

THOUGHTS ON A
DECOLONIAL CITY TOUR

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A decolonial city tour throws a different light on urban history. It weaves historical fragments, memories, and decolonial legacies to make them accessible to both flaneurs and those with an interest in history. Counter-narratives and critical cartographies are long overdue, and the time is ripe to bring these perspectives to a broader public. We also see them as an extension of history class in schools and a way to promote critical thinking amongst young people.

Which colonial continuities can be read in the urban space? Which forms of resistance serve to oppose forgetting and enable a multidimensional form of remembrance? Which local phenomena point to the complex entanglements of colonial activities? We want to explore these and further questions—and provide answers based on concrete places and examples in a number of German cities.

At the centre are the colonial traces inscribed in our cities, as well as the visibility of decolonial resistances and achievements. For us, remembering does not simply mean preserving, but also creating active spaces in which history can be read anew and where we can engage with the pluralist past.

Remembering as Starting Point

When we developed the idea for a decolonial city tour, we asked ourselves what determines the discourse on the culture of remembrance in Germany, what should it aim to achieve, and with what resources. We first realized

that there is not just one but many, sometimes overlapping, cultures of remembrance, including personal and familial, local, occupation- or branch-specific, and national. In this context, remembering serves different functions: it can generate, stabilize, or preserve—particularly within knowledge institutions, education, and the political order. These functions decisively shape how and what is remembered—and, above all, what is not remembered. It is precisely here that our project starts: it aims not only to make gaps visible but also to name the ghosts of colonialism that haunt our everyday lives to this day—sometimes openly, sometimes subtly. Remembrance culture is itself historically situated and has its own traditions that can be drawn on, both today and in the future.

Remembering as a Praxis of Visibility, Participation, and Accessibility

With our project, we aimed to leave a lasting impression that informs participants about their immediate surroundings and its colonial history, while simultaneously promoting a critical, questioning attitude towards Germany's role in historical colonialism. We asked ourselves how our goals and methods relate to what is commonly understood as the 'German culture of remembrance'. Another important question was what goals this culture pursues and whether they have been realized. We sought answers not merely within academic discourse but through concrete praxis—through our own experiences and the reactions of those around us. In the process, we recognized that remembrance culture not only serves public education and identity formation but also, beyond this, influences the concrete behaviour of the people who engage with it.

The content of remembrance culture ranges from positively connoted themes, such as cultural achievements or historical anniversaries, to the often-suppressed chapters of violence, war, and colonial oppression. Alongside the accessibility of knowledge, it involves active participation—both from the general public and from those directly involved—in the collaborative shaping of decolonial remembrance.

We are aware that we, too, are not free from mechanisms of exclusion. That is why we always ask ourselves: Whose memory is being negotiated? Who is speaking? Who is being heard—and who is listening? Decolonial remembrance does not follow a linear logic—it is fragmented, polyvocal, contradictory.

Urban Space as Memory Carrier: Walk, See, Contextualize

For us, a central component of the praxis of decolonial remembrance is consciously moving through the urban space—walking, pausing, and observing concrete sites where knowledge and memories are either visible or deliberately made invisible. Our city tours include six stations per city—at each, fundamental questions can be addressed in just a few minutes: What can be seen here? What relevance does this place have in a decolonized urban history? Drawing on historical remembrance practices—such as street names, representative buildings, or burial places—we engage with existing forms of place marking in order to critically contextualize them. It is important for us not to bypass the community in these activities, but for local protagonists to be integrated, alliances forged, and spaces for exchange created through talks with experts and workshops. These can be seen as a form of peer-to-peer review—a collaborative comparison that not only examines the content but also makes thematic repetitions between cities fruitful—for example, the traces of seventeenth-century African philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo, which can be found in various locations across Germany. In this way, remembering becomes a moving, collective praxis—open to a diversity of perspectives, contextualization, and contradiction.

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Open Questions, Open Process

Our city tour can be understood as an attempt to generate spaces for the development and discussion of an active culture of remembrance within the public sphere. Through collectively walking through the urban space and making colonial traces visible, we aim to make remembrance palpable as both a cognitive and a physical-spatial praxis. In the process, we do not rely on a consensus politics of remembrance; rather, we grasp remembrance as a contested terrain, and thus the possibility of asking questions instead of simply giving answers.

Our reflections on existing German cultures of remembrance—particularly those associated with the Shoah—have strengthened our resolve to rely not on shock, mourning, or moral authority, but on contextualization, historical-material connectivity, and active personal and communal engagement. When remembrance is primarily mediated through narratives, monuments, or official commemoration days determined by the state, it leaves little room for collective self-questioning or social praxis beyond the official politics of remembrance, and its transformative potential remains limited.

State-led remembrance culture has always been a highly political praxis, directed less at the past than shaping present and future activities. For us, this means critically questioning the political positioning of projects such as ours. What attitude do state actors currently take towards European colonialism? What responsibilities do we assume as project initiators? And what concrete implications does this have for the realization, mediation, and further development of our work?

The answers to these questions are open—and it is precisely herein that our task lies: viewing remembrance not as a finished narrative but as a process shaped by many voices, experiences, and conflicts. We hope our contribution encourages people to see remembering as something collective, mobile, and incomplete, and to create spaces in which learning is possible.

Translated from German by Colin Shepherd