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Multidirectional Memory:  
Remembering the Holocaust in  
Age of Decolonization

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Introduction: Theorizing  
Multidirectional Memory  
in a Transnational Age

Beyond Competitive Memory

In a characteristically provocative essay on the relationship between racism and anti-Semitism in contemporary America, the literary critic Walter Benn Michaels considers the seemingly incompatible legacies of slavery and the Nazi genocide in the United States:

Why is there a federally funded U.S. Holocaust Museum on the Mall in Washington, DC? . . . The difficulty of coming up with a satisfactory answer to this question has produced a certain exasperation among African Americans, memorably expressed by the notorious black racist Khalid Muhammad when, in the wake of a visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, he told an audience at Howard University on 3 April 1994 that “the black holocaust was 100 times worse than the so-called Jew Holocaust. You say you lost six million. We question that, but . . . we lost 600 million. Schindler’s List,” as Muhammad put it, “is really a swindler’s list.” The force of these remarks consists not in the absurd Holocaust denial but in the point—made precisely by his visit to the Holocaust Museum—that commemoration of the Nazi murder of the Jews on the Mall was in fact another kind of Holocaust denial. Why should what the Germans did to the Jews be treated as a crucial event in American history, especially when, given the absence

of any commemoration of American racism on the Mall, what Americans did to Black people is not?<sup>1</sup>

In this passage Michaels takes up one of the most agonizing problems of contemporary multicultural societies: how to think about the relationship between different social groups' histories of victimization. This problem, as Michaels recognizes, also fundamentally concerns collective memory, the relationship that such groups establish between their past and their present circumstances. A series of questions central to this book emerges at this point: What happens when different histories confront each other in the public sphere? Does the remembrance of one history erase others from view? When memories of slavery and colonialism bump up against memories of the Holocaust in contemporary multicultural societies, must a competition of victims ensue?

Michaels's stance toward his example in his essay on anti-Semitism and racism is somewhat cagey; he acknowledges Muhammad's racism and the "absurd" nature of his Holocaust denial, yet he seems simultaneously to embrace a fundamental feature of Muhammad's argument. Like Muhammad, Michaels implies that collective memory obeys a logic of scarcity: if a Holocaust Museum sits on the Mall in Washington (or just off of it, as is the actual case), then Holocaust memory must literally be crowding the memory of African American history out of the public space of American collective consciousness. There are plenty of legitimate ways to engage critically with the fact and function of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and there is certainly a great need to engage with the ongoing fact of American racism, but Michaels's argument begs some important questions: Does collective memory really work like real-estate development? Must the claims of memory always be calculated according to their relevance for national history? Is "commemoration of the Nazi murder of the Jews" really a form of "Holocaust denial"?

Although few people would put the matter in such controversial terms, many other commentators, both inside and outside the academy, share the understanding of memory and identity articulated by Michaels. This study is motivated by a sense of the urgency of the vexing issues that Michaels raises, but it challenges the widely held ideas about the nature of collective memory and its links to group identity that undergird Michaels's provocations. Like Michaels and, indeed, Muhammad, many people

assume that the public sphere in which collective memories are articulated is a scarce resource and that the interaction of different collective memories within that sphere takes the form of a zero-sum struggle for preeminence. Because many of these same commentators also believe that a direct line runs between remembrance of the past and the formation of identity in the present, they understand the articulation of the past in collective memory as a struggle for recognition in which there can only be winners and losers, a struggle that is thus closely allied with the potential for deadly violence. While there can be no doubt that many manifestations of contemporary violence, including war and genocide, are in part the product of resentful memories and conflicting views of the past, I argue that the conceptual framework through which commentators and ordinary citizens have addressed the relationship between memory, identity, and violence is flawed. Against the framework that understands collective memory as *competitive* memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as *multidirectional*: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative. This shift in perspective allows us to see that while Muhammad and Michaels both speak of Holocaust memory as if it blocks memory of slavery and colonialism from view (the model of competitive memory), they actually use the presence of widespread Holocaust consciousness as a platform to articulate a vision of American racism past and present. This interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, intercultural dynamic that I call multidirectional memory.

In focusing on the politics of commemoration, Michaels criticizes the role memory plays in public discourse about the past and its impact on the present. As its title indicates, this book also places memory at the center of analysis, although it adopts a less skeptical position toward its object of study than does Michaels. But what is memory? And why does it feature so prominently in this book? These are crucial questions that I will return to below and throughout this study. The literature on memory is enormous and continues to grow at a staggering rate—a growth that has itself become an object of study!<sup>2</sup> For now, let me note the useful minimalist definition from Richard Terdiman that orients this book: memory is the past made present. The notion of a "making present" has two important corollaries: first, that memory is a contemporary phenomenon,

something that, while concerned with the past, happens in the present; and second, that memory is a form of work, working through, labor, or action.<sup>3</sup> As Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche write, “Memory [is] a symbolic representation of the past embedded in social action”; it is “a set of practices and interventions.”<sup>4</sup> *Multidirectional Memory* considers a series of interventions through which social actors bring multiple traumatic pasts into a heterogeneous and changing post–World War II present. Concerned simultaneously with individual and collective memory, this book focuses on both agents and sites of memory, and especially on their interaction within specific historical and political contexts of struggle and contestation. Making memory the focus of this work allows me to synthesize concerns about history, representation, biography, memorialization, and politics that motivate many scholars working in cultural studies.<sup>5</sup> Not strictly separable from either history or representation, memory nonetheless captures simultaneously the individual, embodied, and lived side *and* the collective, social, and constructed side of our relations to the past.

In both its individual and collective versions, memory is closely aligned with identity, one of the most contested terms in contemporary debate. What is the relation between memory and identity? As readers familiar with the writings of Walter Benn Michaels will know, his purpose in propounding an implicit theory of competitive memory is not in any way to valorize memory or collective identity. Indeed, much of Michaels’s work has offered a thoroughgoing critique of both memory and identity and what he sees as the straight line that connects them in mutual confirmation. This attitude certainly differentiates him from Khalid Muhammad, who enters the arena of competitive memory in order to stake out a claim for a militant black identity. My perspective differs from both of these polarized positions. Unlike Michaels, I don’t see all claims of memory or identity as necessarily tainted; instead, I see such claims as necessary and inevitable. But unlike Muhammad, I reject the notion that identities and memories are pure and authentic—that there is a “we” and a “you” that would definitively differentiate, say, black and Jewish identities and black and Jewish relations to the past. I differ from both of these positions because I reject two central assumptions that they share: that a straight line runs from memory to identity and that the only kinds of memories and identities that are therefore possible are ones that exclude

elements of alterity and forms of commonality with others. Our relationship to the past does partially determine who we are in the present, but never straightforwardly and directly, and never without unexpected or even unwanted consequences that bind us to those whom we consider other. When the productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory is explicitly claimed, as it is in many of the cases I discuss in this book, it has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice.

The understanding of collective remembrance that I put forward in *Multidirectional Memory* challenges the basic tenets and assumptions of much current thinking on collective memory and group identity. Fundamental to the conception of competitive memory is a notion of the public sphere as a pregiven, limited space in which already-established groups engage in a life-and-death struggle. In contrast, pursuing memory’s multidirectionality encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction. Equally fundamental to the conception of competitive memory is the notion that the boundaries of memory parallel the boundaries of group identity, as we’ve seen with Michaels and Muhammad. As I struggle to achieve recognition of *my* memories and *my* identity, I necessarily exclude the memories and identities of others. Openness to memory’s multidirectionality puts this last assumption into question as well. Memories are not owned by groups—nor are groups “owned” by memories. Rather, the borders of memory and identity are jagged; what looks at first like my own property often turns out to be a borrowing or adaptation from a history that initially might seem foreign or distant. Memory’s anachronistic quality—its bringing together of now and then, here and there—is actually the source of its powerful creativity, its ability to build new worlds out of the materials of older ones. Finally, those who understand memory as a form of competition see only winners and losers in the struggle for collective articulation and recognition. But attention to memory’s multidirectionality suggests a more supple social logic. The struggle for recognition is fundamentally unstable and subject to ongoing reversal, as Hegel recognized with his famous “Master/Slave

dialectic": today's "losers" may turn out to be tomorrow's "winners," and "winning" may entail learning from and adopting the rhetoric and images of the other. Generally speaking, moreover, the examples of multidirectional memory explored here are much too ambivalent and heterogeneous to reduce too quickly to questions of winning and losing—which is not to say that there is little at stake in articulations of collective memory, for quite the contrary is true.

In order to demonstrate the stakes of the past in the present, *Multidirectional Memory* takes remembrance of the Holocaust as its paradigmatic object of concern. Michaels's and Muhammad's choice to stage the problem of the stakes of memory and identity in relation to the Nazi genocide of European Jews is not accidental. Indeed, there is probably no other single event that encapsulates the struggles for recognition that accompany collective memory in such a condensed and global form. While, as historians have demonstrated in multiple national contexts, public Holocaust memory only emerged belatedly as a widespread collective form, the last half-century has seen such memory move toward the center of consciousness in many Western European, North American, and Middle Eastern societies—and significant inroads have been made throughout the rest of the world as well.<sup>6</sup> The spread of Holocaust memory and consciousness across the globe sets the stage for and illustrates perfectly the multidirectional dynamic I draw attention to throughout this book.<sup>7</sup> I argue that far from blocking other historical memories from view in a competitive struggle for recognition, the emergence of Holocaust memory on a global scale has contributed to the articulation of other histories—some of them predating the Nazi genocide, such as slavery, and others taking place later, such as the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) or the genocide in Bosnia during the 1990s. Because of the Holocaust's salience to the relationship of collective memory, group identity, and violence, an exploration of its ongoing public evocation in multiple national contexts stands as the central example of this book's exploration of multidirectional memory.

But multidirectional memory, as its name implies, is not simply a one-way street; its exploration necessitates the comparative approach I adopt here. My argument is not only that the Holocaust has enabled the articulation of other histories of victimization at the same time that it has been declared "unique" among human-perpetrated horrors (a point to

which I return below). I also demonstrate the more surprising and seldom acknowledged fact that public memory of the Holocaust emerged in relation to postwar events that seem at first to have little to do with it. Here, we can observe that Michaels's and Muhammad's staging of Holocaust memory in competition with the memory of slavery, colonialism, and racism is also not accidental. As a series of case studies treating intellectuals and artists ranging from Hannah Arendt and W. E. B. Du Bois to French anticolonial activists and experimental documentarians will demonstrate, early Holocaust memory emerged in dialogue with the dynamic transformations and multifaceted struggles that define the era of decolonization. The period between 1945 and 1962 contains both the rise of consciousness of the Holocaust as an unprecedented form of modern genocide and the coming to national consciousness and political independence of many of the subjects of European colonialism.<sup>8</sup> This book argues that far from being an arbitrary conjunction of two separate histories, this observation about the early postwar period contains an important insight into the dynamics of collective memory and the struggles over recognition and collective identity that continue to haunt contemporary, pluralistic societies. The fact that today the Holocaust is frequently set against global histories of racism, slavery, and colonialism in an ugly contest of comparative victimization—as is the case in Muhammad's infamous speech and in the pronouncements of many "defenders" of the Holocaust's uniqueness—is part of a refusal to recognize the earlier conjunction of these histories that I explore in *Multidirectional Memory*. But the ordinarily unacknowledged history of cross-referencing that characterizes the period of decolonization continues to this day and constitutes a precondition of contemporary discourse. The virulence—on all sides—of so much discussion of race, genocide, and memory has to do, in other words, partly with the rhetorical and cultural *intimacy* of seemingly opposed traditions of remembrance.

### From Uniqueness to Multidirectionality

One of the major stumbling blocks to a recognition of the interactions that take place among collective memories is the belief that one's own history, culture, and identity are "a separate and unique thing," to adopt a phrase that W. E. B. Du Bois uses critically and that I discuss

further in Chapter 4. This is especially true when it comes to thinking about the Nazi genocide of European Jews. Along with its “centering” in public consciousness in the last decades, the Holocaust has come to be understood in the popular imagination, especially in Europe, Israel, and North America, as a unique, *sui generis* event. In its extremity, it is sometimes even defined as only marginally connected to the course of human history. Thus, Elie Wiesel has written that “the Holocaust transcends history,” and Claude Lanzmann has claimed that “there is an unbreachable discrepancy” between any of the Holocaust’s possible historical causes and the ultimate unfolding of the events.<sup>9</sup> Even arguments for uniqueness grounded in history sometimes tend toward ahistorical hyperbole. In an essay that seeks to differentiate the Nazi genocide from “the case of the Native Americans,” “the famine in the Ukraine” under Stalin, and “the Armenian tragedy,” Steven Katz argues that the “historically and phenomenologically unique” character of the Holocaust ensures that the Nazi genocide will differ from “every case said to be comparable to” it.<sup>10</sup> Initially, asserting the uniqueness of the Holocaust served to counter the relative public silence about the specificity of the Nazi genocide of Jews in the early postwar period that many historians of memory and students of historiography have described. Such assertions thus played a crucial role in fostering understanding of the genocide and generating acknowledgment and study of its horrific particularities and traumatic legacies. Although one of my purposes in *Multidirectional Memory* is to complicate this view of the early years of silence by drawing attention to articulations of Holocaust memory that have remained absent from the standard corpus, I certainly agree that in the first postwar decades there was a necessity to assertions of the Holocaust’s specificity.

But, even if understanding of that specificity has not become universal today (and what historical understanding ever does?), by the time Wiesel, Lanzmann, and Katz were writing, acceptance of the uniqueness of the Holocaust was widespread. At the same time that this understanding of the Nazi genocide emerged, and in direct response to it, intellectuals interested in indigenous, minority, and colonial histories challenged the uniqueness of the Holocaust and fostered research into other histories of extreme violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Many of these latter intellectuals have argued that, while it is essential to understand the

specificity of the Nazi genocide (as of all events), separating it off from other histories of collective violence—and even from history as such—is intellectually and politically dangerous. The dangers of the uniqueness discourse are that it potentially creates a hierarchy of suffering (which is morally offensive) and removes that suffering from the field of historical agency (which is both morally and intellectually suspect).<sup>11</sup> This critique of uniqueness discourse undergirds Michaels’s and Muhammad’s complaints about the place of the Holocaust in U.S. public culture.

Despite their obvious intellectual and political differences, however, many proponents and critics of uniqueness share the model I’m calling competitive memory: that is, both groups tend to understand memory of the Holocaust as taking part in a zero-sum game of competition with the memory of other histories. Thus, on the one hand, the proponents of uniqueness assiduously search out and refute all attempts to compare or analogize the Holocaust in order to preserve memory of the Shoah from its dilution or relativization. Deborah Lipstadt, one of the leading scholars studying Holocaust denial, suggests links between those who relativize the Holocaust through comparison and analogy and those who deny its very existence; both groups, she argues, blur the “boundaries between fact and fiction and between persecuted and persecutor.”<sup>12</sup> Blurring is also the concern of literary critic Richard Golsan. In a discussion of the trial of Maurice Papon, a French police secretary-general during the Vichy period who will play a key role in this book, Golsan worries that comparison between French complicity in the deportation of Jews and French persecution of Algerians during decolonization, which Papon was also involved in, “could only deflect the focus from the Vichy past and, more significant, blur the specificity of the Final Solution.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, critics of uniqueness or of the politics of Holocaust memory often argue, as do Michael and Muhammad, that the ever-increasing interest in the Nazi genocide distracts from the consideration of other historical tragedies. For instance, in his study of the creation of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Edward T. Linenthal expresses a concern that “official Holocaust memory may also function as a ‘comfortable horrible’ memory, allowing Americans to reassure themselves that they are engaging profound events, all the while ignoring more indigestible events that threaten Americans’ sense of themselves more than the Holocaust.”<sup>14</sup> In

one of the more extreme versions of this argument, David Stannard asserts that the uniqueness argument “willingly provides a screen behind which opportunistic governments today attempt to conceal their own past and ongoing genocidal actions.”<sup>15</sup>

There is, of course, some truth in both of these views. Relativization and banalization of the Holocaust do take place, although perhaps more frequently at the hands of a culture industry that seeks to exploit its currency than among marginal or oppositional intellectuals and activists. Conversely, undue stress on the singularity of the Holocaust at the expense of its similarities with other events can block recognition of past as well as present genocides, if not generally with the full intentionality implied by Stannard. The fact of such a blockage of recognition is one of the lessons of Samantha Power’s convincing study *A Problem from Hell*. In summing up her account of American response to the threat and actuality of genocide in the twentieth century, Power writes that “perversely, America’s public awareness of the Holocaust often seemed to set the bar for concern so high that we were able to tell ourselves that contemporary genocides were not measuring up.”<sup>16</sup> Memory competition does exist and sometimes overrides other possibilities for thinking about the relation between different histories.

The existence of such contradictory and intractable positions on the uniqueness of the Holocaust suggests that the controversy is not an empirical, historical one. Rather, as Fredric Jameson has argued with respect to the related and more general issue of historical periodization, such controversies always turn on the deployment of narratives, and not on facts that can be objectively adjudicated: “The decision as to whether one faces a break or a continuity—whether the present is to be seen as a historical originality or as the simple prolongation of more of the same under different sheep’s clothing—is not an empirically justifiable or philosophically arguable one, since it is itself the inaugural narrative act that grounds the perception and interpretation of the events to be narrated.”<sup>17</sup> If the place and status of the Holocaust is not determined purely through recourse to the historical archive, as Jameson’s argument implies, then getting beyond the deadlock characteristic of the uniqueness debates requires thinking about the work of memory and representation—the consequential arenas in which narrative acts shape understanding.<sup>18</sup> The competitive memory

model functions something like what Michel Foucault, in the introduction to his *History of Sexuality*, calls “the repressive hypothesis.” Foucault argues that the popular notion of sexual prohibition in the Victorian age should not be made “into the basic and constitutive element” in a history of sexuality because “negative elements” were “only component parts that have a local and tactical role” within a larger incitement and dissemination of discourses on sexuality.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, I would argue that the negative elements of the competitive memory hypothesis are only component parts of a larger dissemination of memory discourses.

An overly rigid focus on memory competition distracts from other ways of thinking about the relation between histories and their memorial legacies. Ultimately, memory is not a zero-sum game.<sup>20</sup> Instead of memory competition, I have proposed the concept of multidirectional memory, which is meant to draw attention to the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance. Thinking in terms of multidirectional memory helps explain the spiraling interactions that characterize the politics of memory—the fact, borne out by Muhammad’s reference to the “black holocaust,” that the use of the Holocaust as a metaphor or analogy for other events and histories has emerged precisely because the Holocaust is widely thought of as a unique and uniquely terrible form of political violence.<sup>21</sup> Assertions of uniqueness thus actually produce further metaphorical and analogical appropriations (which, in turn, prompt further assertions of uniqueness). However, such moments coexist with complex acts of solidarity in which historical memory serves as a medium for the creation of new communal and political identities. It is often difficult to tell whether a given act of memory is more likely to produce competition or mutual understanding—sometimes both seem to happen simultaneously. A model of multidirectional memory allows for the perception of the power differentials that tend to cluster around memory competition, but it also locates that competition within a larger spiral of memory discourse in which even hostile invocations of memory can provide vehicles for further, countervailing commemorative acts. The model of multidirectional memory posits collective memory as partially disengaged from exclusive versions of cultural identity and acknowledges how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites. While I hold that understanding

memory as multidirectional is ultimately preferable to models of competition, exclusivity, and exceptionality, I also consider cases in this book where memory's multidirectionality functions in the interests of violence or exclusion instead of solidarity.

### Rethinking Screen Memory

Some critics targeting the Holocaust's alleged domination of the spheres of collective memory adopt a psychoanalytic terminology and describe remembrance of the Holocaust as a "screen memory" (*Deckerinnerung*). According to this Freud-inspired argument, memory of the Holocaust doesn't simply compete with that of other pasts, but provides (as the arguments of Linenthal and Stannard alluded to above suggest) a greater level of "comfort" than confrontation with more "local" problems would allow. Thus, in a sophisticated version of this argument, film scholar Miriam Hansen speculates that "the popular American fascination with the Holocaust may function as a 'screen memory' in the Freudian sense, covering up a traumatic event—another traumatic event—that cannot be approached directly. . . . The displaced referents . . . may extend to events as distant as the genocide of Native Americans or as recent as the Vietnam War."<sup>22</sup> While Hansen's argument echoes Michaels's, her emphasis on displacement—as opposed simply to silencing—opens up a potentially more productive approach to the relation between different traumatic events. *Multidirectional Memory* incorporates psychoanalytic insights, such as Hansen's, but my reading of Freud shows that his understanding of screen memory approximates the multidirectional model I develop here rather than the model of competition: the displacement that takes place in screen memory (indeed, in all memory) functions as much to open up lines of communication with the past as to close them off.<sup>23</sup>

Memory is, as Freud recognized, primarily an associative process that works through displacement and substitution; it is fundamentally and structurally multidirectional, even though powerful forces are always trying to shape it according to more or less rigid psychic or ideological parameters.<sup>24</sup> In the 1899 essay "Screen Memories" and again a decade later in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud tries to understand why some memories from childhood are preserved and some are not. In

particular, he asks why "the content of some people's earliest memories consists of everyday impressions that are of no consequence and could not have affected the child emotionally, but were nonetheless noted in copious detail . . . whereas other, roughly contemporaneous events are not remembered, even though the parents testify that the child was profoundly affected by them at the time."<sup>25</sup> Pursuing networks of associations between the particularities of a memory and other events in an individual's life, Freud determines that the banal memory of the everyday is in fact a *screen memory*, "one that owes its value as a memory not to its intrinsic content, but to the relation obtaining between this content and some other, which has been suppressed" ("Screen" 19). Despite its apparent innocence, screen memory stands in or substitutes for a more disturbing or painful memory that it displaces from consciousness. (Note that the screen memory is at some level authentic, according to Freud; it is not a mere fantasy.) The mechanism of screen memory thus illustrates concretely how a kind of forgetting accompanies acts of remembrance, but this kind of forgetting is subject to recall.<sup>26</sup>

As Freud clarifies in "On Childhood Memories and Screen Memories," a chapter in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, the content of the screen memory has a variety of "temporal relation[s]" with "the subject it has screened out." He distinguishes between "retrospective," "anticipatory," and "simultaneous" screen memories in order to clarify that the content of a screen memory can be formed by projections from repressed memories that happened after, before, or at the same time as the remembered events.<sup>27</sup> Noting the temporal complexity that Freud finds in childhood memories (and pointing out that the memories at stake in "Screen Memories" are probably Freud's own), Hugh Haughton writes that "the notion of the 'screen' or 'cover' becomes increasingly many-layered and multidirectional."<sup>28</sup> The English translation of *Deckerinnerungen* (literally, "cover memories") as "screen memories" is thus apt, if not literal, since such memories do encapsulate two notions of the "screen": they serve both as a barrier between consciousness and the unconscious, and as a site of projection for unconscious fantasies, fears, and desires, which can then be decoded. Consequently, screen memory is, in my terminology, multidirectional not only because it stands at the center of a potentially complex set of temporal relations, but also—and perhaps more importantly—because

it both hides and reveals that which has been suppressed. The example of screen memory—which as with so many concepts in Freud begins as a special case but ends up seeming to encompass almost all acts of remembrance—suggests the limits of the model of memory as competition. While screen memory might be understood as involving a conflict of memories, it ultimately more closely resembles a remapping of memory in which links between memories are formed and then redistributed between the conscious and unconscious. To be sure, the truths of memory are often in tension with the truths of history; as with many of the multidirectional exchanges that I consider here, the “motives” of screen memory are “far removed from the aim of historical fidelity” (Freud, “Screen” 21). Yet both screen memories and multidirectional memories provide access to truths nonetheless, truths that produce insight about individual and collective processes of meaning-making. Thinking about screen memories and multidirectional memories as less “pathological” than “normal” proves to be a boon to interpretation.<sup>29</sup> Awareness of the inevitability of displacement and substitution in acts of remembrance points toward the need both to acknowledge the conflicts that subtend memory and work toward a rearticulation of historical relatedness beyond paradigms of uniqueness.

If multidirectional memory functions at the level of the collective as screen memory does at the level of the individual, there remain obvious difficulties with moving from Freud’s model to a discussion of the intersection of memories of the Holocaust and colonialism. First, while screen memory is individual and biographical, multidirectional memory, as I use it, is primarily collective and historical, although it is never divorced from individuals and their biographies either. Additionally, while screen memory replaces a disturbing memory with a more comforting, everyday scene, the multidirectional memory explored here frequently juxtaposes two or more disturbing memories and disrupts everyday settings. These are important distinctions, but further reflection also helps to modulate the apparent starkness of the differences between screen and multidirectional memories.

Let’s take these difficulties one at a time, beginning with the question of what we mean by collective memory. The work of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs is crucial here since it helps to break down the commonsense opposition between individual and collective memory. For

Halbwachs and the tradition that has emerged from him, all memories are simultaneously individual and collective: while individual subjects are the necessary locus of the act of remembrance, those individuals are imbued with frameworks common to the collectives in which they live.<sup>30</sup> The frameworks of memory function something like language—they provide a shared medium within which alone individuals can remember or articulate themselves. The philosopher Avishai Margalit’s distinction between two forms of collective memory, common and shared, helps clarify further how memory operates beyond the individual: “A common memory . . . is an aggregate notion. It aggregates the memories of all those people who remember a certain episode which each of them experienced individually. . . . A *shared* memory, on the other hand, is not a simple aggregate of individual memories. It requires communication. A shared memory integrates and calibrates the different perspectives of those who remember the episode . . . into one version. . . . Shared memory is built on a division of mnemonic labor.”<sup>31</sup> The memory at stake in multidirectional memory, and indeed in most collective memory today, resembles Margalit’s shared memory. When we talk about collective Holocaust memory or about collective memories of colonialism and decolonization, we are talking primarily about shared memory, memory that may have been initiated by individuals but that has been mediated through networks of communication, institutions of the state, and the social groupings of civil society.

In contemporary societies, mediascapes of all kinds play a predominant role in the construction of the memory frameworks described by Halbwachs. While global media technologies make possible a new kind of common memory, via the creation of global media events that all might witness simultaneously, the lack of an Archimedean point of reference ensures that even memory of such events (like the attacks of September 11, 2001) will ultimately more closely resemble shared memory with its division of labor and calibration of different perspectives. Both Halbwachs and Margalit, however, seem to overestimate the degree to which collective memory will converge into “one version.” Multidirectional memory is collective memory insofar as it is formed within social frameworks; it is shared memory insofar as it is formed within mediascapes that entail “a division of mnemonic labor.” Yet the concept of multidirectional memory differs from both of these others because it highlights the inevitable



displacements and contingencies that mark all remembrance. Collective memory is multilayered both because it is highly mediated and because individuals and groups play an active role in rearticulating memory, if never with complete consciousness or unimpeded agency. Competitive scenarios can derive from these restless rearticulations, but so can visions that construct solidarity out of the specificities, overlaps, and echoes of different historical experiences.

The other difference between screen memory and multidirectional memory concerns the question of the affective charge of the memories at issue. For Freud, screen memories stand in for and distract from something disturbing—either a traumatic event or an illicit, unacknowledged desire. As we have seen above, many critics think that memories of the Holocaust function this way, at least in places like the contemporary United States that are temporally and spatially far removed from the events of the Nazi period. What is odd about the case of Holocaust memory, however, is that such memory hardly seems innocent or comforting. And yet, as the concept of screen memory reveals, the content of a memory has no intrinsic meaning but takes on meaning precisely in relationship to other memories in a network of associations. My interest in multidirectional memory takes off from this insight to complicate assumptions about what in memory is “innocent” and what is “disturbing,” about what serves as a necessary screen for the projection of memories and what as a barrier to remembrance. Looking at particular cases leads me to conclude (in the spirit of Freud, but sometimes with opposite results) that one cannot know in advance how the articulation of a memory will function; nor can one even be sure that it will function only in one way. The concept of multidirectional memory holds memory open to these different possibilities, but does not subscribe to a simple pluralism, either. While a given memory rarely functions in a single way or means only one thing, all articulations of memory are not equal; powerful social, political, and psychic forces articulate themselves in every act of remembrance.

### On Comparison and Justice

Because of the complex psychic demands that Freud identified, individual memory emerges and recedes in fits and starts—especially when

the memory of traumatic events is at stake. The same holds true for collective memory. When we look at collective memory historically, one thing we notice is how unevenly—and sometimes unexpectedly—it develops. Memories of particular events come and go and sometimes take on a surprising importance long after the materiality of the events remembered has faded from view. An important epistemological gain in considering memory as multidirectional instead of as competitive is the insight, developed here through historical case studies, that the emergence of memories into the public often takes place through triggers that may at first seem irrelevant or even unseemly. Thus, to give a concrete example that will prove significant for this book, the practice of torture seems like an unlikely trigger for Holocaust memory—for how could a practice as widespread, if repellent, as torture conjure up the extremity of genocide? But in France during the Algerian War of Independence many observers understood the French state’s widespread use of extrajudicial violence as just such a reawakening of the past. As I discuss in Chapters 6 and 7, some survivors of the Nazi camps, such as the Austrian/Belgian writer Jean Améry, even cite the discussion of torture as one of the impetuses for their own public articulation of Holocaust memory. But this is not the end of the story. For a practice that triggered memory of Nazism at one moment could later serve as a trigger in France for memory of the Algerian War itself—a war that had for almost four decades seemed to be blocked from view even as, in its wake, Holocaust consciousness experienced an incredible growth. Thus, the turn of the millennium in France (and elsewhere) has seen renewed debates about torture, renewed interest in the connections between the Holocaust and the Algerian War, and a sense—expressed in Michael Haneke’s film *Caché*, among other places—that post-9/11 policies in the United States echo older histories of imperial and fascist violence.<sup>32</sup> It is precisely that convoluted, sometimes historically unjustified, back-and-forth movement of seemingly distant collective memories in and out of public consciousness that I qualify as memory’s multidirectionality. As these examples, which will be pursued at much greater length later in this book, begin to suggest, thinking of memory as multidirectional instead of competitive does not entail dispensing with a notion of the urgency of memory, with its life-and-death stakes. Rather, these examples alert us to the need for a form of comparative thinking that, like memory itself, is not afraid to traverse sacrosanct borders of ethnicity and era.

The shift in the conceptualization of memory from competition to multidirectionality that this book advocates has methodological implications for comparative thinking and study. A central methodological problem and opportunity concerns the constitution of the archive for comparative work. Far from being situated—either physically or discursively—in any single institution or site, the archive of multidirectional memory is irreducibly transversal; it cuts across genres, national contexts, periods, and cultural traditions. Because dominant ways of thinking (such as competitive memory) have refused to acknowledge the multidirectional flows of influence and articulation that collective memory activates, the comparative critic must first constitute the archive by forging links between dispersed documents. As this book demonstrates, there is no shortage of cross-referencing between the legacies of the Holocaust and colonialism, but many of those moments of contact occur in marginalized texts or in marginal moments of well-known texts. The evidence is there, but the archive must be constructed with the help of the change in vision made possible by a new kind of comparative thinking. The greatest threat to the visibility of this marginalized archive of Holocaust memory in the age of decolonization is the kind of zero-sum thinking that underwrites the logic of competitive memory. The greatest hope for a new comparatism lies in opening up the separate containers of memory and identity that buttress competitive thinking and becoming aware of the mutual constitution and ongoing transformation of the objects of comparison.<sup>33</sup> Too often comparison is understood as “equation”—the Holocaust cannot be compared to any other history, the story goes, because it is unlike them all. This project takes dissimilarity for granted, since no two events are ever alike, and then focuses its intellectual energy on investigating what it means to invoke connections nonetheless.<sup>34</sup> The logic of comparison explored here does not stand or fall on connections that can be empirically validated for historical accuracy; nor can we ensure that all such connections will be politically palatable to all concerned parties. Rather, a certain bracketing of empirical history and an openness to the possibility of strange political bedfellows are necessary in order for the imaginative links between different histories and social groups to come into view; these imaginative links are the substance of multidirectional memory. Comparison, like memory, should be thought of as productive—as producing new objects and new

lines of sight—and not simply as reproducing already given entities that either are or are not “like” other already given entities.

Emphasizing the dimension of imagination involved in acts of remembrance should not lead to assumptions of memory’s insubstantiality. Remembrance and imagination are material forces as well as fundamentally human ones. They cannot be wished away, nor, I believe, should they be. Despite the plentiful evidence of violence and willed oblivion that can accompany hegemonic (and sometimes even subaltern) acts of remembrance—and despite this book’s predominantly dark subject matter—*Multidirectional Memory* has been written under the sign of optimism. Because the structures of individual and collective memory are multidirectional, they prove difficult to contain in the molds of exclusivist identities. If memory is as susceptible as any other human faculty to abuse—and here again Muhammad’s speech serves as a convenient example, although only one of many—this study seeks to emphasize how memory is at least as often a spur to unexpected acts of empathy and solidarity; indeed multidirectional memory is often the very grounds on which people construct and act upon visions of justice.

A theory of multidirectional memory can help us in the task of “reframing justice in a globalizing world,” to cite the title of a relevant essay by political philosopher Nancy Fraser.<sup>35</sup> Fraser argues that today’s debates about justice—which she defines as “parity of participation” (73)—need to move beyond the “Keynesian-Westphalian frame” that has defined them for most of the post-World War II era. By this she means that the acceleration of globalization creates injustices that a previously taken-for-granted nation-state framework based on a national citizenry can no longer solve (if it ever could). For Fraser, drawing attention to the way capitalism, migrations, and other transnational forces break the nation-state frame also brings into view a third dimension of justice beyond economic redistribution and cultural recognition that theorists need to account for, a dimension she associates with questions of political representation: “Whether the issue is distribution or recognition, disputes that used to focus exclusively on the question of *what* is owed as a matter of justice to community members now turn quickly into disputes about *who* should count as a member and *which* is the relevant community. Not just the ‘what’ but also the ‘who’ is up for grabs” (72). Additionally, addressing the issue of the

subjects or “who” of justice entails, Fraser argues, thinking about the procedures or “how” of justice (84). The matters of “who” and “how” point toward what she calls “meta-political” issues concerning the “framing” of disputes over justice. Framing entails decisions about who is permitted to claim the right to speak about issues of injustice affecting them. In a globalizing world, in which transnational factors (such as flows of capital and ecological degradation) coexist with or even predominate over national factors, debates about framing become unavoidable elements of a quest for justice. As Fraser sums up the political force of her argument, “Struggles for justice in a globalizing world cannot succeed unless they go hand in hand with struggles for *meta-political democracy*. . . . [N]o redistribution or recognition without representation” (85–86).

As my opening example of Michaels and Muhammad illustrates, debates about collective memory and group identity are primarily struggles over injustices of recognition, over whose history and culture will be recognized. Such injustices are real, but the rethinking of the relation between memory and identity can contribute to a rethinking of cultural recognition beyond zero-sum logic.<sup>36</sup> Fraser helps us see that part of the problem may lie in the assumed nation-state framing of the problem of recognition, although she also recognizes, as I do, that the nation remains a significant player in questions of recognition, redistribution, and political representation. Despite Michaels’s and Muhammad’s desire to fix the memory wars to the landscape of the Mall in Washington, the articulations of cultural recognition and collective memory I consider in this book do not remain tied to the fetishized sites of the state—which doesn’t mean that they ignore the salience of state spaces either. Such articulations also allow us to supplement Fraser’s account.<sup>37</sup>

In *Multidirectional Memory* I reveal how memory of the Nazi genocide and struggles for decolonization have persistently broken the frame of the nation-state during the entire period of Keynesian-Westphalian dominance. Fraser admits that there have been exceptions in the post-war period to the framing of justice on the terrain of the nation-state, but she doesn’t consider in a substantive way what such exceptions might contribute to reframing justice: “Occasionally, famines and genocides galvanized public opinion across borders. And some cosmopolitans and anti-imperialists sought to promulgate globalist views. But these were

exceptions that proved the rule” (69–70). *Multidirectional Memory* focuses on just such exceptional views and makes visible a countertradition that not only foregrounds unexpected resonance between the Holocaust and colonialism but also can provide resources for the rethinking of justice. In addition to moving the logic of recognition beyond identitarian competition, the theory of multidirectional memory and the countertradition it helps expose can contribute to what Fraser calls “the politics of framing”: “Focused on the issues of who counts as a subject of justice, and what is the appropriate frame, the politics of framing comprises efforts to establish and consolidate, to contest and revise, the authoritative division of political space” (80). A work of scholarship does not intervene directly in the materiality of political space, although many of the intellectuals I address were actively involved in political struggle. Rather, I undertake an archaeology of the comparative imagination in the hopes that documenting these earlier attempts to reconceptualize the subjects of justice can inspire our present and future projects to remake political space.

### Argument and Outline of the Book

In *Multidirectional Memory*, I put forward arguments that are theoretical, historical, and—in a world not yet free from colonialism or genocide—inevitably political. Let me reprise them while also outlining the scope and trajectory of the book. At the level of theory, I rethink the conceptualization of collective memory in multicultural and transnational contexts. Fully cognizant of the differentials of access and power that mark the public sphere, I nevertheless provide a framework that draws attention to the inevitable dialogical exchange between memory traditions and keeps open the possibility of a more just future of memory. I identify the misrecognition of collective memory as a zero-sum game—instead of an open-ended field of articulation and struggle—as one of the stumbling blocks for a more inclusive renarration of the history of memory and a harnessing of the legacies of violence in the interests of a more egalitarian future. Several of the chapters of *Multidirectional Memory* also suggest the need to think outside the universal/particular opposition that marks much discussion of the politics of identity and cultural difference. Many of the writers, intellectuals, and activists considered here point us instead

toward a multidirectional ethics that combines the capacious open-endedness of the universal with the concrete, situational demands of the particular. An ethics of multidirectional memory involves creating fidelity (in the sense given that term by Alain Badiou's *Ethics*) with the multiple events and historical legacies that define any situation.<sup>38</sup> A politics built on that ethical foundation will require a notion of transnational, comparative justice that can negotiate conflicting and sometimes mutually exclusive demands made on unstable and shifting terrain.

At the historical level, *Multidirectional Memory* uncovers a marginalized tradition that has implications both for Holocaust studies and postcolonial studies—and can serve to stimulate the kinds of ethical and political thinking I call for here. Drawing on this tradition of Jewish and non-Jewish writers, artists, and political figures, I renarrate the received history of Holocaust memory. I demonstrate, first, that the early postwar period is richer and more complex than earlier studies, with their stress on a period of silence and repression that lasts until around the time of the Eichmann trial in 1961, have allowed. Shifting attention to unexpected texts, such as the writings of Du Bois on the Holocaust, or underexplored contexts, such as André Schwarz-Bart's engagement with the Caribbean diaspora, reveals both more Holocaust remembrance than we've been led to expect in this era and markedly more comparative forms of memory than would come to predominate in later decades. My renarration of this early postwar period reveals, additionally, that the emergence of collective memory of the Nazi genocide in the 1950s and 1960s takes place in a punctual dialogue with ongoing processes of decolonization and civil rights struggle and their modes of coming to terms with colonialism, slavery, and racism. Tracing events and reading texts from the late 1940s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, I make the case for a long-term minoritarian tradition of "decolonized" Holocaust memory.

This new approach to Holocaust memory has implications, in turn, for those concerned primarily with the varied experience of decolonization and the aftermaths of colonialism. Postcolonial studies can learn from the history of Jews and anti-Semitism in Europe in a number of ways. In particular, the experience of Jewish difference within modern Europe—and the frequently violent reaction Jews confronted—foreshadows many of the debates and problems faced by postcolonial societies and by postcolonial

migrants in contemporary Europe.<sup>39</sup> Even if the histories of Jews and formerly colonized peoples diverge significantly, Europe's ambivalent memory of the Nazi genocide has left traces that inflect policies and discussions concerning race, religion, nationalism, and citizenship today. Attention to the history of Jews on the continent can serve as a timely warning not to homogenize conceptions of Europe on ethnic, racial, or religious grounds—a tendency that has understandably played an important role in postcolonial critique but is now more frequently associated with conservative (and increasingly liberal!) perspectives within Europe. While minority and postcolonial critique has had a tendency sharply to distinguish Jews from postcolonial subjects on the grounds of Jews' presumed "whiteness"—a tradition that harks back to founding texts by Césaire and Fanon and is based on a somewhat ahistorical understanding—the tradition uncovered here draws attention to possibilities for solidarity as well as distinction. Shared histories of racism, spatial segregation, genocide, diasporic displacement, cultural destruction, and—perhaps most important—savvy and creative resistance to hegemonic demands provide the grounds for new forms of collectivity that would not ignore equally powerful histories of division and difference.

*Multidirectional Memory* consists of four sections of two chapters each and addresses more than a half-century of cultural history in Europe, North America, the Caribbean, and North Africa. It begins with the observation that some of the earliest responses to the Nazi genocide placed it on a conceptual continuum with colonialism and antiblack racism. Part I, "Boomerang Effects: Bare Life, Trauma, and the Colonial Turn in Holocaust Studies," considers the figures through which such connections were made in two influential works from the beginning of the 1950s: Hannah Arendt's attempt to read the history of Nazi terror back through imperialism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Chapter 2) and Aimé Césaire's understanding of Nazism as the return of the colonial repressed in his polemical pamphlet *Discourse on Colonialism* (Chapter 3). Arendt's notion of the "boomerang effect" and Césaire's "choc en retour" (translated as "boomerang effect," but more literally a backlash or reverse shock) both describe the unexpected debt of totalitarianism to colonialism, although the two writers approach these links from different directions and with significantly different political assumptions. Despite

presciently drawing detailed connections between two now seemingly separate histories, Arendt proves unable to elude discourses of the human, the progressive, and the universal that remain complicit with the violence she is trying to explain. While Arendt remains at the limits of Eurocentrism, Césaire aims his polemic specifically against European self-understanding. Drawing on multiple intellectual and cultural traditions, Césaire uses the *choc en retour* to expose the multidirectional ripple effects of extreme violence. While focused especially on European disavowal of colonial atrocities, Césaire also exposes how an inability to come to terms with Nazism inflects late colonial discourse. Césaire's *Discourse*, along with his student Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, helps us to forge a multidirectional trauma theory that accounts for the experience of colonialism and genocide, although investment in a certain version of Marxist theory and the exigencies of anticolonial struggle sometimes impair his attention to the specificity of the Nazi genocide.

Part II, "Migrations of Memory: Ruins, Ghettos, Diasporas," continues the consideration of the early postwar period and adds attention to the spaces and places of memory's movements. Two writers who successfully negotiate the multidirectional perspective opened up by Arendt and Césaire bookend this section: W. E. B. Du Bois and Caryl Phillips. In between, I discuss the more ambivalent case of André Schwarz-Bart. In Chapter 4, Du Bois's visit to the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1949, which he reflected on in a 1952 article, becomes the occasion for modeling multidirectional memory. Placing "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto" within the larger context of Du Bois's thinking about Jews, Nazism, race, and resistance, I demonstrate how, against the backdrop of the cold war and continued segregation in the United States, Du Bois rearticulates his concept of "double consciousness" to incorporate the experiences of other minority groups. In particular, his powerful response to the ruins of the ghetto and to Nathan Rapoport's much-maligned Ghetto Monument demonstrates the workings of a multidirectional memory able to hold together the disparate histories of blacks and Jews while simultaneously allowing for the rearticulation of their specificities. In Chapter 5, I continue the discussion of blacks and Jews through attention to two writers who also foreground ghettos, ruins, and other diasporic spaces as sites of multidirectional exchange. Here I pursue the anachronistic aesthetic

projects of Schwarz-Bart and Phillips, which bring together that which is supposed to be kept apart. Although forms of anachronism constitute different types of "error" when perceived from a historicist perspective, they can also be powerfully subversive and demystifying in the ways that they expose the ideological assumptions of historicist categorization, as novels such as Schwarz-Bart's *A Woman Named Solitude* and Phillips's *Higher Ground* and *The Nature of Blood* demonstrate. While Schwarz-Bart struggles—and might ultimately be seen to fail—to find a literary form for the anachronistic juxtaposition of black and Jewish histories, Phillips employs fragmentation and intertextuality in order to develop an aesthetic premised on nonappropriative hospitality to histories of the other. Both writers, however, continue the attempt by Du Bois to think through colonialism's and genocide's disruptions of space and time, and, in different manners, they reflect on possibilities for resistance to the legacies of those disruptions.

The historical resistance to Nazi occupation and European colonialism lies at the heart of Part III, "Truth, Torture, Testimony: Holocaust Memory During the Algerian War," and Part IV, "October 17, 1961: A Site of Holocaust Memory?" Here I focus intensely on metropolitan anticolonial resistance during the late stages of the Algerian War of Independence. Part III explores how the resonance between the violence of decolonization and that of the Nazi genocide created a multidirectional network of memory that facilitated the emergence of survivor testimony as a powerful genre for exposing both forms of violence. At the very moment when the Israeli state was staging survivor testimony in the Eichmann trial, Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin set out to experiment with documentary form by producing what they called "cinéma vérité." Their documentary, *Chronicle of Summer*, the topic of Chapter 6, turns out to feature testimony by a Holocaust survivor at its center and juxtaposes that testimony with discussions of race, decolonization, and colonial war. Turning to contemporaneous discourses of the anticolonial movement in France, I demonstrate how the notion of "truth" that is central to cinéma vérité circulates in attempts to expose the violence of the late colonial state. In particular, controversies about torture, censorship, and the use of concentration camps in the fight against the Algerian independence movement lead to the importance of testimony as a mode of articulating the suppressed truth of colonialism.

In the same year that the Eichmann trial and *Chronicle of a Summer* staged Holocaust testimony in public, Auschwitz survivor and memoirist Charlotte Delbo published her first book—a collection of open letters, surrounded by Delbo’s editorial comments, on the Algerian War. Chapter 7 demonstrates how the same context of torture, censorship, and camps that elicits Rouch and Morin’s film also prompts Delbo to reflect on the form of testimony and the shape of the public sphere. Much more explicitly than *Chronicle*, *Les belles lettres* is a political text; it takes part, materially and discursively, in a network of anticolonial activity. Harnessing memory of the Nazi occupation and genocide, Delbo’s text offers possibilities for a critical, leftist politics of Holocaust memory that also possesses implications for a moment defined by “war on terror.”

By the time *Les belles lettres* was published and *Chronicle of a Summer* opened in Paris in the fall of 1961, the country was facing another crisis pertaining to the war in Algeria. At the very moment when the war seemed headed for a certain end with the coming independence of Algeria, violence intensified in the metropole as well as in the colony. Ongoing violent confrontations between the French state, the Algerian independence group the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), and the extreme right-wing Organisation Armée Secrète (OAS) culminated in a police massacre of dozens of unarmed, peacefully demonstrating Algerians in the streets of Paris during the evening of October 17. Part IV continues to explore the echoes that the Algerian War has cast around the globe and uncovers a multinational archive of texts that respond to the October 17, 1961 massacre and roundup by Maurice Papon’s Paris police. Long absent from the dominant collective memory of France, October 17 has in recent decades become a significant site of mobilization for antiracist and migrant groups. Drawing on research into contemporaneous responses among the cohort of anticolonial activists discussed in the previous chapters as well as works produced long after the events, this section of the book argues that the October events constitute a significant turning point in French Holocaust memory and that a lasting multidirectional network connects the Nazi past to this episode of the Algerian War.

In Chapter 8, I focus in particular on contemporaneous responses in order to mount an argument about race, gender, and universalism. Considering both a little-known journalistic text by the French writer

Marguerite Duras and a recently rediscovered novel by the African American writer William Gardner Smith, I demonstrate how the French state’s late colonial racialization of the war led to intensified connections with the experiences of Jews under Nazi occupation. I also show how these texts can help us rethink discussions of the universalization of the Holocaust by foregrounding complicity and revealing a multidirectional alternative beyond the universal/particular opposition—an opposition that nevertheless sneaks back into Smith’s novel through a simplified gendering of memory. Chapter 9 tracks the return of attention to October 17 since the 1980s in order to argue for an ethics of multidirectional memory subtended by a fidelity to historical comparison. Here the key texts are a novel by the French detective fiction writer Didier Daeninckx, the Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke’s 2005 feature film *Caché*, and a novel for young adults by French-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar. I also read the latter two works in relation to the 1997–98 trial of Papon for crimes against humanity during the Holocaust, which offers fascinating evidence of the current status of multidirectional memory and testimony and of the transformations under way due to generational shifts. As both the trial and the works of Sebbar and Haneke suggest, the figure of the child has taken center stage as a site of uneasy, multidirectional memory. This chapter reflects on the possible ethical and political significance of the child as a bearer of memory and postmemory in a moment of violent global transformation.<sup>40</sup>

As the scope and scale of *Multidirectional Memory* suggest, the book cannot possibly offer a comprehensive survey of all texts, films, or political movements that engage with both the Holocaust and European colonialism. But it does provide both in-depth analysis of many key texts from this not-yet-recognized, six-decade-old tradition and close consideration of moments of epochal change—such as the transitional early postwar years and the 1961 turning point when Holocaust memory increasingly entered the public sphere and many formerly colonized nations attained independence. I hope that other scholars will find it worthwhile to apply, adapt, or correct the approach undertaken here. Certainly, the methodology of the book could be directly applied to other obviously “multidirectional” works such as Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* (1984; Anne Frank and the Caribbean), Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1989; the Holocaust

and the colonization of India), Nancy Huston's *The Mark of the Angel* (1999; the Algerian War and the Holocaust), or W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001; the Holocaust and Belgian colonialism). In addition, the writings of French–Jewish–North African scholars H el ene Cixous, Jacques Derrida, and Albert Memmi constitute a fertile terrain for further investigation. Perhaps more crucially, the concept of multidirectional memory might help scholars working on other historical and cultural traditions—histories and traditions that sometimes overlap explicitly with those discussed here and sometimes do not. Multidirectional legacies of violence haunt the histories of indigenous peoples on a global scale and cut across the former Yugoslavia and other parts of the former Soviet Bloc as well as Afghanistan, South Africa, Argentina, and other formerly colonized nations. Meanwhile, labor migrants and their descendants in Europe often find themselves confronted with the ghosts of the past at the same time that they experience the prejudices of the present.<sup>41</sup> Finally, there are the prospective multidirectional legacies of the American war in Iraq, a country scarred by colonialism, dictatorship, and genocide, and now by neoimperialism and civil war.

That unhappy current conjuncture shadows this book, but the book also directly confronts those shadows at a couple of key moments. Indeed, the Algerian War, which figures so prominently in these pages, has increasingly become a charged and highly politicized reference point at the turn of the new millennium, as Haneke's film *Cach e* also attests. The Bush administration frequently references Algeria as an analogy for Iraq, and the Pentagon even hosted a screening of Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, apparently in order to "benefit" from its insights into counterinsurgency.<sup>42</sup> Having considered the Algerian question throughout the second half of this book, I briefly turn to another multidirectional political hotspot in conclusion. Along with the Iraq War and the "war on terror," which, with their liberal use of torture and indefinite detention, have produced uncomfortable echoes of the Holocaust and colonial adventures past, the other dominant political site of multidirectional memory today is the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli crisis. In the Epilogue, "Multidirectional Memory in an Age of Occupations," I briefly consider the implications of my theory of collective memory for that intractable struggle as well as for the claims of indigenous peoples.

I use this short epilogue to make a few concluding points relevant to the book's exploration of multidirectional memories of genocide and colonialism. Through the example of the Israeli historian Benny Morris, I argue that invocations of the Holocaust in the context of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict are part of a larger multidirectional network that includes apocalyptic colonial fantasies of the dissolution of the "Western" self—fantasies that in Morris's case reference France's "loss" of Algeria and call upon the Conradian vision of savagery that plays a disruptive role in Arendt's account of imperialism and that C esaire acutely critiques. I further argue that despite the obvious ugliness of many of the invocations of the Holocaust in the context of contemporary Middle Eastern politics (and elsewhere!) and the temptation to declare a moratorium on such references, the theory and history of multidirectional memory suggests the need to confront a different possibility. While all intercultural memory does not foster cross-cultural understanding—as the case of Morris illustrates here—comparisons, analogies, and other multidirectional invocations are an inevitable part of the struggle for justice. Against the alternatives to comparison—an intense investment in the particularity of every case or the promulgation of absolutely neutral and universal principles—I offer the multidirectional option: an ethical vision based on commitment to uncovering historical relatedness and working through the partial overlaps and conflicting claims that constitute the archives of memory and the terrain of politics.

PART I

BOOMERANG EFFECTS

*Bare Life, Trauma, and the  
Colonial Turn in Holocaust Studies*



At the Limits of Eurocentrism:  
Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of  
Totalitarianism*

"Atlantic Civilization": Conceptualizing  
Multidirectionality in the Early  
Postwar Period

In 1953, the French Communist painter André Fougeron produced a large canvas that makes visible the tensions of the postwar era. Although not himself a deportee, Fougeron had been active in the resistance during World War II and had produced journals and art denouncing the Nazi camps along with French collaboration; after the war, he contributed many canvases to the struggles of decolonization as well as the worker's movement.<sup>1</sup> Painted at a moment when France's war in Indochina was heading toward defeat and events in Algeria were beginning to heat up, Fougeron's *Atlantic Civilization* juxtaposes colonialism and Nazism in French space (see Figure 1). *Atlantic Civilization* represents a break with Fougeron's earlier attempts at developing a new Socialist realism and marks a turn toward the deployment of montage (a turn that was not welcomed by the Communist Party). In the center of the canvas, a uniformed German soldier with an SS insignia on his helmet aims his gun at an undefined target outside of the painting's frame while leaning over the hood

of a large American automobile. Around the soldier and the car, in a cluttered nonperspectival space, we find a variety of figures and symbols of war, colonialism, the death penalty (a reference to the Rosenbergs), and the ills of an industrial society as well as scenes of a more everyday and jocular France, such as sweater-wearing poodles and a girlie magazine-reading man sitting with his legs propped up on a café table. As if presaging the next colonial war in Algeria that would start the following year, a pair of Arabs shrouded in black robes peak out from under a corrugated tin sheet in the bottom left-hand corner of the canvas while posters affixed on the side of a building celebrate the notorious “parachutistes coloniaux,” who would also play a large and bloody role in Algeria. The overwhelming presence of the blue Cadillac in the center of this eclectic visual field, as well as the background scene of smoking chimneys, suggests that the central category of Fougeron’s indictment is modernity itself, here rendered as a joint venture of French colonialism, American capitalism, and German bellicosity.

In its focus on modernity, *Atlantic Civilization* recalls Kristin Ross’s reading of 1950s French culture in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* as constituted by the concurrence of Americanization and decolonization.<sup>2</sup> But Fougeron’s painting—precisely because it is explicitly ideological—differs in two ways from most of the works considered by Ross. First of all, instead of displacing the anticolonial struggle through a domestic discourse of modern hygiene and technology, as do most of the texts and documents Ross analyzes, Fougeron highlights the overlap of the everyday with the punctuality of violent events. In creating such a montage, he uses an aesthetic form that will return in Algerian War–epoch works to be considered later, such as Rouch and Morin’s *Chronicle of a Summer* and Delbo’s *Les belles lettres*. Secondly, *Atlantic Civilization* demonstrates that the memory of German occupation, which Ross largely leaves out of her account, remains active in postwar discourses and in aesthetic and political projects. Colonial violence comes home, but under the sign of Nazism. Ross goes on to argue in *May ’68 and Its Afterlives* that memory of the Algerian War underwrites the student and worker struggles of the late 1960s.<sup>3</sup> *Atlantic Civilization*, however, suggests the presence of a more multidirectional matrix of dissent in which memories of Nazism and genocide play a significant role along with those of colonialism and workers’ struggles. Yet Fougeron leaves the precise nature of the links in that matrix unclear.

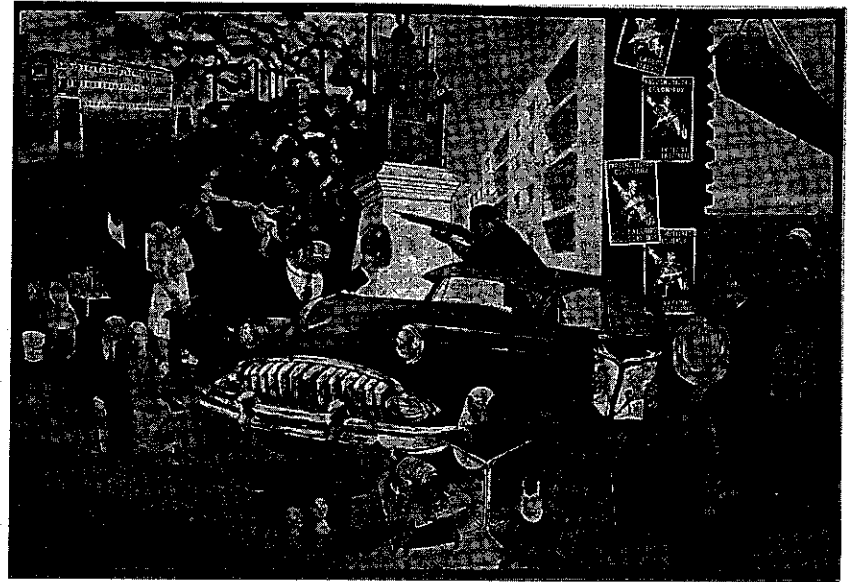


FIGURE 1 André Fougeron, *Atlantic Civilization* (1953). © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/Tate, London.

Fougeron’s painting thus raises several questions pertinent to a theory of multidirectional memory. What kinds of aesthetic form are adequate to the task of representing and recalling history’s overlapping forms of violence? Is the simple recollection of multiple histories indicative of the dynamic, productive interplay I have called multidirectional memory? Or do links such as that between an SS soldier and an American Cadillac only amount to an additive model in which histories are brought together without producing an interchange of memories and ideas? Opening up our powers of comparison requires a framework that takes the wayward currents of collective memory seriously but can also make judgments that distinguish between different articulations of relatedness. I argue that both individual and collective memory are always in some sense multidirectional. In “making the past present,” recollections and representations of personal or political history inevitably mix multiple moments in time and multiple sites of remembrance; making the past present opens the doors of memory to intersecting pasts and undefined futures. Memory is thus structurally multidirectional, but each articulation of the past processes

that multidirectionality differently. In other words, as soon as memory is articulated publicly, questions of representation, ethics, and politics arise. While Fougeron's painting invokes multiple historical legacies, it alone does not answer the questions that orient this section of the book: how to conceptualize and represent multidirectionality; and how to assess its ethical and political effects.

The dialectical relationship staged in Fougeron's painting between violence in the colonies and in the metropolis recalls two well-known texts from the same early postwar moment that I take up here in order to pursue the conceptualization of multidirectionality: Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950/1955). Both Arendt and Césaire grasp a relationship between the two forms of colonial rule that Arendt distinguished as "continental" and "overseas" imperialisms. But their understanding of that relationship is significantly different. In his brilliantly provocative polemic, Césaire describes Nazism as "un choc en retour," which his translator later rendered as a "boomerang effect," but which we may want to preserve more literally as "reverse shock" or "backlash" so as to maintain the discourse of "shock." Arendt also considers the possibility of "boomerang effects" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, but her argument about causality in that unclassifiable scholarly work takes a different form than does Césaire's in his anticolonial pamphlet—a form at once more complex and yet more troubling.

With their references to "chocs en retour" and "boomerang effects," both Arendt and Césaire use metaphors of *directionality*. By charting what those metaphors make thinkable and where they break down, we can begin to imagine a specifically multidirectional approach. At stake in a comparison of Arendt's and Césaire's different articulations of historical relatedness are linked notions of uniqueness, universalism, and the human that continue to bedevil scholars of the legacies of violence. In exposing the limits of those notions as internal to the structures of violence they are meant to expose, I suggest that multidirectionality provides a conceptual logic beyond the unique and the universal and outside the problem of the human.

In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on Arendt's writings on totalitarianism and imperialism and then conclude with a short coda that

also takes up the related and influential work of Giorgio Agamben on "bare life." I demonstrate that Arendt is ahead of her time in grasping the specificity of what would become known as the Holocaust as well as in linking the genocide to European colonialism, but that she simultaneously falls victim to tendencies within colonial discourse that she otherwise unveils. I argue, in particular, that Arendt's figuration of the colonized in Africa—derived in part from the cultural memory encoded in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*—provides the grounds for her path-breaking analysis of the Nazi camps, but in such a way that it confirms the racist suppositions of colonial logic. Arendt's still crucial consideration of the sources of Nazi genocide thus leaves us with a difficult question that gets to the heart of the contrast between competitive and multidirectional approaches to the past: How is it possible to remember the specificities of one history without silencing those of another? I continue to pursue this question in the following chapter in my discussion of Aimé Césaire. By reading closely Arendt's and Césaire's attempts to think colonialism and Nazism together, and by paying attention both to what they make possible and to where they reach their limits, I begin sketching this book's alternative model—a model that avoids the conceptual traps of uniqueness, universalism, and the human and reconfigures the conceptualization of violence, trauma, and memory around a multidirectional logic.

### Blindness and Insight: Arendt and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

Fougeron's *Atlantic Civilization* situates Nazi violence in a crowded constellation of the ills of modern capitalism—colonial war, environmental devastation, hunger, homelessness, rampant consumer culture, and alleged immorality. Arendt's nearly contemporaneous work on totalitarianism also deploys the constellation as a form for understanding the relation between the brutality of imperialism and the genocidal violence within Europe. While Arendt's approach brings significantly greater subtlety and complexity, not to mention scholarly weight, to such a project than does Fougeron's painting, her work also gets caught in its own ideological binds. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* demands a double reading, one that recognizes the unprecedented insights that Arendt brings to understand-

ing modern history—insights that today’s historians are only beginning to catch up to—while also revealing how those insights are interlaced with forms of blindness about race and colonialism that might be typical for the Europeans of the era in which she wrote, but no less crippling for their typicality. The ultimate stakes of reading Arendt involve unraveling this knot of blindness and insight and reconstructing a vision of history that can transcend the limits that define its initial articulation. Such a simultaneously deconstructive and reconstructive method assumes that Arendt’s ideas are partially constrained by history and even biography, but also that their import remains urgent in a world still working through the aftermath of colonialism and genocide and indeed living through their new incarnations. Both as a historically situated example of multidirectional memory and as a theorization of historical comparison, Arendt’s efforts at what she calls “comprehension” continue to speak to us today.

Arendt’s ability to see what others could not see—and yet, at the same time, to remain blind to what was happening around her—no doubt derives in part from the very particular personal circumstances in which she undertook her study. When Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951 she had spent the previous eighteen years as a stateless person. Born in 1906 to a German-Jewish family, Arendt studied philosophy in Marburg with Heidegger and in Heidelberg with Jaspers. Beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s she became increasingly involved with Jewish politics and Zionism, a movement toward which she maintained a complex and critical relationship throughout her life. Forced to flee Germany shortly after the National Socialist rise to power, she spent several years in Paris working for Jewish organizations such as Youth Aliyah, which helped young Jews emigrate to Palestine. After being detained in the French camp Gurs as an “enemy alien” in 1940 when war was declared between France and Germany, she escaped to Lisbon and made her way to New York in 1941 (the very trip that Walter Benjamin had failed to make the previous year). Arendt learned early on about the Nazi genocide, in the winter of 1942–43, and she quickly integrated it into her understanding of politics and history. Throughout the 1940s, while working on various versions of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she also wrote essays for Jewish journals such as *Aufbau*, *The Menorah Journal*, and *Jewish Social Studies*. Because of the unclassifiable nature of her writing, which

mixes philosophy, political theory, social commentary, and history, and the unorthodox and often controversial tenor of her political positions, Arendt occupied an ambiguous position in the intellectual landscape during her lifetime—she was simultaneously marginal and central to major debates of the postwar years.<sup>4</sup> Since her death in 1975, however, her work has become increasingly important, if no less controversial, in scholarly circles.<sup>5</sup> From the vantage point of the present, it is possible to look back and see how the unusual mix of personal experience, collective history, and philosophical training that produced Arendt makes her work and life by no means representative, but perhaps revelatory or indicative of some of the major political and intellectual forces of the twentieth century.

As Arendt moves in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* from anti-Semitism, through the colonial encounter in Africa and the European refugee crisis after World War I, to the totalitarian camp system, she follows a trajectory that shuttles between European and non-European worlds. Yet she never quite achieves the “planetary” or transnational account of the “tensions of empire” in modernity called for by recent critics of postcolonial and global culture.<sup>6</sup> Because Africa remains an ahistorical backdrop against which European history plays out, Arendt does not make the transition that the Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel calls for from a conception of European modernity as “an *independent*, autopoietic, self-referential system” to one in which it is “*part of a world-system*” (Dussel 4).<sup>7</sup> Dussel identifies how Eurocentrism has set inadvertent limits on modern and postmodern critiques of reason: “In general, no debate between rationalists and postmoderns overcomes the Eurocentric horizon. The crisis of modernity . . . refers to internal aspects of Europe. The peripheral world would appear to be a passive spectator of a thematic that does not touch it, because it is a ‘barbarian,’ a ‘premodern,’ or, simply, still in need of being ‘modernized.’ In other words, the Eurocentric view reflects on the problem of the crisis of modernity solely with the European–North American moments (or now even Japanese), but it minimizes the periphery” (17–18). Measured against Dussel’s criteria, Arendt writes at the limit of Eurocentric models. Because she places events in Africa at the center of the making of modern politics, she avoids the danger of leaving the peripheral world “untouched” in her account. Like Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, a text that figures centrally in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,

Arendt exposes and strongly condemns European violence in the colonial encounter. Yet, also like Conrad, she reads that encounter only from one direction. Arendt's text is not simply like Conrad's, but draws heavily on the image of Africa it produces and circulates. Despite the attention Arendt draws to imperialism in the second section of *Origins*, she revives the colonialist cultural memory encoded in Conrad's novel and renders Africans "passive."<sup>8</sup> Her critique of modernity remains primarily internal to Europe because even as she tracks imperial expansion she is unable to render its victims as subjects.

One great irony of this inability to recognize the other is that Arendt was writing at one of the great moments of anticolonial agitation. At the same time Arendt was providing unprecedented insight into the singularity of totalitarianism and the Nazi genocide, anticolonial movements around the world and individual intellectuals such as Césaire and Du Bois were helping to bring the possibility of decolonization to the forefront of world history—and they were doing so in ways that also acknowledge Europe's recent Nazi past. Arendt's missed encounter with decolonization underlies *The Origins of Totalitarianism's* story of blindness and insight. In fact, Arendt's *inability* to comprehend the subjects at Europe's periphery as bearers of history, memory, and culture is intrinsically related to—and even provides the conditions for—her *ability* to recognize Europe's internal others. The imagined savage without culture—the imagined barbarian—provides the metaphorical grounding for two of the central "characters" of Arendt's analysis: the naked human being deprived of culture, and the stateless concentration camp inmate stripped of the right to have rights.

### Comprehension and the Constellation

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt sets out "to comprehend" one of the key political phenomena of the twentieth century by returning to its roots in the nineteenth.<sup>9</sup> Plans for the book took different forms as Arendt was writing it in the mid- to late-1940s, but in its final version it is divided into three semiautonomous sections, "Antisemitism," "Imperialism," and "Totalitarianism."<sup>10</sup> There are a number of puzzling features to Arendt's methodology and to the organization of the book. First, there is the fact that the phenomenon to be explained by the totality of the book,

totalitarianism, is also one of the sections of the book. This would be less unexpected if the sections represented a clear narrative progression toward the apogee of totalitarianism, but in fact the connections between the sections are not explicit and the volume as a whole is characterized more by disjuncture than progression. In addition, Arendt's notion of totalitarianism differs from those more familiar accounts that posit it as a closed, totalizing system of control. Margaret Canovan, one of the best commentators on *Origins*, has succinctly summed up the distinctiveness of Arendt's theory: "Instead of referring to a political system of a deliberately structured kind, 'totalitarianism' in Arendt's sense means a chaotic, nonutilitarian, manically dynamic movement of destruction that assails all the features of human nature and the human world that makes politics possible."<sup>11</sup> This understanding of totalitarianism has two correlates that make it especially relevant for this book. First, it makes the Nazi genocide an extreme but exemplary instance of the larger phenomenon of totalitarianism because it consists of a "pure" form of the radically destructive attack on the human. Second, and seemingly paradoxically, it leads Arendt to situate the core of her argument not in the first section on anti-Semitism, but rather in the second section on imperialism. While the emergence of anti-Semitism in late nineteenth-century Europe explains why Jews became the targets of Nazi totalitarianism, Arendt argues that only the history of imperialism can explain the global and nonutilitarian dimensions of the genocidal dynamic of destruction (cf. Arendt, *Origins* xvi). With these two correlates of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism in mind, this chapter offers not a complete interpretation of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a task that far outstrips the scope of this book, but rather a focused reading of the relationship between the Holocaust and imperialism, with a particular emphasis on the way the concept of the assault on the human anchors and unsettles Arendt's analysis.<sup>12</sup>

In laying out a disjunctive constellation linking anti-Semitism, imperialism, and totalitarianism, Arendt sets herself a paradoxical task in *Origins*: to grapple with the unprecedented nature of the Nazi genocide of European Jews while simultaneously seeking the antecedent elements that help explain its possibility and marking the parallel phenomena that share its genus.<sup>13</sup> If the paradox of comprehending the incomprehensible has become one of the expected tropes in discussion of the Holocaust, this

should not block from view the specificity with which Arendt approaches the question, nor should it obscure the relevant fact that it is often via the comprehension/incomprehension distinction that the Holocaust is articulated to—or, most often, disarticulated from—other histories of collective violence. Arendt's notion of comprehension is intended to finesse the paradoxical task of defining the novelty of the totalitarian catastrophe while at the same time locating it in some kind of historical framework: "Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden which our century has placed on us—neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality—whatever it may be" (*Origins* viii). Arendt sets an exacting standard here for comparative approaches to history. She restricts usage of some of the most obvious conceptual tools of the comparatist (analogy, generalization, and deduction from precedent) while, conversely, reinforcing the need to feel history's "burden," its impact beyond its initial occurrence. Concurrently, she enjoins the thinker to take in the impact or shock of history while simultaneously resisting its force and, as she writes elsewhere, "destroying" it (qtd. in Bernstein 53). With these crosscutting demands in mind, Arendt's effort to "comprehend" totalitarianism in relation to imperialism and anti-Semitism in *Origins* can provide an opportunity both to reflect on the historical background against which the studies in the following chapters of this book emerge and also to consider the epistemological as well as political problems of writing comparative cultural and historical analysis. Facing up to and resisting reality: these are tasks both for a post-Holocaust and a postcolonial critique, and especially for a critique that seeks to transgress the discourses of separation and uniqueness that have taken hold in the wake of Arendt's writings.

In saying that Arendt's example can help us to avoid the discourses of separation, it is important to be clear, however, that Arendt by no means authorizes a reduction of disparate historical phenomena to versions of the same essence. To the contrary, in "A Reply to Eric Voegelin," a 1953 statement in which Arendt comes closest to laying out the methodology

of *Origins*, she decries the "growing incapacity for making distinctions" that afflicts "the present state of the historical and political sciences."<sup>14</sup> But if she focuses on the distinctiveness of totalitarian domination, why would she construct a text structured by juxtaposition and implied linkage of disparate phenomena such as imperialism, Nazism, and Stalinism? The complexity of Arendt's project has always inspired misunderstanding. The political philosopher Voegelin read *Origins* as "a gradual revelation of the essence of totalitarianism from its inchoate forms in the eighteenth century to the fully developed" (qtd. in Arendt, *Essays* 405). Arendt refuses this account of her methodology as a narrativizing revelation because it seems to import a totalitarian essence into the past. Instead, she proposes an alternative model: "This essence, in my opinion, did not exist before it had come into being. I therefore talk only of 'elements,' which eventually crystallize into totalitarianism, some of which are traceable to the eighteenth century, some perhaps even farther back" (*Essays* 405). As has often been remarked, Arendt's metaphor of crystallizing elements provides a more trustworthy image of her approach to totalitarianism than the "origins" of the book's title. And yet Arendt's work continues to bear traces of the linear and progressive narrative of origins she disavows.

Arendt's methodology, as she lays it out in her response to Voegelin and practices it in *Origins*, cuts against the grain of traditional empirical history and makes productive alliances with memory, representation, and imagination.<sup>15</sup> Hence it is not accidental that Arendt's language in her response to Voegelin is close to that of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in which he embraces the "constructive principle" of "materialistic historiography": "Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a constellation [*Konstellation*] pregnant with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad [*als Monade kristallisiert*]."<sup>16</sup> Famously dedicated to "blast[ing] open the continuum of history" through the rupture of the narrative of "the homogeneous course of history," Benjamin's theses draw on the powers of the memory of the oppressed, providing a method that contrasts sharply with Voegelin's idea of a "gradual revelation of essence." Benjamin's insight is that beneath the ideology of progress lies a particular conception of temporality—a "homogeneous, empty time" that serves as the backdrop for the idea of historical progression. In

contrast to the homogeneous time of progress(ion), Benjamin's crystalized constellations provide an image of encounter in which different temporalities collide and in which movement and stasis are held in tension. Arendt's Benjaminian language thus suggests that instead of appearing as a three-part narrative, the structure of *Origins* (Antisemitism, Imperialism, Totalitarianism) offers a constellation in which synchronic and diachronic elements appear in tension, in patterns that are contingent but have taken on solidity in the course of history.

Nevertheless, Arendt's methodological commitment to the constellation increases the reader's sensitivity to the progressive narrative elements in *Origins*. As Seyla Benhabib has shown, there are ultimately two strands to Arendt's approach to the past: "one corresponding to the method of fragmentary historiography, and inspired by Walter Benjamin; the other, inspired by the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, and according to which memory is the mimetic recollection of the lost origins of phenomena as contained in some fundamental human experience" (95). The persistence of this search for lost origins in Arendt's account of totalitarianism is the counterpart of a residual progressivism that haunts her text and her concept of the human.

### "A New Kind of Human Beings"

Long before Arendt completed *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—and, indeed, at a moment when few in the world beyond the perpetrators themselves had grasped the scope of the genocide—she was already beginning to conceptualize fundamental features of her larger project of comprehending the political and moral questions of the twentieth century. In her dark and powerful 1943 essay, "We Refugees," originally published in *Memoir Journal*, we see an important step toward Arendt's yoking together of colonialism and genocide: an interrogation of the limits of the human. In "We Refugees," Arendt uses her own position as escapee from Hitler's Europe to reflect on the novelty of contemporary history and its implications for understanding the place of the Jews in it. Sounding themes that run through her writings of the 1940s, Arendt emphasizes the political significance of dislocation. As she concludes the essay and reflects on the meaning of the war raging around her, she places the experience of Jews at the center of history:

Those few refugees who insist upon telling the truth, even to the point of "indecenty," get in exchange for their unpopularity one priceless advantage: history is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of Gentiles. They know that the outlawing of the Jewish people in Europe has been followed closely by the outlawing of most European nations. Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples—if they keep their identity. For the first time Jewish history is not separate but tied up with that of all other nations. The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted. (*Jew as Pariah* 66)

Locating her thought at the "vanguard" of history allows Arendt to draw large conclusions from supposedly marginal experiences. In this case, she understands the experience of radical marginalization itself—the "outlawing" of a human group—and the production of new categories of refugees that follows as a forerunner of the greater European crisis represented by the war. The point is not to uncover some essence of modernity or to argue for the inevitability of the history unfolding around her. Rather, the point is to search out what is new in the current crisis and then, through a method at once explosive in a Benjaminian sense and genealogical in a Nietzschean sense, to comprehend the elements that constitute the conditions of possibility of the crisis.

Already in "We Refugees," Arendt anticipates one of the sections of *Origins* that has proven the most fruitful to contemporary thinkers, her reflections on "the end of the rights of man." Considering the imperative to "forget" with which countries of haven address refugees, Arendt remarks, "In order to forget more efficiently we rather avoid any allusion to the concentration or internment camps we experienced in nearly all European countries. . . . Apparently nobody wants to know that contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends" (*Jew as Pariah* 56). Although Arendt's writings on the camps are not usually considered as works of memory, she conceives the project that she outlines here and continues to develop in *Origins* as part of an anamnestic project dedicated to reclaiming contemporary history from instantaneous oblivion. Remembering the camps entails recognizing the novelty of the humanity produced there. This new kind of human is what, under Arendt's influence, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben will later call "homo sacer" and "bare life."<sup>17</sup> Sacred or bare life is what has

been radically excluded by the polis but is simultaneously still sufficiently included to be subject to murder: "life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 82). This inclusion of the excluded marks the realm of what Agamben, following Foucault, calls biopolitics, a politics that targets life itself and that Agamben sees coming to define the totality of contemporary politics.<sup>18</sup> For Agamben, as for Arendt, the Nazi concentration and extermination camps form the paradigm of biopolitics, but both thinkers, in different ways, see the biopolitical threat expanding well beyond that particular locus.<sup>19</sup>

As Arendt formulates the problem of biopolitics in 1943, the greatest danger to the "new kind of human beings" created in the camps is that all markers of culture and civilization have been stripped away from them, leaving them naked and radically vulnerable: "We expose ourselves to the fate of human beings who, unprotected by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings. I can hardly imagine an attitude more dangerous, since we actually live in a world in which human beings as such have ceased to exist for quite a while" (*Jew as Pariah* 65). Human beings as such have ceased to exist because of the dense "artificial" networks of social, cultural, and political institutions that surround them under almost all circumstances. The loss of such a context is so dangerous because, as Arendt would go on to argue in *Origins*, it is only via constructed communal categories—especially citizenship in a sovereign state—that humans can attain the fundamental "right to bear rights." Without those categories, "the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human" (*Origins* 296, 99). In the section of *Origins* called "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," Arendt notes how in the wake of World War I the phenomenon of statelessness that had seemed peripheral—"an unfortunate exception to an otherwise sane and normal rule," "peculiar to certain territories that deviated from the norm" (*Origins* 267–68, 276)—became definitive and marked a generalized crisis of the nation-state. In other words, the figure of the abstract, naked human is not simply an accidental effect of contingent crisis, but is revelatory of aporias in the structure of modern political organization. *Origins* thus confirms and develops the insights of "We Refugees," allowing us to see once again how Arendt connects the marginal and the central—and the Jewish vanguard to the comity of nations—as parts of a structured historical process.

The early essay "We Refugees" thus raises several issues crucial to the more fully developed project of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It suggests the methodological necessity of deploying a transnational lens, both to reveal that many quintessentially modern phenomena entail the transgression of national boundaries and to bring into focus the scale of the problems caused by the crisis of the nation-state. Realigning the methodological lens to bring into view the centrality of "marginal," transnational phenomena also allows insight into the importance of the categories of the "human" and the biopolitical for an understanding of extreme violence and genocide. As the work of Agamben testifies, it is at the margins of the polis that we find the determinant issues and figures of modernity such as bare life, sovereignty, the state of exception, and *homo sacer*. Yet, in the early essay, we are also left with a gnawing concern—In what time or place exactly *did* "human beings as such" exist? This question will come back to haunt *Origins* and reveal its imbrication in a colonialist vision of history.

### Beyond Human Comprehension: Eurocentrism and the Discourse of Utility

Arendt's notion of comprehension bears a complex relationship to the category of the human, which is itself centrally at stake in her discussions of totalitarianism. Arendt distinguishes her own version of comprehension from the more common meaning of the term, which in a 1946 review essay she calls "human comprehension": "*Beyond the capacities of human comprehension* is the deformed wickedness of those who established such [monstrous] equality" as was found in the Nazi extermination camps (*Essays* 198; Arendt's emphasis). By "human comprehension," Arendt seems to mean the integration of events into the recognizably *utilitarian* framework of understanding that is "the very basis on which history is produced" (*Essays* 199). *Human* comprehension is inadequate because, for Arendt, totalitarianism entails precisely "the transformation of human nature itself," a transformation that cannot be subsumed under any utilitarian motivation and thus goes beyond any familiar notion of the human (*Origins* 458). Canovan summarizes Arendt's account of why the category of the human becomes inadequate in the face of totalitarian terror: "The totalitarian



assault on human nature is an attempt to create something closer to nature than human beings ought to be, and to destroy the specifically human qualities that distinguish human beings from animals, namely their individuality and their capacity to initiate action and thought" (*Hannah Arendt* 25). While Arendt understands this destruction of individuality as pervasive in totalitarian societies, the camps and the genocide enacted in them represent an extreme point of the totalitarian assault. Despite the extremity of that assault, Arendt's notions of comprehension, the human, and totalitarianism also shape her understanding of nontotalitarian histories where the limits of the human are at stake—and, indeed, nontotalitarian histories (especially the history of imperialism) shape her conception of totalitarianism.

As becomes clear in her prescient 1950 essay "Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps," Arendt's notions of the human and of comprehension—or of the destruction of the human and human comprehension—are crucial to her understanding of the relations between totalitarian genocide and its antecedents. Since the concentration camp system, which she sees as the defining and unprecedented moment of totalitarianism, is characterized by "an absence of . . . utilitarian criteria," then it cannot be equated with the "definite purpose" identifiable in other forms of terror. For Arendt,

The road to total domination leads through many intermediary stages which are relatively normal and quite comprehensible. It is far from unprecedented to wage aggressive war; massacres of enemy population or even of what one assumes to be a hostile people look like an everyday affair in the bloody record of history; extermination of natives in the process of colonization and the establishment of new settlements has happened in America, Australia, and Africa; slavery is one of the oldest institutions of mankind and forced-labor gangs, employed by the state for the performance of public works, were one of the mainstays of the Roman Empire. Even the claim to world rule . . . is no monopoly of totalitarian governments and can still be explained by a fantastically exaggerated lust for power. (*Essays* 233–34)

In contrast to these phenomena, Arendt writes, "The fate of European Jewry [and] the establishment of death factories . . . transcend anti-Semitic reasoning as well as the political, social, and economic motives behind the propaganda of anti-Semitic movements" (*Essays* 235). The attempt to

understand the novelty of historical experience demands the kinds of un-sentimental distinctions that Arendt makes here. In addition, the insight that extreme and unprecedented forms of violence can emerge from the normal and the everyday is both epistemologically productive and carries the critical corollary that the elements of totalitarianism might outlast the historical period of totalitarianism's eruption and lie dormant, waiting to be reactivated. Furthermore, the recognition that some forms of terror are familiar from history's bloody record need not minimize that terror. As Arendt concludes in this essay, "The point is that Hitler was not like Jenghiz Khan and not worse than some other great criminal but entirely different" (*Essays* 243). The insistence that historical difference does not necessarily entail moral distinction avoids slippage from a discourse of comparison to one of competition—a matter especially crucial when the discussion shifts from the evaluation of perpetrators to the recognition of the suffering of victims.

Nevertheless, the previous long passage also raises problems about how to think about victimization that return us to the question of human comprehension. What does it mean, for example, to relegate "extermination of natives" to the category of the "relatively normal and quite comprehensible"? On the one hand, Arendt's point is clear; she means to suggest, rightly or wrongly, that the process of colonization is an explainable, utilitarian pursuit that entails massacres and even genocide. This is not meant as a justification of colonization and its correlates, but is rather intended as a factual statement about what the pursuit of wealth and power entails. On the other hand, the absence of utility as one of the elements differentiating the Holocaust from other genocides and "exterminations" easily slides into less objective judgments that seem to grant "rationality" to some forms of killing.<sup>20</sup> The evaluation of colonialism as utilitarian also skirts essential conclusions of *Origins* itself.

Arendt's formulation in these early essays of the particularity of the Nazi genocide has become a standard feature of contemporary discourse on the uniqueness of the Holocaust. For example, Yehuda Bauer, one of the most important historians of the Shoah, cites the "nonpragmatic and irrational" ideology of National Socialist anti-Semitism as one of the things that led to "an unprecedented form of genocide."<sup>21</sup> Bauer's formulation seems to capture something important about the Holocaust—which one

would never want to describe as "rational"—and yet it begs the question of who gets to decide on the definition of the pragmatic and rational. This conceptual uncertainty becomes especially significant when the question of comparison enters in. While the murder of Jews is considered irrational, Bauer consistently describes the murder of other groups as "pragmatic." While he insists (no doubt genuinely) that such distinctions are not meant to suggest a "gradation of suffering" (50), it is difficult to avoid reading the attribution of the pragmatic and rational as imbued with value. The problem is that using utility as a criterion raises the question of perspective. From what and from whose perspective is something utilitarian? For instance, Bauer writes that "in the Armenian genocide, arguably the closest parallel to the Holocaust, the motivation was political and chauvinistic, that is, it had a pragmatic basis. . . . The Armenians, an 'alien' nation, occupied stretches of Anatolia, the heartland of Turkey. They had to be done away with" (45). While there are obvious geographical, cultural, and political differences between Jews in Europe and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, it is difficult to grasp how the elimination of one "alien" presence is more irrational than the other, or why motivation for the Holocaust could not be described as "political and chauvinistic." The definition of any act of extermination as pragmatic, and therefore rational, will always be ideological. Accepting claims that certain genocides or massacres are pragmatic often entails accepting the terms and worldview of the perpetrators—as Bauer does when he ventriloquizes the voice of the Turkish perpetrators ("They had to be done away with"). Bauer and others are willing to perform this act of definition for all genocides except for the Holocaust. The establishment of pragmatism and utility as standards of historical distinction in this instance presupposes European frameworks of evaluation—the Holocaust is unique based on modern European criteria of rationality. Seen from another perspective, such as that of the victims, however, the nonutilitarian basis of genocide is hardly relevant; ascribed motivation has no bearing on the results of genocidal procedures.<sup>22</sup> Even worse, the discourse of pragmatism reinforces and reproduces Orientalist and colonialist ideologies. As Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd writes in response to similar comments by Deborah Lipstadt differentiating the Holocaust from the genocide of indigenous peoples, "What happens to American Indians in such a competition for the 'true'

genocide is that we become, yet again, the 'logical,' if tragic victims of modernization who stand in the way of progress."<sup>23</sup>

For Arendt, the question of utility is far more complicated than for Bauer and other contemporary proponents of uniqueness. She seems to waffle on the question of the utility of the camps. In *Origins*, she writes, "The uselessness of the camps, their cynically admitted anti-utility, is only apparent. In reality they are more essential to the preservation of the regime's power than any of its other institutions" (456). Far from being useless, the camps are a necessary component of the totalitarian regime's drive toward intensive total domination. Emphasizing how the question of utility is a question of perspective, Arendt actually takes on the voice of totalitarianism to make this point: "Common sense protests desperately that the masses are submissive and that all this gigantic apparatus of terror is therefore superfluous; if they were capable of telling the truth, the totalitarian rulers would reply: The apparatus seems superfluous to you only because it serves to make men superfluous" (*Origins* 457). Because Arendt self-consciously foregrounds her ventriloquism of the totalitarian rulers, her approach remains critical, whereas Bauer's risks sliding into the perspective of the perpetrators. Although Arendt insists elsewhere—and crucially—on the nonutilitarian values that drive totalitarianism, she also recognizes that the question of utility is a question of "common sense," or, in other words, of "human comprehension." Such a notion of sense and comprehension takes for granted the image of the human that totalitarianism (and, as we'll see in a moment, even imperialism) renders irrelevant. Only when pushed beyond the limits of common sense can a discourse of utility or of the human remain pertinent. But this is a difficult task to which even Arendt is not always equal.

The most striking difference between Arendt and most of those who locate the uniqueness of the Holocaust in its irrationality or nonutility is that Arendt locates the origins of nonutilitarian or, better, postutilitarian thinking in imperialism, and particularly in the "scramble for Africa." Arendt's account of the development of the Boers in the chapter of *Origins* on "Race and Bureaucracy" serves as a genealogy of the antagonism between utilitarian notions of rationality and the foundations of the racial state and identifies the most important links between colonialism and Nazi genocide. The Boers "were the first European group to become completely

alienated from the pride which Western man felt in living in a world created and fabricated by himself" (*Origins* 194). Defined by "contempt for labor, hatred of territorial limitation, general rootlessness, and activist faith in [their] own divine chosenness," the Boers proved themselves willing "to sacrifice productivity and profit to the phantom world of white gods ruling over black shadows." They thus stood in contrast to the British in South Africa, with their "simple utilitarian minds" (*Origins* 197). And indeed, in this "respect, the most important one, the Boers remained the undisputed masters of the country: whenever rational labor and production policies came into conflict with race considerations, the latter won" (*Origins* 204). As Canovan summarizes Arendt's argument in this section of *Origins*, "South Africa showed that it is possible for a modern society to be organized on quite uneconomic principles along racial lines. . . . [A]lthough in Arendt's account imperialism started from the subordination of politics to bourgeois economics, it culminated in the abandonment of economic imperatives, and the adoption instead of sheer violence by men who had discovered a new form of community, a chosen race" (*Hannah Arendt* 38–39). This dialectic of utility and nonutility, played out in the encounter between Europe and its others, gives the question of utility a different cast in Arendt's work than it takes on for many later Holocaust scholars, such as Bauer. For Bauer, the nonutility of the Holocaust is one of the key indices of its uniqueness and one of the factors that differentiates the murder of Jews from massacres of predominantly non-European peoples. As he writes, "It would be superfluous to analyze the motivation for the annihilation of the Caribs at the hands of the Spaniards, or the genocide of Mexican and Peruvian Indian peoples that followed—clearly the quest for gold, commerce, and natural riches was the central motive, and the conversion to Christianity an ideological 'superstructure'" (47). Bauer's mobilization of a logic of self-evidence (always a sure sign of ideology at work) is far from the insights of Arendt, for whom the very possibility of a "non-utilitarian" genocide emerges from European practices in non-European space. Consistent with Arendt's attempt in *Origins* to show the crystallization of elements that led to totalitarianism instead of charting a deterministic causality, the link between Nazism and imperialism in South Africa is "indirect." But the crucial idea that "societies can function according to principles other than economic" was an important lesson that

"South Africa's race society taught the mob" (*Origins* 206). By situating the emergence of a nonutilitarian dynamic of destruction in Europe's expansion beyond its borders, Arendt provides an opening for a non-Eurocentric Holocaust studies that would not take European categories of utility and humanity for granted. Rather, her example suggests the need to submit such categories to the dual historical test of imperialism and genocide. This insight applies equally to her own texts.

Before submitting Arendt's categories to the standards she establishes, let me sum up what we've learned so far about Arendt's understanding of comprehension and the human in the context of imperialism and genocide. Arendt's task is to explain a political movement that defies human comprehension by ceaselessly producing destruction. What Arendt calls human comprehension corresponds to events and actions derived from motives that are explainable with recourse to utilitarian reasoning. Historical events and political projects, like the Holocaust, that do not obey utilitarian logic are thus beyond human comprehension. Events beyond human comprehension are not mystical or sacred events, according to Arendt. Rather, phenomena beyond human comprehension require the form of paradoxical comprehension Arendt describes as facing up to and resisting reality. Such paradoxical comprehension thus involves breaking up phenomena and recomposing the fragments in the form of constellations. The fragmentary historiography of constellations does not mimic the linear causal thinking of utilitarian logic that lies behind humanly comprehensible actions. Rather, fragmentary historiography attempts to capture the ruptures in and with normality that characterize acts of extreme violence. Arendt uses this distinction between what is beyond and what is within human comprehension to distinguish between the Holocaust as the essence of totalitarianism and all other preceding forms of extreme violence and oppression. Yet, at the same time, she places this nonutilitarian genocide in a constellation that includes the emergence of a hierarchical "race society" in South Africa. Imperialism forms a condition of the Holocaust, even as Arendt fundamentally distinguishes the two phenomena.

While extreme events are beyond human (that is, ordinary) comprehension, they nevertheless (or, perhaps, consequentially) have as their stakes the definition of the limits of the human. For Arendt, extreme

events are those that confront us with humanity in a pure form, "human beings as such." Mapping the contours of the human thus becomes one of the keys to understanding totalitarianism and the Holocaust. In Arendt's conception, human beings "as such" do not take part in a shared universal humanity, but instead represent an extreme point of isolation and vulnerability. The human being as such resides in the zone beyond human comprehension. The concentration camp inhabitant—especially the near-death, zombie-like figure who was known in the camps as the *Muselmann*—and the stateless refugee are figures of a new humanity; they are bare life that can be killed but not sacrificed. Understanding the fate of "abstract, naked" humanity requires a form of comprehension attuned to the ruptures in the human; the challenge of formulating a comprehension of the human beyond human comprehension motivates Arendt's project in *Origins*. But if the Holocaust victim epitomizes that challenge to understanding, what of the victim of colonial race society who represents the site at which, in Arendt's account, human action first exceeds human comprehension? How is it that this latter figure does not become the inspiration for the thinking of bare life in either Arendt or Agamben? In asking about the relationship between these two figures of victimization the point is not to work toward an equation of their experiences and the histories in which they find themselves, nor to play them off each other in a competition of victims, but to put pressure on the categories that Arendt uses to link and differentiate them. I argue that the figure of the colonized plays an essential role in the clarification of the Nazi genocide in *Origins*, but it is a role that seems to lie beyond even Arendt's radical form of comprehension.

### The Colonial Encounter and the Trauma of Race

Arendt considers the formation of race society (that is, a society structured fundamentally by racial hierarchy) in the colonies a crucial step on the way to racial extermination within Europe. Yet the matter of race and racism in *Origins* and in commentaries on it by scholars as important as Canovan is complicated by the odd way Arendt describes race society's emergence out of the encounter between Europeans and Africans.<sup>24</sup> Arendt's depiction of the colonial encounter reproduces the central ambigui-

ties that mark one of her key source texts in the chapter on "Race and Bureaucracy," Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, which she describes as "the most illuminating work on actual race experience in Africa" (*Origins* 185n). Conrad's text illuminates for Arendt a vision of the colonial encounter as traumatic encounter. But if, in a postcolonial moment, we are not initially surprised by the notion that colonialism produces trauma, Arendt has something else in mind. The trauma is not on the side of the colonized, but of the colonizer:

It is highly probable that the thinking in terms of race would have disappeared in due time together with other irresponsible opinions of the nineteenth century, if the "scramble for Africa" and the new era of imperialism had not exposed Western humanity to new and shocking experiences. . . . Race was the emergency explanation of human beings whom no European or civilized man could understand and whose humanity so frightened and humiliated the immigrants that they no longer cared to belong to the same human species. Race was the Boers' answer to the overwhelming monstrosity of Africa—a whole continent populated and overpopulated by savages—an explanation of the madness which grasped and illuminated them like "a flash of lightning in a serene sky: 'Exterminate all the brutes.'" (*Origins* 183–85)

On the one hand, Arendt's idiosyncratic manner of portraying the colonial encounter encourages rethinking of certain theories of modernity, such as Benjamin's, that place shock at the center of the modern experience.<sup>25</sup> Whereas, for Benjamin, shock describes an experience internal to European modernity, Arendt finds that definitively modern experience in the encounter with the periphery that produces the central modern category of "race" as an "emergency explanation" and provides the conditions of possibility for extermination and Holocaust. On the other hand, rather than fully exposing her theory to what is truly shocking and traumatic about the colonial encounter, Arendt's mode of narration consistently marginalizes the very colonial violence she recognizes, seems to reproduce the terms of colonial discourse ("monstrosity," "savages"), and reproduces a homogenized notion of Europeaness ("no European," and so forth). Despite her methodological interest in constellations, crystallizations, and the avoidance of linear narration, the unified point of view of the narration and the granting of narrative voice solely to the European perspective reduce the potential traumatic impact of the "massacres of enemy population" and

“extermination of natives” that, to her credit, she so clearly sees.<sup>26</sup> Here, she doesn’t follow through on Benjamin’s insights in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” about the co-constitutive encounter of “civilization” and “barbarism.” Rather than understanding the categories civilization and barbarism as a constellation, Arendt turns them into a progressive narrative, despite her own suspicion of that form.

As the previous passage’s closing citation of *Heart of Darkness* attests, Arendt’s portrait of frightened and humiliated Europeans is distinctly Conradian, a line of influence that has particular implications for the link between comprehension and the human.<sup>27</sup> In a famous passage that Arendt quotes at length, Conrad’s Marlow, who has been hired in the colonial metropolis to retrieve the ivory company’s top agent in the colonies, describes his confrontation with Africans as he sets out on his steamer, heading through the jungle toward that agent, Kurtz. Arendt introduces this passage by remarking, “The world of native savages was a perfect setting for men who had escaped the reality of civilization. . . . [The Europeans] were confronted with human beings who, living without the future of a purpose and the past of an accomplishment, were as incomprehensible as the inmates of a madhouse” (*Origins* 190):

The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly appalled, as sane men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse. We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. (*Heart* 37)

Like Arendt’s successor text, *Heart of Darkness* simultaneously confirms the humanity of Africans and removes them from present civilization and, implicitly, from past accomplishment and future world-making. While the

depiction of this encounter calls into question the possibility of comprehension, memory, narrative, and self-orientation for Europeans, a progressive understanding of history that locates Africans and Europeans in different chronological frames continues to operate. The Europeans are baffled by what they find because it reminds them vaguely of what they left behind so long ago: “We could not understand because we were too far.” While the first “we” is a disoriented, amnesiac subject, the second “we” returns as the modern subject, whose ignorance and inability to remember mark him precisely as modern, as capable of being “thrilled” and not simply overwhelmed. Despite the threat of uncanniness suggested by Africans’ “remote kinship,” Africa and Africans ultimately function as the sublime other that confirms the reason of European man—provided that he does not, like Kurtz, “go native” and regress to a precivilized state.<sup>28</sup>

The notion of the human does the most invidious work here. In both *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Heart of Darkness*, the notion of the human splits in the encounter between Europe and Africa: recognition of the monster as human institutes a narrative of “remote kinship” that draws Africans into the text only to leave them behind. Indeed, shortly after quoting Conrad, Arendt echoes him by portraying Africans in *Origins* as the past that Europeans have overcome:

What made them different from other human beings was not at all the color of their skin but the fact that they behaved like a part of nature, that they treated nature as their undisputed master, that they had not created a human world, a human reality, and that therefore nature had remained, in all its majesty, the only overwhelming reality—compared to which they appeared to be phantoms, unreal and ghostlike. They were, as it were, “natural” human beings who lacked the specifically human character, the specifically human reality, so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder. (*Origins* 192)

The primary problem with this passage lies not in Arendt’s final claim about the Europeans’ lack of awareness of murder, which can be read as coming from the perspective of the colonizer and thus capturing something important about the conditions of possibility of genocide. The problem is the splitting in two of the human that emerges from Arendt’s understanding of Africans as never having constructed “a human world.” Like stateless refugees and concentration camp inmates slated for death, Afri-

cans are the included exclusion, they are bare life. Or, to put it another way, their inclusion within the realms of the human is precisely the source of their exclusion. But the “incomprehensibility” of Africa and Africans is of a different order from that of Europe and its refugees and camp victims. Although Arendt does not acknowledge it, her argument rests on a preexisting cultural difference that provides the distance necessary to protecting and preserving the European subject in the face of traumatic extremity. Deploying a Hegelian understanding of history as written practice, Arendt consistently represents Africa as “prehistoric” and Africans as “prehistoric man”—human, but not too human. Although the category of imperialism in *Origins* is not meant to be a cog in a narrative of the emergence of totalitarianism, but instead an element awaiting crystallization, the practice of imperialism nevertheless (according to Arendt) writes a history of progress: Europe brings history to naturally human Africa in the form of a recognizable and unnatural, if brutal and genocidal, human reality.<sup>29</sup>

One of the most consequential connections Arendt makes between imperialism and the Holocaust derives from this destabilization of the human—a connection that is thus partially troubled by its reliance on a colonialist version of encounter. The progressive, narrative dimension of Arendt’s account of imperialism and the splitting of the human it produces also underlie her notion of totalitarianism and especially of the “new kind of human beings” produced in the Nazi camps. If imperialism entails the deadly encounter of “natural” human beings with civilization—an encounter that traumatizes but ultimately stabilizes the European subject—totalitarianism attempts to effect a regression to that natural state within European space. Such a coding of totalitarianism as regression (the mirror image of narrative progression) is reinforced when Arendt discusses the European pan-nationalist movements, whose racism she sees as the mediating link between overseas imperialism and Nazism, as expressions of “tribal nationalism” (*Origins* 227–43).<sup>30</sup> Such terminology reveals the metaphorical paths that Arendt’s theory traverses: a primitivist conception of Africans is passed first to European colonists in Africa, then to continental imperialists in Europe, and finally to both the victims and the perpetrators in the totalitarian camps. In the “Totalitarianism” section of *Origins*, Arendt uses language that recalls Conrad’s as well as her own discussion of the colonial encounter; she describes “the real horror [that] began . . . when the SS took over the administration of the camps”:

The killing of man’s individuality, of the uniqueness shaped in equal parts by nature, will, and destiny, which has become so self-evident a premise for all human relations that even identical twins inspire a certain uneasiness, creates a horror that vastly overshadows the outrage of the juridical-political person and the despair of the moral person. It is this horror that gives rise to the nihilistic generalizations which maintain plausibly enough that essentially all men are like beasts. Actually the experience of the concentration camps does show that human beings can be transformed into specimens of the human animal, and that man’s “nature” is only “human” insofar as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man. (*Origins* 454–55)

In understanding the camps as a site of the unmaking and remaking of the human, Arendt does not have in mind only the victims. As in the colonial encounter—where the traumatic shock of the confrontation impacts the colonizer—the horror of the camps rebounds in a boomerang effect on the very subjects who have constructed them. However, the difference between the two boomerang effects reiterates the splitting of the human. While in the colonial situation the spectacle of savagery disconcerts but ultimately confirms human (that is, European) possibility, here the uncanny (note the uneasiness inspired by twins) does not give way to the sublime reconstitution of the individualized modern subject. Arendt connects the killing of the prisoner’s individuality with elimination of the killers’ humanity: The “absolutely cold and systematic destruction of human bodies, calculated to destroy human dignity . . . turned [the camps] into ‘drill grounds,’ on which perfectly normal men were trained to be full-fledged members of the SS” (*Origins* 454). This passage not only anticipates later insights about the “ordinary men” engaged in the Nazi genocide (see esp. *Origins* 454n), but also sets the stage for one of Arendt’s most original and chilling arguments about totalitarianism: “Men insofar as they are more than animal reaction and fulfillment of functions are entirely superfluous to totalitarian regimes. Totalitarianism strives not toward despotic rule over men, but toward a system in which men are superfluous” (*Origins* 457). Totalitarian functionalism—or “logicality,” as Arendt calls it—leads to the attempt to produce a world bereft of superfluous humanity and, instead, fully consistent with the movement’s “ideological supersense”: “It is chiefly for the sake of this supersense, for the sake of complete consistency, that it is necessary for totalitarianism to destroy every trace of what we commonly call human dignity. For respect for human dignity implies the

recognition of my fellow-men or our fellow-nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or cobuilders of a common world" (*Origins* 458).

For Arendt, the camps reveal in microcosm the narrative of man's emergence into humanity as a fragile victory over nature and the animal that can be reversed under the right (for example, totalitarian) circumstances. This formulation represents the aporia or undecidable impasse of Arendt's thought. Arendt hesitates between two understandings of the human: one in which the animal resides at the core of the human and one in which only the unnatural (the nonanimal) could ever constitute the human. These two versions of the human correspond, respectively, to the "lessons" of the "Imperialism" and "Totalitarianism" sections of *Origins*: in Africa, Europeans discover "the human animal," while in the camps of the twentieth century they discover how to produce the animalized human. If, as Canovan argues, Arendt's political vision is forged out of and in stark opposition to the experience of totalitarianism, this aporia cuts to the center of her thought. The properly human realm in which politics can be practiced is buffeted on either side by the forces of "nature." Politics is threatened as much by the "natural" nature of the non-European world as by the production of a second natural state by the crises of the modern European world. Such a vision ignores the constitutive role of the non-European in the making of modern Europe and the opportunities for a new constitution of the human that might arise from that space. At the very moment when anticolonial struggles are raising the possibility of a "third nature" that would remake the world beyond colonialism and without the fantasy of return to supposedly prelapsarian conditions, Arendt translates the conquering of the colonial world into that world's threat to the very constitution of the human.<sup>31</sup>

The relation between imperialism and totalitarianism in *Origins* is even more intimate than Arendt acknowledges. As the previous citations from Arendt make clear, the colonial difference—that is, the distinction between natural and unnatural humanity—figures the ultimate limit of the totalitarian barbarism of the camps: "the killing of man's individuality" and the refusal of recognition for "my fellow-men [and] our fellow-nations as . . . cobuilders of a common world." Arendt's description of the concentration camps relies on a distinction that she derives from the colonial encounter, but she cannot fully recognize that that encounter produces

the very distinction she takes for granted there. That is, instead of understanding the traumatic nature of the physical and epistemic violence of colonialism as productive of the natural/unnatural humanity opposition, Arendt seems to hold that the Africans really are excluded from the project of building a common world (not essentially, perhaps, but historically and for the foreseeable future, nonetheless). The logic of her argument is that the Nazis turn their victims (and even their own adherents) into the de-individualized humans that Africans already are. This asymmetry leaves an unsettling mark on Arendt's account, despite the power and originality of the link she makes between the destruction wrought by the camps and that of imperialism. Arendt transforms the supposed absence of certain forms of life (European culture) into lack of all culture, all as a means of identifying what is lost under totalitarian conditions (the individualization of camp inmates and the SS).<sup>32</sup>

While it is of course troublesome that Arendt does not understand imperialism as producing Africans as bare life in the same way that the Nazis transformed the Jews into bare life, the problem potentially runs even deeper and has an impact on the category of comprehension. The splitting of the human in the colonial encounter is essential to Arendt's explanation of racism and the biopolitical world of the camps, a world in which a caesura is produced in the continuum of life between a "master race" and a category of "life unworthy of life" (or, in less extreme circumstances, between the citizen with rights and the refugee stripped of rights). The difficult problem to address is the degree to which Arendt's categorization of the Holocaust (and other aspects of totalitarianism) as beyond human comprehension depends on the assumption of a realm of humanity beyond human culture. In order to explain the reduction and splitting of the human that takes place in totalitarianism, Arendt has to posit such a split as already active in the colonial encounter. But her attempt to explain how that encounter produces the salience of race and the force of racism ends up requiring that racial difference preexist the encounter. She thus draws the very line within the human that she finds produced in the colonial encounter and camps. If we take seriously Arendt's own genealogy of the nonutilitarian in the formation of colonial race society, however, the source of incomprehension is brought closer to home, with unsettling results. It is not the confrontation with bare life

that produces incomprehension, but the very norms of European culture and its conception of the modern subject out of which the paradoxes of the human emerge. Perhaps most provocative in this account is the possibility that the "shock" experienced by Europeans in Africa emerges from the very universalism and humanism of Enlightenment thought, which leads the colonizers to expect an encounter with sameness. It is from within the expectation of homogenous universality that difference becomes traumatic.<sup>33</sup> The category of race is more fundamental to Arendt's argument and historical account than she can admit; it is not simply an "emergency explanation," but a place where the emergency mingles with the norm.

### Bare Life and the Boomerang Effect

In a series of recent books focusing on the biopolitics of "bare life," Giorgio Agamben has helped develop Arendt's accounts of imperialism and genocide. Unlike the discussion of Africa in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Agamben's investigations do not assume a preexistent realm of bare life or animality. In *State of Exception*, for instance, Agamben specifies that bare life is not "a natural biological given" but is "a product of the [biopolitical] machine."<sup>34</sup> Because he does not situate bare life in a preexisting state of nature, Agamben can develop insights into the proximity of bare life to European norms of sovereignty and personhood. Yet, Agamben's genealogical analysis of the growing indistinction of life and politics remains internal to Europe; he thus, symptomatically, never discusses Arendt's sections on the colonial encounter, which in my reading constitutes a key moment in the development of biopolitics (however ambivalently represented by Arendt). Agamben never offers an explanation of why biopolitics comes to triumph in modernity, a triumph that Arendt and more recent work in postcolonial studies suggest must have something to do with racial difference and a colonial encounter that radically transformed conceptions of the human. Agamben claims that "the camp—as the pure, absolute, and impossible biopolitical space (insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception)—will appear as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity" (*Homo Sacer* 123). While provocative, this claim remains troubling both because it mobilizes an absolutist/purist logic and because of its inability to think the colonial encounter as a biopolitical

event. As Arendt and Conrad demonstrate, sometimes against their own intentions, the colonial encounter is founded on a taken-for-granted state of exception in which there is no need for a "radical transformation of politics into the realm of bare life" (*Homo Sacer* 210), because contact with Africa already constitutes such a politics for Europeans. Agamben builds an artificial discursive wall around "the West" that prevents him both from seeing forces outside Europe as constitutive of modernity (as a range of minority and postcolonial thinkers have argued in recent decades) and from finding a way out of "the [biopolitical] machine" that is not apocalyptic. Agamben's "West" is a "pure, absolute . . . space" that cannot be productively transformed from within or without because its rise and fall are sealed off from a heterogeneous global history.

Insofar as she employs a Benjaminian methodology of constellation and crystallization, Arendt's *Origins* avoids both the absolutist nature of Agamben's argument and its extreme European exceptionalism—two methodological positions that thus appear as linked. Yet, she cannot fully account for the significance of the imperial encounter in her own reading of the camps. This failure manifests itself again when Arendt introduces the potentially fruitful concept of colonial "boomerang effects."<sup>35</sup> When, in the "Imperialism" section of *Origins* she explicitly addresses the connection between empire and Nazi genocide, she inadvertently reproduces the racial logic under analysis. She first suggests that, in comparison to the influence of the Boers' antiutilitarian thinking, their racism and anti-Semitism "influenced Nazism only in an indirect way" because it was "a matter of course and a natural consequence of the status quo in South Africa" (*Origins* 205–6). She then uses the figure of the boomerang to give form to that indirect influence:

There were, however, real and immediate boomerang effects of South Africa's race society on the behavior of European peoples: since cheap Indian and Chinese labor had been madly imported to South Africa whenever her interior supply was temporarily halted, a change of attitude toward colored people was felt immediately in Asia where, for the first time, people were treated in almost the same way as those African savages who had frightened the Europeans literally out of their wits. The difference was only that there could be no excuse and no humanly comprehensible reason for treating Indians and Chinese as though they were not human beings. In a certain sense, it is only here that the real crime began, because here everyone ought to have known what he was doing. . . . [S]ince the race prin-



ciple supplanted the older notions of alien and strange peoples in Asia, it was a much more consciously applied weapon of domination and exploitation than in Africa. (*Origins* 206)

This passage condenses the possibilities and problems of Arendt's efforts to link imperialism and Nazi genocide. Arendt finds in the conscious taking up of race as a weapon the origins of the "real crime" of genocide, yet her explanation of the circuits of the race-concept's transnational migration itself reinscribes racialized valuations of humanness. Certain uses of race are "natural" and hence comprehensible, while others demand a genealogical explanation. Despite Arendt's care in differentiating her notion of "origins" from a progressive narrative, then, Africa serves as an unquestioned point of origin in her genealogy of totalitarianism. The passage demonstrates the terrible proximity of the category of "human comprehension" to the humanly incomprehensible and also shows Arendt as unable fully to attain her own notion of comprehension as that which goes beyond everyday comprehensibility. Only by excluding certain groups, such as Africans, from recognition as human can comprehension trace the origins of inhumanity: alleged African savagery is the necessary beginning for the boomerang movement from racism that is a "natural consequence" of the European presence in Africa, through unnatural and "no[t] humanly comprehensible" racism in Asia, to the "real crime" of genocide in Europe.

The boomerang effect in Arendt's own text is double. There is both sympathy and distancing in this figurative connection between colonialism and genocide. Colonial violence foreshadows totalitarianism at the same time that totalitarianism casts a shadow backward on the colonial archive. Affect flows in multiple directions, from Africa to Europe and from Europe to Africa, with stopovers in Asia, as colonialism, war, and genocide illuminate each other. However, the relation between these nodes is not symmetrical: the African is chronologically and conceptually prior to the stateless European, but that priority is closer to what Johannes Fabian describes as the "denial of co-evalness" than it is to recognition of the claims to justice of the colonized. Arendt's text thus raises a fundamental question of comparative history and multidirectional memory: Does the attempt to go beyond Europe in providing a global frame for European history risk displacing European responsibility? William Pietz's judgment is harsh: "It was Arendt's signal achievement to frame a set of historically

grounded political concepts capable of locating the origin of 'totalitarianism' in general and modern European anti-Semitism in particular—and by implication, the responsibility for the Nazi holocaust—outside Europe, in the savage 'tribalism' of 'the Dark Continent'" (69). I find Pietz's critique of Arendt overly one-sided because it ignores the productive aspects of Arendt's linking of imperialism and Nazism, the aspects that provide a larger, European, and global explanatory frame for what is otherwise often reduced to an account of Germany's "special path [*Sonderweg*]." But I agree with Pietz that Arendt's text becomes contaminated by its own presuppositions about the nature of the human, Africa, and the colonial encounter.

The question then becomes: How can we describe a boomerang effect that doesn't silence one history of violence to convey another? The history of the word "boomerang" suggests that some of the tensions surrounding the comprehension of genocidal violence are already lodged deeply within the word. According to the *OED*, "boomerang" emerges in English in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the "adoption or modification of the native name in a language] of the aborigines of N.S. Wales" for "an Australian missile weapon: a curved piece of hard wood from two to three feet long, with a sharp edge along the convexity of the curve. It is so made as to describe complex curves in its flight, and can be thrown so as to hit an object in a different direction from that of projection, or so as to return to or beyond the starting-point." One of the first mentions of the word, according to the *OED*, is "in a short vocabulary of the extinct language of George's River, Botany Bay, printed by Ridley."<sup>36</sup> The English word "boomerang" thus not only emerges out of a colonial encounter but also indexes a genocidal history in which languages, cultures, and people teeter—or are thought to teeter—on the edge of extinction. The taking up of the boomerang as a metaphor for historical transmission encodes the risks of the comparative imagination—as words are translated and transmitted violence is simultaneously carried forward and left behind. In the circular trajectory of the boomerang, certain histories risk falling into oblivion. Yet when we situate those histories on the arc of the boomerang we also gain the means to return to those silences and to return them to a multidirectional archive of collective memory. This risky notion of return also plays multiple roles in the writings of Aimé Césaire.