The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism

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Memory studies work and literature examine how memory as well as the representations of the past have become significant cultural, social, political, and national resources and forces in shaping the present and future relations and engagements within and between borders (Lowenthal [1985] 2015; Olick et al., 2011). The field of memory studies has a "nonparadigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless" character (Olick and Robbins, 1998, pp. 105–106) which sets itself to address shifting epistemological as well as historical boundaries pertaining to social memories. Memory activism is a growing field within memory studies, which not only makes claims for the present and the future by creating ways of comprehending, remembering, and commemorating the past but also intervenes in the dominant representations of discourses and various modes of producing and sharing knowledge about the past. It aims to understand both political changes in the recognition of contested pasts (Gutman, 2016, 2017a) and transformations of public memory (Wüstenberg, 2017). In this respect, memory activism contains the nexus of power relations of various actors from grassroots, activists to elites and states (Bernhard and Kubik, 2014; Gutman, 2017a; Wüstenberg, 2017), including memory researchers as activists.

As memory activism emerged in relation to peace activism and social movements, it is considered a strategy of peace activism (Gutman, 2017b) and mainly focuses on "action" (Katriel, 2016). Researcher activists in general reject the binary and exclusionary positioning between research and political involvement (Hale, 2008; Gutierrez & Lipman, 2016). They argue that research and political engagement enrich social and political action since for such action knowledge is vital (Hale, 2008). In line with this, any intervention by memory researchers as activists is a direct intervention in the dominant knowledge and the strategies of representing the past in order to shape the future of the politics of memory in defending equality, justice, pluralism, and reconciliation (Gutman, 2017b). Furthermore, in this article, I argue that memory activism has the possibility of developing reflexive borders thinking approach – more specifically an approach which has the potential to think within and out of the knowledge regarded as binaries by taking the different positionalities and perspectives of the involved actors, including the subaltern ones into account.

Memory activist researchers carry out their work in two ways: either by focusing on activists and their political engagements or by revealing an alternative layer of memory concealed by the dominant one. Either way, as actors who shape the processes of knowledge production by intervening in the present and reflecting on the possible future of the politics of memory,

memory activist researchers defend plurality, inclusion, and equality and as such, they play crucial roles in both as activists and as researchers. Memory activism's reflexive borders both between research/knowledge and action, and between researcher and researched emerge when memory researchers as activists recognize and question the established boundaries of thought within global binary knowledge constellations, and furthermore when they overcome and act beyond the established binary oppositional categories and knowledges such as modern-colonial, victim-perpetrator, or dominant-submissive, in developing knowledge(s) alternative to dominant one(s). Such an approach also allows memory activist researchers to question their shifting epistemological and methodological positionalities.

In the light of this discussion memory activist researchers, I think, have a twofold responsibility: first, they need to carry on their scientific and ethical research while reflexively recognizing and questioning their own ambivalent, situated positions as researchers in their relations with their respondents in the field, the data and/or texts they analyze and the realities they examine. Second, they need to maintain their critical distance vis-à-vis power-based knowledge production mechanisms, which shape memory work as well as the interests and policies of different state institutions and other actors who aim to frame memory work within the borders of a singular, victimhood-based, and reified identity politics. In this article, I discuss memory activism's reflexive border thinking approach by keeping my focus on this twofold responsibility of the activist researcher.

Situating reflexive borders

Memory itself represents not only the border between what is remembered and communicated but also what is forgotten and silenced. Nevertheless, remembering and forgetting are rarely mutually exclusive processes (Assmann, 2012). In my work, I focus on the interconnectedness of individual and collective memory and the processes of knowledge production. Individual and collective remembering (Olick, 2007) as well as identification processes are all interrelational. Individuals, communities, and/or state and non-state organizations identify with, or distinguish from, each other depending on opportunities, obstacles, and interests in everyday power relations (Jenkins, 2004). Emotions (Ahmet, 2017) and experiences (Scott, 1991) also play roles both in the identification and remembering processes. Individuals remember in their minds, yet, they remember in relation to their group identity and what they remember is shaped by social frameworks such as family, kinship, class, ethnicity, nation, occupation, religion (Halbwachs, 1925, 1950), gender, and sexuality (Neyzi, 1999; Hirsch and Spitzer, 2006; Altınay, 2014; Altınay and Petö 2015; Avakian and Attarian, 2015; Muti & Gürpınar, 2021).

Knowledge production is shaped not only by local national ideologies and discourses (Anderson, [1983] 2003; Calhoun, 1997; Coronil, 1996; Brubaker, 1998) but also by colonial relations that divide the West and the East; the North and the South (Said, [1978] 2003; Chakrabarty, 1992; Mignolo, 2000). The actors from state to local and transnationals civil society platforms or organizations and individuals are active parts of knowledge production, yet it is the capacity to exercise power over others that determines norms and dominance as well as subjugated knowledges, by systematically classifying, regulating, and normalizing (Foucault, 1980, 1982). The dynamic and relational capacity of power is influential in the formation of the identification processes and the formation of memories of both individuals and collectivities.

Memory activist researchers are among the actors of power-based knowledge production and dissemination mechanisms of the past. They intervene in the production of dominant knowledges about the past while questioning the hierarchies within the production mechanisms of dominant as well as alternative knowledges for the present and future. In this respect, I think

all successful memory activism interventions already incorporate something akin to what I refer to as reflexive border thinking, whether memory activist researchers intentionally do it or not. Mignolo's (2000) border thinking (border gnosis) conceptualization not only aims to understand the knowledge from a subaltern point of view but also closes the gap between opposite knowledges, subjects, and terminologies. Mignolo utilizes Foucault's conceptualization of "subjugated knowledges" and Khatibi's (1983) conceptualizations of "double critique" and "an other thinking" to develop his own conceptualization of "border thinking" which transcends the hermeneutical and epistemological distinction between the knower and the known, as well as the distinction between globalized and subaltern knowledges. This implies an endeavor to overcome the limitations of the territorial thinking, which is based on subalternization of knowledge through the modern conceptualization of rationality and reason (2000).

In addition to border thinking, reflexivity is another exercise that is highly influential both in the formation of cultural memory (Assmann, 1995) and in shaping the positionality of memory activist researchers. Reflexivity as an exercise serves memory activist researchers' exploration of the ambivalent power relations among researchers, the field, participants, data researched and the realities studied (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). It involves reflecting on the way in which research is carried out and understanding how the process of carrying out the research shapes the outcomes. Thus, reflexivity is considered as the critical eye on one's own practices while simultaneously examining the social, political, and cultural shifts in the power relations. A successful exercise of reflexivity inevitably takes into account the situatedness of all knowledge and intersectionality as analytical frames. Taking the situatedness of knowledge requires the researchers to take the responsibility for their own positions within the research and to position the respondents in the field not as external objects to be studied by a disinterested observer but as subjects and agents to be understood by a fellow human being (Haraway, 1988). Intersectionality, in turn, depicts an analytical frame that takes into consideration whether social and political identities in focus occupy discriminated or privileged positions in the prevailing power hierarchies (Crenshaw 1991).

In the memory activism work not only the situatedness of the researchers but also both the participants' understanding of reality, witnessed and remembered situations (Simandan, 2019) and the contexts of remembering and expressing what they remember matter. Examining the process, practices, and outcomes of collective remembering and identification, the social, cultural, and historical context where the remembering takes place should also be taken into account in an intersectional way (Wang, 2008, Mutluer, 2023). In my research, I try to open a space not only for the participants but also for myself as the researcher to develop border thinking by reflexively remembering, thinking, and positioning ourselves in between and beyond the borders of the past and modes of knowledge produced by two or more oppositional sides.

Thus, for example in my research on Alevi communities in 12 cities, I examine how remembering the Turkish state's acts of violence in different periods shapes their social and political identification processes and collective memories in plurality with respect to the intersectionality of geography, ideology, and belief (Mutluer, 2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2016). State's violence creates a loss of the feelings of social and economic security, and political trust in the state, yet the responses to these losses vary. Some of my respondents positioned themselves around reified Alevi identity and viewed their belief as the ideological, sociological, and political opposite of the state. However, by self-reflexively thinking in-between and out of the borders of oppositional state and reified Alevi identity political knowledge(s), I could widen the focus of some of my respondents beyond past narratives and get them to reflect on possible knowledge for the future.

In my research on the everyday life of internally displaced Kurdish men at the center of Istanbul, in Tarlabaşı neighborhood I employ a reflexive borders' thinking approach. I, as the

researcher, sought to develop a form of reflexive border thinking together with my respondents, Kurdish men and women, by reflexively positioning ourselves in between and beyond the borders of the past and knowledge produced, in this case by the two sides of the decades-long armed conflict in the southeastern regions of Turkey, namely the Turkish state and the Kurdish movement. The traumatic experience that internally displaced Kurdish people passed through during the evacuations of their hamlets by the Turkish security forces in the late 1980s and early 1990s entrapped them in dual stigmatization: The state labeled them "terrorists," and city dwellers labeled them as "uncivilized" newcomers of the urban life. In their everyday relations with the other actors in the city such as Kurdish and non-Kurdish civil institutions and political parties, the municipality and various inhabitants from various different classes, ethnic, gender, and sexuality backgrounds, they reflexively resist, react and/or make use of the dominant knowledge of the state, the oppositional knowledge of Kurdish movement as well as other non-state institutions as "tactics" (de Certeau, [1980] 1988). Thus, in everyday encounters, both their memories and the obstacles and/or the opportunities they face in the urban context, shape their everyday identification process (Mutluer, 2011, 2023).

Current works and the future

A remarkable number of memory activism works aim at revealing and including the shadowed, silenced, or forgotten past of discriminated, oppressed people who are subjected to various forms of violence by authoritarian regimes' genocides, racism, ethnic cleansing, and wars by examining the reflexive borders of memory and knowledge production processes. Nevertheless, not all the works of memory and activism are inclusionary and serve the purposes of peace, plurality, and equality (Bernhard and Kubik, 2014) or hope (Rigney, 2018). Some of these works run the risk of being reified as parts of nationalist and identity politics as they focus on the trauma and victimhood in the victim-perpetrator binary constellation (Olick, et al., 2011; Wertsch, 2012; Iğsız, 2018). Actors of far-right, nationalists, and authoritarians also develop their own versions of the past and they have been active parts of memory policies (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014; Iğsız, 2018; Levi & Rothberg, 2018). For instance, in their work Bernhard and Kubik seek to understand memory activism by right-wing, nationalist, and reactionary groups and they find out that the reified memory works' "warrior strategy" harm democratic institutions (2014). Such approaches not only harm critical thinking and policies promoting equality and diversity, but they also open a space for the securitization discourse by justifying the discriminatory, biopolitically segregative, violent, and criminal acts of the power holders.

What distinguishes the growing body of the inclusionary works of memory activist researchers from those works which play into the hand of binary exclusionary identity politics is their explicit or implicit adoption of a version of what I called above reflexive border thinking approach. Thus, for example, a group of memory activism works adopt that approach to focus on activist memoirs and works. Such works directly examine the agencies of the activists and the alternative knowledges they produce (Hamilton, 2010; Reading & Katriel, 2015; Rigney, 2018). For instance, Altınay discusses how feminist researchers' memory work on women's activism in Turkey since the late Ottoman era challenge the official memory, history, and knowledge which maintains that women were granted their rights from above (2014) by the grace of the founders of the republican state. Feminist researchers of memory work reveal, by contrast, that women's movement had a strong grassroots presence and their activism raised widespread debate on gender-equality-related issues. Confrontation with the Armenian genocide in Turkey is another area on which memory activist researchers focus. For example in her work, Ayata criticizes the tendency of scholars and civil society organizations to de-couple the

interlinking crimes of the Turkish state by compartmentalizing them as those which belong to the past, like the Armenian genocide and those which belong to the present, like the Kurdish conflict (2015). She argues that this tendency not only ignores the Kurdish movement's transformative challenge to the Turkish denialism of the Armenian genocide since the 1980s but in doing so it also obscures the complex and intersectional raptures and continuities in the state discourse. Gutman's analysis of the oppositional knowledge production in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is another example of work that focus on activists' memories. Gutman focuses not only on the existing inequalities between dominant and oppositional knowledge producers but also on the inequalities within the activists who produce alternative oppositional knowledge. Thus, her analysis goes beyond the already existing binary oppositional power dynamics and questions the power hierarchy locally and transnationally also within alternative knowledge producers (2017).

Another trajectory of critical border thinking that memory activist researchers follow is to create memory-based knowledge that intervenes in the dominant knowledge. Such works reconstruct an alternative memory of controversial issues. One such example is Iğsız's work *Humanism in Ruins* where she examines how liberal humanitarian projects not only serve nationalist agendas in whitewashing their violent and discriminatory past but also feed into such current worldwide trends like the rise of far-right authoritarianism (2018). Focusing on the Greek–Turkish population exchange, Iğsız argues that the "unity in diversity" approach of the international community of states after the World War II dehistoricizes the past and degrades the specificities of segregative biopolitical acts (genocides, ethnic cleansings, pogroms, etc.) that humanity has been subjected to in different times and geographies (Iğsız, 2018). Dekel and Özyürek's intervention in the official and mainstream German way of commemorating the Holocaust by silencing or mostly stigmatizing any criticism against Israel's state policies as being antisemitic is another example of what I called above reflexive border thinking. Starting from Achille Mbembe's disinvitation from giving a keynote lecture at the Ruhrtiennale art and music festival as a result of his critical views on Israel's Palestinian policy, Dekel and Özyürek discuss "who has the right to speak publicly on Holocaust memory, the defense of Jews, and Israel, in a polarized political climate" (2020, p. 1).

I think an overarching analytical approach which questions geographical, epistemological, and methodological borders (thinking/gnosis) reflexively enhances memory activist researchers' possibility of comprehending power relations as well as ways to intervene in the knowledge production mechanisms in an ethical way. Such interventions reveal the hidden past and enable thinking in the present and for the future.

Additional Resources

Bernhard, M. and Kubik, J. (eds.) (2014) *Twenty Years After Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Gutman, Y. (2017) *Memory Activism: Reimagining the Past for the Future in Israel-Palestine*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Iğsız, A. (2018) *Humanism in Ruins: Entangled Legacies of the Greek-Turkish Population Exchange*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Mutluer, N. *Kurdish Men, Internal Displacement and Memory in Everyday Istanbul: Dignity and Masculinity*, Bloomsbury Publishing (Forthcoming, under contract)h

Wüstenberg, J. (2017) *Civil Society and Memory in Postwar Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.