

Remembering to Change the World—Organizing Transnationally against Atrocity

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When I first visited Auschwitz, I visited it as an analyst, a cultural anthropologist accompanying a group of mostly Turkish, Turkish-German, Palestinian, and Palestinian-German youth participating in a federally and locally sponsored program meant to teach them about German history and to address their own antisemitism.¹ I was there as an observer who could not help but be dislodged from my professional role and deeply moved by flakes of bone on the ground, and sites of intimate, state-sponsored murder: a shooting wall where guards killed at close range; the collection and smell of the human hair of the murdered a wheelbarrow used to carry human ashes produced after the gas chamber in crematoria. I was moved also by the tears and horror of these same youth, also traumatized by the remains of state-sponsored mass murder. Although the program that led them to Auschwitz was meant to teach them democracy, I wondered about the extent to which actually existing democracy, using its tool of democratization, has the adequate means, humility, or desire to transform itself or to start anew from the position of the mass murdered, the slave, or the noncitizen. What unexpected lessons would it then learn?

I thus write this piece in response to German state-centered debates about Nazi Holocaust memory as a scholar who has been examining transnational “tales [of atrocity] that touch” (in the language of Leslie Adelson).² As an anthropologist, I am more invested in the everyday consequences of debates about memory as opposed to wanting to take a central role on national stages. Even if *Historikerstreit* 2.0 is less masculine and less German than *Historikerstreit* 1.0, it still relies on liberal democratic hopes that themselves are built on a politics that is still not centered on the liberation of those murdered in Auschwitz, on Black people, Sinti and Roma, people of color, queer people, trans people, women, antifascists, or noncitizens. If, as I argue in my book, *Blackness as a Universal Claim: Holocaust Heritage, Noncitizen Futures, and Black Power in Berlin*,³ democracy and processes of democratization are still built on top-down hierarchies, who will they free? If French and American revolutions excluded slaves, then Enlightenment claims to the universal still seem like the wrong move. I still cannot rely on them for my liberation or the liberation of those with whom I necessarily find common ground. The feuilleton politics of debate is

¹ See also Damani Partridge, “Monumental Memory, Moral Superiority, and Contemporary Disconnects,” in *Spaces of Danger: Culture and Power in the Everyday*, ed. Heather Merrill and Lisa M. Hoffman (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 101–31.

² Leslie A. Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature: Towards a New Critical Grammar of Migration* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

³ See Damani Partridge, *Blackness as a Universal Claim* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022).

then one that, for me, remains suspect. Neither *Die Zeit*, nor the *New York Times*, nor the *FAZ* are going to liberate us (e.g., those who were murdered at Auschwitz, those who are still Black, or those who are now noncitizens). These marketplace news media venues might be interested in some of our causes for the moment, but then they are going to move on. They are not going to systematically stand firmly with us when we face persecution or backlash, and neither is the nation-state. They (nation-states), especially, won't stand fully behind the perpetual plight of noncitizens.

The audience for a more sustained transnational memory politics must remain differently placed. If liberal democracy also begins with slavery and genocide, then why should the descendants of slaves or indigenous people trust it to incorporate them later? The Nazi death camp might seem like the exception to liberal democracy but seeing it as the exception also prevents a different kind of coalitional politics from emerging. And those coalitions are the ones that I find most urgent and vital.

It was clear then, and it is clear now, that we need to remember. We need to also remember the specificity of atrocity, and we need not only to think about but also to advocate against any reoccurrence. But how? What are the best tools and how can the field of advocates, those fighting for a politics of "never again," be extended from now into the future?

For me, the stakes of systematically remembering atrocity are directly linked to changing the world. As a scholar of transnational German studies, who works in Detroit, Philadelphia, and Berlin, but who also works to think within and beyond the nation-state, I am also aware that if one compares experiences of atrocity, one risks erasing the particularity of one versus the other. In fact, I would argue, as Leslie Adelson does,⁴ that thinking through multiple historical moments of atrocity might actually lead toward a more collective politics that can more effectively work against repeated horror, now and into the future. Being touched⁵ by the memory of atrocity might actually lead to a kind of coalitional politics that would otherwise be much more difficult to achieve.

The most effective "never again" politics will likely be generated through broad coalitions. Relying on the nation-state as the primary vehicle for memory and memorialization will tend to serve nation-state interests as opposed to the interests of the noncitizen. The risk here, as Benjamin suggests,⁶ is forgetting the memories and the perspectives of those who were actually murdered. We can never know fully what their experience was, but serving their memory should always be the goal, and it must be possible, as Rothberg suggests, to remember multiple moments of atrocity simultaneously.

In this piece, I thus begin with Holocaust memory, in particular, in order to open up space to think concretely about the risks and possibilities of memory and memory politics more broadly, and also the risks of thinking too rigidly on national or nation-state terms. Counterintuitively, I think through the coalitional strategies necessary for a transnational politics. Here, as elsewhere, if one prioritizes the national framings, then one will do damage to the potential transnational alliances. If one really wants to change the world, then it shouldn't be primarily for nation-states, but for those who continue to suffer systemic violence, including the memory and effects of institutionally organized mass murder. Our linked strategies will mutually strengthen us. Particularly for those of us without any nation-state on which we can rely, we will need other political strategies anyway.

When I was doing the research for my first book in Berlin from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, I attended events with discussions about racism triggering responses that necessarily linked racism to Holocaust memory, in which preventing racism meant preventing the

⁴ Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature*.

⁵ Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature*.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969); "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. . . . Only the historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (quoted in Partridge, "Monumental Memory, Moral Superiority, and Contemporary Disconnects," 101).

reoccurrence of that particular atrocity. In connecting their own struggles to this memory, contemporary immigrants and postmigrants risked accusations of Holocaust denial, definitely through comparison, but also in invoking claims to experiencing racism.

In my first book, I therefore largely avoided the term *racism*. I instead thought about citizenship and the production of noncitizens in contemporary (German) life. I also understood citizenship to mean more than the legal regime. For me, citizenship had to do more work. As an analytic, it had to also address the everyday exclusions and exclusionary incorporations associated with post-Nazi-led-Holocaust life.⁷

In my second book, after analyzing the failures of citizenship to fully liberate, particularly as it concerns the lives of noncitizens (broadly conceived), it seemed important to think about how one might imagine and enact politics from the perspectives of the stateless, the disenfranchised, and those who had systematically been pushed outside of the Enlightenment idea of humanity, including those who had been and are historically dehumanized and those thought of originally as slave/things.⁸ As an anthropologist, I followed actual lives and actual practice. I ended up in the theater,⁹ drawn in by a perspective I witnessed on stage and in packed performances. It struck me that amid the memory of the Nazi-administered Holocaust, claims to Blackness were being and had historically been made by people with Arab and Turkish heritage in Germany, but also by Kurds and Kurdish-Germans, Africans and African-Germans, and also, historically, by Mizrahi Jews in Israel. Claims to Blackness were being made, in part, because Blackness opened itself up as a universal claim in a way that Jewishness could not, given the specificity of Holocaust memory and the related state-sponsored murderous atrocity in Europe. Six million Jews were killed. Never again! From the Haitian revolutionaries to Mohammed Ali to Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, the anti-apartheid movement, and now Black Lives Matter, mobilized Blackness offered a systematic and sustained global response to persistent everyday experiences of marginalization, systematic violence, and slow death.¹⁰ There has also been a transnational history, emerging from Europe, that had also led historically to thinking of Jewish-Europeans, Italians, Irish people, and Sub-Saharan and northern Africans as Black. In the Berlin theater context, I also witnessed articulations of Blackness as kinds of claims made by noncitizens who found power in the previous articulations of Black Power. This was true even if they, themselves, might not automatically be perceived as Black.

Importantly, claims to Blackness would not lead to accusations of Holocaust denial. Charges of appropriation could be avoided by accountability to Black people, even if the terms of this Blackness are not historically stable. In spite of the lack of stability, one should note that people of sub-Saharan African descent usually find themselves at the center.

It struck me, in my research, that claims to a mobilized Blackness¹¹ offered a different kind of articulation that might lead to a different kind of politics, both outside of Enlightenment imaginations and imaginations that sought to draw equivalences between the Nazi-led Holocaust and what was happening in post-World War II Europe. The Haitian

⁷ For more on exclusion and exclusionary incorporation, see Damani Partridge, "We Were Dancing in the Club, Not on the Berlin Wall: Black Bodies, Street Bureaucrats, and Exclusionary Incorporation into the New Europe," *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 4 (2018): 660–87, and Damani Partridge, *Hypersexuality And Headscarves: Race, Sex, and Citizenship in the New Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

⁸ See Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text*, 28, no. 2 (2010): 31–56, and Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020).

⁹ See Partridge, *Blackness as a Universal Claim*.

¹⁰ Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 754–80; Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Mobilized Black Germanness (see, for example May Opitz, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz, *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), or Tiffany N. Florvil, *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020) is a critical part of transnational articulations of Blackness, but I focus here and in my research more on the transnational mobilization of Blackness and claims to Blackness more broadly. We ultimately need to work against the nation-state for a different kind of transnational possibility to systematically liberate.

response to the French Revolution's inclusionary failures also provided another clue to the stakes of claiming Blackness as a site of accountability to the otherwise supposedly universal Enlightenment claims.¹²

Even here, though, and even by those who would be recognized as Black in Europe, after writing the second book, I discovered that competitive memory could nevertheless become an issue. The point here is not to deny the importance of Holocaust memory, but to think about how thinking memory as a national project, as opposed to the necessary transnational affiliation, might lead away from the kind of change that memory associated with atrocity should ideally achieve. This is not to say that change is the only work of memories of atrocity, but if we want to work toward a different kind of world, it should be a necessary part.

I write this piece amid much controversy about who, not only has the right to remember, but also who has the right to relate to memories of atrocity. As noted previously, I have observed the effects of comparison, particularly when it comes to remembering the Shoah and debates over and the effects of its memorialization.¹³

When thinking about *the right to remember* and then also the desire to compare, like invocations of citizenship, rights often fall within the realm of a sovereignty that requires nation-state backing,¹⁴ both monetarily and politically. Also, like citizenship, within this context, noncitizens must contend with a more marginalized role and a more marginalized status, ironically, even when the question of memory revolves around them and their ancestors (e.g., Jewish people in and outside of Germany, Armenians in and outside of Turkey, African Americans in and outside of the United States); they do not have the final say (even if they get consulted) about how the atrocities should be remembered. How should they be taught in schools? What images should be shown? How much of regional, national, international, and local budgets should be devoted to remembering?

As a scholar who focuses on transnational Berlin, I have written about the memory and memorialization of Nazi-led genocide and how this memory relates to Turkish-, Kurdish-, Arab-, and Palestinian-Germans, including those who live long term in Germany with and without a German passport. I have examined the impact of youth from these contexts visiting both sites of memorialization and the actual sites of mass murder, including Auschwitz and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin.¹⁵ Furthermore, I have worked to understand the impact of the visits on these youth as well as the broader effects of the contemporary forms of remembering and memorialization. To what extent, I have asked, might Leslie Adelson's understanding of being touched (*berührt*) by Other memories offer a different possibility for connecting with these memories without resorting to trying to draw equivalencies between then and now, and necessarily relying on the nation-state?

In this piece, I also want to think about another, more recent, context for memory and memorialization. I wanted to think further about the stakes of memory and memorialization more generally and how the forms of that memorialization, also finding themselves contained within and constrained by national and supranational logics, often lead to getting

¹² See C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins; Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938); Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry*, 26, no. 4 (2000): 821–65; and Julius S. Scott and Marcus Rediker, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Verso Books, 2018).

¹³ Adelson, *The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature*; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); Damani Partridge, "Holocaust Mahmmal (Memorial): Monumental Memory amidst Contemporary Race," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 4 (2010): 820–50; Partridge, *Blackness as a Universal Claim*; and Irit I. Dekel and Esra Özyürek, "What Do We Talk About When We Talk about Antisemitism in Germany?," *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no.3 (2021): 392–99.

¹⁴ See also Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), and Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), also quoted in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

¹⁵ See previous and Partridge, "Holocaust Mahmmal (Monument)," and Partridge, *Blackness as a Universal Claim*.

stuck. How might one produce a new situation, not only for remembering, but also for creating a context in which the politics of “never again”¹⁶ might have a broader impact?

As part of the context for this piece, I also returned to Berlin. This time, though, I thought through Blackness and the memory of atrocity symbolized by and then also directly connected to the murder of George Floyd. In my observations of some of the responses to the activism organized around that murder, at an event on Black European organizing, I was struck by a claim, in particular, by a large group of the activists present who had seen the major post-Floyd protests in Europe against anti-blackness and then claimed that we need to deemphasize the United States in thinking about the future of Black activism in Europe.

The point of focusing on Blackness here as opposed to the *Historikerstreit* 2.0 or 1.0 is to examine the dangers of a nation-state (or supra-nation)-centered memory in another context. Also in this context, I want to critique this form of memory without challenging the necessary need to remember altogether. I do, though, want to acknowledge the importance of state funding. I think, however, that this funding can be obtained without reifying the nation-state.

The risk, as some have argued, is that national monuments and (supra)nationalized memory end up remembering for the nation, and thus allow large swaths of national populations to forget and disconnect.¹⁷ They do the remembering for us, making memory more passive and allowing more recent forms of atrocity to go unchallenged. Referencing the second World War:

In the case of the French memorials of this period,¹⁸ there is no reference to the shared responsibility for the mass deportations or the French collaboration with Germany.¹⁹ They make concrete a particular reading of events that has little to do with living memory but rather replaces it, as Pierre Nora argues.²⁰ As products of an official, state-led commemoration, “rather than encouraging active remembering on the part of the community, these memorials remember for the community.”²¹ Unlike the sites that evoke a popular response, like the Cenotaph or the Vietnam Wall, these monuments stand as evidence of a problem solved. We visit, ponder a while, and then turn our backs: “under the illusion that our memorial edifices will always be there to remind us, we take leave of them and return only at our convenience.”^{22,23}

An active memory politics necessarily involves new and unanticipated contextualizations and connections, new and unanticipated implications and debates.

Amid this learning, the processes of film and theater production²⁴ have also had the effect of creating the possibility for new selves that might ultimately, and collectively, produce a new world, at least for the collective, if not for the neighborhood, city, or country as a whole.

¹⁶ See also A. Baer and N. Sznajder, *Memory and Forgetting in the Post-Holocaust Era: The Ethics of Never Again*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); also quoted in Partridge, “Holocaust Mahmmal (Memorial).”

¹⁷ Partridge, “Holocaust Mahmmal (Memorial).”

¹⁸ Here, Edkins is referring to an earlier period.

¹⁹ Caroline Wiedmer, *The Claims of Memory: Representations in Contemporary Germany and France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

²⁰ Pierre Nora, Pierre, “Introduction,” in *Realms of Memory*, ed. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

²¹ Wiedmer, *The Claims of Memory*, 33.

²² James E. Young, *Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning in Europe, Israel, and America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

²³ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003): 130, cited in Partridge, “Holocaust Mahmmal (Memorial),” 837.

²⁴ See Damani Partridge, *Blackness as a Universal Claim* and filmingfuturecities.org.

A deeper history of activism and transnational connection must mean a deeper history and politics of memory everywhere, including in the United States; one must also remember that that history is always already transnational.

It's not as if Europe has not historically shared its racial logics and strategies with the United States. Hitler learned from Jim Crow,²⁵ and white supremacists continue to learn from one another and kill us, in various locations, all over the world.

Remembering atrocity is necessary. It tells us that we must do things differently now and into the future, and we must both organize and remember transnationally, or else. We must remember as everyday practice, beyond the feuilleton.

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²⁵ Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Confronting Race and the Memory of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

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