

MEMORY POLITICS
Decolonizing the colonial memories of
indígena–marrón bodies

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In this paper I propose critical, active reflection on the politics of memory around the European colonial heritage in the Global South from 1492 onwards. I am guided by three questions: first, how do we understand memory and the remembrance of colonialism from today's perspective?; Second, how do we include memory into this work?; and third, what should we take into account when creating a space for learning and memory about colonialism in Germany specifically? Through these questions I seek to analyse and understand the past, memory, and colonialism and demonstrate its impact on *indígena-marrón*¹ people in the Global South. Finally, I shall suggest some perspectives and strategies to aid academic and curatorial research, establish spaces for learning about the colonial past and promote future decolonial actions.

Memories and colonialism: 1492

Memory, understood as an ability to carry the past into the present (time), is not a linear or static process. The individual recollections and experiences which constitute memory are subjective and selective, shaped by emotions, perceptions,

¹ In order to render structural racism in Argentina and Latin America visible and to resignify our ancestral history, I use the term *indígena-marrón* to refer to the brown body of Indigenous descent as a political construct.

and social, political, and cultural factors.² In this regard, as Elizabeth Jelin observes in her book *State Repression and the Labors of Memory*:

Even individual memory, implying an interaction between the past and the present, is culturally and collectively framed. Memory is not an object that is simply there to be extracted, but rather it is produced by active subjects that share a culture and an *ethos*.³

It follows that individual memories are complex, dynamic social constructs. If that is the case, how are these memories constructed?

The construction of memory is sustained by a web of cultural symbols and practices such as rituals, monuments, squares, museums, and plaques. By means of interaction and repetition, these elements evoke the past and endow it with shared significance within a specific social context. In *The Struggle for the Past: How We Construct Social Memories*,⁴ Jelin argues that memory is the frame in which subjects construct the meaning of the past, a past which is updated by interactions with the present and aspirations for the future in an active process of *remembering, forgetting, and silencing*.

This process entails story-writing, or in other words, using narrative and discourse to configure the past and interpret it for the present. In this way, memory also generates a sense of *identity and belonging*, as it helps us to define who we are and points us towards where we wish or do not wish to go.

- 2 Essential foundations were laid here by the philosopher Paul Ricœur in his book *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (2000), where he analyses how individuals interact with memory and the past, exploring links between individual experience and social context. He highlights two fundamental aspects: first, memory as personal experience, where recollections are interwoven with emotions and perceptions and expressed through personal narratives; second, collective memory, which is influenced by social, cultural, and historical context and expressed in shared narratives, rituals, and practices. In this space, memory becomes a field for dispute and negotiation. The English translation *Memory, History, Forgetting* was published in 2004 by The University of Chicago Press.
- 3 Elizabeth Jelin, *State Repression and the Loss of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 68.
- 4 Elizabeth Jelin, *The Struggle for the Past: How We Construct Social Memories* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021). First published in Spanish in 2004 as *La lucha por el pasado, como construimos la memoria social*.

In this sense, memory is a process of *interaction and action* (from past to present) that constructs narratives—some which have been transmitted onwards, while others are alternatives to what has been imposed. As a result, we have a diversity of memories to constitute identity and belonging. However, not all these memories acquire the same visibility or recognition, which raises the question: *Are some memories more legitimate than others?*

If we follow Jelin's argument, society does not have one single memory of the past. At various moments in history, however, a broader consensus can be observed around a hegemonic vision of the past, and this often reflects the narrative imposed by the 'conquerors'. Meanwhile other histories—other memories—emerge and resist this dominant vision. As the author puts it, 'the space of memory is thus an arena of political struggle'.⁵ The hegemonic vision tends to be exclusive, as it interprets the past by creating and perpetuating narratives which are skewed by prejudice and make assertions about certain groups and individuals. One illustration of this is the historical and memorial construction surrounding Christopher Columbus and his arrival in America in 1492. On 12 October 1992, Spain 'celebrated' the quincentenary of that event, and other countries have chosen to call it a 'Meeting of Two Worlds'. These interpretations of the colonial past fail to address the Indigenous genocide which took place in the Americas as a result of his arrival. Aníbal Quijano takes issue with this denial in his essay '¡Qué tal Raza!'⁶ where he describes how European modernity established its domination over

5 Jelin, *State Repression*, 16–17.

6 Aníbal Quijano, '¡Qué tal Raza!', *Revista del CESLA* 1 (2000). Accessed: antropologiadeoutraforma.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/quijano-anibal-que-tal-raza.pdf. Other decolonial authors such as Enrique Dussel, Ramón Grosfoguel, Walter Mignolo have likewise demonstrated the impact of 'modernity' on the Indigenous communities of Latin America following the invention of race and racism.

the Americas during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries by means of colonization and capitalism.

Similarly, in his fundamental work *La revolución india*⁷, the Quechuaymara⁸ writer Fausto Reinaga argues that European domination imposed a single vision of history, culture, and race while bringing violence, oppression, and pillage to Asia, Africa, and Latin America:

Universal history is the history of Europe: in this ethnocentric view, the race and culture *par excellence* are its own. Its classical division into ancient, medieval and modern is based on events in Europe. Other peoples foreign to its territory are thus marginalized and are in consequence barbarians ... The derogatory epithets still remain: savage, primitive, wild, indigenous. Always in the meaning of inferior beings, sub-humans.

In his seminal work *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of 'the Other' and the Myth of Modernity*, Enrique Dussel argues that the notion of 'modernity' is rooted in a foundational myth.⁹ This myth, in turn, was predicated on the purported superiority of a white, religious, European 'race', and this justified the need to 'civilize' the Indigenous peoples, whom they labelled 'savages' and 'barbarians'.

This narrative granted legitimacy to the domination, exploitation, and pillaging of Indigenous nations by Europe during the colonization process and the establishment of nation states in Latin America. Moreover, this universal historical vision of the colonial past in America and the oppression of Indigenous communities and communities of African descent was shored up by knowledge production in the social and human sciences. The writer Genara Pulido-Tirado denounces this as 'epistemic violence'.¹⁰ She identifies the construction of 'a series of systematic, regular and repeated discourses intolerant of alternative epistemologies, seeking to deny the alterity and subjectivity of Others in a manner which perpetuates the oppression of their knowledge and justifies their domination.'¹¹

7 Fausto Reinaga, *La revolución india* (2010 [1969]), 81.

8 This adjective refers to the Indigenous nation of Quechua and Aymara.

9 Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of 'the Other' and the Myth of Modernity* (London: Continuum, 1995).

10 Genara Pulido-Tirado, 'Violencia epistémica y descolonización del conocimiento', *Socio-criticism* XXIV/1-2 (2009), dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/4637301.pdf.

11 Pulido-Tirado, 'Violencia epistémica y descolonización del conocimiento', 177.

**Contested memories:
power, knowledge, and being**

For a critical understanding of how colonialism constructed memories and narratives in the Global South, I propose focusing on three aspects of the colonial domination initiated, as described above, in 1492. The first aspect is *the coloniality of power*; a concept used by Quijano to describe how colonialism imposed upon the peoples of the world a hierarchical system founded on racial classifications ranging from ‘superior’ (white European) to ‘inferior’ (non-European, of African descent, Indigenous).¹² The second aspect is *the coloniality of knowledge*,¹³ which refers to the imposition of a Western body of knowledge as the only valid epistemic system, devaluing non-European wisdom and insights as ‘inferior’ or ‘primitive’. This is reflected, for example, in the hegemony of Western social sciences and humanities, which ignore the experience and knowledge of Indigenous peoples and communities of African descent:

The social sciences, Eurocentric in character since their inception, offered the image of an autonomous Europe, forged historically without links to other cultures and consistently ignoring the colonial relationship produced between Europe on one side and Africa, Asia and America on the other.¹⁴

The third aspect, the *coloniality of being*, a concept developed by Nelson Maldonado-Torres,¹⁵ proposes that colonized communities were denied humanity and reduced instead to a condition of ‘inferiority’ and ‘irrationality’. This denial served to justify the violence and genocide perpetrated

¹² See: Anibal Quijano, ‘Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America’, *Nepantla: Views from South* 1/3 (2000), 533–580.

¹³ This concept was developed in various forms by Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, Maldonado Torres, and Genara Pulido-Tirado.

¹⁴ Pulido-Tirado, ‘Violencia epistémica y descolonización del conocimiento’, 183.

¹⁵ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, ‘On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the development of a concept’, *Cultural Studies* 21/2–3 (2007), 240–270.

in the Americas while at the same time laying foundations for dominant colonial memory.

Enzo Traverso pursues a similar line of thinking in his work *Le passé, modes d'emploi* when he points out that, 'there are official memories supported by institutions and even states, and then there are underground, secret or forbidden memories'.¹⁶ He distinguishes between 'strong memories' and 'weak memories', which influence the present and shape identity and belonging. 'Strong memories' gain social recognition and become an institutional force. They are expressed through *vehicles of memory*¹⁷ such as monuments and official acts of commemoration, and in this way they impose a dominant narrative. One example, as mentioned, is official nation state narratives about the 'discovery' of America, which constitute an antagonistic memory of colonialization and the genocide committed against Indigenous nations. By contrast, 'weak memories' obtain scant recognition and are marginalized in official accounts. These are the memories of ethnic 'minorities' and excluded groups, not least their memories of slavery, colonialism, dictatorship, and genocide. Both forms of memory are dynamic and conflictual. This means that 'weak memories' can sometimes subvert 'strong memories', opening up a new space for justice and reparation. As Traverso has pointed out, 'memory of the Holocaust, a unifying narrative that has become a "civil religion" in the Western world, is a good example of this shift from weak memory to strong memory.'¹⁸

As described by these writers, the structures of domination (coloniality of power, knowledge, and being) established from 1492 onwards reveal how colonialism imposed a racialized hierarchy that devalued non-Western, non-European forms of knowledge and denied personal status to members of colonized communities. This negation, which refused to grant visibility, was perpetuated by means of the dominant historical narratives which generate official memory, including the official commemorations celebrated by nation states.

16 Enzo Traverso, *El pasado. Instrucciones de uso. Historia, Memoria, política* (Madrid: Marcial Pons Ediciones Jurídicas y Sociales, 2007), 49. First published in French by *La Fabrique Éditions* in 2000. The page references here are to the Spanish translation.

17 Elizabeth Jelin, *Los trabajos de la memoria* (Madrid: Siglo XXI Editores, 2002), 37.

18 Traverso, *El pasado*, 49.

However, as Jelin and Traverso both argue, the construction of memory is an *arena of class struggle*, because weak memories emerge and can, occasionally, undermine or be co-opted by more hegemonic forms.

Decolonizing memory and the colonial narrative

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.
—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera*, 1987

My memory, which constructs belonging and identities, is permeated and influenced by the colonial past, or what Gloria Anzaldúa has called 'the colonial wound'.¹⁹ This wound is expressed in my face, my surnames, my mother tongue, my nation of origin, my sexuality, the indelible marks of a past which, as the years pass, become evident and conscious in my memories.

In this same vein, let me mention Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, her 'biomythography' where she reflects on her own process of self-discovery. Lorde revealed that over the course of her life she learnt that her sense of belonging did not depend on adhering to a specific, homogeneous identity but on embracing the complexity of her multiple differences. In other words, she found her place by accepting her difference in hegemonic US society rather than seeking security in conformity.

That said, questions come to my mind as part of this memory process. *What action can we take to resist this erasure or negation? How does memory express itself when it lacks a specific space? And from where, from what political, cultural, and*

19 See: Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* (Madrid: Capitán Swing Libros, 1987).

artistic position can we transform a weak memory? To untangle all this, I feel I need to introduce a decolonial perspective, the Indigenous sense of time and memory.

I shall begin with an aphorism: *Quipnayra uñtasis sarnaqapxañani*.²⁰ It comes from my Indigenous nation and is Aymara in origin. It translates as, 'looking back and forward we can walk towards the future present.' I do not see the past merely as a point of origin on the line of time, but seek to situate the past in the future, which we do not know and which erupts into the present. That is what happens, for example, in the memory process, when a person sets about constructing identity and belonging, passing through moments of shame, negation, acceptance, and transformation before finally achieving a spiritual inner reparation of their own. This shift enables us to act in ways that are political, public, in education and culture, those that materialize in literature (such as poetry or essays), in public interventions (such as posters or performance), and in institutional settings (museums).

This process of decolonizing²¹ the colonial past in order to transform and seek racial justice from one's own singular perspective has also been applied in 'decolonial aesthetics',²² an approach that seeks to liberate art and aesthetic theory from concepts imposed by colonialism. Given that art has the power to affect our senses, emotions, and intellect, and that aesthetic philosophy seeks to understand the nature of meaning, the authors argue that both artistic creation and its interpretation must start by recognizing the 'colonial wound' and making it visible, given the tendency of Western art, culture, and aesthetics to disguise it or even—perhaps unintentionally—silence it by only attaching value to one way of seeing and doing art.

20 As discussed by the Bolivian writer Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui.

21 The concepts 'decolonize' and 'decoloniality' in research and critical practice are linked but there are significant differences. 'Decolonize' refers to the active process of transforming power structures and knowledge inherited from colonialism with an emphasis on self-determination for the communities concerned. 'Decoloniality', in turn, is focused on challenging hierarchies and power structures rooted in Western modernity and promoting the transformation from a 'popular' perspective of resistance, for example that of Indigenous communities or communities of African descent with their situated knowledge.

22 This concept is developed in P. Pablo Gómez and Walter Mignolo, *Estéticas decoloniales* (Bogotá: Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, 2012), [adelajusic.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/decolonial-aesthetics.pdf](https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839463093-086).

That is why I see a critical review of the Eurocentric and racist narratives present in, for example, exhibitions of modern and contemporary art or of colonial history as a crucial part in challenging the dominant forms of representation, which are hegemonic and white. Proposing new exhibition formats

which recognize the perspectives of colonized and Indigenous peoples entails confronting an uncomfortable past and it calls for careful thought about the tensions inherent in spaces of memory.

I believe that lending visibility to the colonial wound is a crucial step towards historical and racial reparation. Moreover, creativity will be an essential tool in conveying a sense of *past-present-future* in memories. Constructing decolonized memory and taking action to decolonize means grasping this movement in time and colonial memory.

Uncomfortable memories: critical decolonizing practice

It follows from the above that engaging with the discomfort of the decolonial perspective means activating a way of *thinking, feeling, and doing* that generates critical and transformative practices. I understand that a critical, decolonial reading of art

and of the narratives currently on display (in museums and literature, for example) invites us to go further than simply reviewing the past. It means injecting questions, challenging the visibility of artists, activists, researchers, and curators, not least by recognizing different forms of art and whether or not they are accessible: What is art and who is it for? Which actors come into the cultural spaces (like museums) and why? Who narrates and exhibits decolonial art, and who genuinely represents decolonization? These questions invite us to examine the power structures that shape the world of art.

I understand that it is not an enviable task to review the past, especially a colonial past, that is so present in our contexts in both the Global South and North. It is an uncomfortable and painful process of memory that must be addressed in order to repair the colonial wounds of history. We feel this painful discomfort, for example, when we look at the early voyages and accounts of Columbus (1451–1506), the chronicler Ulrich Schmidel (1510–1580), or the entrepreneur Carl Hagenbeck (1844–1913). These individuals in their various roles took part in the exploration, exploitation, plundering, and abduction of Indigenous peoples, and they perpetuated narratives to justify racialization and territorial dispossession.

Schmidel, for example, who joined the first expedition of Don Pedro de Mendoza to South America, chronicled their journey to the Río de la Plata.²³ He described Indigenous women in derogatory and hypersexualized terms, reducing them to exotic objects. Hagenbeck, notorious for organizing and marketing ‘human zoos’, placed on display Indigenous families, *fueguinos*, who had been kidnapped from the south of Argentina and Chile and transported to the major cities of Europe, including Berlin, Hamburg, and Paris, where he exhibited them as ‘savage cannibals’. These displays, which lasted into the early twentieth century, were a manifestation of Europe’s colonial racism and ethnocentrism and they contributed to spreading stereotypes which denied humanity to Indigenous peoples. It is fair to claim, therefore, that these examples serve to illustrate a colonial memory charged with violence and dehumanization that still persists today. That is why I invite you to engage with the discomfort of colonial history and the colonialism perpetrated in the Americas. Focusing on

23 His account was first published in German in 1567 under the title *Reise nach Süd-Amerika in den Jahren 1534 bis 1554*. It was translated into Spanish in 1731.

Germany specifically, it is important to conclude by stating that while Germany is known to be one of the economic and political powerhouses of Europe, it is also *re-cognized* for a dark, colonial, modern past which led to persecutions, abductions, theft, displacement, the trafficking and parading of human beings, and even to the development of eugenicist methods and policies targeting the race and bodies of *those who matter and those who don't*, or what Frantz Fanon called 'zones of being and zones of non-being',²⁴ beyond the boundary of humanity and the human.

24 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1967 [1952]). See also Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1963 [1961]).

In Germany, too, there are hotbeds of resistance, weak memories in the North itself. I suggest that this decolonizing perspective should be introduced or taken into account in any production of art, literature, history, performance, or museum installation. At the same time, it is a reminder to take care not to present this colonial world that we wish to decolonize as something exotic, or as a piece of folklore.

It is hard to say whether these suggestions will change the way we see and the way we see each other. Nevertheless, I do believe that we must move our bodies, inhabit this *past-present-future* time which, in my case, resonates Indigenous ancestral memory, and come together to build future memories and narratives with reparation, participation, spirituality, representation, and racial justice at its fore.

Translated from spanish by Kate Vanovitch