ANTON WILHELM AMO ~~LECTURES~~ №12

Michael Rothberg

From Memory Wars to Memory Work

Relational Remembrance in Pınar Öğrenci's *Aşît* [The Avalanche]

AMO ~~LECTURES~~

Universitätsverlag Halle-Wittenberg uvHW

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The ANTON WILHELM AMO ~~LECTURES~~ are edited by

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Anton Wilhelm Amo is considered to be the first and for a long time the only Afro-German academic scholar and philosopher. According to the biographer Ottmar Ette (2020: 14–17), Amo was born around 1700 in what is now Ghana and arrived in Europe as a small child. Like Ette, many scholars assume that Amo was enslaved as a child and came to the court of Duke Anton Ulrich von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel via Amsterdam as a so-called "gift" from the Dutch West India Company. However, the historical sources are sparse and inconclusive, so that the Amo researcher William Emmanuel Abraham (1964: 61–64) also considers a kidnapping by sailors to be possible and ultimately regards as the most tenable hypothesis an intended dispatch to Europe to have Amo educated there as a preacher of the Dutch Reformed Church. Recently, the historian of slavery Michael Zeuske argued on the basis of two allegedly new sources dating back to 1706 and 1746 that Amo possibly descended from a local African slave-trading elite and was sent to Europe under the protection of the Dutch West India Company. However, as the Amo historian Monika Firla points out, the 1746 source is known and discussed within Amo scholarship for more than two decades; and the 1706 source, Firla argues, refers to a different person, namely the slave-trading intermediary "Amoe" (who came from the distant Agonna region) rather than to Anton Wilhelm "Amo" himself.[1]

1 See the recent controversies between these and other historians in *Berliner Zeitung* (Zeuske's original statement and additional report on 27 September; Firla's and Sandkühler's response on 13 October; and additional report on 15 October 2025) and *Spiegel* (report on 30 September 2025). It is noteworthy how much of this debate is framed by the historians in explicit opposition towards "postcolonial" or "decolonial

Whatever the reasons behind Amo's travels to Europe, once at the court of the Duke of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel he was baptised "Anton Wilhelm" in 1708[2] using the first name of the Duke and his son, respectively (Mabe 2020: 15). When arriving in Wolfenbüttel he was already called "Amo", which some hold to be a patrilineally transmitted African name (Menn and Smith 2020: 4), whereas others regard it as a then-popular Latin-derived name imposed on enslaved Africans at the Dutch fort in today's Ghana (Mabe 2020: 13–14). The very name "Amo" thus embodies and symbolises the spanning and traversing of a hierarchically structured, overdetermined, yet polysemic Afro-European space, simultaneously identifying an original thinker of the early Enlightenment and signifying a larger post/colonial predicament.

While being on record for serving as an African court servant – a "*Kammermohr*" (Firla 2002) – Amo also received his first formal education in the context of the court in Wolfenbüttel, including literacy in Latin, even though the details of his schooling remain in the dark (Ette 2020: 28–29; Menn and Smith 2020: 18–19). Documentary evidence shows him enrolling in 1727 at the University of Halle at the Faculty of Philosophy and the Law Faculty, where he completed a first disputation in 1729 (Menn and Smith 2020: 19). This legal disputation *De iure Maurorum in Europa* ("On the Rights of Moors in Europe") is considered lost, if it ever was written down. However, a contemporaneous summary indicates that it

activists" who advocate a more prominent role for Amo in German memory culture (e.g. through re/naming streets after him). These "activists" are falsely portrayed as being uniformed and unaware of historical facts whilst, in fact, the incomplete and inconclusive situation regarding historical sources on Amo has been a dominant theme in interdisciplinary Amo scholarship and interventions into German memory culture for decades (see Zenker 2026). Against this backdrop, it is somewhat ironic that Zeuske, while criticising "decolonial activists" for not sufficiently taking the ambiguities and inconclusiveness of sources on Amo into account, himself proclaims with certainty and self-confidence that Amo was clearly part of a not further specified and differentiated "elite" both in West Africa and Europe (a methodological approach that Firla rightly criticises in her response). Tellingly, these very same historians use these renewed debates about the ambiguities around Amo's biographical origins for their own "activism" against renaming the "Mohrenstraße" in Berlin as "Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße" (fuelling opposition against the already accomplished renaming of part of the "Universitätsring" in Halle (Saale) as "Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße"), thereby missing the crucial point for advocating a more prominent acknowledgement of Amo in contemporary German memory culture: namely his stature as the first Afro-German philosopher and his prevailing oblivion in much of European intellectual history.

2 According to Stephen Menn and Justin Smith (2020: 15 fn 38) who consulted the original chapel register, some works (e.g. Firla 2002: 56, Ette 2020: 14) falsely date Amo's baptism to 1707.

engaged with ancient Roman sources about the enfeoffment of kings of "Moors" under the Roman Emperor, thus deriving legal implications for the rights of free and enslaved Africans under Roman Law practiced in Germany in the 18th century (Menn and Smith 2020: 1–2, 10–12). Evidently Amo was well versed in canon law as well as in various secular legal forms, natural law and legal history, enabling him to examine the legal position of people of African descent in these contexts. However, little is known about this disputation, which – as Jacob Emmanuel Mabe (2020: 18) points out – anticipated important Pan-Africanist and postcolonial debates around the rights of humans under conditions of structural inequality and oppression.

In 1730, Amo moved to the University of Wittenberg where, within weeks, he was admitted as *Magister* allowing him to teach while further pursuing his own studies.[3] Continuing his work in philosophy, Amo also expanded into numerous related disciplinary fields. Notably, he studied medicine with influential physicians shaping the future direction of his scholarship that became increasingly situated at the intersections of philosophy, medicine and anthropology (Ette 2020: 59). In 1734, he received his doctorate in philosophy for defending his major philosophical work *De humanae mentis apatheia* ("On the Impassivity of the Human Mind"). With this inaugural dissertation, Amo made an original, radically dualist medico-philosophical contribution to the debate on the relationship between body and soul: By *mens humana* – the human soul – he refers exclusively to the spiritual soul of the Aristotelian tradition, which is distinct from the sensitive and vegetative soul and even more strictly separated from the body. In fact, he sees the latter two parts of the soul as functions of the body itself. Rather than using "apatheia" in the stoic tradition emphasising abstention from the emotional overvaluation of non-moral goods, Amo conceptualises this Greek term differently, namely as an "impassivity" of the human mind: sensation and the power of sensing are seen as belonging to the body rather than the human mind, as the latter cannot be acted on by sensed objects. For this reason, Amo also denies the soul the ability to feel because of its immateriality (Menn and Smith 2020: 3–4, 101–111).

In 1736 Amo was admitted to the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Halle as a lecturer. While teaching in Halle, he completed a final and much more extensive work in 1738, Tractatus de arte sobrie et accurate philosophandi ("Trea-

3 For discussions contextualizing Amo's move from Halle to Wittenberg in the broader political and intellectual debates between pietism and early enlightenment philosophy at the time, see Ette 2020: 31–109, Mabe 2020: 31–42 and Menn and Smith 2020: 51–60.

tise on the Art of Soberly and Accurately Philosophising"). In this magnum opus, Amo unfolds his own teaching after providing an overview of the traditional fields of knowledge. He conceives of philosophy as the continuous quest for wisdom beyond intellectual dishonesty, dogmatism and prejudice as well as the perfection of human beings in all areas, from natural existence to eternal happiness. In addition, Amo criticises those contemporaries who see philosophy only as an act of theoretical understanding without any connection to its practical side and pragmatics. For Amo, philosophy is essentially working on the virtue of wisdom – and this proves its worth in action. In this respect, philosophy cannot be reduced to pursuing purely theoretical knowledge. It also has an inescapable practical relevance (see Mabe 2020: 43–67).[4]

In 1739, Amo left Halle for the University of Jena, where he started teaching a broad spectrum of subjects, including physiognomy, chiromancy, geomancy, astrology and cryptography (Ette 2020: 119). Little is known about the following years. Racist hostility in a mocking poem cast shadows over Amos' situation around 1747. During this time, he is said to have left Germany for West Africa. Until at least 1753 he lived in Axim in what is now Ghana, where the Swiss traveller Henri-David Gallandat reported meeting him as a locally respected philosopher, astrologer and soothsayer (Menn and Smith 2020: 2). Later, Amo moved, or possibly was moved, to the Dutch-controlled Fort San Sebastian in Shama, where his tombstone can be found noting the year of death as 1784 (Brentjes 1976: 66–69).

With the departure of Amo from Jena, his texts were relegated to the margins of European intellectual history, even if never entirely lost. As Stephen Menn and Justin Smith (2020: 2, 39–51) chart in much detail, scattered references to Amo can be found since the 18th century including, for instance, a discussion of his life and work by the philosopher and physical anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1787). This, in turn, was taken up by the French cleric and abolitionist Henri Grégoire (1808) who approvingly engaged with Amo's intellectual achievements in his *De la littérature des Nègres* ("On the Literature of the Negroes"). Other abolitionists of this era equally drew on Amo as an exemplar counterproving prevailing racist stereotypes, as propagated for instance by David Hume ([1772] 1994: 86), that Africans had allegedly never made any noteworthy intellectual accomplishment.

4 For recent engagements with Amo's philosophy see: Ette 2020; Mabe 2020; Menn and Smith 2020 and Knauß et al. 2021.

Within the African and African American traditions of the 20th century, Amo emerged as an occasional reference, as in a passing mention by W.E.B. Du Bois (1939). Kwame Nkrumah, the Ghanian political leader and Pan-Africanist thinker, in his influential 1964 book *Consciencism* engaged with Amo's ideas in the attempt to conscript the latter as an early representative of Nkrumah's own fusion of Marxist-Leninism and traditional African thought (see Menn and Smith 2020: 45–48). Within African(a) philosophy, some scholars, such as Kwame Gyekye, have denied Amo the label "African philosophy" (Gyekye 1987: 34), since he responded intellectually to contemporary European philosophers rather than African conceptual schemes, whereas others, such as Paulin Hountondji, have characterised him as an "African philosopher in Germany in the Eighteenth Century" (Hountondji 1996: 111–130).

In Germany and especially at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg created in 1817 through the merger of the Universities of Wittenberg (founded in 1502) and of Halle (founded in 1694), Amo was rediscovered in 1916. Wolfram Suchier, a librarian in Halle at the time, brought Amo's memory to public attention again with an article in the *Akademische Rundschau* (Suchier 1916). He referred to Amo as a student and a "private lecturer" in Halle, Wittenberg and Jena and described him in racialising terms as a "*Mohr*" ("Moor"). Amo was presented as an outstanding person with an exceptional biography and thus brought out of oblivion.

According to Menn and Smith (2020: 48), the greatest single contribution to Amo scholarship – not only at Martin Luther University, but for the 20th century in general – was made by the East German scholar Burchard Brentjes. A university lecturer on the archaeology of the Near East in Halle since the 1960s, Brentjes was politically involved in organisations boosting solidarity between Eastern Bloc countries, the Arab world and decolonising states in Africa and beyond. A close friend of Nkrumah, Brentjes published a comprehensive collection in 1968 of facsimile reproductions, sources and studies on Anton Wilhelm Amo (Amo and Brentjes 1968). The latter is introduced as "Antonius Gvilielmus Amo from Axim in Ghana" and as a student, doctor of philosophy and *Magister legens* at the Universities of Halle, Wittenberg and Jena. A few years later, Brentjes (1975) characterises Amo as the "first African philosopher in European universities" as well as "the black philosopher in Halle", as the subtitle of his small monograph indicates (Brentjes 1976; see also Brentjes 1977). In 1975, a bronze plaque dedicated to the memory of Anton Wilhelm Amo was also placed at the main campus of Martin Luther University (next to the street "Universitätsring"), identifying him as the first African student and lecturer in philosophy at the Universities of Halle, Wittenberg

and Jena 1727–1747.[5] In 1994, the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg started awarding the Anton Wilhelm Amo Prize annually for outstanding theses.

Renewing this local tradition of Amo scholarship and remembrance, the ANTON WILHELM AMO ~~LECTURES~~ have been organised annually since 2013 at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg by the Research Cluster "Society and Culture in Motion". They feature internationally acclaimed scholars presenting their ongoing research on themes connected to or emanating from the work of Amo. Dedicating a named lecture at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg in honour of Anton Wilhelm Amo seems highly apposite, given that this was, after all, his *alma mater*: Amo studied and attended lectures here, worked here as a scholar and lectured extensively both in Halle and Wittenberg. What better way than to use the format of a public "Lecture" to take seriously Amo as a scholar and to "re-member" his academic legacy that, by and large, has been neglected? This gesture is in harmony with the recent impetus of scholarship paying increasing attention to the actual content of Amo's work rather than primarily engaging his remarkable life as a form, treated mostly "as a datum to comment on the 18th-century discussion of the equality of the races, the origin of the human species, and slavery" (Heckmann 1990: 155). In this spirit, the ANTON WILHELM AMO ~~LECTURES~~ deliberately offer a space for engagements with Amo's *oeuvre* – his specific ideas and interventions that have been under erasure in Euro-modern intellectual history for far too long.

At the same time, this can only be one aspect of the work that the AMO ~~LECTURES~~ can and should set out to accomplish. Menn and Smith's well-intended proposal – to better leave the historical moment of Amo's racist 18th-century life-world and form of life behind and "to pay attention to what Amo in fact has to say, to who he was and to the social world he inhabited" (Menn and Smith 2020: 3) – might ultimately be proposing false alternatives. While there is the danger of sliding into a tendentious tokenism, reducing Amo to an identitarian exemplar of a peculiarly racialised politics of academic work (rather than taking seriously the academic work of politics Amo set out to accomplish), there is another danger to miss out on the broader ethico-onto-epistemological conditions that historically shaped and perspectivised Amo's work beyond the surface of its content (see also Hillgärtner and Kaczmarek 2021: 197). Put bluntly: in light of contemporary

5 See Hamann and Schubert 2022 for a critical appraisal of Amo research and memorialisation during GDR times, mobilising the notion of "(post)socialist coloniality" to highlight the ambivalent colonial logics in the diplomatic relations between the GDR and the Republic of Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah and thereafter.

demands from within postcolonial and decolonial theories to delink from "modernity/coloniality" as a Western ethico-onto-epistemological formation writ large and universalised under colonial expansion (Quijano [1989] 2007; Mignolo 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018), the question arises as to what an extent *the epistemic format of the "Lecture"*, as a potential *pars pro toto* of that overall Western formation, operates merely within or truly beyond its limiting confines. In other words: in what ways does "lecturing" as a modality allow imagining and enunciating an alternative existence that transcends the limitations scripted into the historical conditions of possibility, both for Amo's academic career and his contemporaneous and subsequent marginalisation and relative oblivion? Can a "Lecture" evoke, and bring into existence, the political potentialities of an otherwise – understood as a *chiffre* for both apprehending submerged forms of life that have persisted against all odds and for sensing that which may have been prefigured but not yet fully formed (McTighe and Raschig 2019)? Can "lecturing" deliver on "the will to be otherwise" (Povinelli 2012), possibly through reflexively teaching a lesson of the *leçon* ("lecture")?

In order to keep open for reflection and discussion, within the forum of this series, the uncanny simultaneity of an absent-present potential for "lecturing" on an im/possible otherwise on, with, through and beyond Amo's work, the AMO ~~LECTURES~~ take inspiration from Jacques Derrida's concept of "under erasure". Drawing on Martin Heidegger, Derrida ([1976] 1997) introduced the visual technique of crossing out a word while keeping it legible and in place – thereby putting it *sous rature* ("under erasure") – in order to signal its inadequate yet necessary nature. In similar vein, the ANTON WILHELM AMO ~~LECTURES~~ use the academic format of a "Lecture" named in honour of Amo while crossing out the term and thus putting it "under erasure" in order to highlight its ambiguous existence as both the means for critical reflection and – metonymically standing in for the Western epistemic formation itself – the potential object of such critique. This way, the AMO ~~LECTURES~~ offer a space for reflection on, and a calling into being of, an otherwise that, it is hoped, is as pregnant with present and future possibilities as it is scarred with the impossibilities of the past.

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From Memory Wars to Memory Work

Relational Remembrance in Pınar Öğrenci's *Aşît* [The Avalanche]

Abstract

Over the last five years, a series of acrimonious debates has taken place in Germany about Holocaust memory, antisemitism, and Israel/Palestine. In one of the most visible of those disputes, an enormous scandal rocked the 2022 documenta fifteen international art exhibit in Kassel. This lecture reviews the recent memory wars in Germany and then turns to a work that was displayed at documenta fifteen but was not part of the controversy swirling around the exhibit: Pınar Öğrenci's film Aşît [The Avalanche]. This film, which concerns the tangled histories of violence directed against Armenians and Kurds in a remote town in eastern Turkey, does not address the terms of the German debate directly. However, as Rothberg argues, in weaving together multiple histories of exile, trauma, and catastrophe, Aşît offers a mode of relational remembrance that suggests alternative possibilities for coming to terms with the past in contemporary Germany—and beyond.

Keywords: Armenian genocide, Kurds, Turkey, Germany, migration, Pınar Öğrenci, Holocaust, multidirectional memory, Historikerstreit 2.0, trauma

Prologue: A ~~Lecture~~ Under Erasure

The ANTON WILHELM AMO ~~LECTURE~~ series takes inspiration from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's practice of putting some concepts "under erasure." As the series website explains, putting a concept under erasure entails "crossing out a word while keeping it legible in order to signal its inadequate yet necessary nature." The point of such a gesture is to draw attention to the power

relations embedded in language and representation more generally. The genre of the academic lecture, we read on the website, has an "ambiguous existence as both the means for critical reflection" on the "Western epistemic formation itself" and as the "potential object of such a critique" because of the lecture-form's complicity with such a hegemonic formation.[1] While I do not possess the requisite expertise to do justice to the work and life of Anton Wilhelm Amo, I offer this lecture in the spirit of the engaged critique of hegemonic epistemic formations—as well as our implication in them—for which this series calls. Indeed, two such epistemic formations are at stake in my lecture: one that we might locate in Germany but that is also broadly at work in the "West"; and one that we can locate in contemporary Turkey, but that also has transnational implications. These two formations are, it is important to emphasize, not sealed off from each other, and one goal of my lecture is to offer a critical engagement with the Turkish context as a resource for engagement with the German one.

The notion of being "under erasure" resonates in multiple ways in my lecture. In the crudest and most literal sense, this text was put under erasure when an event at the *Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst* Leipzig, where I was supposed to give a lecture with the same title, was canceled because of the political expression of one of the participants, the Palestinian artist Jumana Manna.[2] Ironically, the canceled event was part of a series meant to confront and explore just such an urge to censor critical speech. The series, "Facing the Authoritarian Drift: Art Schools as Sites of Critique," which continued over the summer 2025, was conceived in order to foster "understanding of (art) universities as places of critical art and knowledge production, where arguments can be developed, controversies aired in public, and dissent can exist."[3] The cancelation of our event, which was to be titled "The Art of Memory in Times of Trauma and Grief" and which was eventually held in modified form in an alternative venue in Berlin, is not irrelevant to my topic; it tells us something about the German context in which I gave the AMO ~~LECTURE~~. Such second-order erasure—the cancelation of an event about cancelation—might also

1 See https://amo-lectures.uni-halle.de/about. I am grateful to Olaf Zenker for inviting me to deliver the ANTON WILHELM AMO ~~LECTURE~~ in 2025, and to Pınar Öğrenci for her inspiration and generous assistance. A previous version of the lecture was given as the Mosse Lecture at Columbia University in New York. Thanks to Claudia Breger for the invitation to Columbia, as well as to Skye Doney, Marianne Hirsch, Andreas Huyssen, Sonali Thakkar, and Yasemin Yildiz.

2 See the statement I released about this cancelation: https://krisol-wissenschaft.org/en/statement-rothberg/.

3 See https://krisol-wissenschaft.org/en/facing-the-drift/.

remind us of another concept from deconstructive theory: the *mise-en-abyme*, a figure of endless self-referentiality and mirroring. Not a bad metaphor for what we see in contemporary German memory culture.

But erasure is also relevant to the Turkish context addressed by the film that will be at the center of the second half of my text, Pınar Öğrenci's *Aşît* [The Avalanche]. Öğrenci's film documents the subtle and not so subtle forms erasure takes in the context of state violence, past and present. At the same time, the film also practices something closer to what Derrida meant by "under erasure"—that is, the necessity of mobilizing forms of representation, despite their inadequacy, as a means of subverting dominant structures of thought and power. The film's practice is, above all, aesthetic and visual, not philosophical and conceptual, but it shares Derrida's interest in traces—in that which hovers somewhere between presence and absence, and which, like a specter, haunts us without ever being fully there. In the case of the film, those spectral hauntings are traces of genocide lodged within denial and ongoing political violence—a nesting of one history inside another that we might also think of as a kind of *mise-en-abyme*.[4]

Introduction: The Crisis in German Memory Culture

It took some time, but it is now widely recognized internationally that Germany's much vaunted memory culture is in crisis. For some years this knowledge remained primarily restricted to insiders and obsessives—I consider myself among the latter—but at least since October 7, 2023 and all that has followed it in the German public sphere, including the attempted cancellation of *New Yorker* journalist Masha Gessen, who dared to compare the fates of Jews and Palestinians, the world has increasingly become conscious that something has gone terribly wrong (Gessen 2023; Hauenstein 2023). A memory culture once defined by a stance of admirable self-criticism and self-doubt is now characterized at the elite level by a dogmatic, repressive self-righteousness. As an emblematic short-hand for the transformation that Germany's reputation has undergone, consider the few short years between the Berlin-based, Jewish-American philosopher Susan Neiman's 2019 book *Learning from the Germans*, which argued (not incorrectly) that those of us in the United

4 Helen Makhdoumian has coined the term "nested memory" to describe situations in which subjects witness the recursive nature of political violence. See her book-in-progress *Afterwords: Nested Memories and the Forms of Global Indigenous Removals*.

States could learn something about coming to terms with the past from the German model, and her October 2023 essay "Historical Reckoning Gone Haywire," which diagnoses a "philosemitic McCarthyism" that has, in short order, come to dominate Germany's public culture (Neiman 2019; 2023). Neiman's essay was released just before October 7, but it points to what would become inescapable in the months leading up to our moment: the litany of scandals, cancelations, and disinvitations that target artists, writers, scholars, activists, and journalists who challenge or are suspected of challenging certain taken-for-granted orthodoxies of contemporary German memory culture, namely the absolute singularity of the Holocaust, the unique nature of antisemitism, and the unquestioned support for the state of Israel—*Staatsräson*—that is thought to follow from Germany's responsibility for the Nazi genocide.

Despite the patent absurdity to which this "philosemitic McCarthyism" has led—for instance, the disproportionate number of Jewish people targeted by this anti-antisemitic campaign alongside a larger number of Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims, and people in solidarity with Palestinians—and despite recent shifts in messaging, especially in the face of Israel's blockage of aid to Gaza, I see no indications yet that a large-scale political or social transformation will alter the landscape in the short term. The dominant political and media classes continue to hold on to restrictive understandings of antisemitism, Jewishness, Israel, and the Holocaust, and thus also racism, Islam, Palestine, and colonialism, even as scholars, human rights organizations, and international legal instances point to overwhelming evidence of crimes against humanity and genocide in Israel's assault on Gaza and continuing occupation of the West Bank.

Paradoxically, despite the apparent hopelessness of the situation, alternative visions already exist across German society: in the political alliances and cultural imaginations emerging from Germany's migrant, refugee, and exile populations as well as from critical intellectuals, activists, and artists. These alternative possibilities, however, are generally ignored, deliberately put under erasure through cancellation and sanction, or fundamentally distorted through the application of dominant interpretive frames.

In this lecture, I will first review the dispiriting developments of the last five years, which have culminated in a hierarchical, partitioned memory landscape. I will then turn, contrapuntally, to a work of art that offers an alternative, relational vision of how to think about the claims of the past and the inequities of the present. Without addressing the German context directly, Pınar Öğrenci's 2022 film *Aşît* [The Avalanche] nevertheless opens up much needed space for reflection on memory, mourning, complicity, and political violence beyond the orthodoxies of the

German model of coming to terms with the past. A sixty-minute essay-film by a recently exiled Kurdish artist from Turkey, who is now resident in Berlin, *Aşît* was screened first in an installation at the controversy-ridden *documenta fifteen* exhibition in Kassel and was subsequently shown at the *Berlinische Gallerie*, where I had the opportunity to see it in July 2023.

Öğrenci's film depicts a highly particularized context of violence, erasure, and enforced forgetting—the Turkish Republic's perpetration and subsequent denial of the Armenian genocide and its ongoing repression of the Kurdish minority—but its production and exhibition also locate it in the contemporary German context of mnemonic struggle I have been evoking. Although self-conscious about the limited agency of a singular aesthetic work, *Aşît*'s delicate mode of relational remembrance and its weaving together of distinct stories of migration, exile, and political violence make it a work that not only allows us to re-member the repressed local pasts the film depicts, but also to reconceptualize memory *work* in a time of national and transnational memory *wars*.

1. Memory Wars: "*Historikerstreit 2.0*" and the Comparison Taboo

In March 2021, the historian Jürgen Zimmerer and I published an essay in *Die Zeit* that was titled "Enttabuisiert den Vergleich!" (Remove the Taboo from Comparison!) (Rothberg and Zimmerer 2021). The title was not ours, though a version of the phrase does appear in our text. The immediate context for our essay was a series of attacks in the German press that targeted the two of us—scholars who had never previously collaborated, had only met once almost twenty years earlier, and work in different disciplines. The occasion for the attacks was the 2021 German translation of my 2009 book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Rothberg 2009; 2021). Although I know many people in Germany who welcomed the translation of the book—including artists, activists, scholars, and people working at memorial sites—the journalistic response was fierce. In prominent conservative newspapers like the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Welt*, but also in some "left-wing" venues such as the *taz*, I was accused of relativizing the Holocaust because I consider remembrance of the Holocaust alongside that of slavery and colonialism and in relation to ongoing processes of decolonization (Schmid 2021; Seidl 2021; Martini 2021). Attacks on Zimmerer appeared in almost all of the responses to my book; journalists took

the occasion of the translation to rehash old debates about his argument that there are important continuities linking the Holocaust to the early twentieth-century genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama in today's Namibia (Zimmerer 2024 [orig. 2007]).[5]

The larger context of these public disputes involved what had been called since summer 2020 the "Historikerstreit 2.0" or the Second Historians' Debate—a somewhat misleading reference to the famous 1986 controversy in which Jürgen Habermas accused conservative historians, including most notoriously Ernst Nolte, of attempting to relativize the Holocaust and minimize German responsibility for the Nazis' genocidal actions.[6] In 2020, the term *Historikerstreit 2.0* was first used to describe the controversy concerning the South Africa-based, Cameroonian historian and theorist Achille Mbembe. Lorenz Deutsch, a regional FDP politician, and subsequently Felix Klein, Germany's non-Jewish "Commissioner for Jewish Life and the Fight Against Antisemitism," had accused Mbembe of "antisemitic 'Israel critique,' Holocaust relativizations and extremist disinformation" (Deutsch 2020, transl. by the author). In addition to denouncing Mbembe's alleged ties to the BDS or Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement targeting Israel, Deutsch and Klein focused on a few decontextualized sentences from Mbembe's 2016 essay "The Society of Enmity" in which he juxtaposes—without equating—South African apartheid, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and the Nazi genocide as different instantiations of an ethnonationalist "phantasy of separation" (Mbembe 2016: 25). Deutsch and Klein called for Mbembe—who had previously won the Sophie Scholl Prize and had had many of his works translated into German—to be disinvited as a keynote speaker from the Ruhr Triennial cultural festival. Although the festival was canceled because of COVID-19, the accusations against Mbembe provoked an acrimonious debate in Germany and internationally involving many dozens of opinion pieces, radio and television features, and open letters.[7]

5 For a critical approach to Zimmerer's theses see, for example, Gerwarth and Malinowski 2007; 2009. For an assessment of the scholarly debate, see Kühne 2013.

6 For my account of the *Historikerstreit 2.0*, see Rothberg 2022b. An earlier piece assesses this debate in relation to the first *Historikerstreit* (Rothberg 2020).

7 To get a sense of the scope of the Mbembe debate, see the online literature list compiled by Serdar Gunes, "Wer zuerst ... sagt, hat gewonnen: Die Achille Mbembe Debatte—Eine Artikelliste," https://serdargunes.wordpress.com/2020/05/18/wer-zuerst-x-sagt-hat-gewonnen-die-achille-mbembe-debatte-eine-artikelliste/. See also "Memory debates: Erinnerungskultur, Holocaust, Historikerstreit, (Post-)colonialism—Artikelsammlung," https://serdargunes.wordpress.com/2021/06/04/a-debate-german-catechism-holocaust-and-post-colonialism/?fbclid=IwAR13jDe8hAQ4tKLo7kEnnryai-4HVpSkm2mZd0bX5fp884QBS01j-PLxb_c.

A year after the Mbembe controversy and a few months after the attacks on *Multidirectional Memory*, the historian Dirk Moses wrote a sharp essay called "The German Catechism" that assessed the stakes of the ongoing controversies (Moses 2021). Referring back to the earlier debates of 2020 and 2021, Moses diagnosed German memory culture as defined by a series of quasi-religious dictums that had become a rigid orthodoxy: an understanding of the Holocaust as a unique rupture in civilization (or *Zivilisationsbruch*) that entails a special German responsibility to Jews and to Israel; of antisemitism as distinct from other racisms; and of anti-Zionism as intrinsically antisemitic. Moses's point, I believe, was not that these tenets are all implausible—who doesn't think that Germany has a special responsibility to Jews, for instance, or that the Holocaust has specific features that distinguish it from other instances of political violence? Rather, Moses was arguing that these linked propositions had become a weaponized doctrine that limits freedom of expression, shields Israel from criticism, and enables the disciplining of minorities, especially members of Palestinian and Muslim communities, but also, increasingly leftist Jews, including Israelis. "The German Catechism" generated a lively and respectful debate in the English-language online forum *New Fascism Syllabus* (Evans and Griffith 2021), but was highly controversial in Germany. Yet, nothing that has happened since Moses's essay appeared—either before or after October 7—contradicts Moses's insight about the disciplinary turn in German Holocaust memory culture. Indeed, the pressure on the cultural and intellectual spheres in Germany has increased radically in the past three years, as it has to different degrees in the US and elsewhere.

In the pre-October 7 period, we see this exacerbation most famously in the controversy about *documenta fifteen*, where the film I will discuss was first shown in 2022. Created in the wake of National Socialism—but also, as we now know, by people implicated in Nazism—Documenta was always intended to help renovate (West) Germany's international reputation. *Documenta fifteen*, which featured an Indonesian collective, ruangrupa, as curators, was specifically meant to open up the German cultural sphere to what was often called the "Global South." Ruangrupa used a highly decentralized mode of curation that empowered various other collectives from outside Europe to invite artists to the exhibit. In the end, over 1,500 artists took part—several times more than the usual number—and by the end of the three month-long exhibit more than 700,000 people had visited Kassel and audience satisfaction was high. This is, of course, only one part of the story. Starting several months before the opening, ruangrupa and various other artists involved in the exhibit were subject to a virulent campaign accusing them of antisemitism by virtue of their presumed "postcolonial" perspective and alleged

support of BDS. Although most of these accusations were absurd or defamatory, when the exhibit finally opened, a prominent work by the Indonesian collective Taring Padi was in fact found to contain one, and possibly two, demonstrably antisemitic images as part of a large banner called "People's Justice," focused on the Suharto dictatorship. The banner was quickly covered over and then removed, but the resulting hysteria led to a hunt for further evidence of antisemitism.[8] An expert commission charged with evaluating the artworks determined that, among the thousands of works of art, there were four that could be described as including antisemitic elements. Beyond Taring Padi's "People's Justice," the other works all concerned Israel/Palestine and were thus open to conflicting interpretations about the border between antisemitism and anti-Zionism.

There is much to be said about the Documenta crisis, but the key point here is its symptomatic nature. While it took sixty-five years until the first public accounting of Documenta's Nazi roots—almost half of those who worked on the first Documenta were members of the Nazi party, SS, or SA—even that revelation did not provoke the crisis that the antisemitic motifs did in 2022, a clear index of the special scrutiny given to those "Muslims" always already presumed to be antisemitic.[9] Quickly generalized from a few disturbing, if isolated images to a thoroughgoing delegitimization of the entire exhibit as well as of "postcolonialism" and the "Global South" as such, the controversy demonstrated the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of having a substantive discussion in Germany among international actors that does not simply take the tenets of the German Catechism for granted. That is, whatever one makes of the particular art works at stake, the true scandal was the inability to talk about the relation between different conceptions of racism, antisemitism, and the politics of aesthetics. As if to prove the point, a panel series that was supposed to take up these issues was canceled after objections from the Central Committee of Jews in Germany. The series, you will recall, was called "We Need to Talk."

Such ironies have been visible throughout the so-called *Historikerstreit 2.0*. When Zimmerer and I published our article calling for the destigmatization or "de-taboo-ization" of comparison, the public response was aggressively dismissive. The same journalists who had been attacking my multidirectional approach to memory and Zimmerer's comparative approach to history now told us that there

8 For my account of Taring Padi and the *documenta fifteen* controversy, see Rothberg 2022a.

9 See the exhibit at the German Historical Museum: https://www.dhm.de/en/press/press-release/how-the-documenta-invented-the-zero-hour-in-art-after-1945/

were actually no strictures on comparison after all. Writing in a collective volume that responded harshly to Moses's "Catechism" essay, the prominent Holocaust historian Sybille Steinbacher castigated Zimmerer and me by saying straightforwardly: "There simply is no taboo on comparison" (Steinbacher 2022: 64).[10] In contrast, when I described our essay to colleagues outside Germany the response was the diametrical opposite: of course, there is a taboo on comparison, everyone said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

How can we make sense of that polarized response? I think there are three questions to consider: In what contexts do comparisons take place? How does taboo function? And what do we mean by comparison? First, the question of context: Steinbacher refuted the idea of a comparison taboo by referring to the plentiful scholarship in comparative genocide studies. But our essay targeted public discourses on the Holocaust in Germany not the work of academics, which we obviously know is comparative. Contexts vary. Second, the question of taboo: for something to count as taboo, there must be a sanction for its violation. Obviously, there is no consistent sanction for the act of comparing the Holocaust, even in Germany, but if we consider just two of the cases I have mentioned it is obvious that both Achille Mbembe and Masha Gessen were sanctioned because of provocative Holocaust comparisons contained in their writings—comparisons that in both cases touch on Palestine. Taboos do not necessarily function in an absolute way: Gessen, after all, did receive their prize in the end—but in a private setting instead of Bremen's town hall and without the backing of the Böll Stiftung, one of the prize's prominent sponsors. Even in their partial form, however—and perhaps especially so—taboos act as deterrents that shape the limits of the publicly sayable. Finally, the question of comparison: at least in contemporary Germany, the mode of comparison matters a great deal. As I have learned over the past few years, Holocaust comparisons are indeed permissible in the German context, but only if they take very particular forms: most prominently, the use of contrast to demonstrate—via comparison—that the Holocaust is unique in human history and thus, well, incomparable. Since October 7, however, it has also been permissible to compare the Holocaust to the Hamas attacks, which have frequently been referred to with the Holocaust-specific terminology of the *Zivilisationsbruch*. What remains taboo, however, are comparisons that work relationally: not simply the enumeration of similarities and differences that conclude with the repetition of what we already know—that the Holocaust and antisemitism are unique—but comparisons that evoke unexpected kinships (for example, between the suffering of Jews and non-

10 In German: "Es gibt schlichtweg kein Vergleichstabu."

Jews), structural similarities, genealogical continuities, or warnings for the future. If taboo involves the policing of unwanted *contact*, the assertion of relationality raises the possibility of unanticipated *proximity*—one that in German Holocaust memory culture often triggers sanction.

A particularly charged site of relationality in Germany, as elsewhere, is migration and the so-called "postmigrant society," a society transformed by multiple histories of migration. Memory culture itself represents a significant realm for negotiating the impact of migration, especially in a country where memory of the Holocaust has become central to conceptions of national identity and citizenship. In 2011, Yasemin Yildiz and I diagnosed what we called the "German paradox"—a dominant understanding that confronting the Nazi past entails holding on to the very conception of ethnic Germanness that was one of the sources of Nazi crimes in the first place. We also observed the emergence of a "migrant double bind" in which migrants and racialized minorities are told that they must remember the Holocaust to become German, but that they cannot remember the Holocaust because they are not really German (Rothberg and Yildiz 2011). More recently, Esra Özyürek has explored this logic ethnographically and described the "subcontracting of guilt" that leads majority German society to offload responsibility for the Holocaust and antisemitism onto already stigmatized migrants and postmigrants of Muslim background—an offloading that was clearly visible in the Documenta controversy (Özyürek 2023). Despite the force of these paradoxes, double binds, and forms of stigmatization, however, postmigrant Germany remains a site where multiple memories and memory traditions jostle against each other in unexpected ways. What Yasemin Yildiz calls the "multiple frames" of migrant remembrance create unexpected kinships and inorganic genealogies—in short, new forms of relationality—that, unsurprisingly, often trouble German conceptions of memory culture and thus either fly under the radar or attract disciplinary sanction.[11]

I want to turn now to an artwork marked by migration that can help us think relationally about the remembrance of multiple histories of political violence and break out of the national frames that constrain our understanding of memory cultures.

11 As Yildiz puts it in an essay on migrant memory activism, memory in migrant spaces involves "the negotiation of multiple pasts and—just as important—the interplay of multiple frames and repertoires." See Yildiz 2023: 225.

Figure 1

All images are stills from the film *Aşît* [The Avalanche] (2022), courtesy of the artist, Pınar Öğrenci

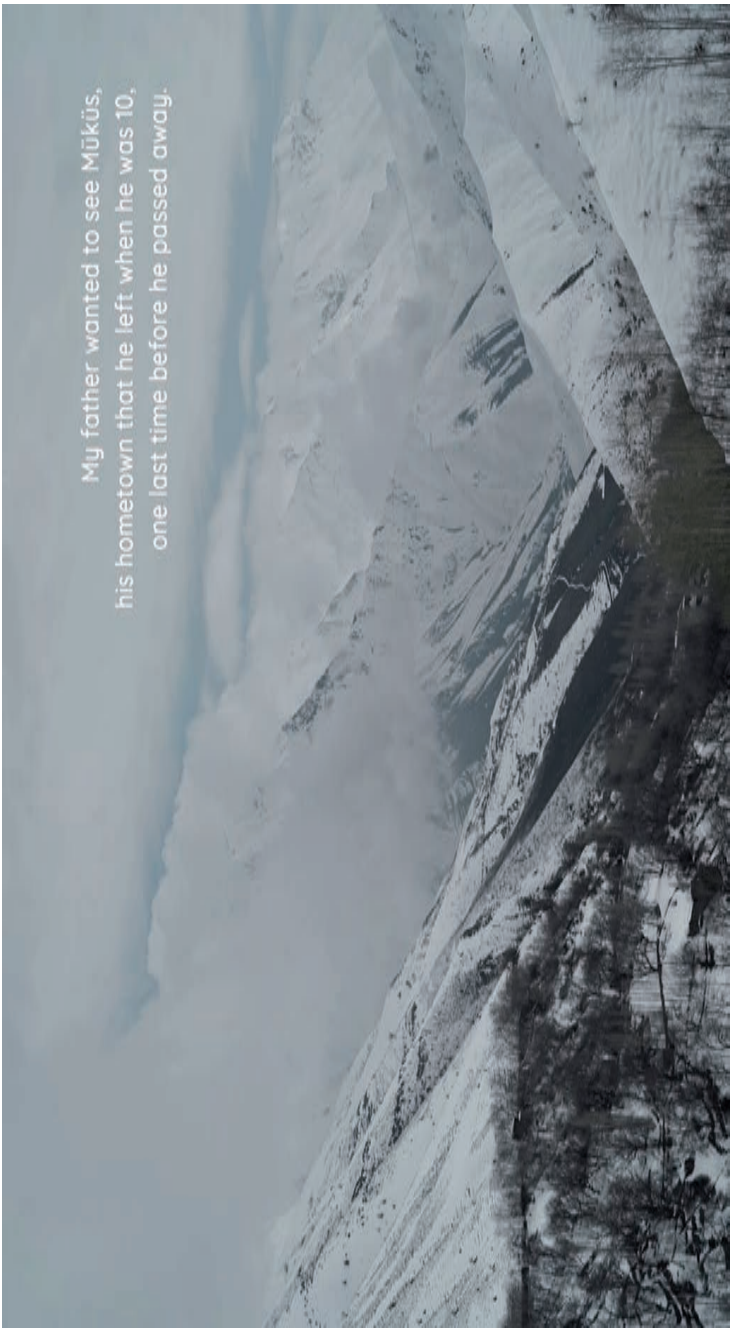
My father wanted to see Müküs,
his hometown that he left when he was 10,
one last time before he passed away.

Figure 2

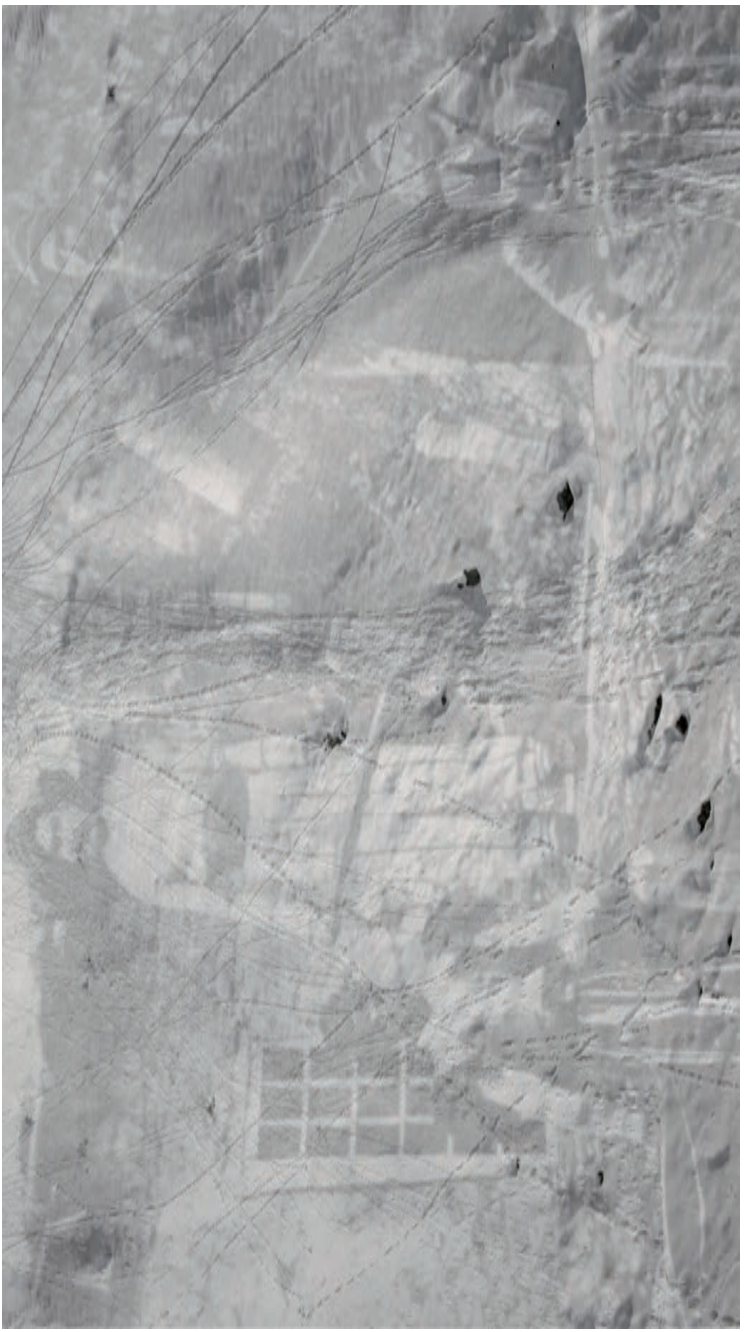

Figure 3

Figure 4


These names have entered our culture
from Persian or Armenian.

Figure 5

Figure 6

2. Memory Work: *Aşît*'s Relational Remembrance

In *Aşît*, which was commissioned by *documenta fifteen* and the SAHA Association in Turkey, Berlin-based artist Pınar Öğrenci returns to her father's birthplace, Müküs, a remote town in eastern Turkey, in order to excavate entangled, highly local experiences of Kurds and Armenians that also intersect with transnational histories of political violence, migration, and exile. A Kurdish artist and activist from Van—the city to which her father had migrated—Öğrenci fled the country of her birth in 2018 after being subjected to a two-year long trial and the threat of eighteen years in prison because of her engagement with feminist politics and the Kurdish question. After months of traveling between Oslo, Brussels, Vienna, and Athens, she settled in Berlin, a base from which she has created a series of films and installations that reflect on histories of migration and persecution (Bitkina 2022). For *Aşît*, Öğrenci employs observational and poetic modes that mix mostly stationary, documentary shots with selected archival images. English subtitles convey the personal narrative of the artist along with political and historical context. The soundtrack, meanwhile, combines ambient sounds from the country and city with off-screen, non-synchronous interviews in Kurdish and, crucially, several songs, one filmed synchronously in Kurdish and the others, in Armenian, taken from archival recordings. This complex, multilayered montage of visual, verbal, and aural elements constitutes the formal means through which the film engages in what I am calling memory work. Without explicitly addressing the German context in which it was produced, *Aşît* puts into practice just those modes of comparative and connective remembrance that we often find in migrant spaces—and that agitate the contemporary memory wars.

Indeed, the film's memory work stands in stark contrast to the tenor of contemporary German memory culture. If the dominant form of German memory has become rigid, self-righteous, self-enclosed in a restrictive national paradigm, and defined by taboos and a punishing aggressivity, the film possesses an inquisitive, self-critical, and multidirectional sensibility that manages to be both deeply political and gently contemplative. At the same time, however, some aspects of the film's project do have affinities with the grassroots and citizen-initiated memory work that characterized German grappling with the Holocaust in the 1980s before it became ritualized and incorporated into the state. Like those grassroots movements, *Aşît* explores and seeks to commemorate unmarked local sites that bear witness to political violence and the erasure of minority cultures. As an emblem of those affinities, we might keep in mind the famous image of memory activists performatively digging at the site of the former Gestapo headquarters in Berlin—a site

that was then unmarked but that would, through their efforts, become the *Topographie des Terrors*. Öğrenci's film also mobilizes the performative force of digging as a way of signaling the need to excavate buried histories. In a scene that provides the film's signature image, an s-shaped line of Kurdish men sets out with shovels to clear a mountain path blocked by snow [Figure 1]. While a Kurdish interviewee recounts how "in the past, Persians, Armenians, and Kurds used to live together here," the men clear the path and sing a song called "Malan Bar Kir," whose lyrics "speak of loved ones parting, households moving to distant lands, and mice and snakes eating people's flesh." Popular among Kurds, the song is also, for Armenians, "a lament that commemorates" the "great disaster" of genocide—beneath the snow, the film suggests indirectly, is a past rendered amnesiac (Çaylı 2022).[12] As we hear the song, the interviewee continues by informing us that even today the region is beset by avalanches that continue to claim dozens of lives. The Kurdish word that gives the film its title, "aşît," avalanche, also means disaster and thus evokes the Armenian catastrophe as well as these recent, "natural" deaths. This scene foregrounds dramatic local geography and tragic history, but what Öğrenci excavates in *Aşît* ultimately exceeds the kind of local histories that were the focus of 1980s German memory activists and opens up relational, transnational vistas from which current German memory discourses could learn.[13]

In *Aşît*, Öğrenci probes peripheral locations and identifies exile and involuntary migration as nodes of relationality that connect—without equating—Armenians, Kurds, and (more surprisingly) Jews. She does not simply approach these relational nodes from the outside, but rather self-reflexively situates herself in proximity to the histories she uncovers. Although we neither see the filmmaker nor hear her voice, she frames *Aşît* through a personal, textual narrative rendered in English. Shortly after the film's title appears, we look down into a valley surrounded by imposing, snow-covered mountains that are shrouded in clouds [Figure 2]. At the top right corner of the screen, a series of three narrative subtitles announces:

12 I am grateful to Eray Çaylı for sharing his essay with me.

13 The particular mode of memory work we find in *Aşît* also differs from other examples of migrant Holocaust remembrance, which often engage directly with the central symbols and tropes of German memory culture. For example, the immigrant author Priya Basil's film about the Humboldt Forum, *Locked in and Out* (2020), and the Syrian refugee journalist and activist Wafa Mustafa's essay "Travels" (2017) both feature significant moments in which migrants encounter Berlin's central Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and inflect it with their own transnational memories and insights. Although National Socialism and the Holocaust do play key roles in Öğrenci's film, as we will see, *Aşît* mobilizes a different network of associations.

> My father wanted to see Müküs, the hometown that he left when he was 10, one last time before he passed away.
> But because the roads to Müküs are closed off during winter and dangerous during summer, he was unable to go.
> When the first asphalt road was laid in 2013, my father had already passed away.

The film, then, can be seen as taking up an intergenerational quest that has been frustrated by blocked paths and death. Yet, while a return to Müküs was impossible for the narrator's father, the film itself constitutes evidence of the narrator's temporary return to this site; it is thus a work of postmemory, but one that combines what Marianne Hirsch calls familial and affiliative forms (Hirsch 2012). If the attempt to reembody the story of her father is an act of familial postmemory, her work of affiliative postmemory includes the former Armenian community of Moks, as the town was called in Armenian. At the same time, Öğrenci modulates that postmemorial affiliation through a forthright acknowledgment of Kurdish implication in the genocide. In an interview, she describes how she feels her hometown of Van "died" after the disaster of 1915 and goes on to say that

> When you grow up in this kind of city where you can't talk about the past, its former people and culture, you feel like you are part of the guilt. [...] Having this strange guilt on my shoulders since my youth, brought me to the 3,300-meter high mountains which covered my father's town Müküs.
> (Bitkina 2022)

In *Aşît*, Öğrenci transforms these feelings of guilt into a complex work of mourning that acknowledges Kurdish participation and implication in the "great disaster" as well as the way that the state solicits similar forms of complicity in its repression of Kurds today.

Although "set" entirely in Müküs and infused with this sense of implication and responsibility, *Aşît* is a work created from a position of political exile, and the fact of exile influences both the form and content of the work. While the film most obviously concerns Turkish memory wars about the Armenian genocide along with "hot" wars in the Kurdish region, it was produced in Germany. That extra-territorial location provides space for a critical engagement with the gaps in official Turkish memory, but it also means that we can read the film in relation to its exilic context as an implicit—even unintentional—intervention into the German memory wars. Öğrenci's German exile has clearly influenced her artistic production, as a series of works up to her most recent exhibitions in Hamburg and Berlin demon-

strate.[14] Even before her arrival in Berlin, however, the artist was already attuned to the transnational entanglements of Germany and Turkey. Citing Germany's alliance with the Ottoman Empire in World War I and Hitler's famous quip, "Who remembers the Armenians today?," Öğrenci remarks in an interview that "the relationship between our political histories also motivated me to be inspired by German literature," an inspiration we find prominently displayed in *Aşît* (Bitkina 2022).

Öğrenci's exilic location combines with her sense of Turkish/German historical and cultural relationality to lend *Aşît* a multidirectional sensibility that stands in stark contrast to the insistence on the absolute singularity of the Holocaust that drives recent German memory culture. This sensibility emerges from unexpected sites. Throughout the film, recurrent shots show groups of men intently playing chess in the town's cafes, but it takes time for the resonance of these shots to emerge. Chess, we are told, is a game that may have been brought to the region centuries earlier by Arab invasions and that has been played by men, women, and children of all ethnicities in Müküs. But chess is not only a local pastime linked to larger regional histories of conquest; it also constitutes a reference to a non-local history: that of National Socialism and the Holocaust. In interviews, Öğrenci frequently mentions her interest in Benjamin and Brecht's epistolary exchanges about chess during their exile from Nazi Germany. More explicitly, in the film, Öğrenci deploys subtitles to evoke the Austrian-Jewish author Stefan Zweig's novella about chess, *Schachnovelle,* translated as *The Royal Game*, which he wrote in 1941, one year before his suicide in exile. While the camera zooms in on chess players' faces and hands, the narrator tells us that when she discovered Müküs's cafes, "It was as if I was in the book 'The Royal Game' that I had read as a child." She continues:

> [Stefan] Zweig wrote the book during the days of his escape from the Nazis, seeking asylum in Brazil. In Portuguese 'xadrez' means both chess and prison. While writing his book, Zweig must have been inspired by this polysemy.

14 Her first documentary, the 2020 film, *Gurbet Is a Home Now*, takes inspiration from Esra Akcan's book *Open Architecture* (Akcan 2018) and addresses Turkish-German settlement in the Berlin neighborhood of Kreuzberg; *Inventory 2021*, set in Chemnitz and focusing on local anti-racist struggles, continues her exploration of settlement by remaking Yugoslavian filmmaker Želimir Žilnik's 1975 film, *Inventory*, about guest-worker families in a Munich apartment building. Most recently, her film and exhibition "Glück auf in Deutschland" about migrant miners, and her current exhibition in Hamburg working with an archive of migrant protest images attest to an ongoing exploration of the politics of migration.

At the mention of Portuguese polysemy, the camera leaves the cafe and we see heavily armed, patrolling soldiers and the interior of a Turkish state building, filmed to emphasize its sterile and prison-like appearance. After recounting the plot of *Schachnovelle*, which involves a lawyer imprisoned by and then in exile from the Nazis, the narrator informs us that:

> In 2017, the government dismissed the opposing Kurdish mayors and replaced them with their own people. Today most of the elected mayors are either in prison or exile.

Chess becomes an occasion to reference an exiled cosmopolitan writer who, in George Mosse's words, "knew no nations" (1985: 19), as well as a minority persecuted by the Turkish nation-state. It thus represents a "multidirectional" switch point through which flight from the Nazis during the Holocaust sharpens the film's account of anti-Kurdish persecution in the present without suggesting that those two experiences are in any way identical.

Such multidirectional remembrance, anathema to dominant German sensibilities focused on the Holocaust's singularity, takes time to emerge. The film practices a particular form of "slow" cinematic memory work that decodes and resignifies seemingly silent traces of the past. For instance, the film opens with a two-minute sequence of seven stationary shots: both long shots of the sky, trees, and mountains and close-ups of snow, stone ruins, and a herd of sheep, all accompanied by the sounds of howling wind, dripping water, and gently falling snow. These shots are picturesque, but initially opaque. The film's subsequent shift from this highly localized—almost motionless—portrait of a particular ecology to a dense depiction of the relationality of past and present state violence mimics the surfacing of suppressed memories from the snows of oblivion. The film enacts such a surfacing through one of its most striking formal techniques, a technique that I believe one can compare to Derrida's practice of deploying concepts under erasure: in several key moments, documents or archival photographs gradually emerge from the documentary footage of the landscape and slowly become legible [Figure 3]. In one scene toward the middle of the film, Armenian script and the outlines of Armenian settlements appear superimposed on an otherwise barren brown hill across which the camera tracks while a Kurdish interviewee reads out the names of former Armenian villages from the region [Figure 4]. The knowledge we acquire in this shot of destroyed Armenian villages lends weight to the opening scenes of ruins and carved stones, which we now cannot avoid understanding as material remnants—traces—of genocidal destruction.

A similar resignification of "natural" signs takes place in relation to the sheep we see early on. In the opening sequence, the sheep appear in harmony with the

landscape and with traditional village lifeways. Eventually, the film teaches us that this particular way of life is being eroded by anti-Kurdish state violence and climate change, which have forced many peasants to abandon their land and livestock and migrate into the city or further afield. A key scene supplements these present-tense forms of forced displacement with an additional association: the sheep also call up the forgotten traces of eradicated Armenian culture. In a late sequence, a herd of sheep grazes by a rushing river and across from an imposing digger, itself symptomatic of the destruction of the landscape; the camera then moves into the animals' hut. As the camera pans over the sheep, staying close to them and positioned around eye level, another off-screen Kurdish interviewee begins to describe the different animals: "The ones with the horns are known as Keels. Those with no horns and with small ears are Kurrs." The interviewee proceeds to name fifteen different kinds of sheep—Hemdani, Keer, Ser Rash, Qere Kas, etc.—all of which are distinguished by physical features such as the presence and absence of horns and the color of their mouths and eyes [Figure 5]. He then clarifies:

> These names have entered our culture from Persian or Armenian. Because many words have no equivalent in Kurdish we do not know the meanings of these names.

The names, in other words, *refer* to the sheep but they do not possess *meaning* for the speaker, a peculiar linguistic form that the film exposes and struggles against by highlighting a paradoxical transmission of cultural memory. The varieties of sheep represent a trace of cultural relationality that lives on despite the forces of violence and erasure that have sought to eliminate non-Turkish language, culture, and, often enough, people. Conveyed in a Kurdish-language narrative, the names of the sheep transmit that trace of relationality but also reveal the genocidal loss that haunts cultural transmission: the memory of the Armenian (and Persian) past lives on as sounds whose meaning has been lost. In drawing our attention to this peculiar form of transmission without meaning—and identifying genocide and state violence as the force behind that process of de-signification—the film remediates the lost memory: not to bring it to fullness, but to suggest the fullness of what has been lost. *Aşît* is a work that searches for traces of the past against the forces of violence in the present and in the face of blocked access to the past.

In addition to the recitation of Armenian villages and animal names by current Kurdish residents of Müküs, Armenian is present primarily through the voice of Hayrik Mouradian, who survived the genocide of his people as a young boy from the neighboring town of Çatak—one of four survivors out of a family of fifty-four, the narrator tells us. After his family settled in Armenia, he made it his life's work to collect the songs of his childhood. Three of those songs accompany the film and

two are translated in English subtitles. In one instance, lyrics recounting the destruction of home are set against a snow-covered mountain in a shot that resembles the sequence recounting the narrator's story of her father's failed return home. As if to emphasize that connection, the narrator informs us that both her father and Mouradian left their homes at age 10; Öğrenci has also remarked that Hayrik means "father" in Armenian (Bitkina 2022). Once again we have the sense that this is a work of affiliative postmemory, but the affiliation is a charged one that requires engaged working through.

Aşît "returns" Mouradian's voice to the landscape that once held a thriving Armenian community, but it does so self-consciously through montage: through the filmmaker's ability to edit together non-synchronous sounds and images. Despite this partial return, there is nothing cathartic or redemptive about the direction in which the film moves: from its initial stunning shots of the town's natural setting, the film builds toward a recognition that "The catastrophe of 1915 was a turning point" in the erasure of Armenian Moks, as one of the last subtitles reads. This recognition of the town as the site of a catastrophe—really, several catastrophes, as the film has shown us—is also another moment that inspires multidirectionality. Earlier, as we have seen, the film associated chess with Stefan Zweig's exile from the Nazis. Now, immediately following the reference to the 1915 genocide, a series of subtitles (the final three of the film) evoke the Holocaust survivor and psychoanalyst Dori Laub and link his theory of trauma and testimony to Hayrik Mouradian. Set against a dark cave and the sound of dripping water, we read:

> Dori Laub says that communities that have experienced major traumas like genocide need to be listened to gently: 'Ears appropriate for listening.'
> The voice of Mouradian, who could never return to his homeland, was one of these voices for me.
> The voice of trauma and the unspeakable.

In *Time's Echo*, his book on music and the Holocaust, Jeremy Eichler draws on Laub to describe the contributions music can make to witnessing, and uses terms that apply equally to Öğrenci's mobilization of Mouradian's voice:

> what Laub writes about the importance of witnessing survivor testimony applies to [the] broader process of cultural transmission as well [...] Just as trauma survivors require the witness of intentional listeners who then become party to the truth, there must be someone waiting on the other end of a musical performance to receive its signal from the past, to help the record be made anew.
> (Eichler 2023: 174).[15]

15 For Laub's work on trauma and testimony, see especially Felman and Laub 1991.

In *Aşît*, Öğrenci puts herself in the place of that "receiver" and in doing so turns her film into what Eichler might call a "visceral" memorial:

> While musical memorials may remain silent for years or even decades as their scores slumber unrealized on a shelf, when a work is at last performed, it cannot fade into the background. Sound is too visceral a medium, too penetrating of the senses to be naturalized like stone.
> (Eichler 2023: 175)

Although Eichler is referring to a concert in this passage—the performance of Schönberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw*—his account also captures the performative force of Mouradian's voice in *Aşît*.

Indeed, after we read the references to Laub in the film's subtitles, there is a brief pause, and then we hear the elegiac voice of Mouradian singing "I Am a Deer of the Highlands," the third and final Armenian song included in *Aşît*, but without translation—as if to reinforce the notion of the unspeakable. After a few seconds, the image-track shifts to an ordinary Müküs street scene: the camera appears to be mounted on the back of a truck and a continuous shot documents the filmmaker leaving town. From the town center, with pedestrians and shops visible, we pass police cars and barricades deployed in front of state offices at the side of the road [Figure 6]. As the camera moves over a bridge, an older man half turns around and waves, and then the camera moves out into the countryside; the screen fades to black and the credits roll, accompanied by Mouradian's untranslated song—a song that thus persists beyond the image-track and becomes an occasion for the confrontation with ongoing grief.

This final sequence encapsulates much about the particular mode of *Aşît*'s memory work. Through a careful montage of image and sound, the film creates a multidirectional constellation of violent histories, including the Holocaust, the Armenian genocide, the repression of Kurds, and even anti-Black racism, which is present via an oblique reference to Chantal Akerman's 1999 film *South*, which concludes with a similar shot from the back of a truck that traces the path on which an African American man, James Byrd, Jr., was dragged by a lynch mob. (Akerman is, of course, herself the daughter of Holocaust survivors.) Yet, despite this manifest multidirectional relationality, *Aşît*'s dislocation of sound and image suggests the limits of mnemonic reparation in the face of denial, trauma, and ongoing military occupation. An exiled Armenian voice, English-language subtitles evoking the Holocaust, barely glimpsed scenes of military repression in a remote town, an intertextual reference to a modern-day lynching: these cinematic materials are invested with forms of historical content that resonate but—in their formal distinctness—are deliberately prevented from melting into each other. Grasping both their con-

nection and their unredeemable separation requires a particular form of perception that *Aşît* also seeks to supply. The film has, indeed, taught us to "listen gently" to multiple traumas—a training that its quiet early scenes of nature began to impart to us before we even knew the violent content buried in the snowy landscape and visible in the texture of contemporary everyday life in the Kurdish regions.

Conclusion: Beyond Provincialism

When Jürgen Zimmerer and I responded to our critics in the *Zeit* essay I discussed earlier, our concern was not only with the taboo regulating comparison, but also with an underlying intellectual atmosphere in Germany characterized by a willful embrace of provincialism. The insistence on the absolute singularity and incomparability of the Holocaust that drives the memory wars has served not only to isolate the Shoah from other genocides, but also to narrow the scope of German opinion and even German identity (as expressed in the German paradox). One of the stranger responses to the 2021 translation of *Multidirectional Memory* came in an essay by the *FAZ* journalist Claudius Seidl, who wrote that "Rothberg cannot take away our German responsibility" (Seidl 2021, transl. by the author). Such a bizarre misunderstanding ignores the fact that opening up German memory culture leads precisely to the *expansion* of German responsibility to include colonial crimes and other entanglements in political violence (from Armenia to Palestine), not to its minimization. This embrace of provincialism corresponds to a denial of relationality beyond the ethnic and the culturally familiar. Such a rearguard attempt to bolster the borders of Germanness has only intensified in the years since, even as Germany's implication in political violence has continued to deepen.

I have turned to Pınar Öğrenci's film as an antidote to such provincialism. Although *Aşît* focuses on the provinces of remote eastern Turkey and is attuned to the very particular resonances of the local environment, it is, as a work of art, the farthest thing from provincial. Even more, it shows Müküs to be a town that harbors a strong cosmopolitan legacy, albeit one beset by a genocidal violence that has almost, but not completely, erased its entangled histories.

In a brilliant response to an earlier version of this lecture, Sonali Thakkar of New York University drew my attention to an essay by Mashinka Firunts Hakopian, "Where Scenes of Catastrophe Reappear: On Armenian and Palestinian Solidarities" (Thakkar 2024; Hakopian 2024).[16] Writing in the wake of both the

16 I'm grateful to Thakkar for her response and for this reference.

expulsion of more than 100,000 Armenians from Artsakh in September 2023 and the destruction and displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza that began a month later, Hakopian evokes the recursive nature of colonial violence, and of the images of it that seem to repeat themselves across centuries of Armenian and Palestinian history. She points out how diptychs of images of Armenian and Palestinian suffering in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries circulated simultaneously across digital media in fall 2023—images that also echo, as Thakkar pointed out, scenes in *Aşît*. Although Hakopian expresses appropriate skepticism that simply "viewing regime-made disasters" will constitute "a galvanizing force" that will effect change, she nevertheless insists that such juxtaposed images can bind us to powerful historical and political imperatives:

> Placed alongside one another, [these images] become a grid of interlocking attempted erasures undone by refusals to be erased. [...] These scenes demand the cultivation of dauntless solidarities, a praxis of collective witnessing and coalitional action. (Hakopian 2024)

The question that Thakkar raised in referring to Hakopian's text was whether we could extend the Kurdish-Armenian solidarities implied in *Aşît* to the Armenian-Palestinian solidarity evoked by Hakopian, and whether we could read into *Aşît* a knowledge of disasters, like the one in Gaza, that it could not have registered when it was made years earlier. There is, after all, according to Hakopian, "a particular form of intuitive knowledge that accrues for descendants witnessing the recursion of colonial violence" (Hakopian 2024). I agree with Thakkar that such a knowledge is at work in Öğrenci's film, and that it can help us expand the bonds of multidirectional solidarity by linking the Kurdish question to the Palestinian one across the common reference point of the Armenian catastrophe. There is a potential here for a radical cosmopolitan solidarity—albeit one that comes without guarantees.

Aşît refuses provincialism, but it acknowledges and dwells on the violent conditions in which provincialism flourishes—conditions we must all take seriously today. In referencing Stefan Zweig, the film calls up a figure who stands for an Enlightened cosmopolitan tradition associated with German culture, as George Mosse details in his book *German Jews Beyond Judaism*. Yet, the film's pursuit of cosmopolitan pasts extends far beyond the "unpolitical," liberal "individualism" that Mosse finds in Zweig (Mosse 1985: 33, 19). Öğrenci's cosmopolitanism, if that is the right word, is ecological, more-than-human: its traces are encoded in landscapes, animal life, multiple languages, music, and material culture. Öğrenci does not pretend that she can reanimate the lost cosmopolitanisms she excavates, but in remembering relationally she reveals what has been lost; exposes the forces

of violence that seek to suppress memory; and teaches us to look and listen gently for possibilities of repair. If *aşît* means avalanche and disaster, it is also very close to the Kurdish word *aşiti*, which means peace.[17] As Öğrenci's film attests, it is often in the memory work of migrants, refugees, and minorities in Germany that we find powerful, reparative alternatives to the memory wars, inspirational forms of grassroots memory activism, and the kinds of cosmopolitan worlds that genocidal regimes always seek to eradicate.

17 Pınar Öğrenci, personal communication.

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