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Citation for published version (APA):

Chidgey, R. (in press). Activist turns: The (in)compatibility of scholarship and transformative activism. *Memory Studies*.

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Activist turns: The (in)compatibility of scholarship and transformative activism

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Abstract

Is memory studies experiencing an activist turn? What discourses and practices surround such a pronouncement, and what forms of forgetting might such an assertion usher in? This commentary explores recent claim-making around memory studies' activist turn and seeks to understand its provocations and critiques. It anchors these discourses within a wider constellation of scholar-activism, paying particular attention to citational politics and memory, activist forms of knowledge making, resource distribution, and the politics and precarities of the contemporary university system.

Keywords

Scholar-Activism, Citational Politics, Memory and Activism, Feminist Memory, The Undercommons

For publication in a special issue of *Memory Studies*, "Remembering Activism: Critical perspectives on the memory-activism nexus", edited by Samuel Merrill and Ann Rigney.

Activist turns: The (in)compatibility of scholarship and transformative activism

How to respond to the thorny question, ‘is memory studies experiencing an activist turn?’ I issued such a provocation in my contribution to the *Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism* (Chidgey, 2023). In that piece, I explored whether intersectionality—as an analytic drawn from Black feminist scholarship to examine how systemic violence is composed through a nexus of racialised, classed and gendered+ injustices—can be applied or not within research examining the intersections of memory and activism. Beyond the discussion of intersectionality and its potential resonances and disavowals, it was the suggestion that memory studies *is* experiencing an activist turn that seemed to stick. The editors of the *Handbook*, Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg, re-named their introductory chapter “The Activist Turn in Memory Studies” (2023) in reference to this argument, effectively continuing the claim. In discussions of the *Handbook* organised under the theme of an activist turn, friendly discussions and counter-provocations ensued from audiences and contributors, including Ann Rigney’s (2023) cautionary remarks at the seventh annual conference of the Memory Studies Association:

It seems as if we have started to call every new thematic concern, new concept, or new approach within the field a turn, rather than reserving that term for a major paradigm shift that affects the field as a whole (this is the way I think of the ‘linguistic turn’ in the 1970s). This creates a dynamic of innovation that, while it does produce a new common focus for a while, also produces a lot of amnesia within our field itself. Instead of consolidating and working through earlier issues we ‘take a new turn.’ It’s like a house-owner who, instead of renovating their house, abandons it for a new house next door.

Here, Rigney queries the extent to which memory studies’ current interest in activism constitutes a ‘turn’ in the sense of a paradigm shift. This is worth unpacking. For some scholars, the emerging emphasis on memory, activism, and agency marks a concerted attempt to provide “an alternative line of memory work”; to embrace a politics of hope, and to chart “creative collective action” as a counter-archive to the field’s driving concern with the darker aspects of history, including its foundational inheritance of trauma (Reading and Katriel, 2015: 1, 28). While acknowledging that trauma versus political agency theorisations have been rightfully critiqued (Hamilton, 2010), the activism and memory approach of scholars such as Reading and Katriel seeks to re-inscribe human agency, resistance, and even joy, into cultural memory studies’ points of reference. Such approaches purposively articulate alternative desire lines and

less-trodden paths in our shared intellectual project. Inevitably, wider questions remain about which genealogies, scholars, and political actors are included under the claim of an ‘activist turn’, and which histories and precursors are erased.

In evaluating whether memory studies is experiencing an activist turn—the tentative beginnings of which can be dated to (but not contained within) Anna Reading and Tamar Katriel’s influential collection *Cultural Memories of Nonviolent Struggles: Powerful Times* (2015)—we can certainly argue that memory studies can continue without activism, and that activism can continue without memory studies. Yet, in doing so, we lose discussions, political experiments, and methods that can genuinely help to elaborate and strengthen the transformative aspects of memory practices for a wider social good. The idea of transformative activism cited in this commentary refers not only to the transformation of structures and changes to “the material conditions of inequality and suffering” but also to “deep personal and collective transformation” in the psychic lives of power and our experience of the everyday (Altınay and Pető, 2022: 482). As such, the ‘activist turn’ that has captured the critical imagination as of late is arguably less a wholesale paradigmatic turn in intellectual thought and more a navigation, mundanely and modestly, of academic aims, practices, and commitments. This includes engagement towards the university as a site of power. Indeed, memory studies’ attentiveness to activism can be positioned within the wider ‘activist turn’ writ large across the arts, humanities and social sciences for some years now, which seeks to foreground how academia and academic practices can be re-visioned as tools for social justice work (Wittel, 2016).

Through such a framing, the proposed ‘activist turn’ in memory studies could be better approached as an *orientation*. As the queer feminist antiracist scholar Sara Ahmed instructs, orientations “are about how we begin, how we proceed from here” (2006: 545). They move bodies, knowledge, feelings and politics. Orientations may well have been on my mind when I invoked the activist turn in the *Handbook*. There I argued that the emergent activist shift (of attention, methods, resources and commitments) “presents an opportune and ethical moment to revisit the field’s theoretical and analytical approaches, and to query the place of a social justice orientation within its work” (Chidgey, 2023: 65). Following this line of thought, the provocation posed at the beginning of this commentary may then shift into the corollary question, ‘how can cultural memory scholars nurture a social justice orientation through their work?’

The nature and extent of memory scholars' activist commitments are naturally varied. There is no regulation or policing to be done here. Some scholars researching the connections between memory and activism (especially in its progressive stances) have themselves a breadth of personal experience within movements for transformative change. Some may be sympathisers and allies; others may hold intellectual inquisitiveness only. Some scholars dream their research will be capable of doing positive things in the world—what Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly have deemed “a productive orientation” (2021: 59). Others may see the resonances of their work most profoundly within the classroom, using socially engaged pedagogies and academic knowledge to support the “practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994: 207). Others yet may be unconcerned with any of these factors, and besides them, there are those who move through all the orientations, avoiding clear-cut distinctions between researcher, educator and activist.

Methodologically speaking, a wide range of disciplines (and actors) have grappled with the figure of the *militant researcher* (Colectivo Situaciones, 2003; Halvorsen, 2015). Scholars and activists have long pursued collaborative forms of co-enquiry. This includes participatory action research which centers the knowledge and experiences of research participants (often from marginalised communities) to achieve tangible outcomes in the social world through collaborative research (Cox et al., 2024; Hale, 2001). Within memory studies, the fusion of activism with feminist, queer, trans*, migrant, postcolonial and socially transformative actions have found a vibrant trajectory within participatory, arts-based approaches, including exemplary studies such as *Women Mobilizing Memory* (Altınay et al., 2019; see also Till, 2008). While acknowledging these important works, I wish to take a different route in this commentary: to think of everyday, not-too-difficult, and activist-informed principles that memory scholars may wish to consider. These actions are small, minor—some so easy they may appear trivial—but are worth stating. These are everyday orientations aligned with knowledge practices, concerned in part with thinking about *to* whom, and *with* whom, our work speaks and predicated on recognising the considerable labour and knowledge practices that activists themselves enact.

Earlier, I shared Rigney's (2023) caution about memory studies being too quick ‘to turn’, “like a house-owner who, instead of renovating their house, abandons it for a new house next door.” This invocation finds an unexpected resonance with Sara Ahmed, who argues that citations are “academic bricks through which we create houses” (2017: 148). For Ahmed, citations have the power to enact “feminist memory” (15) and can function as “feminist bricks” (16); materials,

arguably, which are useful when renovating a discipline. *Who we cite* is a crafted strategy for challenging institutional obstacles, majority-built brick walls, and enclosures that replicate the dominance of a field. In her book *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), Ahmed chooses to exclusively cite from scholarly works by feminists of colour, not the institutional apparatus of “white men”. As she argues, “[m]aking feminist points, antiracist points, sore points, is about pointing out structures that many are invested in not recognizing” (158). The whiteness of a discipline—we can include memory studies here—is structurally upheld by its unaccountable habits of citations, of paths legitimated and followed, of knowledge repeated and shut out.

To extend the point to memory and activism scholarship, a citational politics would recognise that movement actors are themselves knowledge producers, authors, publishers and researchers (Choudry, 2020). These intellectual productions can, and perhaps should, be jointed into our (inter-)disciplinary dwellings. If we study activism and memory, it is appropriate to cite activists. Doing so might require more effort in terms of finding relevant works, tracking activist knowledge production, and putting these insights into conversation with wider scholarship. But this memory work also helps scholars to un-forget prior genealogies of critique, previous combinations of memory and activism, and helps to keep radical imaginaries open—including imaginaries which decentre the interpretative power/privilege/mythology of the detached, singular ‘professional researcher’ located solely within the university system.

Now, fast forwarding to publication: what to do then? There are long histories of arguing for the accessibility of academic knowledge, not only with regard to writing and language use but also with respect to how that knowledge is distributed. As Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly argue, central to scholar-activism is a critique of locking “knowledge into the university” and the “simultaneous mechanisms of exclusion that function to lock communities out” (2021: 15). These days, early career scholars are broadening their skill sets with podcasts, zines, and social media videos of their research. They are interested in dissemination and collaboration techniques beyond the paywall of journal subscriptions and the high price points of academic texts. Scholars more widely may be fortunate enough to have university agreements and funding provisions that enable them to benefit from open-access publishing routes; others may contemplate publishing work under a Creative Commons license to encourage its uptake and reuse (Creative Commons is a form of copyright activism pioneered by legal scholar Lawrence Lessig and inspired by the Free Software Movement; see Forsythe and Kemp, 2009).

If none of these options are available, there is always good old subterfuge. During an online launch hosted by the UCLA Working Group in Memory Studies (2023) for the *Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, the conversation inevitably turned to how to get this knowledge of memory and activism ‘out there’. “Perhaps guerrilla actions can be taken,” suggested Michael Rothberg, chair of the session. If open access, creative commons and copyleft routes are out of reach, scholars can make strategic use of online repositories—whether institutional or networking sites such as *Academia*—to create digitally accessible iterations of their work for free.

To linger further on copyright and intellectual property issues brings into the realm of the thinkable what an activist ‘memory commons’ may look like. This includes the need for greater scholarly attention to how activists today are increasingly trademarking their activist creations and actions (Szpyrko, 2024) as well as to how memory workers within the GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) sector navigate increasingly complex domains of copyright, orphan works and intellectual property rights in the circulation of activist materials from their collections. Such issues deserve further attention from a memory studies perspective, guided by a creative industries and economy lens (see Chidgey and Garde-Hansen, 2024; Deazley and Wallace, 2017). Although routinely deemed as outside of memory studies’ tacit ethical and disciplinary domains, conventional industry and proprietary issues will only become more salient as we inch towards an ever-more digital future and grapple with the legal, cultural and administrative elements of producing a transnational, digitally interactive and immersive memory commons of activism for the social and public good. To imagine a global activist (digital and embodied) archive and repertoire—with web 2.0 and web 3.0 infrastructures and affordances—is to consider how memory resources, stories, promises and prompts, in all their historical depth and complexity, can become more easily locatable and actionable in the here-now-future as digital and cultural assets worth investing in.

The need to bring a *materialist* perspective into activist memory studies also finds its ethical companion in calls for resource distribution through and beyond the academy. In *Anti-Racist Scholar-Activism* (2021), Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly detail what they call “reparative theft”—the practice of stealing from the university to work in *service* to social justice groups and communities (88-114). For many academics, this notion may cause concern and hesitation. ‘Stealing’ anything may be viewed as unethical, unjust, un-serious, and highly problematic,

and working in ‘service’ of activist groups may appear as an assault on ‘objective’, critical, and detached scholarship. But the discourse and praxis of ‘reparative theft’ must be understood within its wider socio-historic framework. In outlining this proposal, Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly draw upon Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s series of essays, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013). The undercommons—an ungovernable social realm, co-habited by the lives and knowledge of Black people, indigenous peoples, queers, feminists and low-wealth thinkers and creatives in a common cause for resistance—can become a site of action for what Harney and Moten call the “subversive intellectual”, where the “university needs what she bears but cannot bear what she brings” (2013: 26). Polemically aflame, they argue that the “only possible relationship to the university today is a criminal one” (2013: 26). Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly frame this as the pressing need for academics who, driven by a radical orientation to antiracism, firmly oppose “the neoliberal-imperial-institutionally-racist university” (2021: 89). The university is understood here as an unjust and extractive space. As they continue, not “only do many universities have direct and indirect *material* and *financial* ties to African enslavement, colonialism and contemporary racial capitalism, but—through knowledge production—universities played (and continue to play) a key role in the development and perpetuation of the white supremacist ideologies that underpinned slavery, colonialism, and contemporary coloniality” (2021: 90; see also Yang, 2017). Consequently, even though we might love universities, we should not be afraid to stand up to them and un-do them.

But what does it mean to steal from the university? Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly point to the small roles that scholar-activists can play in redirecting the vast resources of the university to communities of resistance. Drawing on empirical interviews with scholar-activists and the strategies they employ, this stealing can be manifold: it can take the form of tangible resources (printing activist materials for free, paying activists for talks and lectures) as well as symbolic forms of capital (mobilising the prestige of being an academic to help advance public understandings of activist causes, and using grant writing expertise to support activist groups). In addition, time can be leveraged, as academics use their salaried time to engage in activist work: “If one can (perhaps duplicitously) frame their activism in such a way as to see it recognized as part of their academic work, then time can be redirected from the academy to communities of resistance” (2021: 99).

The need to pay activists for *their* time and expertise is an issue that came up within the Afterlives of Protest Research network, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research

Council, of which I was a founder and co-investigator. Along with Joanne Garde-Hansen, the project's principal investigator, we reflect on these issues in our recent monograph *Museums, Archives and Protest Memory* (2024). This book grapples with the collection and curation of activist memories in the cultural sector, and in doing so reflects on the role of scholars in contributing to this work and in forging ethical relationships with social justice activists. There is a timeliness to this need. There has been a surge in large-scale funding projects in recent years dedicated to memory and activism across academic disciplines, generating research incomes in their millions. With such healthy financial support, there is even more of an imperative to commit to the financial recognition of activist labour, to generate outputs that are accessible to activist readerships, and to nurture scholarship that speaks directly to the research needs and priorities of contemporary social justice groups, rather than exclusively top-down academic agendas.

Finally, the (in)compatibility of scholarship and transformative activism discussed in this commentary must be anchored in the precarities of the contemporary neoliberal moment, and underscored by ongoing decolonisation, anti-militarisation and anti-precarity actions by students and staff. These conflicts and forces should also be made visible within the activist orientation in memory studies. Beyond the recent gleam of social justice discourse and pledges on behalf of institutions and corporations, equalities are routinely dismantled. Within the UK higher education sector, from which I write, academics face chronic workloads, pension and pay (gap) disputes, and waves of multi-institutional mass redundancies, issued through attacks on arts and humanities subjects, including pioneering Black Studies and queer history programmes. Like many others, the higher education sector is one of the largest architects of fixed-term precarious labour contracts (Burton and Bowman, 2022), igniting industrial action from within. Through the so-called 'woke culture wars', academics working in the pursuit of social justice are targeted, trolled, harassed, and threatened at the hands of far-right actors on social media (Fazackerley, 2021); within the Memory Studies Association there is a much-needed initiative dedicated to supporting 'Memory Scholars at Risk'. As I finish this piece, news reports flood in on the use of arrest, chemical irritants and Tasers as brave international students and faculty call for a ceasefire in Gaza and institutional divestment in Israel (Wendling, 2024). The contemporary university is a site of brutal, implicated struggles. There are stark gaps between comfortably teaching histories and memories of dissent, and researching the intersections between social movements and memory, while witnessing students and staff being punished for acting in protest against the university in real-time. As Ahmed (2017)

reminds us, the intersections of memory, activism and scholarship constitute “a fragile archive, a body assembled from shattering, from splattering, an archive whose fragility gives us responsibility: to take care” (17). It is this careful recognition of activist and academic precarity, the role of scholar-activism in complex, polarising times, and the material and epistemic commitment to social justice within and beyond the academy, that this commentary hopes to spotlight and nurture.

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