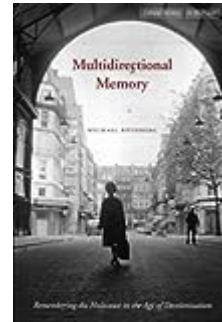


Michael Rothberg. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. xvii + 379 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6217-5; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-6218-2.



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Beyond Competing Memories

In writing about the assassinated Algerian writer Tahar Djaout, Julika Sukys draws a connection to the Vilna Ghetto. As she explains, “In periods of terror books serve as a survival mechanism.” [1] To make this case she writes about how this idea was “observed and well-documented in the Jewish ghettos of World War Two” and goes on to cite Herman Kruk’s account of the years he worked as a librarian in the Vilna Ghetto.

I begin this review of Michael Rothberg’s powerful book, *Multidirectional Memory*, with this connection between the Algerian writer Tahar Djaout and Herman Kruk’s memory of the role of books in the Vilna Ghetto because it illustrates well the kinds of cross-cultural resonances that are at the heart of Rothberg’s study. Rothberg insists that we pay attention to precisely these connections. He shows us how to make sense of the legacies of the Holocaust and colonization in an ever-changing present, be it the situation in Algeria in the early 1990s as it resonates with an account of the Vilna Ghetto in 1940, or some other situation.

As Michael Rothberg passionately argues throughout *Multidirectional Memory*, to draw such connections is not to diminish either of these legacies or to pit one against the other. Rather, he offers a more profound appreciation for how memory works always and already in relation to other stories and other histories. These kinds of connection and their necessities is what multidirectional memory is all about. In his pointed introduction Rothberg explains, “Against the framework that understands collective memory as *competitive* memory—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” (p. 3).

Here Rothberg makes explicit that he is arguing against the notion of competitive memory. By retelling literary critic Walter Benn Michaels’s polemical account of the tension between Holocaust memory and the memory of slavery set up in such competitive terms, Rothberg makes his case. He uses Michael’s description of Khalid Muhammad’s account of his frustrations with the

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum—an address presented to an audience at Howard University—to set up his alternative account. But, not without first making explicit the competitive argument. As he tells us, Muhammad asks, “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” (pp. 1-2)? Rothberg opens with this stark and unfortunately all-too-common logic of scarcity in order to refute it. As he goes on to explain, his move to a notion of multidirectional memory is all about getting out of this deeply unproductive, competitive, zero-sum game of what critical legal theorist Martha Minow has described as victim talk.^[2] By shifting perspective, Rothberg shows us 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” (p. 3). As Rothberg goes on to point out, “The interaction of different historical memories illustrates the productive, intercultural dynamic that I call multidirectional memory.” This is the power and beauty of Rothberg’s position—a profoundly generous stance—that enables him to forge new critical space where even these competing sides can be in conversation.

The book fleshes out a powerful genealogy for multidirectional memory as well as a more sustained account of how, more specifically, Holocaust memory and colonial memory come together in France around the legacy of the Algerian War. It is in the spirit of this vision that I purposely opened this book review by citing another text, a text about Algeria where, in the folds of a much richer and more intricate argument, Holocaust memory appears alongside the legacy of postcolonial violence. Because Algeria is so critical to Rothberg’s text, it seemed fitting to extend and reenact his argument to signal its power. Although Rothberg sets up a much broader argument in his opening chapters, they also serve as prelude to the rich case study that is the final portion of the book, October 17, 1961 as a site of Holocaust and colonial memory.

In what follows I want to briefly recount the trajectory of Rothberg’s argument as it builds chapter by chapter. In each instance, what I find most noteworthy is the generosity of Rothberg’s rich and textured readings. Even as he challenges, often profoundly, some of the operative assumptions or critical moves in the works he engages, Rothberg manages to find, as he does in his intro-

duction, something productive, a road not taken, especially in some of the earliest texts he considers. It is in this spirit that he begins with Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and Aimé Césaire’s *Discourses on Colonialism and Genocide* (1950). He calls this section “Boomerang Effects: Bare Life, Trauma, and the Colonial Turn in Holocaust Studies,” insisting that Holocaust discourse has always already been engaged with issues of colonialism. This relationship is a kind of return signaled by the figure of the boomerang, a powerful trope in both Arendt’s and Césaire’s works. Rothberg is a superb reader who manages to revive and reanimate these works for contemporary readers, revealing not only roads not taken, but also blind spots in these powerful, now canonical texts.

From here, Rothberg offers another genealogy. In part 2, “Migrations of Memory: Ruins, Ghettos, Diasporas,” he begins with W. E. B. Du Bois on the color line and Holocaust memory with a reading of Du Bois’s essay on his visit to the Warsaw Ghetto memorial in 1949. Out of this reading, he then moves to two different literary figures who write in the aftermath of Colonization and the Holocaust, Caryl Phillips and Andrzej Schwartz-Bart. Again Rothberg offers remarkably generous, productive, and intricate readings of these authors’ works. As in his close readings in part 1, here again Rothberg brings disparate authors and writers into subtle and nuanced conversation with each other. He makes a powerful case for rereading Schwartz-Bart and Phillips anew, challenging much of the secondary literature on both of these authors. He concludes these readings by explaining: “The different ruinous histories narrated by Du Bois, Schwartz-Bart, and Phillips—histories involving genocide, slavery, everyday racism, and state power—resist conflation. Even when such histories are brought together in the space of one text, their juxtaposition can serve more to bring difference into relief than to melt them into banal equation” (p. 171). This is precisely what Rothberg’s readings illuminate in this and in every section of this book.

As I have already noted, in the final sections of the book Rothberg moves away from a focus on the early postwar period to “the moment around 1961 when movements of decolonization were at their peak and Holocaust memory began to emerge in its more familiar, contemporary form” (p. 171). This is a moment marked by the Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem and more specifically, for Rothberg, the Algerian War of Independence. The case study he builds is set in France where Holocaust and colonial memories come together again and again, not in com-

petition but resonating deeply and profoundly with and through each other. He forms his argument in part 3, "Truth, Torture, Testimony: Holocaust Memory during the Algerian War," with a reading of the film *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) followed by a haunting, and for me startling, account of Charlotte Delbo's *Les belles lettres* (1961) that places this most powerful Holocaust survivor and writer very much in the struggle for Algerian liberation in France and shows how this work resonates with her more well-known memoirs of survival.

The book and these discussions culminate in part 4, "October 17, 1961: A Site of Holocaust Memory," with two chapters that powerfully draw out the connections between the massacre of Algerian protesters in Paris on October 17, 1961 and France's haunted collaborationist past. Here again Rothberg offers rich intertextual and historically layered readings. In chapter 8, "A Tale of Three Ghettos: Race, Gender, and 'Universality' After October 17, 1961," Rothberg focuses on contemporaneous responses to these events, "a little-known journalistic text by the French writer Marguerite Duras and a recently rediscovered novel by the African American writer William Gardner Smith" (p. 27). He uses these texts to demonstrate how the French state's late colonial racialization of the war led to intensified connections with the experiences of Jews under Nazi occupation. And, in his final chapter "Hidden Children: The Ethics of Multidirectional Memory After 1961," he turns to more contemporary works to show the ways that multidirectional memory is also multigenerational. This time, he uses Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory to great effect in reading the works of the heirs to the legacy of 1961. He offers a reading of Michael Haneke's 2005 feature film *Caché* alongside "a novel for young adults by the French-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar" (p. 27) in

conjunction with the 1997-98 trial of Maurice Papon for crimes against humanity dating back to his role in the deportation and torture of French Jews during the Holocaust. Rothberg draws out the connections linking Papon's Holocaust past with his role in the 1961 massacre. The tale Rothberg tells is breathtaking and demands to be read in full. This is the culmination of his argument, where we are most fully able to see the intergenerational and multidirectional dimensions of Rothberg's position.

The book leaves readers with new appreciation for these cross-cultural and multigenerational enactments that enable different legacies of violence, trauma, and loss to resonate with and through each other. Rothberg shows us anew what it means to do the work of memory, encouraging us to be open to how the interplay of different losses animates the present in powerful and compelling ways.

The book's epilogue, "Multidirectional Memory in an Age of Occupation," suggests the direction perhaps of Rothberg's next project. It is an all-too-brief foray into the fraught territory of Israel/Palestine and how multidirectional memory might be of some use in resisting the competitive and deeply unproductive assumptions that mark these legacies. In its brevity, some may be less than satisfied but I see an opening for another project that I very much look forward to reading in the future.

Notes

[1]. Julika Sukys, *Silence Is Death: The Life and Work of Tahar Djaout* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 82.

[2]. Martha Minow, "Surviving Victim Talk," *UCLA Law Review* 40 (1992-93): 1411-1445.

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