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Recollecting Violence:
Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory*
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In defending uniqueness, I am *not* simultaneously endorsing the injudicious claim that the Holocaust is *more evil* than alternative occurrences of extensive and systematic persecution, organized violence, and mass death. The character of the uniqueness that I am prepared to champion is not tied to a scale, a hierarchy, of evil.

–Steven Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context, Volume I*

The aim is to go beyond the simple comparative history of different genocidal phenomena, which has characterized much of the political science scholarship, and to look at interrelations between cases of genocide and the polities that perpetrate genocide.

–Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide*

The interdisciplinary field of Holocaust studies has always been conceptually isolated from postcolonial and African American studies, due in no small part to the rhetoric of "uniqueness" that, as Michael Rothberg points out in *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, has unduly limited the expression of collective memory to a competitive, zero-sum logic in which various victim groups fight for recognition. Although those who propound this rhetoric often follow Steven Katz in claiming that the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust need not lead to a hierarchy of suffering or evil, Rothberg suggests that on the terrain of collective memory, one cannot easily separate claims of some special historical uniqueness from claims of some special historical victimization. And these claims have both ossified the scholarly boundaries erected between disciplines that focus on distinct sites of violence and, according to Rothberg, obscured the actual nature of collective memory, political violence, and traumatic experience.

In contrast to Daniel Lévy and Natan Sznaider in *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (2006), Rothberg is not so much concerned with the sudden cosmopolitization of Holocaust memory as with the fact that the Holocaust has always served as a catalyst for other types of traumatic memories. The transnational, intercultural relation between these memories and memories of the Shoah lays bare an alternative model for remembrance and the politics of the public sphere.

Multidirectional Memory serves as the psycho-cultural counterpart to Donald Bloxham's recent book, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (2009), insofar as Rothberg explains how comparative genocide is even possible; that is, he provides a model of memory that allows us to understand how we can *imagine* different sites of violence together without reducing them to either the same type of suffering or to utterly separate events. The first sort of reduction leads to the "universalization" of the Holocaust and provokes skepticism about the emerging field of comparative genocide, while the second sort often leads to what Rothberg calls "an ugly contest of comparative victimization" (7) and a competition over what appear to be scarce resources, such

as land for memorials. In this sense, comparative history has been thwarted by the model of "competitive memory" that, in the case of the Holocaust, is supported by the rhetoric of uniqueness. The development of Holocaust memory is the central example of the sort of "multidirectional memory" that Rothberg presents, and he uncovers a history of art and scholarship that acts as a sort of counter-tradition to the more orthodox rendition of this development. For he unearths texts that examine the connections and interactions between Nazi Germany, slavery, colonialism, and decolonization in a way that illuminates the revelatory and meaningful nature of otherwise seemingly accidental and arbitrary historical juxtapositions. Throughout his book, Rothberg skillfully makes use of a variety of interdisciplinary sources (primarily from the 1950s and 1960s) to chart the alternative terrain of multidirectional memory that has emerged in the wake of the Holocaust.

For example, Rothberg's novel reading of the correlation between Nazi ideology and colonialism as first articulated by Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire demonstrates that productive lines of thought can emerge from this sort of juxtaposition, even though this reading also shows that making such juxtapositions has its limits. In this case, his analysis reveals how Arendt's multidirectional approach to the question of totalitarianism was still hampered by her lingering Eurocentrism, while Césaire doesn't quite grant the Holocaust the specificity that it obviously deserves. However, when disparate discourses on race, identity, suffering, and genocide collide in these texts, we see an appreciation for diverse forms of suffering and the production of new lines of thought on violence and trauma. In the cases of Arendt and Césaire, Rothberg demonstrates that their invocation of the "boomerang" effect between colonialism and Nazism neither reduces one to the other nor isolates their historical emergences. Instead, it represents a sophisticated effort to link traumas according to their psychoanalytic and historical aftershocks. For Rothberg, "multidirectionality" names a type of logic and serves as a theory of memory and political violence, both of which are distorted by a linear view of time and unidirectional thinking. Further, the rhetoric of uniqueness (and the competitive memory to which it gives rise) has, to some extent, further distorted our understanding of the politics of memory insofar as it perceives the public as a contested space where one collective memory of violence trumps another. Instead, Rothberg insists that collective memories cannot simply be associated with discrete identities, nor is it the case that they are formed in isolation from one another.

Rothberg's theory of "multidirectional memory" is descriptive insofar as he claims to explain one way in which collective memory actually works. His theory is prescriptive insofar as he claims that we ought to recognize the power of this memory to move us beyond the zero-sum game of competitive collective memory. Such an effort can lead towards new forms of solidarity among traumatized groups and new visions of justice. His central evidence for this claim is the way in which the development of Holocaust memory coincided with (and indeed, provoked) political resistance during the French-Algerian war. In his brilliant analysis of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's film *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) and Charlotte Delbo's overlooked *Les belles lettres* (1961), he shows how disparate occasions of political violence (here Nazism and decolonization) can actually serve as vehicles of remembrance for each other, as well as occasion acts of political resistance against contemporaneous forms of state violence. In so doing they create a radical "counterpublic sphere" that establishes "a legacy for the politics of the future" (223). For Rothberg, "history is an echo chamber," and "an ethics of memory establishes fidelity to the echoes" (224). Scenes of political violence do not disappear; rather they reverberate in later scenes of violence.

An ethics of memory is one attuned to those reverberations, aware that "social conflict can only be addressed through a discourse that weaves together past and present, public and private" (285), historically specific sites of violence and the common human toll of these sites.

Rothberg also provides an archeology of concepts, such as race, terror, trauma, and biopolitics, that can serve to forge multidirectional links between disparate occasions of violence. The question here is not whether these multidirectional comparisons between the violence of slavery, Nazi Germany, colonialism, and decolonization are historically accurate, but rather whether they provoke productive lines of political thought, new occasions for political resistance, and new forms of solidarity among historically oppressed groups. In this way, Rothberg illustrates how multidirectional memory works to expose the traumatic gaps in the collective remembrance of political violence through the dialectical interrelation of discrete sites of violence. This dialectical interrelation does not recognize these discrete sites as operating under the same assumptions or as utilizing the same techniques, but rather brings out the historical specificity of each site through an ongoing dialectic between the universal and the particular aspects of each traumatic event.

This is perhaps best illustrated by Rothberg's meditation on W.E.B. Du Bois's visit to the Warsaw ghetto in 1949 and his analysis of the resulting 1952 essay "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto," which Du Bois wrote for the magazine *Jewish Life*. Here, Du Bois's reflections about spatial organization and racial violence from the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto indicate that the formation of "multidirectional memory" is spurred as much by the geography of traumatic sites as by their temporal occurrence and re-occurrence in collective memory. Rothberg quotes Du Bois reflecting on his visit to the ghetto: "The race problem in which I was interested cut across lines of color and physique and belief and status and was a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice, which reached all sorts of people and caused endless evil to all men" (116). Du Bois's trip to the Warsaw Ghetto led him to bracket his notion of the "color line"—valuable as a way to understand a certain type of violence—for the sake of thinking through the violence that erupted at the Warsaw Ghetto and its relation to other forms of violence. Rothberg suggests that we may similarly see past the "color line" to think through disparate occasions of traumatic violence together as part of our intercultural, transnational collective memory.

In this way, Rothberg moves beyond the study of "comparative genocide" to the study of "comparative traumas," for he reveals that the terrain of collective memory—messy and multidirectional—does not limit itself to comparing discrete occasions of contested sites of "genocide," but instead compares the interrelations between sites of violence separated by time, geography, and scale. Most importantly, he illustrates that the new field of comparative genocide must be based on the model of multidirectional memory in order to avoid the pitfalls of competitive memory that have stilted its development. This model shows us how disparate experiences of suffering (rather than simply discrete acts of genocide) can be brought into dialogical engagement with one another for the sake of a revolutionary praxis, one based on dialectical engagement with traumatic histories rather than identity politics.

Rothberg also interprets now standard texts in Continental philosophy in new and fascinating ways, as, for example, when he draws on the views of the contemporary philosophers Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben to explain the ethical dimension of multidirectional memory. Rothberg applies Badiou's "ethic of truths" (and his notion of "fidelity" to an "event") to the process of

multidirectional memory, arguing that the same sort of "fidelity" to the "multiple events and historical legacies that define any situation" is required in order to expose something akin to Badiou's "void" or the "not-known" of any situation—namely, the multidirectional links between sites of political violence (22). Here the act of remembering is an "event" in itself, which can lead to the transformation of the conditions which initially instigated the violence that is the object of multidirectional memory (308). As an example of how this can occur, Rothberg references three texts that address the 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris: Didier Daeninckx's 1984 thriller *Meurtres pour mémoire*, Leïla Sebbar's 1999 novel for adolescents *La Seine était rouge: Paris, octobre 1961*, and Michael Haneke's 2005 film *Caché*.

Pointing to the multidirectional legacies that intersect with and cluster around the massacre of October 17, 1961, Daeninckx, Haneke, and Sebbar seek not the endless uncovering of more and more layers of history, but an engagement with the fundamental situations that produce violence. By probing the uncomfortable overlap and complicities that mark histories of genocide and colonialism, they leave open the possibility of building new places of concord.

(308)

The recognition of the multidirectional nature of traumatic memory may lead to new forms of solidarity between victim groups and new, more universal visions of justice.

Rothberg also borrows Badiou's notion of truths as simultaneously universal and multiple, for his analysis reveals that there are truths of modern victimization, though there may not be a single truth common to all victims of modern, state-sanctioned violence. Rothberg identifies one of these truths in terms of Agamben's notion of "bare life" and its intimate connection to both sovereignty and the "state of exception." However, he takes Agamben to task for his exclusion of the colonial encounter from the history of biopolitics and his genealogy of bare life, which leaves Agamben unable to account for the triumph of biopolitics in the modern world (62). At the same time, Rothberg illustrates that Agamben's categories can be utilized to understand the logic of colonialism: "colonialism blurs the distinction between the state of exception and the norm and thus collapses the opposition between 'bare life' and political existence and between the animal and the human" (86). In this way, Rothberg extends Agamben's analysis of "bare life" to the historical process that he excludes from his own work, and exposes the Western exceptionalism that informs many of Agamben's central claims, such as the view that biopolitics represents the "original nucleus" of Western politics—a view that, as Rothberg points out, excludes all historical sequences from the history of biopolitics (86).

In the introduction to the book, Rothberg derives certain implications from his theory of multidirectional memory and, in particular, the fact that it problematizes the automatic association of memory and identity: "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" (5). Multidirectional memory provides a model of remembrance whereby one cannot draw sharp boundaries between identities and traumatic histories, as they overlap in our attempt to recollect and understand them. However, if the boundaries between memory and identity are "jagged" rather than exact, what happens when a case of false memory leads us to

reassert—rather than complicate—their close and indeed inseparable connection? I have in mind the notorious case of Benjamin Wilkomirski (a.k.a. Bruno Grosjean, Bruno Dössekker), who published his Holocaust "memoir" *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* to great acclaim in 1995, before it was debunked as false by the Swiss journalist Daniel Ganzfried. Since Rothberg exposes the messy nature of collective memory in its multidirectional form, where traumatic memories overlap and intersect with one another and, indeed, give shape to each other through their dialogical interaction, how can we object to an individual who appropriates some traumatic memory as his own, when doing so provides greater sense to his own life narrative? This question is not addressed in Rothberg's book, though I imagine it will occur to other readers as well.

Finally, although Rothberg admits that multidirectional memory can give rise to discord rather than solidarity (with reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict), he doesn't fully explain how this model of collective memory can guard against the cynical political appropriation of traumatic memory for the sake of affirming state policy. For it is certainly "multidirectional" to invoke the crimes of Nazi Germany in relation to the terrorists who threaten our safety and national sovereignty, though I would argue that such comparisons do not lead to productive lines of thought but to the worst sort of propaganda.

Despite these questions, Rothberg has written a groundbreaking work in support of a new public space where memories collide. His book promises to change academic and public discourse on memory, identity, and atrocity from a zero-sum game where no one wins to an intercultural, transnational dialogue about traumatic experience and the politics that perpetuate it. He has also built a convincing case to lay aside finally the rhetoric of uniqueness for the sake of greater solidarity between victim groups.