

BEYOND 'COLONIAL AMNESIA':
TRANSFORMATIVE POSTCOLONIAL MEMORY ACTIVISM IN
GERMANY

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores the transformative nature of memory activism, investigating the important role of grassroots action in Germany's process of critically reckoning with its colonial past and its legacies in the present. Over the past four decades, a broad movement of civic initiatives and activist individuals has worked relentlessly to promote a more critical understanding and commemoration of German colonialism and its impact. They have frequently operated among a widespread lack of public knowledge and amidst institutional refusal. This project draws attention to how critical activism has been an integral catalyst and accountability measure in Germany's process of finding a way for critical reflection and commemoration of its colonial past.

This research is situated in memory studies, with further inspiration taken from postcolonial studies, and uses a qualitative approach informed by critical feminist methodologies and standpoint epistemologies. Building on material gathered through semi-structured qualitative interviews with memory activists involved in the movement, this project addresses activist motivations, experiences, ambitions, challenges, and successes. This project follows an extensive empirical approach, as it investigates a broad range of examples and case studies of activism work from across Germany, highlighting campaigns by established civic organisations, as well as more sporadic activities by loosely organised grassroots initiatives and student groups. It explores movement activities traced back to the 1980s in West Germany and illustrates how over subsequent decades, this evolved into a nationwide multi-vocal and heterogenous movement across reunified Germany.

The core of this thesis focuses on four broad pillars of postcolonial memory activism work in Germany. It illustrates how activists use *public engagement* strategies, such as walking tours and exhibitions, to stimulate critical learning about and reflection of colonial histories and postcolonial legacies among mainstream audiences. Through the use of political *advocacy* work and participatory street renaming campaigns, activists address, challenge, and secure changes to colonially themed street names, that for decades have constituted offensive reminders of colonial control and racism in Germany's urban landscape. Activist *institutional critique* serves an important accountability measure within Germany's heritage institutions, as a broad range of critical interventions pushes museums and universities to 'own up' to their own implication in colonial violence and lasting postcolonial legacies of injustice. Finally, civic actors establish an

important link between descendants of formerly colonised communities, who experienced violent abduction of their cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains during the colonial period, and the institutions, who continue to hold these dispossessions in custody. Through intricate archival research, testimony gathering, and empathetic engagements, grassroots *restitution activism* significantly contributes to ongoing restitution practices in ways that promote these returns as acts with the potential of justice and healing for dispossessed communities.

This thesis constitutes a timely project. As the idea of the ‘colonial amnesia’ has remained important in public and scholarly discussions of Germany’s postcolonial reckoning to highlight institutional blindspots and political inaction, this study underscores that for many decades, there have been pockets where critical commemoration has been taking place, promoted by ambitious and committed grassroots actors. Furthermore, in a context of emergent institutional and political commitments to postcolonial reckoning across Germany, this research makes visible the grassroots underpinnings of these developments and demonstrates how civic action has been a pivotal factor stimulating institutional changes, thereby adding to the evolving research into the important relationship between grassroots activism and collective memory in Germany in the 20th and 21st century. Finally, amidst ongoing contested discussions about the state and scope of German memory culture more broadly, this thesis underscores important learning points we can draw from grassroots memory work about how multiple and diverse memory narratives can be commemorated in Germany alongside, and even in solidarity, with one another.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Opening	1
German colonial history and post-1919 revisionism	4
Post-1945 reckoning with colonialism in East and West Germany	8
The <i>colonial amnesia</i> narrative	10
Literature review and research ambitions	18
Methodological considerations	22
The first year – preparations and preliminaries	22
The second year – fieldwork and interviews	27
The third and fourth years – analysis, writing, and shortcomings	35
The structure of the thesis	38
Chapter 1. Introducing the Movement.	41
1.1. Historical outline: The evolution of postcolonial memory activism in Germany	41
1.1.1. Targeting colonial symbols in internationalist movements in the 1960s/70s	42
1.1.2. Shifting towards a critical grassroots commemoration of German colonialism in the 1980s	45
1.1.3. Consolidating a civic postcolonial memory movement in the 2000s	48
1.1.4. Expanding postcolonial memory activism in the 2010s	54
1.2. Lineages and actors: a multi-vocal movement	60
1.3. Considering context: Postcolonial memory activism within wider German memory culture	63
Chapter 2. Making colonialism relevant: Activist <i>public engagement</i>.	73
2.1. Introduction	73
2.2. The prominence of walking tours and exhibitions as instruments of grassroots public engagement	77
2.3. Countering memory absences by making colonialism relevant	85
2.3.1. “Spurensuche”: Foregrounding local traces and connections	87
2.4.2. Prioritising persistent legacies and demonstrating continuities	93
2.4. Distinctive features of walking tours and exhibition formats	98
2.4.1. Memory activist walking tours as embodied and interactive encounters	98
2.4.2. Civic exhibitions using disruptive visual features and transportability	105
2.5. Complementarity	110
2.5.1. Going beyond the ‘bubble’	110
2.5.2. Creating ‘aha effects’ and tipping points	114
2.6. Conclusion	117

Chapter 3. Grassroots <i>political advocacy</i>: Activist campaigns to change colonial street names.	118
3.1. Introduction	119
3.2. Colonially themed street names as persistent reminders of oppression & violence	122
3.3. Long-standing grassroots campaigning against colonially themed street names	124
3.4. Grassroots activism using <i>advocacy</i> and lobbywork	130
3.5. “Das ganze Drumherum der Umbenennungskampagne”: The participatory nature of grassroots renaming campaigns	138
3.6. “Postkoloniale Perspektivumkehr”: Politics of Surrogacy to create recognition and critical learning sites	144
3.7. “Die Hochehrung überhaupt”: Street Names as Namescapes	147
3.8. Conclusion	152
Chapter 4. <i>Institutional critique</i>: pushing accountability for colonial legacies.	153
4.1. Introduction	153
4.2. Heritage institutions as agents of colonial power: institutional repercussions	158
4.3. Grassroots postcolonial <i>institutional critique</i> in Germany	160
4.3.1. Antagonistic encounters: Grassroots activism against the <i>Humboldt Forum</i>	165
4.3.2. Constructive critique: <i>Kolonialismus im Kasten</i>	171
4.3.3. Consultative collaborations: <i>Postcolonial Potsdam</i> and <i>Amo Bündnis Halle</i>	176
4.4. Conclusion	186
Chapter 5. Recognising dispossessed communities and descendants through <i>restitution activism</i>.	189
5.1. Introduction	189
5.2. Heritage institutions as agents of colonial power: impacts of dispossession and dehumanisation	193
5.3. Grassroots <i>restitution activism</i>	196
5.4. The relationship between restitutions and healing	200
5.4.1. Public acknowledgment of injustice and wrongdoing	202
5.4.2. Recognising communities as witness bearers	207
5.4.3. Generating empathy	216
5.5. Conclusion	224
6. Conclusion	225
Bibliography	239

Table of Illustrations

Figure 1: Impressions from activist walking tours. _____	75
Figure 2: Impressions from zurückGESCHAUT exhibition, in June 2022. _____	89
Figure 3: Impressions from ReTelling DOAA exhibition opening, in October 2022. _____	91
Figure 4: Köln Postkolonial exhibition panel. _____	107
Figure 5: May-Ayim-Ufer, in Berlin, in July 2022. _____	127
Figure 6: Impressions from the Antikoloniales Amofest, in August 2022. _____	142
Figure 7: Impressions from PARA's Berge versetzen intervention at Grassi Museum Leipzig, in April 2022. _____	155
Figure 8: PARA's replicas of the Kilimanjaro summit stone, available to purchase for the fundraising campaign, in April 2022. _____	156
Figure 9: At Park Sanssouci with Postcolonial Potsdam, in April 2022. _____	177
Figure 10: The statue Freies Afrika, on campus of Halle University, in Halle (a.d.S.) _____	178
Figure 11: Memorial plaque for Anton Wilhelm Amo, on campus of Halle University in Halle (a.d.S.) _____	181
Figure 12: Social media responses to SPK/MVF research findings, which identified living descendants of abducted Ancestral Remains from Tanzania, in September 2024. _____	191
Figure 13: Flyer exhibited in Marejesho exhibition at TaT in Berlin, showing the route and locations visited when the exhibition travelled to descendant communities in Tanzania, in September 2023. _____	209
Figure 14: Impressions from Marejesho exhibition at TaT in Berlin, in September 2023. _____	210
Figure 15: Panel titled Stimmen aus Tansania/Tanzanian Voices at Marejesho exhibition at TaT in Berlin, in September 2023. _____	213
Figure 16: Marejesho at TaT in Berlin is dedicated to different locations and communities across Kilimanjaro and Meru, Tanzania, in September 2023. _____	214

Introduction

Opening

In March 2018, I participated in a postgraduate research event. For approximately two years at this point, I had been studying 19th century German colonial history, and how postwar Germany was critically commemorating and reckoning with its colonial involvement and its social, cultural, economic and political legacies. What I had learned in the academic literature so far was that Germany's colonial involvement was barely discussed publicly at all, and that it was not considered in Germany's widely acclaimed *Erinnerungskultur*. I had learned that this situation had become known as Germany's "colonial amnesia" (Köbler, 2005; Zimmerer, 2004).

This is what I spoke about in my presentation at this symposium. Quoting from my script: "the argument I intend to make is that over the past decades, if not over the past century, Germany has failed to recognise its colonial past, failed to acknowledge its involvement in the era of European colonialism in the 19th and 20th century and that this disregard has had grave social and political implications in German society and culture". I referenced some of the key scholars who had been working on this amnesia narrative, presented some of the arguments I had found in existing literature about some historical factors that had contributed to this forgetting, and listed some of the ways in which I myself had noticed this silencing, e.g. that I had learned nothing about German colonialism in school, nor during my university studies, despite a significant personal interest in historical studies. "Germany had a lot to catch up on!", I concluded with a mix of nerves, passion, and righteous indignation.

My presentation was the academic iteration of a raised forefinger, delivered by a fledgling academic who had just found out about an "underexplored" public discourse. When I finished, I was out of breath and my throat was dry. My nerves had not allowed me to take any breaks during my presentation. I was relieved—but also proud—when it was over.

After I had finished speaking, a fellow young *white* woman in the front row raised her hand to respond to my presentation.¹ My paper had made many valid points, she said, but it was generalising. In fact, she continued, whilst public discourse had, as I described, largely

¹ In this research, *white* and Black are not used as references to skin colour or as biological categories. Instead, they are sociocultural constructs denoting historically and concurrently situated identities and group memberships. Additionally, Black is capitalised in order to emphasise this as a self-denomination. (Sow, 2018)

neglected a critical interrogation and commemoration of German colonialism, there was a broad network of civil society initiatives and organisations, who had been doing the work of critically reckoning with this past, researching and making public marginalised histories, postcolonial legacies and lasting injustices in the present, through events, exhibitions and advocacy. They had been doing this for decades, she said, without receiving much recognition for it. Not referencing their work in my presentation was not merely an oversight, she stated, but was contributing to their work being silenced and marginalised.

Needless to say, this was not the response I expected. My respondent was by no means antagonistic or unfriendly, yet her feedback hit me like a ton of bricks and shattered my carefully crafted argument. I do not remember how I responded. To this day, I have no idea who my respondent was, but I have thought back to this situation regularly, recalling explicit feelings of unease. My discomfort, I understood later, was not only that of being called out on this blatant omission. It was about the fact that I *had* been aware of the activist movement that she had referenced. I knew of the kind of activism she was talking about. Just two years before, I had participated in several events and meetings of one local group, who were hosting public activities on colonial history in Leipzig and promoting postcolonial perspectives on urban life locally. My participation in their events had considerably shaped my own learning and research about postcolonial reckoning. Nevertheless, I had completely left their work out of my narrative. Beyond a careless omission, it was an active exclusion. The story of *colonial amnesia*, in the way I had presented it in my paper had only been possible because I had removed the work done in civil society from my lens.

This feedback I received in 2018, presents one of the starting points of this PhD research. It substantially shifted my focus during my MA away from *amnesia* and towards studying street renaming activities and campaigns that were part of this activism movement my critic had pointed me to. From that project, the PhD research was conceived. I believe this has not only been about correcting an omission. What my critic had helped me see was that if I wanted to study processes of critical postcolonial reckoning in Germany, rather than dwelling on why most mainstream society and public institutions *were not doing it*, there may be more insights to be gained from learning about the kind of spaces and actors *who were already doing it*.

This is what this thesis has done. Over the past four years, I researched grassroots activism activities, that aim to promote a more critical retrospective understanding and critical commemorative approach to colonial history and its legacies in Germany. These started as sporadic activities and protests in the 1970s and 1980s and over subsequent decades, grew into a broad, coordinated and sustained movement, in which hundreds of individuals, student initiatives, and civic organisations are operating across all of Germany. Bringing together an extensive scope of motivations, backgrounds, ambitions, strategies, and campaigns, this grassroots activism has played a pivotal role in pushing the memory of Germany's colonial past more into the mainstream public, making postcolonial legacies visible, and promoting political and institutional responses to historical legacies and ongoing injustices. This thesis maps out these activities, in order to demonstrate how they have shaped public processes of postcolonial reckoning, and to illustrate that attending to civil society activism is integral to understand postcolonial remembering in Germany more broadly.

In this introduction, firstly, I provide a succinct historical overview, outlining some key processes of German colonial history. Subsequently, I investigate in more detail the *colonial amnesia* narrative that in the last two decades has been a pivotal concept to illustrate the broader public and political non-engagement with colonial history in postwar East and West Germany. Whilst this framing has had important value in pointing to political and institutional blindspots, I also explore some significant shortfalls, including the critique that it can be too general and simplistic. As illustrated by my critic back in 2018, this narrative contributes to a marginalisation and invisibilisation of civil society activists and grassroots activities that have, contrary to the *amnesia* narrative, promoted critical reckoning and commemoration across Germany, alongside public, political, and institutional refusal. Afterwards, I discuss the methodological framework for my research project to explain the steps I have taken over the last four years to learn about this activism and, finally, to outline the wider scope and structure of this thesis.

German colonial history and post-1919 revisionism

German colonial history is still frequently referred to as the period of thirty years of the formal German colonial overseas empire, between the late 1880s and 1919. However, Germany's involvement in modern European overseas expansion and occupation can be traced much further back. In the 1500s, German merchants and colonisers were engaged, both directly and indirectly, in the early colonisation of the Americas (Raphael-Hernandez and Wiegink, 2020). The German Welser banking family, established in Augsburg and Nuremberg in the 1500s, was granted colonial rights by the Spanish Crown and joined the colonisation of Southern America, establishing for two decades colonial rule over a territory they named *Klein-Venedig*, in today's Venezuela, in which they exploited natural resources and violently ruled over Indigenous communities (Montenegro, 2018). Spanish colonisation of the Americas, under Charles V, had also been financed through the wealth of the Fuggers, another German merchant family, facilitating the establishment of exploitative colonial trading networks (Häberlein, 2012). In the 1600s, German colonisers established a foothold in the brutal trade of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic through a trading fort, *Großfriedrichsburg*, built in 1682 by Brandenburg-Prussia on the coast of today's Ghana (Aikins and Kopp, 2008; Rozas-Krause, 2019), and by contracting the use of a trading fort on St Thomas in the Caribbean from Denmark (Bärwald and Lentz, 2023). Via these forts, German actors were responsible for the violent abduction and involuntary movement of at least 20,000 enslaved Africans, many of whom were killed during the journey (Mallinckrodt et al., 2023; Weindl, 2017). Over centuries, German merchants and economies furthermore benefitted indirectly from forced labour and plantation economies in the Americas by providing linen clothing for enslaved workers, which substantially advanced German early industrialisation (Weber, 2009).

In the late 1800s, Germany became a formal colonial power, facilitated via the unification of a German nation state in 1871 under Chancellor Bismarck (1815-1898), which then joined Britain, France etc, in the large-scale, almost comprehensive, colonial occupation of the African continent (Speitkamp, 2005). As Bismarck initially remained sceptical towards state-sponsored colonisation, it was private merchants who pioneered early exploration and annexations (Zimmerer, 2013). Notable 'pioneers' in this earlier period up until the early 1880s included Karl Peters (1856-1918), who illegitimately annexed vast territories in East Africa, Adolf Lüderitz (1834-1885), who established a fraudulent foothold in South West Africa, and Gustav

Nachtigal, who negotiated German annexation of lands on the West African coast (1834-1903). Following these early efforts, in summer 1884, Bismarck decided to formally place these territories under German “protection” (Speitkamp, 2005), and, in 1884/85, these claims were formalised and ratified by other colonial powers during the *Berlin Conference*, hosted by Bismarck in 1884/85, during which several European nations came together, without any effective African representation, to formalise their respective territorial claims across the African continent (ibid). By the late 1800s, Germany had formalised colonies in East Africa (Tanganyika/Tanzania), South West Africa (Namibia), Cameroon, and Togo, in Papua New Guinea and on multiple Pacific Islands (North Solomon Islands, Northern Mariana Islands, Caroline Islands, and Marshall Islands), as well as in Samoa and in Tsingtao (Köbler, 2005). In total, the formal German colonial empire spread across 2.7 million square kilometres, representing a land mass more than seven times the geographic area of modern Germany, and establishing control over approximately 12 million people.

During Germany’s formal colonial period for three decades following 1884/85, control and occupation across the territories was organised in various ways, as a second generation of German merchants, officials, and military governors established administrations and systems for control, settlements, and extraction of resources. *German South West Africa*, following German occupation in 1884/85, became a settler colony. With Heinrich Ernst Göring (1839-1913) as the first governor, farms, mines, and infrastructures were set up, stealing land and labour from Indigenous populations. When local communities, most notably OvaHerero and Nama, resisted and fought back against dispossession, forced labour, and brutal policies, they were violently bludgeoned by German forces under Lothar von Trotha (1848-1920), whose campaign culminated in the first German genocide of the 20th century (Kössler, 2015; Zimmerer and Zeller, 2003; Zimmerer, 2008). In German East Africa, formed in 1885, Hermann von Wissmann (1853-1905) established an extraction colony focused on cultivating cash crops (e.g., cotton) using forced African labour. A series of liberation movements and rebellions, such as the Abushiri rebellion or the Maji Maji uprising, were brutally suppressed through establishing colonial paramilitary groups, which used African soldiers, named Askaris, to quell resistance (Giblin and Monson, 2010; Kuß, 2010). In West Africa, Germany established two colonies. In *German Togoland*, colonial forces used brutal military force to annex territories, upon which an extraction colony was set up to cultivate cotton, coffee, and cocoa, using forced labour and

heavy taxation (Laumann, 2010). *Cameroon* was likewise established as a German colony in 1884, building an extraction economy around rubber, palm oil and timber, similarly using forced labour to run it, and German military to control resistance, for instance during the so-called *Adamawa Wars*, which German colonisers fought against local Fulani communities who resisted German rule (Gouaffo and Tsogang Fossi, 2021). Territories in the Pacific were formally claimed as German land in 1885. Here, merchants set up plantations, especially to farm the highly profitable copra (dried coconut meat), and administration was organised by several colonial companies. Plantations, as in other colonies, used forced labour and communities frequently resisted, attempting to free themselves from harsh conditions. When German forces suppressed these liberation movements, they commonly used local soldiers from other Indigenous groups to staff their military forces (Hempenstall, 2016). In 1896/97, Germany forced China into a 99-year lease contract to annex a territory in the Bay of Kiautschou, which they built into a de facto colonial property until 1914 (Mühlhahn, 2000). Across these territories, German colonial occupation diminished local cultures and languages, exploited valuable resources, undermined economic and political developments, and separated ancestral relationships and community networks, establishing German rule as a system of racist supremacy over local cultures.

The German metropole “back home” was not left unaffected by overseas expansion (Bechhaus-Gerst and Zeller, 2021; Melber, 2024; Perraudin and Zimmerer, 2010). Cultural production in movies and literature reflected colonial mindsets, supremacist ideologies, and exoticising narratives (Göttsche, 2013; Langbehn, 2010). Colonial inscriptions and annexations were manifested in German urban landscape through street names and monuments (Schilling, 2020; Zeller, 2000). Scientific institutions were engaged in colonial administration and racist research, museums and cultural organisations were showing exoticising and discriminatory exhibits of looted artefacts, and hosted colonial exhibitions and human zoos (Dreesbach, 2005). Migration from the colonies meant that African individuals and communities were establishing themselves in Germany (Oguntoye, 2004), building lives and community whilst confronting racist discrimination and violence, advocating for their own civic rights (Reed-Anderson, 2005) and fighting for the liberation of colonial territories (Kuck, 2014).

German overseas colonialism formally came to an end with the World War I. As part of the Treaty of Versailles, drafted as a strict punitive measure for Germany’s conduct during the

war and to reshape European power relations for the 20th century, German colonies were handed over into a mandate of the newly founded League of Nations, and Germany was the first European nation to cease having colonies overseas (Schulte-Varendorff, 2021).

Just as colonial ideologies and ambitions preceded the establishment of the formal empire in 1884/85, they also outlasted the official end of German rule in 1919. Facilitated by what became known as the *Kolonialschuldlüge*, the public belief and political narratives that the removal of the colonies in Versailles had been illegitimate, fond memories of the German colonies and ambitions for their reestablishment appeared to grow after 1919. Likewise, many colonial institutions remained in place and continued to advocate for colonial expansion and annexation, e.g. the *Reichskolonialamt*. The *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft* continued to hold conferences and maintained tens of thousands of members until 1933 (Conrad, 2019a).

After 1933, pro-colonial elements within the National Socialist regime, building on the above narratives and structures, further attempted to promote re-annexation of overseas colonies as a political goal. To this end, in 1934, for instance, the *Kolonialpolitisches Amt* was founded with the intention to plan the re-establishment of German overseas territories. This was followed in 1936 by the *Reichskolonialbund* in order to streamline existing pro-colonial organisations and structures into one institution (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2021). These institutions, and the actors involved played a pivotal role in sustaining revisionist ambitions and ideologies among some segments of society, growing and maintaining them also after 1945. Yet, as the National Socialist regime's prime focus remained on territorial *Lebensraum* expansion in Eastern Europe, no overseas annexation took place during its rule. Established structures, as they did not serve the regime's immediate needs during World War II, were sidelined after 1939 and finally disbanded in 1945. Political ambitions to re-establish an overseas German Empire were put to rest with Nazi capitulation in 1945 (ibid).

Post-1945 reckoning with colonialism in East and West Germany

After the end of World War II in 1945, Germany was divided into four occupation zones, from which, in 1949, two German states were established: the *Federal Republic of Germany (FRG)* in West Germany, and the *German Democratic Republic (GDR)* in East Germany. Due to this division into two states with entirely different political systems and ideologies, the topic of German colonial history, its legacies, its memory, and retrospective engagement with it, developed very differently in both societies.

The FRG in West Germany was established as a liberal democracy, aligned with Western capitalist nations. As allied forces demanded an end to German expansionist and internationalist policies, colonial institutions remained dissolved, and colonial actors adapted their political agendas, in order to facilitate a process of reintegrating the republic as a liberal, cooperative Western European state. More broadly, colonialism was officially rejected as being contrary to democratic values (Conrad, 2019b). In the context of global dissolution of empire with growing anticolonial movements in the Global South, in West German perspective, colonialism was considered much more integral to other Western European nations' histories. It was seen as a problem the others had, like Britain and France, and it was not really recognised as relevant to German history (Melber, 2024). Overarchingly, the postwar period in West Germany, with the exception of sections of civil society (see 1.2.1.) was focused on denazification efforts, establishing a critical distance to the horrors of the Nazi period, World War II and the Holocaust. Conversely, limited attention was paid to critical retrospective engagement with German colonial histories and its legacies; there were few public or scholarly investigations, for instance, of what had happened during the colonial period, and this history was to some extent pushed out of mainstream public consciousness (ibid).

The GDR, conversely, was established as a Soviet Union aligned socialist nation, with anti-fascism and anti-colonialism as proclaimed state policy (Hamann and Schubert, 2022; Speitkamp, 2005; Trzeciak, 2022). Colonialism was officially rejected as a capitalist, imperialist endeavour, and as part of this stance, the GDR supported, both ideologically and materially, anticolonial movements in the Global South (Van der Heyden et al., 1993; Weis, 2011). Within this official anticolonial state policy, the GDR also sought to distance itself from Germany's colonial legacy. There were, for example, instances of colonial street names and monuments being removed (Schilling, 2020; Trzeciak, 2020) (see Chapter 2). Furthermore, in the 1960s and

70s, important critical scholarship about Germany's colonial past was produced in the GDR (Bürger, 2017). Whilst this represents a significantly different approach than in the FRG in West Germany, in larger mainstream public circles, Germany's involvement in colonialism remained, not unlike West Germany, mostly unaddressed.

Despite these significant differences, across both societies there persisted a lack of a broader societal consensus on the significance of Germany's colonial past and the need for critical reckoning. There was limited recognition of colonialism as a relevant part of German history that necessitated serious introspection, reflection, and public engagement. In West Germany, critical reckoning was focused on confronting the National Socialist past and its crimes, extending limited critical energy to colonialism. In East Germany, colonialism was framed as a capitalist imperialism, therefore, accountability was deflected by the SED regime. This neglect extended across public spaces and most institutions, ensuring that in both German states, colonial history remained largely peripheral to German broader historical consciousness. This means that, on one side, among segments of both societies, colonial ideologies, mindsets, memories and revisionist ambitions were able to last, and on the other side, that attempts to critically grapple with colonial history remained limited and anecdotal, and colonialism fell short of being included in Germany's emerging culture of critical reckoning and commemoration.

The *colonial amnesia* narrative

In the last two decades, there has been one narrative that has become particularly prominent as a descriptive category to assess the ways in which mainstream public and political actors in both East and West Germany have engaged with the histories and memories of the German colonial past, after 1945: *koloniale Amnesie*, or *colonial amnesia*. This phrase has become a common buzzword, both in popular and media discourse, as well as scholarly investigations. It was this phrase that I had used in 2018, described above. In this section I want to pick up this narrative, and similarly to my presentation six years ago, investigate it in more detail, how it emerged, what it described, and what purpose it served. However, this time I will pay attention to the concept's shortcomings and blindspots. This will allow me to set a frame and move my considerations away from or, in other words, *beyond colonial amnesia* and towards the work of civil society and activist actors.

The emergence of this concept as a means to describe the German postwar condition of neglect, ignoring, and suppressing of the memory of its colonial history and its legacies can be traced back to the early 2000s. The narrative emerges primarily in the use of German intellectuals and scholars to describe and draw critical attention to how the German mainstream public and political representatives in particular had across the second half of the 20th century been neglectful of German colonial history, and had fallen short of developing a reconciliatory commemorative approach towards this period and its legacies (Bürger and Rausch, 2022). There were two key features of the *amnesia* narrative in its original context. Firstly, the narrative emerged in order to make a statement about Germany's failure to critically reckon with its colonial history and its legacies, that is illustrated via an examination of how Germany had failed to reckon with one of the most brutal colonial crimes – Germany's colonial genocide against OvaHerero and Nama communities in GSWA in the early 1900s. In other words, initially the *amnesia* narrative is specifically related to the non-recognition of Germany's OvaHerero and Nama genocide (ibid).

In one of the earliest references for the concept, in an article for the newspaper *taz* in January 2004, titled *Keine Geiseln der Geschichte*, historian Jürgen Zimmerer calls out the persistence of romanticised, nostalgic, and revisionist narratives in German mainstream discourse and literature about its colonial past, which had neglected a critical commemorative engagement (Zimmerer, 2004). He emphasises that the selective commemorative engagement

in Germany is particularly grave with regards to the crimes and atrocities committed during colonialism, such as the Maji Maji war in German East Africa in 1905-07, and in particular the genocide against OvaHerero and Nama in 1904-08 (ibid) (see 1.1.3.). These are lasting iterations of a *colonial amnesia*, which begin to develop, in his view, soon after Versailles in 1919 (ibid).

A second early reference for *koloniale Amnesie* is found in a chapter published in 2005, titled “Kolonialherrschaft – auch eine deutsche Vergangenheit”. Like Zimmerer, Köbler examines Germany’s selective memory culture through its retrospective engagement with the OvaHerero and Nama genocide in GSWA, using the case to highlight the country’s limited reckoning with colonial atrocities—what he terms colonial amnesia (Köbler, 2005). He states: “[d]ie deutsche Kolonialherrschaft und ihre Schrecken für die Kolonisierten unterliegen geradezu öffentlicher Amnesie” (ibid:23), in which German colonial history had remained “negiert und kleingeredet” (ibid). This state of amnesia, according to Köbler, was “gründlich” (ibid:33) and “vorherrschend” (ibid:35), and urgently needed to be overcome, in order to pave the way and move towards not just critical reckoning, but also reconciliation, especially with regards to the German colonial genocide against OvaHerero and Nama people (ibid). This illustrates how initially the amnesia narrative was developed specifically to draw attention to the political non-engagement with the genocide in GSWA, which is used to make a more general assessment of Germany’s non-engagement with its colonial past.

A second key feature of the early iteration is that a relation is identified by these commentators between the lack of engagement with colonial history, and postwar Holocaust memory in West Germany. In his 2004 article, Zimmerer writes, that in postwar Germany a critical reckoning with the Holocaust and National Socialist crimes, outside the right wing spectrum, was becoming a German “Grundkonsens”, which was made possible by isolating twelve years of brutal Nazi rule from the rest of German history, in order to enable a rehabilitation of German history at large (Zimmerer, 2004). The recalling of German colonial crimes that had preceded Hitler, in Zimmerer’s view, threatened this rehabilitation narrative, as it would draw attention to violent continuities, that would undermine the framing of the Holocaust as an anomaly (ibid). This, he argues, served as a powerful barrier and generates persistent resistance towards recognising and apologising for the genocide against OvaHerero and Nama communities (ibid). In his chapter, Köbler likewise investigates the

(non)commemoration of colonial crimes in a post-Holocaust context (Köbler, 2005). He, similarly, draws attention to the continuities between colonial atrocities and the Holocaust (ibid:39), and considers critically the notion of the singularity of the Holocaust as a potential barrier towards recognising other (genocidal) atrocities (ibid:38). Whilst he warns more explicitly against drawing comparative relationships between distinct crimes, memories and contexts, he also advocates that German memory politics need to find a way to include colonial crimes into its commemorative frames (ibid).

The *amnesia* narrative, as noted above, emerged in the early 2000s to describe these dynamics, in response to the 2004/05 centenaries of the Maji Maji rebellion in GEA and the OvaHerero and Nama genocide in GSWA. These anniversaries marked a commemorative caesura, prompting a modest increase in public visibility and media attention to Germany's colonial history and its crimes (De Wolff, 2021). In this context, this early iteration of the *amnesia* narrative was commonly used as a tentatively hopeful statement, gesturing to a potential for this amnesia to be overcome. In a 2006 article, for instance, Köbler raises the question whether Germany was slowly "awakening" from its *amnesia*, evidenced by a sequence of events around the commemoration of the OvaHerero and Nama genocide in 2004, that "may indicate a break with the silence" (Köbler, 2006). Perraudin and Zimmerer, in 2010, similarly assert that Germany's *colonial amnesia* had been "severely shaken" in recent years, referencing the impact of the 2004/05 centenaries as decisive factors that had raised the public profile of Germany's colonial past (Perraudin and Zimmerer, 2010). This is to say, the *amnesia* narrative emerged as a rhetorical tool proposed by these commentators, at a time when there appeared to arise a potential for discursive openness, transformation, and change.

These tentative hopes, however, in subsequent years appear to be quashed. The *amnesia* narrative remains an important framing tool for discussions about Germany's retrospective engagement with its colonial past. In the second half of the 2010s, mentions and uses of the narrative (in popular discourse in particular) increased significantly, in academic and public discourse, maintaining a critique of the insufficient critical reckoning with German colonialism, and indicating the importance of investigating this in a post-Holocaust context (Bach, 2019; Bechhaus-Gerst, 2019; Conrad, 2019b; Köbler and Melber, 2021a; Melber, 2020; Opoku, 2017; Scaturro, 2015; Schwarzer, 2018; Zimmerer, 2016).

Several scholars have contested the idea of a public *colonial amnesia* in Germany. German cultural and literary scholar Monika Albrecht, for instance, in a chapter from 2010 titled “(Post-) Colonial Amnesia? German Debates on Colonialism and Decolonization in the Post-War Era”, building on analysis of discussions about European colonialism in West German newspapers in the 1950s and 1960s, shows that these were actually quite frequent discussion points among German journalists, upon which she concludes that “there was no post-colonial amnesia in postwar Germany in the sense that the entire colonial system fell from mind—for it did not” (Albrecht, 2010:194).

In a similar fashion, German cultural historian Britta Schilling in an article *Imperial Heirlooms: The Private Memory of Colonialism in Germany*, published in 2013, demonstrates how German families who were involved in colonial expansion passed down memories of this involvement “like a family heirloom”, through photographs, stories, and ethnographic items, which she uses as evidence to dispute the narrative of *colonial amnesia*, “as there were always individuals and groups determined to bring the colonial past into the present” (Schilling, 2013). A year later, Schilling expands this with her book *Postcolonial Germany: Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Nation*, in which she presents analyses of, for instance, 1920s European travel writing to Africa, and of colonial events and proms hosted in the 1930s, to underscore her argument that memories of Empire never went away in post-1919 Germany, that *colonial amnesia* never existed, and that instead, Germany had actually developed a dynamic approach to commemorating its colonial past, and a vibrant postcolonial memory culture (Schilling, 2014).

These contributions present insightful empirical studies on how colonial discourses and ideologies persisted in journalism, public discourses, and private archives past 1919, as rebuttals for the *amnesia* narrative; however, they fall short. Albrecht, for instance, insufficiently consider the circumstance that most newspapers in her analysis speak about colonialism generally and investigate other European nation’s remaining colonies in the 1950s and 1960s, whilst not distinguishing that there is little discourse on German colonial engagement (Melber and Köbler, 2018). Schilling’s work, conversely, insufficiently attended to the *amnesia* narrative critiquing a lack of *critical* retrospective engagement with colonialism. The material she provides powerfully outlines the persistence of colonial discourses and narratives, but the sentimental family memories and the exoticised writing and events in her analysis do not evidence a vibrant postcolonial, as in *critical*, engagement with these histories, but rather

indicate the persistence of nostalgic and apologetic revisionism, which have been identified as characteristic features of *colonial amnesia*, rather than evidence against the notion (ibid).

Lastly, these studies insufficiently pay attention to the lack of recognition of the OvaHerero and Nama genocide in Germany throughout the 20th century, which was such an important feature for the *amnesia* they sought to refute. These studies meaningfully enrich our understanding of postwar engagement with colonialism, commemoration, and revisionism, but have been insufficient as counterclaims to the *amnesia* narrative.

Whilst this framing, as Albrecht and Schilling show, was not uncontested, it continued to grow throughout the 2010s, soon becoming a dominant frame through which observers and commentators of German commemorative politics described the engagement with colonial histories. During this growth, the concept undergoes a significant shift, as its meaning expands beyond the original reference frame, the lack of recognition of colonial genocidal atrocities, and towards the neglect of critical investigations of colonial legacies in European museum collections (Bürger and Rausch, 2022). In June 2012, construction began for the *Humboldt Forum* in Berlin, one of Germany's most prestigious cultural museum projects (Bach, 2021; von Bose, 2016). Combining several institutions, a core feature of the new museum became a display of Berlin's prestigious 'non-European' ethnographic collections. Whilst the project, since its inception, was discussed widely and critically, a critical interrogation of the colonial histories and legacies of these collections and the objects to be displayed was long missing in these discussions, as activists and critical observers highlighted (see 4.4.1.). It is this lack of postcolonial interrogation that many observers and commentators then began to describe via the *colonial amnesia* frame. Again, historian Jürgen Zimmerer was a key proponent of this view, as he writes in 2017, for instance, that those responsible for the *Humboldt Forum* had not understood and neglected the historical contexts of the objects they wished to display and in so doing, maintained a setting of *colonial amnesia* within the project (Zimmerer, 2017). Zimmerer became a repeat public critic of the project and maintained his argument after the opening of the museum in 2021 (Flohr and Werner, 2023). Another scholar who contributes an important critique in this context was literature and ethnic studies professor Fatima El-Tayeb. In her 2020 article, *The Universal Museum: How the New Germany Built its Future on Colonial Amnesia*, El-Tayeb critiques the Humboldt Forum as emblematic of Germany's *colonial amnesia*, for its

failure to confront its violent colonial histories, evidenced by how the project seeks to frame ‘non-European’ art and objects as part of “universal” cultural heritage (El-Tayeb, 2020).

What this shows is that *colonial amnesia* in the last two decades has become a common buzzword to describe how Germany, at large, has engaged with its colonial history and its legacies. This narrative has become common place in popular and media discourse, by critical observers and commentators, as well as in scholarly investigations. It has been applied to specific events and circumstances, such as, especially, the OvaHerero and Nama genocide, and more recently the *Humboldt Forum* in Berlin. Whilst some critics have rejected this assessment of public non-engagement and neglect of colonial histories and memories, the *amnesia* narrative prevailed to effectively and meaningfully draw public discursive attention to pivotal institutional blindspots and politics of non-recognition.

And yet, the concept has likewise, over the years, shown some significant shortcomings and blindspots itself. Though often discussed via specific examples and case studies, the *amnesia* narrative has frequently been used in a generalising and broad-sweep fashion, in phrases such as “die koloniale Amnesie in Deutschland” (Zimmerer, 2015:22) or “die koloniale Amnesie, die in Deutschland so lange herrschte” (Melber and Köbler, 2018:1). Much in the same way I had used the narrative in my 2018 presentation, this generates the image of *colonial amnesia* as an umbrella covering all of Germany, affecting all of society and all discourse, with limited consideration of nuances, differences, and discontinuities. This has particular consequences, especially when *amnesia* is used in this way in scholarly investigations.

Recently, this has been investigated in detail by sociologist Sahra Rausch and historian Christiane Bürger. Bringing together their recently published dissertation expertise, Rausch on German memory politics related to the OvaHerero and Nama genocide (Rausch, 2023a), and Bürger on the history of scholarly engagement with German colonial history in East and West Germany in the 1960s and 1970s (Bürger, 2017), their 2022 article titled *Ein “vergessener” Völkermord. Der Begriff der ‘kolonialen Amnesie’ als erinnerungspolitisches Instrument in der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Genozid an den OvaHerero und Nama – Konjunktur, Funktionen und Grenzen* investigates the *amnesia* narrative not just as a deficient descriptive category, but to draw our attention to how this phrase has become a trope with discursive agency and power itself.² Not

² Originally in German, an English translation of the article was published in 2024, see Rausch, S. and Bürger, C. (2024) “A Forgotten Genocide? The concept of colonial amnesia as an instrument of memory politics.”, in: Eckl, A.,

unlike other critics, Rausch and Bürger assert that colonial *amnesia* is flawed as a descriptor for postwar engagement with colonial histories in East and West Germany, as it renders elements of critical engagement invisible, in their example, critical scholarship from the GDR in the 1960s and 1970s, which critically examined German colonialism and atrocities such as the genocide in GSWA (Bürger and Rausch, 2022). What constitutes the significance of their contribution and sets Rausch and Bürger apart from previous critiques of *colonial amnesia* is that they continue from this assessment to show the rhetorical agency of the concept. When considering theoretical nuances of the concept, as well as contextual information of when and how the *amnesia* narrative emerged, namely the context of the Cold War and the institutionalisation of Holocaust memory in the 1990s and early 2000s, in the wake of German reunification in 1989, what becomes apparent, is that *colonial amnesia* is not merely an insufficient category for *describing* a lack of engagement with colonial histories in postwar East and West Germany. Instead, they argue it may be better understood as a rhetorical and memory political tool that contributes to *shaping* the marginalisation of critical engagement that the trope ostensibly seems to describe (in their example critical GDR scholarship). What they show is that it is not a general forgetting that has erased these activities but that the *amnesia* narrative itself has contributed to influencing public memory, making critical investigations appear forgotten or absent.

It is this point, the investigation of *amnesia* as an instrument of memory politics, that is the most relevant contribution of Rausch and Bürger's article for my framing here, as it draws attention to the memory political and rhetorical agency of this concept, showing that it is an idea that has power and one that may actively contribute to shaping discourses and processes, in a way that emphasises certain assessments—here, the assertion of a general lack of critical engagement in postwar East and West Germany—whilst undermining other narratives about postcolonial engagement and commemoration in Germany. For Rausch and Bürger, it is critical GDR scholarship on German colonial history that has become marginalised and rendered invisible in this dynamic; but their analysis is further helpful to set the stage to consider the marginalisation of civil society and grassroots activism within these discourses, which this thesis seeks to investigate. In other words, my assertion here is that by framing postwar engagement with colonial history in East and West Germany through a lens of *colonial amnesia* this contributes to silencing and

Häussler, M., Akawa, M., et al. (eds.) *An unresolved issue: genocide in colonial Namibia*. Windhoek: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. pp. 259–281. It can be accessed online via the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/namibia/21437.pdf> (Accessed: 26 December 2024)

rendering invisible the kinds of critical grassroots activities that have been taking place, critically discussing and reckoning with Germany's colonial past and its legacies.

Others before me have considered this point as well. Anthropologist Margareta von Oswald, in her doctoral publication from 2022, *Working Through Colonial Collections: An Ethnography of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin*, on processes of critical reckoning with colonial legacies in museum collections, notes:

The established use of the term 'amnesia' also discredits the work of activists, academics, and cultural producers who have been engaged in rendering Germany's colonial past visible, continuous efforts that particularly intensified in the years 2004 and 2005. (von Oswald, 2022:77)

And similarly, historian Bernhard Gißibl writes in his 2021 book titled *Imperiale Weltläufigkeit und ihre Inszenierungen*:

die wissenschaftliche und aktivistische Beschäftigung mit imperialen Verflechtungen und der deutschen Kolonialvergangenheit im lokalen Kontext in vielen Städten [hat] eine viel längere Geschichte, als es die allgegenwärtige und pauschal verurteilende Rede von der kolonialen Amnesie der deutschen Gesellschaft vermuten lassen. (Gißibl, 2021:17)

What scholars cited above draw our attention to is that whilst the *amnesia* narrative as a descriptor has meaningfully highlighted politics of non-recognition and a lack of *critical* public discourse with German colonial histories for most of the 20th century, the narrative also requires us to utilise it in a more nuanced manner by way of asking, *colonial amnesia* where and for who? Considering this will show us that mainstream public and political inaction has for many decades co-existed alongside a vibrant network of grassroots civic activities that have discussed German colonial histories and its legacies, and that have practiced reconciliatory memory politics across Germany, but these activities have long remained at the margins of these discourses, in part because they may not have fit in with the critiques promoted under the *colonial amnesia* narrative.

Literature review and research ambitions

Initial research for this project commenced in 2020/21. During that time, some significant scholarly attention had begun to build to discuss postcolonial commemoration in Germany, and critical reckoning with Germany's colonial past (Bechhaus-Gerst and Zeller, 2021). The *amnesia* theme was in many ways still a decisive feature in these discussions, but some research had also begun to pay attention to critical grassroots activities, that had been emerging over the preceding decades.

In this section I discuss an overview of relevant scholarly contributions that have preceded my project. Many of these will be discussed in more detail throughout the thesis, as I bring these existing points of knowledge and references into conversation with the material generated over the course of this project. The purpose of this section, therefore, is not a detailed literature review, but rather a sketch of the scope of the research on postcolonial memory activism in Germany of the last few years, signposting key topics, themes, and trends, and outline how this served as my point of departure which also influenced my own research questions and ambitions.

Scholarly attention to postcolonial activism in Germany began to gain momentum following the upsurge in commemorative activities during the 2004/05 centenaries (see 1.1.3.). In the wake of these dynamics, an important article by scholar-activist Manuela Bauche was published in *Phase Zwei* magazine in 2010. Titled *Postkolonialer Aktivismus und die Erinnerung an den deutschen Kolonialismus*, the article was groundbreaking in its focus on activist efforts as a central subject rather than a peripheral note. In this article, Bauche, a historian specialising in medicine, eugenics, and colonialism, combined expertise both from her academic work as well as her own involvement in civic activism. The article outlined key developments, actors, motivations, and ambitions within what Bauche termed the postcolonial memory movement, highlighting the emergence of a vibrant and growing network of postcolonial activism advocating for the remembrance of German colonialism, and underscored the necessity of giving these efforts sustained scholarly attention. Subsequently, research into these activities grew, especially throughout the 2010s. This produced a body of literature that started to outline the important role of grassroots actors in postcolonial commemoration in Germany. Below, I trace some of the themes and key notions in that existing literature.

The first theme is the important relationship between postcolonial activism and public space (Pape, 2017; Schwarzer, 2022), and activists' work on reckoning with remaining 'traces' of colonialism in the present urban landscape (Rozas-Krause, 2019; Schweitzer, 2024). There has been a focus on activism targeting colonial monuments as well as colonial street names (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2019; Zeller, 2000), investigating these activities as potential attempts to 'decolonize' the public sphere (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2017; Jethro, 2022; Zeller, 2004), and as grassroots struggles over minoritised identities, belonging, and heritage (Engler, 2013; Förster et al., 2016; Jethro and Merrill, 2023; Rothberg and Yildiz, 2011). Notably, in the context of street renaming activism, research has also paid significant attention on the kinds of resistance generated against this activism among mainstream publics, investigating these further through critical whiteness approaches (Barwick-Gross and Kulz, 2024; Bönkost, 2017; Hartmann, 2019).

Under the same umbrella of activism in the public sphere, there has been a significant research focus on activist postcolonial and decolonial walking tours (Mancheno, 2024; Pape, 2017; Rozas-Krause, 2019). These are activities where activist hosts take a group of participants on a walk along a route of colonial traces and other significant sites that relate to colonial history, in an effort to demonstrate how German society and public sphere at home was impacted by colonialism. Existing literature has investigated the role of these interventions to counter public 'forgetting' (Trzeciak, 2020) and to make marginalised traces and histories in public settings visible (Bernhard, 2016; Jacobs and Sprute, 2019), as well as traced the communicative and pedagogical features and potentials of these activities (Voshage and Gamerith, 2024; Wappelhorst, 2022). Both challenges to monuments and street names as well as walking tours have constituted the most widespread activities among activists, but also the most publicly visible campaigns, which may serve to explain the preoccupation with these formats in the literature. I investigate these activities in more detail in Chapter 2 and 3 of this thesis.

Alongside the focus on walking tours and street renaming campaigns, there has been research on a small number of activist campaigns targeting large-scale, high visibility institutional projects over their (lack of) engagement with colonial histories and ramifications. The first initiative that received significant attention here was the campaign *Kolonialismus im Kasten*, initiated in Berlin in 2009/2010 as a critical response to the lack of discussion of German colonial history in the *Deutsche Historische Museum* (Kopp and Bauche, 2017;

Bischoff, 2017; Czerney, 2015; Merrow, 2022; Sieg, 2021; Wegener, 2018; Thiemeyer, 2019). A few years later, grassroots activism also began to be recognised as an important influence and critical catalyst in the discussions around the colonial histories of the ethnological collections that were in the course of being moved into the *Humboldt Forum* in Berlin, that was newly under construction starting in 2013 (Bach, 2021; Morat, 2019; Sieg, 2021; Schwarzer, 2022; Steckenbiller, 2019; von Oswald, 2022). I discuss both of these examples in more detail in Chapter 4 on activist *institutional critique*.

Another theme has been the role of grassroots actors in pushing German authorities and political representatives to formally recognise, and to atone and apologise for, the atrocities committed during the OvaHerero and Nama genocide in GSWA (Köbler and Melber, 2004, 2021b; Melber, 2020, 2022; Pape, 2017).

Finally, existing literature has also made efforts to begin establishing the overall genealogy of these activities. As such, the centenaries of 2004/05 and the period of the early 2000s more broadly has frequently been recognised as representing a significant memory political caesura and for sparking much activist activity (Bernhard, 2016; Förster et al., 2016; Pape, 2017; Steckenbiller, 2019), whilst some studies have also pointed to a longer *durée* of these efforts reaching back into the 1980s (Bauche, 2010; Schilling, 2015). It has also been recognised that these activities are promoted and carried out by activists from a range of different backgrounds, histories, ambitions, and motivations, whilst African diasporic activists have been noted to play a particularly integral role across many campaigns and issues (Bauche, 2010; Bernhard, 2016; Förster et al., 2016; Jethro, 2022; Wappelhorst, 2022), therefore drawing attention to the multi-vocality of the movement.

What can we summarise from the above: some relevant and important scholarship was produced especially throughout the 2010s that by 2020 constitutes an important body of work, with several scholar-activists as key contributors (alongside Bauche, also Bernhard, Trzeciak, Bechhaus-Gerst). Taken together these works made significant efforts to establish that grassroots activism needed to be considered an integral and constitutive factor for postcolonial commemoration in Germany. What was notable in these studies was the following: firstly, much research is focused on only some grassroots activities and campaign types, whilst others received less recognition (e.g. walking tours and street renaming campaigns had seen more attention than, for instance, activist exhibition making, and grassroots efforts to restitute human remains and cultural belongings

abducted during the colonial period). Secondly, much research has been very case study focused, as most studies explore one kind of activity and often use one or a small number of key examples to illustrate their analysis. More detailed analytical engagements so far have not yet brought various kinds of campaigns or groups into conversation with one another. Thirdly, most analyses and many chosen examples in existing research have been very Berlin-focused.

My project takes these themes as a point of departure, with the ambition to contribute to broadening the scope of our understanding of this activism. For this purpose, this thesis seeks to centre the activities of grassroots actors as a core of postcolonial commemoration in Germany and as the centre point for research. Whilst my thesis continues to use examples and case studies that are discussed in detail and grounded in empirical analysis, I bring various activities and examples into conversation with one another. Firstly, as various case studies of similar activities are investigated in tandem, and secondly, as various kinds of activist activities are discussed alongside one another. This aims to broaden the scope of research beyond some of the key activities focused on so far and aims to generate something like a map of this grassroots activism, showing what these actors are doing, how, and why, with what shared ambitions and characteristics, and with what impact. Furthermore, this approach attempts to reduce the Berlin focus established thus far, by considering examples from various regions. Additionally, my thesis seeks to further sketch the genealogy of this movement. Though I recognise the early 2000s as a memory political caesura, and the 1980s as the starting point for much civic action, as others have established before me, I also reach back into the 1960s as a foundation upon which activism began to grow, as well as add more detail to previous efforts to establish timelines and historiographies. Lastly, this thesis also intends to expand our understanding on the actors involved in these campaigns, focusing on the heterogeneity and multi-vocality of these activities, to outline different actors' ambitions, perspectives, and experiences, noting where these generate potential tensions and challenges, as well as considering how these are working together in solidarity. What this thesis hopes to convey, most importantly, is that grassroots activism in this realm has both an immensely broad scope and long trajectory, as over the past forty years, it has continued to grow and establish itself as a pivotal influence on postcolonial commemoration and related discourses in Germany. My thesis aims to recognise and acknowledge activists' efforts as well as the labour, resources, and commitment that have been necessary to shaping these activities and campaigns.

Methodological considerations

Building on these research intentions, below I explain the methodological framework of my research. Of all the aspects of this research, designing the methodological approach was one of the most challenging processes, and the following sections were difficult to draft concisely. After numerous abandoned attempts, I decided to attempt telling this as a story, shaping it as a more or less chronological narrative of the research steps I took over the past four years, what I did, when and how, and weaving into this narrative, my underlying theoretical and epistemological underpinnings and ethical considerations, to explain why I did what I did in the way I did it, from initial preparations to the moment of finishing this draft. The way I chose to write this inevitably results in me centring myself in this section, which can legitimately be criticised (Sultana, 2007). Nonetheless, I believe in the value of making explicit that every thesis represents the outcome of a series of actions and decisions taken by the researcher. The research process is, of course, much more complex than this, but my point here is, that I think it is meaningful to explicitly spell this out in order to emphasise that research does not just happen but is being made to happen by researchers who are accountable for these processes. Further, in telling it as a story, I hope to enhance the accessibility and transparency when methodological considerations can be seen as dry, convoluted, and discouraging for other researchers to read as well as to write.

The first year – preparations and preliminaries

The section above outlined the kind of kind of general research interests and ambitions I generated from the literature review of this activism at the outset of my project. I wanted to learn about the experiences and activities of activists in the movement, what they did, how, why, and with what impact, how they were shaping wider postcolonial commemoration processes in Germany. In order to do that, the only thing I knew going into this was that I wanted to do qualitative research and utilise interviews with activists in the movement as my primary insights to learn about their work. On the one hand, this was my preferred approach personally, as this likely promised to generate the most interesting learning points. Additionally, I knew that the notion of “nothing about us without us” had been, and still was, an important rallying demand within the movement for many years (hamburg postkolonial et al., 2015). This served as encouragement to seek direct conversation with those involved, whilst it simultaneously made

me apprehensive, as I knew I was stepping into a context where, over previous years, academic projects had not always taken steps to speak to activists directly, and in so doing, generated an understandable and legitimate scepticism and sometimes reluctance in parts of the movement towards academic engagement, as I had gathered from literature, as well as in personal communication with my contacts.

With a lack of previous experience in qualitative interview research, my first year was dedicated not just to scoping the field, reading materials produced by activists themselves, and reviewing existing scholarship on this activism and related research in social movement studies, postcolonial studies, and memory studies, but also to exploring methodological literature, and considering questions entirely new to me, about confidentiality, consent, transcripts, feedback, compensation, and more. My perception of interview research was that of a terrain with significant (potential) power differentials between researcher and participants, therefore, I turned primarily to feminist and decolonial methodologies, as critical disciplines sensitive to power differentials, hierarchies, and balances, to learn more about and to guide my research design. As I was reading various methodological literature, two epistemological principles resonated strongly with me about the nature of the research process, and the interview encounter specifically, which resulted in significantly shaping the practical steps I took in my research.

The first learning point was the understanding, shared by feminist and decolonial scholars, about the situatedness and partiality of knowledge and knowledge production, i.e. the recognition that there is no such thing as neutral or objective research or knowledge, and that knowledge production is always situated in a particular context and impacted by the researcher, and therefore, that all research and knowledge produced is always incomplete and partial. In feminist methodologies, these ideas are commonly attributed to Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding, who in the 1980s and 1990s raised vital questions about the relationship between science and feminism and defined what would become known as standpoint feminism to articulate the relationship between a subject's location in society (taking social hierarchies such as class, race, and gender into account) and their ability to know and understand the world (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2016; Wylie, 2003, 2012). Decolonial thinkers have enunciated the idea of "geopolitics of knowledge" (Grosfoguel, 2002, 2011; Lugones, 2007, 2010; Mignolo, 2009, 2011; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018) in order to demonstrate how knowledge production and

research are situated along “the axis of the colonial difference produced by the colonality of power” (Grosfoguel, 2002:208).

The second learning point was, that, as anticipated, the research encounter held significant potential for imbalanced power hierarchies between researcher and interviewees. Interview settings, as most interactions as part of a research encounter, are socially constructed encounters, impacted and shaped, to differing degrees, by the agency of those participating in the encounter. Interviewees hold significant agency over the research process, as they decide whether or not to participate, and may opt to participate for a variety of different reasons. Further, participants influence the flow of research questions by choosing whether or not to answer, as well as what kinds of answers to provide, therefore substantially shaping subsequent research directions. Interviewees choose what details to disclose during an interview, therefore, the interview content is always substantially impacted by participants’ choices. Thus, interviewees hold a significant influence over the portrayal of reality that the researcher will obtain in the encounter. These dynamics account for the active, and in many respects, self-determined nature of interviewees’ participation in the process (Miller et al., 2012).

Nonetheless, the interview is an imbalanced and not always egalitarian encounter, with a significant share of the decision power remaining with the researcher in the interaction. It is the interviewer (most times at least) who decides to conduct the research in the first place; we choose the topic, the question, the angle to take on it, the methodologies, possibly the institution and the funding. We are the ones to decide who has the opportunity to participate, as we decide on the target group and whom to approach for participation. Even in projects reliant on volunteer participation, we impact participation by how we define the target group and advertise the project. Ultimately, we compile the research into a format of our choice and decide how and whom to share it with. Lastly, we ideally gain an advancement of our careers upon completing the research. Though our academic context, personal, and professional contexts may curtail these decisions, most researchers’ positions are further emboldened through their affiliation with an academic institution, which in most societal contexts are seen as authority figures, which may not just increase the researcher’s credibility externally, but may also impact power differentials internally, as it may contribute to participants feeling a sense of obligation to participate or provide certain information (Enosh and Ben-Ari, 2016; Thompson, 1996).

From these readings, four learning points can be distilled that were important for my research. Firstly, learning more about the situatedness of knowledges and epistemic differences of social locations helped to (re)articulate the intentions of this research. It is my argument that there is value in studying grassroots activism in this field, not merely as an argument of representation, or to articulate a diversity of perspectives; rather, there is a need to study these perspectives, that are still frequently located on the margins of these discourses, and outside official realms of decision power, because they hold distinct and necessary epistemic value. Their perspectives offer value and insights into these debates, which are not represented by other actors.³

Secondly, it enhances transparency about the ambitions of this research. The research I present in this thesis represents a limited perspective of postcolonial memory activism. It does not claim to craft an extensive or complete representation of movement activities, not merely as a question of scope and limitation, but as one of impossibility. Further, this research encompasses *my* partial perspective on this activism; a perspective I have formed based on my understanding of what my interviewees chose to share with me and how I interpreted what they shared. Scholarship in situatedness and the geopolitics of knowledge reminds us that there cannot be a complete and comprehensive scholarly representation of anything, therefore guiding us to avoid universalising and generalising knowledge claims, with likely harmful and delegitimising consequences.

Thirdly, it helped me to understand that a solid foundation of reflexivity to situate my own location relative to the research topic and my prospective research participants was a necessary ethical research practice. If I as the researcher actively impact the knowledge production process, and this process, including the interview encounter, is shaped by hierarchical imbalances and power differentials, taking this seriously requires me “to epistemologically account for the geopolitics of [my] own knowledge production” (Grosfoguel, 2002:209). In other words, ethical research requires a solid foundation and consistent practice

³ It is this argument that distinguishes standpoint feminist approaches and epistemologies of situated knowledges from relativism. Haraway argues, standpoint feminism and the notion of situated knowledges are “hostile to various forms of relativism” and emphasises, “[r]elativism is a way of being nowhere while claiming to be everywhere equally” while “[t]he alternative to relativism is partial, locatable, critical knowledges” as proposed by standpoint feminism (Haraway, 1988:584). Harding adds, standpoint feminism does not “accept the equal validity of any and all knowledge claims” (Harding, 2009:195). It is precisely the argument in the idea of situated knowledges and standpoint feminist epistemologies, that different social locations hold different epistemic value, and that some, due to their social location hold an epistemic privilege over others.

of research reflexivity, in which we account for our own social location relative to our research and research partners, what values and experiences we bring to the project, and how that shapes our interpretation of the knowledge that is shared with us and the output we produce (Finlay, 2002; Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2012; Sultana, 2007).

Research reflexivity has rightfully been critically interrogated for its potential to overemphasise and to centre the researchers' subject position, taking away the focus from the research topics and participants' experiences (Doucet and Mauthner, 2007), for creating an overconcern with positionality that may cause scholars to avoid qualitative fieldwork and engage with marginalised perspectives (Sultana, 2007), and for becoming a self-indulgent practice of navel gazing for researchers (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2012). Furthermore, critiques have been articulated about reflexivity being a static and superficial practice that struggles to move beyond merely naming or acknowledging the researcher's various identity markers and towards more seriously engaging with how these aspects influence our research (Doucet and Mauthner, 2007). Despite these critiques, and simultaneously because of them, reflexivity remains a pivotal practice "to reflect on how one is inserted in grids of power relations and how that influences methods, interpretations, and knowledge production" (Sultana, 2007:376).

For me, reflexivity became a practice in two parts; before I engaged with "the field" I took time to consider carefully my own position relative to the research topic and my prospective participants. I was born in former East Germany shortly after reunification and spent most of my life in (East) Germany, in many aspects I can count as an 'insider' to the field, and with many of my research participants, I shared a language and a set of cultural norms. My position as *white*, middle-class, University-educated, cisgender woman, with previous experience with grassroots and civic engagement, aligns me demographically with a subset of activists in the movement. At the same time, this also distinguishes my standpoint from other groups in the movement, notably Black German and African activists.

Simultaneously, demographic markers and national belonging are insufficient to describe belonging and standpoint (Sultana, 2007). Further, it is pivotal to distinguish between essentialist identity markers and standpoint, the latter of which is better understood as "an achievement, not an ascription" (Harding, 2009:195) that requires reflective and political effort, to interrogate ideological norms that underpin social relations (ibid). This underscored the importance of vigorously engaging with the knowledge others shared with me, and at the same

time understanding the kind of reflective work necessary to understand the realities others experience shaped by their social location distinct to mine. Subsequently, I made reflexivity an ongoing practice, mainly through detailed field notes, voice notes to myself, and reflexive journaling before and after every interview, alongside my transcription, processing, analysis, as well as during my writing up. I will weave more of this reflexivity into my considerations of the practical steps taken in the subsequent sections.

Lastly, understanding that the research encounter held significant potential for power imbalances, for extractivism and imbalanced research relationships, helped me understand the responsibility I had for recognising that there may not be one way of doing ethical, non-extractivist research (Doucet and Mauthner, 2007), and at the same time, considering steps that can be taken in order to identify moments and elements of the research process where some of the control usually held more exclusively by the researcher/interviewer may be shared with others.

The second year – fieldwork and interviews

Roughly, this was the point I was at, with these four considerations in mind, when I started my second year with the prospect of reaching out to others to connect with them and hopefully to secure some interviews. I started off with a long list of organisations, initiatives, student groups, and activist individuals that I had identified as relevant to my research aims. I discuss more in section 1.3. the kinds of actors who make up this movement, their backgrounds, ambitions and motivations; here, I want to briefly elaborate who I included into the scope of ‘postcolonial memory activism’, both to clarify terminologies and to make explicit my decision on how to define my target group for interviews, which others undoubtedly may define differently.

Let me start with the second part of that phrase. Informed by the recent boom in studies into memory activism (Berger et al., 2021; Chidgey, 2018; Daphi, 2017; Daphi and Zamponi, 2019; Hajek, 2013; Gutman, 2017a, 2017b; Reading and Katriel, 2015; Rigney, 2018, 2021; Till, 2008; Zamponi, 2022) and influenced crucially by the conceptual work of Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg, I understand *memory activists* as those actors “who engage in the strategic commemoration of the past in order to achieve or prevent change in public memory by working outside state channels” (Gutman and Wüstenberg, 2022:1071). For memory activists, memory and commemoration are both the tool of their work—they use memory narratives,

commemorative practices etc as part of their activist instruments—as well as the prospective outcome of their work—they aim to generate, change, undermine certain commemorative narratives or public expressions of memory in society. Their work is taking place, at least in significant parts, publicly, and often in relation with other public actors (ibid).

As for the first part of the phrase, the definition of *postcolonial* itself has long generated controversy and discussion (Ashcroft, 2017; McClintock, 1992; Moore-Gilbert, 2000; Parry, 2004); here, let me say that my use of *postcolonial* goes beyond a temporal understanding (Hall, 1996; Shohat, 1992) and refers, to a critical (non-revisionist) understanding of modern European history, that recognises colonialism as a system of structural injustice and contests resulting disparities (Loomba, 2010; Young, 2016), that privileges an investigation of the lasting legacies and impacts of colonialism beyond the formal colonial period (Fanon and Sartre, 2001; Mbembe, 2019), that validates the perspective and epistemic authority of those formerly colonised to their experiences (Mbembe, 2001; de Sousa Santos, 2016, 2016), as well as interrogates the former colonisers' implicatedness and the repercussions of colonialism on their own societies structures, landscapes, and relationships (Said, 1978, 1994).

Taking these understandings together, those I had identified as relevant for the scope of my research were non-state actors, initiatives and individuals, who were engaged in public efforts to address and reexamine the collective memory of German colonialism and its legacies, in a way that promoted a more critical perspective towards these histories, which recognises injustice and ongoing inequalities, values descendant communities' perspectives, and takes accountability, through commemorative work as well other public engagement activities. Based on this approach, there were about 100 contacts on that list which I had started collating since the beginning of my research. I was helped in this approach by the fact that many organisations and initiatives engaged in this work shared a common way of naming themselves, that is by indicating a local reference like a city name followed by the indicator “postkolonial” (see 1.1.3.), but the list also included several other organisations and individuals engaged in these activities who did not label their work like this.

I started reaching out to contacts in spring 2022. Some of these were personal contacts, people who were active in the movement who I knew from my time at University, who I had met since starting my research and through friends engaged in similar, related civic spheres. Some initial relationships were based on these personal contacts, some of whom became interview

partners as well as referred me to other contacts (snowball sampling). The majority of contacts were personally unknown to me and I was unknown to them, so I reached out to them without a preexisting (in/direct) relationship. Initial contact in almost all cases was made via a brief email in which I introduced myself and my project and asked if the recipients were interested in learning more and/or collaborating with me. For my project, I was hoping for approximately 20-25 interviews. Hence, from 100 potentials, I reached out to ca 70 individuals and initiatives. I chose to exclude initiatives for whom I was unable to find contact details and those that were no longer active.

Whilst emailing was quick and easy, I was aware that cold emails from an unknown contact would likely not generate the most responses. With all organisations and individuals that I reached out to, I noted beforehand whether they had any public events or activities coming up, like walking tours, exhibitions etc. If that was the case, I emailed to ask their agreement for me to participate or come along. My primary intention with this was to make personal contacts and to demonstrate to prospective interviewees my genuine interest in their work and activities, by attending or joining in (Cohen et al., 2017; Duncombe and Jessop, 2002; Gillies and Alldred, 2012). As a result, I attended walking tours with *Decolonize Erfurt*, *Postcolonial Potsdam*, and *Freiburg Postkolonial*; I also attended the *Dekoloniales Flanieren* and the *Antikoloniales Amofest* in Berlin in 2022. I participated in a guided walkthrough of the *ZURÜCKgeschaut* exhibition at Museum Treptow in Berlin in June 2022, attended the *ReTelling DOAA* public opening at GfzK in Leipzig in October 2022, and visited the *Marejesho* exhibition at Tat in Berlin in November 2023. Lastly, I attended internal plenum/organisational meetings with *Leipzig Postkolonial* and *Göttingen Postkolonial*. With each of these I made my research interest known to organisers beforehand. Whilst participant observation was not a methodological approach of my work, these events were personally interesting, as well as meaningful to establish contacts and relationships. During these activities I generated a range of fieldnotes and personal reflections, which I refer back to at different moments during my thesis.

With these approaches, from the approximately 70 contacts I reached out to, 22 became interviews (see more detail in the next paragraph). A further 20 responses indicated an interest in the project and the potential idea to collaborate, with most of them there was some back and forth via email and in some instances an informal chat, but then the interview was not facilitated, primarily due to participants' logistical restraints. The remainder of my attempts to

connect, approximately one-third of my emails, remained unanswered. Given the above I can assume that capacities and time commitments will have been a key factor with these unanswered requests. At the same time, I have to consider that at least some individuals I approached left my email unanswered because they were not interested in collaborating with me.

As noted above, 22 individuals voiced an interest in being interviewed and in collaborating with me for my project. By the point of this expression of interest, usually there had been some back and forth via email or other communication. Once an individual had agreed to consider an interview, I shared a more detailed and formal invitation, which included a succinct summary of my request and a copy of my *Research Participation Agreement*. Drafting this agreement had taken me a long time, mainly because I was seeking to balance my desire to be hyper transparent about myself, the project, the intentions, and about what would be involved in participation, with knowing that I would need to be mindful of how much time commitment I was asking of my interviewees to read the information I shared. In the end, I opted for an agreement in two parts; the first was detailed information about the project, myself, my intentions, and the interview process. I structured these as numbered questions and bullet point answers in the hope of enhancing readability. At the start of the document, I asked my interviewees to decide for themselves how much of this information they would like to read, depending on their interest and capacities. In the second part, my research agreement asked interviewees' decisions on some necessary questions. Unlike the contextual information, this section was signposted as mandatory for interviewees at the top of the agreement. Here, I asked interviewees for their consent as to their participation, about audio-recording for transcription purposes, about confidentiality, about feedback after the interview, and about data storage. With these two parts, my agreement was longer than most I have seen elsewhere, yet this option, to me, felt the closest to honouring my commitment to transparency whilst leaving it up to my interviewees' agency how much time and attention they would like to invest. In this I was also trying to take seriously, and respond to, the complicated nature of consent. Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical research, but at the same time, far from straightforward, as it requires us to negotiate questions such as what is involved in the participation, what kind of information needs to be shared, what is the researcher committing to as part of the encounter (Leavy, 2014; Miller et al., 2012). Once the participation agreement was shared and signed, I

scheduled an interview in which I prioritised flexibility to respond to interviewees' availability and schedule. Most interviews were conducting online via zoom, which was in part due to participants' logistical preferences, but also because I was not able to be physically present in Germany for the entire fieldwork period.

Each interview began with a confirmation about logistics and consent, as well as an invitation for participants to ask me any questions about the research project or myself as the researcher (Gillies and Alldred, 2012). For me this was not merely necessary to make sure that interviewees have all information they need to commit to the interview, but also an ethical research practice, to be forthcoming about myself and my research role (ibid). Several interviewees responded to this positively, in some instances, taking a whole 30 minutes to quiz me before we started the interview, which, in my experience significantly shaped a more trusting research encounter. Following these preambles, the interviews themselves proceeded in a semi-structured fashion; I did not have a strict questionnaire but followed a topic guide and a broad list of themes and topics (Blee and Taylor, 2002). Selection of topics and questions depended as much on my pre-research about the group/individual I was speaking to (making sure to ask them about specific aspects or campaigns their group was involved in) as well as on the flow of the conversation (Blee and Taylor, 2002; Cohen et al., 2017; Magnusson and Marecek, 2015). I also asked interviewees to bring their own topics to discuss, and at the end of each interview I asked them whatever they would like to add (Magnusson and Marecek, 2015).

The semi-structured approach allowed for both consistency, as I started with similar themes and opening questions, as well as flexibility, as I was able to adapt to my interviewees. This means that in some respects, my interviews differed significantly from one another. Most were 1-1 interviews, three interviews were conducted as a small group, with two interviewees together from the same activist group. All but four interviews were conducted online via Zoom; in most cases a face-to-face encounter had taken place beforehand but online interviewing was more suitable for logistical purposes. On average, interviews lasted about 75 mins and discussed a range of topics, including the interviewees' personal background and motivation, organisational features of whichever group they were involved in, key campaigns, successes, and challenges. In one instance, the interview lasted 100mins and discussed twenty years of activism work, whilst in another instance, the interview lasted for 30mins and critically discussed only one specific museum project.

The overall fieldwork process was not linear but iterative, i.e. I began reaching out/making contacts in early 2022, started interviewing in the spring, yet continued writing new emails and making new contacts throughout the whole calendar year. In some instance, this was snowball sampling, as existing interview partners helped me make new connections, but the staggered approach was also intentional so that I could be flexible and respond to emails in a quick fashion and be available to interview when it was suitable for my research partners. I conducted my final interview in December 2022.

Another question I had asked in my research agreement was that of permission to audio record the interview, to which all of my interviewees agreed. These recordings were used exclusively for transcription purposes and not published. I began working on transcriptions whilst still conducting interviews. I did these ‘by hand’ without the use of transcription software. This was partly for data protection reasons but also due to the fact that at the time there was no actually good software available for German transcriptions. I transcribed the interviews as “intelligent verbatim”, i.e. a way of transcribing that focuses on the meaning, whilst making light edits to reduce filler words, repetitions and non-verbal expressions, in order to produce a more concise, more readable transcript.

As part my participation agreement, I had asked my interviewees about what kind of feedback they’d like to receive after the interview, which included an option to get access to a full transcript of their interview, with the option to read, edit and comment, and to strike out what they wished to amend. Let me stay for a moment with the points on transcripts. Again, transparency about the research process and sharing authority as much as possible were key ambitions in my work, yet how to do this and how to balance this with resources and feasibility was challenging. Ultimately, I decided to offer access to a full written transcript to each individual participant—provided consent had been given to record the interview—as it appeared as the only appropriate manner for me to ensure some of the control over the content of the interview is shared with my participants. Further, I considered how I might enable participants to feel like they are consenting in the most genuine way to an interview process of which the outcome is unclear at the beginning of the process. To enable participants to feel more comfortable to answer as openly as possible, it was a key priority to be as transparent as possible about what their interview record will contain (hence, sharing the transcripts and inviting amendments) as well as what their words will be used for (hence, sharing quotations

and inviting feedback). Consenting to an interview is an immense expression of trust in the researcher. This is especially the case when interview participants agree to the recording of the interview and it was a central concern of my project to be respectful of this trust. About half of my interviewees opted to receive and review their transcripts, indicating to me that at least to some of them, this option mattered. Most of them approved the transcript without changes, some offered minor adjustments and edits.

As a final consideration with regards to the interview process, I offered a financial compensation to each of my interview participants. This was one of the most contested points of my methodology, probably the one that I (over)thought the most, and the one that I have simultaneously remained most confident and most conflicted about. Each of my interviewees was offered a compensation of 50€ which was expressed as an acknowledgment of their time commitment of the approximately 2 hours they dedicated to an interview. Information about the compensation was included in every recruitment email I sent out right from the start, confirmed again with each participant at the start of the interview and paid directly in cash via bank transfer shortly after the interview. All but three participants accepted the compensation. My decision to offer this compensation was based on, firstly, my funding situation: I was being compensated for my work in this project, why should the same not apply to my interviewees? Secondly, a critique of unpaid labour: it would be unjustifiable for me to include a critique of insufficient recognition of these activists' work in my dissertation, while asking them for more unpaid work to contribute to my research. Thirdly, uneven power relations: influenced by feminist methodologies, I considered financial compensation a possible means to bridge the power imbalances inherent in any research setting.

Whilst they have become a commonly accepted method in health and survey research to boost sample sizes and enhance representability (Collins et al., 2017; Fry, 2005; Russell et al., 2000; Weise et al., 2002), in qualitative research financial compensations have remained much less accepted (Cook, 2012; Magnusson and Marecek, 2015), not always transparently declared and generally less embraced (Warnock et al., 2022). Key concerns in qualitative research relate to, on the one hand, *commodification*, the concern that in light of financial compensation, participants could alter their answers to fit researchers' expectations (Cook and Nunkoosing, 2008; McKeganey, 2001), and on the other hand, *consent infringement*, i.e. that, attracted by the offer of financial compensation, participants may no longer feel fully able to

reasonable assess the potential risks of the research and be unduly influenced to participate (Head, 2009; Surmiak, 2020; Tyldum, 2012). Both of these are really crucial concerns that need to be taken seriously, yet in my research setting I found these concerns to be unsuitable/not substantial enough to weigh up against my reasons to offer compensation. Trust in participants' answers is complex; as noted above, a range of factors impact interviewees' behaviour during an interview, and interviewees always consider what to share, how, and why. In this context, it is misguided to single out financial compensation, and to equate a 20 or 50€ payment with 'purchasing' a narrative (Cook and Nunkoosing, 2008), as this so clearly does not represent the value of someone's life story. Financial compensation was offered not as a purchase of their expertise, but as an acknowledgement of interviewees' time. It is likewise oversimplified to assume that a 50€ compensation, in my project, would have enabled me to persuade reluctant participants to engage. The majority of individuals engaged in activism do so unpaid. Whilst this indicates a potential and often reality of financial precarity for many, much more relevant to me here is that this is evidence that these individuals are motivated not by financial gain but political and personal commitment. Further, they are extremely well versed in critically assessing collaborators' intentions and challenging co-optation by others. Without at least a kernel of interest or belief in the project, I would not have been able to convince participants to participate. Against the backdrop of having ruled out these concerns, I remained simultaneously convinced and ambiguous about this decision until the end; one key concern was, for instance, that with many interviewees, their time commitment exceeded the 2h noted above, due to additional communications, reading transcripts, providing me feedback etc; this significantly watered down the amount of the compensation. Yet, I found that offering compensation facilitated, at least, two important benefits. Firstly, it helped to mitigate the exclusion of individuals who may decline participation due to limitations in their capacities, which is not only beneficial, but harmful in reverse, as failing to acknowledge these uneven material realities and considering compensatory payments to negotiate this "will result in data that are skewed towards the experiences of the resourced" (Warnock et al., 2022). Secondly, several interviewees shared with me that offering compensation suggested to them that I valued and respected their time and effort, and, therefore, enhanced the trust in our encounter (Miller et al., 2012). Whilst payments remain complicated and controversial, and certainly not suitable in all contexts, my experiences in response to offering compensation underscore the productive

potential in undermining the persistent default of *not* compensating participants, and in shifting institutional culture towards their justification in different contexts (Warnock et al., 2022).

The third and fourth years – analysis, writing, and shortcomings

One element making a distinct methodological account more difficult is that research is always iterative (Leavy, 2014); I began reading and analysing material as I transcribed it, jotting down notes and observations as I proceeded with further interviewing and transcripts, hence there is no clear distinction between these stages. Formally, I completed interviewing and transcribing in December 2022, and once I had received all reviewed transcripts from back interviewees, I commenced multiple rounds of close reading and coding of the material in January 2023. The first two close reads, during which I compiled notes and possible codes, too, I did on paper printouts, before I moved to use *QDA miner lite* for further coding. For me, this free software was both accessible and intuitive, and while its features were less sophisticated than with other software, it did not require extensive training and, importantly, allowed for the use of multiple-coloured codes. Over the subsequent two months, I conducted multiple close reads, during which a long list of detailed codes, gradually were grouped into categories, and organised by themes and topics (Saldaña, 2016). My research was not interested in fulfilling a specific hypothesis; rather, I followed thematic analysis as I sought to establish both patterns as well as divergences among my interviewees, in order to be able to map out the kind of activities, strategies, and priorities that shaped the activism in the movement (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Hence, I used a range of coding strategies to capture this, including primarily process coding, descriptive coding, in vivo coding, and value coding (Saldaña, 2016).

This period of analysis and coding was challenging; interviewees had answered my questions and shared their thoughts in various different ways, making some interviews more straightforward, more cohesive to read than others. Secondly, being tasked with organising my interview materials, assigning my codes and my interpretations onto my interviewees' words, was a responsibility that needed getting used to. Throughout this process I referenced the fieldnotes and reflections I had compiled around each interview to triangulate what I was reading and identifying in my interview materials. I also continued my research journal to capture further observations, reflecting on any reactions I had during the reading and coding.

Thirdly, multiple close reads and spending several weeks in my data really illustrated the richness of the materials, which was exciting, and at the same time, generated frustration as I knew I would not be able to fully explore and investigate all themes and topics in my thesis (see below). Building on these close reads and codes, I sat down to draft a thematic map (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was, of course, also not a distinct process, as I kept up notes and drafted possible themes and chapter ideas throughout the process. A thematic map was productive to compile a visual overview of the most important themes and topics, allowing for noting of divergences alongside shared patterns; it became the basis upon which I drafted the first outlines for my chapters, which moved me into my writing stages.

Over the subsequent 18 months, I proceeded to draft my thesis, which, like the other stages was a discontinuous and non-linear process, as chapter outlines, themes, arguments, and case studies continued to change and move around. Writing is analysis, interpretation, and presentation all in one, with all of these fluctuating throughout the process. There were practical challenges with this as I worked to keep to timelines and wordcounts; additionally, how to triangulate between interviews, additional activist materials and publications, my fieldnotes, as well as secondary literature, how to bring all these into conversation with one another, remained a learning process. But more so, during the writing stage my key challenge constituted moving away from the ambition to “cover everything”, towards accepting and embracing that this process was about making choices. This thesis represents my partial account of this activism, it reflects the themes that I was able to identify as notable during the process, written from my perspective and in my words.

Twice during my writing period, I provided an overview to my interview participants, in order to keep them updated as to the progress of the project, to share preliminary structures and themes, and to keep communication channels open in case of any concerns, or questions. Both times several interviewees responded with questions, feedback, and encouragements. Towards the end of my draft period, in late 2024, I also reached out to those interviewees again, who had requested to be informed about quotations and/or to read chapter draft (excerpts). Two interviewees proceeded to read full drafts of two chapters (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 5) and provided feedback; several other interviewees responded positively but no longer wished to read drafts.

The above is an account of me giving it my best attempt at conducting ethical, responsible, and analytically meaningful and insightful research; at the same time, it has maintained shortcomings and blindspots. Firstly, there are multiple analytical angles and questions that remain underexplored. These include, for instance, a closer interrogation of the notions of ‘postcolonial’ and ‘decolonial’, how they are used and employed among activists, regional differences in East and West Germany, relationships between these activists and other memory activist movements in Germany, the transnational features and impact of their work, the political opportunity structures impacting the activism, or their use of digital methods and social media. These questions feature in my analysis, yet exploring these in more detail will significantly enhance our future understanding of this work. A key reason why these remained less explored in this thesis is that it was my guiding intention to try to tell as much as possible of the story of this activism movement that I had learned about, for the sake of it being written down. This means that, at times, I prioritised empirical breadth and the inclusion of a greater array of different examples, over providing more in-depth analytical assessments of a smaller number of case studies or questions.

Additionally, I reflected above on my outreach and recruitment process, including its limitations. What this means is that, despite different attempts, there are certain key actors with whom I did not get to speak to directly, for different reasons. This creates a dilemma because leaving these actors and their work out of an account of postcolonial memory activism in Germany would be a glaring disregard. There are, therefore, several examples and case studies that build not primarily on interview data generated by me, but on publications published directly by these actors, or other interview accounts with these actors (including in newspapers). In these instances, these actors were still made aware of the conduct of this project; with some there were email exchanges to confirm their consent with this procedure. It remains a shortfall of this research as it challenged my efforts to speak directly to and with these actors, rather than merely speaking and writing about them.

The structure of the thesis

To conclude this methodological review, I provide an outline of the subsequent chapters. Chapter 1, titled *Introducing the Movement*, serves to frame subsequent investigations. It is comprised of three key sections, including a historical overview, an illustration of multi-vocal actor groups involved, as well as an exploration of wider memory culture contexts in Germany.

The subsequent chapters are thematically organised. They have been conceptualised so that each of them spotlights one key activity pillar of postcolonial memory activism. Each thematic chapter commences with an opening that illustrates an example or experience to set the scene for readers. Chapter 2, titled *Making colonialism relevant: Activist public engagement*, focuses on public engagement and analyses walking tours and exhibitions as two pivotal instruments used by activists to engage mainstream public audiences into conversations and critical reflections about German colonial history and its legacies. This chapter explores the shared aims and diverging methodologies of these activities and demonstrates how they work in a complimentary fashion to make postcolonial legacies *relevant* to German mainstream audiences in order to create stimuli for critical commemoration.

Chapter 3, titled *Grassroots political advocacy: Activist campaigns to change colonial street names*, investigates grassroots campaigns to change colonially themed street names in Germany. This chapter explores the use of advocacy and lobbywork in order to generate effective support from political decision-makers, but also how activist campaigns are participatory and collective, how they attend to distinct politics in choosing replacement names, and how they enhance the understanding of street signs not merely as labels but as active participants in the negotiation of history, societal belonging and identity.

Chapter 4 and 5 discuss two interrelated facets of postcolonial memory activism, as both are concerned with grassroots activities that are critical responses towards the legacies created by the fact that many German heritage institutions, museums and universities especially, have had an intricate historic relationship with German colonialism, and a persistent role in upholding postcolonial injustices in the present. These chapters address this in two ways.

Chapter 4, titled *Institutional critique: pushing accountability for colonial legacies*, analyses activist interventions and campaigns to challenge these institutions to 'own up' to these legacies. This chapter explores different examples to showcase the broad spectrum of

grassroots *institutional critique* that depend on different institutional contexts and activist ambitions. It illustrates how activists navigate the integral and outstanding question of how to effect transformative change within and alongside institutional settings.

Chapter 5, titled *Recognising dispossessed communities and descendants through restitution activism*, addresses these legacies from another direction. This chapter investigates activist efforts that seek to promote the restitution of stolen cultural belongings and abducted Ancestral Remains, that were looted during the colonial period and remain in custody in German institutions.⁴ Many of these activities relate to the same (kinds of) institutions explored in Chapter 4, yet Chapter 5 demonstrates that rather than seeking *institutional critique* and/or reform, these activities are aimed towards wanting to ‘do right’ by those communities who continue to live with the legacies of these dispossessions and to promote a sense of justice and healing for these communities.

⁴ Across this thesis, use the term “cultural belongings” which I learned from LeGall and Machona (2022). Alongside Priya Basil (2021), these scholars advocate for its use instead of “items” or “objects”, still commonly applied in restitutions discourses, in order to undermine “the erasure of subjugation, objectification and denial of ownership that [the latter] terms tend to reproduce” (LeGall and Machona, 2022). “Cultural belongings”, instead, underscores that there are communities whom these *belong to* and from whom these were violently abducted and looted (ibid). Additionally, both “human remains” and “Ancestral Remains” are used interchangeably in this thesis, as both terms are commonly used and accepted by many descendant communities (Fforde et al., 2020b; Reimann, 2022b). Occasionally, the latter term is privileged in order to act as a reminder of family ties and ancestral relationships (Bader et al., 2023; Meloche et al., 2021). Capitalisation serves to underline the subjecthood of the ancestors and their descendants (ibid).

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Chapter 1. Introducing the Movement.

This first chapter is set up to frame empirical investigations in subsequent chapters. I first provide a historical overview of the evolution of this activism starting as sporadic activities in the 1960s and growing into a nationwide movement operating today. Secondly, I explore the kinds of actor groups involved in this activism, illustrating lineages and positionalities, and outlining this as a heterogeneous and multi-vocal movement. Finally, I provide an investigation of wider memory culture processes in Germany as relevant and important contexts in which postcolonial memory activism has been evolving.

1.1. Historical outline: The evolution of postcolonial memory activism in Germany

In this first section, I provide a historical overview of how this activism developed. As I explore key developments and campaigns, and signpost important catalysts and caesura points, I demonstrate the activism evolving across four time periods. The 1960s and 1970s are introduced as a preamble period that sets a foundation for postcolonial memory activism, as radical student groups and internationalist movements in West Germany turn their critical attention to symbols of German colonialism. Many of their campaigns do not yet focus on critical commemoration of colonialism but target colonial symbols as part of their efforts to draw attention to ongoing colonial exploitation, however, they employ similar strategies and choose similar targets that serve as important models for subsequent activist generations. Taking these developments as a foundation, the 1980s present a starting point or first phase of postcolonial memory activism, as I identify several developments that mark a shift towards historical research and explicit commemorative engagement with German colonialism, especially in Hamburg and West Berlin. The 2000s represent a second phase, in which earlier (largely sporadic) activities become consolidated in the first purpose-built ‘postkolonial’ initiatives and efforts to build collaborative structures among different locations. The 2010s signify a third phase, during which momentum moves to an increase in numbers, and an expansion of actors and topics, now across both western and eastern Germany.

This overview serves to intentions. Firstly, to show the long trajectory of these activities, and to contribute to efforts seeking to build a more comprehensive historiography of this

activism, that so far remains underdeveloped (Bauche, 2010; Wegmann, 2019). Secondly, I seek to show how these activities can be understood as a memory movement (Gutman and Wüstenberg, 2022). This category has remained an open question so far, among activists and in scholarship; in this section I provide my contribution to this, showing how these activities, as they start as sporadic activities, that then consolidate into purpose-built groups, expand and diversify their ambitions and focus points, and form long term collaborations and structures, can be understood as a movement as they represent “a sustained, organised, and repeated action that requires enduring commitment from its members” (Gutman and Wüstenberg, 2022)

1.1.1. Targeting colonial symbols in internationalist movements in the 1960s/70s

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of global upheaval. In multiple nations in the so called ‘Third World’ decades long fights against imperial oppression culminated in anticolonial liberation movements that were finally dismantling especially British and French foreign rule. Simultaneously, the USA’s war in Vietnam emphasised the persistence of multi-national imperialism and neocolonial exploitation. These developments echoed in recently divided Germany, with West Germany forming as a liberal democracy and East Germany adapting to Soviet-style state socialism. The GDR in East Germany, during this period, positioned itself as an alliance with those countries seeking liberation, as well as with the Soviet Union’s support of North Vietnam against the US, including through material and financial support of anticolonial movements. Whilst West German political elites, given the recent history of National Socialist aggression were reluctant to intervene directly in these developments, the FRG remained aligned politically and diplomatically with the US and NATO in their operations.

It is in this context, that radical student movements and internationalist solidarity campaigns, that developed especially in Western countries seen to uphold (support for) colonial exploitation, also gained a foothold in West Germany and proceeded to become the first grassroots actors that also turned critical attention to the remnants of German colonial involvement, predominantly in the form of direct-action protests against historic colonial monuments, by student activists (Baum, 2022; Speitkamp, 2005). Across various West German cities, radical students and internationalist solidarity groups, took charge at sites such as the

Kolonialdenkmal in Braunschweig,⁵ the *Train Denkmal* in Münster,⁶ and the *Südwestafrika-Denkmal* in Göttingen,⁷ all of which had been erected in commemoration of colonial regiments, as well as the *Karl-Peters-Denkmal* in Hannover, honouring the 19th century German colonialist,⁸ in attempts to remove these symbols of colonial oppression.

In Hamburg in 1969, German and African students targeted statues of German colonialist Hermann Wissmann (1853-1905) and colonial officer Hans Dominik (1870-1910), located outside the University campus. This became the most prominent example in this series, because this was the first successful toppling case, with visibility further spurred in the wake of the recent 50th anniversary (Boieck and Kirey, 2022; Jokinen et al., 2022). Additionally, students and civic actors also began to promote critical engagement with German colonialism through educational activities. In Hamburg, for instance, the *Hafengruppe Hamburg* conducted extensive research on the relationships between Hamburg-based companies and countries in the ‘Third World’, through analysing conditions in coffee and cocoa trade (Arbeitsgruppe Hamburg-Dritte Welt, 1985). They published their findings in a booklet titled *Schwarzbuch Hamburg—Dritte Welt* and began hosting critical boat tours in the Hamburg harbour, to take these topics to broader audiences. These activities were intended as strategies of practiced solidarity, with solidarity being understood as both supporting liberation materially, as well as via educating public audiences about the ways in which circumstances in Europe were shaping conditions in the ‘Third World’ and about the importance of changing these dynamics, accordingly, starting at the local level (ibid).⁹

These activities represent a preamble rather than a first stage of what emerges as a postcolonial memory movement in subsequent decades. During the 1960s and 1970s, these

⁵ In Braunschweig, local resident Friedhelm Hanse wrote a critical petition to his council in 1968, advocating for the removal of the local *Kolonialdenkmal*, in place since 1925 to commemorate the German colonies, as it represented a symbol of racist discrimination (Lampe, 2022).

⁶ In Münster, the so called *Train Denkmal*, likewise erected in 1925, to commemorate a soldier regiment from Münster that had died during German colonial wars, was challenged by local activists of the *Arbeitskreis Afrika Münster (AKAFRIK)* (Zeller, 2019).

⁷ In Göttingen, the local *Südwestafrika-Denkmal*, put in place in 1910 in honour of four fallen local colonial soldiers, had been challenged since the 1960s, for years without significant response, until in 1973, students with the communist association took charge at the monument and removed the eagle head figure mounted on top, as part of an anti-imperialist campaign (Zeller, 2019).

⁸ In Hannover, civic organisations with the *Chile-Solidaritätskomitee* (Chile solidarity committee) in the 1970s began targeting the local Carl Peters monument, installed in the 1930s to commemorate the German colonialist and brutal founder of German East Africa (Schürmann, 2006).

⁹ More on these early activities of the *Hafengruppe Hamburg* can be found here: <https://www.hafengruppe-hamburg.de/WieAllesBegann.shtml> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

actors did not yet seek to alter the historical consciousness or memory of German colonialism; rather, historical remnants were targeted as means to draw attention to and further the efforts of contemporary anti-colonial solidarity mobilisation. In other words, historic legacies were challenged in place of, and as part of, critiques of present-day colonial oppression and Germany's (indirect) involvement (Lehmann, 2023). And yet they build an important foundation, firstly, because some of the same actors, sites, and strategies continue to play an important role in later activisms, and, secondly, because some of these earlier instances had a critical catalyst effect for subsequent activist generations.

Alongside Hamburg, manifold activities were developing in nearby Bremen. Emerging from the same socio-political contexts of the 1960s and 70s, radical students and grassroots actors targeted the local colonial monument, the *Kolonialelefant*, seeking to rededicate the site into an anti-colonial monument (Baum, 2022), as well as challenging *Lüderitzstraße*, commemorating Adolf Lüderitz (1834-1886), founding father of the colony of German South West Africa (Gißibl, 2021). Additionally, activists advanced educational campaigns, produced critical materials for schools and publications to raise public awareness (Baum, 2022). Compared to other sites, activities in Bremen were to some extent more continuous and more societally wide spread, with the University of Bremen, known as a left-wing critical institution after 1968, the Bremen *Afrika Archiv*, and the *Überseemuseum*, as crucial interlocutors to substantiate these movements (Baum, 2022; Schäfer, 2023). This makes Bremen a memory political exception in this earlier period (Baum, 2022), though in the wider movement these dynamics have been less remembered and less explored.

Notably these critical student movements were concentrated in West Germany and did not develop in this way in East Germany. As the GDR was ideologically aligned with those seeking anticolonial liberation, and supporting these movements (materially), the state, in that regard, was less of a target for critical grassroots action aimed at challenging state power. Furthermore, in general, critical grassroots movements and protests faced stricter state control in the GDR, which hindered their development. Lastly, as part of the GDR's state policy of antifascism and anti-imperialism, many symbols of German colonialism in street names and monuments had been removed by the state, therefore there was a smaller number of symbols providing a relevant target for such critical action (see Chapter 3).

1.1.2. Shifting towards a critical grassroots commemoration of German colonialism in the 1980s

The 1980s registered a shift among grassroots actors that emphasised the need for historical research and an explicitly commemorative engagement with German colonialism. In this section I explore this shift, as well as contextual factors that contribute to this dynamic, to demonstrate how the 1980s can be seen as a starting point or first phase for postcolonial grassroots commemorative efforts, especially in Hamburg and West Berlin.

In Hamburg, an important figure in this shift towards a focus on colonial history, and the need to commemorate, was the historian and former director of the *Eine Welt Netz Hamburg* e.V., Heiko Möhle. Born in 1962 in Hamburg, Möhle had studied in Hamburg and Yaoundé (Cameroon), and was situated in the same internationalist student groups, explored above.¹⁰ Furthermore, he developed a keen interest in German colonial history and its impact, in particular in the Cameroonian context, evidenced by his doctoral dissertation submitted in 1995 on impacts of colonial plantation economy in Cameroon (Langlo and Schmitt, 2011). It was then over the course of the 1980s, alongside his continued involvement in internationalist solidarity spaces, that Möhle focused attention on legacies of German colonialism, especially in traces found ‘at home’ in Hamburg. In the late 1980s, he began to host historical-focused walking tours on Hamburg’s involvement in enslavement, sugar plantations, and colonial exhibitions, encouraging audiences towards a critical commemoration of these legacies (ibid). Building on these walks, he produced a travelling exhibition as well as the landmark publication *Branntwein, Bibeln und Bananen - Der deutsche Kolonialismus in Afrika*, first published in 1999 (Prinzleve, 2023).¹¹ Möhle’s work was pioneering and influential among subsequent activist generations. His focus on local historical engagement focusing on local traces, his efforts to turn this into an encouragement for critical commemoration, and his early use of walking tours, exhibitions, and an edited publication, popularised important engagement techniques and built a substantial legacy (Authaler, interview, 2022; Wegmann, interview, 2022).

¹⁰ In the 1980s, for instance, Möhle was part of a student group during the *Hamburger Universitätstage*, who in November 1984 published a brochure, titled *Hamburg Tor zur Welt dank ‘Dritter Welt’*, and hosted an initial city tour to illuminate these discussions for public audiences (Langlo and Schmitt, 2011).

¹¹ *Brandy, Bibles and bananas - German colonialism in Africa*.

In West Berlin, it was the centenary of the Berlin Africa conference, convened in 1884/85 (Eckert, 2013) that generated a significant catalyst for grassroots memory activities. A key figure in this process was Mnyaka Sururu Mboro, Mchagga teacher and activist from Tanzania, who has remained one of the central actors in the movement to this day. Born in 1951 in the Kilimanjaro region, Mboro came to West Germany in the 1970s for postgraduate study (Memarnia, 2021b). By the 1980s he was part of a community of Africans living in West Berlin, largely communist students and academics (ibid), among whom, they formed a group to discuss colonialism and Apartheid (Wagener, 2020). Growing up, Mboro had an intimate knowledge of colonisation and its impacts, through stories shared with him by family members, including memories of resistance and fights for liberation (ibid). With this in mind, in 1984, Mboro and his collaborators organised a conference “to remember how European leaders divided the African continent and drew their own borders” (Mboro et al., 2020). This conference was the first of its kind, large-scale, grassroots organised commemorative event related to German colonialism, featuring high profile guests including Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (Mboro, 2019). For Mboro, he recalled later, the conference was also a starting point, for what would become his decades-long civic engagement, focusing on combatting the pervasive lack of knowledge about colonialism in German society, fighting remaining symbols of colonial oppressions in street names, and on advocating for reparatory justice for the victims of colonisations (Mboro et al., 2020), as subsequent chapters demonstrate.

There was another important development during the 1980s, which had a significant impact on the developing critical memory work during this period, which is the emergence of a Black German or Afro German movement in West Germany. Black Germans have lived in Germany for decades, even centuries (Aitken and Rosenhaft, 2013; Campt, 2003; El-Tayeb, 1999, 2016; Wright, 2003). In the 1980s, inspired and mentored by African American feminist, poet, and scholar Audre Lorde, based at the Free University in Berlin at the time, Black German women started to form a transnational movement, which nurtured belonging, innovative grassroots practices, and liberatory cultural traditions (Florvil, 2020). Two grassroots associations, the *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland e.V. (ISD)* and the feminist collective, *Afro-Deutsche Frauen (ADEFRA)*, became the backbone organisations for the Black German movement (ibid).

This formation is critical with regards to postcolonial commemoration, because in articulating contemporary perspectives of Black German experiences and community, it is these actors that also turn a critical lens on the German colonial past, examining the lack of reckoning as a key factor contributing to contemporary anti-Black racism. The volume *Farbe Bekennen. Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (Oguntoye et al., 1986), was edited by three of Lorde's students and published in 1986. It was a landmark publication for Black German history and activism (Florvil, 2020), and also pivotal for articulating the relevance of postcolonial legacies not just for Black German communities, but for German society as a whole. In the first part of the book, titled *Racism, Sexism, and Precolonial Images of Africa in Germany*, chapters include discussions on the precolonial relationship between Germany and Africa, early African migration to Germany, colonial heritage, and legacies of colonial ideologies after the formal end of the empire. This work, emphasising the relevance of the colonial experience for contemporary racism, and outlining phantasies that supported colonial oppression, was a remarkable catalyst to this emergent field of critical postcolonial reflections in Germany (Pape, 2017; Wienand and Brandes, 2016).

Editors of the volume were Katharina Oguntoye, Dagmar Schultz, and May Ayim, the latter of whom especially became a central figure for Black German activism and critical commemoration of German colonialism. Born in Hamburg in 1962 to a *white* German mother and a Ghanaian father (Florvil, 2020), she grew up in a *white* German adoptive family in Münster, from whom she got the nickname May and last name Opitz. Her upbringing was shaped by a strict parental regime, persistent anti-Black racisms, and exclusion (ibid:115). She studied at the University of Regensburg (ibid), before moving to West Berlin in 1984, where she found a sense of belonging among Black German and other marginalised communities (ibid). She became a poet and writer, from 1992 under the name Ayim, after her Ghanaian father, and was involved in various transnational activist spaces (ibid). At the same time, Ayim suffered from depression, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and her life remained shaped by hardships and racism (ibid:126). On 9th August 1996, she decided to end her life by suicide (ibid). The impacts of German colonialism on discourses on race and identity were pivotal in Ayim's work. The maintenance of racist language in colonial street names, for instance, in her words, was testament to the fact that racist thinking remained accepted in German society (Kopp and Krohn, 2013). Starting in the 1980s, her legacy has lasted and grown, making Ayim an

integral figure for both the Black German movement and an important catalyst for critical commemoration (Hügel-Marshall et al., 2021). The 1980s, stimulated by these multiple dynamics, encouraged a significant shift in critical civic activities, which form the starting point for what becomes postcolonial memory activism. Alongside important continuities, especially in the influence of internationalist solidarity movements, during the 1980s, actor groups and engagement modes expanded, moving towards a more sustained and long-term engagement.

1.1.3. Consolidating a civic postcolonial memory movement in the 2000s

Building on the 1980s, this section explores the consolidation of activities during the 2000s, that by the end of the decade resulted in the emergence of a postcolonial memory movement (Bauche, 2010). The first relevant dynamic is that Berlin became an epicentre for civic activity, as African and Afro-diasporic activists intensified their activities through commemorative efforts related to three pivotal anniversaries. The first key date is the 120th anniversary of the Berlin Conference of 1884/5. Similarly to commemorative events in 1984, African activists across Berlin came together in 2004/05 for a large-scale grassroots conference (ibid). Hosted over four days in mid-November 2004, the *Anticolonial Africa Conference* exceeded many events that came before, in scale of its audience with 300 people in attendance, and in the scope of topics that were discussed, including demands to end current wars in Africa and cease military involvement, to dismantle colonial ideologies still perpetuating racial hierarchies, as well as a push for reparations and restitutions, and concluded with a protest rally outside the Bundestag on 15th November 2004 (FFM, 2004; Stock, 2005).

Additionally, activists installed a memorial plaque on site where the historic conference had taken place, in Wilhelmstraße 92 in central Berlin, which was campaigned for most notably by the *Afrika Forum e.V.* and chairperson Victor Dzidzonou, with an inscription reading “Erinnern, versöhnen. Gemeinsam Verantwortung tragen für unsere Zukunft”.¹² It was the first plaque critically addressing German colonialism in Berlin and has since been an important critical learning sites for fellow activists and passersby (Decolonize Berlin e.V., 2021b; Rozas-Krause, 2019).

¹² “Remembering. Reconciling. Bearing United Responsibility for our Future”

The second important date was the centenary of the German genocide against OvaHerero and Nama people in German South West Africa (GSWA) between 1904-08. GSWA had been a German territory since 1884, established on a foundation of violent displacement, Indigenous dispossession, racial segregation, and heavy taxation (Zimmerer, 2008; Zimmerer and Zeller, 2003). In 1904, local communities resisted against this regime, under OvaHerero leadership Samuel Maherero. German colonisers responded by launching a colonial war (Hull, 2013), which culminated in a genocide, as concentration camps, starvation, and mass killings caused more than 80,000 deaths, nearly annihilating OvaHerero and Nama communities (Rausch, 2022; Zimmerer, 2008). OvaHerero and Nama representatives demanded a formal recognition and apology since Namibian independence in 1990 (Bürger and Rausch, 2024; Kössler, 2015; Rausch, 2023b), as the German government long resisted compensation demands and commemorative efforts (Bauche, 2010). In this context, it was memory activists who stepped into this vacuum to mark these histories and underline political demands (ibid).

A key figure in these efforts in the early 2000s was and remains the activist Israel Kaunatjike. Born in 1947 in Okahandja, the OvaHerero capital in today's Namibia, Kaunatjike grew up in Namibia when it was under South African apartheid rule (which had succeeded the German colonial regime in Namibia) with racial segregation dictating everyday life, prompting him to join the SWANU resistance movement for Namibian independence. In the 1970s, he obtained political asylum and settled in West Berlin (Kaunatjike, interview, 2022). It was the wake of Namibian independence in 1990 that prompted Kaunatjike to research Namibian history and learning about German occupation and the colonial genocide (ibid). From the 2000s onwards, he became a leading figure in the civic efforts to make these histories known, and to lobby the government for formal reparation: “[w]ie so ein Motor [haben wir] diese ganze Geschichte in Gang gesetzt. Seit 2004 haben wir daran gearbeitet und bis heute, ohne Pause” (ibid). In 2004, alongside his friend and movie maker Martin Baer, he produced first documentary film about the colonial war and genocide against the OvaHerero, which is titled *white ghosts*.¹³ Additionally, Kaunatjike organised and joined several protests and commemorative gatherings to publicly mark these memories, often together with other African and Afro-German activists. In addition to a protest outside the *Neue Wache* in Berlin in June

¹³ The documentary movie can be viewed online on vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/whiteghosts> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

2004 (Zeller, 2019), in August 2004, activists commemorated the brutal *Battle of Waterberg* at the Columbiadamm cemetery, in Berlin-Schönefeld. This site was chosen because in this cemetery, since 1907 a commemorative boulder has honoured 41 regiment members who had participated in the German campaign in GSWA, whilst no recognition was paid to the thousands of African victims of the genocidal war. With a civic coalition calling for “Erinnern – Deutsche Kolonialgeschichte aufarbeiten”,¹⁴ Kaunatjike and civic and political supports honoured these victims and installed commemorative plaque in their memory which reads, “Zum Gedenken an die Opfer des deutschen Völkermordes in Namibia 1904-1908” (ibid).¹⁵ Public education, commemoration and advocacy for the victims of German colonial rule in GSWA, and a particular focus on the recognition for the German genocide in Namibia has been spearheaded by activists since the 2000s until today.

The third pivotal date is the centenary of the brutal suppression of the Maji Maji uprising by German forces between 1905-08. German East Africa (GEA) was annexed in 1885, followed by German colonisers establishing exploitative forced labour and cash crop systems, and a brutal tax regime, against which local communities frequently mounted resistance (Kuß, 2010). When in July 1905, local healer and resistance leader, Kinjikitile Ngwale, was executed, in response, the Maji Maji rebellion quickly mobilised communities across cultural and language barriers to drive out German rule (Giblin and Monson, 2010). The name references Kinjikitile’s famous proclamation that a medicine mixed of water, corn, and sorghum (known as *maji*), would foster invulnerability from weapons (ibid). In 1908, the rebellion was suppressed brutally in a series of large-scale battles, resulting in approximately 180,000 deaths (ibid).

Mirroring approaches to the legacies of genocide in GSWA, public and political discourses in Germany took little notice of Maji Maji in the early 2000s. Commemorative absences were rectified by memory activists, especially, several diasporic Tanzanian organisations, including the *Tanzania-Network.de*, *Umoja wa Watanzania Berlin Brandenburg (UWATAB)*, and Mnyaka Sururu Mboro, introduced above. Firstly, they hosted a series of commemorative marches, in August 2005, November 2005, and October 2006 (Wagener, 2020; Zeller, 2019). One of these included an artistic intervention by Hüseyin Arda, who installed a temporary memorial composed of large steel sculpture letters spelling MAJI MAJI KRIEG (Zeller,

¹⁴ “Remembering – Working Through German Colonial History”

¹⁵ “In memory of the victims of the German genocide in Namibia 1904-08”

2019) and a confrontational intervention of Tanzanian activists, who chained themselves from neck to toe to represent conditions in concentration camps during the war (Wagener, 2020). In November 2005, the march was paired with a large commemorative conference, titled “Gedenkveranstaltung zum 100. Jahrestag des Maji-Maji-Krieges”,¹⁶ and hosted at the *Werkstatt der Kulturen*, Berlin. With an audience of approximately 300 people, a series of speeches and remarks discussed the historical circumstances of Maji Maji, called out the persistent silencing around these histories, considered the need for joint commemorative efforts of Germans and Tanzanians, and concluded with a performance of the theatre production, “Zauberwasser gegen Gewehrkugeln”¹⁷ by the group Bagamoyo Players (Wegmann, 2005).¹⁸ These developments show how during 2004/05 Berlin became an epicentre of civic memory work. Activists of different communities carved out space to commemorate distinct colonial events, often working collaboratively to support each other’s protests, and campaigns. These activities signified a civic resistance against the vacuum generated by an absence of formal political recognition, shining a light on unrecognised histories, demanding public remembrance and centring the perspectives of descendants of victims and survivors.

Alongside these activities in Berlin, in other cities, earlier sporadic activities began to become more consolidated, as purposive groups began to form, taking a more sustained and long-term approach. In Hamburg, several previously engaged actors, *Hafengruppe Hamburg*, the historian Heiko Möhle, and organisations such as the *Eine Welt Netzwerk Hamburg e.V.*, also came together to place a focus on the centenaries of the OvaHerero and Nama genocide and the Maji Maji uprising. The events initiative *hamburg postkolonial* ran for 14 months between 2004 and 2005, and during this period, these actors, alongside new collaborators, hosted several different guided tours, exhibitions, and film screenings, on a range of topics (*hamburg postkolonial*, 2005a, 2005b).¹⁹ Among the newer contributors, one figure emerges as another leading figure to further critical commemorative and civic activity. Hannimari Jokinen (sometimes HM Jokinen), born in Helsinki/Finland in 1950, is a visual artist and curator, who has lived in Hamburg since 1977 (Kaiser, 2012). In 2004/05 she got involved in *hamburg postkolonial*

¹⁶ “Memorial serve for the centenary of the Maji Maji War”

¹⁷ “Magic Water against Bullets”

¹⁸ A detailed documentation of the conference compiled by the Tanzania network can be viewed online: https://tanzania-network.de/sites/default/files/Habari_Heft/HABARI_2005_4.pdf (Accessed: 14 January 2025).

¹⁹ *hamburg-postkolonial*: <http://www.hamburg-postkolonial.de/willkommen.html> (Accessed: 14 January 2025).

with what would become her inaugural project titled *afrika-hamburg.de*,²⁰ a participatory, interventionist re-installation of the Wissmann statue, which had been toppled in the 1960s by radical student protests (see 1.1.1.), which Jokinen re-erected as a “counter-monument” in the Hamburg harbour. This was a subversive display to confront passersby with the history of German colonial rule, stimulating reflection and discussion by providing different avenues for participants to share their thoughts and commentaries on the project and the statue in person and via the project website. An estimated 300.000 passersby were confronted with the installation, and approximately 35.000 people visited the website to learn about the project, and/or share their comments (Jokinen, 2007). The project remains one with a lasting legacy and impression; it continues to be referenced as an impactful commemorative intervention (GiBibl, 2021; Speitkamp, 2013; Zeller, 2004), and the project website remains a detailed repository of knowledge on colonial monuments and civic commemorations. Jokinen has since been an important co-initiator of several landmark projects in the wider movement (see Chapter 2 and 3).

The initiative *hamburg postkolonial* is a pivotal moment in the development of this activism, because it is the first instance that explicitly uses the label ‘postkolonial’, in combination with a local reference point. This became a pioneering label for critical activities, and creates a recognition factor inside and outside the movement (Bauche, 2010; Wegmann, 2019). *hamburg postkolonial* is the first in a series of many of “purpose built” groups, i.e. an initiative set up specifically to promote grassroots approaches to critical commemoration of German colonial history. With this approach, and their focus on engagement through walking tours and exhibitions, *hamburg postkolonial* became a role model. In the years following the anniversaries and following *hamburg postkolonial*, there is a ‘first wave’ of newly formed initiatives, who share similar ambitions and who use ‘postkolonial’ to position their work and to make reference to one another.

One initiative that is exemplary for this, and that has in the two decades since built an expansive legacy, is *Freiburg Postkolonial*.²¹ This project was founded in Freiburg i. Br., a relatively small city in the very south of Germany, by Heiko Wegmann, who was born in 1970 and is a historian and sociologist. During his time at university in Oldenburg he had a primary

²⁰ *afrika-hamburg.de*: <http://www.afrika-hamburg.de/willkommen.html> (Accessed: 14th January 2025).

²¹ *Freiburg Postkolonial*: <https://www.freiburg-postkolonial.de/index.htm> (Accessed: 14 January 2025).

interest in economic topics and global North-South dynamics, which lead him to a directorship at the *Informationszentrum 3. Welt (iz3w)*,²² a publishing house based in Freiburg i.Br. with a focus on developmental politics and socio-political matters affecting the Global South. Simultaneously, in the early 2000s, Wegmann took note of civic memory activities in places like Hamburg, which stimulated his own engagement with German colonialism (Wegmann, interview, 2022). On occasion of the 2004/05 centenary of the OvaHerero and Nama genocide, *iz3w* produced two features focusing on German colonialism. From this Wegmann expanded the project *Freiburg Postkolonial*: focusing on intricate historical research into local colonial traces and legacies, and into processes of repression of these histories, especially against the backdrop of persistent colonial nostalgia and revisionism (ibid). Starting research in 2005, the corresponding website went live in 2006. The website created an expansive repository of historical and contemporary research, pioneering a hyper-local focus and expanding discourses of colonial histories and postcolonial legacies beyond major metropolises into provincial areas of Germany, to demonstrate their entanglements in colonial expansion. Wegmann built this repository over the last twenty years with support of Julia Rensing, PhD candidate and Wegmann's colleague, and several short-term interns. *Freiburg Postkolonial* has been a leading example for many and Wegmann has supported several networks across the movement (Authaler, interview, 2022).

In addition to Hamburg and Freiburg i.Br., more purposive groups emerged in the later 2000s across various other cities. These initiatives are discussed in detail in subsequent chapters, therefore, here I mention them only briefly. In 2005, a group of employees at the *Welthaus* in Bielefeld, formed a working group to host a small exhibition to commemorate the OvaHerero and Nama genocide, which built the foundation for what in subsequent years becomes *Bielefeld Postkolonial* (Frey, interview, 2022).²³ The group *München Postkolonial* was formed in 2006, following the role models like *hamburg postkolonial*, to research colonial traces and history in München (Bahl et al., 2021).²⁴ In 2007, activities in Berlin were formalised into the association *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.*²⁵ In 2008, the exhibition project *Köln Postkolonial* exhibited local histories in Cologne, initiated by the historian Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst, as a project of

²² Information Centre about the Third World.

²³ *Bielefeld Postkolonial*: <https://spurensuche-bielefeld.de/bielefeld-postkolonial/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

²⁴ *München Postkolonial*: <http://muc.postkolonial.net/> and <https://mapping.postkolonial.net/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

²⁵ *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.*: <https://www.berlin-postkolonial.de/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

the civic association *KopfWelten* e.V. (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2023b).²⁶ In Dortmund, in 2010, the website *Dortmund Postkolonial* went live, as a local historical initiative, similar to *Freiburg Postkolonial*, hosted by the author Detlev Brum.²⁷ At the same time, activists initiated long-term collaborations and lasting collective structures, including regular nationwide network meetings (see 1.1.4.), as well as large-scale campaigns, spanning multiple initiatives (e.g. *freedom roads!*, see Chapter 3), that fostered cross-regional connections. By 2010, following significant momentum generated in the wake of the 2004/05 caesura, and stimulated by sustained government inaction a postcolonial memory movement was being invigorated (Bauche, 2010).

1.1.4. Expanding postcolonial memory activism in the 2010s

During the 2010s, the numbers of groups involved here grew from about 10-15 to more than 60 by the end of the decade. New groups were no longer emerging from existing civic structures but were established proactively building on a growing momentum. This ‘second wave’ not only showed a growth in numbers but a further expansion of actor groups, reaching across different regions, including in eastern Germany, and a growing consolidation of networks and collectives to build lasting and sustainable structures.

The first characteristic of this growth is an increase in groups that emerge out of academic contexts. In 2008, a group of students came together in Heidelberg, to form a loosely organised group named *schwarzweiss* (Authaler, interview, 2022; Bürger, interview, 2022).²⁸ In 2010, a workshop on postcolonial urban research at the Goethe University Frankfurt serves as a catalyst for a group of students to initiate *Frankfurt Postkolonial* (Tutzer, interview, 2022).²⁹ In Leipzig, the *AG Leipzig Postkolonial* arose from an academic reading group in 2011, co-initiated by lecturers and students from history, ethnology, African studies, and cultural studies (Rahn, 2016).³⁰ *Oldenburg Postkolonial* was established as a historical seminar in 2011/12, during which students were tasked with crafting a postcolonial city map.³¹ At the Technical University

²⁶ *Köln Postkolonial*: <http://www.kopfwelten.org/kp/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

²⁷ *Dortmund Postkolonial*: <http://www.dortmund-postkolonial.de/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

²⁸ *schwarzweiss* e.V. no longer has an active web presence.

²⁹ *Frankfurt Postkolonial*: <https://frankfurt.postkolonial.net/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

³⁰ *Leipzig Postkolonial*: <https://leipzig-postkolonial.de/deutscher-kolonialismus/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

³¹ *Oldenburg Postkolonial* does not have a distinct project/group website; but more information can be found here: <https://uol.de/olpostkolonial> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

Dresden, a research seminar resulted in the formation of *DRESDENpostkolonial* in late 2013.³² And, *Postcolonial Potsdam* was formed in 2014, by a group studying English, in the aftermath of an academic conference on postcolonial discourses in Anglophone contexts (Urbanski, interview, 2022).³³ The project *Cottbus Postkolonial und Postsozialistisch* was established as a University project at the BTU Cottbus in summer 2018.³⁴

These are student-led groups that research local postcolonial legacies in self-organised spaces, as well as lecture-initiated groups arising from formal class structures. They share similarities with left-leaning, politically engaged student groups of the 1960s and 1970s, but in contrast, these 2010s student groups are operating with a specific focus on historical reckoning and critical commemoration. Moreover, the formation of these groups testifies to how postcolonial discourses, though they remained niche, by the 2010s, had started to penetrate academic contexts, primarily stimulated by preceding corresponding Anglophone contexts, as well as precursory civic activities across Germany (Prinzleve, 2023).

Secondly, during this ‘second wave’, several newly formed groups started using ‘decolonize’, in addition to or instead of ‘postkolonial’, to label their work. *Augsburg Postkolonial/Decolonize Yourself*, for instance, was organised in 2017, merging *Decolonize Yourself*, a previous critical whiteness initiative, and the historical project *Augsburg Postkolonial*.³⁵ Two other groups started in 2017, *Decolonize Bremen*, as a loosely organised grassroots initiative that cooperated closely with the *ISD e.V.* local group,³⁶ and *Decolonize Erfurt* formed as part of a University project in 2017/18.³⁷ *decolonize Jena*, founded in 2018, was a coalition to collectivise existing sporadic projects in the city,³⁸ followed by *Decolonize Hannover* in 2019,³⁹ and *Decolonize Weimar* in 2020.⁴⁰

³² *DRESDENpostkolonial*: <https://dresden-postkolonial.de/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

³³ *Postcolonial Potsdam*: <https://postcolonialpotsdam.org/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

³⁴ *Cottbus Postkolonial und Postsozialistisch* does not have a distinct project/group website; but more information can be found here: <https://www.b-tu.de/en/migration-conflict-and-social-change-mikowa/research/research-projects> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

³⁵ *Augsburg Postkolonial/Decolonize Yourself*: <https://augsbουργpostkolonial.wordpress.com/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

³⁶ *Decolonize Bremen* does not have a distinct project/group website; but more information can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/DecolonizeBremen/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

³⁷ *Decolonize Erfurt*: <https://decolonizeerfurt.wordpress.com/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

³⁸ *decolonize Jena*: <https://decolonize-jena.de/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

³⁹ *Decolonize Hannover* does not have a distinct project/group website; but more information can be found here: <https://www.instagram.com/decolonizehannover/?hl=en> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

⁴⁰ *Decolonize Weimar*: <https://decolonize-weimar.org/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

Much of the work done in these groups is similar to ‘postkolonial’ groups as they focus on local traces and use walking tours and exhibitions to make hidden stories visible. Simultaneously, most ‘decolonize’ groups, to varying degrees, appear to de-prioritise the intricate historical focus and encyclopaedic approach characteristic for earlier initiatives (Wegmann, 2019), in favour of giving attention to contemporary impacts of unprocessed colonial histories, anti-Black racism, and micro/macroaggressions. Frequently, ‘decolonize’ groups centre an engagement with contemporary lived realities of Black communities and people of colour in Germany, sometimes encouraged by BPOC group members or a group’s association with critical whiteness approaches. Additionally, these groups often appeal to *white* German society to stimulate individuals’ critical self-reflection to reflect on individual implication and to overcome colonial mindset structures (Wilmot et al., 2020).

This shows that the use of ‘decolonize’ in this context is less motivated by an engagement with the Latin American scholarship usually associated with the ‘decolonial’ (Grosfoguel, 2002; Mignolo, 2009; Lugones, 2010; Quijano, 2000), but rather influenced by a tradition formed by Black and Afro-German activists and scholars, explored above, who argue for the recognition of unprocessed colonial legacies as a crucial step in addressing and countering the racist aggression and exclusion faced by Black German and migrant communities. The use of additional labels and approaches, in this context, is indicative of both an expansion of the positions and motivations of activists involved in this movement, as well as of a diversification of ambitions and priorities (Wegmann, 2019).

Thirdly, many of these newly groups emergent groups are now found in the cities of eastern Germany (Wegmann, 2019), including, Leipzig, Halle (a.d.S.), Erfurt, Jena, Weimar, Potsdam, Dresden, and Cottbus. Differing political and societal structures in the GDR, with persistent impacts after reunification, contributed to civil society structures developing differently, in a less extensive and less sustained way, in East Germany. Whereas civil society development in West Germany benefitted from existing formal democratic structures and a more significant trust in institutions, civic associations in eastern Germany, both under the GDR and since reunification, have historically been undermined/underfunded, there was a more significant distrust in political participation and higher levels of economic precarity. These factors have created barriers to volunteer-based and civic engagement (Ebert and Vogt, 2023). These initiatives based in eastern Germany, follow their West German counterparts in seeking to

promote a critical understanding of German colonialism as a relevant aspect of German history, that needed to be reckoned with.

This is not to say, however, that GDR-specific histories and GDR legacies of commemoration of colonialism are rendered invisible in the work of East German activist initiatives, as for the majority of these groups, GDR legacies constitute an important dimension of their work. One initiative reflects this intersection explicitly in their name, *Cottbus Postkolonial und Postsozialistisch*, seeking to interrogate Cottbus' colonial heritage against the backdrop of its GDR, socialist past (Trzeciak and Peters, 2022). Other groups reflect this in their events, for instance, focusing on East German realities of racism, as in *decolonize Jena's* event in 2021, titled *Polyphonic Realities in East Germany – Identities. Activism. Communities*. Other make the cross section of East German histories and anti-racism engagement visible, as evidenced by *Decolonize Erfurt's* advocacy to set up a street named after the East German anti-racism advocate Gert Schramm in place of a colonial general (see Chapter 3). *DRESDEN-postkolonial* has shed light on antifascism as GDR state policy that failed to combat lived realities of racist aggression (DRESDENpostkolonial, 2014). The *Amo Bündnis* in Halle has been actively engaged in critically reckoning with the GDR's commemoration politics (see 4.3.3.) and *Decolonize Weimar* has researched the histories and colonial realities of so-called contract workers from the Global South resident in Weimar in the 1960s and 1970s (Günther and Kirchner, 2022). The group *Leipzig Postkolonial* has explored GDR commemorative politics of simply removing colonial inscriptions, which eradicates pro-colonial commemoration but also fails to stimulate wider societal public commemoration. Lastly, the work of these initiatives is supported by scholar-activism and a growing body of research into the intersection between histories of the former GDR and postcolonial discourses (Backhouse et al., 2022; Bürger, 2017; Hamann and Schubert, 2022; Trzeciak, 2020; Trzeciak and Peters, 2022). At the same time, East German initiatives in particular have faced an increasing challenge to their work due to resurgent far-right control across local governments, undermining progressive grassroots activism through underfunding, persecution, and dismantling of civic structures (Rausch and Bürger, 2024).

A final important dynamic during the 2010s is the investment in creating collective networks and structures, that bring together shared expertise and resources. This includes, on one side, regional collaborations; *Sachsen Postkolonial*, for instance, is a network meeting,

convened in June 2022 and in November 2023 bringing together activists, research institutions, and cultural organisations involved in postcolonial reckoning processes across the federal state of Saxony, to consolidate existing momentum, reflect on challenges, interrogate barriers to civic participation, and plan strategies collectively.⁴¹

Additionally, there are collectives being formed over a shared topical focus. The *Anton Wilhelm Amo Erbschaft* is a nationwide collective, set up by Andrea-Vicky Amankwaa-Birago in 2020. Anton Wilhelm Amo was the first Black philosopher known to have taught at a German university in the 18th century; in recent years his person has developed commemorative meaning for many Afro German and Black German communities and activists and gained significant research and civic attention (see 4.3.3.). Amankwaa-Birago is a cultural scholar and memory activist, based between Hamburg and Ghana. It was her personal and research interest into Black memory culture in Germany that introduced her to Amo and his activities across Germany (Amankwaa-Birago, interview, 2022).⁴² Memory culture, for her, was about making histories visible, but it was also about a transgenerational recognition of these legacies and about creating community structures for commemoration to last (ibid). In 2020, she explained, there were multiple groups working on Amo's legacies across multiple sites in Germany but they were largely disconnected from one another and operating independently from one another (ibid). So, she initiated the *Anton Wilhelm Amo Erbschaft*, a collective project seeking to establish a long term collaboration between the *Amo Bündnis Halle*, *decolonize Jena*, and *Amo Braunschweig Postkolonial*, to generate lasting structures for collaboration, to share resources, research, and to support across events (ibid).⁴³

These efforts, firstly, seek to make these activities more sustainable and accessible. Despite the widespread and rapid growth, this activism has also been shaped by discontinuity and precarity. Many initiatives operate in insecure conditions, often with a very small number of contributors, with rapid fluctuation, without access to physical meeting spaces, or consistent funding routes. Much of this work is taking place “umsonst und draußen und nebenbei” (Wegmann, 2022). Moreover, activists usually participate without financial compensation whilst juggling wage labour and other life commitments.

⁴¹ *Sachsen Postkolonial*: <https://home.uni-leipzig.de/sachsenpostkolonial/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

⁴² Andrea-Vicky Amankwaa-Birago is currently conducting doctoral research into memory culture related to Anton Wilhelm Amo, provisionally titled *Doing Memory: Anton Wilhelm Amo*, which is due to be published in 2027.

⁴³ *Anton Wilhelm Amo Erbschaft*: <https://antonwilhelmamoerbschaft.wordpress.com/home/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

Sarah Böger is a freelance educator and trainer for diversity, anti-discrimination and critical whiteness approaches, and co-initiator of the network *Göttingen Postkolonial* in 2020. Critical postcolonial commemoration, for Böger, is an integral part of democracy, and an essential aspect of critical whiteness, for those implicated in the aftermath of colonial exploitation to grapple with the supremacist structures that persisted and that perpetuate contemporary racism (Böger, interview, 2022). Böger has been involved in social justice activism and freelance work for many years and in a range of civic and institutional settings. Structural precarity, she noted during our interview, was one of the key obstacles to sustainable civic engagement, which is compounded for those with additional caring or related responsibilities. As a single parent, she noted, it is “strukturell unmöglich, (...) gesund, nachhaltig, und finanziell gesichert zu arbeiten” and at the same time to keep up unpaid civic activities (ibid).⁴⁴ It is a constant challenge to weigh up time commitments for paid labour with commitments to value-driven, unpaid civic engagement, with significant impact on social relationships, physical and mental health (ibid). It can also contribute to tensions within groups over commitments, resources, or uneven compensation (ibid). In addition to these personal challenges, the unpaid nature of this activism may furthermore curtail the accessibility of civic engagement, raising questions about, who, in the context of these structural confines, can afford to engage in unpaid activism? (ibid) Collectivisation of resources and efforts enable activist actors to facilitate their own structures in order to counter the constant challenges in sustainability of these activities and successes that have been achieved (Amankwaa-Birago, interview, 2022).

⁴⁴ *Göttingen Postkolonial*: <https://goettingen-postkolonial.de/> (Accessed: 14 January 2025)

1.2. Lineages and actors: a multi-vocal movement

The above outline has noted a variety of actors and organisations involved in this work. In this section, I explore further who is involved in this movement, outlining different lineages, positionalities and relationships. Broadly speaking, there are three lineages of activists within this movement (Bauche, 2010). African activists have, in many ways, been a leading force since 1980s as it was especially their work in Berlin that stimulated a shift towards sustained, long-term grassroots memory work. This group includes an older generation of Africans activists, from various class and professional backgrounds, many of whom with familial relationship with German colonialism, who migrated to West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, including most notably Mnyaka Sururu Mboro (see 1.1.2.) and Israel Kaunatjike (see 1.1.3.). This group also includes a number of activists in countries formerly colonised by Germany, some of whom are descendants of survivors of German colonial violence, who work in collaboration with activists in the diaspora towards recognition and reparation.⁴⁵ The work of these actors has been supported, since 1990s, by self-organisations that formed in many metropolises to advocate for the for the recognition of African communities in Germany.⁴⁶

A second lineage are Afro-German and Black German activists and related associations; this lineage emerged primarily in the 1980s, with the formation of a Black German movement and related associations like the *ISD* and *ADEFRA*. A generation of Black German activists have been involved in efforts ever since, spanning several decades. There is also a younger generation who got involved in memory work through *ISD* local groups or other structures, showing that this group, likewise, is constituted of individuals of various ages, and professional and class backgrounds.

White German activists constitute the third lineage in this activism. This lineage, likewise, reaches back many decades, to those that were part of radical student movements and internationalist solidarity campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s in West Germany, with *white* German

⁴⁵ This includes, most prominently, Sima Luipert, deputy chairperson of the *Nama Genocide Technical Committee*, and Esther Utjiua Muinjangu, chairwoman of the *Ovaherero Genocide Foundation*; as well, more recently, Tanzanian activists who have been campaigning for many decades for the return of Ancestral Remains and stolen cultural belongings (Zane, 2023).

⁴⁶ Organisations include, for instance, *Afrika Haus Farafina* (established in 1993 in Berlin) <https://www.afrikahaus-berlin.de/>, *AfricAvenir* e.V. (2000 in Berlin): <https://www.africavenir.org/en/>, *Sunugaal* e.V. (2005 in Berlin), *Afrika Rat* e.V. (2005 in Berlin) <https://afrika-rat.org/>, *ARCA* e.V. *Afrikanisches Bildungszentrum* e.V. (2009 in Hamburg): <https://arca-ev.de/>, *AK Panafrikanismus* (2010 in Munich) <https://panafrikanismusforum.net/start.de.html> (Accessed: 14 January 2025).

students often operating alongside their African student colleagues contributing to efforts to support anticolonial liberation. A next generation of *white* activists got involved in different ways in the early 2000s, followed by younger generations of those activists who formed leading actors for many of the student and academically affiliated groups that formed in the 2010s.

Bauche (2010) asserts that within these lineages, there are differing priorities that demonstrate not only the broad range of concerns in the movement but also indicate how it can be a struggle for them to be aligned. A primary concern with representation, for example, notable among Black and Afro German activists and street renaming campaigns (see Chapter 3), may be seen as being in tension with concerns over social equality, that may be more supported by African and other migrant activists (Bauche, 2010). Bauche also indicates how an overly encyclopaedic approach to historical research, as in the work of some *white* historian-activists, may insufficiently recognise the contemporary realities of anti-Black racism and discrimination (ibid). For the sake of space, I am not going into a further, in-depth investigation of tensions and challenges related to positionalities and lineages within the movement at this point.

What I focus on, rather, is that the range of lineages indicates that the actors shaping this movement have different relationships to the histories and legacies that form the matter of their activism. One of my interviewees expressed this point as follows:

Es gibt ja (...) Leute, die befassen sich mit Rassismus und Kolonialismus, weil sie sich (...) dafür entschieden haben, und es gibt Leute (...) die können sich das nicht aussuchen. (Palasie, interview, 2022)

Serge Palasie and his work is introduced in more detail in Chapter 2. In this quote, he noted that some actors have a personal relationship through direct impact. For someone growing up Black in a predominantly *white* German society, the engagement with racism and colonial ideologies is not voluntarily chosen, as the confrontation with racist structures, and the resistance against them, significantly shapes and impacts lived realities (ibid). Similarly, for many African activists, an engagement with critical colonial histories is something that is passed down through personal experience and familial relationships (Wagener, 2020).

For many *white* German activists, conversely, the avenues by which they get involved are different. A significant portion of memory activists come to this activism via what could be seen as an academic route (see 1.1.4.), including many who came to postcolonial discourses via

their university study and those who were confronted with the lack of postcolonial considerations during their University learning (Reimann, interview, 2022a; Tutzer, interview, 2022; Urbanski, interview, 2022). Another important route is via critical developmental organisations and ‘Third World’ solidarity engagement (Herrwig, interview, 2022). A smaller number of people in this group have come to postcolonial memory activism via other social justice work, such as refugee support work (Frank, interview, 2022), or through cultural exchange and global volunteering programmes, such as *weltwärts*, stimulating a critical engagement with global inequalities (Anonymous Interviewee Erfurt, interview, 2022).

Whilst African activists and Black German actors can be understood to be motivated, in different ways, by personal relationships and familial ties to the violent histories that are being remembered, or to the lasting impacts in the form of racism and discrimination that have persisted, *white* German activists can best be understood as “entangled agents”, that are activists “who are temporally and geographically distant from the historical events that they reference, but that they nevertheless feel responsible for” (Gutman and Wüstenberg, 2022:1077), or as “implicated subjects”, who “occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm” (Rothberg, 2019). In other words, these activists are socially located in such ways that they structurally benefit from the historical and present-day hierarchies and inequalities created by colonial exploitation, and though they were not themselves involved, they may see themselves, directly or indirectly, as descendants of perpetrators of colonial exploitation and violence, and as a result may “feel responsible for past injustices” (Gutman and Wüstenberg, 2022:1077).

This is important because it underscores that the heterogeneity of this movement does not merely relate to backgrounds and identities of the people involved, but it demonstrates that whilst victim- and survivor-driven advocacy were an important early stimulus and have remained an integral leading force within the movement, over subsequent decades, with more *white* positioned actors becoming involved in this work, the movement became substantially shaped by their perspectives, that are more driven by a sense of historical implication and accountability. This movement, in other words, is driven by victim and survivor memories in as much as it is shaped by the learned perspectives of those who seek to take responsibility for past injustices perpetrated by the wider national community to which they belong, and from which they continue to benefit.

1.3. Considering context: Postcolonial memory activism within wider German memory culture

Postcolonial memory activism as it emerged and evolved over the past four decades has not operated in a vacuum or in isolation. They have been evolving, and continue to do so, within wider memory culture contexts in Germany (and globally). This final section of this framing chapter aims to zoom out to explore these contexts, investigating their relationship with postcolonial memory activism as well as how this has been impacting memory activists' work.

In this section I demonstrate the important societal role held by collective commemoration and memory culture in Germany, which has manifested a societal consensus about the importance of critical collective remembrance, but wherein at the same time, the articulation of various memory claims and narratives has often been contested and fought over. Postcolonial memory activism is situated in this context alongside other narratives, but there are also distinct features and dynamics that have provided obstacles to the articulation of postcolonial memory claims in this context.

Memory culture holds a significant role in postwar German society. This is the result of a long, complicated, and contested process of Germany facing the immense challenge of finding ways to reckon with its National Socialist past and the atrocities committed during World War II and the Holocaust. Immediately after the war in 1945, Germany was divided into occupation zones controlled by Allied forces in the West and the Soviet Union in the East. In West Germany, many attempted to suppress a retrospective interrogation of the National Socialist past (Adorno, 1959; König, 1996; Lübke, 1983). Allied denazification efforts removed many Nazi officials and structures, and the Nuremberg trials held perpetrators judicially accountable, whilst politically, priorities lay with (re)establishing West Germany as a liberal democratic ally (Frei, 1995, 1996; Fulbrook, 2020) and, socially, most West Germans prioritised commemorating their own dead and prisoners of war (Wüstenberg, 2017) over a genuine recognition of National Socialist crimes and the Holocaust. In East Germany, Soviet-driven denazification was harsh and systematic (Frei, 1995). Beyond this, as the SED regime took control over the state's memorialisation processes (Wüstenberg, 2017), it prioritised an integration into the Soviet bloc by focusing on commemorating anti-fascist resistance against the Nazis, which likewise made limited efforts

to acknowledge the crimes and atrocities committed against Jewish and other victims (Müller, 2008; Niven, 2021; Wolfrum, 2008).

It was in the 1960s that these dynamics began to change. Alongside the Eichmann Trial (1961) and Auschwitz Trials (1963-65), a younger generation of West Germans began to question their parents' complicity during the National Socialist regime which gave rise to a critical grassroots movement to interrogate and commemorate the crimes of National Socialism. The work of memory scholar Jenny Wüstenberg has been crucial in illustrating how Germany's engagement with the history of National Socialism emerged out of critical grassroots action, showing how memory activists, in the context of widespread political inaction, established memorial sites, organised history workshops, and developed numerous new ways to commemorate German history (Wüstenberg, 2017). Since these beginnings, critical commemoration of the Holocaust was a political project with memory activists advocating for an interrogation of the past for the purpose of societal progress, to learn from the past in order not to repeat it (Kundnani, 2009). As West German activism reshaped how state institutions and society engaged with these histories, memory culture in East Germany remained tightly controlled by the SED regime, continuing to largely marginalise any commemoration except for Communist victims (Frei, 1995).

In 1990, East and West Germany were formally reunited. This posed the challenge of how to integrate two different memory culture approaches that had developed during division. Throughout the 1990s, Holocaust-centred memory narratives that had developed in West Germany became the dominant framework for the reunited country (Schäfer, 2020). A nationwide memorial concept was established in 1999 ensuring state funding for memorial sites and manifesting a unified state led approach to Holocaust memory culture (Garbe, 2022). Memorial sites of National Socialism in the East were remodelled in order to make room for Holocaust victims that the SED regime had marginalised (Lepitre, 2020). Holocaust education became mandatory across German secondary schools (Boschki et al., 2010; Vitale and Clothey, 2019), and in 1996, the 27th January was made the nationwide *Tag des Gedenkens an die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus*.⁴⁷

This institutionalisation of Holocaust memory in reunified Germany is a hugely significant and progressive process. A critical reckoning with the terrible realities of National

⁴⁷ *Day of Remembrance for the Victims of National Socialism.*

Socialism and the Holocaust became enshrined in legal frameworks, and social and cultural practices, as the notion of “never again” manifested a pivotal guiding principle for postwar generations. Institutionalisation ensured that important commemorative achievements by grassroots actors were recognised and made to last (Wüstenberg, 2017). Throughout this contested and complicated process of finding a reckoning with National Socialism, large parts of German society had come to a consensus about the importance to be critical with one’s difficult past, and to remember.

This institutionalisation of memory culture in response to Germany seeking to grapple with the horrific crimes of National Socialism and World War II, however, also meant that during the 1990s and 2000s, German memory culture developed in such ways that the crimes of National Socialism, the Holocaust, and Jewish victims in particular, were positioned as the primary focus of collective remembering in Germany; and secondly, there was a particular framing of the Holocaust that became dominant, that is, articulating the Holocaust as a singular and unique historical atrocity in order to underline its importance in German historical reckoning. These articulations were pivotal in order to safeguard critical Holocaust memory from right wing and conservative revisionism, relativism, and denial, which had been shown as a crucial threat to critical commemoration during the *Historikerstreit* in the late 1980s (Nolan, 1988; Peacock, 2001; Reinhard Piper, 1987). This preoccupation with Holocaust memory, as well as the particular articulation of the Holocaust as singular and unique, however, at the same time created a context that fostered contentious discourses over the scope of German memory culture.

Throughout the making of German memory culture in the 20th century, there have been conflicts over the compatibility and legitimacy of different memory claims has been contested, and where the scope of German memory culture was interrogated. In the GDR, for instance, Communist victims of National Socialism were prioritised, which left other persecuted groups largely invisible (Müller, 2008). The FRG, conversely, as well as the subsequent nationwide memory culture post-1990, was seen to emphasise Jewish victims of the Holocaust, leaving other victims’ groups unaccounted for, including Black victims (Campt, 2010; Lusane, 2004), queer and trans victims (Ashton, 2023, 2024; Hájková, 2021; Marhoefer, 2023), and disabled victims (Kaelber, 2022; Zwick, 2019), as well as Roma and Sinti and traveller communities (Warnock and Bath, 2023) and their memories overshadowed and sidelined (Brusius, 2022).

Contestations over the scope of German memory culture further intensified after the 1990s, as simultaneously to the integration of a nationwide approach to Holocaust memory, post-unification German commemorative debates made little room for the histories of German division, the history of the GDR, and the victims of the crimes under the SED regime (Clarke and Wölfel, 2011). In the aftermath of reunification there have additionally been contestations interrogating the narrative of reunification as a German success story, by highlighting especially eastern German, queer, feminist, and post-migrant perspectives on reunification (Lauré al-Samarai and Piesche, 2019; Lierke et al., 2020).

To summarise, the wider memory culture context in Germany is one where, firstly, memory at large is of pivotal importance to wider society, and the importance to remember and to critically interrogate one's (difficult) past is recognised as of utmost societal importance and as an integral avenue for future democratisation and societal progress; at the same time, German hegemonic memory culture contexts have been primarily preoccupied with a singular and exclusive focus on Holocaust commemoration, in response to which other memory narratives have been often been fought over and contested, in dynamic and often uneven ways and other memories have frequently been framed as undermining or infringing upon Holocaust commemoration, and sometimes as antisemitic (Zavadski et al., 2024; Zimmerer, 2023).

Now, how does postcolonial commemoration, and postcolonial memory activism specifically, interact with this context? On one side, it has been shown that the established memory culture as it evolved around Holocaust commemoration, has created important backdrops and infrastructures within which commemorative recognition for colonial crimes could be articulated. Jonathan Bach showed how general public awareness post-reunification for the importance to remember genocide in particular, helped enhance the visibility of memory claims for the colonial genocide against OvaHerero and Nama communities (Bach, 2019). Relatedly, Sahra Rausch identified how, because Holocaust memory had generated a “distinctive emotional order”, OvaHerero and Nama representatives have sought to enhance their claims for recognition, by making references between their genocidal experiences and the National Socialist past (Rausch, 2022). What this research indicates, importantly, that there are moments where postcolonial memory claims have been able to tap into existing (memory infra)structures to enhance how they are being understood (Rothberg, 2009).

However, this is not to say, that German memory culture has embraced postcolonial commemoration inclusively and with open arms. Rather, as postcolonial memory claims have been articulated over the last decades, they have remained in a marginalised and peripheral position to other memory narratives. They have developed, in many ways, as counter-hegemonic memories, that have sought to advocate for their space within German memory, alongside a dominant narrative focused primarily on the Holocaust, yet many activist demands and commemorative claims have frequently remained unheard.

To date, there is no state-endorsed memorial for victims of colonialism and enslavement in Germany, nor are these victims recognised at Germany's central memorial for victims of war and tyranny, at the *Neue Wache* in Berlin. There is no nationwide memorial day officially observed to commemorate the victims of colonial violence and genocide. In 2021, Germany formally recognised crimes against OvaHerero and Nama communities in GSWA as a genocide (Wesel, 2021), yet continues to refuse reparations. In 2023, German president Steinmeier formally apologised for colonial crimes committed in German East Africa, today Tanzania (dpa, 2023), but identified Ancestral Remains from Tanzania have remained in institutional custody (see Chapter 5). When it comes to substantive reconciliatory or commemorative changes, commitments have remained vague and inconclusive.

In this way, the articulation of postcolonial memory claims in Germany need to be understood within the wider context of other memory claims that found themselves in those peripheral positions before them (Niven, 2021), such as critical GDR memory for instance, or the multiple victim groups of National Socialism that long remained unaccounted for, and who, in their attempts to articulate their remembrance alongside hegemonic Holocaust memory and Jewish victims, were framed through a lens of competitive victimhood, or *Opferkonkurrenz*, that accused them of undermining the importance of Holocaust memory at present (Brusius, 2022).

There is a long history, as shown above, of memory narratives being contested and of marginalised perspectives, including non-Jewish victims of National Socialism, and victims of SED totalitarianism, being accused of *Opferkonkurrenz*. Recognising these trajectories and making these exclusions visible is integral. What has shifted in recent decades, however, is that both of these memory discourses have started to achieve formal recognition in established German memory practices. The GDR, for example, since 2008 has been formally recognised as important to German history and commemoration in the nationwide memorial concept (Garbe,

2022; Wüstenberg, 2017). Queer persecution and other crimes against marginalised groups have also found their way into the same guiding document in recent years. In 2008, the *Denkmal für die im Nationalsozialismus verfolgten Homosexuellen*⁴⁸ was opened in Berlin (Haakenson, 2010), and scholars have noted that queer victims are now largely officially recognised as victims of National Socialism (Hájková, 2021). This is not meant as an unconditional rehabilitation of these marginalisations, many of which have remained contested, developed with significant delay, remain incomplete, and were achieved through long grassroots activity, often against state inaction (Haakenson, 2010; Hájková, 2021; Wolfrum, 2008). This is also not to gloss over the fact that GDR memory and non-Jewish victimhood of National Socialism, in many ways, remain treated as ‘secondary’ to the histories of the Holocaust, or positioned in an “in-between” space (Jones, 2022) which is quite literally spelt out like this in the state’s memorial concept (Garbe, 2022).

This points to an important distinction, in that whilst the GDR and different victim groups of National Socialism have recently found some formal recognition in German memory culture, the same is not true for postcolonial commemoration. What this indicates is that the resistance against a formal recognition of memories of German colonialism cannot solely be explained by a preoccupation with J Holocaust memory culture, creating a too narrow, exclusive scope of German memory culture. Below, I demonstrate that the ways in which German memory culture became an institutionalised, state sponsored project in the 1990s/2000s, shows that this process also became an integral process of reshaping post-unification Western, liberal, *white* German democratic national identities, which posed specific challenges for the integration of postcolonial commemorative claims.

To support this point, it is necessary to recall that memory culture was institutionalised as a state-supported project in the 1990s/2000s, following decades of critical grassroots advocacy which had sought out state support in an attempt to make its genuinely progressive and radical efforts of critical self-reflection on a difficult past more sustainable and guard them against revisionist infringement, in order to shape a better, more democratic future. Moreover, it is essential to recognise that this was a time of great political upheaval. Following reunification, Germany was facing a new set of challenges, putting behind it the realities of German division, overcoming the experience of (somewhat externally imposed) Soviet-inspired state socialist

⁴⁸ *Memorial to Homosexuals persecuted under the National Socialist Regime*

rule, and, importantly, reintegrating the newly reunited nation into the cadre of liberal, democratic, and *white*, Western European nations.

In this situation, efforts to safeguard a genuine commitment to reconciliation and “never again”, became incorporated into formal political structures seeking to refashion post-unification Germany as a member of those progressive, democratic, liberal Western European nation states. Memory culture became a pivotal instrument in the reshaping of post-unification German identity. Establishing memory culture becomes tied to reinventing German identity, and because it is not just reinvention of any type of German identity, but one that is Western, democratic, and liberal, the making of German memory culture becomes aligned with those kinds of political and ideological principles.

This critique, drawing attention to how formalised, state-sanctioned, official normative memory culture as it emerged in 1990s/2000s then became shaped to serve the re-normalisation of Germany postwar and post-unification, has been developed in recent decades, especially by Jewish scholars and critics (Biller, 1996; Bodemann and Geis, 1996; Czollek, 2018, 2021). Their critiques have drawn attention to how, in this process, memory culture became more or less exclusively preoccupied (though challenged) with the Holocaust and Jewish suffering; how this has shaped post-1990s German-Jewish relationships in Germany; and how this has also contributed to making German memory culture overly performative, (because if it is something that should aide the process of German rehabilitation, then it needs to be observable externally) (Czollek, 2018). Building on these critiques, I suggest, can also help our consideration of the kinds of obstacles faced by postcolonial memory actors and the establishment of postcolonial memories in German memory culture.

The first point has to do with genocide. One of the cornerstones of postcolonial memory critique, and the efforts of seeking a formal place for postcolonial memories in German memory culture, is to argue that the German colonial war against OvaHerero and Nama communities in GSWA in 1905-08 was Germany’s first genocidal war of the 20th century, that there are historical links and continuities between the two, and building on the recognition of one genocide, the other one also needs to be recognised (Köbler, 2005; Zimmerer, 2004, 2008). In the German mainstream, this notion has frequently been rejected, and links between the Holocaust and colonial genocide dismissed, because to relate the Holocaust to other crimes equates to harmful relativism. By viewing this situation through a lens which considers German memory as

embedded in processes of reshaping identity, we can see that the argument about the link between colonial genocide and the Holocaust is rejected, because in disrupting the framing of the Holocaust as unique and an anomaly, it makes the refashioning of liberal democratic German identity more difficult, as the latter necessitates the complete and extensive divorcing of modern German history and identity from historic violence and genocidal atrocities, rather than making visible deeply entrenched continuities of violence in Germany history.

The second point has to do with whiteness. This topic stands out in critical scholarship so far precisely through its glaring absence from most discussions. Generally speaking, if memory culture is a process serving the needs of German identity formation, and that process considers German identity to be tied synonymously to whiteness, then this prioritises the recognition of other *white* victims, over the recognition of non-*white* victims (Fulbrook, 2020; Müller, 2011). This plays a significant role in the negotiation of postcolonial commemoration, and the recognition of crimes and victims of colonial rule, who, to a very large proportion, are not *white*, and their suffering has resulted, in overwhelming ways, from entrenched and systemic *white* supremacy and anti-Black racism. The commitment to whiteness in memory culture has not been articulated through an explicit outright rejection of Black victimhood, but rather in the ways in which Black perspectives are largely absent from public memory discussions, with little recognition of them as agents of memory themselves (Fulbrook, 2020; Florvil, 2021; Samudzi, 2021). In summary, if we take into account the vast body of scholarship investigating how over the course of the 20th century, German national identity has been constructed in ways that treats Germanness and whiteness as exclusive and synonymous (El-Tayeb, 1999, 2016; Mazon and Steingrover, 2005; Müller, 2011; Wright, 2003), with reverberations until today, and bring this together with discussions on memory culture and the refashioning of post-unification identity markers, this shows how this new identity is shaped by racialised notions of whiteness; and it also demonstrates how this creates barriers and obstacles of non-*white* victimhood to be articulated, and non-*white* memory actors' work and memory claims to be recognised.

The above explores dynamics in German memory culture over many decades, especially since institutionalisation in the 1990s. I demonstrate how it evolved around a critical reckoning with the Holocaust and National Socialism, in particular, and how other memory narratives that have been articulated are to varying degrees being challenged, contested, or recognised. These

negotiations, as well as accusations of *Opferkonkurrenz*, are as old as state-sponsored memory culture at large. In these contexts, postcolonial memories sometimes have found themselves in a similar position to other marginalised memories; at the same time, there are some distinctions in the place of postcolonial memory in Germany.

This particular place was further confirmed over the past five years. Since 2020, during the same period in which this thesis project unfolded, German memory discourses experienced multiple waves of hotly contested discussions that have challenged the current state and scope of public memory, interrogated the prominence of Holocaust memory, and, crucially fought over the role of postcolonial commemoration within this memory culture at large. I am referring, of course, to the *Causa Mbembe* in 2020, the discussions over the translation of Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory* and Moses' *catechism* polemic, both in 2021, the controversy surrounding *documenta 15* in 2022, the recent outrage over reform plans to include colonialism into the state's official memorial concept in 2024, and the ongoing discussions over German memory culture in the context of the most recent escalation of Israel's occupation in Palestine and its genocidal war in Gaza in 2023/24. With regards to memory, the content of most of these discussions was not substantially different from preceding discourses—German memory culture, whilst it continually struggles to make room for multiple narratives, it remains contested as the importance of the Holocaust as singular and unique is emphasised continuously. And yet, over the course of these debates, discussions in Germany and beyond changed in tone and, at times, grew increasingly unhinged, as they were discussed much more publicly and vehemently, and with a different kind of salience and urgency to these narratives, and consequently, different political repercussions for those involved.

Throughout the course of this project, I grappled with how I might respond to these concurrent developments. Ultimately, I decided to refrain from a dedicated analysis of them in my thesis. Instead, I will offer some reflections on their relevance to my study in my conclusion. There were two reasons for this choice; one being that the relationship between the memory activism I studied in this project and these concurrent debates was more tenuous than direct (I explain what I mean by this and why in my concluding reflections), and the other being that these continued to move and expand through the course of my writing. This is not just a reason about the difficulty of analysing ongoing developments, but I suggest that the impact on memory activism and postcolonial approaches to memory in Germany more broadly have only begun to

evolve and will continue to do so over coming years and decades. They will then necessitate a dedicated investigation that would go beyond the scope of this thesis at this point. For the purpose of this thesis, I will these developments in my conclusion, as part of a reflection outlining what dynamics have shaped this grassroots movement until now, and how they might continue to do so; and crucially, what we may have learned from this activism so far, and what we may learn from it in the future, especially given the current, ongoing, and ever-shifting upheaval.

This context section has provided a framing for my analysis over the next four empirical chapters, by outlining how these activities operate in wider German memory contexts. German memory culture, nationally as well as internationally, is frequently framed and celebrated as a great success story; Germany is accredited as a role model for atonement (Gabowitsch, 2017) and for confronting difficult pasts (Neiman, 2019). Memory has even become an export product for Germany (Jones, 2022). Throughout many decades and several turbulent contexts, this image has remained strong and pervasive; and there is something to be said about the wider societal recognition of the importance to remember, of wanting to reflect and be critical of one's own past and implication in injustice. At the same time, this image has always been too simplistic and narrow minded, as time and again, the scope of German memory culture has been challenged and contested. In recent decades, postcolonial commemoration increasingly finds itself in the centre of these discussions, navigating between being able to build productively on societal mindsets that recognise the importance of public memory, whilst at the same time, remaining in a peripheral position and falling short of asserting the validity of postcolonial memory at large. This positions postcolonial memory claims in a wider context of other memory narratives that have faced, and continue to do so, accusations of *Opferkonkurrenz*. But the way that postcolonial memory narratives have remained pushed back against also comes with their own characteristic features that are important to keep in mind, not just to further understood wider German memory culture and its shortfalls; but to understand the work and activities of these activists and the challenges they face.

With these explorations in mind, I invite my readers to shift their attention. The next thematic chapters will explore four pillars of postcolonial memory activism in Germany, for us to understand in more empirical detail, the work of these grassroots memory activists, their ambitions and strategies, and their wider impact on Germany's critical reckoning with its colonial past and postcolonial present.

Chapter 2. Making colonialism relevant: *Activist public engagement.*

2.1. Introduction

It was a sunny spring day in April 2022. About 25 people gathered outside the main train station in Erfurt, a medium sized town in East Germany. I joined the casual circle, in which some were chatting in clusters, others standing alone, all waiting expectantly. We were there to meet members of the civic initiative *Decolonize Erfurt*, who were going to take us on a guided walking tour. A few minutes later, three members of the initiative stepped forward, introduced themselves in English and welcomed us. *Decolonize Erfurt*, they outlined, is an initiative working towards the critical re-appraisal of and reckoning with German colonial history in Erfurt. The two-hour tour would trace the history of colonialism and postcolonial legacies in Erfurt, demonstrating the lasting impact of the German colonial empire in the present.

Decolonize Erfurt has been hosting these walks since 2019, on regular dates open to anyone, or on specific dates for groups. The walk this morning, which *Decolonize Erfurt* had agreed for me to come along to after a brief email exchange, had been pre-arranged for this group as part of a multi-day educational workshop. Many in the group were nodding in response to the hosts' introductions; they knew what the activity was going to be about. Nevertheless, due to the nature of the tour, our hosts reminded us to be mindful, to look after ourselves and each other, and to speak up if we found ourselves overwhelmed at any point. Our hosts completed their introduction with a brief positionality statement, as they acknowledged their positions as three *white* women, recognising that this would frame their perspectives and expertise during the walk. Emphasising the tour as a collaborative, dialogical encounter, we were invited to share comments and experiences, if we wished to do so, as well as pose questions and concerns at any point. Again, many attendees nodded, expressing understanding and agreement. Finally, the hosts posed a couple of questions: What was Erfurt's relationship with German colonialism and its legacies? How had Erfurt obtained its contemporary wealth? These were opening questions, not to test participants' knowledge, but to invite us to start reflecting on what we already knew, and to set the scene for the walk, which aimed to provide an alternative reading of German colonial history, with a local focus on Erfurt.

Over the next two hours, we visited four different locations. Our first stop was a pharmacy with the name *M*-Apotheke*. M* is a racist and discriminatory term for Black people and people of colour in Germany. Yet, despite decades of critique, many businesses and public sites in Germany, have upheld this terminology, representing lasting effects of colonial ideologies on language. Our second tour stop was the *Kaisersaal*, a well-known conference location, where in 1919, an anticolonial lecture titled “Our colonial past” by Mdachi bin Sharifu, a Kiswahili teacher born in contemporary Tanzania, had been hosted, drawing our attention to the record of anticolonial advocacy in Germany. The third stop was the *Kunsthalle*, Erfurt’s main public art gallery, housing the so called “South Sea collection” consisting of 600 objects from the South Pacific that had been brought in by a colonial official from Erfurt. Our last stop was the *Domplatz*, the cathedral square, a site where, in the former GDR, German assailants had brutally attacked 25 Algerian contract workers in a series of racist attacks in 1975. At this site, our walk invited a reflection on how such violent incidents can evidence the persistence of colonial mindsets and racist thinking that co-existed with the GDR’s official antifascist state ideology.

We spent about 20 minutes at each site. One of the tour hosts, supported by images or handouts, provided a short input about the site, about what had occurred and its wider significance. Subsequently, participants were invited to ask questions, share thoughts and discuss with one another. Our tour hosts moderated contributions and occasionally answered questions. Discussions captured a broad variety of topics and themes both directly and indirectly related to the sites. We discussed, for instance, the M*-word’s colonial history, its dehumanising use, the disruptive practice of shortening it to its first letter, why many sites continue to use it, and efforts by *Decolonize Erfurt* and others, to challenge those sites and encourage removal, as well as the suitability of removal as an effective strategy over other critical engagement forms, as well as the structural settings that enabled racist representation, upholding anti-Black imagery and language, as well as less considered discriminations, like contemporary anti-Muslim injustices. Many participants weighed in on the conversation repeatedly, while others primarily listened.

Figure 1: Impressions from activist walking tours.

Top: Walking tour with *Decolonize Erfurt*, in April 2022. Bottom: *Dekoloniales Flanieren* in Berlin, in July 2022. All but two images were taken by myself between 2022 and 2023 as part of my research.



Activist-led critical walking tours have become a prominent aspect of postcolonial memory activism in Germany, making them an appropriate starting point to open up this first thematic chapter of this thesis. These tours engage mainstream audiences in critical reflection on Germany's colonial history and its lasting impacts (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2017; Voshage & Gamerith, 2024). Alongside them, critical exhibitions serve as another important, though less-studied, format for public engagement (Fechner & Schneider, 2023). Together, these practices form key strategies through which activists address widespread public ignorance and promote a more critical culture of remembrance.

In this chapter I am interested in these kinds of grassroots public engagement work, that seeks to counter the persistent lack of knowledge about Germany's colonial past among the general public, especially through making colonial histories and their legacies *relevant* to these audiences. First, I review the history of both walking tours and exhibitions in this movement. Whilst both practices have been used widely since the 1980s, I outline a set of factors that have contributed to making walking tours especially popular, especially after 2010. Secondly, I turn my attention to the questions of what these activities are for, and what they do. I demonstrate that they share a set of aims and principles, as focus on curating local traces as well as showcasing lasting legacies in order to underline colonialism's historical significance, its contemporary relevance, and the need for critical reckoning. They differ, however, in their methodological approach. Walking tours present embodied and interactive activities, generating opportunities for visceral encounters and dialogical exchanges, whilst exhibition formats can make productive use of multi-media formats, visual features and mobility to communicate with their audiences. I conclude by showing how walking tours and exhibition formats provide engagement tools that operate in a complimentary fashion. Walks create situations that can generate more in-depth, experiential reflective engagement, but they have also struggled with a lack of reach, frequently remaining in a "bubble". The engagement through exhibition formats may be more superficial and less interactive, yet their accessibility and transportability allow activists to address broader audiences and therefore expand their scope. Walking tours and exhibitions, I demonstrate, have served pivotal features of public engagement for activists in this movement, as they enable activists to destabilise known, hegemonic narratives about colonialism's attested insignificance; they engage mainstream audiences in order to become a catalyst and to generate "tipping points" that get people to start thinking about these histories and their impacts differently.

2.2. The prominence of walking tours and exhibitions as instruments of grassroots public engagement

Both walking tours and exhibitions have a lasting and prominent history as activist engagement practices in this movement. In the 1980s and 1990s, it is the use of walking tours and exhibition making, in particular, that marks the shift towards a more critical commemorative engagement with German colonialism, spearheaded by civic and activist actors, in distinction to radical student groups' direct-action campaigns previously (see 1.1.2.). In Berlin, walking tours become spearheaded by the Tansanian activist Mnyaka Sururu Mboro, who began to take largely German audiences on walks through the 'African Quarter', as part of civic commemorative activities aimed at the centenary of the Berlin Conference of 1884 (Mboro, 2019; Mboro et al., 2020; Wagener, 2020). In Hamburg, the first civic walking tours with a commemorative focus likewise emerged in 1984, in the work of historian Heiko Möhle, who initiated the first topic-specific tours focusing on Hamburg's relationship to enslavement, to colonial exhibitions, and colonial trade, as well as the first civic exhibition format discussing these topics (Langlo and Schmitt, 2011). Other early examples can be found in the 1990s. In Freiburg i.Br., an exhibition titled "Freiburg Colonial - Kolonialismus gestern und heute - ein Stadtrundgang" was designed by civic actors associated with the *iz3w* and *Aktion Dritte Welt e.V.* and shown at the *Volkshochschule* (adult education centre) and city library for several months in 1992/93, showcasing local traces and legacies of colonialism (Fechner and Schneider, 2023: 80), and accompanied by a critical walking tour (Wegmann, interview, 2022). In Augsburg, in 1992, as part of fifth centenary of Christopher Columbus' colonisation of the Americas, the *Werkstatt Solidarische Welt* and the *Geschichtswerkstatt Augsburg*, curated a local critical walking tour, with an accompanying brochure (Anonymous Interviewee Augsburg, 2022). Both formats, walking tours and exhibitions, this demonstrates, were among the first tools and strategies utilised by grassroots and civic actors in their very early efforts of promoting more visibility of and more critical commemorative engagement with German colonialism and its legacies.

In the 2000s, when the first purposive 'postkolonial' memory initiatives formed at an increased rate especially after 2004/05 (see 1.1.3.), both walking tours and exhibitions were employed frequently and often utilised in tandem by the same initiatives. *hamburg postkolonial*, marking the first 'postkolonial' event series, incorporated both a range of walking tours, as well

as several exhibition formats between 2004/05, including one designed by Möhle on the presence of Africans in Hamburg during the colonial period, and another on colonial postcards (Fechner and Schneider, 2023; Schneider, 2005). Similarly, when Heiko Wegmann started *Freiburg Postkolonial* in 2005, he utilised both walking tours, as well as a travelling exhibition starting in 2010, to communicate his research findings. At the *Welthaus* in Bielefeld, a small working group that became *Bielefeld Postkolonial* a few years later, began their work with a two exhibition concepts: firstly, a small exhibition series titled “Erinnern und Verantworten - Namibia und Deutschland” at the community space *Dankort* in Bethel in 2005, discussing German colonial rule and genocide in German South West Africa, and highlighting the need for commemoration, apology, and reparation (Sarcletti, 2005), which was followed, secondly, by another exhibition in collaboration with the city archive, on colonial products and trade (Frey, 2023). The same group began hosting walking tours discussing similar topics and narratives in 2007 (Frey, interview, 2022).

The prominence of exhibition formats in the movement during this period is further underlined by what was then the largest collaborative activist campaign to date, bringing together actors from across the country and significantly contributing to movement making dynamics in the subsequent decade, which was the participatory travelling exhibition *freedom roads! koloniale straßennamen – postkoloniale erinnerungskultur. Geschichte, Kunst und Beteiligung*, curated in 2010 by Hamburg-based visual artist HMJokinen and Berlin-based historian Christian Kopp, with the civic organisation *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.*, about colonial street names and postcolonial remembrance (Fechner and Schneider, 2023; Kopp, 2023a). The exhibition was first hosted between August and October 2010 at the *August Bebel Institut e.V.* in Berlin, before moving to the *Kunsthaus Hamburg* for six weeks in August and September 2013, and a final stop in Munich for four months at the city museum in 2013 (Kopp, 2023a). At each location, the project changed to collaborate with local grassroots actors and to engage issues of local relevance, incorporating extensive participatory features and events (ibid). This project was not just immensely meaningful in the discussions on colonial street names (see Chapter 3), but *freedom roads!* also was the first exhibition generating significant public and scholarly attention, remaining the notable example for activist exhibition making in this realm (Fechner and Schneider, 2023; Klein, 2022; Gißibl, 2021; Prinzleve, 2023).

At this point, I offer a brief excursion exploring why these activities have been so commonly utilised by activists in this field. A first reason has to do with resource demands and adaptability. Memory activism in this field largely depends on voluntary time commitment by activists and has continuously been shaped by limited resources and facilities (see 1.1.4.). Most groups operate without secure avenues of funding, and, usually, without the security of a fixed organising space. Activities are usually either partially or entirely self-funded by activists themselves and depend on their availability and resources alongside other commitments including waged labour. From a participant perspective, both walking tours and exhibitions are time limited activities. Walking tours, for instance, typically last between an hour and a half and two hours.

From the perspective of activist hosts and organisers, however, both activities require an extensive amount of time and effort to produce. Several of my interviewees drew attention to the lengthy and laborious research and organisation involved in staging these activities (Authaler, interview, 2022; Urbanski, interview, 2022; Wegmann, interview, 2022). Caroline Authaler is a historian at the University of Bielefeld, where she teaches public history. In the 2010s, during her time at Heidelberg University, she was co-founder of the student initiative *schwarzweiss e.V.* During our interview, she explained how the group approached research to prepare information for their walking tours format deductively, commencing with a broader set of questions into the relevance of colonialism into the local area. Via numerous trips to research archives and libraries, the group took several years to collate relevant materials, teaching themselves and each other the necessary skills to navigate archival spaces and resources along the way (Authaler, interview, 2022). Archival trips for research purposes were at times particularly laborious for the earliest initiatives in 2000s, when local archives and libraries, because of a lack of knowledge and public discourse, had limited ability or interest to support researchers to navigate relevant materials (Wegmann, interview, 2022). The combination of limited resources and time constraints within the movement and this iterative research process means that it is not uncommon for groups or individuals to spend several years researching and collating materials before they host their first walk (Authaler, interview, 2022; Urbanski, interview, 2022) or open their first exhibition display (Palasie, interview, 2022; Wegmann, interview, 2022).

Whilst this poses real and significant challenges, the relative independence that groups hold over this process offers flexibility. Firstly, practical demands can usually be adapted to activist availability and can be made to fit the resource profile of the individual or within the group. This

generates flexibility to organise the process according to circumstances. Some groups, like *Decolonize Erfurt*, have organised their walk through a dedicated working group of individuals who have opted to focus on this project among the group's many priorities, enabling activists to choose activities according to their preferences and skills (Anonymous Interviewee Erfurt, interview, 2022). Others, like *Göttingen Postkolonial*, conversely, have prepared their walk by relying primarily on individual initiative within the group, making the process participatory and allowing many members to contribute flexibly, which produced challenges, meaning that topics selected may represent the preferences and priorities of those members who are in the position to contribute, but also generated an openness, and where contributions can be made to fit the capacities that members have to give at a certain point in time (Herrwig, interview, 2022).

Additionally, whilst the preparation is laborious and time-consuming, both activities are relatively sustainable for activist contexts as they are easily reproducible. Many groups invest many years into research and production (Wegmann, interview, 2022). At the same time, once a set of relevant materials are processed, a walk map is prepared, handouts are printed, or exhibition roll-ups are written, both activities are easily replicable and do not need to be produced from scratch for each occasion (Authaler, interview, 2022). Sharing materials and notes further enables different members of the group to rotate hosting responsibilities (ibid), and exhibition displays can be reused across multiple locations with decreasing effort over time (Palasie, interview, 2022; Wegmann, interview, 2022). Travelling exhibitions, in this context, have been particularly prominent to harness this benefit (Kopp, 2023a).

A second reason that has contributed to the popularity of these two formats has to do with familiarity. Both activities, walking tours and exhibitions, are engagement modalities that are well known to many people in the mainstream from other popular or educational contexts, which generates a familiarity that lowers the participation threshold for people to get involved. Activists, in this instance, are utilising the familiarity of this activity to attract public audiences and to communicate perspectives related to their activist and educational agendas:

[Stadtrundgänge sind] für viele [Menschen] was Attraktives, generell sich mit Themen zu beschäftigen, also rauszukommen aus den klassischen Bildungskontexten (...) Es ist niedrigschwellig, also, (...) für große Teile der Bevölkerung ist [ein Rundgang] etwas Einfaches, und was sie sich auch gut vorstellen können. (Herrwig, interview, 2022)

Chris Herrwig works for the *Entwicklungspolitisches Informationszentrum (EPIZ)*⁴⁹ in Göttingen and has for the last ten years been involved in postcolonial initiatives in Berlin, Frankfurt, and Kassel, and most recently as co-convenor of the network *Göttingen Postkolonial*. The familiarity of walking tours can expand the reach for the activity as it creates a lower participation threshold for participants and provides the practice in this activist context with an additional layer of legitimacy, exemplifying that people are more likely to engage in a format that to them feels like a familiar and recognisable practice.

Recognisability was also noted as influential for those actors choosing exhibitions as their primary engagement tool. Serge Palasie works in public education, for the One World regional network in North Rhine-Westphalia, focuses on fostering critical awareness about current North-South dynamics, such as migration, and collaborates closely with many anti-racism and postcolonial initiatives all across Germany, with which he shares the overall goal to promote awareness of the contemporary relevance of German colonialism and its legacies. As part of these efforts, Palasie has curated two exhibition formats, on German colonial history, and on the relationship between historic colonialism and contemporary migration to Europe. These formats, he noted, were attractive and requested by a range of institutional partners, including schools, therefore offering suitable means in order to address mainstream audiences (Palasie, interview, 2022).

Memory activism scholar Yifat Gutman has referred to these strategies as an activist “appropriation and redeployment of popular cultural practices for the distribution of oppositional knowledge and claims to the dominant ones” (Gutman, 2017:41). Through common and familiar cultural practices, activists are utilising “the significance of culture as a mediator” (ibid), in order to transmit “activist agendas” from their group to their public audiences (ibid). The methodology or practice, in some instances, can be a decisive factor: “[durch diese Methoden] erreichen wir Leute, die sich sonst eher schwer mit diesem Thema beschäftigen würden” (Herrwig, interview, 2022). Familiar and well-known practices can have a powerful authority as legitimate means of knowledge production and dissemination in public spaces, that enable activists to attract broader audiences.

Since 2010, in the subsequent “second wave” of postcolonial memory initiatives and thereafter (see 1.1.4.), exhibitions have continued to be used by activist actors. Several examples from this period will be explored in more detail below. Yet, it is noticeable that during

⁴⁹ Development Policy Information Centre Göttingen.

this period, it is walking tours that took on a particularly prominent role in the movement. This dynamic, I suggest, can be linked to the increase of grassroots student-led initiatives that emerged in the early 2010s in University contexts, such as *Leipzig Postkolonial* (2010/11), *Frankfurt Postkolonial* (2011), *schwarzweiss e.V.* in Heidelberg (2011/12), and *Postcolonial Potsdam* (2014), and others. In this context, the fact that walking tours are more spatially independent, and that they depend to a lesser extent on material resources, can be seen as pivotal factors that increased their attractiveness as an activist tool, relative to exhibition formats. Of course, walking tours, are highly spatially dependent, as they facilitate physical movement around a selected route of sites in the public sphere (and they are embodied activities, as I discuss below). However, they are hosted in public and outside, therefore, they are not dependent on having access to a specific building or physical centre as a host space, in the same way that exhibitions usually require the use of a gallery or community centre to be presented (Authaler, interview, 2022). As a result, in the decade since the 2010s, walking tours have emerged as a ubiquitous feature of postcolonial memory activism, becoming prolific across Germany. At the time of writing, approximately sixty walks can be identified in fifty cities and towns, both in major metropolises, in both eastern and western Germany, such as Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, Cologne, Frankfurt a.M., Stuttgart, Dusseldorf, Leipzig, Essen, Bremen, Dresden, as well as small and provincial towns such as Detmold, Fulda, Hattingen, Saarlouis, and Witzenhausen.

Alongside the proliferation of walking tours all over Germany and across various activist groups, what has been noted is that much of the walking tours space in this context is largely shaped and organised by activists and civic actors from largely *white*-German backgrounds, i.e. most walking tours in this realm, are led and organised by activists without direct relationship to the legacies of colonial history or racialised discrimination that constitute the core topics of many walks. This, for one, is a demographic dynamic, as most postcolonial initiatives in this space are predominantly *white* positioned, because this is still the largest demographic group across Germany. But this is not the only reason. The utilisation of familiar, well-known, and in this way, in other words, socially legitimised and hegemonically positioned engagement activities (Gutman, 2017), does not merely lower the engagement threshold for mainstream audiences, as explored above, but may in return produce barriers to who may contribute to them.

Walking tours, noted above, depend on being granted access to, or feeling empowered to access archives, libraries, and other hegemonic spaces of knowledge production to conduct necessary research. They rely, furthermore, on the use of public settings more broadly, as they are hosted in public streets and town centres, thereby necessitating that those who participate feel safe walking around town in larger groups. Being part of, or rather being *seen as part of* the dominant social group certainly is not an essential requirement to access these spaces, but being hegemonically positioned will make partaking in said activities more feasible. Additionally, the matters discussed during walks require a different kind of emotional engagement from activists of colour and Black activists, as colonialism and racism are topics that can be seen as “Biographiearbeit”, when they are matters with personal relationship and impact (Elomda, cit. in Wilmot et al., 2020). This illuminates that not all activists may opt to perform this kind of labour or may wish to share experience accounts in *white* dominated spaces. The walking tours format may lean towards disclosure as a one-sided activity, where emotional vulnerability on part of hosts may not be reciprocated by, especially *white* positioned, participants. Whilst this is not a strict pattern, there are activists of colour who opt out of walking tours for some of the above reasons or decided that this does not match with their priorities for community empowerment practice (ibid). As a consequence, whilst in metropolises like Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, and Mannheim, walking tours have been hosted by activists of various backgrounds, especially African and Black German actors (Jethro, 2022), in less metropolitan settings, walking tours have been predominated by *white* German, often middle-class activist individuals.

This was also reflected in my interviews, where most individuals whom I talked to about walking tours as a prevalent practice in their work, operated in largely *white* initiatives. This was openly acknowledged by all of my interviewees. Several of my *white* interviewees reflected upon how speaking from a position without direct experience or familial relationship to legacies of colonisation or racism, may pose risk for misrepresenting their meaning, and how positionality statements to acknowledge this are used as a mitigation strategy (Anonymous Interviewee Erfurt, interview, 2022). Other predominantly *white* groups found other strategies to include first person accounts as sources into their walks. Mirjam Tutzer is a political scientist with a background in critical international development and public political education. In the 2010s during her time at Goethe University Frankfurt, she became involved with the group *Frankfurt Postkolonial*, which has

remained a contributing member of since. In their walking tour, Tutzer explained, the group makes use of a publicly available recorded interview with Theodor Wonja Michael (1925-2019), who was a Black German actor, journalist, anti-racism advocate, and survivor of the Nazi regime (Tutzer, interview, 2022). The use of recorded first person testimonies like this sheds light on lived realities of those directly impacted by these legacies, and offer the additional benefit that they do not place activists of colour into a position of giving personal accounts with a significant amount of emotional labour required to re-narrate their experiences, which can be painful, or creating a situation where they may end up exposing themselves towards a majority *white* audience, who does not replicate the labour of opening up emotionally and/or who may not provide space for these accounts in a way that is sensitive and empathetic.

Yet other activists consider how their *whiteness* may be used productively for subversive means and to communicate activist agendas. Herrwig, for instance, noted the beneficial potential of *white* people explaining racism to other *white* audiences, as this may enhance reception and reduce defensiveness (Herrwig, interview, 2022). *White* privilege, in this context, may serve as a connective tool to reach out to other mainstream audiences to bridge gaps between audiences (LeGall, interview, 2022), therefore harnessing a hegemonic identity for subversive means. The predominance of *white* positioned activists in the walking tours space resulting from utilising familiar, well-known, and hegemonically positioned practices has generated in diverging views among various activists, and generated challenges that are well known among contributors in the movement. They have been addressed in various ways and strategies, but they have remained a current dilemma for activists more broadly.

Walking tours and exhibitions have been integral features of civic commemorative activity in this field since the very beginning of grassroots engagement in the 1980s. Different actors have shaped these activities in distinct ways, adapting them to specific contexts and local circumstances. What this overview has not discussed is the proliferation of digital formats, such as online exhibitions, and virtual or audio guide direct walking tours. These have been emerging themes in recent years, especially, partly in context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and offer different kinds of encounters with distinctive potentials and challenges. As these require dedicated attention that goes beyond the scope of this chapter, the focus here remains with physical, collective walking tours, as well as physical exhibition formats.

2.3. Countering memory absences by making colonialism relevant

Building on the above outlining the widespread use of both practices in the movement, the subsequent section turns attention to what these activities aim for, and how they do so. Generally speaking, the use of critical walks and exhibition formats seeks to address mainstream audiences to engage these in critical conversations and reflections about histories related to German colonialism, its impacts and present-day legacies in an attempt to counter an identified lack of critical knowledge and of reflective commemorative engagement with German colonialism for most of the 20th and early 21st centuries. As historian Henning Melber references in his recent publication, a government commissioned academic review from 2013 noted that public awareness in Germany about its colonial empire in Africa and elsewhere had remained very limited (Melber, 2024). In Tutzer's words: "konkretes Wissen über Kolonialzeit und Kolonialgeschichte ist selten da [unter Teilnehmenden am Stadtrundgang]" (Tutzer, interview, 2022).

The reason for this lasting, widespread lack of knowledge of German colonialism is not an active repression nor simple process of forgetting over time (Assmann, 2016; Connerton, 2008). Rather, the reason is a powerful and dominant discourse in Germany that throughout the 20th century framed German colonialism as something that was historically insignificant, and therefore, irrelevant for the present day. Critical scholars have noted different features of this framing, such as German colonialism being considered, especially in comparison with other European nations, as having started late (Kundrus, 2003), as having been short-lived (Wirz and Eckert, 2002; Zantop, 1997), or even "extremely brief" (Wildenthal et al., 2008: 251). In other words, German colonial history was framed as 'too short' to be of relevance. Another widespread notion was that the German colonial empire, again comparatively, comprised only a smaller number of less lucrative colonial territories and was not "as impressive geographically or as profitable economically as that of other colonial powers" (Friedrichsmeyer et al., 1998: 3). Moreover, there has been a prominent notion that, there was no substantial number of "postcolonial texts in German", and a relatively small "diasporic presence of formerly colonized peoples in Germany" (ibid:4). Fewer former colonial subjects have been present in the metropole (physically, or in their writing), "to remind Germans of the past violence that

Europeans had inflicted on non-European peoples” (ibid). The “colonial experience”, it was commonly framed, had simply not affected the former metropole in any consequential ways (Conrad 2002). Lastly, there was a hegemonic belief that, Germans had been the ‘friendly colonisers’, and by no means ‘as bad as’ the British, the French, or the Belgians (Maricocchi, 2024), and the “myth of benevolent German colonial rule” stayed alive much longer than the empire (Conrad, 2019a); in other words, German colonialism was, for a long time, largely not considered a problematic history that warranted or necessitated genuine interrogation.

These repeat narratives have been overwhelmingly wrong and revisionist. German colonial fantasies and mindsets far preceded as well as outlived the ‘short’ formal colonial period (Kundrus, 2003; Zantop, 1997). Further, whilst small in numbers of territories, Germany constituted one of the largest European colonial empires of the 19th century (Conrad, 2011). German colonialism had been far from insignificant, for both the former colonised, as well as the former colonisers (Conrad, 2019a; Wildenthal et al., 2008; Wirz and Eckert, 2002).

At the same time, these notions were persistent in shaping a popular understanding among mainstream society, that German colonialism had been too short, too small, and mostly benevolent, therefore, not warranting any critical public retrospection. This dominant discourse has been described as Germany’s “stubbornly non-postcolonial postcolonial (...) identity”, meaning that when colonialism is discussed, the discourse is primarily concerned with underscoring “its insignificance” (Wildenthal, 2003). It has been this insistence on the insignificance, this framing of German colonialism as not necessitating or not warranting any critical reflection, that has contributed to this situation, where large parts of German society did not, and sometimes still do not, have any significant understanding of Germany’s colonial past and its legacies (Melber, 2024).

In the context of this discourse, in order to challenge the widespread and persistent public lack of knowledge about German colonialism, what activists aim for through the use of walking tours and exhibitions is to make German colonial history and its legacies *relevant* to German audiences. In this section, I examine principles of selections of sites and narratives in activist practice and demonstrate how activists prioritise, firstly, the inclusion of local sites and traces, in order to bring colonial narratives and histories into participants’ and visitors’ known, everyday environments; and secondly, the prioritisation of persistent legacies, in order to showcasing the lasting impact of colonialism in the present-day.

2.3.1. “Spurensuche”: Foregrounding local traces and connections

The first key principle with regards to the kinds of narratives curated by activists in these interventions is the highlighting of sites with local relevance. Locality plays a significant role in both activities, as activist hosts of walking tours, commonly, take participants along a route through known local environments and neighbourhoods, and, similarly, exhibition, frequently, prioritise the curation of perspectives that connect to nearby surroundings.

Local sites where significant colonial events occurred feature prominently in activist-curated walking tours. *Freiburg Postkolonial*, for example, takes participants to a local manor house, the *Colombi-Schlössle*, which in the 1930s was a prominent gathering site for colonial revisionists (Wegmann, 2009) as well as a local city park, the *Stadtgarten*, which in 1935 hosted a colonial exhibition and included the installation of a colonial *Völkerschau*, or ‘human zoo’ (Wegmann, 2017). Additionally, these activities foreground local actors, businesses, and organisations, who were involved in and benefitted from colonial exploitation. The exhibition project *Köln Postkolonial* set an explicit focus on investigating colonial involvements of local businesses in Cologne, such as, the chocolate manufacturer *Stollwerk*. Similarly, *schwarzweiss e.V.* in Heidelberg conducted research into a tobacco merchant, Landfried, who was a resident business owner in Heidelberg, who had acquired and made significant profits of a tobacco plantation in Cameroon in 1910, at the time a German colony (Authaler, interview, 2022). Another integral category of sites incorporated in walking tours and exhibitions are sites with a significant connection to anticolonial history and resistance. This can be seen, for instance, in *Decolonize Erfurt*’s tour stop at the *Kaisersaal* as a site of Mdachi bin Sharifu’s anticolonial lecture in 1919, where participants engage with the important history of anticolonial resistance during the colonial period and after (Lindner, 2019).

With regards to locality, there is one element that presents prominently in activist exhibition making, that is, activists using exhibitions as an inversion, in order to critically re-assess and re-appraise the history of colonial exhibitions that had been set up locally in various cities in Germany during the colonial period, and constituted a dehumanising and violent pro-colonial propaganda tool (Dreesbach, 2005). The first example for such displays was

zurückGESCHAUT. Die Erste Deutsche Kolonialausstellung in Treptow 1896,⁵⁰ hosted in Treptow Park in the South-East of Berlin, between May and October 1896. It was organised by the German Foreign Office and funded by private investments, and its key ambition was to fuel public interest in German colonial expansion. Alongside exhibits on colonial goods and medicine, and recreations of colonial architecture, the core feature of the exhibition were recreated ‘colonial villages’, populated by 106 individuals from across the Germany’s colonies (Aitken, 2017), who for the duration of the *Colonial Exhibition* lived in this ‘human zoo’, to be gazed upon by German audiences, in an attempt by the organisers to manifest racist notions of “otherness” and “incivility” (ibid).

In 2016, on occasion of the 120th anniversary of the *Kolonialausstellung*, the Treptow district museum decided to design a critical reappraisal, and for this purpose, reached out to local civic postcolonial and anti-racism organisations for support. This began a lasting and fruitful collaboration, during which the museum handed over coordination of the process to grassroots and civic actors, of *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.* and the *ISD e.V.*, who produced a critical exhibition that in October 2017 opened as a permanent display at the museum, titled *zurückGESCHAUT. Die Erste Deutsche Kolonialausstellung in Treptow 1896* (Kopp, 2023b).⁵¹

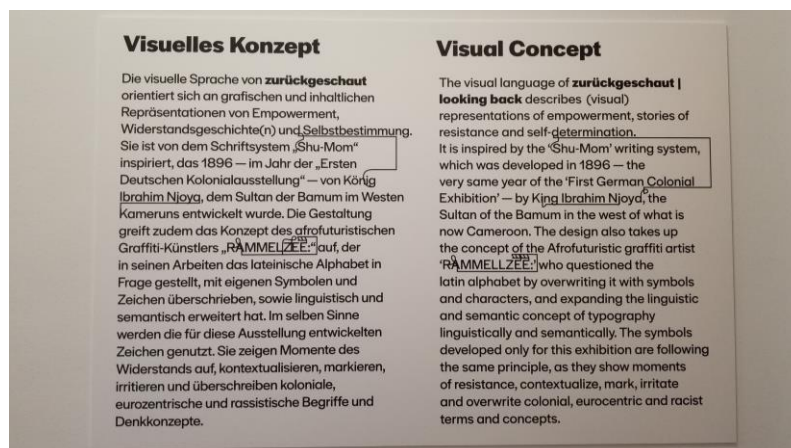
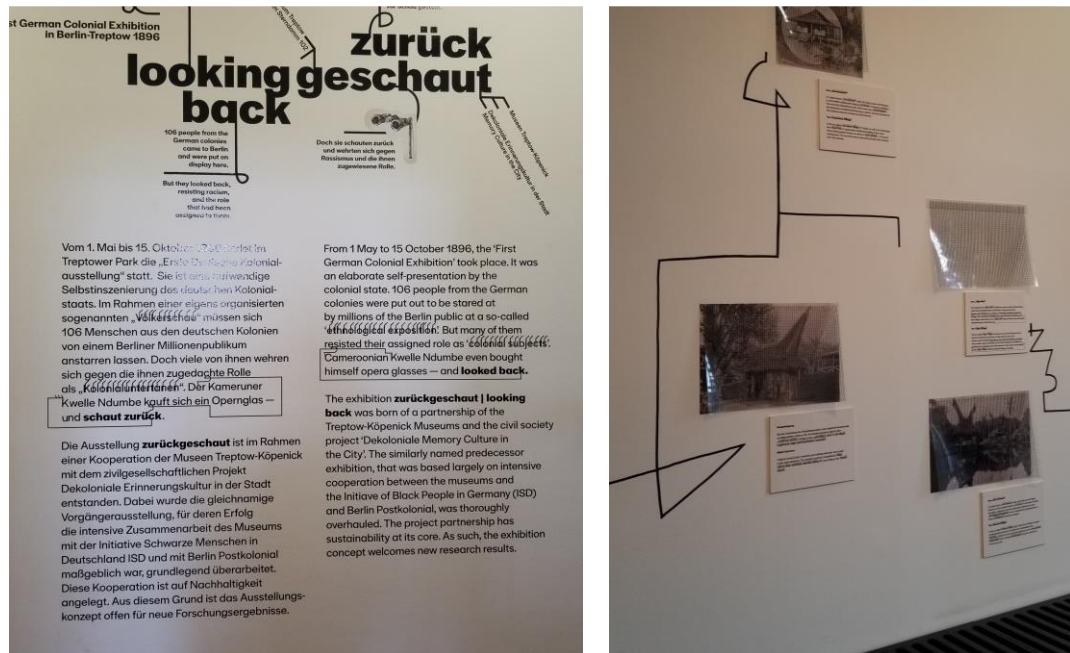
Alongside a model of layout of the *Kolonialausstellung* and historical information, the core piece of the display is a collection of photographs of the individuals that had lived in the ‘human zoo’ during the *Kolonialausstellung*. This have been re-purposed from the archive of anthropologist Felix von Luschan (1854-1924), who had taken these images for racist scientific purposes, and re-coloured to underscore their individuality. They are presented across all four walls in one of the exhibition rooms, “looking back” on the exhibition visitors who gaze upon them (Kuban, 2021). This activist exhibition not only represents a critical display of one of the most significant colonial events that took place locally in Germany – the *Kolonialausstellung* had attracted over seven million visitors (Aitken, 2017) – it also became the first permanent critical exhibition related to German colonialism, racism, and resistance (Kuban, 2021), attracting significant numbers to the Museum in Treptow (Kopp, 2023b) and garnering tremendous media attention (Drescher, 2017; Habermalz, 2017; Memarnia, 2021a; Noffke, 2021).

⁵⁰ *First German Colonial Exhibition*

⁵¹ *Looking back. The First German Colonial Exhibition of 1896 in Berlin-Treptow.*

Figure 2: Impressions from *zurückGESCHAUT* exhibition, in June 2022.

Top left: An introductory panel provides historical context and introduces the exhibition. Top right: Visual imagery from the exhibition's introductory section. Middle: The exhibition develops and uses a dedicated visual concept, using disruptive visuals to resist racist and euphemistic language. Bottom: The exhibition provides a timeline of key events and development related to the *Erste Deutsche Kolonialausstellung* in Treptow in 1896.



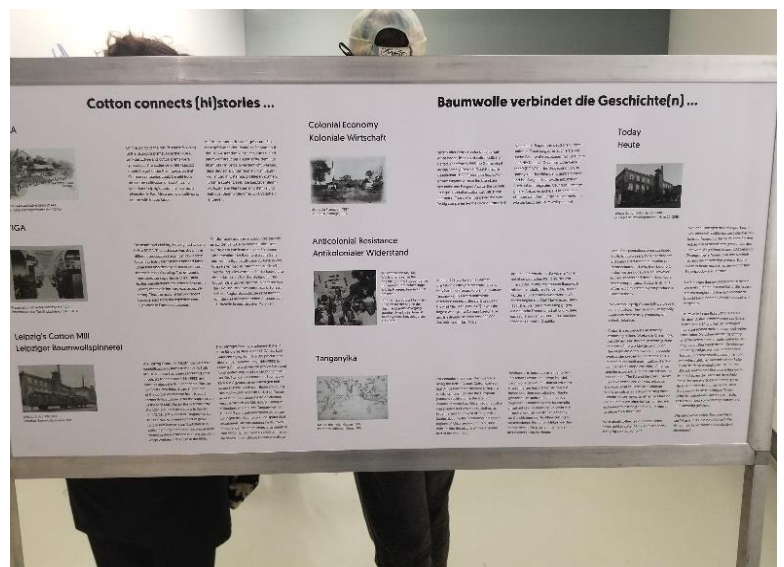
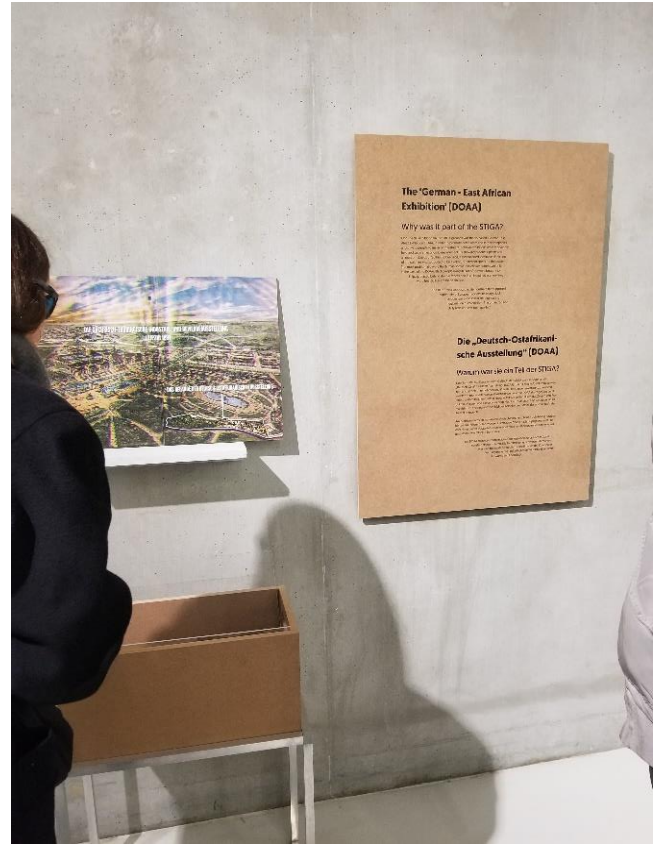
Another example is a grassroots-designed critical reinvestigation of another colonial exhibition, that was partially inspired by the *zurückGESCHAUT* project (Kopp, 2022). The so-called *Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Ausstellung (DOAA)*⁵² was held in Leipzig in 1897. In the central location that now features one of Leipzig's most popular parks, *DOAA* was hosted for a period of five months, between April and October 1897, and attracted more than two million visitors (AG Leipzig Postkolonial, 2020). Sharing similar ambitions as the *Colonial Exhibition* in Treptow, key intentions in Leipzig were to foster public enthusiasm for German colonialism, lobby German businesses for support, and popularise German colonial products (ibid). Moreover, as in Treptow, a constitutive element of the *DOAA* was a colonial 'human zoo', consisting of recreated colonial buildings, displays of 'objects' from the colonies, as well as, crucially, 47 Africans who had been brought from the colony in East Africa, put on display to represent European superiority and to legitimise colonial control (ibid).

In 2022, on the 125th anniversary of the *DOAA*, an alliance of activists from the *ISD e.V.* Leipzig group, the collective *diversif*, and the *AG Leipzig Postkolonial* got together in Leipzig, in order to design a critical reappraisal of the event in form of an exhibition titled *Colonial Memory: ReTelling DOAA*. The opening of the exhibition in October 2022 attracted a large number of visitors that could not all find space in the foyer of the *Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst (GfZK, Gallery for Contemporary Art)* in Leipzig, that was hosting the exhibition. Over the subsequent four months, the exhibition was open to the public presenting not only the first ever substantial public display about the history of *DOAA* as important elements of local city history in Leipzig, but generating an important critical inversion of perspectives (*Colonial Memory. ReTelling DOAA*, 2022: 18). The exhibit and the accompanying brochure presented not before seen historical information and contextualised it critically by drawing attention to the Eurocentrism and one-sidedness in the sources (ibid: 27). Further, they aimed to centre the experiences of the individuals who had lived in the 'human zoo'. Critiquing powerfully how the *DOAA* had voided all records including the names of those who had been brought from East Africa (ibid: 20), activists used a fictional counter narrative as well as illustrations in order to visibilise them (ibid: 30).

⁵² *German East African Exhibition.*

Figure 3: Impressions from *ReTelling DOAA* exhibition opening, in October 2022.

Top left: A city map provides an overview of local sites in Leipzig connected to DOAA. Top right: An introductory panel provides information about the DOAA exhibition in 1897. Bottom left: A panel provides information about Black histories in Leipzig and their invisibilisation. Bottom right: A panel informs about colonial entanglements of cotton production.



The re-engagement with colonial exhibitions, as key local traces of German colonialism in the metropole, provides a particularly multi-faceted critical reckoning. These critical displays, on one side, make visible the histories of some of the most pivotal colonial events that took place locally in the metropole that most mainstream audiences today simply had never heard off before. They also make visible the ways in which these events significantly shaped the physical landscapes of cities that the German public continue to navigate on an everyday basis: the location where the *DOAA* were held in 1897, for instance, originally a swamp area, was drained and developed specifically for these events, and, today, has become Leipzig's most popular park, and a key landmark for both locals and visitors (AG Leipzig Postkolonial, 2020).

By focusing on local traces, walks and exhibitions have a way of relating colonial histories and legacies to participants' and visitors' known, familiar environments. These interventions make these dynamics tangible and perceptible and highlight how spaces and sites that visitors know intimately and frequent often have been shaped by these processes:

Man sieht [in den Rundgängen], dass das Thema halt nicht nur Relevanz hat in Weltregionen, die man automatisch mit dem Wort Kolonialismus verbindet. Sondern man versteht halt ganz schnell, "Ok, auch Erfurt als mittelgroße, mitteldeutsche Stadt hat was mit Kolonialismus zu tun und das sehe ich hier, hier und hier." Und das ist halt sehr eindrücklich und macht Geschichte ja auch so erlebbar. (Anonymous Interviewee Erfurt, interview, 2022)

This quotation refers to the notion that there are certain world regions commonly or automatically associated with colonialism ("automatisch mit (...) Kolonialismus verbindet".) What is referred to here is that these are formerly colonised world regions, i.e., those overseas, elsewhere, and far away. During the walk participants are confronted with the idea that formerly colonising region also have something to do with colonialism and that this can be made visible in specific local sites. The result of which, the interviewee outlines, is that it makes history impressive ("eindrücklich") and perceptible ("erlebbar") and able to draw an immediate connection to people's known, local surroundings. This principle focusing on local traces and remnants, has also been referred to, in related activist and scholar-activist publications as "Spurensuche", as looking for traces (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2017; Bernhard, 2016; Möhle, 2017).

2.4.2. Prioritising persistent legacies and demonstrating continuities

The second important principle is the underlining of contemporary legacies and impact.

Activists seek to demonstrate that colonialism is not merely a historical period, long past and finished, without repercussion in the present, but a lasting dynamic that shows remnants today. Whilst shining a light on historical matters, and being grounded in historical narratives and circumstances, these activities emphasise contemporary connections to demonstrate the ways in which colonialism has shaped, and continues to do so, current circumstances and dynamics.

Walking tours commonly include colonial monuments and colonially themed street names as a frequently visited site. Walks hosted by *Göttingen Postkolonial*, for instance, include a stop at the local South West Africa monument. This was erected in 1910 and, despite decades of activist opposition and petitioning against it, continues to remember German soldiers who had participated during the colonial genocide of OvaHerero and Nama people in GSWA in 1904/05 (Göttingen Postkolonial, 2024). This site provides a very illustrative and easily comprehensible example for walk participants:

Also, dieses DSWA-Denkmal, wenn wir davorstehen, dann ist das allen sofort klar, dass das problematisch ist, dass da vier Kolonialverbrecher im Stadtraum geehrt werden. (Herrwig, interview, 2022)

Colonial monuments like this one serve as a tangible example for colonial relics that have been maintained and the persistence of colonial commemoration, as Herrwig notes, is immediately recognised as inappropriate by walk participants. These sites, therefore, demonstrate vivid examples of lasting colonial legacies, and serve as effective engagement sites also for participants newer to these topics and concerns.

Another typical category of stops that many walking tours visit are ethnographic museums. At these locations, activist hosts are not only able to draw attention to the historical role museums played in the project of colonisation, but they can point to the maintenance of many cultural belongings, collected, or better, stolen, from colonial contexts that largely have been maintained as ethnographic collections. Sefa Yeter has been hosting postcolonial walking tours in Mannheim, in collaboration with the *Eine Welt Haus e.V.*, since 2020. Professionally, he has drawn from his expertise in intercultural communication, political education, and anti-

racism efforts. On a personal level, he has found resonance in postcolonial critiques, which helped him navigate his own experiences of "Othering" as a child of Turkish so called 'guest workers' in Mannheim. This understanding empowers him and has fostered a desire to build solidarity with others facing racial discrimination (Yeter, interview, 2022). During his walks, Yeter usually takes his participants to two ethnographic museum sites related to the local *Reiss-Engelhorn-Museum*. Both sites hold tens of thousands of cultural belongings stolen during the colonial period and kept in the museum as so called 'non-European' ethnographic objects. At this site, Yeter illustrates museums' involvement in 'collecting' and looting during the colonial period, drawing attention in particular to a local actor from Mannheim with significant involvement in this (ibid). In addition to this historical dimension, Yeter takes these sites as opportunities to highlight lasting implications of these histories for contemporary museum work and 'ethnological research', to discuss notions of what is recorded in knowledge and memory:

Und dort [an der Station] habe ich über Erinnerungskultur gesprochen, also, was wird denn erzählt, und was wir nicht erzählt, und was wird erinnert und was wird nicht erinnert (...) Wissen vs. Nicht-Wissen, und was macht das mit uns. (...) Das muss man einfach kritisch sehen, dieses Wissen, das da produziert wird. (Yeter, interview, 2022)

Colonial contexts of museum 'collecting' and research, Yeter underlines, have persistent repercussions for notions of knowledge and remembering today. He draws attention to stories that are remembered as well as those that are not remembered, encourages participants to reflect on these dynamics and the implications for our understanding of knowledge and memory today.

The foregrounding of persistent legacies and continuities is likewise employed in exhibition making practices, as Palasie explains:

Mein Anspruch ist, zu zeigen, wie breit die Palette der oftmals voneinander isoliert betrachteten Themen ist, die alle auf koloniale Umverteilungsprozesse zurückgehen, oder zumindest ohne sie in der Gegenwart nicht zu erklären sind. Da wird irgendwo einmal Rassismus behandelt, [oder] Klimagerechtigkeit, dann (...) globale Wirtschaft und ihre unfairen Strukturen behandelt, [oder] Flucht, [oder] Migration. Alles [wird

aber] als voneinander isolierte Themenkomplexe [behandelt]. Im besten Falle [ist das] einfach nur Unwissen aber eher teilweise politisch motiviert, dass man diese Zusammenhänge nicht zeigt. Und mein Anspruch ist halt, dass halt möglichst alles zusammen zu denken und Maßnahmen zu gestalten. (Palasie, interview, 2022)

There is a broad range of topics, such as racism, climate justice, unjust economic structures, or migration, Palasie notes, for which there is a certain level of critical awareness and public discussion, but what this lacks, is an understanding of their interconnectedness, and their interrelationship with colonial injustices, that have served as root causes for many of these developments. These topics are kept isolated from one another, drawing attention to this being active, rather than passive, processes of separation, that Palasie seeks to counter by showing linkages and interdependencies.

In the first exhibition he created in 2014, this focus on interconnectedness is explicitly obvious in its title, which reads *Schwarz ist der Ozean. Was haben volle Flüchtlingsboote vor Europas Küsten mit der Geschichte von Sklavenhandel und Kolonialismus zu tun?* (*Black is the Ocean. What do full refugee boats off the coasts of Europe got to do with the histories of enslavement and colonialism?*) In this exhibition, Palasie addresses the current discourse on African migration to Europe, by showing that current migration patterns must be understood within the historical context of European colonisation and exploitation, that contributed significantly to many of the challenges that humans seek to escape from through migration to Europe (Palasie, 2019). In so doing, he seeks not only to address historical contexts but to counter contemporary hostility towards migrants and anti-immigration rhetoric (ibid).

Using six roll-up posters featuring multiple images and illustrations, short texts in very accessible language, illustrative quotations, and artistic renditions by the French-Togolese artist William Adjété Wilson, *Schwarz ist der Ozean*, has been shown in over two hundred locations and addressed a broad range of audiences “von der 9. Klasse bis 99”, from 9th grade to 99 years old (Palasie, interview, 2022). Exhibitions provide a particularly effective tool to showcase continuities and interconnectedness, as they allow for a range of different topics and contexts to be featured, discussing them not in much individual detail but bringing them in relationship to one another. They are suited to provide overviews and, in doing so, to draw attention to

relationships and interdependencies: “alle Aspekte mal anreißen und zusammen in Bezug bringen” (ibid).

Markus Frank was involved in various anti-racism efforts and networks supporting migrants and refugees since 2015, when he learned about the relationship between racism and colonial history as well as the group *Decolonize Erfurt* which had been formed at Erfurt University and decided to become a member in 2018. In our interview, he summarised walking tours’ efforts to foreground lasting legacies and continuities as follows:

[Wir sind ja] nicht nur in der Vergangenheit, irgendwie in den 1880er Jahre [unterwegs]. Wir ziehen ja auch dann schon die Verbindung in die Gegenwart oder in die nähere Vergangenheit. (...) Denn ist ja auch ein Ziel der Initiative nicht nur Vergangenheit [zu erzählen] sondern zu zeigen, wie Kolonialismus bis heute nachwirkt. (Frank, interview, 2022)

In this quotation, the importance of considering postcolonial continuities and legacies during these walking tours becomes evident. Frank describes that walks do not merely consider past events but seek to explicitly draw connections into the present. The choice of “Verbindung” here is notable, as it highlights that there is a relationship, an interconnectedness, between historical developments and contemporary, present-day circumstances. Another important word choice at the end of the excerpt is “nachwirkt”, which can be translated as to reverberate, and illustrates the implication that colonialism is something that continues to have an effect or impact in the present. Focusing on local traces brings familiar sites into new focus and prompts participants to see familiar environments through a new lens. The history that once seemed distant and irrelevant is suddenly brought into sharp focus, connected to the spaces they inhabit and navigate in their daily lives. Additionally, bringing attention to lasting legacies and continuities shapes participants’ thinking into considering how historical processes persist in shaping their conditions and surroundings in the present.

By carefully curating locations that both reveal the local impacts of colonial history and demonstrate its enduring legacies, activists not only make the invisible visible but also directly confront and challenge the prevailing discourse that had previously dismissed a critical reckoning by framing colonialism as irrelevant. In doing so, they create new opportunities for

critical engagement, enabling participants to connect past injustices with present realities, and encouraging a deeper, more reflective understanding of colonialism's ongoing influence.

[Mit dem Stadtrundgang wird] diese räumliche und zeitliche Trennung aufgehoben und wir gehen weg von diesem, 'Es gibt Kolonialismus damals und nicht Kolonialismus heute. Und Kolonialismus war nur dort, und nicht hier.' Also, [wir wollen] diese Trennungen aufheben und zeigen, es geht viel weiter zurück und reicht bis in die Gegenwart und hatte Einfluss hier und aber auch woanders. (Tutzer, interview, 2022)

It is narratives such as “Colonialism happened back then” and “Colonialism happened over there”, Tutzer describes, that walking tours are aiming to move away from. These kinds of narratives are both binary and hegemonic and have been impactful in shaping much of German dominant discourse around colonialism. ‘Moving away’ from them, indicates walking tours as a counter-hegemonic practice. These narratives, Tutzer further shows, have resulted in a separation or division (“Trennung”), contributing to a separative thinking between then/now and there/here, which downplays colonial history’s contemporary relevance in the former metropole. Moving away from this severance shows that these walks aim to foreground connectivity, both spatially, between colonised regions and colonising society, as well as temporally, between colonial history and its contemporary relevance. This foundational shift in perspective is crucial because it may encourage a more sustained interest in colonial histories and their legacies, as it may cultivate a mindset among participants that continues to question and reflect on these dynamics after the tour has finished. Participants are not just exposed to new information and narratives but equipped with an understanding as to why it is pivotal to think about these narratives as well as why they had previously been rendered invisible.

2.4. Distinctive features of walking tours and exhibition formats

Despite the shared set of aims, walking tours and exhibition formats operate very differently on a methodological level. In this section, I focus on some distinctive features of both activities, exploring walking tours' discursive nature and interactivity, and exhibition formats' use of visual features.

2.4.1. Memory activist walking tours as embodied and interactive encounters

Walking tours, as was illustrated in the opening of this section, typically involve a group of participants being guided by a host individual or small group, along a preselected route of sites, where participants engage with a range of narratives and perspectives, through discussions and activities. Walking tours, this shows, as are a distinctive engagement practice with two pivotal features that I discuss here; firstly, these walks are embodied interactions, and secondly, they are interactive and dialogical encounters.

Wenn der Stadtrundgang gut läuft und [Leute] sich darauf einlassen, lernen [sie] die Stadt, in der sie leben, mit anderen Augen zu sehen. (...). Wenn es um Subjektivität geht, und Subjektivität hat ja auch etwas mit dem räumlichen Empfinden und Erleben zu tun, kann man mit dem Stadtrundgang wirklich einiges erreichen. (Lindner, in: Wilmot et al., 2020)

This quotation is excerpted from a conversation, published in 2020, between four Erfurt based activists, who are discussing different facets of critical grassroots activism. As one contributor, *Decolonize Erfurt* co-founder Urs Lindner draws attention to the notion of embodiment in the context of postcolonial walking tours.

Embodied experiences are understood as instances, where our physical bodies are productively involved in the interaction and implicated in learning processes. This has been conceptualised most prominently by feminist scholars, who investigated how our experiences and ways of understanding the world around us are shaped and impacted by our body, as well as how different kinds of bodies experience and are treated differently in knowledge production processes (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2016; Hill Collins, 2009).

During walking tours, there are several ways in which participants' bodies become productively involved in the activity. Firstly, participants move physically towards and around the sites, facilitating spatial associations and contextual engagements. This physical proximity enables a closer engagement with these sites that is distinct from purely text- or image-based encounters. In this way, walking tours become a form of "peripatetic commemorations", which allow participants "to inhabit the world of the past, to follow in the footsteps of those that came before, to see the world as they saw it" (Bonilla, 2011:315). This facilitates an opportunity for a particular kind of historical engagement:

[Ich habe den Eindruck], es ist etwas ganz anderes, wenn ich vor einem Denkmal für einen Kolonialverbrecher stehe, als wenn ich darüber nur höre. (...) [Es ist] eine ganz andere Verwobenheit (...). Ich bin jetzt gerade an dem Ort, an dem das und das passiert ist. Oder, Ich bewege mich jetzt genau in diesem Kontext. Hier in dem Haus hat mal Bismarck gewohnt. Das ist etwas anderes, als wenn ich das in einem Buch lese oder in einem Vortrag gezeigt bekomme. (Herrwig, interview, 2022)

Herrwig's words choice of "Verwobenheit", stands out in this reflection. It can be translated as connectedness or entanglement. Herrwig does not identify explicitly what the entanglement applies to. I read this as signifying not only the interconnected relationship between the knowledges transmitted and the transmission context (i.e., the historical narrative about the site and the physical act of walking to the relevant site), but also the entangled, intimate relationship generated between the walk participant, the site and the knowledges discussed during the walk. Walking to these sites simulates for participants the experience of being moved into the given historical context. As Bonilla puts it, "[t]hese practices impart historical fluency by generating an intimate knowledge of the past: participants emerge not just with knowledge about the past (savoir) but with an intimate relation to the past (connaissance)" (2011:332). It is this visceral, intimate experience of these significant sites, which shapes walk participants' historical consciousness.

Secondly, the embodied engagement facilitates the use of multiple senses to mediate the provided input, providing a more immersive engagement (O'Neill and Hubbard, 2010; Pink, 2008). At each site during the walk, participants physical move around and listen to the host

and each other's reflections; additionally, participants speak to share reflections or to ask questions, they look at photographs or further materials provided by the hosts. In some settings, participants may note smells or background noises that provide a broader scope of the scene. At other times, participants might engage with a place, a monument for instance, by touching it. Walking tours illustrate "the interrelatedness of the visual and the other senses" (Pink et al., 2010:5). They have the ability to "[aid] kinaesthetic learning through the engagement of multiple senses and an innate desire to 'show and tell'" (Rose and The Modernist Heroines, 2022:1289), and provide an opportunity to enhance the experience through broadening the spectrum of perception through utilising multiple senses:

[Ein Stadtrundgang] ist auch methodisch attraktiv, dadurch dass es so ein Methodenmix ist. Man spaziert, man sieht Sachen, man kriegt Sachen erzählt. Teilweise haben wir haptische Sachen dabei, wo man etwas anfassen kann, oder durch die Bewegung. Ich habe den Eindruck ganz viele Reflexionsprozesse entstehen auch bei den Spaziergängen, weil ein Stadtrundgang auch immer wieder [informelle Räume] schafft. (Herrwig, interview, 2022)

Herrwig highlights how the breadth of sensory engagements during the walks contributes to the format's attractiveness and popularity. Furthermore, he emphasises how this can contribute to the creation of more informal engagement spaces, which allow for a multitude of reflective processes to take place among participants. Bonilla summarises the sensory engagement as follows:

historical knowledge is transmitted not just through a textual or discursive engagement, but also through a sensuous encounter with the material landscape. History is 'read' off of [sic] both the natural and built environment, but it is also experienced through the sensorium (Bonilla, 2011:315).

A second methodological feature is that walking tours are also collective and interactive encounters, that offer reflective and dialogical engagement. Grassroots advocates Mboro, Kopp, and LeGall, of *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.*, draw attention to interactivity and participation during these walks in their article *Small is Beautiful*:

As a form of street justice, [walking tours] allow interaction and discussion. Questions can be asked and debates can take place in an intimate setting of a group of less than twenty-five participants. (Mboro et al., 2020:230)

Walking tours are not lectures, nor are they outdoor history lessons. They are small-scale and personal interactions, with a setting that allows for discursive interactivity, discussion, and reflection which signifies one of their particular strengths as an engagement modality.

Likewise, my interviews highlighted vividly the attention that postcolonial activists pay to making these activities into engaging and participatory encounters, that foster critical dialogue and conversation:

Unser Ansatz ist eigentlich, dass wir ins Gespräch gehen wollen. Also, am Anfang [waren die Touren] relativ starr, wie eine Stadttour. Wir erzählen was, die Leute hören zu und dann laufen wir weiter. [Später] haben wir das methodisch nochmal anders aufgearbeitet. Dass wir mehr Fragen stellen und [mehr ins Gespräch gehen] und die Leute dann auch da abholen, wo sie sind. (...) [dadurch] nimmt man die Leute mehr mit. (...) Weil's dann auch einfach nochmal eine andere Interaktion ermöglicht. (Tutzer, interview, 2022)

The dynamic approach characteristic for walking tours, as explained by Tutzer, underscores how methodological considerations are an intentional and deliberate part of this activist practice in order to enable the most impactful engagement. Further, the quotation outlines how engaging critically and, where possible inverting, conventional knowledge hierarchies, represent a key priority for activists in this field. Finally, Tutzer demonstrates the ways in which implementing more interactivity enhances the transformative potential of these walks, for instance, as it allows the group to adapt their practice to participants' pre-existing knowledges and, therefore, to generate an engagement that is suitable and appropriate for a given audience.

Asking questions to participants in order to prompt reflection and critical thought is the most common strategy by walk hosts to encourage participation (Wappelhorst, 2022). Many hosts, for instance, pose a series of reflective prompts on the outset of the walk. Participant engagement can be of particular importance at this moment in order to gauge participants' existing knowledge on the matter:

[Es ist] eine Herausforderung, wie wir Leute mitnehmen. Das habe ich auch bei meinen Stadtführungen [gemerkt]. Ich mache immer erst mal eine Einführung in Kolonialgeschichte, was ist das überhaupt, von wann bis wann, und welche Kolonien. Mit Schulklassen mache ich das interaktiv. Mit den Erwachsenen-Gruppen, da frage [ich] sie . (...) Weil ich dadurch einfach merke, ja, worüber reden wir eigentlich. (Frey, interview, 2022)

Barbara Frey is a literary and theatre scholar and curator based in Bielefeld. Her approach to postcolonial discourses was shaped by intercultural theatre projects and a literature dissertation that got her working with writers from different African countries. At the *Welthaus Bielefeld*, she came in touch with a working group named *Bielefeld Postkolonial* in the mid 2000s, of which she has been a contributing member since (ibid). A dialogical approach at the outset of the walk, she emphasises in the quotation above, provides an opportunity to get participants and hosts on the same page, to understand what kinds of knowledges participants are bringing along. This is essential to adapt her delivery to the knowledge base, where necessary, in order to ensure that the experience is targeted appropriately, but also to set the tone for an interactive, participatory approach through the remainder of the walk.

Occasionally, interactivity and participation can also show up with more practical features and go beyond dialogical features through questions and reflection prompts:

Es hat immer mal Rundgänge gegeben, da hat jemand eine Kreide mitgenommen und (...) was auf die Denkmäler geschrieben. Das ermöglicht einfach andere, ganzheitliche Bildungserfahrung, als ich das bei einem Vortrag oder in klassischen Bildungsräumen habe. (Herrwig, interview, 2022)

This activity can be understood as prompting participants to reflect on the monument in front of them and share their reactions through the chalk inscription, allowing for an internal reflective

process but adds another layer of engagement through externalising the contemplation, therefore fostering opportunities for holistic learning experiences.

To facilitate dialogue with participants is sometimes not easy or straightforward to implement, as lack of existing knowledge, a sense of apprehension and nervousness, a fear of saying the wrong things and asking the wrong questions, can generate barriers (Anonymous Interviewee Erfurt, interview, 2022). Whilst walking tours are informal, the sensitivity of the topics and histories presented and discussed, maintains a level of distance and apprehension that can generate challenges for participants to get involved, and for walk hosts to facilitate an interactive and dialogical interventions (ibid). Yet overarchingly, participants respond positively to interactive and participatory features, frequently utilising these opportunities to seek further information, to share their thoughts, to converse and to ask questions (Authaler, interview, 2022; Wappelhorst, 2022).

Interactivity, finally and importantly, also reflects a critical engagement among activists with notions of knowledge hierarchies and authority (Wappelhorst, 2022).

Was man bei so einer Art von Stadtführung immer mit beachten muss, ist, dass wir da in diese Rolle derjenigen schlüpfen, die Wissen mitbringen und das an die anderen weitergeben. Allein das stellt schon eine Art von Machtgefüge da, ohne dass man das halt wirklich intendiert. (Anonymous Interviewee Erfurt, interview, 2022)

Walking tours are generated from intricate research and detailed contemplation which manifests an important knowledge base among activists. Sharing this with participants during the walk is a crucial feature of any walk. And yet, this quotation underlines, this also necessitates a critical and self-reflective engagement among walk hosts with their own knowledge base and with ideas related to knowledge and epistemological authority. Especially within the contexts of postcolonial and decolonial interventions, a critical engagement with these notions comes with a particular necessity.

By prioritising questions and dialogue, activists not only make these encounters more interesting and engaging for participants, but they have the potential to engender further critical reckoning beyond the walk itself, as they seek to encourage participants to think for themselves, and to consider the processes that have prioritised some histories whilst marginalising others.

Paul Urbanski studied history and pedagogy at Potsdam University where he became involved with *Postcolonial Potsdam* around 2019, after the group had been formed at the University in 2014. He was motivated to join the group in response to a distinct absence he had noticed in his university teaching, where colonial histories and legacies found little to no mention, and more broadly how colonialism was hardly discussed in the German school system and curricula generally (Urbanski, interview, 2022). With regards to interactivity and dialogue, he explains about the walking tours:

Wir wollen keinen Frontalunterricht machen. Das, was wir am wenigstens wollen, ist, die Leute belehren über irgendeine Denkweise, die wir haben sollten (...) Was wir auf jeden Fall alle in der Gruppe wollen, ist den Leuten andere Perspektiven und Ansichten geben, und möglichst viele Geschichten erzählen, die sie selber ins Denken und ins Grübeln bringen, [und] neue Denkprozesse anregen. (Urbanski, interview, 2022)

As interviewees cited above, Urbanski reflects on the ways in which walking tours are designed to be a dialogical activity, that seeks to invert or destabilise conventional knowledge hierarchies between tour guides and participants, indicated by the rejection of classic classroom style teaching and by the emphasis on seeking conversations with participants and stimulating debates at each tour stop. Moreover, his insights also illustrate ambitions to get participants thinking critically about these paradigms for themselves. Urbanski provides an impactful illustration of this process, when he says, the tour does not seek to lecture participants about a way of thinking they ought to have. His choice of verbs stands out in this excerpt, as he emphasises the group's ambition to avoid "belehren", which can be translated as 'to teach' or 'to instruct' but holds a strong moral, top-down, and authoritative connotation, as in 'to lecture' or even 'to indoctrinate'. This verb also implies a passivity on part of those on the receiving end of the "belehren", being supplied information without reflection. Walk hosts do not tell participants what to think or feel about these histories. What they aim to do instead, is to provide those kinds of new perspectives and new stories, which will get people thinking and pondering for themselves. Urbanski's illustration shows that whilst walking tours engage with and utilise histories and memories of the past, the kinds of narratives and memories generated during the walks are not introduced to participants simply as replacements for previously held, hegemonic

memories and knowledges. The counter-memories present a challenge to hegemonic knowledges but not in order for one set of memories to replace a previously held, dominant one, but in order to stimulate longer term critical thinking among participants themselves. These walks reject providing alternative, overarching, unified narratives about the past. Instead, the priority lies with illustrating and critically reflecting on the processes and circumstances that shape memory construction and dissemination. The narratives and memories circulated during the walks become vehicles for this critical discourse and reflective engagement.

2.4.2. Civic exhibitions using disruptive visual features and transportability

Building on the above about walking tours as embodied, and interactive encounters, this section, explores some of the methodological features of exhibition practices in this movement.

Exhibitions are spatially organised, public displays, usually conceptualised around a series of between 10 and 30 posters, that display text and images, presenting information frequently in multiple languages (Karakis, 2023). One introductory placard is usually followed by the remainder being dedicated to specific focus topics (Lindner, 2023). Posters are supplemented by physical objects in display cabinets (Frey, 2023), and audio or film stations for more vivid illustrations (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2023b; Karakis, 2023; Wegmann, 2023). Some exhibitions feature artistic interventions (Kopp, 2023a), and are accompanied by events series that run alongside the exhibition period and include talks, readings, walking tours, artist performances etc. (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2023a; Frey, 2023; Kopp, 2023a; Wegmann, 2023). In this way, exhibitions operate very differently from walking tours to communicate their agendas and evoke visitor reflection.

As a particular type of visual material, colonial images, photographs, and postcards, are integral as visual sources for exhibition makers, as they serve as important tools to illustrate historical narratives and make historical realities visible (Edwards and Mead, 2013). Importantly, these are not neutral historical sources but carry with them the context and ideologies within which they were produced (Bate, 1993), which makes them a type of material that poses challenges for how to incorporate them into exhibitions, as displaying them without a meaningful critical re-appraisal may risk reproducing the kinds of colonial violence in the

context of which they were produced and reinforcing stereotypes (Wegmann and Himmelsbach, 2023: 118).

Civic actors in the movement have found various strategies to display these images in order to harness their illustrative qualities, whilst disrupting the historical contexts and oppressive ideologies within which they were created. One example for this is provided by the historian Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst, in her project *Köln Postkolonial* from 2007/08, which she discusses below:

Die intensivsten Diskussionen im Ausstellungsteam gab es über die Frage, wie mit dem visuellen Erbe des Kolonialismus umgegangen werden sollte. Einigkeit bestand von Beginn an darüber, dass eine bloße Reproduktion von Kolonialfotografien und anderen zeitgenössischen Abbildungen den kolonialen Blick und koloniale Diskurse unbeabsichtigt fortschreiben und bestätigen würde, und zwar unabhängig von den begleitenden kritischen Texten. Wir entschieden uns schließlich dafür, alle Bilder zu dekonstruieren, indem wir eine gewisse Anzahl an kleinen Quadraten, „Pixel“, ausschnitten und aus den Bildern herausfließen ließen. Die kolonialen Bildregime wurden so zerstört und der Blick der Betrachter*innen auf die Bilder wurde irritiert. (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2023b)

Visual sources, she reiterates, generated the most challenges and most discussions in the project team, for the danger of reproducing the colonial gaze by reproducing them. Critical texts alone, she notes, were insufficient to disrupt this risk, prompting the team to opt for an additional deconstructive strategy of cutting out small squares, or ‘pixels’ from the images that are then arranged in such a way around the image that they appear to be ‘falling out’ of the image, in order to break the colonial gaze, as well as to irritate the visitors (see Figure 4).

This illustrates a simple yet effective strategy, as its effects are manifold and it can be employed with various types of photographs: Colonial officials are displayed to underline their positions of power and superiority; cutting pixels out of these photos disrupts this curated unity and, therefore, destabilises this position; conversely this effect can be used on colonial photographs of colonised communities and ‘subjects’, which were usually produced to present positions of inferiority and ‘Otherness’. Such external representation, imposed by colonial

officials against the agency of those represented, can likewise be broken or undermined through the pixel approach. Lastly, retaining the cut-out pixels and re-arranging them in and around the images themselves, underlines the meaningful impact, as in addition to the disruption of the images themselves, the re-arranging of the pixels effectively draws visitors' attention to that disruption process, prompting further irritation and reflection.

Figure 4: Köln Postkolonial exhibition panel.

Exhibition panel titled *Der koloniale Blick* informs about colonial imageries reproducing racist representations. The exhibition makers use a visual strategy to disrupt these dynamics, with pixels 'falling out' of the image to disturb visitors' perception. Source: http://www.koofwelten.org/ko/virtualmuseum/KP_01_Einfuehrung.pdf (Last



Exhibitions are settings that invite visitors to look and observe in order to engage with the content presented to them (alongside use of other senses). Yet, the act of looking at and gazing upon exhibits does not reflect an innocent process of gathering information but rather, it is shaped by social, cultural, political contexts, impacting both the exhibition itself and the viewer's perspective (Bhandari, 2021). This encounter can carry inherent power dynamics within these concepts, making the act of looking not a neutral or objective activity. For this reason, exhibitions, for instance, have functioned as acts of power and oppression, as the colonial exhibitions hosted in Berlin-Treptow and Leipzig in the 1890s, including their 'human zoos', have attested. These exhibitions reinforced colonial ideologies by presenting colonised peoples as objects to be gazed upon, perpetuating a dynamic where the viewer (typically from the colonising society) held power over the subjects on display. The term 'imperial gaze' was coined by Kaplan (2010), to denote relationships between coloniser and colonised, where the coloniser gazing upon the colonised, because of the power hierarchies in which they operate, becomes a process of definition and of oppression. Similarly to the question of colonial photographs, and images, this generates challenges for activists seeking to design critical exhibitions about German colonial histories and its legacies. The exhibiting of various objects, especially but not limited to, the exhibiting of racist representations, even when displayed as a critical re-appraisal, by the fact that looking at and gazing upon them, can be considered a process of placing those doing the looking in a position of power. In response, civic actors, have found strategies not merely to respond to this challenge but to turn this challenge into an opportunity for a productive engagement and as a means to even further enhance their communication of critical agendas.

A key strategy that activist exhibition makers have been using to disrupt is the use of reflective glass. *DECOLONIZE MÜNCHEN* was the Munich iteration of the travelling *freedom roads!* exhibition, curated by activists with the *Decolonize München* collective in 2013, and hosted at the city museum, to showcase local traces and continuities of colonial histories in Munich (Bahl et al., 2015, 2023). In the display, activists included representations of racist imageries and figurines but displayed them in a designated cabinet behind reflective glass. Visitors were invited to switch on a specific light to see the displayed objects, but in this process also saw a reflection of themselves in the glass, which confronted them with their own act of looking, gazing upon these objects (Bahl et al., 2023; Lawryniuk, 2023).

In Berlin, the *zurückGESCHAUT* exhibition, explored in detail above, utilised a similar strategy with regards to the collection of photographs of the individuals that had lived in the 'human zoo' during the Colonial Exhibition, which activist exhibition makers had included in the exhibit in order to illustrate their biographies as individuals and humans. These images were themselves a product of racist operations, having been taken by colonial anthropologist Felix von Luschan for his own racist research purposes (Memarnia, 2017). Additionally, displaying these images in the exhibition ran the risk of perpetuating the procedure of exhibiting human beings as objects to be gazed upon by museum visitors, therefore, replicating similar power dynamics that had shaped the Colonial Exhibition. What activists decided to do was, first, to produce re-coloured versions of these photographs, which enabled activists to invert some of the anonymisation that is produced through black/white photography, as well as re-affirm their position as individual humans. Secondly, activists likewise opted for the use of reflective glass, meaning that when museum visitors looked at these portraits, they were confronted with their own reflection and made them stumble upon their own gaze.

Displaying content behind reflective glass is a powerful curatorial strategy. It activates visitors' self-awareness, as the confrontation with their own reflection converts the encounter from a more passive gaze, that can inadvertently reproduce dominant power relations, into a more active, self-conscious, reflexive encounter. It confronts the viewer with the fact that they are not a seemingly objective, neutral observer but that they are playing an active role in the viewing. Making the viewer's reflection a constitute part of the viewing, it confronts visitors with the fact that in the process of viewing others, they are also being viewed, which can undermine and destabilise some of the power dynamics in the viewing process.

2.5. Complementarity

To conclude this chapter, there are two final points I want to make about these two activities, and this relates to their complementarity. Over the past decades, walking tours and exhibition formats have served opportunities for civic public engagement in this context, which followed a shared set of aims and ambitions, and utilised distinct methodologies and strategies, in a way that has made these techniques complementary.

2.5.1. Going beyond the ‘bubble’

The first point relates to how these two strategies are complementary in the sense that they have a potential to balance out each other's strengths and shortfalls.

Above I outlined how walking tours generate an interactive, dialogical, and embodied engagement. In this way, walking tours for many participants offer in-depth engagements and often serve as a catalyst for critical reckoning (Urbanski, interview, 2022). Yet, one major challenge relates to the walks' scope and reach. A key target group and significant audience for these walks are local communities and residents, as activists are seeking to engage walk participants in participatory and critical thinking related to topics and environments that are local and familiar to them (Urbanski, interview, 2022). Several interviewees noted that demographically, walks are relatively diverse (Yeter, interview, 2022), engage participants from various ages (Frey, interview, 2022), from other civic organisations, and sometimes political representatives (Authaler, interview, 2022; LeGall, interview, 2022; Tutzer, interview, 2022).

Despite this diversity, my interviewees acknowledged that overall, the reach of these walks commonly remains within a circle of those that were already interested and critically sensitised to these histories and their legacies:

Bei den Rundgängen [sind] oft einfach Leute mit da, die schon generelles Interesse mitbringen (Anonymous Interviewee Erfurt, interview, 2022)

Zu 90 Prozent [kommen] Leute, die Interesse haben, die empfänglich sind für das Thema und die entsprechend eher aufgeschlossen sind, sich auch kritischen Input zu geben. (Yeter, interview, 2022)

There is a common theme, these interviewees report, that overarchingly participants join these tours with a pre-existing sense of interest, and sensitivity, sometimes pre-existing knowledge about the kinds of topics discussed during the walk.

This pattern has created a sense that often, walking tour audiences have remained within something of a “bubble” of those already interested in these topics:

Also, unsere Veranstaltungen oder die Stadtrundgänge (...) das passiert alles, (...) „in der Blase“. Das ist sowohl in der universitären akademischen Blase als auch natürlich in der politisch sich links verstehenden Blase. (...) Da haben wir eigentlich durchweg hauptsächlich positives Feedback, [aber] meine Erfahrungen sind [auch], dass es wirklich bisher kaum zu wirklich grundlegender Kritik oder auch Diskussionen oder Ablehnung oder so weitergekommen ist. (Anonymous Interviewee Augsburg, interview, 2022)

This “bubble”, it is highlighted here, frequently consists of either academically aligned and/or politically left leaning individuals, meaning these are individuals that largely share the political aspirations and values of activist groups during these walks, and, frequently, join these activities with a relevant pre-existing understanding of the significance of colonial histories and their legacies. This is reflected, this interviewee observes, in overarchingly positive feedback and discussions from participants, and limited critical approaches or resistance during the walks. The metaphor of the “bubble” was referenced also by several other interviewees in this context (Steyn, interview, 2022; Urbanski, interview, 2022).

Whilst a sense of openness, sensitivity, and interest are vital for a meaningful walk experience, as they create necessary conditions for participants to engage reflectively and collaboratively, therefore solidifying the walks’ critical potential, if these activities are aimed at reaching broader societal engagement, staying within this bubble may result in reinforcing critical beliefs within a narrow sphere, rather than reaching new audiences to drive societal change; they run the risk of “preaching to the choir” (Steyn, interview, 2022). As such this “bubble” has been recognised as one of the key challenges and most significant potential shortcomings of activist walking tours:

ich habe auch das Gefühl, dass wir sehr schwierig an Leute herankommen, die nicht aus dem akademischen Kontext herauskommen. Da bin ich relativ

frustriert aber auch motiviert, wie wir unsere Arbeit noch umstrukturieren können, dass wir ein breiteres Publikum ansprechen (...) Weil oft bei den Touren habe ich schon das Gefühl, dass wir schon auch was bewegen können, oder Leute zum Denken anregen können, und wir auch dort gut ins Gespräch kommen, aber eben in diesen akademischen Blasen, (...) ist es oft so, dass es mir schwerfällt, daraus auszutreten. Das sehe ich als sehr große Hürde in unserer Arbeit. (ibid)

Anette Steyn studied English and Sociology at Potsdam University, where she became involved with *Potsdam Postcolonial* about which she had read on the university website. Her motivation in postcolonial discourses and local histories had been shaped by personal circumstances, as growing up in a *white* South African family had sparked her critical interest in colonial histories and their legacies through a personal familial connection, which then shaped an academic and activist engagement (ibid). In the quotation above, Steyn notes that the question of accessing broader audiences for their walking tours is a question of reaching beyond academic environments. In this process, frustration stands alongside perseverance and motivation, as activists like Steyn take this as an opportunity to review their processes and strategies. This underlines that, whilst activists show great awareness of this as a key hurdle in their practice, they remain committed to this practice and its impact potential. A crucial factor contributing to the formation of the “bubble” is that walking tours are self-selecting. In order to be aware of these activities and deem it suitable to dedicate time and resources to attend, participants are more likely to already possess a level of awareness and interest in these matters.

In response to this, activists have devised strategies in attempts to reach beyond their familiar circles. Some groups, for instance, offer walks as part of ‘alternative induction weeks’ hosted quite commonly by many universities (Frank, interview, 2022); whilst this reach still remains within an academic bubble, these are large scale events during which civic organisations may reach students beyond already politically aligned and engaged circles and of broader professional and disciplinary backgrounds. Other actors emphasised the engagement with school classes (Frey, interview, 2022), and youth festivals (Yeter, interview, 2022), in order to work towards a sensitisation of younger generations towards these histories and their legacies. A more unusual strategy has been employed in Bielefeld where Frey has been collaborating with the city’s tourist office, *Bielefeld Marketing*, to host postcolonial walks as

part of a ‘blind date’ format. Whilst collaborating with *Bielefeld Marketing*, Frey conceded, goes not without hesitation or scepticism, she emphasised that this strategy has been crucial in order to reach audiences beyond the usual “bubble”, and, to a certain extent, undermine the principle of self-selection, as local audiences sign up for a walk without knowing the kind of topic or focus that they will engage with (Frey, interview, 2022).

In this context of the “bubble” and the question of scope and reach, exhibition formats have been noted to offer some potential with regards to addressing broader audiences. As displays that are primarily constitutive of posters and placards, supplemented by a range of other objects, exhibitions in this context, are usually transportable and mobile meaning they can be moved to different kinds of public locations and in doing so, address various kinds of audiences.

In the conceptualisation of their exhibitions, grassroots exhibition makers frequently opt for the use of lightweight and flexible materials, printing their posters, for instance, on roll-up displayers, rather than static panels (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2023a; Wegmann, 2023). This is influenced on the one side, by a need to work within limited financial means, as well as the necessity to be able to adapt to different host locations, as most activist initiatives do not commonly have a permanent dedicated work or exhibition space they can utilise. As a consequence, many exhibitions are deliberately conceptualised as travelling exhibitions with a stated aim in the exhibition concept to move around different localities, sites, and sometimes cities (Kopp, 2023a; Wegmann, 2023). In this movement, exhibitions created by grassroots actors on German colonial histories and related topics have been displayed at a very broad range of public sites including local museums, but also public libraries, schools, universities, and other educational organisations, cultural organisations, sociopolitical festivals, cinemas, city archives, art galleries, local administration buildings. In our interview, Palasie noted that mobility had become one of the key features of his exhibitions. He called himself the “Wanderpromotor”, he joked, as he had presented *Schwarz ist der Ozean* in over 200 locations (Palasie, interview, 2022).

Whilst this can come with challenges and obstacles with regards to dependency on host spaces, this also creates the effective potential that exhibitions become inherently transportable. And their mobility enables them to be adaptable to different sites, and in doing so, allows activists to address and reach different kinds of audiences. Taking exhibitions to

social or cultural festivals, it allows for topics related to colonial histories to be brought into relationship with other socio-cultural contexts or topics (Palasie, interview, 2022). When exhibitions are displayed in cultural centres or cinemas, they can be further enhanced with complimentary programmes, such as topical movies. Additionally, presenting an exhibition in spaces that feature in everyday life, like educational or administrative facilities, which have nothing to do in particular with cultural or historical matters, allows activists to address audiences when they are in the process of doing something else. Whilst this might not create a suitable situation for an in-depth critical engagement, it does have the potential to address audiences in a more incidental way, which may generate a lower or more gentle engagement threshold for those who have never encountered such topics before and may, as a consequence, feel hesitant or resistant. It also enables an engagement with those audiences that would not have sought out an exhibition like this on their own, either because of a lack of interest or aversion, or simply because they were not aware of such interventions (Wegmann, interview, 2022).

2.5.2. Creating ‘aha effects’ and tipping points

The final point I want to make about these walks and exhibitions relates to what they may actually be seen to achieve. As noted above, a broad lack of public knowledge of German colonialism and its legacies has been part of and the result of a decades long dominant discourse insisting on colonialism’s insignificance (Wildenthal, 2003). It has been neglected in curriculums as well as public discourse for generations.

In this context, there is no expectation, among my interviewees, nor in my analysis, that a two-hour walking tour or a 10 poster exhibition format may succeed in entirely overhauling participants’ or visitors’ understanding of these complex and lasting histories and their impacts. What they do do, however, is that they create opportunities for familiar notions of insignificance to be destabilised, for participants to be confronted with a sense of disorientation and confusion about neglected histories, and in so doing, generate a starting point for further reflection and engagement, and a foundation for broader societal commemorative activity:

Viele [Teilnehmende an einem Stadtrundgang] sind [rausgegangen] mit so einem großen Aha Effekt, wie groß und vielfältig dieses Thema ist, und wie

wichtig das eigentlich ist, dass man darüber spricht. (Anonymous Interviewee Erfurt, interview, 2022)

Walks offer a moment of illumination for previously unknown or incomprehensible perspectives, and in particular, a moment of comprehension about the relevance and significance of talking about these topics.

Ich sage immer in meinem Vorwort, dass man aus seiner Komfortzone rausgehen muss, dass der Stadtrundgang nur ein kleiner Tropfen ist, sozusagen (...) [wenn dann] vielleicht jemand dabei [ist], der sich noch nie damit beschäftigt hat, der [geht] dann in Zukunft mit einem anderen Bewusstsein [weiter]. (Yeter, interview, 2022)

In so doing, Yeter emphasises the potential to contribute to shifting perceptions and consciousness, as well as highlighting the focus of these walks to exceed beyond the two-hour intervention.

Und ich finde, gerade wenn es um koloniale Kontinuitäten in der Stadtgesellschaft geht, ermöglicht ein Stadtrundgang total viel, nämlich einen anderen Blick zu bekommen, auf meine ganz direkte Umgebung. Ich glaube, das hat diesen Irritationsmoment von Ach guck mal, ich bin hier mal vorbeigelaufen, und jetzt fällt mir erst auf, dass XYZ. Und es führt auch dazu, dass Leute uns häufig zurückmelden, Nachdem ich den Rundgang gemacht habe, gucke ich nochmal mit anderen Augen auf Orte in der Stadt. (Herrwig, interview, 2022)

Walking tours may generate a different view, a different perspective, and, notably, an “Irritationsmoment”, a moment of disorientation, of confusion, of unsettling. Having participated in a walking tour, participants may experience some undoing of previously held imaginations or associations with their immediate, familiar surroundings. Subsequently, Herrwig describes a little later in the interview, walking tours can become an “Augenöffner” (ibid), an eye-opening experience which allows participants to see known spaces through a new lens, connect with new facets and perspectives that they had previously been oblivious too, therefore making this moment into one of productive confusion, that generates further engagement.

Creating eye-openers and inflection points, as interviewees describe in the excerpts above, are integral and meaningful for wider public commemorative engagement, as they create tipping points that can change societal thinking more broadly:

Also mein Anspruch ist es (...) Kipp-Punkte [zu erzeugen] im Umdenken von Leuten, (...) also, dass ich lieber mehr Leute mal anfixe, und hoffe, dass im Nachgang so ein bisschen Nachdenken stattfindet, (...) [und] vielleicht auch manche Leute sagen, *Ok das war jetzt sehr oberflächlich, es gibt bestimmt auch die Möglichkeit mich vertieft mit dem Thema, oder mit einem Teilaspekt des Themas zu befassen*. Also, das ist mir schon klar, ich setze vor allem Impulse (...) Weil ich halt einfach denke, dass wenn wir gesamtgesellschaftliche Kipp-Punkte erreichen wollen (...), dann müssen wir schauen, wie bekomme ich auch die normale Bevölkerung für die Themen zumindest mal ein bisschen angefixt. (Palasie, interview, 2022)

Palasie's exhibitions, he describes in this excerpt, do not provide in-depth investigation or exhaustive detail but rather present surface level overviews. This deliberate strategy allows Palasie to reach "normal" audiences, meaning mainstream audiences without substantial pre-existing knowledge or existing sensitivity to these matters, which are more likely to find broader overviews or introductory displays more engaging and relatable to their expertise. With these audiences, exhibitions then enable Palasie to set an impulse, to provide a stimulus, or to give a nudge that opens up their thinking, and that may prompt further exploration beyond the encounter with the exhibition. Getting these audiences "hooked", for Palasie, is instrumental in order to generate a critical mass, which is instrumental for generating a "tipping point", if postcolonial reckoning is to be approached as something that touches on and engages all parts of society. Getting people "hooked" illustrates that generating critical discourse and getting people to change their thinking about these histories and their legacies represents a long-lasting, long-term transformation; whilst "tipping point" draws attention to the wide scale of societal transformation that is being sought.

2.6. Conclusion

Public engagement, to address mainstream public audiences and to illuminate blindspots in public knowledge and memory related to German colonialism, has constituted a key activity and pivotal pillar of postcolonial memory activism reaching back into the 1980s. In order to navigate a persistent gap in critical knowledge related to colonial history and its impacts, these activities highlight local traces of colonialism and anticolonial resistance, as well as showcase the lasting persistence of these histories and their legacies. With this strategy, grassroots actors undermine a persistent dominant discourse that has historically tried to mark German colonial history and its impact as insignificant and irrelevant for contemporary reckoning.

In recent years, walking tours have been particularly prominent and ubiquitous in this movement, as activists seek to make persistent coloniality within the public space visible and work to undermine hegemonic readings of Germany's urban landscapes (Zwischenraum Kollektiv, 2017). As these walks have grown into what can be seen as the characteristic activity of this movement, they have already generated significant public and scholarly attention. This chapter has brought these walks and existing scholarship into conversation with another engagement activity, that is activist exhibition making. In so doing, I hoped to have drawn some further attention to activist exhibition making, that so far has remained less explored, within this context (Fechner and Schneider, 2023), and as an activist practice more broadly (Grindon, 2023). Furthermore, this has demonstrated how walking tours and exhibitions have been utilised in this movement as two sides of the same coin, as they share a common aim, but pursue this by different means, that are utilised alongside each other, and in many ways, in a complimentary manner, enabling activists to reach different kinds of audiences to expand their critical scope (Wegmann, interview, 2022), and generating critical inflection points that stimulate further reflection (Palasie, interview, 2022).

Most participants encounter activist exhibitions and walking tours with an existing level of interest and sensitivity, yet frequently, these activities constitute a first dedicated engagement with the local persistence of colonial histories and impacts—and with the work of postcolonial memory activists. With this in mind, this chapter has aimed, to create an engaging starting point for readers' exploration of less familiar and less widely discussed postcolonial memory activist activities and critiques in the subsequent chapters.

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Chapter 3. Grassroots *political advocacy*: Activist campaigns to change colonial street names.

3.1. Introduction

In late 2010, a petition titled “Aufruf zu einem grundlegenden Wandel im Umgang mit Deutschlands kolonialem Erbe, zur Umbenennung von Straßen, die koloniale Akteure ehren sowie zur Förderung postkolonialer Erinnerungskulturen”,⁵³ drafted by a coalition of activists, artists, and civic actors, was addressed publicly to German municipal districts and local administrations (freedom roads!, 2010). It drew attention to the persistence of the many physical remnants of colonialism in European and German cities, noting that colonial street names were reminders of colonial oppression, and names with racist references served as a perpetuation of racist and colonial discrimination and were an insult on human dignity (ibid). The petition noted that whilst in most European societies, a comprehensive critical reckoning with colonial histories had long been overdue, it was a growing network of civil society actors and NGOs, especially African and Afro-German individuals and organisations, that had in recent years been advocating for and working towards the change of offensive street names and towards more critical, postcolonial cultures of remembrance (ibid). In this petition, these actors were making a joint appeal to local administrations, as well as the *Deutsche Städtetag*,⁵⁴ to finally take account of the importance of a “coming to terms” with the colonial past and of an active support for postcolonial remembrance, for both the present and the future (ibid).⁵⁵ Whilst demanding a comprehensive approach to critical reckoning with colonial and with postcolonial remembrance, street names were of central importance in this petition, as the authors included a list of twelve concrete demands, such as the removal of any vestiges honouring colonial figures, the prioritisation of new names to commemorate anticolonial resistance, the critical contextualisation of street names with colonial references, and the development of comprehensive reckoning concepts in cities with so called ‘colonial quarters’, among others (ibid). This petition had been drafted in the course of the activist conference *freedom roads!* -

⁵³ “Appeal for a fundamental change in dealing with Germany's colonial heritage, for the renaming of streets that honour colonial protagonists as well as for promoting postcolonial cultures of remembrance”

⁵⁴ *German Conference of Cities*.

⁵⁵ The *Deutsche Städtetag* is an advocacy organisation, composed of representatives of more than 3000 municipalities, serving as a platform for local administration to discourse and collaborate on urban policy and local governance, but it does not exercise any formal executive powers, as decision-making authority is retained by individual cities.

Vom Umgang mit kolonialen Straßennamen: Praxis und Visionen,⁵⁶ hosted in Berlin in October 2010, and in its aftermath, signed by over 300 activists, artists, and other civic actors, and organisations from more than thirty different cities across Germany. This conference had taken place as part of the wider, multi-faceted project *freedom roads!* which was substantially co-organised by Berlin based activist and historian Christian Kopp, and Hamburg based activist and visual artist HM Jokinen. It incorporated, alongside this networking conference and petition, a detailed travelling exhibition on the topic of colonial street names, as well as a comprehensive website detailing lists of colonial street names in Germany and activist mobilisation towards change. *freedom roads!* was by no means the first grassroots appeal to local administrations and wider society for a critical reckoning with colonially themed street names, which had persisted since the 1970s. Yet it was a caesura. It consolidated previous, largely sporadic grassroots efforts into a sustained and national campaign, and as a result, was able to manifest renaming activism as a pivotal pillar in the emerging postcolonial memory activist movement, and in future years, secure public and political attention and traction for these issues, which significantly furthered critical commemorative efforts overall.

Grassroots campaigns drawing attention to and critically challenging colonially themed street names, of which *freedom roads!* is one illustrative example, have over the last several decades, constituted a second important pillar of postcolonial civic activism in Germany (Barwick-Gross and Kulz, 2024; Bönkost, 2017; Engler, 2013; Förster et al., 2016; Rozas-Krause, 2019; Schilling, 2020; Schwarzer, 2022; Steckenbiller, 2019; Thiemeyer, 2019). Recognising street names as vital and powerful inscriptions of colonial power and control, activists have been researching colonially motivated naming contexts, inscriptions, and histories, challenged the underexplored meanings and legacies of these monikers, and advocating for their contextualisation as well as removal (Aikins, 2012a; Aikins and Hoppe, 2011; Engler, 2013; Schwarzer, 2022; Zeller, 2000).⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *freedom roads! - Dealing with colonial street names: Practice and visions*

⁵⁷ This chapter focuses on colonial street names and will not discuss colonial monuments. Both street names and monuments served an important role of inscribing colonial propaganda, control, and revisionism into the German public landscape (Ebert, 2021; Zeller, 2000). In recent years, both street names and monuments have come under critical consideration and been targeted by various (de)commemorative activities (Gensburger and Wüstenberg, 2023a). Yet, the strategies by which these have been addressed and the implications for their (de)commemorative potential differs. As Brasher & Alderman have pointed out, “[W]hile monuments can be torn down or removed, place names—out of practical necessity—must be rewritten and reimagined. A street cannot be left without a name in the same way a removed statue can leave behind an empty pedestal. In this respect, place name removal can never be

This grassroots activism challenging colonially themed street names has been an instrumental tool utilised by activists in promoting critical postcolonial commemoration and reflective engagement with colonial histories and legacies across Germany and has contributed to a significant shift in consensus about these street names. Whilst decades ago, these had remained unaddressed and unchallenged, colonially themed street names are now overarchingly recognised as outdated remnants of colonial power and control (Frank, 2023; Klein, 2022; Memarnia, 2022a; Reiff, 2023).

In this chapter I investigate these activities, and I demonstrate that this impact has been achieved, not through larger numbers of street names changed, but through the transformative nature of the campaigns themselves. Following a brief overview of the history of colonially themed street names in Germany, I illustrate that grassroots activism regarding public inscriptions of colonial power in Germany have a particularly long-lasting history, with earliest campaigns tracing back to the 1970s (Zeller, 2000), this feature of civic action can be considered one of the earliest facets of postcolonial memory activism in Germany. I then turn to investigate in more detail the transformative nature of these campaigns: firstly, I demonstrate that these campaigns, whilst generating public awareness and sensitivity, are demands for specific and practical changes to these inscriptions, in other words, this activism is about advocacy work (Giugni and Grasso, 2018); moreover, because street names fall under the formal authority of city councils and elected officials, I demonstrate the important role of political engagement and lobbywork as a strategy for activism in this field (LeGall, interview, 2022). Secondly, I explain that lobbywork and political engagement are embedded in wider memory work contexts and agendas (Engler, 2013; Frank, interview, 2022), and demonstrate how this participatory nature impacts their effective potential for critical commemoration as they recognise local communities and residents and stakeholders to these issues (Brasher and Alderman, 2023). Thirdly, I investigate grassroots activists' "politics of surrogacy" (ibid) and demonstrate how activists' principles for replacement names to maintain the historical colonial context but with a commemorative inversion, ensures that renaming campaigns and new street names can become sites for critical recognition and learning about historically invisibilised and marginalised (anti)colonial histories. Finally, I explain how grassroots renaming campaigns are

fully understood or evaluated outside of the context of name replacement." (Brasher and Alderman, 2023). For the sake of scope, and in an attempt not to conflate these distinctions, this chapter focuses only on the transformative, (de)commemorative potential of street names and renaming processes.

meaningful for critical commemoration because they underline the importance of street names not merely as ‘names’, but as ‘namescapes’ (ibid) acknowledging that what is recognised in the cityscape is understood as having a bearing on wider societal processes, and in so doing, they utilise street names to contribute to negotiations of history, memory and identity in the public sphere (Aikins, 2012a; Aikins and Hoppe, 2011; Engler, 2013; Schwarzer, 2022).

3.2. Colonially themed street names as persistent reminders of oppression & violence

Between the 1880s and the 1940s, across Germany, several hundreds of streets were assigned colonially motivated toponyms and colonial themes in order to commemorate important colonial events and developments, such as annexations and expansions, as well as to honourably remember significant colonial officials and personalities.⁵⁸ The assigning of colonially themed street names was a state controlled, top-down process by which German political elites were seeking to control official narratives about colonisation and German involvement (Azaryahu, 1996; Azaryahu and Kook, 2002). Many names were allocated during the colonial period, as a means of spreading colonial propaganda and highlighting colonialism’s assumed prestige and political value (Kopp and Krohn, 2013), in a contest of European nations competing for global dominance and the inscription of imperial expansion into public landscapes legitimised imperial actions. Numerous further street names using colonial themes were implemented during the National Socialist period, in a revisionist attempt to retrospectively celebrate and reemphasise colonial wins, as well as rehabilitate colonial perpetrators (Ebert, 2021; Weger, 2014). Street names were an important power tool in the overseas colonies, part of the process of annexing and claiming colonial and settler spaces, because they provided means to assert control and underline colonial authority, imposing the coloniser’s worldview, whilst eradicating Indigenous identities and markers, both in German colonies (Aleff, 2017) and elsewhere (Nash, 1999; Yeoh, 1992). Simultaneously, they were also

⁵⁸ An extensive overview list of colonially themed street names in Germany was collated as part of the freedom roads! project, explored above, and can still be found on the project website, which remains an important research and knowledge reservoir on such street names and grassroots campaigns advocating for change. It can be accessed here: <http://www.freedom-roads.de/frdd/staedte.htm> (Accessed: 15 January 2025).

an integral mechanism in the metropole to steer and manipulate society's understanding and interpretation of German colonial involvement, during the colonial period and thereafter.

In an attempt not merely to control official narratives but to streamline them, naming strategies frequently commemorated and honoured the same locations, events, and personalities, by reusing toponyms across multiple cities, including, most commonly, Lüderitz, Wissmann, Nachtigal, Leutwein (Ebert, 2021). Where many instances assigned such names to individual streets, several cities dedicated multiple streets within one neighbourhood to the colonial project, resulting in what became known as 'colonial quarters'. The so called 'African Quarter' in Berlin Wedding remains the most well-known and the largest, with 27 streets and squares (Honold, 2003; Kopp and Krohn, 2013), but others can be found in Munich, Cologne, Mannheim, Dusseldorf, and Hannover (Ebert, 2021).

Colonially themed street names were addressed in different ways in both German states in the immediate post war period. In West Germany, a small number of renamings took place of colonially themed street names that had been assigned during the Nazi period, as part of the state's denazification efforts (Speitkamp, 2005). In East Germany, colonially themed street names became the target of the government's anti-imperialism policies and several renamings were implemented, especially of those street names that commemorated perpetrators of colonial violence and genocide (ibid). This resulted in larger number of street names being changed by the East German regime, yet these efforts still remained incomplete, as streets that commemorated lower profile colonial officials remained unattended (AG Leipzig Postkolonial, 2021), and some changed names were later reinstated as well (Decolonize Erfurt, 2020b).

As a result, the frequency of colonially themed street names has differed across the two regions since reunification, with states in West Germany showing a larger concentration. Nevertheless, examples colonially themed street names, have remained across Germany. Furthermore, whilst the name changes in both German states in the afterwar period certainly mattered, these activities did not generate much engagement with the colonial past, and instead were an expression of both German states using street name changes as means to express their own respective political agendas. As a result, to the majority of the mainstream German public, most of these inscriptions have remained largely unnoticed and unexplained across most of the 20th century.

3.3. Long-standing grassroots campaigning against colonially themed street names

The longevity of grassroots campaigns targeting public inscriptions as remnants of colonial power and oppression is crucial. In this section, I provide a brief review of activist campaigns against colonially themed street names in Germany over the last decades. This is not a historical timeline as much as a sketch of important campaigns and developments. My purpose is to showcase the longevity of grassroots action against colonially themed street names, identifying key actors and hotspots, crediting important successes as well as challenges.

As noted in 1.2., earliest activist critiques of insufficient commemoration of German colonialism, first emerged when grassroots activists began targeting colonially themed street names and monuments. This developed first during the 1970s and 1980s in West Germany, initially as largely sporadic campaigns, as part of radical student and critical internationalist movements (Baum, 2022). In Bremen, civic activists began calling for a change to the name of *Lüderitzstraße* in the 1970s, named to commemorate Adolf Lüderitz (1834-1886), who was a merchant from Bremen and colonial lobbyist and who, during the 1880s, played a pivotal role in fraudulent colonial land dispossession in what would become German South West Africa, today's Namibia (Greve, 2022). Simultaneously in Hannover, activists and civic solidarity organisations demanded the removal of the name of *Karl-Peters-Straße*, named to remember the violent colonial commissioner of German East Africa, Karl Peters (1856-1918) (Otto, 2022; Schürmann, 2006). In West Berlin, likewise, colonially themed street names were first challenged in the 1980s, initiated primarily by Black German and African activists. Their challenges focused especially on streets in the so called 'African Quarter', in Berlin-Wedding, where more than 20 street names had been named to honour German colonisation over multiple decades (Aikins and Kopp, 2008). Early civic critiques called for the removal of, first and foremost, *Petersallee*, commemorating the same commissioner noted above (Aikins and Kopp, 2008; Kopp and Krohn, 2013).

Colonially themed street names in East Germany had to a larger extent been removed by the GDR regime, as part of their anti-colonial state policy (see 3.2.). This context helps explain why these critical activist activities emerged in West Germany and were not replicated in the same way in East Germany. During reunification in 1989/90, efforts were made by the newly unified regime to

remove legacies of GDR cultural policy in the landscapes of the former Eastern states. On one hand, this resulted in GDR street names (regardless of what they were about) being changed, as part of a general approach of reversing GDR naming procedures. On the other hand, there were some instances, where the GDR had replaced a place name with a name to honour a communist leader in order to underscore the GDR's position as a socialist, antifascist state. When these changes were reversed, this created examples of colonially themed street names being re-instated not to reaffirm colonial memory but as a byproduct of overwriting GDR inscriptions. Post reunification, some of these instances then became the target for activist critique and challenge.

One such example is the *Mohrenstraße* in Berlin-Mitte, formerly East Berlin. Named around 1700, it is one of the earliest streets in Germany referencing early Prussian overseas colonial involvement. Prussian king at the time, Friedrich I. (1688-1713) held control over the German fort *Großfriedrichsburg* (today's Ghana, see Introduction), from where Prussia was involved in the transatlantic trade with abducted and enslaved Africans. Several enslaved Africans during the time also lived in Berlin, serving at the Prussian court, which the original street name makes reference to (Kopp, 2015). The label, 'Mohr', is the oldest German word referring to Black people, and with this colonial context in mind, it holds a racist and derogatory meaning and has remained criticised as a foreign designation for Black individuals in Germany (Arndt and Hamann, 2011). Responding to this meaning, it has become common to express refusal of this context and meaning by shortening the label to *M-Straße* (Rozas-Krause, 2019). In 1908, an underground train station was opened nearby, originally with an unrelated, and historically relatively neutral name, *Kaiserhof*. During the GDR period, the station held two communist names, first as *Thälmann-Platz*, after SED party leader Ernst Thälmann (1886-1944), and finally as *Otto-Grotewohl-Straße*, referencing the GDR's first prime minister Otto Grotewohl (1894-1964). After reunification in 1991, in order to erase the GDR's commemoration of their communist leaders, the underground station was named into *M-Straße*, in alignment with the street nearby (Jethro and Merrill, 2023). Following these multiple (re)namings, *M-Straße*, both the street and the underground station, became subject to fierce activist challenges by grassroots activists. In the 1990s, for instance, Afro-German poet and activist May Ayim called out the street for flaunting a racist term. The maintenance of this language in the public sphere, she noted, was testament for the persistence of racist thinking and ideology in post-unification Germany (Kopp and Krohn, 2013). *M-Straße* in Berlin has in the nearly 30 years since, been one of the most

prominent examples of a contested colonial, racist street name, invigorating many decades of relentless activist campaigning, as well as fierce public, political, and academic disputes. Some of these dynamics I return to later in this chapter. Most of these early critiques and pre-2000s cases remained largely sporadic and discontinuous, with only few links between campaigns; with regards to securing name changes, they remained largely unsuccessful. Nevertheless, they are important evidence for the long trajectory of activist critiques of these street names.

Following these early critiques, we can register a move towards more consolidated campaigning in Berlin, as activists across different organisations involved in these efforts, come together to form the first purposive group, dedicated specifically to street renaming. The *Straßeninitiative* was formed in 2008, bringing together actors from eight Berlin based organisations, including *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.*, *AfricAvenir International e.V.*, *Berliner Entwicklungspolitischer Ratschlag e.V.*, *Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland e.V.*, and *Tanzania-Network.de e.V.*, as well as several individual actors. Many of them had already been involved in critiques and calls for change in preceding decades and were now coming together in a dedicated campaign, symbolising a shift in street name campaigns in Berlin towards a more sustained and coordinated dynamic. In the same year as their founding, this initiative published a critical dossier, which was the first comprehensive activist publication on these issues, compiling an overview of 70 streets and squares with colonial naming contexts from across the capital city (Aikins and Kopp, 2008).

On the back of these shifts towards more sustained campaigning and engagement with local administrations, activists in Berlin also secured the first formal successes. One street name that became a target for activists in the context of the *Straßeninitiative*, was *Gröbenufer*, which was named after Otto Friedrich von der Gröben (1656-1728), who had founded the Prussian trading post *Großfriedrichsburg*, mentioned above. With particular efforts of the *ISD e.V.*, *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.* and the *BER e.V.*, since the 2000s, activists lobbied local representatives to remove this commemoration of one of the key facilitators of Prussia's involvement in violent enslavement. In 2010 *Gröbenufer* was renamed into *May-Ayim-Ufer*, commemorating in his place, the notable Afro-German poet and activist. It is notable that formal political support in the relevant district, Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg, for the renaming of *Gröbenufer* was secured by activist actors much faster than in other neighbourhoods and contexts. This is because since 2006, the district was governed by the left-leaning and

progressive local Green party who responded quickly to critical grassroots campaigning to submit a formal name change petition in 2007. The renaming was completed in February 2010, which was marked with a public celebration, as well as a permanent remembrance plaque on site, informing passersby about the history of the street name, the renaming, and about new name patron (Engler, 2013; Kopp and Krohn, 2013).

Figure 5: May-Ayim-Ufer, in Berlin, in July 2022.



Alongside these developments in Berlin, Hamburg can be identified as another important hotspot for civic activity regarding colonially themed street names. This begins to manifest, in particular, in 2010, via another campaign with a dedicated focus on street names, which expands the scope of renaming activism by consolidating a broader national base. The *freedom roads! koloniale straßennamen · postkoloniale erinnerungskultur (freedom roads! colonial street names and postcolonial memory culture)* campaign, already mentioned above, was co-initiated, first and foremost, by Hamburg-based activist and visual artist HM Jokinen, and Berlin-based activist and historian Christian Kopp, who in Berlin had already been contributing to the *Straßeninitiative* and many of the developments explored above. *freedom roads!* constituted a multi-activity project, which included, in addition to the public resolution and activist conference explored in the opening of this chapter, a participatory traveling exhibition, and a detailed web presence and online database (Kopp, 2023a). *freedom roads!* was similar to the *Straßeninitiative*, as it consolidated actors already involved in this realm into a dedicated space, and, like the *Straßeninitiative* dossier, the *freedom roads! website* was concerned with increasing public visibility, as well as exerting strategic and targeted political influence, by bringing forward specific demands and proposals. The web presence in particular has had a lasting legacy within the movement, as the extensive and detailed, tri-lingual *freedom roads!* website has remained an integral resource on the issue of colonially themed street names in Germany and early activism to challenge them. In addition, *freedom roads!* significantly expanded the scope of these activities, as it built a nationwide platform reaching far beyond Hamburg and Berlin, enlisting support, for instance, from recently founded initiatives such as *Freiburg Postkolonial* (founded in 2005), *Köln Postkolonial* (founded in 2008), *schwarzweiss e.V.* (founded in 2008), *Dortmund Postkolonial* (founded 2010), and *AG Leipzig Postkolonial* (founded in 2010), as well as from cities where formal initiatives had not yet emerged, most notably Dresden (*freedom roads!*, 2010).

In the context of the *freedom roads!* campaign, Munich emerged as a third pivotal hotspot for civic action related to colonially themed street names. different groups had been mobilising locally on the issue since the 1990s. When these activists learned about the *freedom roads!* campaign, they not only participated in the conference and signed the petition, but they also got together and worked hard over several months in order to secure funding and logistics to bring the *freedom roads!* travelling exhibition to Munich, to draw attention to local contexts in

Munich, as well as to use the campaign momentum to further their own renaming demands. The Munich edition of *freedom roads!* titled *DECOLONIZE MÜNCHEN freedom roads! Spuren Blick Stören. George Adéagbo*, was shown for four months in 2013/14 at the *Münchner Stadtmuseum*, accompanied by various events and activities, which (re)ignited grassroots mobilisation around street names in Munich significantly (Bahl et al., 2015). I discuss street name advocacy in Munich as a dedicated case study in more detail below.

Through developments in these three hotspots, large-scale and nationwide platforms, as well as sustained and continuous civic activities, colonially themed street names in the early 2010s gained a pivotal role and much visibility as a critical activist topic. By this point, colonially themed street names are widely known among civic actors, and with the formation of new groups in the 2010s, many of them began to investigate street names in their local contexts. Groups such as *Decolonize Bremen* (founded 2016), *Düsseldorf Postkolonial* (founded 2018), and *Decolonize Erfurt* (founded 2020) began researching local traces as well as advocating with their local administrations for awareness and change. Groups such as *Decolonize Bielefeld* picked up earlier critiques and reignited change petitions (Frey, interview, 2022). The visibility of colonially themed street names was further enhanced through global developments, as a resurgence in Black Lives Matter and anti-racism protests and mobilisations in 2020 shone a spotlight on physical traces of colonialism and racism in form of monuments and street names (Schwarzer, 2022). This enhanced traction, in some instances, has generated harsh repressive actions; in 2021, for example, police raided personal and business-related premises, related to activists with the *tearthisdown* platform, which had collated hundreds of colonially themed street names and monuments across Germany to foster a nationwide reckoning and enhance demands for change (Joswig, 2021; Peter, 2020). In other locations, like Hamburg, Regensburg or Cologne activist campaigns and mobilisation encouraged city councils to commission large-scale reviews of street name registers and to consider renaming processes (Klein, 2022). Whilst not all of these represent genuine political support and commitment, and many city responses have remained ambiguous and contested over their feasibility and potential for change, by the early 2020s, colonially themed street names and change campaigns have certainly become visible including to many mainstream audiences, and in media reporting. Over these years, resistance has remained high, both politically and publicly, but what has certainly been secured, largely due to unrelenting, strategic and committing civic campaigning is that the

colonial histories and legacies of hundreds of street names across Germany have become visible and much more well known, and that change processes now are widely known to mainstream audiences, and much more commonly discussed and considered (Kessel, 2024; Reiff, 2023; Wagener, 2023).

3.4. Grassroots activism using *advocacy* and *lobbywork*

The above overview of pivotal developments and locations of grassroots mobilisation about colonially themed street names demonstrated how this activism work has long constituted one of the integral pillars of postcolonial memory activism in Germany. I now turn my attention to the transformative elements of these efforts, as I focus on the nature of these campaigns as action-focused advocacy, as well as the role of political engagement and lobbywork. Firstly, I focus on Munich as one of the hotspots for postcolonial street name activism, in order to illustrate that renaming campaigns, fundamentally, are about, firstly, making appeals for practical actions, and, secondly, providing specific proposals for what kinds of changes are to be made, which underlines the advocacy nature of these efforts. Subsequently, I illustrate that because street names fall under the formal authority of city councils and elected officials, political engagement and lobbywork takes on a particular role as a strategy for activism in this realm.

In Munich, first critical activism related to street names evolved in the 1990s, when civic organisations raised challenges towards the local *Kolumbusplatz*, named to commemorate the Italian coloniser Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) as early as 1990 (Pfeiffer, 2013b). Subsequently, street names were discussed in more depth between 2003-2006 when local Green politician Siegfried Benker campaigned successfully for the renaming of the local *Von-Trotha-Straße*, honouring the German commander Lothar von Trotha (1848-1920), who had been instrumental in Germany's genocidal campaign against OvaHerero and Nama people in German South West Africa in 1904/05, to *Hererostraße*, in order to commemorate those that had resisted his rule. This renaming in 2006 was pivotal because it became known as the first case of a 'postcolonial' renaming, where the new name retained the commemoration of German colonialism but inverted its direction, to undo the commemoration of the perpetrators instead instating a public recognition of anticolonial resistance and liberation (Aikins and Hoppe, 2011).

Benker's efforts had been motivated, at least in part, through his relationships with local organisations, and his efforts to make this renaming happen, in turn, were credited and appreciated by civil society organisations and members of the African diaspora (Pfeiffer, 2013a). At the same time, activists noted that this renaming had been insufficient, as it left several more street names with similar legacies untouched. The debate in the early 2000s missed converting this important milestone into a catalyst for more sustained and comprehensive momentum and it fell short of consolidating a broader coalition of political and civic actors into a more sustained campaign. After 2006, among many public and political actors, the concern about colonially themed street names fell quiet. Instead, several activist individuals and organisations kept their eye on colonially themed street names, determined to build further momentum towards change.

One of these individuals in Munich was Hamado Dipama. Arriving in Germany in the early 2000s as a refugee from Burkina Faso, Dipama had had a “langjährige Asylkarriere” (Dipama, interview, 2022), including nine years on a *Duldung* (tolerated status),⁵⁹ and six years in refugee shelter. In 2006, he founded *AK Panafrikanismus* (*Pan-Africanism Working Group*), as a forum for social, cultural, and intellectual dialogue and exchange, primarily for members of the African Diaspora in Germany; since 2007, he has been the speaker of the Bavarian Refugee Council, and since 2010 elected member of the Migrants Council in Munich. After Benker's initial campaign to implement *Hererostraße*, Dipama explained, it was civic organisations and activists of the *AK Panafrikanismus*, *München Postkolonial*, the *Nord Süd Forum*, and the Munich local group of the *ISD e.V.*, that continued efforts to change the remaining colonially themed street names. After many years of internal discussions between the *AK Panafrikanismus* and other civic groups, Dipama, through his position in the migrants' council, submitted a formal request in March 2012, appealing for the city to re-engage with discourses over colonially themed street names and renaming demands. This petition reignited public and political discussions over street names in Munich, which have been ongoing since.

I want to stay with this point for a minute and elaborate, as an illustrative example, what exactly it was that activists and civic actors were demanding: the nature of activist demands.

⁵⁹ *Duldung*, or tolerated status, refers to a temporary suspension of deportation due to humanitarian or practical reasons.

During our interview, Dipama explained with regards to the contexts and the concerns of the submitted petition in 2012:

Wir haben in München zwei Kolonialviertel, (...) nämlich Bogenhausen und Trudering. Und wir nennen sie Kolonialviertel, weil während des Nationalsozialismus der nationalsozialistisch dominierte Stadtrat damals entschieden hat [in] diesen zwei Vierteln viele Straßennamen mit Offizieren, die damals in Namibia am Völkermord sich beteiligt haben, mit Straßennamen zu würdigen. (...) Wir haben (...) 29 Straßen in diesen zwei Kolonialviertel (...) Natürlich fordern wir nicht die Umbenennung für alle 29 Straßen, aber es sind viele dabei. Warum nicht alle 29? Da sind ja auch einige wie Kameruner Straße oder Togoer Straße [dabei]. Und da sagen wir, Ok, wenn es um die Namen der Länder [geht] wo deutscher Kolonialismus stattgefunden hat, kann man das lassen, mit einem Hinweisschild. Das ist ok. Aber wir haben weitere Offiziere wie Wissmann, also wir haben eine Wissmannstraße, der im Kamerun als deutscher Offizier so viele schreckliche Sachen getan hat. Wir haben [eine] Von-Gravenreuth-Straße. Gravenreuth ist auch bekannt, was er damals gemacht hat. (Dipama, interview, 2022)

This quotation, in a first instance, illustrates the specific context in Munich, and the stated number of twenty-nine colonially themed street names illustrates the scope of the matter in Munich, and underlines why the change of one street name in 2006 was regarded insufficient by civic actors. More importantly, in this quotation, we gain an insight into the nature of activist appeals. Firstly, we learn that activists are not merely raising awareness, or highlighting critical histories, but they are submitting demands for action (“wir *fordern* die Umbenennung”). This call for practical action is mirrored in other activist publications and statements. The *Straßeninitiative* dossier from 2008, for instance, had emphasised a “erheblicher Handlungsbedarf”, an considerable need for action, with regards to colonially themed street names, and had called on Berlin’s district representatives to “umgehend tätig werden”, to take immediate action (Aikins and Kopp, 2008).

Secondly, what we learn from Dipama’s statement is that the kinds of demands that are called for by activists are specific and targeted, impacting name changes in different ways.

Whilst there is an appeal for action with regards to *all* street names with a colonial naming context, the specific *kind* of change that is to be implemented depends on whom or what the names are dedicated to. There are two categories of demanded actions. On the one hand, Dipama asserts, there are cases for which a critical contextualisation of street names, through implementation of informational plaques, in order to make these contexts and histories publicly visible, is a sufficient strategy. This includes street names that refer to locations where German colonial was established, such as *Togostraße* or *Kameruner Straße*. In a similar fashion, the *Straßeninitiative* dossier had noted that for the majority of streets with colonial naming contexts, the implementation of informational plaques was sufficient (ibid). The intention here is that colonial naming contexts and historical information become visible in the public sphere. The campaign to attach critical plaques for this purpose in Munich ran with the title “Kolonialgeschichte offenlegen”, *revealing colonial history* (Pfeiffer, 2013a). In this way, these streets are intended to become sites for critical learning, education, and reflection.

For a subsection of street names, however, Dipama explains, the submitted petition called for a removal and replacement of the stated name. This was the case in particular with street names that commemorated German colonial officials that had been involved in the perpetration of numerous terrible acts (“so viele schreckliche Sachen”), such as Wissmann, referring to Hermann von Wissmann (1853-1905), and Gravenreuth, referring to Karl von Gravenreuth (1858-1891), who were both responsible for the violent repression of anticolonial liberation movements in the German colonies in East Africa as well as Cameroon (Pfeiffer, 2013a: 30). Providing further detail on this point, the *Straßeninitiative* dossier had explained that those signs that maintained the names of such colonial ‘pioneers’, were particularly blatant cases, that commemorated the violent foundations of the German colonial empire, and for this reason, removal and replacement of their original name was, therefore, considered unavoidable (Aikins and Kopp, 2008). The argument here is that the retention of these names represents a lasting source of pain and aggression for those who are descendants of the victims of these perpetrators, as well as those who continued to be impacted by persistent coloniality at present (Aikins and Hoppe, 2011). In this category that required renaming, the *Straßeninitiative* also included street names that refer to racist terminologies, such as the so-called *M-Straße*, as the representation of racist language is deemed untenable within a democratic society (ibid).

What this demonstrates is that grassroots campaigns are characterised as action-focused and practical, demanding effective policy changes to be implemented, as well as specific, as they make suggestions for precise changes that have been assessed on a case-by-case investigation depending on the given street's naming context and on who or what is being commemorated. These campaigns are not primarily about raising awareness or public attention—although that plays a role—but they seek to bring about effective and targeted changes. Activist campaigns do not merely critique those street names, they introduce instead, in explicit and precise ways, what should be done about them and how. There are two kinds of demands that were illustrated in the above: critical contextualisation through information plaques etc, or removal and replacement. These demands depend on the contested name and what the name is commemorating, as well as the circumstances and conditions of the naming context.

These characteristics of grassroots demands as practical and action-focused, and the efforts to propose specific and targeted solutions to be implemented to change these street names, underlines the nature of these activities as *advocacy* (Galego, 2018; McKeever et al., 2023). Commonly this term is associated with activities with an action or change-centred focus, that are targeted at a specific cause, that involve proposing specific solutions for the identified challenge, as well as seeking to garner public and political support, or persuading other actors for these proposed solutions (Andrews and Edwards, 2004; Pezzullo and Cox, 2017; Galego, 2018; McKeever et al., 2023).

Furthermore, advocacy is work that is about making claims that affect communities beyond the immediate claimants, is understood to be explicitly about pursuing a collective good in the public interest, but also includes claims that if implemented can conflict with other constituents' interests (Andrews and Edwards, 2004). The change of street names generates impact on various community groups, both local residents and others, and, as resistance and hostility have emphasised (Engler, 2013; Förster et al., 2016), grassroots change demands are not infrequently contested because others reject or seek to discredit their interests. This is what often makes these grassroots demands and campaigns into situations where grassroots campaigning and advocacy can become contentious (Wüstenberg, 2017; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). As a result, advocacy often focuses on persuading others to garner significant *support* for one's own ideas (McKeever et al., 2023:572), and, moreover, advocacy work often has to do

with ‘persuading upwards’, with seeking to generate higher-up political support, among political representatives or elected officials, as the formal/official arbiters of community interests, in order to successfully implement a policy change to reflect one’s aspirations. What this also means, is that advocacy more commonly is required to “work inside the system” (ibid: 574).

Given the advocacy nature of these campaigns and the ambition to achieve specific, effective policy change, there is a specific target audience that plays a significant role in these grassroots efforts. Since the late 1930s, the naming of public streets and squares in Germany, both the assigning of new names as well as name change processes, has been the authority of local municipalities, which are the lowest level of territorial administration. It is local representatives, usually elected officials, through a variety of legal frameworks and guidelines, who hold executive authority over these public markers in the German toponymic landscape (Börnig, 2020). Each municipality determines their own structures, guidelines, and principles for (re)naming process, as well as determines which specific political organs hold executive authority (ibid).

As a consequence, political actors and representatives have become an integral target audience in grassroots street name advocacy. Street name changes are activities that grassroots actors cannot secure or implement by themselves. Whilst both public awareness raising, and direct actions like protesting, operate somewhat more independently of these formal structures, when activists want to secure an actual, effective name change, this is reliant upon the collaboration with formal political representatives. Grassroots engagement with formal political structures in order to garner support among political representatives (Giugni and Grasso, 2018), has also been referred to as “political advocacy” (McKeever et al., 2023). Activists target elected political officials in an attempt to influence their role in effective policy making.

Ich habe das jetzt politische Arbeit genannt, weil wir da einfach schon an einem Stadium sind, wo wir tatsächlich im Austausch mit den Fraktionen und dem Stadtrat [sind]. Das ist ein Thema, was politisch einfach die Stadt gerade beschäftigt, und wo, Vorlagen vorliegen, die sich halt mit der Umsetzung davon beschäftigen. (...) Wenn man jetzt einen Stadtrundgang bewirbt oder machen möchte, ist das etwas ganz anderes als wenn man eine politische Forderung durchbringen möchte, oder wenn man etwas fordert, was halt

nicht einfach [alleine machen kann]. Wir können ja nicht eine Straße umbenennen, das muss ja schon beschlossen werden vom Stadtrat bzw. von der Straßennamenskommision, die halt auch eine politische Instanz ist. (Anonymous Interviewee Erfurt, interview, 2022)

This quotation underlines the feature of the engagement with formal, elected political actors as a distinctive activism feature in this context of street (re)naming advocacy, which this interviewee emphasises by calling it “political work”. This not only draws out the distinction between street (re)naming advocacy and other activism pillars, such as walking tours for instance, but also implies a sense of dependency or reliance on political collaboration.

When grassroots actors, consequently, address political actors about street names and renamings, what they seek to do is to garner political support and to generate influence over political decision-making processes in which political representatives and city councils are involved. The terminology of ‘lobbying’ or ‘lobbywork’ can be applied in these contexts (Giugni and Grasso, 2018), if reservedly, in order to emphasise these persuading strategies. Yann LeGall currently works as a Research Associate at the Technical University in Berlin, but he has been contributing to two civic initiatives *Postcolonial Potsdam* and *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.* for the last decade, whose work he has been committed to in various ways (see Chapter 5, in particular). With regards to street name advocacy, LeGall explained:

Ja, ich nenne das Lobbyarbeit, weil—Also, sehr viele Leute in linken Bewegungen mögen das Wort Lobby nicht, und ich mochte es auch ganz lange nicht, aber um so viel zu schaffen, [wie das], was die FDP oder Energiekonzerne oder Autokonzerne in der Politik schaffen, muss man so lernen, wie diese Leute arbeiten. (...) Dann ist es wirklich Lobbyarbeit, dann muss man wirklich so zeigen, in welchen Bereichen der Gesellschaft sollen sich so Sachen ändern, aber welche konkreten Maßnahmen haben wir da dafür. (LeGall, interview, 2022)

In LeGall’s view, ‘lobbywork’ is an appropriate term because it underlines the nature of the work as trying to seek influence and persuade political actors. Whilst he concedes that others may contest this terminology for its link to corporate lobbying, in this view, what memory activists were trying to do in this line of work was substantially not that different, as they were seeking

political support and influence. The principle was the same, he noted, the work was about demonstrating to political representatives what one wanted to change in society, as well as providing specific and concrete strategies and measures to achieve it.

Finally, with this kind of work, when activists liaise with political structures and insert themselves into formal political environments, what this also means, is that these activities require grassroots actors to adapt their work, behaviours, even language to the structures in which they are operating:

[Mit Lobbyarbeit] muss man sich auch so einen ganzen Jargon aneignen. Dann kann man nicht mehr so mit einem Megaphon so laut schreien, sondern muss sich so wirklich anpassen an den politischen Jargon. (...) wenn man vor dem Landtag oder vor dem Abgeordnetenhaus einen kurzen Input halten muss, um zu zeigen, wie wichtig eigentlich Antirassismus ist, dann muss man sich anpassen auch. (ibid)

When grassroots actors engage in these lobbying activities, LeGall asserts, this requires them to adapt and conform to the normative rules of political structures. “aneignen” and “anpassen”, in particular, emphasises this encounter less as a mutual exchange but as a process of grassroots actors fitting themselves into the structures set by the political environment. He specifically accentuates the role of language, noting the importance of adapting how one speaks, in order to be listened to and heard within these environments. Giugni & Grasso refer to these as “insider activities” (Giugni and Grasso, 2018). In these instances, grassroots actors appropriate avenues of the formal political environment in order to disseminate their concerns and garner authoritative support. Adding to Giugni & Grasso’s framing, I would emphasise that this does not mean that these actors become ‘insiders’ themselves to these environments. In fact, grassroots actors commonly retain some of their influential political power explicitly by not becoming absorbed by formal political structures (Weldon, 2011).

3.5. “Das ganze Drumherum der Umbenennungskampagne”: The participatory nature of grassroots renaming campaigns

Having explored the role of advocacy and political lobbywork, a further aspect of the transformative nature of these campaigns that I wish to explore relates to their participatory and discursive features. In this section, I use two case studies to illustrate how grassroots campaigns, in addition to their political engagement and lobbywork, are embedded into wider memory work agendas (Brasher and Alderman, 2023; Engler, 2013). The first case study concerns a street renaming campaign in Erfurt, to illustrate how activists, over a period of three years, used various events and activities, and a detailed web presence, to make their campaign and their claims transparent and accessible for various local and national audiences. As a second case study, I return to the *M-Straße* in Berlin and explore the *M-Straßenfest* (since 2021, *Antikoloniales Amofest*) an annual activist renaming festival, which has become a staple event in the postcolonial activism movement since 2014. The use of such public events by activists, alongside their formal lobbying activities, make activists campaigns into discursive and participatory encounters, which not only raises the visibility of their claims, but more importantly underlines that street name changes are public decommemorations (Gensburger and Wüstenberg, 2023a) that are not merely matters between activists and the city but recognises communities and residents as local stakeholders to these issues.

Between 2020 and 2023, activists in Erfurt with the association *ISD e.V.* and *Decolonize Erfurt* ran a campaign to change the name of the local Nettelbeckufer, which is located in the North of the city near the river Gera. The street was named in 1905 to commemorate Joachim Nettelbeck (1738-1824), who was a German mariner and who became a symbol for German nationalism following his role in defending the town of Kolberg during the Napoleonic Wars. During the Nazi period he was a celebrated patriot, which in 1950, in an attempt to dissociate from Nazi legacies, prompted the East German SED regime to alter the name to Goerdelerufer, commemorating Carl Goerdeler (1884-1945) for his resistance against Hitler. Yet in 1956, the change was reverted by the SED regime, who aimed to reclaim Nettelbeck as a symbol of national pride whilst sidelining commemoration of Goerdeler, in order to monopolise the narrative of resistance to focus only on communist resistance against Hitler (Decolonize Erfurt, 2020a). In March 2020, activists with the *ISD e.V.* and *Decolonize Erfurt* launched a public

campaign that called for the removal of Nettelbeck as a namesake. Nettelbeck, they noted, was not merely a seafarer but a colonial lobbyist, who was actively involved in the enslavement of Africans, as a steersman on Dutch ships during the 1750s, and someone who lobbied Prussia for the establishment of colonies and plantations in South America and West Africa (ibid). The street served as an inscription of Germany's role in enslavement, colonialism, nationalism in the public sphere, as well as of the GDR's inconsistent antifascism, and the current name was, therefore, unacceptable (ibid). As an alternative, activists proposed to dedicate the street after Gert Schramm (1928-2016), who was an anti-fascist activist and Black Buchenwald survivor, and who had strong local ties, having been born in the very same street himself (ibid).

Whilst there is much more to be said about the street name itself, or the legacy of Gert Schramm (Lindner et al., 2020), the point I wish to emphasise here relates to the ways in which activists operated within a discursive and participatory campaign. In my interview with *Decolonize Erfurt* in summer 2022, Markus Frank emphasised the multiple events and activities they were hosting as part of their campaign (Frank, interview, 2022). First off, at the launch of their campaign, activists set up an online petition to gather public support and sent a letter to all residents in the street in order to introduce themselves, to inform residents of the campaign, and to invite them to attend an information event to establish a dialogue with local communities.⁶⁰ Additionally, on their website, they made extensive information and research publicly available to substantiate their claims, and in a series of blog posts, responded to questions and concerns from residents. Over the following months, they hosted numerous public events, including an information talk, a public reading of Gert Schramm's autobiography, several talks with supporters and experts, a film screening, as well as public rallies (ibid). Details on all of these activities, and more, have been documented and remain publicly available on the *Decolonize Erfurt* website (Decolonize Erfurt, 2024). These activities demonstrate grassroots renaming campaigns manifest as a multi-faceted network of memory work activities (Brasher and Alderman, 2023; Engler, 2013), as in addition to formal engagement with elected local politicians and city representatives, grassroots campaigns frequently host a range of public events to mobilise residents and local communities, to share their claims and demands with public audiences. What stands out in Erfurt is activists' proactive transparency

⁶⁰ The campaign was launched in early March 2020 with an in-person information event in mind later that month, which was postponed by activists due to the Covid-19 pandemic and hosted at a later point as a virtual event.

with local communities about their efforts and claims. Via directly addressed letters, as well as via their website, campaigners reached out to residents and wider communities in order to make their concerns and claims known to them. As activists set up a varied range of activities and communication channels, this enabled contact with different kinds of audiences and communities, including physical spaces for face-to-face exchange, virtual events and various communication channels for text based or digital communications, allowing interlocutors to choose between different means and avenues for dialogue to engage, and making room for different kinds of audiences and communication needs.

For my second case study, I return to Berlin. As noted before, Berlin has been a hotspot for renaming activism since the 1980s. One key target, since the 1990s, is the *M-Straße*, in central Berlin (Kopp and Krohn, 2013). Especially African and Afro-German activists and organisations have been calling for the removal of this name as it carries a racist and derogatory meaning, with a direct link to enslavement and oppression.⁶¹ Activists have been advocating via petitions and lobbying of local representatives; but in addition to these actions, a coalition of activist actors in 2014 launched a local, public renaming festival, the *Umbenennungsfest für die Berliner M-Straße*, sometimes *M-Straßenfest* (decolonize-mitte, 2014). The festival, which has since been hosted annually on or near the 23rd of August (*International Day of the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and Abolition*)⁶² is part celebration, part protest (Jethro, 2022), and part

⁶¹ In summer 2020, the discussion around renaming *M-Straße* saw an increase in public and media attention. In the context of a global resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests after the killing of George Floyd in May 2020, and building on many years of relentless grassroots campaigning in Berlin against M-Strasse, the *Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe* (BVG), the company running Berlin's transport network, in July 2020 announced that it would change the name of the underground station at *M-Straße* to remove to racist name (Jethro and Merrill, 2023). The new name was announced as *Glinkasträße*, aligning the station name with another local street, and commemorating the Russian composer, Michail Iwanowitsch Glinka, who lived and died in Berlin in the 1800s. This announcement was initially applauded and welcomed by many, but plans to rename the station were subsequently withdrawn, when it became public that Glinka had been antisemitic, and the *BVG* was called out for not sufficiently researching their selection (ibid).

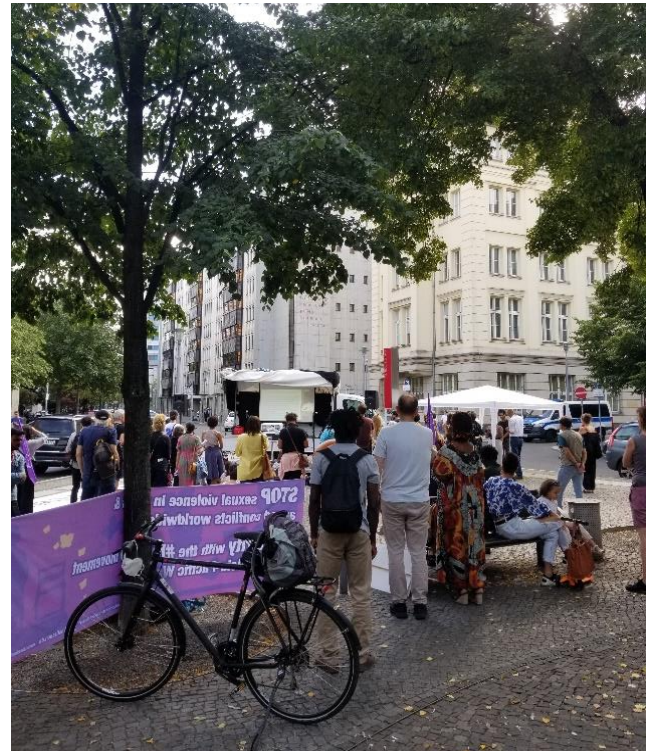
This development brought an increase in visibility to this street name, adding to its larger prominence relative to many other contested street names in Germany; more so, this episode reveals the shortfalls in the actions of public and corporate actors, who appear to seek to provide a quick fix to respond to media pressure and publicity concerns, without more substantially engaging with decades-long grassroots critics and their concerns with regards to the name changes. It also points to the importance of considering renaming "politics of surrogacy" (Brasher and Alderman, 2023), which I explore in section 3.6.

⁶² The 23rd of August was adopted as the *International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition* in 1998, designated by UNESCO General Conference. The date was chosen to mark the beginning of an uprising of enslaved workers in Saint-Domingue (today's Haiti) who rebelled against their enslavement on 23rd of August 1791. Their efforts played a pivotal role in the process leading to the abolition of slavery, to the Haitian Revolution, and to establishing Haiti as the first independent Black republic. This commemoration of the 23rd of August is unrelated to other commemorative meanings of this date, notably the 23rd of August as the *European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism*.

resistance against lasting colonial legacies, political conservatism and historical revisionism (Rozas-Krause, 2019). The festival lasts a day and usually includes a range of activities, speeches, artist performances, panel discussions; and frequently showcased symbolic renamings through the use of temporary, home-made street signs (ibid). In earlier years of the festival, activists called for the removal of *M-Straße* and proposed a range of suitable alternative namesakes, since 2017 Anton Wilhelm Amo as official choice for alternative name (decolonize-mitte, 2017). In March 2021 city council officially, formally accepted the name change to *Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße*, activists continue hosting the festival as administrative procedures continue, from August 2021, the name *Antikoloniales Amofest* (Decolonize Berlin e.V., 2021a). The *M-Straßenfest* has been hosted by an ever-growing coalition of activists and organisations in support of the removal of the street name, in favour of a surrogate name highlighting anti-racist and anti-colonial resistance and commitment, showcasing the broad community support of the renaming claim and campaign. As it is hosted annually, this underlines the continuity character. The different kinds of activities during the renaming festival, including performances, lectures, talks, interventions, again provides a diverse discursive scene that invites and fosters community collaboration and various channels for communication and outreach.

Figure 6: Impressions from the *Antikoloniales Amofest*, in August 2022.

Top left: Andrea-Vicky Amankwaa-Birago, co-founder of the Anton Wilhelm Amo Erbschaft (see 1.1.4.), speaking at the *Antikoloniales Amofest*. Top right: Visitors gathered around the stage at the *Amofest*. Bottom: Activists have displayed a banner displaying *Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße* as replacement for *M-Straße*.



The embedding of lobbywork into broader networks of memory work (Brasher and Alderman, 2023), and implementation of a range of public activities and events alongside formal political engagement, does not only have the effect of making activist claims and agendas more publicly visible and asserting pressure onto political decision makers. Beyond this, they make these campaigns into discursive and participatory encounters, with significant impact on their efficacy as (de)commemorative activities. By practicing transparent community outreach, sharing campaign information, and hosting participatory events and festivals, activists ensure that these campaigns become not matters between activist coalitions and political administration; instead, they recognise that residents and wider civil society are stakeholders over these issues. This not only establishes a shared ownership and responsibility for both shaping public landscapes, through toponymic inscriptions, as well as for commemorative activities more broadly. Establishing campaigns with community support also enhances the efficacy of the campaign. Bringing residents and communities into the campaigns as stakeholders, as active participants rather than passive observers, enhances community buy-in for public (de)commemorative activities. In the Berlin *M-Straße* for instance, a coalition of more than 150 institutions, organisations and academics whose offices were located in the street, formed a coalition to demonstrate local and residential support for the renaming campaign via an open letter titled “Kein Rassismus vor unserer Haustür”.⁶³ The broader community support established through participatory campaigns further ensures that, whether or not the name change was formally affirmed, broader sways of the community had been brought into the discourse as stakeholders of public commemoration, and more community members had learned about the kind of violent histories that often have remained under-recognised, as well as the meaningful legacies of those that had fought against them.

⁶³ “Kein Rassismus vor unserer Haustür”: <https://www.carmah.berlin/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Kein-Rassismus-vor-unserer-Haustur-Umbenennung-der-Mohrenstra%C3%9Fe.pdf> (Accessed: 20 January 2025).

3.6. “Postkoloniale Perspektivumkehr”: Politics of Surrogacy to create recognition and critical learning sites

A third crucial feature of these grassroots campaigns relates to their propositions regarding surrogate names. When grassroots actors advocate for the change of a street name, commonly they do not merely challenge the given name, but they propose a replacement name, which maintains the colonial historical context, but instead of recognising colonial annexation and perpetrators, it advocates for commemoration of anticolonial resistance and liberation, both past and present. This principle has become known as “postkoloniale Perspektivumkehr” (Aikins, 2012a; Engler, 2013; Schwarzer, 2022), referring to a distinct politics of surrogacy (Brasher and Alderman, 2023), wherein the commemoration of colonialism is maintained, yet in a reversed, critical form. In this section, I investigate this idea, reviewing materials by activists themselves who explain these politics, and illustrating a range of activist contexts in which this has been shown in practice. The point in this section is to show that this principle is meaningful because it ensures that both renaming campaigns, as well as new implemented street names, become sites for recognition and for public critical learning about historically invisibilised and marginalised (anti)colonial histories.

The idea now known as “postkoloniale Perspektivumkehr” has guided activist efforts for many decades, though it has not always been labelled as such. Earliest manifestations can be traced back to civic renaming campaigns in the 1980s. Activists from African diasporic and Black German communities advocated, for instance, for replacing Petersallee in Berlin-Wedding, with a name that instead honoured figures such as Nelson Mandela, recognising his commitment to anti-Apartheid liberation in South Africa (Aikins and Hoppe, 2011). The concept further influenced the 2006 renaming of *Von-Trotha-Straße* to *Hererostraße* in Munich, when Greens politician Siegfried Benker, with support of civic actors, advocated for a commemoration of the victims of colonial genocide, instead of recognising the perpetrators.

The term “postkoloniale Perspektivumkehr” was first explicitly articulated in the context of the grassroots-led renaming of *Gröbenufer* to *May-Ayim-Ufer* in Berlin in 2010, that inverted the commemoration away from a Prussian official who had facilitated German involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, and towards an Afro-German poet, educator, and anti-racism advocate (Aikins and Kopp, 2008). In a speech during the renaming ceremony, Afro-German

political scientist and activist, Joshua Kwesi Aikins, who had substantially contributed to the renaming efforts, explained the two important aspects of the inversion principle: firstly, that any replacement names should retain the colonial context in order to acknowledge the importance of colonialism for national history and its representation in the public landscape; and secondly, that the commemorative focus should be shifted from celebrating colonial annexation and colonial perpetrators, and towards recognising and honouring those who took up resistance against the oppression, thereby, dismantling ideas of their passive victimhood (Aikins, 2012b). Aikins emphasised that “postkolonial” described not a temporal meaning but signified an understanding that colonial ideologies and legacies continued to impact self-determination and self-realisation of communities today, both of those formerly colonised, as well as those formerly colonising, with colonially themed street names serving as one expression (ibid). Elsewhere, Aikins noted that through this principle, street renamings would generate the potential to find a new way of reckoning with the German colonial past (Aikins and Hoppe, 2011), and that the inverted perspective on colonialism, honouring the resisters rather than the perpetrators, was an important argument against those accusing street renaming campaigns of wanting to erase historical contexts and narratives (Aikins, 2012a).

Over the years, this principle has become a vital strategy for grassroots renaming campaigns, becoming a defining characteristic of these efforts. Furthermore, activists have progressively enriched this principle by incorporating local contexts into their proposals. For example, in the initial phases of the M-Straße renaming festival, suggested surrogate names included prominent international figures like Nelson Mandela. However, as the years passed, activists came to advocate for names that more directly connected to resistance against German colonialism and racism, leading to the proposal of names such as Anton Wilhelm Amo, Samuel Maharero, Hans Jürgen Massaquoi, and Rudolf Duala Manga Bell, among others. This move towards integrating local reference points is also evident in other German cities. In Bielefeld, for instance, activists have challenged Karl Peters’ legacy in the public sphere by pushing to rename a street after Fatuma Elisabeth, who was taken from East Africa to Bielefeld in 1891, as a five-year-old, as part of a missionary expedition, and who died there just a few years later (Frey, interview, 2022). Similarly, the renaming campaign in Erfurt, seeking to replace Nettelbeckufer with Gert-Schramm-Ufer, demonstrated this local framing, as activists emphasised Schramm’s local connection to the street where he was born (Decolonize Erfurt,

2020b). In Munich, as part of the campaign to rename Kolumbusplatz, activists proposed Miranhaplatz, honouring Isabella Miranha, a young Indigenous girl who was abducted from Brazil by German scientists in 1820 during an ethnographic expedition and died shortly after arriving in Munich.

The principle of *postkoloniale Perspektivumkehr* has been a pivotal strategy, as it not only demonstrates that activist efforts are strategic, coordinated, and explicit, once again underlining the advocacy nature of their work, but more importantly, because it shows important implications for the efficacy of street renaming campaigns with regards to their critical commemorative potential. By maintaining the historical reference frame to colonialism and anticolonial histories, this principle ensures that in the renaming process, more visibility and recognition are granted to colonial and anticolonial histories that have previously been rendered largely invisible. This makes these stories more known, and generates learning opportunities for public audiences, as a necessary condition for further commemoration; and it also serves as a pivotal defence against those claiming that removal of harmful street names was equivalent to historical erasure (Aikins, 2012a). Further, by inverting the perspective towards postcolonial and anticolonial resistance and liberation, it ensures that the direction of the commemorative act shifts from being one that celebrates and honours colonial violence, towards one that honours and commemorates resistance, therefore enabling more critical engagement. This aspect works as an important defence against supposedly neutral renamings, during which offensive colonial street names are replaced with generic, and “color-blind monikers” (Brasher and Alderman, 2023), as was the case, for instance, in 2009, when a town near Stuttgart in South Germany, Bietigheim-Bissingen, decided to replace *Karl-Peters-Straße*, with *Eisvogelweg* (Kingfisher Street). These renamings not only fail to establish critical commemoration but end up working against it, as they remove the colonial reference point that makes these histories visible. Lastly, the local focus, furthermore, ensures that much lesser-known, local histories, like that of Fatuma Elisabeth in Bielefeld, and that of Isabella Miranha in Munich, receive visibility and recognition, beyond larger national narratives. By advocating for a *postkoloniale Perspektivumkehr*, activists are ensuring that both newly implemented street names, as well as the renaming campaign before the formal approval, become sites for recognition and for critical public learning about invisibilised and marginalised anticolonial histories.

3.7. “Die Hochehrung überhaupt”: Street Names as Namescapes

The last crucial feature relates to the underlying motivations and intentions of actors in renaming campaigns. Grassroots campaigns understand that street names are elements in a broader social, geographic, cultural, and political context, and they are advocating for name changes because they recognise that what is publicly credited in the public sphere has a bearing on societal negotiations of history and identity. In this final section I illustrate how grassroots activists recognise street names as tools in the public negotiation of history, memory, identity and belonging, hence, not merely as ‘names’ but as ‘namescapes’ (Brasher and Alderman, 2023), meaning that their advocacy is not just changing a street name, but inscribing statements about society, identity and belonging in the public sphere (Aikins, 2012a; Aikins and Hoppe, 2011; Engler, 2013; Schwarzer, 2022).

In campaign materials and discussions, activists emphasise repeatedly that their understanding of the importance of street names far exceeds the names themselves. Street names are pivotal for orientation, but not merely spatially, but they are “Träger von Geschichte, die eine starke Symbolkraft haben”, and they operate “als Teil des gesellschaftlichen Wissenssystems” (Aikins and Hoppe, 2011: 521). In other words, street names have meaning beyond the sign itself, but they are understood as social actors, or as “namescapes”, serving as tools for negotiating history, memory, identity, and belonging within the public sphere (Brasher and Alderman, 2023: 313). Consequently, with renaming activities, “there is more at stake than (...) the actual names of the streets” (Engler, 2013: 41). These are discourses not merely about terminology or nomenclature, but in advocating for street name changes, activists are seeking to make a statement about, and to shape, wider societal dynamics. Firstly, activists advocate that harmful street names are unacceptable in a democratic society, as they reflect remnants of discriminatory and oppressive practices that must be removed for the sake of ensuring democratic dynamics. Secondly, they argue, that progressive street names need to be implemented, as they may reinforce positive values in public spaces. I want to address both points in turn.

The first point is that when activists draw attention to the maintenance of colonially themed street names, honouring colonial figures and espousing racist language, they are not

merely saying these represent outdated and antiquated names; but they are saying that they embody social values that are oppressive and discriminatory and, therefore, pose a contradiction of Germany's self-identification as a democratic society, which undermines the legitimacy of the kinds of democratic values society aims to promote. Consequently, when activists call for change, they represent a critical statement about the fragility of social progress and democracy. Street names, as stated above, as cultural markers and carriers of history, are embodiments of social values and power. As such, colonially themed street names that show names of colonial genocidaires uphold an honourable recognition of their acts in public landscape, and conversely, an erasure, and thus further oppression, of their victims (Schwarzer, 2022). Similarly, the preserving of discriminatory language in street names, as has been the case with *M-Straße* in Berlin for many decades, served as a "ein sicheres Zeichen, dass auch in (...) der neuen Bundesrepublik rassistische Sprache und entsprechendes Denken geduldet und tradiert werden" (Ayim, 1993, cit. in Kopp & Krohn, 2013:220). Street names, it is the argument, are symbols that have a relationship with contemporary thinking and ideologies. As such, colonially themed street names are positioned at odds and in contradiction with contemporary self-identified democratic and progressive values in German society, suggests Hamado Dipama:

[W]ir wissen, dass ein Straßename die Hochehrung überhaupt ist, die eine Stadt vergeben kann. (...) Wieso erlauben wir heutzutage im 21. Jahrhundert, dass Menschen, die einen Völkermord begangen haben, in unseren welt-offenen Städten wie München—München bezeichnet sich ja als weltoffene Stadt—weiterhin geehrt werden? (Dipama, interview, 2022)

In this quote, Dipama recognises the honourable function of street names, as a means to award recognition and distinction publicly to someone; his wording emphasises that it is even the most important kind of public recognition that can be given. The contradiction this poses with contemporary social values is underlined by Dipama through use of a question: why are we allowing colonial genocidaires to retain this honourable recognition, in cities that think of themselves as open, worldly, and cosmopolitan?

This contradiction is a matter with relevant ramifications. If we understand street names as cultural markers, through which societal dynamics are not merely framed and understood,

but also navigated and processed, then cultural markers that are at odds, may be able to undermine the meaningfulness of the progressive social values that have nominally been adopted (Gensburger and Wüstenberg, 2023b). A discrepancy between nominal social values and public cultural frameworks, such as street names, can therefore be seen as representative of a level of fragility of social progress and democratic values. Therefore, calling attention to street that have maintained colonially themed names that honour perpetrators of colonial genocide, and that represent racist language, are not just efforts to call attention to outdated symbolisms, but they are making a statement with wider implications, drawing attention to the idea that maybe German society is not so firmly and securely progressive and democratic, as we believe ourselves to be. Activists are alerting us to the fragility of social progress and democracy through an “exercise in counterfactuality” (ibid:13). What does it say about the state of the democratic system and society, that these kinds of value markers have been retained in the public sphere, and that the need to change them was not recognised?

The second point is that when activists are calling for the replacement of colonial street names with surrogates that honour anticolonial and antiracist work and commitment, they are not merely drawing attention to historically marginalised perspectives and histories, but because they understand street names as influential cultural markers, by inscribing previously underrecognised social identities into these cultural frameworks, they are claiming that these identities have a rightful belonging in wider German society. In advocating for toponymic recognition in particular for African, Afro-diasporic, and Black German identities, activists are making a statement about identity and about belonging of these groups within wider German society.

Above I outlined how the remnants of cultural markers honouring discriminatory histories may undermine societal progress and democracy; here, I draw attention to contemporary street names as possible markers to negotiate, more productively, processes of identity and belonging (Brasher and Alderman, 2023), in particular African, Afro-diasporic, and Black German belonging. As noted in Chapter 1, a broad scholarship and civic activism emerging since the 1980s in particular, has asserted the place of Black German identities and communities in German society (Florvil, 2020). Whilst this has shown that Black German communities and Germans of colour have long lived in Germany, they have nevertheless long

remained discursively and conceptually erased, which has often resulted in very real and practical experiences for those communities in Germany, having to justify their existence:

heute hat sich das verselbstständigt. (...) wenn ich einem sage, Ich bin Deutsch, dann muss ich echt ich weiß nicht wie oft, irgendwie Nachfragen beantworten, bis er irgendwann mal mich sozusagen in eine Ecke stellen kann, die dann doch nicht mehr Deutschland ist. Und dann ist die Person zufrieden. (Palasie, interview, 2022)

Serge Palasie, who was introduced in Chapter 2 alongside his work as a regional promoter for the One World regional network in North Rhine-Westphalia, and his exhibition-making practices, reiterates the common experience of being both Black and German, noting not only the frequency of being called upon to justify his identity, but noting in particular the insistence that these questions are usually embedded in, underlining the dominant frame of reference from which these questions are commonly asked, that cling to ideas about Blackness and Germanness as incompatible identity markers.

This erasure of African, Afro-diasporic, Afro-German, and Black German identities has likewise manifested in public landscapes, as Hamburg based activist Ginnie Bekoe reflects walking through Hamburg, she recalls, fills her with joy as she recognises diverse communities around her and finds fellow Black community members and people of colour in her neighbourhood; diversity has become natural, she recalls, shaping the reality of her everyday life. On the other hand, in Hamburg's public landscape, this is not reflected, which constitutes a painful experience. Hamburg's street names, she explains, honour colonial expansion and colonial "discoveries", whilst Black Germans and communities of colour are invisibilised: "Unsere Geschichten zählen nicht. Wir sind unsichtbar (...)" (Bekoe, 2015)

Grassroots activists in Germany have recognised that in these contexts, there is a "direct link between this disavowal of identity and street names" (Jethro, 2022: 141), and that commemorative street names have the potential to be a powerful tool for the recognition of minoritised and excluded perspectives (Alderman, 2003). Consequently, grassroots efforts can be framed, rather, as efforts of "memory citizenship" (Engler, 2013; Rothberg and Yildiz, 2011) by which especially Black German and Afro-German grassroots actors assert their identities as "people who belong to the city and who have the right to change and determine the city's

cultural memory” (Engler, 2013: 42). These are efforts around “issues of civic authority, race, identity and national belonging”, as well as efforts of “doing diversity”, efforts that are trying to make public landscape more inclusive, especially with regards to Afro-German and Black German identities (Jethro, 2022). They are activities that are saying, these perspectives and identities are part of German society, they belong, they have a right to be here.

For many Black German and Afro-German individuals, recognising this belonging in the mainstream public sphere, does make a difference. As one of the participants in the conversation during the *Decolonize Erfurt* tour, at the start of this chapter, highlighted, it did make her feel different, to pass through a street that honoured a name to which she was able to relate. In Serge Palasie’s view, these dynamics were not only morally and altruistically right, but they also ensured in a more tangible way a stronger sense of social cohesion and integration (Palasie, interview, 2022). Whereas the maintenance of colonial street names, served as a means of Othering and exclusion, recognising their perspectives and identities in the public landscape, may serve as a strong symbolic means to prevent the rejection of those communities and individuals that were seen as not belonging (ibid).

In summary, in advocating for Black German or Afro-German surrogate names, grassroots street renaming campaigns exceed changing the name for the sake of changing it, but utilise the name change as a tool to stage an intervention into German identity negotiations and assert belonging for historically excluded perspectives. This enhances the efficacy of street renamings as they understand street names as cultural symbols through which wider cultural and social developments are negotiated. The section above has demonstrated that grassroots renaming campaigns are not merely about changing street signs, but they are efforts that seek to intervene into German societal processes by asserting the belonging of historically marginalised perspectives and identities, as well as alerting to the possible negative implications for social democracy. In doing so, commemorative street names as well as processes of changing them can “affect, positively or negatively, the psychosocial wellbeing of communities, and they mark and help reproduce larger social geographies of disparity or opportunity” (Brasher and Alderman, 2023: 313).

3.8. Conclusion

Activist campaigns to challenge, remove, and change colonial street names constitute a testament to relentless grassroots efforts to change how Germany's public landscape reflects and engages with its colonial past. Whilst these monikers have long remained ignored and persisted across Germany as latent remnants of colonial propaganda and control, decades-long activist campaigns have been substantially responsible for making these visible and, therefore, discussable. The impact and outcomes of this activism is nuanced and shows ambiguities. Despite the longevity of their efforts, only a small number of street names have officially been changed. Furthermore, this also points to a wider paradox within public memory projects.

In recent years, the paradigm about the inherent value of de-commemorations and public memory has been called into question. It has been noted that it is difficult to measure the impact of public memory work on the "hearts and minds" of people (Gensburger and Lefranc, 2020). Others have called into question the redemptive potential of public memory (Pisanty, 2021) and have argued that progressive commemoration alone does not only not prevent the past from repeating itself but may itself have damaging potentials (Rieff, 2017). It has also been noted that if we "learn from the past" through public memory, then how does this reconcile the coexistence of more critical commemoration alongside a simultaneous rise in far-right extremism and the persistence of racist violence (Wüstenberg, 2023).

What this points to is that it is not (merely) the act of the renaming that is critical, but the process of how it is taking place. Grassroots campaigns—through their persistence, their participatory approach, and their politics of surrogacy—ensure that even before new street names are implemented, or even when the official process remains contested, the renaming campaigns themselves have become critical sites for learning and discourse that have drawn people's attention. Though few new names have been implemented over these decades, grassroots campaigning has disturbed the silence around these inscriptions and challenge the seeming permanence of these symbols of colonial oppression, therefore, substantially contributing to reshaping public memory inscriptions in Germany.

Chapter 4. *Institutional critique*: pushing accountability for colonial legacies.

4.1. Introduction

It is the 3rd of March 2022 at the *Grassi Museum für Völkerkunde*⁶⁴ in Leipzig. Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, Grassi director since 2019, is addressing a busy audience, welcoming them to the museum's partial re-opening. For the past three years, Meijer-van Mensch and her team, supported by federal funding, have been working on a critical reassessment of the history and acquisition contexts of the museum's ethnological collections and a "root-and-branch redisplay" (Hicks, 2022), under the project title *Reinventing Grassi*. She thanks her colleagues and visitors, and shares remarks on the importance of reinvention in the museum, as well as the need to be not just innovative, but radical and rebellious.⁶⁵

As Meijer-van Mensch nears the end of her remarks, a commotion develops in the open staircase opposite the stage. A small group dressed in protective gear and equipped with various tools make their way through the audience and towards an empty plinth that is located on a small landing halfway up the stairs to the first floor. After some initial confusion, the audience members are made aware that what is happening is a live performance by the artist *PARA Kollektiv*.⁶⁶ Over the next few minutes, *PARA* members take on the plinth. Two are working with hammer and chisel, another applies a jackhammer. Together they are chipping away at the structure. Dust and pieces of stone material are gathering on the floor around the structure. After a few minutes, the performance relocates, as *PARA* members move into a large room on the first floor, taking their tools and materials from the demolished structure with them, onlookers following behind. The room is set up like a workshop or laboratory, with white, empty walls, sparsely lit, populated only with a long work bench in the middle. During the proceeding final stage of the performance, *PARA* members use the materials from the demolished plinth, grind them down, process them and cast them into moulds in order to produce a series of identical looking, roughly triangle shaped, small stone objects, which are packaged individually and then placed into a vending machine at the end of the work bench.

⁶⁴ *Grassi Museum of Ethnology*.

⁶⁵ A recording of a live stream of the even that is described in this opening can be found on youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfr9lysee10&ab_channel=StaatlicheKunstsammlungenDresden (Accessed: 15 January 2025).

⁶⁶ *PARA Kollektiv*: <https://p-a-r-a.org/en/projects/berge-versetzen-2> (Accessed: 15 January 2025)

What visitors learn later on the night, and wider public audiences read in media over the following weeks, is that this performance is part of a project titled “Berge Versetzen/Moving Mountains” designed by *PARA* in collaboration with two Tanzanian artists Rehema Chachage and Valerie Asiimwe Amani.⁶⁷ This project, supported by the museum as part of *Reinventing Grassi*, is a critical response to the museum’s historical implications in German colonial overseas control through its relationship with two 19th century colonial geographers.

One of these geographers is Karl Weule (1864-1926), the Grassi’s second director in the early 1900s, who is not only known as the ‘founding father’ of Ethnology at the University of Leipzig, but also as an “excessive collector” who quintupled the Grassi’s illegitimate holdings of stolen cultural belongings during his directorship (Brus, 2022; Kuhn, 2022). The other is Weule’s colleague and friend, Hans Meyer (1858-1929), who is known for illegitimately appropriating Mt Kilimanjaro, in today’s Tanzania, ‘renaming’ it to *Kaiser Wilhelm Peak* and looting the top of the summit of the mountain in 1899 (Messmer, 2022). The legacies and impacts of these two colonial actors have been persistent. The plinth in the Grassi foyer, targeted by *PARA* in their performance, used to display a bust of Weule’s head, that was gifted to the museum by the *Verein für Völkerkunde*⁶⁸ in Leipzig in 1929, in honour of Weule’s work. Whilst the bust itself was removed by the then Grassi director Nanette Snoep in 2020 (Schlehahn, 2022), the empty plinth had remained in place, serving as a latent reminder of his commemoration. The abducted Kilimanjaro summit, conversely, has never been returned to the mountain. After the theft, Meyer divided the stone in two parts, of which one part, ‘gifted’ by Meyer to Kaiser Wilhelm II., is now considered lost, and the other part, long used by Meyer as a letter weight, has been up for sale by an Austrian antiquities dealer for 40,000 Euros (Messmer, 2022).

⁶⁷ “Berge Versetzen”: <https://berge-versetzen.com/> (Accessed: 15 January 2025).

⁶⁸ *Association for Ethnology*.

Figure 7: Impressions from *PARA's Berge versetzen* intervention at Grassi Museum Leipzig, in April 2022.

Top: *Para Kollektiv* activists have dismantled the empty plinth in the foyer at the Grassi Museum, which used to display a bust of Karl Weule. Bottom left and right: In the workshop space, activists use the material from the plinth to produce replicas of the Kilimanjaro summit stone for their crowdfunding campaign.



With “Berge Versetzen”, the German Tanzanian collaboration seeks not only to address the remaining physical traces of Weule at the Grassi by dismantling the plinth, but also to use the structure as raw material for what they have called a participatory restitution project. The small stone objects, produced by the group in the final act of the performance, are accurately sized replicas of the stolen Kilimanjaro summit stone, which can be bought by supporters and members of the public via the vending machine in the museum for 25.00 Euro per piece as a contribution to a crowdfunding campaign run by *PARA* to be able to buy back the summit from the antiquities dealer in order to return it to the Kilimanjaro. The campaign has been ongoing since 2022. At the time of writing in January 2025, the crowdfunder, which can be observed on *PARA*’s website, stands at 45%, with 908 replica pieces having been bought.

Figure 8: *PARA*’s replicas of the Kilimanjaro summit stone, available to purchase for the fundraising campaign, in April 2022.



Heritage institutions in Germany played an active role in colonisation and annexation, and thereafter, in upholding postcolonial legacies, silences and injustices. Whilst discourses and attention has increased in recent years, many institutional practices have remained persistently contentious. Institutional critique in order to challenge and call out institutions for their implication in these histories and legacies in the present has been a third important pillar of grassroots postcolonial memory activism for over four decades.

In this chapter, I investigate the spectrum of strategies and practices activists have employed to push towards institutional accountability (and transformation). I demonstrate that unrelenting activist critique has impacted institutional contexts, discourses, and practices in many multi-faceted, meaningful ways. At the same time, they have often remained contentious, therefore, re-emphasising fundamental questions and challenges over the possibility of transformative activism within institutional settings. Firstly, I briefly outline the involvement of German heritage institutions in exploitation during the colonial period, as well as how they contributed to upholding (post)colonial dynamics in the aftermath of 1918. The focus of this section will remain with the impact of these histories and legacies on these institutions, and how, despite an increase in discourse and scholarship, many harmful practices have remained, and many institutions have yet to own up to these histories and their impacts. Subsequently, I focus on grassroots responses to this. I demonstrate that activists in this movement have been critically challenging heritage institutions for many decades, guided by the premise that institutions owning up to these legacies is vital for postcolonial ‘reckoning’ and because they are integral memory institutions, it matters how they engage with these histories, for wider societal commemoration. These activities can be framed as *institutional critique*, and they manifest on a wide spectrum between collaborative engagements and resistance, hinging on activist and institutional contexts, and on perspectives regarding the transformative potential of the institution targeted, which I explore through my analysis of four case studies. I demonstrate that through a spectrum of varied and targeted approaches, activists and civic actors have asserted themselves as an integral accountability measure for institutional practice, contributing to raising awareness about institutional blindspots, generating important oppositional positions, and also impacting critical shifts in institutional practices over how German colonialism is recognised and represented in within German cultural institutions. Whilst their critiques and efforts have been impactful and significant, at the same time, this work has existed in a contentious environment. Many challenges described to me by my interview partners raised questions about the ways in which activist and civic partners and their knowledges and expertise are being perceived by institutional actors, how differences in resources impact these relationships and, therefore, demonstrate a fundamental question confronted by activists engaging in *institutional critique*: To what extent can transformative activism effectively operate within the context of institutional settings.

4.2. Heritage institutions as agents of colonial power: institutional repercussions

Heritage institutions, such as museums, archives, and universities (Smith, 2010), were implicated in Germany's colonisation of overseas territories and communities, as well as in the upholding postcolonial legacies, silences, and injustices in the present. In this section, I explore the ways in which German heritage institutions were implicated in colonial dynamics and how this continues to shape and impact institutions and their practices today.

During the colonial period, particularly on the African continent, German colonisers extensively looted hundreds of thousands of cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains from communities they violently colonised.⁶⁹ These disposessions were part of attempts to erode local cultures, identities, and traditions, and played a constitutive role in colonial subjugation, oppression and efforts to establish coloniser control (MacKenzie, 2010; Zimmerman, 2001). Regularly, these pillages were conducted as punishment or as violent attempts to break anti-colonial resistance (Savoy and Sarr, 2018; LeGall and Machona, 2022). Colonial agents were aware of both the violent circumstances of their 'collections' and of the injustice that these thefts were perpetrating, but were not hindered by the illegitimacy of their actions (LeGall and Machona, 2022).

Frequently, disposessions were conducted on order by institutional partners in the metropole, who were, for example, interested in accumulating collections of colonial cultural belongings, for prestige and status reasons, as European powers were competing with one another for imperial fame. Further, heritage institutions and museums sought to display and present cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains in museums and exhibitions for pro-colonial purposes, showing exoticised displays in order to justify oppression, in the name of 'civilisation' (Aguigah, 2023; Zimmerman, 2001). Moreover, Ancestral Remains were abducted and looted in the colonies, often on demand by cultural and medical institutions in Germany for the sake of conducting racist research, which was likewise used to further justify colonial control (Förster and Fründt, 2021; LeGall and Mboro, 2021; Reimann, 2022b). Furthermore, many cultural and

⁶⁹ I first explained my use of language in the context of colonial dispossession and violence in the Introduction. To remind my readers, I use "cultural belongings" (LeGall and Machona, 2022) to underscore community relationships that were disrupted by looting, as well as "human remains" and "Ancestral Remains" interchangeably (Fforde et al., 2020b; Reimann, 2022b) to underscore family and ancestral relationships, with capitalisation being used to emphasise the subjecthood of both ancestors and their descendants (Bader et al., 2023; Meloche et al., 2021).

heritage institutions were implicated in the perpetration of colonial violence and control in more indirect ways, for instance through the funding of colonial expeditions, enabling colonial geographers to assess and map landscapes in order to enable subsequent physical annexation (Hansen, 2015) or through the training of colonial officials to uphold colonial administrative systems in order to enable, for example, financial exploitation through taxation (Conrad, 2019a).

After the formal end of the colonial period in 1918, heritage institutions maintained a firm tie to the colonial project and colonial ideologies, as many legacies persisted: Stolen cultural belongings and abducted Ancestral Remains were kept in custody in so-called ethnological ‘collections’ and, in so doing, contributed to the upholding of these violent dispossessions and in the dehumanisation of ancestors and their descendants (LeGall and Mboro, 2021). Additionally, many ethnological museum practices continued to exoticise and to ‘other’ communities, for instance, through displays that are divided by continents or ‘cultures’, or by producing ‘authentic replicas’ of ‘traditional’ clothing or living settings (Vawda, 2019). Furthermore, across the 20th century, newly founded historical institutions and museums, joined in perpetuating these misrepresentations, for instance, by marginalising the role that Germany had played in overseas colonisation, and conversely, the role that colonial expansion and imperialism had played in German national history.

Things have started to change and there is more scholarly, public, political discourse around these; and several institutions have taken proactive stance (Macdonald, 2022), but overarchingly, many colonial dynamics have remained persistent. There is more visibility and acknowledgement for these issues, but practices continue; ethnological ‘collections’ have remained in institutional custody, institutions remain ignorant or secretive about acquisition contexts ; new ‘world cultures’ museums are still being built (El-Tayeb, 2020), institutions largely continue to seek to limit institutional accountability as much as possible.

4.3. Grassroots postcolonial *institutional critique* in Germany

For several decades, grassroots postcolonial actors have been challenging these dynamics as they have called on institutions for more transparency about their role in German colonialism, urged them to reassess contemporary museological practices that perpetuate Eurocentrism, Exoticisation and Othering, and demanded a more critical engagement with the legacies and histories of German colonialism for contemporary national German history. A proactive, transparent and critical engagement about the historical and present day involvement of these institutions in colonial legacies and harmful dynamics has been considered vital as acknowledgement of wrongdoing, both past and present, plays an integral role in critical reckoning with this past (Savoy and Sarr, 2018).

Moreover, museums have been urged to engage with these histories and legacies in a more transparent and critical manner, because of their important role as memory institutions (Noy, 2018) and memory sites (Rivera-Orraca, 2009). As mediators of a society's collective memory, as institutions that are productively involved in the process of constructing and interpreting a society's past (Arnold-de Simine, 2013; Black, 2011), how cultural and heritage institutions engage with these histories and their relevance is considered meaningful and instructive for how wider society proceeds in their critical reckoning with these histories. Before I delve into the details of grassroots mobilisation and critiques of German heritage institutions over these matters, I want to briefly clarify the focus of this chapter.

As with Chapter 2's section on activist exhibition making, there is a plethora of existing research literature on the intersection between activism and museums. Most notable is the notion of 'museum activism', as coined by Janes & Sandell, under which a significant body of literature explores the activities of museums as institutions that are productively positioned to and capable of contributing to transformative change and social justice matters (Adair and Levin, 2020; Janes and Sandell, 2019; Message, 2013, 2019; Reilly, 2018; Sodaro, 2023). In this field, research explores various insightful questions, such as the reasons that have in recent years pushed museums to become more called upon to contribute to social change and how museums have embraced an "activist turn" (Sodaro, 2023), what makes museum workers and curators into activists within museum spaces (Reilly, 2018; Cole, 2019), the varying insider/outsider relationships within museum activism (Wajid and Minott, 2019), questions of genuine versus performative museum activism (Lynch, 2019), and more. In this field, research

usually departs from within museum spaces and centres the museum experience of ‘becoming more activist’ (with and alongside the influence of various factors). The main concerns in this field remain with activism that emerges from within the institution and museum institutions and professionals are at the forefront of research interest, as studies investigate situations where impetus and energy for transformative change emerges from within museum spaces to embrace museums’ roles as transformative actors.

‘Museum activism’ though the label may sound suitable, does not apply to the initiatives I discuss in this chapter, as I focus on groups, campaigns and projects that emerge from civil society spaces and that take critical approaches to institutional spaces from the *outside*. My research is, therefore, more closely related to literature discussing activist movements as interlocutors for institutional actors (Grindon, 2023; Robertson, 2019). Museums and heritage institutions have also been recognised recently within the context of memory activist movements; in her contribution to the *Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* (Gutman and Wüstenberg, 2023), Erica Lehrer referred to “museums as sites for memory activism” (Lehrer, 2023). In this contribution, Lehrer investigates how in recent years, in their efforts to advance means for “the strategic commemoration of a contested past outside state channels to influence public debate and policy” (ibid:374), an increased number of memory activist movements have targeted and critically challenged museums over their implications in nation-building and exploitative dynamics, and for reinforcing power dynamics and marginalising subaltern and oppressed perspectives (ibid), and how, conversely, the increased presence and high visibility of such heritage institutions have made them into valuable targets for memory activist expression (ibid:375).

Additionally, I use the label of *institutional critique* to refer to the instances and case studies in this chapter, as it enables me to underline some important aspects of the nature of these activities and helps situate my study in a wider scholarly context. This framing was proposed to me in my interview with Yann LeGall, who was introduced in Chapter 3. Reflecting on the beginnings of *Postcolonial Potsdam* as an initiative, LeGall shared during our interview:

[Postcolonial Potsdam ist] entstanden so gegen den Diskurs der *Stiftung Preußischer Schlösser und Gärten* und das heißt, wir sind entstanden als *institutional critique*. Sowas, was (...) feministische Künstler:innen in den 1980ern gemacht haben, als sie gesagt haben, zum Beispiel, „Warum sehen

wir nur nackte Frauen in Kunstgalerien? Und warum sind das nur männliche Künstler?“ Und viele [andere] Initiativen machen das auch. (LeGall, interview, 2022)

LeGall reflects on the origins of *Postcolonial Potsdam*, as an ambition to create a counter-discursive position to the SPSPG, and their representation of German and Prussian history, as the most important cultural foundation in Potsdam. Invoking the notion of *institutional critique*, LeGall draws a relationship to critical grassroots arts movements of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, which sought to interrogate and challenge contentions of art institutions, to reveal underlying power structures, ideological biases, and societal implications within the realm of art, to critique the socio-political contexts in which art is produced and displayed, to encourage a re-evaluation of the role of cultural institutions in shaping artistic discourse (Sheikh, 2006; Steyerl, 2006). The approaches in these movements sought to dismantle traditional hierarchies within the art world and provoke self-reflection within cultural institutions, challenging them to reassess their roles and impact on society (ibid). Placing these critical engagements as developed by *Postcolonial Potsdam* and others above, under this umbrella label of *institutional critique*, LeGall invokes a shared ambition between postcolonial memory activism and critical art movements targeting similar institutions, which helps to highlight the long trajectory of critical activist movements, and to further the visibility and legitimacy of these grassroots activities.

Framing my investigations with Lehrer's 'museums as sites of memory activism' and LeGall's *institutional critique* provides a helpful lens for my investigations for two reasons: Firstly, Lehrer helps me to highlight that these are instances of memory activists targeting these institutions externally, as outsiders, and that I am not referring to activist agendas emerging from inside the institution, whilst LeGall helps me to emphasise that 'the institution' sits at the heart of these interventions, as activists are challenging institutional legacies and practices, as efforts to hold institutions accountable and/or encourage institutional transformation.

Secondly, both of them draw attention to the diversity of approaches of activists with regards to institutional and museum critique. As Lehrer asserts, activists have developed "a range of creative, embodied practices (...) [thereby] thinking and acting *through*, rather than only against, the museum, and (...) both tapping into and appropriating its particular 'curatorial' power, authority, and legitimacy" (Lehrer, 2023:374), LeGall speaks of a spectrum of activities:

Also, *institutional critique* hat ein ganzes Spektrum von so richtig civil disobedience—ziviler Ungehorsam—bis zu, ja, Mitmachen bei der kuratorischen Arbeit. (...) verschiedene Mitglieder von verschiedenen Initiativen sind unterschiedlich positioniert auf diesem Spektrum. (LeGall, interview, 2022)

Not only do these map onto each other and demonstrate significant parallels between LeGall's reflections from his experience in postcolonial memory activism in Germany, and Lehrer's scholarly investigations of memory movements more broadly. More importantly, the point both of them are making about diversity of approaches, and how they can be considered on a spectrum, helps me set the scene for my investigation of four case studies in the remainder of the chapter, as well as where I demonstrate how activists use different strategies and approaches towards different institutional actors and practices, and secure significantly different impacts and outcomes, as a result.

Grassroots critique of and mobilisation against heritage museums in Germany from a postcolonial perspective has had a long trajectory. In the 1990s, civic activists and development groups in Freiburg i.Br., for instance, challenged the local ethnological/nature history museum over their display of a honorary plaque in the foyer of the museum, which listed the names of important donors, several of whom had been implicated in colonial dispossession (Wegmann, 2018). In the 2000s, critiques of museums and related actors were also part of the demands articulated in the programme for the *Anticolonial Africa Conference* in Berlin, which was hosted by a coalition of activist actors and civic groups (FFM, 2004). Since the later 2000s and 2010s, heritage institutions have featured increasingly in memory activist initiatives, as activists have engaged with them in walking tours (Yeter, interview, 2022), and exhibition making spaces (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2023b). Furthermore, there have been artist collectives producing critical displays and interventions to challenge heritage institutions, of which *PARA's* "Berge Versetzen" project in Leipzig, explored in the opening of this chapter, is one example. In addition, there have also been a number of initiatives and campaigns that formed specifically in response to, or with the purpose of targeting, a particular institutional actor or practice, which I explore in more detail below.

What this demonstrates is that grassroots postcolonial *institutional critique* operates on a spectrum of various activities, ranging from direct action and civil disobedience, to co-curatorial encounters (LeGall, interview, 2022). This diverse spectrum of approaches is the focus of this chapter, I explore four case studies in order to illustrate how grassroots initiatives utilise a range of different strategies and formats to communicate their critiques. Firstly, I explore antagonistic activist challenges against Berlin's most recent, prestigious museum project, the *Humboldt Forum*. Secondly, I investigate the initiative *Kolonialismus im Kasten* that set out to reform the inadequate engagement with colonial history in Germany's main historical museum, the *DHM*. Lastly, I review two collaborative encounters between activist groups and institutional actors.

4.3.1. Antagonistic encounters: Grassroots activism against the *Humboldt Forum*

The first case study I investigate here is one that over recent years has generated significant controversy and public (conservative) resistance, and at the same time, has influenced institutional discourses and practices in incomparable ways. For more than a decade, grassroots activists presented an unrelenting critical challenge against the *Humboldt Forum* in Berlin, starting with the collectives *Alexandertechnik* and *artefakte//anti-Humboldt* between 2007 and 2009, and growing into a broad grassroots coalition, *No Humboldt 21!*, between 2013 and 2021. In this section, following a brief introduction to the *Humboldt Forum* project, I investigate the critiques articulated against the project by these three grassroots collectives, as well as the strategies they used in their work. I demonstrate that not only were these groups pioneering civil society actors that shaped new critiques of the projects that other discourses had disregarded completely, but how they also generated a new kind of critical engagement with the project, not merely critiquing the project but generating an antagonistic opposition to it (Pittas, 2023).

The *Humboldt Forum* is one of Berlin's most recent and highly esteemed museum projects. The idea originated in the 2000s, when the Berlin senate decided to build a new cultural centre on the *Schlossplatz* (Macdonald, 2016; von Bose, 2016). The *Schlossplatz* is one of the most central squares in Berlin and one with a turbulent history. From the 15th century, the site was home to the *Stadtschloss*,⁷⁰ serving as the principal residence for the Hohenzollern family, ruling dynasty of the Kingdom of Prussia and later the German Empire. After damage during World War II, the *Stadtschloss* was demolished in 1950/51 by GDR leadership as one of their first acts as a new socialist state (Bach, 2021). In its place, in 1976, the GDR built one of its key parliamentary buildings, the *Palast der Republik* (Bach, 2017).⁷¹ After reunification in 1989, the *Palast* lay vacant, closing in 1990 due to safety concerns. Subsequently, debates ensued about the fate of the square. In the 1990s, various ideas were explored but deemed unsatisfactory. Due to the area's historical significance, an expert commission was established in 2000 by the German parliament and Berlin senate to draft a proposal for the site's usage. What they proposed was to demolish the vacant *Palast der Republik*, and in its place, construct a new built with a reconstruction of the historical façade of the former Prussian *Stadtschloss*

⁷⁰ City Palace.

⁷¹ Palace of the Republic.

(Morat, 2019; von Bose, 2013, 2016). This new built, the commission proposed further, was to establish an unprecedented hub for culture and science by creating a new shared home for the research collections of Berlin's Humboldt University, the Central and Regional Library, and the ethnological collections of the *Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SPK)*.⁷² The *SPK*, founded in 1957, is a large cultural foundation, responsible for overseeing twenty-seven museums and cultural organisations across Berlin, including Berlin's *Ethnologisches Museum (EM)*.⁷³ Centrepiece of the concept for the *Humboldt Forum* was the inclusion of the *EM*'s so-called non-European ethnological collections, comprising of the *SPK*'s collections from East Asia, India, Oceania, Africa, and Ancient and Mesoamerica (Macdonald, 2016). With these collection at the heart, the new hub was intended to be an innovative museum of "world cultures" and a place to be "in touch with as much of the world as possible" (Parzinger, 2011).

The proposal was drafted over many years and confirmed by parliamentary resolution in 2007 (Morat, 2019). Support was strong for the idea of a new culture hub, but at the same time, the project was highly controversial from the start. Alongside discussions over timeline and finances (von Bose, 2013), two key controversies evolved, on one side, around the proposed demolition of the *Palast der Republik*, which critics asserted represented an erasure of GDR memory and history (Costabile-Heming, 2017), and, on the other side, opponents challenged the reconstruction of the 19th century façade, which was seen as a revisionist move towards restoring a pre-World War II version of German identity and German history (El-Tayeb, 2020).⁷⁴

The *Humboldt Forum* has a complex and complicated project history and, since the 1990s, various proposals have generated multiple concerns and controversies. And yet, what remained conspicuously absent from the many discussions around the *Forum* was that much of the *SPK*'s 'non-European' collections had originated from illegitimate, colonial acquisitions (Morat, 2019). These were not a manifestation of intercultural, cosmopolitan dialogue, but a legacy of Germany's involvement in overseas colonisation and of violent looting, that had been rendered entirely invisible. These kinds of critiques only slowly began to gain some space in the discourse around the *Forum* as a result of critical grassroots mobilisation, starting in 2007, that drew attention to both these legacies, and to these discursive absences.

⁷² *Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation*.

⁷³ *Ethnological Museum*.

⁷⁴ Connecting these two critiques, it has also been noted that in reconstructing the former Prussian *Stadtschloss*, the new project was reversing one of the GDR's policy decisions, which was the demolition of that same *Stadtschloss* in 1950, as part of their attempt to eradicate traces of imperialism as a newly socialist state (Bach, 2021).

Critiques relating to the neglect of colonialism in the debates around the *Humboldt Forum* were first expressed publicly through the efforts of a group known as *Alexandertechnik* (Alexandertechnik, 2009). This was a civil society collective of freelance artists, activists, and academics in Berlin, who organised themselves in a series of meetings and events, to formulate a critical response to the *Humboldt Forum*, between 2007 and 2009. Their critique, in summary, called out the project for seeking to place illegitimately accumulated “ethnological collections (...) in a building that is congruent with the colonial and academically hegemonic collection history” (Alexandertechnik, 2009). Their work cumulated in a two-day conference in July 2009, during which the group began to promote the idea of a discursive dismantling of the project (Kuster et al., 2018; Raether, 2012). Following this conference, critiques of colonial legacies and neglected postcolonial ramifications in the project concept were further developed and disseminated by a smaller artist and activist group, named *artefakte//anti-Humboldt*. This group operated for several years, hosting workshops, lectures, and movie screenings, covering various topics including colonialism, restitution, and mummification (Wulffen, 2009; Bétonsalon, 2011; Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative, 2013; Kuster et al., 2018). Building on the critical foundations laid by their predecessors, *artefakte//anti-Humboldt*’s critique noted, that “non-restitution is not a neutral act, and any insistence to hold on to property of cultural good should be abandoned, especially against the backdrop of the histories of acquisition of many artefacts that ended up in German museums.” (cit. in Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative, 2013). These two early initiatives were both relatively short lived and garnered relatively little public attention. Following in their footsteps, a large-scale grassroots campaign grew their critique into a sustained activist opposition that not only garnered public attention and support but became an integral accountability mechanism for the project. The *No Humboldt21!* campaign was launched in June 2013 on occasion of the groundbreaking ceremony of the museum. The core of the coalition was constituted by seven member organisations, which included critical Afrodiasporic and Black German initiatives, such as *ISD Bund e.V.*, *afrotak TV cybernomads*, and *AfricAvenir e.V.*, two critical developmental NGOs/networks, *glokal e.V.*, *Berliner Entwicklungspolitischer Ratschlag*, the postcolonial activist association *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.*, and the critical artist collective *artefakte//Anti-Humboldt*. With *artefakte//Anti-Humboldt* as one of the founding members, a key continuity with previous efforts was visible, whilst *No Humboldt21!* also significantly expanded the scope, particularly through the

participation of developmental organisations, Black German initiatives, and Afro diasporic organisations, who had themselves been critically engaging with German museums over postcolonial critiques for years.

Alexandertechnik and *artefakte//anti-Humboldt* were pioneering actors in the discourse around the *Humboldt Forum*, as they were the first one to publicly call out the institution for its implication in colonial looting, for planning to display abducted art and cultural belongings in a building that featured a 19th century Prussian façade, and for its disregard for postcolonial and critical museology discourses (Kuster et al., 2018). These critiques were expanded by the *No Humboldt21!* manifesto, which articulated five critique points: First, because most of the collections had been acquired through colonial conquests, the *SPK* could not be considered the legitimate ‘owner’ of these pieces. Second, the display of these items within a building showcasing the reconstructed Prussian palace represented a redemption of German/Prussian involvement in colonisation and enslavement. Third, the *SPK*’s concept was maintaining display practices that resulted in the exoticisation and discrimination of cultures deemed ‘non-European’. Fourth, Alexander von Humboldt was deemed an unsuitable namesake on the basis of his involvement in European colonisation. Fifth and last, it was criticised that these items were deemed for display at a site to which their communities of origin do not have access. The *SPK*’s statement, that visitors from all over the world were invited to see these objects at the *Humboldt Forum* was described, in light of repressive European migration policies, as cynical (*No Humboldt 21!*, 2013).

I suggest that these activities of grassroots mobilisation against the *Humboldt Forum* can be framed as an antagonistic confrontation of the institution (Pittas, 2023). Whilst previous civil society critiques had largely aimed at promoting alternatives and aiming for reformation, *Alexandertechnik* and *artefakte//anti-Humboldt* opted for “strategies of exodus from the institution, [and] a head-on confrontation with it” (Pittas, 2023). Their oppositional positioning is immediately evident in their naming, as the two earlier groups framed themselves as “anti-Humboldt” in one of their names, and in the title of the activist conference hosted in 2009 (Raether, 2012), whilst *No Humboldt 21!* likewise projected a deliberate opposition in how they named themselves. Furthermore, activists deliberately scheduled their critical events to juxtapose the *Humboldt Forum*’s official representation, as *Alexandertechnik*’s activist conference in July 2009 was scheduled to coincide with a workshop exhibition, hosted by the *Humboldt Forum* at the *Old Museum*, where the organisers were showing previews of the kinds

of exhibitions envisaged for the new site (Peitz, 2009; von Oswald, 2022). *No Humboldt21!* asserted the antagonism most strongly, as their manifesto called not merely for a critique or challenge of the project but urged for the cessation of the construction altogether. Titled *Stop the planned construction of the Humboldt-Forum in the Berlin Palace* (No Humboldt 21!, 2013), the coalition demanded “that the work on the Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace be ceased” (ibid). Moreover, activists staged a series of confrontational protests and demonstrations, often on site near the *Forum*, to mark their opposition (Loy, 2013).

From the perspective of these activities, the institutional concept for the *Humboldt Forum* was rife with institutional illiteracy. The overall project idea itself, for one, especially the idea of the “universal museum”, was regarded as a “regressive projection” (*Rückprojektion*) and completely out of touch with wider critical museological developments that had evolved since the 1970s (Kuster et al., 2018). Additionally, the institution as well as the surrounding public discourse had demonstrated for many years a significant capacity for critical reflection and scrutiny, as timelines, funding structures, and architectural concerns had been scrutinised (von Bose, 2013), yet colonialism had been a complete blindspot. Morat suggests, this was because the question of what to do with the historical *Schlossplatz*, the subsequent decision to demolish the *Palast der Republik*, and to reconstruct the *Stadtschloss*, were not merely urban planning choices, but attempts at addressing fundamental questions of German identity (Morat, 2019). The *Humboldt Forum* was fundamentally about re-negotiating German identity post-reunification, wanting to leave behind a trouble and divided past, and to (re-)join the ranks of worldly Europe (ibid). In this context, the ‘non-European’ collections became instrumentalised as a tool to reconceptualise the museum landscape in the heart of the capital and to underscore a new 21st century German cosmopolitanism, which created a discursive preoccupation and resulted in the neglect of interrogating important postcolonial ramifications (ibid). Similarly, *Alexandertechnik* had noted in 2009 that the idea of the *Humboldt Forum* as a symbol of multiculturalism had made the ‘non-European’ artefacts into instruments to refashion newly reunited Germany in an image of cosmopolitanism and worldliness (Alexandertechnik, 2009; Raether, 2012). For these activist critics, this was not merely a situation with discursive repercussions, yet the *Humboldt Forum* had become a museum with so many flaws, that it was irredeemable. Hence, grassroots actors advocated not merely for a critique of the museum but for an opposition to it, as they challenged not merely certain aspects of the project but oppose it as a whole. Naming these as an antagonistic

intervention is relevant not only to illustrate the spectrum of *institutional critique*, and to distinguish these from activist strategies. It illuminates an understanding of activists' ambitions. Activists were working "against the institution" (Chidgey and Garde-Hansen, 2024), however, importantly, not in an effort for institutional transformation but in order to reject, oppose, and boycott the institution. Institutional reform was not envisaged, it was deemed impossible, due to the grave and lasting flaws that were built into the project.

Activists were unsuccessful in stopping the project from proceeding—the *Forum* opened, first virtually, in 2020 followed by a phased physical opening of different sections between 2021 and 2022. And yet, activist opposition was instrumental in shaping public discourse and understanding of the new project. Relentless grassroots campaigning especially after 2013, catapulted colonial contexts of the *Forum's* collections to the forefront of public discussions. This momentum was further enhanced when, in 2017, French art historian Bénédicte Savoy publicly resigned from the *Forum's* advisory board, calling out the project's persistent intransparency on postcolonial matters as "toxic" (Häntzschel, 2017). In subsequent years, the *Humboldt Forum* has become seen as a critical "catalyst", discussed internationally, for considerations over the role of European ethnographic museums in a postcolonial world (Bach, 2021; El-Tayeb, 2020; Macdonald, 2016; Morat, 2019), interrogating not only necessary changes, but stimulating radical considerations over the overall feasibility of maintaining so-called non-European collections in European museums.

Critics of antagonistic mobilising against museum institutions highlight that these may be disempowering and less effective in achieving transformative change, as these interventions may regard institutions as too monolithic and, in doing so, limit the "spectrum of possible avenues of political engagement", therefore, closing down avenues for impacting institutional transformation (Pittas, 2023:169). In light of this critique, the case study of activist mobilising against the *Humboldt Forum* offers a meaningful perspective, as it underlines the value of antagonistic encounters in seeking to stage an opposition with the institutions, rather than seeking reform. Antagonistic approaches can be seen as one end of the diverse spectrum of postcolonial activist *institutional critique*, in which activist and civic actors utilising direct action and confrontational approaches, to vocalise uncompromising critiques of institutions and museums, whose engagements with German colonialism they consider 'beyond repair'.

4.3.2. Constructive critique:

Kolonialismus im Kasten

The second initiative I explore here is one that can be considered (among) the earliest initiatives that formed in explicit response to a specific institutional practice. *Kolonialismus im Kasten* (*KiK*)⁷⁵ was a scholar activist initiative driven by five historians, which, between 2010 and 2017, targeted the permanent exhibition at the *Deutsche Historische Museum* (*DHM*),⁷⁶ for its insufficient and inadequate representation of German colonial history. In this section, following a short introduction to the *DHM*, I explore the motivations behind and the evolution of *KiK* and analyse their work by framing it as an approach of ‘constructive critique’, by which I mean it provides a critical confrontation of the inadequate practices in the museum, but seeks to intervene productively, to highlight blindspots and shortcomings to correct and reform them.

The *DHM* in Berlin is Germany’s largest, most well-known and hegemonic historical museum, with a collection that encompasses several hundreds of thousands of artefacts and that attracts approximately 800.000 visitors every year.⁷⁷ In 2010, the museum made headlines as it opened its reconceptualised permanent exhibit, promising not only a “forthright confrontation with mass violence and genocide in Germany’s past” (Sieg, 2021), but also claiming “to foster a self-reflective stance about national history” (ibid). Shortly after this reopening, five Berlin-based female historians and scholar-activists, Manuela Bauche, Dörte Lerp, Susann Lewerenz, Marie Muschalek, and Kristin Weber, who had met during the grassroots commemorative campaign *125 years Berlin Africa Conference*, went to see the new exhibit at the *DHM* (Kopp and Bauche, 2017). What they found during their visit was that, despite much

⁷⁵ *Colonialism in a Box*.

⁷⁶ *German Historical Museum*.

⁷⁷ The *DHM* was founded in 1987 in West Berlin as a state initiative under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, with the aim of presenting a comprehensive and pluralistic representation of German history. This was, at least in part, a response to the East German *Museum für Deutsche Geschichte* (*MfDG*), which had been established in 1952 by the *GDR* and was viewed as presenting German history through a Marxist-Leninist lens. The foundation of the *DHM* was met with mixed reactions. While political representatives were largely supportive, grassroots memory activists—especially those associated with the West German *History Movement*—accused the museum’s founders of promoting a revisionist view of German history and downplaying the significance of National Socialist history (Wüstenberg, 2017). Following reunification in 1990, the *MfDG* was dissolved, and the formerly West German *DHM*—until then without a permanent location—took over the *Zeughaus* in central Berlin, the building that had previously housed the *MfDG*. This has remained the *DHM*’s home ever since. Along with the building, the *DHM* also inherited large parts of the *MfDG*’s collections, prompting further critical debates about the role and representation of *GDR* history in the post-reunification *DHM* (Morat and Zündorf, 2019; Sabrow et al., 2007).

fanfare and critical acclaim surrounding the new display and despite the impressive scope of 8.000 objects incorporated to present an extensive illustration of 'German history', the colonial period was left almost completely unaddressed. Throughout the 19th century display, German colonial involvement overseas was barely mentioned. There was only one small display case dedicated to German colonialism, but this case was located in the corner of the exhibit hall, under a set of stairs, and behind another large exhibit case. The case was quite literally hidden away from visitors' gaze, this physical marginalisation further underlining how the overall exhibit had made German colonial history appear as short, contained, and historically insignificant.

In response to the inadequacies in the permanent display, these scholar-activists formed the initiative *Kolonialismus im Kasten*. The group's name was both a reference to *Kasten* in the exhibit, the singular display case discussing German colonialism, as well as a wordplay hinting to the dual meaning of *im Kasten*, referring to something being physically enclosed, as well as something being presented as finished (Bischoff, 2017), thus invoking a critique of the museum's treatment of German colonialism not merely as minimal but as self-contained and completed. The incentives of the group became both to call out and draw attention to the inadequate and insufficient representation of colonial history in the museum, as well as to improve the display by providing both more information, more narratives, stories, and more detailed content, as well as to provide a critical appraisal of these histories. The problem with the display at the *DHM* was not just that the information was short and incoherent, but it also lacked a necessary critical re-appraisal of German colonialism. There was no engagement with the violent realities of German colonial rule, with its lasting legacies, or with anticolonial resistance and liberation. It was presented not only as short, but an 'odd' and almost irrelevant episode of 19th century Germany.

KiK was one of the first museum-specific *institutional critique* initiatives within the memory movement that was in its early stages, as a movement, at the time. Their approach can be understood as a 'constructive critique' of the *DHM*, meaning that theirs was a critical confrontation with the museum's shortcomings and inadequacies, but in such a way that was not antagonistic, but productively sought to intervene, to provide supplementary content and contextualisation enhancing the experience for those visiting the display, to provide a disruptive encounter and to defamiliarize them with the permanent display (Czerney, 2015), therefore

becoming a productive and constructive intervention, that also significantly shaped institutional practice and reform.

The first evidence for this as constructive critique rather than overt opposition can be found in the strategies chosen by the group to disseminate their critiques. Firstly, in 2010, the group began hosting critical walking tours through the *DHM* display. During the two hour interventions, the group illuminated the near invisibilisation of German colonialism in the display, as well as filled the gaps left by these absences: they demonstrated the interconnectedness of German colonialism with other periods in German history, drawing attention to continuities and legacies, highlighted the violent and exploitative realities of colonial rule, and underlined the persistence of anticolonial resistance and liberation movements (Kopp and Bauche, 2017). The walks were open to the public, hosted collaboratively by two group members. They drew large numbers of interested visitors and continued for many years after 2010 (ibid). In addition to these, in 2013, the group released an independent audio guide (Czerney, 2015). This guide was (and still is) freely available to download online and allows interested visitors to flexibly engage with the group's critiques in addition to the information provided by the museum exhibit. An overview map is provided with the audio guide online. There are over twenty audio recordings, for which the group collaborated with voice actors of colour to record the narratives that had been absent (Sieg, 2021). Drawing further attention to the gaps left in the permanent exhibit, the audio guide sought to advocate for a critical commemoration of German colonialism, and to reconsider what German colonialism means for the present.

Throughout their walks, website, and audio guide, the initiative's critique calls out the marginalisation of histories and draws attention to institutional blindspots. Their approach to addressing these is a clear confrontation, yet it is not antagonistic. For instance, the initiative recognises the "impressive" scope of the museum, highlighting the 8.000 items in their displays. This is used to underline the weight of the omission of colonial history, but it is not a confrontation of the scope of the museum itself. Additionally, the consideration of other important histories is recognised and used as a parallel, not competition, to draw attention to colonial history. In her recollection of *KiK*'s guided tours, Bauche recalls:

Aber es ist schon so, dass es nach wie vor eine total große Lücke ist und viele Leute merken, dass es neben den großen Aufarbeitungsthemen, die

Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus vor allem, noch andere Themen gibt, die aber öffentlich nicht so präsent sind. (Kopp and Bauche, 2017)

The mention of National Socialist history is highlighted here as an important topic for critical reckoning and engagement, to which a parallel can be drawn. This is not an antagonism between these two histories but a productive comparison in order to emphasise the importance and meaning of colonial history. In highlighting blindspots and providing additional information, *KiK* further provides a critique more broadly of notions of museum or object neutrality (Czerney, 2015), and challenges established assertions about German memory culture (Sieg, 2021). Rather than calling for boycott or protest, *KiK* highlights the necessity for providing supplementary information and additional narratives to enhance the experience for those visiting the exhibit via these additional provisions. The initiative provides “what Edward Said calls ‘contrapuntal readings’ of images, artifacts and elisions” (cited in Sieg, 2021:228), thereby bringing “to the foreground the larger historical and political processes on which seemingly unremarkable, commonplace references are contingent but remain unquestioned” (ibid).

Furthermore, in constructing their critique, the initiative strategically built upon the institution's own work and structures. This is evident, for instance, in their deliberate use of the institution's own guiding system in the exhibit (information panels and numbers), in order to direct those using their audio guide in the museum. Additionally, in their critique of the *Kolonialschaukasten*, the group utilises the same exact selection of items to anchor their critique. Whilst using the museum's own features, markers, and objects, however, the group does not simply provide additional information but generates critical inversions. For instance, whilst they use the museum's markers as guidance, the audio guide does not follow the same chronological system. It directs visitors directly to the section on the German Empire, thereby, skipping several centuries of German history prior. Furthermore, once in the designated section, the audio guide does not present a linear instruction. It directs visitors to objects off the main route, encourages them to turn around, to go back and forth, or to skip certain sections or displays (Czerney, 2015). Further, their presentation of the same objects in the *Kolonialschaukasten* centres and prioritises marginalised perspectives, by telling stories about and through these objects about the lived realities of the formerly colonised. In doing so, they demonstrate that museum objects do not speak for themselves (Czerney, 2015). Instead, they required other media and contextualisation for visitors to make sense of them (ibid). In drawing

attention to the gaps and providing alternative perspectives, the audio guide “alerted visitors to the politics of museological choices” (Sieg, 2021).

Lastly, in staging their interventions within the grounds of the museum itself, the group generated opportunities for interactions between activists and museum workers. There were several instances, Bauche recalls, of interactions between activists and museum workers during the interventions, which ranges from critical encounters, in which the institution reacted with avoidance and defensiveness, as well as dialogical encounters, during which museum workers reacted with interest and openness to the group’s critiques (Kopp and Bauche, 2017). This further underlines the group’s approach as a constructive intervention, as it made the critiques more accessible to the institution itself, therefore, stimulating opportunities for transformation within it, which generated also some success. In 2013 and in 2020, the *DHM* opted to revise its permanent display of German colonial history, and in 2016/17 it curated a dedicated exhibition on German colonialism that continues to be referenced as a key milestone in the way in which German colonial history was brought into public consciousness (Thiemeyer, 2016).

4.3.3. Consultative collaborations: *Postcolonial*

Potsdam and Amo Bündnis Halle

As a third and final stop on the spectrum of *institutional critique* in this section, I explore two examples of activists utilising collaborative approaches to communicate their critiques with heritage institutions. The first case relates to *Postcolonial Potsdam*, who contributed to an exhibition, curated by the *SPSG*, in order to engage with its own colonial histories and legacies. The second case study relates to the *Anton Wilhelm Amo Bündnis* in Halle (Saale), who participated in an advisory commission with the University of Halle, to support their efforts to (re)consider a commemorative concept for the first Black philosopher known to have taught at a German university in the 18th century. I introduce both groups and illustrate the contexts and evolutions of these collaborations, to demonstrate how activists may opt in to such consultative encounters (Fouseki, 2010), not without hesitancy or scepticism, but in an effort to meaningfully shape institutional practice and policy by embedding activist critiques within institutional processes.

In the 19th century, Potsdam, a medium-sized town in East Germany near Berlin, served as provincial capital and royal residence for the Kingdom of Prussia, resulting in Potsdam's public landscape being dominated by royal gardens and palaces. Since the end of Prussia in 1947, more than thirty became heritage sites, since 1994 under management of the *Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg (SPSG)*.⁷⁸ Prussia held a leading role in the German colonial empire, many heritage sites have been shaped by colonial history. For instance, the *SPSG*'s prestigious *Park Sanssouci*, was the 19th century residence for Emperor Wilhelm II, during whose reign German colonial exploitation abroad gained significant momentum and *Sanssouci* became a site to display imperial wealth and propaganda. The contemporary importance of these sites cannot be understated. Many of them are recognised as *UNESCO World Heritage* and attract over one million visitors annually. *Sanssouci*, in

⁷⁸ *Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation Berlin-Brandenburg*. These heritage sites are found in various locations across Berlin and Brandenburg. Between 1949 and 1989, these were under management of respective cultural organisations in East and West Germany. In East Germany, sites were managed, for instance, by the *Institut für Denkmalpflege (Institute for the Preservation of Historical Monuments)*, whilst in West Germany, many sites were under guardianship of the *SPK*. Post reunification, in 1994, Prussian heritage sites across Berlin and Brandenburg, including Potsdam, were transferred into custodianship of the newly formed *SPSG*. Though similar in name, overall cultural aims, and some organisational features, the *SPSG* is a foundation that is distinct and independent from the *SPK* (see 4.4.1.).

particular, is a Potsdam landmark, for both locals and visitors alike. It is an expansive park, encompasses a vineyard, numerous palaces, a church, a picture gallery, as well as extensive flower gardens and many sculptures.

Figure 9: At *Park Sanssouci* with *Postcolonial Potsdam*, in April 2022.

Top: Walking at *Sanssouci* during a walking tour with *Postcolonial Potsdam*. Bottom: Walking tour participants gather near a statue outside the 'Chinese house' at *Sanssouci* (bottom left) and near the *First Rondell* (bottom right).



Before further exploring these legacies and grassroots activism in Potsdam, let me introduce the second case study here. On the main campus of the *Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg*, one of Germany's oldest universities in the East German town of Halle (an der Saale), stands a two meters tall bronze sculpture titled *Freies Afrika*,⁷⁹ which was created by local sculptor Gerhard Geyer in 1963. Inspired by the artist's recent participation in a study trip to West Africa funded by the socialist GDR regime, the sculpture depicts two African individuals, one man and one woman, intended to represent African liberation fighters as an honorary dedication to anticolonial African independence movements. As this context of how the statue was made is often unknown, it has instead frequently become associated with, and seen as a commemorative site for, Anton Wilhelm Amo, who was the first Black philosopher known to have studied and lectured at this university in Halle in mid-18th century (ibid).

Figure 10: The statue *Freies Afrika*, on campus of Halle University, in Halle (a.d.S.)

Source: Martin Beitz, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Halle-Universit%C3%A4tsring-Freies-Afrika.jpg>

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⁷⁹ *Free Africa*.

The site in Halle is much less prestigious or well-known than the *SPSG* heritage sites. These sites do share, firstly, that both represent sites in former East Germany, where (physical) inscriptions of the legacies of Germany's colonial involvement overseas co-existed with, and outlived, the GDR's state ideology as an antifascist, anticolonial state. Secondly, on the back of these contexts, both of them have been subject to critical activist responses for several years, that have been responsible for making the complex post/colonial entanglements visible, and that resulted in critical collaborative encounters with the institutions managing the sites.

The colonial entanglements of Potsdam's landscape long remained underexplored by the *SPSG*. Instead, for the past decade, these histories gained critical recognition in the work of *Postcolonial Potsdam*. This is a small, yet vigorous, largely student-led initiative formed in 2014. Prompted by a University conference exploring colonial legacies across Anglophone contexts, a group of five students—Anna von Rath, Lisa Nechutnys, Lina Fricke, Paula Seemann, and Yann LeGall—set out to explore the surroundings “[at] our own doorstep”, and to address the “postcolonial silence in contemporary Potsdam” (*Postcolonial Potsdam*, 2019). Paul Urbanski, who was introduced in Chapter 2 as a member of *Postcolonial Potsdam* since 2019, explained how the group turned a critical lens onto historic *SPSG* sites through intricate archival research (Urbanski, interview, 2022). The residential *Neues Palais*, the sculpture gardens at *Sanssouci*, as well as the imports in the *Botanical Gardens*, they found, showed “a multitude of references to Prussia's colonial history”, which so far had been “mostly wilfully or unconsciously ignored by the majority society because this version of the past does not fit into conceptions of Prussian heritage” (*Postcolonial Potsdam*, 2019).

In Halle (an der Saale), critical postcolonial activism first emerged with *Halle Postkolonial*, formed in 2018 to become the first critical student group to research the statue and Amo's legacy; but it was with the *Anton Wilhelm Amo Bündnis*, a spin-off from *Halle Postkolonial* in 2019, that a dedicated grassroots engagement with the statue and its impact on contemporary memory culture evolved. The *Amo Bündnis* is a small civic initiative, whose key objective is a critical transformation of Halle's local memory culture regarding Anton Wilhelm Amo. The *Freies Afrika* sculpture has become a focal point for them, as activists have been articulating its unsuitability as a commemorative site for Amo and pushing the University to work towards an alternative engagement. I discussed this in detail with Raja-Léon Hamann, a

PhD candidate in Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University in Halle, and contributor to the *Amo Bündnis*.

One point that has been criticised by activists, he explained, is that the current display is insufficient as a memorial site for Amo, because it maintains the inaccurate association between the sculpture and Amo though that relationship had not been intended initially (Hamann, interview, 2022). As noted above, the statue was made in the 1960s by a local sculptor, as an art piece honouring African liberation (Hamann and Schubert, 2022). The piece had been made on commission by the primary trade union organisation in the GDR, the *Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (FDGB)*,⁸⁰ with the intention for it to be gifted to the newly independent nation of Ghana, in an attempt to foster favourable diplomatic relations (ibid). When these plans fell through for unknown reasons, the statue was instead installed in its current location on campus in Halle in 1965 (ibid). This site was chosen as an alternative, because, at the time, the University was conducting research into the legacy of Anton Wilhelm Amo, with a large-scale project led by archaeologist Burchard Brentjes, likewise publicly funded as part of the GDR's political rapprochement with newly independent nations (Brentjes, 1975). A festive event planned at the University as part of this research, was identified as a suitable context to unveil the statue and, because of the research context at the time, Amo was referenced during the festive unveiling speech, paving the way for the inaccurate yet lasting association between the two. This was further cemented when ten years later, in 1975, a plaque to commemorate Amo, resulting from Brentjes' research project, was installed in immediate vicinity of the bronze statue (Hamann and Schubert, 2022).

⁸⁰ Free German Trade Union Federation.

Figure 11: Memorial plaque for Anton Wilhelm Amo, on campus of Halle University in Halle (a.d.S.)

Source: Martin Beitz, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Halle-Universit%C3%A4tsring-Amo-Gedenkplatte.jpg> This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license. (Last accessed on 15th January 2025).



As the sculptor Geyer did not have Amo in mind when making the statue, activists have argued, the figure is unsuitable as a depiction of Amo. Unlike the figure, Amo was known to be dressed in European formal attire (Anton Wilhelm Amo Bündnis, 2020). Further, given the context of the statue, in the GDR's rapprochement with newly independent African states, and the depiction of African liberation fighters, the reading of Amo in this statue simplified his identity to 'African' only and left his life and his teaching in Germany for two decades completely ignored (ibid). Moreover, the statue depicts both individuals with proud body postures, clenched fists and raised heads, reflecting a celebration of African liberation, indicative of the GDR's official, state-sponsored socialism (Hamann and Schubert, 2022). Simultaneously, their portrayal with bare upper body and in 'traditional' attire upheld stereotypical representations and spoke to the ways in which racist thinking continued to co-exist alongside the official anti-imperialist agenda (ibid).

Initially, both activist groups utilised strategies similar to approaches outlined above. They communicated critiques to institutions and wider audiences via direct letters (Hamann, interview, 2022), via walking tours and an online blog (Urbanski, interview, 2022). In both contexts, institutional responses remained limited and dismissive (Hamann, interview, 2022),

or the relationship was even contentious, as the institution was seen to co-opt activist efforts (Urbanski, interview, 2022). Eventually, a shift occurred as activists were invited to collaborate with these institutions, in their critical work to re-engage with these sites and legacies. In August 2019, the University in Halle composed a working group to draft a new commemorative concept to reflect Amo's legacy and asked the *Amo Bündnis* to participate in the efforts. Conversely, in spring 2022, *Postcolonial Potsdam* were asked to contribute to a new critical exhibition the SPSG was planning, highlighting the complex colonial past of 17th century Prussia, and exploring the colonial legacies within the SPSG's own collection.

Community engagement, broadly speaking, is a relatively common institutional practice, especially within museums, in order to represent diverse viewpoints, experiences and expertise in institutional settings (Crooke, 2008; Golding and Modest, 2013; Karp et al., 1992; Lynch, 2011; Morse, 2018). These engagements can take various forms, ranging in the proximity between institutional officials and community stakeholders, and in how curatorial authority is shared (Simon, 2010). The encounters I explore here can best be understood as community consultations, where external stakeholders are asked to contribute with experiences, expertise, and feedback, but curatorial control remains in the hands of institutional actors (Exell, 2013; Fouseki, 2010). Within this context in Germany, as case studies above have shown, institutions long reacted with reluctance and dismissal to activist critiques; this underlined this move towards a collaborative approach, with institutional actors approaching activist actors, as a significant shift in the relationship between these actors, not uncommonly following more contentious relationships (Sieg, 2021).

Consultative engagements utilise a range of different methods (Fouseki, 2010). In Potsdam, the curatorial team was planning a new critical exhibition, titled *Schlösser. Preußen. Kolonial*,⁸¹ exploring the colonial histories of the SPSG's collections, and in Brandenburg more broadly, to be opened in 2023. *Postcolonial Potsdam* activists were invited by the curatorial team to support the curatorial process as "Expert:innen oder kuratorische Berater:innen" (Alff et al., 2023), as experts and curatorial advisors.⁸² This indicates a recognition for activist expertise, and an understanding that they would have valuable, critical perspectives to contribute. The curatorial team emphasised the importance of "Wissensaustausch", seeking to democratise the

⁸¹ *Castles. Prussia. Colonial.*

⁸² *Postcolonial Potsdam* activists were invited alongside other activist collaborators, including representatives of the *ISD e.V.*, *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.*, *PAWLO*, and the *Koreaverband*.

curatorial process (ibid). Annette Steyn, another *Postcolonial Potsdam* member introduced in Chapter 2, explained that in order to facilitate this, the *SPSG* curatorial team hosted a kick-off workshop, followed by five workshops with different thematic focus (for example, target audience of the exhibition) (Steyn, interview, 2022). During these, the curatorial team asked activists to share their expertise and to provide their feedback on the curators' proposals (ibid). Activist collaborators were provided written follow-ups and financially compensated for their time (ibid).

In Halle, the University set up a working group draft a proposal for a more suitable commemorative approach to Amo's legacy on campus with *Amo Bündnis* activists invited to contribute. The working group was soon transformed into an advisory committee, implementing a formal recognition of the significance of the matter (Hamann, interview, 2022). Practically, the committee consisted of ten members, who were primarily university staff, two external representatives, and the two members of the *Amo Bündnis* (ibid). Over a series of meetings, committee members drafted a proposal for a new artistic intervention that would provide a more critical, more nuanced, and more contemporary commemorative engagement with Amo's life and legacy in Halle.

Research for this thesis was conducted at a time when these collaborations were ongoing; the *SPSG*'s critical exhibition had not opened, the new Amo commemorative concept had not been published. In the later course of this project, it was not possible to arrange follow ups to gather activists' reflections on the collaboration and their outcomes. This section, therefore, focuses less on impact of these encounters, but explores further the experiences of these activists during these encounters, before offering some concluding remarks about what we can learn from these for this chapter's investigation of *institutional critique* more broadly.

For both groups, the invitations initially generated hesitation. For *Postcolonial Potsdam*, given previous experiences, there was scepticism about the sincerity of the exhibition, and concerns about financial motivations (Urbanski, interview, 2022). In Halle, similarly, there was hesitancy in the *Amo Bündnis* about whether participation could lead to activist critiques being instrumentalised, invoking that the University may be more interested in diversification as a tick box exercise, than a genuine engagement with critical perspectives (Hamann, interview, 2022). Furthermore, interviewees experienced a number of challenges during the collaboration. Steyn reflected on how institutional hierarchies and structures were acting as impediment to

productive collaboration and to making critical activist perspectives recognised, for instance when activist input on the exhibition's title was overwritten by leadership priorities (Steyn, interview, 2022). Moreover, they noted barriers to inclusivity as workshops were held mostly in German thus limiting accessibility for non-German speaking activists (Urbanski, interview, 2022). In Halle, the sensitivity for matters related to racialisation and discrimination was varied among members of the committee, with several members showing a lack of awareness for appropriate language (Hamann, interview, 2022). The work of the committee required significant critical grassroots impetus, Hamann said, which they were asked to provide without financial compensation (ibid). In general, Hamann noted, members' capacities for committee work, and therefore, their commitment seemed to have been limited (ibid).

And yet, not entirely without surprise, both interviewees reflected with some enthusiasm on their experience. Hamann noted, that there was significant openness and commitment within the advisory board, as well as a consensus about the inappropriateness of the current commemoration in the statue (ibid). Steyn recalled, that despite internal hierarchies and tensions, their experience working directly with the curatorial team was characterised by mutual respect and largely represented an engagement on equal footing (Steyn, interview, 2022). The impact of internal struggles on the collaboration was limited, because primarily activists were interacting with the curatorial team and not with *SPSG* leadership. The feedback provided during the interactive workshops, Steyn noted, was taken forward by the curatorial team in their conceptualisation, and activists were further invited to provide feedback on the curatorial concept (ibid).

A detailed assessment of the impact of these collaborative encounters will have to be explored elsewhere; here, I want to instead offer some reflections on what we can learn from the accounts about collaborative encounters between grassroots actors and heritage institutions, and about activist *institutional critique* more broadly. In contrast to examples explored above, these cases show, how activist critique can operate *through* and *within* institutional settings (Chidgey and Garde-Hansen, 2024). Not uncommonly, such "regularised relationships" follow earlier, more contentious encounters (Sieg, 2021). This contributes to making these compromise situations where activists see relevant potential for transformation, whilst holding back reservation and operating with caution (Hamann, interview, 2022). This compromise nature, Steyn emphasised, may come with frustration at having to adapt to institutional

processes and at the uncertainty about the outcome (Steyn, interview, 2022). The efforts expensed by activists to navigate scepticism, alongside institutional hierarchies that may not always be ready to embrace change, can place activists at a structural disadvantage relative to institutional actors, that is further enhanced in situations where activists are not financially compensated. Pitfalls are generated by these structures, where activists are “invited” to participate (Lynch, 2011), or to contribute whilst curatorial authority remains with institutional actors (Simon, 2010). At the same time, these collaborations represent a significant recent shift in the relationship between institutions and postcolonial memory activists. They demonstrate that institutions are adapting their responses to activist pressure, and they indicate how activists are exploring collaboration as potential avenues for embedding critical approaches within institutional processes (Lehrer, 2023).

4.4. Conclusion

Since the 1970s, critical scholarship has investigated the entanglements between heritage institutions, museums in particular, and difficult histories, as well as the implication of these institutions in representative injustices and the importance for reflective practice (Ames, 1986; Anderson, 2016; Bennett, 1995; Clifford, 1988; Karp et al., 1992; Savoy, 2022). Despite the long trajectory of such critical approaches, increasingly in the last ten years, museums and related institutions in Germany have in the last ten years, that museums and related institutions have become pivotal sites wherein the changing discourse on postcolonial reckoning has become visible (Macdonald, 2022; Sieg, 2021). Grassroots activism has played an integral role, building on critical discourses within museology, to challenge institutional inaction, to push institutions to embrace reflective practice, and to change the wider public understanding of museum sites. This chapter has explored an array of strategies employed and avenues taken by grassroots actors to assert pressure in institutional space. The spectrum of approaches explored in this chapter, has indicated how approaches taken hinge on perspectives regarding the transformative potential of the institution involved. In situations and context, for instance, where personal interaction indicates the possibility to foster meaningfully transformative projects, activists may opt to collaborate with institutions; whilst periods of sustained institutional inaction and confrontations may encourage activists to engage through more antagonistic or oppositional means. This also points to more fundamental questions about the nature and the possibility of transformative change within institutional settings. These were questions that became particularly evident in my interview conversation with Raja-Léon Hamann (see 4.3.3.), which I want to revisit further to conclude this chapter.

Being asked to join the University commission to contribute to a new commemorative concept for Anton Wilhelm Amo had spurred critical reflections about collaborating for transformative change with institutional partners more broadly. There certainly were some institutions, because of their specific histories or contexts, that he would not consider working with, Hamann said (Hamann, interview, 2022). The preceding email exchanges and relayed conversations in which the University had remained largely reluctant, had given him food for thought (*ibid*). Yet turning away from institutional collaboration as per principle, he noted, also was not a viable or productive position (*ibid*). When the stakes involve decisions over which the institution holds control, then collaboration may be a necessity to seek to influence the

outcome (ibid). And at the same time, there always remained questions as to the extent in which collaborations between civic actors, who may envisage more transformative changes, and institutional partners, who traditionally prioritise more reformist approaches (ibid).

This duality, between the necessity to engage in order to influence change, and the risk of having one's critiques absorbed, made clear the conditionality of institutional renewal; whilst activism can be a force for profound opposition and transformation, radical critiques may also end up affirming a status quo, if they become co-opted by institutional actors and practices. Hamann elaborated this point by drawing on the work by critical theorist Nancy Fraser:

[Nancy Fraser] unterscheidet zwischen affirmativen und transformativen Strategien. [Im Sinne der affirmativen Strategien] ist die Frage, inwiefern [Aktivismus], also das, was wir tun, zu einer Reproduktion des Status quo beiträgt und nichts wirklich an den Regeln [ändert], sondern eine Veränderung innerhalb des Systems [ist]. Oder inwiefern geht es um Transformation, d.h. um ganz grundlegende Veränderung und Abbau und Dissolution von bestehenden Machtstrukturen. Das ist eine ganz zentrale Frage, bei jeglicher politischer Arbeit, [und] auch ganz drängend, bei Aktivismus. (ibid)

This chapter, on one hand, has sought to draw attention to the variety of approaches taken by activist actors in Germany to engage in meaningful *institutional critique*, in order to hold heritage institutions accountable for their implication in historical colonialism and the persistence of representative injustices. On the other hand, it aimed to draw attention to the delicate contextual factors that activists navigate in these processes. Institutional contexts are rife with potential for profound change, whilst at the same time, reluctance, or resistance to give up the status quo temper these.

As museums and related heritage sites continue to grapple with their legacies as colonial institutions, and their current presence of those that continue to uphold injustices today, the role of grassroots activists remains imperative. These efforts have raised public and institutional awareness and sensitivities to these contexts and continue to do so today; and an ongoing dialogue between activists and institutional decision-makers will be integral in determining whether these will be sites of genuine reckoning or merely reaffirm them as structures that have arisen out of the colonial project.

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Chapter 5. Recognising dispossessed communities and descendants through *restitution activism*.

5.1. Introduction

In September 2023 a remarkable headline made the news in Germany, and internationally: DNA matches had been identified that connected Ancestral Remains from the colonial period, from more than 100 years earlier, to living descendants in today's Tanzania (Memarnia, 2023; Schlindwein, 2023; Zane, 2023). There were three DNA matches that had been identified. One sample led to a complete genetic match with a still living male descendant: it confirmed that one abducted skull had belonged to Sindato Kiwelo, a high-ranking advisor (*akida*) to Chief Mangi Meli, leader of the Chagga people in the Kilimanjaro region in Tanzania, who had been executed by Germans in October 1900. The identified living descendant was his grandson Zablon Kiwelu (Schlindwein, 2023). A further two samples established almost complete matches, indicating a highly likely direct biological relationship in the paternal line of the Molelia family from Kibosho. These two skulls were found as likely being those of two other Chagga leaders, Mangi Molelia and his brother (Memarnia, 2023).

These DNA matches were identified among remains that were part of an extensive collection of nearly 8,000 skulls that had been assembled by German colonial anthropologist Felix von Luschan between 1871 and 1919, after colonial officials had violently abducted them from colonial territories, frequently looted from cemeteries and other burial sites, before shipping them to Germany for racist research purposes (Zane, 2023). During the 20th century, these Ancestral Remains had been retained in the custody of several institutional archives in Berlin. Since 2011 they had been held by the *Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte (MVF)*.⁸³ In 2017, researchers at the *MVF*, in collaboration with colleagues at the University of Göttingen and colleagues in Rwanda, had begun working on a large-scale research project to establish the provenance of more than 900 human remains, primarily skulls, from today's Rwanda, Kenya, and Tanzania (ECCHR, 2023). These DNA findings were an important accomplishment for these researchers, as it was the first time ever that living descendants of abducted Ancestral Remains from the colonial period had been identified (Düker, 2018; Jöbstl, 2023; Pelz, 2018).

⁸³ *Museum of Prehistory and Early History*.

And yet, at the same time, these findings had also been the significant achievement of many years of relentless, intricate, and committed critical activism work. Whilst researchers had done the lab-based processing and analysis, it was civil society actors who had been substantial in facilitating these analyses, and, ultimately, making these findings, happen. Whilst institutions had held custody of these remains throughout the 20th century, it was activists, who had operated as an important accountability mechanism, raising sensitivity towards the importance of these ‘collections’, both with institutions directly and in public, through letters, petitions, meetings (Müller, 2013; Prosinger et al., 2013), and often against institutional reluctance (Kathmann, 2014; Kopp, 2014). Furthermore, activist actors also played a significant role in the context of this research project and DNA analysis themselves. The press release by the *SPK*, head organisation to the *MVF*, that had announced these findings had referred to the support by activist filmmaker Konradin Kunze, and the civic association *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.*, in procuring the DNA samples for testing (Jöbstl, 2023). Yet the press statement barely scratched the surface of the scope of grassroots involvement. Civic advocates had spent several years researching the histories of the abducted skulls, narrowing down origin regions and scoping out potential descendant communities. They had not gone to collect ten samples randomly in Tanzania, they had done meticulous research to narrow down the most likely possible descendants, in order to enhance the chances for success of the samples taken. Furthermore, collecting these samples was not merely a logistical and practical effort, involving overseas travel, but it also involved many months spent with descendant communities in order to collect their testimonies and to build trusting relationships that enabled the procurement of these samples (Memarnia, 2023).

With this context in mind, this was neither an unlikely needle in a haystack moment, not a small wonder, as *SPK* president Hermann Parzinger described it (see below), but the result of meticulous, detailed, and very deliberate research and collaboration between civic actors in Germany and descendant communities in Tanzania. The institution had given the funding, and researchers had processed the samples and conducted important work, yet it was grassroots activism that made these developments possible, therefore, taking developments one step further for descendant communities to be reunited with their abducted ancestors.

Figure 12: Social media responses to SPK/MVF research findings, which identified living descendants of abducted Ancestral Remains from Tanzania, in September 2024.



This final empirical chapter investigates grassroots efforts to push for the return of cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains, stolen through German colonial violence and dispossession. Held in German archives for over a century, these objects remain a testament to historical injustice. Driven by the ambition to ‘do right’ by the dispossessed and their descendants, activists have worked to challenge this enduring legacy and demand restitution. For decades, activists have raised awareness, researched histories, and championed restitution campaigns; but crucially, they have been doing so not as an attempt of *institutional critique*, to reform institutions and practices in Germany, but they have been driven by a concern for descendant community interests, seeking to push forward restitution discourses and processes, in order to contribute to a sense of justice and healing for these communities.

In the first section of this chapter, I demonstrate how violent abductions and dispossessions, for dispossessed communities and descendants, represent not historical legacies or reminders of violent colonial history, but sources of active and ongoing pain and trauma that have long outlasted the colonial period. Subsequently, I briefly review how activists in Germany, motivated by this understanding of these dispossessions as an ongoing source of

pain for descendant communities, have been working towards restitutions over the past several decades. Thirdly, I shift my attention towards the kind of work that grassroots activists have engaged in, focusing in particular on the ways in which their activities have contributed to facilitating restitutions as politics that promote healing and pain relief for descendant communities.⁸⁴

I frame these activities as *restitution activism*. Learning from Rassool and Gibbon (2024), I adopt the term restitution in favour of repatriation, which are commonly used interchangeably, in order to emphasise the relevance of restoration, justice, and healing in the return process. Repatriation, these scholars propose, often implies a transactional, state-centred process focused on *giving back*, that deprioritises addressing colonial injustices or fostering reconciliation. Restitution, conversely, is used to embody empowerment and agency, and emphasises return processes in the contexts of “politics of reparation, repair, mourning, honoring and renewal” (Rassool and Gibbon, 2024:3).⁸⁵

Across this chapter I explore violent histories of dispossession and the ongoing pain of abducted cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains being kept in institutional custody. I invite my readers to read with care. This invitation is addressed both at those readers with direct and familial relationships to these dispossessions, who may find reading about these histories distressing and upsetting, as well as those who are descendent of the perpetrators, whom I would like to invite to read with compassion for these histories and for those still impacted by them today.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ For this chapter, a special note of thanks is due to Isabelle Reimann, who not only substantially informed my process of learning about the intricate dynamics described in this chapter through an interview and multiple informal exchanges; but she also took time to read a draft of this chapter and to sit down with me again to share her detailed feedback and thoughts. All of her contributions to this chapter have been referenced to credit her input.

⁸⁵ Reimann has pointed out the helpful addition, that it was in particular institutional developments in Germany, that have frequently been perceived by restitution advocates as returns without restitution, i.e. processes of giving back without considering the wider importance of repair and mourning, that has motivated, and continues to shape, Rassool’s distinction between these two terms (Reimann, 2024).

⁸⁶ The use of disclaimers like this is found regularly in scholarship discussion restitutions of Indigenous Ancestral Remains (Cubillo, 2010).

5.2. Heritage institutions as agents of colonial power: impacts of dispossession and dehumanisation

As demonstrated in the previous chapter (see 4.2.), heritage institutions played an active part in German colonisation and annexation, through community dispossession, discriminatory research, and by substantiating colonial administration, as well as in the upholding of colonial legacies afterwards, through the maintenance of so called 'ethnological collections' that have perpetuated these dispossessions and dehumanisation of the descendants of those who were colonised. These institutional involvements in overseas exploitation, annexation, and dispossession did not, however, as 4.2. demonstrated, merely impact institutional actors, but also have impacted, and continue to impact, dispossessed communities (Moiloa, 2022; Reimann, 2022b).

As a result of institutional, colonial dispossessions, unimaginably vast numbers of cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains were forcibly abducted from their origin communities and have since been held captive in European institutional settings. Though an exact number has not been established, it has been estimated that over 90% of Africa's cultural belongings is held outside the continent (Savoy and Sarr, 2018; Savoy, 2022). The disparity, for example, between 40,000 cultural belongings from Cameroon held in German institutions and the only 6,000 in Yaoundé's public collections (Meyer et al., 2023), illustrates the scope of this continued injustice. This features even more gravely, if we consider looted belongings originating other continents, or those kept in privately owned collections, which are commonly not considered in the statistics (Savoy, 2022). With regards to collections of human remains in German (or European) collections, no comprehensive overview exists (Ramírez, 2023; Reimann, 2022b; Wegmann, 2013), which both hinders statistically viable claims, and underlines the persistent institutional disregard of these matters.

As a result of these thefts, several contemporary communities do not have access to large part of their own material cultural heritage (Savoy, 2022). It is not just access itself, but many stolen cultural belongings hold significant meaning for cultural practices, rituals and traditions, as well as carry spiritual meanings. Their abduction therefore has resulted for many communities in a significant disruption of cultural practices and their relationships to spiritual worlds (Hicks, 2020; Moiloa, 2022). The forced dislocation from these communities can have a significant disruptive impact on the transmission of cultural knowledges and practices, shaping

intergenerational knowledge loss (Coombes, 1994). With regards to the abduction of Ancestral Remains, their perpetual custody in so called ethnological collections, on one side, signifies a violation of these ancestors' humanity and dignity, as they were involuntarily removed from their communities (LeGall and Mboro, 2021); but it also represents a dehumanisation of their descendants, because it violates their ability to care for their deceased as well as signifies a generational burden, as communities' fear that they will pass on this trauma to their children if they are unable to succeed in returning these remains (Reimann, 2022b). From the perspective of many of those who experienced the dispossession and their descendants, these are not merely violent histories or legacies of German colonialism nor are they stories concerned with historical theft; they signify an ongoing act of dispossession that continues to perpetuate harm, and constitutes a living reality for many descendant communities (LeGall and Mboro, 2021; Moilola, 2022; Reimann, 2022b; Thornton, 2002).

I spoke about this point also during my interview with Israel Kaunatjike, who was introduced in Chapter 1. Kaunatjike is OvaHerero activist, who has lived in Berlin since 1970s, and who has for several decades been one of the leading civil society figures in the German discourse on its 'reckoning' with its colonial past broadly, and the 'reckoning' with legacies of stolen Ancestral Remains more specifically; he has been collaborating with descendant communities, gathering and disseminating their testimonies and demands, and sharing with them information about collections held in German institutions so that descendants can submit appeals for returns (Mboro and Kopp, 2018). It was in the process of researching German colonial rule in Namibia, that Kaunatjike learned about the terrible and painful history of Ancestral Remains and Herero skulls in particular, which were abducted by German forces especially in the course of Germany's genocidal war against the Herero and Nama people in German South West Africa:

Wir haben damals während dieser Zeit uns aber auch [mit] den *human remains* beschäftigt, also d.h. ich wusste auch nicht genau, was die Deutschen damals denn gemacht haben mit den Schädeln von Menschen aus den Konzentrationslagern. Das war für mich natürlich [eine] unheimlich sehr schmerzhaft Geschichte, [eine] sehr schmerzhaft Geschichte. Überhaupt, dass Menschen hier enthauptet wurden, nach Deutschland gebracht wurden. In den Konzentrationslagern mussten die Schädel natürlich

erstmal gekocht werden. D.h. sie [wurden] gekocht, [und] Du kannst [die Schädel] deines eigenen Mannes oder Bruders [kochen]. Meistens haben die Frauen diesen Job gemacht, mit dem Fleisch vom Schädel. Dann rüber nach Deutschland [verschifft]. Auf [Bestellung] für Deutschland, um hier diese pseudowissenschaftlichen Untersuchungen [zu machen], was eigentlich rassistische Forschung war, hier in Berlin. (Kaunatjike, interview, 2022)

The ongoing and lasting pain constituted in these histories is manifested in this quotation in several ways. For one, it is the learning about these histories and the knowledge itself, that Kaunatjike describes as immensely painful; yet furthermore, this is further exacerbated by the details of the abductions. The excessively brutal details of the circumstances in which these remains were abducted, involving beheadings and concentration camps, the boiling of the skulls to prepare them for travelling, and the ways in which German colonisers forced community members and relatives to be implicated in these processes of dehumanisation, potentiate the injustice. This underlines the lasting impact of these histories and signifies that these are not merely violent histories and brutal colonial legacies, but that they continue to cause pain for descendant communities to this day.

It is these kinds of testimonies of pain that have motivated and driven grassroots activism for restitutions. Diasporic activists in particular, as well as non-diasporic, German supporters, including those with relationships to relevant institutions, have been advocating for restitutions because they share this understanding that the persistent maintenance of these 'collections', the continued absence of these belongings and Ancestral Remains from their origin communities, and that they are still being held in German institutions, is not merely a violent historical facet of colonialism, but an active and ongoing source of pain and trauma.

5.3. Grassroots *restitution activism*

As noted in 4.4., dispossessed communities resisted continuously in the course of the dispossessions, as well as began calling for the return of their ancestors, through letters, petitions, and pleas written to institutional and political representatives, immediately after the abductions had taken place (Gram and Schoofs, 2022; LeGall and Mboro, 2021; Moilola, 2022; Müller, 2021; Savoy, 2022). In other words, grassroots activism for restitutions and returns of stolen belongings and Remains is as old as the dispossessions themselves.

Since the 1970s, demands for restitutions have also been part of civic activism in Germany and of what would become postcolonial memory activism in subsequent decades. Petitions sent to German museums by descendants in Tanzania, formerly German East Africa, for instance, some of whom were involved in the developments explored in the chapter opening, can be traced back to the 1960s (Zane, 2023), with diasporic Tanzanian activists in Berlin, with ties to the same communities, reinforcing these demands from the 1970s onwards (Wagener, 2020).

Petitions and direct correspondences through letters frequently remained unsuccessful, as institutions ignored and/or dismissed these demands (LeGall and Mboro, 2021; Müller, 2021; Savoy, 2022). During the 1970s and 1980s, there was significantly less public visibility for and attention to these discourses, and as these were direct, i.e. not public, communications, there were no real repercussions for institutional inaction or dismissal (Müller, 2021). Furthermore, the unjust contexts in which these belongings and Ancestral Remains had been taken had not yet been established as a societal or political consensus, hence there was less ‘moral’ motivation for institutions to act upon these demands (Reimann, 2022b).

Whilst these demands, therefore, have a historical trajectory as long as many other activities in this movement, they have been less widespread, and have remained more niche than other activities. Whilst activities like walking tours have emerged across numerous locations across Germany (see Chapter 2), *restitution activism* emerged in a smaller number of cities and locations. This is because, up until the 2010s, the realities of these ‘collections’ of looted belongings and abducted ancestors were somewhat less well known, including among activist circles. Further, not all cities or towns had institutions and museums who were involved in large-scale colonial dispossession or had large collections of looted belongings and Remains, therefore created less of a target point. But also, another factor is that in this branch of activism,

diasporic activists have played a particularly important catalyst role, who often have been more active in larger metropolitan areas and less so with smaller, more provincial activist initiatives. In the below I draw attention to some locations and some civic campaigns, that are by no means extensive but highlight important developments and hotspots.

In Berlin, as noted above, diasporic activists with relationships to dispossessed communities in Tanzania, began contacting institutions and sending letters in the 1970s, in order to ascertain what kinds of Ancestral Remains and belongings were kept in institutional custody and in order to return them (Wagener, 2020), yet without success. In the 1990s, the German-Namibian historian Joachim Zeller, whose career has been devoted to a critical reckoning with German colonialism and efforts to reconciliation for numerous decades, also reached out to Berlin institutions about the matter, yet was dismissed (Reimann, 2022b; Wegmann, 2013). In the early 2000s, the realities of Ancestral Remains and looted belongings held in institutional custody and demands for restitution were an important point on the agenda of the *Anticolonial Africa Conference*, hosted by Berlin-based and diasporic activists (FFM, 2004; Stock, 2005), as well as during activist commemorative campaigns for the centenary of the OvaHerero and Nama genocide in GSWA (Reimann, 2022b), and during grassroots commemorations for the victims of Maji Maji in GEA (Wagener, 2020). In August 2004, OvaHerero activist Israel Kaunatjike and film maker Martin Baer published the first documentary on the subject, titled *white ghosts*, which drew attention to Ancestral Remains, skulls in particular, abducted during the colonial genocide in GSWA (Reimann, 2022b). In those years, details of the kinds of ‘collections’ held in these institutions were largely unknown (and to some extent, still remain incomprehensive today), but what was known was the reality that colonised ancestors and cultural belongings had been abducted from colonial contexts by German colonisers, and also, that Berlin-based institutions were among the most important ethnological institutions in Germany, hence historians and activists were reaching out to these institutions in the hope of acquiring information that would generate more detailed insights and support their efforts for restitutions (Förster and Fründt, 2021). Key targets for civic activism in this period were the *Charité*, Berlin’s university hospital, and the Ethnological Museum, both of whom were known to have been involved in colonial dispossession, exploitation, and racist research. These campaigns, overarchingly, remained dismissed and unrecognised by institutions, but they

generated a certain, if limited, public visibility and media coverage (Kleffner, 2004; Wegmann, 2013).

In July 2008, the German TV programme *FAKT Politmagazin* ran a broadcast about Ancestral Remains in German institutions, produced by investigative journalist Markus Frenzel. Whilst it is somewhat unknown what motivated this investigation, the broadcast, titled *Koloniales Erbe*, was immensely impactful and drew significant public and institutional attention to the matter (De Wolff, 2021; Fründt, 2017; Reimann, 2022b; Wegmann, 2013). The programme focused on the collections at the *Charité* in Berlin, which had already been targeted by activists and descendants. Additionally, the programme also investigated the archive of the University of Freiburg (i.Br.), which also held an important colonial collection of abducted human remains, after a contact had been liaised by historian and *Freiburg Postkolonial* founder, Heiko Wegmann (Wegmann, 2013). The *FAKT* broadcast stimulated a significant shift, as subsequently, there was much more public attention on collections of Ancestral Remains in German institutions, with a specific focus on Berlin and Freiburg i.Br., which grassroots activism had played an important role in facilitating.

In Berlin, the *FAKT* broadcast also generated pivotal tangible movements. The *Charité*, responding to the *FAKT* broadcast, as well as to two official return demands submitted by Australia and Namibia in 2008 and to many years of civic pressure from Berlin based activists, initiated the first large-scale research project, the *Charité Human Remains Project (CHRP)* (Gram and Schoofs, 2022; Stoecker and Winkelmann, 2018). This project ran between 2010 and 2013 and involved the identification and documentation of large numbers of Remains in the collection. As part of the project, a first restitution of human remains was facilitated to Namibia in 2011 with subsequent ones in 2012, 2014, and 2018 (Förster, 2020, 2021; Förster and Fründt, 2021; Stoecker et al., 2013; Stoecker and Winkelmann, 2018).

The *CHRP* was a landmark development, and the *Charité*'s commitment has been recognised by restitution advocates (Reimann, 2022b). It also contributed to policy changes, as it prompted the German Museum Association to issue a set of recommendations on the care for Ancestral Remains in German institutions in 2013 (Deutscher Museumsbund e.V., 2013; Förster and Fründt, 2017). These developments signified a pivotal shift in consciousness as well as important steps for policy changes (Howes, 2020), to which grassroots activism had

significantly contributed over many years of raising awareness, and advocating for and uplifting descendant community demands.

Other institutions in Berlin remained inactive and reluctant, however, so grassroots pressure continued to be an important accountability mechanism. For instance, activists, again especially with relationships to Tanzanian communities, played a pivotal role in bringing attention to illegitimate collections in the custody of the *SPK* in Berlin, the cultural foundation that had begun building the *Humboldt Forum* in 2013 (see 4.4.1.). They staged numerous protests and sent petitions and letters, which the *SPK* long ignored. In 2016, activists with *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.* collaborated with another *FAKT* investigative broadcast, specifically on the ‘collections’ held in *SPK* custody (Reimann, 2022b), which finally in 2017, prompted the institution to initiate a provenance research project into collections from former German East Africa, which later lead to the researching findings outlined in the opening of this chapter (Heeb and Kabwete-Mulinda, 2022).

In Freiburg i.Br., civil society likewise has remained an important accountability measure. After the 2008 *FAKT* programme, the University remained inactive and reluctant and did not follow the proactive strategy that the *Charité* had opted for (Gram and Schoofs, 2022; Wegmann, 2013). Instead it was *Freiburg Postkolonial* who spoke with the Namibian ambassador Neville Gertze about the ‘collections’ and about restitution demands, and Heiko Wegmann became an important liaison between the different sides, which helped facilitate a visit of the ambassador to Freiburg i.Br. in 2010, which resulted, eventually, in the first negotiations and facilitated restitutions from Freiburg i.Br. in 2014 (Gram and Schoofs, 2022; Köbler, 2018).

In this section I have sought to demonstrate, by looking at developments in two locations, Berlin and Freiburg i.Br., some of the ways in which grassroots actors and civic organisations have been doing *restitution activism*, how they have liaised with descendants and dispossessed communities, and have pushed institutions towards research and more proactive approaches. This is by no means an extensive overview of civic activity in this realm, but an overview that seeks to underline that grassroots activities have been important accountability measures that have significantly shaped restitution discourses and processes in Germany over many decades.

5.4. The relationship between restitutions and healing

In this third part of this chapter, I explore some more details of these activities, campaigns, and projects. In part this is intended to draw attention to grassroots activities that have long been underappreciated and underrecognised—as illustrated by the neglect of the scope of grassroots involvement in the SPK research and press release in the opening. Even more, I seek to demonstrate that via these activities, activists have been shaping restitutions in such ways that promotes these as processes that hold the potential to advance pain relief, justice, and healing for descendant communities. Before I delve into the details of how they are doing this, I briefly explore some relevant literature on the relationship between restitutions and healing. This is by no means an extensive literature review, but rather an acknowledgement of some of the interventions and contributions that have informed my thinking in this chapter.

From the perspective of Indigenous and dispossessed communities, Atalay reminds us, calls for returns were never merely legal or logistical concerns or matters of institutional transformations, but always efforts and demands for healing (Atalay, 2019). Yet, this reality has so far been relatively underexplored in most mainstream scholarship on the matter, as much scholarship and institutional discourse have frequently prioritised a focus on the historical study of the il/legitimate circumstances of the looting, questions of property rights, or reflections on the impact of institutional transformation (Atalay, 2019; Bienkowski, 2015; Colwell, 2019a).⁸⁷

An important impetus for a scholarly reflection of restitutions and their relationship to healing was Russell Thornton's 2002 framing that dispossession of cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains represented, for dispossessed/colonised communities, a historical cultural trauma, and, in instances where collections have been maintained in European institutions, an unresolved trauma (Thornton, 2002). This intervention was pivotal because positioning dispossession as trauma, and in many cases unresolved trauma, situates it not as a historical legacy, but as something ongoing that requires healing and atonement, and, likewise, arguing that restitution can ease the pain, not by erasing scars but by closing open wounds (Colwell, 2019a). In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has explored the relationship between

⁸⁷ An exception for this is found in scholarship emerging from the Australian context, which has, relative to scholarship from other Western contexts, developed an engagement with restitutions in the context of healing, restorative justice, and repair earlier, in the 2000s (Fforde et al., 2002; Reimann, 2024; Turnbull and Pickering, 2010).

restitutions and healing, and made the case for returns as practices that can foster healing and postcolonial reconciliation (Adjei et al., 2024; Atalay, 2019; Colwell, 2019a; Feld, 2022; Fforde et al., 2020b; Hemming et al., 2020; Ładosz, 2019; LeGall and Mboro, 2021; Meloche et al., 2021; Wergin, 2021).

At the same time, this scholarly line of enquiry has remained relatively new (Fforde et al., 2020a) and research on the healing potential of restitutions has remained a “nascent scholarship” (Colwell, 2019a). Hence, several questions remain academically underexplored. For one, different understandings exist what is entailed in the concept of healing and uses differ across literature. Secondly, what has remained less conceptualised so far, is a theorisation of the conditions under which and the specific ways in which restitutions can develop a healing potential for dispossessed communities (Atalay, 2019; Colwell, 2019a; Fforde et al., 2020a). The varied uses and perspectives in the literature draw our attention to the integral fact that healing is not only deeply personal, but also that these dynamics impact a broad range of geographies, historical contexts, and community settings, therefore defying clear and distinct definitions. Simultaneously, as a researcher, it is pivotal to make my understanding and use of terminologies more explicit. The lack of concept theorisations, admittedly, make an academic use of the term healing more complicated. Below, whilst allowing space for this ambiguity, I offer not exact definitions, but some thoughts on my application of these terms for the remainder of this chapter.

Learning from Atalay (2019), Colwell (2019a, 2019b), Hemming et al. (2020), and Lonetree (2012), when I use healing, I recognise this as a long, active, and complex process, not a state. Healing is not the absence of pain, but rather to be understood as a process of closure that changes the kind of pain from an active, ongoing wound to a scar that serves as a reminder of pain and trauma, but also of survival and strength. Importantly, healing is largely “experiential”, as in grounded in individual experiences, as well as “largely aspirational” (Colwell, 2019a); it involves open questions about the extent to which healing can ever be possible within a postcolonial world. Hence, in this chapter I refer to healing not as something that can be achieved, but I refer to practices that move towards, promote, or advance healing, in order to emphasise it is a process rather than an end destination.

Secondly, whilst there is a lack of comprehensive theorisation of the healing conditions of restitutions, there are some recurring themes in the existing literature on the topic, upon

which my analysis in the remainder of this chapter builds. Themes that have been noted in the literature, are, firstly, that restitutions can contribute to community healing when they involve the creation of a shared record of understanding, and an institutional acknowledgement of injustice and wrongdoing (Colwell, 2015, 2019a; Meloche, 2022). Secondly, restitutions can shape healing when they empower dispossessed communities and descendants to become knowledge bearers and witnesses themselves (Atalay, 2019; Hemming et al., 2020). Lastly, the role of empathy have been discussed with regards to their impact on restitution politics and healing (Fforde et al., 2022a, 2022b). In the subsequent sections, I explore grassroots *restitution activism* and show how activist activities in this context are acting in ways that speak to these three conditions, and in so doing, contribute to shaping returns and restitutions in ways that impact healing and pain relief for descendant communities.

5.4.1. Public acknowledgment of injustice and wrongdoing

One key grassroots activity in the realm of restitution relates to institutional knowledges and archival databases. In this section, I explore how grassroots and scholar activists have been engaging in reviewing and processing institutional archives and databases for relevant information about cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains kept in their custody as well as details about these holdings and the circumstances of how they were obtained. This, I demonstrate, practically contributes to the facilitation of returns, by making information available to descendant communities that are necessary for them to submit relevant claims. Moreover, this advances the healing potential of these returns for descendant communities because it contributes to a public acknowledgement of the injustices that have been committed which signifies a necessary condition for the healing of trauma (Colwell, 2019a; Fforde et al., 2020a; Meloche, 2022).

Demands for information and calls for returns of abducted belongings and Ancestral Remains by descendant communities have persisted ever since the very moment of abduction (Moiloa, 2022). Whilst, in the decades since, some institutions have begun to respond, committing themselves to provenance research, outreach, and returns (Reimann, 2022b),⁸⁸ the pattern has remained one of institutions opting for silence, intransparency, and secrecy

⁸⁸ In the German context, this includes, firstly, the *Charité* in Berlin (Reimann, 2022b), and, to a lesser extent, the *Staatliche Kunstsammlungen* in Dresden (*SKD, Dresden State Art Collection*) (Appleby et al., 2020; Ayau and Keeler, 2017).

(Colwell, 2015; Reimann, 2022b). There have been various reasons for this. Institutional carelessness during the thefts, for instance, has resulted in failure to maintain relevant records about the collections they abducted and continue to hold (Hoffmann, 2022). In other instances, institutions refuse access to information for risk of reputational damage (Colwell, 2015). Institutions have been largely able to get away with these absences and inactivity, because of a lack of a societal consensus about the illegitimacy and injustice encompassed in these collections (ibid). Institutions frequently opt to deny any wrongdoing, insisting that cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains were taken for scientific purposes (Ładosz, 2019), or that holding these in institutional custody represented some kind of cultural preservation (ibid). This has been referred to as institutional silences that operate “in collusion with society’s silences” (Mason and Sayner, 2019), as museums are “overtly [participating] in wider societal disavowals and denials” (ibid). Historical and archival records tend to represent the perspective of the powerful, or to preserve the records of such details that those in power have deemed most relevant, therefore, generating absences in the historical records about those deemed less powerful (Mason and Sayner, 2019; Trouillot, 2015).

In response to this situation, where demands for information and returns by descendant communities and activist advocates have long remained ignored and dismissed by institutions, there have been some actors and organisations that have taken it upon themselves to review and process institutional archives and databases and to make this information available to public audiences, and crucially, to descendant communities. One person who has been engaging in this kind of work is scholar activist and provenance researcher Isabelle Reimann. When I first reached out to her in spring 2022, I was keen to speak with her about a report she had written just a few months before about Ancestral Remains from colonial contexts currently held in (cultural and medical) institutions in Berlin. The report titled *Wissenschaftliches Gutachten zum Bestand menschlicher Überreste/ Human Remains aus kolonialen Kontexten in Berlin*, published in 2022, is 100 pages long and divided into four sections.⁸⁹ The core

⁸⁹ Reimann’s report was included within a wider publication, collated and edited by *Decolonize Berlin e.V.*, titled *We want them back. Wissenschaftliches Gutachten zum Bestand menschlicher Überreste/ Human Remains aus kolonialen Kontexten in Berlin*, which includes further contributions by civil society and restitution advocates, including Adetoun und Michael Küppers-Adebisi, Santi Hitorangi, Evelin Huki, and Edward Halealoha Ayau, a commentary from activists Mnyaka Sururu Mboro and Christian Kopp, summarising and reflecting on Reimann’s findings, as well as a poem by Jephta U. Nguherimo, who is an activist of Herero descent. The publication was made available online and for free on the *Decolonize Berlin e.V.* website and can be accessed here: <https://decolonize-berlin.org/>

component of the report is the inventory, in which Reimann showed that, in 12 Berlin institutions nearly 6,000 human remains from colonial contexts are confirmed to be held, with an additional 3,500 remains whose existence, though not confirmed, is highly likely. Consequently, this means that there is a total of almost 9,500 human remains still held in Berlin that most likely were violently and illegitimately abducted during the German colonial period overseas (Reimann 2022b). In addition, the report gave an overview of the current state of research, including ongoing and completed provenance projects, and provided recommendations for political action to further restitutions from Germany.

The report had been commissioned and funded through the civil society organisation *Decolonize Berlin e.V.*,⁹⁰ in response to decade-long demands by civil society, activist, and diasporic groups, who had called for institutions to provide a comprehensive overview of what they held in their archives and basements. For years, commitments had been made by institutional actors to prioritise provenance research and inventorisation of these collections; but up until the publication of Reimann's report, none of this had materialised, "so far there is no publicly accessible consolidated national inventory" (ibid:23). Reimann's report underlined the grassroots political commitment towards these issues. It was an expression of civil society actors taking steps and commissioning the kind of work that they saw institutional actors lacking. At every step of her institutional review, Reimann took care to highlight any activist activities that had contributed to pushing institutions forward. Despite challenges regarding accessing institutional information and generating institutional collaboration, the report was immensely significant. By providing concrete numbers, Reimann was able to make the fate of the ancestors held in institutional custody more tangible. It stimulated institutional action, as Reimann's request for information had incentivised institutions to begin more focused engagement with the remains in their custody (Memarnia, 2022b). It generated significant visibility for the role of activist efforts in these discourses in Germany and highlighted some of

berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/We-Want-Them-Back_deutsch-web.pdf (Accessed: 21 November 2024). The publication was also published in English, translated by Jeannine Kantara, with the title *We want them back. Scientific report on the presence of human remains from colonial contexts in Berlin*, and can likewise be accessed online: https://decolonize-berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/We-Want-Them-Back_english-web.pdf (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

⁹⁰ Since 2020, *Decolonize Berlin* has been the host for the coordination office for the creation of a city-wide concept for coming to terms with Berlin's colonial past. This coordination office has been funded by the Berlin Senate, following a senate resolution in 2019 (DS 18/1788). This institutionalisation was the result of decades-long activist campaigning in the city.

the challenging institutional structures that descendant communities and grassroots actors were up against. It generated significant media attention, and in doing so, played a decisive role in furthering media and public awareness of the issue of human remains from colonial contexts in institutional custody. This report represents an example of the kind of work that is taking place under this umbrella, of activist taking things into their own hands and showing up to process institutional information and archival databases, when institutions are refusing to do so.

This kind of work, accessing and processing institutional databases and archives, in an attempt to increase transparency and to challenge hegemonic institutional authority over these knowledges, has been an area of civic work, in which in particular *white* positioned German or European scholar activists have played an important supporting role. Someone who has been involved in this in a similar fashion to Reimann is Yann LeGall, who was introduced in Chapter 3 as research associate in Berlin, and contributor to *Postcolonial Potsdam* and *Berlin Postkolonial e.V.* LeGall, for whom academic and activist work have likewise been closely intertwined, has been reviewing archival databases for years, processing institutional knowledges about stolen belongings and ancestors to make these available to claimant communities (LeGall, interview, 2022). For him, this is primarily a task that has to do with *white* privilege. Doing this work, is essentially a way to use his structural privilege, as a *white* European scholar, in a counterhegemonic way that is productive for liberatory processes (ibid). Being *white* and institutionally affiliated, for instance, enables him to get institutions to grant him access to archives and databases, when others, non-academic, and non-*white* activists had been refused, even if they held familial relations to the ancestors held in custody (ibid). Furthermore, access to academic training enabled him to gain the necessary skills to navigate archives and process information effectively. LeGall, for instance, was able to teach himself to read *Sütterlin*, an early 20th century historic style of German handwriting used in many archival records, which only few people today can read (ibid). Lastly, LeGall pointed out, his positioning allowed him the ability to travel and connect with claimant communities in order to share information about stolen cultural belongings and abduction contexts. In so doing, he has used his position not only to access and process relevant information, but to make information available to descendant communities enabling them to submit relevant claims for returns (which often represents a necessary requirement before returns can be considered) (ibid). LeGall and Reimann, as scholars working with and alongside grassroots activism, have viewed their roles as making

links and bridging gaps between descendant communities and institutions, in a way that shapes solidarities. LeGall referred to this as acting as a “Multiplikator” (ibid), whilst Reimann reflected that she saw her role in opening up institutional spaces to undermine the coloniality that has remained alive in these contexts (Reimann, interview, 2022a). From her positioning as a *white* German researcher and activist, Reimann had drawn a sense of responsibility and dedication for this work, to contribute towards ending the injustices, that the maintained collections of Ancestral Remains and cultural belongings in European institutions represented (ibid).

This work has an integral transformative potential with regards to healing. Institutional secrecy about the collections in their custody, besides creating barriers for claimant communities, also means that frequently the violent realities of colonial abductions have remained underrecognised, hidden away in institutional databases. These corrosive silences have left the theft of cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains unacknowledged as an act of violent injustice (Fforde et al., 2020a). Returns of these Remains can become encounters with significant healing potential, because in the process of preparing for and facilitating returns, the violent circumstances of the abductions are laid bare for everyone to see. This can foster a shared understanding of the injustices that have been perpetrated and can move towards public and institutional acknowledgement of wrongdoing, and of the harm done, which is a necessarily requirement for healing (Fforde et al., 2020a; Meloche, 2022).⁹¹ Importantly, making information about abductions and Ancestral Remains available publicly can be contested and ambiguous. Learning about the violent fate of their ancestors can be immensely painful experiences (see 5.2.). Further, not all dispossessed communities consent to making information available publicly and advocate instead for direct communication in private with descendants (Reimann, 2022b, 2024). This underscores the complexity that civic actors are navigating as they work to undermine institutional authority about knowledges about abductions and to establish a shared understanding of the injustices perpetrated by colonisers, in an effort to enhance a public acknowledgement of wrongdoing and move towards reconciliation and healing.

⁹¹ In this way, it has become common to relate restitution processes with reconciliation commissions from other historical contexts to underline their role in seeking truth and transparency about injustices (Colwell, 2019a; Fforde et al., 2020a).

5.4.2. Recognising communities as witness bearers

Another pivotal aspect of activist work in this context relates to descendant community testimonies. In this section, I explore how activists connect with descendant communities for the purpose of gathering their memories and testimonies of dispossession and its impacts. This, I demonstrate, both records and amplifies their perspectives and their demands, and it also contributes to the healing potential of these processes as it recognises dispossessed communities as witness bearers for the injustices that have been inflicted and allows them to speak their truth (Atalay, 2019; Hemming et al., 2020).

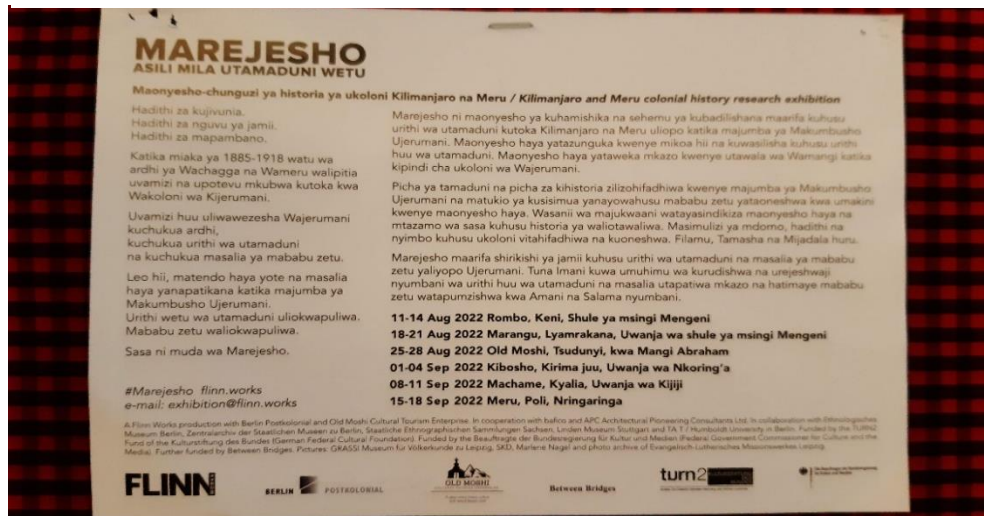
Institutional information about these abductions, explored above, represent only one relevant repository of knowledges in this context. Very different kinds of knowledges, frequently vastly more expansive, are being held in the minds and memories of those who were dispossessed of their belongings and of their ancestors' remains. Engagement with descendants and origin communities as knowledge bearers about these belongings and Remains has increased in importance over recent years, yet overarchingly it has remained limited, and frequently descendants have been denied recognition as legitimate knowledge bearers. In this context, building relationships with claimant communities and descendants of the dispossessed has become an integral aspect of grassroots mobilisation, in order to gather their testimonies, to record their claims, and to underline the importance of their perspectives for our understanding of the realities of the dispossessions and their impacts.

Marejesho is one project working with these ambitions. *Marejesho* (Kiswahili for restitution, return) is a travelling research project and exhibition, conceptualised by Mnyaka Sururu Mboro (*Berlin Postkolonial e.V.*) and the German filmmaker Konradin Kunze (*FlinnWorks e.V.*), alongside the *Old Moshi Cultural Tourism Enterprise*. It is a project “about objects that were taken during the German colonial time in [the] Kilimanjaro and Meru region, [which are now] in the depots of some museums in Germany” (Marejesho, 2022). Specifically, there are two intentions. On one side, the project is about sharing with descendant communities in Tanzania information and images about cultural belongings that are being kept in German institutions at present, and on the other hand, it is about gathering knowledges and testimonies from dispossessed communities about these belongings as well as abducted Ancestral Remains of their forefathers.

Mboro was first introduced in this thesis in Chapter 1 and has recurred as one of the most important memory activists in the context of postcolonial memory in Germany throughout subsequent chapters. The search for stolen belongings and abducted Ancestral Remains from his home region in Kilimanjaro has always constituted a key motivating factor for his work, since his arrival in Germany in the 1970s (LeGall and Mboro, 2021; Memarnia, 2021b; Wagener, 2020). Over the course of his activism, he has frequently been in touch with various institutions. Often he was denied access to archives, but he never relented until eventually, it was possible for him and his collaborators to identify collections of Tanzanian cultural belongings in the archives of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart, the Grassi-Museum in Leipzig, and the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne, totalling nearly 20.000 cultural belongings (Günther, 2024). From his years of experience in activism, Mboro knew that it would be a long and difficult process to secure the restitution of these objects to their origin communities. So what he decided to do in the meantime, was to photograph the belongings he was able to find and take these images back to these communities, so that descendants could see these belongings and learn about them (Marejesho, 2023a). As a means of bringing these images to these communities in Tanzania, Mboro and his collaborator Kunze conceptualised *Marejesho*, as a travelling exhibition that would over several weeks travel to various communities across Meru and Kilimanjaro regions in today's Tanzania.⁹²

⁹² A short video showcasing impressions of the travelling exhibition *Marejesho*, how it was built and how it travelled across different locations can be viewed online on the *FlinnWorks* e. V. website: <https://flinnworks.de/en/marejesho> (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

Figure 13: Flyer exhibited in *Marejesho* exhibition at TaT in Berlin, showing the route and locations visited when the exhibition travelled to descendant communities in Tanzania, in September 2023.

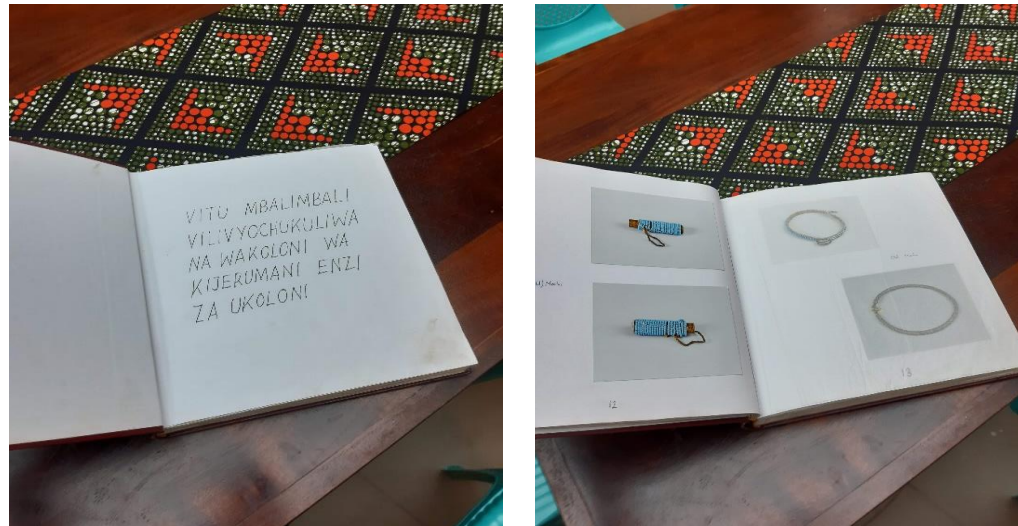


When *Marejesho* travelled to Kilimanjaro and Meru, one ambition was for the exhibition to share with descendants of dispossessed communities information about stolen belongings that had been identified in German institutions. For this purpose, the core of the exhibition that travelled across Tanzania was a collection of images and photographs of identified belongings, both from everyday and spiritual contexts, that German colonisers had abducted during colonial rule, which many members of these regions had never seen before. These photographs had been taken by members of the exhibition team, working alongside Mboro and Kunze, over the summer of 2022. In addition to these photographs, the exhibition included a showing of *Mangi Meli Remains*, a short animated movie produced by Kunze about the story of chief Meli, who had fought German colonial occupation and was executed in 1900, several multi-media stations, as well as a collaboration with Tanzanian artists and live illustrations.⁹³ This had been made possible by many months of work by the research team that had reviewed and processed archival databases and depots, therefore showing significant alignment with the efforts explored in the theme above, related to institutional knowledges.

⁹³ The short film *Mangi Meli Remains*, in Swahili with English subtitles, tells the story of how the head of Mangi Meli, resistance fighter from Old Moshi, was abducted to Germany and Mangi Meli was executed in 1900, and the efforts made by his descendants for the head to be returned. The film was produced in 2018 by Kunze, alongside several collaborators: Sarita Lydia Mamseri, Amani Abeid, Cloud Chatanda, Mirsky Stein, Malte Stein, Andi Otto, Dr. Holger Stoecker, Prof. Arnold Temu, Gabriel Mzei Orio, Elias Ng'hangasamala, Michael Ojake, Mary Charles Mrema, Georg Werner, Isaria Anael Meli, Helena Tsiflidis. It can be viewed online on the *FlinnWorks* e.V. website: <https://flinnworks.de/en/mangi-meli-remains> (Accessed: 21 November 2024).

Figure 14: Impressions from *Marejesho* exhibition at TaT in Berlin, in September 2023.

Images show a catalogue produced by exhibition makers, showing stolen cultural belongings from Kilimanjaro and Meru, on photographs taken during activists' archival research. Activists took this catalogue to origin communities to show them the belongings that had been abducted, and subsequently exhibited it at TaT, in Berlin.



In addition to these efforts, as much as *Marejesho* was about *sharing* information with descendant communities, it was about *gathering* their testimonies and recording their knowledges as sources and insights about these disposessions from the perspectives of the dispossessed and taking these back to public and institutional audiences in Germany. In the course of the exhibition display across the six villages in Kilimanjaro and Meru, many conversations were had between the *Marejesho* team and community members about the information and images that the exhibition team had brought. Most importantly, the team encouraged and invited visitors and community members to respond, to share their own memories, recollections, and oral histories about the photographed belongings as well as their missing ancestors, in the exhibition space and beyond:

Bei *Marejesho* in Tansania ging es um den Austausch von Wissen über Ancestral Remains und geraubte Kulturgüter aus dem Norden Tansanias in Deutschland mit dem Ziel der Restitution. Es fanden viele Gespräche von Dorf zu Dorf statt, bei denen die Menschen ihr Wissen weitergaben. (Marejesho, 2023b)

The project generated a reciprocal exchange and dissemination of knowledges and narratives. Travelling to various villages in Kilimanjaro and Meru, *Marejesho* was sharing images and knowledges that had been confined to German institutional spaces with communities from whence they had been abducted; but, furthermore, the project was seeking to gather stories, narratives, and testimonies from descendants of origin communities, in order to bridge the gap between German museums and communities. Community narratives and memories were centred as authoritative sources of knowledge and information that so far had mainly been excluded from discourses around colonial loot and Ancestral Remains, as well as from debates over their returns.

Following the two months in Tanzania, the team travelled back to Germany, in order to show to German audiences the same photographs and, more importantly, the additional materials, testimonies, and narratives from descendant communities. Exhibited at the *Tieranatomisches Theater (TaT)*,⁹⁴ an exhibition space located on the North campus of Humboldt University in Berlin, between October 2023 and June 2024, the Berlin iteration of *Marejesho* carried the subtitle “The Call for Restitution from the Peoples of Kilimanjaro and Meru” and focused on “the questions asked, the knowledge generated and the responses of the communities across Kilimanjaro and Meru”. The introduction panel to the exhibition, displayed in the image below, read:

The generation of leading voices, many who are aged 70 years plus and calling for restitution are foregrounded in this exhibition. These are the voices who will guide you in understanding the urgency of the collective call, along with the complexity of individual cases. (Marejesho, 2023b)

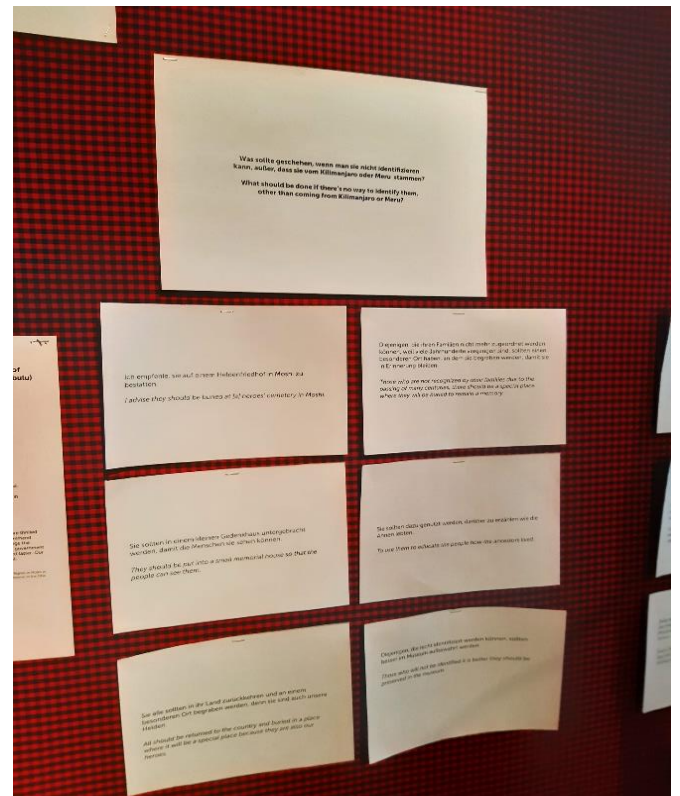
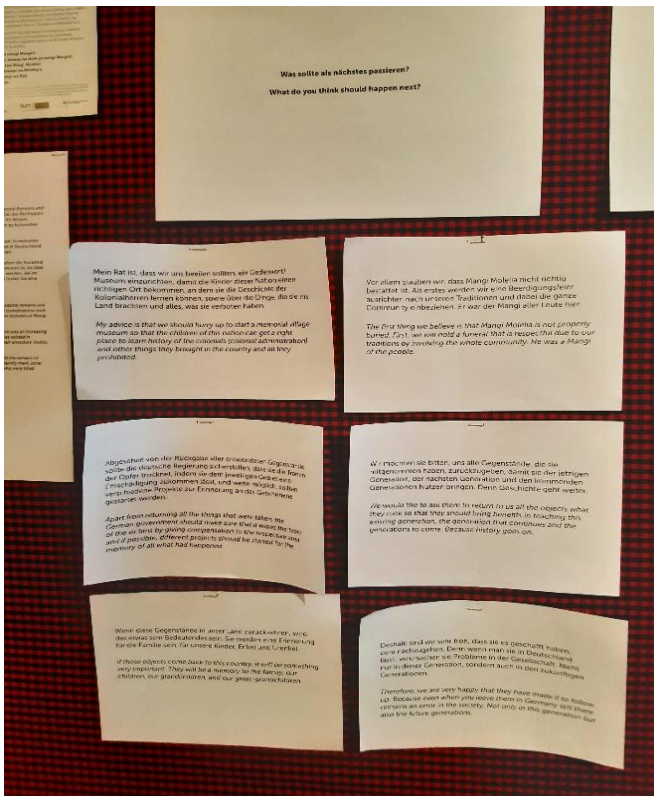
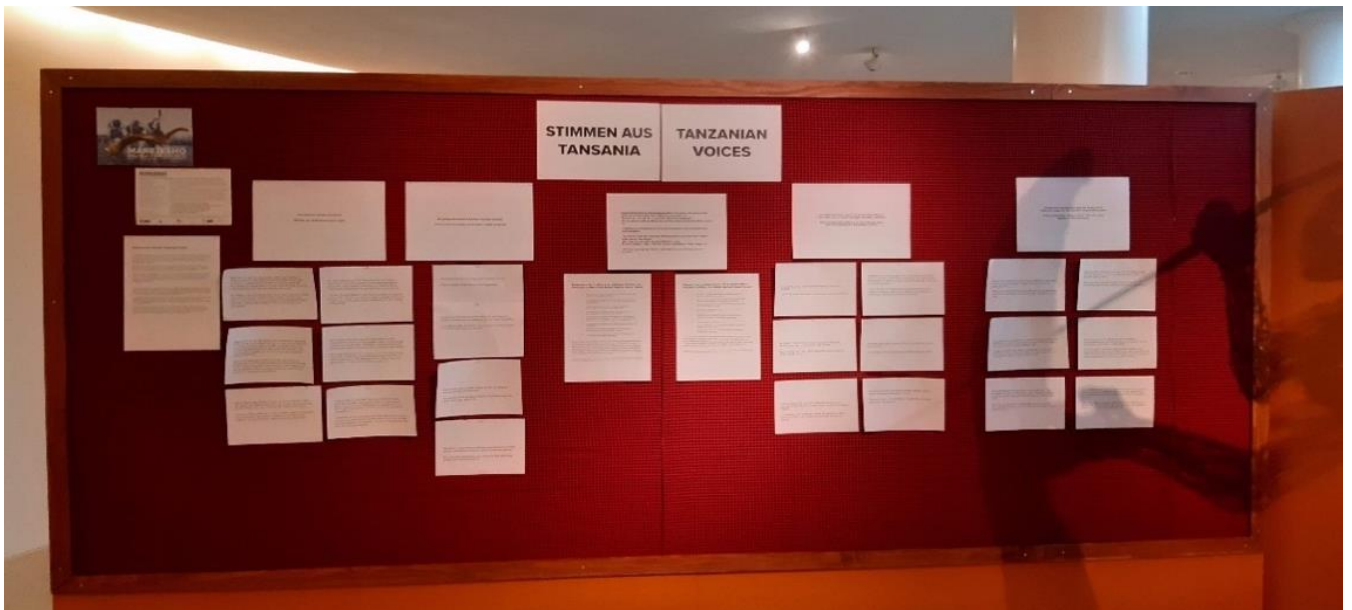
This excerpt of the introductory panel text underlines a shift in perspective, to ‘foreground’ those that had inaugurated demands for returns several decades ago but whose voices had in the decades since, frequently been ignored, marginalised, or repressed. Noting the age of these community members not only drew attention to the longevity of their demands and how long their concerns had been ignored but also emphasised the urgency of the matter.

An example of how the exhibition was re-centering these perspectives was a panel titled, “Stimmen aus Tansania/Tanzanian Voices”, which displayed large printouts of questions

⁹⁴ *Veterinary Anatomy Theater*.

and community testimonies. Four sets of questions were listed (see Figure 16): “Where should the remains of ancestors’ bodies be buried? What should be done if there is no way to identify [the remains] other than coming from Kilimanjaro or Meru? What do you think should happen next? And how should we remember leaders who were killed fighting for their homelands?” (Marejesho, 2023b). Underneath each question, there was a selection of direct quotations from community members. On the question regarding commemoration, for instance, one answer read: “Let us remember them by maintaining their tradition and narrating their stories to the children and to the generations to come, when they will be preserved so that it can be a memory to be recognised by the community of our culture.” (ibid). In addition to these questions, the panel listed demands that had been collected from descendants of those community leaders who had been executed and abducted, including, for instance, “The descendants shall be involved in the restitution process and their wishes shall be respected”, and “The costs of restitution and burial are to be borne by the government of Germany” (ibid). Moreover, the panel made space for community members to express pain, grief, and anger at the failure of German institutions to act more genuinely and more proactively, noting, “I personally think that when you offend someone, you should first restore what caused that offence. (...) I think just apologising without returning the taken belongings is [an] injustice.” (ibid) These quotations of community contributions were made to stand on their own. There were no accompanying texts, contextualising information, or further references. The quotations were printed, on their own, on large sheets of paper. They were, in this display, the only information that was necessary. Allowing them to stand on their own, positioned them as sources of legitimate knowledge, that was valid and authoritative as answers to these questions, that did not require further substantiating.

Figure 15: Panel titled *Stimmen aus Tansania/Tanzanian Voices* at Marejesho exhibition at TaT in Berlin, in September 2023.



The remainder of the main part of the exhibition was divided into stations, which represented the six villages that *Marejesho* had visited: Keni, Marangu, Old Moshi, Kibosho, Machame, and Poli. They displayed photographs of the stolen belongings and pictures of the ancestors that had been abducted from these villages, alongside testimonials from descendants, and contemporary artistic reinterpretations. Each of these was curated in a way that made them appear almost like a shrine, a place of remembrance and honouring, to the belongings and the ancestors, whose stories were told at each given location.

Figure 16: *Marejesho* at TaT in Berlin is dedicated to different locations and communities across Kilimanjaro and Meru, Tanzania, in September 2023.



By gathering, recording, and noting down descendant community knowledges, and by presenting them in these ways to public and institutional audiences in Germany, grassroots initiatives like *Marejesho* re-assert dispossessed communities as knowledge bearers and witnesses to these histories (Kunze et al., 2024). This gathering of accounts of dispossessed communities can be mapped onto identified information from institutional archives which can identify matches that can help to facilitate returns. Furthermore, this approach presents Indigenous and descendants' knowledges as an important counter-repository of knowledge, that often has received less attention. It challenges institutional singular authority about these and significantly broadens the scope of our understanding of these processes. Most importantly, in re-asserting dispossessed communities as legitimate knowledge bearers to these histories, grassroots efforts can contribute to restitutions in such ways that enables the healing potential of these processes. Whilst reliving these histories and memories requires a significant amount of emotional labour and can be taxing and painful for descendants (Fforde et al., 2020a), being recognised as a bearer of testimony and a witness to one's own story, referred to by Atalay as "Indigenous storywork" (Atalay, 2019), constitutes a significant source of pain relief and healing (Hemming et al., 2020; Kunze et al., 2024).

5.4.3. Generating empathy

A final aspect of activist work in this context relates to empathy. By and large, in restitution scholarship, empathy has remained underexplored; that is both empathy in relation to the histories of dispossession, as well as the role of empathy in return processes (Fforde et al., 2022a, 2022b). On one hand, this is unsurprising given much scholarship's preoccupation with institutional and legal questions, i.e. concerns with, at least overtly, less emotional attachment (Colwell, 2015, 2019a). Simultaneously, this still represents a glaring shortfall in current literature, given the many accounts of Indigenous scholars and descendants of the dispossessed who emphasise the emotional impact of these histories (Fforde et al., 2022a, 2022b). Remembering these histories, learning about dispossession from ancestors, or encountering abducted belongings for the first time in institutional archives, is frequently described as immensely emotionally charged (Krmptich, 2010), underscoring these histories closely linked with emotion. Again, it has been in the research by Indigenous restitution scholars, that emotion and empathy has found some recognition, as their research has begun to consider restitutions as an "affective practice", exploring the ways in which emotions can shape restitution practices both productively as well as act as an inhibitor (Fforde et al., 2022b).

Given the limited research, a clear definition of empathy in the context of restitution remains to be developed. Here, I instead build on the work of philosopher Amy Coplan to understand empathy as both a cognitive and affective process, that requires one's imagination to gain an experiential understanding of another person, whilst maintaining a clear distinction between oneself and the other. Empathy is difficult to achieve, requires mental work and flexibility, depends on multiple factors and conditions, and remains imperfect and incomplete, but is a unique and meaningful process of gaining an understanding "of another from the 'inside'" (Coplan, 2011, 2011).

Building on this, I explore empathy as a third condition that can foster healing through restitutions. I investigate how especially diasporic activists have been engaging with institutional collaborators to foster an empathetic understanding among them that recognises Ancestral Remains not as museum property or objects, but as someone's family member. This challenges institutional authority over these Remains. It also helps foster conditions for these processes to become encounters with healing potential, as empathy enables museum professionals to recognise those making the claims for returns as humans with human

concerns who want to be able to care for their deceased. In this section, I return, primarily to my interview with Isabelle Reimann, whom I learned from with regards to activist activities towards restitution, encounters with institutional representatives, and empathy.

During our interview in 2022, Reimann explained that a key challenges of facilitating restitutions relates to a persistent institutional understanding regarding Ancestral Remains as objects and property. By being inserted into institutional, Ancestral Remains become incorporated into settings and structures, which objectify and reify these remains as objects and resources. Reimann reflected on her experience witnessing restitution processes in Saxony, Germany, during which she learned:

dass diese menschlichen [Gebeine] in diese Strukturen eingebunden sind,
und wie diese Strukturen an sich, diese Verdinglichung [und] Objektifizierung
als Ressource, als Eigentum (...) immer wieder fortsetzen (Reimann,
interview, 2022a)

She emphasised the structural element of this process, which incorporates these remains within the institutional setting, resulting in their reification and continuous categorisation as objects, property, and resources (Rassool and Gibbon, 2024). This is a process of institutionalisation, referring to the placing and organising of these remains within an institutional/museum setting, which frequently exposes these remains to scientific interventions and anonymisation (Fforde et al., 2022b). Embedding human remains into institutional settings results in distancing the meaning of these remains from ‘the dead’ (ibid). In the process of curating these remains within an institutional museum space, these settings no longer appreciate these remains as human or as ancestors; from an institutional perspective, they have become dehumanised.⁹⁵

This dehumanisation is particularly striking when considering not only how Ancestral Remains are still held in paper boxes and cartons, without name tags, and sometimes alongside

⁹⁵ There are restitution scholars and descendant community advocates who disagree with this framing, noting the importance that these remains were never not human: “The appropriation of the bones disturbs the reciprocal relationship of the ancestors with the living and this disturbance is continued by keeping the Iwi Kūpuna in anthropological collections. The disturbance can be countered by appropriate rituals within restitution work. From this perspective, not the human remains have to be rehumanized, which according to Hui Mālama were ancestors before, during and after the restitution, but the handling of them and their descendants by the German institutions [have been dehumanised/need to be rehumanised].” (Reimann, 2022b:37)

animal bones and specimen (Reimann, 2024), but also the extremely violent circumstances of these abductions and their involuntary shipment to Europe.

What this objectification results in, on one side, are practical barriers towards the facilitation of restitutions. When institutions understand these remains as property, this means that collections are bound by administrative structures prescribing how ‘ownership’ can change:

[Die Gebeine] sind eben ‘staatliches Eigentum’, [und] es ist kompliziert staatliches Eigentum zu reduzieren. Dafür braucht es wieder bestimmte administrative Vorgaben, es braucht eine juristische Begründung, es braucht eine Provenienzforschung, es muss eine Bestätigung geben, dass diese Gebeine nicht mehr zur wissenschaftlichen Forschung gebraucht werden. (Reimann, interview, 2022a).

The treatment of these remains as property set a series of administrative, political, judicial, and other preconditions, which constitute significant obstacles to the facilitation of restitutions, which also risk being reproduced throughout the restitution process (Reimann, 2024).

An essential step towards returns is therefore that institutions re-appreciate these as human remains, and that they are someone’s ancestor. In other words, in order to facilitate restitutions, a shift in understanding among museum institutions is required for them to recognise these ‘the dead’. Reimann referred to this as an “ontological shift”:

Also, ich denke schon, dass dieses Umdenken und auch, dass Menschen [innerhalb der Institution] sich auch einsetzen, das [hat] auch oft mit diesem ontologischen Umdenken zu tun (Reimann, interview, 2022a)

In order for institutions to align themselves with restitution demands, she notes, individuals in institutions need to change their thinking about these collections. Notably, the characterisation of this process as an “ontological change” underlines the gravity of this re-thinking process, representing a fundamental reshaping of institutional considerations about their collections. In understanding these remains as ‘the dead’, as ancestors, rather than as objects and institutional properties, this results as well in a changed understanding regarding who holds authority over these remains to decide over their treatment and retention.

In order to facilitate this renewed understanding among institutional practitioners, the practice of empathy is essential. Reimann reflected in our interview how empathy was an important constitutive factor of what she referred to as this ontological shift. Reflecting on how to align museum professionals with restitution claims, as she did in the quotation above, she noted, “dass das oft auch mit diesem ontologischen Umdenken zu tun hat (...) und letztlich zum Teil auch mit einer gewissen Empathie” (Reimann, interview, 2022a).

Emotion “plays a key role in causing perceptions/values about human remains as object to shift to those that understand/appreciate the meaning of human remains as primarily ‘the dead’” (Fforde et al., 2022b:78). Specifically, they note empathy as a process of developing “shared emotions” and the ability to understand another person’s concerns and feelings, or, at least, to recognise another person’s feelings as legitimate. This is crucial within the process by which human remains can be recognised as human or ‘the dead’, in the way that they are seen by their descendants. It is the importance of empathy, that shows that there is more to restitution processes than merely documenting evidence: “it is about people recognising our common humanity. Showing some empathy” (Fforde et al., 2020c:689).

When it comes to how and when emotional engagement is generated, restitution studies have focused particularly on handover ceremonies as significant moments that generate empathetic understandings between claimant societies and museum professionals (Fforde et al., 2022b:79).⁹⁶ In this section, I draw attention to situations where the generation of empathy restitution demands becomes a precursor to move the institution closer towards facilitating returns, long before handover ceremonies take place.

Reimann reflected on one such instance during our interview. In summer 2021, she was on a research visit in one of the public universities in Berlin, alongside Mnyaka Sururu Mboro (*Berlin Postkolonial e.V.*). During the visit to this institution, both advocates worked together with one staff member, who operates as a supervisor to a collection of human remains held in the archive. The purpose of the visit was to begin recording an inventory of the remains in this collection. At the time, there was little provenance research conducted in this university’s

⁹⁶ There are several accounts of institutional professionals who describe their experiences of gaining a more in-depth understanding of the importance of restitutions and a sense of empathy during these ceremonies (Wergin, 2021), in addition to Reimann herself recalling her participation in a handover ceremony in 2017 as a decisive experience (Reimann, interview, 2022a). These instances emphasise the importance of handover ceremonies as moments that can generate understanding, emotions, and meaning-making processes that are shared but experienced in very different ways dependent on positionality (Reimann, 2024).

collection and the institution was considering disposing of the remains without further investigations. During the joint archival visit, and after talking to both restitution advocates, the staff member began to decisively shift his perception of these collections and began to understand the importance of restitution concerns. Reimann noted, both she and Mboro had shared their concerns with the staff member, as well as reiterated their request for further research and proactive engagement with these collections, to enable a move towards returning them to their descendants, where claims had been made. What was decisive, however, was the latter being able to convey what the maintenance of these collections in German institutions meant for him. For many descendant communities, the meaning of restitution is very multi-layered, they are collective and familial endeavours. Many of them, like Mboro, recall having made promises to family and community members to try their best to bring back their ancestors. Others derive a significant sense of responsibility from an understanding that if they are not able to solve this, and to heal this pain for their extended community, the same pain will be passed on to their own descendants. Furthermore, many descendant communities see a relationship between present, ongoing injustices and misfortunes and their continued absence of their ancestors. Current inequalities are frequently seen as related to advocates “inability” to return their ancestors to their community and to facilitate an appropriate burial for them (Reimann, 2022b).

wenn jetzt Mboro nicht dabei gewesen wäre, der auch nochmal aus seiner Perspektive erzählt hat, was diese Repatriierung für ihn bedeutet, dann weiß ich gar nicht inwieweit dieses Verständnis angekommen wäre. (Reimann, interview, 2022a)

Mboro’s viewpoint was a pivotal factor to change the staff member’s perception of these collections. Without his presence, this shift would have been unlikely. This was furthermore underlined by the staff member’s own account:

[Das] war auch auf jeden Fall [seine] Rückmeldung. Wir haben dann noch ein Gespräch gemacht, wo er auch nochmal gesagt hat, wenn er das jetzt hört, dann hört er, dass es durchaus wichtig ist, diese menschlichen [Gebeine] zu behalten [um] diese Forschung weiterzudenken, was er sonst vielleicht gar nicht so gesehen hätte. (ibid)

Learning from Mboro's perspective, the staff member began to shift their understanding and started to see that these remains were ancestors, that they were someone's family member from whom they had been separated. This change of perception is not merely of intellectual or emotional impact. It also generates a change in conditions towards the facilitation of returns. When institutional actors begin to recognise human remains in their custody as someone's ancestors, this shifts the question about who decides over their care away from institutional authority, and towards descendants and family members. Empathy, in this context, may renegotiate the question of decision power.

Yet the impact of empathy in this setting exceeds this. These interactions also have the potential to promote healing for descendant communities, because they may reverse some of the dehumanisation resulting from harmful institutional practices. Restitution literature has established, that a desire to care for our dead is a recognised universal human trait, recognising that a concern with how to treat the dead can be observed among most communities globally, and is not something unique to formerly colonised or Indigenous communities (Fforde et al., 2022b:78). What this also means is that by maintaining collections of Ancestral Remains within these institutional settings which continue to treat them as museum objects, institutions deny an important aspect of descendant communities' humanity, by refusing their right to care for their own dead. Referring on a critique by the Hawaiian restitution practitioner Edward Halealoha Ayau, Reimann's report had stated:

Refusing people to take responsibility for the Ancestral Remains and thus the possibility of concrete care for their ancestors means withholding an expression of their humanity from them. (Reimann, 2022b)

The refusal of their humanity is particularly striking, when a justification for this is attempted through formal and administrative means and through emphasising the remains' perceived role as institutional property (Reimann, interview, 2022a), something that Ayau and Keeler referred to as "intellectual savagery" (Ayau and Keeler, 2017).

In turn, this means, that being able to practice care for the dead, can be an expression of humanity: "when we return human remains and restore their humanity, we remake ourselves as people, outside the terms and categories given to us by the empire of the museum (Rassool, 2015). Or in the words of Ayau and Keeler: "we must each commit to elevate our respective

humanity – our understanding of who we are as human beings through the proper treatment of the ancestral dead and their possessions” (Ayau and Keeler, 2017). Reimann recalled that through Mboro’s contribution, the shift that occurred was that the institutional practitioner was able to understand: “dass es da um ganz normale, menschliche Anliegen geht” (Reimann, interview, 2022a). The use of “menschliche” is decisive here. The University staff member was able to recognise the restitution request as a “human” request, something that was normal and relatable. The efforts made to identify Ancestral Remains and to take steps towards their return to their descendants, was an expression of the humanity of those advocates searching for their ancestors, in order to be able to appropriately care for them.

The discourse around affective engagement and empathy is not without controversy. For one, whilst the above demonstrated how an empathetic engagement can provide a productive factor to facilitate returns, accusations of emotions have also been used, historically and at present, to denigrate and delegitimise restitution claims. The colonial project often framed Indigenous and colonised communities as “too emotional,” contrasting them against an allegedly superior, rational Western mind (Fforde et al., 2022b). This is not only discriminatory in itself, but this false dichotomy seeks to portray institutional spaces as *rational*, undermining restitution claims labelled as *emotional*. This fails to recognise the institutions’ own emotional investment in these collections, and specifically, in the retention of these collections, and practitioners’ investment in the institution and their careers. The identity of the institutional partners is as much at stake as the identity of descendant communities (Fforde et al., 2022b:73), meaning that restitutions “have a high emotional charge for all involved” (ibid). Hence, when grassroots actors seek to generate empathy among museums for their claims, they are doing so not against a “blank canvas”, but they need to negotiate the institution’s own emotional investment, often against the institution’s refusal to recognise its own emotional investment. This, alongside the general fact that generating empathy frequently requires these actors to divulge personal, often painful memories and testimonies, and to “to reveal their cultural selves” (Colwell 2015:272), means, that these kinds of activities commonly represent a significant amount of emotional labour for descendant activists and their supporters. Having to (repeatedly) describe the pain caused by these dispossessions, as well as having to emphasise the meaning these returns hold for their communities and to justify their demands for returns, takes its toll.

These dilemmas underline the persistent coloniality of the issue at stake. Diasporic activists in particular are pushed into a position where they are having to argue for and justify not just the humanity of their ancestors, but their own humanity as well. As a result, it is, therefore, entirely valid and necessary to highlight the contradictions that especially diasporic activists are involved in, when doing this kind of work to generate an empathetic understanding among institutional actors. They should not have to be in a position where this is necessary. Yet in a context where the reification of Ancestral Remains continues to be pervasive and maintained by the institutional status quo, instances of individual engagement between civic actors and institutional partners that have the potential to generate an empathetic understanding, and as a result steer institutional practices towards an understanding of these ancestors as humans and as family members, provide opportunities to substantially contribute to the re-assertion of dispossessed communities' humanity and, in doing so, to the facilitation of restitutions of stolen ancestors to their descendant family members.

5.5. Conclusion

Much of the discourse on restitution of abducted cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains, has long been dominated by institutional perspectives, framing these efforts as steps towards addressing historical wrongs or seeking institutional transformation. Whilst institutional milestones such as the CHRP or the development of museum guidelines in 2017 are undeniably important, they represent only part of the narrative. This chapter has sought to shift attention towards the underrecognised role of grassroots activism and civic actors' contributions to these processes. Grassroots efforts have established a critical counterpoint to institutional framings by centring the voices, needs, and authority of descendant communities. For many descendants, the theft of cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains is not a legacy of the past; it is an enduring and ongoing source of pain, a manifestation of persistent coloniality in the present. These processes are not about 'righting historical wrongs' but reclaiming dispossessions, restoring community and ancestral relationships, and moving towards healing and justice. Restitutions, from that perspective, are about restoring authority of descendant communities over their belongings and their ancestors, and about resisting the persistent dehumanisation manifested in these 'collections' that are still held in institutional custody. Focusing on grassroots efforts and their long histories underscores that momentum for restitutions has not emerged spontaneously but often spring from persistent campaigning and grassroots civic action. It emphasises that these processes are about more than institutional reform and transformation. Exploring grassroots activities, therefore, reveal narratives and perspectives that in institutional discourse frequently remain omitted and silenced.

The restitution of cultural belongings and Ancestral Remains to their descendants and origin communities is one of the most important tasks involved in postcolonial reckoning. Recognising the authority of descendant communities, their demands, needs, and voices in these processes is essential if these processes are intended to shape up as more than merely handing over what was stolen during the colonial period. Restitution processes and ceremonies hold a critical potential to move discussions over historical reckoning and postcolonial legacies towards reconciliation and reparation, and in so doing, to significantly reshape relationships in the postcolonial world. In order for this potential to be realised, the genuine authority and humanity of those formerly colonised and dispossessed needs to be re-affirmed; in this process, recognising the work of grassroots actors and civic collaborators takes an integral role, in order to reshape these processes and relationships.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has navigated a broad and continuously evolving landscape of postcolonial memory activism in Germany, investigating a complex range of activities, strategies, ambitions, achievements, and obstacles. It has mapped key actors and developments, while analysing the central areas of work that present four pillars of postcolonial memory activism in Germany. I illustrated how activists use walking tours and exhibitions as public engagement strategies, during which they prioritise local traces and lasting continuities, thereby making colonial history and its legacies relevant to mainstream audiences and stimulating reckoning moments that encourage further retrospective investigation and reflection. I investigated how grassroots street renaming campaigns remove remnants of colonial symbolisms, through critical and participatory campaigns that generate critical learning points in transforming urban landscapes. I examined how activist *institutional critique* generates integral accountability measures for institutional transformation, shaping institutional engagement with their implication in past colonialism and present-day coloniality, whilst simultaneously reiterating fundamental challenges of how to effect meaningful transformative change within institutional settings. Finally, I demonstrated how grassroots activists establish important links between institutional actors and formerly colonised and dispossessed communities, in the integral process of working towards the restitutions of stolen cultural belongings and abducted Ancestral Remains, in order to move towards justice and reparation for dispossessed communities and their descendants. A primary aim of this extensive empirical approach was to underscore the visibility of activist work in postcolonial reckoning processes, and to demonstrate the multiple ways in which grassroots action has shaped ongoing nationwide discourses and practices.

Over the last ten years, there have been notable advancements in political and institutional commitments towards formally reckoning with Germany's colonial past. In 2015, president of the German *Bundestag* Norbert Lammert, publicly declared that the violence against OvaHerero and Nama people needed to be recognised for the genocide that it was, which spurred important efforts towards a reconciliation agreement and an apology that followed in 2021 (Pape, 2017). In the German museum landscape, several large-scale research and collaboration projects have been moving towards re-assessing colonial collections in institutional custody and towards restitutions (Appleby et al., 2020; Heeb and Kabwete-Mulinda, 2022; Stoecker and Winkelmann, 2018). In 2022, Germany became the first country to

formally commit to returning a collection of looted Benin Bronzes to Nigeria (Oltermann, 2022). In 2018, an ambition to formally engage with Germany's colonial past was written into the coalition contract (Schwarzer, 2018), and in 2024 reform plans were discussed to include colonial history into Germany's official memorial concept (Aguigah, 2024; Staas, 2024). The substance of these commitments has remained somewhat unclear, as many of them were fiercely contested and their implementation is still largely ambiguous (Becker, 2021; Boehme, 2022; Sabrow, 2024). What they indicate nonetheless, is that a broader consensus is under reassessment, as Germany's colonial past and its legacies are more seriously being reconsidered as a historically relevant topic that necessitates critical recognition and engagement in the present.

In light of these developments, this thesis has made visible their grassroots underpinnings. It demonstrates that many recent institutional and political commitments have long been preceded by critical civic campaigning. It, therefore, underscores the longer *durée* of critical reckoning processes, and demonstrates how activism has frequently presented an important catalyst and accountability measure for political and institutional actions. In her important 2017 book on postwar German memorial culture, Jenny Wüstenberg reasoned that Germany's process of reckoning with its National Socialist and GDR past "cannot be understood without considering civic memory activism" (Wüstenberg, 2017:5). This thesis has shown that the same is true for Germany's critical reckoning with its colonial past and postcolonial present, and, in doing so, added another puzzle piece to our larger understanding of the relationship between memory culture and civic activism in 20th century Germany.

Additionally, this project has developed at a time of great upheaval for German memory politics, as a series of public discussions and 'scandals' between 2020 and 2024 have interrogated the current state and scope of German memory culture. These discourses continue to evolve, but they have already made a further critical engagement with memory activism in Germany even more crucial. I hinted at these discussions in my context section (see 1.3.) with the promise that I would get back to these concurrent developments and offer some reflections on how they have interacted with memory activism thus far, and how this may evolve in the future. I first summarise briefly the debates and global developments that have reverberated in German memory politics since 2020 and continue to do so today.

The first public ‘scandal’ was the so-called *Causa Mbembe*.⁹⁷ In 2020, renowned Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe was invited to speak at the cultural festival *Ruhrtriennale* in Germany. However, the invitation was rescinded, upon criticism by the German federal commissioner for antisemitism Felix Klein, when it became known that in his writing he had compared Israeli occupation politics in Palestine with South African Apartheid, and that in 2017, he had signed a petition in support of a specific target of the non-violent pro-Palestinian *Boycott Divestment and Sanctions* movement (BDS) (Aguigah, 2020a; Eimermacher, 2020; Mbembe, 2020). Many came to defend and contextualise Mbembe’s work and the debate (Aguigah, 2020b; Amjahid, 2021; Häntzschel, 2020; Nichelmann, 2020; Rothberg, 2020a), yet his critics were harsh, equating his work with Holocaust relativism and antisemitism (Cheema and Mendel, 2020; Kaube, 2020; Posener, 2020; Wolffsohn, 2020).

The way in which Mbembe, an internationally acclaimed scholar, who previously was widely respected also in Germany, was fiercely discredited, brought to light how political contexts were shifting in Germany. Holocaust memory culture had been formally established since the 1990s, but it was in this period that really brought attention to how Holocaust memory had also evolved into a strong and unwavering alliance with Israel, that had manifested in particular, through the 2010s. In 2016/17, the new IHRA definition of antisemitism had been widely adopted across institutional settings in Germany. It included certain critiques of the state of Israel as antisemitic, thereby conflating antisemitism and antizionism, and making critical interrogations of Israel’s state politics more difficult (Assmann, 2021). Additionally, in 2019, a resolution in the *Bundestag* officially cast the BDS movement as antisemitic, as it was seen to mirror the boycotting of Jewish business in the 1930s, consequently preventing anyone with state funding or support to collaborate with those in support of BDS (ibid). The debate around Mbembe was among the first instances that brought more public attention to these developments, making visible that Holocaust memory in Germany came with a strong alliance with Israel, and, consequently, in light of escalating conflict between Israel and Palestine, implicated German support in Israel’s occupation (Anonymous, 2021; Capdepón and Moses, 2021; Dekel and Özyürek, 2021).

⁹⁷ An impressive online archive of contributions to the debates, which I review here only briefly, was concurrently curated by Sedar Günes, an Islamic and political science scholar, publicist and blogger, and remains accessible online: <https://serdargunes.wordpress.com/2021/06/04/a-debate-german-catechism-holocaust-and-post-colonialism/> (Accessed: 20 January 2025).

One of those who came to Mbembe's defence was the American literary scholar, Michael Rothberg. In 2009 he had written a book titled *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust In the Age of Decolonization* underscoring that drawing links between different historic injustices and crimes was not relativism or competitions. Memory was not a "zero-sum game" but memory claims of different social groups were able to productively enhance one another's claims in solidarity (Rothberg, 2009). Having come into the debate as a supporter of Mbembe (Rothberg, 2020b), Rothberg soon became a protagonist, when during the same period, his book was published in a German translation for the first time (Rothberg, 2021). Whilst his ideas had been widely acclaimed and accepted in Anglophone contexts and also welcomed by many in Germany (Brumlik, 2021; Zimmerer, 2021); yet against the backdrop of criticism of Mbembe's work, Rothberg's book was like fuel on the fire, providing another target to attack, doubling down on the illegitimacy of drawing attention between different crimes (Martini, 2021; Seidl, 2021).

The focus in Rothberg's work on 'memory of the Holocaust in times of decolonisation', alongside contributions from historians like Jürgen Zimmerer, who explored German colonial histories and genocide, stimulated a particular branch of discussion in these debates that focused specifically on German colonial history in Germany's memory culture. Would it be legitimate to include German colonialism into German memory culture? Could it be compatible with Holocaust memory without undermining or infringing on its established place? For months, numerous articles and hundreds of social media impressions weighed in on these discussions (Amjahid, 2021; Arnold, 2021; Axster, 2021; Feddersen, 2021; Laurin, 2021; Thadden, 2021; Wiedemann, 2021; Zimmerer and Rothberg, 2021). In many ways, these were situated in a wider context of discussions over the scope of German memory culture, the compatibility of different narratives, and notions of *Opferkonkurrenz* (Niven, 2021). At the same time, in 2021, they had a different salience and urgency to it; they were fiercer and in some ways, more violent. They did not shy away, for instance, from accusations of antisemitism against Michael Rothberg who himself is Jewish American (Martini, 2021).

These debates reached a culmination point in May 2021, when the Australian genocide scholar Dirk Moses called German Holocaust memory culture a "catechism" (Moses, 2021). The German feuilleton had lashed out so defensively against arguments for comparability,

Moses asserted, because Holocaust memory in Germany had become a static dogma, constituted by a series of “articles of faith” that was central to German moral redemption (ibid).

Moses’ piece was written intentionally as a polemic to antagonise and confront. This was helped to significant extent by his position in non-German academia, allowing him more freedom to criticise from afar with less risk of repercussions. His choice of words, using religious metaphors, irritated many (Chervel, 2021; Frei, 2021; Roelcke, 2021). Moses also insufficiently reflected upon the widely contested beginnings of Holocaust commemoration in Germany, thereby stimulating harsh and legitimate criticism from those who had worked to establish critical memory amidst right wing revisionism (Friedländer, 2021; Schmidt, 2021). Seeking to open up the broader discourse and invite international responses, the Canadian historian Jennifer Evans curated a collection of reactions to Moses’ piece on the *New Fascism Syllabus* blog, bringing together scholars of various backgrounds to engage with the arguments (Biess, 2021; Brusius, 2021; Evans, 2021; Florvil, 2021; Makdisi, 2021; Samudzi, 2021).

Towards the end of 2021, the flurry subsided for a time. It seemed as though public discourse and German feuilleton had finally been fatigued, maybe even somewhat resigned to keep pace with it all, especially after the *NFS* collection had published its series of eighteen responses in an extraordinarily quick succession over two weeks. Discussions did resurface again, however, in mid-2022 in the context of *documenta 15*, a prestigious art exhibition, held once every five years in Kassel/Germany. Shortly after its opening in July 2022 curated by the artist collective *Ruangrupa*, a controversy arose over one art work, titled “People’s Justice”, a mural by the Indonesian collective *Taring Padi* investigating historical and political injustices in Indonesia, which was critiqued for including antisemitic caricatures (Greenberger, 2022). The mural was quickly removed, and *Taring Padi* apologised (ibid). But once a remark about antisemitism had been raised, this soon spiralled into a wider investigation into antisemitism, and supposed antisemitism, at *documenta*, which then turned attention to a Palestinian art collective, *Question of Funding*, also present at the exhibition. Whilst their project was different and unaligned with *Taring Padi*, the fact that antisemitism had been raised as an issue meant that these Palestinian artists came under scrutiny of antisemitism (Rothberg, 2022). This controversy shifted into a wider discussion about artistic freedom and support for Palestinian causes, and, once again, highlighted the complexities of Germany's ongoing engagement with the Holocaust. It demonstrated that the critical reckoning with the Holocaust, while essential to

Germany's memory culture, had led to an environment where concerns about antisemitism may be raised disproportionately (Doughan and Toukan, 2022; Moses, 2023).

On 7th of October 2023, these preceding debates found new and unforeseen relevance. On that day, Hamas launched a large-scale violent attack on southern Israel. The terror organisation killed approximately 1,200 Israeli citizens, injured hundreds more, and took 245 hostages, including 30 children (Seddon and Palumbo, 2023). In response, on 8th of October, Israel declared war on Hamas and started attacking the Gaza Strip with thousands of rockets and via a ground invasion (Abu Alouf, 2023). Over the following months, this evolved into a genocidal campaign, during which Israel violated international humanitarian law, and cut the civilian population in Gaza off from water, electricity, medical care, and civic infrastructure (Albanese, 2024). Thousands of displaced civilian Palestinians, including children, sought shelter in refugee camps, where Israeli forces brutally attacked those seeking safety (Yaqub et al., 2023). By January 2025 this has cost more than 45,000 Palestinian lives, including 18,000 children, and more than 110,000 injuries (AJLabs, 2025). Approximately 1.9 million, representing 95% of the overall Palestinian population, have been displaced from their homes since October 2023 (ibid).

Following Hamas' attack, and during the early stages of Israel's war on Gaza, Germany, alongside other Western states, reaffirmed its solidarity with Israel (Bundesregierung, 2023), including through provisions of military and medical equipment (Tagesschau, 2024). In subsequent months, as international bodies confirmed Israel's violations of international law and in the unfolding of an extreme humanitarian crisis, Germany highlighted humanitarian concerns and condemned attacks on schools, hospitals and refugee shelters (Gritten, 2024). Nevertheless, throughout the ongoing war, Germany remained in a steadfast alliance with Israel and stood in support of Israel when South Africa took Israel to the ICJ over accusations that it had breached the genocide convention (Bubalo and Murphy, 2024).

Pro-Palestine solidarity movements mobilised quickly across the globe, organising sustained and large-scale protests against Israel's war and in support of Palestinian liberation. In Germany, where Palestinian solidarity groups have long experienced harsh policing, this saw an escalation of violent repression (Becker, 2024; Casey, 2024). During these protests and subsequent repressions, German memory culture again arose as a key target of critique. With protestors chanting "Free Palestine from German Guilt" (Doughan, 2024), arguments were

made that Germany's efforts to atone for crimes during National Socialism and the Holocaust, had shaped memory culture in such ways that it prioritised an unconditional alliance with Israel, even in times of disproportionate war, which made Germany complicit in Israeli violence, the suppression of Palestinian citizenship, advocacy, as well as their humanity and human rights (Thompson and Tuzcu, 2024).

The dynamics explored above discuss contentious and polemical fights in German media, reflecting tensions that include significant instances of censorship and suppression of academic and artistic spheres. At the same time, these have intersected with deeply violent realities of historical and contemporary injustice, dehumanisation, and repression, as well as brutal terror attacks and war crimes. Many of them have unfolded in real-time on our scenes over the past months. I invite readers to take a moment to pause, if needed, before reading on.

As these events and discussions continue to unfold, critical scholarship weighs in to make sense of it (Agnew, 2024; Al-Taher and Younes, 2024; Becker, 2024; Fekete, 2024; Veracini, 2024; Younes and Al-Taher, 2024). What can be summarised with regards to memory culture is the following: Memory culture started as civil society driven radically critical efforts to atone for crimes during National Socialism, and from the 1990s onwards, became a hegemonic project and tool by which Germany has sought to rehabilitate itself, to re-enter among liberal Western nations. Since the 2010s, in particular, among ever-shifting and expanding global contexts, memory culture has become something that substantiates an unconditional German alliance with Israel which remains in place as well during time of extreme violence enacted by Israel. What this shows is that, whilst German memory culture has long been characterised by notions of *Opferkonkurrenz* and hierarchisations of victims, it has evolved in such ways that the prioritisation of Jewish suffering and Holocaust memory can culminate in an outright denial of Palestinian humanity and their right to exist, and complicity in extreme and disproportionate violence.

Where has postcolonial memory activism been in all this and what may this mean in future? The relationship between postcolonial memory activists' work and the above debates, initially, was mostly tenuous. When discussions raged publicly over Mbembe, Rothberg, Moses, and *documenta 15*, memory activists were largely absent. Civic postcolonial memory groups did not engage significantly with these debates online and few of them mentioned them during our interviews in passing. There may be various reasons for this limited response of memory

activists in these discussions, including logistical and resource constraints or the general heatedness of these debates which create barriers to people getting involved over concern for backlash. Simultaneously, there was limited engagement in these discussions with grassroots activism, including among those curated on *NFS*, and limited recognition that postcolonial commemoration in Germany was grassroots driven. The most direct overlap was during the discussions surrounding Rothberg's book and Zimmerer's support, as these focused to some extent specifically on commemoration of German colonial histories (contrary to relational, postcolonial approaches to memory more broadly). The broader lack of attention to grassroots activities by those involved in these debates, with Florvil (2021) being an important exception, therefore, offers further evidence for the need for this research. The way that many questions were framed as discussing the *compatibility* and potential of thinking postcolonial memory and Holocaust memory alongside one another, demonstrating an underlying assumption that postcolonial commemoration was not already happening, emphasised the tenacity of the *amnesia* narrative, also among critical scholars.

I can see two kinds of implications of these developments for postcolonial memory activism. The first could be framed as a concern. There are two component developments to explore. Firstly, as stated, for decades, hegemonic memory culture in Germany has been plagued with contentions over competitiveness, of prioritising certain narratives over others, framing memory advocates as competitive. In the last year, these dynamics have taken their as of yet most dramatic turn, as memory culture has become implicated as a tool that denies Palestinian human rights. The other component is that at the same time, we can register, slowly and gradually, how some elements of postcolonial memory activism are moving closer towards institutionalisation within hegemonic memory culture. Above I outlined certain institutional commitments. In addition, there are instances of grassroots actors seeking long term political collaboration and funding, moving closer to formal memory structures, especially in Berlin. In this way, we may consider postcolonial memory activism currently being at a similar point in its evolution, as grassroots memory activists seeking critical engagement with National Socialism were in the 1980s (Wüstenberg, 2017). In many ways this represents an important move as such collaborations can make this work much more sustainable, safeguard it against revisionism, and enhance the perceived level of legitimacy. What does it mean when these two processes converge? What happens to postcolonial memory advocacy, when, in an attempt to safeguard

decades of critical and precarious grassroots action, activists are moving closer to the same formal memory political structures that have not just shown to be engaging in hierarchisation of victims, and generating competitiveness, but most recently have also been seen to become implicated in extreme dehumanisation and violence?

Let me illustrate this: In September 2024, a memory event titled “Kolonialismus Erinnern” was hosted, primarily, by a range of African, diasporic, and Black German civil society actors. These actors have, after decades of self-funded critical campaigning, in recent years gained some sustained political support (e.g. *Decolonize Berlin* coordination office, see Chapter 5). The event was to present a memorial concept that these civic actors had written with political funding, to draft a comprehensive approach to postcolonial commemoration across Berlin (Memarnia, 2024). The concept and the event were civil society led, but political representatives were there to support and also contributed speeches. The event was then disrupted by pro-Palestine supporters, who criticised the event, firstly, for claiming to ‘remember colonialism’ without reflecting Palestinian perspectives, and secondly, for collaborating with two political figures—federal culture minister Claudia Roth, and Berlin’s culture senator Joe Chialo—who were seen as implicated in supporting Germany’s alliance with Israel’s war on Palestine (Guggenberger, 2024).

Two aspects have concerned me about this event. Firstly, a gathering titled “Kolonialismus Erinnern”, in a German context, that does not consider Palestinian perspectives needs to be queried. I understand the long lineage of this memory activism that ran this event, with African activists and Afro diasporic actors, especially in Berlin, and the importance of their focus on critically reckoning with German historical colonialism in Africa. I also understand how ongoing discussions around Palestine are so contested and firmly policed that it creates multiple barriers for people positioning themselves publicly (likely compounded for those positioned at the intersection between anti-Palestine rhetoric and anti-Black racism). It is likely that the event would have received excessive scrutiny if it had declared public support for Palestine. And, not having spoken to anyone involved in this event, I can make no judgment on their non-public perspectives on Palestine solidarity. I would nonetheless assert that it raises questions about the suitability of the label of the ‘decolonial’ in this context, which many groups involved in this event have employed, and the ways in which they are seeking to ‘decolonize’

German memory culture, if the ongoing occupation in Palestine is not or cannot be reflected upon.

What concerns me further is the question about how postcolonial memory activists, by collaborating with state actors, may run the risk of being implicated, or being seen as implicated, in the kinds of hierarchisations of memories and victim narratives that are perpetuated by the political officials they are collaborating with. Pro-Palestine supporters had targeted the event because of memory activists' collaboration with Roth and Chialo, who are not only (indirect) representatives of the German state alliance with Israel, but, in the case of Chialo was also directly responsible for harsh repression of pro-Palestine support in Berlin (Hickley, 2024).

The few media pieces reporting on this event and the incident emphasised the ways in which the event's host, Miriam Camara, found an empathetic way to engage with protestors, not by delegitimising their critiques or shutting them down but by emphasising that this space had been fought for by decades of African and Afro-diasporic mobilisation; as Roth and Chialo sat quiet, Camara sought dialogue and eventually convinced protestors to take their placards down (Memarnia, 2024; Zekri, 2024). Based on this reaction, to me, therefore, this is not an instance illustrating activists or memories being in competition with one another; rather, this is an instance that draws attention to the risks and dangers of institutionalisation and formal memory structures. This challenge by protestors raises legitimate concerns, about the ways in which postcolonial memory activism may be implicated in the ways in which state-funded memory politics are generating hierarchies among memory actors and narratives. Could there be a danger, that by seeking state support to safeguard their work, activists are becoming engulfed in these systems and structures that are conjuring up notions of *Opferkonkurrenz* and have shown to be generating notions of competitiveness, and 'divide and rule' (Bauche et al., 2022b)?

The final reflection I have to offer is somewhat more hopeful, because it has to do with the potential for mnemonic solidarities. The above discussions and debates have spoken at length about notions of *Opferkonkurrenz* and memory competition and spoken up for or against memory being seen as a zero-sum game (Rothberg, 2009). We have seen how hegemonic discourse has frequently positioned those memories at the margins of German memory culture as competing with one another and being delegitimised for supposedly undermining the importance of Holocaust commemoration. We have also begun to see how they may be better

understood as ‘divide and rule’ as notions of competitive victimhood “are not primarily produced by those fighting for recognition of their histories of exclusion and dehumanization” (Bauche et al., 2022b).

Postcolonial memory activism, despite the challenges and risks outlined above, has something substantial to offer in these discussions. Because when we examine grassroots activities closely, we find instances that disprove the above framings, and that demonstrate that multiple memories cannot only co-exist alongside each other, but actually can operate multi-directionally, as Rothberg had framed it, and in compassionate solidarity, to productively enhance the commemoration of each other’s histories (Rothberg, 2009).

This is the final empirical example this thesis has to offer. It is one that has developed over several years, coming to fruition just before this research drew to a close. To me, this is an example that demonstrates one of the most substantial learning points of memory activism work. That when we pay attention to civic action, we find that those working with commemoration on the ground, though they may not be free from being engulfed in wider contestations and competitiveness, know how to work collaboratively and extend solidarities across different experiences and histories of injustice.

The *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Institut für Anthropologie, menschliche Erblehre und Eugenik (KWI-A)* was a eugenicist research institution established in Berlin in 1927. Led by anthropologist Eugen Fischer, its researchers conducted racist projects, that supported policies of sterilisation, eugenics, and genocide during the Weimar Republic and the National Socialist period, frequently using ‘collections’ of human remains from colonial and National Socialist contexts (Bauche et al., 2022a). After World War II, the building in Ihnestraße 22–24 was repurposed and soon used to house parts of the *Free University* in Berlin-Dahlem, then West Berlin (ibid).

Between 2014 and 2016, during construction procedures, human remains were found buried in the ground near one of the buildings of the former institute and it was asserted that these could be linked to the racist research at the *KWI-A*. This made visible the lasting violent legacies of racist research and dehumanisation in German history, as well as raised questions about how to proceed and what to do with them (Kirchner, 2017).

From the beginning, it was noted that these remains likely originated from different contexts (ibid). Whilst the *KWI-A* was active during the Weimar Republic and the Nazi period, it had used varied ‘collections’ of human remains in their research, including different Nazi victim

groups as well as colonial victims. In the proceeding research project, this encouraged an analytical and commemorative approach that collaborated with multiple civic groups and victim representatives in collective solidarity.

The project *Geschichte der Ihnestr. 22* was initiated in January 2019, led by Manuela Bauche. One part was extensive research into the history of the site and the legacies of eugenics at *KWI-A*, the other was a collaboration with several memory activist initiatives and civic organisations to address the associated injustices in order to find a comprehensive and sensitive commemorative approach. This collaboration included a broad spectre of victim groups with relationships to the racist research committed at *KWI-A*, including, centrally, Jewish victims and Roma and Sinti victims of National socialist eugenics, as well as African victims of German colonial crimes.⁹⁸

The broad coalition came to a joint decision against further investigative research regarding the individual remains determining exactly which remains had come from which context. These processes would be invasive, and, moreover, ‘dividing’ these remains among victims groups and ascribed identities would perpetuate racist and dehumanising categorisations of people (Groeger, 2023). Instead, these remains were buried in March 2023 on *Waldfriedhof Dahlem* cemetery. They were buried collectively, and without the display of any distinct religious symbolism, it was said, to underline the solidarity among these different victim groups (Boldt, 2023).⁹⁹ OvaHerero activist Israel Kaunatjike, who was introduced in Chapter 1 and spoke on the painful history of human remains in Chapter 5, was part of the project and explained the process to me like this:

Wir haben uns mit jüdischen Organisationen und mit Roma und Sinti [und anderen] zusammengeschlossen (...) und wir haben vereinbart, dass wir diese Knochen von den Menschen gemeinsam begraben. Wir werden die Knochen nicht trennen nach DNA—der kommt aus Namibia, der kommt aus Auschwitz, [und der kommt aus Tansania]. Wir haben vereinbart, dass wir alle

⁹⁸ The coalition included the Central Council of Jews in Germany, the Central Council of German Sinti & Roma e.V., the Initiative for Black people in Germany e.V., the Central Council of African communities in Germany e.V., Israel Kaunatjike as OvaHerero representation, the federal working of "Euthanasia" Victims and the Forcibly Sterilised, *save space* e. V., an empowerment NGO, *Kellerkinder* e. V., an advocacy group for people with disabilities, the post-migrant organisation *korientation* e. V., *IniRromnja / RomaniPhen* e. V. und *Berlin Postkolonial* e. V.

⁹⁹ Photos taken during the burial and memorial ceremony in March 2023 can be found here: <https://box.fu-berlin.de/s/ay2sm3aZZBaGCdj> (Accessed: 20 January 2025).

gemeinsam als Mahnmal begraben (...) Alles gemeinsam, sodass wir das nicht mehr separieren in Roma und Sinti, und Juden, und Herero (...) Es ist besser so, [denn] wir waren alle Opfer. (Kaunatjike, interview, 2022)

What Kaunatjike emphasises clearly, is that the process was not one out of practical ease or logistical necessity but a deliberate act of shared compassion. “[W]ir waren alle Opfer”, he said, demonstrating clearly an understanding that multiple kinds of groups, impacted and shaped by different kinds of racisms, discrimination, and violence, can see the differentiated but shared experiences among them, and use these as a basis for solidarity and empathy.

No explicit reference was made during the project or in related articles and reports, to the contentious memory debates that had been ongoing concurrently across German media and academia. And yet, the quiet and resolute actions of victim groups and memory activists offered a profound lesson for those observing these dynamics. Through their commitment to remembrance and justice, they demonstrated how mnemonic solidarities can come to fruition, bringing postcolonial memories of German colonial violence into conversation with other narratives and memories of historical injustice. Without competition or overshadowing, they created a space where the stories of all victims could not just coexist in mutual recognition and dignity, but the joint process worked to enhance the understanding and the commemoration of all victims’ experiences—a testament to the power of determined and often quiet nature of on the ground memory activism, and their efforts to shape a more inclusive and compassionate overall memory culture.

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