

PART II MEMORY
NARRATIVES/MEMORY
TECHNOLOGIES

Race, Gendering, and the
Politics of Memory Work

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, during the first half of the twentieth century, German public discourse regarding Afro-Germans was structured around the threat they were perceived to pose to the purity of the white race and the German nation. This population's mixed racial heritage was articulated as a looming specter in need of containment. The public discourse on racial endangerment that emerged in the mixed-marriages debates, the Rhineland propaganda campaign, and later in the Nazi sterilization of the children of the Rhineland was fueled by a conception of the German nation as a bodily organism—a national body that could be maintained only through the defense of its purity. Its primary vulnerability was figured as the threat of pollution posed by racial mixture. This public discourse of racial endangerment must also be read as a type of national and/or historical memory technology that anchors the dominant historiographical interpretive paradigms of the prewar generation of Afro-Germans. These paradigms assume a teleology of Afro-German history in which all Black Germans living in the Third Reich are perceived as *Besatzungskinder* (war babies) born of the Rhineland occupation, at the same time predicting and inscribing these individuals' eventual demise as innocent and passive victims of Nazi persecution. As illegitimate racial subjects, Black Germans are presumed not to have survived the racial regime of the Third Reich, thus fulfilling early prophe-

sies of their demise as the embodiment of the specter of racial endangerment.

Yet we must ask what explanatory power these paradigms hold for the history of this population. Are they accurate or appropriate representations of this history? What about individuals whose life histories do not correspond to this model? And for those whose biographies do correspond to this model, how significant were these experiences? Finally, what if any insights do such interpretations offer into the effects of National Socialist racial politics on the racial and gendered subject formation of German Blacks living in this regime?

The chapters in this section set out to deconstruct the dominant narrative of German collective memory of Black Germans examined in chapters 1 and 2 through a critical reading of the private memories of individual members of this group. In these chapters, I seek to show how an examination of the memories of Afro-Germans highlights the workings of memory as a technology that produces not only dominant accounts of history but also the potential for alternative forms of knowledge production and meaning making. The chapters in this second section shift the focus away from German responses to what they saw as the harrowing consequences of the presence of a Black German population in their midst, exploring the concrete implications of these historical discourses of racial endangerment for Germans of African descent in the period directly preceding and during World War II. The following chapters theorize the effects of racial discourses and processes of gendering on Afro-Germans in the Nazi regime, focusing on the imbrication of private memories and social processes of subject formation for Black Germans in the Third Reich.

The readings presented in chapters 3 and 4 perform a kind of memory work that engages memory as a technology in two senses. First, memory work serves as a mode of transforming these individuals' oral recollections into historical texts of memory (that is, historical "sources"). Second, these readings engage memory as a process of knowledge production or, in other words, "meaning making." The narratives of memory that my Afro-German interview partners construct in their accounts demonstrate the ways in which these individuals came to contend with the meanings imposed on them as raced and gendered subjects in the racial state of Nazi Germany. Perhaps more important, their narratives also reveal alternative forms of meaning

they produced in their efforts to constitute their own understandings of their subjectivities as German Blacks. In this way, their memory narratives offer new sources of knowledge, both on the effects of racial politics in the Third Reich and on processes of subject formation more generally. One important dimension of the technology of memory is its capacity to transmit and reproduce existing conceptions of the nation and national identity while revealing fissures and gaps in these conceptions, most notably through the ways in which the processes of inclusion and exclusion constitutive of nationhood and nationality are engaged and contested in creative ways by individual social actors.

In “Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory,” Jonathan Boyarin eloquently makes this link between the politics of memory and discourses of the nation and the body, in a manner that is particularly instructive in the German context. Arguing against the prevalent tendency to construct an absolute distinction between the technological and the organic, Boyarin asserts that technology can never be outside or separate from the body. In the case of memory, the body is also always crucially linked to memory and its technologies. Warning against a notion of memory as superorganic, he emphasizes that on the most material level, the “place” of memory remains the brain. Boyarin makes clear that memory is always at once intersubjective, technical, and physical (that is, bodily/organic).¹ This crucial point underlies the links among memory, the body, and the discourse of the nation for, as he asserts, the nation also “works through the body” via memory on a number of different levels, enlisting the rallying power of both collective memory and identity in strategic ways.

[The nation] generates loyalty analogous to that owed to parents. It rallies allegiance to its sovereign power through dramatizing the threat to its integrity from alien “bodies,” to preserve its organic identity: “for the nation to be itself—for it to be strong dominant, for it to save itself and resist its enemies—it must be racially and/or culturally pure” (Balibar 1990: 284). Like a “body,” the nation must grow or decay; and hence expansionary adventures are made to seem vital necessities. Like organisms, popularly and scientifically understood until quite recently to be controlled by a master logic, the nation must be hierarchically organized in order to maintain systemic functioning (Haraway

1991). Furthermore, if nations are bodies, then they inevitably grow from childhood to maturity. Hence the paternalistic domination of certain “Other” nations (e.g., Native Americans, Koreans, Palestinians) can be rationalized by rhetorically casting them as being in their “infancy,” not ready for self-determination.²

Boyarin emphasizes that focusing on the relations among memory, the body, and the nation—in the sense of what he refers to as “embodied memories”—reveals some of the less obvious ways in which “state ideologies appeal to organic experiences and common sense dimensionality to legitimize themselves.” He further asserts, “Those who elaborate and maintain such ideologies pretend, quite often with great success, to dictate both the contents of appropriate ‘memory’ and the proper spatial borders of the collective.”³ Yet Boyarin is careful to point out the most important implication of this complex imbrication of memory, the body, and the nation. As he rightly contends, memory can be neither solely individual (in that it is symbolic and thus intersubjective) nor thoroughly collective (since it is, on some fundamental level, embodied rather than superorganic). Boyarin concludes that what is most important for understanding this conundrum is the recognition that the aim of an inquiry into this complex configuration is not an explanation of a relation between body and group via culture. On the contrary,

What we are faced with—what we are living—is the constitution of both group “membership” and individual “identity” out of a dynamically chosen selection of memories, and the constant reshaping, reinvention, and reinforcement of those memories as members contest and create the boundaries and links among themselves.⁴

We can learn much from Boyarin’s astute reading of the politics of memory, nation, and the body, and much of his argument resonates in the German context. A similarly constructed German national discourse of racial endangerment and national body politics also functioned to define the terms of membership and exclusion from the national body for Black Germans and, in the case of the Third Reich, often had substantial material effects on those deemed unfit for mem-

bership. The negotiation of these processes of inclusion and exclusion was by no means unproblematic but rather was rife with paradoxes and contradictions.

The memory narratives of Afro-Germans recount dynamic processes of negotiation, reinvention, and reinforcement of individual identity and group membership as well as the ways in which these processes are characterized by complex forms of resistance, contestation, and creativity. The accounts of two individuals serve as case studies for the analysis in this section. Here I must acknowledge the fact that basing my analysis on only two cases raises certain obvious methodological questions about what kinds of conclusions can be drawn from such a narrowly focused study. Indeed, a more direct formulation of this question might do more justice to the important issues that underlie it. Plainly put, why only two cases, and why these two cases in particular? The most straightforward response to this question is that the two accounts presented here are in many ways the most complex of the larger corpus of oral histories collected for this project. The contradictions and contestations they detail make them rich and revealing sites of analysis. Yet the broader problem raised by the use of these two accounts is the status of the local and the quotidian for scholarly analysis. Specifically, what can the minutiae of the lives of two individuals tell us about the monumental processes of social administration and subject formation in the Third Reich? In other words, what can we learn from looking at two individual cases?

At the heart of these questions lie fundamental issues about how the narratives of these two individuals will be used as sites of scholarly inquiry into the racial politics of the National Socialist state. These questions point to the fact that as the premier historical case of a racial state, the Third Reich occupies monumental historical stature as the exemplar of an authoritarian racial regime and its ultimate consequences for humanity. Seen in this context, using the memories of only two people to unpack even a small piece of this complex system would seem at the very least a questionable undertaking, woefully insufficient to its goal. Yet I would argue that such a project can in fact be extremely fruitful, and I will take precisely this approach in analyzing these individuals' memory texts. My intention is not to use these accounts either as representative of the history of an entire population or as privileged sites of personal experience. As stated in the introduc-

tion, my approach to reading these accounts of memory explicitly attempts to avoid the trap of using oral historical accounts as one-dimensional documents of experience or as an irrefutable form of truth, fact, or evidence. It is important to view the testimony of each of my interview partners as a retrospective evaluation of the narrator's past screened through the prism of memory.

But how exactly do we connect the workings of this monumental racial state to the minutiae of the lives of Afro-Germans? I make this important link through memory or what I call historical memory work. One of the most important sites of such memory work is oral histories. Yet in many ways, our popular perception of memory is also one of our most prevalent prejudices against it as the object of historical study. We think of memory as individual, subjective, and specific. We consider it always partial, inherently flawed, and ultimately intrinsically unreliable in that it can give us only a single individual's perception of the past, colored by that individual's very subjective interpretation of events or experiences. But although memory is in fact all of these things, it is also far more than just an individual cognitive process. Memory is also a deeply social process through which individuals construct and articulate their relationship to the world and the events transpiring around them, both now and then.

Memory (both recollection and remembering) involves the subjective reconstruction of past events and experiences from the speaker's standpoint in the present. Years ago, the Popular Memory Group described memory as the process through which an individual's sense of the past is produced.⁵ Their point was that memory is never solely an individual, subjective process. Memory is neither a question of storage nor of recall; rather, memory is about the continual process of attributing meaning to events of the past in the present. In this way, memory is most certainly a social process or, to repeat Maurice Halbwachs's oft-cited observation, it is individuals who remember yet they remember as members of groups—that is, through common points of reference, contexts, and associations.⁶ Memory is about individuals making the past meaningful, not so much for what it was but for how it is of use to us today. Similarly, my interview partners' accounts must be read not as records of immediate experience but as selective reconstructions of their life histories produced through the configurations of memories from which they strategically construct a narrative of their past (and,

by implication, of the self). Their conceptions of memory narratives emphasize that we are dealing with highly mediated representations of the past.⁷

It is important in this regard to stress that the objective of the memory work in which I will be engaged, as well as the analysis of memory more generally, is not to ascertain “how it really was” or even to record “actual” perceptions from the past, for such narratives neither represent actual experience nor can ever be an absolute index of the accuracy of a speaker’s account of “back then.” It is impossible to capture or assess “immediate” or “authentic” experience, because “real” or “pure experience” is inaccessible to any type of scholarly evaluation. Indeed, to state a truism, all historical evaluation is in fact mediated by the lens of memory and, therefore, to some extent, is both selectively and subjectively reconstructed. Nevertheless, as James Young asserts, such mediated representations of the past offer rich sites for interpreting and understanding the ways in which individuals made sense of their lives and their historical contexts as well as what they viewed as the possibilities for action and agency available to them in a given historical context.⁸ In this way, memory work is a valuable historical tool: precisely because these narratives are already filtered through the screen of memory, they offer important perspectives on the past as seen through eyes of the present.⁹

The three chapters in this section offer readings of race and gender in the stories and memories of ordinary Germans—ordinary people who happened to be black. Yet the emphasis is on their stories and memories of “little” things. My aim is a nuanced and sophisticated reading of the details that constitute the fascinating memory narratives of individual Black Germans. This focus on the little is an attempt to emphasize questions that we frequently overlook or that often get obscured in our desire to explain the larger overarching social and political systems. Blackness was a big little detail in the lives of my informants: lives which were lived in complicated and contradictory ways in the Third Reich. Blackness was recognized and misrecognized, scrutinized and overlooked—it was the single most important and insignificant fact of their lives as Germans in this regime.

The memory narratives of my informants offer a complex rendering of racialized and gendered social topographies of Nazi Germany. At the same time, these stories narrate the ways in which these social land-

scapes became differentially visible and invisible, internalized and contested by Black Germans. In this way, these complicated narratives of memory present highly textured representations of the past that allow us to read racial and gender formation in the Nazi regime through a finely tuned historical lens. The minute details of these memory narratives allow these individuals to articulate and explain the local politics of race and gender in the Third Reich and help us to better understand the monumental impact of Nazi ideology as it was deployed both nationally and symbolically. In this way, the importance of remembering “little” things begins with shifting our sense of the status of the little to conceive of it not as necessarily small or insignificant but on the contrary as a window on what we tend to think of as larger “more important” things.

This connection between the local and the national or the monumental and the minute is one of the most revealing dimensions of the memory narratives of Black Germans in the Third Reich. The Nazi regime clearly was a monumental social, historical, and political phenomenon that affected the lives of countless millions of individuals and that continues to ripple throughout our society in its implications for how we think of questions of evil, justice, human rights, responsibility, complicity, and forgiveness. The Nazi era has also had a major impact on how we understand such fundamental concepts as race, racism, and anti-Semitism. Yet the monumentality of this system is rooted in the fact that it had such a pervasive effect on individual lives and in the fact that that effect took the form of shaping life at the local level. In this way, the monumental is rooted in minute questions of the local—in the “little” details of the everyday, or what I will call the monumental minutiae of individual lives. For this reason, the history of this population is particularly significant.

My readings of the memory narratives of these two Afro-German informants insist on an ongoing recognition of the deep connection between the monumental and the minute—the monumental phenomena of National Socialism and the Holocaust and the minutiae of the lives and memories of two individuals. This connection highlights the fact that we are often able to apprehend larger monumental social, political, and discursive systems of organization only through an examination of the minutiae of the everyday and the local. In point of fact, the minutiae of everyday lives can provide a greater appreciation

of the monumentality of National Socialism. The memory work of the chapters that follow uses the narratives of two individuals to unpack the intricate functioning of processes of racialization, gendering, and subject formation and thus shifts our basic understanding of the functioning of the Nazi racial state.

My selection of these particular individuals' narratives is not made on the basis of an understanding of them as representative exemplars of the experiences of all Afro-Germans or Blacks in Germany during this period. By the same token, I have also not chosen to use them to demonstrate their status as exceptional illustrations of the most extreme consequences of race for Blacks in this regime. My aim is in fact both far more complex and far simpler. The significance of the lives and memories of these individuals lies in the fact that they are less representative than exemplary—not of all Black Germans but of the dynamics of race and gender in the Third Reich and the complex and contradictory ways in which it produced particular forms of legitimate and illegitimate German subjecthood in the service of sustaining this regime. Memory work serves as a self-conscious attempt to acquire mediated access to the processes of subject constitution these individuals recount, access that makes explicit the connection between the monumental and the minute. As we will see in the pages that follow, examining the dynamics of the production of racialized and gendered subjects through these individuals' memories of the politics of the local has a significant impact in shifting and reshaping how we understand the workings of race in the Third Reich.

Historical memory work offers a crucial tool for examining the monumental minutiae of the lives of Black Germans in the Third Reich. A critical reading of memory reveals the richness inherent in the lives of each of these individuals and allows us to see the ways in which their lives were in fact monumental. Thus, in response to the questions posed earlier regarding what the memories of two individuals can teach us about the functioning of such monumental social systems, this section will seek to emphasize the extent to which understanding the minutiae of the lives and memories of my Afro-German interview partners allows us to understand the workings of race and gender in the Third Reich not only more generally but also more minutely.