

The Gespenst of Postcolonial Theory

Anne Berg

University of Pennsylvania

Email: anneberg@sas.upenn.edu

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“What is going on in Germany?” asked Natalie Zemon Davis after Munich suspended the acclaimed play *Vögel* (*Birds*) by Wajdi Mouawad in November 2022. Davis, a renowned historian, had been deeply involved in the play’s conception and production only to see it pulled for alleged antisemitism and Holocaust relativization.¹ This was not an isolated example.²

In summer 2021, the German public sphere mobilized against postcolonial approaches—supposedly the new Trojan horse for antisemitism—in an attempt to discredit the documenta Fifteen in its first-time attempt to foreground non-Western artists and surrender curatorial control to the Indonesian art collective Ruangrupa.³ Even before an antisemitic image was “discovered” in what journalist and author Eva Menasse called “das Dings”—a nine-by-twelve-meter tapestry by the Indonesian collective Taring Padi, which should have never been included in the exhibit in the first place—the German press exerted itself in speculations over the inherent antisemitism of artists from the “Global South.”⁴ Ruangrupa apologized multiple times for having failed to notice the antisemitic figure in Taring Padi’s “People’s Justice,” which was immediately covered up and then removed. Sabine Schormann, the managing director of documenta, resigned. Chancellor Olaf Scholz canceled his visit. The subsequent eruptions of moral outrage were a foregone conclusion.

¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, “‘Vögel’ ist weit entfernt, antisemitisch zu sein,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 22, 2022 (<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/muenchen-metropoltheater-voegel-natalie-zemon-davis-1.5701082?reduced=true>).

² Examples of insinuated antisemitism include “Dramatikerin Caryl Churchill wird Theaterpreis aberkannt,” *Der Spiegel*, November 1, 2022 (<https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/caryl-churchill-dramatikerin-wird-theaterpreis-aberkannt-a-0f7eedf-e378-4c24-b026-3961dea5419c>); Sharon Wrobel, “German Cultural Institute Reschedules Holocaust and ‘Nakba’ Remembrance Discussion after Fierce Debate,” *Allgemeiner*, November 8, 2022 (<https://www.allgemeiner.com/2022/11/08/german-cultural-institute-in-israel-reschedules-holocaust-nakba-remembrance-discussion-after-fierce-protest/>).

³ Frederik Schindler, “Der Documenta muss es jetzt ans Budget gehen,” *Die Welt*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article240515165/Antisemitismus-Skandal-Nun-muss-es-der-Documenta-ans-Budget-gehen.html>.

⁴ For a summary of the moral panic, see Eva Menasse, “Im Rausch des Bildersturms. Was ist gefährlicher? Alte antisemitische Karikaturen aus Indonesien? Oder Antisemiten, die mit Maschinenpistolen in Synagogen eindringen?,” *Der Spiegel* 27 (July 2, 2022): 40–41. For an anticipatory symptom of this panic, see Thomas E. Schmidt, “Verschweigen, das geht nicht mehr. Hat die Documenta ein Antisemitismus-Problem?” *Zeit Online*, January 12, 2022 (<https://www.zeit.de/2022/03/documenta-15-kassel-antisemitismus>). On the campaign to discredit the Documenta Fifteen, see Eva Menasse, “Die Antisemitismus-Debatte ist eine fehlgeleitete, hysterische Pein,” *Die Zeit*, January 31, 2022.

German feuilletons wrote off the entirety of documenta as antisemitic, dismissing countless other artists, their work unseen and undiscussed.⁵

When Menasse called out the strangeness of these developments and insisted that the public focus on the proliferation of violent attacks against Jews rather than engage in *Symbolpolitik*, Maxim Biller publicly questioned her Jewish heritage and identity in an attack that showcases the worst of German intellectual chauvinism.⁶ This German purification crusade continues and deliberately conflates critiques of Israeli policy toward Palestinians with antisemitism. Ironically, even Jews who continue to “use words like ‘human rights’ and ‘Palestinians’ in the same sentence” frequently find themselves in the crosshairs of the self-anointed German moral police.⁷

So, what is going on in Germany? Critiques of German memory culture by scholars whose work is informed by postcolonial theory have been in the headlines for quite some time.⁸ Such work has met with polemical attacks that regularly pit “high priests” against supposed “minimizers,” “apologists,” and “antisemites” rather than with critical and substantive engagement of their work and arguments.

Historian Dirk Moses clearly hit a nerve when he reached for religious metaphors to describe such boundary policing. Many of the accusations that an old guard of memory wardens rehashed in response to Moses’s “The German Catechism” were neither surprising nor particularly noteworthy.⁹ The renewed insistence on the “singularity” of the Holocaust repackages arguments reminiscent of the so-called intentionalist position, now suffused with ignorance about the work of postcolonial scholars.¹⁰ Centering their moral indignation around the *Gespenst* of postcolonial theory, the contributors to the booklet *Ein Verbrechen ohne Namen* (excepting one, all previously published opinion pieces) now imagine a new boogiemanager—the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement—as the latest handmaiden of a resurgent tide of antisemitism.¹¹ The volume and its artfully obscured editor(s) weaponize philosopher Jürgen Habermas (apparently with his consent) in an attempt to enshrine the Nazi genocide as a nameless and inexplicable crime and *the* break of (Western) civilization.¹² To what end, I wonder?

Ironically, Habermas acknowledges that memory culture ought to evolve with a changing society. Not only is society changing, it is actively being changed. But public memory has yet to catch up with a population that rejects the assimilation of its histories into a German one and instead draws on global narratives to explain past and present racisms and structural inequalities. Some historians have argued that antisemitism is fundamentally different from other racisms and thus foreclose comparative analyses as a matter of principle.¹³ For others, antisemitism

⁵ Elke Bühr, “Mützenprobleme: Kommentar zu den jüngsten Vorwürfen gegen die Documenta,” *Monopol.Magazin für Kunst und Leben*, August 17, 2022 (<https://www.monopol-magazin.de/muetzenprobleme-documenta-taring-padi-kippa-hajj>).

⁶ Maxim Biller, “Wie links ist Eva Menasse” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 23/24, 2022.

⁷ Menasse, “Im Rausch des Bildersturms,” 40.

⁸ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Jürgen Zimmerer, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz? Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011); A. Dirk Moses, *The Problems of Genocide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Also “Achille Mbembe accused of anti-Semitism: The German controversy,” *Africa Report*, May 31, 2020; Aleida Assmann, “A Specter Is Haunting Germany: The Mbembe Debate and the New Antisemitism,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 23, no. 3 (September 1, 2021): 400–11, doi-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/10.1080/14623528.2020.1847861.

⁹ A. Dirk Moses, “The German Catechism,” *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, May 23, 2021 (<https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/the-german-catechism/>).

¹⁰ Dan Diner, “Über kognitives Entsetzen,” in *Ein Verbrechen ohne Namen* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2022), 83; Dan Diner, *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism, and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 130–37; Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 45.

¹¹ Saul Friedländer, “Ein Genozid wie jeder andere?,” in *Ein Verbrechen ohne Namen*, 31; Diner, “Über kognitives Entsetzen,” 86.

¹² Jürgen Habermas, “Statt eines Vorworts,” *Ein Verbrechen ohne Namen*, 9.

¹³ Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933–1939*, vol. 1, *The Years of Persecution* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998); Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

neither serves as the sole nor even primary explanatory factor.¹⁴ Having debated these questions for decades, historians somehow managed without calling one another antisemites.

Zeitgeist matters. Antisemitism is certainly on the rise and not just in the United States, where antisemitic, anti-Black, anti-LGTBQ and other hate crimes accompany the resurgence of far-right politics and the systematic gutting of democracy. However, to blame BLM activists for resurgent antisemitism is not only blatantly false but insidious. When in 2017, white thugs marched through Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting “blood and soil” and “Jews shall not replace us,” they were opposed by BLM protesters, not by the supposed guarantors of the US *Rechtsstaat*, a trend that has continued.¹⁵ The movement that spilled into the streets in late May 2020 after the murder of George Floyd is an abolitionist movement that jived with similar movements around the world, rejecting not only police violence but police itself as the capillary armed defense force of global white supremacy. Insisting on the historical recognition of slavery, Jim Crow, and the continuing oppression of Black people in the United States, activists understand themselves *in alliance* with the oppressed and marginalized everywhere, including Jews persecuted and murdered by the Nazis; indigenous peoples displaced and murdered by settler colonialists; Palestinian civilians facing off with the Israeli police state; displaced people and migrants fleeing war, famine, and climate-induced disaster; trans and nonbinary people; the poor; and the incarcerated.

The Movement for Black Lives continues along the lines of the Black radical tradition, anchored in the abolitionist and decolonization struggles of the past.¹⁶ Their critique of Israel (which presumably prompted the allegations of antisemitism) is based on the asymmetry of imperial violence, a critique that Achille Mbembe and others have repeatedly articulated.¹⁷ Rather than equating settler colonialism, chattel slavery, Nazism, Apartheid South Africa, contemporary Israeli policy toward Palestinians, and “Western” financial imperialism by way of IMF and the World Bank, scholars and activists understand the structures of global white supremacy and its proliferating forms as an explanatory umbrella that makes visible the pathways of knowledge transfer. Colonialism is thinkable without Nazism. The inverse does not hold.

The question is not a matter of pitting one crime against another but of recognizing the adaptability of global structures that were forged through state-sponsored, state-sanctioned mass violence before, through, and beyond Auschwitz.¹⁸ The question is about solidarity not about competition. As historian Peter Novick argues, to use the Holocaust as a benchmark to evaluate other atrocities as “truly holocaustal” or merely “genocidal” undergirds the self-congratulatory complacency that marks Western democracies (even in their terrifying decline).¹⁹

¹⁴ Christopher Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Geoff Eley, *Nazism as Fascism: Violence, Ideology, and the Ground of Consent in Germany, 1930–1945* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Devin O. Pendas, Mark Roseman, and Richard Wetzell, ed., *Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of the Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Raz Segal, *Genocide in the Carpathians: War, Social Breakdown, and Mass Violence, 1914–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

¹⁵ Tess Owen, “Charlottesville Police Chief Told Cops to ‘Let Them Fight’ when Nazis Came to Town,” *Vice News*, 1 December 1, 2017 (<https://www.vice.com/en/article/gydd3y/charlottesville-police-chief-told-cops-to-let-them-fight-when-nazis-came-to-town>); Anne Berg, “The Teargassing of West Philly: A History in Police Dispatches,” *WHYY News*, July 30, 2020 (<https://whyy.org/articles/the-tear-gassing-of-west-philly-a-history-told-in-police-dispatches/>).

¹⁶ Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016); Vicky Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2020); Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Eyal Weitzman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017); Stephen Graham, ed., *Cities, War and Terrorism: Towards an Urban Geopolitics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

¹⁸ Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 2.

¹⁹ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

Explanatory approaches that bracket off from history the Nazi genocide of the Jews are in fact confined within the same intellectual frame that gave rise to European imperial extractivism in the first place. Europeans articulated ideas of universal freedom and equality at the very moment that they built the structures through which inequality, violent oppression, genocide, and ecocide became a painfully pervasive *reality*.²⁰ Philosophers from Kant to Jefferson, even with their “enlightened anti-imperialism,” ultimately excused acts of barbarity perpetrated by Europeans in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania at the same time that they articulated frameworks for critiquing such violence.²¹ The presupposed “rationality” of European genocides was quasi-religious—a civilizing mission, violent by “necessity” and an unwelcome “burden” of the white man to uplift those peoples whom Europeans did not consider fully human based on their increasingly scientific understanding of “race.” Black and postcolonial scholars have long since called this system by its name: racial capitalism.²²

Nazi Germany stands out in this history because it unapologetically embraced racism as the “West” began to lay the foundations for the post-1945 pretzel-work that attempted to render racial inequalities within their own societies as an unfortunate side-effect of market-based dynamics.²³ Unsurprisingly, contemporaries such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon recognized their own histories in the human debris of the Third Reich.²⁴

Nonetheless, the Holocaust was the first genocide that the “enlightened West” *recognized* as such. This recognition took place *before* the Allies understood the landscape of death they encountered in Germany in 1945 and *before* they understood the central place of the Jews in the Nazi slaughter.²⁵ The hellscape of murder and slave labor in the most industrialized country of Europe lacked a familiar frame. In the absence of cotton fields and gold mines, the Nazi genocide elicited shock and speechlessness from the Allies, who conveniently betrayed their knowledge of and participation in a longer history of imperial extraction.²⁶

Rather than an unprecedented *Sonderfall*, Nazism introduced into Europe, adapted, and modernized practices that hitherto had been directed almost exclusively against nonwhite populations in European-dominated colonies or settler states. To call in this history is neither to equate the Holocaust with other genocides nor to deny its specific characteristics, as Andreas Wirsching insinuates.²⁷ It recognizes the numerous continuities that reach beyond Auschwitz in spite of the ever so loudly professed “never again.”²⁸

²⁰ Malcolm Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021); Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

²¹ Quoted in Moses, *The Problems of Genocide*, 65; see further Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015); Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Trevor Burnard and John Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Benjamin Madley, “From Terror to Genocide: Britain’s Tasmanian Penal Colony and Australia’s History Wars,” *Journal of British Studies* 47 (January 2008): 77–106.

²² Cedrik J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of The Black Radical Tradition*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Justin Leroy and Destin Jenkins, ed., *Histories of Racial Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

²³ Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

²⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto [1949],” *Raisons politiques: études de pensée politique*. 1 (2006): 131–35; Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, ca. 1972); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, ca. 1967).

²⁵ Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 12.

²⁶ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: The El Niño Famine and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso Books, 2002).

²⁷ Andreas Wirsching, “Holocaust: Ist der Tod kein Meister aus Deutschland mehr?,” *Die Zeit*, May 8, 2022 (<https://www.zeit.de/2022/19/holocaust-nationalsozialismus-krieg-ukraine/komplettansicht>).

²⁸ Anne Berg, “Don’t Trash My Holocaust,” *AllegraLab: Anthropology for Radical Optimism*, January 2022 (<https://allegralaboratory.net/heritage-out-of-control-dont-trash-my-holocaust/>).

Nazi racism could look back on centuries of racist practice, from racial legislation over labor extraction and incarceration to violent oppression and systematic murder.²⁹ Nineteenth-century criminology and racial science shaped an international consensus about social hygiene and eugenics in the twentieth century.³⁰ The histories of colonialisms are central to these developments. When the Nazis came to power, the racial lexicon had already been adapted to German particularities. After World War I, anti-Black racism (which was espoused in near universal fashion across the political spectrum in Weimar Germany) readily jived with antisemitism on the political right, continuing trends that had characterized racial antisemitism since the late nineteenth century.³¹ The color-coded lexicon of imperial racism also informed the development of racial anthropology that “proved” the “inferiority” of Jews, Slavs, and Roma as “Asiatic peoples.”³² Nazi racism was undoubtedly indebted to this earlier history.

Moreover, the Nazi regime attempted to build colonial structures of extraction in the occupied east, focusing on cash crops, rubber, and fuel, even if these endeavors left marginal traces in German archives.³³ But there is no shortage of records concerning the brutal regime of forced labor the Nazis implemented in desperate attempts to close the raw material cycle by squeezing every last kilojoule out of people and things.³⁴

To insist that the Holocaust is an evil that occupies a category of its own, that has neither category relatives nor can it be subsumed in another category, is to remove it from history. As Peter Novick argues, such a eulogized vision offers cheap experiences of moral righteousness rather than an effective strategy to combat continuing injustices.³⁵ History is messy. And it is this messiness that begs new questions and provides new insights. Moral absolutes and universal principals, as comforting and politically expedient as they may be, are best confined to Plato’s fictional cave, undisturbed by the muck of history.

Anne Berg is an assistant professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *On Screen and Off: Cinema and the Making of Nazi Hamburg* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022) and *Empire of Rags and Bones: Waste and War in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

²⁹ James Q. Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

³⁰ Alex Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults & Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Manfred Berg and Simon Wendt, ed., *Racism in the Modern World: Historical Perspectives on Cultural Transfer and Adaptation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011); David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Anton Weiss-Wendt and Rory Yeomans, ed., *Racial Science in Hitler’s New Europe 1938–1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2013).

³¹ Gisela Lebzelter, “Die ‘Schwarze Schmach.’ Vorurteile Propaganda Mythos,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 11, no.1 (1985) 37–58; Axel Stähler, *Zionism, the German Empire, and Africa: Jewish Metamorphoses and the Colors of Difference* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018).

³² Andrew D. Evans, *Anthropology at War: World War I and the Science of Race in Germany* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 138.

³³ Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

³⁴ Anne Berg, *Empire of Rags and Bones: Waste and War in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

³⁵ Peter Novick, “The American National Narrative of the Holocaust: There Isn’t Any,” *New German Critique* 90 (Autumn 2003): 27–35, esp. 34.

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