

SARTRE, MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY, AND THE HOLOCAUST IN THE AGE OF DECOLONIZATION

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Paige Arthur, *Unfinished Projects: Decolonization and the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (London and New York: Verso, 2010)

Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009)

Jacques Derrida's memorial reflections on the impact of Sartre's journal *Les temps modernes* in shaping his generation's projects highlighted the legend of the courier from Marathon who died while running to deliver his message of victory to the Athenians.¹ Sartre alluded to the fable in his manifesto for engaged writing. "It's a beautiful myth," Sartre wrote in his précis for the politics of commitment, for

it shows that for a little while longer the dead act as if they were living. A little while—one year, ten years, maybe even fifty . . . and then they're buried a second time. This is the standard we offer for the writer: as long as his books provoke anger, embarrassment, shame, hatred, love . . . he shall live!²

This moment in Sartre's text captured Derrida's attention for he sought to point out that political involvement often has effects that are deferred. It is these detours of memory—signals and signatures from a once-buried moment that

¹ J. Derrida, "Il courait mort": Salut, salut: Notes pour un courier aux *Temps modernes*," *Les temps modernes* 587 (March–May 1996).

² J.-P. Sartre, "Ecrire pour son époque," *Les temps modernes* 33 (June 1948), 2113–21, part of which is reprinted as "We Write for Our Own Time," in *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre*, vol. 2, *Selected Prose*, ed. M. Contat and M. Rybalka, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston, IL, 1974), 178.

ramify politically anew in different contexts³—that are wound into the complex circuitry of what Michael Rothberg has called “multidirectional memory.” And it is the signature of Sartre, whose anticolonial provocations remain prescient and provocative, that enable us to link these two books that are united by the word “decolonization” in their subtitles. Each tome is a touchstone for new openings at the intersection of postwar French intellectual history, postcolonial theory, and critical race and Holocaust studies. Both books ask us to reconsider racism and empire; memory, alterity, and history; temporality and trauma; identity both individual and collective; and the singularity versus the generalizability of instances of oppression and calls for liberation. Each beckons us to do so in light of the unfinished project of coming to terms with Europe’s colonial legacy in a globalized world.

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In his lively and thought-provoking overview of Sartre’s *oeuvre*, Bernard-Henri Lévy suggested that Sartre was the anti-ambassador to the Third World.⁴ Sartre’s sustained engagement with the Arab–Israeli conflict, the negritude writers and their journal *Présence Africaine*, anticolonialism in Indochina and later Vietnam, the French–Algerian war, Cuba, the Congo, and his final years of political activism involving immigrant Africans in France, show that he merits the epithet. Nourredine Lamouchi’s groundbreaking *thèse* published as *Jean-Paul Sartre et le tiers monde* documented and evaluated these interventions.⁵ Paige Arthur provides the first English-language monograph detailing the links between Sartre’s philosophical work and his anticolonialist stance. In doing so,

³ On how texts and concepts “ramify” see P. E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 3–4.

⁴ B.-H. Lévy, *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge, 2003), 21. As is often the case, Lévy borrows the idea unacknowledged, in this case from A. Cohen-Solal, *Sartre, 1905–1980* (Paris, 1999), 654–93. While Arthur copiously cites Lévy’s book even as she overlooks much other Sartrean scholarship, I think she misses, as have others, the real insight of Lévy’s take on Sartre, which is to insist that there were two Sartres. Sartre is Janus-faced, Lévy argued, a Jekyll-and-Hyde schizo-character: the antihumanist, libertarian, individualist, antimetaphysical, dystopian, pessimistic, existentialist Sartre and the humanist, communitarian, metaphysical, utopian, optimistic, Marxist Sartre are two souls that share the same body of works. This complicates a persistent debate in Sartrean scholarship about whether there was a *Kehre* in his thought between an earlier existentialist and later Marxist stance. For an alternate reading of Lévy’s text see J. Judaken, *H-France Review* 6/59 (May 2006), available at <http://h-france.net/vol6reviews/judaken3.html>.

⁵ N. Lamouchi, *Jean-Paul Sartre et le tiers monde: Rhétorique d’un discours anticolonialiste* (Paris, 1996).

she complements the belatedly translated volume of *Situations V (Colonialism and Neocolonialism)*, the fire and brimstone of Sartre's decolonizing vision.⁶

Arthur's book nuances Lamouchi in critical respects. For instance, she faults his periodization of Sartre's anticolonialism for following too closely the bible of Sartre scholars, Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka's *The Writings of Sartre*, rather than tracking closely the links between Sartre's interventions and those being written by other authors in *Les temps modernes*.⁷ We learn from Arthur, for example, that between 1945 and 1951 alone, *Les temps modernes* had already published thirty-one articles on colonialism and seven others related to the theme. Alongside her deft exposition of Sartrean works in light of his anticolonialism, Arthur's thoroughgoing immersion in *Les temps modernes* as the key means for advancing his political agenda is one of the merits of her study.

But the key challenge of her work is the striking disparity she notes between Sartre's pivotal role in Third World liberation movements, at least in the orbit of the European cultural imagination, and the dearth of work in the Anglo-American- and South Asian-dominated (i.e. English-language) discourse of postcolonial studies. Announcing yet another unfinished project left to be taken up by others, Arthur ends her study on this note:

This absence is remarkable for four reasons which would seem to make Sartre pertinent: the radical anti-essentialism of Sartre's philosophy; his direct relationship with (and sometimes influence on) foundational thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, and foundational institutions such as *Présence Africaine*; his attempt, like that of so many in the field of postcolonial studies, to theorize individual agency in some productive relationship with Marxism; and the fact that he was, at one time, the world's most famous intellectual supporter of movements in the non-European world.⁸

Indeed, for those few who have not passed over Sartre's seminal contributions to these concerns in silence, he has even been dubbed "an African Philosopher."⁹

⁶ Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, trans. A. Haddour, S. Brewer, and T. McWilliams (London and New York, 2001).

⁷ Arthur, *Unfinished Projects*, 49–50.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 228. There are some exceptions to this silence on Sartre and postcolonialism. See, for example, J. Judaken, ed., *Race after Sartre: Antiracism, Africana Existentialism, Postcolonialism* (Albany, 2008). It is odd to note that while Arthur's chap. 10, "Sartre, the Left, and Identity in Postcolonial France," was first published as a chapter in this work, she makes no reference to the important contributions of others in the volume even when their work bears directly on her own. So to mention only one glaring example among many, there is no discussion of Judith Butler's important essay "Violence/Non-violence," which squarely focuses on Sartre's preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* even though the latter is discussed at length by Arthur.

⁹ Arthur, *Unfinished Projects*, xvi. See V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, 1988) who titled the section of his

While Sartre offered no overarching tract on the subject, the signposts of the roads to freedom he walked alongside anticolonial theorists clearly ought to mark out a central place in postcolonial theory for his work, including on the important theme of rethinking the interplay between cultural identities and social structures.

Arthur's book begins with this problematic. She asks what constituted the shift in the meaning of the "Other" from an interpersonal relationship to an intercultural dyad. In other words, when and how did the problem of the cultural "Other" take hold and does it make sense even to formulate intercultural relations in these terms? Writing in the wake of post-structuralism, this conundrum has been a central preoccupation for this generation of intellectual historians, especially those we might refer to as the California school of intellectual history.¹⁰ Arthur suggests that the tipping point for referencing an intercultural Other was the convergence of two intersecting trends: first, the impact of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity on figures like Jacques Derrida, the *nouveaux Philosophes*, and Tzvetan Todorov, whose 1982 work *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* "was one of the first major publications to have the word 'Other'—defined as the cultural Other—in its title."¹¹ Second, there was the turn by the left toward human rights and a new universalism. Arthur reads this concern back into Sartre's thought, posing as a problem how "[could] a methodological individualist like Sartre, who granted no ontological status to

book on Sartre "J-P. Sartre as an African Philosopher." Robert J. C. Young picked up on this designation in his preface to Sartre, *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*. Young is among the rare postcolonial commentators to take Sartre's work as central, for example in his critical chapter "Sartre's Extravagances" in *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (New York, 1990), and in his mammoth *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford, 2001). See also Cohen-Solal's chapter "Prophète du tiers-monde et penseur du post-colonialisme" in *Sartre: Un penseur pour le XXIe siècle* (Paris, 2005), as well as Lewis Gordon's reflections on "Sartre and Black Existentialism" in Judaken, *Race after Sartre*, 158. Gordon's chapter serves as a guidebook for all interested in further work on the topic of Sartre and Africana existentialism, an emerging area of Sartre scholarship.

¹⁰ To cite only a few explicit examples, see S. Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca, 2005) and J. Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question: Anti-antisemitism and the Politics of the French Intellectual* (Lincoln, 2006). This question is also buried in other works of the California school of intellectual history preoccupied by Heidegger's Jewish question like E. Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927–1961* (Ithaca, 2005) and P. E. Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley, 2003). The Jewish Question underlies as well E. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher* (Waltham, MA, 2006) The general question of the ethical relation to the Other in French thought is central to J. Bourq, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal and Kingston, 2007).

¹¹ Arthur, *Unfinished Projects*, xxvi.

groups, recognize and account for collective identities?”¹² She then correlates this development with Sartre’s politicization in the postwar period.

In doing so, she repeats the oft-cited claim that Sartre’s experience during World War II marked his turn toward politics. But what is more distinctive is her repetition of Sonia Kruk’s original contention that Simone de Beauvoir and specifically *The Second Sex* (1949) “must be credited with criticizing Sartre’s notion of the absolute freedom of consciousness and his eventual turn toward a concern with collectivities.”¹³ Both sides of this argument, however, are unconvincing. Sartre was never the “methodological individualist” that Arthur contends he was. Already in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre had acknowledged that freedom was constrained.¹⁴ The whole second half of his magnum opus is a phenomenological ontology of “being-for-others” where this is not only described in terms of a dialectic of the gaze between two individuals. Indeed, the outline of Sartre’s broader social theory was already intimated in his conception of “the situation.”¹⁵ Arthur even cites passages that make this evident. Sartre wrote in *Being and Nothingness*, for example,

The primary fact is that the member of the oppressed collectivity, who as a simple person is engaged in fundamental conflicts with other members of this collectivity (love, hate, rivalry of interests, etc.), apprehends his condition and that of other members of this collectivity as looked-at and thought about by consciousnesses which escape him.¹⁶

Before World War II, in short stories like “The Wall” (set in the Spanish Civil War), then most emphatically in his underappreciated “The Childhood of a Leader” (about a young boy who becomes involved with the rabidly anti-Semitic Camelots du roi, the shock troops of the extreme-right Action Française), Sartre had set these situations in fictional form. He did so in ways that clearly indicated his politicization in the midst of the rise of fascism and by responding to the widespread negative representations of Jews and Judaism in the late 1930s.¹⁷ In his postwar play *The Respectful Prostitute* (1946), whose plot was loosely based on the events of the 1931 Scottsboro Trial, Sartre once more dramatized group formation in terms of a racialized Other.¹⁸ Arthur also recognizes that *The Notebooks for*

¹² Ibid., 7.

¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴ Arthur’s first chapter is titled “Putting Constraints on Freedom: A Philosophy of Marginal Groups.”

¹⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York, 1956), 619–707.

¹⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 544. Arthur, *Unfinished Projects*, 26.

¹⁷ For a detailed development of this argument, see Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question*, chap. 1.

¹⁸ See S. Martinot, “Skin for Sale: Race and *The Respectful Prostitute*” in Judaken, *Race After Sartre*, 55–76.

an Ethics, his posthumously published work from 1947 to 1948, “demonstrate[s] that Sartre was at the very least aware of the ethnocentric bias of the Hegelian dialectic, and they also show him using the word ‘Other’ in a collective sense.”¹⁹ This is patently clear in “Black Orpheus,” his famous preface to Léopold Sédar Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (Anthology of African and West Indian Poets Writing in French, 1948), which served to introduce the negritude writers to the world.

Consequently, contra Arthur and Kruks, Sartre had long been developing a vocabulary for discussing the relationship between freedom and oppression, individuality and collectivity in terms of an existential analytic of the dialectic of the gaze worked out philosophically both for the individual and within a broader social ontology. He had done so in his philosophy, but also in some of his literature and plays, which are snippets from life in which group identity is key. All this preceded Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. This claim is in no way to undermine the massive influence Beauvoir had on the development of Sartre’s thought. Certainly Sartre refined and nuanced his understanding of collectivities and alterity, racism and colonialism over time. Surely he learned from Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* about some of the limits of his earlier social theory. But Sartre’s existential analysis did not entail “contradictory argumentation,” or necessitate the integration of a “social theory that seems incompatible with existentialism,” even if there are “certain tensions both in Sartre’s thinking and in the discourse available to describe collective phenomena (and, in particular, the relationships Europeans have with non-Europeans).”²⁰

Arthur’s book takes us through Sartre’s postwar engagements with non-Europeans in four periods that make up the four parts of *Unfinished Projects*: his ostensible politicization from 1945 to 1954; his most developed theoretical account of colonialism in the years from 1954 to 1962 within the contours of his “verbose, heavy, and shapeless book,” as one critic described the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*; his turn toward Third Worldism between 1962 and 1968; and Sartre’s irredentist stance in the context of the post-1968 shift toward human rights and the critique of Third Worldism by many within the socialist orbit in the aftermath of the bloody and often dictatorial outcomes of wars of national liberation.²¹

¹⁹ Arthur, *Unfinished Projects*, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21–2. In fact, one might consider the extent to which these are built into the logic of generalization and the structure of language, not to mention the differences between the theoretical purview on the individual and on collectivities.

²¹ On this last phase see Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

In thus periodizing Sartre, his interventions within the contingent circumstances of colonial history are integrated into his overarching philosophical concerns. In some of the best moments of the book, these are interrelated with other positions in the intellectual field, sometimes through reanimating the debates Sartre's work engendered. A good case in point is how Arthur balances the damning response to the *Critique* by Claude Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind* with the counterweight provided by the now less well-known political anthropologist Georges Balandier, a rival of Levi-Strauss, whose Third Worldism was significantly influenced by Sartre.²² Valuable also are Arthur's quick reception histories of works like *Situation V* or her detailed overview of how the *Critique* was assessed at the time of its publication.²³

Among other insights along the way, Arthur complicates our understanding of Sartre's famous preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. She insists upon rereading it as the polemic it was, written at a heated moment in the French–Algerian conflict. The Fanon preface was tempered by Sartre's more sophisticated assessment of revolutionary violence in the face of the systemic violence of colonialism in the *Critique* and elsewhere. This is important given that the Fanon preface is often held up as the definitive statement by Sartre on revolutionary violence, which is a claim that Arthur shows does not hold water.²⁴ Further, Sartre's appraisal of the US war in Vietnam and his support for Che-style guerrilla warfare in the Third World is complicated by Arthur's summation and commentary on Sartre's "ethics of global responsibility" in his little-known 1964 "Rome Lecture," which is still an underexplored frontier for Sartrelogues. The upshot of Arthur's book is that in our own post-Cold War, postcolonial, and supposedly postracial world, Sartre's insights continue to provide philosophical resources to trouble the somnambulant conscience of the neocolonial, neoliberal world order. As such, like the Marathon messenger upon whom he commented, Sartre remains alive as a still irrepressible memory.

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Michael Rothberg's book, like Arthur's, has a lucidity that is often lacking in works grappling with new theoretical terrain. As his title lays bare, his project is

²² For an account of this debate as a key moment in the shift from existentialism to structuralism as the vanguard in French philosophy see A. D. Schrift, *Twentieth-Century French Philosophy: Key Themes and Thinkers* (Oxford, 2006), 47; and F. Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, 2 vols., trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis, 1997), 1: 7.

²³ Arthur, *Unfinished Projects*, 94 n. 39 and 96–102.

²⁴ This more nuanced view is evident in the title of R. E. Santoni, *Sartre on Violence: Curiously Ambivalent* (University Park, PA, 2003).

to rethink collective memory multidirectionally and transnationally, specifically when it comes to the Holocaust in our postcolonial era. This entails rethinking history and memory in nonlinear terms, and ultimately reevaluating what Jean-François Lyotard called “the politicization of memory” in the “memorialization of the past.”²⁵ Rather than think of memory via the model of the tree, grounded with evident roots and branches, Rothberg’s approach to memory is what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would call in *A Thousand Plateaus* “rhizomic,” shooting in many directions, with memory-like weeds often popping up unexpectedly, disrupting easy systems for the ordering of the collective past.

Rothberg’s reexamination of collective memory is related to group identity. Akin to what Arthur suggests about how we conceptualize collectivities, the result is that he problematizes any homogenizing uniformity of group constitution or monolithic version of “collective memory.” Central to his project is his interest in undoing the way the memory of victimization and oppression is often discussed in the public sphere competitively—as a zero-sum game. As if comparing the mass murder in the Congo to the Holocaust, for example, necessarily dilutes the uniqueness of each event. Or, worse, that comparative frames inherently banalize or instrumentalize, as guardians of Holocaust memory sometimes claim. *Multidirectional Memory* consequently makes the case for “‘decolonized’ Holocaust memory” that is capable of addressing the “shared histories of racism, spatial segregation, genocide, diasporic displacement, [and] cultural destruction.”²⁶ To do so is to appreciate that the singularity of events is the necessary basis upon which any comparison can be made. To this end, Rothberg gathers together an archive of texts written primarily in the immediate post-Holocaust period where one finds a sensitivity to multiple registers of memory in books often “located at the intersection of discourses that coexist uneasily.”²⁷ Their point of intersection is found in their linkage of the Holocaust to colonialism and anti-Semitism to racism. As such, *Multidirectional Memory* brings “together Holocaust studies and postcolonial studies for the first time in a book-length work.”²⁸

Opening with his theoretical Introduction, Rothberg emphasizes memory’s inherent relationality: how it undulates through modes of perception often in uncanny ways, which means that it necessarily produces ripple effects. This is evident even in Rothberg’s own mode of writing, which traverses from one textual or theoretical object of analysis to another. He thickens his speculative points as

²⁵ J.-F. Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, trans. A. Michel and M. S. Roberts (Minneapolis, 1990).

²⁶ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 22, 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 118, 73.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xiii.

he moves along. So, for example, Rothberg's discussion of Hannah Arendt's reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* discussed in chapter 2 is resumed in his analysis of Aimé Césaire's invocation of Hitlerism in *Discourse on Colonialism* in chapter 3. Rothberg shows that the trope of the *choc en retour*, the boomerang effect between the Holocaust and colonialism, was a figure of thought that marked both texts. He then takes this a step further by turning his analysis of Césaire on his reading of Arendt and vice versa. First, Rothberg considers how Arendt recapitulates the primitivism that Conrad applied to Africans. Then he shows how exactly these stereotypes were squarely in Césaire's crosshairs. But at the same time, he assesses the limits in Césaire's account of the genocide of European Jewry in an Arendtian vein.

A further ripple is a section on how Césaire and Frantz Fanon bear upon trauma studies influenced by the work of Cathy Caruth. Caruth has been criticized by postcolonial theorists, Rothberg tells us, for her "accident'-based model of trauma" that assumes the circumstances of white, Western privilege, and for downplaying the "everyday, repeated forms of traumatizing violence."²⁹ Each ripple furthers the call in *Multidirectional Memory* for "a comparative theory that would track the interconnectedness of different perpetrators and different victims in overlapping, yet distinct, scenarios of extreme violence."³⁰

None of the texts Rothberg draws upon for resources to develop his arguments are without their weaknesses, however. In the case of Césaire and Fanon, each is faulted for adhering to a universalist metanarrative derived from Marxism that fails to account for Jewish particularity. The irony here for those familiar with Fanon's critique of Sartre's "Black Orpheus" essay in *Black Skin, White Masks* will be evident: this is precisely what Fanon had claimed about Sartre's lack of understanding about the lived experience of blackness.

One of the most intriguing assertions Rothberg makes about multidirectionality is that it is "not simply a terminological shift" but that the "move from universalism to multidirectionality has serious implications for the ethics and politics of memory."³¹ For it deconstructs the binary logic of universalism, and pries apart "the too-easy collapse of the transnational, the global, and the comparative into the universal." Parsing these tensions sensitively along multidirectional lines, Rothberg maintains, leads to a cosmopolitan and progressive position. "A more heterogeneous understanding of moral action" results, he claims, "that recognizes the importance of comparison and generalization while resisting too-easy universalization [which] may not produce

²⁹ Ibid., 89.

³⁰ Ibid., 96.

³¹ Ibid., 263.

a global moral code, but may produce the grounds for new transnational visions of justice and solidarity.”³²

As he develops these points, Rothberg offers a set of important new readings of classic texts, provocatively rethought around his thematic. But he also includes reflections on less well-known works, including interpretations of paintings like Boris Taslitzky’s *Riposte* and André Fougeron’s *Atlantic Civilization*; minor but nonetheless remarkable prose pieces like W. E. B. Du Bois’s “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto,” which “rethinks the color line from the ruins of Warsaw” (chapter 4); uncelebrated novels like André Schwarz-Bart’s *A Woman Named Solitude* discussed alongside contemporary Caribbean British novelist and travel writer Caryl Phillips (chapter 5); experimental films like the documentary *Chronicle of a Summer* (chapter 6) and *Caché* (chapter 9); as well as the documentary-style prose that serves as a form of “counterpublic witness” in Charlotte Delbo’s *Les belles lettres* (chapter 7).³³ This blurring of genres, national contexts, periods, and types of witness is in keeping with Rothberg’s “methodology of putting into question taken-for-granted assumptions about which fields and authors belong together and which do not.”³⁴ In thus linking the Holocaust and European colonialism, Rothberg carves a niche subfield that might be called “post-memory studies” located at the intersection of post-Holocaust and postcolonial studies.³⁵

Ultimately, *Multidirectional Memory* makes its theoretical points by establishing a pantheon of theorists and textual moments that suggest the arguments that Rothberg then develops. His work serves as a manifesto for others to add to the new archive that he has built to house post-memory studies. His chapter on Du Bois elegantly serves to illustrate the methodology. In 1949, Du Bois wrote his relatively unknown and brief article in *Jewish Life*, a Communist Party journal. It was about the utter devastation that he witnessed when he visited Warsaw, site of the iconic struggle of Jewish resistance, now a wasteland of ruin, Jewish life eviscerated. Through rescuing this source and elevating its significance, Rothberg is able to walk a line “across a series of overlapping spaces: that of cold war America, that of the Left and, in particular, the Jewish Left, and that of African American and African diaspora experience in an era of segregation at home and decolonization abroad.”³⁶

³² Ibid., 265.

³³ Ibid., 114.

³⁴ Ibid., 136.

³⁵ Marianne Hirsch first used the term “postmemory” in an unhyphenated form to discuss the specific relation of children to the traumatic events experienced by their parents. *Multidirectional Memory* significantly expands the contours of what might be termed “post-memory” in its hyphenated form.

³⁶ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 121.

Du Bois in exile from Jim Crow America testified to how the desolation of Warsaw forced him to rethink the color line, bearing witness to “legalized segregation as part of a shared logic of biopower.”³⁷ Du Bois’s account, according to Rothberg, was also attuned better than either Césaire’s or Arendt’s thought to the differences between Europe and America. Developing this contention, the Du Boisian category of “double consciousness” is then generalized by Rothberg, as no longer only a condition of African American life or even Jewish life in Europe. It becomes “a conceptual, discursive, and aesthetic structure through which the conditions of minority life are given shape in order to ground acts of resistance to the biopolitical order.”³⁸ From his close reading of this minor essay, then, Rothberg teases out the whole nexus of concerns he raises in *Multidirectional Memory*: “multiple categories and experiences [that] collide and coexist: histories of slavery, colonialism, and genocide; the politics of the cold war; extreme and everyday forms of violence; the marginal cultural identities of European Jews and American blacks; the aesthetics of exile and resistance.”³⁹ There is clearly a powerful ethical, political, and hermeneutic insight in such work.

But what are the epistemological limits of multidirectional memory? Rothberg acknowledges that his approach requires “a certain bracketing of empirical history.” If all of the comparisons Rothberg considers are based on “*imaginative* links between different histories and social groups” and “these *imaginative* links are the substance of multidirectional memory,” then one wonders if Rothberg has thrown out important epistemological criteria in the pursuit of the ethical and political questions he wants to raise.⁴⁰ His critique of Yehuda Bauer’s distinction between the Holocaust and the Armenian genocide, for instance, focuses on the binaries in Bauer’s analysis. Bauer maintains that what differentiates the two was the axis of rationality and pragmatism at work in the Armenian genocide as opposed to the “‘nonpragmatic and irrational’ ideology of National Socialist anti-Semitism as one of the things that led to ‘an unprecedented form of genocide.’” For Rothberg to suggest that “this instance presupposes European frameworks of evaluation—the Holocaust is unique based on modern European criteria of

³⁷ Ibid., 126.

³⁸ Ibid., 131.

³⁹ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18, emphasis added. These epistemological issues have, of course, been raised at great length in discussions of the Holocaust, perhaps most famously in some of the essays included in S. Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, MA, 1992). It should be noted that Rothberg is eminently aware of these problems, as is clear from N. Levi and M. Rothberg, eds., *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings* (New Brunswick, 2003); and M. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis, 2000). The issue of these epistemological considerations in the comparative frames that Rothberg urges in *Multidirectional Memory* is another problem, however.

rationality”—rings hollow. For surely what is unique and general in these two instances of genocide cannot be wholly settled on conceptual grounds. This points to an important set of epistemological considerations that might yet form the next conversational frame for post-memory studies, for it remains unclear what criterion of truth is brought to bear in parsing when multidirectional memory is valid and when it is an imaginative act that does not have enough substantive relation to experience to warrant linking different events or processes.⁴¹

For all the merits in Rothberg’s exploration of their points of analogy, moreover, some attention to the differences between racism and anti-Semitism should not be ignored. Léon Poliakov, the doyen of scholars of anti-Semitism and pioneering researcher of racism, suggested that the master tropes in these interlaced discourses indicated that they ultimately functioned differently. Perhaps the key antiblack racist motif across history is the “beast of burden,” for the work of racism has been primarily to justify the exploitation of labor, so blacks are bestialized. On the other hand, suggested Poliakov, the master trope of anti-Semitism is demonization, emerging from its origins in the theological category of evil, so Jews are claimed to be the minions of the devil. While these metaphors were bounced back and forth in racialized discourse, some further epistemological consideration of this divergence is warranted. To paraphrase Rothberg’s own critical question about Arendt, then, would be to ask a fundamental question of comparative history and multidirectional memory: “Does the attempt to go beyond Europe in providing a global frame for European history risk displacing” some epistemological criteria that need to be brought to bear on the links but also the disconnections between imperialism and the Holocaust?⁴²

To raise these issues is merely to insist on the obvious point that multidirectional memory must be explored multidirectionally, considering both similarity and difference, singularity and generalizability. Nested therein one finds the complex of concerns raised by these works about the individual and the collective, the alternate but related modes of racialization and paths of violence experienced by Jews and blacks, and the contextual specificities but also the entangled histories of the Holocaust and decolonization. Sartre, like the Marathon man, ran with the message of these intertwined issues across the twentieth century, theorizing their connections, but not always as satisfactorily as their disaggregations. He died before he was done. But his unfinished project is also ours.

⁴¹ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 49–50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 64.