

# Memory in action: Reflections on multidirectionality's possibilities in the classroom

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/mss](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mss)**Nicolaas P Barr**

University of Washington, USA

**Jazmine Contreras**

Maybeck High School, USA

**Johanna Mellis**

Ursinus College, USA

## Abstract

Our essay examines the use of multidirectional memory in three different classrooms and institutions. It reflects on the possibilities and challenges of a multidirectional framework for Europeanists seeking to teach students how to identify and/or commemorate historical linkages between minoritized groups, encourage students to develop bonds of solidarity among themselves, and diversify and globalize their syllabi. Reading authors such as W.E.B Du Bois, Amié Césaire, and William Gardener Smith through a multidirectional lens helped students place events such as the Holocaust, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Algerian Revolution in conversation with one another while staying attuned to the spaces between particularist and universalist readings of the past. Discussing media sources such as films *La Haine* and *Battle of Algiers* within this larger multidirectional context give students a frame with which to imagine alternative trajectories of memory and solidarity in Europe. Finally, by applying their understanding of multidirectional memory to a real-life scenario in a commemorative proposal, students attempt to grasp the never-finished complexities of creating liberatory, solidarity-based historical commemorations. We argue that the concept of multidirectional memory helps students to develop a stronger sense of investment in learning about the complex historical legacies of persecution of violence and to engage more critically with the competitive memory frameworks that remain dominant in contemporary political discourse about antisemitism and racism.

## Keywords

anti-racism, colonialism, genocide, multidirectional memory, pedagogy

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## Corresponding author:

Jazmine Contreras, Maybeck High School, 2727 College Avenue, Berkeley, CA 9470, USA.

Email: [jazmine681@gmail.com](mailto:jazmine681@gmail.com)

## Introduction

Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory is well known among scholars as an alternative method for conceptualizing the relationship among memory cultures in the aftermath of the Holocaust. But what does it have to offer teachers and undergraduate students of these topics, particularly in the discipline of history? This essay examines the use of multidirectional memory in three different classrooms and institutions and reflects on the possibilities and challenges of a multidirectional framework for Europeanists seeking to make visible past–present connections, diversify and globalize their syllabi, and illustrate the importance of cross-communal solidarity against colonial and other forms of violence.

The ideas presented here were developed not only through individual engagement with the concepts and source materials analyzed in Rothberg's book, but also through ongoing conversations among three early career faculty, working at three different institutions, and with different areas of scholarly expertise. We first came together as a virtual reading group for *Multidirectional Memory* (Rothberg, 2009) in 2021, each seeking to bring these historical topics into careful relation with urgent contemporary social and political problems—most especially the mainstreaming of the global far right. Through our shared engagement with the book, we developed ideas for undergraduate syllabi, coursework, and pedagogy that aim to facilitate the relational approach to historical memory that Rothberg's intellectual protagonists model.

At Goucher, a small liberal arts college in Baltimore, Jazmine Contreras incorporates multidirectional memory into courses on Holocaust memory, comparative genocide, and global history. At the University of Washington-Seattle, Nicolaas P. Barr teaches a humanities course focused on theorizations of antisemitism, racism, and modern mass violence. As a socio-cultural historian of Central-Eastern Europe teaching at a similar institution to Contreras—Ursinus College—Johanna Mellis infuses elements of multidirectional memory into her classes related to world history, European nationalism and memory, colonialism, and authoritarianism. Despite these differences in institutional context and curricular approach, each of us has found multidirectional memory to be a powerful tool for complicating narratives of European and Holocaust history, and for bringing global resistance movements into conversation with one another in a way that intellectually challenges but, ultimately, inspires students.

## Pedagogies of multidirectional memory

The number of debates resulting from Rothberg's work (Moses, 2021), both within the academic and public context, points to the importance of the term in teasing out the historical dimensions of memory activism and the contemporary pathways of memory. Less discussed, is the utility of multidirectional memory as a pedagogical tool. It is only in the past few years that scholars have zeroed in on the potential of multidirectional memory in the classroom. Articles and book chapters detailing the uses of multidirectional memory have explored the relationship between multidirectional memory and intergenerational memory, its impact on decolonial thinking, and the practical uses of multidirectional memory to educational memory work in Germany (Arnold and Bischoff, 2023; Hansen, 2020; Smith and Thorson, 2019). Each of these pieces takes seriously Rothberg's (2009) emphasis on multidirectional memory as, “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing as productive and not private” (p. 3). Placing historical events and moments in conversation with one another, while staying attuned to their particularities, produces new perspectives and possibilities within the classroom. Our essay details these possibilities in the hopes of offering insights into the power of multidirectional memory to shape the teaching of history.

## Paris, 1961/1995: reading victimhood and complicity in *The Stone Face* and *La Haine*

At the heart of Rothberg's (2009) concept of multidirectional memory is a rejection of the competitive memory model and those discourses which feed into a hierarchy of victimhood. In teaching mass violence, decolonization, or comparative genocide, students are asked to wrestle with multiple victimhood(s) and reflect on the historical construction of such categories as victim, perpetrator, and bystander. Using multidirectional memory as a frame for this study emphasizes the malleability of these categories and reveals the importance of analyzing individual agency alongside the larger historical conditions. In the course *Race, Empire, and Citizenship in the Global 20th Century*, students trace the construction of European and Japanese empire and the development of settler-colonialism from the late-nineteenth century through to movements for decolonization in the twentieth. Following Rothberg's focus on the Algerian Revolution, the module on decolonization features Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (first published in 1950) and William Gardner Smith's 1963 novel *The Stone Face*. At the end of the module, students also watch the 1995 French film, *La Haine*.

Césaire's *Discourse* serves as both an accessible and foundational text for undergraduate students seeking to understand the relationship between colonialism and the Holocaust and the violence inherent in the project of settler-colonialism. As Rothberg (2009) writes, "Césaire's focus on the shock of colonialism's return to the metropole attempts to bring together different scenes of violence and trauma without confusing perpetrators and victims" (p. 41). His central argument about the "boomerang effect" teases out the process by which European colonizers' dehumanization of the other results in their own transformation into an animal (Césaire, 2000). Césaire's description of colonized societies also underscores the vitality of these communities and refuses the narrative of the European civilizing mission. While he points out Césaire's, "ambivalence about Jewish difference" (Rothberg, 2009: 94) *Discourse* serves as a bridge between teaching the Holocaust and decolonization. Rather than teaching decolonization as a postwar phenomenon, which also risks ignoring earlier moments of resistance, Césaire's essay emphasizes the ongoing brutalization of man.

Smith's *The Stone Face* continues this theme and raises important questions about identity, victimhood, and complicity. Reading the fictional account of Simeon, an African American man who hopes to find refuge in Paris from racism and violence in the United States, introduces students to the experiences and memories of a Holocaust survivor, Black Americans, and Muslim Algerians. While Rothberg (2009) notes that each section in the book ("The Fugitive," "The White Man," and "The Brother") documents the evolution of Simeon's, "move from victimization to complicity to solidarity" (p. 271), the inclusion of multiple character arcs also serves to blur the boundaries between the three categories. Through seeing antisemitism, racism, and Islamophobia operating in tandem in Paris, Simeon slowly begins to understand that the "stone face" is not limited to the perpetrator of anti-Black racism. Simeon's reflection on his own complicity within the existing colonial system in France while he also wrestles with the trauma and violence of Jim Crow America provides a space for students to understand how positionality functions historically. His move from complicity to solidarity occurs at the end of the book when he intervenes in a police beating of an Algerian woman and her child on 17 October 1961, the night of the infamous Paris massacre. Before Simeon acts, he realizes that he too feels the blows of the club and this sensation propels him forward. Waking up in an overcrowded stadium, which incidentally mirrors the conditions inside the Vélodrome d'Hiver during the roundup of Jews in July 1942, solidifies his dedication to fighting against oppressive systems. Simeon's ability to leave the stadium and his refusal to

agree to not intervene in French politics signals the malleability of victimhood and models how empathy for the other can develop the bonds of solidarity.

In order to evaluate students' understanding of the concept of multidirectional memory, they are asked to write a paper discussing multidirectional linkages within *The Stone Face* and the film *La Haine* (1995) while drawing on Césaire's *Discourse*. The film examines the ongoing effects of colonialism and the contours of modern French racism in an immigrant, working-class banlieue. The three main characters, Vinz, Hubert, and Saïd wrestle with their own response to the police beating and arrest of their friend Abdel, a young Arab man. By chronicling the boundaries dictated by their socioeconomic and ethnic and racial status, the violence inherent in the "postcolonial" city is laid bare. In their analysis papers, many students remark on a scene in which the police chase after the three men, but only Vinz, who is Jewish, escapes arrest. Hubert, an Afro-French man and Saïd, an Arab man, are held in a police station and beaten by two officers, while a rookie officer looks on. For students, the scene evokes submission of the colonized individual to the parameters of the colonial order, while also offering a meditation on victimhood and complicity. Many remarked on the parallels between this scene and Simeon's intervention and read the concept of the "stone face" into *La Haine*. Placing the novel and film in conversation with one another allows for a deeper reading of victimhood and complicity in action and underscores for students the impossibility of reading post-1945 Europe as cleansed of genocidal impulses.

### **When is never again? Conceptualizing violence and its afterlives**

"The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again," the German-Jewish philosopher Theodor W. Adorno (2005: 191) said in a 1966 West German radio address, subsequently published as "Education After Auschwitz". Yet, Adorno himself was already aware that when reduced to the slogan of "never again," this imperative, still ubiquitous in Holocaust education, risks becoming an empty platitude. It is not surprising that when students in our classes explain why learning about the Holocaust is important, their initial conclusions fall back on exactly this phrase: we must learn its lessons so that nothing like it ever happens again.

In the course "Violence and Contemporary Thought: Antisemitism, Racism, and Historical Memory After Auschwitz," students begin to complicate this well-intended moral lesson by grappling with the afterlives of colonial violence. The framework of multidirectional memory allows us to ask with our students: never again for whom? As discussed earlier, if Nazism is already the "boomerang effect" of colonial violence, then it becomes difficult to maintain the sense of absolute historical uniqueness of the Holocaust. One of the benefits of bringing the Holocaust into direct conversation with colonial violence through Césaire's essay is to challenge the impulse to bracket the Holocaust spatially, as a strictly European phenomenon (Boum and Berber, 2023), and temporally, as beginning with the Nazi dictatorship and ending in 1945, thereby inaugurating the "post-war" era.

Césaire's refusal to isolate the violence of Nazi Germany from wider forms of European racial domination and colonial violence in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Americas—and carried out by the same imperial states that defeated the Axis—forces students to question why the Holocaust itself is so often treated as a strictly intra-European phenomenon. What does it mean, for example, that the Netherlands, after liberation from 5 years of Nazi occupation, fought violently to maintain its colonial domination and suppress Indonesian independence, or in the following decade, the French in Algeria? From this perspective, students begin to understand that the genocidal violence of the Shoah was indeed distinctive in its totalizing ambition, but also emerged and operated within a continuum of ongoing racialized colonial violence. This more global perspective, moreover, challenges the traditional division of history curricula into regional fields, such as

European history—the disciplinary field in which we ourselves were trained and taught to reproduce as historians.

Situating “postwar Europe” in this wider geographical context also has important implications for how students think about the afterlives of mass violence. Although Rothberg’s (2009: 12–16) book uses theoretical concepts that may be just above the reach of many undergraduates, such as Sigmund Freud’s theory of screen memories, our students are already thinking about the legacies of historical violence in contemporary US society. Students are actively engaged in thinking about issues such as communal trauma and structural forms of oppression in the US context, but as Rothberg notes (2009: 10), the “never again” approach has the paradoxical effect of separating out the Holocaust from other forms of violence, and antisemitism from racism. Teaching multidirectional memory, by contrast, can facilitate nuanced but meaningful connections between the past and the present.

What is perhaps most compelling about approaching these topics through this framework is that rather than working strictly by way of historical analogy, which risks flattening historical differences and subject positions, students can follow paths of multidirectional thinking that are mapped out historically in Rothberg’s book. W.E.B. Du Bois’ (1996) 1952 essay on “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto” to give a key example, demonstrates how productive his encounters with European antisemitism and the destruction of the Shoah were for expanding his own thinking about the structure of “the color line.” While the conjuncture of postwar peace with ongoing colonial violence presents a challenge to the self-flattering narrative of European redemption through the Holocaust with which many students enter the class, it is powerful for students to see how contemporaneous figures, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, forged analytical and political connections to other struggles against oppression. To give a Jewish American example, in the poem “Bashert” (1971), the Yiddishist and poet Irena Klepfisz (2022) conjures her own birth and escape from the Warsaw Ghetto, where her father was killed in the Uprising, in confronting the violent socioeconomic structures of anti-Black racism in 1960s Chicago—“the Holocaust without smoke” (p. 152), as she shockingly puts it. In a contemporary moment when mainstream political and cultural narratives frequently pit antisemitism against other forms of racism in precisely the competitive, zero-sum form that Rothberg warns against, teaching with a multidirectional memory approach models for students the opportunities and challenges of developing solidarity across difference.

## **Addressing contemporary racisms: teaching expansive commemorative culture and solidarity**

Even as individuals such as Simeon and Klepfisz practiced the art of multidirectional memory and solidarity to great effect, research illustrates how state and institutional responses to the Holocaust often serve to perpetuate competitive victimhood in the service of outright nationalism. Connecting historical analyses of post-1945 Europe and global colonialism to contemporary racisms thus illustrates just how state approaches to commemoration continue to fall short today of “never again,” especially in Germany. In the course “Martyrs, Victims, and Perpetrators: Nationalism and Memory in Modern European History,” teaching anthropologist Damani Partridge’s (2010) article shows the dire, exclusionary consequences when a state explicitly denies the opportunity for multidirectional memory in its attempted commemorative practices. In “Holocaust *Mahnmal* (Memorial): Monumental Memory amidst Contemporary Race,” Partridge (2010: 822) analyzes his experiences accompanying German government-funded “democratic education” trips to Holocaust sites for right-wing males and “immigrant” (Turkish-, and Palestinian-Germans) youths. The programs did not attempt to invite Turkish- and Palestinian-Germans to connect historical German

antisemitism with the contemporary racisms they endure, effectively closing off “never again” for these minoritized communities. Rather, the guide disciplined students’ behavior by admonishing them for striking a hip-hop pose for pictures (Partridge, 2010: 823). The liaison for the national anti-racist foundation that organized the trip threatened to not take them to the next site (Partridge, 2010: 824). Their actions align with Partridge’s (2010: 821) belief that the teachers were more willing to sympathize with “White” German students visibly identifying with skinheads than “Turkish-” or “Arab-German” students. Partridge’s many examples show how Germany’s nationalist, exclusionary Holocaust memory culture attempts to surveil and discipline a certain kind of “Germanness” onto non-white Germans. Instead of centering genuine anti-racism, Germany’s national identity-via-memorialization is tied to “atoning” and “getting over” its Holocaust crimes through commemoration (Partridge, 2010: 832, 834). As Partridge (2010) explains, “the implicit call for atonement as a central rubric of a post-racist European future is embedded in an inability to see, and refusal to recognize contemporary racisms as central to the logic of the nation-state and Europe” (p. 835). He wonders, “When German teachers insist on a certain form of memory, are they reproducing nationalist memory and securing national sovereignty?” (Partridge, 2010: 841).

Students grapple with Partridge’s argument and ask in class: “How can the memory culture about a genocide be nationalist and exclusionary? I thought the Germans had done the best job remembering their atrocities?” (Neiman and Younes, 2021). His work forces us to confront our prior knowledge and question the intent and impact of commemorative practices. It moreover helps set us up for the course’s final project: a Commemorative Proposal, where students propose to commemorate the history of an excluded, minoritized community in European history.

The Commemorative Proposal consists of three parts: the historical conditions of the community vis-à-vis the majority, the justification for the community’s commemoration, and the commemorative idea itself. The complex assignment tasks students with applying their course skills to a real-world scenario in a creative way and allows them to research a community’s history that we did not cover in class. Students express struggles with creating the “right” commemorative idea. After referring them back to multidirectional memory’s careful contextualization, students are reminded of Partridge’s stated need for comparison to contemporary racisms as the goal, and not perfection (which can slide into atonement). Over the years, students’ proposals have ranged from a British children’s home commemorating the World War II-era evacuation of children, a gitano festival in Spain, to a hospital for the disabled to commemorate the victims of the Nazis’ T4 Program. The opportunity to express their creativity, conduct research and develop their own ideas, all with serious real world-implications, makes for a meaningful learning experience that has them ruminating on multidirectional memory’s possibilities long after the semester ends (Fink, 2013).

## Conclusion

As educators, we encourage students to dig deeply into understanding how structural systems of power and oppression are created and sustained historically, and see their relation to our present conditions—including their own. Multidirectional memory pushes students to understand what many people grasped in their own historical times and today too: how we must compare and make connections about how colonial and other forms of discriminatory rule oppressed people in order to develop strategies of resistance, community, and solidarity. Because empires and nation-states continue to borrow strategies from one another and mold them to fit their local conditions, it makes sense that marginalized communities would seek to identify such patterns and find empowerment in careful comparisons and linkages with other people. Yet teaching multidirectional memory can be incredibly challenging. Students often come into our courses believing in a hierarchy of suffering,



with the Holocaust as the singular most devastating event in world history that is disconnected from earlier and ongoing histories of global colonialism and genocide. Another challenge lies in trying to strike a balance with them between universalist and particularist readings of the past to ensure that we can pursue comparisons with nuance and to develop linkages and solidarity across groups. This work is painstaking as it requires constant negotiation and attention to ever-shifting conditions that influence how we view the past. The never-finished conditions can prove frustrating for students; their question, “When will we know when we have it right?” is a complicated one with no easy answers. It belies one of the biggest challenges: there is no end point to racism and other forms of structural discrimination, and there never will be. Yet just as people are constantly adjusting their racism and other forms of discrimination to maintain their power, marginalized communities are always refining their strategies in response.

In the years since the COVID pandemic began and amid white supremacy and transnational fascism resurging globally, it is crucial for people in and beyond minoritized communities to develop connections and solidarity with one another to develop modes of resistance. Ongoing global colonialism seeks to atomize or separate communities and put them in competition with one another, to avoid mass collective resistance. Although there are many ways to encourage undergraduates to develop bonds of solidarity among themselves and others in society, the teaching of multidirectional memory provides us with a tool to do such work in a deeply historical and interdisciplinary way. This pedagogy simultaneously pushes us to expand what European history “is” historically beyond white Christians. It therefore also helps us invite minoritized students’ experiences in the classroom by reaffirming their experiences in relation to these histories, too.

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### Author biographies

Nicolaas P Barr teaches in the Comparative History of Ideas Department and Jewish Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. He is the translator of Tofik Dibi's *Djinn* (SUNY Press, 2021).

Jazmine Contreras is a Humanities teacher at the Maybeck School in Berkeley, California. Her research examines contemporary memory of the Second World War and Holocaust in the Netherlands. Her second project analyzes the Dutch far right's use of memory politics to distort the Holocaust.

Johanna Mellis is an Assistant Professor of History at Ursinus College teaching courses on modern World and European history, colonialism, the Cold War, sport history, memory, and more. She is a cohost of the *End of Sport* podcast and has (co)authored pieces for the *Guardian*, *Time*, the *Washington Post*, and more. She is working on a book about how Hungarian sportspeople navigated the overlapping spheres of state socialism and Western cultural imperialism, tentatively titled *Changing the Global Game: Hungarian Sportspeople and International Sport during the Cold War*.