

UC Berkeley

TRANSIT

Title

Multidirectional Memory and Verwobene Geschichte(n)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3j368484>

Journal

TRANSIT, 12(1)

Authors

Attia, Iman
Rothberg, Michael

Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.5070/T7121043486

Copyright Information

Copyright 2019 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

***Multidirectional Memory and Verwobene Geschichte(n)* [Entangled (Hi)stories]**

A Conversation between Iman Attia and Michael Rothberg

TRANSIT vol. 12, no. 1

This conversation between the German critical race theorist Iman Attia and the American memory studies scholar Michael Rothberg originally appeared in German in a special issue of the journal *Neue Rundschau* (190.2 [2018]). Edited by Manuela Bauche and Sharon Dodua Otoo, the issue, “Geschichte Schreiben” [Writing History], was dedicated to exploring non-hegemonic ways of narrating the past, especially from the perspectives of people of color. The editors asked Attia and Rothberg to discuss their contributions to the reimagining of history and memory, with particular emphasis on Attia’s project “Verwobene Geschichte(n)” (<http://www.verwobenegeschichten.de>) and Rothberg’s concept of “multidirectional memory.” The bilingual dialogue took place over email during the course of winter 2017-2018 with Attia drafting her comments in German and Rothberg writing in English.

IMAN ATTIA: Memory culture and historiography are never fixed, not even when they serve to uphold the status quo. Writing down memories and narrating history are always informed by highly competitive interests, and therefore always in flux. Currently there is quite a bit of movement in German cultural memory and historiography. The stories of communities of color and movements of marginalized people which are mostly not represented or misrepresented in public historiography and memory, but are often passed along in other ways and other spaces, are gradually finding their (roundabout) way into professional, medial, and everyday discourses. A long time passed before each of the silenced memories and adjusted stories was heard and could no longer be ignored, until the desire to know about them began growing within others and bore fruit.

Initially, it was not a given to share the story of the Shoah and to perceive and carry it into public spheres as a history of persecution and genocide of Jews in Germany and Europe. In the face of opposition and threats, continuous efforts and struggles ensured that Shoah history and related memory were included in curricula, museums, and the field of history and memory culture. These attempts also allowed for the narratives of survivors and their descendants to be heard and recognized. Today students cannot avoid grappling with the persecution and genocide of European Jews; in many places in contemporary cityscapes this memory is present and professional and public debates are being elaborated. And yet, there is still much to be explored and discussed, differentiated and adapted to various contexts. Dominant society attempts to discard its history of persecution and genocide, search for perpetrators among (Muslim) migrants, and end the

entanglement with their own history—at least from the standpoint of the perpetrators, bystanders and profiteers.

It also took significant time and action on the part of the Sinti and Romani Civil Rights Movement until they were finally, even if only partially, heard. Hunger strikes, the occupation of institutions, exhibitions, and so much more were necessary until the genocide of the European Sinti and Roma was recognized and received commemorative memorialization. The Porajmos, i.e. the genocide, began to be cautiously discussed in schools and in the media. These efforts and struggles also allowed for the funding of projects that engaged with the Porajmos, and honored the work of the civil rights movement. The movement's main aim was not to write history, fill abstract gaps, or correct misrepresentations within national historiography. Rather, Sinti and Roma wanted to remember their history and revise false or misleading historical narratives in order to receive justice and compensation. Only by proving that they, too, were and continue to be persecuted could they receive at least a small pension as reparation and begin to be able to criticize current discrimination in its historical context, hoping to bring ongoing persecution to an end and to take their rightful place within society. Passing on what they experienced, suffered, and fought for was of particular significance to the families of survivors, but also to the minority as a whole. By no means has everything been said that would be important to speak about in order to understand, to acknowledge, to provide reparations to some extent, and to recognize Sinti and Roma as a legitimate part of society—not to mention ending present-day discrimination and the continuous misrepresentation of Sinti and Roma in European societies.

African communities and Black people in Germany have also been fighting for quite some time for the inclusion of their (hi)stories in historiography and cultural memory, for justice, for reparations, and a critical confrontation with German colonialism and the colonial legacy. One poignant example is the fight for a politically-just renaming of streets which continue to uncritically or affirmatively evoke colonial crimes. These communities are also protesting the establishment of the Berlin Palace and the Humboldt Forum which largely perpetuate colonial practices, rather than using the opportunity of a new, centrally located building and the relocation of an ethnological collection to begin cleaning up the mess. This would include the return of unjustly appropriated items and looted art, the unearthing of what has been silenced or trivialized, and the offering of room for a diverse range of narratives and cultural inheritances. This would also mean revising and apologizing for the wrongs committed—the historical occurrences and the prevailing continuities—by material and political as well as discursive, cultural, and epistemological means.

Sinti and Romani Civil Rights work, begun more than fifty years ago, is slowly beginning to bear small fruit, at least in as far as the process of working through history is concerned. However, these groups continue to face discrimination. Germany's confrontation with colonialism has been timid, but at least it has begun. Other histories and memories, however, remain marginalized or misrepresented. The history of the persecution and exile of Palestinians, many of whom came to Germany, especially to Berlin, is either completely ignored or cast as anti-Semitic. The voices of Arab and Sephardic Jews are rarely present. The histories of Vietnamese, Sudanese, Chileans, and

all the others who have migrated to Germany in the context of global historical events, primarily find consideration—if they find consideration at all—as stories of displacement and migration that have occurred elsewhere and only begin to affect “our” past and present as a result of “their” migration.

German memory culture and historiography have therefore only partly been set in motion. They have begun bringing (hi)stories into the open that have long been invisible or still are. In this way, they bring recognition to particular experiences and narratives—a prerequisite for understanding and reparation, and maybe one day, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Within the context of the pluralization of narratives and memories as well as additions and revisions to memory culture and historiography, new challenges arise. One such challenge is that more stories and memories demand entry into historiography and public memory. All of them are important, and yet, it is difficult for the hegemonic, overwhelmingly national perspective to accept that other perspectives question, contradict, revise, and provincialize the dominant perspective. In addition, starting conditions and terms of negotiation differ: While some remember from privileged positions and solid foundations, others are granted more or less generous spaces, and still others fight from the sidelines in order to be heard at all. In addition to the fight for the recognition of primary, historical discrimination—which is often the focus—there is also the fight for the recognition of secondary historiographical discrimination. The latter is marked by discrimination based on historiography and memory culture, as well as historical- and memory politics which silence and misrepresent individuals and groups.

Narratives of primary and secondary discrimination are important to those who previously have not been seen or heard, who demand a place in society and have already begun to claim it. They are, however, met by privileged discontent about having to repeatedly listen to more and more marginalized stories, rather than finally looking ahead. As the memories and standpoints from which narratives are told pluralize, interpretations collide, thereby competing with and contradicting one another. They also connect and relate to each other and challenge the demarcation of borders between historical events and racialized groups. What should be remembered and how, what should be conveyed or remain hidden, what is worth reconstructing, maintaining, and presenting, the ways in which (hi)stories entangle and yet develop differently—these are the questions raised in contentious debates. The pluralizing and interweaving of memories has led to an intervention in hegemonic historiography in which conflicts of interest and struggles for power are unavoidable. This is the starting point for various contemporary concepts.

MICHAEL ROTHBERG: As Iman Attia demonstrates, the writing of history and the public commemoration of the past are conflict zones in which questions of recognition manifest themselves against a backdrop of unequal power relations. She highlights particularly the relationship between different racialized minorities and the dominant public memory of the Federal Republic of Germany and notes both the processes of exclusion that have defined that memory and the long and incomplete struggles for inclusion and transformation of the memory field on the part of marginalized

communities. Since my interests in memory are comparative, I will make reference both to the German situation, as well as to other national contexts.

I regularly visit Berlin for extended periods, but I am based in the United States, so let me begin by reflecting on that context. While US-American memory is marked by the same kinds of struggles that characterize German memory in Iman Attia's account, it also has its own particularities.

Although it is a somewhat crude generalization, I think we could say that American public memory is simultaneously more and less "progressive" than that of Germany. On the one hand, the US has a strong tradition of liberal multiculturalism that—despite obvious limitations—makes for a more inclusive memory culture than has yet developed in Germany. Certain versions of the memory of immigration, the memory of civil rights struggles, and other minoritarian memory traditions are central to American memory and identity. Of course, such inclusive practices come with their limits: only the most innocuous versions of such memory are acceptable, and there is a strong risk of appropriation. For example, the memory of the civil rights activism of Martin Luther King, Jr. is regularly coopted as a form of "color-blind" ideology that serves the mistaken and dangerous notion that the US has become "post-racial." More generally, multiculturalism has shown itself to be easily incorporated into a neoliberal politics of diversity that depoliticizes difference and leaves questions of power and inequality out of the equation. Nevertheless, the relative inclusiveness of American memory culture vis-à-vis the German case does indicate something about the democratic potential of US society and the deficits of the German sphere.

On the other hand, however, the Federal Republic possesses something almost entirely absent from the US: a memory culture founded on responsibility for the state's own crimes—or, at least, for a singular and significant crime: the genocide of European Jews. This culture of responsibility took decades to develop, as Iman Attia notes, and it remains flawed in important ways. Yet, for many people around the world, it offers a model of how states can confront difficult pasts and create novel forms of reparation (financial and otherwise) for victims and their descendants. In the US, reparations for slavery remain a fringe idea—albeit one that continues to be debated by activists, intellectuals, and occasionally political figures. Even more absent from public consciousness is confrontation with the nation's other founding crime: the dispossession and genocide of indigenous peoples and the settler colonial state built on stolen land.

This double structure of American memory—simultaneously inclusive in ideology and largely silent on founding crimes and ongoing dispossessions—creates a situation of tension that is somewhat distinct from the one that Iman Attia describes in the German case. While the kinds of binary relations between the state and racialized minorities that Iman Attia describes for Germany are certainly very present in the US, the prominence of a multicultural ideology also opens up a field of cross-minority relationality that is sometimes defined by solidarity, sometimes by conflict, and often by some mixture of the two.

My own work on cultural memory starts by foregrounding such cross-minority relations. When I began writing my book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in*

the Age of Decolonization, I had a strong sense that discussions of memory of the Holocaust—in the US, but also in Europe and elsewhere—were caught in what I called “competitive memory” and the logic of the “zero-sum game.” That is, on the one side were people concerned that any time the Holocaust was evoked in relation to another history that the Holocaust was being “relativized” or even “denied.” On the other side were people who felt that the very evocation of the Holocaust was pushing other historical memories of violence and trauma out of sight. I felt that these two groups shared a mistaken understanding of cultural memory in a general sense and also a very partial understanding of how Holocaust memory had emerged in relation to other historical memories. By focusing on what I called Holocaust memory in “the age of decolonization,” I sought to provide a new account of the emergence of Holocaust memory and a new understanding of the dynamics of memory. While I acknowledge—indeed begin my thinking from—the kinds of hierarchies and power asymmetries that Iman Attia charts so well here, I felt it was necessary to bring into view the productive and often surprising encounters that take place between minority memory traditions and even between dominant and marginal memories *despite asymmetries of power*.

Thus, for example, I show how in France, the emergence of a public memory of the specificity of the Holocaust—around the years of the Eichmann trial—took place in part because of the intensity of the anticolonial struggle over Algeria. I found that even survivors of Nazi camps like Charlotte Delbo decided to bring their personal memories of Auschwitz into the public sphere during and after the Algerian War of Independence, a war that awakened memories of torture, camps, and massacres among many French anticolonial activists (and also some Algerian independence fighters). In an article for the New Left weekly *France-Observateur*, the writer Marguerite Duras went so far as to juxtapose an Algerian worker in his French “ghetto” with a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto—all of this in the context of the massacre by Paris police of peaceful Algerian demonstrators on October 17, 1961. Another observer of the October massacre, the African American novelist William Gardner Smith took things one step farther. Not only did he see links (as well as differences) between the violence of France’s late colonial war and that of the Nazis, he also juxtaposed those racist regimes with racism in the United States. He creates a vision of what I call “three ghettos” which he juxtaposes sympathetically but does not reduce to sameness. Such multidirectional acts of memory need not create equations that erase the particularities of different histories. At their best, they can create new cross-minority solidarities by bringing together differentiated historical memories.

My concept of *multidirectional memory* has been taken up by other scholars and applied in many areas around the globe. It is true, however, that the German context creates particular challenges for the conceptualization and articulation of multidirectional Holocaust memory because of the particular culture of historical responsibility that has developed there.

IMAN ATTIA: Some of the forms of racism mentioned by Michael Rothberg, which are a pivotal part of the historical and current cultural relations of dominance and power in the United States, are also relevant in Germany, although in different ways. Critiques of

racism against indigenous Americans attract little attention in German perception: neither the genocide nor the displacement of Native Americans or First Nations receive adequate attention within historiography, nor is there reflection on ongoing cultural representations that keep racist discourses alive in children's and young adult literature, movies, and Carnival parades. Few in the Federal Republic are aware that there is also a German dimension to slavery, due to Brandenburg-Prussia's participation in the late 17th-century slave trade. Those who are aware often trivialize German involvement in the enslavement of Africans. According to the widespread colonial version of the narrative, slavery is presented as a rescue mission which allowed slaves and others to "purchase" slaves' freedom within German colonies and guaranteed abducted Africans a good life within the German Empire. In the United States and in Germany, some of the forms of racism described by Michael Rothberg therefore originate from the same sources, but adapt to the specific historical contexts and societal conditions, and are evoked in different ways (or not at all).

Concrete, historical entanglement is as significant to each specific memory culture as a nation's concept and construction. As Michael Rothberg notes, the United States' neoliberal and multicultural identity may risk losing sight of inequality and societal power relations, but has the potential for a democratic and inclusive memory culture. In comparison, memory politics and culture within the German context reflect the ways in which the nation is homogenized and difference is externalized or destroyed. Historiography and memory culture are framed by a homogeneous and essentialist concept of nation as *Volk*, made up of people who share a common history, culture, and language. It is not suitable for considering global-historical interdependence, transnational belonging, and contradictory entanglement in ways that honor both the crimes committed in the name of the nation (state) and the (national) community, as well as the multiple and plural experiences and memories of its (national) citizens.

This is where the project *Verwobene Geschichte(n)* [Entangled (Hi)stories] comes into play. We take the entanglement of histories into consideration in two ways: On the one hand, we consider the entanglement of German history with global history—the latter is generally considered external to national(ist) historiography and narratives and can at best affect the nation as it relates to migration flows. We focus on the global-historical dimensions of events because we are especially interested in (hi)stories that are entangled with German history and can be shared within local social spaces or by engaging the biographies of people of color. On the other hand, we interweave often separately researched- and narrated stories with each other, and search not only for specifics but also for historical continuities between and ruptures within events. We ask about common experiences, referring to both shared and divided experiences, and methods of dealing with them. Narratives and biographies, which problematize rigid categories of racial belonging and the historical events connected to those categories, work well because they allow for the visibility of multiple, hyphenated, and intersectional identities at different moments and locations.

Verwobene Geschichte(n) differs in part from Michael Rothberg's *multidirectional memory* concept, but there are also parallels and overlaps between the two. Essentially, *Verwobene Geschichte(n)* looks at neglected aspects of historiography and memory

culture in a way that crisscrosses dominant container models of history and culture, nation and identity, and geography and politics. Colonialism and National Socialism are therefore not conceived of as self-contained historical time periods and events separated from “actual” history and from each other. In comparison to historiography that separates historical time periods and events from one another, we look for fluid relationships and transgressive cross-connections while focusing on relevant themes.

The phenomenon of unfree labor and its connection to racist societal and political models is one such theme. As entangled (hi)stories, unfree labor offers us different perspectives. In our project, we do not focus on differentiating between colonial and National Socialist unfree labor, merely recounting them as separate, finished histories. Rather, we examine those contexts that introduced racialized organization of labor prior to the German Empire’s involvement in the colonial exploitation and reconstruction of Africa and forced labor resulting in death. We also do not end our investigation with forms and phases of forced labor during National Socialism, nor do we disconnect these from forced labor during colonialism. Instead, we explore the effects of unfree labor and examine current forms of racialized work within national and international frameworks. Within each respective historical epoch and geopolitical space, we are interested in the different processes and formations of racialized, unfree labor, including their everyday manifestations and the subjective and social memories they evoke. Recalling the story of an individual who was forced to work within both the colonial and National Socialist contexts or was excluded from working during these eras illustrates the entanglement of history from a subjective perspective. Remembering an individual’s story of forced labor shows entanglement as effectively as evoking the story of a flourishing business that profited from forced labor within different racist regimes and that still refuses to critically engage its history and compensate the victims.

Based on these concrete examples, we ask how racialized unfree labor has changed over time and shapes the present era in both discursive and material ways. Unfree labor was not organized in the same manner during each phase of colonialism and at every colonial site, a characteristic that parallels the different ways of organization of unfree labor during National Socialism. Being forced into labor under inhumane conditions resulting in death did not in one case affect “Black people” and in the other “Jewish people.” On the contrary, unfree labor affected various racialized groups of people whose experiences and memories overlap in multiple ways across groups while also differing within racialized groups. Even ambitious racists had a hard time assigning specific individuals to racialized groups, and as a result, the organization of unfree labor and its related experiences interweave and drift apart across epochs and racialized boundaries.

Other forms and places of racist societal order move across colonial and National Socialist time periods and contexts as well. For example, German authorities stigmatized particular relationships as “mixed marriages” and raised the question of how best to deal with them. In other instances, special legal and bureaucratic status was given to racialized individuals within borders drawn by Germans in power. Through the neat separation of epochs and affiliations, multiple reference points and identities are neglected within hegemonic historiography and at best declared ambivalent hyphenated identities, such as African-Jewish, Black Muslim, or Arab-Jewish. A contrapuntal assessment of these

“impure identities” and a critique of the difficulties of classifying and integrating them can offer multi-layered entanglements of (hi)stories by deconstructing und replacing them within historiography and memory culture.

MICHAEL ROTHBERG: In her comments here, Iman Attia links colonialism and National Socialism by focusing especially on the phenomenon of unfree labor (*unfreie Arbeit*). Without collapsing different forms of coerced labor into each other, she makes a strong case for the epistemological and political utility of mapping common forms of power, violence, and exploitation across histories usually kept separate—and beyond the epochs in which those histories allegedly “ended.”

In some of my own work since completing *Multidirectional Memory*, I have also been interested in exploring how labor can serve as a node for intersecting histories and memories in the (transnational) German context. My focus, however, differs from that of the *Verwobene Geschichte(n)* project in focusing on one of post-National Socialist Germany’s largest waves of migration—the so-called “guest worker” program—which seems to remain largely outside the purview of the project. Because of the homogenous conception of nation and “race” that Iman Attia has sketched above, guest workers and their descendants are usually considered “foreign” to Germany’s National Socialist history, although many came from countries such as Italy, Yugoslavia, and Greece that had very direct experiences of the war and genocide. But even those labor migrants who had not had personal experience of the War found themselves migrating into a context that was saturated with the legacies of fascism and genocide.

These new arrivals confronted material and discursive continuities with the National Socialist era. In some cases, guest workers arrived in train stations on the same tracks that had been used for forced laborers under National Socialism. These labor migrants were, in addition, often housed in barracks that had previously held slave laborers in the industrial sub-camps of the National Socialist economy. In his *History of Foreign Labor in Germany*, Ulrich Herbert notes that the same camp barracks were “not seldom” first used to house *Reichsarbeitsdienst-Kolonnen* [work detachments of the National Labor Service], then alien workers, displaced persons at the end of the war, expellees, and finally guest workers. As such an enumeration suggests, Germany’s memorial landscape is multi-layered and *verwoben*, even if not all histories can be considered “equal” in public consciousness. Furthermore, the very language of the guest worker migration could not help but “remember” a history that was barely past, as contemporaries were well aware. The historians Anne von Oswald and Barbara Schmidt comment dryly in their study of the conditions of labor migrants in the 1960s and 1970s, “in Wolfsburg, the director of housing appointed by the VW management could draw on his earlier experience as the leader of the alien workers camp at the time of the city’s founding.” Perhaps because of such continuities, the VW General Director was quite conscious of the resonance of certain vocabulary choices. He warned his employees “not to speak and write about ‘barracks’ and ‘camps.’ (...) The word ‘camp’ can call up associations that, in the interest of all involved, we would like to avoid.” In other words, postwar labor migration took place in a geographical and discursive landscape haunted by unworked through memories of National Socialism—and no doubt other histories of unfree labor.

In the book I am writing with the German studies scholar Yasemin Yildiz, *Inheritance Trouble: Migrant Archives of Holocaust Remembrance*, we look at the way migrants and postmigrants—especially those with a connection to Turkey—have negotiated with this troubled legacy of labor, genocide, and memory. We have found that despite an unwelcoming context defined by a homogenous conception of nation and “race,” migrants and postmigrants have undertaken innovative forms of memory work that grapple with the legacies of National Socialism, while pointing to continuities in race-thinking in the Federal Republic and weaving in other histories of violence and genocide, including, prominently, that of the Armenian Genocide. Despite focusing on histories and memories that are not part of the *Verwobene Geschichte(n)* project, our interest dovetails with what Iman Attia has described here. We, too, highlight the mnemonic agency of racialized minorities who are creatively opening up the German archives of cultural memory and putting them in contact with sites of memory that are simultaneously intensely local and insistently transnational.

Projects such as *Verwobene Geschichte(n)* are a positive sign that the democratization and de-ethnicization of history writing and memory culture are possible despite ongoing hierarchies of race, class, gender, etc. Through the work of scholars and activists (as well as activist-scholars!), multidirectional tendencies in the past become newly visible and possibilities in the present begin to change the fabric of the dominant self-representation. At the same time, we have to remain vigilant about reactionary tendencies that are asserting themselves today: both in the United States and in Europe (as well as Turkey, India, and elsewhere), a resurgent right-wing not only threatens racialized minorities and all those who reject visions of racial purity, it is also articulating historical memories based on denial and relativization of past crimes as well as celebration of fascist predecessors. In this time of great possibility and peril, I find myself returning frequently to Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: “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. [...] In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.” As scholars and activists dedicated to revealing “*verwobene Geschichte(n)*” and multidirectional memories, our task is to follow Benjamin’s lead in reading history and memory against the grain.

Translation from German of Iman Attia’s Contribution by Melody Makeda Ledwon