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## Memory and Implication at the Limits of the Human: A Response to Nathan Snaza

Michael Rothberg

In ‘Posthuman(ist) Education and the Banality of Violence’, Nathan Snaza offers an important reflection on the forms of intersecting violence that characterize the contemporary world and he makes thought-provoking proposals about how to conceive of pedagogy in such a context. Starting from Adorno’s well-known writings on Auschwitz, Snaza seeks a model that allows us to grasp both the particularity of different histories of violence and the underlying structures that make violence omnipresent and everyday for much of the planet. Inspired especially by Sylvia Wynter’s work on ‘the coloniality of being’, but also drawing on my own theory of multidirectional memory and numerous thinkers of biopolitics and posthumanism, Snaza identifies a particular conception of the human – what Wynter calls ‘Man’ – at the root of violence and proposes cultivating an alternative, ‘posthumanist’ way of being in the world that acknowledges implication in violence instead of disavowing knowledge and involvement. Snaza’s posthumanism is explicitly political and oppositional. As he writes elsewhere together with Mina Karavanta, ‘posthumanisms attend to the knowledge that arises from the *bios politikos* of lives that are seen as bare, subaltern, illegal’.<sup>1</sup>

Although Snaza draws on my notion of multidirectionality as a way of negotiating the relationality of forms of violence, he does not engage directly with the question of memory; instead, he shifts the focus from memory to pedagogy. In my response, I thus work through the posthumanist perspective Snaza offers as well as the challenge posed by the editors of this special issue: to rethink memory studies and my concept of multidirectional memory in conjunction with posthumanist thought.

In Snaza’s essay – as well as in the larger field of posthumanism – a significant and productive tension exists between a desire to critique the *centring of the human* (in the name of a broader conception of ‘life’ and its links to the inanimate) and the *centring of Man*, the dominant version of the human (in the name of a more encompassing notion of humanity). The distinction between these two conceptions – one that targets anthropocentrism as such; one that targets bourgeois humanism – matters for a discussion of posthumanist memory studies: should we rethink remembrance from the perspective of a newly conceived human or from a broader conception of life and even the inanimate? The direction(s) in which we might move memory studies will diverge significantly depending on the answer to this question.

Consider Richard Crownshaw's injunction regarding the implications of climate change for the study of memory: 'Given the imbrication of human and non-human worlds and systems described by the Anthropocene, memory studies need[s] to adopt a posthumanist stance, otherwise it will be circumscribed by the normative theorization of memory's symbolic reconstitution of human life and human worlds'.<sup>2</sup> Crownshaw's proposal that a posthumanist memory studies consider 'a radically enlarged spatial scale of cognition' that includes consideration of 'non-human materials and systems' differs from a posthumanist memory studies that, in decentring Wynter's 'ethnoclass Man', would attend to an expanded conception of 'lives that are seen as bare, subaltern, illegal'. While Crownshaw gestures toward a potential 'geology of memory', Snaza and Karavanta call on beings that are alive in a way that the kinds of 'materials' Crownshaw invokes might not be.

The posthumanist interrogation of memory studies leads me to ask about my own category of multidirectional memory: to what extent is it already 'posthumanist' or amenable to one of these versions of the posthumanist turn? Snaza provides a reasonable answer to this question: while open to posthuman possibilities, my 'account remains, for the most part, within the ambit of a particular version of European humanism even if that humanism is called into question within the book'. I conceived multidirectional memory within the kind of posthumanism that attends to the 'bare, subaltern, illegal' and challenges the 'ethnoclass Man' (although I had not been familiar with Wynter at the time). In my chapter on Hannah Arendt, I reveal how the category of the 'human' serves to naturalize the racialized relations of colonialism at the same time that Arendt builds multidirectional links between European imperialism and Nazi genocide. I subsequently show how Aimé Césaire moves beyond Arendt's invocation of the human in building similar multidirectional links: he describes colonialism as a form of 'animalization' that infects the colonizer and ripples out to other contexts within Europe (such as the rise of Nazism) through what he calls a '*choc en retour*'.<sup>3</sup> Yet, while the examples of Arendt and Césaire demonstrate the limits of the category of the human for a decolonial multidirectional memory, my project did not take the step of leaving the human altogether: I did not have in mind, for instance, the ecological turn identified by Crownshaw or the turn toward a conception of life that goes beyond the expanded human. Can the concept of multidirectionality extend beyond the human (as surely it does beyond 'Man')?

In my essay 'From Gaza to Warsaw', I developed an ethics of comparison that builds on *Multidirectional Memory*. The essay sketches a grid at the intersection of an *axis of comparison* (stretching from equation to differentiation) and an *axis of political affect* (stretching from competition to solidarity) that allows us to map different examples of multidirectional memory in four quadrants. While my primary example in that essay is comparisons between the Holocaust and the Israeli occupation, the grid can also accommodate the comparative biopolitical perspective offered by Snaza. Although I privilege a 'differentiated solidarity', the point of the grid is not to police the borders of

permissible comparison but to provide a heuristic device for distinguishing *how* different forms of violence are brought together.

But perhaps it is precisely in posing this question that the model reveals its residually humanist basis, for it seems to rely on a human(ist) *subject* who is the agent of memory, comparison and ethics. Certain versions of the posthumanist critique – especially those that seek to move dramatically beyond the human – raise more radical questions about subjectivity and thus about ethics and politics. Take climate change: from a human(ist) perspective, it appears as an extraordinary challenge situated within a relatively familiar ethical and political problematic involving cause and effect, individual and collective forms of responsibility. However, the already visible crisis of human-produced climate catastrophe surely suggests the failure of such a limited understanding of causality and responsibility and thus calls for a different kind of thinking. Indeed, seen from a ‘geological’ perspective, the familiar problematic of human responsibility appears radically insufficient: geological change takes place not only at scales and in temporalities foreign to human subjects but in a realm altogether beyond familiar human morality and politics. In order to address the geology of memory, a radically non-anthropocentric multidirectional memory would need to move off the grid of human(ist) comparison and ethics – but where that would leave us remains open.

The articulation of multidirectional memory in crisis situations frequently involves attempts to gain recognition for one traumatic history through analogy with another (e.g. making the Israeli occupation visible through invocation of the Holocaust). Posthumanisms, in contrast, call for a ‘turning away from the demand for recognition within the circle of humanity’.<sup>4</sup> Yet, such a turning away need not mean the de-activation of multidirectional links. Rather, following Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, we might understand the ways it ‘multiplies not only the possibilities for intrahuman connection but also our ability to imagine other kinds of trans/material attachments’.<sup>5</sup> The challenge for (multidirectional) memory studies then becomes how to imagine subjects of those ‘trans/material attachments’ who might be said to remember.

Most recently, my approach to both intrahuman and trans/material connections has involved theorizing what I call the ‘implicated subject’, a figure of responsibility beyond the victim/perpetrator binary who is entangled in histories of violence and exploitation that can be distant in either time or space.<sup>6</sup> This project bears some resemblance to the work of Karen Barad, which, in the words of Luciano and Chen, ‘develop[s] a sense of responsibility that goes far beyond one’s individual “acts” to a recognition of one’s agential entanglement in “the larger material arrangements of which ‘we’ are a ‘part’”’.<sup>7</sup> In my thinking, such modes of implication and entanglement involve both traditionally ‘human’ histories, such as genocide and slavery, and those that test the limits of the human, such as climate change.

In theorizing the implicated subject, my approach dovetails with Snaza's provocative concluding call to educate children into a sense of their implication in scenes of everyday violence. Memory can play an important role in this pedagogy of implication. Referring to Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, Snaza proposes that we use the classroom to ask of any object of study: 'whence does this appear?' Such a question helps cut through the fetishized disavowals that facilitate the compartmentalization of violence and exploitation and help keep them at a distance. Even when our concern is with contemporary violence, such a critical pedagogy can help us cultivate the sense of simultaneous temporal distance and connection that memory exemplifies. 'Whence does this appear?' asks us to (re)activate mnemonic links that too often fall by the wayside and grasp our implication in histories that only seem distant.

For me, the question 'whence does this appear?' leaves us at the borders between the human and the inhuman: it is both an ontological question that asks after the trans/material co-constitution of subjects and objects and an epistemological question that asks about the possibilities of knowledge of that co-constitution. If posthumanism has a strong ontological bent, I cannot imagine either a memory studies or a pedagogical practice that forgoes the epistemological question of our knowledge of the past as a source of present and future action. In other words – and I think this is the crux of the posthumanist problem in memory studies – I am not yet ready to give up the subject of memory and political responsibility, even as we rethink that subject from a radically nonhumanist perspective. Memory, as Jan Assmann has written, combines knowledge of the past with an 'identity-index'.<sup>8</sup> The identity-index is a form of affective connection that posthumanisms have explored powerfully – and that we need not think in a humanist mode – but historical cognition remains equally important and (for me, at least) tied to a certain imagination of the human subject.

A radical pedagogy of memory and implication would involve the fostering of capacities for affect and cognition at the limits of the human and in the realms of a differentiated solidarity. It would nurture expansive powers of recognition not merely within the parameters of the human but in the entangled zones where matter, imagination, and life mingle and where power and resistance mix. Because subjects and objects – human or not, animate or not – are equally marked by history, memory remains a site for exploring their constitution and the possibilities of their transformation.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Snaza and Karavanta, "Human Remains," 10.

<sup>2</sup> Crownshaw, "Memory and the Anthropocene," 175.

<sup>3</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>4</sup> Luciano and Chen, "Introduction," 184.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Rothberg, "Beyond."

<sup>7</sup> Luciano and Chen "Introduction," 192, citing Barad, *Meeting*, 178.

<sup>8</sup> Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," 114.

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