

## The Holocaust and the Comparative Imagination. Interview with Michael Rothberg<sup>1</sup>

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Michael Rothberg's first book, *Traumatic Realism* from 2000, approached issues of Holocaust representation in a refreshingly broad range of domains. Engaging with the work of Blanchot and Adorno as well as with popular culture, the book exemplified a bold articulation of critical theory, cultural studies, and Holocaust studies. In the last couple of years, his work has increasingly begun to connect these earlier concerns to postcolonial contexts and problems; the result of this research is his book *Multidirectional Memory*, which was published in the summer of 2009. Rothberg is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He was a fellow of the VLAC research cluster on the future of literary research on the memory of catastrophe (Brussels, 2009).

**Q:** Your new book is entitled *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*<sup>4</sup>. How does your concept of multidirectional memory relate to Holocaust memory and to the age of decolonization?

**MR:** The concept of multidirectional memory came out of research that I began about the relationship between Holocaust memory and the memory of other forms of extreme violence. Initially I focused on the memory of slavery and racism and how that related to memory of the Holocaust in the early post-war period, and from there I started to branch out into the question of colonialism and the process of decolonization that was going on during the first years of the emergence of Holocaust memory. I started to realize that it was somewhat problematic to think about these different forms of memory as strictly separate and autonomous forms of remembrance. I found texts and figures and memorial sites in which these different forms of memory seemed to be in dialogue with each other, in a way that put into question the separateness of the different memorial traditions. Multidirectionality was a way to capture this dialogic emergence of memory traditions in relationship to one another.

I discovered that one of the problems was a prejudice that memories are in a sense at war with each other and that that war takes the form of a competition in which only one side can prevail. What I saw instead was precisely an interaction that was productive, that led to more memory and not to less memory, and it was this kind of interaction that led me to coin the term multidirectional memory, because the memories were indeed circulating, ricocheting back and forth across traditions, across identities, in some ways across historical periods and national boundaries.

**Q:** In your description you seem to single out the immediate post-war period. We were wondering about the ways in which this immediate post-war period relates to what your title calls 'the age of decolonization.' Few people would claim that the age of decolonization is over. What would be the geographical and historical boundaries of your claim about multidirectional memory?

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

MR: I am trying to redescribe a common periodization – say the post-war period – but I am not trying to imply that this is an absolute periodization that applies to all things everywhere and that the boundaries are so set and fixed. So for instance it is obvious that one could think of the period of decolonization as almost coterminous with the period of colonization; colonialism immediately provoked resistance on the part of the colonized. At the same time I think there is a particular period that runs from the end of the Second World War to the early 1960s in which the process of decolonization accelerates in significant ways and in which a number of new nations are founded and formed, sometimes in the aftermath of war, sometimes in the aftermath of negotiation, etcetera. The war had a lot to do with the acceleration of the process of decolonization as various colonized peoples fought in the war, were used by the colonial powers to fight fascism, and then had to think afterwards, ‘wait a minute, we are fighting for somebody else’s freedom, what about our freedom and independence.’ The war itself was a stimulus to the process of decolonization. But I would agree, obviously, that we are not a fully post-colonial age, and that therefore the process of decolonization continues into the present, as does the need for further decolonization in various realms; in particular territories, but also in ways of thinking and cultural forms, ideas and intellectual traditions.

Q: Your book often quotes examples from the French context. Is that a deliberate choice?

MR: France and the Francophone world in general definitely became one of the most, if not the most important site of my investigation. I started in a more American context. The first piece of the puzzle for me was W.E.B. DuBois’ essay on visiting the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto – so an African-American intellectual confronting Jewish history and European history<sup>5</sup>. That was really the starting point, but it did quickly move into a Francophone context. France emerged as a particularly dense site of multidirectionality, in part because of the rapidity with which it went from a situation of occupation by the Nazis, in which you had both resistance and collaboration, deportations, etcetera, to a need to grapple with decolonization – with first the war in Indochina, and immediately after that the war in Algeria. In France you have a very similar cast of characters living through these histories as if they are in some way continuous – which is not to say identical, but for those who lived them, they were part of the same life. This didn’t mean that everybody came up with the same answers to those problems – they often came up with diametrically opposed answers to the questions that were raised by the history.

I think there is sometimes, among American scholars at least, a kind of monolingualism of research, which means that they are focused on particular contexts and particular translated texts and that they are not looking in the places where you might find other kinds of stories, which might be happening in other languages. Just through French alone one already opens up the archive in really important ways and finds things that do not fit into this American model.

Q: The subtitle of your earlier book *Traumatic Realism* was ‘The Demands of Holocaust Representation.’ In the last section of that book, you discuss a short story by Grace Paley, and you already show the way in which Holocaust memory or issues of Holocaust representation interact with ‘qualitatively different historical experiences’ such as AIDS and the Haitian refugee situation<sup>6</sup>. We were wondering whether at that moment you already felt the need to address other demands, or whether since 2000 the context in which memories and Holocaust representations circulate has changed so drastically that you felt forced to address those other demands?

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<sup>5</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, ‘The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto’, *Jewish Life* (May 1952): 14-15. See Michael Rothberg, ‘W.E.B. DuBois in Warsaw: Holocaust Memory and the Color Line, 1949-1952’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14.1 (2001): 169-89.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 265-73.

MR: *Traumatic Realism* was a book that really did focus largely on texts responding to the Holocaust. They cut across genres and modes; I was trying to engage with more philosophical texts like those of Adorno or Blanchot, testimonial texts such as those of Delbo and Klüger, and also more popular-cultural forms, whether it's Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which uses the comic book form to tell a very serious story, or *Schindler's List*, or the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. So I was cutting across genres, and media, but focused really on the Holocaust. At the same time I always hoped and I always thought of what I was trying to do there as in some way applicable to other histories; that the kinds of questions that people like Adorno, Blanchot, or Spiegelman were raising were questions that could also be productively, and were of course also being productively raised in the context of other histories.

A couple of things happened during the time of the writing of that book that shaped what I went on to do after that, and this is already visible in the conclusion. On an intellectual level, an important moment was the publication of Paul Gilroy's book *The Black Atlantic*, which in its last chapter opened up its history of black diasporic cultural production and resistance to comparison with Jewish diasporic experience, resistance, and suffering, and particularly brought together texts that responded to the Holocaust, such as Primo Levi's writings, with texts responding to slavery and the Middle Passage, like the novels of Toni Morrison for example<sup>7</sup>. That was a really important moment because it was a gesture across identities, which at the time seemed like a risky thing, or in any case was not common. On a more historical level, while I was writing the first book things were going on in the world which were obvious echoes of the history that I was talking about: there was the situation in the former Yugoslavia, and there was the situation in Rwanda – two genocides that were happening as I was writing about the Holocaust. Certainly I was conscious of that but at a certain moment, after finishing *Traumatic Realism* or toward the end of it, it made me want to ask more serious questions about the Holocaust and other histories of genocide and other histories of extreme violence. There was a demand for comparison or for comparative thinking that emerged out of a particular historical and intellectual situation.

Q: Concerning the place of the Holocaust in this multidirectional memory, would you say that the Holocaust functions as a paradigm, or maybe as a metonymy or a metaphor for other genocides? Of course, metaphors can be very persuasive, but they can also suggest a false transparency, even if the events resist such a transparent juxtaposition.

MR: I think there is no doubt that the Holocaust functions as a metaphor and as a paradigm that has circulated quite broadly and has provided a kind of language with which people can articulate their histories and experiences. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider's book on the globalization of Holocaust memory describes that process well<sup>8</sup>. I certainly wouldn't deny that that happens, but what I have tried to do in this book is to provide a different angle on some of those processes of circulation and metaphorization. What strikes me is that in most of those discussions it is always the Holocaust that provides the paradigm, the Holocaust that has a kind of agency which allows other histories to be articulated, but I think the process is not so simple, and in fact that the process is more multidirectional, to use my terms. You can't simply ask how the Holocaust was circulated in the world and allowed other histories to be articulated, you also have to ask 'how have other histories helped to shape the way we think about the Holocaust and in fact helped to shape the way the Holocaust itself has circulated.' I argue that it's a much more dialogic process than it's usually described as being in scholarship and in more popular discourse.

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in a Global Age*, Trans. Assenka Oksiloff. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006.

Q: In your work, you emphasize the fact that memories circulate in broader media, and do not just exist in high-cultural forms. Yet in *Traumatic Realism*, you also assert the relevance of Adorno's work on memory. Where would you locate the concept of multidirectional memory: is it tied to high culture, or can it, despite its academic provenance, be translated to a wider society?

MR: In *Traumatic Realism*, I was dealing with some high-cultural, rarefied figures like Adorno and Blanchot, but what I was also trying to do was to put them into dialogue with more popular responses. In a way that was the part of the thinking behind the idea that there are distinct demands of Holocaust representation that need to be dealt with. One is the demand for what is often a kind of high cultural self-reflexivity about the limits of representation, but another one of the demands was a demand precisely for some kind of public circulation; these are histories that can't just be dealt with in high cultural or academic realms but have to be, and in fact always are being dealt with, in popular culture and public discourse. And I would certainly say the same thing for thinking about multidirectional memory, which neither is something that only takes place in rarefied realms, nor should it be. I think you see elements of multidirectionality all over the place. Every time you open the newspaper and read an article about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict you get the circulation of Holocaust references, if not actual Holocaust memory on all sides of the conflict; they are signals that it is very difficult to think of histories as purely separate from each other.

Q: But would you consider literature and cinema privileged vehicles for multidirectional memory?

MR: I do believe that the aesthetic provides a space for imagination and experimentation in which it may be possible to imagine things that in reality seem much more difficult to imagine; so that forms of relationality may be easier to conceive of in certain aesthetic spaces than they would in the political realm. Some of the works that I discuss in the book, like Michael Haneke's film *Caché*, I consider very strong works of art that are very provocative and push questions beyond the limit of what you might be able to articulate in a more everyday discourse. Some of the questions that Haneke raises about responsibility, for example, are ones that would be difficult to raise in a legal setting, in a political debate, but precisely because the aesthetic offers a space at least partially detached from some of these more everyday realms, it allows him to pose really difficult questions, and to make certain kinds of suggestions about what an ethics in the face of extreme violence might be that wouldn't so easily be made in other circumstances.

So, on the one hand, I think some of these works of art do things that maybe other genres or media can't do or don't do so often. On the other hand, I do look at a wide range of kinds of texts in the book, from novels and films to journalistic writings to paintings to photography to political theory to political polemics. And often it is difficult to know whether a text is an aesthetic or a journalistic discourse, for instance when Marguerite Duras publishes a piece in a news weekly. I think a lot of the texts have strong aesthetic dimensions but also have a public address that is important to what they're doing. And so I think it's difficult to hold on to a notion of aesthetic autonomy as a privileged site of multidirectionality, when in fact I can see it emerging in all sorts of more mundane situations or mundane forms of writing. I think the lines are a bit blurry between high and low, between serious writing and journalistic writing, between what sometimes looks a bit like political propaganda, and in fact sometimes may be political propaganda, and yet at the same time may be offering something that goes beyond mere propaganda. I think some of these texts emerge in particularly urgent political situations where a kind of political instrumentalization does go on, but they're not just propaganda; they're also thinking in interesting ways about the relatedness of histories and the ways that memory circulates.

Q: Do you see particular aesthetic characteristics emerge, in the 1950s and the 1960s or later on?

MR: I see people trying to forge new aesthetics in order to grapple with the complicated histories that are unfolding around them. Certainly there are testimonial and documentary aesthetics that emerge in the '50s and '60s, which are closely tied, I think, to the multidirectional dynamics of memory. You could start with Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*, the first really important documentary about the Nazi camp system, which is also in some coded way a response to the Algerian war, and you can go up through Rouch and Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer*, an experiment in *cinéma vérité* which also brought together anti-colonialism, decolonization, and Holocaust memory in a very interesting, surprising way in the early 1960s. Charlotte Delbo, who has been recognized in recent years, especially in the American context, a little bit less in the French context so far, as one of the important writers of the Nazi camps and is to me really one of the most important writers of the post-war period, turns out to have gotten her start as a writer, for the public, as someone responding to the Algerian war. So these different histories of anticolonialism and Nazi genocide sparked something in a number of important writers and served as an inspiration for aesthetic innovation, particularly in the documentary or testimonial form, but not only that. One of the things that surprised me and came up on more than one occasion in the course of writing the book was the inspiration of surrealism and the fact that some of these figures – especially important for me were Aimé Césaire and Jean Rouch – were formed in the context of surrealism in the 1930s in Paris and went on to use what they had learned or developed in that context to provoke unexpected juxtapositions, such as the kind that interest me between the Holocaust and colonialism.

Q: Another thing that struck us in your recent work is the constant emphasis on the oppositional and minoritarian character of the archive that you construct. You call it a 'minoritarian' position, you talk about 'the counterpublic,' you show very convincingly that the witness is always to a certain extent a foreigner. Is that something inherent in the position of the witness, as essentially disruptive of the status quo?

MR: I would probably hesitate to say that the witness is always a disruptive figure. I think there are enough examples at this point where witnessing and testimony can be put to very undisruptive work and I think there is a way in which right now Holocaust testimony has been or is being codified in a way that makes it a lot less disruptive than it probably was at one time. I'm thinking for example of the Spielberg archive, which in some ways amounts to a mass production of testimony. I'm not saying that this has no value at all and yet it seems designed to undercut some of the disruptive nature of testimony. Anything can become familiar at a certain moment. The meaning of witness, the meaning of testimony is not stable, it is not established once and for all. That said, why the emphasis on the oppositional and the minoritarian? Partly it is a problem of how one deals with master narratives and dominant narratives. There's no doubt that a dominant narrative has evolved to describe the emergence of Holocaust memory according to which in the first fifteen years after the war memories mostly remain private and unspoken. At a certain later moment, usually dated to the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961, Holocaust memory starts to emerge into public, in large part due to the staging of eye-witness testimony in the trial. You start to get a sense of the Holocaust as a unique historical event and of the witness as a particular kind of figure: a bearer of memory, a bearer of history. That is a powerful narrative and I think in some ways the narrative is accurate, even though it is being questioned in lots of ways. It captures something about the process by which the Holocaust became a figure of public discourse. What I wanted to articulate was that other things were going on at the same time: things that do not fit in that narrative, things that were there before the Holocaust was qualified as a particular kind of event, things that remained after it was qualified in that way but don't quite fit into that story. In that sense they are minoritarian because they can't quite find a place in the dominant narrative and they don't quite constitute an entirely new master narrative. Rather what they do is to complicate and trouble the dominant narrative. So I wasn't

interested in replacing one canon of Holocaust representation and Holocaust memory and one grand narrative of Holocaust memory with another canon or grand narrative but rather to open up the narrative we have, to point towards some of the things that it has eclipsed, and to look for possible alternative visions within those marginalized moments. I think it's a bit of a deconstructive move or I at least would want to see it that way: playing the margin against the center but in such a way that you don't simply reverse the hierarchy.

Q: In your introduction, you refer to your project as 'an archaeology of the comparative imagination.' Yet your own project also seems to be a work of the comparative imagination. Is the use of this term 'archaeology' a strategy to avoid that confusion between your research and the archive you investigate? As you know, there is this topos that you have in Holocaust discourses of 'witnessing for the witness' – the idea that as a researcher, or even as a belated witness, one has to assume responsibility for the witness one is speaking for. How do you understand your own responsibility to the witnesses you present?

MR: That is a question that is very important to me, actually. The phrase 'archaeology of the comparative imagination' was in no way intended to produce a distancing effect, because as you guess, I would like to situate myself precisely within that space of the comparative imagination, so perhaps 'genealogy' would have been a more felicitous term. It is precisely an attempt to find resources, comparative resources which can contribute to comparative thinking in the present. I am constitutionally a comparatist; my training is in comparative literature but even beyond that I simply have trouble staying within national boundaries. I find myself always cutting across different contexts, and so yes, in some ways I find inspiration for that in the figures that I discuss in the book. In terms of whether this constitutes a kind of 'witnessing for the witness,' which is a phrase that has come up a lot, inspired by Celan, in the discourse on the Holocaust: I don't think I would use exactly that terminology, which, when used in the right context, is a very powerful and important concept but also sounds to me at times a bit too pious, and possibly puts the critic in too important of a position. What I am trying to do is to bring some of these texts that were forgotten or ignored back into circulation because I think they still speak to us. They represent alternative paths and alternative ways of thinking that are worth retrieving, precisely because they don't fit exactly into our expectations of what one should say in the context of Holocaust memory.

Q: Does your concept of multidirectional memory include a comparison of models of remembrance and an analysis of transmission problems in the context of 'postmemory'? Or does multidirectional memory rather establish and study links between different histories at the level of events? And if so, to what extent does a multidirectional approach to the past induce or prevent political instrumentalizations of memory?

MR: The question of transmission is important to me and it comes up particularly in the last chapter of the book, where I suggest that multidirectional memory can supplement in important ways the notion of postmemory. Postmemory, as it has been articulated by Hirsch, is a way of dealing with a generational dynamic of living in the wake of events that you did not directly experience but that have shaped your life in powerful ways nonetheless<sup>9</sup>. What I'd like to add to that is that the process of transmission is never a direct one but that in fact the processes of transmission are themselves often multidirectional. So that when memories or histories are transmitted from generation to generation, that doesn't happen in a pure form, but those memories and histories start to be mixed up with other memories and histories. In some ways postmemory is almost necessarily a form of

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<sup>9</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, London: Harvard University Press, 1997; Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (2008): 103-28.

multidirectional memory because in that gap between the initial experience or the personal memory and the transmission of the memory, even within the intimate setting of the family, other histories or memories start to circulate.

A really interesting example that I discuss in the book is the postmemory of the October 17, 1961 massacre, which was an event in Paris where the Parisian police massacred up to 200 peacefully demonstrating Algerians, sometimes threw their bodies into the Seine, and in which 11,000 thousand people were arrested and sent to camps, sometimes the very same places where Jews had been held during the Second World War. Memory of that massacre was quickly marginalized within France and even within Algeria and went underground to a certain extent until it started to re-emerge in the 1980s and 1990s and in the first part of the 21st century, often at the instigation of later generations: it was often second- or third-generation migrant groups who became the carriers of this event that they had not experienced. But what's interesting is that the process of transmission from the event to its later memory or postmemory often took place not strictly through the family context but via the French anti-colonial militants who had been active in the anti-war movement during the Algerian war. They later helped to foster the transmission of memory to this second and third generation of migrants. This means that those are the very same activists and militants who themselves were already articulating a form of multidirectional memory during the Algerian war, because their militant activity during the war was in part a product of their memories and sometimes postmemories of the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the Nazi Occupation. There is a transmission of memory that takes place in a multidirectional context in which different histories are in fact playing off each other and helping to produce the process of transmission.

Q: Would you say that the aims of multidirectional memory change in the context of postmemory? You could say that the aim of Duras, for instance, was more political than that of later generations.

MR: I don't know if it's more political but it's a different political context: Duras and her comrades and colleagues were involved in opposition to a war that was going on at that moment, so it was a situation of great urgency and crisis, centered around a war. The kind of postmemory that you see emerging in the '80s and '90s around October 17 is also political and in some cases also quite urgent, as in the references to the Algerian civil war which was a history that was going on at that moment – see for instance Leïla Sebbar's text *La Seine était rouge*<sup>10</sup>. So I think the political context has changed but I'm not sure that it is necessarily less political. There has to be something that is making recovery of a previous history seem urgent, and that often can be some sort of political context, not necessarily the context of a war or anything quite so immediate, but at the very least some sort of social-political context of crisis or a situation in which there is a felt need for the recovery of these histories and memories. You have to want to recover them – at least if it is to become an active process; postmemorial transmission is obviously not always an active and conscious process, a lot of that simply takes place the way that other forms of transmission take place in a family – but when it becomes a program of recovery, that seems to me to be responding to some sort of social or political need.

Q: One of the issues in postmemory is precisely the impossibility of recovering memory.

MR: Yes, and you see that in these postcolonial postmemory texts, just as you see that in post-Holocaust postmemory text, like *Maus* or *Dora Bruder*, to reference another interesting example from the French context<sup>11</sup>. Yes, often these postmemory texts about transmission are also texts

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<sup>10</sup> Leïla Sebbar, *La Seine était rouge – Paris, Octobre 1961*, Paris: Thierry Magnier, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Art Spiegelman, *Maus I & II*, New York: Pantheon, 1992; Patrick Modiano, *Dora Bruder*, Paris: Gallimard, 1997.

about the crisis of transmission and in some ways about the impossibility of transmission. And you absolutely see that in these more multidirectional contexts just as you would in a more strictly post-Holocaust or postcolonial context.

Q: Your project emphasizes the ways in which memories interact and circulate, but of course there are also always investments or elements of our identities that are more resistant to that kind of circulation and that kind of interaction. And probably religious investments are quite paradigmatic for what we want to talk about. The emphasis you put on the circulation and the interaction of memories seems to make your project an emphatically secular one, in the way that it presumes that memories can be and want to be shared, that they cannot be claimed as exclusive or sacred but have to be profaned, in a sense. So we were wondering what this would mean for contexts in which some memories refuse to be shared, or are claimed on a religious or crypto-religious basis that really withdraws them from circulation.

MR: I think these debates around secularism and religion are obviously among the most important ones today. And even though I recognize the complexity of the issues and some of the problems with the secular perspective, I think you are right that my perspective is indeed a secular one, in a broad sense, not just in the sense of secular versus religion, but really in Edward Said's sense of secular criticism as a worldly and self-reflexive form of critique that does not take absolutes or identities for granted, but sees them as always in need of critical reflection. In terms of the question of the sacred, definitely one of the driving forces for me in the project was a critical perspective on the sacralization of the Holocaust, which I think has happened especially in the last 40-50 years, since the Eichmann trial and the establishment of a discourse of uniqueness. There is still a need to think about these histories as specific, but somewhere along the line, specificity turned into uniqueness and uniqueness was an element of a sacralizing discourse in which, as in Claude Lanzmann's famous phrase, we have to think as the Holocaust as something surrounded by a ring of fire.

So in that sense, yes, it is a secular project, which attempts to desacralize the Holocaust by looking at it relationally, by saying that we can transgress this ring of fire without having to give up on the notion of the Holocaust's specificity. We can think of the Holocaust in relationship to other historical events without flattening it out, without universalizing it, but also without separating it out of human history into a sacred space where there will be no contact between it and other historical experiences. I think it is true that people are going to hew strongly to their identities, whether they are religious identities or ethnically or nationally or racially based identities. That is probably inevitable. What I try to point out is that even when you are doing that, you may be articulating your identity in terms borrowed from the other, even if you don't know it, even if you are not fully conscious of it. And so even when on a surface level there seems to be a logic of separateness and competitiveness or even sacredness in the articulation, I think the secular perspective is to look at that and to reveal how, despite people's intentions, the memories, identities, and so on that are being articulated are more complex, are more contingent and are more comparative, ultimately. I start out in the book with an example from the literary critic Walter Benn Michaels where he is quoting a militant American black Muslim saying: 'well maybe some Jews died in the Holocaust but our Holocaust was much worse. You say 6 million were killed, we doubt that, but we lost 600 million.' It's an obvious competitive move, an attempt to establish and secure a separate and to a certain extent sacralized identity, but it does that precisely through comparison and precisely through borrowing the rhetoric of the other. And so even in the moment of declaring one's separateness from the other, and perhaps of attempting to establish one's position in a hierarchy – whether it's a hierarchy of suffering or what have you – there is an implicit, unintended recognition that one is implicated in the other's history. And I don't think you can escape that implication.



Q: The last example brings us back to the dangers of multidirectional memory. You consider multidirectional memory as a potential basis for solidarity, but as you have indicated, it can have other effects: we could think of the flattening out of historical specificity in certain (political) contexts as well as your critique of Agamben's work, which in a sense also presents a kind of multidirectional memory, as it is multiplying the presence of the Holocaust in a way that makes it uncontrollable<sup>12</sup>.

RM: When multidirectional memory is articulated, consciously and sometimes unconsciously, it can potentially be the basis for new visions of solidarity and justice. It can be, but certainly is not always and does not have to be, and certainly sometimes quite the opposite can take place. And so it is very tempting to just declare a moratorium on analogies and comparisons. But these kinds of analogies and comparisons, even when they are not 'good' versions of multidirectional memory, are symptomatic of the interconnectedness of the histories and that is something that needs to be worked through.

As for Agamben, I think you are right, it's multidirectional in the sense that there is a universalization of the camp as the paradigm of modernity, and I do think that is very problematic as well. At the same time, I would say that Agamben's work is insufficiently multidirectional in that it remains within a very Eurocentric frame of reference, and that's what I argue in the book: there is very little mention, it seems to me, of colonial contexts that one might refer to in attempting to derive the genealogy of the camp form. And so in some ways, I think that Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which is certainly one of the inspirational texts for Agamben's thinking of biopolitics and of the camp and of a kind of totalitarian political model, was doing something that falls out of Agamben's work, at least as far as I'm aware, in that she was looking to the history of imperialism and colonialism as part of the genealogy of the camp and of the Nazi genocide<sup>13</sup>. She did it, I argue, in ways that are also deeply problematic, and that reinscribe certain key elements of colonial discourse, particularly as it pertains to Africa and Africans. And I think Agamben doesn't do that, I don't think he reinscribes some of the racialized models that Arendt falls into. At the same time Arendt was going beyond Europe in a way that I think Agamben doesn't do.

I agree that one wants to think about what are the distinguishing elements that differentiate 'better' uses of multidirectional memory, uses in the interest of solidarity, from uses that are more disturbing. This issue of distinguishing the ethics and politics of different forms of multidirectional memory is something I'm working on now, in the wake of the book. I think that often one of the distinctions is between articulations that bring different histories into contact, and articulations that dissolve histories into each other, articulations that work toward an equation between histories. And the examples that interest me and I think have the most potential to provoke new visions of justice or new visions of solidarity are not ones that work toward equation or render all histories substitutable into each other but rather ones that create constellations of histories. So Walter Benjamin would be important to me as someone who thought the constellation as the coming together of heterogeneous elements that transform each other by virtue of their proximity. When you bring the Holocaust and colonialism together the idea is not to reduce one to the other, but to see what happens when we try to think of history as a proximity between heterogeneous processes that have taken place and have played a role in producing our present.

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<sup>12</sup> See Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 62-63; Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, 'Auschwitz and the Remains of Theory: Toward an Ethics of the Borderland', *Symploke*, 11.1-2 (2003): 23-38

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Schocken, 1951.