

On Cheyette: “Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Inquiry*

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Bryan Cheyette’s career in Jews in English literature, literary criticism, modernism, diaspora, and postcolonialism has been devoted to the exploration of intersecting fields. His most recent path-breaking monograph, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (2014), illuminates an intertwined aftermath of Holocaust and colonialism. Faulting disciplinary thinking from nationalism to identity politics and academic specialization has created a division; Cheyette advocates the overcoming of all rigid and restrictive boundaries. In many ways, this excellent article continues to promote overcoming the division among Jewish, Holocaust, and postcolonial studies and takes particular aim at what he calls supersessionist thinking.

In his opening discussion of postcolonial and Jewish studies, Cheyette references the introduction of *Colonialism and Jews* that argues that the colonial nature of Zionism and the State of Israel has operated much to the detriment of potential productive interaction between the two fields.¹ Before Cheyette pushes along the lines of *Colonialism and Jews*, he turns to the “detriment” of productive interaction between Jewish and postcolonial studies by bookending his article with a discussion of action and theory in response to Amir Mufti’s desire to see an engagement between postcolonialism and Jewish studies translate into a political stance on and against Israel. In an interview, Mufti referred to the dialectics that turns “victims into perpetrators and invited those in Jewish studies who are embracing his formidable *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (2007) “to extend their insights to Israel and the Palestinians.”² Uneased by this invitation and the portrayal of Israel as fascist, Cheyette criticizes what he calls the moralizing politics and its underlying analogical thinking of Mufti’s invitation. By returning to Adorno’s predicament of action and theory, Cheyette defends the value of theory against action.

Going beyond Cheyette’s rejoinder, I would suggest that Mufti’s argument falsely constructs practitioners of Jewish studies as colonial and postcolonial subjects to create continuity and identity between Jewish studies and Israeli politics. More importantly, the opening frames the subsequent discussion about the intersectionality of Jewish, postcolonial, and Holocaust while viewing Jewish and postcolonial studies respectively as contained and internally homogenous disciplines. Refuting Mufti’s

1 Ethan B. Katz, Lisa M. Leff, and Maud S. Mandel, eds. *Colonialism and the Jews* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 2.

2 Ato Quason and Aamir R. Mufti, “The Predicament of Postcolonial Thinking,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3.1 (Winter 2015), 143–156, esp. 152.

prescriptive politics does not engage the underlying assumption about the field of Jewish and postcolonial studies that exists as a multidisciplinary field of intersection between disciplines across the globe. This is probably nowhere truer than in the field of Jewish studies that Aamir Mufti most strongly engaged in his book: *The Study of German Jewish History*, which exists in the fault lines of several fields and disciplines in multiple countries around the world.³ Similarly, scholars of Latin American colonialism advanced the view that colonialism cannot be reduced to either French or English manifestation. Walter Mignolo argues for the need to delink postcolonial theories from its Europe centeredness and to consider more seriously the locations from which postcolonial thinking emerged.⁴ Indeed, one of the pitfalls of postcolonialism seems to be that it centers global history around “single rubric of European time” as Anne McClintock observes.⁵ Plurality instead of singularity thus ought to be the beginning of the discussion of the intersectionality of Jewish and postcolonial studies.

To be sure, I sympathize with Cheyette’s desire to fend of Mufti’s challenge, but following Mufti’s logic sidesteps conceptualizing the possible intersection between Jewish and postcolonial studies as the intertwining of two internally heterogeneous fields of inquiry and to think additionally about Europe in a more diverse manner. It also fails to illuminate postcolonial and Jewish studies as fields of inquiry that critically engage homogenizing power of discourses that construct and subjugate its subjects. Jewish studies emerged in Germany, Europe, and the United States in the nineteenth century outside of the universities and within various disciplines, and contested binaries of sacred and secular, the nation and the transnational, and last but not least, identity politics of nature and nurture. Jewish scholars unhinged at times the constricting and disciplining logics of academic disciplines by asserting their field inside and outside of them.⁶ Cheyette’s own scholarship is a testimony to the productiveness of working inside and outside of English literary, Jewish, and postcolonial studies. At the same time, the invention of a Jewish past promoted by the scholars of Judaism in the nineteenth century forged and asserted not only the existence of a continuing vibrant Jewish history but formulated the history of Jews in the shape and form of German historicism. At issue for Adorno was not simply whether action is

3 Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). On the field of German Jewish Studies, see Steven E. Aschheim, “German History and German Jewry: Boundaries, Junctions and Interdependence,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 43 (1998): 315–22; Todd Presner, “Remapping German-Jewish Studies: Benjamin, Cartography, Modernity,” *German Quarterly* 82 (2009): 293–315; Leslie Morris, “How Jewish is German Studies?” *German Quarterly* 82 (2009): vii–xii.

4 Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking,” *Cultural Studies* 21.2 (2007): 449–514.

5 Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism,’” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 84–98, esp. 86.

6 Nils Roemer, *Jewish Scholarship and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Germany: Between History and Faith* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin University Press, 2005); Nils Roemer, “Towards a Comparative Jewish Literature: National Literary Canons in England and Germany,” eds. Bryan Cheyette and Nadia Valman, *The Image of the Jew in European Liberal Culture, 1789–1914* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2004), 27–45; Nils Roemer, “Outside and Inside the Nations: Changing Borders in the Study of the Jewish Past during the Nineteenth Century,” eds. Andreas Gotzmann and Christian Wiese, *Modern Judaism and Historical Consciousness: Identities–Encounters–Perspectives* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), 28–53.

preferable over theory, but Adorno questions as Cheyette cautions that action "is incomparably closer to oppression than the thought which catches its breath."⁷

Cheyette rightly charges against supersessionist thinking that has been at the heart of Western European Christian tradition and extended to secular and even postmodern variations that relegate Jews to the bygone age and social margins. Postcolonialism surfaces as the new, and Jewish studies appears as the old tradition of which postcolonialism is critical. Here, too, Cheyette views the difficulties at the heart of the intersection of postcolonial and Jewish studies at the level of disciplinary formulation and institutionalization. Postcolonialism emerged as a field at the exclusion of Jewish studies to become recognized as an autonomous field.

Against the exclusionary politics of disciplines, Cheyette marshals a number of postcolonial imaginative writers, who wrote at the time postcolonial studies became institutionalized and display a far greater inclusion with fewer rigid boundaries. Salmon Rushdie, V. S. Naipul, and Anita Desai do not distinguish in their fiction between Jewish and postcolonial histories or between different forms of racism. Rushdie's imaginary worlds are inhabited by Huguenots, Irish, and Jews. Yet Rushdie's novel charts a supersessionist trajectory where an elderly Jewish patriarch is succeeded by a younger postcolonial counterpart.

Shifting gears, Cheyette critically notes the boom in memory and Holocaust studies. Michael Rothberg's influential *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009) excavates articulation of memories that conjoin histories of the Holocaust and European colonialism. Cheyette values the wider more inclusive nature of these knotted histories but fears they marginalize history in the name of memory. Old homogenizing history stands here against the liberating fluidity and imaginary power of memory.

Instead, Cheyette argues that the histories of colonialism and the Holocaust are intertwined by referencing Mark Mazower *Hitler's Empire*. Mazower's parallels and connections are between the Third Reich and colonialism, and less between colonialism and the Holocaust, but more importantly, Cheyette's criticism displays his skepticism of testimonies that "are far from authoritative." Insofar as memory appears to silence history, memory, Patrick Hutton observes, "has become a pressing problem for history itself."⁸ Indeed the obligation to remember and the task to comprehend the past increasingly seem to grate against each other. The proliferation of memoirs and testimonies that Cheyette is critical of appear as part of what others observe as "a therapeutic alternative to historical discourse."⁹ Thus, Cheyette is in accordance with scholars who are uneasy by the reliance on memory that undermines or at least overshadows the status of historical knowledge.

The past is never readily available to neither memory nor history, and for many scholars of the Holocaust, the events pose formidable challenges to the historian's ability to comprehend and for memories to be forged. In a collection of essays titled

7 Theodor W. Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 273–74.

8 Patrick Hutton, "Recent Scholarship on Memory and History," *The History Teacher* 33.4 (2000), 533–46, esp. 534.

9 Kerwin L. Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69 (2000): 127–50, esp. 145.

Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution" (1992), Saul Friedländer famously addressed the problem: "[We] are dealing with an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories, an "event at the limits."¹⁰ Others like the literary scholar Lawrence Langer, defined the "literature of atrocity" as "concerned with an order of reality which the human mind has never confronted before, and whose essential quality, the language of fact, was simply insufficient to convey."¹¹ Along similar lines Alvin Rosenfeld in his *A Double Dying* wondered how we can read historical documents from the period: "A manuscript written secretly and at the risk of life in the Warsaw ghetto . . . such a manuscript begins to carry with it the aura of a holy text. Surely we do not take it in our hands and read it as we do those books that reach us through the normal channels of composition and publication. But how do we read it? At this point in the study of Holocaust literature, the question remains open-ended."¹²

Memory and history are intertwined. They are not binaries and exist in their mutual confluence. Indeed, the first historians of the Holocaust were displaced persons (DPs) in postwar Germany, and many postwar historians of the Holocaust were also survivors.¹³ To memory and history the past is available only in a mediated representation or as James Young advocated, the Holocaust ought to be written as a "received history." Young's writing during the 1990s was still addressing and seeking to overcome a period of Holocaust research that largely existed without the testimonies of survivors. Epistemologically speaking, historical studies of the Holocaust investigate, reconstruct, and comprehend the past; literary accounts and memories only represent them. The underlying binary of history and memory mistakenly maps different types of expert and survivor knowledge and associates them with different claims of authenticity and truth. Instead of viewing memory as undermining openness of historical interpretation, pitting history against memory, we ought to content with the coexistence of production of knowledge in multiple forms. Confronting the Holocaust is, therefore, a fluid process that emerges from multiple realms and venues.

Leaving aside how the concept of trauma and postmemory possibly complicates this discussion further, the Holocaust and its memories are framed here as the past. Conversely, postcolonialism posits the existence of coloniality, a state that continues even after political colonialism ended. What scholars have called coloniality comprises colonialism and its subsequent impact. It views colonialism not from the perspective of its aftermath but its ongoing imprint. Within Holocaust studies, scholars have delineated the Nazi policies, the experiences of harassment, persecution, exile and genocide, as well as the process of facing the legacy of the Holocaust, but have not equally paid attention to how the Holocaust continuously impact cultures and societies. Coloniality is not reducible to the presence or absence of a colonial

10 Saul Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 2–3.

11 Lawrence Langer, L. *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 3.

12 Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), 17.

13 Steven E. Aschheim, *Beyond the Border: The German-Jewish Legacy Abroad* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

administration and power;¹⁴ nor is the Holocaust reducible to an aftermath of remembrance. Cheyette's critical pursuit of supersessionist thinking points to the ongoing impact of century-old exclusionary politics that culminated in the Holocaust and still manifests itself today in the representation of Jews. Just as much as the idea of the decolonization obscures continuities between colonial pasts and current times, the idea of post-Holocaust conceals continuities. The mythology of the "decolonization of the world" obscures the continuities between the colonial past and current global colonial and racial hierarchies while contributing to the invisibility of "coloniality" today. To think about the Holocaust from the perspective of postcolonial studies might open a fruitful endeavor to investigate the ruptures, continuities, and discontinuities the Holocaust has inscribed in global history.

Furthermore, Cheyette effectively seeks to avoid both the idea of viewing the Jewish diaspora as paradigmatic and of understanding it as a classical concept that eventually was transcended by more recent manifestations of diasporas. Borrowing Mieke Bal's idea of traveling concepts allows Cheyette to advance contestation, negotiations, and transformation instead of suppression and replacement.¹⁵ Embracing the idea of traveling concepts allows us to think of diaspora and ghetto, Cheyette contends, without separating out "the history of the ghetto or diaspora into old and new, postcolonial and Jewish."

Instead of measuring manifestations of diaspora cultures against a binding definition, Cheyette advocates a more fluid open use of this concept. This helpful corrective advances diasporas as a description of spatialized culture that encodes and performs identities within interacting nodes of multiple cultural centers. Jewish cultures and communities have emerged in response to a former homeland, but also their place within modern societies was determined by their role as in- and outsiders within respective nation-states as well as by their status as a social, religious, and cultural group that stretched beyond territorial boundaries. This perspective highlights the complexities of identifications of Jewish cultures in London, Paris, Berlin, and New York of Eastern European Jews or of Jewish communities around the world and their interaction among one another and with Israel.

I would like to think of diasporas also in the words of Avtar Brah as " 'inhabited' not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of *diaspora space* (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put.' "¹⁶ It is this later meaning that is often overlooked but that became decisive in the way in which Jewish cultures became entangled with European cultures, which also allowed for the critical engagement with colonial powers and its production of meaning. Colonialism represented not only a political program of subjugation but also the production of knowledge. To consider diasporic knowledge requires acknowledging not just asymmetrical power relations, but also more uneven, fluid relations that challenged, contested, and transformed

14 Ramón Grosfoguel, "Colonial Difference, Geopolitics of Knowledge and Global Coloniality in the Modern/Colonial Capitalist World – System," *Review* 25.3 (2002): 203–24.

15 Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities* (Toronto, Canada: Toronto University Press, 2002).

16 Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 181.

colonial knowledge. The fields of ghetto and diasporas highlight the wonderful entanglement of the periphery and center. The booming French Mediterranean port city Marseille functioned as a fulcrum not only between France and its colonies, but also as the site of alternative urban architectural theories and different models of modernity.

The crisscrossing routes of colonies, diasporas, and ghettos along with the Holocaust routed equally imperial visions and anticolonial fantasies while becoming spaces of exile and deportation. Positioned at the very edge of France, Marseille, for example, functioned as Sheila Crane's excellent book suggests, a "Mediterranean crossroad" between the French empire and its colonies juxtaposed with a metropolitan harbor city and overseas. In 1906 and 1922, France held two colonial exhibitions in Marseille, its second largest city. Notoriously dangerous and cosmopolitan, Marseille, too, became host to remarkable architects and theorists of alternative urban modernity.¹⁷ The Jamaica-born Harlem renaissance writer Claude McKay sought to draft an alternative model of modernity from the streets of Marseille, and for the famed Weimar-Jewish journalist Joseph Roth, Marseille displayed a "continuous mixing of races and people. . . . This isn't France anymore. It's Europe, Asia, Africa, America. It's white, black, red, yellow."¹⁸ Similarly, for Walter Benjamin, Marseille defied classification and erased class, time, and space.¹⁹ Here he met up with Hannah Arendt, who eventually placed Africa at the center of modern politics and reflected on antisemitism and the Holocaust within her overarching interpretation of colonialism, modernity, and totalitarianism. Arendt successfully crossed the Atlantic from Marseille to New York, and tragically Benjamin would make his final but futile attempt to cross into Spain. Finally, in Vichy France, Marseille's police superintendent, along with virtually every other organization, supported Vichy policies and collaborated with the Nazis when it came to the exploitation and deportation of Jews.²⁰ It is in the interstices of varied urban port cities such as Marseille, Shanghai, New York, and Hamburg that the knotted histories of colonialism and the Holocaust exist; this offers great opportunities for a productive interaction among postcolonial, Jewish, and Holocaust studies.

17 Sheila Crane, *Mediterranean Crossroads: Marseille and Modern Architecture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Zeynep Celik, "Le Corbusier, Orientalism, Colonialism," *Assemblage* 17 (April 1992): 58–77.

18 Leah Rosenberg, "Caribbean Models for Modernism in the Work of Claude McKay and Jean Rhys," *Modernism/Modernity* 11.2 (April 2004): 219–38; Joseph Roth, *The White Cities: Reports from France 1925–1939* (London: Granta, 2004), 132.

19 Stuart Jeffries, "In Praise of Dirty, Sexy Cities: The Urban World According to Walter Benjamin," *The Guardian*, September 21, 2015, and Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 25–27.

20 Donna F. Ryan, *The Holocaust & the Jews of Marseille* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996).