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Travel in Autobiography: Albert Camus's *Le premier homme* and Assia Djebar's *Le blanc de l'Algérie*

by Gina Breen

COLONIAL CROSSINGS

Algerian born French writers Albert Camus and Assia Djebar both employ their memories, and those of their family and friends, within French-Algerian landscapes to construct travel narratives that blend myth with reality. Albert Camus's *Le premier homme*, published posthumously in 1994, is a blend of fiction and non-fiction that can be described as a semi-autobiographical novel. *Le blanc de l'Algérie*, published in 1995 by Assia Djebar, is a memoir on loss. Written four decades apart and published one year apart, their descriptions of creative, physical, metaphysical, and mental voyages convey an (auto)biographic travel narrative that represent the hybridity and plurality of Algerian society, pre- and post-independence, through their own voice and through the lives and writings of others.¹

These selected writings by Camus and Djebar convey both the value and loss inherent in travel to, from, and within Algeria. Given their backgrounds, it would seem that Camus and Djebar travel in different directions. Camus's status as a *pied-noir* links him to the colonial voyages his ancestors made from France and Spain to Algerian soil.² In stark contrast, Djebar's position as an Arabophone Muslim woman of Berber heritage, who experienced both the Algerian War of Independence and the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s, leads us to anticipate an anti-colonial, or certainly postcolonial, narrative. However, despite their obvious differences in their gender, racial, and religious identities, I argue that often they have travelled similar paths for the same reasons, and certainly crossed paths as authors. While Camus is hesitant to overtly discuss both colonization and the prospect of decolonization, Djebar willingly addresses the complexity of violence and terrorism as byproducts of colonial warfare. A comparison of their biographies suggests that their experiences in Algeria serve as catalysts

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for travel both within Algeria and beyond Algerian borders. Camus and Djébar thus blend memory and imagination to share their journeys of the body and mind. As they look back on their past histories, they highlight the educational, familial, or professional opportunities they gained from crossing borders or adapting to new borders. Additionally, through reminiscing, they underscore potential hazards of French-Algerian travel. Therefore, in order to demonstrate fully the ambivalence that surrounds twentieth-century Algerian travel, I examine how Camus and Djébar appeal to Algerian memory and mythology to show why, how, and where they travel. Furthermore, I demonstrate how they detail their personal experiences in *Le premier homme* and *Le blanc de l'Algérie*, revealing their precise motivations and inspirations for Algerian exploration in the colonial and postcolonial periods.³

Using the genre of the semi-autobiographical novel, Camus tells his story through an alias, Jacques Cormery. *Le premier homme* opens with a story of Algerian travel entitled “Recherche du père.”⁴ Camus’s discussion of travel dates back to the colonial period at the beginning of the twentieth century in Algeria. On the opening page, Camus provides a physical description of a journey. He delves into the geography of the region and describes the weather elements the passengers endure:

Au-dessus de la carriole qui roulait sur une route caillouteuse, de gros et épais nuages filaient vers l’est dans la crépuscule [. . .] Après une course de milliers de kilomètres au-dessus de cette sorte d’île immense, défendue par la mer mouvante au nord et au sud par les flots figés des sables, passant sur ce pays sans nom a peine plus vite que ne l’avaient fait pendant des millénaires les empires et les peuples, leur élan s’exténuait et certains fondaient déjà en grosses et rares gouttes de pluie qui commençait de résonner sur la capote de toile au-dessus des quatre voyageurs.⁵

As we travel further the story becomes reminiscent of the story of Jesus’s birth; Camus describes the North African landscape and uses Christian mythology to set the scene of Jacques’s birth in Algeria. An Arab holds the reins and drives the wagon along a stony road carrying a Frenchman, a shabbily dressed woman, and a four-year-old boy:

L’Arabe qui conduisait faisait claquer alors sur son dos le plat des rênes usées*, et bravement la bête reprenait son rythme. L’homme qui se trouvait sur la banquette avant près du conducteur, un Français d’une trentaine d’années . . . Sur une deuxième

banquette, coincée entre la première et un amoncellement de vieilles malles et de meubles, une femme, habillée pauvrement mais enveloppée dans un grand châle de grosse laine [. . .] Elle avait un visage doux et régulier, les cheveux de l'Espagnole bien ondes et noirs.⁶

Just as Mary sought a place to give birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, Jacques's mother encountered similar difficulties with regard to finding a place to deliver her second child. Certainly Camus wishes to address the extreme level of poverty into which he himself was born, and it is no coincidence that the Cormery family look for a place to rest on an autumn night in 1913: Camus was born November 7th, 1913. By mythologizing his birth in this manner Camus attempts to reconcile two worlds—the French and Algerian, as well as Arab and Christian worlds.

Much has been written about the Algeria that Camus presents in his literature, but this particular narrative of *Le premier homme* supports the claim that Camus mythologized French-Algeria and his *pied-noir* roots through his own origin story. He also mythologizes French Algeria through his travels to France. Journeying back and forth in time, across the Mediterranean Sea, Camus then narrates Jacques's pilgrimage to his father's grave, located in Saint-Brieuc.⁷ At the cemetery Jacques locates his father's name among a long list of deceased: "Cormery Henri, dit-il, blessé mortellement à la bataille de la Marne, mort à Saint-Brieuc le 11 octobre 1914."⁸ In this way, Camus mythologizes his humble beginnings, his family, and his *pied-noir* culture and community; his own father, Lucien Camus, whose family was from Alsace, France, came to Algeria to participate in the colonial endeavors and died in the Battle of Marne, October 11, 1914, during World War I.

It is important to note the ironies involved in Camus's pilgrimage to France. First, Jacques's narrative conveys strong emotional sentiments as he searches for his roots. Referring to Jacques as "le voyageur" and noting the vessel of travel "le train," Camus emphasizes the action undertaken by the protagonist, as well as the change in location "l'Occident moderne."⁹ He comments on every detail of the train ride. However, he also expresses his overall hesitancy to make this journey. He reveals his reluctance to visit his father's grave. Void of filial devotion for his father who died when he was less than one-year-old, Camus explains that he visits his father's grave on his mother's behalf. Deprived of the opportunity to travel back to Europe, his mother never saw her husband's grave. Camus then embarks on a double pilgrimage: "Depuis des années qu'il vivait en France, il se

promettait de faire ce que sa mère, restée en Algérie, ce qu'elle lui demandait depuis si longtemps: aller voir la tombe de son père qu'elle-même n'avait jamais vue.»¹⁰ Inspired by his love for his mother, Camus sets forth on his physical journey across the Mediterranean.

Then, Camus elicits pity when we learn that Jacques's father, who was a French descendent, had never been to France before the war: "Il n'avait jamais vu la France. Il la vit et fut tué."¹¹ Thus, as an Algerian-born *pied-noir*, Jacques must travel to France to gain knowledge about his father's final journey as *the first man* (to whom the title refers), the French-Algerian settler and soldier who fought in on foreign soil for a country he did not know. Moreover, Camus learns more about France and the colonizing force in the process.

Although the specific dates of travel of Camus's ancestors from Europe to Algeria remain unclear, Camus's search for his French roots occurs in the mid 1950s, when French power was dwindling in Algeria. At the time critics and fellow Algerian or French writers questioned repeatedly Camus's political position on Algeria's independence from France and so he affirms his Algerian heritage by resuscitating his *pied-noir* community throughout this narrative. By emphasizing his emigrant parents and their struggles, he allows poverty to dominate his search for roots and reiterates the extreme misery his family endured, including the many hardships they had to overcome.

Camus then advances the complexity of his origins when he describes the midpoint of his life journey. The more complete sections of his "roman inachevé" portray his childhood and adolescence in Algeria. Unlike his father, who died young, Camus's deaf and illiterate mother and domineering grandmother were not strangers to him. Since these women of Spanish origin laid down solid foundations for Camus in the Belcourt quarter of Algiers, he manages to promote a French-Algerian hybrid identity, and so begins the controversy surrounding Camus's representations of culture and territory.

Camus's contradiction is that he was happy to escape his impoverished Algerian childhood, yet always felt like a foreigner living abroad in France. His travels were motivated by the quest for knowledge and also by the fear of the unknown. He reveals how colonial French and Catholic schooling provided him with the opportunity to travel and explore, embarking on intellectual journeys. Camus's travels of the mind, body, and soul are intrinsically linked to creativity, transformation, and knowledge. Yet, the more he travelled, the more alienated he became:

le cœur serré d'une sorte d'angoisse heureuse à l'idée de revoir Alger et la petite maison pauvre des faubourgs. C'était ainsi chaque fois qu'il quittait Paris pour l'Afrique, une jubilation sourde, le cœur s'élargissait, la satisfaction de qui vient de réussir une bonne évasion . . . De même que, chaque fois qu'il y revenait par la route et par le train, son cœur se serrait aux premières maisons des banlieues . . . comme un cancer malheureux, étalant ses ganglions de misère et de laideur et qui digérait peu à peu le corps étranger pour le conduire jusqu'au cœur de la ville, là où un splendide décor lui faisait parfois oublier la forêt de ciment et de fer qui l'emprisonnait jour et nuit et peuplait jusqu'à ses insomnies.¹²

Later, Camus's alienation from France and the French landscape will contrast with his attachment to his Algerian roots, when he expresses that "la Méditerranée séparait en moi deux univers."¹³ Camus tries to confront the real Algerian situation with his imaginary Algeria. Refusing to support or accept an independent Arab Algerian nation, Camus always defended his *pied-noir* Algerian community. According to Adele King, Catherine Camus's decision to wait and publish *Le premier homme* posthumously in 1994, during the Algerian Civil War, was significant. Catherine "waited until the political climate was less hostile toward her father."¹⁴ King explains:

There were also by the 1990s other reasons to allow publication. In the present political situation, France is trying to maintain contact with the government of Algeria, the successors of the FLN against which France fought, but now the group which France has supported in its decision to annul the elections that gave a majority to the violent anti-French Islamic fundamentalists. With this political situation in the headlines almost every day, Camus's thoughts on Algeria seem of contemporary relevance and not necessarily politically suspect.¹⁵

Emily Apter asserts that Camus equates his own lack of roots with the false insinuation that Algeria lacks history:

The old *colon's* grim fate makes a marked impression on the autobiographical narrator of *Le premier homme*, for this homestead was the narrator's birthplace, the site of a dead paternal legacy. Throughout the novel, the paternal void, and the loss of personal genealogy, undergird the narrator's bizarre affirmation that Algeria "has no history."¹⁶

While I do not fully support the idea that Camus portrays Algeria as a motherless and/or fatherless land, Camus nevertheless blends his memories of personal travel with the imagined and real journeys of his father, to present Algeria as a French acculturated nation at the threshold of change. In many ways, the composition of this text on the eve of Algerian Independence depicts the very timely ending of his and his parents' French-Algerian *pied-noir* odyssey. Like his father before him, Camus's roots remain planted in French soil as he was buried in Lourmarin, France after being killed in a car accident in France in 1960.

POSTCOLONIAL PASSING

Assia Djébar made many journeys throughout her life and career. Moving as a student, novelist, filmmaker, or professor, Djébar made her way from Algeria to Tunisia, to Morocco, to France, to the United States, and then back to France where she died, and finally and posthumously back to her hometown of Cherchell, Algeria.¹⁷ Self-exiled from Algeria for significant periods of time, Djébar shares similar feelings of displacement with Camus. However, unlike Camus's depiction of travel, which is catalyzed primarily by a search for roots in *Le premier homme*, Djébar's *Le blanc de l'Algérie* avoids directly revealing details about her personal journeys across the Mediterranean and beyond. She chooses instead to share stories of loss as she travels back and forth in time and retraces her friends' final journeys towards death.

Djébar was the first Algerian student and Muslim woman to be accepted to the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Sèvres in 1955. After completing her studies, she taught history at the University of Algiers and then returned to France, later travelling to the United States to teach literature and cinema. In the course of five decades Djébar also published a variety of novels, poems, essays, and plays. While these literary publications focus mostly on women in the male-centered Islamic world, she is equally renowned for her writings that explore her plural identities that include Arabo-Berber, Muslim, and French sensibilities. She wrote about violence during the decades of violence, challenged national identity, and was committed to the emancipation of Algerian Muslim women. She acknowledged her heritage, which was rooted in Arab and Berber cultures, and discussed her decision to write in French. Like Camus, she attributed her success to her education under French colonial rule. Yet Djébar's background demonstrates how she transitioned from place to place, from genre to genre, and from language to language with a freedom of movement that Camus never shared.

Through a mixture of both pleasant and unpleasant remembrances that are imbued with geographic references and historic landmarks, or specific dates and times, Djébar reconstructs Algerian space and time. Beginning with her old friendships, she provides readers with details about her friends' professions and recalls where and when they first met. She then juxtaposes these happy moments with more somber reflections on their deaths, highlighting that their lives were cut short by Algerian violence. Like Camus, Djébar's Algerian displacement is twofold. It enables her to reflect upon French–Algerian history, including war and death, while simultaneously mourning her beloved compatriots, for a future purpose. As we embark on these fatal journeys with Djébar we learn that her deceased loved ones were estranged from and unwelcome in their homeland during both Algerian Wars as a result of their politics, professions, and publications. Djébar pays her respects by promoting writing as the ultimate journey. She represents her individual legacy, and that of the postcolonial Algerian nation.

Officially entitled a “récit,” Djébar's lyrical style blends fiction with non-fictional memoir, and weaves Arabic with French. This unique fusion of genres, languages, and writing style lays the groundwork for this mythical journey. Like Camus, her writing emerges as both personal and political as she remembers and imagines the horrors of Algeria's Civil Wars. Writing thirty years after Independence, Djébar's memoir has an advantage over Camus's writing because she is able to compare and contrast the two periods of war. In doing so, Djébar responds to a larger collective memory and history. Fundamentally, by providing us with this collection of deceased Algerian intellectuals who were also her close acquaintances, such as Josie and Frantz Fanon, Mouloud Mammeri, and Tahar Djaout among others, Djébar mythologizes a unique version of Algerian history that is reminiscent of her Arab, Berber, French-educated community, hence contributing to her (auto)biographic Algerian travel.

Djébar begins the narration with a literary procession that involves flashbacks and conversations with phantoms. She introduces the flashbacks as “quelques éclats d'une amitié.”¹⁸ In an effort to commemorate her fellow countrymen and women who have recently departed, she traces their lives once again on the blank “white” page:

S'est installé alors en moi le désir de dérouler une procession : celle des écrivains d'Algérie, depuis au moins une génération, saisis à l'approche de leur mort . . . *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* n'est pourtant pas un récit sur la mort en marche, en Algérie. Peu à peu, au cours de cette procession, entrecoupée de retours en

arrière dans la guerre d'hier, s'établit, sur un peu plus de trente ans et à l'occasion d'une vingtaine de morts d'homme—et de femmes—de plume, une recherche irrésistible de liturgie.¹⁹

These flashbacks enable Djébar to manipulate Algerian history and geography as she chooses which deaths and which places to recall. However, Djébar blatantly rejects the notion of polemicizing her friends' deaths. Instead she claims that she wants to re-establish and thus re-live their final days: "Je ne polémique pas; ni non plus ne pratique l'exercice de déploration littéraire. Le plus simplement possible . . . je rétablis le récit des jours . . . à l'approche du trépas."²⁰ In "Violence, Mourning and Singular Testimony" Jane Hiddleston refers to how *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* directly engages with, "current confrontations and losses [. . .] bearing witness to a swathe of murders and attacks" and admits Djébar rejects a prescriptive political discourse.²¹ In fact, Djébar declares that the deaths of the authors and the legacies we inherit from their writings "s'entrecroisent et s'esquissent plusieurs Algéries."²² Essentially, Djébar creates her own map and customizes her worship and commemoration. The suggestion that Djébar will sketch an Algeria that intersects with other interpretations and mythologies also indicates that it is still a fluid, on-going journey in 1995. For Djébar and Algeria there is no final destination. Djébar highlights how travel and language are also in a constant state of flux. This is precisely what Alison Rice considers as Djébar's act of *translation*. She clarifies:

My concentration on physical displacement as a theme in the life (and) writing of this Francophone writer is in step with the meaning of the French word "*translation*," a term that is not an exact equivalent of its English homonym. Different from *traduction*, the word that in today's parlance designates the foremost sense of what we call translation in English, *translation* refers most often to movement in space [. . .] Its obvious affinity with *traduction*, however, indicates that movement from one place to another is related to movement in language, whether from one language to another or within a single language.²³

While Rice's essay focuses on Djébar's movement in the form of travel or movement in Djébar's other texts, I argue that the same is true for *Le blanc de l'Algérie*. Although she herself does not depart from a specific place and arrive in another, Djébar embarks on multiple literary journeys, as a way to theorize the positive and negative aspects of Algerian history and the Algerian nation, like Camus. Djébar's linguistic choices in terms of language

and vocabulary imply a strong spatial-temporal relationship that facilitates a transient Algerian space, which changes as the narration moves back and forth from past to present. Ultimately, for Djébar, travel is spiritually, politically, and intellectually enlightening, and signifies progress.

In both of these works, Camus and Djébar establish the degree to which they must rely on autobiographical elements to activate their literary journeys. They make their motivations clear as they revisit the past and unearth roots for a present or future function. For both Camus and Djébar travel was not voluntary. Djébar declares her friends return to her as ghosts and speak to her by whispering memories:

Il se présentent tantôt en cercle au-dessus de mon lit—assis comme des saints d'images naïves, sans auréole sur la tête –, tantôt silhouettes solitaires, l'un plutôt que l'autre chuchotant tel ou tel souvenir, lui redonnant la signification autrefois suspendue, ou incertaine, tantôt dans cette conversation qui s'emmêle, qui se tresse, qui palpite—elle frange ma sortie du soleil d'avant l'aube –, je ne sais plus qui parle, de moi ou de celui qui approche; je ne sais pas encore qui est le fantôme.²⁴

It is clear that Djébar struggles with bereavement; she wants to welcome her ghosts and accept the flashbacks so that she can share their stories in a postcolonial environment. She is more eager to travel than Camus. Jane Hiddleston claims, “Djébar keeps returning to the past in order to do justice to her friends’ memory, to prevent them from being forgotten and to counter precisely the Islamist desire to eradicate them.”²⁵ I believe Djébar wants to recognize not only her friends’ deaths, but also the return of her ghosts highlights the inability to bury what remains of Algeria’s colonial roots. She emphasizes the difficulty associated with grief in postcolonial Algeria because violence, oppression, and torture continue in a second cycle of tyranny. Through remembering, retracing, rewriting, and rereading her friends’ final days, she demonstrates how it is necessary to confront the colonial past in order to understand the present, postcolonial situation. Djébar also proposes that death offers possibilities for Algeria’s future because all these buried bodies of writers have forged different Algerian paths: “Une nation cherchant son cérémonial, sous diverses formes, mais cimetière en cimetière, parce que en premier, l’écrivain a été obscurément offert en victime propitiatoire: étrange et désespérante découverte!”²⁶ She calls attention to the sacrifice writers have made for Algeria on their creative journeys.

For Djébar, writing is an important element of the grieving process and she compares the white “deuil” of Algeria (the official color of grief) with the blank, empty, white page. She travels via the pen and her travel narrative is firmly rooted (and routed directionally) in the postcolonial. This contrasts with Camus’s travel narrative because Djébar represents all aspects of Algerian society. Djébar summarizes her presentation of multiple journeys towards death as “parcours interrogateur” because we are still in the process of remembering unfinished death, “la mort inachevée.”²⁷ This is also a clear reference to Camus’s “roman inachevé,” *Le premier homme*, as Djébar insinuates that she continues to narrate with a view to counteract the extinction of Algerian writers.

Djébar’s literary journey intersects with Camus specifically when she discusses a lecture she gave on *Le premier homme* in Berkeley, California. Traveling back in time to recall her speech, she does not justify her examination of Camus’s life and work, but it becomes obvious that despite their gender, religious, and ethnic differences, Camus and Djébar share plural Algerian identities. Djébar explains how they both have muted female family members that reside in a similar Algerian space. Djébar elaborates on this shared space and shared language when she compares Camus’s mute mother, of Spanish origin, to her maternal aunt, who is of Berber origin and who also lived in the Belcourt area of Algiers: “Sa mère, presque muette, reste éternellement, assise près de la fenêtre (ainsi ma tante maternelle si douce, installée à Belcourt, et qui psalmodie en cas instants mêmes, dans le chagrin ou la patience, des bribes de versets coraniques).”²⁸ This passage indicates how Camus and Djébar share more than merely being born in Algeria and writing in the French language. It reiterates how Camus’s and Djébar’s family members occupy the same Algerian space.

Later in *Le blanc de l’Algérie* Djébar travels back once again to 1956 to revisit Camus’s provocative speech. As previously mentioned, Camus’s stance on Algerian Independence in the late 1950s was unwelcome by the French Left, but Djébar keeps returning to him and *Le premier homme* to acknowledge their shared space. She highlights their political engagement of the past and present, as divisive or unpopular as it may be. Debarati Sanyal calls attention to this:

Although Camus was attacked by his contemporaries for the exclusions of his representational practice, his figures have been reanimated by authors such as Djébar who seek to imagine Algeria otherwise. In *Algerian White*, the narrator places Camus at the head of her procession of the dead, recalling his failed

attempt to prevent Algeria's exsanguination during the War of Independence. Observing the repetition of fratricidal fractures and the "mechanics of violence and carnage" in the 1990s, she mourns the absence of the pied-noir perspective: "Today there is no one to stand up, as did Camus of '56 in such a stirring way [during his call for a civil truce]."²⁹

Camus and Djébar may approach Algeria and Algerian history differently through family and friends, personal travel or metaphorical literary journeys, but they both use travel as a conduit for their progress, or as a means of providing them with insight, that allows them to uncover the truth about the past and present.

As Camus and Djébar have illustrated through their colonial and post-colonial narratives, Algeria has in the past and continues in the present to signify a transcultural space. Camus, Djébar, and their protagonists epitomize transnational identities. Algeria was and still is the site where travel facilitates a multilingual, multicultural, and multinational discourse. It is necessary for inhabitants of a colonized, or formerly colonized space, such as Camus and Djébar, to travel to and from Algeria through a process of mind and body that uproots their precolonial, colonial, and familial pasts in order to reroute the (post)colonial future.

Notes

1. According to Olivier Todd's *Albert Camus: une vie* (Gallimard 1996), Camus began working on this manuscript in 1952. In *The Development of Albert Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice* (Farleigh Dickinson University Press 2007), Mark Orme reminds us of Camus's earlier plans to discuss his Algerian roots in 1946, which he addressed in *Carnets* (Gallimard 1962).

2. *Pied-noir* is a term that refers to people of European ancestry who were born or lived in Algeria.

3. Albert Camus, *Le premier homme* (Gallimard 1994) and Assia Djébar, *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (Albin Michel 1995).

4. Camus incorporates his own experience into the narrative and uses elements of personal biography. There are substantial narrated events that correspond to Camus's life that we can confirm in official biographies.

5. Camus, *Le premier homme*, 13-14.

6. *Ibid.*, 14-15.

7. Saint Brieuc is located in Brittany.

8. Camus, *Le premier homme*, 32.
9. *Ibid.*, 29-31.
10. *Ibid.*, 33.
11. *Ibid.*, 79.
12. *Ibid.*, 53.
13. *Ibid.*, 214.
14. Adele King, "Le Premier Homme: Camus's Unfinished Novel," *World Literature Today* 69.1 (1995), 83.
15. King, "Le Premier Homme," 83.
16. Emily Apter, "Out of Character: Camus's French Algerian Subjects" *MLN* 112.4 (1997), 506.
17. Assia Djebar died February 6th 2015 in Paris, France and was buried February 13th in Cherchill, Algeria.
18. Djebar, *Le blanc d'Algérie*, 11.
19. *Ibid.*, 11-12.
20. *Ibid.*, 11.
21. Jane Hiddleston, *Assia Djebar: Out of Algeria* (Liverpool University Press 2006), 120.
22. Djebar, *Le blanc de l'Algérie*, 12.
23. Alison Rice, "French Transcriptions, French Transpositions," in *Time Signatures: Contextualizing Contemporary Francophone Autobiographical Writing from the Maghreb*, ed. Alison Rice (Lexington Books 2006), 69.
24. Djebar, *Le blanc de l'Algérie*, 18-19.
25. Hiddleston, *Assia Djebar*, 134.
26. Djebar, 12.
27. *Ibid.*, 233.
28. *Ibid.*, 29.
29. Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (Fordham University Press 2015), 238-239.