

---

H-France Review Vol. 16 (August 2016), No. 169

Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. 352 pp. \$37.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13: 978-0823265480.

Review by Zoë Roth, Durham University.

“Memory is on the move,” writes Debarati Sanyal in *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance*, describing how globalization, migration, and digital technologies have cracked open the “container of the nation state” of collective memory.<sup>[1]</sup> The Holocaust, still a paradigm for theorizing memory in modernity, has similarly changed shape, no longer one event but many and emerging out of the *longue durée* of empire and colonization. Sanyal’s book, which explores how postwar French and francophone culture confronts Holocaust memory, contributes to scholarship by Marianne Hirsch, Michael Rothberg, and Andreas Huyssen that seeks to understand how memory of the Holocaust travels across generational, geographical, and cultural spaces. *Memory and Complicity* offers two important contributions to the field of memory studies. First, it specifically addresses French and francophone cultural responses to the Holocaust within the context of colonialism and contemporary responses to terror. Second, it advances a major corrective to trauma theory, which has often been criticized for overly identifying with the experience of victims.

French literature features heavily in trauma and memory studies scholarship. But this archive has often been implicitly “translated” for a field dominated by English studies. Sanyal, a professor of French at Berkeley, brings a close knowledge of the specificity of the French context to bear on these works. Given how the Holocaust in France and its later remembrance was closely tied to its colonial past, French and francophone responses to the Holocaust represent a unique site through which to explore the intersection of Holocaust memory and the remembrance of other traumatic events. Indeed, French and francophone cultural production cannot be neatly divided between a pre- and postwar period, as Hannah Feldman has argued, as the country became embroiled in a series of decolonization wars in Africa and Asia just as reconstruction was beginning in the Hexagon.<sup>[2]</sup> The post-WWII corpus Sanyal explores, which includes both canonical authors (Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre) and relatively recent entries in the French literary market (Jonathan Littell, Boualem Sansal) often attest to these ongoing battles within French culture and politics.

Sanyal’s most important contribution, however, is in acknowledging that the intersections of different memory cultures, while inevitable and productive, can also be dangerous. Just as she makes an important intervention into trauma studies’ tendency to blur the line between experiencing a traumatic event such as the Holocaust and vicariously remembering the event through stories, narratives, and images, so too does she trace the ethical limits of multidirectional models of memory. The concept of “complicity” does much of the theoretical work in the book. It provides a framework to critique experiential and affective responses to trauma that invite problematic identifications with victims. Whereas “complicity” in English evokes largely negative associations with collaboration or collusion, in French it also entails a sense of intimacy. Complicity, then, embodies both the danger and potential inherent in the intersection of different violent or traumatic histories. Complicity also evokes the

condition of the information and virtual era, in which the 24/7 news cycle makes us all bystanders, spectators, and consumers, complicit in a carefully curated sequence of catastrophic events. Rather than collapsing into a kind of armchair activism, Sanyal is concerned with the way complicity might make us committed to effective and transformative acts of justice. Complicity “is not a fixed stance but a structure of engagement that produces ethical and political reflection” (p. 17).

Rather than conceiving of complicity in juridical terms, Sanyal addresses what happens to memory when it becomes part of aesthetic modes and figures, such as allegory, irony, self-reflexiveness, and the palimpsest. By focusing closely on the work of representation, Sanyal unpicks how highly mediated forms—films, novels, art, but also media coverage—produce the impression we have lived through traumas as passive “victims of history” rather than “potential actors” (p. 8). The attention to aesthetic figures, which necessarily escape a definitive interpretation, also challenges historical paradigms that seek to produce a master narrative of the past. Lastly, Sanyal is concerned above all with the act that vivifies aesthetic figures, i.e., reading, which she considers as a form of ethical engagement—a process, finally, “where an ethics of memory in motion can develop” (p. 22). By refusing to fall into the trap of seeing representations as reflections of political and historical events—that is, by remaining attentive to “the theoretical tendency to collapse events and their representation” (p. 9)—Sanyal masterfully fuses formal analysis and historical interpretation. At the same time, she explores the kind of political work representations do by imagining the intersection of different histories. Beyond its sensitive readings of a range of works and authors, then, Sanyal’s book advocates a politically committed understanding of aesthetic works as capable of acting upon us to be ethically responsible—and thus implicitly promotes the value of the humanities. Her book will appeal to a wide array of scholars and students working in trauma, memory, and Holocaust studies; French and francophone literature and visual culture; and history.

The book is structured chronologically, beginning with a discussion of the Holocaust and then moving through postwar French and francophone literature, film, and visual culture until the present day. The book’s dense first chapter, “A Soccer Match in Auschwitz: Passing Trauma in Holocaust Studies,” plots out the conceptual and theoretical stakes of Sanyal’s argument via an analysis of Primo Levi’s concept of the “gray zone” and the work of the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben. Sanyal opens the chapter with an extended discussion of an anecdote about a soccer match in Auschwitz between the SS and the Sonderkommando, special squads of Jewish prisoners who led people to the gas chambers and disposed of the bodies. The game, which stages an impossible equality between SS officers and Jewish prisoners, embodies the logic of the gray zone. It blurs the distinction between perpetrator, victim, witness, and bystander, and produces “a fiction of normalcy” (p. 26) that elides the violent reality of the camp.

Sanyal astutely lays out the problems that emerge when trauma and Holocaust studies scholars employ the gray zone as a wider paradigm to understand the guilt, innocence, shame, and complicity of people who have no first-hand experience of or connection to the camps. Levi insisted the gray zone was particular to the concentration camp, but once removed from this highly specific context, “Levi’s gray zone is recast as a trauma that ‘we’ continue to inhabit and perpetuate at all times and in all places” (p. 27). Any possible advantages the conflation of the gray zone with a universal model for our relationship with history might serve, say by reminding us that the violence of the past continues to shape the present, are outweighed by the risks of “erasing the specificity of the Holocaust *and* conflating the distinct subject positions of victim, executioner, accomplice, witness, and secondary witness” (p. 27). In this (im)moral bog, guilt and trauma circulate freely, and anyone can experience trauma and vicimization, including perpetrators.

The strength of Sanyal’s argument comes from her close attention to the processes of representation at work in Levi’s anecdote. Levi prefaces the anecdote by pointing out how it was first recounted by a Hungarian physician who worked in the Sonderkommando for Mengele. The story’s *mis-en-abyme* function is then reinforced by the way Levi describes the two teams as “a group *representing* the SS on

guard at the crematorium and a group *representing* the Special Squad.”[3] The interchangeability of executioners and victims in the soccer match does not signify that perpetrators can be traumatized like those they torment. Instead, Levi’s telling of the anecdote reveals “a politically expedient fiction” (p. 36). It is “this mimesis, this identification or imitation, or exchange of roles,” which elides the difference between executioner and victim.[4]

To illustrate her argument, Sanyal turns to the contemporary Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, whose work has consistently used the Holocaust and the concentration camp as a “paradigm for modern political life” (p. 30). For Agamben, the camp is not an aberration but the underlying structure of modern society, even liberal democracies. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben projects Levi’s anecdote of the soccer match onto the television screens of contemporary households, turning us all into complicit witnesses. Agamben’s formulation is helpful to the extent that it acknowledges how our actions might unknowingly reproduce violence. Sanyal sensitively critiques the universalization of shame Agamben carries out. Can we really say, she rightfully asks, if “the genocide masked by a game in Auschwitz is fundamentally the same as the violences masked by contemporary mass culture”? (p. 32).

By expanding the gray zone beyond the spatial, historical, and juridical boundaries of the concentration camp, Agamben invites a highly problematic identification with the victim in which the boundaries between victim and perpetrator become dangerously blurred. This partly results from the way Agamben overlooks the self-reflexive aspect of Levi’s narrative—that is, the way it draws attention to the act of representation. Once the players and bystanders of the match are no longer aesthetic figures who focus attention on the process of dehumanization in the camps, the non-survivor Agamben is drawn to identify with them, collapsing the distance between primary and secondary witnesses and erasing the gray zone’s particularity. Agamben’s identification with the traumatized witness and the conflation of representation into experience is a key constituent of what Sanyal terms “traumatic complicity” (p. 12). Instead of shame, the affective mode most commonly associated with trauma studies, Sanyal argues that traumatic complicity is a more accurate understanding of the “paradigm of implication” that underpins how much canonical trauma studies scholarship theorizes the subject’s relation to history (p. 45). Traumatic complicity features three main characteristics: “the postmemorial secondary witness’s identification with the traumatized survivor/witness, the confusion of survivor memory and cultural postmemory (in which we assimilate ‘floating’ mediatized memories), and the conflation of experience and representation” (p. 45).

Whereas Agamben reads the gray zone and the camp—the most extreme “state of exception”—as a paradigm defining the norm, Sanyal then goes on to read the gray zone as an allegory. In contrast to a paradigm, which “exemplifies” and produces an overarching narrative, allegory “speaks otherwise” (p. 52). Aesthetic modes like allegory, irony, and analogy are self-reflexive, constantly drawing attention to the work of representation, and produce multiple narratives. Where paradigm installs a singular interpretation that collapses historical specificity, allegory invites forms of reading able to compare distinct phenomena. Reading allegorically thus offers a method for tackling ongoing attempts in Holocaust and comparative genocide studies to acknowledge historical, political, and cultural links between different genocidal events without constructing a hierarchy of genocides.

Sanyal remains attentive to allegory’s problems, namely that, while it might offer a useful tool under regimes of censorship, it risks becoming a purely textual operation or an empty parable that loses its political force in other contexts. But it is precisely allegory’s self-reflexiveness that “has much to teach us about the political value and the ethical limits of drawing comparisons between distinctive histories of violence” (p. 53), enabling us to associate different phenomena, such as the Holocaust and colonialism, while resisting the identification of one with the other. In contrast to “traumatic complicity,” then, Sanyal proposes a method of reading informed by “ironic complicity,” a mode or strategy that, at the moment readers, viewers, and secondary witnesses are invited to identify with violence, disavows this identification, drawing attention to the representational forces at play in this process. The

methodologies of ironic complicity and allegory underlie the book's objective to understand the ethical force of aesthetics and reading. In the chapters that follow, Sanyal explores the way the Holocaust, and in particular Auschwitz, has served as an allegory that has mobilized political struggles, from anticolonial movements to right-wing ideology.

In chapter two, "Concentrationary Migrations in and around Albert Camus," Sanyal puts into motion the theoretical and methodological strategies of ironic complicity and allegory through an astute survey of the work of the arch-allegorist, Camus. Sanyal first lays out the ideological stakes in the reception of Camus's life and oeuvre, which have become battlegrounds for not only French, but also global memory and politics. Competing historicizations ranging from committed resistant to colonial apologist and, more recently, unwitting pawn in post-9/11 neo-conservatism have produced a "Camus effect" (p. 59), enabling his texts to be mobilized for a range of political positions across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But it is precisely the "plasticity of his allegories, their allusion to multiple—if not contradictory—legacies of violence" (p. 59) that leads Sanyal to read not only the intersections of histories of the Holocaust and colonialism in his work, but to also read Camus's work as providing a model for reading aesthetic figures in history/historical allegory aesthetically. By tracing these operations in Camus's texts and their reception, Sanyal argues that Camus enables readers to envision multiple histories—the Holocaust *and* colonialism—without subsuming one or the other in an over-determined paradigm of interpretation.

Underlying the chapter is a theme that Sanyal returns to explicitly at the book's end, and which informs many of her close readings: Camus's condemnation of Vichy collaborators for their failures of the imagination. Like Hannah Arendt's excoriation of Eichmann's inability "to think from the standpoint of somebody else," Camus mobilizes the ethical possibilities of the imagination as a way of overcoming abstraction and recognizing the embodied existence of people subjected to violence, such as those who suffered from Vichy's crimes.<sup>[5]</sup> Like ironic complicity, however, the call to think from another's perspective does not invite the kind of identification that would lead us back to vicarious trauma and victimization. Rather, it entails a more open-ended process of contamination embodied in the figure of the plague, in which the virus's endless recombination and mutation resists "the fixity of paradigm" (p. 69).

Chapter three, "Auschwitz as Allegory: From *Night and Fog* to Guantánamo Bay," follows on from Camus's Holocaust allegories through an analysis of Alain Resnais's extraordinary concentration camp documentary, *Nuit et brouillard* (1955), a film Resnais famously asserted was actually about Algeria. *Nuit et brouillard* is the embodiment of allegory: it never identifies the Jewish specificity of the Holocaust in order to evoke the Algerian war, which was politically censored and psychologically repressed in the Hexagon. The film's allegorical register is made manifest in its aesthetics. Think of the opening shots that pan across fields in which the ruins of concentration camps gradually come into view, where there exists "plus aucun pas que le nôtre."<sup>[6]</sup> These footsteps in the present then lead into an abrupt transition to archival footage of Nazis marching towards the future—a future in which the French government will construct concentration camps on French soil to incarcerate Algerians. By inviting such forms of historical comparison while also exchanging the specificity of the Jewish Holocaust for the indeterminate status of the *guerre sans nom*, *Nuit et brouillard* encapsulates both the opportunities and dangers of allegory. Sanyal then traces the ethical stakes of *Nuit et brouillard*'s aesthetics across a series of films that represent the consequences of colonial violence and the war on terror.

Leading on from this kind of politically committed aesthetic work, chapter four explores the thinking of a key promoter of *la littérature engagée*, Sartre. Focusing on his aesthetic rather than philosophical work, Sanyal zooms in on the figure of crabs in Sartre's play, *Les séquestrés d'Altona* (1958), in which the creatures' sideways scuttling disrupts paradigmatic, chronological, or hierarchical historical interpretations. Sanyal's discussion of torture is also a welcome addition to scholarship on the body in pain, which continues to be dominated by Elaine Scarry's notion of pain's unrepresentable or

unspeakable nature.[7] Allegory “speaks otherwise” about torture that gives representational force to embodied subjects who too often become abstract bodies in debates about torture (p. 52).

Chapters five and six leapfrog to twenty-first-century francophone literature and ongoing debates about identity politics, history, and memory in France. In “Reading Nazi Memory in Jonathan Littell’s *The Kindly Ones*,” Sanyal explores anxieties around the rise of perpetrator narratives and the kinds of identifications they might invite. As with her analysis of Camus, she resists taking sides in relation to Littell’s hotly debated fictional memoir of an incestuous, matricidal, Franco-German Nazi jurist who finds himself at many of the major sites of genocidal extermination in the European theatre of war. The narrator’s “ironic complicity” reroutes the kind of vicarious traumatization Sanyal critiques earlier on, enabling us, in an echo of Arendt, to imagine being where we are not. Arendt’s kaleidoscopic *The Origins of Totalitarianism* also provides the novel’s topology, which Sanyal rightly maps out across a range of sites of imperial and colonial violence, including Eastern Europe, South Africa, the United States, and Algeria.

Chapter six explores the politics of French national memory in the era of the *guerre des mémoires*. Legislation codifying French collective memory (the Loi Gayssot [1990], the Loi Taubira [2001], and the Loi Mekachara [2005]) provides the backdrop for Sanyal’s exploration of two Algerian writers imagining the reverberations of Holocaust memory in the age of global terror. Assia Djebar’s *Les nuits de Strasbourg* (1997) addresses how the colonial specter of Algeria haunts the “capital” of transnational Europe. Boualem Sansal’s *Le Village de l’Allemand* acts as a warning for the kind of dehistoricized historicization that occurs when writers eschew the self-reflexive mode of allegory. Sansal’s novel falls into the trap of setting up a “clash of civilizations” between Western liberal democracies and Islamic fundamentalism that risks reproducing earlier cycles of violence.

One question I am left with reading *Memory and Complicity* is what kind of present and future forms of politically committed practice might her ethical mode of reading produce? How can aesthetic figures animate political solidarity for Syrian refugees, for example, that goes beyond seeing them as tragic characters? How can allegory and ironic complicity, which Sanyal rightly employs for their plasticity and mobility, counteract neo-liberalism’s celebration of flexibility? But it is precisely in her engagement with practices of reading and interpretation that Sanyal’s book is most original and urgent. Sanyal lays out the stakes—and dangers—of allegorical thinking in *Memory and Complicity*, and I look forward to discovering how her future research will think about the ethical stakes of aesthetics in a world in which both the ethical and the aesthetic seem on increasingly precarious ground.

#### NOTES

[1] Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, trans. Assenka Oksiloff (Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 2006), p. 2.

[2] Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2014).

[3] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1991), p. 38. My italics.

[4] Levi, p. 32.

[5] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin), p. 49.

[6] Alain Resnais, dir., *Nuit et brouillard* (1955), as cited by Sanyal, p. 104.

---

[7] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Zoë Roth  
Durham University  
[zoe.roth@durham.ac.uk](mailto:zoe.roth@durham.ac.uk)

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172