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For Activist Thought: A Response to Bryan Cheyette

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This essay responds to Bryan Cheyette's "Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora."[1] *It argues that Cheyette fails to evade certain forms of binary thinking, in particular those that polarize thought and action, theory and praxis. We see this persistence of binary logic in his discussion of my book* Multidirectional Memory *and in his engagement with the critic Aamir Mufti on the topic of Israel/Palestine and the legacies of Edward Said.*

Keywords: Jewish studies, postcolonial studies, memory, Israel/Palestine, theory, activism, Aamir Mufti, Edward Said, Primo Levi

There is much to admire in Bryan Cheyette's essay "Against Supersessionist Thinking," as there is in all of Cheyette's work at the intersection of Jewish studies and postcolonial studies. Cheyette's intervention here both draws on and extends his important recent book *Diasporas of the Mind*. Characteristic of his work is a nuanced, nonreductive pursuit of historical and cultural overlap between Jewish and other minoritarian diasporas that manifests itself most powerfully in his attention to the generative power of the literary imagination. Here he casts a critical eye especially on what he identifies as the "supercessionist" logic of representative examples of postcolonial criticism and literature, a logic that tends to fetishize Judaism and Jewishness in order to overcome them discursively. Cheyette links supercessionism to a series of other binarizing modes of thought, including disciplinary thinking and foundationalism. In conclusion, he briefly sketches an alternative approach to the relation of Jewish studies and postcolonial studies inspired by Mieke Bal's nonbinary notion of "traveling concepts."

I will argue, however, that despite its stated intentions, Cheyette's essay fails to evade certain forms of binary thinking, in particular those that polarize thought and action, theory and praxis. We might think of the genre of Cheyette's essay as an unacknowledged polemic against polemic. Ultimately, that polemic comes down to a dispute about the legacies of Edward Said and about how to think through—and thus engage with—the question of Israel/Palestine. Against Cheyette's polarization of theory and praxis as well as nuance and action, I will suggest the need for an activist

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1 Bryan Cheyette, "Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Inquiry* 4.3 (2017): 424–439.

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thought: a worldly, politically aware mode of thinking that can remain intellectually and morally complex while daring to diagnose binary structures of power when needed. Urgent attention and slower forms of reflection and historicization can and must go hand in hand.

Let me begin with Cheyette's instructive critique of the logic of supercession. Derived from the theological logic of overcoming whereby Christianity was said to complete and replace Judaism, supercessionism has—Cheyette argues convincingly—prominent secular avatars in modernity. He traces a logic in which the "old," "the classic," and "the foundational" are simultaneously acknowledged and then overcome in contemporary theory and culture. In this process of overcoming, Cheyette demonstrates, figures coded as Jewish are frequently assimilated to the "old" and thus displaced by something novel and seemingly more urgent. He follows this supercessionist logic through such diverse forms as the contemporary theoretical interest in St. Paul in Badiou, Agamben, and Zizek, and a range of novels by Salman Rushdie and other postcolonial authors. Supercessionist logic is binary (old versus new) and hierarchical (the new replaces the old), and it has connections, Cheyette shows, to what he calls "foundational" and "disciplinary" thinking, which work according to similar logics of opposition and exclusion. In place of such binary modes of thought, Cheyette proposes the fertile model of "traveling concepts," a methodological move that allows us to think relation in nonbinary and nonexclusionary forms. His examples here are "diaspora" and "ghetto," terms that can easily be assimilated to a supercessionist logic (i.e., they started out as Jewish but now best apply to other contexts) but that Cheyette wants to reclaim for a more inclusive methodology. Although Cheyette does not allude here to the thought of Walter Benjamin, one can see a family resemblance to Benjamin's deployment of historical and conceptual constellations in opposition to the "homogenous, empty time" of historicism—the temporal framework in which such progressive narratives of supercession frequently take place.[2]

It is this particular critique of the temporality of historicism—and the counter-suggestion of thinking in terms of constellations—that inspired me in my book *Multidirectional Memory*.[3] In the course of his essay, Cheyette respectfully takes my book to task for submitting to the logic of disciplinarity and thus polarizing history and memory. He suggests that in *Multidirectional Memory* "history is marginalized and rendered outside our active consciousness." The first half of this assertion strikes me as a significant misreading of my book based on selective quotations that strip away context; the second half seems to me undeniably true and I will return to it later. The misunderstanding derives from a slippage in Cheyette's argument between my critique of *certain forms of historicism* and a critique of *history as such*. I target historicism at a few points in the book because I believe that a vision of history based on a notion of time as progression through homogenous, empty time cannot easily account for the knots of history and memory that link—in the case of my book and

2 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 253–64; cf. 261.

3 See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). Pertinent discussions of Benjamin can be found on pp. 43–44 and 80.

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some of Cheyette's own interests—the Holocaust, colonialism, and decolonization. But history is by no means dismissed or absent from my account of multidirectional memory. To the contrary, the book works closely with particular historical moments—such as "1961"—and it acknowledges the important work by historians such as Isabel Hull, Dirk Moses, and Jürgen Zimmerer that has emerged in recent years to link the Nazi genocide to various colonial contexts and logics.[4] Contra Cheyette, however, it remains the case that disciplinary historians (as opposed to anticolonial thinkers such as Césaire and Fanon or even a political theorist like Arendt) have come to this connection only very recently and that, at least until the last decade, such overlaps have remained outside the purview of most mainstream histories of both the Holocaust and colonialism (and probably still do).[5]

A further point deserves mention that also connects to Cheyette's primary concern with the relation of theory and praxis. Disciplinary history has, in fact, often failed to acknowledge minoritarian histories (as is well known) and, thus also, intersections and connections between minoritarian histories (what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih call "minor transnationalism").[6] This means that our (re)discovery of these histories often derives from cultural and political actors outside the constraints of disciplines. I doubt Cheyette would disagree with this point—this is, after all, one of his arguments about literature, I believe—but it illuminates a weakness of his critique of my book and of his intervention as a whole: although arguing against simplification and binary oppositions, Cheyette relies quite explicitly on a fundamental opposition between scholarship and activism. It has been, however, activist scholarship and not conventional disciplinary history that has most often been responsible for first bringing minoritarian histories and memories simultaneously into the realms of the academy and public culture.

Let me illustrate what I am getting at here through a key example from *Multidirectional Memory*: the history and memory of the October 17, 1961, massacre of peacefully demonstrating Algerians in Paris, which took place during the late stages of the Algerian War of Independence.[7] Initially covered extensively in the leftist French

4 My engagement with recent historical work on the relationship between colonialism and the Holocaust can be found in *Multidirectional Memory*, pp. 102–07. My purpose in that section of the book is both to identify parallels between my conception of multidirectionality and emergent trends in the historiography of genocide and to reflect on ways that a theoretically informed memory studies approach can help us reconceptualize historical processes. In a more recent essay that further refines the theory of multidirectional memory—but which Cheyette does not cite—I also write of the need to consider the politics of multidirectional memory in relation to "a differentiated empirical history, moral solidarity with victims of diverse injustices, and an ethics of comparison that coordinates the asymmetrical claims of those victims." See Michael Rothberg, "From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory," *Criticism* 53.4 (2011): 523–48. This essay is equally relevant to the question of Israel/Palestine that Cheyette also broaches and that I address later.

5 The one example of a historical study in this mode that Cheyette mentions is Mark Mazower's *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*, which was published by Penguin in September 2008 while my book was in press. See also the previous footnote for my own engagement with this historiography.

6 Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

7 I explore this history in chapters 8 and 9 of *Multidirectional Memory*. In chapters 6 and 7 I also focus on the moment of 1961, where I trace intersections between emergent Holocaust memory and ongoing decolonization. For a book-length consideration of the history and memory of October 17, 1961, see Jim

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press, the massacre quickly disappeared from public consciousness before beginning to reemerge in the 1980s and continuing to gain visibility in the early 2000s. In the course of my research, I discovered three things relevant to this discussion: first, that from the time of the initial responses to the massacre, activists made connections between what had happened to Algerians in 1961 and the Nazi occupation and persecution of Jews; second, that the history of the massacre (and with it the connections between the massacre and the earlier history of the Holocaust) were indeed marginalized for decades; and finally, when the history eventually reemerged in public memory and scholarship, it came from the initiatives of social movements and nonacademic historians and was restimulated by the hidden links with the Nazi past. In other words, I want to suggest, the emergence of the history and memory of the October 17 massacre as well as its links to the Holocaust derived from the initiatives of social movements and activist scholars that were *ahead of disciplinary history* in considering this event "real" history. In telling this story in *Multidirectional Memory*, I am in no way rendering history marginal, as Cheyette asserts; rather, I am showing how actually marginalized histories often gain attention and acknowledgment from outside of history-as-usual and from the realms of public memory.

Furthermore, there is indeed something "outside our active consciousness" that takes place in such scenarios: in this case, the immediate mnemonic connections that activists made between the massacre and the deportation of Jews during the Shoah were "verified" years later when it turned out that the same man, Maurice Papon, was responsible for both atrocities—a fact that was not known in 1961. The Papon case is unusual, but I would not hesitate to affirm the more general insight, which Cheyette seems to reject in his critique of *Multidirectional Memory*, that history often takes place outside of human consciousness. As Marx puts it in the opening paragraphs of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already."[8] It is of course impossible to be fully conscious of such circumstances and thus of the implications of one's actions. As the case of Marx also demonstrates, new forms of knowledge often emerge most forcefully when they stand in proximity to social and political movements.

The reason that I dwell on this example is that it helps shed light on further aspects of Cheyette's argument. Cheyette's target is binary thinking, but, as I have begun to indicate, it is difficult to pursue a critique of binarism without falling into binary thinking oneself. This is not surprising because, after all, the persistence of binaries despite our attempt to undo them is one of the key insights of Derridean deconstruction. Thus, for instance, in his discussion of the insights offered by postcolonial literature vis-à-vis postcolonial criticism, Cheyette asserts, "The contrast between imaginative and disciplinary approaches, when it comes to an intertwined Jewish and colonial history, could not be starker." But the most significant binary that

House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

8 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). I am also thinking here of Slavoj Zizek's gloss on Marx's theory of ideology: "They do not know it but they are doing it." See Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989).

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Cheyette reimports—and the one that I have tried to illustrate through my October 17 example—is that between theory and praxis.

Drawing on Adorno's critique of the student movement, Cheyette diagnoses a form of "actionism" among certain postcolonial critics. Although he ends by referring to Adorno's promotion of "thinking actionism" and his resistance to "a hard and fast distinction between theory and praxis," Cheyette's essay starts and maintains a structuring binary opposition between what he calls "scholarly nuance and complexity" and the "clarity and certainty of political action" (the last phrase seems to be meant ironically and pejoratively in the context). Here we find another slippage in Cheyette's argument: if postcolonial studies certainly privileges the analytical category of politics—and I do not see how it could not, given its field of interest—I am not sure that such an understanding of politics can be collapsed into "political action" (and Cheyette, in fact, never demonstrates such a thing). Even more, I would suggest that postcolonial criticism (as well as other forms of minority and oppositional discourse) highlight the importance of what we might want to call "activist thought" (to complement Adorno's "thinking actionism"). Thought inspired by activism characterizes the kind of constellation that my notion of multidirectional memory seeks to make visible in relation to October 17 and its legacies: when it comes to minority/colonized histories, I have argued, activism often lies behind and enables scholarly complexity. (One also hopes, of course, that the direction of exchange is not just unidirectional.)

I doubt that Cheyette would object to this notion of a feedback loop between politics and knowledge, theory and activism. In part, our difference here may be more one of emphasis than essential opposition. Yet, something more—and something important—is at stake here. The only real example of contemporary postcolonial criticism's alleged actionism Cheyette gives is a brief citation from the interview with Aamir Mufti featured in the earlier special issue of this journal on Jews and postcolonialism.[9] This brief example seems to motivate the essay as a whole, however, serving as its point of origin and terminus. At issue is—no surprise—the question of Palestine.

Cheyette takes issue with a brief passage in this extended interview where Mufti responds to a question from editor Ato Quayson about how the concept of minoritization that Mufti develops in his book *Enlightenment in the Colony* might apply to "Israeli policies toward the Palestinians" (151). While provocative, Mufti's response appears to me much more nuanced than Cheyette allows. In sentences that Cheyette does not quote, Mufti expresses cautious support for accounts of Israel as a form of settler colonialism, but then suggests the need to situate that framework in relation to "the Jewish Question of post-Enlightenment European society." In this context, he invokes the "necessity of an 'ironic double vision'" of the sort promoted by Edward Said (151). Mufti then remarks on how the Israeli state seems to possess a "remarkable . . . ability to turn the victims of majoritarianism and militarism into (settler-colonial and majoritarian) militarists." Cheyette begins his direct engagement with Mufti's words when he quotes part of the following sentence in which Mufti describes "this horrific dialectical reversal that can turn victims into

9 Ato Quayson interviews Aamir Mufti, "The Predicaments of Postcolonial Thinking," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 3.1 (2016): 143–56.

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perpetrators, or—I know this is explosive and painful for both peoples I am naming here—'Jews' into 'Germans' " (152). Cheyette leaves out, however, the first part of that sentence, another reference to Said, who, Mufti says, "wants to explore the possibility of interrupting this process in the case of the Palestinians themselves." Cheyette's selective quotation may leave the impression that the reversal of victims into perpetrators is only a Jewish/Israeli trait, but in fact Mufti identifies it as a shared concern related to situations of overwhelming state power (a point to which I return in conclusion).

A similar selectivity marks Cheyette's engagement with Mufti's next point, which Cheyette calls "equally painful." In the interview, Mufti invites "those folks in Jewish studies who have been generously receptive to the argument presented in *Enlightenment in the Colony* concerning liberalism's historic failure with regard to Jewish emancipation . . . to confront the question of whether they are willing and able to extend those critical insights to Israel and the Palestinians themselves in a clear and unsentimental assessment of who are the fascists and who constitutes the vulnerable and brutalized population" (152). Cheyette considers this invitation an example of "progressive exceptionalism" that "[turns] Israel into a pariah state" and treats it as a unique problem in world politics. For Cheyette, this example highlights "the binary, analogical and moralized world of political action which the 'folks in Jewish studies' find themselves confronted with." Moralizing politics, for Cheyette, involves a worldview in which "one side [is] uniquely outcast and the other side [is] uniquely unique." I agree with Cheyette that such a worldview radically simplifies the field of politics, yet I do not believe Mufti's responses—in what is, after all, an interview and not an essay or book—fit this description. Cheyette, for instance, misses the fact that Mufti also holds postcolonial critics to account for a highly selective engagement with the Palestinian question, which they mobilize politically without "attempt[ing] to make Palestinian historical experience central to [their] intellectual enterprise as students of the postcolonial world" (152). Mufti's intervention is surely polemical in intent, but it is by no means one-sided or crude. Indeed, far from rendering Jewish experience exceptional or passé according to the logic of supercession, Mufti continually tacks back and forth between Jewish and postcolonial histories in exactly the way that Cheyette calls for. As his plea to make "Palestinian historical experience central" to criticism illustrates, his project is far from some pure form of activism or actionism: it is a call for a scholarly program that would be in dialogue with political concerns. It is Cheyette who has imported the question of "political action" to the discussion.

In the differences between Cheyette and Mufti, I glimpse a struggle over the legacy of Edward Said, who is cited by both critics. It seems to me that Cheyette values Said's humanism, which he finds in Said's refusal to see Palestinians as "the 'new Jews' superseding 'the Jews' in their role as foundational world-historical victims." For Mufti, Said similarly seeks to "interrupt" the cycle of victimization, but Mufti also does not hesitate to call on Said in identifying the primary motor of that cycle: Zionism's "involvement in imperialism" and the current militarism of the Israeli state (cf. "Predicaments" 152, 145). It is of course always dangerous (if unavoidable) to argue over the legacy of someone who is no longer there to formulate new arguments in the face of changing circumstances, someone who in addition was not without his

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own contradictions. But I would wager that were Said able to see the lay of the land today—and in some sense we can say that he already did see it clearly in advance—he would not hesitate to use the kinds of formulations employed by Mufti to indict Israeli state responsibility. I think the limit of Cheyette's argument is once again a tendency to fall into a binary or zero-sum logic despite himself: in responding to Mufti on Israel he does not seem to acknowledge that a morally complex perspective can coexist with a politically consequential one.[10] Indeed, Said never separated a stringent critique of Israel from a clear-eyed assessment of the moral and political weaknesses of the Palestinian leadership; yet, this did not lead him to hesitate in his calls for Palestinian liberation.

Critical for understanding the question of Israel/Palestine, Said's combination of moral complexity and political clear-sightedness reminds me of one of the writers Cheyette and I most admire: Primo Levi. In his essential essay "The Gray Zone," Levi famously seeks to break down the binary conceptual framework that has structured understanding of the Nazi camps or Lager.[11] Cheyette usefully characterizes the Italian Jewish survivor Levi as deploying a productive "ethical uncertainty" when he confronts complicit, morally gray figures—from Kapos and Sonderkommando workers to minor collaborators—who populate the prisoner population. Yet, Levi is always equally certain about who created the environment in which such collaboration and complicity proliferated, and he does not hesitate to indict the perpetrators for their murderous deeds and to hold them responsible for the additional crime of creating the gray zone.[12]

Said's and Mufti's assessment of Israel/Palestine—one that I share—works analogously (which is not to say that the analogy is perfect, of course). One should remark on the moral grayness of the situation, trace its complex history, and assert that nobody is innocent in creating an untenable situation. If, however, in today's world, one does not identify the radically asymmetrical relations of power that structure the occupation of the West Bank, the blockade of Gaza, the refusal of the right of return to Palestinians, and the abdication of equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel, then one has missed the essential of the situation. All conflicts and situations of oppression contain shades of gray, but that does not invalidate the need to name certain groups as perpetrators and others as victims. Israel/Palestine is manifestly one of those situations.

10 For my own attempts to think through some similar questions as those at stake here, see Michael Rothberg, "From Gaza to Warsaw" and "Trauma Theory, Implicated Subjects, and the Question of Israel/Palestine," *Profession* (2014). http://profession.commons.mla.org/2014/05/02/trauma-theory-implicated-subjects-and-the-question-of-israelpalestine/.

11 Primo Levi, "The Gray Zone," *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Michael F. Moore in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, vol. III, ed. Ann Goldstein, pp. 2434–35.

12 I am thinking especially of the following passage in "The Gray Zone": "I do not know, nor am I particularly interested in knowing, whether a murderer is lurking deep within me, but I do know that I was an innocent victim and not a murderer. I know that murderers existed, and not just in Germany, and that they still exist, retired or on active duty, and that confusing them with their victims is a moral disease, an aesthetic license, or a sinister sign of complicity" (pp. 2439–40). As Levi makes clear here, there is a great distance between recognizing the way the Nazi system forced or cajoled some of its victims into positions of collaboration and declaring—as the film director Liliana Cavani did—that "We are all victims or murderers and we accept these roles voluntarily" (quoted in Levi, "Gray Zone," 2439).

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The project of bringing Jewish studies and postcolonial studies into continuing dialogue is an urgent one. Indeed the project has only been made even more timely by the global rise of far-right political movements in which antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of racism all play prominent roles. As scholars we have a duty to bring nuance and historical depth to analysis of these different oppressive ideologies, but I believe we also have a responsibility to engage actively with the currents in which we are living. If there is one good thing about the new far-right movements, it may be that they offer an opportunity to rebuild alliances between different diasporic populations, including Jews. But those alliances will ultimately founder if consequential confrontation with the asymmetries and injustices of Israel/Palestine remains marginal. We are not living in a moment where it makes sense to polarize thought and activism; we are living in a moment when both are more necessary than ever. We need to be in the streets, in the classrooms, and in the libraries, and we need to bridge those spaces in our own thinking actionism and activist thought.

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