Continental Drifters: Holocaust Memory, Decolonization, and Postwar Migration to Europe

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation investigates the relationship between the cultural memory of the Holocaust and postwar migration to Europe from the Global South. I argue that the European postcolonial and migrant literature I read claims the history of the Jewish Question and Holocaust memory as critical resources for Europe’s new migrants and diasporic communities. In these late-twentieth-century and contemporary works, the Holocaust represents the failures of assimilation, religious tolerance, and minority rights in Europe. This literature’s attentiveness to Holocaust memory, I show, critically disrupts both the strategic forgetting of the Holocaust and the simultaneous repurposing of its memory as instructive of the dangers of failed recognition in postwar Western European democracies. I argue that the works I examine in this dissertation situate Holocaust memory as an aspect of a migrant counter-pedagogy: the residues of past violence reveal the insufficiency of liberal strategies for the management of difference, and signal the danger of current versions of racialist thought. Europe’s violence against the Jews thus functions as a paradigm for the limits of diasporic life and the possibilities of cohabitation in contemporary Europe.
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Introduction
Postwar Drifts

The fact remains that the present is bound to the singular imprint of the past. Thus when we come to ask in what sense the fixation of racial hatreds upon immigrants from the Maghreb reproduces certain classic features of anti-Semitism, we should not only point to an analogy between the situations of Jewish minorities in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century and ‘Arabo-Islamic’ minorities in present-day France; [...] rather we need also to inquire into the unique drift of anti-Semitism out beyond ‘Jewish identity.’
— Étienne Balibar

I remember being especially perplexed when, on one weekend historian’s walk through the desolate and bomb-damaged riverside areas of the old City of London, my father and I encountered the encircled lightning-flash insignia of the British Union of Fascists painted carefully on a wall alongside the, by then, traditional injunction to Keep Britain White. Weren’t fascists the same as Nazis, I asked him? What were they doing here? Were they still around? How could they be English people? How could English people be Fascists? Was their exciting lightning-flash the same sort of thing as the hated but fascinating swastika?
— Paul Gilroy

Paul Gilroy’s description of his youthful apprehension (in both senses of the word) that there might exist a subterranean but politically meaningful connection between German fascism and English racism, and, by extension, between Europe’s Jews and its other religious or racialized minorities and diasporic communities, is one starting point for this project. The questions Gilroy relates asking his father—“weren’t fascists the same as Nazis,” “was their exciting lightning-flash the same sort of thing as… the swastika?”—stage a conceptual struggle to understand the seeming kinship of two histories of racism and racist violence. Gilroy narrates how his childhood self takes “sameness” as his point of departure; over the course of his magisterial book, Against Race, he shows via his analyses and readings how this preliminary perception develops into a subtle and complex understanding of the bonds that link Jews and other minoritized communities—bonds that flow from shared experiences of racialization and
racial violence, and from the possibilities of political and emotional solidarity that such experiences might generate.

The episode Gilroy recounts is a scene of inter-generational transmission, in which the present traces of a painful history are passed on and made visible to him. But it is also a scene of pedagogy. Gilroy represents this encounter with the past both as provoking immediate questions but also as the impetus for a long process of intellectual, political, and affective labor dedicated to making meaningful these perplexing and urgent connections. Among these connections is the insight—which Gilroy shares with many of the writers I examine in this dissertation—that the history of European anti-Semitism as a discourse does not limit itself to Jews but instead lends its energies to current forms of racialist thinking. As such, our efforts at comparison and connection need to go beyond identifying what Étienne Balibar, in the epigraph above, describes as “analogies between the situations of Jewish minorities in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century” and minorities in Europe today.

In this dissertation, I examine a group of late twentieth-century and contemporary Anglophone and German-language texts—by Ama Ata Aidoo (1942- ), Emine Sevgi Özdamar (1946- ), and Caryl Phillips (1958- )—that lay claim to the history of the Jewish Question and the memory of the Holocaust as critical resources for Europe’s new migrants and diasporic communities in the postwar period. In the wake of decolonization and postwar migration to Europe from the former colonies and the global South, these writers take the memory of the Holocaust as an intellectual and affective paradigm with which to understand the persistence of racism in Europe. In this Introduction and the chapters that follow, I trace the conceptual and formal red threads that run through these works. But I begin with a reading of Kazuo Ishiguro’s 1989 novel, *The Remains of the Day*, which is set at the moment of empire’s decline. My reading
of Ishiguro’s text, precisely in and for its difference from the other works I study, functions as a frame for this project. Though Ishiguro shares many of the preoccupations I identify in the works I examine, his representation of a very different scene—that of the limited worldliness and corresponding historical blindness of an aging, class- and duty-bound English butler—throws into relief the elements that my texts share with one another, and that allow me to view them as a meaningful corpus.

**Past is Prologue**

The title of Ishiguro’s novel, *The Remains of the Day*, evokes the twilight of an empire on which, for a time, the sun famously never set. But war in Europe and its depletion of Britain’s resources hastens Britain’s withdrawal from Mandate Palestine and India in 1948; British exhaustion emboldens Egypt’s revolution in 1952 and its nationalization of the Suez Canal four years later, threatening Britain’s passage to its colonies and protectorates via the Mediterranean and Red Seas—a diplomatic and political watershed that confirms the decline of Britain’s global dominance. In *The Remains of the Day*, the narrator, Stevens, sets off on a solitary driving tour of the English countryside in July 1956, the first month of the Suez crisis. But these events are nowhere referenced in Stevens’s narration, or in the reflections on his decades of service as a butler that preoccupy him during his journey. The novel is organized into eight parts, all but one of which bears a title page specifying a segment of his journey, the time of day, and the place, for instance, “Day One • Evening Salisbury”. Only the title page of the first section, which reads “Prologue • July 1956 Darlington Hall,” deviates from this organization: it identifies a part of the book, rather than a time span within the novel’s narration, and it locates the novel’s action as historically coincident with this crisis of empire. This is the novel’s only reference to the Suez crisis, and its extradiegetic character signals what the narrative reveals at length: Stevens’s
inability to acknowledge the historical situatedness of personal memory and his reluctance to connect events that differ in scale.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said offers an interpretation of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* that typifies a symptomatic mode of postcolonial reading. Austen, Said suggests, indicates that the world of Mansfield Park depends on the extraction of profit from Sir Thomas Bertram’s colonial holdings in Antigua: “she sees clearly that to hold and rule Mansfield Park is to hold and rule an imperial estate in close, not to say inevitable association with it.” But for all that Austen “sees clearly” the economic and geographical matrix that creates what Said argues are the conditions of possibility for life at Mansfield Park—encouraging us “to conclude that no matter how isolated and insulated the English place… it requires overseas sustenance”—there is a great deal that Said thinks Austen does not see, or at least does not say (89). That is, the suppression, by and large, of any representation of the Antiguan plantation and of what transpires there. Sir Thomas is absent from Mansfield Park but “is never seen as present in Antigua”; as such, Antigua and the master’s trip there serve only to facilitate, in both narrative and economic terms, the events at Mansfield Park that are the novel’s focus (Said 90). From this representational imbalance, Said derives the lineaments of his reading, arguing that it is “precisely because Austen is so summary in one context, so provocatively rich in the other… [that] we are able to move in on the novel, reveal and accentuate the interdependence scarcely mentioned on its brilliant pages” (96). Said’s description of “mov[ing] in on the novel” is startling, because it announces a purposeful, even aggressive, bent to his interpretive work. Indeed, critics have challenged the single-mindedness of his reading. Yet such a “strong” interpretation, together with attentiveness to the asymmetry between the barely manifest and its potentially abundant significance, are the cornerstones of a symptomatic method which, in
Fredric Jameson’s description, entails pursuing those elements which have “remained unrealized in the surface of the text, which have failed to become manifest in the logic of the narrative, and which we can therefore read as what the text represses.” In the case of what Said calls the “hidden or allusive” imperial context of *Mansfield Park*, symptomatic reading demands that we recognize such canonical nineteenth-century texts “in the main as resisting or avoiding the other setting, which their formal inclusiveness, historical honesty, and prophetic suggestiveness cannot completely hide” (94, 96). In turn, the reinscription of that “other setting”—the colonial setting—in the fullness of its context exemplifies the kind of contrapuntal reading that fills the gaps and absences a symptomatic reading identifies.

*The Remains of the Day*, which draws self-consciously on the tradition of the English manor house novel of which *Mansfield Park* is an example, invites symptomatic and contrapuntal readings that would similarly diagnose imperial and postcolonial histories at play in the muted reference to Suez. But the novel’s narrative form also works to short-circuit such a critical impulse. It does so, in part, by establishing the narrator’s unreliability; Stevens’s unwillingness to reckon with history is the novel’s central thematic preoccupation and the source of what one critic has called the novel’s mood of “post-imperial melancholy.” The narrative thus works to generate doubt on the reader’s part and, with it, psychological and affective distance between narrator and reader. So too, Stevens’s unreliability functions to mark Ishiguro’s critical distance from his narrator. In contrast, when Jameson invokes the unconscious of a text, or when Said concludes—as he does in his reading of *Mansfield Park*—that the artlessness with which characters mention the Antiguan plantation, if they mention it at all, “reveals [Austen] herself to be assuming (just as Fanny assumes, in both senses of the word) the importance of an empire to the situation at home,” they are presupposing that author and character, text and
narration, share the same limits of knowledge and imaginative capacity. But, as is the case for *Remains*, if the implied author of a novel’s form or a narrative’s organization knows the thing that is purportedly “latent,” “buried,” “absent,” or “silenced”—and signals that knowing—it cannot be the thing that constitutes the essential secret feature of the text’s unconscious, at least as a symptomatic reading would imagine it.\(^{11}\) The inclusion of the suggestive date of July 1956 functions as a clue and not a symptom. It is motivated and, at the level of form, intentional.\(^ {12}\) The date’s discreet appearance in the novel’s paratextual material functions to correct Stevens’s narration, from which it is absent, and it establishes at the outset what the reader can only recognize in hindsight, over the course of reading: namely, that there is a decided gap between what Stevens reports in his narration and the skeptical light in which other aspects of the narrative form encourage us to receive it.\(^ {13}\) Of course, all of this assumes a reader’s attentiveness to both form and context; as with the question of the reader’s retrospective awareness of the incompleteness of Stevens’s account, the novel demands of the reader those very practices of narrative meaning-making which we witness Stevens repeatedly failing to perform: attention and retrospection.

The elisions and equivocations of Stevens’s thought, which allow him to elude the demands of the present, are specifically distortions of the past, that is to say, of his memory. The mental landscapes through which Stevens’s attention and recollection drift as he motors through the English countryside are full of half-buried, partially submerged objects of recall. Among them is his reluctant recounting of his complicity in Nazi appeasement in the 1930s, some twenty years earlier. This complicity takes the form of an unquestioning trust in Lord Darlington, who works tirelessly to promote a political rapprochement between Britain and Nazi Germany, forging a close relationship to Joachim von Ribbentrop and aligning himself, for a time, with
Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists. There are, then, two vexed histories at work in or at the edges of Stevens’s consciousness, and conscience: that of empire and Britain’s postwar decline, and that of fascist appeasement. The question is how these two histories—both of which the text makes available to the reader but which Stevens holds at bay to varying degrees—are related.

The delay between Stevens’s participation in Lord Darlington’s political projects of the 1930s and his tentative efforts to revisit these events two decades later, suggests that this reckoning with the past is both deferred and belated. While deferral is an act of postponing the present into the future, and belatedness the quality of having arrived too late, both are temporal displacements, and Stevens’s narration—his actions, his thoughts and the language in which he articulates those thoughts—are saturated with these forms of untimeliness. The first lines of the novel indicate an anticipatory mood about the journey: “It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days. An expedition, I should say, which I will undertake alone, in the comfort of Mr. Farraday’s Ford; an expedition which, as I foresee it, will take me through much of the finest countryside of England to the West Country, and may keep me away from Darlington Hall for as much as five or six days” (3). Likelihood, foresight, and the future tense are characteristics of this passage. But the unremitting communiqué of almost every page of the novel is that Stevens is immersed in thoughts of the past. This is signaled by phrases such as “In fact, as I recall,” “recalling the time,” “In fact, I remember,” “For when I look back,” “I find myself going over in my mind again,” and a host of variations on statements of this sort, all of which draw attention to Stevens’s faculty of memory at work, even as his powers of recall prove tendentious. He rekindles an anticipatory affect when he finds himself gazing upon a view that leads him “for the
first time to adopt a frame of mind appropriate for the journey before me. For it was then that I felt the first healthy flush of anticipation for the many interesting experiences I know these days ahead hold in store for me” (26). But the aspect of his journey he anticipates most acutely—his reunion with Miss Kenton, Darlington Hall’s housekeeper during the 1920s and ‘30s—comes decades too late to fulfill what once seemed to be the possibility of love between them.15

Poignant as the novel’s portrait of unrequited love may be, it figures as one instance among others of Stevens’s failures of judgment. The most egregious of these are his willing execution of Lord Darlington’s request that the two Jewish maids at Darlington, Ruth and Sarah, be let go from service; his posture of political incuriosity, which Lord Darlington’s godson and critic describes as Stevens’s willingness to “just let all this go on before you… and never think to look at it for what it is”; and his resistance of some twenty years to come to terms with his responsibility for and to the past (223). This combination of misjudgment and belatedness renders ironic Stevens’s claim, in reference to a small matter, that “I believe my judgement proved quite sound on the question of timing” (13).

His reflections on Ruth and Sarah’s dismissal take place over two sections of the book. In the novel’s shortest section, he addresses public perceptions of Lord Darlington’s anti-Semitism. He challenges the “great hypocrisy” of those who pretend that Darlington “was alone in believing Herr Ribbentrop an honourable gentleman” or that he was “unusual in receiving hospitality from the Nazis” (136). His severest words are reserved for the “salacious nonsense” of Lord Darlington’s purported anti-Semitism:

Such claims can only arise from complete ignorance of the sort of gentleman his lordship was. Lord Darlington came to abhor anti-Semitism; I heard him express his disgust on several separate occasions when confronted with anti-Semitic sentiments. And the allegation that his lordship never allowed Jewish people to enter the house or any Jewish staff to be employed is utterly unfounded—except, perhaps, in respect to one very minor episode in the thirties which has been blown up out of all proportion. (137)
His first reference to the incident in which he plays such a central role is thus couched in a spirited defense of his employer in which he makes no mention of himself except as a witness to Lord Darlington’s rectitude. His concession that there may be a nub of fact to these views appears at the very end of his thoughts—literally an afterthought separated temporally and grammatically from the rest by a dash. It is only in the novel’s next section that he dilates on this “minor episode,” opening with the words: “I feel I should perhaps return a moment to the question of his lordship’s attitude to Jewish persons, since this whole issue of anti-Semitism, I realize, has become a rather sensitive one these days” (145). He thus circles back to the topic with what seems an oblique reference to the Holocaust, conceding that what was once insignificant may seem otherwise in hindsight. “Let me clear up this matter of a supposed bar against Jewish persons on the staff at Darlington Hall,” he offers (145). Yet his version of clearing up is less akin to clarifying than it is to the duties to which he is long accustomed, as a butler, of whisking away any offending objects from sight. He describes his supposedly disinterested knowledge of the matter in terms of “authority”: “Since this allegation falls very directly into my own realm, I am able to refute it with absolute authority” (145). But what he goes on to relate reveals instead the moral and class authority with which Lord Darlington makes his request (“Let me assure you, I’ve looked into this matter and thought it through thoroughly”) and the willingness with which Stevens not only complies but cedes his authorship of any feelings or even the expression of a private response, observing to an outraged Miss Kenton that “we must not allow sentiment to creep into our judgement” (148). It is only during the course of his journey that Stevens rethinks the relationship between judgment and sentiment. Provisionally, when he concedes at the end of this section that Lord Darlington—though only Lord Darlington—may have erred (“It is hardly my fault if his lordship’s life and work have
turned out today to look, at best, a sad waste—and it is quite illogical that I should feel any regret or shame on my own account” [201]); shatteringly, when he crumbles at the novel’s close on Weymouth pier at the realization that “at least [Lord Darlington] had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. […] As for myself, I cannot even claim that” (243).

But there is more to the belatedness of these memories than their untimeliness, for they emerge in temporal coincidence with the crisis of empire of July 1956. Stevens’s delayed, recursive, and equivocal account of the anti-Semitic events at Darlington Manor in the early 1930s is in fact for him a welcome distraction from the present. “But I see I have become somewhat lost in these old memories,” muses Stevens at the end of this analeptic episode, “This had never been my intention, but then it is probably no bad thing if in doing so I have at least avoided becoming unduly preoccupied with the events of this evening” (159). The evening in question includes the novel’s single most explicit discussion of empire, in which Stevens—mistaken by his hosts in the village of Moscombe for a gentleman, and unwilling to disabuse them—finds himself in a political debate between a bluff liberal, Harry Smith, who believes in the dignity of the common Englishman on behalf of whose rights “we fought Hitler,” and a socialist doctor (186). Stevens’s repeated attempts to extricate himself with protestations of his exhaustion are unsuccessful until, “seizing what seemed a suitable moment,” he rises from the table (192). But before he can make his escape he is confronted with one last entreaty from Harry Smith, who would have wished to solicit his opinion—on decolonization:

Mr Harry Smith leaned across his wife and said to Dr Carlisle: “I was hoping the gentleman would have a few words to say about your ideas on the Empire, Doctor.” Then turning to me, he went on: “Our doctor here’s for all kinds of little countries going independent. I don’t have the learning to prove him wrong, though I know he is. But I’d have been interested to hear what the likes of yourself would have to say to him on the subject, sir.” (192).
It is the question’s very belatedness that spares Stevens from having to articulate a position on this timely issue. And in the safety of his room, his belated memories of Lord Darlington’s fascist sympathies and his own complicity displace the discomfort of the evening for a time. What it is about the present that incites thoughts of the past? It may be that the seeming untimeliness of Stevens’s memories is nothing of the sort, for the belatedness of memory in this instance serves a function—it defers the demands of the here-and-now.

The dynamics of Stevens’s encounter with the past seem to depend as much on forms of misplaced attention as they do on the belatedness of his retrospections. Along with the profusion of terms indicating recall, Stevens continually finds himself in a state of preoccupation. The word “preoccupied” (or “preoccupying” and “preoccupy”) appears over a dozen times, including in the novel’s first sentence as well as in the passage I discuss above, in which Stevens resists “becoming unduly preoccupied with the events” of his evening in Moscombe by losing himself in memories. He repeatedly uses the word to describe states of mental absorption, though even here there are bathetic shifts of register that suggests Stevens’s inability to discriminate between greater or lesser degrees of importance. However, in several instances, he also refers to preoccupation as a condition akin to distraction or a state in which one’s attention is not in readiness; as a form of misplaced or excessive attention; or as a frame of mind in which one has been diverted away from a more pressing object of attention. In the context of Stevens’s actual occupation—that of a butler—his susceptibility to preoccupation ironizes his labors; he prides himself professionally on his ability to manage and apportion his own and others’ labor to best effect, noting of his prized staff plan that “the ability to draw up a good staff plan is the cornerstone of any decent butler’s skills” (5). Yet those discrepancies of scale and value between the various objects of his attention suggest his mismanagement, in an
ethical and historical sense, of the energies that fuel the work of memory.

“Preoccupation” designates the capture of attention, but the *pre* also implies a particular cast to that attention. While the *OED* indicates that, most recently, “preoccupation” designates the state of being engrossed in something or occupied with a matter that dominates or takes precedence, it also notes that in the late-nineteenth century, the term described “mental prepossession leading to a particular disposition or tendency” or “the occupation of a place in advance;” earlier still (and now obsolete), it is a rhetorical term: “a figure of speech in which objections are anticipated and prevented; anticipation, prolepsis.” Attention thus also functions to displace and rearrange significance, and, like belated or deferred memory, it has a temporal structure that anticipates in order to preempt, predispose, and prevent—that is, it has a conscious or unconscious strategic dimension.

A passage in the text demonstrates the extent to which memory and attention are yoked together in the novel. Stevens observes that “one memory in particular has preoccupied me all morning—or rather, a fragment of a memory, a moment that has for some reason remained with me vividly through the years” (212). Here, memory is explicitly the focus of his attention (“one memory… has preoccupied me”) but in fact, as he goes on to describe, what he remembers is peculiarly saturated with problems of displaced or fractured attention:

It is a recollection of standing alone in the back corridor before the closed door of Miss Kenton’s parlour; I was not actually facing the door, but standing with my person half turned towards it, transfixed by indecision as to whether or not I should knock; for at that moment, as I recall, I had been struck by the conviction that behind that very door, just a few yards from me, Miss Kenton was in fact crying. As I say, this moment has remained firmly embedded in my mind, as has the memory of the peculiar sensation I felt rising within me as I stood there like that. However, I am not at all certain now as to the actual circumstances which had led me to be standing thus in the back corridor. It occurs to me that elsewhere in attempting to gather such recollections, I may well have asserted that this memory derived from the minutes immediately after Miss Kenton’s receiving news of her aunt’s death; that is to say, the occasion when, having left her to be alone with her grief, I realized out in the corridor that I had not offered her my condolences. But now,
having thought further, I believe I may have been a little confused about this matter; that in fact this fragment of memory derives from events that took place on an evening at least a few months after the death of Miss Kenton’s aunt—the evening, in fact, when the young Mr Cardinal turned up at Darlington Hall rather unexpectedly. (212)

The structure of the memory (or memories) Stevens describes here approximates what Sigmund Freud terms a “screen memory.” The symptom of a screen memory, Freud explains, is the seeming reversal of the expected “relation between the psychical significance of an experience and its retention in the memory,” which has it that “whatever seems important on account of its immediate or directly subsequent effects is recollected; whatever is judged to be inessential is forgotten.” In the instance of a screen memory, however, what the subject remembers is seemingly inessential, even fragmentary, but it is a memory that has “associatively displaced” the essential experience, which in its very affective power motivates remembrance on the one hand but resistance on the other. As Stevens describes it, he remembers a moment seemingly out of time, insisting that it has “remained firmly embedded in my mind,” even as he concedes that he may have long misidentified it as connected to the death of Miss Kenton’s aunt. He alludes too, to a “peculiar sensation”—a detached affect that he later acknowledges as an incongruous feeling of “triumph” (228). The impression of a screen memory at work is heightened by the literal screening off, or (as per the German Deckerinnerung) covering over effected by the door that stands between him and Miss Kenton. As Stevens realizes and goes on to recount in the novel’s penultimate analepsis and the last concerning the interwar period, the evening in question is in fact the one on which Miss Kenton informs him of her plans to marry. It seems this is the painful memory Stevens covers over with the “substituted memory” of an earlier event (Miss Kenton’s grief at her aunt’s death) connected to the later one by what Freud terms “symbolic or similar links.”

As Stevens reassembles the memory of that evening, however, his account admits the
presence of another closed door at which he gazes, behind which, screened from his view, matters of great import are taking place. It is there that he is hurrying, in fact, when he pauses outside Miss Kenton’s closed door for a moment on his way back from retrieving something from the cellar. The doors lead to the drawing room where, it is implied, Lord Darlington is meeting secretly with the British Prime Minister and foreign minister, and von Ribbentrop:

I took up my usual position beneath the arch, and for the next hour or so, until, that is, the gentlemen finally departed, no event occurred which obliged me to move from my spot. Nevertheless, that hour I spent standing there has stayed very vividly in my mind throughout the years. At first, my mood was—I do not mind admitting it—somewhat downcast. But then as I continued to stand there, a curious thing began to take place; that is to say, a deep feeling of triumph started to well up within me. I cannot remember to what extent I analysed this feeling at the time, but today, looking back on it, it does not seem so difficult to account for. I had, after all, just come through an extremely trying evening… And there across the hall, behind the very doors upon which my gaze was then resting, within the very room where I had just executed my duties, the most powerful gentlemen of Europe were conferring over the fate of our continent. (227)

The apparent screen memory that displaces the painful remembrance of Miss Kenton’s engagement and reattaches his fragmentary memory of standing outside her door to the event of her aunt’s death seems itself to function as a screen that displaces the evening’s other event: Lord Darlington’s meeting and Stevens’s sense of triumph at his proximity to what he calls “the great hub of things” (227). The floating affect of triumph, which seems to Stevens so “peculiar” a sensation when connected to the memory of standing outside Miss Kenton’s door, is now put in its place; the “vivid[ness]” of his recollection of the hour he spends standing across from the drawing room door and the triumph he “cannot remember” particularly having “analysed… at the time” are connected.25 The displacement of the one with the other turns on the possibility of shame and of the difficulty of admitting, for Stevens, his own pride and elation at a project he years later acknowledges as a mistake. The shame is potentially a consequence, too, of the evening’s third incident: Lord Darlington’s godson, Mr. Cardinal, a critic of the Nazis and of
appeasement, arrives hoping to put a stop to Lord Darlington’s actions. He challenges Stevens’s passivity and complicity—a warning Stevens ignores as he rushes back to his position outside the drawing room and exults. Stevens discloses the pivotal nature of this encounter with Mr Cardinal when he anchors his “confused” memories by way of reference to his arrival (“in fact this fragment of memory derives from events that took place on an evening at least a few months after the death of Miss Kenton’s aunt—the evening, in fact, when the young Mr Cardinal turned up”).

I am stressing screen memory for two reasons. First, because we might adopt its logic of displacement and substitution to understand the vexed connection, or lack thereof, between Stevens’s belated reckoning with fascist appeasement on the one hand, and the crisis of empire to which he remains seemingly blind, on the other. Understood thus, the belatedness of his recollections of the 1920s and 1930s—rather than being an instance of the untimeliness of memory’s emergence—would serve the function of displacing and deferring Stevens’s recognition of the end of empire. Even in 1956, the empire is for him a given, a means of ordering his world, as we see when he reflects on the “worthi[ness]” of “serv[ing] a gentleman… who, however humble his beginnings, has made an undeniable contribution to the future well-being of the empire” (114). Second, we might be inclined to read in this way because critics have repeatedly turned to the figure of screen memory as an interpretive framework with which to understand the seemingly asymmetrical development of Holocaust memory in comparison to the remembrance of other histories of violence, or, conversely, have had to contend with its explanatory power in trying to develop alternative frameworks. But the substitutional logic of screen memory is inadequate to the task of interpreting Stevens’s delayed attention to fascism and English anti-Semitism, and his denial of imperial crisis. Instead, Stevens’s untimely
mediations and historical blindness are the consequence of a *defective worldliness* that fails to apprehend the connections between European fascism, British imperialism, and the impending decolonization of England itself.

Strong readings of Holocaust memory as a screen for other histories are themselves symptomatic readings, which try to look beyond what is manifest on the surface in order to reveal what is hidden, and by what ideological operations this relation is determined.\(^2^9\) Freud’s German term—*Deckerinnerungen*, or “cover memories”—suggests a similar logic of depth or latency, in which something blocks off or conceals what is under or behind it. But the common English translation, “screen memories,” is more ambiguous, for while a screen can veil something from sight or “screen it off,” it is also a surface off of which we read. Both valences are at work in the novel: Ishiguro shows how Stevens remains blind to screened memories, even as the novel makes available to the reader the recognition that such blindness is at work on the narrator’s part. It is not that Stevens’s attention to one memory displaces the other, but that he does not possess and cannot acquire the tools that would allow him to attend to both at the same time, in some simultaneous or dialectical fashion. I call this lack *defective worldliness*, and it is in part the consequence of failed or non-existent pedagogies. There runs throughout the novel a discursive current about education— not knowledge *per se*, but its acquisition or formation. Ishiguro gestures to two forms of education—worldly experience and autodidacticism—that might correct such narrowness of perspective. And he shows how the constraints of class, generation and national structure of feeling, all of which produce Stevens’s subject position, place such worldly experience and autodidacticism out of Stevens’s reach, alienating him even from the desire for them.\(^3^0\) Stevens has disciplined his consciousness and attentiveness to not stray beyond a certain purview; in fact, we might read his profession as a butler as an allegory of
such a disciplining, and not just as an indicator of his class position.

Ishiguro depicts—and mourns—Stevens’s failures to make historical connections between the history of empire and the memory of the Holocaust, and he represents such defective worldliness as in part the consequence of a classed and national subject position that limits Stevens’s experience, knowledge, and curiosity. In contrast, the works I study in the following chapters actively pursue such connections. They do so because for the authors and characters of these works—migrants, exiles, and minorities—such connections possess a lived and felt urgency. What Said terms “the other setting” cannot be excluded in these works (as Ishiguro demonstrates Stevens to be excluding it), for these texts and authors feel themselves to belong to, or move back and forth across, both that other setting and a migrant or diasporic postwar Europe. As such, these texts and authors possess a knowingness about the Holocaust, and a grasp of how it bears upon their own experiences of racialization and liberal exclusion as migrants and racial or religious minorities in postwar Europe.

The “Other” Setting

The multi-leveled knowingness of these novels about the persecution of the Jews operates as an intellectual and affective paradigm, and it is produced by pedagogical practices and acts of transmission—it is made and not given. All of the works I discuss situate knowledge of the Holocaust as both a crucial component and a product of an educative project directed towards the development of a worldly sensibility. That is to say, the worldly experience—in the forms of migrancy, travel, exile and education—that is so crucial to the development of the characters who populate these works brings about direct encounters with Holocaust memory and its landscapes. For instance, two of the works—Ama Ata Aidoo’s Our Sister Killjoy (1977) and Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde [Strange Stars Stare Towards Earth]
(2003)—both concern young women who travel to Germany in the period between the late 1960s and mid-1970s for educational purposes: the protagonist of Our Sister Killjoy on a youth exchange sponsored by the German government, and the narrator of Strange Stars for a theater apprenticeship in East Berlin. Holocaust memory and pedagogy shape the two women’s acts of political self-fashioning. In Aidoo’s novel, such encounters with the residues of anti-Jewish violence and its forgetting fuel the protagonist’s scathing critique of postwar African migration to Europe and her anti-colonial nationalism, while Özdamar’s valorization of German interwar cultural production and Jewish and socialist opposition to fascism strengthens her internationalist commitments. For Caryl Phillips, issues of pedagogy and political development manifest themselves in his essay collections, The European Tribe (1987), which informs and prefigures The Nature of Blood’s treatment of racial difference in epidermal and genealogical terms. In several essays in The European Tribe, Phillips describes his childhood preoccupation with the genocide of the Jews, and the influence it exerts over his changing perceptions of race and racism in his youth and adulthood. At the same time, each of these works to some extent adumbrates a counter-pedagogy that figures the Holocaust in such a way as to disrupt and ironize the strategic remembering and forgetting of the past in states transformed by postwar migration, such as Britain and Germany. These authors’ awareness of Europe’s violence against the Jews frames their assessments of both the risks of diasporic life and the possibility of cohabitation in Europe, though as I show in my readings, these novels suggest very different answers on that score. It is in this sense that memory of the Holocaust constitutes an intellectual paradigm for these works.

There is another dimension to these texts’ knowingness about the Holocaust—one that returns us to the issue of symptoms and surfaces. This project developed in part from what I
perceived as both a sustained and surprising pattern of *explicit* attention to themes of Jewishness and the Holocaust in texts that were also works of post-colonial literature or literature concerned with migration to Europe from the Global South. This is true of the works I discuss in this dissertation, of course, but also in a number of other texts and authorial *oeuvres* that (with the exception of *A Question of Power*, which I discuss briefly in my Coda) are not included among my case studies: Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and *In An Antique Land* (1992); Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) and *Shalimar the Clown* (2006); Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988); Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) and Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* (1974). To these we can add a number of Turkish-German authors such as Zafer Senocak, Aras Ören, and Feridun Zaimoglu who, together with Emine Sevgi Özdamar, form a constellation of German-language writers preoccupied with the implications of German National Socialism for reimagining German citizenship and national identity in the postwar context of migrant works and, more recently, tentative efforts at German “multiculturalism.” I read this contemporary literature as part of an intellectual tradition that took shape in the early postwar period. At that time, thinkers including Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire wrote powerfully about how the colonies were a testing ground for the kinds of political violence that National Socialism eventually deployed within Europe itself.

But the comparative intellectual project for which they laid the groundwork has, until recently, been pursued only fitfully and elliptically, for instance in some of Edward Said’s dispersed reflections about Orientalism’s figuration of European Jews. However, the dates of some of the works of postcolonial and migrant literature I have mentioned suggest that these issues have long appeared in literary texts, even if they have not always drawn the sustained attention of literary and cultural critics. By attending to Holocaust memory, this body of
literature undertakes—or provides opportunities for critics to undertake—to consider works that do not fit neatly within the traditional purview of scholarship in trauma and memory studies and to thereby explore the global dimensions of the Holocaust. While trauma and memory studies has largely been Holocaust-focused, it has not always considered how Holocaust memory might inflect works that do not on the face of it belong to a canon of Jewish writing or Holocaust testimony. At the same time, the incorporation of Holocaust memory in such post-colonial or global works also suggests the Holocaust’s significance for postwar anti-colonial and anti-racist movements. By looking comparatively at Anglophone and German-language works, and by bringing together postcolonial works such as *Our Sister Killjoy* with a Turkish-German text that does not fit the postcolonial frame, I move beyond the relationship of the imperial metropole to its former colony (or to migrant subjects from its former colony), suggesting new conceptual and geographical configurations that a focus on postcolonial literature alone would not generate.

This body of literature attends to what Said calls “the other setting”; in the context of his readings in *Culture and Imperialism*, this term indicates the absent or repressed colonial scene. But in contrast to that relation of absence or repression, these works thematize on their very surface the mutual presence of these scenes to one another, even if they do so largely within the landscape of Europe. In the texts I examine, the Holocaust and “the other setting” *cohabit* on the page. Rather than understanding this relation in terms of displacement or appropriation (the latter a charge critics have leveled against both Phillips and Özdamar), cohabitation on the page demands interpretation on its own terms. As such, I attend to this surface co-presence or cohabitation in something of the spirit in which Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus describe surface reading: “We take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding… A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what
we must train ourselves to see through." Of course, this does not mean there is nothing to question or challenge in these works. In generating certain unexpected constellations they risk ignoring others; for instance, Caryl Phillips’s *The Nature of Blood* makes expansive connections between black and Jewish diasporas in Europe and Israel but, in its efforts to suggest connections and parallels between the two, it cannot keep hold of or incorporate the significant third term of Muslims and Arabs in both settings. Attending to the surface does not mean looking nowhere else. But in contrast to Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, which signals the co-presence of these histories but stages the failure (via the narrator’s limitations) to consciously think them together, each of the works I discuss possesses a formal and thematic commitment to actively posing such relations as ones to be thought through. Cohabitation is a powerful figure for moving past equations of appropriation and appropriateness.

Attentiveness to the Holocaust in these works is as much a question of affect as of epistemology. My preference for the word cohabitation and its connotations of living together implies the possibility of solidarity. What I mean by solidarity is exemplified by Gilroy’s introduction to *Against Race*, in which he considers the bedrocks of racist thought that are common to nineteenth- and twentieth-century race science, postwar retrenchments of racial identities in terms of “culture” or “ethnicity,” and contemporary forms of biopolitics that are reimagining race without dispelling its power. British racism, continued overseas colonial misadventure (such as in Suez in the year of his birth), and the persistent “incomprehensible mystery of the Nazi genocide,” converge, creating a complex political landscape of interlocking and sometimes paradoxical histories. It is precisely this paradoxical quality to which the sign of the British Union of Fascists draws his attention, and he ours, and which prompts him to consider what bonds existed between black Britons and Holocaust survivors. “I struggled with the
realization,” he writes, “that [the] suffering [of Jewish survivors in the community] was somehow connected with the ideas of ‘race’ that bounded my own world with the threat of violence.” To reiterate, this bond is not based on sameness of identity, or even on a shared or analogous history, but rather on a common experience—that of the boundedness that violence, or the threat of violence, effects on one’s experience of the world.

Gilroy’s version of solidarity is quite different from the kind of commonality that Stevens nostalgically invokes when he refers to the old days when he and his colleagues in domestic service “were all essentially cut from the same cloth, so to speak”—an assumption to which the abrupt ejection of Ruth and Sarah on the basis of their Jewishness pointedly gives lie. As Gilroy describes it, the commonness is less in the cloth than in the cuts. There is a potential comparison here, too, between what I have described as the narrowness of Stevens’s world, in part because of failures of learning and its transmission, and the recurring perception in the works I discuss that the threat of racialized violence might shrink one’s world, cause one to turn back or return home on the basis of nationalism or nativism, as occurs in Aidoo’s Our Sister Killjoy. As I show in my chapters on Aidoo and Phillips, solidarity between or among at times appears indistinguishable from fidelity to—whether to a tradition, nation, or identity. Moreover, I suggest that the opposite of solidarity in these works repeatedly shows itself to be shame, and I trace the appearance of shame at scenes of apparent complicity or betrayal.

I have repeatedly relied on the terms “attentiveness,” “attend to,” and “attention” in order to describe a number of operations: the awareness of the Holocaust these works demonstrate; the alertness with which they seem to draw connections to or theorize its significance for postwar migration, racism, and decolonization; and the interpretive aliveness I think we as critics should adopt as we look to these elements of these texts. Attentiveness, I argue, is a practice that
supplements and mediates memory. For the fact is, these works do not “remember” the Holocaust; they arrive on the scene very much after the fact and from a perceived elsewhere—the so-called other setting. As such, they share some of the limitations on knowing and remembering that Marianne Hirsch has described as “postmemory” and Alison Landsberg as “prosthetic memory.” In addition, these works thematize their own otherness or foreignness by approaching Holocaust memory as a found object that has already been strategically put to work, or strategically forgotten, at the scene of their encounter. Our Sister Killjoy and Phillips’s essays treat such strategic use or forgetting as crucial to Holocaust memory’s significance as an object lesson for their assessments of continued racism in Europe, while Özdamar’s novel aligns itself with an effort to rescue the memory of the Holocaust in 1970s Germany from its status as what Eric Santner terms a “stranded object.”

**Boomerangs and Drifts**

In the early work by Arendt and Césaire to which I have referred, there is a decidedly directional logic at work. This is captured by what Césaire describes as the shock of return, and what Arendt calls the boomerang effect—that is the rebounding upon Europe of the violence that it brings to the colonies and refines there. I discuss their work in some detail in Chapter One; my point here is only that their accounts, despite being different in important respects, both preserve the sense of Europe and the colonies as discrete spaces, even as they trace the movement of norms and practices of violence across borders. This tendency to describe space in such directional terms parallels, especially in Arendt’s case, a temporal logic in which early stages of imperialism prepare the ground for subsequent violence in Europe. Such a diachronic framework, as I show in Chapters One and Three, has conceptual limitations; it underestimates the possibility of coeval formations that are entangled in ways more complicated than a logic of
stages and progressions can capture. More recent work, such as Michael Rothberg’s concept of “multidirectional memory,” rethinks these organizing figures and instead emphasizes the synchronic though uneven process by which, as Rothberg’s subtitle indicates, the memory of the Holocaust as a discrete event emerges during the high era of decolonization. But multidirectionality still suggests distinct points between which one moves, even if that movement is diverse and multiple. For instance, one could preserve the fixity of the cardinal directions while showing the complex and cross-cutting ways in which one can move between them; in the context of the importance but also exhaustion of dichotomies such as “East” and “West,” “North,” and “South” for postcolonial and transnational studies, “multidirectional” might not escape the connotations of distinct zones as thoroughly as it wishes to.

My choice of title for this project, “Continental Drifters,” suggests a less purposive form of movement and a decidedly shifting geography. In large part, this is to emphasize the porous and changeable quality of the geographical and political borders of the zones that appear in these texts. Each of the works I study incorporates in some fashion sites that belong to multiple geographical and cultural imaginaries, and that represent phantom Europes, or troubling extensions of Europe. By this I mean sites that no longer exist, and/or whose existence is sometimes elided, such as the multiethnic Mediterranean at the time of the Ottoman Empire, early modern Venice, and Muslim Spain; or sites whose Europeanness is permanently in question, such as contemporary Israel-Palestine and modern Turkey. The centrality of Mediterranean geographies in this project is especially striking in light of Roberto Dainotto’s reflections on the relationship between Europe’s “Southern Question” and postcolonial scholarship. The presence of these zones in the texts I study suggests that these regions might be especially productive ones for thinking about the connections between Jewish, Muslim,
postcolonial, and other histories. Indeed, these edges and outposts are not simply the colonial “periphery” to which postcolonial criticism has drawn our attention for many years, but instead are zones of historical coexistence and conflict between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim populations. As such, they resignify and redirect those questions of cohabitation—especially between Christian, Muslim, and Jew—that so preoccupy the political “center” of Europe today. In this context, we might think too of Judith Butler’s discussion of cohabitation as a mode in which to think about the impasses in Israel-Palestine. It is in light of these debates about religious/cultural cohabitation in Europe, and Israel, today that we can understand what I take to be another implication of “drifting”: that is, the conceptual and vernacular drifts of racism, which Balibar soberingly describes as the “drift of anti-Semitism out to other identities.”

**The Present Work**

This dissertation consists of three chapters. In my first chapter, “The Right-ness of Return: African Diaspora, Jewish Catastrophe, and ‘Group Survival’ in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy,*” I argue that Aidoo treats the Holocaust as a cautionary tale in her polemic against diasporic life and her insistence on the return to the native land—a polemic that I argue metonymically invokes the rhetoric and figures of Zionism as a mode of Jewish survival. The novel’s protagonist, Sissie, travels from Ghana to Germany and England on an educational program, thanks to the largesse of German benefactors who understand her journey to be a variation of the colonial civilizing mission. However, Aidoo attends to the destruction of the Jews to expose the hollowness of this pedagogical impulse, formulating a migrant counter-pedagogy that ironically affirms the gap between an exhausted European humanism still seeking to transmit itself, and a history of barbarism that the truly astute student discerns for herself. By reading *Our Sister Killjoy* alongside critics of Zionism, including Arendt and her interlocutors, I
show that Aidoo’s use of the Holocaust as a cautionary tale of the dangers of diasporic life unintentionally undermines her own argument for return as an act of racial solidarity and national fidelity. Instead, I argue, it reveals the fearful anticipation of failed political recognition that shadows her own and others’ critiques of diaspora. I show, too, how Sissie’s growing awareness of racial difference produces shame, and argue that shame as an affect is itself racialized in the novel.

In contrast, my second chapter, “Reclaiming What is Not One’s Own: Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde,” examines a work that I argue recuperates the memory of prewar German-Jewish culture despite the destruction of that world in the National Socialist period. Unlike Aidoo, who sees in the past dangerous portents for the future, Turkish-German writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s Strange Stars Stare Towards Earth identifies the cultural production and the socialist activism of the period as a source of inspiration for the narrator, a Turkish theater student and political exile in 1970s Berlin. I argue that Özdamar neither appropriates German-Jewish history as an analogy for vexed Turkish-German relations in the present, nor posits Holocaust memory as a German national memory that migrants must adopt as a mechanism of assimilation. Instead, I argue that this novel shifts our focus from diaspora as a post-national formation that nonetheless retains the contours of national identity, to exile as a critical intellectual and affective position that allows the narrator to imagine her primary attachments in non-national terms.

My third chapter, “Rituals Without Sacrifices: Race and Fidelity in Caryl Philips’s The Nature of Blood,” examines the long history of Europe’s so-called Jewish Question. Phillips’s novel, I argue, explores the development of a racialized understanding of Jewishness, and explores its relationship both to modern anti-Semitism and to forms of racism that focus on
epidermal difference. I argue that Phillips tries to undo binaries he has previously drawn between black racial fixity and the potential whiteness of Jews by generating a conception of Jewishness as fidelity to a set of practices that, over time, blurs what is given and what is chosen. However, Phillips contrasts such fidelity to forms of betrayal that he associates with conversion, and I examine how this inflects his rewriting of the Othello narrative, which he reads primarily in terms of Othello’s race, while ignoring the significance of Othello’s conversion from a religion that is never identified but is likely Islam.

Describing the texts I study, and their representation of migration and movement, in terms of “drifting” may be provocative; in at least one case, Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*, the novel traces a clearly defined route of travel and return. More generally, each of the works I discuss provoke questions about migration as a form of upward mobility, and as an impetus for self-development. As such, this project’s emphasis on migration as an interpretive grid raises the question of whether the kinds of solidarity, forms of attention, and the counter-pedagogies that I identify these works as deriving from the connection of Holocaust and postwar histories are available only to those authors and texts discernibly implicated in transnational flows or exilic culture. My reading of *The Remains of the Day* offers one account of how limited worldliness and narrowness of experience seems to stunt the possibilities for such expansive connections. In my Coda, I take up this question from another angle, via a work—Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*—whose protagonist is also profoundly homebound but who shares some of the political and affective orientations of the texts I consider in my chapters.
Notes


3 The duration and gravity of this labor is apparent in the fact that Against Race is not Gilroy’s first work to pursue these connections. In The Black Atlantic, he proposes memory as a shared resource for African and Jewish diasporic communities. Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993).


6 Susan Fraiman challenges what she terms Said’s “collapsing of author into character,” contending that as a consequence he misses Austen’s “critique of the moral blight underlying Mansfield’s beauty” and, by extension, Austen’s skepticism about the “ethical basis for its authority both at home, and by implication, overseas.” David Bartine and Eileen Maguire observe that Said’s contrapuntal reading practice encompasses both classical harmonic/tonal counterpoint but also, less explicitly, forms of atonal counterpoint associated with modern music: “Contrary to Said’s reading which finds Austen establishing and sanctioning at the outset of the novel what she considers to be a form of harmony in which the imperial/paternal order is assumed to be positive… it is our contention that many clues provided by Austen tell us that the harmony Said finds the novel issuing from and returning to is a false harmony that cannot fully hide the dissonance that resists it.” We might say that what these critics challenge is an excessively strong symptomatic reading that ignores the nuances of Austen’s references to empire.


9 Critics have taken up the invitation. John P. McCombe and Susie O’Brien identify what O’Brien calls the novel’s “postcolonial politics” primarily in what they consider its representation of the transition of imperial power from Britain to postwar America. Philip Whyte seems to read symptomatically when he notes of the novel’s allusion to Suez “the discrepancy… between the magnitude and gravity of the monumental happenings thus evoked from afar and the manner in which they impinge so little on the events which, within the novel’s actual economy, shape the life and feelings of the central protagonist.” But Whyte is suspicious of what he describes as “an overabundance of symbolic weight” to this single allusion and orients his reading elsewhere, focusing on the “materiality” of the manor house, the “thick description” of which he imagines “counteract[s] this imbalance.” Similarly, James Lang affirms the
text’s postcolonial status based on the reference to Suez yet writes: “colonial politics and issues affect Ishiguro’s novel only marginally.” Neither Whyte nor Lang reads the scant attention to Suez as significant for its very paucity.


11 Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus identify some of the conceptual pairs that characterize symptomatic reading, noting especially “present/absent, manifest/latent, and surface/depth.” To these we might also add voiced/silenced. George E. Boulukos, who challenges on historical grounds Said’s interpretation of the silence that follows Fanny’s mention of the Antiguan estate as indicative of the novel’s repression of the imperial context, urges caution about the equation of “silence to complicity and speech to resistance.” Said’s interpretive commitments, he argues, are “to an ideal of interpretation as breaking the silences of the past, dependent on the model of ‘the colonial unconscious.’” Certainly, Said stresses the recuperative potential of giving voice when he writes, in Culture and Imperialism, that we must “read the great canonical texts… with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented” (66). This aspect of Said’s reading strategy indicates the reparative dimension of contrapuntal reading. This reparative attempt to “give… voice” parallels the emphasis in trauma theory on undoing the silence that trauma imposes on experience. For instance, in their work on testimony (published at almost the same time as Said’s Culture and Imperialism), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub suggest that it is by eliciting speech and through “the return of the voice” that trauma can be meaningfully represented and worked through.


12 One might argue that we can guess, but not know, that the mention of the date July 1956 is intentional, or in any sense “conscious” of Suez. There is a great deal in the novel that thematizes the question of empire (Stevens’s pleasure in the anecdote about the butler who shoots a tiger in India and, unruffled, serves tea; his meditation on the beauties of the English landscape in contrast to the showy vistas of Asia and Africa; his brother’s death in the Boer War; and, finally, the character of Dr. Carlyle, a socialist in favor of decolonization), and I consider the reference to 1956 as part of this thematization.

13 Kathleen Wall offers a careful analysis of the novel’s strategies of unreliable narration and their effect. She argues that, like other contemporary novelists, Ishiguro’s use of unreliable narration reflects a notion of subjectivity as fractured; it indicates psychological conflict rather than moral turpitude, reflects a subject’s need to “bracket off large portions of his or her experience… else the metaphysical blocks of his world will come tumbling about his head.” While I disagree with her suggestion that “the novel… asks us to formulate new paradigms of unreliability for the narrator whose split subjectivity, rather than moral
blindness or intellectual bias, gives rise to unreliable narration” (moral blindness seems to be very much at stake in the novel!), her observation that unreliable narration here indicates a “compartmentalization of feeling and experience” is very insightful. Again, there are connections here to trauma theory. What Cathy Caruth and others describe as trauma’s unknown quality, or its seeming resistance to comprehension, effects a similar kind of compartmentalization or fragmentation of experience. Trauma, Caruth suggests, blocks the incorporation of experience into a composite picture or meaningful narrative.


14 The word “recall” alone appears fifty-six times, “remember” thirty-one.

15 His account of this reunion is itself delayed; his narration breaks off before he is to meet her, on the fourth day of his trip, and resumes two days later, when he recalls both her confession that she “get[s] to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr. Stevens,” as well as her observation that “there’s no turning back the clock now” (239). It is a statement of belatedness so shattering that, as he recounts: “I do not think I responded immediately, for it took me a moment or two to fully digest these words of Miss Kenton. Moreover, as you might appreciate, their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed—why should I not admit it?—at that moment, my heart was breaking” (239). Yet even here there is delay and deferral: poignantly, in the moment he takes to register her words; characteristically, in the circumlocution he reflexively produces (“their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me”) before he can coax from himself an admission of heartbreak.

16 My interest in attention is indebted to Rebecca Walkowitz’s work on cosmopolitan style. She notes of a group of authors, including Ishiguro, that “conditions of national and transnational affiliation depend on narrative patterns of attentiveness, relevance, perception, and recognition.” I find an observation she makes about Virginia Woolf particularly striking: “How does one resist inattentiveness if one’s attention can never rest, if one must always look away in order to keep looking?” This suggestion that inattentiveness, or “look[ing] away, does not preclude a cosmopolitan sensibility—indeed, in its diffuseness, it might characterize such a posture—is interesting in light of what I am arguing is Stevens’s failure to look or to attend; might Stevens’s looking away be similarly recuperable? My sense is, no. Walkowitz is describing a “posture” that wants to look, feels it must look, yet cannot always maintain its scrutiny; in contrast, I am suggesting that Stevens’s strategies of inattention are active and resistant. Instead of a roving consciousness able to settle on various things, Stevens exaggerates attention into preoccupation, lavishing attention in one place so as to avoid directing it elsewhere. Rebecca L. Walkowitz, Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation (New York: Columbia, 2006), 6, 81.

17 On the issue of scale in Ishiguro, see Walkowitz’s article “Imaginable Largeness.” I think there is considerable confusion in how she links thematizations of uniqueness in Ishiguro’s novels to what she terms “comparision literature” as a mode of world literature. But she does draw our attention to how shifts in scale in Remains, particularly the exaggerated shifts that are such a characteristic of Stevens’s thought, encourage the reader “to see single actions in the context of more pervasive or more collective consequence,” even if Stevens himself cannot. Interestingly, Walkowitz also mentions symptomatic reading in connection with this novel. However, while I am arguing against symptomatic reading as a model for understanding the relations the text posits between different histories, Walkowitz focuses on the erroneous symptomatic readings towards which Stevens himself tends, and which lead to “the problem that Stevens often faces, or indeed does not face”—that of “devalu[ing] or often simply miss[ing] what is present.” As I have suggested is the case for retrospection and attention, the novel may

18 For example, when he explains his intention to make a request of his employer at a moment when Mr Farraday is not “preoccupied or distracted” (12).

19 For instance, he speaks of the servants of his generation as having been “much too preoccupied with the ‘trimmings’ [of their professional skills]… when the time should have been spent mastering the basic fundamentals” (35). Later, when Lord Darlington requests that Stevens explain the “facts of life” to his grown godson, Stevens finds himself “taken aback” but notes that “coming upon me as it did, however, in the midst of such a busy period, I could not afford to let it preoccupy me unduly” (83).

20 The most pointed instance of this is when he comments: “But I see I am becoming preoccupied with these memories and this is perhaps a little foolish. This present trip represents, after all, a rare opportunity for me to savour to the full the many splendours of the English countryside, and I know I shall greatly regret it later if I allow myself to become unduly diverted” (67). In contrast to the later instance in which he becomes preoccupied with memories but finds them a welcome diversion from thoughts of the recent past, here he tries to dispel such a preoccupied frame of mind by referring anxiously to the possibility of missing what he is there for, and of the regret that might result from such belatedness.

21 Etymologically, it derives from the Latin praecoccupat, which in its English verb form survives until the eighteenth century and similarly means “to take possession of (the mind) in advance; to prepossess; to influence, bias, prejudice,” also “to usurp,” or “To meet in advance; anticipate; forestall, pre-empt.


23 ibid., 51-52.


25 There are two possible implications to understanding his preoccupation with the memory of his missed encounter with Miss Kenton: on the one hand, it seems a screen of a further screen—a regret that conceals shame—functioning as a red herring of sorts. On the other hand, it may be that the triumph he feels includes and springs in part from his rejection of Miss Kenton and his refusal to acknowledge what he believes are her feelings or his own. Such a view dovetails with Renata Salecl’s caution against reading for depth vis-à-vis the novel’s romance plot, and her argument that while the novel “impl[ies] that there is something suppressed or hidden behind this ideological machinery—passions of the individuals engaged in rituals, their secret ‘true’ loves,” it is in fact “useless to search in Stevens for some hidden love that could not come out because of the rigid ritual he engaged himself in—all of his love is in the rituals.” Renata Salecl, “I Can’t Love You Unless I Give You Up,” in Gaze and Voice as Love Objects, eds. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Zizek (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 180, 185.

26 It is for this reason that I cannot agree with Bruce Robbins’s reading of the novel, in which he focuses only on the first of Lord Darlington’s conferences, in the early 1920s. Robbins notes that Lord Darlington’s instinct to relax the terms of the Treaty of Versailles was sensible, and argues that, as such, “the butler’s professionalism turns out to have been correct. His detached professional affectivity removes him sufficiently from the national passions raging around him that he can play his small part in what turns out to have been a plausible, even visionary project, a project to avoid Hitler’s rise to power and the
catastrophe of the World War II.” This would be convincing if it weren’t for subsequent events, in which Lord Darlington’s “visionary” project is thoroughly co-opted; Darlington adopts anti-Semitic views, and Stevens abandons “detached professional affectivity” for a decidedly personal pride in what he describes as “all that I had come to achieve” (228). Bruce Robbins, “The Village of the Liberal Managerial Class,” in Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture, ed. Vinay Dharwadkar (New York: Routledge, 2001), 30.

27 Peter Novick makes the claim in strong terms when he argues that the focus on the Holocaust in the United States has allowed Americans to displace “those responsibilities that do belong to Americans” (the genocide of Native Americans, slavery, and the Vietnam War, among others) with an “evasive” and easy preoccupation with the Holocaust. Walter Benn Michaels makes a similar argument about Philip Roth’s 2004 novel, The Plot Against America, which offers a counterfactual history in which America elects an anti-Semitic president instead of Roosevelt. The things the novel depicts he notes, did happen, but to blacks, not Jews, and he challenges both Roth’s representation of “a society that in reality discriminated against black people as one that discriminated against Jews instead,” as well as Roth’s use of anti-Semitism as a “placeholder for prejudice of all kinds.” See too Michael Rothberg’s response, “Against Zero-Sum Logic: A Response to Walter Benn Michaels,” in which Rothberg criticizes Michaels’s “competitive” or “zero-sum” conception of one memory “displac[ing] another.” (Rothberg of course expands on his critique of competitive memory in his book Multidirectional Memory.)


28 This is a growing body of work. A number of scholars explicitly address arguments about screen memory as displacement, while others respond implicitly to such paradigms of “competitive” or “zero-sum” memory. Miriam Hansen and Alison Landsberg both specifically challenge Novick. Hansen argues that rather than understanding an instance of screen memory only as ideological displacement, we might more usefully consider screen memory as a form of allegory, “behind/through which the nation is struggling to find a proper mode of memorializing traumata closer to home.” Landsberg develops the term “prosthetic memory” to describe the affective, experiential, and sensory dimensions of “remembering” what one has not actually experienced—a phenomenon that she, like Hansen, identifies as an outgrowth at least in part of mass media and the creation of new publics. She argues that while “the Holocaust may very well have functioned in American life as a screen memory… it has also allowed the nation to develop a vocabulary with which to engage in discussion above collective trauma.” Landsberg’s development of prosthetic memory as a concept with which to understand vicarious, distant, or belated forms of memory shares some of the preoccupations of what Marianne Hirsch terms postmemory: memory as it is remembered by and transmitted to a second generation that has not directly experienced the past it is receiving—a dilemma reflected in the textual and visual works through which Hirsch develops the concept. Hirsch proposes that postmemory, which is always already distanced from what is being remembered and demands an active “connective” principle, might suggest a way around the limiting logics of determining which memories narrowly belong to whom and which are being screened out. See also Neil Levi, who offers a careful analysis of whether the Holocaust can be described as a screen memory in the context of Australia’s debates about the stolen generation.

As the above and my previous note suggest, much of the discussion of screen memory has occurred in the American context, where the violence of slavery and its aftereffects are pressing. Even so, I am surprised at the extent to which critics try to distinguish between events and histories that are properly American and those that are not. While critics phrase this in terms such as “direct responsibility,” it still suggests to
me an oddly narrow perspective that refuses the kinds of global connections that would not only recognize the Holocaust as an “American” event, but that would also rightly situate American slavery in a transnational frame. Others have begun to consider the logic of the Holocaust as screen memory specifically in its global dimensions. Andreas Huyssen describes the Holocaust as “universal trope” in the context of “the globalization of memory,” and notes that its shift from “index of the specific historical event” to “metaphor for other traumatic histories and memories” or “prism” may sometimes function “as a screen memory or simply block insight into specific local histories” (13-14). But Huyssen suggests that such a determination varies with each case, and accepts these risks as part of the process of “decentering” the Holocaust in a global memorial field. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider also propose a global frame, suggesting that Holocaust memory might function as a model and paradigm for human rights in a cosmopolitan age. However, while their analysis tries to open up a cosmopolitan dimensions, they seem to reinscribe a hierarchical order with the Holocaust at its head.


29 Novick’s and Michaels’s readings suggest the extent to which the language of screen memories, and memory in general, is characterized by those same spatial/conceptual frameworks that characterize symptomatic reading (absence/presence, manifest/latent, spoken/unspoken, surface/depth)—unsurprising, since psychoanalytic modes of interpretation are so integral to symptomatic reading (Jameson, for instance, describes the tension between these binaries in terms of “generation, projection, compensation, repression, displacement”). Novick, The Holocaust in American Life; Michaels, “Plots Against America”; Jameson, The Political Unconscious, 49.

30 There is a great deal to say and many examples to provide, which the space constraints of an introduction do not allow. Two points: Ishiguro suggests Stevens’s suspicion or rejection of worldly experience in his initial response to his new employer’s observation that housebound domestic servants have little opportunity to “ever get to see around this beautiful country of yours,” and his recommendation that Stevens take a vacation, and borrow his car, to do exactly that. Stevens’ defensive response is to assert that “it has been my privilege to see the best of England over the years, sir, within these very walls” (4). It is only with time and thought that Stevens ventures to make the journey. So complete is his isolation and so narrow his world that, upon setting out, he soon finds himself in “surroundings [that] grew unrecognizable” and finds himself thinking that “I had gone beyond all previous boundaries,” and fearing that “I was perhaps not on the correct road at all, but speeding off in totally the wrong direction into a wilderness” (23-24). In light of psychic confrontations and reluctant encounters with the past that the journey prompts in Stevens, Ishiguro seems to suggest that the absence of such forays into the world, and the sclerotic life that Stevens leads at Darlington, may be materially and causally related to his historical and imaginative failures. Ishiguro suggests Stevens’s resistance to auto-didactic projects in a passage in which Stevens meditates on his profession and rejects a school of butlering that is committed to education and self-improvement, or what he dismisses as “the obsession with eloquence and general knowledge” (34). The suggestion that Stevens may in fact attach feelings of shame to his lack of learning, even as he rejects such a path for himself, comes in an episode when Miss Kenton finds him with a
sentimental” novel he quickly tries to hide from her, presumably on account of his embarrassment at being caught seeking out entertainment that he enjoys but knows is lowbrow (167-168).


33 Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading,” 9.

34 Gilroy, Against Race, 4.

35 ibid.

36 On the question of shame as a postcolonial affect, see Timothy Bewes. Bewes describes his project as trying “to reframe the problematic of postcolonial studies… as a field defined not positively, by the presence of certain cultural motifs, identity formations, historical struggles, or emancipatory goals, but negatively, by an incommensurability that is materialized whenever such presences are produced or named as the object of subject of a work.” One of the most interesting aspects of his project is that he draws not only on the postcolonial context but also on what he repeatedly refers to as the significance of “Auschwitz.” He argues that literature’s shame and discomfort with its formal qualities and limitations is “emblematic of a general disintegration of form, or forms…” and he sets the violence of Auschwitz and of colonization/decolonization alongside one another as the two key “events” that have generated this sense of the ethical inadequacy of form. He observes of a number of writers, including Blanchot, Sartre and Fanon, that “shame in these works… is about a historical transformation in the conditions of possibility in the literary work, a transformation in which the event of colonialism is just as implicated as that of Auschwitz, but which does not originate with either.” Yet even as he repeatedly treats the two as a rhetorical and conceptual pair, he does not offer any theorization of how we might think about their connection, beyond their joint or symmetrical “implication” in inaugurating a period of formal disintegration. Timothy Bewes, The Event of Postcolonial Shame (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2011), 7, 17, 43.

37 Hirsch, The Generation of Postmemory; Landsberg, Prosthetic Memory.


40 I must also mention here Aamir Mufti’s brilliant book, Enlightenment in the Colony, which is another major contribution to this area. Mufti argues that the minoritization of the Jew in Europe, in the age of Enlightenment and at a time of growing secularism, has implications for the discursive construction of the


Introduction: Modes of Return

I’m on a train moving slowly through the Frankfurt suburbs, on my way to the nearby town of Mainz, where I’m teaching English and American literature to German undergraduates for the year. There’s a copy of that day’s *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* sitting folded on my lap, dated October 14, 2009. On the front page are several compelling headlines: a piece on Romanian-German author Herta Müller, who’s just won the literature Nobel for her writing on dictatorship and migration; an article on China’s controversial “honoured guest” status at the Frankfurt Book Fair, which has just opened that day; and an update on the fate of Thilo Sarrazin—a highly public figure in Germany’s historically left SPD party who’s caused a scandal by asserting that Turks and Arabs in Berlin, along with various other members of the “underclass,” are contributing to the city’s economic stagnation and cultural decline and must be either radically assimilated or denied recognition as members of the body politic.¹ As if in counterpoint to Sarrazin’s claims, there’s also a prominently placed op-ed by political journalist Stefan Dietrich. It argues that immigrants have long since left the fringes to become part of German society and active participants in the political discourse about migration. They are not the mute objects of immigration policy: they are here to stay, and they play a role in transforming the public debate.²

These two positions—that migrants are a policy problem requiring political elites to find forceful or even coercive solutions and that migrants are interlocutors and agents of transformation—are both mainstays of contemporary immigration politics in liberal democracies. The text I consider here, Ama Ata Aidoo’s 1977 prose poem, *Our Sister Killjoy*, does not recapitulate either of these positions but instead proposes a very different account of the political
stakes of migration and diasporic life—one that focuses on emigration’s role in the
impoverishment of the native land, and on the political and ethical responsibility of members of
the diaspora to return home.3

A Ghanaian feminist author and scholar, Aidoo writes critically about African and
transnational feminisms in the period after decolonization, as well as about the African diaspora.
Our Sister Killjoy is a formally innovative feminist and anti-colonial provocation that brings
together these themes. The work narrates the journey of a young Ghanaian woman called Sissie
to Germany and England. Sissie’s voyage is not one of exile or economic migration. Instead, less
predictably, she heads off on what resembles a student exchange or one of those overseas
friendship-and-goodwill programs for youth, this one sponsored by the post-war German
government’s international largesse and its desire “to make good again” (8). But, unlike an
exchange, the travel only goes one way: from Africa to Europe. Sissie’s German benefactors
understand her journey as a variation on the colonial civilizing mission; it is an educative
opportunity for a promising young woman from Africa to enrich her character and prospects
through an encounter with European culture.

Sisse also eventually travels to England and the narrator addresses its strange pull on her
imagination, noting, “Germany is overseas. / The United States is overseas. / But England is
another thing” (85). It is the place that Sissie reluctantly acknowledges as “her colonial home”
(85). In Germany, which does not share England’s specific colonial history with Ghana, she is
seemingly unencumbered by such unwanted affinities. But as I show in this chapter, it is Sissie’s
encounters with traces of Germany’s National Socialist history that provides the potent negative
energy for Aidoo’s critique of diasporic life. Barbara Mennel notes that in Our Sister Killjoy
“England functions as the imperial center and Germany as its displacement,” upsetting the
familiar postcolonial binary of colony and metropole, while from a German studies perspective the text is “considered neither German nor migrant literature.” It is precisely this eccentric relation that makes *Our Sister Killjoy* such a provocative example of a European postcolonial literature that triangulates the English-Ghanaian colonial relationship with Europe’s Jewish catastrophe on the continent.

It is around 1967 as Sissie’s journey gets underway, and she finds herself in a quaint-sinister Bavarian village where she plants trees, embodies difference, and reaffirms to herself what she seemingly knows before she’s even left: that she is a woman whose place is at home. I use that phrase not in the narrow sense of an enforced reproductive domesticity (if anything, Sissie’s commitment to the idea of home is what complicates the text’s hetero-romantic subplot), but to try to get at what makes the work so unsettling: namely, that it valorizes Sissie’s radical political commitment to Africa and its decolonization in a way that at times shades into something disturbingly like nativism, a conviction that a life in the diaspora is no life at all.

Believing that “for the slave, there is nothing at the centre but worse slavery,” Sissie is baffled and infuriated by the Ghanaians and other Africans she meets in England who have remained abroad. The African diaspora in Europe and elsewhere is an intractable problem for her—one that gives her “many sleepless nights trying to understand why, after finishing their studies, our brothers and sisters stay here and stay and stay” (12). If, as I am suggesting, the op-ed in the *FAZ* reaffirms to its German audience that immigrants are there to stay—hardly news—it’s because reiterating this point is politically potent, whether in 1977 or 2009. For migrants and their advocates, asserting that their presence is lasting and persistent effectively forces the issue of migrant rights, challenging convenient fictions that migrant workers, illegal aliens, and others are transient; temporary visitors who will or must be forced to leave. As the massive
demonstrations in spring 2006 for migrant rights in the United States showed, the quotidian act of staying put becomes a measure of migrants’ *staying power*—a staying power that eventually demands acknowledgement and recognition.

But in Sissie’s formulation, staying is no political affirmation. It loosens the bonds of attachment and weakens political consciousness and accountability. The real work is to be done at home, and she “plead[s] [that] instead of forever gathering together and virtuously spouting such beautiful radical analyses of the situation at home we should simply hurry back” (121). When Sissie speaks uncomprehendingly of those who “stay here and stay and stay,” her repetition of the term implies that those who choose not to return are travelling further and further away by remaining where they are. This image—of moving away while staying put—appears in the text itself, but inverted, as a figure for the futility of diasporic attempts at upward mobility. Migration, she muses, is one aspect of “the general illusion of how well an unfree population think they can do for themselves [sic]. Running very fast just to remain where they are” (89).

Even those who *do* return are not exempt from her disdain; them she suspects of merely not having had “the courage to be a coward enough to stay forever in England” (107). There’s a powerful germ of critique at the heart of her rhetoric that can’t be dismissed, for what Sissie deplores here is what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has described as the collusion of transnational economic migrants with global capital. Or, as Bruce Robbins puts it: it sometimes seems “that upward mobility can happen only as betrayal of those left behind.” Such issues of complicity and opportunism are charged and salient, and the text addresses them poignantly, including in the form of fragments of coaxing letters from home that ask: “when are you coming?” (104). “If only you were here” (105). “Apart from you, who else do we have?” (106). What’s questionable,
though, is Sissie’s seeming conviction that correcting such migratory dispersion is a matter of loyalty and resolve, of moral courage and political will.

The text’s insistent desire to reverse migratory currents is at odds with accounts of diaspora that take as their starting point the impossibility, even undesirability, of a return to origins. Instead, they sketch the political possibilities of diasporic rupture rather than its reversal, proposing new affiliations and practices of memory that recognize the temporal and spatial divide. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy proposes diaspora as a rejoinder to essentializing discourses of racial solidarity and authenticity, suggesting instead a diasporic consciousness that recalls the ruptures of “loss, exile, and journeying,” rather than conjuring up “a lost past” and “a culture of compensation that would restore access to it.” Sissie, in contrast, understands the relation between diaspora and home as simultaneously parasitical and neglectful; diaspora indicates the wilful renunciation of belonging and history, rather than the existence of fragile continuities or imaginative bonds. While Gilroy and other critics of diaspora question a telos of homecoming, Sissie worries: “We have been scattered. We wander too far. We are in danger of getting completely lost. We must not allow this to happen” (118). Her words are hortatory but also elegiac, rendering uncertain the distinction between Sissie’s return as an act of political conviction, and other forms of return that stem from nostalgia or strive to recuperate loss.

Let me note that there is a repeated oscillation in my analysis of this text between “diaspora” and “migration.” Certainly, the context about which Aidoo writes—the postwar movement of Africans to Europe, often for economic reasons—is an instance of migration, and the relation between these new migrants on the one hand, and, on the other, those diasporic Africans whose longstanding presence in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere is a product of the transatlantic slave trade is not clear cut. One implication, of course, is that the diaspora does
not have an Africa to which they can be enjoined to return—a theme I will take up later in the chapter. However, I persist in describing the text in terms of diaspora as well as migration, for two related reasons: first, the novel invokes figures that I read as examples of a diasporic imaginary. For instance, when Sissie worries: “We have been scattered. We wander too far. We are in danger of getting completely lost. We must not allow this to happen,” she is drawing on a language of scattering and wandering that takes its mournful resonance from the pertinence of those figures as a description for what diaspora, in its specific sense, is and represents—a scattering and a wandering from which its members nonetheless try to preserve or recover forms of attachment, shared identities, or memory as a common critical resource. This brings me to my second point, which is that as I use it in this chapter, diaspora refers in a broad sense to instances of migration and dispersal in which I see a common theme of the preservation and transmission—indeed, preservation through transmission—of a sense of cultural identity or belonging, despite spatial dislocation.  

If there is a distinction between return as an act of political conviction, and return as nostalgic or reparative, then it is the nostalgic or recuperative modes of return with which we’re more familiar—modes in which return is deferred, foreclosed, or traumatic—frequently generated in works of migration literature and exile, or narratives of traumatic memory. Among that constellation of stories on the front page of the newspaper, all of which are in some way stories about returning and staying, I pause on the headline “Herta Müller in Transylvania.” Earlier that day, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, I had heard Müller speak about her newest book, *Atemschaukel*, in an interview for the television channel Arte.  

First, a series of photographs flashed up on a screen—photos of her journey to Ukraine with poet Oskar Pastior in 2004. It is his story of imprisonment in Soviet camps that the novel revisits, and, as Müller explained in the
interview, early in their collaborative project they undertook literally to revisit that landscape—a journey of return. The journey is fraught, for Pastior has never before returned to Ukraine and they fear he may not be able to bear it. But instead, she explains, the journey is a type of Heimkehr, a term that most properly implies a homecoming, but also emphasizes the act of returning or circling back.

Yet in this instance, too, the full measure of what such a return might mean remains incalculable, for Oskar Pastior dies before they can write the book and before he has a chance to return again, as he wishes to. What is left, Müller says, is the task of writing the story—a task that falls to her. Describing herself as the story’s Werkzeug or instrument, Müller also functions as its medium, transforming the belated and unfinished return into narrative. In such instances of exilic loss, what is salvageable may be return as a narrative trope that allows for explorations of fiction making and self-fashioning, substituting narrative open-endedness for return’s presumed closure.

Yet such substitution is never symmetrical or compensatory. In Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route, Saidiya Hartman addresses the absence of a legible archive of slavery and the Middle Passage, tracing the consequences for disrupted genealogies. She attends to the archival aporia, in part by engaging in forms of narrative reinvention. Such work doesn’t aim to console with the illusion of narrative fullness, but rather seeks to draw attention to failures of transmission, echoing Gilroy’s emphasis on diasporic memory work as tracking what is lost without imagining it can be recovered. But, despite its focus on historical gaps and fragments, Hartman’s book coheres powerfully around the narrative frame of her own journey along the slave routes of West Africa. Her travel narrative retraces, or returns to, the forced footsteps of other travellers in the hopes of making their presence legible. It is a terrain
she describes as “both an existent territory” and a “figurative realm of an imagined past.”\textsuperscript{14} She travels to find out what is knowable, as well as to investigate how one might narrate or speak of what is not.

I stress this point because \textit{Our Sister Killjoy}, like \textit{Lose Your Mother} and Müller’s account of return, is also self-consciously a narrative of travel. It may seem obvious to suggest that return narratives are travel narratives, for return in the literal (rather than metaphorical) sense seemingly demands a journey. But \textit{Our Sister Killjoy} tellingly adapts and revises familiar tropes and generic conventions, not least through its deep scepticism of travel and its relationship to knowledge, particularly self-knowledge. As far as Sissie is concerned, the original purpose for African students to travel to Europe was to “come to these alien places, study what we can of what they know and then go back home” (120). As if in rebuttal to the paternalistic aspirations of the Germans who bring her to Europe in an effort to remake African subjects, such aloofness casts knowledge as an object to be acquired while protecting the self from exposure to the foreign or “alien.” Indeed, one of the most suggestive aspects of Sissie’s experience abroad—her tentatively erotic relationship with a German woman named Marija—resists inclusion and narration in the traveller’s report: “do you go back to your village in Africa and say… from the beginning of your story that you met a married woman?” Sissie wonders (65).

While the narrative of the travel falters and questions its own legitimacy, the direction of Sissie’s travel remains steadfastly directed at a return home, or \textit{Heimkehr}. The text is bookended by Sissie’s two journeys, the first of which takes her from Africa to Europe, “organised in such a way that they passed over the bit of Africa left in their way in the dead hours of the night,” and the second that returns her home so that she wakes to see the coastline of Africa, “warm and green” (10, 33). The contrast between the African continent cloaked in darkness on the voyage
out, and the triumphantly verdant and alive African landscape to which Sissie returns, figures the circularity of a journey that ends where it began as one of narrative fulfilment. Unlike Hartman’s narrative, where the literal journey is a “return” only in a metaphorical sense; or Müller’s account of a journey that returns to an unhomely site of trauma, Sissie’s return is for Aidoo an act of “complete sweetness” that returns Sissie to herself, rather than indicating a self made anew (133). In Our Sister Killjoy, home is the point of departure and the final destination. As such, the frame of the travel narrative not only affirms Sissie’s return as an ethical and political necessity but also situates that return as generically inevitable.

Yet there is another mode of return at work in the text that is bound up with Sissie’s hyperalertness to Germany’s catastrophic recent history and its violence against Europe’s Jews. Let me turn one last time to the assemblage of stories in the newspaper. There’s nothing intrinsically special about that date or paper—it’s a snapshot of a day on which issues of migration and difference, as it not infrequently the case, are somehow front-page news. Specifically, I want to focus on the story describing the ongoing consequences to Thilo Sarrazin, former Berlin finance minister and a major figure at the Bundesbank, of the interview he gave to the cultural journal Lettre International as part of the journal’s special issue on Berlin twenty years after the fall of the wall. Sarrazin argues that Berlin has struggled in its reconstruction efforts post-1989, lagging according to economic markers and failing to attract the right kind of people to the city. Berlin, he explains, has never again achieved the heights it reached before the war, in part because the city cannot compensate for what it lost with the expulsion of its Jewish population. Their disappearance, he mourns, marked the passing of a classically bourgeois culture oriented toward achievement and accomplishment (197). This wistful description of a pre-1930s German-Jewish community, representing the apotheosis of a culture that’s now lost,
he contrasts to Germany’s present-day minorities. Turks and Arabs in particular, whose numbers he explains have risen thanks to incorrect policies, have no “productive function apart from selling fruits and vegetables” (198). It is not that he minds migrants—quite the opposite. It would please him if it were Eastern European Jews “with an IQ 15% higher than that of the German population” who were taking over Germany with their higher birth rates, but what he cannot abide is the spectre of the Turks doing the same, when all they “regularly produce is new little headscarf girls” (199).  

The breathtaking crudeness of Sarrazin’s comments should not be allowed to disguise their rhetorical specificity, moving insidiously as they do from the insignificant economic production of Turkish and Arab migrants to their excessive reproduction. His emphasis on productivity, birth rates, IQs and population statistics adopts the brutally biopolitical language of a race thinking that manifests itself in demographic calculations and eugenicist population improvement schemes. That he advances this point not only by referring nostalgically to a pre-war German-Jewish minority annihilated under the sign of those same racist logics but also by trying to reanimate the language of Jewish “racial” characteristics (characteristics that, today, would supposedly improve rather than degrade the German Bevölkerung) is a depressing confirmation of what Paul Gilroy has argued are the continuities of fascist and racist thought.  

*Our Sister Killjoy* makes these connections via its insistent turn to the history of German National Socialism and the Holocaust. Indeed, the text emphasizes that racialized bodies are not just expelled but also made useful, subtly suggesting an echo between Nazi medical experiments in the Bavarian forests, “just hearing of which should get a grown-up man urinating on himself,” and, later, Sissie’s horror at the news of Dr. Christian Barnard’s forays into heart transplantation in 1960s apartheid South Africa; experiments that Sissie suspects depend heavily on the
disposability of black South African bodies (44, 95-101). Aidoo’s attentiveness to the continuities between National Socialist and colonial racisms in the era of decolonization encourages us to think critically about Sarrazin’s historically disingenuous comments in the present. What political maneuvers are effected when previously cast-out Others are rehabilitated and instrumentalized as today’s friendly ghosts and are rhetorically positioned so as to shame and disparage new Others?

Sarrazin is willing to spell it out, asserting the rightful consequences for those who are not properly productive and who do not constitute the right kind of “human capital”: one needn’t “recognize” them, he declares, so long as they make themselves unworthy of recognition (198, 199). The question of recognition is at work in Sissie’s logic as well. Even as she recites the reasons for return as a series of joys and modest rewards that are ends in themselves and ought to be morally persuasive, she also counterposes them to the impossibility of achieving recognition abroad, saying “we would burn out our brawn and brains trying to prove what you describe as ‘our worth’ and we won’t get a flicker of recognition from those cold blue eyes” (130). Sissie is in the grip of her own stereotypes and clichés, but her words reveal that the form of return with which the text is most concerned—that is, return as an act of political conviction—is locked in a mostly silent contest with a racism that demands Others not stay and that refuses to recognize them. Sissie must return home, not just because her loyalties demand it, but also because she feels herself unwelcome and unwanted elsewhere. In one of the work’s devastating passages, the words that Sissie has incessantly repeated throughout the text—“finish and hurry back” “go home”—move uncannily from her mouth to other mouths, facilitated by the form of the text, which moves between prose and poetry, allowing for the unexpected circulation and repetition of words and phrases that suddenly signify differently:
Frozen fingers in winter,
Cheap nigger-food from Shepherds Bush
Hot faces in hiding from
Sneering mouths that wonder
When
You are going to
Finish, and go back home… (104)

Racist demands to “go home” or “go back to were you came from” are also calls for a form of return. It is also this mode of return that Our Sister Killjoy implicitly addresses—a mode of return that takes us in a direction quite different from return as an act of political conviction, or an acknowledgement of familial and social bonds, or return as a foreclosed or traumatic journey, or even return as a mode of fiction making. It asks us to think about return as an outcome of the failure of recognition—of return as racism’s imperative.

In what follows, I argue that Aidoo invokes the destruction of Europe’s Jews for two related ends. By dwelling on the brutality of Europe’s recent history, she exposes the hollowness of the pedagogical impulse that motivates Sissie’s German benefactors, formulating a migrant counter-pedagogy that ironically affirms the gap between an exhausted European humanism still seeking to transmit itself, and a history of barbarism that the truly astute student discerns for herself. But the Holocaust also functions metonymically as a figure for precisely the fear of failed political recognition that I have suggested circulates covertly in Our Sister Killjoy. Aidoo puts Holocaust memory to work as an object lesson in her polemic against diasporic life and her insistence on the return to the native land. By employing this history as a cautionary tale with which to shore up her case against the viability of diasporic life, however, Aidoo complicates the language of racial solidarity, political commitment, and national fidelity in which she largely chooses to frame her exhortations. In its admixture of demands for postcolonial national self-determination and its anxiety about a people’s survival in the diaspora, Aidoo’s polemic, I want
to argue, also draws on the rhetoric and figures of Zionism as a mode of Jewish survival. In the next section, I examine the first of these uses of the Holocaust, that of formulating a migrant counter-pedagogy, before turning in the third section of the chapter to Zionism and the critique of diaspora.

**Pedagogy and Counter-Pedagogy**

The novel’s first section, titled “Into a Bad Dream,” begins with the narrator’s critique of a local educated class that traffics in technocratic calculations and takes as its alibi an enlightened humanism the narrator suspects is nothing more than the regurgitation of received knowledge. The danger of the “the academic-pseudo-intellectual,” muses the narrator,” is that “in the face of reality that is more tangible than the massive walls of the slave forts standing along our beaches, [he or she] still talks of universal truth, universal art, universal literature and the Gross National Product” (6). Mellifluous talk of universalism, charges the narrator, conceals a vulgar economic endgame and denies entirely the pressing weight of historical violence that will not dematerialize merely through the application of developmental or managerial theorems.

But this is not all: “the worst of them / these days supply local / statistics for those populations studies, and / toy with genocidal formulations” (7). The text’s opening passages thus establish a negative model of a weak education oriented to bureaucratic rationality. More than an indictment of meager or deluded intellects, Aidoo suggests that the worst tendencies of such an orientation are its readiness to reduce life to a matter of administrative management and, in so doing, to risk inhabiting the role of what Hannah Arendt, describing Adolf Eichmann, terms a “mere functionary”—one whose inability to think critically is “the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such.”18 The functionary, or Aidoo’s “academic-pseudo-intellectual,” understands compliance with such an
agenda as only sensible. And his or her assessment of those who disagree is that they “are too young. You must grow up” (6). Aidoo situates the narrative of Sissie’s journey against the opportunistic pragmatism of this educated comprador class, offering a different version of political maturation that stubbornly refuses to submit to such lessons.

These fragmented prefatory passages, approximately forty lines scattered unevenly across four pages, stake out a position of profound disenchantment. But these initial doubts are in no way assuaged once the text moves from this frame to the narrative of Sissie’s journey to Europe. Indeed, the first line of the text proper, “It is a long way from home to Europe,” is belied by Sissie’s experience there, where she finds another version of the mendacity at home. She finds too that those African students and migrants who have traveled to Europe, the best and brightest, are as misguided as the pseudo-intellectual at home “busy defending [interests that] are not even his own” (6). Unblocking her view and uncluttering her brain, Sissie discovers, is a task for which she must invent the tools herself. By framing the narrative thus, Aidoo implies that what I am terming “weak education” is overdetermined. At home in the postcolony, it appears in the guise of a stunted modernity that, in her view, imitates the worst of received colonial knowledge and bureaucratic forms, while in Europe Sissie encounters a widespread arrogance that refuses to recognize what the recent pasts of fascism and national liberation in the colonies indicate about the limits of Europe’s cultural superiority.

The first suggestion that Sissie’s journey is related to Europe’s moral exhaustion comes when Sissie realizes that it “must have had something to do with a people’s efforts ‘to make good again’” (8). This sly reference to the postwar West German precept of restitution—Wiedergutmachung—which Aidoo translates literally, implies that Sissie’s travels have something to do with German postwar guilt and its efforts at reparation to its Jewish victims. But
what do German guilt and repair have to do with a young Ghanaian woman in 1967? To what historical impulse does Aidoo ascribe the remarkable beneficence that Sissie observes in her German sponsors, who “had shown a lot of interest,” “pulled strings for her,” and whose ambassador himself “had invited her to his home” (8)?

The answer, I think, has to do both with the instrumental aspects of German approaches to the past and with memory’s pedagogical dimensions. Anson Rabinbach observes that *Wiedergutmachung* took the concrete form of the financial reparations treaty of 1953, which West Germany established with Jewish groups inside and outside Israel.\(^\text{19}\) If, as Rabinbach puts it, “the symbolic value of the ‘Jewish Question’ in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany is to hold German sovereignty in escrow,” then such reparations were the first step in buying back sovereignty and national legitimacy.\(^\text{20}\) Suggestive here is Aidoo’s implication that such restitution is more expansive than reparations to Germany’s victims; it may also take the form of a moral and economic investment in the so-called third world and its development.\(^\text{21}\)

Yet Aidoo’s identification of *Wiedergutmachung* as an animating impulse for Sissie’s educative voyage intuits too that this reparative impulse takes the form not only of economic restitution to the victims but also of a lasting preoccupation on the part of Germans with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or mastering a difficult past. A central term in political controversies of the 1980s,\(^\text{22}\) well after the publication of *Our Sister Killjoy*, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*’s early resonance was in the context of postwar debates about reeducation and the psychic reconstitution of German subjects. Rabinbach identifies the shift from a discourse of guilt and reparation to one of repression and pedagogy as early as 1959, observing that if “reparations substituted policy for pedagogy, the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* turned pedagogy into national policy.”\(^\text{23}\) It is at this uneasy juncture of reparation and pedagogy
that we might situate Aidoo’s acute suggestion that the educative character of Sissie’s journey is related to German “efforts ‘to make good again.’” Or, to put it differently, Aidoo discerns that the reparative impulse to invest in history’s victims imagines that economic and pedagogical development are of apiece.

This alone does not explain Sissie’s significance, especially because the German duty to master the past is presumably a self-reflexive one, not one aimed at the education of others. We might well wonder, as Sissie does at a dinner the German ambassador offers in her honor: “Who did they think she was?” (8). I would argue that the seeming discrepancy between educating others and mastering one’s own past is in fact a productive tension for understanding the peculiarity of Sissie’s position, since it suggests the ambiguity of efforts to come to terms with the past. At work is a persistent cultural vanity that imagines a trip to Europe is, for an “insignificant” young African woman, a declaration of exceptional status and a confirmation that “Our Sister had made it” (9). But Sissie also discovers that in Germany she is, at best, a symbolic bit player in attempts to ameliorate the past and, at worst, an object of both fascination and revulsion to the “natives” (43).

It is Sissie, in the form of the narrator’s commentary—and not the Germans who see in her an opportunity to contend bravely and tolerantly with difference—who articulates the violent traces of the past she discerns everywhere around her. In his 1959 lecture, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?” Theodor Adorno argues that coming to terms with the past, or Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit, cannot be achieved by learning to know the Other in an effort to correct distorted perceptions and recognize the Other’s humanity: not much, he opines, “is accomplished by social gatherings, encounters between young Germans and young Israelis, and other such organized acts of friendship” (127). In this piece and the companion essay of
1966/67, “Education After Auschwitz” [Erziehung nach Auschwitz], he insists instead on what he calls the “turn toward the subject: reinforcement of a person’s self-consciousness and, with that, of a sense of self.”  

Sissie’s sojourn in the idyllic Bavarian village where she helps replant the pine forests is untouched by the disruption of any overt memory work. But the villagers recognize “what the campers could only guess at: that all that to-do was just an excuse to procure the voices of the children of the world to ring carefree through the old forests” (36). Aidoo implies that at work in this “organized act of friendship” between German and Other is the very opposite of what Adorno terms the imperative to “draw near [the horror]” and, in so doing, confront it.  

Instead, it is the novel’s narrator who sees the landscape as a violent palimpsest, decries the attempt to make the earth recover from what it has witnessed, and who breaks from prose into poetry to ask “if, should they / Stop cultivating the little pine trees, would / Something else, / Sown there, / Many many years ago, / In / Those Bavarian woods / SPROUT?” (37). Here, figures of development and cultivation reappear but this time explicitly as modes of denial and evasion. Like the pines, those “prospective Christmas trees,” Sissie is repression’s ornament and guilt’s substituted object (36).

She is an enigma to the villagers, who came when “the Leader had had built one of those massive chemical plants that served the Empire [and where] experiments were done on herb, animal and man,” and who then stayed when the factory was converted “into just another chemical plant for producing pain-killing drugs” (44). In its alertness to both the nature of past violence and the palliative strategies of forgetfulness, Our Sister Killjoy registers in its own literary terms some of the most searching critiques of the failure to come to the terms with the past in postwar Europe. I am not arguing that Aidoo is rearticulating the critiques of Adorno and his contemporaries, though she may be in conversation with them. Rather, the significance of
this text for my dissertation’s larger argument is its refraction—in a narrative about a black African woman’s experience of Europe—of their insights about the distortions of post-Holocaust repression, the evasive turn to the Other, and the failure of self-critique. Furthermore, the text incorporates Sissie’s blackness to go beyond critiques of denial and forgetting and to connect European violence against the Jews to the persistent force of race as a category of social demarcation and organization.

In one of the novel’s most suggestive passages, Sissie and her German companion Marija encounter two “old” Germans. Sissie does not understand the flurry of words the sight of her unleashes but she sees the man’s gestures, as he points “first to his arm then to Sissie’s arm, then to his, then to hers, back to his own arm then again to Sissie’s arm” (47). It is plausible, even likely, that he is remarking the difference of his skin from hers, and that this is a scene of racial recognition in which an instance of visual apprehension insists on the unsightliness of another body. If so, Sissie’s body and his own disintegrate under the pressure of his gaze, which reduces both of them to figuratively dismembered limbs and their epidermal difference.

While it is not certain what his response is, something enters the atmosphere between Sissie and Marija, dividing them from each other. As they continue on their way, the text once more shifts into poetry as it does repeatedly at moments of anxious revelation:

Who was Marija Sommer?
A daughter of mankind’s
Self-appointed most royal line,
The House of Aryan –

An heiress to some
Legacy that would make you
Bow
Down
Your head in
Shame and
Cry.
And Our Sister?
A Little
Black
Woman who
If things were what they should have been,
And time had not a way of
Making nonsense of Man’s
Dreams, would
Not
Have been
There
Walking
Where the
Führer’s feet had trod—
A-C-H-T-U-N-G! (48)

Aidoo establishes two intersecting lines of continuity here. The first connects Marija to a terrible legacy she cannot disavow. The potential scene of racial recognition arouses in Marija an embarrassment that manifests itself on her skin. “Blushing R-E-D” yet remaining white, Aidoo distinguishes this flush from an affect that would (and should) provoke not a fleeting color on the surface of the body but instead tears of “shame” (48). It is not Marija whom Aidoo imagines shamed and grieving, since her embarrassment is coupled with a desire to mollify—“Marija smiling, smiling, smiling—but rather a “you” who can see in this scene the contours of historical tragedy.

The second suggestion of the relation between the past and Sissie’s present is more radical, since it describes a historical near-impossibility rather than a historical inheritance—that of situating Sissie in a place where, but for a shift of historical circumstance, her presence would have been thoroughly proscribed. Aidoo emphasizes that she is speaking of “A / Little Black / Woman” and not, I would argue, drawing an equivalence between Black and Jew. Rather, by gesturing to the incongruousness of Sissie’s presence in a place “where the / Führer’s feet had trod,” she draws our attention to the status of race as an animating category of Nazism’s logic.
She is posing it, I suggest, both as a question but also, in the final line of this passage—A-C-H-T-U-N-G! [attention, caution]—as a warning and an entreaty to thought.

The thought to which Aidoo urges us entails displacing for a moment anti-Semitism as the primary object of analysis, not in order to diminish its significance but to ask, as Tina Campt does in her work on Black Germans in the Third Reich, “what happens when we view the Holocaust not through the history of anti-Semitism and the persecution of the Jews but through the ideology of racial purity?” Campt’s answer has to do in part with the sexed and gendered dimensions of racial purity, and the obsession with miscegenation in Nazi Germany—issues that find their echo in Sissie and Marija’s vexed erotic relation, as I will discuss. But broadening the analytic frame from anti-Semitism to race also effects a conceptual move that makes visible the farther-flung connections between Europe’s violence against the Jews and its violence in the colonies. The seminal insight of Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is that these two formations are related. In that work, she describes how race thinking and race science in Europe, routed through imperial violence, rebounds on Europe in the form of a new kind of racism capable of functioning as a totalizing ideology with which to organize politics and human life itself. Specifically, Arendt claims that the imperial “scramble for Africa” demands and produces racism as the only justification for its violence. “Imperialism,” she writes, “would have necessitated the invention of racism as the only possible ‘explanation’ and excuse for its deeds, even if no race-thinking had ever existed in the civilized world.” Arendt’s analysis of how imperial violence in the colonies provides the conditions for the eventual appearance and refinement of a system of terror in Europe leads her to describe this phenomenon as a “boomerang effect.”
But even as Arendt declares race a concept that allowed for “an escape into an irresponsibility where nothing human could any longer exist,” her readers and critics have observed that her analysis suffers from significant lopsidedness. As Michael Rothberg writes in his assessment of *Origins*’ contribution to a “multidirectional” memory of colonialism and the Holocaust, Arendt’s conception of Africa and Africans remains moored to an idea of a savage continent that traumatizes not the colonized but the colonizer with the spectacle of sheer unmasterable difference. Rothberg describes this inclination as Conradian in light of the explicit and implicit influence of *Heart of Darkness* on Arendt’s imagination.

Aidoo also offers an account of the relationship between colonialism and the Holocaust—one that resonates with aspects of Arendt’s argument without being at all identical to it, since it emerges from a different vantage point. Absent from Aidoo’s perspective is the developmental model that Arendt adopts, which allows her to claim, for instance, that “some of the fundamental aspects of [the imperial period of 1884-1914] appear so close to totalitarian phenomena of the twentieth century that it may be justifiable to consider the whole period a preparatory stage for coming catastrophes.”

Arendt’s logic is linear, which risks treating imperial violence as a dress rehearsal for what follows and, as Rothberg suggests, also risks deeming some forms of violence utilitarian and comprehensible and others as singular in their incomprehensibility. But it is also successive, treating each moment of emergence as distinctive and generating a relational structure of preparation and “debt,” with each new present borrowing from an earlier formation. Unlike Arendt, who does not imagine or consider Africa after 1914, Aidoo looks to Africa’s present while understanding the present’s continuity with colonialism. In fact, Aidoo’s version of the boomerang effect sometimes seems to run in the other direction, for instance when she links Nazi medical experiments to apartheid-era South African heart transplants. Elsewhere,
she abandons directionality altogether, looking for recurring forms, not origins, and for circulating figures that move like tendrils and not boomerangs.

Aidoo’s choice of a literary form in which poetry repeatedly interrupts the novel’s prose does significant work here. Describing racial difference, she begins: “someone somewhere would always see in any kind of difference, an excuse to be mean / A way to get land, land, more land”; and ends: “Power, Child, Power. / For this is all anything is about. / Power to decide / Who is to live / Who is to die” (13). The contours of this passage almost uncannily echo Arendt’s description of race first as a justification of expansion and then as a principle of organizing life and death. But Aidoo traces this logic over a mere twenty-line poetic fragment, suggesting temporal and conceptual coincidence rather than causal progression. The point is not to valorize Aidoo’s literary form over Arendt’s historical account and political philosophy, but to indicate how Aidoo’s orientation to the Arendtian question about the relationship between Europe and colony differs in its conclusions—conclusions that seem singular to the text in part because they emerge from and with its formal qualities.

We might also read Our Sister Killjoy in counterpoint to Aimé Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism. Like Arendt, Césaire considers the relation between colonial violence and what he terms “Hitlerism.” But his version of the boomerang effect, which he terms the choc en retour, a return shock or backlash, situates the two formations much closer to one another. Colonialism is not the preparation for Nazism, it is Nazism, but abroad. When Césaire describes the choc en retour he is not speaking, as Arendt is, of the unwelcome return to the metropole of the consequences of untrammeled expansion in the colonies, but about the return of the thing itself. In Discourse, colonial violence is not “a preparatory stage” but a vengeful unchecked spirit that, once unleashed on the world, has the power to possesses its masters’ spirits: “it would be
worthwhile… to reveal to the very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century that without his being aware of it he has a Hitler inside him, that Hitler inhabits him, that Hitler is his demon.” The language of demons, of bestialization, and of disease that spreads (infection) and consumes (gangrene) is both the analytical and rhetorical engine of the text’s polemic.

Our Sister Killjoy is in some respects much closer to Césaire than to Arendt, not least in its style and tone, which dwell on ironic reversals and paradox. Césaire imagines that the great 19th century European humanists were ventriloquizing Hitler, and that in their words “it was already Hitler speaking.” Aidoo generates a similarly haunting figure—one that turns on monstrous copulation and reproduction rather than the inhabitation and ventriloquism of a man in the souls of other men. In Our Sister Killjoy, Aidoo situates Marija, the hapless German Hausfrau, in a gendered familial matrix of complicity and continuity. As Marija explains to Sissie, “My Mann is called / ADOLF / And zo is our little zon” (23). The scene about which Marija fantasizes, “Vee all eat together. You. Me. Little Adolf. Big Adolf,” is impossible within the emotional economy of the text. What does occur is a fleeting and perplexing relation that suggests how Marija and Sissie are both captive to their subject positions and the familial ties that largely define them, even as they try momentarily to loosen these bonds in acts of queer affiliation and empathy.

It is a challenging relation to read because, as Gay Wilentz suggests, Sissie’s violent rejection of Marija’s touch and kiss seems swiftly to foreclose their homoerotic encounter and its suggestiveness—ambiguous and challenging, too, because as Hildegard Hoeller argues, Marija shades towards the cartoonish, a seemingly vulgar portrayal of a provincial bumpkin who, when it comes to worldliness, is virtually “illiterate,” in contrast to Sissie’s sophisticated historical
consciousness. True, Sissie’s rejection of Marija’s kiss appears to coincide with a longing for a home that’s familiar and safe, far from the seeming perversity of a place “where not so long ago human beings stoked their own funeral pyres with other human beings, where now a young Aryan housewife kisses a young black woman with such desperation, right in the middle of her own nuptial chamber” (64). But Marija’s touch arouses fear, pleasure, anguish and regret; Wilentz and Hoeller’s well-founded observations don’t fully capture the two women’s relationship and its tentative tenderness. More interesting, however, are the multiple challenges that Sissie and Marija’s relationship poses: not just homoerotic and interracial but encompassing something yet more fraught. That is, the seeming perversity of an empathic bond between a young African woman attuned to the violence of fascism and imperialism and a German who, as Hoeller suggests, is almost (but to my mind not quite) reduced to a stereotypical representation of an entire nation of brutish, ignorant racists. It is this peculiarity that is suggested in the passage that reports with seeming incredulity the kiss between “a young Aryan housewife” and “a young black woman.”

It is not just Marija’s entanglements with her ADOLFS but also Sissie’s sense of her own familial bonds that forecloses their relation. Relating to Marija why she’s called Sissie, she explains that it is not for the usual reason of a dearth of girls in the family, but “because of something else. Some other reason… to do with school and being with many boys who treated me like their sister” (28). Sissie cannot quite put this relation into words. Twice, she describes it as somehow otherwise (‘something else,” “some other reason”) before finally specifying that to be “Sissie” is not to be a sister but to be nonetheless treated like one. But Sissie’s quasi-familial position cannot hold when she travels abroad. Part of what she comes to doubt is the familial status of members of the African diaspora. By questioning whether they still belong to the nation
and, by extension, rethinking the terms of her intimacy or familiarity with them, she begins to consider what other kinds of intimacy or affiliation may be possible in their place. Superficially, such familiarizing and familial names are the mode by which she and others like her hail and recognize one another in passing encounters at train stations and transit points: “She said, ‘Hi Brother.’/ He said, ‘Hi Sister.’/ ‘I am from Surinam.’/ ‘I am from Ghana’” (80). But later, in England, she confronts boys with whom she was educated, or boys like those boys, who have pursued the paths of upward mobility open to them; forestalling their return home and deferring their responsibilities. When Sissie confronts them, they respond with empty invocations of not only her name—Sissie, My Sister—but also other names. For as Sissie observes, “For most, it was the mother thing. Everybody claimed that he wanted to make sure he did ‘something’ for ‘My Mother’” (123). Among these newly minted members of the diaspora, familial ties are not guarantees of attachment or cultural continuity. Instead, they are placeholders—emptied-out names that are called upon to signify a continued and decorous attachment to home. Over the course of this exchange, “Sissie” increasingly reveals itself to be the sign of a vanishing relation.

This uncertainty may generate opportunities for the emergence of what Edward Said describes as affiliative relations, which transcend genealogy, kinship, and the presumably “natural continuity” of filiative relations between “one generation and the next.”40 Said generates these terms by thinking about exile and displacement, which suggests that one politically optimistic implication of such displacement may be the possibility of decisively reimagining stories of origin. Yet, as he acknowledges, the seemingly more expansive quality of affiliative relations based on adherence to shared values, common institutions, or compensatory communities constantly threatens to fold back into the filial.41 This is an observation that is in keeping with the logic of diaspora, which pairs geographical displacement with cultural
continuity and transmission. Continuity, frequently framed as intergenerational familial transmission, is what supposedly allows for the transmission of identity despite dislocation. It is this emphasis on cultural reproduction as familial reproduction that makes diasporic discourse often so dependent on family forms.\cite{42}

The connections between familial reproduction and cultural continuity are certainly striking in *Our Sister Killjoy*, for both Sissie and Marija. Ann Cvetkovich, noting the insistence with which heteronormative “models of sexual reproduction govern those of cultural reproduction,” so that “each generation is expected to produce another like itself,” suggests that queer accounts of migration and diaspora might disrupt such assumptions, generating other “bonds of affect and affiliation that are not biological or natural.”\cite{43} The suggestion of interracial and homoerotic desire in *Our Sister Killjoy* seems to reflect such desires.

But the strangeness of Marija and Sissie’s encounter cannot be captured or explained by an account that stresses the rich potential of queer or affiliative bonds. Between these two women still lies Aidoo’s image of their place of contact as one “where not so long ago human beings stoked their own funeral pyres with other human beings” (64). Aidoo appears to depart from a Césairean vision of demonic possession and infection, proposing instead the possibility of encounter and empathy. But she decisively undercuts this empathic affect by a moment of negative identification that, in its form, resembles something like a possession. As Sissie recoils from Marija’s touch and later, Marija herself, she is filled with “the pleasurable heat” of inflicting pain (75). “It hit her like a stone,” Aidoo writes, “the knowledge that there is pleasure in hurting. A strong three-dimensional pleasure, an exclusive masculine delight that is exhilarating beyond all measure” (76). This is another instance of a scene of recognition, but it is one in which Sissie both does and does not recognize herself. The pleasure is hers: visceral,
“three-dimensional” and full of “sweet sensation” (76). But “enjoying herself” in this role “was nothing she had desired” (76). Indeed, the only tool Sissie seems to have for naming and also distancing herself from this desire is to term it “exclusively masculine.” As she both inhabits and evacuates this self, she experiences a version of a choc en retour in which the shock of what is frightful rebounds on her. The sudden, scandalous reversal of hers and Marija’s positions as Sissie has understood them reimagines Césaire’s figures of possession and ventriloquism as something much more intimate, felt and lived at the level of the gendered body.

This instance of horrific recognition echoes a similar moment earlier in the text when, in a scene that recalls Frantz Fanon’s “Look, a Negro!,” a young girl identifies Sissie as “‘das Schwartze [sic] Mädchen’ [the black girl]” (12). Sissie does not fully understand that this refers to her and, when realization hits, it is not as a recognition of her own difference, which has just been named, but of the difference of others from her: “that crowd of people going and coming in all sorts of directions had the colour of the pickled pig parts that used to come from foreign places to the markets at home… And she wanted to vomit. / Then she was ashamed of her reaction” (12). Sissie’s repeated experience of shame at scenes of recognition and misrecognition has, I want to suggest, profound implications for Aidoo’s interest in the failures of pedagogy and her account of the formation of Sissie’s critical and oppositional consciousness. Sissie is not a victim of the “weak education” of which I spoke earlier. But the lessons she learns in Europe, particularly those that relate to the traces of violence she discerns in Germany’s recent history and in herself, are also not complete or fully assimilated.

Sissie formulates but cannot always articulate her critique. When Marija implores Sissie to go visit Munich’s treasures, Sissie thinks but does not say—wants to say but does not say—that for her, Sissie, Munich is not the crown of Bavaria but is instead “The Original Adolf of the pub-
brawls / and mobsters who were looking for / a Führer”; is “Prime Minister Chamberlain / Hurrying from his island home to / Appease, / While freshly-widowed Yiddish Mamas wondered / What Kosher pots and pans / Could be saved or not” (81). Similarly, when a German professor earnestly tells her that Germans, the Irish and Africans are united in their oppression, she is astonished into silence, “could not ask him whether… there are or could have been some other oppressed peoples on the earth, like Afro-Americans or Amerindians or Jews. She forgot to ask / Her Most Learned Guest / If he had heard of Buchenwald, / or come across Dachau / even in his reading?” (93-94). “Could not ask”; “forgot to ask”—these scenes describe missed moments in which her fluency with words and her critical consciousness are stilled into silence.

Indeed, the narrative of Sissie’s experience in Europe is contextualized by what she has learned subsequently or, as the narrator puts it over and over again in the text’s refrain, “by knowledge gained since” (36). The journey itself is not enough. It requires too some supplemental knowledge that comes with the distance of both time but also of space, in the form of Sissie’s return to Ghana. Indeed, this temporal gap highlights one of the text’s formal qualities: the shifts in voice between an unnamed narrator (or narrators), who speak about and sometimes for Sissie, and Sissie’s own speech. It is at moments of inhibition such as these that the gap between Sissie and the narrator becomes most pronounced. To the extent that this gap can be understood as one of pedagogical lag—that is, the incomplete lessons of the past are fulfilled, understood and rendered narratable at a later time that is the time of the novel’s narration—I think of this narrator as Sissie’s future self, meditating on all that she knew then and all that she needed still to discover in order to make that knowingness meaningful.44

*Our Sister Killjoy* is thus not quite an example of what Said describes as the “voyage in”—one characterized by the postcolonial intellectual’s resistant intervention in Europe’s
exclusionary or calcified discourse. Sissie’s “voyage in” is an educative process but her critical acuity is paired with moments of misrecognition or failed recognition that produce shame and revulsion, and that inhibit the articulation of critique. It is the voyage back out, or Sissie’s return, that allows for that educative process to eventually reach some fulfillment. In that sense, we might understand the very itinerary of Sissie’s journey as an instance of a shock of return.

“Group Survival” and the Rightness of Return

Sissie’s sojourn in Germany generates a series of experiences and affects that suggest the limits of empathy and the recursive failure of recognition. But the forms of recognition and misrecognition to which Aidoo is attuned are not adequately captured by the notion of political recognition that is such a mainstay of contemporary identity talk and the politics of difference. In his influential essay, “The Politics of Recognition,” Charles Taylor tries to account for the salience of recognition in contemporary political life, arguing that its moral urgency stems from its link to identity; to withhold recognition is to deny what he terms the “authenticity” and “distinctness” of a given identity, and identity’s role in the constitution of selfhood. Taylor’s version of the challenge of political recognition is one in which procedural liberalism, or the insistence on strict equality, conflicts with demands for the recognition and accommodation of difference. Correspondingly, his vision for incorporating the desire for recognition into contemporary democratic politics turns on two points: first, tempering procedural liberalism’s “inhospitable” stance towards difference by acknowledging that “what members of distinct societies aspire to… is survival”; and, second, correcting the distorted self-perception of “subjugated” peoples and the ill-formed value judgments of the “dominator” in the realm of what Taylor terms “the world of education” and via “the study of the other.” In Taylor’s model, then,
survival and pedagogy are, respectively, the problem of and the provisional solution to the dilemma of difference.

These two terms, survival and pedagogy, are crucial to the politics of *Our Sister Killjoy*. In my reading thus far, I have tried to show that Aidoo resists the idea that an encounter with otherness fulfills her protagonist’s educative journey. Aidoo is scathing about Sissie’s status as an object of difference, there for the edification of her German benefactors, even the well-intentioned ones such as Marija. But Aidoo also critiques *Sissie’s* growing awareness of difference, and her training in its perception. The pivotal scene in which Sissie is identified as “*das Schwartze Mädchen*” and, thus interpellated, “looked around her, really well this time,” is in fact a scene of education. In a moment of enlightenment—“And it hit her”—Sissie learns to perceive racial difference (12). This “enlightenment” however, represents a darkening of Sissie’s horizons, even a tragic loss of innocence, since “for the rest of her life, she was to regret this moment when she was made to notice differences in human colouring” (13). “The human sensorium,” Gilroy notes, “has had to be educated to the appreciation of racial difference,” and, in this scene, Sissie becomes a pupil of precisely this education in the perception of difference. Sissie not only perceives difference but does so in a form that reduces the bodies around her to “pickled pig parts” and, specifically, to the extremities of the animal’s body—“trotters, pig-tails, pig-ears”—that least resemble the human form and are least desirable for human consumption. Aidoo’s version of the pedagogical scene as one that transmits the logic of racialization, rather than undoing it, is thus seemingly anti-humanist in its implications, and is at odds with that benevolent notion of “the study of others” that Taylor recommends as the basis for a robust politics of recognition.
Read for its progressive potential, this scene, particularly the shift from Sissie’s initial feeling of revulsion (“she wanted to vomit”) to the blossoming of shame (“then she was ashamed of her reaction”), might represent an instance of self-reflexivity as a component of a critical education. But it might also signal a different trajectory to Sissie’s education: one in which her perception of racial difference solidifies and grows more absolute. Indeed, the shame that Sissie feels both in this scene and elsewhere becomes an increasingly racialized affect, specifically in its transmission from Sissie to Marija. It is the peculiar vulnerability of Marija’s white skin to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as one of the “blazons” or “semaphores” of shame—the blush—that distinguishes the manifestation of visible shame on and across the two women’s bodies. Sissie marvels at Marija’s skin:

It seemed as if according to the motion of her emotions Marija’s skin kept switching on and switching off like a two-colour neon sign. So that watching her against the light of the dying summer sun, Sissie could not help thinking that it must be a pretty dangerous matter, being white. It made you awfully exposed, rendered you terribly vulnerable. Like being born without your skin or something. As though the Maker had fashioned the body of a human, stuffed it into a polythene bag instead of the regular protective covering, and turned it loose into the world. (76)

Here too, Sissie’s perception of epidermal difference expresses itself in the form of speculations about the humanness of other bodies. To be white is to be unfinished in one’s humanness, possessing “the body of a human” but a surface of plastic. And it is that plastic surface that is the body’s interface with the world into which it is set loose, leaving the body “vulnerable” and “exposed” but also impoverished—devoid of the sensory apparatus that is skin, with which one experiences the world in all its tactility. It is a moment of reversal, in which whiteness not only signifies but also embodies lack, and blackness becomes protective and powerful in its indecipherability. As such, the two women’s encounter with the old German couple takes on another dimension, for while it is the blackness of Sissie’s skin that incites the man’s animated
gestures, it is on Marija’s face, “blushing R-E-D,” that the triangulated shame of this scene of recognition makes itself visible. This reading suggests that we might connect Taylor’s story of identity and recognition to Sedgwick’s account of identity’s relationship to shame. Bringing Taylor and Sedgwick into conversation helps answer, in turn, two of the questions *Our Sister Killjoy* poses: what relationship does shame bear to recognition and especially misrecognition? And can shame be recuperated and put to work as part of Sissie’s political education?

For Taylor, recognition is the fulfillment of identity, not just its positive affirmation. In part, this perspective stems from his political commitments, which demand that difference be accommodated within a liberal framework. But it stems too from the way that he extrapolates the significance of political recognition by modeling recognition in “the public sphere” along the lines of the inter-subjective recognition individuals experience in the realm of what he calls “the intimate sphere.” Our identities, he explains, are constituted in concert with those closest to us, are “formed or malformed through the course of our contact with significant others.”

So too, in the public sphere, identity depends on the dialogical quality of recognition. It is one of the great oversights of Taylor’s account that, even as he credits the experience of the “intimate sphere” and feminist efforts to connect private and public with highlighting the salience of recognition as a political value, he leaves intact and indeed reaffirms the distinction between what he calls “the intimate plane” and “the social plane.” The result, in part, is that the dialogical quality he posits as the hallmark of our intimate relationships dissipates in his description of the actual instantiation of political recognition. For if, as Taylor would have it, political recognition means recognizing not just the distinctiveness of identity but the desire for that identity’s persistence over time—its survival—then identity is stilled and rendered static. As Patchen Markell explains, the pursuit of political recognition entails “demanding that others recognize us as who we
already really are.” Markell argues that such a desire leaves us wedged between wishing for an unchanging identity that “is tantamount to wishing for the security of death,” or soliciting a form of recognition that is necessarily misrecognition, since (in Arendt’s words) it “can only recognize us as such and such, that is, as something which we fundamentally are not.”

It is precisely this slippage of recognition and misrecognition that Aidoo’s text repeatedly reveals. When Sissie perceives what she experiences as the repulsiveness of others’ skin, she is both recognizing difference but also misrecognizing its character and significance in a way that she finds shameful and immediately disavows. Similarly, when the child identifies Sissie as “the black girl,” or when the old man perceives Sissie’s skin, they are recognizing difference but misrecognizing identity. Taylor, who is concerned with difference as identity, and who situates recognition as the antidote to the distortions that misrecognition produces, does not account for the partial, conflicted, disavowed, and shameful dimensions of recognition—that is, for how recognition is also always misrecognition. In Taylor’s account, there is, on the one hand, the injury of misrecognition, which is inflicted when “people or society around [a person or group of people] mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves… imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being”; and, on the other, the restorative promise of recognition, which by definition is curative, liberating identity from the “imprisonment” of its misrecognition.

Critics other than Markell have taken Taylor to task for both the integrity he affords to identity and for the liberatory potential he ascribes to recognition. But it is those critiques that attend to negative affects—grief, melancholia, disgust—at the scene of recognition and misrecognition that are particularly illuminating for my reading of Our Sister Killjoy. In The Cunning of Recognition, Elizabeth Povinelli examines the alterity of indigenous subjectivity as it
is produced through discourses of state recognition. Her central correction to a liberal discourse of recognition politics is that there exists “an ideological and experiential nonpassage” between the goal of mutual recognition in the public sphere, and the forms of “moral sensibility” that interrupt the encounter of recognition, in which repugnance or disgust at the Other’s difference mark the limits of what is recognizable and tolerable.\(^{56}\) The compulsions and failed imperatives to be an authentic subject, together with the moral judgments that evaluate and often resist the performance of authenticity, may produce melancholic subjects, not liberated identities.\(^{57}\) Indeed, a potent site of such melancholic (mis)recognition is race—a discursive realm that problematizes what Taylor assumes to be the coherence of identity. Anne Cheng, who investigates the persistence of grief at the site of racial identity formation, complicates the relation of identity and recognition, arguing both that “identity is a fiction of ontological integrity organized by identification” and that, as such, identification as a mechanism of self-recognition is inherently cast as “a drama of otherness.”\(^{58}\) Recognition thus never captures either the self nor fully allows for what, following Ann Pellegrini, Cheng describes as “the redemptive possibility of recognizing the self in the other and vice versa.”\(^{59}\)

Fanon’s description of the moment in which he is (mis)recognized—“Look, a Negro!”—which Aidoo revisits, gives flesh and form to these critiques of recognition, and reorients us to the question of shame. When he is hailed with those words, “Look, a Negro!” he reflects both that “it was true” but also finds himself in a “circle [that] was drawing a bit tighter.”\(^{60}\) In its confining and fragmenting qualities, the scene of racial recognition produces in him a defective sense of his own “bodily schema,” which crumbles, “its place taken by a racial epidermal schema” (110, 112). But Fanon’s account of his struggle to assert himself in the face of being “denied the slightest recognition” is saturated with a gendered logic in which he seeks first to be
“a man, nothing but a man” and, finding such an identification foreclosed, resolves “to assert myself as a BLACK MAN” (115, 113). The bodily and psychic fragmentation he experiences produces, variously, indignation, amusement, anger, and “shame. Shame and self-contempt. Nausea” (109, 112, 115, 116). It is these last—shame, self-contempt, and nausea—that are especially striking, not least because shame manifests itself in Black Skin, White Masks as particularly feminized. Shame circulates in the black man’s bodily consciousness, but it settles and appears on the face of the white woman who, when she fetishizes the black male body, is told to “Kiss the handsome Negro’s ass, madame!” At this, “shame flooded her face,” and only then does Fanon describe himself as “at last… set free from my rumination” (114).

This description of shame as gendered and racialized and produced at the scene of (mis)recognition repeats itself in Our Sister Killjoy. Aidoo revises Fanon’s scene of interpellation to a different end, so that when Sissie is identified as “the black girl” it is not her own bodily schema that is thrown into disarray but rather the bodies of those around her that become inhuman and nauseating. But in the scenes of Sissie and Marija’s encounters, Aidoo hews closely to Fanon’s figuration of the white female body as a screen onto which shame is projected and where it manifests itself as visible. Anne Cheng observes that Fanon pays little attention to “women of color,” reserving his analysis for “black male subjectivity,” and Gwen Bergner takes this criticism further, arguing that in wresting back the power of self-definition for black men and not black women, Fanon enacts “black women’s double oppression or exclusion.” But by repeating Fanon’s ascription of shame to white female bodies and construing Sissie’s sense of herself in those moments as either invulnerable or possessed of a masculine prerogative to wound, Aidoo appears to remain bound within a logic of racial
domination in which the relative values of racial difference can be momentarily inverted, even as the dynamic of power is left undisturbed.

Yet what might recast Aidoo’s figuration of shame is its transmissibility. For unlike Fanon’s account, in which he describes himself as “set free” from his “rumination” by shaming another, Sissie and Marija’s encounters produce a shame that circulates between them, echoing Sedgwick’s analysis of shame as both “peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating.”

Though Sedgwick does not adopt the language of recognition, her description of the way that shame interrupts the “mutual gaze” (36), functioning as a “disruptive moment in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication,” resonates with Taylor’s description of recognition as that which is rooted in the intersubjective constitution of identity. But in contrast to Taylor who fails to imagine how recognition of identity can be partial, disavowed, shameful or otherwise problematic, Sedgwick understands such interruption as constitutive of identity formation, privileging shame as the place where “the question of identity,” rather than identity as essence, “arises mostoriginarily and most relationally.” It is the transmissible or relational dimensions of shame that complicate shame’s identification with white femininity in Our Sister Killjoy. For though Marija’s body repeatedly functions as shame’s locus, the hallmark of each of the scenes of (mis)recognition I have described is the shared affects they produce, either through the transmission of shame between Sissie and Marija, or through shame’s aftereffects. Thus, when Sissie wounds Marija, she marvels first at the “magic” of Marija’s “blushing and blanching,” but, witnessing this, feels herself “ashamed and unhappy” (72). Similarly, Marija’s manifestation of shame at the old man’s ambivalent reaction to the sight of Sissie both separates the two women (giving rise to the narrator’s meditation on the irreconcilable gap between Marija, “a daughter of... the house of Aryan,” and Sissie, “a little black woman”) but also unites
them momentarily in a shared sorrow: “their inner joys gone, too aware of the sad ways of man” (48). Shame thus marks the failure of an intersubjective encounter, but also binds together the subjects who find themselves entangled there.

Indeed, shame is integral not only to the episodes of racial (mis)recognition but also to the dynamics of desire that bring Sissie and Marija together. The first time the two women meet after dusk, Marija’s “eyes had a gleam in them that the African girl would have found unsettling if the smile that always seemed to be dancing around her lips had also not been more obviously there. She was flushed and hot. Sissie could feel the heat” (45). Here, the flush that elsewhere appears as a blush of shame is also a mark of a state of excitement and arousal, which Sissie perceives most acutely in the form of a sensation of “heat” that emanates from Marija’s body, rather than via the transmission of an affective mood. Yet the flush of desire inevitably coincides with the blush of shame:

Sissie had been unconsciously looking down, unaware that Marija had been watching her all the time. When Sissie lifted her head and their eyes met, red blood rushed into Marija’s face. So deeply red. Sissie felt embarrassed for no reason that she knew. The atmosphere changed. Once or so, at the beginning of their friendship, Sissie had thought, while they walked in the park, of what a delicious love affair she and Marija would have had if one of them had been a man. (61)

In Sedgwick’s formulation of shame’s relationship to queer identity, she argues that queerness might designate “those whose sense of identity is for some reason tuned most durably to the note of shame.” By framing queerness thus, Sedgwick discourages the notion that queerness is synonymous with same-sex love and desire, instead proposing queerness as an affective identity. This is a productive mode for reading Our Sister Killjoy, for it suggests that we might read Sissie and Marija’s relationship not primarily for its swiftly foreclosed homoeroticism—a foreclosure that in this passage takes the form of Sissie’s imaginative recasting of herself as a man as a way to make a love affair with Marija conceivable—but instead for a queerness that
turns on shameful and partial recognition of the self in the other. Aidoo renders such mutual recognition between Sissie and Marija almost unthinkable, not because she is expressing some version of “African homophobia,” as some critics have charged, but because she identifies as “perverse” the crossing of a line of racial difference that, in dividing “a young Aryan housewife” from “a young black woman,” designates not just color difference but the irreconcilability of two experiences of racial violence—one of perpetration and the other of victimization. Sedgwick reorients us to queerness and shame, rather than a narrow homoeroticism, but she does not account for the racialized dimensions of the production of shame as affect. While she notes that shame manifests itself on the skin, writing “shame—living as it does, on and in the muscles and capillaries of the face—seems to be uniquely contagious from one person to another,” she does not consider, as Aidoo does, the way that skins manifest shame differently, and with differing degrees of vulnerability. Aidoo’s obsessive attentiveness to the vulnerability of Marija’s white skin heightens and hyperbolizes this difference, drawing our attention to the specific relationship between race, recognition, and shame that I have argued this text posits.

The questions we are left with, then, are how shame functions in Sissie’s critical education and in the development of her political consciousness, and what role racial recognition plays in Aidoo’s critique of diasporic life and in her polemic on the necessity of a return to the native land. Shame shadows the politics of the text, and functions to two ends. First, it is a tool in Aidoo’s rhetorical arsenal; it is the primary affect her coruscating critique of the complicities and delusions of the upwardly mobile diasporic African elite aims to produce. She writes, therefore, of those African students who “were the recipients of the leftovers of imperial handouts” and who, in a “story as old as empire,” represent another iteration of those “oppressed multitudes from the provinces rush[ing] to the imperial seat because that is where they know all salvation
comes from” (86, 87). And, eventually, in order to protect themselves against the shame of what they are, “if they were to keep on being something in their own eyes, then they could not tell the truth to their own selves or to anyone else” (89). Moreover, their compliance, Aidoo argues, is not just an instance of personal failure but political betrayal:

For a few pennies now and a 
Doctoral degree later, 
Tell us about 
Your people 
Your history 
Your mind. 
[…]

Tell us 
Boy 
How 
We can make you 
Weak 
Weaker than you’ve already 
Been. 
[…]

Giving away 
Not only themselves, but 
All of us— (87)

In these lines, Aidoo implies that an entire people (“All of us”) is being weakened and sold for the scraps of meager financial gain and a degree bestowed from the seat of power. By describing this complicity in the most unforgiving terms she can muster, Aidoo aims to unveil it and produce the shame that she suggests is only barely held at bay by those who participate in this great delusion.

It is crucial to distinguish between a passage such as this, which takes the form of the narrator’s commentary, and Sissie’s critiques which she articulates to herself but repeatedly fails to voice. When the German professor tells her that his people have been oppressed, Sissie finds
her “own mouth caught so rigidly open with surprise, and wide enough for a million flies to
swarm in and out, how could she ask him: Germans? / Oppressed? / By whom?” (93). Were she
to ask the acidic question the narrator formulates—if “Her Most Learned Guest / If he had heard
of / Buchenwald / or come across / Dachau / even in his reading”—it would similarly be in the
service of an effort to unveil a denied truth and, in revealing it, shame those who suppress or
elide it (94). But Sissie, “so touchingly naïve then” cannot bring herself to speak, just as
elsewhere she “admonish[es] herself to tread / Softly” when she longs to voice her skepticism
(96). In contrast to the acidic and knowing tone of the narrator’s commentary, Sissie’s
experience of witnessing the degradation of her people takes the form not of shaming but of
being shamed, and this is the second end to which shame circulates in the text. When Sissie sees
the “wretched” black population in London, she “bled as she tried to take the scene in” (85). She
is struck most of all by the “pitiful” sight of their clothes, and the shame of “women who at home
would have been dignified matrons as well as young, attractive girls looking ridiculous in a
motley of fabrics and colours… in a desperate effort to keep warm” (8). Such spectacles of lost
dignity, is what she implicitly invokes when she cautions a roomful of African students that “we
would burn out our brawn and our brains trying to prove what you describe as ‘our worth’ and
we won’t get a flicker of recognition from those cold blue eyes” (130). It is this passage, as I
have suggested earlier, that indicates how the fear of failed recognition, and the shame it
produces, circulate in the text. The gap between Sissie’s youthful experience, in which she is
shamed into silence and anticipates the shame of failed recognition, to the knowing and acidic
perspective of the narrator, who functions as the agent of shaming, deploying it in an effort to
teach a lesson or reveal moral and political failing, is only bridged by Sissie’s return home. It is
only through the journey back, and the “knowledge gained since” her return, that Sissie “come[s]
to know” and articulate, what Aidoo perceives as the unvarnished reality of her people’s predicament in the diaspora.69

The covert fear of being shamed that circulates in the text, which I have suggested surfaces in the form of return as racism’s imperative, functions in a similar way to the text’s figuration of Europe’s violence against the Jews—that is, as a metonym for the impossibility and dangers of diasporic life. While Aidoo gestures to the specter of indelible racialization, *Our Sister Killjoy* also reveals itself to be preoccupied with the fear of deracination, or the erasure of racial difference. Even as Sissie and the narrator decry the delusion that a limited upward mobility can ever furnish its aspirants with successful assimilation, Sissie also fears for what she calls “group survival,” or the coherence of a cultural and racial group identity. In setting herself in opposition to such dreams of upward mobility and assimilation, and by insisting on the salience of difference, Aidoo establishes a tense dialogue that echoes, in its contours, the distinction Arendt draws between the Jew as pariah and the Jew as parvenu.

In Arendt’s account, the parvenu seeks assimilation at all costs. Following Bernard Lazare, she argues that the parvenu suffers from “dependence, on the one hand, upon the hostile elements of his environment and, on the other, on his own ‘highly placed brethren who are somehow in league with them.”70 And, having adopted this position, a pariah people becomes co-opted: its representative figure is “worth nothing, not because he begs, but because he begs from those whom he ought to fight, and because he appraises his poverty by the standards of those who have caused it” (*JW* 285). In terms that echo Aidoo’s description of “the slave [for whom] there is nothing at the centre but worse slavery,” Arendt describes this condition as a form of “double slavery” (*JW* 284). The gross error of the parvenu is that he or she seeks erasure of his or her Jewishness but, in so doing, misapprehends the real conditions that constrain his or
her existence and, rather than opposing them, consents to serve the interests of others. In contrast, the conscious pariah—a figure who bears a striking resemblance to Aidoo’s “Killjoy”—refuses to participate in what Aidoo describes as the “general illusion of how well an unfree population think they can do for themselves [sic]” (89). Arendt’s pariah recognizes the limits of tolerance and emancipation, contesting both its partiality and incompleteness but, more importantly, the implicit condition of emancipation: the pariah, Arendt writes, “tried to make the emancipation of the Jews that which it really should have been—an admission of Jews as Jews to the ranks of humanity, rather than a permit to ape the gentiles or an opportunity to play the parvenu” (JW 275). Arendt’s emphasis here, as elsewhere in her writing, is on the specificity of Jewishness and the urgency of preserving it—a position she held even as she became increasingly disenchanted with Zionist political and territorial solutions to the problem of Jewish survival. Strikingly, Arendt deems the refusal to assume the consciousness of the pariah as a political failure that is irremediably marked with “shame [from which] there was no escape” (JW 285).

Arendt’s skepticism about what she describes (ironically quoting the words of the poet Judah Leib Gordon) as a belief among assimilated Jews that “they were able to be ‘men like others on the street but Jews at home,’” functions as a critique of a certain form of “passing” (JW 316). The term may seem odd in this context, since what she is subjecting to criticism is the limited form of political emancipation that, in a liberal move that has since become deeply familiar, frees an individual from his or her identity in the public sphere while allowing for its preservation in the private realm. But “passing” becomes significant when we consider how the history of Jewish vulnerability to racialization functions as a trope in Aidoo but also in Fanon. Indeed, in the same chapter of Black Skin, White Masks, in which Fanon outlines his account of
racial (mis)recognition, he offers an extended reflection on the relationship of the black man and the Jew:

The Jew, can be unknown in his Jewishness. He is not wholly what he is. [...] He is a white man, and, apart from some rather debatable characteristics, he can sometimes go unnoticed. [...] Granted, the Jews are harassed—what am I thinking of? They are hunted down, exterminated, cremated. But these are little family quarrels. The Jew is disliked from the moment he is tracked down. But in my case everything takes on a new guise. I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance. (115-116)

Fanon’s analysis is troubling, even astonishing, on two counts: first, the lightness, even dismissiveness, with which he describes the “harassment” of Jews, such that even after calling himself out (“what am I thinking of?) and correcting his language, he can still refer to the persecution of the Jews as “little family quarrels.” But it is troubling too for the absolute distinction he draws between his own blackness, which enslaves him on the basis of his “appearance,” and his facile designation of the Jew as “a white man,” with no consideration of the forms of racialization that produce Jewish racial difference, not as an “idea” but as a supposed fact that operates in as overweening a fashion as the fixity of Fanon’s blackness.

Fanon’s assessment of the difference between the Jew and the black man turns on what he describes as the Jew’s ability to pass, to remain “unknown in his Jewishness” and thus be freed from the complete saturation of racial difference.

Arendt’s analysis does not share Fanon’s terms or assumptions; while Fanon decries his own racial “fixed[ness]” as that which is inescapable, Arendt makes a political claim about the significance of Jewish difference and urges resistance to the parvenu’s attempt to dissolve difference through incomplete assimilation and political cooptation. However, Aidoo, like Fanon, looks to Jewishness and particularly the racialized persecution of the Jews as somehow instructive for her own critique of diaspora, coming to a very different set of conclusions. While
Fanon disassociates the problem of blackness from that of Anti-Semitism by virtue of the different forms of racialization that establish the identities of black and Jew, Aidoo sees in the destruction of the Jews a cautionary tale about the dangers that diaspora poses to group survival. In contrast, to Fanon, who mourns the ineradicable quality of racial difference, Aidoo fears both racialization and deracination. She describes the diaspora as “Migrant birds of the world, / Beginning with such / Few feathers too, which / drop / and /drop / and / drop / and /drop […] Until the / Last wing / falls: and / Skins bared to the / Cold winds or / Hot, / Frozen or / Scorched, / We / Die” (23). In this moving figure, the plumage that is both protective and identificatory is stripped away leaving, paradoxically, bared skin that is less than skin in the sense in which Aidoo construes it. For in her description, the blackness of black skin is protective and dignifying, such that when Sissie weeps to see the outfits of the black women she encounters in London, she “could console herself with only one thought. That against any other skin, such an assemblage of rags would have made the people look even more ridiculously pathetic” (89).

While racial difference in *Our Sister Killjoy* is produced and (mis)recognized in ways that deform, it is also fiercely protected against the dangers of deracination, for instance when Sissie quails at the sight of an African migrant doctor who stands “holding the hands of a white woman”—a figure for the specter of miscegenation (130). Arendt identifies in the history of Western European Jewish experience the danger of the loss of a sense of the Jews as a people, “for only within the framework of a people can a man live as a man among men, without exhausting himself” (*JW* 297). In Arendt’s account, Jewishness is not a racial identity to be protected, but a form of community that should be preserved in its specificity for the possibility it affords the Jew to lay claim to humanness as a Jew. Arendt’s break with a Zionist logic of
return comes about, writes Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, when she perceives its subordination of “a distinctive and genuine ‘Jewish politics’” to a deforming logic of territorial and nation-state sovereignty. In Our Sister Killjoy, in contrast, the logic of return stems both from a fearful and shamed experience and anticipation of the failure of recognition, but also from a conception of what Aidoo terms “group survival” as decisively threatened by the erasure of racial difference. It is this version of the rightness of return that troubles the political claims of solidarity and commitment to the decolonization of the native land in which Aidoo at times casts her critique, revealing instead a version of identity that imagines it can only survive and flourish by a return to the native land—to Africa, “oh, Africa” (133).

At this conceptual juncture, tensions manifest themselves between, on the one hand, the forms of fear and protectiveness that make return such a pressing necessity, and, on the other, the potential contradiction between Aidoo’s diasporic sensibility or imaginary and her focus on migration. For it is not clear that the injunction to return the text produces is an expansive one—one that would include in its address not just those migrants who have left home and could return but refuse to, but also those diasporic subjects who, like Hartman, can only return in some figurative sense. While I have described how the text draws on Zionist forms and figures, such a narrow understanding of return is a significant departure from the terms of a Zionist commitment to return that sees the entire diaspora as potential returnees. Of course, the contexts are importantly different: Aidoo writes from the location of an Africa in the midst of decolonizing itself, while Zionism opens wide its understanding of return in part to secure its claim to the land (that is, in order to colonize). But what emerges in both cases is a congenital exclusiveness, in the one case the privileging of a people at the expense of another and, in the other case, a
nativism that can only imagine a home for the sons and daughters, the sisters and brothers—that is, the immediate family—of the nation.
Notes

1 Thilo Sarrazin, “Thilo Sarrazin im Gespräch: Klasse statt Masse,” Lettre International 86 (Autumn 2009), 198. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text, and all translations are my own.


9 To offer a contrast: as I will discuss in the next chapter, I do not think of the protagonist of Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s novel, Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde, as diasporic in any sense. Her orientations and attachments are migratory, certainly, and exilic too, I will argue, but there is no sense in which she situates herself as part of a Turkish community that maintains bonds of national coherence, kinship, or shared attachments to home.

10 Herta Müller, Atemschaukel (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2009).


13 See for instance her reimagining of the life and death of an unnamed woman murdered aboard the ship Recovery, Ibid. 136-153.
14 Ibid., 9.

15 In the original: „klassischen leistungsorientierten Bürgertum.“

16 In the original: „ständig neue kleine Kopftuchmädchen produziert“


19 Anson Rabinbach, “The Jewish Question in the German Question,” in New German Critique 44 (Spring/Summer 1998), 160.

20 Ibid., 159.

21 Such an interest in the third world was expressed not only via official channels of education and development but, as Arlene Teraoka has shown, in the postwar literature of both East and West Germany, including in the work of writers associated with the German left. In her words, “the leftist German dream of a non-European otherness [was] the dream of the German liberated from his fascist past.” Teraoka, East, West and Others: The Third World in Postwar German Literature (University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 169.

22 Chief among them the Bitburg scandal of May 1985 and the subsequent Historikerstreit [historian’s quarrel]. On the Bitburg controversy, which occurred when Chancellor Helmut Kohl invited Reagan to pay an official visit to a cemetery where German war dead were buried, see Geoffrey Hartman’s edited volume, Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986).

23 Rabinbach, “The Jewish Question in the German Question,” 171.

24 Theodor W. Adorno, “What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?,” in Hartman, Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective, 127.


27 Tina Campt, Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2005), 5.


29 Ibid., 183.

30 Ibid., 155, 223.
31 Ibid., 55.


33 Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 123.

34 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 49.


37 Ibid., 39.


41 Ibid., 19-20.

42 To offer just one striking example, when Arjun Appadurai poses the question of “reproduction” in a transnational context, he tellingly describes the problem of “cultural transmission” as synonymous with the question of how “small groups, especially families… deal with these new global realities as they seek to reproduce themselves,” despite pressures under which “generations easily divide.” Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy, *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 228.


44 I am drawing here in part on what Joseph Slaughter describes as some of the tautologies of human rights discourse and its pedagogies, in which the subject of human rights is both supposed to already be a knowing subject but also one forever trying to catch up to the promise of rights it supposedly already knows and possesses. Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham, 2007).


Ibid., 61, 65, 72.

Gilroy, Against Race, 42.


Ibid., 36-37.


Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” 25. Markell carefully traces this tension in Taylor, arguing that the coincidence of recognition and misrecognition in Taylor becomes visible if we attend to what he terms the “two competing strands or moments” in which Taylor locates recognition: on the one hand, “recognition as construction,” which acknowledges that recognition is “the intersubjective activity through which identities are formed and transformed” and “recognition as cognition,” which turns on the success or failure of our ability “to accurately perceive and/or appropriate respect people as who they already really are.” While the first understands identity as open and changeable, the second retrenches identity as given, independent, and persistent (Markell 58-59). This is a split that, again, I would argue is symptomatized by Taylor’s peculiar use and then abandonment of a feminist politics that connects the intersubjective or “intimate” and the political.


Ibid., 39, 56.

Ibid.


63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 37.

65 Ibid., 63.

66 Ibid., 62.

67 See for instance, Susan Arndt, “Boundless Whiteness?: Feminism and White Women in the Mirror of African Feminist Writing,” in *Body, Sexuality, and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures I, Matatu* 29-30, eds. Flora Veit-Wild and Dirk Naguschewski (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2005), 165. Arndt ascribes to Aidoo the “the stereotype, common in Africa, that white feminists are lesbians,” (though Marija is in no way a feminist), and argues that Sissie’s rejection of Marija has “homophobic tendencies” (165). In contrast, see Yogita Goyal, who rightly notes that Aidoo undermines such a reading by drawing attention to “instances of African homosexuality,” such as when she describes a white missionary who is shocked to find two African girls together in bed. Yogita Goyal, *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 197.

68 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 64.

69 It is for this reason that it seems to me that the narrator’s commentary should be read as Sissie’s own voice, grown older and more knowing with the passage of time and with the return home, rather than as a chorus in the style of an African oral tradition, as Goyal, for instance, has suggested. Goyal, *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature*, 189.

70 Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 284. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text with the abbreviation JW.


Chapter Two
Reclaiming What is Not One’s Own:
Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde*

What a history!—A fugitive from Egypt and Palestine, here I am and find help, love, fostering in you people. With real rapture I think of these origins of mine and this whole nexus of destiny, though which the oldest memories of the human race stand by side [sic] with the latest developments. The greatest distances in time and space are bridged. The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life—having been born a Jewess—this I should on no account now wished to have missed.

— Rahel Varnhagen

I have set this epigraph, purportedly Varnhagen’s last words, at the head of this chapter because it reads as something the author I consider here, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, might have written. The flight of Oriental fantasy with which it begins, the “rapture” it expresses about the fact of being in the world, caught between “origins” and “destiny”; and the reference to the “help, love, and fostering” its author has found in the company of other people all suggest feelings of intense aliveness and connection—feelings that characterize, indeed permeate, Özdamar’s work. But the last sentence clarifies any uncertainty about authorship, for Varnhagen’s declaration that “the thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame… having been born a Jewess—this I should on no account now wished to have missed” is hers alone. It could not come from Özdamar’s pen, first because she is not a German Jew but a Turkish German and second, because the world of German Jewry in which Varnhagen found herself so uncertain, so uneasy, is a source of inspiration and an object of attachment for Özdamar.

We turn, then, to a very different landscape than the one I have described in the previous chapter. Özdamar’s protagonist travels to Germany in the 1970s, approximately a decade after Sissie. But far from feeling herself torn by a sense of obligation, belonging, or destiny to the
world she has left behind, Özdamar embraces the peripatetic, exilic life she finds herself in as a political exile from Turkey, apprenticing in the East German theater. In contrast to Aidoo, who sees in the destruction of Europe’s Jews, and especially the world of German Jews, an object lesson for the dangers of a migratory or diasporic life in Europe as a racialized or religious minority, Özdamar revives and celebrates the memory of this destroyed world.

Özdamar’s 2003 semi-autobiographical novel *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* [*Strange Stars Stare towards Earth*] begins in Berlin on December 27, 1975. We know the setting because the subtitle of Özdamar’s novel is *Wedding—Pankow 1976/77*, identifying the two Berlin neighborhoods, one on each side of the wall, where the narrator lives during that time. We know the year because the subtitle also identifies the calendar years the novel covers. And we know the date because the narrator informs us that it is the last of the German days of Christmas, or *Weihnachtstage*. Which is why the Turkish narrator is alone in the apartment she shares with seven bohemian West Berliners, who have all traveled home to their families, despite the distaste some of them feel for their parents and their parents’ generation. Woken by the relentless barking of a dog, the narrator moves from room to room of the frigid apartment, regarding the abandoned objects the others have left behind: an ashtray full of frozen cigarette butts, old bathwater in the tub, a piece of chocolate into which someone has bitten, leaving the imprint of teeth, and an illuminated Christmas tree. The narrator’s only company is a book that, as she puts it, “lies on the second pillow”: a volume of poetry by the German-Jewish expressionist Else Lasker-Schüler, from whose poem “Sterne des Fatums” (“Star of Fate”) the novel’s title is taken (SS 9). The narrator reads aloud from the cover blurb: “‘She was the most important poetess Germany ever had. Her themes were in many cases Jewish, her imagination oriental, but her language was German; a lush, ornamental, delicate German’” (SS 15).
This is a striking constellation: a young Turkish woman of Muslim background reads a German-Jewish poet as the last day of Christmas dawns—a poet whose work, according to the anonymous critic the narrator cites, brings together supposedly identifiable Oriental, Jewish and German dimensions. The constellation evokes the familiar triad of Muslim, Jewish, Christian, in which each term maintains its discrete identity yet is related to the others. The narrator’s interest in Lasker-Schüler and her critical reception may signal that Özdamar similarly seeks to position herself at the juncture of these traditions. By reproducing so pointedly the critical assessment of Lasker-Schüler, Özdamar suggests a possible parallel between her own literary practice in German and Lasker-Schüler’s eccentric status. The latter was a bohemian twice-divorced German-Jew, a woman affiliated with the male-dominated avant-garde movement of expressionism in the teens and 1920s, and an eventual refugee to Palestine in the 30s after the rise of National Socialism who nonetheless, in the critic’s estimation, ought to be reclaimed by the German literary canon as a skilled and supple writer of the language, her use of German superseding her affinity for Jewish themes and oriental fantasies. Such an identification with Lasker-Schüler may legitimize Özdamar’s writing as German writing.

However, the authorial affinity I am suggesting between Özdamar and Lasker-Schüler, which seems to propose Lasker-Schüler as a possible model for Özdamar’s own entry to the German literary tradition, is complicated by the readerly intimacy between Lasker-Schüler and the novel’s narrator. For the narrator, Lasker-Schüler is an imagined ally against the politically suspect aspects of the German milieu. The image on the novel’s first page of Lasker-Schüler’s writing lying on the otherwise empty side of the bed is most suggestive when read alongside the narrator’s musings, several pages later, on the aging widows of dead German soldiers—musings prompted by an incident where an elderly German woman watches silently while the narrator is
harassed by a man on the train. Of these women she speculates, “only one half of their beds have been used for the last thirty-five years. When these women wash their bed linens… they only wash their half. The half that belongs to the dead, with whom they sleep, is surely always clean” (SS 17). The mildness of the observation is at odds with its cutting implications, which ironize the sanitized memory of the German war dead, and question the complicity of women who believe their sheets—and hands—are unsullied. These two moments in which the narrator reflects on the bedfellows one keeps brings to mind the dual meanings of getting into bed with someone, implying at once intimate and erotic relations but, figuratively, also collusion and complicity.

The narrator’s claim on Lasker-Schüler as her bedfellow might suggest that the novel’s logic is one in which a young Turkish exile takes refuge from a hostile and historically tainted German/Christian environment by identifying herself with an (Orientalized) Jewish tradition. The narrator’s interest in Lasker-Schüler is but one instance of her repeated references to the vexed history of German-Jewish relations, and to the destruction of German Jewry. But the purpose of these references is not to identify indecorously with the suffering of German Jews, or to appropriate this history as a figure for Turkish-German relations in the present. In this chapter, I suggest that the narrator’s growing knowledge of this history figures in the education and political maturation she experiences in Germany. On some level, her growing familiarity with German history appears to be a kind of training for national belonging, an assimilative mechanism. But the novel challenges this telos of assimilation. For one, the narrator must constantly go back and forth between East and West Berlin. In East Berlin, she must repeatedly petition the state for a visa to work and live, which she can only hold once work on a production has begun; while waiting for it to be processed she must travel nightly back to the West, while
between productions she lives in limbo in West Berlin, where she has no rights of residency—only an expired tourist visa. The novel’s emphasis on Berlin’s dividedness underscores that the nation-state is fractured, rendering uncertain the narrator’s national and political orientation. Her commitments are to an anti-fascist, international socialist politics; the history of German-Jewish relations, specifically fascism’s interruption of this relation, becomes for her an object of historical and political preoccupation that she shares with those who share her politics. By invoking this history, the narrator accesses a German genealogy of inter and post-war intellectual and political opposition to fascism, and she inserts herself into a shared tradition of political exile.

**A Divided City**

*Strange Stars* is the third volume of Özdamar’s semi-autobiographical Istanbul-Berlin trilogy. Unlike the first two installments, it is set almost entirely in Germany. The text focuses on the narrator’s life in the divided Berlin of the 1970s among students, artists, political dissidents, and especially East Berlin’s theater community. In self-imposed exile from her native Turkey, the narrator travels to Berlin where she worked in the mid-1960s in factories and hotels—a period recounted in the second volume of the trilogy, *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn [The Bridge from Golden Horn]*.³ This time, though, she is not in Germany as a guest worker but instead as a *Hospitant*, or guest apprentice, at the renowned *Volksbühne* [People’s Stage] in East Berlin. Her theatre career in Istanbul disrupted by the state’s persecution of leftists, she travels to Germany in order to immerse herself in the work of Bertolt Brecht, who worked in Berlin from 1924-33, and in East Berlin from 1949-56. She apprentices herself to Brecht’s protégé, Swiss
director Benno Besson, who as artistic director of the Volksbühne is at the center of a community of directors, writers, and actors profoundly influenced by Brecht’s legacy.

The years 1976-77 are a time of political disenchantment in both East and West Germany. State violence and censorship, together with the disarray of the West German Left, suggest that the narrator is not as far away as she might have wished from the political violence in Turkey against intellectuals and the left following the 1971 military coup—the very violence that prompts her exile. The East’s persecution of intellectuals and dissidents reaches new heights with the state’s expatriation of musician and activist Wolf Biermann in 1976, and the imprisonment of scholar Rudolf Bahro the following year, both committed socialists critical of the German Democratic Republic’s (GDR) political regime. In the West, the Deutscher Herbst, or German Autumn, of 1977 marks the violent disintegration of the left radicalism of the late 1960s, culminating in dramatic acts of terrorism by the Red Army Faction and the deaths of the imprisoned Baader-Meinhof gang in Stammhein prison. The narrator is not only present during these events but very much a witness to them, from her friendship with Bahro’s wife to her fear of the police who patrol the West Berlin streets.

Literary critic Yasemin Yildiz has observed of Özdamar’s first prose work, a collection of stories titled Mutterzunge [Mothertongue] (1990), that Özdamar’s use of a self-consciously “broken German” that incorporates the literal translation of Turkish words and phrases is a linguistic strategy for working through the memory of anti-leftist political violence in Turkey, not just the manifestation of a migrant poetics preoccupied with bilingualism or the preservation of language. The use of German in Mothertongue, Yildiz suggests, offers a reprieve from the political violence that mars the Turkish tongue. In Strange Stars, published thirteen years later, the German language may no longer be a reprieve from the experience of political violence but
rather another medium for witnessing political opposition. Özdamar continues to attend to the political violence of the 1970s in Turkey but also to its parallels in Germany, both East and West. *Strange Stars* in fact marks an important shift in Özdamar’s *oeuvre*, since for the first time her focus is squarely on Germany’s cultural and political history, rather than on German as a linguistic medium for working out the tensions of diasporic experience.

In this text, which is the final volume of the trilogy and her most recent novel, Özdamar offers a generically and formally inventive account of the narrator’s apprenticeship at the *Volksbühne*, mixing journal entries with notes and sketches from her work at the theater. In part, the novel works as a historical document of the institution and of an artistic milieu characterized by the ideological contestation between East and West Germany, and offers many finely-drawn and often intimate portraits of some of the major cultural figures of the GDR, including playwright Heiner Müller, directors Benno Besson, Matthias Langhoff, and Frank Castorf, and actor Gabi Gysi, as well as a number of others who pass in and out of the story and her acquaintance. These are individuals who would be familiar to insiders, by which I do not mean national or linguistic insiders (that is, Germans as opposed to migrants or Turks) but rather cultural insiders acquainted with the theater of the period and conversant in its artistic debates and political investments. Much of the narrator’s apprenticeship consists of taking detailed notes and sketches of all aspects of a production’s staging, and these materials make their way into the *Volksbühne* archive. In this way, the narrator becomes an unofficial archivist of the institution and leaves her own traces in the archive; by reproducing these sketches and notes in the pages of the novel, Özdamar frames the text as an extension of this archival practice. In addition to the narrator’s privileged view of the *Volksbühne’s* workings and the rarefied cultural and political debates that go on there, she also offers richly comic descriptions of alternative living in a West
Berlin commune, where her friends and lovers rehearse the political debates of the period, particularly those having to do with changing norms of gender and sexuality. The range of her experience, encompassing life in both East and West Berlin, outdoes that of most Germans of the period. She is an insider, and doubly so. Yet to the extent that both of these worlds—that of the socialist East and of West Berlin’s alternative youth culture—were held at arm’s length and regarded with suspicion by much of the West German population at that time, she is an insider in worlds that are themselves very much outside the political and cultural norms of the majority.

We can track the distance the narrator traverses to achieve this complex insider status by comparing this life to the one she experiences as a factory guest worker in The Bridge from Golden Horn. In the earlier volume she initially lives, as was commonly the case for unmarried guest workers, in a Turkish women’s Wohnheim [residence, dormitory]. The narrator spells it as the women pronounce it, Wonaym, linguistically defamiliarizing the space and underscoring the women’s unfamiliarity with the place to which they’ve come. In Strange Stars, in contrast, she lives in West Berlin in a Wohngemeinschaft (WG) with German students—literally, a “living community.” Today a term that refers loosely to an apartment share, WG in the 1970s referred to forms of communal living arrangements inspired by the quest for social arrangements other than those dictated by the norms of the bourgeois family. In the East, she lives with and is mentored by Gabi Gysi, a well-known figure in the theater scene and the daughter and sister of important political figures in the GDR. This is all at quite a remove from the typical guest worker narrative of the 1970s. She does not follow—or rather, she follows and then seemingly transcends—the usual trajectory of the Turkish labor migrant, instead positioning herself in the cultural industry and orienting herself to East Germany. When she first arrives in West Berlin, her West German
friends laughingly introduce her as “the only Turk who isn’t going to West Berlin but instead to East Berlin’ (SS 41).

It bears noting why, historically speaking, this is rather unique, for the story of Turks in Germany and, eventually, Turkish Germans, is primarily a West German story, constituting part of the political reality to which the former East had to assimilate itself upon reunification. It was the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) that recruited guest workers from Southern Europe and the Mediterranean. The first guest workers arrived in the 1950s, but it was only in 1961, with the construction of the Berlin Wall, that the West German economy, in the midst of its post-war economic miracle, began to experience an acute labor shortage, compelling the state to begin recruitment in earnest. Thus, even as Turkish/German relations developed as a specifically West German phenomenon, it was Germany’s division into East and West that determined the contours of that relationship. In some respects, Turkish German history remains largely a West German narrative, even after German reunification—a schism visible in infamous acts of xenophobic violence in the former East (though these have occurred in the former West as well) that the national and international press have sometimes represented as ominous expressions of East Germany’s isolation from the demographic and cultural transformations that have shaped West Germany in the mold of a liberal North Atlantic democracy.

There are also more subtle links between Germany’s history of migration and its history of division. Historian Rita Chin suggests that in the late 1980s, “West German society was on the verge of a real ideological breakthrough” in terms of recognizing its diversity and moving from a limited model of integration to a more expansive one of multiculturalism. But these developments, she argues were effectively sidelined by the disintegration of the East German state and the challenges of reunification, which monopolized the political agenda for the next
decade, sending questions about multiculturalism into a deep freeze (264). The history of Turkish migration to West Germany and the history of the East-West division thus serve as negative images of one another, with Germany’s division and reunification overshadowing and at times even undermining Turkish-German claims on the state.

Not only does the narrator’s orientation to the GDR offer an alternative to the well-established historical narrative of Turks in the FRG, her work in East Germany reimagines the dichotomies of the category of “guest worker.” At the Volksbühne, the narrator is initially a Hospitant, a term that refers to a guest student or to an apprentice who offers unremunerated labor, particularly in the cultural sector, in order to gain entrance to a profession. Across its range of meanings, the term depends on a notion of hospitality, since in each of these capacities an individual is a guest, whether of a university, institution, or professional body. Hospitant accordingly stems from the same Latin root and word (hospī, hospitales) as the English “hospitality” or the French hospitalité. In German however, the word for hospitality is Gastfreundschaft (literally, guest-friendship); Hospitant is a so-called Fremdwort [foreign word], the German term for words of non-Germanic origin borrowed from other languages, often Latin. Linguistically speaking, the Hospitant is inherently foreign. However, the status of Hospitant necessitates learning. Under the hospitable aegis of this status, an initiation takes place that allows the Hospitant eventual entry to some familiar category of person or profession. Unlike the guest, who as the object of Gastfreundschaft depends on the benevolence of friendship, the Hospitant claims passage.

The distinction I am proposing between Hospitant and guest might in turn illuminate something of the workings of that much-derided term Gastarbeiter [guest worker]. The term is rich in contradictions and ironies, for guest workers were tolerated but not welcomed, and the
original intention of the program was that they would eventually be repatriated. While the lack of hospitality makes the term “guest” inapt, the type of labor to which guest workers were mostly consigned (largely factory work and menial labor) makes the yoking together of the two words seem positively euphemistic. Guest worker status usually meant limited mobility: there was no promise of permanent entry, and there was little possibility of upward mobility in one’s work. Compared to the status of Hospitant, which implies both a right of entry and the upward mobility of education, the limited passage of the Gastarbeiter may after all bear some resemblance to the arm’s length hospitality of Gastfreundschaft. Özdamar has observed in her characteristically droll way the contradictions of the term guest worker: “The word ‘Gastarbeiter’: I love this word, I always see before me two people, one sits there as a guest, the other works.”8 To be a guest and yet work, she suggests, are not compatible concepts. At the Volksbühne, the narrator’s work is not always proportionally compensated, but as a Hospitant neither is it meant to be. The theater finds ways to help her sustain herself, improvising from one production to the next, and her means are crucially supplemented by the help of friends and mentors who support her materially, house her, and draw her into their community. Strange Stars thus represents the narrator’s work in the sphere of cultural production as a form of labor that actually reconciles “guest” and “worker.”

But the peculiar imbrications of Hospitant not only encompass being a guest who works, and a worker whose labor is compensated not with wages but with a means of entrance to a profession, or a form of cultural capital: it also broadly entails learning and being taught. In Strange Stars, the narrator’s descriptions of her period of apprenticeship are rich in references to tutelage, schooling, education and pedagogical relationships, and it is by way of an educative process that the narrator develops a network of affiliations on both sides of the wall, and, indeed,
with authors and thinkers she knows only from books. While the copious production notes she takes for Besson and others become part of the holdings of the Volksbühne’s archive, it is in this same archive that her education begins immediately after her arrival in Berlin. Upon meeting Besson for the first time, to whom she’s traveled directly after disembarking from the Istanbul-Berlin train, she asks: “Starting tomorrow, could I study your old rehearsal notes for Brecht’s play The Good Person of Sezuan here in the archive, and translate them for my friends in Istanbul?” (SS 34). 9

Why Brecht? What is it about his theater and his legacy that compels her to travel to Berlin to study him under his former students? In Golden Horn, the narrator undergoes a preliminary education that lays the groundwork for what follows, mostly under the tutelage of the Turkish communist who runs the women’s residence where she lives—a former actor who venerates Brecht. But along with Brecht, he brings with him to the Wonaym “another life,” one in which he gives them books by Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Gorky, London, Tolstoy, Joyce, Sartre “and a woman, Rosa Luxemburg.” It is a new life because, as the narrator relates, “I knew none of them until then” (GH 36). And it is not until she observes the political conflicts among the Turkish students in Berlin, divided between leftists and Turkish nationalists, that she comes to know “who Marx, Mao, Khrushchev, Castro and Trotsky were” (GH 83). And it is later still that she encounters young people involved in the German SDS [Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund], 10 who introduce her to scene around Café Steinplatz, which they call “the heart of the student movement,” and ask her if she knows “the filmmakers Eisenstein, Godard, Alexander Kluge”—again, she confesses she does not (GH 152-153). This repeating structure, whereby the narrator is introduced to things about which she admits ignorance, gradually
generates for her a loose canon of largely socialist thought and literary and cultural experimentation.

It is not just a slew of books and ideas to which she’s introduced, however, but also to a different and more demanding mode of interpretation, which the narrator dramatizes with an account of her disorientation after watching a Godard film, as those around her furiously debate whether it depicts bourgeois or antibourgeois figures. The gap between her previous language for interpreting representation, and the language that the film seems to demand its viewers speak is considerable:

Back in Istanbul, I had seen films with my parents like The Three Musketeers, or films with Liz Taylor, Marilyn Monroe, and Clark Gable. You said: “it is a lovely film. It has a tragic ending. Liz Taylor is wonderful.” […] With these old films, it was easy to imitate [nachmachen] the characters [Figuren]. When Liz Taylor was angry with her lover she tipped a glass of water on his jacket. Or she left the apartment and wrote on the mirror with her lipstick… She always did something stagey [theatralisches] and it was easy to imitate it. But the figures [Figuren] in the Godard film were not easy to imitate, they spoke a new language that you first had to know. About Liz Taylor you said: pretty or fat—that was enough. You could conceive of [sich vorstellen] pretty or fat. But about the Godard figures you said bourgeois or antibourgeois. It was hard to conceive what bourgeois or antibourgeois was. (GH 156)

While she may be gently mocking the dogged binaries (bourgeois/antibourgeois) that those around her are determined to fix on the film, her hilarious description of her bewilderment speaks to the difficulty of the task that she is encountering for the first time—that of interpreting, (rather than describing or evaluating) representation. The language in this passage gestures to the complexity of figuration and of the mimetic dimensions of representation. The elastic term Figuren can mean “characters,” “figures,” and also “representations.” Part of what the narrator appears to struggle with in this passage is conceiving of Figuren not just as characters (that is, as fictional people with a bundle of characteristics proper to them, which constitute their supposed personhood) but instead as figures that demand interpretation, and that represent positions or
identities that they index without fully inhabiting. For her, the difference between these two kinds of Figuren has to do with the ease with which it is possible to imitate or reproduce them [nachmachen]. Yet what makes it easy, in her mind, to imitate these characters is not the transparency of their language or the verisimilitude of their gestures. As she implies instead, they are so readily imitable because their gestures are possessed of an excessive quality that is formalized as a recognizable code. It is the stagey quality of these gestures—the tossed water, the lipstick on the mirror—that makes them familiar and legible, even as it estranges them from any claim to naturalism. Moreover, the narrator notes how this mode of representation throws the viewer’s attention back to the person performing the gestures: Liz Taylor, pretty or fat? Such descriptions, she notes, are of a type that one can conceive of or imagine [sich vorstellen]—a term that also refers to the act of representing something to or for oneself. What makes Godard’s figures and their language so difficult to represent to oneself, she suggests, is the abstraction of what those figures convey, and their indeterminacy. The dilemma she ponders here has to do more broadly with the challenge of reading the political character of a representation, and of finding a language with which to understand and articulate a work’s claims about its social content and transformative potential.

Indeed, as she sits in the archive almost ten years later (in Strange Stars) reading Besson and his collaborators’ notes on their production of The Good Person of Sezuan, she finds a series of reflections on this very task. The first sentence she reads explains that “everything that occurs in the play is too large in relation to the personages,” and the notes go on to discuss how this problem of scale demands interpretation (SS 39). But the staging of the play, Besson’s notes observe, must also work to make the spectators aware of how what is represented on stage intersects with their own reality and awaken in them the drive to grasp that “there exist other
ways” (SS 43-44). It is this latter claim about the play’s capacity to activate understanding, even transformation, that lingers with the narrator, so that as she leaves the archive and sees the people in “East Berlin’s streets, I looked in each face and thought: these then are the spectators who know that there exist other ways” (SS 44). What she appears to look for in this play are the transformative possibilities it may awaken—a mode that Besson and his colleagues turn on other works as well, not Brecht’s alone. As such, the questions that concern the narrator and her mentors at the Volksbühne have to do with the relationship between theater and politics, and echo the debates about aesthetics and politics that were such a preoccupation of Marxist cultural critics (including Brecht, Adorno, and others).

These were not just questions pertinent to “German” theater, or to Brecht. Of course, a host of Marxist thinkers and writers were important to the burgeoning social movements of the 1960s in Germany and elsewhere—as one excitable German student tells the narrator, it was “social theories from Marx to Marcuse”—as was the modernist tradition of which Brecht was a part. Martin Puchner has observed that the avant-garde movements of the 1960s took as their “central task” the challenge of “relat[ing] an artistic avant-garde to revolutionary politics,” and that the Situationists of the 1950s-1970s (the heirs of dada and surrealism) worked to realign those avant-garde traditions with socialism. For the Situationists, Puchner explains, Brecht was a “major point of reference” since he, like them, was concerned with undoing the seeming totality of the work of art, its apparent closure.

But Brecht’s theater and the socialist politics with which it was aligned were also salient for the political climate in Turkey in the late 1960s and mid 70s. The second half of Golden Horn is set in Turkey, largely in Istanbul, and the narrator finds upon her return there that the artistic and political scene is very much in tune with the intellectual currents she has encountered
in Berlin. Historically, Brecht’s plays were being performed in Turkey in the 1960s and 70s. In his study *Brecht in Turkey 1955-1977*, Albert Nekimken notes that the Turkish theater public’s fascination with Brecht took off in the early 1960s, and that *The Good Person of Sezuan* was very much at the heart of this development; it was the first full Brecht play translated into Turkish (in 1961), and the Istanbul Municipal Theater’s production of the play in the 1963-64 season set of violent conservative and anti-communist protests that shut down the production and “threatened to create a McCarthy-like era of fear among entire classes of Turkish artists and intellectuals.”  

The 1975-76 season (when the narrator of *Strange Stars* leaves for Germany) was a particularly concentrated period of such performances: “an uninformed visitor arriving in Istanbul in September 1975 might have thought that there was some sort of Brecht Festival in progress. […] The daily press included items concerning these productions, or items about Brecht, or translations of his writings, on an almost daily basis so that at least one reviewer was compelled to call the season of 1975-1976 the Year of Brecht in Turkey.” According to Nekimken, by the mid 1970s (after the coup), the political context made Brecht’s writing seem particularly relevant to a Turkish audience in the midst of witnessing sustained political violence between the authoritarian right controlling Turkey’s institutions at the time, and leftist political opponents, such that in the period 1975-76 “daily political developments nourished [the] broad analogy between Brecht’s anti-fascism and contemporary Turkey.”

The chronology of Brecht’s reception in Turkey in the 1960s and 70s, overlaid on the narrator’s own chronology of encounters with Brecht from Germany to Turkey and back again, together suggest the complex ways that she envisages Brecht’s theater and its subsequent practitioners (such as Besson, Müller and others) as offering a flexible and transmissible theatrical vocabulary and repertoire. The juxtaposition of these two chronologies also indicates
the territorial displacements that govern the narrator’s contact with this work: she discovers Brecht in West Germany in 1967 when his theater has renewed salience for the social movements afoot there and, according to Nekimken’s historical account, salience too for a Turkish political and theatrical context with which she is not even yet familiar, but that she discovers after she returns to Turkey. In 1975, under conditions of political siege, she leaves Turkey to school herself in Germany in the kind of theater she can no longer pursue in Istanbul. While Nekimken’s documentation suggests that Brechtian theater experiences an unparalleled resurgence in Istanbul in 1975-1976 when political conditions there make it especially timely, the narrator describes to a Swiss friend the collapse of her theater career after the coup, relating to him that her last role was that of the Widow Begbick in Brecht’s *Mann ist Mann* (SS 21). The translation she undertakes in the archive thus reflects the discoveries she makes and the losses she incurs in both Turkey and Germany, and becomes a figure for the aesthetic and political investments that connect her experience across these sites. The German term for translation, übersetzen, literally means “to carry over,” and her work of translation is thus both a marker of loss and also an act of transmission.17

I have suggested that the narrator’s education begins in the archive, where her own notes and drawings eventually end up, suggesting the closure of a circle that marks her assimilation into the institution. But the account of the narrator’s education is more complex, and in fact differentiates the initial solitary work of translation and transmission she undertakes in the archive from the education proper that she undertakes as a Hospitant. This distinction is signaled early on. As she sits in the archive and reads Besson’s notes, an unfamiliar man enters and interrupts her with the question: “did you come here in order to learn?” (SS 39). An innocent enough query, yet it invites the question of what else she may be there for, if not to learn. The
narrator describes this exchange as disquieting, and the terms she uses are ones that convey a scene of failed learning, noting that in the silence that falls between them, he “sat there like a teacher observing a suspicious pupil [Schüler]” (SS 39). It is only as she finishes her translation and the first production on which she will assist (Heiner Müller’s Die Bauern) gets underway that her work as a Hospitant begins in earnest, drawing her out of the theater’s past and into its present, and demanding of her that she inhabit the role of pupil. To prepare for it, she buys “lined exercise books [Schulhefte],” and as the first rehearsal begins she observes that, “with this Heiner Müller play, I would go back thirty years in the history of the GDR. I sat myself in a corner and drew and noted down everything I saw and heard in an exercise book [Schulheft]” (SS 82). As she orients herself to her new task, the narrator thus comes to inhabit the role of pupil, or Schüler (a term that specifically refers to adolescent students, as opposed to the grown Studenten of a university). Here appear the first of the novel’s many sketches, which together with her written notes depict the scenes being worked out on stage. On the next page, the narrator relates that it is during these first days of rehearsals that she has a dream in which she sees Besson and looks at him “as though I were in a dream, the dream that I had had in Turkey” (SS 84). The odd structure of this dream—a dream that feels like a dream that was her dream—suggests it is at the Volksbühne that the dream she had is now being fulfilled, and it is upon waking from it that she immediately begins keeping a journal [Tagebuch]. Here the first part of the novel ends, and the rest of the novel is written in the form of a journal, with individual dated entries. But the sketches and theater notes reproduced in the novel appear among these entries as though part of this journal, so that her rich reflections on her work and days, her intimacies and sorrows, are worked out alongside her documentation of the theater and its productions. The educative dimension of her role as Hospitant entails that she must be an observant pupil, but this task incites in her a
desire for self examination, throwing her attention back on the process of becoming that she tracks in the journal’s pages.

The educative process into which she immerses herself by inhabiting so fully the position of student-observer in the theater is thus conjoined with a process of self-development that is continuous with but also exceeds her work there. The form of the diary as a mode of novel writing also raises questions about the boundaries between the public space of the theater and the supposedly private realm of the journal. The reproduction of the sketches and notes generate an authentication effect, seeming to verify the historicity of her experience. Bound within the form of the journal, this historical experience is rendered highly personal and particular to the narrator’s subjectivity. The literary form of the journal thus not only suggests how the narrator’s work and education in the theater inflect her development, it also undoes the supposed distinction between the public space of the theater and the private realm of the journal by making her self-reflections and revelations “public.” This porousness is heightened by the narrator’s own practice as an actor, which thematizes issues of self-revelation and the performance of identity. Or, to put it another way, Diana Fuss has observed a distinction between identity and identifications, writing that “while we tend to experience our identities as part of our public personas—the most exposed part of our self’s surface collisions with a world of other selves—we experience our identifications as more private, guarded, evasive,” even as she immediately undoes this public/private distinction by noting that it “disguises how every identity is actually an identification come to light.” The question, then, is how the work of education and self-development cohere into a set of identifications that together articulate an identity that the narrator constructs for herself.
What accrues to her from the educative project in which she is engaged, and for what is she being educated? For it quickly becomes clear, as the journal I’ve described suggests, that her education goes beyond what she is learning in the theater. This education takes multiple forms, its most obvious one perhaps manifested by the narrator’s relentless thirst for books and culture. Her journal serves in part as a record of the cultural objects she accumulates and makes her own, and it includes lists of the plays she watches and the play she intends to watch; the books she reads and those she intends to read. This activity is purposive and she links it to both a project of self-becoming but also political transformation, writing in her journal: “Now is the time to become suppler, richer, through knowledge […] Now I must grow up. The strength of human beings will suffice against injustice, against poverty […] Look upon history, look closely therein” (SS 105). Even as she writes that one word, “murder,” describes the situation in Turkey where political opponents are being shot and hanged, she writes “But I tell myself: to work, to learn more, these are the only things that give time meaning (SS 101). And she revives herself with the exhortation: “Long live awakened consciousness [waches Bewußtsein]. Long live objective observation. Long live Molière. Read on” (SS 126). Learning is thus succor against the violence of the present, but also the vehicle of hope. The language here suggests a political sensibility that longs to articulate hope for the future—her own and the world’s—but that does so with an awareness of the necessity of looking to history and of finding models of doing and thinking in the words of the past.

This sensibility is not utopian, but its insistence on hope suggests a belief in the imminence of political transformation. One dimension of the narrator’s desire for transformation of self and world has to do with the politics of gender. Here too, she seeks out interlocutors: not only books but also the women around her. The narrator reflects on a conversation with Gundula
Bahro, writing: “we spoke about women’s solidarity. Gundula thinks solidarity in the capitalist system is different than that here. […] In the socialist system the law affirms the equality of women, nevertheless there is violence against women. When a woman sleeps with someone she is criticized, here too women are always still sexual objects [Lustobjekte]” (91). The politics of gender and gender roles are incessantly discussed in the text, both in West Berlin where her friends in the WG try to create via their communal living arrangements a space of sexual autonomy that challenges the gender norms of domestic and public life, but also in the East, where her female friends and mentors reflect on the work still to be done in a socialist state that claims to have achieved gender equality. Angelika Bammer has suggested that feminist writing about utopia in the 1970s rethought the parameters of the utopian genre, focusing on questions of power rather than institutions. Bammer pays sustained attention to East German literature, particularly in the context of the utopian aspirations of the socialist state. She observes of East German writers of the 1970s, particularly Christa Wolf, that they “insisted that the question of the future always had to be posed in terms of the past,” and that their work implied that to understand the peculiar historical contradiction of women—the fact that they have been at once ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, marginal and central—is to have learned an important lesson in the social meaning of contradiction. As such… feminism presents a model for an oppositional politics (simultaneously critical and affirmative) that is particularly appropriate to the conditions under which change is effected in a post-revolutionary context.”

This reading underscores how a feminist politics of the period, at least in Germany, tried to conceive of transformation in terms of continuities and ruptures with the past, which resonates with the narrator’s own language of maintaining a double gaze on the past and future.

But Bammer’s comments also imply that the dream of political and social transformation entails considering the tension between being inside and outside and that as such, it may also pose questions about what identifications become meaningful in asserting political positions that
make claims about belonging or the demand to be allowed to enter. For opposition, Bammer later
observes, also demands a consideration of complicity. This question has historical significance
in the German context I am discussing. As numerous critics have noted, the political opposition
and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including feminism, at times posed their claims in
terms that suggested troubling identifications with aspects of the very past from which they were
attempting to break. While in West Germany, their crudest reiteration took the form of blatantly
anti-Semitic figures in the rhetoric of the radical left of the Red Army Faction and other militant
groups, there were other more subtle evasions that left unexamined some of the continuities
between fascist figures and post-war renunciations of fascism. Andreas Huyssen has criticized
the tendency of “left theories of fascism” of the period to instrumentalize “the suffering of the
Jews for the purpose of criticizing capitalism then and today,” which he describes as “itself a
symptom of post-war German amnesia.” So too, the left’s identifications with anti-imperial
movements were for some writers a screen with which to displace (or upon which to work out)
the complicated legacies of the past: Arlene Teraoka has examined a number of writers from
East and West Germany (including Heiner Müller) to show how in varying ways and with
varying degrees of reflexivity, “the leftist German dream of a non-European otherness is the
dream of the German liberated from his fascist past.” In East Germany too such continuities
were visible precisely in the way that the East German state articulated itself as the living
inheritance of socialist opposition to fascism, in contrast to a capitalist West German “successor
state” that had not broken with National Socialism. The result of this, as Julia Hell notes, is that
the victims of fascism were primarily identified as fascism’s socialist political opponents, and the
specificity of Jewish victimhood became a minor element subsumed in the state’s glorification of
its socialist anti-fascist heroes/victims. And in Dagmar Herzog’s work on gender and sexuality
after fascism, she powerfully shows how the language of sexual liberation in West Germany sought to overcome what it falsely understood as the fascist legacy of sexual repression in a way that revealed “the West German generation of 1960’s contradictory mixture of intense emotional identification with, and supreme insensitivity to, the murdered Jews of Europe.” In an attempt to remake what she terms “antifascist bodies,” their discourse deployed figures of fascism and its victims to make claims and counterclaims about oppressive norms of gender and sexuality. Herzog’s observations about the politics of gender and figures of fascism suggest that these figures were not just adopted as a rhetorical screen or as misplaced allegories, but as ways of thinking about the performance of history through bodily identities and identifications that could displace as much or more than they revealed.

The stakes of such identifications with Jewishness or Jewish suffering bear on Strange Stars; the narrator’s preoccupation with Jewish figures and the history of German Jewish relations widens the question of how identification works in the novel as a mode of establishing identity and attachments. In an article on Strange Stars, literary critic Kader Konuk “critiques ahistorical identifications between Jews and Turks that are the basis for [an] analogous viewpoint,” and argues that in the novel, “Turkish figures align themselves with, stand in for, and reenact Jewish figures.” While Konuk is sympathetic to the project of transnationalizing memory culture and developing frameworks with which to understand how migrants might participate in national memory, she reads the novel’s interest in Jewishness through the lens of “appropriation,” writing that it “engages with Jewish-German history and literature by appropriating Else Lasker-Schüler as the narrator’s alter ego,” by an “appropriation of literary figures in German Jewish history,” and by “appropriating the memory of the exiled and murdered Jews”—moves that she argues raise “ethical dilemmas.”
While her claim that Lasker-Schüler functions as the narrator’s alter ego seems to me greatly overstated and her tendency to use “appropriation” and “identification” interchangeably is problematic, Konuk bases her argument about the novel’s appropriative stance on a reading of what she takes as a key scene. The narrator stands in the woods outside Berlin through which the death marches of Jews from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp passed, and reflects on the landscape: “Now there are deer, cranes, and crows here. Then, this place must have looked like something from another planet, people like skeletons in the moonlight. Wide eyes. Clothes, torn clothes, that fly over the landscape with the wind” (SS 114). As the narrator enters the woods, with a blanket from the nearby house where has spent the night thrown over her shoulders, she cries, for the woods remind her of the woods near Istanbul where she lived with her husband. As Konuk rightly notes, this scene in the woods near Sachsenhausen is prefigured by an earlier scene in that house in the woods in Turkey, where the narrator’s empathy with those sitting in prison is so powerful that it shadows her experience of the everyday: “each piece of meat we grilled, each apple into which I bit, seemed to me a betrayal of those who sat in prison” (SS 25). In this passage, her reflection on her comrades’ suffering registers both proximity and distance, suggesting her bodily awareness of their privations while also acknowledging that these are not shared equally between them. Yet she also takes upon herself a witnessing that takes literally the task of identification: “When my hair fell from the washbasin in the mornings, I thought, this is not my hair, this washbasin is a prison washbasin, there in the mirror, that is the head of a prisoner, who like a crazed bird rips his own hair from his body” (SS 26). These instances of a political solidarity that becomes imaginative identification and bodily performance are part of what drive her to leave Turkey. In Konuk’s reading, she reenacts this embodied identification in the woods at Sachsenhausen. Her weeping and draping of herself with the blanket signify that
she is “projecting herself into the experience of the death march.” Konuk writes that the task of remembering the Holocaust asks one to “presuppose identification with a specific point of view—either that of the perpetrator, or of the victim.” What she takes to be the narrator’s performance of embodied Jewish victimhood signals to her Turkish-Germans’ tendency to adopt the position of fellow victim because of their own experiences of marginalization and racism in German society, encouraging such ahistorical identifications.

I am addressing Konuk’s argument at some length both because I disagree with her reading and its implications, about which I will have more to say, but also because the implications of her reading intersect with contemporary debates about Turkish-German assimilation: her suggestion that Turkish-German incorporation into German memory of the Holocaust may shape Turkish-German integration in Germany is an open question. Two positions have tended to emerge in these debates. In the first instance, some critics have noted the perception among Turkish Germans, or the reality, that they may share historical and political affinities with German Jews because of shared experiences of marginalization and racism. One of the more provocative explorations of these comparisons that circulate polemically in the German public sphere is author Feridun Zaimoglu’s hybrid literary-sociological text, *Kanak Sprak*, in which he gathers the supposedly authentic voices of young male Turkish migrants who frequently compare themselves to German Jews (and also to African Americans), positing a shared but uneven subaltern experience. In a scholarly vein, some sociologists have shown how community leaders in both the Turkish German and German Jewish communities have mobilized such presumably shared experiences to build solidarity around particular issues such as anti-racism, while other sociological research has suggested that it is mainly intellectual and
political elites within the Turkish migrant community who make such connections, and that they remain matters of indifference to the majority.\footnote{34}

A second, related (but potentially more politically suggestive) position is one that proposes that the extent to which Turkish Germans are able to affirm political and cultural belonging in Germany may depend in part on their willingness to investigate Germany’s National Socialist past and, in some fashion, make it their own. In this instance, the orientation is not towards identifying with the victims but instead understanding the guilty legacies of the perpetrators. One of the more forceful articulations of this is a much-cited speech in 2002 by Safter Çinar, the head of the Turkish-German Federation of Berlin-Brandenburg, at a commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the neo-Nazi attack on Turkish migrants in the German city of Mölln. In his speech, Çinar reformulated former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s claim to “the grace of late birth,” in terms of his generation’s relationship to the Nazi past, instead asserting that “there can be no grace of late birth… and there can be no grace of another birthplace.”\footnote{35} Çinar’s claim is that as residents, Turkish (and other) migrants to Germany must share the responsibility of the past.

While this pithy articulation seems to rush to adopt collective guilt without nuancing what responsibility entails and its relationship to culpability, recent careful interventions by scholars and writers have also taken on this vexed question of the relationship between national belonging and a shared past. Andreas Huyssen, writing about what he terms “migration into other pasts,” poses the question of whether “it is possible or even desirable for a diasporic community to migrate into the history of a host nation,” and asks in his reading of a work of recent Turkish-German fiction, Zafer Senocak’s \emph{Gefährliche Verwandtschaft} (1998), whether such migration can escape the binary of victim/perpetrator identifications.\footnote{36} Leslie Adelson,
writing about “the Turkish turn” in contemporary German literature, explores at length how what she calls “literatures of migration” might reframe national memory, undoing the worn trope of migration as suspension “between two worlds” and instead demonstrating the proximity of seemingly disparate histories, or what she terms “touching tales.” And Tom Cheesman proposes that the operative term for contemporary Turkish-German literature ought perhaps to be “literatures of settlement” (rather than “literatures of migration”) since it emphasizes the permanence of the Turkish-German presence in Germany, particularly in the wake of changes to citizenship laws in the last decades that ease naturalization for immigrants and that make citizenship at birth more accessible for children born in Germany to immigrant parents. This body of recent work on diasporic or migratory memory is very useful for thinking about memory and national belonging in the context of current debates about assimilation and migration in reunified Germany, particularly now that Turks there are no longer “just” labor migrants but immigrants. However it seems to me that this framework may not be the most appropriate one for understanding this novel and the identifications it proposes. And since Konuk’s article on Strange Stars explicitly orients itself to this recent work by Huyssen, Adelson and others (she credits Özdamar’s novel with trying to establish a mode for migration into other national pasts but criticizes its failure to think past an appropriative analogy of Turkish German and Jewish German experience) it may be that we can in fact read otherwise the identifications at work in the text between the narrator and German-Jewish history, including in the scene at Sachsenhausen.

Let me first turn to this second claim, which necessitates returning to the question I posed earlier about why Brecht figures so significantly for the narrator. Konuk is concerned with the narrator’s appropriative performance of a suffering Jewish body. But remarkably, nowhere in her
article does she consider the fact that the entire novel is about the narrator’s life in the theater and her work as an actor and theatre practitioner, or address how this might inflect the scene of performed identification. Konuk argues that in seeming to try to embody Jewish suffering, the narrator erases the distinction between self and other. Such an erasure, which Konuk describes as a moment of “intense empathy,” is an instance of the kind of empathic identification that has been much theorized in work on memory. In her explorations of “postmemory,” Marianne Hirsch suggests that the challenge of identifying ethically with another’s suffering while acknowledging the “distance between self and other” is central to remembering a past that one inherits but did not experience. She proposes that the ethical demands of this problem entail adopting what, following Kaja Silverman, she calls “heteropathic memory”—a mode of identification that can empathize with the other while still recognizing the non-identity of self and other. Dominick LaCapra has similarly proposed what he calls “empathic unsettlement” as a way of acknowledging the shared dimensions of traumatic memory without undoing the distinction between victims and others. Specifically, he suggests that such empathic unsettlement is related to performativity, and that “performative engagement with unsettling phenomena is important in an exchange with the past.” If we consider the narrator’s powerful, indeed professional, interest in performance, then the scenes of her empathic identification with the political prisoners in Istanbul and, later, with Jewish victims of the death marches can be understood as something other than just the failure to enact heteropathic memory or empathic unsettlement.

Specifically, the narrator’s training in Brechtian theory offers her a mode for managing identificatory desires. In Golden Horn, she describes in some detail her training in two different theatrical approaches at the theater school she attends in Istanbul. One charismatic teacher urges
on his students a mode of acting that is entirely about identification, and which the narrator
describes as entailing a great deal of screaming and writhing about on the floor. But in a striking
scene, she describes a particular lesson in which he asks her to reflect on a photo and then
perform her feelings about it. She describes the photo:

A dead man lay open mouthed on the ground, he was as emaciated as a skeleton, naked,
his cheekbones, knees, and shoulders protruded out from his body as though he lay in a
desert, his body slowly drying out. But there were trees near him in the picture. I went on
stage, looked at the photo for two minutes, screamed, and threw myself about, tore at
my hair and actually vomited on the stage. After this improvisation my teacher Memet
took me in his arms. I breathed heavily and moaned. Memet said he couldn’t teach
anymore today. [He said] “The dead man in the photo is a Jew, and the place is a
concentration camp.” That there were trees near this dead man made me almost crazy.
During the lesson I constantly scratched at my legs till they bled. (GH 206)

In this grotesquely comic scene, the narrator wryly reveals the histrionic and wildly self-
indulgent nature of what is taking place. Not only does she acknowledge how she revels in the
most cliché gestures, tearing at her hair, throwing herself on the ground, and deeply impressing
herself with her ability to vomit in the throes of her emotion, she also implies that her response to
the photo after the lesson is over (scratching at herself till she bleeds) in fact differs little from
the show she puts on on stage. She ironizes this acting “method” by setting it against the sharply
different lessons she receives at the hands of another teacher, a committed Brechtian, who warns
them that “you can’t drag everything out of your body. You shouldn’t listen to your inner self,
but rather look at your environment, observe it. You don’t show the world [zeigt ihr nicht die
Welt] with screaming and bawling, you show yourself” (GH 204). The narrator reflects on the
horror and suffering that the pictures in the world around her convey, noting, “in the paper I saw
in one photo a working class woman, whose husband had been killed by the police. She pressed
a corner of her headscarf against her mouth, perhaps so as not to scream. I saw too the loosened
headscarf of a mother from Palestine, who stood in front of the body of her dead child, or the just
fallen hat of a Jew, bending to a dying child on the street” (GH 209). In this passage, the narrator imagines why the woman might press her headscarf to her mouth, but she does so soberly and with restraint, suggesting rather than assuming. What she is not yet able to do is simply to stay with what she sees and not immediately turn it into a performance of self. Again, this is a tendency that the Brechtian teacher tries to temper, telling them “you’re not allowed to scream, instead you must examine history. Because you don’t examine history, you miss what is happening in the world… you don’t represent [darstellen] the reality of these people but instead your feelings in relation to this nightmare, and as a result you make a new nightmare” (GH 209).

Of course, the narrator comically overdraws the difference between these two approaches—the thoughtful Brechtian teacher in contrast to the clown-like Memet—but her departure from Turkey in order to school herself in Brechtian theater makes clear the depths of her investment. And as I have suggested, her work at the Volksbühne demands close observation, and she throws herself too into the task of reading and being a student of history. While her experience of profound identification with the prisoners in Istanbul may prefigure the apparently similar scene in the woods at Sachsenhausen, these two events are interrupted by her journey to Berlin and her theatrical apprenticeship. They are not a reiteration of one another. The narrator notes too that both methods in which she is schooled are extremes, relating that the students call Memet the “body-ist” [Körperist], and the Brechtian teacher the “head-ist” [Kopfist]. Her continued identifications, and attempts to understand identification, are thus also a way of thinking through the relationship that does exist between seeing/analyzing and feeling, including with and through the body. By setting the scenes in the woods in Istanbul and Sachsenhausen in relation to the narrator’s self-conscious reflections in Golden Horn on the political emptiness of excessive identifications that make little distinction between a theater of emotions on stage and
off, we might come to read her experiences of identification in *Strange Stars* as themselves subject to those processes of education and self development that characterize her work as a *Hospitant* and her life in Berlin. Similarly, Vivian Liska has suggested of Lasker-Schüler, whose penchant for displays of Oriental exoticism were read by contemporaries and later critics as an expression of her selfhood, that such an “assessment fails to recognize the extent to which the Orient is deployed in Lasker-Schüler’s writing as a means of artistic *Verfremdung* (defamiliarization) aimed at raising a critical awareness of existing conditions in her own time and place. Her Oriental masquerades contribute to a liberating blurring of…the categories of communal or collective belonging.”

The scene at Sachsenhausen is also revealingly juxtaposed with a later moment in the text. The narrator makes a trip to Weimar with her theater colleagues in order to prepare for an upcoming Goethe play. She notes the lightheartedness of the outing and the beauty of the landscape: “Joy of morning. We drove in three cars. The forests on each side. Images out of the middle ages. Farmers in the distance. Church towers […] On the way Hasso von Lenskis hands suddenly started shaking on the steering wheel. […] ‘Look up to the left, there on top of the hill my mother was in the concentration camp. KZ Buchenwald’” (SS 140). In this instance, the narrator does not respond either to the imagined pathos of a space or her associations with it. Instead, she is alerted to what lies in the landscape by her awareness of von Lenski’s memory of his mother’s internment as it manifests itself on his body. Leslie Adelson writes that “if we are willing to contemplate the body as a secret of history… then we must also be wiling to entertain history as an even better-kept secret of the body”; this is a moment of witnessing in which the narrator’s attention is oriented towards another’s embodied identification as that history becomes visible.
Let me turn then to the question I earlier bracketed, which has to do with whether the discourse of migration into other pasts (which tries to work out a frame for understanding the relationship between German national memory and diasporic or migrant populations, particularly Turkish Germans) offers a useful interpretive lens for this novel. I suggest that perhaps it does not. In a piece on *Strange Stars* that questions the intactness of the narrator’s Turkish identity, B. Venkat Mani observes that in *Golden Horn* the narrator quickly forms communities with other guest workers, while in *Strange Stars* she has little contact with “fellow Turkish immigrants.” This he ascribes to her traumatized sense of Turkishness after the political violence she has witnessed in Turkey. But it is not at all clear that the narrator of *Strange Stars* is an immigrant, or that there is much likeness between her position in Berlin and that of other Turkish migrants. Her position in the East depends on the hospitality of the theater where she is a guest and in West Berlin, she skulks about on an expired tourist visa. More importantly, the text discourages the suggestion that the narrator will remain in Germany; the novel ends with her arrival in Paris, where she goes with Besson to assist on a production and where she intends to stay on to do a doctorate. When Besson urges her to go with him he tells her that “you are young enough that in another culture you could have other experiences. One cannot stay too long [zu lange bleiben] in Germany” (SS 236). Earlier, as she wonders about the uncertainty of her future, she considers the possibility of traveling to London—“assimilating another culture [eine andere Kultur in mich aufnehmen], “English docks, the working class, Jack London, Agatha Christie, *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, milkmen in the small hours of morning, Peter Brook, the film *Marat/Sade*”—painting for herself with this list of associations a possible other life to be experienced and assimilated (SS 125).
Knowing, as most readers likely do, that the trilogy is a work of semi-autobiography and that Özdamar did go on to settle in Germany is perhaps one reason that *Strange Stars* is so readily framed as though it were about migration, assimilation, and Özdamar’s place in the Turkish diaspora. Other generic elements of the trilogy do make it tempting to read it in terms of what Cheesman calls narratives of settlement. For instance, the narrator’s willingness to immerse herself in an educative process of learning in and about Germany may seem to signal that the trilogy ends with national assimilation. Framed thus, the trilogy could be described as tracking the development from childhood to youthful travel to professional fulfillment in a way that positions the narrator’s life in Germany in the third volume as the culmination of this development. The various forms with which Özdamar experiments over the three books might also seem to urge such a reading: the first volume, *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus [Life is a Caravanserei Has Two Doors I Came In One I Went Out the Other]*, represents the narrator’s childhood in Turkey with magical realist figures and plays freely with “broken German”; the second volume, *Golden Horn*, which of the three is closest to a “guest worker narrative,” eschews the first book’s flights into magical realism in favor of a confessional voice; and *Strange Stars* generates a hybrid form that combines narrative with diary entries, notes, quoted documents, and sketches, offering generic experimentation while also stressing the text’s documentary and archival qualities. In light of some critics’ claims that Özdamar’s writing, in particular the stories in *Mothertongue* and the first volume of the trilogy, pander to Orientalist fantasies and Arabian Nights stereotypes, the generic uniqueness of *Strange Stars* would thus seem to suggest that it is with her arrival in Germany as a theater artist that she manages to liberate her authorial and artistic voice. Such a teleological view of the three volumes as tracking a process of self-becoming that
is made possible and fulfilled by the narrator’s migration would in turn strengthen a reading of Özdamar’s trilogy as a Bildungsroman. Elizabeth Boa, commenting on the first two volumes of the trilogy, notes that what initially seems like a Bildungsroman plot as the narrator moves away from the sphere of her childhood home in Turkey seems to come undone when, upon her return to Turkey from Germany, the narrator confronts a brutal and unreceptive political climate in which she can find no place for herself. But of course, the third volume of the trilogy, which Boa does not consider, reopens the possibility of the narrator finding a place for herself in Germany through her work and education there in the cultural sphere of the theater. But as I am arguing, Strange Stars does not end with the narrator’s settlement into a permanent place in Germany, or accept that the narrator’s education and self-development has as its telos a national assimilation that would also align neatly with Özdamar’s liberation of a mature authorial voice. Instead it once again ends, as the two earlier volumes do, with a leave-taking.

Another aspect of the text that might lend credence to reading it in terms of migration and settlement is of course that it is written in German, thus seeming to declare for itself an affiliation with German literature even as the novel ends with the narrator’s departure from Germany. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the early references to Lasker-Schüler may suggest that the poet functions as a kind of model for Özdamar’s inclusion in a literary canon of German minor writing, and that the anonymous critic’s declaration of Lasker-Schüler’s status as a German writer despite her Jewish themes and “Oriental” imagination may slyly comment on Özdamar’s own position. But as Vivian Liska explains, debates still attend Lasker-Schüler’s status as a “German” vs. a “Jewish” author. As late as the 1990s, long after the historical moment of 1975 when the narrator reads aloud the critic’s words, “there was still a discussion over whether [Lasker-Schüler] should be regarded as a true ‘representative of German ‘Geist,’ sent
into exile or as a ‘conscious representative of her Jewish people.’”49 The limits of Lasker-Schüler’s reception into “German” literature may thus reveal the precariousness of such inclusion for Özdamar or any other writer of uncertain identity. Earlier, I also proposed that for the narrator, Lasker-Schüler seemed to function less as a model for inclusion and more as an ally in a mode that I tried to describe loosely with the term “bedfellows.” This affinity does not depend on the presumption of shared victimization or the narrator’s appropriation of Lasker-Schüler’s suffering as a Jew persecuted by National Socialism. Instead it may have to do with what the narrator perceives as their shared sense of difference—a difference that is not only about their status as ethnic or racial Others but about a shared artistic sensibility that expresses itself in the language of wonder, self-discovery, and theatricality. Liska emphasizes that while Lasker-Schüler went into exile to Palestine, as a writer she was a “master of performance, masquerade, and metamorphosis,” with a fondness for narratives that rejected “a fixed place, a finished figure….”50 The narrator’s refusal to settle herself in Germany may in fact mark a sensibility she shares with Lasker-Schüler.

While I have argued that the moments in the novel that seem to suggest an identification with Jewish suffering should not be read in terms of appropriation but instead as a kind of estranged performance that reflects on identification’s risks and limits, there are other moments throughout the novel in which the narrator reflects on German-Jewish figures or German-Jewish memory in the same expansive way that characterizes her affinity for Lasker-Schüler. In large part, these encounters have to do with learning how her friends and colleagues are part of this history. In many cases, such as the scene near Buchenwald, she becomes aware of the stories of their parents’ generation, hearing for instance about Langhoff’s parents’ exile to Zurich because of his father’s political opposition and his mother’s Jewishness, or about Gabi’s father whose
politics forced him into hiding; her mother, whose identification papers were stamped with the “J” for Jew; and her uncle, Gottfried Lessing, who emigrated to Zimbabwe (where he married Doris Lessing) and later returned to the GDR to enter politics.\textsuperscript{51} Repeatedly, the stories she is drawn to are those having to do with exile, particularly the exile of a generation of thinkers and intellectuals, many of whom (but not all) were Jewish and all of whom were socialists and political opponents of fascism. Let me note here that the narrator’s apprenticeship at the \textit{Volksbühne} comes about because of a man who lives in Zurich, whom she never meets and whom she refers to only as “Pinkus the Jewish book dealer.” This man is, I think, Theo Pinkus, a Swiss socialist Jew who lived in Berlin till the rise of National Socialism forced him to flee Germany for Zurich where he worked as a publisher and book dealer, part of the same circle of Zurich exiles to which Langhoff’s parents and other opponents of National Socialism, Jewish and non-Jewish, belonged (and with which Brecht was himself affiliated). This preoccupation with political opposition to fascism, which she sees as meaningful to the political context in Turkey, is the red thread that runs through her affinities, and is what partially constitutes her identifications with Jewish-German history. In contrast to the other authors I consider, Özdamar’s orientation to the history of the Jews is not just transnational, global, or internationalist in the sense that it brings the Holocaust into proximity with “the other setting.” Rather, she sees in the history of Europe’s Jews an internationalist tradition that was itself already open to other settings, for instance in the form of Lasker-Schüler’s self-reflexive fascination with the Orient. Of course, such a description may seem only to affirm the contours of the familiar trope, and often damning stereotype, of the Jew as homeless and rootless—a cosmopolitan figure with no loyalties. Özdamar, contrary to interpretations of her work that read her as identifying excessively with Jewish suffering, instead attaches herself to what she
imagines and understands to have been a creative and productive life-world. It is the memory of this life-world that she tries to rescue and generalize as an orientation to the world available in non-exclusive, and non-stereotypical ways.

In contrast, the novel to which I now turn, Caryl Phillips’s *The Nature of Blood*, adopts this same stereotype of Jewish cosmopolitanism, rendering it a figure for betrayal and conversion, and setting it in opposition to a notion of identity as a tradition or practice of fidelity.
Notes


2 Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde: Wedding—Pankow 1976/77* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch: 2003). Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation SS. All translations from this and Özdamar’s other texts are my own.

3 Emine Sevgi Özdamar, *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch: 1998). Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text, with the abbreviation GH.

4 Yasemin Yildiz, “Political Trauma and Literal Translation: Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s *Mutterzunge*”, in *Gegenwarts Literatur: Ein germanistisches Jahrbuch / A German Studies Yearbook* 7 (2008), 248-270. The most sustained and influential reading of Özdamar’s (early) books as an instance of bilingualism as memory work is Azade Seyhan’s *Writing Outside the Nation*, in which she reads Özdamar alongside other “border” writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Ana Castillo, all of whom, she argues, write “outside the nation.” In Seyhan’s view, the diasporic literary production of these writers tracks the memory of loss and the loss of cultural memory, yet recovers loss via bilingualism, creating what she terms “language islands” that allow for the recovery of a “lost sovereign history.” See Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 63.

5 Though *Heim* literally means home, it also designates institutional spaces such as asylums and old-age homes.


7 The term encompasses auditors in university or other advanced-level studies, unpaid theater assistants, and also trainees in fields like teaching or journalism.


9 The notes to which she refers were made in 1969 and would have been recorded in preparation for a *Volksbühne* production of the play, directed by Besson, that premiered in April 1970. A record of the *Volksbühne*’s productions from 1914 - 2009 can be found at http://www.volksbuehne-berlin.de/deutsch/volksbuehne/archiv/spielzeitchronik/

10 Despite the shared initials, the German SDS was not a branch of the American SDS. However, there existed substantial similarities in the two groups’ political orientations, and historian Martin Klimke has recently traced extensive links and informal collaborations between them, developing a transatlantic account of the New Left in the 1960s. See Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010).

11 I have translated *Figuren* using two different terms (characters, figures) to show the shift that I think is taking place.

13 ibid. 232.


15 ibid., 6.

16 ibid., 18. Nekimken also notes that a new theater group, Birlik Sahnesi (Unity Stage), staged influential productions of *The Good Person of Sezuan* and *Fear and Trembling of the Third Reich* in the 1975-76 season (86).

17 Her desire to send her translation of Besson’s notes to her friends in Istanbul, who intend to stage the play once they are released from prison, traces a path of what Loren Kruger has proposed as a north-south “post-imperial” axis of transmission for Brecht’s work that connects the GDR to the global south, in contrast to what she describes as the dominant tendency to read Brecht as contested terrain between the liberal West and the communist East. Loren Kruger, *Post-Imperial Brecht: Politics and Performance, East and South* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007). Kruger focuses largely on the significance of Brecht and Heiner Müller for apartheid-era South African theater, and on the kinds of political solidarity that activists in both the GDR and apartheid South Africa imagined might exist between the two states. But she also attends to how notions of “third world solidarity” inflect the relationship between Germany and its Turkish residents in a way that sometimes distances Turkish-Germans as objects of sentiment, rather than acknowledging them as co-residents in Germany.

18 This authentication effect seems all the more tangible because of the novel’s semi-autobiographical quality, which it shares with the other volumes of the trilogy. However, as the narrator remarks at one point about Müller’s play, observing that though it works with historical materials it is “no substitute for a history lesson, the play is not documentary,” so too is the semi-autobiographical quality of the novels not historically transparent (88).


21 ibid., 121. Interestingly, at several points Bammer makes historical claims about East German feminism that Özdamar’s novel would seem to challenge. For instance, she asserts that that in the mid-1970s, debates about gender in the GDR focused on the distribution of work and the “double burden” for women who participated in the work force in extraordinary numbers but still bore the brunt of domestic and reproductive labor in the home, rather than on questions of sexuality and intimate relationships that were so central to feminist debates in the west. These questions were dismissed “as a peculiarly western, bourgeois feminist phenomenon” (113). Bammer is not alone in pointing to the salience of this double burden for East German women, but Özdamar’s text and its account of the preoccupation in both East and West with questions of sexuality suggest that the opposition Bammer draws does not quite hold, at least in some circles. This is an example of how one of the contributions of Özdamar’s work may be the way that it revises some aspects of dominant historical accounts; see too her depiction in *Golden Horn* of the participation of Turkish workers and students in the ‘60s social movements in Germany, which nuances the prevailing view that guest workers and migrant laborers were excluded and disconnected from these movements.
22 ibid., 123.

23 Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Indiana UP, 1986), 95. Interestingly, Huyssen goes on to read the television drama *Holocaust* as an instance of how identification could be a mode of reflecting self-consciously on the past, rather than eliding it.


27 ibid., see Chapter 6, “Antifascist Bodies,” 220-258.

28 Kader Konuk, “Taking on German and Turkish History: Emine Sevgi Özdamar’s Seltsame Sterne,” in *Gegenwarts Literatur: Ein germanistisches Jahrbuch / A German Studies Yearbook* 6 (2007), 236.

29 Ibid., 239, 245.

30 Ibid., 243.

31 Ibid., 235.


33 Gökçe Yurdakul and Y. Michael Bodemann, “‘We Don’t Want to Be the Jews of Tomorrow’: Jews and Turks in Germany after 9/11”, in *German Politics and Society* 79, 24:2 (Summer 2006), 44-67.

34 Gilad Margalit, “On Being Other in Post-Holocaust Germany: German-Turkish Intellectuals and the German Past,” in *Tel-Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* 38 (2009), 209-232. See also Viola Georgi, *Entliehene Erinnerung: Geschichtsbilder junger Migranten in Deutschland* (Hamburg: HIS Verlag, 2003), which outlines the multiple models with which migrants express interest in, identification with, or indifference to Holocaust history.

35 qtd. In Yurdakul and Bodemann, “We Don’t Want to Be the Jews of Tomorrow,” 53-54.

36 Andreas Huyssen, “Diaspora and Nation: Migration into Other Pasts,” in *New German Critique* 88 (2003), 154, 159, 163.


38 Tom Cheesman, *Novels of Turkish German Settlement: Cosmopolite Fictions* (Rochester: Camden House, 2007).

39 Konuk, “Taking on German and Turkish History,” 244.

41 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), 103.


44 B. Venkat Mani, “*Cosmopolitical Claims: Turkish-German Literatures from Nadolny to Pamuk*” (Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 2007), 110.


46 On the confessional as a subgenre of (feminist) autobiography, see Rita Felski, who suggests that “the confession poses in exemplary fashion the problem of the relationship between personal experience and political goals within feminism as a whole.” Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), 89.

47 On these criticisms, see especially Jankowsky, who discusses the controversy around Özdamar’s Bachmann prize for *Karawanserei*. Karen Jankowsky, “‘German’ Literature Contested: the 1991 Ingeborg-Bachmann-Prize Debate, ‘Cultural Diversity,’ and Emine Sevgi Özdamar,” in *The German Quarterly* 73:3 (Summer 1997), 261-276.


49 Vivian Liska, *When Kafka Says We*, 79.

50 Ibid., 79, 86.

51 The narrator mentions Doris Lessing more than once, and it would be worthwhile to consider how Lessing’s use of the journal form in *The Golden Notebook* and that novel’s focus on a woman’s identity and development shapes *Strange Stars*. 
**Chapter Three**

**Rituals Without Sacrifices: Race and Fidelity in Caryl Philips’s *The Nature of Blood*¹**

Another woman, someone who worked at a Jewish genealogy center… remarked that people have long used “genetic analogies to talk about ancestry.” But all that talk of “blood” was metaphorical not literal, “The risk of population genetics is that it might transform what might have been a metaphor into something really real.”

— Nadia Abu El-Haj²

**Essaying Forth**

Many of the formative works of the early postwar period on the topics I explore in this project, by Hannah Arendt, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and others, took the form of essays or other works of non-fiction prose. While I have suggested that works of fiction in the Anglophone and Germanic tradition have been exploring these themes for some time, long before they were an object of scholarly interest, the author I examine in this chapter, Caryl Phillips (1958-) is a practitioner of the essay form as well as the novel. The two genres do not always remain separate in his writing; like the other works I examine in this dissertation, which incorporate other genres (poetry in *Our Sister Killjoy*, drama and visual-textual practices in *Özadmar*), *The Nature of Blood* (1997) bears the traces of the essays in which Phillips first begins to consider the relationship between blackness and Jewishness. These essays, travelogues published under the title *The European Tribe* (1987), are the record of Phillips’s travels from Gibraltar to Moscow in an effort to come to terms with the experience of being black and British—the child of parents who emigrated from St. Kitts shortly after his birth. To his mind, the national question is a European question, for the nation-states of Europe “all seemed to share a common and mutually inclusive, but culturally exclusive culture. Reorienting myself in Britain seemed spurious; the problem was a European one, as exemplified by the shared, twisted, intertwined histories of the European
countries.” For Phillips, as for Paul Gilroy, his close contemporary in age, background, and intellectual orientation, a crucial nodal point in this “shared, twisted, intertwined history” is the experience of Europe’s Jews.

Like Gilroy, Phillips locates his awareness that there was some connection between the Jews and his own experience in his childhood. But in contrast to Gilroy’s account of growing up in a community that included refugees and survivors, whose “children were our playmates and school friends,” and some of whom “had opened their homes to West Indian students who had been shut out from much commercially rented property by the color-bar,” Phillips describes an experience of encounter both mediated and so visceral that he identifies vicariously with it:

I was brought up in a Europe that still shudders with guilt at mention of the Holocaust. Hundreds of books have been published, many films made, television programmes produced, thousands of articles written. The Nazi persecution of the Jews is taught at school, debated in colleges, and is a part of a European education. As a child, in what seemed to me a hostile country, the Jews were the only minority group discussed with reference to exploitation and racialism, and for that reason, I naturally identified with them. At that time, I staunchly indignant about everything from the Holocaust to the Soviet persecution of Jewry. The bloody excesses of colonialism, the pillage and rape of modern Africa, the transportation of 11 million black people to the Americas, and their subsequent bondage were not on the curriculum and certainly not on the television screen. As a result, I vicariously channelled a part of my hurt and frustration through the Jewish experience. (53-54)

In an echo of Aidoo’s character Sissie, who must supplement the incomplete pedagogies in which she is being schooled, Phillips identifies the political and curricular gaps that produce a history that needs to be made worldly. In this passage, however, Phillips seems to adopt a rhetorical structure of comparison and complaint, describing an asymmetry between historical attentiveness to the Jewish catastrophe on the one hand, and colonialism and slavery on the other—that is, until the last sentence, when he describes how the Holocaust’s visibility in the world in which he is raised render it an emotional and intellectual object for him. Instead of
expressing *ressentiment* at a perceived historical displacement, Phillips recounts an act of psychic substitution and identification, justifying it as productive and even necessary within the constraints of his education and the tools of comprehension available to him. He is not pitting one history against another. Phillips frames his knowledge of the Holocaust as a vehicle of translation—a conceptual *lingua franca* in which to begin to express the psychic suffering engendered by his own experience of racism.

Despite the echoes between Phillips and Gilroy’s narratives, there is a significant difference in their conceptual starting points—one that turns on the significance of “race.” Even as Phillips identifies Jews as the victims of racist violence and suggests a feeling of fellowship on this basis, he repeatedly distinguishes between Jewish racial undecidability on the one hand, and the fixity of black racial difference, on the other. The long passage I cite above is embedded within a complicated network of citations, claims, and counter-claims, which together function as a compilation of fragments, all attempting to contend in some fashion with what Phillips perceives as the whiteness of Jews, and its implications for the potential solidarity between oppressed Jews and oppressed blacks. Tellingly, Phillips quotes Fanon’s injunction in *Black Skin, White Masks*—which Fanon specifies is first transmitted to him in a scene of teaching that takes place between himself and his professor—that “whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you” (qtd. in *ET* 54). But, as I discuss in Chapter One, Fanon’s assertions of the continuities between anti-black racism and anti-Semitism are complicated by the readiness with which he declares black racial difference as epidermal, biological, and inescapable, while Jewish racialization is an instance of internecine conflict, even minor difference, within the white European “family.”

Phillips reproduces both dimensions of Fanon’s commentary. In another of the essays in
The European Tribe, he recounts watching as an adolescent a documentary about the Nazi occupation of Holland and his bemusement at why, “when instructed to wear the yellow Star of David on their clothes, the Jews complied. They looked just like any other white people to me, so who would know that they were different?” (ET 66). The lesson he draws from this film is both about “the enormity of the crime that was being perpetrated” and also about what he calls “the precariousness of my own position in Europe”—for “if white people could do that to white people, then what the hell would they do to me?” (ET 66-67). This sense of Jewish whiteness as mysterious—seemingly self-evident yet clearly insufficient—reappears in Phillips’s description of the short story he writes after watching this documentary: a young Dutch Jewish boy refuses to wear the yellow star but is told by his parents that he must; en route to the camps in the east he jumps from the cattle car and injures himself but is rescued by a kind farmer who sees “the sunlight shining on his yellow star” (ET 67). Phillips retells the story in order to convey the deep impression that the persecution of the Jews leaves on his teenage consciousness. But enfolded in the story are also a series of figures that probe at the paradox of Jewish whiteness. It is the yellow star catching the light that makes the boy visible and perceptible. Otherwise, we are to assume, the boy would have gone unnoticed and died undiscovered by the side of the tracks. The function of the star here is a benevolent inversion of what Phillips’s adolescent self imagines is its function in Nazi-occupied Europe: to make visible what would otherwise by invisible. The dramatic irony of the story, of course, is that the star the boy would have refused if he could have ultimately saves his life. But the possibility of refusal underscores the fact that the boy’s difference must be marked, that it depends on something supplemental or seemingly non-essential. Indeed, that mark comes in the form of “color”—yellow—that shows itself where white does not. Though Phillips’s youthful fiction insists on the addition of hue to whiteness as a
figure for visibility, the boy’s rescue depends also on the reflective qualities of lightness, which function as a beacon. Color makes one visible; lightness gets one rescued. The implications Phillips imagines for his own status are clear: marked by color, but a color that absorbs light, Phillips is hyper-visible yet reflects nothing back.

While Phillips frames these anecdotes as recollections of his youth he does not indicate in *The European Tribe* that he has revised them as an adult. Gilroy, in contrast, situates his early experience with Jewishness as contributing to his skepticism about the “fact” of racial difference. While he acknowledges the “precious forms of solidarity and community that have been created by… protracted subordination along racial lines,” the argument of *Against Race* is that race is not a viable or ethical basis for political action or identification. And while Gilroy recognizes the power of Fanon’s account of an epidermal schema as “a perceptual regime in which… the observer’s gaze does not penetrate the skin but rests upon it and, in doing so, receives the truths of racial difference from the other body,” he historicizes its salience:

> The idea of epidermalization points toward one intermediate stage in a critical theory of body scales in the making of ‘race.’ Today skin is no longer privileged as the threshold of either identity or particularly. There are good reasons to suppose that the line between inside and out now falls elsewhere. The boundaries of ‘race’ have moved across the threshold of the skin. They are cellular and molecular, not dermal.

Gilroy and Phillips share a sober awareness of how nineteenth- and twentieth-century race science produces the conditions for the industrialized murder of the Holocaust; their heightened sense of the acute dangers of raciology is shaped in part by the cultural memory of this event. But while Gilroy focuses on what he diagnoses as a contemporary and future-oriented shift to other bodily scales, Phillips, at least in the essays in *The European Tribe*, largely remains within a Fanonian framework of the perception of visual difference and of race as located on the epidermis. I do not mean to disparage Philips’s work by comparing it to Gilroy; they are writing
over a decade apart, for one. The comparison is meaningful because Philips’s work and his perspective change over time, as I will discuss.

Phillips’s sense of Jewish whiteness means that in addition to struggling with the relationship between Jewish and black racialization, he also finds himself trying to work out the relationship of Europe’s Jews to Europe’s white Christian character. Phillips’s epigraph to the dense essay, “In the Ghetto,” is from James Baldwin, who writes: “the Jew must see that he is part of the history of Europe, and will always be so considered by the descendant of the slave… unless he himself is willing to prove that this judgement is inadequate and unjust” (ET 52).

Phillips tries to pinpoint the cause of anti-Semitism in African American communities, writing:

That an American black might respond with contempt to an American Jew who told him, “I know what it means to be persecuted; I am a Jew,” is easily understandable, particularly so when the tradition that is responsible for the European oppression of the Jew is a Judaeo-Christian [sic] one, the same one that continues to oppress black Americans. (ET 53)

These two passages operate in a different register than Phillips’s figures of race and racial distinction. They refer, instead, to cultural, religious, or even “civilizational” differences, though race is in some fashion silently assumed and reinscribed under these other headings. What can it possibly mean to write that Jews that have been oppressed by “a Judaeo-Christian” “tradition”—that is, by a tradition that according to its hyphenated name is supposed to designate something that is at least partly their own, and proper to them? Moreover, are “Europe” and “Judaeo-Christian” (and “white,” for that matter) equivalent and synonymous terms, in the grammar of this essay and Phillips’s argument?

To respond to Baldwin’s claim with the rejoinder that “the Jew” is not part of Europe would be historically inaccurate and politically pernicious. But as Jonathan Boyarin argues, medieval and early-modern notions of Christendom depended on the project of achieving a
“unity of conscience [that] was, of course, part and parcel of an imagined territorial and political unity, an imaginary unity that continues to shape conventional understandings of the origins of western European identity out of the ruins of the Roman Empire.” As such, “Christian Europe” was a vanishing horizon and an ongoing project. The work of Boyarin’s book is to trace how efforts around the time of the New World conquest to make Christianity coterminous with a region that we today call Europe depended on various project to either incorporate or (more usually) expel Jews and Muslims. Baldwin is quite right to affirm that the Jews are a “part of the history of Europe.” But acknowledging, as Boyarin urges his reader to do, that “Christendom” is “a term existing in a complex lexical and chronological relation with Europe” means, perhaps, tempering the certainty with which Baldwin writes that the Jew “must see that he is part of the history of Europe” (italics mine). It also means challenging the idea of what Phillips calls a “Judaeo-Christian” “tradition,” especially his suggestion that we can identify this formation as the source of Jewish suffering. This is a problematic claim, too, because it implies that the source or character of this oppression is consistent over time and that its dominant dimension is a religious one—an assessment that would presumably treat medieval or early modern pogroms and modern race science as if they were symptoms of the same (Christian) worldview.

In the preface to *The European Tribe*, Phillips suggests that the problems impelling its writing are “so urgently felt that the fictional mould seems too delicate a vessel to hold it” (ET ix). But *The European Tribe* is not his last word on the subject. Fiction proves to be a rather robust vehicle and, in *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips implicitly revisits and revises some of his early formulations, developing a more complex account of racial differentiation. It is partly the literary form he adopts that makes possible this complexity; Phillips juxtaposes several narrative
strands, which he sets in different and often discontinuous historical periods. These strands rarely refer explicitly to one another but their juxtaposition asks us to imagine their possible connections. There are five narratives. Two are set in late-medieval or early modern Venice. One concerns a blood libel in the Venetian town of Portobuffole, and the other retells the story of Othello. There are three other plots: one about a young Jewish woman, Eva Stern, most of whose family perishes in the Holocaust; another about her uncle, Stephen, a committed Zionist who flees to Palestine in time, becoming part of the underground Jewish resistance to the British and who, in his old age, meets Malka, an Ethiopian Jew, whose story I consider to be the novel’s fifth plot, though it is entirely bound up with Stephen’s. The Portobuffole and Othello narrative are both about “racial” difference, but at a historical moment when it is unclear if and how such differences are continuous with notions of race as they are later conceived in the age of race science and racial essentialisms.

Several critics have focused on debates about the politics of “comparing” black and Jewish histories, and have sought to defend Phillips’s work from accusations that he is appropriating voices and identities to which he has no claim. I will not revisit these questions, which have been ably and subtly discussed by other critics. It seems to me that what is most exciting and risky about The Nature of Blood is not that Phillips indecorously juxtaposes, appropriates or ventriloquizes the stories or suffering of blacks or Jews, but that he experiments with setting into the same frame conceptions of Jewishness and blackness as race from such different historical registers.

I argue that Phillips tries to challenge the centrality of race for his literary projects and political pursuits, developing an alternative account of identity and membership that turns on blood. This is not to suggest that blood does not designate racial difference; indeed, it has been a
privileged figure for precisely the forms of genealogical descent and transmission so central to racial discourse. But blood as a figure of racialization is different than the notion of racial difference as epidermal difference, and it thus allows Phillips to think through the possibility of comparative racialization without being stymied by the imaginative blockage and persistent dichotomy of Jewish whiteness and fluidity, as opposed of back epidermal fixity. Phillips explores blood as a framework with which to explore racialization (what I term stained blood) but also as a figure designating a set of practices whose observance and transmission constitute a religious or cultural community (blood community). In The Nature of Blood, Phillips focuses on fidelity to such practices as the basis of identity. Unlike The European Tribe, in which he repeatedly circles back to the elusiveness of Jews in a racial order, here he tells a story of continuous Jewish fidelity to a set of communal practices despite their supposed access to passing, or to conversion that might eventually dilute stained blood beyond recognition. To such practices of fidelity, Phillips contrasts acts of betrayal and conversion, which he largely associates with Othello. In what follows, I explore this dichotomy.

**Blood and Form**

Phillips’s narrative of a blood libel against the Jewish community of the Venetian town of Portobuffole in the spring of 1480, the first fragment of which appears fifty pages into The Nature of Blood, is chronologically the earliest of the novel’s multiple plots. The “Blood” of the novel’s title is a dominant figure in this narrative; indeed, as a fictionalized account of a historical blood libel, Phillips literalizes figure into plot. While the Portobuffole narrative offers the novel’s most sustained and explicit treatment of blood, it also puts the term under erasure by invoking it in the phantasmatic form of a blood libel. The phrase “blood libel” is corrective,
retrospective; it does not refer to the accusation—namely, that Jews have ritually sacrificed a 
Christian for his or her blood—but rather to the accusation’s untruth. The phrase invokes blood 
in order to aver that none has been spilled, or, if blood has been spilled, then to assert that Jews 
have been misidentified and misrepresented as the perpetrators.

The luridness of such ritual murder accusations suggests the heightened, even hyperbolic, 
significance of blood as a marker of Jewish-Christian difference. Historian David Biale examines 
the profoundly entangled Christian and Jewish discourses of blood and argues that from late 
antiquity to the medieval period blood is essential to both traditions’ ritual practices and 
symbolic economies. Both are founded on a blood covenant—Judaism with the covenantal scene 
of Exodus 24:8, in which Moses sprinkles blood on the people, and Christianity with Christ’s 
 crucifixion—and they share the challenge of “turning the blood of the covenant in particular and 
sacrifices in general into allegories.”¹⁵ Yet despite this allegorical impulse, both traditions remain 
bound to blood rites: circumcision and the prohibition on ingesting blood in Judaism, and the 
consumption of the Eucharist in Christianity/Catholicism. It is from the symbolic centrality and 
persistence of such practices and prohibitions that Biale draws a compelling definition of what he 
terms blood community. Blood community, he suggests, is constituted by common observance 
of blood rituals that determine, among other things, blood’s proper use and correct disposal: “the 
covenant of blood suggests that the nation was based on ritual action at least as much as on 
ancestry.”¹⁶ This conception of blood community revises and supplements the more familiar 
figure of shared blood as a metonym for kinship, and, with it, the transmission of racial identity. 
In The Nature of Blood, Phillips explores blood community in both senses—“ritual action,” and 
ancestry or kinship—and traces the eclipse of ritual by race, or stained blood.

The narrative voice of this strand of the novel is distinctive. While the other narratives
allow the reader access to characters’ interiority, either through first-person narration or sustained focalization, the Portobuffole narrative largely lacks deep subjectivity. Instead, an unnamed narrator, intimately familiar with a sequence of events that begins with the supposed disappearance of a child and leads to an accusation of ritual murder, relates with forensic precision the eventual imprisonment, torture, and execution of several members of the town’s Jewish community. As such, the Portobuffole narrative is largely a sorry catalogue of the Christian community’s fears, misconceptions, and distortions of their Jewish neighbors’ practices and beliefs, and a chronicle of the indignities that the Christian community and the Venetian authorities visit on the Jews once word of the ritual murder spreads, first as rumor, then as supposed fact.

Only once in the three fragments (each approximately ten pages) that together constitute the arc of the Portobuffole narrative is there a description of Jewish ritual observance as the town’s community actually practices it. This episode (about which I will have more to say) depicts the community’s celebration of the first night of Passover, a holiday that in the Christian imagination of the period is entangled with Easter and the abiding Christian perception of Jews as Christ’s killers. The narrator describes how this belief, in turn, historically lends the blood libel its dark energy: “during Holy Week it was common practice for [the Jews] to re-enact this crime and kill a Christian child in order that they might draw out the fresh blood and knead some of it into the unleavened bread which they ate during their own Easter celebration, known as Passover” (NB 52). The blood libel thus also posits ritual practice as the basis for blood community. But, in a precise inversion of Jewish law, it accuses the Jews of “what is most abhorrent to Jewish law,” while projecting onto them “what Christians themselves do, namely, eat the body and blood of Christ in the form of the Eucharist.”17 This peculiar irony may indicate
Christian anxiety about the potentially transgressive dimensions of this act of ingestion; or, by casting the Jews as thirsty for Christian blood and as eager desecrators of the Host, the blood libel might affirm the solidarity of the Christian community that each ritual consumption of the Eucharist re-circumscribes.\textsuperscript{18} By any measure, it is an example of blood community imposed and defined from without, one that reviles Jewish ritual practices as parodic and parasitic of Christian belief, devoid of autonomous sacred life.\textsuperscript{19}

There are ambiguities in the narrator’s representation of the causes of anti-Jewish violence and of the forms it takes. Portobuffole’s Jews, the narrator relates, are migrants from Colonia in Germany, from whence they have been driven out by what the narrator characterizes as the “irration[ality]” of Colonia’s Christians, whose “fear of the plague” and “hysteria” eventually “manifested itself in violence” (\textit{NB} 50). The narrative seems poised to rehearse a well-established, even exhausted, story about the nature of medieval violence against minorities. Violence that, in its supposed irrationality and hysteria, confirms a capsule description of the Middle Ages as a time of credulity, ignorance, and superstition on matters of religious difference: that is, as premodern. But this is a portrait of relatively recent origin, as is the historical charge of the terms, hysteria and irrationality, with which the narrator paints it.\textsuperscript{20} As historical analysis, it would be unremarkable, though not unproblematic.\textsuperscript{21} As the enunciation of a narrative voice in a literary work, however, it implies the narrator’s historical distance from the events s/he relates, even as its glibness suggests the conceptual limits of this critical perspective. Phillips amplifies the temporal ambiguity of the location from which the narrator speaks, and suggests a distinctly contemporary frame of reference: the narrator describes how the Jews are expelled from Colonia “and then, a few years later, they were once more readmitted as though nothing had ever occurred. Such is the way of the Germans with their Jews” (\textit{NB} 51). This last,
laconic statement is jolting. Is the narrator referring obliquely to the more recent history of German Jewry, and recounting the events of the 1480 in Portobuffole in light of this unstated frame? Or is the Portobuffole narrative innocent of any such knowledge? Considering the novel’s juxtaposition of far-flung historical fragments, Phillips is certainly employing an historical and situational irony, but the narrator’s historical frame of reference is unclear.

Such a distinction matters as a measure of the novel’s investment in interpretations of European Jewish history and especially anti-Jewish violence as tending, as far back as the Middle Ages, towards the eventuality of the Holocaust. If the narrative perspective of this, the novel’s chronologically earliest strand, is implicitly conscious of the Holocaust, then we might read such a reference as an indication of the narrative’s teleological bent. But, if such moments are figural, not referential, such historical continuity is much more uncertain, in light of the complex ordering—or disordering—of the fragments of each narrative.

Even so, merely by placing blood libel and twentieth-century extermination camp alongside one another, Phillips risks having the Jewish axis of the novel read as a diachronic narrative, in which modern anti-Semitism is continuous with medieval and early modern anti-Judaism, and Holy Week riots, ritual murder accusations, pogroms, and expulsions are the preparatory ground and even the conditions of possibility for twentieth-century genocide. Such assertions are common; Biale’s unsatisfying claim, among his many compelling observations about the significance of blood in Nazi ideology, that “the Holocaust might be seen as an act of ritual murder against those who had, for centuries, allegedly committed ritual murder of Christians” is one vivid example of the rhetorical and analytical force they exert. Here, blood designates neither blood community nor the stained blood of descent but rather a repeating pattern of spilled blood, or bloodstains.

What is at stake in this issue of continuity or teleology? David Nirenberg argues that
historical works that “take the long view, seeking to establish a continuity between the hatreds of long ago and those of the here and now” depend on historians “act[ing] as geologists, tracing the ancient processes by which collective anxieties accreted into a persecutory landscape that has changed little over the past millennium”—an approach he sets out to challenge (4-5). But The Nature of Blood is a work of literature, not of history. Such a “geological” approach, which in Phillips’s case takes the form of repeating tropes and figures, may constitute the very literariness of the text.23 This is especially significant in light of the novel’s connective or multidirectional approach, which scrambles temporal periodization and historical continuity, generating the novel’s fragmented form. Phillips is at least as interested in the relationship of the Portobuffole narrative to Othello’s narrative, and of Othello’s narrative to Eva Stern or Malka’s stories, as he is in tracing the diachronic axis of the three “Jewish” plots (Portobuffole-Eva-Malka) and the two “African” plots (Othello-Malka), or the synchronic axis of the two narratives set in early modern Venice (Portobuffole-Othello). As such, “accretion” may be a necessary logic. Still, the question of what Phillips is doing here persists, and I have long been preoccupied by the possibility that Phillips is in fact writing in the terms of such a diachronic logic. I would consider this a disappointment for several reasons, and not just because, as Nirenberg shows, such assumptions impoverish historical analysis. Besides being formally and conceptually banal in the context of the novel (that is, the easiness of setting narratives alongside one another as a means of suggesting that there are dots to connect), treating the Holocaust as what Zygmunt Bauman calls “the continuation of anti-Semitism through other means” both denies its specifically modern character and obscures the insight that modernity did not fail, falling back temporarily into barbarism, but rather unfurled itself.24 This is an insight that Bauman, Arendt, and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno all develop in various directions, and which in Arendt’s
version has particular implications for this project, since the modernity of the Holocaust and its distinctiveness from earlier forms of anti-Jewish violence is bound up with imperialism. What would Phillips’s efforts to connect the forms of racialization to which blacks and Jews have been subjected add up to if the long historical context in which he chooses to situate them were so flattened? I do not think Phillips’s novel ultimately insists on such a diachronic logic, and I will go on to argue that Phillips usefully complicates periodization, especially the distinction between premodern and modern on which Bauman and others depend—not by suggesting the continuation or eruption of premodern barbarism or violence, but by indicating that “medieval” violence such as the blood libel already incorporates into its logic and operations supposedly distinctively modern elements. But before I move on to do so, I want to make clear that the stakes of the question I have been asking are narrative as well as historical.

In *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, Michael André Bernstein makes an impassioned case against what he terms “backshadowing”—a form of narrative organization in which the elements of a narrative about historical events tend so inexorably towards what author and reader know to be the historical outcome that the substance of what is narrated is rendered essentially meaningless. Notably, Bernstein develops the concept, and builds his case against it, based on the features he sees repeated across a range of texts about the Holocaust; “When an event is so destructive for a whole people… as was the Shoah,” he writes, “there is an almost irresistible pressure to interpret it as one would a tragedy, to regard it as the simultaneously inconceivable and yet foreordained culmination of the entire brutal history of European anti-Semitism.” Yet to adopt such a perspective, and to write and narrate accordingly, Bernstein argues, means reducing the psychological complexity and ethical significance of the choices, attachments, and life-worlds of characters who are representatively
flattened to figures—to figura in the narrow sense, in fact—whose lives are only a brief flash of significance in comparison to the inevitability and weightiness of their deaths. The consequences on a narrative level for the imaginative and ethical failures that backshadowing produces manifest themselves in “the contradiction… between insisting on the unprecedented and singular nature of the Shoah as an event and yet still using the most lurid formal tropes and commonplace literary conventions to narrate it.” It is an assessment to make one’s heart sink, if one is a reader of Phillips. For Phillips repeatedly invokes figures in the Portobuffole narrative—yellow stars on clothing, Jewish bodies burning into ash, smoke coming out of chimneys—that in some lights look like the very epitome of the indulgence of luridness that Bernstein criticizes. When the Portobuffole narrator explains that the Christians in Portobuffole believe the Jews have burned the body of their victim, noting that “everyone remembered seeing smoke coming from the chimney,” or when Phillips draws repeatedly on the figure of white ash—on the executioner’s shovel after the trial in Venice, and in the crematoria of the camps—it is difficult to see these as something other than a heavy-handed signaling of the themes of continuity and familiarity. While I do not think the novel is based on a diachronic logic, Phillips’s repeated insertions of and references to such figures highlight what he imagines is the circularity of violence: not its progression, perhaps, but its repetition.

On Violence

While the narrator attributes the violence in Colonia to irrationality and hysteria, his or her representation of the prevailing social order in Venice dispels the impression that the blood libel is isomorphic with mob violence, or proper to a medieval “dark age” when the state apparatus cannot direct or control such violence. Colonia’s surviving Jews migrate to Venice
“where it was rumoured that life was more secure” (NB 51). This is ironic in light of what befalls them there. But, in fact, the narrator’s account indicates that Portobuffolo’s Jews are not brutalized by irrational, hysterical mob violence but by the state, which channels and strategically preempts any such violence through a set of legal and disciplinary mechanisms that involves several levels of the republic’s government, a complex set of political negotiations, and two trials. Moreover, in a state that “reluctantly admitted their need for the Jews,” such legal and political calculations to determine what social and economic roles Jews could occupy are the rule and not the exception (NB 55). The narrator is alert to the contradictions at work in the state’s policies: “By obliging the Jews to lend money in exchange for permission to live in their territory, the Republic of Venice could pretend to be implementing a policy of some tolerance towards the Jews, while serving its own interests and ignoring the fact that it was further exposing the Jews to the multiple dangers of Christian hostility” (NB 53). In an observation that echoes Arendt’s description of the “court Jews” of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, who extended vital credit to the state, the narrator observes that “after the war with the Turks, the economy of the Most Serene Republic of Venice began to falter as the opportunity for expansion in the Orient appeared to have been blocked. This led young Venetian aristocrats to explore the commercial and economic prospects inland, but only with the understanding that the Jews would be able to provide large-scale capital investment” (NB 51). There are two elements of note here. First, a geographical distinction is at work. The narrator attributes a complexity and strategic tolerance to Venice’s management of its Jewish population, tethered to an emergent capitalist and imperialist order, that is at odds with his or her airy explanation of violence elsewhere in Europe. Such a characterization of Venice as “modern,” in some temporally discrepant sense, is important to understand why Venice is such an important site for Phillips.
Second, the narrator repeatedly presses on the point that, in Venice, the prevailing social order is one in which tolerance and intolerance function simultaneously. The state’s alternating toleration of Jews on the one hand, and leniency towards periodic episodes of anti-Jewish violence on the other, are contingent and strategic. Tolerance and intolerance are the means of securing specific economic or political ends. Each action the Republic’s governing body adopts against the Jews in the wake of the blood libel, the narrator explains, is the product of negotiations that entail weighing state exigency against the sentiments of the church and populace. This is most manifestly the case at a moment of crisis, such as in the aftermath of the first of the two trials of Portobuffole’s Jews: “On receiving the magistrate’s report, the Council of Ten found themselves in an impossible position. The severity and unusual nature of the punishment would not enhance the judicial reputation of the Most Serene Republic, and might well destroy her carefully cultivated relations with the Jews. But what could they do? Deny the work of the local judges and repeal the sentences? To do so would be to imply that half the population of Portobuffole had given false testimony” (NB 103). The narrator’s sophisticated assessment of the equally sophisticated, or cynical, operations of the state complicate the stereotype of the blood libel as medieval barbarism.

But despite its seeming critical distance, the narrator’s account oscillates uneasily between critique and reaffirmation. As s/he enumerates beliefs the populace holds about Jewish ritual practice, the narrative voice slips into one of recitation rather than analysis, re-circulating these stories as common knowledge. Even as the narrator condemns the violence to which the Jews are subjected in Colonia, s/he also observes that “in Germany they frequently murdered the Jews, because the Christian people claimed (and provided good evidence) that the Jews spread the plague by poisoning the wells with whatever came to hand” (NB 51). There is a shift in
register here; from dismissing the irrationality of the Germans’ fear of the plague and the violent forms it takes, to affirming the “good evidence” on which they base their claims. So too, the narrator lists without question or qualification a series of anti-Judaic claims: “during Holy Week it was common practice for them to re-enact [Christ’s death] and kill a Christian child in order that they might draw out the fresh blood”; “at the moment at which they stabbed the innocent Christian child the Jews were known to recite the words: ‘Even as we condemned the Christ [sic] to a shameful death, so let us also condemn this innocent Christian’; and “it was widely known that the Jews used fresh Christian blood for anointing rabbis, for circumcision, in stopping menstrual and other bleeding; in removing bodily odours, in making love potions and magic power, and in painting the bodies of their dead” (NB 52, emphasis added). Notably, each of these claims is about ritual murder and blood rites, the very substance of the accusations that produced blood libels. Such shifts in narrative register seem to perform the relation between what Nirenberg calls “stereotype and strategy,” thereby suggesting that the distinction been strategic uses of difference on the one hand, and the purported power of stereotypes and the affects attached to them, on the other, do not always hold and are in tension with one another (127). The narrator is not fully or always outside the logic of what s/he narrates.

What does all of this signify about the periodization of historical violence, on which so much of the novel’s meaning making and the potential for its interpretation depends? The skepticism of the narrative voice demystifies the state’s political mechanics, and complicates the extent to which we can read its violence as expressive of fixed relations of religious intolerance. As such, the historical analysis Phillips’s narrator offers does not conform to what Nirenberg describes as “the traditional use by historians of episodes of violence in their attempts to periodize the ebb and flow of intolerance” (228). By resisting, or at least complicating, such
emplotment, the anti-Jewish violence the Portobuffole narrative chronicles might be read as something other than a “sig[n] or sympto[m] of a linear march toward intolerance” that culminates in twentieth-century genocide”—despite the readiness with which the novel’s form seems to lend itself to backshadowing or assertions of continuity (Nirenberg 29).

This is not an escape from periodization. Rather, by representing peculiarly modern operations at work in seemingly premodern violence, the Portobuffole narrative undoes the distinction between premodern and modern. Instead of teleology or diachronic development, we have instead a figural and conceptual node that captures a complex conjuncture of race and religion at a specific historical moment—one among several the novel depicts across its various strands. In her work on the Spanish Inquisition and its global outposts in the New World, Irene Silverblatt argues for the modernity of the seemingly premodern, and its implications for the relationship between race, religion and empire. Her work is especially illuminating for this project, since she builds on and revises Arendt’s claim about the central role of imperialism in the development of race thinking. But while Arendt derives her argument from her focus on nineteenth-century British imperialism, Silverblatt observes that “the globe had experienced Europe’s barbarous civilizing mission nearly three centuries before, when Spain was the Continent’s vanguard of state-making and colonialism… It was Spain’s colonial efforts, not northern Europe’s, that initiated the ‘civilizing’ mix of bureaucracy and race thinking that Arendt found so damning.” Specifically, it is that “icon of premodern irrationality and cruelty,” the Spanish Inquisition, which Silverblatt argues introduces race thinking in the context of empire (226). The Inquisition’s sophisticated bureaucracy; its legal proceduralism; its status as a secular institution, and its establishment in response to “a perceived threat to national security: namely, the undermining of the Spanish state, first by Judaizers, and then by all manner of heretics” all
speak to its modernity, and its role in the production of modernity (6).

There is more to Silverblatt’s significance for the novel than a homology between the Inquisition and the blood libel. Her temporal and geographical reorientation situates Jewish conversos or New Christians (and, to a lesser extent, Moriscos, Christian converts from Islam), whom the Inquisition investigated in Spain and also vigorously in the colonies, at the head of a genealogy of race thinking that determines racial categories in the New World. “Conquistadors brought the curse of the New Christians—the concept of stained blood (sangre manchada)—to the Americas,” she writes, and the perplexing questions that clustered around these converts, including whether “blood stains” were indelible and if all such stained blood was equally stained; if stains could be erased through baptism or over generations, contributed to the development of categories like mulatto and mestizo (219, 25). Jonathan Boyarin, noting that 1492 is often taken to represent a threshold of modernity, observes that in fact overseas colonization was “part and parcel of the efforts to expand, rationalize, and unify Christian Europe that had been going on for centuries.” Jews and Muslims functioned as a reference point for Spanish and European encounters with difference in the New World, in part because attempts to secure “Christendom” in Europe contended with Jewish difference within its borders and Muslims difference at its frontiers. Silverblatt’s account of the Inquisition (instituted in Spain in 1480—incidentally, the same year as the Portobuffole blood libel) affirms hers and Boyarin’s argument that periodizing markers and thresholds such as 1492 are shaky, and demonstrates how Jewishness functioned as a conceptual bridge between European efforts at religious purification and imperialism.

The significance of all of this for what Silverblatt, following Arendt, calls “race thinking” (as distinct from ideas of race that emerged through and are associated with nineteenth-century century race science) turns largely on the relationship between race and religion. Notions of
stained blood, its transmission, and its potential solvency were the terms of an emergent discourse of race/religion, or racialized religious difference. Was Jewishness religious, racial, or raced religious difference, in and around the fifteenth century? The saliency of such terms, especially race; when and where they were meaningful (and how this differed geographically); and their potential applicability to Muslim as well as Jewish difference are all matters of debate and contestation. Silverblatt, whose research of course is based on Spain and its history of conversions and expulsions, argues that “a racialized view of religions [was] a view born at the same time as the Inquisition itself. According to its dictates, baptized men and women of Jewish or Muslim descent were considered stained by ancestral heresies, regardless of conversion to Christianity or commitment to faith (32).” (Though she also discusses many instances in which New Christians successfully challenged those terms, either through “passing” or by exposing some of the system’s contradictions or procedural faultlines.35) In contrast, the red thread of James Shapiro’s story about Jewishness in early modern England is nation, not race—a consequence, he argues, of the early modern English preoccupation with its own nationhood.36 Shapiro notes that there was widespread concern in England about “counterfeit Christians” (that is, insincere New Christians), on the grounds that “faith was disguisable, religious identity a role one could assume or discard if one had sufficient improvisational skill,” but he reads this as evidence that, “in theological terms the Jews were understood not only to be inveterate opponents of Christians but also imminent coreligionists whose conversion would confirm the rightness of the Christian faith.”37 These two examples barely begin to hint at the complexity and diversity of accounts and interpretations of the extent to which race, raced religiousness, or religion as race can be tracked in the discourses, documents and contexts of the period, across various (incipient) national contexts, but they indicate that these are vexed questions, now but
also then.

Let me try to synthesize this material, as well as the readings I have offered in this section: **First**, Phillips’s complication of periodization, of premodern and modern, allows the violence in the Portobuffole narrative to signify other than diachronically, by which I mean as an early phase of anti-Jewish violence that develops teleologically towards the Holocaust. As such, we can understand the novel’s form, and the relation of the Portobuffole narrative to the novel’s other strands, in terms other than “backshadowing.” **Second**, Phillips is contending with the relationship of race/religion at various historical moments, and he is tracking configurations and shifts of stained blood over time. **Third**, focusing on Jewish difference around 1480, which is also the age of expulsion, conversion, and Spanish imperialism, resituates Jews and Muslims vis-à-vis Arendt’s account of the relationship between race and empire. Silverblatt argues that we can discern the patterns Arendt identified three centuries earlier than she located them, and in a way that shifts our notion of modernity, situating race making at its heart. What she does not articulate, though I think it is perhaps implicit in her account, is that this alternative genealogy entails revising Arendt’s figure of the boomerang effect. The strict geographical distinction that Arendt preserves between Europe and the colonies as discrete zones, and the logic of preparation and refinement abroad as a separate stage from its amplified return (which I have discussed in Chapter One), are complicated by the role that Muslims and Jews play in the formulation of race thinking in the metropole and in the colony. Arendt suggests that imperialism galvanized race science, which rebounded on the Jews. But in Silverblatt’s account, the race-making machine begins with Muslims and Jews, who themselves travel to the colonies, where their presence influences and is intertwined with the kinds of racial or proto-racial categories being developed there. Arendt does not account for the significance of the globalization of Europe’s religious
minorities and its religious converts. Fourth, among the complex of overlapping terms, accounts, and interpretations of race/religion, of stained blood and blood community, conversion—its sincerity and its efficacy—is a practice and a form that appears again and again. In the next section, I argue that Phillips unspools a story, across the novel’s various plots, of Jewishness as fidelity, or the very opposite of conversion.

Fidelity and/as Particularism

I have discussed the shifts in the narrative voice of the Portobuffole plot, noting the tension between strategy and stereotype that pervades the narrator’s account, such that he or she can critically assess the state’s disingenuous and instrumental relation to the Jews, while also naturalizing and affirming as common knowledge, in the seemingly most unthinking way, stereotypes of Jewish ritual practice and its absolute otherness. But the narrator also offers a commentary on the possibilities of assimilation, and insists that Jewish difference is chosen by the community, as well as imposed from without. Portobuffole’s Jews, the narrator asserts, “arrived as foreigners, and foreigners they remained” (NB 51). The formulation implies that, in the narrator’s view, it could have been otherwise. He or she faults Portobuffole’s Jews for their continued adherence to “unseemly” modes of conduct ranging from their clothing to their observance of the Saturday Sabbath, and largely poses the problem of assimilation as a failure of Jewish will: “Sadly, as the years passed, this mistrust did not abate. It became apparent that the Jews wished to speak only among themselves. Furthermore, they chose not to eat or drink with the Christians, and they refused to attend to their heavy German accents” (NB 51). “Wished,” “chose,” “refused”: the narrator describes Jewish unassimilability in terms of stubborn ethnic particularism.
The aspects of Jewish difference the narrator refers to have less to do with the perception of absolute religious difference than with the community’s insularity and its apparent rejection of neighborliness and cohabitation. The emphasis here is on the community’s foreignness, its refusal to take on the trappings of visible sameness, rather than on religious practice. Even the accent of which the narrator complains is designated as German, not Jewish *per se.* I am not suggesting that such a recasting of Jewish difference is innocent. Indeed, as I will discuss at some length, the stereotype of excessive Jewish ethnic particularism as inimical to community has significant implications for Jewish assimilation and legal emancipation in Enlightenment-era debates. But for now I want to highlight that the narrator’s emphasis is on cultural practices, rituals, and outward markers—practices and markers that he implies could be given up or removed—instead of anything that resembles race or insoluble racial difference. The tension between these two modes or models of characterizing Jewish difference is apparent in the Venetian practice of compelling the Jews “to distinguish themselves by yellow stitching on their clothes” (*NB* 52). On the one hand, there is something ironically redundant about imposing such marks on clothing when, according to the narrator, it is in part through clothing that the Jews choose to set themselves apart. On the other hand, such a practice suggests that were Jews to cast off such external markers, it might no longer be possible to distinguish them from others—an echo of Phillips’s discussion of the yellow star in *The European Tribe* and of the questions he poses as to why, in the 1930s, the Jews wore the star instead of refusing and passing. I suggest that in *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips revises his early assessment of Jewish as cultural or religious difference that could be denied in order to pass. Instead of stressing the racial undecidability of Jewishness and its potential dissolubility into “whiteness,” Phillips reconceives of Jewishness as fidelity—that is, the faithful reaffirming and choosing, over and
over again through the generations, of a set of practices. Such fidelity, he suggests, produces an identity as constant as any imposed by the perception of racial fixity.

We might read the Passover scene in the Portobuffole narrative in this light. Earlier, I noted in passing that this is the sole episode in which the narrative records a trace of community and household life as Portobuffole’s Jews live it, rather than in the terms and figures of Christian projection and persecution. As such, Phillips’s representation of Passover in the home of Servadio, one of the Portobuffole’s Jewish community’s senior figures, corrects the distorted “gentile tales” of Jewish ritual sacrifice by describing the poignant rhythms of the Passover celebration as they unfold within the seeming security and intimacy of a family home. The narrator’s description stresses the deeply enduring character of the rituals associated with Passover, and subtly suggests that the commitment to its commemoration is one measure of the extent to which Christians and Jews occupy different calendrical orders and life worlds; while the “highly spirited Christians were joyfully celebrating the Feast of Annunciation and looking forward to the following day, Palm Sunday,” Portobuffole’s Jews meanwhile “had gathered in the house of Servadio to begin to celebrate the night of the fourteenth day of the month of Nissan in the year 5240 since the creation of their world” (NB 57). Implicitly rebutting the Christian stereotype that the coincidence of Passover and Easter indicates that Passover is a debauched celebration of Christ’s crucifixion, the narrator’s invocation of “their world” suggests that Portobuffole’s Jews dwell in a different, or perhaps dual, temporal and spiritual world.

But I do not mean to suggest that this episode offers any sort of “thick description” or representational richness: it does not. In fact, the depiction of Passover falls almost into the realm of cliché, and while this is the one instance in which Portobuffole’s Jews emerge from behind the story of their victimization, they do so as hardly more than stock characters. The narrator
sketches in broad strokes the elements of ritual: ridding the home of fermented food, eating unleavened “crackers” in place of bread, and “the huge tray” on which these and the “various other objects necessary to their Jewish rituals” are placed (NB 57). The characters populating this scene are just as two-dimensional. There is Servadio’s young son, whose ritual task is to ask “why this night was different from any other”; there are the sentimental women, who “left the kitchen with damp eyes and came to listen to this small boy who stood in front of the assembly of men”; and there is the “proud” father, who “smiled as he recognized himself in the inquisitive young boy” (58). My point is not that this is an instance of literary or representational failure. The very carelessness and superficiality of the narrator’s description and the lack of descriptive verisimilitude or psychological depth suggests that we are reading for something else. That something else, I argue, is the emphasis Phillips places on the cyclicality and continuity of these traditions; it is precisely the relative insignificance of the individual instantiation that highlights instead the power of the repetition of these practices. Only once does the narrator offer something other than vague brushstrokes of what is taking place inside the home, and it is when s/he pauses to comment that “For almost three thousand years the Jews had celebrated this holiday by reciting the same prayers, abstaining from the same foods, and reading the same stories as if reading them for the first time. This was the source of their safety, and the basis of their relative confidence and happiness” (NB 58). This portrait of re-reading, revisiting, and repartaking of a repertoire of texts and practices blurs the binary of chosenness and fixity, and it is on the basis of fidelity to this repertoire that Phillips imagines and represents Jewishness as identity. 41

In keeping with the narrator’s description of Jewish particularism in terms of markers such as clothing, food, accent etc.—Phillips emphasizes only practice and ritual. Nowhere in the
Portobuffole narrative does he suggest that Jewishness is transmitted through anything other than the preservation of and adherence to these practices. That is, he never suggests that Jewishness is transmitted through blood, or descent. I have indicated that the period about which Phillips is writing is one in which the nature of Jewishness was complex, contested and evolving, at times focusing on religious difference and the possible assimilation that could be effected through conversion, while also incorporating emergent discourses of stained blood, purity of blood, and racial features that were indissoluble. And this indeterminacy informs the Portobuffole narrative. Yet Phillips scrupulously restricts his references to blood in the Portobuffole narrative to instances of blood community as ritual practice, and to bloodstains produced by violence—never to the genealogical transmission of blood. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Phillips ought to understand Jewishness in those terms, or that it is perplexing why he would not want to do so. But—in light of, variously, the novel’s other narrative strands and their visions of race; Phillips’s efforts to try to understand the racialization of blacks and Jews in comparative or connective terms; the salience of discourses of blood and genetics for understanding Jewishness then and now; and the conceptually rich and contested terrain of medieval and early modern notions of race on which Phillips is drawing—I am suggesting that his choice to eschew such a frame of reference, even on the part of his narrator, is meaningful.

To try to unfold what this choice signifies, I draw on Nadia Abu El-Haj’s insightful recent work on Jewish practices of genealogical investigation in the age of the genome and commercially available DNA ancestry testing. El-Haj studies the surge of interest in the possibility that evidence of Jewish ancestry can be found on the Y-chromosome and in mitochondrial DNA. Such evidence takes the form of “noncoding genetic markers” or “junk DNA” that record mutations to which scientists ascribe little or no biological significance but
which, it is thought, can be “read as ‘mere’ indexes of ancestry and origins”—that is, as an historical archive of sorts (22). While “anthropological genetics” tries to distinguish itself from race science, insisting that the biological characteristics it examines have no “causal properties” with “biological and social consequences” for the organism and its place in the world, such “genetic history,” El-Haj argues, still “biologize[s] history (16, 22, 12, see also 77). The crux of her powerful interpretation of these emergent practices is two-fold. First, while the genetic markers that testing examines offer evidence of “origins, migration patterns, and descent lines (or kinship practices),” the presence of such markers depends on what she terms “the repeated act of remaining faithful to [a] religious principle” (her example is the Cohanim, which she argues is “a scientifically legible group” only because the descendents of that lineage “have remained true to the principle of passing priestly status from fathers to sons”) (22). Such fidelity necessarily precedes and produces the genetic traces that purportedly confirm identity. Or, as she beautifully puts it: “populations are visible to the molecular gaze because of a sustained and repeatedly chosen fidelity to one’s traditions. And those choices, that responsibility, that fidelity is what testifies to—what produces, in fact—a meaningful human collectivity, a ‘culture’ that is” (119). Second, she shows that the inconclusive and contradictory genetic data is never sufficient to the historico-political work it is called upon to do; the results of such tests depend upon and require supplementation from what one scientist terms “already existing data.” “That already existing data,” writes El-Haj, is “textual data. For its proper interpretation, genetic data depends on older, humanistic sources. The truth of Jewish origins lies elsewhere. It resides in longstanding traditions, in biblical texts, in existing ‘historical’ sources,” as well as “in religious beliefs and practices” and “in cultural and political commitments” (128). Abu El-Haj takes seriously the social and political work that genetic testing does, particularly to shore-up Israeli
nationalist projects. And she explores with care the imaginative significance of such testing for individuals, especially in the diaspora. I am drawing on her at such length because the thrust of her argument disaggregates biological and genetic identity (even biological and genetic identity that asserts the bio-social inconsequence of its analytical objects and its innocence of race) from observance, transmission, and fidelity of and to a set of religious and/or cultural practices, in much the same way that I am arguing of Phillips. Or better, we might say that both El-Haj and Phillips offer interpretations that reverse the causality and valence of identity’s chosen versus given dimensions. Previously, Phillips has focused on the possibility of divesting oneself (hiding, converting, passing) of a Jewishness that is nonessential because not epidermally fixed. In The Nature of Blood, Phillips rethinks this logic and explores instead how enduring fidelity to an identity, including in the face of danger, blurs the distinction between chosen and given.

Such a perspective risks romanticizing Jewishness as an identity and fidelity as a principle, and I wonder if Phillips does not do exactly that. Why does Phillips engage so explicitly with Othello but not with The Merchant of Venice, when he is clearly preoccupied with Jewish difference in Venice at that time? After all, in The European Tribe, Phillips describes Shylock as “his hero.” Reviews and articles about The Nature of Blood regularly note that it has two Shakespearean intertexts, not one, yet where we might expect to find Merchant (as the Jewish pole of the medieval/early modern Venetian axis whose other pole is Othello) we instead find the reconstruction of the Portobuffole blood libel of 1480. My suspicion is that this may be because Merchant is not about fidelity but is rather, as Janet Adelman shows in her brilliant book, Blood Relations, a play that turns on conversion and the anxieties it generates. Adelman notes that there are three conversion plots at work in the play: Lancelot’s conversion of his loyalties from Shylock to a Christian master; Jessica’s conversion via marriage to Lorenzo; and
Shylock’s conversion at the play’s end. One of these is a forced conversion (Shylock’s) but the two others draw out the implications of conversion as an act of betrayal. In the play’s most famous lines, Shylock proposes the essential sameness of how blood behaves in Christian and Jewish bodies (“If you prick us, do we not bleed?”) but some dozen lines earlier, Shylock invokes blood as genealogy when he discovers Jessica has absconded with Lorenzo: “My own flesh and blood to rebel!” and, three lines later, “I say my daughter is my flesh and blood.”

Contrast Shylock’s recourse to blood as genealogy at the moment of its apparent betrayal to Phillips’s resistance to blood as a principle of descent in the Portobuffole narrative. Adelman argues that the centrality of conversion to Merchant should be contextualized by the anxieties about conversos circulating in England and elsewhere at the time: “The conversos were Jews who had become Catholics who had become [in England] Protestants who were—maybe—still Jews after all.” Similarly, Brian Pullman observes of the Venetian Inquisition of 1547 and after that it seldom concerned itself with Venice’s longstanding communities of Jews, or individual professing Jews, focusing instead on conversos and especially Sephardic conversos who had converted back to Judaism: “Such notions of faithlessness and unreliability developed… into fears of treachery towards Christian countries and of alliance with the Turk.” Conversion is thus on the one hand fraught with betrayal but, on the other, it is never complete. For while conversion addresses confessional difference, it can only ambivalently and insufficiently respond to the stained blood that a raced religious identity indexes. As Adelman observes of Jessica’s attempted conversion, “she persistently regards her conversion to Christianity as complete, and they [at Belmont] persistently regard her as a Jew. If the crucial distinction for her is religious, the crucial distinction for them is of blood lineage.” From this observation, Adelman offers a careful reading of the “proto-racial” distinction that this
emphasis on blood lineage draws between Gentile/Jew: “although ‘Jew’ might function primarily as a religious category when it is opposed to ‘Christian,’ it becomes an incipiently racial category when it is opposed to ‘gentle/gentile.’” As such, “while Jessica hopes for a conversion from Jew to Christian; Graziano implies that the necessary conversion will have to be from Jew to gentile, shifting the grounds of conversion from religion to race even as he seems to grant her the conversion she wishes for.”49 Merchant produces a complex of interlinked terms: blood, conversion, betrayal, and race. Specifically, the play’s logic is that conversion is a betrayal but one that is never fully efficacious. For while religious identity can be transformed, the blood of which it is an index cannot be overcome and is bound to continue to transmit its stain through descent. In contrast, Phillips’s Portobuffole narrative engenders a different complex of terms: practice, fidelity, community, identity. That is, identity is produced through fidelity to a set of practices and their transmission, including those that produce and delineate blood community, blurring the binary between what is given and what is chosen, but not in a way that is reducible to race. Again, I am not suggesting that this is “wrong.” Indeed, as a position that allows Phillips to think about Jewishness in terms that go beyond race as epidermal difference but do not collapse into equally noxious essentialisms about race as blood descent (and of course the two are connected) it is clearly “right.” But the risk is that the insistence on identity as fidelity generates binaries between fidelity and betrayal that risk romanticizing some narratives—including those of martyrdom—and disavowing others. Compare the end of Merchant and Shylock’s conversion, which is forced upon him but which he chooses over death, to the end of the Portobuffole narrative, in which Servadio and his fellow community members “rejec[t] [a] last-minute offer of conversion, preferring to die as sinner,” praying “‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one’” as the flames beneath them burn” (NB 154).
In its best version, Phillips’s story of Jewishness as fidelity opens up and insists upon a space for what El-Haj describes as those practices of textual and imaginative supplementation about the past and its transmission that are non-essentializing and irreducible to genealogical descent. But in the context of the extreme states that Phillips represents—the torture and executions that come of the blood libel, as well as the Holocaust—it is less clear what fidelity signifies and demands from those who remain faithful. I have discussed the repetition of figures such as ash and smoke, reading them for their potential implication in a diachronic logic that sees anti-Semitic genocide as the expanding ripples of a stone thrown long ago, and have suggested an alternative interpretation. But perhaps the white ash on the executioner’s shovel and the white ash the crematoria produce represent not the inevitable and inexorable logic of violence as teleology but instead the fatal price of fidelity—a fidelity that holds until death and only after, as ash, “disperse[s] or “scatter[s]” (NB 155, 177). The implications of such a perspective in light of the Eva Stern narrative, which describes the destruction of a family—and a world—of assimilated, secular German Jews are especially troubling, since as Bernstein observes, quoting Irving Howe, “‘[most of] the Jews destroyed in the camps… died… not because they chose at all costs to remain Jews, but because the Nazis chose to believe that being Jewish was an unchangeable, irredeemable condition.”

In fact, one of the novel’s notable characteristics is that while Phillips ranges across half a millennium, from 1480 to approximately the 1990s, and touches on aspects of Jewish history including medieval blood libels, the Venetian ghetto, the camps of the Holocaust, the detention of Jews on Cyprus en route to Palestine, and the in-gathering of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, he spares no time or space for the era of Emancipation. Eva’s narrative depicts the two Stern brothers, who are a product of that world of assimilated bourgeois Jews, but the narrative begins
as this era and its promise of assimilation is coming to a brutal close, when Eva’s uncle Stephen chooses a life in the Zionist underground and then in Israel, and his brother, upon whom he urges the same, dies in the camps along with much of Eva’s immediate family. The novel’s Jewish plots are all thus essentially set in ghettos and camps; from the Venetian ghetto, to Eva’s family’s confinement before deportation, to the British camps on Cyprus in which the Jews are held, to the shadowy developments at “the edge of the city” where Malka’s people “had been placed” (202).

The closest Phillips comes to representing this era is in his description of Passover at the home of Servadio in 1480.³¹ In contrast to the Christians—whose public celebration of Holy Week and manifest joy at the safe return of the town’s men from Venice’s war with the Turks is such that “in Portobuffole the atmosphere was merry”—Phillips pointedly depicts Jewish communal life as taking place only behind the closed doors of the domestic, once “the Jews of Portoboffole had gathered in the house of Servadio” (*NB* 56-57). Phillips’s segregation of domestic or private space as a zone of religious autonomy, as distinct from public (Christian) space, is resonant in two historical registers. It affirms a familiar portrait of late-medieval and early modern religious intolerance that insists on the unassimilability of Jews into the Christian body politic—a body politic that coincides with the blood community of those who ingest the Eucharist and thus are literally part of the *corpus Christi*.³² But this scene of ritual practice confined to the home also evokes the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century era of emancipation, when the modern state adopted ideologies of assimilation and toleration as new strategies with which to contend with the “Jewish Question.”

In contrast to a social order in which religion as “blood community” determined membership in the body politic, emancipation in Prussia and France sought to reframe Jewish
difference as a confessional matter that was meaningful only within a private sphere, as opposed to an avowedly increasingly secular public sphere. Wendy Brown notes that a polity’s toleration of a set of beliefs or practices is inversely related to the political and social importance it ascribes to them: “tolerance of diverse beliefs in a community becomes possible to the extent that those beliefs are phrased as having no public importance; as being constitutive of a private individual whose private beliefs and commitments have minimal bearing on the structure and pursuits of political, social, or economic life.”

Accordingly, the new emancipatory political order of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries attempted to depoliticize the distinction between Jews and Christians, though with decidedly political ends, and reframed religious beliefs, at least those beliefs that were the objects of toleration, as tolerable so long as their observance was restricted to the world beyond the closed doors of the private home. Or, as Hannah Arendt describes it, formal emancipation asked of Jews that they invest in the state’s novel fiction that they could be, and ought to be, “a Jew at home and a man on the street.”

This is a well-established story about the limits of emancipation. It is noteworthy here because its contours emerge in a surprisingly distant time and place, and because Phillips otherwise evades any representation of the period—and the promise—of emancipation.

The particularism for which the Portobuffole narrator faults the town’s Jews is still very much at stake in Enlightenment-era debates about the possibilities and limitations of trying to emancipate Jews from their Jewishness, and society from religion, notably in Karl Marx’s essay “On the Jewish Question.” Before moving to an analysis of the essay and its significance for an interpretation of the novel, let me note that Phillips does offer a cautionary tale about the hopes and dangers of assimilation—not in nineteenth-century Germany but in sixteenth-century Venice, in the form of a retelling of Othello. It is to this plot that I now turn. But we will not find
any answers here, or at least no reassurance, about the troubling elements I have identified. For if Phillips renders the Portobuffole narrative in terms of particularism and fidelity, Othello fulfills the opposite function, representing faithlessness, the treachery of conversion, and the mercenary cosmopolitanism that Marx sets in opposition to ethnic particularism, and which he identifies as the true danger to meaningful human community.

**Othello—and Marx**

In the sometimes scathing tone she adopts when describing those assimilated Jews who rushed to accept their status as parvenus, or who longed for assimilation for just this reason, Arendt argues that German Jews of the late-eighteenth century were uninterested in being “emancipated as a whole; all they wanted was to escape from Jewishness, as individuals if possible.” “The only ti[e]” that existed among them, she writes, was the “questionable solidarity which survives among people who all want the same thing: to save themselves as individuals.”

Arendt, writing in the 1950s, perceived the problem of Jewish emancipation as the willingness of Jews to renounce their Jewishness and, more importantly, Jewish community. But in 1843, Marx entered into a debate framed along very different lines—one in which Jewish emancipation was a suspect proposal because it was thought that Jewish ethnic particularism was too stubborn for Jews to enter a civil, public sphere as citizens rather than Jews, and to confine their Jewishness—\textit{as practice and life-world}, to the private realm. Bruno Bauer, to whom Marx is responding in his essay, takes this position. Bauer, as Marx summarizes his argument, believes that the Jews cannot be emancipated because of their excessive religious and ethnic particularism; they cannot privatize their religious beliefs and practices as they ought to, just as the state ought to purge and privatize its Christian affiliations in order to be properly secular.

Such a claim about particularism and secularism, Marx responds in his essay, is a red herring, effectively
maintaining the split between the bourgeois individual (as he exists in civil society) and the citizen (as he exists in the universalizing discourse of the state). For Jews or others to displace their religious commitments and beliefs from the political sphere to the private one, Marx argues, would be a move in keeping with the political emancipation of the state—a partial emancipation that takes the rights of man as its formal vehicle.\(^{58}\) Marx argues that these rights are the rights of “egoistic man, of man separated from other men and from the community.”\(^{59}\) As Wendy Brown observes in her helpful gloss on this essay, for Marx, rights are “bits of discursive power that quintessentially privatize and depoliticize, that mystify and reify social powers.”\(^{60}\) In fact, Marx draws on the figure of Jewishness as an example—I would suggest as an allegory—of this dimension of rights. For Marx, it is not a question of whether Jews might receive the rights of man despite their particularism (as Bauer understands the problem) but rather that they epitomize the very qualities of atomization and fragmentation that he identifies as the failures of a liberal order, thanks to their self-interest and their disregard for forms of community: “we discern in Judaism, therefore, a universal anti-social element of the present time.”\(^{61}\) These are the two poles between which Jewish figures oscillate in “On the Jewish Question”; on the one hand, excessive ethnic/religious particularism or communalism (Bauer) and, on the other, a willingness to transcend all forms of community in the pursuit of profit (Marx). In Marx’s account, Jews are supposedly exceptional to the extent that they embody this tendency in extreme ways, but also exemplary, in that they the problem of self-interest is the problem of society generally. Together, these are also among the most persistent figures of the anti-Semitic imagination.

In *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips splits this stereotype and remaps it. The Portobuffole narrator attests to the perception of the Jewish community’s particularism, and Phillips refashions this and recasts it in the form of Jewishness as fidelity. But in his version of *Othello*,
Phillips indicates that while Othello’s indissoluble alienness to the Venetian community is a result of his racial unassimilability, the devastating consequences this exclusion has for him become possible because of his migrant cosmopolitanism—his willingness to betray and abandon, rather than preserve, his community—and the mutually parasitical relation into which he has entered with the state. The first fragment, which is bookended by the penultimate and final episodes of the Portobuffole narrative, begins in Othello and Desdemona’s wedding chamber, presumably coinciding temporally, though not perspectivally, with the play’s first scene, in which Iago and Rodrigo report Desdemona’s elopement to her father. Othello gazes down at his wife’s sleeping body, admiring her yet wondering how to comprehend his marriage to a Venetian, in the city in which he lives as “a foreigner” (107). From here, Phillips moves backwards in time, providing the backstory of Othello’s arrival in Venice and his courtship of Desdemona.

This narrative is told in the first-person, and Othello relates his arrival in Venice and his wonderment at the city, as well as his bafflement at Venetian ways. The problem is one of cultural intelligibility: “I possessed only a rudimentary grasp of the language that was being spoken all around me, and I lacked fluency in dealing with issues which related to common Venetian practices and matters of custom” (NB 108). A solution presents itself in the form of Desdemona, in two senses: she explicates and translates Venetian customs, which Othello describes as consisting of a “special code” (116) and, more importantly, she offers herself to Othello, extending to him the possibility of entering Venetian society via marriage. It is in Othello’s hopes for himself after his marriage that Phillips’s narrative most closely coincides with Shakespeare’s, for it is at this point that Phillips’s Othello imagines himself as finally having made a place for himself in Venetian society, and most resembles the proud and confident
Othello who appears at the beginning of Shakespeare’s play, and whom we gradually see come undone. As Phillips’s Othello and Desdemona pledge their engagement, Othello marvels at his fortune: “Was I truly the same man who had arrived lonely and unannounced? […] The same man who had initially struggled with the language and who had, at times, wondered if he would ever settle among these strange and forbidding people? And now to be married to the heart of the society” (NB 144). Like a well-executed marriage plot, Othello and Desdemona’s union seems to offer the tantalizing possibility of resolving Othello’s socially uncertain status.

But Othello’s apparent pride is hard won. While the play places its emphasis on the misjudgments that prove to be Othello’s undoing, Phillips concentrates on the psychological position in which Othello finds himself or, better, has placed himself, as one who has abandoned his people to pursue personal glory at “the very centre of the empire” (NB 107). Othello’s position in Venice is not dissimilar to the status of Portobuffole’s Jews, whose usefulness as lenders to individuals and to the Republic renders their presence tolerable, or tolerably necessary; he recognizes that he has been summoned by the Venetian state both in acknowledgment of his military prowess but also because “the republic preferred to employ the services of great foreign commanders in order that they might prevent the development of Venetian-born military dictatorships” (NB 116). Othello is there to fulfill a specific function—waging war on Venice’s behalf—that is carefully sealed off from the other workings of the state. As he notes, “I was to serve only in a time of crisis” (NB 115). But while Portobuffole’s Jews are perceived to be excessively and stubbornly particularist, Othello is eager for what he calls “passage through society” (NB 120). Instead of preserving difference, he attempts to overcome it, shedding or suppressing whatever signs of it can be shed or suppressed. Othello recognizes the limits of acceptable difference and confirms to them, observing that “while exterior display of a different
culture was tolerated, I was learning that such stubbornness was unlikely to aid one’s passage through society” (*NB* 120). But Othello cannot shed or suppress what he terms his “natural state,” or presumptive racial difference, despite adopting Venetian ways in an effort to “subdue a portion of the ill-feeling to which [this] natural state seemed to give rise” (*NB* 120). While the play traffics in a complex series of terms and figures that are either racialized or in which critics see incipient forms of racialization, and that suggest the connection of Othello’s tragic fate to the manifold ways in which he is or may be foreign, Phillips focuses fully on the split subjectivity that Othello’s racialization produces, as he finds himself coming “to think of myself as a man less worthy than the person I knew myself to be,” in the face of Venetian fixation on his visible difference. While Phillips is stressing Othello’s seeming racial fixity its significance is not absolute; the perception of his difference and its valuation imposes itself because he subjects himself to the gaze of those to whom he is irremediably Other. That is to say, the fixity of Othello’s identity in Venice is the product of his willingness to renounce the world that is proper to him and render himself a mercenary, a commodity—the self-interested, individualistic, atomized figure whom Marx imagines as quintessentially Jewish and cosmopolitan.

The narrative twice stages an encounter between Othello and Venice’s Jews. The first time, Othello’s nighttime wanderings lead him to the ghetto’s gate and he enters, exploring it while its inhabitants, who he observes apparently “obeyed the rhythms of day and night with slavish adherence,” sleep. In contrast to the ghetto community’s obedient and harmonized cycles, Othello situates himself as a wanderer and a loner, disturbed at the confining character of the ghetto’s architecture. He is startled by the juxtaposition of “well-appointed houses” and “hovels,” and wonders at a mode of life in which “the rich and the destitute lived together, the denizens bound only by their faith” (130). Othello’s sense of Venice’s Jews as a group bound
together only by their Jewishness is heightened by the fact that on this first visit he explores the built space the community inhabits, but does not encounter a single individual person. There is an implicit opposition here between what Othello perceives as the Jewish prioritization of community, and Othello’s own orientation to his possibilities for upward mobility and the passage into society it allows.

His second visit some days later, however, is motivated by the hope that he may find someone in the ghetto whom he can trust to decipher a letter Desdemona has sent him. Despite having previously encountered no one, he has in mind a particular type of person, “a scholar of some description” (NB 114). In the early morning light, the people he passes on the ghetto’s streets seem to him “ghostly figures… mov[ing] quickly, as through frightened of holding their shape” (NB 141). The spectral quality of these Jews is ironic, since when he finds the sort of man he seeks, he describes him in terms of a “shape” that is so familiar as to be a cliché: “a weather-beaten, warp-faced Jew toiling over a book in the semi-darkness” (NB 141). The substance of their encounter is simultaneously richly suggestive and utterly flat. Othello describes it as largely silent, except for the man’s recitation of the letter’s contents, which Othello summarizes in his narration. The economy of their communication may either indicate a perfunctory transactionalism or (as Othello seems to want to think) an unspoken sympathy. Othello thrice describes “the Jew” as anticipating his requests or understanding without being asked what Othello requires of him. The first time is completely business-like: “I offered up the letter to the Jew and he immediately understood what I expected of him” (NB 141). The authority with which Othello engages the scholar’s service is undercut by the shame he feels at perhaps being taken for illiterate. Though the scholar “did not betray any emotion, but simply began to recite to me the contents of the letter, Othello observes that “as he began, I almost asked him to stop in order
that I might press upon him the knowledge that I could read, and inform him that it was only this
dense and unclear script that had defeated me. But it was too late” (141). This is a moment of
vulnerability, not just because Othello knows no one in Venice he can trust with the letter, but
also because his need for assistance with the language undermines the masterfulness that Othello
otherwise tries to exhibit.

While Othello goes to the ghetto because its population is isolated and because he can
purchase this act of interpretation, the rest of Othello and the Jewish man’s encounter is set on a
different footing. After the man has finished reciting, “I paid him, adding some extra for the
good news he conveyed, and our transaction was complete” (NB 142). But Othello makes two
further requests, which the scholar not only immediately understands but, in fact, anticipates.
Othello “asked if I might dictate to him a letter of reply set down in his finest hand, but he had
already anticipated my request.” Thus, the scholar’s function shifts from being the instrument of
the conveyance of the text of Desdemona’s letter, to being Othello’s amanuensis (NB 142). Like
Friar Laurence, the priest in Romeo and Juliet, he becomes a facilitator, even a collaborator, of
Othello and Desdemona’s clandestine romance, functioning as a go-between. He thus seems to
slip into the role that scholars note Jews often played in the Mediterranean at the time, operating
as interpreters and the go-betweens for transactions between different communities—particularly
Christians and Ottoman traders [CITE]. But he also represents and stands in for Othello; the
fineness of his writing is meant to indicate something of Othello’s nature to Desdemona. This
relation inflects Othello’s account: once the letter was complete “I asked my Jew if he would be
good enough to convey it to the lady in question, but again he seemed to have already
understood” (NB 142). The phrase “my Jew” is telling, indicating a Othello’s feeling of
attachment, even as the man remains an unnamed cipher who is never described as anything
other than a Jew, whether “the Jew” or “my Jew.” Othello discerns, or projects, something of this feeling of kinship on the scholar’s part as well, noting that “The good scholar refused to take extra money for this task [of delivering the letter], and I judged by the way he looked upon me that he felt a certain sympathy for my predicament. Indeed, as I left, I am sure that I noticed a smile play around his thin lips” (NB 142). But as readers of the play know, Othello’s judgment (like Stevens) is not sound and, since the scholar says nothing for himself and we have only Othello’s assessment to go on, his impression of the scholar’s sympathy is just that—an impression. The scholar’s generosity and smile may signal affinity but also pity.

I note the possibility of Othello’s misapprehension, or selective interpretation of the encounter, because there seem to me two possible readings of this episode. As a scene of reading, in which the two men transmit a text back and forth between them and together generate a new text, it may function as a figure for the possibility that these two minoritized subjects may be able to produce a shared story of some kind, or perform for one another forms of interpretive work. It also suggests a relation of solidarity, in which Othello, made vulnerable in this instance by his foreignness, turns to someone who is similarly marginal to the Venetian Christian society he hopes to enter. Notably, the figure for Venetian Christian society in this instance is a woman—Desdemona—and we might understand the apparent fellow-feeling between the two men as generated as much by their conspiratorial efforts in the sexual pursuit of this object, as by their religious or racial difference from it. And while I have suggested that Phillips splits the anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews as unassimilably particularist but also incorrigibly self-interested—mapping and valorizing particularism as a form of fidelity onto the Jews, while disdaining migrant cosmopolitanism as the cause of Othello’s downfall—in this scene of cohabitation on the page both men occupy roles that are utterly cliché (the grizzled scholarly
Jew, and a black man who deals in action and war but not in words). Perhaps this suggests Phillips’s implicit awareness of the inherent limits of stereotype, even when its positive or negative valence is shifted.

Another reading is possible as well, and it turns on Othello’s perception of the unfreedom of the ghetto’s inhabitants on his first visit. Othello implicitly contrasts the restrictiveness of a communal identity that limits them to a zone Othello calls an “underworld,” to his own sense of himself as a sovereign subject, engaged in a process of self-fashioning and self-fulfillment that widens his purview, allowing him to move “from the edge of the world to the centre” (NB 107). Succinctly put, Othello’s sense of freedom derives from his understanding of himself as what Elizabeth Povinelli calls an “autological subject,” conditioned by discourses of “individual freedom” (3–4), in contrast to what he perceives as the “genealogical society of the Jews, governed by kinship and “various kinds of inheritances,” one of which is race and its transmission. But Othello’s freedom, including the freedom to leave his people and, in Phillips’s version, a wife and son he has left behind, is illusory, for Othello is fixated on his sense of his own racial fixedness as it is reflected back to him in Venetian eyes.; among the characters that populate the novel, no other reflects as obsessively on the grounds of his or her difference as he does. And while Phillips breaks off the narrative at the point when Othello and Desdemona arrive in Cyprus, when Othello still dares to dream of a Venetian social order that might include him,” the reader knows, by dint of familiarity with the play, that Othello’s sense of self-sovereignty will be undermined and destroyed. As he leaves the ghetto, buoyed by what he takes to be the man’s sympathy and fellow feeling, the novel plays on the deludedness we might ascribe to him as readers of Othello, the play. As such, and from his position within the ghetto—that zone of ethnic and religious particularism—which Othello finds so confining, it may be that
the Jewish man smiles in sympathy but also in pity, or perhaps contempt, for Othello’s fantasy of social and sexual penetration.

I am not certain that even those dimensions of this scene that lend themselves to a reading of encounter, cohabitation, and solidarity evade the totalizing qualities of what I am arguing is Phillips’s mobilization of stereotypes, and the asymmetrical fashion in which the Portobuffole Jews and Othello occupy binary positions of fidelity/betrayal and transmission/conversion. Homi Bhabha writes:

> An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise, the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated.65

Bhabha’s description of stereotype as the discursive strategy of fixity suggests that while Phillips may turn to stereotypes to reconfigure a familiar picture, he is bound by their restrictive logic.

Remarkably, despite Phillips’s preoccupation with the dialectic of fixity and betrayal in the Othello narrative, and despite what I am arguing is his yoking-together of betrayal and conversion, Phillips never connects the question of Othello’s racial fixedness to his religious conversion; in fact, he does not touch at all on the question of Othello’s religious identity, with the exception of signaling that Othello is a convert, as he confirms to the Christian priest who performs the marriage ceremony. Specifically: “the priest asked if I was indeed a Christian, although he knew this to be the case, for an unbeliever could never be entrusted with the command of the Venetian of the Venetian army. I spoke softly and informed him that my journey to the bosom of Christ had taken place many years before my arrival in Venice” (NB
Othello does not indicate from what faith, if any, he has converted. But this is a profound and material element of the Othello story, for Othello is the Moor of Venice. Phillips is quite clear about who or what he thinks Othello is; the arc of Othello’s tragedy, for him, is that Othello forgets. Phillips writes in *The European Tribe*: “I may be in danger of stating the obvious, but I shall state it anyhow. Othello was a black man” (*ET* 46). But, like many statements of the obvious, this claim is not as self-evident, or at least not as complete, as Phillips’s categorical statement would have it. The term “Moor,” no longer in use as a designation, indicates more clearly even than notions and confusions over Jewishness as race and/or religion the difficulty of mapping early modern identities onto later categories of racial difference. For even when the term was in circulation, its referents were always multiple, overlapping, contextual, and changeable. Recent scholarship on race and difference in Renaissance theater have read this term with great critical acumen, addressing it both as a signifier for Islam but also, as Daniel Vitkus puts it, as part of a signifying chain that also could refer to and encompass “‘Turk,’ ‘Ottomite,’ ‘Saracen,’ ‘Mahometan,’ ‘Egyptian,’ ‘Judean,’ ‘Indian’—all positioned in opposition to Christian faith and virtue.”

Insofar as Islam was a privileged referent of Moorishness, however, we need to pose the question of Islam’s significance for Othello. Compare Phillips’s insistence on Othello’s race with Daniel Boyarin’s equally forceful attempt to assert that, when we consider Othello’s Moorishness, “Of course, northern Africa and Islam is where we are bound to look, for Muslim is what a Moor is and North Africa where a Moor comes from.” Similarly, Julia Reinhard Lupton argues that “whereas for the modern reader or viewer a black Othello is more subversive, ‘other,’ or dangerous, in the Renaissance scene a paler Othello more closely resembling the Turks whom he fights might actually challenge more deeply the integrity of the Christian
paradigms set up in the play as the measure of humanity.”  

Neither of these critics are trying to sideline race. Rather they are noting the limits of a dominant conception of race—epidermal difference. As Boyarin puts it, “modern criticism and performance practices of Othello are driven by a profound and tenacious feeling that the play is about ‘race’ as we experience it,” but the markers and signifiers of racial/race identity in the play “make nonsense of (or, rather, demonstrate the recent construction of) our own social and critical litanies.” The term’s ambiguity about race and religion does not have to be settled, since it was and is flexible enough to mean a host of different things, and capacious enough to mean many of them at the same time. Indeed, in the context of the reading of Phillips I have been offering, this ambiguity is precisely the point. Or, as Jonathan Burton puts it, when we consider Othello’s Moorishness we are considering “the religious color of his skin.”

There are four reasons why all of this meaningful. First, I have been arguing that Phillips is exploring what I have called racialized religion, looking to the medieval and the early modern in order to understand its relationship to other modalities of racism, including the anti-Semitism of race science and the apparent fixity of the visual perception of color as a means of apprehending race. But while Phillips examines how Jewishness as a religion is racialized, and pushes back against such a conception, he shows no inclination to similarly consider Othello’s religious color. Instead, he falls back into a fixation with epidermal difference, which he suggests Othello tries and fails to escape in his betrayal and abandonment of a community in which he might belong. To widen this story and include the religious associations of race would allow him to pose a richer question—one that would ask what becomes of the “religious color” of one’s skin after conversion.
Two, I have suggested that Phillips tells a story of Jewishness that re-values the particularism stereotypically associated with Jewishness, and heightens the stakes of such an association by understanding it in terms of fidelity, and against betrayal, with conversion as one figure for betrayal. If Othello is a convert, as Phillips acknowledge, and a traitor to himself, as Phillips insists, then his position is, in a specific sense, that of an infidel. According to the OED, the primary meaning of infidel is “One who does not believe in (what the speaker holds to be) the true religion; an unbeliever.” But some fifty years before it assumes this general sense, its first appearances are as specific references to, “From a Christian point of view: An adherent of a religion opposed to Christianity; esp. a Muhammadan, a Saracen… ; also (more rarely), applied to a Jew, or a pagan.” The most recent meanings of the term, however, widen to include “characteristics of infidels or infidelity”—that is, one who is unfaithful, though not necessarily in a religious context. Phillips focuses on Othello as an infidel in this last sense—as one who betrays. But he is also a convert to Christianity, presumably from the religion most specifically associated with the infidel, Islam. Do these two versions of being an infidel—one of which Phillips attends to, one of which he doesn’t—cancel each other out, in some sense? That is to say, Othello is an infidel because, in his self-interest, opportunism, and willingness to break the bonds of community, he betrays himself, or his “identity.” But in the other sense, Othello is a reformed infidel, a convert—now at the head of the Venetian army as they prepare to battle those who Othello and other repeatedly terms the “infidel Turks” (NB 127, 132, 137). In the binary Phillips establishes between fidelity and betrayal-as-conversion, Othello is presumably doubly an infidel: faithless to himself and faithless to his religion. Indeed, according to the logic of stained blood that Phillips is seemingly so keen to explore, this doubling is in fact a trebling, for conversion is never complete. Othello is thus also infidel because he remains a Muslim. More
vertiginous still, the repeated figure in Shakespeare’s play of “turning Turk,” and its implication that, despite his conversion and his attempt to remake himself, Othello reverts to what he has always been, suggests yet another instance of faithlessness. All of this makes Othello’s story rich and complicated; at least as rich and complicated as the compelling account of Jewishness as fidelity to practices that. But none of it makes its way into Phillips’s narrative; Othello’s story is a story about one set of terms, those of race in the fixed, epidermal sense that Phillips seems elsewhere in the novel to so want to challenge.

Third, considering Othello in light of Islam would allow Phillips’s juxtaposition of Othello and the Jewish narratives to be about more than connections between Jewishness and blackness as raced identities. It would open up another crucial question: that of the connections between Muslims and Jews. Gil Anidjar, who takes up what he describes as the under-explored relationship between Merchant and Othello, suggests that to consider them together is to create an opportunity to ask “about the community and ‘fellowship’… of those two Venetian bodies” and in so doing, to reconsider “the arbitrariness of the decision that separates between Moor and Jew, and historically between Muslim and Jew, between Arab and Jew.” As I sketch what I take to be the failed promise of the novel in this respect, I bear in mind Emily Bartels’s observation that, in effect, each generation rethinks and re-produces Othello’s Moorishness in a way that fits the interpretive and political needs of the time: “In speaking of the Moor we have always had to ferret the subject out from a seemingly endless set of diverse, divergent, and sometimes overdetermined images, to decide who our Moors will be.” Between 1997 and 2012, the question of Islam and its representation in Europe has admittedly taken on new significance in light of the frightening growth of Islamophobia. But I affirm that this is a question to pose to
about this novel, for Islam is an unnamed but haunting presence elsewhere in the book as well, specifically in those narrative strands set in Israel.

**Racial Conversion**

The novel’s chronologically most contemporary narrative strand, which, unlike the others, appears whole rather than in dispersed fragments and which, at twelve pages is a fraction of the length of the others, belongs to two characters: Stephen Stern, who appears elsewhere in the novel, and an Ethiopian Jew named Malka. It is presumably set at some point in the 1990s, since Malka, a young woman, describes coming to Israel as a child as part of Israel’s airlift of the Ethiopian Jews, or Beta Israel. In one sense, Malka, as an Ethiopian Jew, appears to resolve the oppositions Phillips posits between Othello’s blackness and Jewish particularism. The very persistence of the Beta Israel as an isolated community that has held to Jewish practices seems as powerful an example of fidelity as any other. And Malka refers to these practices as blood practices: “During Passover, we kill a lamb and sprinkle its fresh red blood around the synagogue. But not here. You do not allow this” (208). Fidelity to what should be a shared blood community is not so easily achieved, and it is sundered not only by differences within the practices of the dispersed faithful, but also by differences of skin that continues to signify, despite shared membership in a community of Jewishness—indeed, despite shared citizenship in the state of Israel. The question is to what extent epidermal difference continues to matter in this context. Can the persistence and fixity of visible racial difference be overcome by the commitment to shared practices? Phillips’s answer is equivocal, for it seems to turn on the possibility of a *racial conversion*—which Malka imagines as a question: “In this new land, would our babies be worn white?” (*NB* 201). This image fuses the figures of blood and
epidermal difference, but in a way that seems to offer little hope of freedom from either.
Notes


4 Consider, in contrast, the debate about Toni Morrison’s dedication of Beloved to the “Sixty Million and more,” which some critics take to be a reference to, and displacement of, the “six million” so commonly invoked in the context of the Holocaust. Such a reading follows the logic of screen memory I discuss in my Introduction, except that instead of screening slavery with the Holocaust, Morrison purportedly pushes back against such a screening. Peter Novick, who as I have noted makes the case for the American memorialization of the Holocaust as such a screen, notes Morrison’s dedication as one example of such pushback from African Americans. Naomi Mandel offers a much more nuanced reading of this dedication, arguing against the language of “appropriation” to describe Morrison’s use of the number “sixty million and more,” suggesting instead that “Morrison is evoking a sense of the limits of language in order to establish that slavery shares, with the Holocaust, a certain quality of horror that exceeds representation.” Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life [1999] (New York: Mariner Books, 2000), 194; Naomi Mandel, “I Made the Ink”: Identity, Complicity, 60 Million and More,” in Modern Fiction Studies 48:3 (Fall 2002), 584.


6 ibid., 116.

7 Gilroy, Against Race, 13.

8 ibid., 46, 47.

9 In the essay about his journey to Belfast, Phillips recounts a scene that evokes the familiar Fanonian scene—“Look, a negro!”—describing a young boy at the airport who hides behind his father while looking fearfully at Phillips: “Was it some article of my clothing that frightened him, or my face?” (ET 72). I discuss a similar scene from Our Sister Killjoy in Chapter One.


11 ibid., 63.

12 ibid., 15.

13 It is especially interesting that Baldwin, in the 1967 New York Times Magazine essay from which Phillips quotes, not only draws a link between Europe and the Jews but between Jews and Christianity. In a complex series of moves, he cautions (black) readers that “it is not the Jew who controls the American
drama. It is the Christian” and calls anti-Semitism “the most devastating of the Christian vices.” But in trying to explain the relative difference of black and Jews in America and the anti-Semitism it engenders, he also writes “that the Negro is really condemning the Jew for having become an American white man—for having become, in effect, a Christian.” Baldwin, in contrast to Phillips’s reference to a Judeo-Christian tradition, makes a sharp distinction between Christian and Jew, whereby historically, anti-Semitism designates a Christian practice and, figuratively, “Christian” also designates a position of power. James Baldwin, “Negroes are Anti-Semitic because they’re Anti-White” [1967], in James Baldwin: Collected Essays, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 741, 744.


15 Biale, Blood and Belief, 68.

16 ibid., 43.

17 ibid., 82.

18 Miri Rubin suggests that the symbolic elevation of the Eucharist in the 11th century and after was an important aspect of the papacy’s attempt to regulate religious practice and thereby cement church authority: “The Church through its administrators and intellectuals was forging a language of religion which enhanced embryonic claims to clerical privilege and which systematised practices and cults that had developed in the world of the early Middle Ages. […] In a complex world brought together through its language of religion, the eucharist was becoming a focus for claims to universality and efficacy which had to be made stronger, more uniform and applicable everywhere and at every time.” David Biale indicates an even closer connection between the centrality of the Eucharist and the blood libel when he observes that “the medieval blood libel arose at the time when Christians elevated their Eucharistic sacrament to a full-blown dogma in 1215, and when the holiday of Corpus Christi found a mass, popular, following.” Miri Rubin, Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 13; Biale, Blood and Belief, 5.

20 By historical charge, I mean their adoption in social and critical theory as terms with which to diagnose modern individual or social disorder and disruption: “hysteria” as a psychoanalytic term, and “irrationality” as designating what is defective or excessive to a modern, qua rational, order.

21 David Nirenberg observes of postwar scholarship on anti-Jewish violence in France and the Crown of Aragon during the Black Death of 1348 that “the aggression is usually explained sparsely, by allusion to psychosocial phenomena: ‘irrational,’ ‘fantasy,’ ‘unconscious,’ ‘projection. These are important concepts, but they could acquire explanatory sense only in the context of a medieval psychology that is never provided.” Nirenberg, to whose work I will refer several times, takes as his one of his tasks the refutation of such a perspective, which argues (and sometimes assumes) that modern attitudes towards minorities derive from “collective beliefs, beliefs formed in the Middle Ages and transmitted to the present day.” Incidentally, Phillips’s narrator dates the violence in Colonia to 1349, locating it in the same period of violence the representation of which Nirenberg here criticizes. David Nirenberg, Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 232, 4. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.
He goes on: “So although ritual murder came to play a relatively minor role in the Nazi propaganda arsenal, it may be the key to understanding the violence of the Holocaust. To posit the blood libel as a “key” to the Holocaust seems a remarkable flattening-out and simplification. Biale, Blood and Belief, 157.

I am grateful to Kate Stanley for pushing me to think harder on this point.

Bauman puts it thus: “The Holocaust was a unique encounter between the old tensions which modernity ignored, slighted or failed to resolve—and the powerful instruments of rational and effective action that modern development itself brought into being.” Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989), 1, xiv.


See especially ibid., 23-25 for the crux of Bernstein’s argument. On the similarity of such a narrative logic to Christian typological interpretation, and the irony of such a Christian theological cornerstone coming to saturate so heavily narratives of the Holocaust, see 29.

Ibid., 23. In Foregone Conclusions, Bernstein focuses largely on Jewish authors’ literary representations of the Holocaust, and observes that the ascription of error or failure of judgment to those people (real and fictional) who failed to see (because they could not have known) what was coming is particularly entangled with Zionist interpretations of the unviable quality of diasporic life, and with efforts to legitimize Israel as an alternative to such a mistaken choice (there are of course some resonances here with what I have described as Our Sister Killjoy’s mobilization of the Holocaust as an object in the dangers of diaspora).

Though I should certainly note here that Timothy Bewes reads cliché in Phillips as an active narrative principle that demands theorization, rather than as an awkward failure that critics of the text need either to explain, excuse, or ignore in order to assert the literary and interpretive value of Phillips’s work. The function of cliché in Phillips’s work, Bewes argues, is to register the shame of writing and produce the forms of shame that Bewes argues are constitutive of the post-colonial. While I am clearly interested in shame in this project, and very much interested in Bewes’s work on it, I find the broad contours of his theorization of postcolonial shame much more useful and convincing than his readings of Phillips. While I think he is right to note that critics often overlook the awkwardness, cliché, flatness etc. that is such a characteristic of Phillips’s writing in order to “salvage” its thematic content for interpretation, and right too that this does the texts and the interpretations of them a disservice, he corrects too much in the other direction, polarizing the interpretive possibilities for Phillips’s work. Timothy Bewes, The Event of Postcolonial Shame (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2011), see especially Chapter Two.

Nirenberg identifies this distinction between spontaneous and official violence in his challenge to accounts of the “irrational” nature of medieval anti-minority violence. He draws a distinction between “accusational or judicial violence” on the one hand, and “the violence of crowds or individuals,” on the other. Accusational violence is “conditional (it depends upon the charge’s being believed and acted upon by officialdom), and the actual violence is carried out (by judge, torturer, or executioner) in the name of the collective.” By demonstrating how prominent a role such judicial or mediated violence played in the persecution of minorities, he argues for the strategic and highly contextual character of such violence, over and against the familiar figure of the “mob” and its seemingly unmotivated or scapegoating violence (6, 128-129).
30 Though I should add that Arendt makes a point of distinguishing between the kinds of credit that made feasible the development of the emerging nation-state, and the more limited requirements of the “feudal princes and kings [who] also had needed money, and even credit, but for specific purposes and temporary operations only.” That said, it is worth noting in passing that the Venetian Republic early on pursued the kind of large-scale, capital-intensive projects that Arendt describes as a hallmark of the 17th and 18th century nascent nation-state. Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism [1951] (New York: Harcourt, 1979), 14-18.

31 R. Po-Chia Hsia’s historical study of the 1475 blood libel in Trent (part of the Holy Roman Empire), which Phillips singles out in the novel’s acknowledgements as one of two scholarly works to which he is especially indebted, documents at length the politicking that goes on between the prince-bishop of Trent who pursues the ritual murder accusations; Jewish communities (especially in the Veneto), who make the case to “the emperor, the archduke, and the pope” that the prince-bishop had pursued “the trial only to lay his hands on Jewish money [and that] the Trent Jews had been severely, unlawfully tortured and summarily executed; and the papacy, who eventually dispatches an apostolic commissioner to examine the conduct of the trial. In this constellation, the pope himself responds to Jewish complaints against a local ruler. Especially fascinating is the fact that this envoy flees Trent, where his life is threatened, for Rovereto in the Venetian Republic. In his own words: “in Rovereto, he was ‘under the protection of the most illustrious lordship of the doge of Venice, where justice was and would always be dispensed, where innocent people are not killed, where Christians do not plunder Jews, as it was in Trent.” Ironically, this occurs five years before the Portobuffole blood libel, again emphasizing how contingent the circumstances of these cases could be. R. Po-Chia Hsia, Trent 1475: Stories of a Ritual Murder Trial (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 69, 75.


33 Boyarin, The Uconverted Self, 14.

34 Boyarin discusses the complex spatialization of Muslim difference, which was not actually neatly outside the geographical bounds of Christendom, though imaginative and discursive labor was undertaken in order “to invent a Christian Europe bounded by a neatly Islamic exterior.” Boyarin suggests instead that the Christian othering of Islam was “a cultural difference that was then metaphorically spatialized.” Ibid., vii, 53, 43.

35 On passing, see Silverblatt 51, 131, 154, 156.

36 The early modern period, he writes, “was a time in which England was increasingly thinking of itself as a nation, there was still much confusion over the constitutive features of national identity: did it have to do with having a language, or laws, or simply territory? The Jews, who had once been a nation, and might one day be so again, fit uneasily into emerging categories of nationhood” (27). The point on which he concludes some two-hundred pages later is similarly framed in national terms: he observes that beginning with the English Reformation, “the opposition of Christian and Jew was slowly overtaken by that of Englishman and Jews.” So too, he focuses on questions of national assimilation and naturalization, especially the Jewish Nationalization Act of 1753. This is not to suggest that he doesn’t consider perceptions and discourses of Jews as a race, only that he does not take it to be a privileged analytical term in the English context on which he focuses. James Shapiro, Shakespeare and the Jews (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 27, 225; on race, nation and naturalization see 175, 199-224.

37 Ibid., 17, 34.
Brian Pullan notes that by 1600, some hundred-plus years later, the practice in Venice was to distinguish between three Jewish “nations.” Of these, he writes, the oldest was “the so-called Germanic Jews, which in practice contained Jews of Italian birth and family, as well as large clans of German descent... With time many of the Germanic Jews came to regard themselves as more Italianate than Germanic, and more Venetian than anything else.” Yes the designation of these Jews as German (and not Italian) persisted, which renders the narrator’s complaint about the failure of Portobuffole’s German Jews to assimilate sadly ironic. Brian Pullan, *The Jews of Europe and the Inquisition of Venice, 1550-1670* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983), 149.

39 I am indebted to El-Haj’s work for this term.

40 The phrase “gentile tales” is Miri Rubin’s, and in her work it designates Christian accounts and iconographic representations of Jewish host desecration, which became especially prevalent in the late thirteenth century and after, again in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council’s insistence that the Eucharist was the actual blood and body of Christ. Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999).

41 While I am using “repertoire” here in its general sense and not specifically to refer to Diana Taylor’s theorization of the archive and the repertoire as distinct modes of memory and performance, her beautiful analysis of “repertoire” in fact nicely captures some of the elements of what I am arguing is Phillips’s characterization of Jewishness as transmitted and repeated practice. One of Taylor’s key insights, and the central difference between archive and repertoire, is the *embodied* nature of repertoire performance and transmission. Insisting on the embodiment of such repeated practices, as I think Phillips does, is one way to understand how Phillips shifts his attention from epidermal difference to other ways of thinking about Jewishness that nonetheless still encompass the body and the embodiment of difference. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003).

42 Alondra Nelson, whose work is closely related to El-Haj’s has similarly argued that the results of ancestry testing demand imaginative labor and narrative meaning making in order for them to signify or feel “true” to those who undergo testing. See Alondra Nelson, “The Factness of Diaspora: The Social Sources of Genetic Genealogy,” in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, eds. Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 2011), 23-39.

43 She looks particularly at the Israeli state’s use of demographics and genetics in its efforts to forge “the presumption of a common Jewish peoplehood whose truth was hard to ‘see,’ especially in the face of the arrival of oriental Jews...” (17).


46 ibid., 3. 1. 32, 35.


Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions*, qtd. 10.

Rothberg footnote here on echo and anachronism.

Jonathan Boyarin who, like Rubin and Biale, notes the significance of the Eucharist after 1215 in establishing what he calls an “image of Europe as monolithically Christian,” observes that it heightened the distinction between Jews and Christians, since “every time Catholics took communion and their Jewish neighbors did not, the Jews were once again actively placing themselves outside the corpus Christi.” Boyarin, *The Unconverted Self*, 63, 64.


See, for instance, Patchen Markell’s reading of the Prussian Emancipation Edict of 1812, which granted Jews citizenship rights in a fashion that “served as a tool through which the state could mold its Jewish population into a shape consistent with the requirements of modern government—by which, that is, it could perform the work of identifying Jews as citizens, and identifying itself as sovereign.” Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 133.


ibid., 32.

ibid., 42.


ibid., 42.


For an instance of such critical efforts to trace the emergent racial logics at work in figures such as “black,” “fair” etc. as they circulate on the Elizabethan stage, see Kim Hall, who argues of terms like “darkness” and “lightness” that they “became in the early modern period the conduit through which the English began to formulate the notions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ so well known in Anglo-American racial discourse.” Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995), 2.

I am grateful to Sharon Cameron for encouraging me to consider Othello’s encounter with this man in these terms.


Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630* [2003] (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 90. The indeterminacy of the term during its time is such that even some contemporary critics, emboldened, use it as an umbrella term. For instance, Jack d’Amico discusses Aaron, Othello, and the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* as Moors, but also Cleopatra (who he notes was not a Moor per se but a dark-skinned Egyptian) and even Caliban (as a figure of monstrousness). Such an imitation of the term’s discursive openness, rather than an analysis of it, seems less useful, but that one can proceed in this way signals how open the term remains. Jack d’Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press, 1991).


As several critics note, the colorations associated with Moorishness, black or “tawny,” could modify the term in ways that signaled character: the noble tawny Moor as opposed to the villainous “blackamoor.” Emily C. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: from Alcazar to Othello* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 9; d’Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama*, 62.


Bartels offers an account of the development of scholarship on *Othello* and race from its inceptions in the mid-1960s, when, during the era of civil rights, scholars began to contest the assumed whiteness of the early modern world and reclaimed the Moor as African, and black. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*, 3-4, 10-12.

Phillips’s depiction of continued racism in Israel against black Jews leads me to a different conclusion about the novel than Ashley Dawson, with whom I share an interest in forms of racism that are distinct from either modern anti-Semitism or epidermal difference. Dawson’s reading of the novel (which does not include any discussion of the Israeli plot) leads her to conclude that the novel demands of postcolonial critics that we attend more closely to juridical guarantees that would combat statelessness with citizenship. But Malka’s narrative suggests Phillips’s disenchantment with citizenship as a remedy for exclusionary forms of belonging. Ashley Dawson, “‘To Remember Too Much is Indeed a Form of Madness’: Caryl Phillips’s *The Nature of Blood* and the Modalities of European Racism,” in *Postcolonial Studies* 7:1 (2004), 83-101.
Coda
On Being “Homebound”

The texts I have read in the previous chapters share a preoccupation with Holocaust memory as a critical resource in the context of postwar migration to Europe. My focus on this context as one framework for thinking about the proximity of Holocaust memory and postcolonial or migratory histories situates this project as part of the larger effort underway to read these histories in connective (Hirsch), or multidirectional (Rothberg) ways. As such, the rubric of postwar migration to Europe characterizes this project’s contribution but also raises several related questions: are the promising forms of thought, directions of critique, and imaginings of solidarity that I am arguing inhere in these works by virtue of their attentiveness to Holocaust memory only available through such experiences of mobility, which include the upward mobility that each of these works registers in some fashion? Is it precisely the implication of these works in the transnational circulation of bodies, commodities—and books—that makes them exemplary of the implicit limits of the global as it is often invoked in the humanities to describe those forms of movement, proximity, and exchange that issue from economic globalization, cosmopolitan politics, and the development of transnational cultures or discourses?

These are versions of longstanding questions in postcolonial literary and cultural studies. Some of the work that has been especially generative for postcolonial theory, such as Homi Bhabha’s theorization of hybridity, or Said’s trope of the “voyage in,” privilege metropolitan and migratory experience.¹ Those life-worlds in the postcolony that are not caught up in these migratory currents—including forms of subalternity that
are illegible to representation and unassimilable to emancipatory arcs of resistance and reclamation, much less mobility and hybridity—are also postcolonial but in a less readily consumable form. The shift underway from “postcolonial literature” to “global Anglophone literature,” or “world literature” may consecrate the emphasis on the former, doubly remaining what is not caught and captured by those figures. As Aamir Mufti puts it, “transnational literary relations” often focus on “the psychology of assimilation into metropolitan languages and cultures… models of cultural change as creolization and métissage consequently become the privileged mode of understanding literatures originating outside the metropolis.” While such a critique cautions against imagining that a limited body of textual artifacts and literary circuits constitutes “diversity,” there is pressure on postcolonial theory from another direction as well. This perspective charges postcolonial studies with itself constituting an instance of identitarianism complicit in or co-opted by the global logics of capitalism and consumption. This is not a new critique but, as Leela Gandhi maps it, one that has gained renewed salience in the recent (re)turn to universalism in the work of thinkers like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Alain Badiou. According to them, in Gandhi’s words, “postcolonialism’s contaminating turn toward theories of difference and toward a host of mutually incompatible particularisms,” renders it unfit, indeed imimical, to universalism—despite “the vexed, colonial history of the concept of universalism” and its “endemic particularism.” On the one hand, then, we have a critique (from within the field) of the dominance of migratory, metropolitan literary and theoretical production as constituting and indexing a partial globality; and, on the other, a critique (from without) of the study of difference and identity, and their representation, as a necessarily parochial exercise.
The works I have discussed in my chapters not only turn on questions of migration but also repeatedly raise issues of particularism and identity: in the form of Aidoo’s nativist polemic; Özdamar’s potential appropriations of identity; Phillips’s conception of Jewish particularism as fidelity; and, indeed, in the very tension between the specificity of Holocaust memory and its global or cosmopolitan uses and dimensions. I turn now to a novel—A Question of Power (1974), by the Southern African writer Bessie Head (1937-1986)—that provides an example of the significance Holocaust memory might bear in a work that is unconcerned with the trope of migration to the European metropole but profoundly invested in imagining forms of universalism. The novel’s protagonist, Elizabeth, whose story echoes Head’s own in several important respects, is an exile from South Africa living as a stateless person in a village in Botswana. Despite this crossing of borders, Elizabeth is homebound in many respects; not in the sense of one who identifies with the place where she lives—for as a “Colored” South African she is as much an outsider in her Botswanan village as she is an outcast in South Africa, as the illegitimate child of a white woman and a black stable hand—but as one who is confined and imprisoned, figuratively and literally, by psychic terrors, or “madness.” Yet it is through the madness that circumscribes her world, which she describes as her “degraded circumstances,” that Elizabeth is able to discern patterns and form impressions that transcend the particular and that leave her with an expansive, at times oceanic, sense of what is common to humankind: “How did it all happen here, in so unsuspecting a climate, these silent, tortured, universal questions of power and love; of loss and sacrifice?”
To venture to describe Elizabeth’s world risks simplifying its fearsome complexity, since it consists of relationships with neighbors and community members but also of intimate and violent relations with a series of mutable figures who are largely perceptible only to her but whose “soul[s]’s walked right into her” (104). Yet there is an arc to the narrative, and it concerns Elizabeth’s shifting sense of who has a claim on, or can be the subject of, the universal. The question is rendered fraught and its answer is hard won, for Elizabeth’s visions are largely ones of “terror”—a terror that comes of witnessing the “terror tactics people used against each other,” particularly those whom she terms “the power people” (21, 19). It is power and the will to power that Elizabeth perceives as licensing violence: “the title God, in its absolute all-powerful form, is a disaster to its holder… It turns a man into a wild debaucher, a maddened and wilful [sic] persecutor of his fellow men” (37). The antithesis of such dominance, Elizabeth comes to recognize, are forms of love and fellow feeling that are not “shut-in and exclusive,” along with a willingness to be “ordinary”: “no one was the be-all and end-all of creation… no one had the power of assertion and dominance to the exclusion of other life” (108, 31, 35).

The novel’s complicated figurations of violence and love include religious and mythological figures from Buddha to Isis and Osiris, but also references to the recent past and present. Within the economy of the novel, it is “racial hatred” that is one vehicle by which power is taken and expressed, and that causes suffering, including, Head suggests, Elizabeth’s own pathologies, rooted in her experience of South African racialism (57). It is the fixing and degrading quality of racial designations, or the horror of being accused of being oneself a racist, that Elizabeth repeatedly identifies as shattering to her psyche:
‘Dog, filth, the Africans will eat you to death…’ It broke her instantly […] Nothing turned off the record. She had not planned it. She had not been thinking along those lines at all, and the option of any sane, reasonable reply had been taken away from her” (47). Yet even as she struggles with the unrelenting “record” playing in her head, she remembers what a German woman has told her of Nazi Germany, connecting South African racism to the brutality directed at Jews. It is this, together with her own experience, that leads Elizabeth to recognize something generalizable, asking herself: “Was that why that kind of propaganda broke whole races of people? Someone just asserted something and directed it at a victim, regardless of whether it made sense or not: ‘You are inferior. You are filth.’ Their power of assertion was so tremendous the whole flow and interchange of life stopped before it” (47). Correspondingly, Head several times invokes “Hitler” as the representative name of the lust “to rule the world” (14). But she characterizes this Hitlerian ambition for domination in more specific terms: as something born of and legitimized by identity formations that are exclusionary and essentialized. To her American friend Tom, who praises Black Power for its economic activism and jumps to his feet, thrusting his fist in the air in the Black Power salute, Elizabeth says, “I don’t like it… It only needs a Hitler to cause an explosion,” adding “I don’t like exclusive brotherhoods for black people only” (132). Her focus, she explains, is “on mankind in general, and black people fit in there. […] Any heaven, like a Black-Power heaven, that existed for a few individuals alone was pointless and useless. It was an urge to throttle everyone else to death” (133). Elizabeth’s perception of any form of racial essentialism, including one generated as a response to white racism, is to imagine in it the potential for that same assertion of dominance and power that she names with the word “Hitler.” What
is most apposite here is not that Elizabeth generalizes this name in ways that might seem
to render it gestural rather than specific, or that she makes an exaggerated equivalence
between two discourses of racial essentialism. It is that by understanding relations of
violence in terms of power, she identifies patterns and dynamics in the historically
specific that she perceives as governing and deforming relations between human beings
at all levels, and that she is able to do so through the experience of madness that confines
her mind and body, and narrows her world, but compels her to imagine human relations
on a cosmic scale.⁹

Such an argument might seem to romanticize Elizabeth’s suffering but it is in the
experience of suffering that Head locates the possibility of a shared or universal capacity
for mutual understanding. This is not to be confused with a Christian motif of redemption
through suffering. Elizabeth’s experience does not purify or sacralize her in any way:
“But in spite of those three or four years of sustained nightmare, she really knew
absolutely nothing, except that she had gained an insight into what the German
concentration camps must have been like. The inmates had cried: ‘Oh Lord, where are
you? No Lord had appeared to help them. No Lord ever would. She had no illusions left
about God or mercy or pity. A victim simply stared in the face of evil, and died…” (200).
This suggestion of a comparison between Elizabeth’s suffering and that of concentration
camp inmates is an assertion of the absoluteness of an experience of suffering, which
cannot be reduced or transcended. Its only generative possibility, Head suggests, is that
“suffering gave people and nations a powerful voice for the future and a common
meeting-ground”—a meeting ground that Head repeatedly argues is here on earth, not in
“some impossibly unseen, mystical heaven” (31, 54). And the forms and discourses this
commonality takes have many names: “democracy, freedom of thought, social consciousness, protest, human rights, exploration, moral orders, principles and a thousand and one additions for the continual expansion and evolution of the human soul” (54). The universalism that Elizabeth articulates is not that of religion, for she recognizes that “since man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed”; instead, it is the being-in-common that she identifies as the experience of ordinary people, including those who suffer, that constitutes its potential common ground (206). As such, the novel indicates one direction in which we might look for other instances in which memory of the Holocaust appears in postcolonial literature or works of “global” literature in ways that challenge identity and, as this novel suggests, do so even beyond the framework of a postwar, migratory Europe.
Notes


5 ibid., 34, 30.

6 These critiques can also overlap, in some respects. Joseph Slaughter shows how global reading publics have formed around narratives about human rights violations and rescue; this is an example of how a universalist discourse, such as that of human rights, furthers the circulation and reception of certain non-Western or postcolonial works of literature as global in their significance and reach. Joseph R. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (New York: Fordham UP, 2007), see especially Chapter 3.

7 For a discussion of the multiple forms of marginalization to which Head was subjected, see Rob Nixon, “Border Country: Bessie Head’s Frontline States,” in *Social Text* 36 (Autumn 1993), 106-137.


9 On the potential of madness as a means of access to the universal or as a form in which to represent it, see Jacqueline Rose, “On the ‘Universality’ of Madness: Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power*,” in *Critical Inquiry* 20:3 (Spring 1994), 401-418.
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