Queer Memory and Black Germans

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In "The German Catechism," Dirk Moses offers an interesting intervention by challenging the idea of the Holocaust's uniqueness as well as current debates about the Holocaust and its connection to German colonialism, especially the Namibian genocide (1904-08). He also addresses the stifled debates surrounding antisemitism, Israel, and Palestine. In making his argument, Moses uses five points to explore Germans' abilities to come to terms with their genocidal past and how that past has shaped subsequent postwar efforts at state (re)building, national identity, belonging, and restitution. Postcolonial scholars such as Paul Gilroy, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire have long acknowledged the interconnections among colonialism, antisemitism, racism, and the Holocaust. Moses even references the latter two theorists in his piece. I applaud some of his intellectual provocations as well as the other contributors in this exciting forum (i.e. Frank Biess, Alon Confino, Bill Niven, Zoe Samudzi, Helmut Walser Smith, Johannes von Moltke, etc.). Together, they not only force us to grapple with these histories and our own positionalities, but they affirm how subjective (and not value-free) the production and dissemination of knowledge really is.

As much as I welcome debate, I am left pondering what is exactly new about Moses's claims given that Black (queer) women in Germany examined the Holocaust and memory politics since the 1980s often outside of academic institutions and mainstream debates; sadly, a dynamic that is still common today. There were (and remain) racialized communities in Germany who used the Holocaust as a point of reference for opening up public dialogues about discrimination and systemic racism. They did so in their community and in their own publications, constructing a new public sphere. This was not taken up in the mainstream; it still isn't today. Where are the voices of those individuals in these German debates past and present? This is also striking considering that those same communities demonstrated in their cultural and political work how "Memories are not owned by groups—nor are groups owned by memories. Rather, the borders of memory and identity are jagged"—a point stressed in Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), which is encountering criticism in today's Germany, but which has propelled analysis of the complex, overlapping layers of memory at play in the postwar years. If *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* is such a fundamental feature of postwar German society, where are the perspectives from Black German, Turkish German, and Romani communities? Why don't we know them and why aren't they shaping the debate? The latter group was not officially recognized as victims of the Third Reich until 1982. It is the first group I will focus on in further detail below.

As a scholar of Black German and Black Europe, I decenter whiteness by showing how these racialized communities opened up new ways of being, knowing, and thinking about some of the fundamental issues we hold important today. It is here where Black Germans and other Black diasporic individuals gave (and still give) us examples of a queer memory—queer as in layered and multifaceted—that was inherently multidirectional. As the literature scholar Fatima El-Tayeb wrote in *European Others* (2011), Black Germans created a "[queer] memory discourse that is not built on linear notions of roots or authentic origins, but on the grounding of a community embracing its 'inauthentic,' fractured nature rather than resolving it through a projected, unambiguous past" (43-44). They shared counter-memories that challenged the hegemonic politics of mainstream German history and rejected German national memory formations as organic, natural, and homogeneous. In addition, their approach did not advocate

for a competition or a type of "Oppression Olympics," where one group is afforded a gold medal in oppression and the other group a bronze. Their approach rejected linearity and simplistic understandings of the past. Black Germans knew that power was exercised through the production of national narratives and the construction of multiple silences and that subalterns' memories were always subjected to assumptions, memories, and generalizations by the majority. (For more on how power operates in processes of remembering the past and producing histories in the present, one might look to Michel Rolph-Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* (1995/2015), Gayatri Spivak's *In Other Words* (1987), and Joan Wallach Scott's *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988/2018).

Centering their pasts and excavating their overlooked narratives, Black Germans catalyzed their movement through the establishment of two Black German grassroots organizations: the Initiative of Black People (*Initiative Schwarze Deutsche*, ISD) and Afro-German women (*Afro**de**utsche **Fra**uen*, ADEFRA). ISD is now called the Initiative of Black People in Germany, and ADEFRA is now called the Black Women in Germany. In local ISD and ADEFRA chapters, members led pronounced efforts of meaning making by organizing events and producing numerous cultural works. They explored their intersecting histories (of colonialism, migration, and integration) and interrogated German practices of othering and non-belonging across what Michelle M. Wright calls *spacetimes*, sometimes in but also beyond Germany; Wright linked time to space beyond linear framings. In this way, the past remained an integral part of their work.

In my monograph *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement* (2020), I refer to Black Germans as quotidian intellectuals who knew that how we conceive of the past shapes the present and the future. Quotidian intellectuals such as May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, Helga Emde, and Ricky Reiser, created a new Black public sphere that facilitated discussions about the power of coloniality, the persistence of racism, and Black Germans' historical erasure. In doing so, they emphasized the nature of discrimination and race in everyday Germany and made it critical to their activism and outreach.

"Memory's anachronistic quality," as Rothberg wrote, "its bringing together of now and then, here and there—is actually the source of powerful creativity, its ability to build new worlds out of the materials of older ones" (5). Indeed, this "powerful creativity" enabled Black Germans like Ayim to use Holocaust memories to address parallel violent practices of power and exclusion in postwar Germany; she did not diminish the significance of the Holocaust, colonialism, or decolonization in her work. I use Ayim, who was one of the most prominent Black German activists and writers before her untimely death in 1996, to demonstrate that she saw her, other Black Germans', and Germans' of Color conditions as connected to the German (Nazi) past, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall or the post-Wende period. It was a historical moment that saw the reunification of both Germanies and the reemergence of an ethno-nationalism that targeted foreign immigrants and non-white Germans alike. But as we'll see, she realized that structures of racism did not dissipate after 1945, 1961, or 1989 but remained core features of German society in the present day.

Ayim addresses this point in "deutschland in herbst"/"autumn in Germany," which was published in her 1996 poetry volume *blues in schwarz weiss* (82-83), where she takes up the continuation of Nazi violence and ideology in the present. Her vision of a united Germany was far from positive or hopeful. It was a vision of Germany that symbolized its sustained history of exclusion and racial persecution. She references "the shattered windowpanes" during Kristallnacht in 1938/39 and notes how this violence

certainly repeated itself with the right-wing murder of the Angolan contract worker Antonio Amadeu Kiowa in 1990. Kiowa became one of the first victims of racial violence in reunified Germany. His death signaled a rise in xenophobic attacks across Germany, where the cost for German homogeneity was deadly. I also briefly discuss this moment in my book. But here, silences in both 1938 and 1990 around structural racism affirmed the complicity of mainstream white, non-Jewish Germans, and it signaled white, non-Jewish Germans' inability to speak out or even acknowledge these discriminatory acts as deeply entrenched in historical and contemporary practices. Ayim also stresses the lateral connections that racialized and sexualized minorities faced in Germany when noting that the "human bones/of jews and blacks/of the weak and the sick/of the Sinti and Roma and/poles of lesbians and gays of and of/" were again subjected to discrimination, and they were positioned as non-human and not belonging in the German nation. This poem represents a queer approach to memory that did not narrate in a single voice but reaches out in new directions thematically, theoretically, methodologically, and historically. Ayim's queer approach was also cognizant of the significance of gender, sexuality, and race in grappling with Germany's past. Her poem as well as others, such as "blues in schwarz weiss," account for the complexity and mutability of memory in shaping histories, identities, and discourses. It is this attentiveness to intersecting identities and histories that reinforces the importance of queer, multidirectional memory.

As a mentor to both Ayim and other Black German women, Caribbean American poet and activist Audre Lorde, who taught at the Free University of Berlin in 1984, also used the Holocaust and her experiences to link antisemitism and racism in Germany and the United States. Again, her poems such as "This Urn Contains Earth from German Concentration Camps" (1984), "East Berlin (1989)," and "Berlin is hard on Colored Girls" (1984) recognized the persecution of others in an increasingly hostile racist climate in Germany. Lorde was disturbed by the limited engagements that white Germans had with their Nazi past and discussed how that past shaped their treatment of non-white Germans, immigrants, and refugees in the present. She also confronted white West German feminists' reticence to integrate more intersectional politics and to pursue racial solidarity in their movement. Her poetry and public readings, much like Ayim's, offer another example of queer memory that takes up the Holocaust as well as other examples of racial persecution to understand the larger intimate connections that racialized communities experience in oppressive German systems.

Both women illustrate the importance of examining how Black diasporic minorities remained attentive to the significant power of the Holocaust for calling out German marginalization and systemic racism. Ayim's and Lorde's solidarity with oppressed people in and beyond Germany complicated notions of belonging and identity. What remains striking to me about them was their ability to push against the boundaries of tradition, authenticity, and cisheteronormativity (cis referring to a heteronormativity based on the presumed confluence of born sex and gender presentation). In doing so, they showed how German memory was queer, multidirectional, and radical, which allowed them to chart new directions for memory politics and, of course, for themselves.

Ultimately, Dirk Moses's interventions reveal the need for more intersectional approaches in German Studies that account for the multidirectional nature of memory and identity. Scholars from the Global North, in particular, must recognize how complicated different temporalities and geographies of memory functioned in the postwar period. This is why an approach that is attentive to intersectionality must also engage with Black diasporic subjects in the past and present in these larger debates. Doing so does not drain the Holocaust of its meaning; instead it underscores its power for diverse people in search of

restitution and reparative justice.

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