



CHICAGO JOURNALS



---

Michael Rothberg. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*.

*Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* by Michael Rothberg

Review by: Harold Marcuse

*The American Historical Review*, Vol. 117, No. 3 (June 2012), pp. 820-821

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [American Historical Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/ahr.117.3.820a>

Accessed: 25/06/2012 14:48

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*The University of Chicago Press and American Historical Association are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to The American Historical Review.*

<http://www.jstor.org>

ditions of (im)possibility.” His narrative form is satire—historians caught in the changing conditions of their time—even where the subject of that narrative itself represents the world as progressive and romantic (historiography), or as fallen and therefore in need of a fundamentalist return to the beginning (memory). Above all, no matter how bleak things may look for the historical practice, Klein has a liberal’s cautious hope for the future, since the one constant is change: “there will be new words.”

MARK DAY  
*Independent Scholar*

PERO GAGLO DAGBOVIE. *African American History Reconsidered*. (The New Black Studies Series.) Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 2010. Pp. xviii, 255. Cloth \$75.00, paper \$25.00.

In this book, Pero Gaglo Dagbovie seeks to add a new paradigm that “focuses on the role, function, and meaning of African American history over time” (p. 11) to a “new black history,” while taking a fresh look at a number of longstanding issues and problems such as the scholarship of teaching and learning that are essential to such a study. In search of a new black intellectual history, Dagbovie illustrates the popular and powerful notion articulated by the late John Hope Franklin: “every generation writes its own history.” Divided into six chapters, the book offers a refreshing look at African American history from a number of different perspectives, each in its own way central to the author’s purpose. For example, Dagbovie takes on the challenging task of unpacking the question, “What is African American history?” and all of the complexities that go along with such an intellectual undertaking.

These issues, of course, have real implications for the future study of African American history. In an especially insightful chapter on approaches to teaching and learning, Dagbovie observes that “African Americanists have not made many noticeable contributions, in terms of publications, to the important field of historical scholarship on teaching and learning” (p. 76). While I agree in the formal sense of scholarship, one could argue that organizations such as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History continue the enterprise started by Carter G. Woodson—whom Dagbovie treats extensively in this volume—that had at its center issues of teaching and learning.

This observation is important, for as Dagbovie makes clear in an equally illuminating chapter entitled “‘Ample Proof of This May Be Found’: Early Black Women Historians,” African American female educators played a crucial role in both the creation and dissemination of African American history. In the process, Dagbovie explores the important, if often undocumented, contributions of African American female teachers, historians, and bibliophiles. Pointing to a deep intellectual tradition among black women educators, Dagbovie artfully chronicles the missionary zeal

and deep understanding of the political uses of the past many of these women exhibited in their work. Although not always professionally trained, black female novelists such as Frances Harper used history as a backdrop to advance racial uplift and inspire activism. Even more illuminating is the discussion of Progressive-era black women historians like Washington, D.C. school teacher Laura Eliza Wilkes, who published a monograph in 1919 exploring the military service of African Americans in the nation’s early wars but found herself facing perceived sexism.

Dagbovie’s treatment of the circumstances surrounding the discovery of an unpublished manuscript by Woodson demonstrates one of the greatest strengths of the book: the author’s willingness to wrestle with the complex motivations and obstacles that have confronted and in many ways continue to confront historians of African descent. The desire to produce uplifting historical accounts while adhering to the academy’s demand for scholarly detachment is a study in W. E. B. Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness. Dagbovie reminds the reader that black scholars have had to balance “their radicalism with scientific scholarship and objectivity as well as their self-imposed social responsibility (as well that imposed by historical context) of representing and defending the masses of their people” (p. 79).

Throughout the book, Dagbovie illuminates two of the questions associated with African American history that go back to its mainstreaming in the 1980s: who owns black history, and who has a right to record and interpret it? In the process, he acknowledges some of the important challenges that go along with evaluating the historic mission and purpose of African American history as defined by early pioneers like Woodson, including how to make it relevant to the lives of the new “millennial” generation often chided for its lack of historical consciousness. In the final chapter, for example, Dagbovie explores the use of genocide as a framework for teaching African American history. At the same time, his re-examination of the literature on the polarizing figure of Booker T. Washington speaks to a longstanding debate among scholars about the virtues and failings of the so-called “Wizard of Tuskegee.”

Such formulations and questions make the book a highly informative and engaging read. Rich and concise, it is praiseworthy scholarship and highly recommended.

YOHURU WILLIAMS  
*Fairfield University*

MICHAEL ROTHBERG. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. (Cultural Memory in the Present.) Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press. 2009. Pp. xvii, 379. Cloth \$70.00, paper \$24.95.

This book’s fundamental insight is extremely important: that in many cases memory is not a zero-sum endeavor in which public attention to one historical event

necessarily detracts from public remembrance of other historical events. Rather, there can be synergies in which awareness of one event increases attentiveness to other, often only remotely related events. Michael Rothberg lays this out clearly and convincingly in the introductory chapter, which should be required reading for seminars on memory. The remaining eight chapters proceed roughly chronologically, focusing on books as diverse as Hannah Arendt's seminal *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and Didier Daeninckx's detective novel *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1984), articles such as W. E. B. Du Bois's "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto" (1952) and Marguerite Duras's "Les deux ghettos" (1961), and films as varied as the pioneering cinéma-vérité *Chronique d'un été* (1961) and Michael Hanecke's tense thriller *Caché* (2005). Common to all is that they combine references to the Holocaust with analyses of colonialism, especially France's 1954–1962 war against Algerian independence.

This book resembles an anthology of essays, and it would transcend the limits of this review to attempt to discuss all of the eighteen or so works analyzed in depth, a few of which do little to advance the book's main theses or hinge on tenuous connections. A case in point for the latter would be Rothberg's link between *Caché* and the 1997 trial of Maurice Papon. As a regional police inspector in Vichy France Papon supervised the deportation of 1,600 Jewish children. Later, as chief of police in Paris, he ordered the October 17, 1961 massacre of Algerian protestors, during which the fictional parents of the Algerian protagonist in *Caché* were killed, providing the historical impulse for the film. As Rothberg demonstrates, memories connect both backward and forward in time, in this case from the 2005 film to the 1961 massacre, to the 1997 trial to the 1942 deportations; the latter two, if my viewing did not overlook them, are wholly absent from the film, while the 1961 massacre is merely implicit. Whether Hanecke himself made the Holocaust connection, or a contemporary French audience would have done so, is unclear. In any case, such bidirectional movements across time are combined with lateral connections between cultures to produce memory's "multidirectionality."

Rothberg's exegesis of these lateral connections begins with Arendt's "boomerang effect" linking European imperialism and Nazi genocide, and with Aimé Césaire's "*choc en retour*" in his booklet *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950). These analyses ultimately lead to the second main argument of the book: that memory is entering a "transnational age" in which Holocaust studies are experiencing a "colonial turn." Publications such as those collected in A. Dirk Moses, editor, *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (2008), are evidence of this phenomenon (p. 102). Rothberg's third argument emerges in the later chapters of the book: namely, that multidirectional memory operates across generations, with children linking their parents' experiences multidirectionally to other historical traumas.

Instead of going into greater detail about Rothberg's rich case studies—his examinations of André Schwarz-Bart, Charlotte Delbo, and Duras are especially cogent—I would like to extend his core insight about the potential for synergies between memories instead of competition. When does one apply and not the other? In other words, what determines whether one culturally and temporally distinct memory serves as a "screen memory" blocking out another, or whether a multidirectional synergy will occur (pp. 12–16)? The key here, to borrow a theoretical framework from Jürgen Habermas, might be that in a mindset of conventional morality where inflexible rules govern the realm of public recollection, memories are indeed competitive. In a realm of public discourse governed by postconventional, relativistic morality, however, memories can reinforce each other. Thus while the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. might have begun as a screen memory distracting from memories of genocide and slavery, it has ultimately fostered the creation of a National Museum of the American Indian and a National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Rothberg's epilogue describes the moment of a shift between memory paradigms when both exist side by side: the competitive model pitting victims against each other, and a multidirectional model in which "divergent memories converge," thereby opening up new opportunities (p. 311). He applies this both to the memories exhibited on the U.S. National Mall and to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. In the latter Rothberg shows how Israeli historian Benny Morris oscillates between conventional and postconventional moral paradigms in his application of Holocaust parallels to the contemporary situations of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Rothberg's insightful definition and explications of multidirectional memory based on the non-competitive, multivalent connections between Holocaust and colonial memories offers an important analytical tool that will open up productive lines of inquiry and understanding in the field of memory studies.

HAROLD MARCUSE  
University of California,  
Santa Barbara

DOMINIC SACHSENMAIER. *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Connected World*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2011. Pp. vii, 331. Cloth \$90.00, paper \$32.99.

As is the case presently with all fields of learning, the practice of history is increasingly subject to the contradictory impulses of global modernity. The immediate objective of this book is to take stock of the state of "global history" in three societies: the United States, Germany, and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Its broader ambition is "to bring back to the debating table some weighty problems surrounding the nature of historiography as a sociological phenomenon and epistemological endeavor" (p. 6). This aim reflects a new