

Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance. By Debarati Sanyal. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. Pp. 341. USD \$37.00. Paperback.

In his essay “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life” (1874), Friedrich Nietzsche admonished his readers that they should serve history and remember the past, only to the extent that this activity enhanced the purposes of life. By “life,” Nietzsche meant the deliberate and determined cultivation of new cultural forms and values. Only through this enterprise, Nietzsche bellowed, could one hope to avoid a mediocre existence characterized by ironic resignation.

Though she is more concerned with ethics and politics, as opposed to Nietzsche’s cultural program, Debarati Sanyal, Professor of French at University of California, Berkeley, starts from a similar conviction in her study of Holocaust memory and the current paradigms of remembrance. History and memory matter, for Sanyal, when they work to “energize discourses of recognition, solidarity, liberation, and justice” (17).

Memory and Complicity is a book about “the uses of Holocaust memory” (2) in French literature and francophone culture, spanning from the period immediately after World War Two until the present. Sanyal focuses, in particular, on the migration of Holocaust remembrance, or what she calls “the Holocaust’s unmooring from its historical occurrence, its movement across space and time” (3). In other words, *Memory and Complicity* is not a study of Holocaust history, so much as an exploration of the ways in which the Holocaust has been employed as a cultural symbol (i.e., metaphor or allegory) and made to stand in for other traumatic histories and memories.

Keenly aware of the debates concerning the Holocaust’s uniqueness, Sanyal nevertheless works to understand how “the universalization of the Holocaust” (4) has worked, at different times and places, either to nourish or block political and ethical engagement with other violent pasts, e.g., late-colonial violence in French Algeria, the French and American interventions in Vietnam, and practices of rendition, arbitrary detention, and torture in the post-9/11 war on terror. She pursues this program through close readings of major works by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Alain Resnais, while also considering fiction by lesser-known authors, including Jonathan Littell, Assia Djebar, and Boualem Sansal.

Before she engages these works directly, however, Sanyal begins with Primo Levi and his meditations on ethical ambiguity inside the Nazi extermination camps (chapter one). Sanyal worries that Levi’s well-traveled concept of “the gray zone” and his allowance that perpetrators and victims sometimes appeared to swap roles, ultimately (and unfairly, she argues), helped to instill a memory paradigm, which she describes in terms of “traumatic complicity” (45). The hallmarks of this paradigm, according to Sanyal, are ruthless self-condemnation, disabling shame, and, consequently, discouragement from acting in the face of ongoing injustice. Citing Robert Jay Lifton’s work on Vietnam veterans and survivor’s guilt and

highlighting Lifton's distinction between "static and animating forms of guilt," Sanyal argues that the traumatic complicity framework, by encouraging an especially intense feeling of responsibility for both historical and contemporary injustices, imparts a "hypertrophic and pathological susceptibility to guilt" (54). This "anxiety of responsibility," she continues, paralyzes bystanders and witnesses by means of self-reproach and ego depletion, rather than encouraging the solidarities and interventions that are crucial for preventing and/or curtailing mass atrocity.

To recharge this diminished capacity for political engagement, Sanyal proposes that traumatic complicity ought to be reworked into "ironic complicity" (54). Such a strategy, she argues, would allow us to simultaneously deepen *and* suspend our identification with histories of mass violence in cases where we are called upon to witness the suffering of others. While Sanyal's rhetorical move is subtle, this shift, she argues, from full enclosure (i.e., our being complicit in the violence we witness) to partial distance (i.e., our being responsible for what we witness without necessarily being culpable) would allow for a more reliable and effective practice of engagement and activism. "An animating memory in complicity," she writes, "has the potential to uproot our accepted ways of inhabiting the past and present, to disrupt established patterns of memory, and to light up alternative pathways of collective remembrance" (55).

Following from this theoretical framework, Sanyal turns to Camus (chapter two) and what she calls the "concentrationary migrations" that appear throughout his writings. Focusing on *The Plague* and *The Fall*, but touching on other works, too, Sanyal explores the ways in which Camus, while addressing himself to other historical episodes, is nevertheless concerned with the Holocaust and with the responsibilities that arise from what she terms "our ongoing collective complicity" in its violence (90). Is it acceptable, Sanyal wonders, for Camus to put the "traumatic legacy of the Holocaust in dialogue with other histories of violence, notably colonialism" (61)? Or, rather, given that Camus has already intertwined these histories, what are the consequences of his doing so?

In Sanyal's reading, the world evoked by Camus "is one in which each subject is caught up in the abuse of power that perpetuates the gray zone" (92). His novels "open a passage from Auschwitz to Algeria" by revealing how "each historical subject is locked into an unconscious, structurally determined, collusion with terror" (92). The importance of such collusion rests in what Sanyal calls Camus's "faith in a politics of reparation and not a politics of expiation" (92). What moves Sanyal—finally—is Camus's insistence that historical guilt is worthless (he used the term "disgusting"), unless acknowledgment of complicity with violence is matched by a concrete program for "dealing with the consequences" (92). To conscript Holocaust history for the purpose of allegory, Sanyal argues, would be an offense against the victims and their memory, if it did not lead to a definite commitment to historical justice.

Chapter three, on Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*, proceeds similarly. Sanyal asks: "What are the implications of a documentary [...] when it abandons the objectivity associated with its medium, crafting instead an experience of complicity in the face of historical catastrophe" (100). In other words, how should we regard a Holocaust film, which is more concerned with its viewers, i.e., those who watch/witness, than it is with the victims of the Judeocide? By confronting his audience with a pattern of violence that is "continuous with Western modernity's instrumental logic of productivity," Resnais "compels us to feel the proximities between the horror of extermination and patterns of everyday production and consumption" (107). But why? And at what price?

According to Sanyal, *Night and Fog* (1956) ought to be seen as "one of the earliest intellectual mobilizations against the Algerian War" (128). She cites Resnais as one of the "pioneers in the disclosure of a concentrationary topography that was reaching into the French homeland" (128). Arguing for the film's continued relevance, Sanyal highlights an analogous pattern of violence at Guantánamo Bay (144). The "bacillus" that was propagated in Auschwitz and Algeria, Sanyal writes, now circulates in "capitalist and imperialist itineraries that could at any point coalesce into new regimes of terror" (145).

The rest of the book is equally evocative. In chapter four, Sanyal links Sartre's *The Condemned of Altona* (by way of Agamben's state of exception) to the interrogation techniques used at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. Chapter five explores Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly Ones* (specifically, its "shocking analogy between perpetrators and victims") in the context of recent debates over the intellectual coherence of genocide studies. Finally, in chapter six, Sanyal engages recent works by Djebbar and Sansal, two francophone Algerians, in order to "investigate the possibilities, but also the limits, of a creolized, multidirectional, and multicultural remembrance of historical violences such as the Holocaust and colonialism" (220).

Memory and Complicity, as one can probably tell, is heavily influenced by literary and critical theory. Besides Agamben, readers should expect encounters with Foucault, Adorno, Derrida, de Man, and others from the poststructuralist canon. Sanyal is also deeply engaged with the literature on memory studies and trauma theory, e.g., Cathy Caruth, Didier Fassin, and Shoshana Felman. While she puts most of these thinkers to productive use, Sanyal's pre-occupation with theory leads, at times, to a writing style that may test the patience of historians and others concerned with the politics of the past in contemporary societies.

On the whole, though, *Memory and Complicity* makes for interesting and useful reading. Sanyal points to the ways in which film and literature can serve as potential venues for historical dialogue, and she alerts readers to the ethico-political implications of what appear to be, at first pass, cultural and aesthetic choices. The works that Sanyal unpacks show, in ways that the social scientific literature often fails to, how art can "fold together" the histories and memories claimed by different "subject positions" (1). Moreover, it is hard, after reading *Memory and Complicity*,

not to want to explore (or return to) the works, for which Sanyal provides such probing guidance.

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References

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