

# Challenging Binaries and Unfencing Fields: An Interview with Bryan Cheyette

Hanna Teichler<sup>1</sup> and Rebekah Vince<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

<sup>2</sup> French, Durham University, UK

Correspondence: [teichler@em.uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:teichler@em.uni-frankfurt.de) &  
[rebekah.l.vince@durham.ac.uk](mailto:rebekah.l.vince@durham.ac.uk)

Twitter: [@HTeichler](https://twitter.com/HTeichler), [@RebekahLVince](https://twitter.com/RebekahLVince)

Funding: See acknowledgements



**Copyright notice:** This article is issued under the terms of the **Creative Commons Attribution License**, which permits use and redistribution of the work provided that the original author and source are credited.

You must give appropriate credit (author attribution), provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## Abstract

*Bryan Cheyette is Professor of Modern Literature and Culture at the University of Reading, where he directs the Identities and Minorities research group. His comparative research focuses on critical 'race' theory, postcolonial literature and theory, diasporic literature, Holocaust testimony, and, more recently, the social history of the ghetto. In January 2019, the Warwick Memory Group invited Bryan Cheyette to give a public lecture on 'The Ghetto as Travelling Concept', in the light of his forthcoming A Very Short Introduction to the Ghetto (2020), and a workshop on 'Unfenced Fields in Academia and Beyond'. In a wide-ranging interview, Bryan Cheyette speaks of the interconnections between Jewish studies and postcolonial studies, bringing these into dialogue with memory discourses and our contemporary moment.*

**Keywords:** postcolonial studies; global studies; memory studies; Jewish studies; Holocaust studies; ghetto; diaspora; cosmopolitanism; world literature

## Introduction

In their introduction to a special issue on Jewish studies and postcolonialism, published in *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, Willi Goetschel and Ato Quayson write that:

*Jewish studies has received new impulses from postcolonial critique just as postcolonial discourse has found inspiration in the work and thought of Jewish critics and intellectuals. But rather than the assimilation of paradigms from each other's discourse, we need to gain a better understanding of their interface (2016: 3).*

Here there is a sense of both interaction and reflection, on and of the other. This is demonstrated in a lively exchange stimulated by a paradigm article by Bryan Cheyette (2017), in which leading scholars explore what Nils Roemer calls 'the intersectionality of Jewish and postcolonial studies', premised on '[p]lurality instead of singularity' (2018: 124). Both of these fields deal with memory, and therefore bringing them into dialogue with the burgeoning field of memory studies – closely related to trauma studies and Holocaust studies – is a productive exercise (Roca Lizarazu & Vince, 2018). Perhaps it is a helpful analogy to think of these fields – postcolonial studies, Jewish studies, memory studies, trauma studies – as not fenced in or enclosed but open, wild, 'ill-disciplined' fields with unclear boundary lines (Cheyette, 2009: 1–2). Rather than supplanting one another, these fields overlap, intersect, and cross-pollinate. As Roemer writes, 'the field of Jewish and postcolonial studies [...] exists as a multidisciplinary field of intersection between disciplines across the globe' (2018: 124). These intersections are facilitated by what Mieke Bal calls 'travelling concepts' (2000), which might in turn be related to 'traveling culture' (Clifford, 1986; 1992), a concept Astrid Erll draws on to conceptualize 'travelling memory' (2011). Erll writes that 'much of the actual semantic shape that travelling memory takes on will be the result of the routes it takes in specific contexts and of the uses made by specific people with specific agendas' (2011: 15), as evidenced in diasporic memories and ghettoization.

In January 2019, the Warwick Memory Group invited Bryan Cheyette to give a public lecture on 'The Ghetto as Travelling Concept', in the light of his forthcoming *A Very Short Introduction to the Ghetto* (2020). He also gave a workshop on 'Unfenced Fields in Academia and Beyond: Jewish/Postcolonial/Memory Studies' in which participants had the opportunity to discuss his paradigm article 'Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora' (2017) alongside the responses (Rothberg, 2018; McLeod, 2018; Robins, 2018; Freitas, 2018) and his own response to these (Cheyette, 2018a). The Warwick Memory Group partnered with the

Frankfurt Memory Studies Platform to interview Bryan Cheyette on the occasion of his visit. In the interview, presented below, Bryan Cheyette highlights the many overlaps between Jewish studies and postcolonial studies, ranging from interrelated (diasporic) histories to the shared experience of the everyday nature of racism in liberal societies. For Cheyette, Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1994 [1951]), forms the key text that brings such interconnections to the fore, effectively practising 'intersectionality *avant la lettre*' (p. 4). Consequently, the future of both fields of study lies outside the disciplines, and in practising thought and criticism that actively cut across histories, subjects, and cultures. With reference to Theodor Adorno and Edward Said, Cheyette argues for a form of intellectual, 'thinking' activism, whereby the role of the academic is to bring together nuanced thought and critical engagement rather than reinforce the manicheism of contemporary politics. The histories of genocide, colonialism, exploitation, marginalization, and everyday racism cannot and should not be excluded from our understanding of self and other, and of our disciplines, but rather incorporated in criticism, teaching, and 'thinking' activism.

---

## **Interview**

*Rebekah Vince (RV)*: What can Jewish studies and postcolonial studies learn from one another?

*Bryan Cheyette (BC)*: I have shown in a number of pieces and most prominently in *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (2014) that Jewish and postcolonial studies have a great deal in common. Precolonial histories include many different diasporas which interconnect. Different colonial and precolonial cultures again show the ways that Jewish communities can be related and interrelated with all kinds of other communities – in South Asia, in Africa, and in the Iberian Peninsula, for instance. So, there is one way of thinking about history outside of national cultures which brings together Jewish and (post)colonial studies. My starting point has tended to be the 1940s, at the height of colonial rule and at the height of Nazism. What I've explored is how anti-colonial thinkers learned from the history of fascism, particularly the Jewish experience, and applied it to their own experience. Jews, who were victims of fascism, also looked at the experience of colonialism and applied it to their own experience in the ghettos and the camps. The kinds of distinctions between Jewish history and colonial history which exist now did not exist then. So, you mentioned Albert Memmi, for instance, who was a figure who could

write easily about colonialism, about antisemitism, about the outsider and, in general, about the experience of being a minority. He didn't really distinguish between these life-experiences. And figures like Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, and most importantly Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (2017 [1951]), also bring together the history of colonialism and the history of antisemitism. This was intersectionality *avant la lettre*.

That's a long way of saying that fascism, colonialism, antisemitism, and racism were thought of as intertwined up until the 1960s. With the rise of Holocaust studies and postcolonial studies in the 1980s, these 'knotted histories' – as Paul Gilroy put it (2004: 78) – became disciplined. What I have always believed is that it is precisely because postcolonial studies has so much in common with Jewish and Holocaust studies that it had to distinguish itself. There was a kind of anxiety of influence that Jewish studies was more established than its newer counterpart, more comfortable within the Western tradition – the term Judeo-Christianity was becoming prevalent again after the Holocaust, even though it is a meaningless term. It was a term that was used by the radical right, by Thatcher and Reagan, as well as postcolonialists, to talk about a dominant Western 'civilisation'. Postcolonial studies understandably distinguished itself from a conventional Jewish studies. Jewish studies also did not want to be too closely associated with postcolonial studies, because postcolonial studies was transgressive, and was broadly anti-Western, anti-European. Conventional Jewish studies did not want to be tarred with the same transgressive brush. It actually wanted to be respectable and acceptable, although this was not true of Holocaust studies, as many survivors were to question the basis of European civilisation where genocide was always a potential. But, broadly speaking, both sides were quite happy to have nothing in common.

What can they learn from each other? I personally learned a great deal from the founding postcolonial theorists. Robert Young called them the 'Holy Trinity' (1995: 163) – Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. They all spoke to me in different ways. Spivak's construction of the silence of the subaltern – how can the subaltern speak? (1988) – helped me think about Holocaust studies, the question of silence and the question of speaking for the victims. Said helped me because *Orientalism* (1978) constructed racial discourse in ordinary, quotidian terms. That is how I thought about antisemitism in liberal culture – as something that was everyday and mainstream rather than extreme and at the margins of society. One main reason why antisemitism is incorrectly thought of as being exceptional is that it is assumed to be at the extreme end of racial discourse, leading to the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Now racial discourse in its most

extreme totalitarian form – within Nazism, within Stalinism – can work in that way. But quite often, and especially within liberal cultures, it doesn't work that way. What I learned from Said is the everyday nature of racial discourse. What I learned from Bhabha (1983), together with Zygmunt Bauman (1991), although they don't engage with each other's work, is the question of the ambivalence and the complexity of racial discourse within mainstream liberal culture.

*Hanna Teichler (HT):* What role does memory studies play in your research?

*BC:* I come to memory studies via Holocaust studies. I was the first to teach a university course on Holocaust testimonies in Leeds in 1988. Other courses followed, most notably that taught by W. G. Sebald at the University of East Anglia, but I was there at the start in the UK at least. Memory studies to some extent comes out of Holocaust studies. I will leave the question of the foundational nature of Holocaust studies until later, but, for the moment, we can agree that the question of memory is absolutely at the centre of the most important Holocaust testimonies – Primo Levi has a crucial essay on the 'memory of the offence' (2013 [1986]); Charlotte Delbo (2001 [1990]) is tremendously important in distinguishing between superficial memory and bodily memory. Jorge Semprún (1994) illustrates the necessity of sixteen years of forgetting before he could remember his time in the camps. So, there's the question of memory and forgetting, as the weight of representing the victims' camp experience bears down on all great Holocaust testimonies. If you read these testimonies, memory is something that is uncertain. I call it 'Levi's ethical uncertainty' in my article on Primo Levi (Cheyette, 1999). It is the uncertainty of these memories that is crucial and helps me to think about memory studies. That is why I don't regard the Holocaust and Holocaust studies as foundational. I know that memory studies has followed the Holocaust, but Holocaust testimonies are uncertain, they are always unsure about memory. Testimonies are well aware of the impossibility of actually remembering or completely remembering, if you will. The anxiety is that they are not doing justice to the dead. Delbo's distinction between superficial and deep memories is crucial here. What Delbo says is that she lives next to her experience; the experience is not within her. The reason she says that is because if her camp experience is triggered it takes her over completely. It consumes her bodily. This is why Semprun couldn't write for sixteen years as his memories, paradoxically, were so physically traumatising that they prevented him from writing. He wrote a book called *Literature or Life* (1994) as this was his only choice. He could only write after he had forgotten his experiences after sixteen years or, at least, created enough distance between his experiences and his narratives. He could only live by forgetting, as re-living his experiences

in 'literature' disabled him completely. So, forgetting is just as important as remembering. Levi, in his testimonies, often talks about the moments when he is unable to remember, about forgetting, which, paradoxically, become his memories. He always tries to do justice to a fleeting moment of conversation, even though he will have forgotten most of it. What I have learned from Holocaust studies is that the question of forgetting, and the uncertainty of memory, the bodily nature of traumatic memory, is not easily accommodated by memory studies.

RV: Is there a history of combating both racism and antisemitism together?

BC: Yes. Absolutely. Such intersectional anti-racism is a necessity, not a luxury. Again, Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1994 [1951]) is deeply influential in the 21st century precisely because it anticipated an intersectional approach. It was rejected, certainly by the left, in the context of the Cold War, because Arendt was dismissed as being on the side of the West. But if you look at the publishing history of the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, the chapter on totalitarianism was added last and it was very much at the publisher's request. In some ways, the book from the beginning was a tool of the Cold War, even though the important sections – the first two on colonialism, colonial history and the history of antisemitism – are key. The last section, which puts the first two in the context of totalitarianism, is important, but was misread in relation to the Cold War. Arendt was most concerned with fascist rather than Stalinist totalitarianism. Following Arendt, you have a number of figures who bring together questions of (anti-Black) racism and colonialism. Fanon is a prime example, who compared both in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2017 [1952]). He was influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre who, in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1995 [1948]), had begun to theorise French antisemitism. This work is referred to throughout *Black Skin, White Masks*. Quite a number of anti-colonial thinkers start with antisemitism as a way of accessing their own history of racist oppression. Aimé Césaire (2000 [1972]) is a key example who conceived of fascism as colonialism brought home to Europe. These anti-colonial intellectuals are followed by more contemporary thinkers. Gilroy's *Between Camps* (2004), for instance, is an influential work that follows on from the last chapter of *The Black Atlantic* (1993), which brings together Jewish and Black nationalism. Following Gilroy and the Arendtian turn at the beginning of the 21st century, there are a number of figures such as Michael Rothberg (2009), Aamir Mufti (2007), Maxim Silverman and Griselda Pollock (2014), who bring together antisemitism and racism in their work, looking at the intertwined histories of colonialism and the Holocaust in particular, rather than treating them as separate spheres. In other words, they are retrieving an anti-colonial tradition up until the 1960s.

RV: What about antisemitism and Islamophobia, so-called 'good' and 'bad' Jews or Muslims?

BC: I may have to harden my skin a little bit, but I would like to write a *Comment is Free* article about the way that racial discourse works in general in liberal culture. Similar processes are used to integrate minorities, to manage and control 'good' and 'bad' women, and to differentiate 'good' from 'bad' citizens in general. This discourse is so prevalent because it is promoted by successive governments in the name of integration into the liberal state. Jews historically experienced these processes which divided them up into good and bad, with 'good' Jews learning that they were made 'good' by the family, the community, entrepreneurship, professionalisation, suburbanisation. 'Bad' Jews, on the other hand, tended to be unassimilated, in a lower class, and lived together in inner city ghettos or enclaves. They spoke their own mother tongues instead of the national language, English, and could be rather too religious. State agencies often explicitly categorised them as 'bad', as did the Anglo-Jewish establishment and the law courts, as Didi Herman has shown (2011). If you look at case law throughout the 20th century, judges would sit there and would ask questions about where you live, where you were born; they would look at how you dressed, how you spoke, what schools your children went to. This is how you were judged in relation to liberal culture. So, the important point, the really important point, is that racial discourse and sexist discourse is mainstream, it's not extreme, it's not on the margins. To be sure, you'll find a lot of illiberal discourse obviously in social media. Before social media, you would have found a lot of illiberal discourse in private letters or diaries or in mass observation interviews, which was the Twitter or Facebook of the time. But, within a liberal culture, in relation to liberal so-called 'tolerance', it's the division into good and bad types that counts.

Now that's historically how Jews and women are categorised; today Muslims are very much categorised in similar terms, and there is a lot of literature on the 'good' Muslim in relation to the 'bad' Muslim. Just as Jews were also communists and Bolsheviks and anarchists and terrorists, the 'bad' Muslim is categorised in similar terms as beyond the pale. The 'good' Muslim is also about community, integration, religion – not too much but just enough religious practice, so that it remains mainly a private matter. So, the discourse hasn't changed that much. And this is why I bring together racism and antisemitism as mainstream discourses. And one of the reasons I would argue that the Labour party has got itself into such trouble is that it has incorporated these mainstream discourses and divided Jews up into good and bad. They're 'good' if they're good socialists, they support Corbyn, they are actively pro-Palestinian, and they don't have too much to do with the mainstream Jewish community.

They're 'bad' if they are part of the established community which is more conservative, with a small 'c'. There is of course an illiberal tradition of racialising Jews that is out there, but it seems to me that the focus in the first instance should be on the mainstream. This isn't about socialism or a specific left-wing tradition of antisemitism. My position is that antisemitism and Islamophobia, not to mention sexism, in the two main political parties is about the way that racial and sexual discourses work in general within liberal culture.

*HT:* What do you mean by supersessionist thinking? And what would be an alternative framework?

*BC:* I see that you are putting me on my hobby horse. My 2017 article referred to supersessionist thinking in relation to the anxiety of a host of new disciplines with regard to a supposedly older Jewish and Holocaust studies. Supersessionist thinking is a very old idea, and it can be traced back to replacement theology, which claims Christianity as a religion has superseded – or replaced – Judaism. According to this logic, the Christian version of the New and Old Testament is seen as the story of the New Testament superseding the Old. But there are many different kinds of Christian supersessionism. In short, you can have complete replacement – the new replacing the old – or you can have economic or fulfilment forms of supersessionism which many Christian theologians promote today. The use of 'economic' here is a bit like being economical with the truth. So, it is the tension between the new and the old which is of interest.

I apply supersessionist thinking in a secular sphere in terms of Jewish history being superseded or replaced by newer histories. If we look at diaspora studies, for instance, we find Robin Cohen's *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (2008), where the transcendence of the 'classic' Jewish diaspora is announced in the first chapter. Ghetto studies raise similar issues. If we think of the ghetto today it tends to be reduced to the African-American experience. Rather than acknowledging the rich social and cultural history of words such as 'diaspora' and 'ghetto', these tend to be reduced to separate spheres or forms of identity politics. If an older history is superseded by a newer history then there is a refusal to engage with plural or multiple histories of, in my examples, diaspora or ghetto. Antisemitism is sometimes regarded as a history that is confined to the past, to the Second World War, whereas racism or Islamophobia now applies to the present. But any visit to the great European capital cities will find intersecting histories of antisemitism overlain with anti-Black racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Roma racism. That is the problem with disciplinarity, new disciplines replacing old disciplines, as it leads to new histories replacing supposedly old histories rather than intersecting with



them. What does it mean when Cohen's *Global Diasporas* constructs the Jewish diaspora as 'classical'? My argument is that it makes this form of diaspora foundational whose only function is to be transcended by more contemporary diasporas. The same applies to ghettos: you can think about the Venetian ghetto as the founding ghetto that has been replaced by newer ways of conceiving the ghetto. So supersessionist thinking leads to foundational thinking. Both are reductive and binary. Foundational thinking also inflects the placing of the Holocaust in the West at the centre of our understanding of victimhood. In a critique of this approach, I follow Stef Craps (2013) who wants to decentre the history of the Holocaust, and I would agree with that. You can think about the Holocaust, for instance, in terms of wider histories – imperialism and colonialism in particular, as Mark Mazower has shown in his *Hitler's Empire* (2009 [2008]). One of the problems of thinking about the Holocaust foundationally is that it becomes an exceptional history that is fixed in the past and is uniquely unique.

What is an alternative framework? In general, we are in a period where we are looking for a vocabulary to try and name new phenomena. Postcolonialism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism are pretty exhausted terms. My approach is broadly intersectional, on the side of multiplicity, plurality, and multidirectionality.

HT: We are in the 'trans' era now, aren't we?

BC: Exactly. This applies to sexuality more than anything else, certainly when it comes to my students' generation, but also to history and politics. We are in a period of interregnum; as Antonio Gramsci famously stated, 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born' (1971: 276). I agree that we are in a 'trans' era precisely because, as Gramsci maintains, the old/new binary no longer works. We might yearn for an easy supersessionism but that model is defunct. What we need, instead, are new forms of comparativism that change each part that is compared. As you know, I have been engaging with the work of Zygmunt Bauman for some time now. He was constantly in search of a new vocabulary to make sense of the changing times. His late move from 'solid' to 'liquid' modernity is particularly interesting. He thought of the contemporary period in relation to liquidity or fluidity, which includes the difficulty of naming and the difficulty of being fixed or certain about your identity. And I think we need to recognise that. But next to such fluidity is our interconnected world and this obviously feeds into some of the most pressing issues of present times, such as global warming. So, my position is that we have both interconnection and fluidity, which moves us away from fixed histories, identity politics, and national ways of thinking. But I have to recognise that the last vestiges of nationalism, which we are

experiencing currently, indicate that the old is taking a really long time to die and the new is having a difficult birth, to say the least.

*RV:* What are the potentials and limitations of interdisciplinarity in this context? What do you mean by 'ill-discipline'?

*BC:* Ill-discipline was a term that I used in the introduction to the special issue of the journal *Wasafiri* (2009) that I edited. I went back to Hannah Arendt's idea of 'thinking without a banister' (qtd. in Bernstein, 1996: 41) or preconceived categories. Edward Said had a similar position when he characterised the intellectual as an 'amateur' rather than a 'professional' (1994: 49–62). By this he meant that thinkers should stand outside of institutions and speak in a language that is understood generally rather than by a specialised group of professionals. To be ill-disciplined means that you are interested in questions, not answers, and that you stand outside of disciplinary boundaries.

I think there is a tremendous potential in relation to interdisciplinarity, going beyond and outside disciplines. Being ill-disciplined means that we can have a richer sense of historical, political, and social connectedness – a richer sense of human connectedness – if we look beyond our own orthodoxies. Universities tend to speak the speech of interdisciplinarity and do very little in practice about it. The best model that I have experienced is in the United States where you have programmes that enable you to teach a particular subject across disciplines. From women studies to ghetto studies, to diaspora and minority studies, for example. But in the UK system such programmes are not funded. You are only acknowledged by the teaching you do within a particular department, or a particular school. So, I believe that there is a conflict between institutional thinking and Said's characterisation of the ideal intellectual. The future has to be outside of disciplines. Too many academics know more and more about less and less, which means that it is difficult to range across subjects, histories, and cultures. But that seems to me to be the only way forward in our increasingly globalised and, sadly, nationalist world.

*HT:* Speaking about 'thinking without a banister', can you elaborate on the ghetto and diaspora as travelling concepts? They both seem to build on the idea of borders, containment, and limitations, right?

*BC:* Yes. Well, both of these terms are multi-layered and Janus-faced. Diaspora points in two different directions as follows. I agree one direction is about borders and limits, moving from the periphery back to the centre where you belong, or where you are supposed to belong. Diaspora in that narrative is deeply conservative, with a small 'c', and reinforces the idea of a pure national culture. It mistakenly assumes that

people belong to certain places and not to other places. But there is a second version of diaspora which is transgressive; concerned with border-crossing, it undermines national cultures and is on the side of emergent or 'trans' identities. This version of diaspora reinforces all kinds of intertwinings, interconnections, and mixings. So, diaspora travels in two different directions.

Ghetto, historically, is not wholly a negative term and can lead to different forms of cultural flourishing – by men and by women, in science, literature, and theology – from the Harlem renaissance back to Venetian culture coming from Europe and North Africa. The ghetto of course can be a form of racial and urban segregation, on the side of deprivation and even genocide. But, historically, from the earliest ghettos to contemporary North America, the ghetto is also on the side of modernity – urban development, professionalisation, the growth of the state. The truth is that at any one time different versions of diaspora and the ghetto co-exist. The reason the concepts travel is that they have many different possible meanings that those who live these concept-experiences hold on to at any one time.

*RV:* To what extent is cosmopolitanism a useful concept?

*BC:* Cosmopolitanism is surprisingly still quite troubling, especially within postcolonial studies and especially here at Warwick. So, you have one version of postcolonial studies which essentially is a form of Marxian thinking which argues that the only real progressive form of postcolonialism is in relation to national cultures. After all, it was the nation that led to the overthrow of colonialism and can also, in its most benign form, liberate the wretched of the earth. This form of postcolonialism argues that you need a politics of national anti-colonialism to overthrow colonial power. It is uncannily related to Corbyn's intermittent left-wing Brexiteering where he thinks we'll be able to get socialism on our little island. So, within that version of postcolonialism, the figure of the cosmopolitanism is actually quite threatening. By extension, the diasporic transgressor or the hybrid or the boundary-crosser – figures who deny and question national boundaries – threaten the 'many not the few' politics of national anti-colonialism. For that reason, there is a strand within this version of postcolonialism that denigrates cosmopolitans, including Edward Said, who is dismissed as a humanist, or Salman Rushdie, who is dismissed as a mere individualist, or other cosmopolitan figures who are exiles and who don't see themselves as located within any one national culture. In this argument there is a 'good' and a 'bad' Said. As the proponent of a Palestinian national homeland he was, of course, fine. But as a humanist, even a global humanist, he was suspect. So, the cosmopolitan figure is surprisingly

threatening. This may be another reason why contemporary postcolonial studies is so ill-at-ease with the Jewish experience of crossing boundaries and focuses instead on the national solution to the Jewish question.

*HT:* Is it possible to avoid the reiteration of centre/margin, north/south, east/west in postcolonial studies?

*BC:* All I would say is national anti-colonialism reinforces these binaries. It's not straightforward, however, as colonialism *was* overthrown by nationalism. There is obviously a whole range of nationalisms, although progressive or socialist forms of nationalism have tended to be eroded over the years and turned into ethno-nationalisms as we can see in the examples of India and Israel. So, it certainly seems to me incumbent to challenge these various binaries while holding on to fundamental ways of thinking about the global poor, the underdeveloped world compared to the overdeveloped world, and the damage to the planet caused by global warming.

*HT:* And these binaries have been blurred, right? I'm thinking of the Portuguese brain drain to Angola, for example, where a traditionally Global North country loses its workforce to an African country.

*BC:* Yes, I agree with that absolutely. The influence of China also is key – especially in Africa, increasingly in India – and undercuts many conventional ways of thinking. This is state-controlled capitalism on a global scale, often intervening in the poorest regions as the USSR did during the Cold War. So, whilst we should not move away from the wealth divisions in the world, it is getting harder to divide the world up neatly. China will complicate the picture immeasurably in the next decade or so.

*HT:* We've already almost established that we're in the 'trans' phase. What does the term 'postcolonial' – postcolonial criticism, postcolonial theory – then still have to offer?

*BC:* This is a good question. I teach a contemporary literature course at Reading, and we always start with Salman Rushdie. But we start with Rushdie as a foundational text. We ask the question, where does the contemporary come from? The contemporary is another one of these words that is Janus-faced. Historically, what 'contemporary' means is something that happens *at the same time*. It was only about the 'now' and the 'new' from 1972 onwards, about the same time that postmodernism came into being. And, following the demise of postmodernism, postcolonialism, as I said earlier, has also become quite exhausted and has been expanded into a more planetary concept. Just as postcolonial literature has moved into world literature, postcolonial studies is now an aspect of global studies. The problem with postcolonial

studies is that it never really detached itself from regional studies. And my experience as a university teacher is that younger people want to think about the world as a whole, not just in terms of regions, even though some regions are more privileged than others.

We are all rightly thinking in terms of decolonisation rather than postcolonisation. This opens up so many vistas such as the project to decolonise the Frankfurt School. At the Bauman Institute, at the University of Leeds, we have been talking about decolonising Zygmunt Bauman's work, which he did himself to some extent. And that has been really productive. I like the idea of decolonising the university curriculum as well, which has had an impact on my English Literature department. But decolonisation can be misunderstood historically. We have to acknowledge our colonial history rather than expunge it. As Walter Benjamin said famously, 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (1969: 256). And I believe that it's very naïve to think that we can somehow supersede our colonial past as if it isn't also part of our present 'civilisation'. We are a product of colonialism – our culture, our houses, our universities, our financial institutions. I do not believe that *Rhodes Must Fall* but that Rhodes should stand for our colonial present and be acknowledged as a central part of our history and of the history of some of our most important institutions. I guess my position is that 'decolonisation' or anti-racism or anti-sexism are not quick fixes, as the issues they address are so deeply engrained in our culture. They can only be promoted effectively by teachers, professors, and thinking activists if we understand that it will take a long process of dialogue and education to rid ourselves of their pernicious effects.

*RV:* What is the role of activism in academia, if indeed there is one? How can we get away from moralising politics? What can academia do to intervene, with populism on the rise?

*BC:* Yes, this is a question I touched upon in my article 'Against Supersessionist Thinking' (2017), which got me into trouble. I remain critical of certain forms of unthinking activism and have been quite public about that and have intervened in various public seminars. That is why my starting point is Adorno's phrase 'thinking activism', which brings activism and thought together. Nuanced, complex thinking has to go together with activism or what is the point of being an academic or intellectual?

The phrase 'clickbait' comes to mind. So essentially, we're all too quick on social media to respond in an unnuanced and binary way. And the most common form of binarism is of course a form of moralism, dividing the world up into good and bad. Now what the world needs, and what

we all need to engage in, is more dialogue, not less. We need to be speaking to each other, not dehumanising the other. We need to be hearing each other, not shouting each other down. We need to be speaking across orthodoxies, across borders, across identities. We need to be listening and thinking more than we are. And the problem with moralising the world is that you simply stop listening to the other and the other becomes actually something, *someone*, a human being, that you can't listen to. They are put in a category that lessens their humanity. I categorise such moralism as unthinking activism as it divides the world up much too neatly into good and bad. There are fascists, or Nazis, on the one hand, and victims and survivors on the other. Social media obviously reinforces all of that. But what this means is that we only ever speak to the 'good', we only ever speak to a certain circle of people within our own goodness bubble, and we reject other human beings as beyond the pale. Thinking activists surely have to change this model of engagement.

Now I have been challenged by activists who say, 'But I am good, my politics are good. I believe in socialism. I believe in helping the poorest, the weakest. So, my politics *are good*'. But I think the problem is, and this is something that Bauman argued, that if you stop thinking about socialism, and say that your position is and always will be a socialist position, at that point you cease to be a socialist. Bauman, of course, lived through Stalinism. So, we need, it seems to me, to be constantly thinking, constantly questioning, constantly in dialogue with others – most importantly the people that we purport to help – because that is the only way we can bring about lasting change. The problem with categorising yourself as good is that immediately others are categorised as bad and are deemed beyond the pale. That is why moralisation remains a problem, as thought ceases the moment one moralises. As academics and intellectuals, the one skill we have is to think critically, and to talk to others, to be in dialogue with others. And that, it seems to me, is what Adorno meant by *thinking* activism, and it's that kind of activism, which combines nuance, complexity, *thought*, with action, that counts.

*HT*: Just a side note, but I was just thinking we're also teachers, right? So, there's a lot of space to problematise the neat categories that are out there and the vocabulary that is out there. I think this is one of the tasks that we face. Is that also perhaps where our activist potential is located?

*BC*: I could not agree more with this statement. Everything that I have said to you in this interview is something that I would say in the seminar room or lecture theatre. Influencing our students, our colleagues, our friends and relatives is certainly an important form of activism. We

encourage nuanced thought and complex argument and all forms of critical engagement so how can we abandon these hard-won humanising virtues in the name of an *unthinking* activism?

---

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the Institute of Advanced Study (IAS) and Connecting Cultures (Global Research Priorities) for their generous funding of the workshop, in connection with the Warwick Memory Group and the Frankfurt Memory Studies Platform.

The Warwick Memory Group, founded by Mark Philp (Department of History, University of Warwick) and IAS alumna Maria Roca Lizarazu (Department of Modern Languages, University of Birmingham), is an interdisciplinary research group which explores memory and memorialization. The group meets on a termly basis with sessions involving discussion of foundational and recent research in memory studies, as well as presentations from experts in the field.

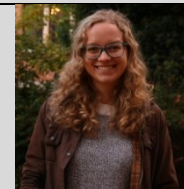
The Frankfurt Memory Studies Platform (FMSP) is an initiative of the [Forschungszentrum für Historische Geisteswissenschaften \(FzHG\)](#) at Goethe University Frankfurt. Founded by Astrid Erll (Department of English and American Studies), the FMSP brings together people and projects from history, sociology, literature, arts, media studies, psychology, and other relevant disciplines to foster dialogue about memory. It aims to shape the future of memory studies by developing and discussing new research questions and new methodologies. The activities of the FMSP revolve around three main research areas: transcultural memory, the mediality of memory, and memory and narrative.

---

Hanna Teichler holds a PhD from the department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Goethe University Frankfurt. She works as a research associate at the department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures at Goethe University Frankfurt. Her doctoral thesis engages with reconciliation processes in Australia and Canada and their resonance in contemporary transcultural literature and film. It is in preparation for publication. Her research interests include memory studies, Anglophone literatures and cultures, and postcolonial studies. A special issue of *Kairos: A Journal of Critical Inquiry*, co-edited with Silvia Anastasijevic and Magdalena Pfalzgraf, titled *Moving Centers & Travelling Cultures*, is forthcoming.



Rebekah Vince is a teaching fellow in French at Durham University, having completed an early career fellowship at the Institute of Advanced Study, University of Warwick. Her research moves at the intersection between postcolonial, Jewish, and memory studies, with a focus on French-speaking countries across North Africa and the Middle East. She completed her PhD, which explored Franco-Maghrebi perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, at the University of Warwick in 2018, and is pursuing postdoctoral research on memories of Jewish life in Muslim-majority countries across the Mediterranean. A volume on *Jewish-Muslim Interactions: Performing Cultures in North Africa and France*, co-edited with Sami Everett, is forthcoming with Liverpool University Press.





## References

- Bal, M., 2002. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto, Canada: Toronto University Press.
- Bauman, Z., 1991. *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z., 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Benjamin, W., 1969. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Ed. by Zohn, H. New York: Schocken Books.
- Bernstein, R. J., 1996. *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*. Oxford: Polity.
- Bhabha, H., 1983. 'The Other Question: Stereotype and Colonial Discourse', *Screen*, 24 (November–December), 18–36. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/24.6.18> [Accessed: 9 September 2019].
- Césaire, A., 2000 [1972]. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Trans. by Pinkham, J. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Cheyette, B., 1999. 'The Ethical Uncertainty of Prima Levi', *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, 48 (1), 57–67.
- Cheyette, B., 2009. 'Jewish/Postcolonial Diasporas: On Being Ill-disciplined', *Wasafiri*, 24 (1), 1–2. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690050802588950> [Accessed: 9 September 2019].
- Cheyette, B., 2014. *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Cheyette, B., 2017. 'Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 4 (3), 424–439. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.31> [Accessed: 9 September 2019].
- Cheyette, B., 2018a. "'Enthusiast": A Response to the Responses', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 5 (1), 129–133. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.48> [Accessed: 9 September 2019].
- Cheyette, B., 2018b. 'Postcolonialism and the Study of Anti-Semitism', *The American Historical Review*, 123 (4), 1234–1245. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhy028> [Accessed: 9 September 2019].
- Cheyette, B., 2020. *A Very Short Introduction to the Ghetto*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Clifford, J., 1986. 'Partial Truths'. In: Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. E., eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 1–26.
- Clifford, J., 1992. 'Traveling Cultures'. In: Grossberg, L., Nelson, C. and Treichler, Paul A., eds., *Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, pp. 96–116.
- Cohen, R., 2008. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Craps, S., 2013. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Delbo, C., 2001 [1990]. *Days and Memory*. Trans. and with a preface by Lamont, R. Evanston, Ill.: Marlboro Press/Northwestern.
- Erl, Astrid, 2011. 'Travelling Memory', *Parallax*, 17 (4), 4–18. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605570> [Accessed: 9 September 2019].
- Fanon, F., 2017 [1967]). *Black Skin, White Masks*. New edn. Intro by Gilroy, P. Trans. by Markmann, C. L. London: Pluto Press.
- Freitas, V., 2018. 'Writing in Inclement Weather: The Dialectics of Comparing Minority Experiences in Threatening Environments', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 5 (1), 106–114. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.47> [Accessed: 9 September 2019].
- Gilroy, P., 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Gilroy, P., 2004. *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Goetschel, W., and Quayson, A., 2016. 'Introduction: Jewish Studies and Postcolonialism', *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 3 (1), 1–9. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.35> [Accessed: 9 September 2019].
- Gramsci, A., 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Ed. and trans. by Hoare, Q. and Nowell-Smith, G. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Herman, D., (2011). *An Unfortunate Coincidence: Jews, Jewishness, and English Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levi, P., 2013 [1986]. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Trans. by Rosenthal, R. London: Abacus.

Mazower, M., 2009 [2008]. *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe*. London: Penguin.

McLeod, J., 2018. 'Figuring and Transfiguring: A Response to Bryan Cheyette', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 5 (1), 90–97. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.46> [Accessed: 9 September 2019].

Mufti, A., 2007. *Enlightenment in the Colony: the Jewish question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture*. Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Pollock, G. and Silverman M., 2014. *Concentrationary Memories: Totalitarian Terror and Cultural Resistance*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris.

Robins, S., 2018. 'Thinking Through and Beyond "Competitive Memory" and Hierarchies of Suffering', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 5 (1), 98–105. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.43> [Accessed 9 September 2019].

Roca Lizarazu, M., and Vince, R., 2018. 'Memory Studies Goes Planetary: An Interview with Stef Craps'. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 5 (2), 1–15. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v5i2.245> [Accessed 9 September 2019].

Roemer, N., 2018. 'On Cheyette: "Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora"', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 5 (1), 123–128. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.42> [Accessed 9 September 2019].

Rothberg, M., 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Rothberg, M., 2018. 'For Activist Thought: A Response to Bryan Cheyette', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 5 (1), 115–122. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.37> [Accessed 9 September 2019].

Said, E., 1994. *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. New York: Vintage.

Said, E., 2003 [1978]. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.

Sartre, J-P., 1995 [1948]. *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Trans. by Becker, G. J. New York: Schocken Books.

Semprún, J., 1997. *Literature or Life*. Trans. by Coverdale, L. New York: Viking.

Spivak, G. C., 1988. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. In: Grossberg, L. and Nelson, C., eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press; Basingstoke: Macmillan, pp. 271–313.

Young, R. J. C., 1995. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge.

---

**To cite this article:**

Teichler, H., and Vince, R., 2019. 'Challenging Binaries and Unfencing Fields: An Interview with Bryan Cheyette'. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 7(1), 94-113. Retrieved from: <http://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v7i1.517>.