

Ends and Beginnings

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In this final entry on the debate, Jennifer Evans uses storytelling and positionality to make a case for ways in which we can learn from Indigenous methodologies and knowledge formations to think about histories of mass violence and genocide. Evans uses this frame deliberately, along with the examples of two survivors of genocide, as an example of the fruitfulness of parallel frameworks and interdisciplinarity for the way they capture both the enormity and distinctiveness of victim experience.

All we are are the stories we tell.

— Leroy Little Bear

It has been a little over three weeks since *Geschichte der Gegenwart* (GdG) published Dirk Moses's catechism polemic and just under two since the *New Fascism Syllabus* (NFS) began running daily blog responses from scholars and writers inside and outside Germany. As those who have followed along here already know, the conversation has gone in vastly different directions. In the German press, however, the focus has been singular, and puzzling. Where these 19 blogs have made the case for nuance, for complexity, and for criticism, for bringing scholarship and expertise to bear on different parts of Moses's claims, the press account has not reflected the various sides to this debate—and there are a great many sides.

As the person behind the posts, I thought I would take this opportunity to weigh in from my vantage about what I hoped this blog series might accomplish as a collective forum and experiment, and where I hope things might go from here.

For the reader who is new to our site, the NFS is a project that came into being in a moment of crisis in the weeks and months following Donald Trump's election in 2016. Started by University of Iowa professor Lisa Heineman and myself and joined by Brian J Griffith—an expert on Italian fascism—it grew into a crowdsourced collection of resources to help journalists and citizens better navigate the news cycle with access to scholarly research and public writing around populism, the authoritarian turn, and historical as well as contemporary fascisms. Its mandate is to promote informed conversation based on the sharing of scholarly expertise in a public venue. But this doesn't explain why the NFS would intervene in a debate around German memory politics today.

The answer to that question is personal as well as professional, as these things often are. And it requires a story.

Today, I am a scholar of German and European history, who writes on the history of sexuality, specifically queer history, and oversees several collaborative big data projects in critical communications studies around how harmful speech becomes normalized as legitimate discourse in social media.

But I was once a curious Canadian student, drawn to West Germany in the late 1980s on a quest to learn more about how a country steeped in history and culture could have perpetrated the tragedy of the

Shoah, together with the targeting of different social and racial minorities, and the mass dislocation of millions of innocent people. For a year, I lived in the Hanseatic city of Bremen, shuffling between four host families, merchants, lawyers, schoolteachers, good, charitable people with their own stories to tell. And it was there that I first learned about how Germans struggled to come to terms with their past.

There was much that I loved about Germany. The empty flagpoles, the disavowal of patriotic rhetoric and symbols, buildings pock-marked with bullet holes—all stark reminders that the past still haunted the present. Unlike at home, in Bremen history was inescapable, etched into the landscape everywhere I looked.

A history of violence was in my midst as well, only I didn't see it yet. I grew up in a working-class family in London Ontario, a city also on the river Thames, made infamous this past week for the Islamophobic killing of a family of four, whose only crime was believing they might venture out for an evening walk. I grew up believing what many Canadians still believe today, that we are a country of polite citizens, with a commitment to liberal democracy and the social contract. We take pride in our policy on multiculturalism, with two official languages and many more spoken in homes across the nation. As American and European friends liked to suggest these last few years as trouble brewed south of the border, we were a success story in a world of increasing ethnic, nationalist, religious, and linguistic strife. That this was occupied and stolen land seems not to have tarnished this image, even after the gruesome discovery of the unmarked graves of 215 Indigenous children this past month, buried on the grounds of a residential school in British Columbia. Our past is with us too. Only given the shock expressed by some of this country's citizens, it is not one that is fully appreciated, still.

When I traveled to Germany in 1987, I believed this same story. I wasn't a proud Canadian by any sense—the language of pride in nation was not yet a thing. What resonated with me most about the Germany I encountered then was this reluctance, fear—maybe even disdain—of patriotism as a public act. I said as much to one of my host parents, that it was perhaps my greatest marvel, only to be surprised at her response: “Why must we Germans constantly atone for our past when you have never even begun?”

Of course, she was absolutely correct. My country was nowhere close to unpacking the continued violence of settler colonialism. Residential schools built to “take the Indian out of the child” would stay in operation until 1996. In any major city, then as now, Indigenous youth loiter on street corners and languish in disproportionate numbers in foster care, while murdered and missing women remain unaccounted for by police services nationwide, neglected but more often than not simply ignored. Absolutely, we had a lot to account for. We still do.

But her words rang in my ears another way. I heard the desperation at having to be held accountable, the self-loathing for being part of unconscionable violence in the first place, and I heard too, just a hint, that the hard work of atoning quite possibly had been done. As we know from these contributions here, in this series, the work of remembering is never over. As Zoe Samudzi, Tiffany Florvil, and Mirjam Brusius showed us, for some groups, it has barely even begun.

I took back with me to Canada the rawness of that conversation. It guided me in my studies those next several years as I learned more about the role of race science, eugenics, and antisemitism in wartime, mechanized killing, and the different way East and West Germans processed these crimes. I became even more curious about what people and communities do in often quiet ways to work through and write their

own stories.

That cross-cultural encounter with Germany's history of perpetration and remembering was existential for me. Suddenly, I saw racial inequality everywhere. It was engraved in historical plaques that wrote out the deep history of Indigenous peoples. It was featured in street names and on government buildings. My own elementary school was named after Sir. Winston Churchill, and our sports teams the British Bulldogs. It was alive and well in my own family, in "innocent" jokes and "funny" asides. To draw on a different book by Michael Rothberg, whose arguments have also surfaced in the debate here, I was implicated in a history of violence and inequality that continues into the present day. It became my professional calling to address this in my writing and work, to widen the scope of historical inquiry to include different voices and experiences of discrimination but also agency, to disrupt what we think we already know with tales of what has yet to be.

In other words, this encounter with what Marianne Hirsch calls postmemory occasioned a reckoning with other forms and vectors of violence. It didn't relativize the enormity of the Shoah by thinking about it in tandem with other genocides. It augmented its force and meaning. Just as the Holocaust gave the world a lexicon for how to recognize crimes against humanity, even if some countries, like my own, still eschew the word genocide despite evidence of its applicability, so too did it give me an index with which to gauge my own implication in the course of white supremacy. By recognizing the tenacity of its hold, we sharpen our senses to its work historically as well as today. As Dutch-Surinamese feminist Gloria Wekkers instructs us with examples from another successful democracy, any presumption of our own progressivism is not just a privilege, for some it is deadly. There remains much work to be done.

None of what I say here is really that shocking. It has been the stuff of scholarship for many years. And yet it is only recently that these ideas—of pushing at the limits of what we believe we have achieved, what was so hard fought for but which might look differently when explored from other vantages—has somehow become the stuff of backlash and distrust. Regardless of where we come down on the intricacies of the arguments themselves, on the question of continuities in Jürgen Zimmerer's work and multidirectionality in Michael Rothberg's, we should be worried, as a scholarly community, when peer-reviewed research, knowledge, and expertise is being dismissed, misunderstood, or deliberately maligned.

When I first read Moses's shot across the bow in GdG, I sensed that there was a lot of work that might be done with this piece. Across the Atlantic, Neil Gregor thought so too, and when he sent me the first iteration of his blog entry for my thoughts, we agreed it might be a good jumping off point for a larger discussion and debate. I wanted to use the NFS as a place where colleagues might collectively weigh in, in public-facing writing, in a digital public sphere, with all the emotional and affective affordances—as media scholar Zizi Papacharissi has called them—that go along with social media. Drawing together scholars from across disciplines and generation, from different points in their career trajectory, with different stakes at play, my aim was to tease out the complexities that seemed to be flattened out in mainstream news. And this has borne out.

Unlike in the legacy press, on this site these last weeks—and thanks to the tireless translation efforts of Svenja Goltermann and Philipp Sarasin also in German in GdG—colleagues have shown us the work that scholarship does and can do in providing much-needed critical thinking on this issue of how Germany's memory culture has evolved these last decades. Respondents here have spoken to problems

with Moses's frame (Gregor, Fitzpatrick, Greenberg, Niven, Smith, Braslavsky, Port) and to the emphasis on certain political realities over others (von Moltke, Haeberlen, Wilke). They have shown the ways in which Holocaust memory has been drawn upon to help legitimize other human rights struggles (Florvil, Tremblay, Biess), and when it seems to have failed to humanize Germans to the pain of others (Confino, Samudzi, Brusius, Wolff, Makdisi, Davison).

This has generated much conversation across social media platforms, in Germany as well as in the United Kingdom and North America (some of it heated to be sure). It has allowed a simple website to have some influence, however small, on the tenor of national debate. This might be shocking to consider for some, but for others it offers a tangible opportunity to shape the terms of reference in important and meaningful ways. It is an example of the potent and sometimes anarchic nature of digital connectivity and what media scholar Andrew Hoskins calls connective memory, a rapidly changing media engagement with national pasts that puts our digital networks front and centre. With modest hopes for shaping civic literacy through representation and information equality, it is, or might aspire to be a democratic practice.

But here too these networks are at once personal as well as digital. For me and my work curating this conversation, these two were inseparable, as was the emotional impact of the original piece by Moses and the sentiments it unleashed. We see this sprinkled throughout all of these texts. What we don't see are the countless hours behind the scenes I and others spent, steeped in discussion. I could not have done any of this without the help and input of so many others.

There is so much to think through here. Unlike other debates, the fact that this took place online has meant alongside the written archive, we have generated tons of social data that can likewise add to our thinking. We can map out empirically the reach of certain voices over others, see in the datasets whose perspectives loomed largest, had more of a footprint, and travelled furthest. The data might even shock some of us accustomed as we are to certain voices as authoritative with others vying to be heard. Whose voices are really dominating, and whose are overlooked? In the spirit of Open Access, I've made some of this data available for folks to take a look themselves.

What we can say with some persuasiveness at this point in the thick of things is that while the mainstream media in Germany has been slow to take up the lessons of scholarly interventions like these outside of its physical borders, even as they are penned by internationally trained, multi-lingual experts with feet in many different academic communities, online initiatives like these offer much in the way of collaborative thinking, claims making, and alternative ways into a subject. The Internet is not a passive medium. It challenges conventional structures and undoes more hierarchical and centralized forms of organization and even thinking. In these last few weeks, it has hosted a rich (sometimes frustrating) multi-faceted discussion of Holocaust history and memory activism that takes up the question of continuity and comparison in important new ways.

In these posts, we have pursued a much-needed exchange about how to put the lessons of the Holocaust in conversation with the legacies of colonialism, the Nakba, anti-Black racism, and contemporary human rights struggles. We might pause, after reading these submissions, and ask what it means that what passes for critical discourse outside Germany's borders can lead to charges of obfuscation and worse, antisemitism, within them? Regardless of where we might stand on the pressing political matters facing our world today, surely we can agree that the cynicism towards scholarship and the policing of dissent is

not only counterproductive but a dangerous outgrowth of the challenging times we live in. We can and must expect more.

Here too, social media might play a productive role. As much as it is often maligned, I am struck by the lessons we might take away from participatory media itself, about the power of collegiality and of mutual support, and our common quest for nuance and informed debate. Despite the fact that we may be accused of speaking past one another sometimes, we also find ways to navigate differences in the name of critical *Ausseinandersetzung* to use one of my favourite German words for “pulling or wresting apart” ideas we might not care for or understand. Social media can be a place where we argue with passion and conviction in public and for the public with the tools we have at our disposal. As this debate has shown, too, it can be a site of recalcitrance, but it was always my hope that we would not lose sight of the fact that social media might also foster an ethics of attentiveness (Claudia Breger), of thinking, of working, and reacting together to argument. As it turns out, listening and dialogue can be a radical project.

Of course it isn't perfect—far from it—and it does not replace sober scholarly interventions. But it can be a site of critical intervention, a place where scholars (and activists) meet one another and are shaped too by the act of going there.

I draw to a close this online forum with one final example of the power of diverse pasts for reconciling with troubling presents. It takes the form of friendship, of listening across divides, of telling difficult stories with a sense of urgency and implication in the face of forgetting, with the hope of reconciliation and learning from each other. It is a practice of living and working “in good relation” as Indigenous feminists teach us, of being responsible to ourselves and our communities, to remain committed to finding new ways to address the erasures of mass violence, while generating knowledge, connections, relationships and ideas for how to work collectively and collaboratively towards a better world and life.

Until a few weeks ago, I had hoped to host a very special event in Ottawa during the Lessons and Legacies conference on Holocaust history. It was to be an evening with two survivors, who shared in different ways the trauma of white supremacy and genocide. This conversation was to be between Ted Fontaine, former Sagkeeng chief, pillar of Manitoba's First Nations communities and residential school survivor and Nate Leipziger, born in Chorzów, Poland, interned at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and fellow Canadian. It would have been an opportunity for us to hear how people find strength in their shared stories, mindful of the differences that indelibly marked who these men were as victims of genocide. At some point, through education and advocacy networks, they had learned of each other's experiences of racial inequality and sexual abuse. They met, became fast friends, and opted to share in each other's suffering in public events to reinforce the urgency of thinking capaciously about state sanctioned violence, even on the most personal of levels. For many years and for many reasons, men—to say nothing of women—were not encouraged to speak about these experiences. When they did, rarely were their stories taken up in the historical register. Ted passed away a few weeks ago, but this legacy lingers on, of asking us to grapple with difficult questions, of situating ourselves in the stories we tell, of doing so mindfully as well as critically, to see the interconnected ways in which history envelops us all, makes us uncomfortable, and pushes us to make good on its teachings. Let that be the lesson of critical conversation in difficult times. Let that be the takeaway here too, that we are implicated in each other's struggles and in our responsibility to ourselves and our publics to do better.

Thank you for reading. Thank you for following along, and thank you for participating in this arena.

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