Memory Citizenship: Migrant Archives of Holocaust Remembrance in Contemporary Germany

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Between People and Population

In 1998, the German-born, American-based artist Hans Haacke was invited by the German state to propose an artwork for the Reichstag, which was about to become the seat of the federal government in the recently unified nation. Haacke’s proposal, submitted in 1999, created enormous public controversy – an unsurprising occurrence given Haacke’s long career of institution-critical art making. Playing off of the famous inscription above the main entrance of the building that reads ‘DEM DEUTSCHEN VOLKE’ [To the German People], Haacke proposed to install a counter-inscription in a courtyard featuring white neon letters that would read ‘DER BEVÖLKERUNG’ [To the Population]. The new inscription would be situated in a large wooden trough into which German parliamentarians would be invited to bring soil from their home districts. In the trough and around the inscription, plants would grow, and a website would feature daily photographic updates of the state of the installation.

The passions raised by Haacke’s provocative work of art emerged during a transitional moment in German history: a decade after unification, in the wake of deadly attacks by neo-Nazis on those considered ‘foreign’ and in a moment of accelerating Europeanization and globalization that rendered nation-state borders increasingly tenuous. The vociferous debate in the Bundestag that led to the narrow acceptance of Haacke’s proposal also took place at approximately the same time that German citizenship laws were changed from their basis in jus sanguinis, that is, citizenship based on ‘blood’ and inheritance, to a more liberal model incorporating aspects of jus soli, that is, citizenship based on birthplace. Like the dispute that accompanied the changes in citizenship, the contention surrounding Haacke’s artwork concerned the relations between state, people and population. Was the German state – represented here by the metonymy of the Reichstag – beholden first and foremost to a culturally and ethnically defined collective, the Volk or people in the original inscription, or did its responsibilities encompass also the Bevölkerung, the broader population, including the migrants, refugees and other expatriates living within its boundaries at any given time? Was the Federal Republic’s constitution – with its commitment to universal human rights – already sufficient to safeguard the rights of all or was a change in the notion of German identity still necessary?
Haacke’s piece touched a nerve because it staged a very current issue, one that is central to this essay: how to think, in a transnational age, about political community (the *demos*) and the subjects who inhabit it.

Haacke traces his inspiration for the project back to his first on-site viewing of the inscription in 1984. Not only was he reminded of the burning of the Reichstag in 1933, which the Nazis used to justify their political takeover, but he also recalled the fact that the sons of the German-Jewish metal caster who created the original inscription in 1915 were later killed in the Holocaust. In Haacke’s mind, this dark past intersected with an ambivalent present marked by Germany’s post-Holocaust migration history. As he writes about his 1984 visit: ‘On the lawn in front of the building, kids were playing football and families were barbecuing lamb – it was a Turkish environment [. . .]. And up there, on the architrave, I read in giant bronze letters “To the German People”. To many of the children playing on the lawn, as to their parents, uncles, and aunts it seemed to say, “This place is not for you! You don’t belong! You stay out!”’ 5

Haacke’s work thus arises from a doubled perception that conjoins the quite different histories of two minorities in Germany, Jewish and Turkish, which frame the twentieth century. 6 It creates a constellation that recognizes the rupture of the Holocaust while juxtaposing it with the travails of contemporary migrants, in particular Turkish Germans, who arrived on the heels of a 1961 labour recruitment agreement and have comprised the largest ethnic minority in the country since the 1970s. Currently numbering between 3–4 million (out of 82 million residents), Turkish Germans have come to figure as German society’s primary Other and, in the years since Haacke’s project was unveiled, have increasingly been recast as ‘Muslims’ in dominant discourses. 7 The astonishing resonance in late 2010 of Social Democratic economist and Bundesbank board member Thilo Sarrazin’s polemical book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (Germany Does Away With Itself), in which he asserts that immigrants of Muslim background are inferior and threaten Germany with their rampant fertility, illustrates that a stark, racially-inflected people/population binary still structures German life sixty-five years after the defeat of National Socialism. 8

Haacke’s project attempts to expose and counter just this persistent racialization of national identity. Excavating a tangled past and reanimating it in an equally tangled present, *DER BEVÖLKERUNG* reveals how a singular site of memory can accommodate a diversity of histories that resonate with each other instead of erasing each other. Prompting us to rethink both the German past and present through the tension between people and population, it suggests, among other things, that Germany’s Nazi and Holocaust history might be productively rethought and re-membered from a perspective that takes into account the migrant subjects who trespass on the sacred political space of the nation. And yet, despite the work of remembrance *DER BEVÖLKERUNG* provokes, Haacke himself does not quite imagine migrants as subjects of memory; rather, they remain primarily stimulants to the artist’s own memory work.

By taking migrants seriously as subjects of national and transnational memory, this essay picks up where Haacke’s project leaves off. It re-envisions the ‘population’...
as an active bearer of memory, rather than as merely a passive object of commemoration. Such a perspective uncovers the multidirectional and transcultural memory work of the population at large: it draws attention in particular to the formation of as-yet under-recognized archives of migrant engagement with the German national past, with a history and memory of which they are ostensibly not a part and about which they are frequently said to be indifferent. In other words, DER BEVÖLKERUNG, a performance of memory by a German artist who migrated out of Germany, constitutes only the tip of a rarely explored iceberg: the unavoidable conjunction in contemporary Europe of Holocaust remembrance and migrant history. This conjunction offers an essential perspective on contemporary European society because the continent’s postwar unification – and especially Germany’s central role in that process – has taken place via the explicit rejection of the Nazi past and against the backdrop of demographic changes resulting from labour, postcolonial and post-Communist migrations. Collective memory of the Holocaust has functioned as a point of reference for a post-fascist Europe and the basis of a new human rights regime at the same time that migrations have complicated the ‘unity’ of Europe’s population and posed challenges to Europe’s liberal model of rights.

The shift in perspective made possible by a migration-centered lens that attends to this context brings into view new subjects and archives of remembrance and offers new possibilities for thinking about the relation between memory and identity. Indeed, the German case presents an extreme version of the link between memory and identity that has implications for all attempts to theorize collective and cultural memory. The migrant archives to which we turn in this essay thus help us to reconceive the subject of remembrance at a more general level. They prompt a reconceptualization of memory as transcultural that leaves behind residually and unwittingly ethnicized models of remembrance and founds itself instead on a social and political form of collectivity.

In the remainder of this essay, we first outline a prominent paradox and a double bind that constrain current conceptualizations of German Holocaust memory before sketching the emergence of migrant archives of remembrance across a heterogeneous spectrum of German society. We then turn in more depth to one particularly suggestive case from the sphere of civil society: the Stadtteilmütter or ‘neighbourhood mothers’ project in Berlin. Ultimately, our consideration of the Stadtteilmütter and migrant archives of Holocaust remembrance leads us to argue that performances of memory can function as ‘acts of citizenship.’ Acts of citizenship, as conceived by political theorist Engin Isin, are not simply the normative practices that formal citizens undertake, such as voting, paying taxes and so on. Acts of citizenship in Isin’s sense are deeds that take place regardless of formal citizenship status and beyond the bounds of normative practices – in Haacke’s terms, they are acts that emerge from the population and seek to reconfigure what counts as the people. Acts of citizenship break with the given and allow us to see, in Isin’s words, ‘how subjects become claimants when they are least expected or anticipated to do so’. When performances of memory become acts of citizenship they model new ways of being-in-common that complicate established understandings of what constitutes ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ forms of belonging.
Two months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Turkish-German writer Zafer Şenocak penned a short essay with his sometime collaborator Bülent Tulay called ‘Germany – Home for Turks?’ that poses a question central to memory discourses in contemporary Europe: ‘Doesn’t immigrating to Germany’, Şenocak and Tulay ask, ‘also mean immigrating into Germany’s recent past?’ Their essay has a double agenda: as this question suggests, it calls on German Turks to engage with German history – in particular with German Jewish history; but, at least as urgently, it also seeks to spark the reflection of dominant German society about its own relation to difference both historically and in the present. Noting the ‘formulaic reconciliation and commemorative events’ that characterize Germans’ ‘strategy of “coming to terms with the past” (Vergangenheitsbewältigung)’, Şenocak and Tulay argue that the ‘mastery’ or ‘overcoming’ (Bewältigung) of the past has always had supplementary affective implications: ‘the suppression of moods, the sublimation of emotions’. Such affective displacement has meant that working through the past has not proceeded in a progressive, linear fashion. Rather, suppression and sublimation have helped facilitate the return of an outmoded rhetoric of ‘the people’. As Şenocak writes elsewhere, ‘rapid reunification [...] created the illusion that current events and contemporary phenomena [could] be described with nineteenth-century language, with concepts such as nation and Volk. We have no concepts for the emotions and psychic structures to which recent historical ruptures have given rise, no concepts for the disarray of the new arrangements’. This resurrection of a pre-Holocaust vocabulary inflects post-Holocaust remembrance. Despite the development of a uniquely elaborated culture of memory focused on the nation’s own crimes, Şenocak argues, majority German society has also perpetuated key elements of the past that is being memorialized – in particular the self-conception of German identity as ethnically based – with obvious implications for the negotiation with perceived difference in the present.

This carry over of ethnicized understandings of identity into the present creates a seeming paradox for German memory culture: in the aftermath of the Nazi genocide, it has seemed necessary to preserve an ethnically homogeneous notion of German identity in order to ensure Germans’ responsibility for the crimes of the recent past, even though that very notion of ethnicity was one of the sources of those crimes. Writing before the 2000 change in German citizenship laws, historian Dan Diner describes this paradox of the dominant German self-understanding powerfully, albeit in a way that risks reproducing its assumptions:

Those whose memory reaches back to the Nazi past, and this first and foremost, by its rejection, do belong dialectically to an ethnified German collective. Germans are those [who] define themselves in terms of belonging by rejection of the Nazi past. A German citizen of Turkish background can hardly fully belong to such a collective. He cannot use the common ‘we’ concerning the contaminated past of Germany. In this sense, ius sanguinis is being prolonged by the rituals of memory and remembrance. Vice versa, the introduction of ius soli would mean to cut off the past as frame of reference for belonging.
It would amount to neutralizing the past and pleading for historical oblivion.\(^\text{19}\)

Diner, who frequently suggests that the Holocaust constitutes a foundational negative collective memory for the forging of a new European identity, argues in this 1998 essay for a shift to \emph{jus soli} precisely because it ‘would contribute to a neutralization of the role of ethnicity and a reduction of xenophobia’.\(^\text{20}\) Yet, he doesn’t return to the problem of what it would mean for German Holocaust memory when ‘German citizen[s] of Turkish background’ become part of the national collective. Is it really true that this would produce ‘historical oblivion’?\(^\text{21}\) The evidence explored in this essay suggests, in contrast to Diner, that it is indeed possible to recognize Germany’s diversity without necessitating an eclipse of historical responsibility toward Nazi crimes. Furthermore, although a significant shift in citizenship law has taken place, a decade later ethnicity and xenophobia have not been neutralized and Germany remains, in Astrid Messerschmidt’s terms, a ‘post-National Socialist’ society – a phrase meant to echo the postcolonial in its suggestion that ideologies and structures of domination forged in one era may outlive their apparent demise.\(^\text{22}\) Clearly, full citizenship requires more than legal structures; it requires, as Şenocak and Tulay imply, both memory work and affective labor across society.

Diner’s paradox – the fact that preserving ethnicized identity seems essential to confronting the crimes committed in its name – describes accurately a conception of memorial consciousness that retains force in contemporary Germany. It also suggests the need to identify a double bind that results from this conception: one that regulates the relation of non-ethnically German residents of Germany to the national past. As Havva Jürgensen, a self-identified Turkish-German ‘\textit{Gastarbeiterkind}’ – guest worker child or ‘second generation’ migrant, in the German vocabulary – puts it in an intervention to which we will return: ‘We often hear that the topic of National Socialism is not for us because we’re migrants. Just as often it’s insinuated that in any case we are too anti-Semitic to be interested in this topic’.\(^\text{23}\) In other words, migrants are simultaneously told to stay away from the Holocaust and then castigated as anti-Semitic for their alleged indifference to its remembrance – this is an example of the potential disciplining function that Holocaust discourse has come to take on in a unifying Europe, especially with respect to minorities considered ‘Muslim’.\(^\text{24}\) Just as with Diner’s paradox, Jürgensen’s double bind reveals how Holocaust memory can function to reethnicize identity in contemporary Germany.

However, while these binds evoke actually existing social attitudes, we don’t believe they describe a historical necessity; rather, they amount to an ideological redescription and occlusion of actually existing practices of memory work. The paradoxes derive from the assumptions and dispositions that structure competitive and restrictive identity-based understandings of collective memory as a form of ethnic property – understandings that not only characterize the public at large, but continue to influence much work in Holocaust studies, German studies, and memory studies, even if there are signs of significant change in the latter arenas. In contradistinction to competitive and ethnically-based understandings of cultural
memory, we offer as a working hypothesis the proposition that multidirectional practices of migrant memory exist and have existed since the influx of ‘guestworkers’ in the 1950s and 1960s that could offer a way out of Germany’s memory paradoxes; those practices, however, have either been ignored or have suffered from various forms of misrecognition.

Migrant Archives of Holocaust Memory

Transnational migration unsettles and complicates the processes of grappling with and remembering national history; this is true both for those who migrate and those who think they have stood still, whether or not either group acknowledges it. Moreover, migration is never a one-way process of ‘integration’: migrants have brought memories of their own – sometimes traumatic – national and transnational histories into German space, and have thus helped transform Germany’s postwar memory-scapes in ways that remain to be explored. These transformations of Germany’s memory-scapes have left traces that constitute what we call migrant archives. An alternative migrant archive that remembers the Holocaust alongside other histories, while simultaneously offering possibilities for reconfiguring ethnically-based models of identity, would include: the writings of Turkish-German author Şenocak, especially the essays cited above and his 1998 novel Gefährliche Verwandtschaft (Perilous Kinship), which puts the Holocaust into contact with the Armenian genocide and dislocates ethnicity radically in the person of its German-Jewish-Turkish-Muslim narrator; the ‘reading tours’ of Serdar Somuncu, a Turkish-German performer and comedian who, in the spirit of Charlie Chaplin’s Great Dictator and Brecht’s Arturo Ui, adopts ethnic drag to present texts by Hitler and Goebbels along with satirical commentary; selected productions of the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, a ‘post-migrant’ performance space in Berlin’s Kreuzberg neighbourhood which, in spring 2010, staged a Kurdish-German adaptation of Holocaust survivor Edgar Hilsenrath’s novel about the Armenian genocide, Das Märchen vom letzten Gedanken; the recent musical collaboration of the migrant hip-hop group Microphone Mafia and the 85-year-old Auschwitz survivor Esther Bejarano; the initially unofficial Turkish-language tours run by Doğan Akhanlı at the Nazi Documentation Center in Cologne, as well as Turkish-language novels by Akhanlı on the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust; and the antiracist and anti-antisemitic civil society work of the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, run by an East German Jewish woman, Anetta Kahane.

The numerous references to the Armenian genocide in this incomplete list of cultural productions of migrant memory already suggest something about the productive possibilities of multidirectional memory in an age of transnational flows of people and ideas. The extent of work by intellectuals of Turkish and Kurdish descent on a genocide officially denied by the Turkish state gives a first, positive indication of how German memory culture has overflowed its officially recognized boundaries and enabled unrecognized memory work at its margins. While European states and politicians frequently instrumentalize Turkey’s non-recognition of the Armenian genocide as part of their attempts to maintain the ‘Christian’ character of Europe, these examples represent autonomous memory work ‘from below’. German-inflected
Turkish/Kurdish work on Armenia is not merely a question of memory culture, but has implications for the writing of history and the practice of politics. One of the leading historians of the Armenian genocide is Taner Akçam, a Turkish scholar now based in the US who arrived in Germany as a political refugee in 1978 after being imprisoned in Turkey for his radical left politics and interventions regarding Cyprus and the Kurdish question. It was only in Germany that Akçam began research on the Armenian genocide, research that has led to a worldwide reputation and is slowly and belatedly beginning to have an impact in Turkey itself. The example of Akçam as well as the artistic works and civil society activism mentioned above testifies to how German Holocaust memory has traveled far beyond the ethnicized collective with which it is too often identified – all without necessarily crossing national borders. Indeed, as our primary example will demonstrate, memory work can be intensely local at the same time that it assumes transnational dimensions.

Rereading German Holocaust memory from a perspective that takes into account the active presence of millions of migrants in German society requires a multidirectional lens – that is, a lens that attends to the productive interaction between the legacies of different histories and is not afraid to consider the Holocaust in a comparative context. To be sure, considering the Holocaust in a comparative context means something different in Germany, the land of the perpetrators, than it does anywhere else in the world. Twenty-five years ago, in the *Historkerstreit* or Historian’s Debate, the liberal-progressive position associated with Habermas held strongly to the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a defense against relativistic conservative positions seeking to overcome the singularity of German responsibility via comparisons to Stalinist terror and Germany’s own losses. It remains essential to guard against relativization and denial, but we also must recognize that times have changed and that the singularity of the Holocaust is increasingly used to discipline non-Jewish minorities in Europe – especially those interpellated as Muslim – through the assertion of the complete incommensurability of anti-Semitism and other forms of racism and through the ascription of ‘new’ forms of anti-Semitism to Muslim minorities. Indeed, as anthropologist Matti Bunzl has argued – and as Havva Jürgensen implicitly indicates above – ‘Islamophobia’ functions in the construction of a transnational European identity as anti-Semitism once helped shore up the ‘purity’ of national identities in Europe. A transnational memory of the Holocaust that serves as a foundation for European identity need not ally itself with Islamophobic discourses, yet today it frequently does – hence the importance of taking alternative migrant archives seriously. In seeking to make such archives visible, we do not pretend that they represent a pure or always oppositional resource, but we hold, nevertheless, that they can surprise us with their unexpected configurations of heterogeneous pasts and a mobile present.

**Citizens of Memory: The Stadtteilmutter Project**

In February 2009, more than two hundred immigrant women – most of them Muslims and many wearing headscarves – filled an auditorium in Berlin’s impoverished Neukölln neighborhood. They had come to listen to presentations by the ‘Neuköllner Stadtteilmütter’ (or ‘Neighbourhood Mothers’), women from their...
community who work with an organization dedicated to the social welfare of immigrant families. Trained by a church-based association, the Diakonie Neukölln-Oberspree, the *Stadtteilmütter* were originally intended to address problems of education, childcare and health among migrant women and families in this relatively disadvantaged urban setting. By virtue of their linguistic and cultural knowledge, the mothers would be able to address segments of the population beyond the reach of majority German welfare workers. But the interests of the mothers soon extended far beyond the areas offered by the social work framing initially provided to them. While continuing their social welfare work in Neukölln, they decided to pursue new projects in the areas of politics and history. In particular, they decided they wanted to learn about and investigate Germany’s National Socialist past, which they have been doing since 2006 in partnership with *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste* [Action Reconciliation Service for Peace], a German peace and volunteer service organization. This collaboration has included study groups, public forums presenting historical information like the large gathering in February 2009, a trip of *Stadtteilmütter* to Auschwitz that has been documented in a self-produced film and a brochure featuring short autobiographical essays by a number of the mothers as well as essays by other scholars and activists.

In a German society self-consciously invested in maintaining an ethical relation to the past, memory is one of the key scenes of citizenship. Hence, the paradoxes and double binds that regulate citizens’ and non-citizens’ relations to the past have material consequences for residents of Germany, regardless of their formal citizenship status. The *Stadtteilmütter’s* project on the history of National Socialism is particularly significant for what it reveals about the work of collective memory and for how it helps us to reconceive the citizen-subjects of that work. The need to invent new forms of participation derives from the specificities of the German context in which, as the Sarrazin affair demonstrates, an ethnicized notion of ‘the people’ persists in the face of the dramatic demographic transformation of Germany’s ‘population’ over the last half-century.

The mothers embody this diverse population – many are the children of labour migrants and a significant number are refugees. Many are of Turkish descent – not surprising since such migrants make up Germany’s largest minority – but some of those ‘Turks’ actually have a Kurdish background. Among the refugees are women from war-torn locations such as Eritrea, Iraq, Palestine and Sri Lanka. Some are secular, some are religious – and many of the latter are Muslim (although some are Christian or Hindu). These are women who, almost without exception, have led difficult lives marked by traumatic political violence, economic deprivation, or racist exclusion – most often by a combination of these factors. Although many report good relations with majority German neighbors, for some their time in Germany has been marked by encounters with neo-Nazis; in the film *Aus unserer Sicht* [From our Perspective] one woman reports of persistent harassment in the East Berlin neighborhood Pankow that led to the stoning of her apartment and the near-fatal injury of her daughter. Additionally, when the women in the film visited Auschwitz they report being harassed in the streets by local residents cursing them as ‘Kanaken’ [a racist slur for migrants] and ‘Kopftuchtante’ [headscarf aunties]. Yet, their project is not primarily about victimization, but rather about memorial agency.
and responsibility for the past. While much of the discourse since the 1970s connecting migrants to the Nazi past has proceeded via the analogy ‘The Turks are the new Jews’ – meant critically by some and threateningly by others – the Stadtteilmütter project opens very different lines of affiliation and historical connection. As befits people located in Germany, many of the women reflect in their self-portraits on how genocide and radical forms of social exclusion become possible through the everyday complicity of ‘ordinary’ men and women.

Framed as an organization of ‘mothers’, the project no doubt courts certain traditional and normative (even heteronormative) understandings of gender, in which women embody care for others and uphold tradition and memory. Yet, what is most interesting about the group is their resignification of such gendered interpellations, which they build on in order to move in unexpected directions and transform conceptions of citizenship. Not simply a passive adjunct of the welfare state, the Stadtteilmütter perform a politicization of motherhood that evokes precedents such as the Mothers of the Plaza del Mayo or El Salvador’s Mothers of the Disappeared (although they are not involved in any kind of protest against the state, as were the very differently situated Latin American mothers). The ‘oppressed’ condition of migrant women in Europe and elsewhere has been a frequent target of polemic for decades. Yet, social scientists argue that the transformation of traditional gender roles performed by groups such as the Stadtteilmütter often emerges out of the conditions of migration. Noting that immigrant women often take on new public, political roles that they might not perform in their home countries, sociologist Saskia Sassen argues that such women constitute one potential vanguard of new forms of citizenship: ‘Women in the condition of housewives and mothers do not fit the categories and indicators used to capture participation in political life […]. These are dimensions of citizenship and citizenship practices that do not fit the indicators and categories of mainstream frameworks.’ Creatively inventing new forms of social and political participation and new ways of thinking about rights and responsibilities, women like the Stadtteilmütter become ‘activist citizens,’ in Isin’s terms. They do not merely ‘act out already written scripts’; they ‘engage in writing scripts and creating the scene’.

Women enter the Stadtteilmütter project with heterogeneous knowledge of National Socialism and the Holocaust. Some of those who were educated outside of Germany bring with them the kinds of comparative perspectives on Holocaust remembrance and education that scholars in recent decades have valued. Regina Cysewski, a Spätaussiedlerin from Poland (an ethnic German who came to Berlin in 1981) reports having learned much about the fate of Polish Jews during the Second World War, but little about National Socialism as such. Meanwhile, Perwin Rasoul Ahmad, a Kurd from Iraq, recounts that Jews and Hitler were topics in school, as was the ‘emergence of dictatorships […] even though the Saddam-regime was itself also a dictatorship!’ Yet, others who did not grow up in Germany confess to having known very little about National Socialism and the Holocaust before joining a Stadtteilmütter’s seminar. But even those mothers with little pre-existing knowledge about the past offer narratives that nonetheless provide access to aspects of postwar German life that do not always show up in the official public discourse of ‘coming to terms with the past’. For instance, Binnur Babig, who came to Germany from
Turkey as a twenty-five year-old tourist and stayed after marrying a German man, recounts how, before the seminar, she knew ‘as good as nothing about the topic National Socialism,’ except for the tales of German suffering told by her mother-in-law: ‘how the Russians came, how her father was taken away, and what hardship they suffered. She never mentioned that Jews had been persecuted and murdered’.39 Besides this privileged peak into the private sphere – testimony to a persistent discourse of German suffering and Holocaust relativization confirmed by other migrants—the women’s stories also hint at continuities that mark post-National Socialist German society. Aylin Teker, born in Berlin and raised in both Germany and Turkey, describes having a history teacher in the Oberschule who was a ‘wanna-be Hitler,’ and who ‘greeted us sometimes with the Hitler greeting and cursed us that we should go back to Turkey.’40

For several of the refugee women, continuities with the history they investigated hit even closer to home and sometimes produced tensions. For ‘Vijee Z.’, one of two Tamil women from Sri Lanka included in the brochure – each of whom remains anonymous for fear of endangering her family back home – learning about ‘the persecution and annihilation of the Jewish people by the Nazis’ recalls ‘the persecution and murder of the Tamil minority by the government’.41 The other Sri Lankan refugee, ‘Mangala K.’, testifies to a related ‘impression that in my homeland at this time something similar is happening to what happened during World War II’. Mangala K. complains: ‘Nobody knows the truth about Sri Lanka. We don’t have enough possibilities to draw attention to the suffering of our people’.42 Whatever one may make of such comparisons on historical grounds, it is clear from Mangala K.’s testimony as well as that of others from a variety of war-torn locations that the Stadtteilmütter project provides an empowering forum for the articulation of a variety of traumatic histories and that this forum emerges from the engagement of a multi-ethnic collective with Germany’s dark past.

Of course, traumatic histories do not always intersect harmoniously; yet the conflicts that arise can lead to – and indeed may be necessary grounds for – new forms of solidarity. One Stadtteilmütter group’s project on National Socialism took place at the same time as Israel’s 2008–2009 assault on Gaza. Emine Elçi, a religious Kurdish Stadtteilmütter born in Berlin to a family from Turkey, recounts how ‘the time in which our seminar took place was overshadowed by the war between Palestinians and Israelis in Gaza. We talked a lot about that. When Inge Deutschkron [a Holocaust survivor] told us that she had felt accepted for the first time in Israel, we also thought of the Palestinians who suffer under Israeli occupation’. Yet, Elçi also describes how participation in the group’s ‘engagement [Auseinandersetzung] with National Socialism’ has made her more ‘sensitive’ to ‘differentiation’ within groups: ‘At a demonstration during the Gaza War I discovered a flyer from a Jewish group that was against the war. The flyer was signed “Not in our name.” Earlier I wouldn’t have noticed these differences’.43 A similar movement from potential conflict to emergent solidarity took place during the February 2009 public forum shortly after the war, at which the mothers’ film about their trip to Auschwitz was screened.44 A Palestinian woman rose from the audience and asserted that what was happening in Gaza was much worse than what happened to Jews during the Holocaust. Her intervention prompted a Holocaust survivor in the audience to
stand up and challenge her comparison. A tense interchange followed, but led, ultimately, to an agreement between the two women to begin a Jewish/Muslim discussion group to address such competitive memories.

As these examples begin to illustrate, the echoes and aftereffects of National Socialism do not only manifest themselves in continuities of exclusion and violence, even if struggles for recognition persist due to ongoing conflicts and an unequal distribution of public attention to violent histories. The mothers also offer insights into unacknowledged, already existing memory work that breaks the bounds of ethnicized identity via cross-ethnic solidarity and intergenerational transmission.

For instance, Havva Jürgensen, whom we mentioned for her account of the double bind afflicting migrant subjects of Holocaust memory, describes growing up in Berlin’s Wedding neighborhood with Jewish neighbors who gave her a copy of Anne Frank’s diary as a gift. Like many Germans, this migrant subject ‘first concerned [herself] intensively’ with the Nazi genocide through the television series *Holocaust* in the late 1970s (53). Decades later, she describes how her involvement with the *Stadtteilmütter* project has led to new forms of prosthetic, postmemorial transmission: ‘The impressions from the seminars often had aftereffects that lasted for days. Sometimes, as I was cooking in the evening, I still thought about the experiences of the seminar, a visit to a memorial site, a film, a conversation, a document. Then tears would roll down my face, something that my twelve-year old son would sometimes notice. Because of that I often also talked with him about the seminar’.

Feeling addressed by some of the most canonical popular texts of Holocaust memory, having had everyday neighborly exchanges with German Jewish survivors, taking part in dialogue with an Israeli survivor about the ‘possibilities for cohabitation among Jews and Arabs in Israel’, and passing on a history not considered her own to her son, Havva Jürgensen is in some ways the prototype of the ethical secondary witness of traumatic history. Like many of the mother’s self-portraits, her story is fascinating both for its ordinariness and for the insight it gives into the multidirectional transmission of memory that has taken place in Germany throughout the decades of the most active Holocaust remembrance, albeit with scant official recognition.

**Conclusion: Being-in-Common, Between Thick and Thin**

From artists like Hans Haacke to community organizations like the *Stadtteilmütter* and the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, by way of writers like Zafer Şenocak, comedians like Serdar Somuncu, and scholars like Taner Akçam, a panoply of actors from across the spectrum of German society and beyond has been performing Holocaust memory in contexts marked by migration. At an empirical level, we can see that their acts and narratives give the lie to the assumptions that underwrite the paradoxes and double binds constituting German Holocaust memory up until now: remembrance of the Holocaust in Germany need not ‘prolong’ the ethnicized notion of German identity if migrants are recognized as already bearing and transmitting memory of Germany’s recent past, even memory articulated in the intimate sphere of the family.

The non-organic nature of such remembrance and transmission is not an aberration, but rather something closer to the norm: as generational change continues to...
distance all Germans from the National Socialist past, migrant subjectivity vis-à-vis national history might become a model for how to remember and retain responsibility for a nation’s past crimes. The Stadtteilmütter as a group also offer the image of a new kind of collective that we would suggest more accurately describes the relation between memory and identity than models derived from theorists of collective memory like Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora in which individuals may be defined by multiple group memories, but groups remain bounded and homogenous containers. The Stadtteilmütter teach us that the turn toward transcultural and transnational remembrance in current scholarship demands a rethinking of the subjects of cultural and collective memory.

In particular, the Stadtteilmütter represent an example of collective memory that undoes a key opposition that structures much thinking in memory studies today, even when it is not explicitly evoked, and has important implications for conceiving collectivity more broadly. To give one indicative example: in the last pages of her excellent survey of memory discourses from Plato to the present, Anne Whitehead references Avishai Margalit’s ‘distinction between “thick” and “thin” relations. For him, “thick relations” connect those with a shared past, and “thin relations” connect those who are strangers or remote to each other’. Although recognizing, along with Margalit, the potential advantages of a more global, ‘thin’ memory, Whitehead closes by arguing that ‘the most promising work on collective memory seems to be that which is concerned with more intimate, “thick” relations,’ and she suggests that ‘smaller, more intimately connected groups appear to constitute more “natural” communities for collective remembering’.47 The Stadtteilmütter do not fit easily into this schema: while they represent a relatively intimate group whose relations could be described as thick, they in no way straightforwardly possess a ‘shared past.’ Indeed, their example problematizes the very notion of what constitutes a shared past and reveals that, even though Whitehead is self-conscious about the notion of a ‘natural’ community – she places scare quotes around the word ‘natural’– the logic of Margalit’s argument, and thus her own, does indeed reproduce organicist assumptions.

The key assumption underlying organicist notions of memory is that thickness of social relations requires a common history – an assumption that also structures the German paradox we have discussed here and that we can therefore see as linked to ethnicized notions of identity. These issues are equally relevant to the Stadtteilmütter project and the debate about Haacke’s DER BEVÖLKERUNG. Indeed, the scholarly debate sparked by Haacke’s installation, which ran parallel to the public debate, concerned precisely the question of whether ‘the population’ could be a political category along the lines of ‘the people’. The political theorist Chantal Mouffe, for instance, questioned whether ‘population’ could ever attain the thickness made possible by ‘identification’ with ‘the people’: ‘The Bevölkerung is not a political category’, she declared.48 But the performances of memory fostered by both DER BEVÖLKERUNG and the Stadtteilmütter project take place between people and population, between thick and thin, and thus suggest the coming into being of new kinds of political actors. These new actors are the expression at the level of the subject of what Murat Aydemir and Alex Rotas call ‘migratory settings’: contexts in which place is ‘thickened’, in their terms, through ‘the variegated memories,
imaginations, dreams, fantasies, nightmares, anticipations, and idealizations that experiences of migration, of both migrants and native inhabitants, bring into contact with each other.’

The Stadtteilmütter produce thick relations without shared ethnicity. Furthermore, the mothers allow us to rethink what counts as ‘thin’ relations. Diner’s articulation of the German paradox suggests that non-ethnic citizenship would entail an abstract and thin relation to national identity that would be incapable of memory and therefore responsibility for the past. But the Stadtteilmütter do not fit this depiction either. In fact, their mode of belonging and their forms of memory are neither simply thick and ethnic, like the Volk, nor thin and abstract, like the Bevölkerung: they are embodied, collective, and affectively powerful, but not bounded and limited. Their performative form of citizenship derives from being-in-common, not common being, to borrow a distinction from Jean-Luc Nancy. To be clear: our argument is not that migrants ‘naturally’ possess a relationship to the past based on being-in-common instead of common being. Migratory settings ought to challenge notions of common being, but often, instead, entrench them, among both migrant and autochthonous populations. Rather, the collective subject of memory the Stadtteilmütter represent is created in the group itself – a group, it is worth recalling, in part facilitated by majority Germans and thus the result of collaboration across the spectrum of the German ‘population.’ This collective practice suggests that memory does not emerge out of formal citizenship or ethnic identity. To the contrary, we conclude, substantive citizenship and political identity are the result of a fidelity to the past that is cultivated and performed in common in the present.

Notes

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3 In using the term ‘migrants’ [Migranten/ Migrantinnen] rather than ‘immigrants’, which is more common in the Anglo-American context, we adopt a grassroots self-designation that emerged in West Germany in the 1980s in response to the dominant label ‘foreigner’ [Ausländer].

4 In bringing together the concepts of ‘the people’ and ‘the population’, the work evokes central issues in political theory, including Habermas’s notion of ‘constitutional patriotism’, Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism, and Seyla Benhabib’s work on citizenship in a transnational age. See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, The Postnational...


6 ‘Jewish’ and ‘Turkish’ are not mutually exclusive categories, of course. On Turkish-Jews living in 1930s Europe, a number of whom became victims of the Nazis because of Turkish state policies towards their own citizens, see Cory Guttsstadt, Die Türkei, die Juden und der Holocaust (Berlin: Assoziation A, 2008).

7 On the recasting of ‘Turks’ into ‘Muslims’ and its larger implications see Yasemin Yıldız, ‘Turkish Girls, Allah’s Daughters, and the Contemporary German Subject: Itinerary of a Figure’, German Life and Letters, 62:3 (2009), pp.465–481.


9 On multidirectional memory, see Michael Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). The claim that migrants are not interested in German history and the Holocaust is made frequently in popular discourse. For a scholarly argument along those lines, see Gilad Margalit, ‘On Being Other in Post-Holocaust Germany. German Turkish Intellectuals and the German Past’, Tel-Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte, 38 (2009), pp.209–32.


11 For the emergence of Holocaust memory as a point of orientation for Europeanizing and universalizing notions of human rights, see Daniel Levy and Natan Szaider, The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

12 By ‘migrant archives’ we do not primarily mean existing document collections or their places of storage. The texts and practices that form the basis of our analysis here have not been collected in any single institutional location (although archives of migrant life exist in Germany, as elsewhere: see, e.g., DOMiD: Dokumentationszentrum und Museum über die Migration in Deutschland e.V. <http://www.domid.org/index.html>). Rather, our paradoxical concept of ‘migrant archives’ is meant to evoke a realm of (trans) cultural memory that does not easily fit into Aleida Assmann’s otherwise useful distinction between an ‘actively circulated memory that keeps the past present as the canon and the passively stored memory that preserves the past as the archive’. Migrant practices of memory are neither canonical nor comprehensively stored in official political or historical archives, but they do circulate widely,
even if they are not recognized by national memory cultures; access to ‘migrant archives’ thus requires a transversal approach that gathers together traces of memory work distributed across realms of culture and everyday life. Without doubt, such an approach proves fruitful beyond the contexts discussed here: as we will argue in our conclusion, migrant memory may provide a useful model for all study of cultural memory. See Aleida Assmann, ‘Canon and Archive’, in Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook, eds, Astrid Erli and Ansar Nunning (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), p.98.


17 For more on Şenocak’s argument and its implications for Holocaust memory and the ‘question of difference’ in contemporary Germany, see Rita Chin, Heide Fehrenbach, Geoff Eley, and Atina Grossman, After the Nazi Racial State, pp.131–6. See also Leslie A. Adelson, The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature, and Leslie A. Adelson’s introduction to her translation of Şenocak’s Atlas of a Tropical Germany, pp. xi–xxvii.


20 Dan Diner, ‘Nation, Migration, and Memory’, p.306.

21 For further discussion of this issue, see A. Dirk Moses, German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. p.17.

22 Astrid Messerschmidt, Weltbilder und Selbstbilder, p.144.


24 For more on this issue, see Jutta Weduwen, ‘Was haben Neuköllner Migrantinnen mit der Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus zu tun?’, in Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste, Neuköllner Stadtteilmitte, p.12.

25 In assembling these traces we draw on the work of Kader Konuk, who was one of the first scholars to begin making this constellation visible. As both Konuk and Adelson note, literary works emerging from Turkish migration began to address German national history – specifically, the Holocaust – in more sustained form in the 1990s, making this a distinctly post-unification phenomenon. It remains to be investigated how much migrant memory work took place in other realms in pre-unification East and West Germany. See Kader Konuk, ‘Taking on German and Turkish History’, p.233–234; and Leslie A. Adelson, The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature, p.85.


27 On the significance of Armenian references in Turkish-German literature (whether written in Turkish or in German) see also Konuk, who sketches how the writings of Şenocak, Akhanlı, and Germany-based Turkish-language author Kemal Yaılın configure genocidal German and Turkish histories. Kader Konuk, ‘Taking on German and Turkish History, pp.247–51.
In Germany, Akçam was affiliated with the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and went on to earn his doctorate at the University of Hannover with a dissertation on the Armenian genocide. He is currently a professor in the Department of History at Clark University, where he is associated with the Strassler Family Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. See his Clark homepage: http://www.clarku.edu/departments/history/facultybio.cfm?id = 722&progid = 172&.

The context of discussing Şenocak’s novel, Adelson likewise notes the fact that Akçam’s academic migration story suggests ‘more entangled histories’ (pp.200–201n118).

Partridge, for instance, offers a critical account of the ‘gap that is being produced between Holocaust memorialization and the recognition of contemporary racisms’. See Damani Partridge, ‘Holocaust Mahnmal (Memorial)’, p.827.


Our account of the project derives from the brochure, the film, and attendance at one of the mothers’ public forums. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in this section are taken from Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste, Neuköllner Stadtteilmütter (brochure). The film, Aus unserer Sicht: Stadtteilmütter auf den Spuren der Geschichte nach Auschwitz, was produced in 2009 by Kiezfilme. The Stadtteilmütter have attracted some attention for their social welfare work, but we think their less well known historical engagement is one of the most crucial and original aspects of their program and one of the most suggestive for rethinking citizenship. See also the brief and sympathetic discussion of this aspect of their project in Damani Partridge, ‘Holocaust Mahnmal (Memorial)’, pp.842–4.

This refusal of victim discourse appears to be characteristic, since, as Adelson stresses, ‘Germany’s resident Turks have not appropriated a universal rhetoric of victimization or pursued a victim-based politics of identity’ (p.191n25).

Besides Adelson, Bodemann and Yurdakul, Mandel, and Peck consider critically the identificatory and analogical rhetoric of Turks as the ‘new Jews.’

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