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Lived multidirectionality: “*Historikerstreit 2.0*” and the politics of Holocaust memory

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mss**Michael Rothberg**

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Abstract

This essay assesses the acrimonious debates about Holocaust memory that took place in Germany in 2020–2021 and that have come to be known as *Historikerstreit 2.0*. These debates call up older controversies, especially the 1986 *Historikerstreit* (Historians’ Debate) in which Jürgen Habermas took on conservative historians who sought to relativize the Nazi genocide. The *Historikerstreit* concerned the relation between Nazi and Stalinist crimes and the question of German responsibility for the Holocaust; today’s controversies involve instead the relation between colonialism and the Holocaust and racism and antisemitism as well as the ongoing crisis in Israel/Palestine. As the current debates reveal, the dominant Holocaust memory regime in Germany is based on an absolutist understanding of the Holocaust’s uniqueness and a rejection of multidirectional approaches to the genocide. While that memory regime represented a major societal accomplishment of the 1980s and 1990s, it has reached its limits in Germany’s “postmigrant” present. Yet, as an example of migrant engagement with the Holocaust illustrates, German society already includes alternative practices of memory that could transform the German model of coming to terms with the past in productive ways.

Keywords

antisemitism, colonialism, comparison, Israel/Palestine, migration, multidirectional memory, racism, Syrian civil war

The return of the *Historikerstreit*

In early summer 2020, the philosopher Susan Neiman started planning a 35th anniversary panel on the *Historikerstreit*—the 1986 German Historians’ Debate—with Michael Wildt, a scholar of Nazi Germany. According to Neiman, they both presumed that the planned evening roundtable would be of relatively limited interest, since the famous 1986 debate about the relation of Nazi and Stalinist crimes “barely remained present” in public consciousness. Yet, by the time the event took place in October 2021 at the Einstein Forum, the Potsdam-based research institute directed by Neiman, the *Historikerstreit* had once again become an obsessive concern of the cultural pages of major German newspapers. The Einstein Forum event marking its anniversary ended up taking place within a

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widespread revival of the kinds of acrimonious arguments that characterized the original debate; by then, the new debate had also come to be known as *Historikerstreit 2.0*. Instead of a modest roundtable reflecting on the past, “*Historiker streiten*” (“Historians argue”), as Neiman and Wildt named their event, became a highly visible, day-long conference dedicated predominantly to the politics of memory in the present.¹

In the *Historikerstreit* of 1986, the left-liberal philosopher Jürgen Habermas called conservative German historians to account for what he saw as their dangerous relativization of National Socialism, the Holocaust, and German responsibility for Nazi crimes.² At a moment when Christian Democratic chancellor Helmut Kohl was seeking to “normalize” West Germany’s position in global politics, Habermas saw such prominent intellectuals as Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber attempting to rehabilitate a “positive” national identity by evading the gravity of the Holocaust through politically tendentious comparisons. Nolte, for instance, famously claimed that the perpetration of the Nazi genocide merely imitated Stalinist crimes and served as a preemptive strike against what would surely be a barbaric “‘Asiatic’ deed” committed by the Soviets against the German people (Nolte in Knowlton, 1993: 22). Less explicitly apologetic than Nolte’s contributions, Hillgruber’s 1986 book *Zweierlei Untergang* (“Two Kinds of Ruin”) nevertheless creates a spurious parallel between non-Jewish German suffering at the hands of the advancing Red Army and the catastrophe of the Holocaust (termed, euphemistically, “the end of European Jewry” in the subtitle of his book). He thus “balances” a somewhat perfunctory account of German responsibility for genocide with an emotionally charged narrative of German victimhood.³

Habermas did not vanquish Holocaust relativization once and for all, but his intervention in the *Historikerstreit* was nevertheless largely successful and highly consequential. With the end of the Cold War and the unification of Germany taking place just a few years later, the position articulated by Habermas—grounded in an insistence on the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the untranscendable nature of German responsibility for the genocide—would become central to the official memory regime of the new Germany. With the 2005 opening of the vigorously debated Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in the center of the capital city, Berlin, the “unique” place of the Holocaust in Germany’s official public memory found a monumental symbolic form.

The memorial landscape is naturally more complicated than that official perspective suggests. Controversies about National Socialism and the Holocaust continued into the post-unification period and have never really abated. Indeed, the presence of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the German parliament since 2017 and the rise of conspiracy-driven anti-vax politics in the age of COVID-19 suggest the persistent popularity of a relativizing approach to the Holocaust among a significant minority of the population. Meanwhile, scholars have shown that private and familial memories of the era follow a logic that diverges from public memory and rarely involves substantive transmission of memories of Jewish victimization and German complicity. *Opa war kein Nazi* (“Grandpa Was Not a Nazi”) is the title of a social psychological study that demonstrates how frequently third-generation post-Holocaust Germans turn their grandparents’ stories of complicity with the Nazi regime into stories of innocence or even resistance to Nazism (Welzer et al., 2002).

Yet, although controversy about the representation and memory of the Holocaust has continued over the decades since the *Historikerstreit*, the years since 2020 have seen a particularly intensive return of some of the central questions at stake in the earlier debates, as the anecdote about Neiman and Wildt’s conference illustrates. *Historikerstreit 2.0*—a term often evoked but rarely affirmed by any of the parties involved—names not a single controversy, but a cycle of debates that focuses on Germany yet involves international interlocutors and transnational stakes. While the debates of the 1980s and 2020s both focus on the question of the Holocaust’s uniqueness and comparability, the terms in which that question is adjudicated have changed. The *Historikerstreit* of 1986 turned on

the relation between Nazi and Stalinist crimes and the question of German responsibility for the Holocaust; today's controversies involve instead the relation between colonialism and the Holocaust and between racism and antisemitism as well as the ongoing crisis in Israel/Palestine. In the 1980s, the progressive position associated with Habermas involved principled opposition to relativizing comparisons made by conservative historians. Today, however, the political valence of comparison in intellectual debates has shifted: comparative approaches to the Holocaust are put forward by scholars on the left, while the dominant memory regime continues to rest on an absolutist understanding of the Holocaust's uniqueness and a rejection of approaches to the Nazi genocide of the Jews that place it in relation to other histories or memories. While that dominant memory regime represents a significant accomplishment of the 1980s and 1990s by grassroots activists as well as major thinkers like Habermas, the insistence on the absolute character of the Holocaust's uniqueness and the disciplinary policing of relational approaches to the genocide have a different resonance in Germany's "postmigrant" present where an ever-more diverse population confronts a powerfully univocal memory culture. The productive "self-doubt" that characterized German memory culture in its earlier stages has given way to a creeping dogmatism and to feelings of what the German journalist Mohamed Amjahid calls "*Erinnerungsüberlegenheit*" ("memory superiority") (Amjahid, 2021).⁴ Yet, at the same time—as I will argue, using an example of migrant engagement with the Holocaust—German society already possesses more relational practices of memory that have the potential to transform the German model of coming to terms with the past in productive ways.

In the opening sections, I recount the recent debates about the uniqueness and comparability of the Holocaust, debates in which I have been personally involved, and tease out their stakes. I then turn to an example from what Yasemin Yildiz and I call the "migrant archives of Holocaust remembrance" in contemporary Germany in order to suggest the possibility of alternative ways of conceptualizing the relations between different histories and memories of violence (Rothberg and Yildiz, 2011, forthcoming). My example in this section—a short text by the journalist and activist Wafa Mustafa—turns in significant ways on the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the very symbol of the dominant memory regime. Mustafa explicitly uses the site of the memorial to link the Holocaust with other histories of violence in a provocative but non-relativizing way.

The advances of postcolonial and decolonial activism and knowledge production, both in Germany and globally, entail that there is less and less legitimate space left for denial of colonialism's legacies. A great deal of controversy does remain, however—especially in Germany—about how to assess the demands those legacies make on the present and how to coordinate their integration into current frameworks of remembering and coming to terms with the past. In my discussion of Wafa Mustafa, I focus not on colonial legacies per se, but rather on the way that dissonant narratives of migration and contemporary political conflict challenge the truisms of German memory culture. Migrant memories of the Holocaust can serve as an inspiration for contesting the orthodoxies of the dominant memory regime, not in order to relativize the Holocaust or the demands it continues to make on Germans—and on all of us—but rather to experiment with new ways of remembering and taking responsibility for multiple forms of political violence.

A second *Historikerstreit*?

Around the time that Neiman and Wildt began contemplating their commemorative event on the *Historikerstreit*, a new round of controversy had already erupted. Indeed, the conditions for controversy had been established by various factors, including the non-binding but policy-guiding 2019 resolution of the German Bundestag condemning the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS) as intrinsically antisemitic. Unlikely targets of antisemitism

accusations appeared in its immediate wake, including Peter Schäfer, the director of the Jewish Museum Berlin and an internationally renowned Jewish studies scholar, who was forced to resign after the museum's twitter account shared an article about Jewish scholars opposed to the BDS resolution (see Deutsche Welle, 2019). The cycle of debate I focus on here began the following year and shows the continuing fallout of the BDS resolution, which has provided legitimacy for trumped-up charges of antisemitism.

On 23 March 2020, a regional German politician from the liberal Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) sent an open letter to the director of the Ruhr Triennial cultural festival accusing the South Africa-based Cameroonian historian and theorist Achille Mbembe of antisemitism and Holocaust relativization and demanding that Mbembe's keynote lecture at the festival be canceled. The politician, Lorenz Deutsch, cited two passages from Mbembe's 2016 English-language essay "The Society of Enmity," which juxtaposes South African apartheid and the Israeli colonization of Palestine, in one case, and apartheid and the Holocaust, in the other. Although neither passage equates these different historical situations or relativizes the extremity of the Shoah, Mbembe's attempt to trace a generalized "phantasy" of "separation" across the three contexts led Deutsch to demand Mbembe's disinvitation from the festival on the grounds of "antisemitic Israel-critique, Holocaust relativization, and extremist disinformation" (Mbembe, 2016: 23; Deutsch, 2020). After being picked up and amplified by Felix Klein, Germany's (non-Jewish) Federal Commissioner for Jewish Life and the Fight Against Antisemitism, the accusations against Mbembe prompted a months-long dispute about the contours of Germany's post-Holocaust memory culture and the particular way it approaches Jews, Israel, and antisemitism. Serdar Günes, a scholar in religious studies who archives public debates in Germany and Turkey, lists hundreds of newspaper articles, blog posts, and radio features dedicated to the case, with a high concentration in April and May 2020 (Günes, 2020). It was in the context of the Mbembe controversy that the moniker *Historikertreit 2.0* made its first appearances in this debate cycle.

A few months after the controversy over Mbembe started to wane, a linked debate was inaugurated by the translation of my 2009 book *Multidirectional Memory*, which appeared in German in February 2021 (Rothberg, 2009, 2021). When it was published in 2009, *Multidirectional Memory* was received by memory studies scholars around the world as part of what Astrid Erll called the "third phase" of memory studies (Erll, 2011). Scholars in this third phase sought to revise understandings of collective memory inherited from the influential work of the first two phases, whose key figures include the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and the French historian Pierre Nora, respectively. In contrast to the nation-based and culturally homogeneous conception of memory that underlay Nora's highly influential "*lieux de mémoire*" project, in particular, scholars in the third phase saw memory as dynamic: as transnational, transcultural, and pluralistic. *Multidirectional Memory*, which pursued the interplay of memories of the Holocaust, colonialism, and slavery across a transnational space and offered a general theory of the dialogic nature of public memory, became a frequent reference point in discussions of collective memory.

The reception of the book in Germany in 2021 was completely different. Instead of being part of an international scholarly discussion about the nature of memory, *Multidirectional Memory* found itself in the middle of fierce conflicts in the public sphere about the same issues that had been at the center of the Mbembe debate: the Holocaust's uniqueness, the nature of antisemitism, and the acceptable forms of critique of Israeli policy (see Günes, 2021). At the same time, while referring back to the Mbembe case, the controversy over multidirectional memory also targeted Jürgen Zimmerer, a German historian of Africa, who for two decades has been involved in studying the relation between the genocide of the Herrero and Nama in German Southwest Africa and the Holocaust (Zimmerer, 2011). Zimmerer's thesis on the forms of continuity between the two German genocides had already been subject to vigorous scholarly interrogation a decade or more earlier;

now it became another focal point of the widening public debate. Indeed, the question of the relation between the history and memory of colonialism and the Holocaust now became central, even as questions of antisemitism and Israel continued to percolate (Rothberg and Zimmerer, 2021).

The debate over multidirectional memory and colonial continuities led in turn to a third phase that has been called the “Catechism Debate,” a reference to historian Dirk Moses’ sharply formulated summer 2021 essay “The German Catechism,” published on the Swiss blog *Geschichte der Gegenwart* and framed as a response to the two earlier moments of the debate cycle. Moses diagnosed an illiberal and even authoritarian turn in recent German memory culture and proposed that the democratic tendencies of 1980s and 1990s grassroots memory activism had been superseded by a new top-down orthodoxy based on a set of sacrosanct tenets: the absolute uniqueness of the Holocaust, the absolute distinction of antisemitism from other forms of racism, and the close connection between anti-Zionism and antisemitism, among others. Together with the Mbembe and *Multidirectional Memory* controversies, the Catechism Debate illustrates the transnational dynamics of the recent cycle: the debate was triggered by an Australian historian, based in the United States and publishing on a Swiss platform; the debate then took off with a lively but respectful series of posts from international scholars on the English-language blog *New Fascism Syllabus*—curated by Canadian historian Jennifer Evans—before continuing in less friendly tones shortly afterward in the German *Feuilleton*, the cultural pages of major newspapers such as the liberal *Zeit* and the conservative *FAZ*, which also were the venues of the original *Historikerstreit*.

These three moments of the debate cycle—Mbembe, *Multidirectional Memory*, and Catechism—have taken place within an even larger cluster of dispute that, I will argue below, ultimately concerns “local” matters, such as the contours of Germany’s “postmigrant” culture, as well as global matters of race, violence, and colonialism. To be sure, the original *Historikerstreit* could be extended to include various other controversies about National Socialism and the Holocaust—earlier ones such as the Bitburg affair and later ones such as the Friedlander/Broszat exchange or the Wehrmacht Exhibit and Goldhagen controversies. The recent debates, however, have been part of a more generalized contestation within Germany and beyond of the legacies of racist pasts in an unequal present, as the global reach of the “Fall-ist” and Black Lives Matter movements attest. Controversies over the definition of antisemitism, which most often turn on the critique of Israeli policy, have also proliferated around the *Historikerstreit 2.0* and, as Moses’ argument would suggest, have often led to serious consequences regarding jobs, funding, and reputations for those considered “anti-Zionist” (regardless of their actual positions).⁵

This concatenation of waves of dispute bears out an important methodological insight developed for memory studies by Jeffrey K. Olick: namely, that the dynamics of memory concern more than a bilateral relationship between a present moment and a particular past. Rather, Olick insists, acts of memory in the present recall both past events and the history of earlier attempts to reckon with those events. Remembrance is, in other words, “path-dependent”—it engages with the itinerary of memories that intervene between any contemporary moment and the object of remembrance (Olick, 2016: 60). Thus, today’s debates about the uniqueness and comparability of the Holocaust inevitably involve a reinvigorated memory of the 1986 *Historikerstreit* itself.

But the particular mnemonic wars of 1986 and 2020–2021 also point to a second feature of remembrance that draws on and extends Olick’s point: the path-dependency of memory entails that engagement with the past will also be multidirectional (Rothberg, 2009). That is, the changing historical contexts of remembrance will always “import” other events that may seem foreign to the primary event being remembered, but that in any given context of remembrance will constitute part of the force field of memory. In the case of German memory wars, the path-dependency and multidirectionality of remembrance entail, at a minimum, that coming to terms with the Holocaust also involves addressing the Communist past and German colonialism, although the former has now

conspicuously receded in visibility in comparison with the 1980s and early post-unification period, while the latter now takes up far more discursive space than ever before. Such references are difficult to contain and limit, however; other pasts and presents will inevitably also intrude—not least, because of the transformative impact of migration.

Migration, citizenship, and lived multidirectionality

Throughout the months that followed the explosion of the Mbembe debate and especially the controversy over Moses's "German Catechism," many observers wondered whether the principle surviving figure of the 1986 *Historikerstreit*, Jürgen Habermas, would weigh in on the new debates. After months of silence, the 92-year-old philosopher spoke out. In a short contribution to *Philosophie Magazin* in September 2021, Habermas offered a nuanced intervention that seemed to give support to both sides of the debate. On the one hand, Habermas affirmed his commitment to an understanding of the Holocaust as singular, and he distinguished the genocide of Jews from colonial genocides based on a distinction between the Jewish "inner enemy" and the "foreigner" of a "colonially dominated population" (Habermas, 2021:10–11). While the inner enemy must be "killed," the colonized, "together with their natural resources, will first be exploited" (Habermas, 2021: 11). If this account follows the understanding of the distinction between the Holocaust and colonialism canonized in the dominant memory regime—and seems difficult to reconcile with the fact that the vast majority of the Nazis' Jewish victims were not "inner enemies" but citizens of Poland, the Soviet Union, and Hungary—Habermas also, on the other hand, showed himself aware of the need to revise some of the tenets of that regime. He began by acknowledging that all events are subject to comparison and he remarked that the stakes of the current debate are not, as many have claimed, the same as that of the 1986 *Historikerstreit*: not an exoneration of German responsibility, which was manifest in Nolte's provocations, but a "shift in weight" between attention to the Holocaust and what Habermas described as "colonial crimes, which have only just today been called back to memory" (p. 10). In the most cited sentences of the brief intervention, he wrote, "The insistence on [the] 'singular' character of the Holocaust obviously does not mean that the political self-understanding of the citizens of a nation can be frozen. The memory of the until recently repressed colonial history is an important expansion" (p. 11).

That expansion of remembrance is necessary, Habermas continued, in response to "the immigration of the last few decades," which ought to bring with it a transformation of Germany's political culture. Habermas' language in this concluding paragraph is ambiguous. It seems, first of all, to reassert a fundamental distinction between insiders and outsiders through the repetition of the phrase "our political culture" and its presumed foreignness to those who belong to "other cultural lifestyles [*Lebensformen*]." At the same time, it recognizes that immigrants necessarily "change and expand" that political culture (p. 11). Immigrants bring new memories—including memories of violence—to their new homes, yet they must also, Habermas makes clear, take on the responsibilities of citizens in this new home; in the case of Germany, such responsibilities include clear opposition to antisemitism and participation in Holocaust memory culture.

Habermas' intervention—and thus, implicitly, the whole series of debates—reached the pinnacle of the German political sphere when President Frank-Walter Steinmeier cited it during a speech opening the ethnological and Asian art galleries of the contested Humboldt Forum, the self-styled "cosmopolitan" museum housed in a reconstructed imperial palace in Berlin that has stimulated a related series of controversies about colonial history in recent years. Like Habermas, Steinmeier affirmed both the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the need for an expanded memory culture that would work through colonialism while simultaneously recognizing that Germany had become, in his words, a "nation with a migration background" (Steinmeier, 2021). Both Habermas'

intervention and Steinmeier's speech thus link the changing nature of memory culture to the transformations in political culture wrought by immigration. Yet, in maintaining a commitment to a canonized understanding of the Holocaust's uniqueness, Habermas and Steinmeier also reinforce the dominant memory regime and preempt other ways of confronting the legacies of the Nazi genocide beyond that regime's strictures. Nevertheless, it is precisely at the intersection of memory, migration, and political culture that we can locate emergent practices of Holocaust remembrance in Germany that have the potential to "unfreeze" a culture that has lost the self-critical dimension that defined it during its ascent in the 1980s and has become, instead, increasingly dogmatic.

Parallel to the debates about the status of Holocaust memory in the Federal Republic is another set of concerns that I would argue constitute the displaced "content" of the debates: how to come to terms with the heterogeneity of postwar German society and the persistence of structural racism and racist violence (see El-Tayeb, 2016; Lierke and Perinelli, 2020; Nobrega et al., 2021). At the margins of the *Feuilleton* and blog discussions of Mbembe, *Multidirectional Memory*, and the "German Catechism" but at the center of German society are questions about race, migration, citizenship, and difference that have hovered around Holocaust remembrance in Germany for the past two decades. There is a paradox here: even as the absolutist conception of the Holocaust's uniqueness has become increasingly central to German *Staatsraison* and Germany's public memory culture in the twenty-first century, Holocaust memory has become increasingly entangled with issues only partially or even tangentially related to it. Holocaust memory has come to possess a magnetic force that does not erase but overdetermines these other issues in what we might describe as a "warped multidirectionality."⁶

The warped nature of German memory culture manifests itself especially in relation to immigrants and racialized minorities, who, despite the pressures of that magnetic force, also sometimes articulate alternative approaches to Holocaust memory. As the anthropologist Sultan Doughan remarks, "an element of multidirectionality" defines the "lived reality for many immigrants" in Germany regardless of the strictures that surround Holocaust comparisons (Catlin, 2022). Doughan observes that some immigrants "regard Holocaust history as opening up a world and a language for their own experiences"; precisely because of the Holocaust's central presence in the German public sphere it has become "a nodal point of histories and political structures, rather than the unique exception of modernity" (Catlin, 2022). Immigrants can find, for instance, "the question of religious and ethnic difference buried in [the Holocaust], or the experience of being a refugee, or the question of Palestine" (Catlin, 2022). Yet, as Doughan further notes, actually voicing this lived multidirectionality publicly can "cause social death, especially if you are a person of color and visibly Muslim," because of the severe limits imposed by the dominant memory regime (Catlin, 2022; see also Doughan, 2022; Younes and Blaas, 2022). Understanding the Holocaust as a nodal point in a multidirectional "world" of experiences need not entail questioning the radical nature of the Nazi genocide of Jews or asserting the equivalence of other experiences of oppression to the category of genocide, although some immigrants, like non-immigrants, may do precisely these things.⁷

Doughan's insights help us shift focus from the epistemological and ontological levels where much of the increasingly sterile debate about the uniqueness of the Holocaust has taken place to the level of everyday life, state policy, and social memory. This displacement also involves a shift in temporal focus: from a debate about a completed historical past to one about active legacies in an ongoing present that has implications for the future. The turn toward "lived multidirectionality" thus brings us back to the classic question posed by Adorno in the late 1950s, which retains its force today: what is the meaning of working through the past? Although those hostile to multidirectional and postcolonial approaches to memory return again and again to the question of whether

or not colonial violence is the “same” as the Holocaust, the real stakes lie elsewhere. They involve what we do with those histories in the present: how we negotiate lived multidirectionality, relations of difference, and contemporary experiences of subordination and violence, all of which are refracted through the habitus of the dominant German memory culture.

Refugee memory and the question of Palestine

To illustrate the complexity of this negotiation with lived multidirectionality, I turn to an example that brings together the issues Doughan mentions: “religious and ethnic difference . . . the experience of being a refugee, [and] the question of Palestine.” In a short essay called “Travels”—known in German as “*Werde ich je wissen, ob ich überlebt habe?*” (“Will I Ever Know If I Survived?”)—the journalist and human rights activist Wafa Mustafa recounts her childhood in Syria and her encounter with German Holocaust memory culture after she fled her war-torn homeland and the regime holding her father in indefinite detention (Mustafa 2017a, 2017b). Mustafa’s engagement with multiple traumas weaves together public history and personal experience and stages a scene of relational memory at the site of Berlin’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the symbolic heart of Germany’s dominant memory regime. Mustafa’s essay deals with deeply political concerns, but “Travels”—unlike Mustafa’s human rights activism—is less invested in direct political intervention than in unsettling regimes of memory and belonging by exploring the identifications and misidentifications that haunt any attempt to grapple with traumatic histories. Indeed, at the core of “Travels” are two different acts of misidentification.

Mustafa’s encounter with German memory culture is not only mediated by her personal story of flight, but also by the Palestinian struggle, whose urgency was communicated to her by her father. He named her, she tells us, after a Palestinian news agency; with that naming, “he marked me and shaped the entire identity I built afterwards.” She recounts driving with him 4 hours each week for 8 years to attend Palestinian solidarity protests in Damascus. Such an identity registers as dissonant in the German context, where solidarity with Palestinians is frequently treated as a form of anti-semitism. But in Mustafa’s narrative, identification with the Palestinian cause already elicits trouble in Syria:

In 2011, this journey [to the protests] took a different turn when an officer of Syrian intelligence slapped me in a protest and yelled at me: “You Palestinian shouldn’t involve [sic] in internal Syrian Affairs.” The reason for this slap was a necklace of the Palestinian map I had worn for ten years. I had to take it off after that day.

For the first—but not the last—time in Mustafa’s short essay, a case of mistaken identity (she is not in fact Palestinian) disrupts the author’s identifications.

When Mustafa seeks refuge in Germany, the unsettling cartographic reference to Palestine as a *lieu de mémoire* comes into contact with the topography of Holocaust memory and produces further emotional upheaval: “While living in Germany, I was confronted with an everyday presence of the holocaust. While I was strongly connected to ‘The Palestinian Cause’, I found myself confused about the holocaust and even scared of visiting memorials.” Nevertheless, she does visit the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, and the visit proves unexpectedly consequential:

Two months ago, I visited the Holocaust memorial in Berlin Mitte for the first time. After spending seven hours there, I left the place even more confused than I was before. I wasn’t only shocked by what I saw but also by what I felt about what I saw.

This affectively powerful encounter leads to another instance of mistaken identity or misidentification.

In the Berlin memorial's Information Centre, Mustafa latches on to the name of a particular Holocaust victim—and the encounter seems to make demands on her:

On the big white screens, I saw names coming up and going. I listened to their stories. Some of them had dates of birth and death while some other[s] didn't. For some reason, I left the place only with the name of Matka Farbe whose story didn't have many details nor any dates.

With the entry of Matka Farbe into the narrative, Mustafa's story takes an uncanny turn. Shortly after her visit to the memorial,

a 40 years [sic] old woman visited me in my dream . . . [S]he was looking at me, smiling in silence. I knew it was her. "When were you born and when did you die?" I repeated the same question again and again. Matka never answered my question.

As Matka appears repeatedly in Mustafa's dreams, Mustafa tries to make sense of the visitations and finally links them to her fears about her father's condition:

Why does she come to me? Why is she always silent? Why do I keep asking the exact same question? Dates? Numbers? Since my father got arrested by the Syrian regime in July 2013, I started counting the days of his absence. I don't really know why or how I made this decision, but what I know is that I became obsessed with numbers since then . . . [I]t has been 1373 days since he left the world I know. Since then, he keeps visiting me in my dreams. Most of the times, he would just be there, looking at me, and smiling in silence.

Through the dream logic that links Matka and Mustafa's father, a layered association of the Holocaust, the "Palestinian Cause," and the Syrian civil war takes shape. Mustafa does not offer this association as analogical or historical in any way—it is, rather, psychic, affective, and autobiographical.

Matka's availability for this kind of free association derives in part from another misidentification. The link Mustafa forms between her father and Matka is a troubling one: "Is she my father? But she's dead. Does that mean my father is also dead! [sic]." This fear drives her to try and learn more about Matka. But her first attempts turn up nothing: "I googled her. I wrote Matka Farbe. She doesn't exist on google. So I decided to visit the memorial and listen to her story again." After returning to the Information Centre, Mustafa learns that it takes "six years, seven months and 27 days" for all of the names to be read out; there was no telling when Matka's name might reappear. But the guides at the memorial help her search their database and inform her that she has mis-transcribed the name: "Apparently, her name was [Małka] Farbe. It wasn't T. It's a Polish name and it's pronounced Mawfka."⁸ When Matka becomes Małka—now identifiable as a girl who died at approximately 6 years old—"everything changed" for Mustafa. While previously "Matka" had seemed to stand in for her father, now, Mustafa writes, "I realized that [Małka] was me. She was the child inside me who wrote her father in his absence." At this point, the essay shifts to an Arabic-language poem addressed to Mustafa's father followed by her concluding reflections: "In the beginning of this journey, my aim was to explore the holocaust, but ever since I met [Małka] and she started appearing in my dreams I realized that I was exploring myself." She then quotes a line from Primo Levi that stands above the entrance to the Holocaust Memorial's Information Center—"It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say"—and describes learning about Levi's presumed suicide: "It raises even more questions in

my mind now. Do we really survive? Did I survive by leaving home and not getting killed there? Will I ever know if I survived?" With these haunting questions, Mustafa's essay concludes.

"Travels" brings together multiple histories of violence but does so through an unsettling reflection on identity, identification, and misidentification. Starting with her identification with the Palestinian cause and ending with her identification with a victim of the Holocaust, Mustafa's essay is imbued with strong emotions, including fear, empathy, and confusion. Some may see Mustafa's self-conscious identification with diverse victims as risking appropriation of the experience of others. Such strong, complicated emotions—as well as the risk of the appropriation and displacement of Jewish victimhood—run counter to Germany's norms of Holocaust memory. Indeed, as anthropologists Sultan Doughan, Esra Özyürek, and Damani Partridge detail, there is a developed discourse on the "inappropriate" responses of immigrants and minorities to the Holocaust—as well as a small industry of educational programs that target Germany's "Muslim" minorities in particular and that are meant to introduce them to citizenship norms in order to fight what is seen as an intrinsic tendency toward antisemitism (see Doughan, 2022; Özyürek, 2018; Partridge, 2010).

Yet Mustafa's short text complicates this discourse on immigrant deficiency as well as the common accusations about an alleged slippage from Palestinian solidarity to antisemitism. First, when Mustafa identifies with a Holocaust victim and worries about whether she has actually survived, the experiences that lie behind her emotions derive from a history of extreme violence, even if they may not amount to systematic genocide: her father remains under indefinite detention as a political prisoner and Mustafa herself has had to flee the horrific civil war that ripped her country apart. While not all immigrants and minorities have the traumatic history of a refugee, most of them will come to Holocaust memory with experiences of everyday racism or worse: those experiences are a source of lived multidirectionality. Second, when Mustafa creates an association between Palestine and the Holocaust, that association does not take the form of a direct comparison or a competition of victims. Mustafa's confusion and fear when the Palestinian narrative comes into contact with German memory culture does not lead to a blockage of empathy; instead, Mustafa finds herself powerfully pulled into the history of the Holocaust. Her misreading of *Matka Farbe's* name as "Matka" signals her "non-native" relation to the Holocaust, but it also drives a deeper engagement with a newly discovered history. As with the question of victim-identification, Mustafa's negotiation of the clash between two sets of civic virtues—commitment to Palestine, commitment to Holocaust memory—is not hers alone, but common to many immigrants and refugees in Germany, including the large numbers of Palestinians and Israelis who live there (see Atshan and Galor, 2020). More than just an autobiographical story about the physical and psychic travels of one Syrian refugee, Mustafa's performance of historical relationality shows how intimately different histories and memories of violence already interact in German society. Doing justice to the frictions Mustafa's essay illuminates will require transforming the parameters of Germany's Holocaust memory culture, however.

Conclusion: caring for memory

The tensions that have given rise to the so-called "*Historikerstreit 2.0*" reside in the becoming-dogma of an initially progressive grassroots mode of remembrance that has been appropriated by the state. How can this process be transformed in order to reclaim the critical dimensions of grassroots memory work? In *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care*, the political theorist Mihaela Mihai (2022) traces how dominant national memory cultures erase the ambiguities of violent histories and propagate myths of purity and "clean slates" (p. 11). While the cases at the heart of

Mihai's book—post–Second World War France, post–Communist Romania, and post-apartheid South Africa—differ in significant ways from the contemporary German case, Mihai's account of how intellectuals and artists can disrupt those dominant accounts through messier and more complex narratives of violent histories and their aftermaths resonates nevertheless. For Mihai, aesthetic production in particular can create forms of “discomfort” and “friction” that “seductively sabotage” homogenizing memory regimes and reopen them to democratic contestation (pp. 9, 62). While Mihai focuses primarily on novels and films, Wafa Mustafa's short text serves a similarly disruptive function in the German context by unsettling, without simply rejecting, the post-*Historikerstreit* model of coming to terms with the past.

Mustafa's text suggests that the critical memory work that some of us have called for in the *Feuilleton* debates already has a place—albeit one that is regularly marginalized—in German society. Some of the resources we need for a reinvigorated democratic memory culture that transcends the current polemics about the Holocaust's uniqueness, in other words, can be found in articulations of the lived multidirectionality experienced by migrant communities—the very communities frequently tarred as uninterested in the Holocaust and even as fundamentally antisemitic. Although Mustafa's experience as a refugee and daughter of a political prisoner is highly specific, her conjoining of migration, political violence, and Holocaust memory is not unique, but rather one example among many of how migrants and minorities have developed creative modes of engaging with German memory culture. As Yasemin Yildiz and I detail in a forthcoming book, creative and ethical engagement with the Holocaust from migrant perspectives can be found in works of literature like Menekşe Toprak's “The Letter in the Suitcase” (Toprak, 2017), in post-migrant theater by Hakan Savaş Mican, in musical performances by Bejarano and Microphone Mafia, and in visual art by Ani and Sibel Öztürk, among other examples (Rothberg and Yildiz, forthcoming). These modes of engagement are heterogeneous, just as are the modes of the majority society, of course, and they come with no guarantees. But at their best they offer a relational, multidirectional remembrance that neither denies the specificity of the Holocaust and its lessons for Germany's present nor elevates that specificity into a sacred and untouchable event.

Precisely because they occupy a liminal position in German society, Mustafa and other migrant writers, artists, and activists are well placed to perform the kind of care work that Mihai associates with the sabotaging of dominant regimes of memory: “in undermining triumphant, self-congratulatory *grands récits*, certain artworks contribute to building a world where we care *about* how our past influences our relationships in the present and *for* more complex and discriminate practices of making memory” (p. 61). Migrant intellectuals become what Mihai terms “caring refuseniks”: “dissenting memory agents who reject reductive national narratives and who nurture (rather than treasonously befouling) a plural space of memory-making” (p. 62). It was dissenting memory agents in the 1980s and 1990s who created Germany's model memory culture and countered the relativization visible in the 1986 *Historikerstreit*. In the changed world of the twenty-first century the tasks are different: we need new memory agents and new forms of dissent.

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Notes

1. See Neiman's introductory comments at the conference *Historiker streiten*, Einstein Forum, Potsdam, 4 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.einsteinforum.de/tagung/historiker-streiten/> (accessed 23 August 2022). A second conference, "Hijacking Memory," co-organized by Neiman with Emily Dische-Becker and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum in June 2022, received even more attention and—predictably—generated controversies of its own. Unless otherwise noted, translations from German are my own.
2. For original documents from the *Historikerstreit*, see Knowlton (1993).
3. For a historian's account of the *Historikerstreit*, see Maier (1990).
4. Also relevant is Czollek's (2018) adoption of Bodemann's (1996), concept of "memory theatre" to describe the reified form of dominant Holocaust memory and his coinage of "integration theatre" to describe the proximate discourse on minorities and migrants.
5. In addition to Mbembe himself, the journalist Nemi El-Hassan, the discussion series "School for Unlearning Zionism," organized by Israeli artists in Berlin, and the publicist Carolin Emcke are examples, respectively, of job-, funding-, and reputation-related damages due to aggressive "anti-antisemitism" campaigns. At the time of this writing in summer 2022, controversies concerning antisemitism have erupted in Germany involving the *Documenta* art exhibit and the "Hijacking Memory" conference mentioned in Note 1; these controversies involve a mix of what I would term both "real" and (in the lead-up to *Documenta* and in the case of "Hijacking Memory") "trumped-up" examples of antisemitism. On *Documenta*, see Rothberg (2022).
6. I am referring here to Etkind's (2013) notion of "warped mourning" from the very different context of post-Stalinist Russia.
7. The same period that has seen the cycle of debates explored here has also seen highly visible forms of Holocaust relativization coming from the conspiratorial right and anti-vaxers as well as from political leaders such as Vladimir Putin. Considering such forms of comparative memory is beyond the scope of this essay but see the "ethics of comparison" I develop for such cases in Chapter 4 of *The Implicated Subject* (Rothberg, 2019). As I make clear there, there is no guarantee that all comparative and relational forms of memory will be ethical or that "lived multidirectionality" will always lead to "differentiated solidarity."
8. As Omer Bartov pointed out to me in a personal communication, "Małka" is the Polish spelling of the Jewish name Malka and "matka" is, suggestively, the Polish word for mother. Unlike the German version of Mustafa's essay (Mustafa, 2017b), the English version (Mustafa, 2017a) does not use the standard Polish spelling—"Malka"—but rather (mis)transcribes the name as "Mawfka." The misidentification in the text relies on the special Polish letter "ł" however, so I use that in the text. The Berlin Holocaust memorial now has a page dedicated to Małka Farbe. Available at: <https://www.holocaust-denkmal-berlin.de/raum-der-namen/biographien/biographie/7620>

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