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Abstract In this contribution, I introduce decolonial memory activism as struggle over meaning (*Deutungskampf*). Decolonial memory activism is understood as a specific form of memory activism that calls for the decolonization of both memory culture and politics, which necessitates a confrontation with dynamics of violence, power, and oppression. Unlike research that has primarily focused on the *contents* of collective memory, I argue that decolonial memory activism seeks to fundamentally challenge and transform the epistemological foundations of collective memory itself. Grounded in decolonial theories and drawing from a shared resolution of decolonial memory activists across Germany, I illustrate three interwoven elements of hegemonic knowledge that are being challenged by decolonial memory activism: nationalism, temporality, and the storage model of memory. Through this lens, the paper suggests that an understanding of struggles over memory gains more depth by considering the epistemic dimensions of these struggles. Such an approach opens up new possibilities for peace and conflict research as well as for social and political transformations.

Keywords Decolonial memory activism · Epistemic struggles · Struggles over meaning · Collective memory

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Erinnerungskämpfe?

Dekolonialer Erinnerungsaktivismus als epistemischer Kampf gegen Eurozentrismus

Zusammenfassung In diesem Beitrag stelle ich dekolonialen Erinnerungsaktivismus als Deutungskampf vor. Dekolonialer Erinnerungsaktivismus stellt eine spezifische Form von Erinnerungsaktivismus dar, denn er fordert die Dekolonisierung von Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik, was eine Auseinandersetzung mit Gewalt-, Macht-, und Unterdrückungsverhältnissen nach sich zieht. Im Gegensatz zu Forschungsansätzen, die sich bisher auf die *Inhalte* kollektiver Erinnerung konzentriert haben, zeige ich, dass dekolonialer Erinnerungsaktivismus die epistemologischen Grundlagen kollektiver Erinnerung als solcher grundlegend in Frage stellt und zu verändern sucht. Auf der Grundlage dekolonialer Theorien und einer gemeinsamen Resolution von dekolonialen Erinnerungsaktivist*innen aus Deutschland zeige ich drei miteinander verwobene Elemente hegemonialen Wissens auf, die durch dekolonialen Erinnerungsaktivismus in Frage gestellt werden: Nationalismus, Zeitlichkeit und das Speichermodell von Erinnerung. Der Beitrag zeigt auf, dass ein Verständnis von ‚Erinnerungskämpfen‘ deutlich an Tiefe gewinnen kann, wenn die epistemischen Dimensionen dieser Kämpfe in den Blick gerückt werden. Mit einem solchen Zugang ergeben sich neue Möglichkeiten sowohl für die Friedens- und Konfliktforschung als auch für soziale und politische Transformationen.

Schlüsselwörter Dekolonialer Erinnerungsaktivismus · Epistemische Kämpfe · Deutungskämpfe · Kollektive Erinnerung

1 Introduction

“To remember is to fight”¹—this slogan has long accompanied social movements and initiatives that fight against forgetting racist and antisemitic violence caused by right-wing terror in Germany. But what makes negotiations of collective memory a fight or a struggle?

In the German-speaking context, historians have adopted the term ‘*Deutungskämpfe*’ (struggles over meaning) to make visible and analyze conflicting interpretations of the past, which are connected to understandings of political order, current concerns and negotiations of the future.² In a similar vein, studies conducted at the intersection of memory studies and peace and conflict studies (PACS) have focused on mnemonic-political struggles in the aftermath of war and violence, acknowledging the central role of collective memory for transitional justice with respect to the dignity of victims and survivors, the necessity for healing, and the transformation of

¹ Own translation from ‚Erinnern heißt kämpfen‘, which is the domain name of an initiative to remember the Oktoberfest terror attack in Munich in 1980, see www.erinnernheisstkaempfen.de (accessed 15 October 2024). It is also the title of a volume on remembering racist, antisemitic, and right-wing violence in Germany, edited by Ali Şirin (2024).

² See, for example, the thematic framework of ‚Historikertag‘ 2021, an academic conference for historians in Germany: <https://www.historikertag.de/Muenchen2021/en/deutungskampfe/index.html> (accessed 15 October 2024).

conditions that made violence possible. In that way, “the analysis of memory politics serves as a seismograph for peace” (Mannergren et al. 2024, p. 14). However, such struggles are often about inclusion in an institutionalized body of public and collective memory, indicating that it is generally the contested content of collective memory that is being researched and scrutinized.

Taking a scholar-activist³ perspective, this article challenges such a narrow notion of ‘struggles over memory’ and argues instead that decolonial memory activism, as introduced below, challenges the epistemological framework of collective memory itself. To demonstrate this, I first introduce memory activism and the context of debates on colonialism in Germany. I then present the theoretical lens of ‘epistemic struggles’ (Icaza and Vázquez 2013) and outline three interrelated aspects of the currently dominant framework of collective memory that are challenged by decolonial memory activism. Drawing on a joint resolution that was adopted during a national network event of decolonial memory activists (Decolonize Berlin 2023), I illustrate how this activism challenges nationalism, temporality and the storage model of memory.

2 Memory activism: political change through remembrance

Collective memory and memory activism are fertile fields for the study of struggles over meaning because they show how current needs and concerns are intertwined with interpretations of the past. Memory as such can be understood as “present past” (Terdiman 1993), which has at least two implications:

“[F]irst, that memory is a contemporary phenomenon, something that, while concerned with the past, happens in the present; and second, that memory is a form of work, working through, labor, or action” (Rothberg 2009, p. 3–4).

While all forms of memory then qualify as a form of work, memory *protest* denotes a shift that occurs when remembering becomes contested and “civil society challenges norms and institutional structures” (Wüstenberg 2017, p. 6) through the realm of memory. Memory activism is then understood as the “strategic commemoration of a contested past to achieve mnemonic or political change by working outside state channels” (Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023, p. 5). Recent studies have shown how memory activism ‘from below’ has shaped larger memory cultures (Wüstenberg 2017), often as counter-narratives with the normative claim to fight for peace and justice (Fridman 2020; Gutman 2017). While memory activism has long been practiced, particularly as a *modus operandi* of colonized people and their descendants (Charumbira 2023, p. 450)⁴, it has only received increasing attention

³ Even though this text was written as an academic contribution, it is important to point out that I myself was involved in decolonial memory activism and participated in the network event in Berlin in 2023.

⁴ Historically, it has particularly been Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) as well as the descendants of formerly colonized who have fought for memory and justice. They have set the agenda in Germany through initiatives such as ADEFRA (a Black women’s initiative) and the ISD (the initiative of Black people in Germany).

as a subject of study in recent years (Gutman 2017; Wüstenberg 2017; Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023).

Since “colonialism ruptures both the past-present continuities embedded in the practices of everyday living and the larger symbolic systems that give shape, continuity, and coherence to cultures over time” (Rothberg 2013, p. 365), collective memory is one of the central sites of decolonial activism and an integral part of the struggle against colonialism. In Germany, however, the widespread lack of awareness and attention given to the colonial past is striking, particularly in combination with the continuities of colonialism, which manifest themselves, for example, in persistent structural racism. A central line of conflict in the German-speaking debate runs along the question of the relationship between various regimes of injustice in German history, such as National Socialism, the SED dictatorship and colonialism (Decolonize Berlin 2024).

The *contested past* that decolonial memory activists problematize is this oblivion of colonial history and its lingering in the present. Across Germany, activists have founded local initiatives and are networking on a national level in the so-called *Decolonize!* alliance⁵. They encompass a range of activities, from raising awareness of local, regional and national colonial histories through cultural instruments such as post-colonial city tours, to political initiatives for the renaming of streets, the removal or recontextualization of certain monuments, and the restitution of cultural objects and *human remains*⁶. At the same time, remembrance is not only about the recognition of suffering, but also about historical, epistemic and transformative justice, which draws concrete consequences from the violent colonial past and its structures that persist to this day. In that process, the focus is on the needs and demands of those affected by colonialism and their descendants, who are affected not only by concrete historical and generational traumatization but also by colonial structures such as structural racism and epistemic injustice⁷ that continue to have an impact today.

3 Decolonial memory activism as an ‘epistemic struggle’ against Eurocentrism

With its genealogy closely linked to the emergence and stabilization of the nation-state, collective memory, both as a political and conceptual arena, has been criti-

⁵ I group these initiatives under the umbrella term ‘decolonial memory activism’, even if there is no general agreement on a particular theoretical affiliation to post- or decolonial theories. The diverse names of local initiatives reflect this, e.g., Augsburg Postkolonial, Göttingen Postkolonial, but also Decolonize Berlin, Decolonize Köln, and others.

⁶ For a comprehensive list of demands see Decolonize Berlin (2023).

⁷ On the implications of mnemonic denial from an epistemic (in)justice perspective, see Altanian (2024, chap. 4). Although she has written primarily on the context of genocide denial, her insights can offer important points of references for the epistemic implications of denying colonialism and its lasting relevance.

cized as Eurocentric (Olick et al. 2023), reinforcing dominant onto-epistemological functions.⁸ Seen this way, in a worst-case scenario,

“[c]ollective memory will never be fully inclusive nor can it be the arena in which new solidarities emerge because it is epistemologically bound to the ideal of purity” (Antweiler 2023, p. 1530).

In contrast, decolonial memory activism is characterized by the objective of promoting a “decolonization of the culture of remembrance”, as formulated by the *Decolonize!* alliance (Decolonize Berlin 2023, p. 4, own translation). In general, decolonization can be understood as a process of deconstruction and transformation of colonial and Eurocentric ideologies, patterns and structures, whereby activists interpret and prioritize the concrete application in different ways. A joint resolution by decolonial memory activists states:

“The goal of holistic social decolonization is the antiracist, intersectional confrontation with global and local relations of power and domination, as well as the cultivation of the processes needed to lead to a social transformation toward more justice for all humans worldwide” (Decolonize Berlin 2023, p. 1, own translation).

In line with decolonial theories, it is not only necessary to pluralize collective memory⁹, for instance by recognizing the plurality of memory contents as a necessary foundation for ‘post-migrant’ societies, but also to go beyond that by naming and transforming the structural relations of power and domination that shape collective memory. A decolonization of memory culture is therefore not just a symbolic politics or a ‘metaphor’ (Tuck and Yang 2012) that remains without material and transformative consequences, but is rather intertwined with a holistic decolonization process that encompasses material, epistemic, social and affective transformations.

In this context, the dimension of knowledge plays an important role, as some decolonial theorists view ontology and epistemology as conceptually intertwined, arguing that our assumptions or narratives about the world (epistemologies) shape or even constitute the nature of the world as it is (ontology) (Mignolo 2018, p. 135; Grosfoguel 2007, p. 212). Accordingly, I argue that struggles over meaning have at least two interrelated dimensions: an ontological one, which implies struggles over (the distribution of) material things and resources, and an epistemic one, which concerns the underlying level of knowledge and its production. From a decolonial (memory) activist perspective, the epistemic can therefore serve as a lever to destabilize established certainties on the one hand and thus also contest the order of power, i.e. the ontological dominance of modernity. This makes it possible to explore the epistemic dimensions of social struggles by raising the question “[w]hat happens if we see social struggles as questioning our worldviews?” (Icaza and Vázquez 2013,

⁸ I use the term onto-epistemological to clarify the conceptual interrelation between ontology and epistemology, which I introduce below.

⁹ See, for example, the ‘Coalition for Pluralistic Public Discourse’ (CPPD), which has listed some cornerstones of a pluralistic culture of remembrance in its manifesto https://www.dialogueperspectives.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/MANifest_ES_V01.pdf (accessed 15 October 2024).

p. 683). In this way, decolonial memory activism entails a creative potential for alternatives to existing structures of power and domination. Reading decolonial memory activism as an epistemic struggle means that it is not only about the *content* of the interpretations and objectives of memory activists, but also about the *epistemic challenges* they formulate. These manifest themselves both in the deconstruction of historically imposed knowledge systems and in the visualization of marginalized perspectives and alternative knowledge. In the following, I outline three of these interrelated challenges, namely, the critiques of nationalism, of hegemonic temporality and of the storage model of memory.

4 Critique of nationalism

Decolonial critique exposes simplistic, endogenous accounts of Eurocentric modernity as a myth and emphasizes its connection to globalized colonialism. It reveals the colonial and imperial entanglements of the history of European nations, whose racist logics persist to this day, albeit in various forms. The control over the production, circulation and validation of historical narratives must therefore be deconstructed. In its function as a constitutive narrative for a national collective, collective memory “remains intrinsically connected to the essentialism that underlies the illusion of a nation” (Antweiler 2023, p. 1541). Therefore, the construction of the self through processes of *Othering* and the subsequent evaluation of these others on the basis of one’s own standards is examined and critiqued. As Fatima El-Tayeb describes, the construction of the German self is based on the marking and problematizing of racialized and migrant groups as “un-German” (El-Tayeb 2016, own translation).

A corresponding critique, as expressed in various artistic, cultural, pedagogical and political practices of decolonial memory activism, destabilizes national self-images because it focuses on the denied, often trivialized history of colonialism¹⁰ as well as its continuities and ruptures:

“To extend the important and hard-won principles of *dealing with the past* towards colonial crimes challenges the self-image of modern Germany in a twofold way: First, as a nation with – at least until 1914 – a generally ‘normal’, unencumbered history. Second, as a nation that has fully addressed its racist past” (Zimmerer 2023, p. 33, own translation).

The challenges that come with such a critique are not only epistemic, but also deeply affective (Pauls 2023, p. 61), as they question self-perceptions on both a collective and individual level. The neglect of Germany’s colonial past “makes unavailable uncomfortable questions of racism and violence, offering the possibility of a continuous dissociation” (Prinzleve 2023, p. 992). Such insights require *white* per-

¹⁰ A common narrative is that Germany was a ‘latecomer’ to colonialism, and lost its colonies ‘early’ in 1919 with the Treaty of Versailles. However, this narrative neglects the active involvement of German actors in the transatlantic slave trade, both as financiers, as slave traders and conquistadors, which began as early as the 16th century, e.g. through the Welser merchants. It also neglects the brutality of German colonialism, e.g. in the genocide of the Ovaherero and Nama or in the violent Maji Maji war.

sons in particular to begin to understand themselves as *implicated subjects* (Rothberg 2019, p. 1) and to acknowledge their own situatedness in historically evolved systems of oppression. Furthermore, the critique of nationalism implies that there can be no national colonial history, but rather, as memory activists put it, “an entangled history of colonizers and colonized, which must not continue to be interpreted one-sidedly from a German perspective” (Decolonize Berlin 2023, p. 2–3, own translation). In addition to the deconstruction of nation-centric narrations, the aim is also to make visible Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) perspectives and their knowledge systems, which were repeatedly marginalized and devalued in the colonial context. This can mean understanding BIPOC perspectives as inherent to the national identity and learning from formerly colonized communities in the Global South through dialogical practices. Decolonial memory activism thus entails the objective and possibility of cultivating a transnational, translocal culture of remembrance.

5 Critique of temporality

The term coloniality problematizes the persistence of the past, because the colonial relational patterns, structures, and logics that were established in the historical epoch of colonialism continue to exist today in various forms (Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 243). In this way, colonization has influenced not only space but also time (Rothberg 2013, p. 360).

The hegemonic understanding of time in modernity has been criticized (Hunfeld 2022; Vázquez 2009) as exercising a form of “temporal discrimination” (Vázquez 2009) by defining the relationship between past, present and future in a linear and evolving time frame. This understanding of time has been and is used to separate and hierarchize groups of people, for example through the pejorative association with the past and the “denial of coevalness” (Fabian 2014). Modern temporality also goes hand in hand with the invisibilization of *Others*, their memories, alternative time references and knowledge systems. Therefore, decolonial memory activists oppose erasures, silences and distortions in hegemonic narratives of the past and reverse the processes of invisibilization and depolitization. In addition to criticizing modern understandings of time, this also offers the opportunity to imagine alternative understandings of time and modes of dealing with the past (Pauls 2023)¹¹. Decolonial memory activists sometimes engage with a multilinear temporality, “which often maps the passage of time as branches of a tree rather than the unilinear arrow or ladder characteristic of the previous views of time” (Gabowitch 2023, p. 49). The result is that different narratives about the past can coexist without the need to reconcile them or for one of them to occupy a hegemonic position, “but to underscore the need for mutual understanding across competing historical accounts” (Gabowitch 2023, p. 50). Given the diversity of temporalities that shape engagements with the

¹¹ See also, for example, the 36th edition of the funambulist magazine: “They have clocks, we have time” <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/they-have-clocks-we-have-time> (accessed 15 October 2024).

past, the struggles over meaning in the field of memory can be better understood by critically engaging with the different ways of relating to past events.

6 Critique of memory model

Furthermore, the “storage model of memory” (Trouillot 1995, p. 14), which assumes that past experiences are more or less consciously ‘stored’ in memory, is scrutinized. Analogous to a methodological individualism, it is linked to the basic assumption that there is a pre-existing collective that can recall these memories:

“The storage model assumes not only the past to be remembered but the collective subject that does the remembering. The problem with this dual assumption is that the constructed past itself is constitutive of the collectivity” (Trouillot 1995, p. 16).

In contrast to individuals, collectives do not ‘have’ a memory—certainly not a shared one—but rather produce it in the first place, using various strategies such as monuments, museums and rituals (Assmann 2010, p. 42–43). In other words, collective memory and collective subjectivity are co-constitutive. Within such a model of memory, the logic of a zero-sum game can emerge because the retrievability and the attention that can be given to certain memories in public discourse are limited. Collective memories then ‘compete’ for public attention. However, this model of memory is only one possibility among many, as Michael Rothberg illustrates with the concept of multidirectional memory:

“Against the framework that understands collective memory as competitive memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative” (Rothberg 2009, p. 3).

This approach rejects both essentializing assumptions about collective identity constructions and the assumption “that a straight line runs from memory to identity and that the only kinds of memories and identities that are therefore possible are ones that exclude elements of alterity and forms of commonality with others” (Rothberg 2009, p. 4–5). Multidirectional forms of memory enable a solidary recognition and, above all, empathy for the pain of the *Other* (Wiedemann 2022) and, through appropriate political, social, and economic practices, can contribute to healing, justice and the transformation of structures that affect survivors and the descendants of colonized people today. Memory activists therefore emphasize that a “multidirectional culture of remembrance is necessary in order to make structural and individual entanglements visible” (Decolonize Berlin 2023, p. 4, own translation).

7 Conclusion

This article provides an additional explanation for understanding the current debates on collective memory in Germany by focusing on the epistemic differences between the objectives of decolonial memory activism and currently dominant frameworks of collective memory.

I have outlined how decolonial memory activism is not merely a quantitative struggle over memory *contents*, but rather a qualitative ‘epistemic struggle’ (Icaza and Vázquez 2013) against the epistemological quality of Eurocentrism inherent in the concept of collective memory itself. Having sketched three interrelated aspects of decolonial memory activism—critiques of nationalism, temporality and the storage model of memory—I have outlined some of the epistemic challenges to the theory and practice of collective memory. On the one hand, these challenges destabilize established certainties about the coherence of national histories, about ways of relating to the past, about images of self and others, and about theory and practice of collective memory. On the other hand, they hold transformative potential to contest the underlying hegemonic systems of knowledge and reshape the collective understanding of the past towards transnational, multidirectional frameworks of remembrance based on multilineal temporalities. Although these processes obviously take place on an epistemic level, the focus on ‘epistemic struggles’ should not lead to the mistaken assumption that the field of the epistemic is inherently rational. Rather, particularly with respect to collective identities, self-perceptions and constructions of *Others*, we should be aware that these are issues that are deeply affective in nature.

Accordingly, this contribution complicates the question of whether and how we analyze memory in PACS “as a seismograph for peace” (Mannergren et al. 2024, p. 14).¹² By questioning epistemological assumptions about collective memory *per se*, decolonial memory activism opens up avenues for a nuanced understanding not only of collective memory, but also of peace as normative concepts that need to be disentangled from their Eurocentric foundations. In this way,

“Memory activism thus brings new empirical research and conceptualization that expand the boundaries of existing categories both of peace activism and of collective-memory politics and so is valuable in the study of conflict resolution and reconciliation processes” (Gutman 2017, p. 16).

These considerations also raise questions about the further course of this particular struggle over meaning. As long as the demands of decolonial memory activists are perceived quantitatively, in terms of the content of collective memory, it might remain a challenge to bring the diversity of memories into a framework that strives for ‘mnemonic harmony’ (Antweiler 2023, p. 1536). Rather, it might be helpful to develop the capacity to listen to the epistemic dimensions of decolonial memory

¹² Notably, based on the exploration of five case studies, the authors conclude that a “just peace is possible if memory is entangled in a way that is plural, while also embracing dignity and inclusivity” (Mannergren et al. 2024, 199). This insight goes well with the approach of epistemic struggles that point to a plurality of understandings about memory.

activism, which “requires being open to questioning our ways of thinking” (Icaza and Vázquez 2013, p. 700) about collective memory. Whether this leads to other ways of understanding and relating to collective memory remains an open question, the answer to which will be revealed in the political and social responses to decolonial memory activism.

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