and thus structural, terms. Oguntoyé’s predicament additionally highlights the need to acknowledge the co-existence of Disability studies and Black German studies in ways that identify ongoing and systemic constraints as they are paired against structural solutions.

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On Remembering Hanau and Being an Emotional Academic

Gökhan Gültekin, Ferhat Unvar, Mercedes Kierpacz, Said Nesar Hashemi, Sedat Gürbüz, Fatih Saraçoğlu, Hamza Kurtović, Kaloyan Velkov, Vili Viorel Păun

I must confess I hesitated to submit this piece. As a racialized, rather young female postgraduate academic working on issues of racism, resistance, and remembrance, I have been told quite a few times that my research is too political and that I supposedly do not speak from a neutral point of view. But what others see as a weakness, I see as a strength. In making ourselves vulnerable and being open about how research affects us, makes us sad, excited, or angry, we can produce research that is more transparent and comprehensible. “The personal is political” is an often-repeated feminist phrase. But the personal is also part of research, and academia as research is personal. This insight is nothing new, but instead an important starting point for works of researchers like Saidiya Hartman, Grada Kilomba, Sara Ahmed, and many more feminist, queer, critical race, post- and/or decolonial scholars.

This became particularly graspable for me in the aftermath of the right-wing terror attack in Hanau, a city located close to Frankfurt am Main, on 19 February 2020. During this night a terrorist murdered nine people in a Shisha bar, on the streets, and in a kiosk. He later killed his mother and himself. After reading the news the next morning while sitting in the train on the way to conduct archival research for my PhD in Berlin, the world stopped for me briefly. Even though I did not know any of the victims of the attack personally, I could not understand how everybody, or maybe, more accurately, every white body, kept going and expected me to work on my dissertation as if nothing had happened. How could I not be affected by this? And how did so many others remain unaffected?

Two years later, 19 February 2022 is a cold, windy, and rainy day in Hamburg. Despite the weather conditions, people gather in Barmbek, a quarter in the Northern part of the city, to remember the victims of the right-wing terror attack two years before. I am part of the crowd, standing with friends and friends’ friends,
huddled together under umbrellas trying to guard against wind and rain. Before joining the demonstration, I had mixed feelings, as the Omicron variant of the Covid-19 virus was circulating through the population and I was not sure if I would feel comfortable in a crowd. However, I decided to go, to join my friends, and to show solidarity with the survivors and with the relatives of victims of the Hanau attack. Two years after the killings of Gökhan Gültekin, Ferhat Unvar, Mercedes Kierpacz, Said Nesar Hashemi, Sedat Gürbüz, Fatih Saracoğlu, Hamza Kurtović, Kaloyan Velkov, and Vili Viorel Păun, many pressing questions are still left open. Activists, friends, and family of the victims came together on this day in many German cities to support each other and to fight for clarification (lück-enlose Aufklärung) of the shooting. We are adding our voices to the ongoing work of the Initiative 19. Februar, which was founded on 6 March 2020, just a few weeks after the attack happened, “to give a permanent place to solidarity and demands for education and political consequences” (“Über uns”).

During the demonstration, we listen to audio contributions from family members of the victims, but also from other activists and survivors of right-wing terror. We hear from Faruk Aslan who lost his mother, daughter, and niece in an arson attack on his house in Mölln on 23 November 1992. In this moment, remembering Hanau means remembering the victims of right-wing extremism and racism in Hamburg as well. It means remembering Nguyễn Ngọc Châu and Đỗ Anh Lân, who were killed in an arson attack on an asylum camp on 22 August 1980 in Hamburg-Billbrook. It means remembering Ramazan Avcı, who died after being chased and beaten by a group of right-extremist skinheads in Hamburg Eilbek in December 1985. It means remembering Yaya Jabbi, who died in a prison cell on 19 February 2016 after being incarcerated for possessing a few grams of marijuana. It means remembering William Tonou Mbobda, who died at the university clinic in Hamburg Eppendorf on 26 April 2019 after being overpowered by security forces. Hanau is not remembered as an isolated incident but is instead connected to all the other killings resulting from acts of racism, antisemitism, and right-wing terror—at least the ones we know about—in Hamburg and beyond.

As structural racism is often perceived in Germany as something alien that belongs to the United States, many deaths caused by racist and antisemitic violence do not gain much visibility and are sometimes not even recognized as such. This became particularly apparent in discussions about anti-Black racism following the murder of George Floyd and the worldwide protests that surged in its aftermath. While police brutality and racism were widely discussed in German mass media, these discussions focused mainly on the United States rather than the German context. These discussions ignored the existence of racism and police violence in Germany, where they are often invisibilized (see for example Mauer and Leinius 8–13). An example of this invisibilization are the discussions surrounding the terror attack at the Olympia shopping center in Munich in 2016, in which a gunman killed nine people. This attack was not recognized as an act
of racist violence until October 2019: the political motive behind the murders was ignored, and the perpetrator was framed as a mentally unstable lone wolf (Vooren 2021).

At the Hamburg demonstration in 2022, we not only remember and mourn the victims of right-wing extremism and police brutality, but we also remember the structural and institutional racism that made these murders possible. In this context, remembering means demanding and fighting for social justice. We hold on to the names of the victims not only to honor them and their histories, but also to change the here and now. We ask mainstream German society to face racism, police brutality, and right-wing structures instead of belittling these issues. Or as the Initiative 19. Februar says: Erinnern heißt Verändern.

Sometimes in writing and researching, I tend to forget that racism and right-wing terror affect me too, as I have learned to push my feelings aside in order to be as objective and rational as possible. But of course, racism affects where I go and where I do not go, how I move through the world, and how I am perceived. Writing about racism and right-wing terror while experiencing racism daily can sometimes feel like a useless task or a vicious circle. We are forced to cover the same basic ground over and over again (“What is racism?”), and we never seem to move forward, since we do this work in an environment that is not detached from racism but rather deeply structured by it. What is the use of sitting alone at my desk, reading theory, when people are being killed out there? In the streets, at least on anniversaries like this, we are able to come together and stand against the adverse conditions of racism and violence, giving each other warmth and hope. Meanwhile coming together is much more difficult in an academic setting that forces all academics—but especially marginalized people—to compete against each other, to work faster, to create more output. We should recognize that these demands are incompatible with careful attention to questions of racism, discrimination, and social injustice.

Yet at moments like this, in the crowd listening to activists, survivors, and relatives of victims of right-wing terror, I can feel it in my bones. I am moved by the speeches, angry but at the same time happy to have the possibility to mourn and protest with others again. Recognizing and working with these feelings can be an important source of knowledge to include in our political work, in our daily life, and in our research and teaching. The work of the remembrance initiatives across Germany gives me a glimpse of hope. The activists do not let themselves be divided; they keep their eyes on the future by commemorating the past.

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I am lucky enough to have found and built up a community in academia as well, through social media, friends, and my own initiative. Even though we work from different places, are located in various countries, and study different issues, it is good to know that there are others who experience similar issues as I do. A group of people that huddles together against the cold, against violence, racism, and right-wing extremism to support each other and give each other hope. This is not a task that can be done alone.
In the future, I hope to keep building on this knowledge and network. Allowing emotions inside my research not only offers a further point of analysis or a new theory, but it also allows me and others to be vulnerable and to rethink how and why to do research. Being an emotional academic can mean working more slowly, especially in the perpetual state of crisis we live in currently; being in touch with others; being kind with each other and allowing ourselves to be affected by what is happening around us. It also means stopping for a moment when attacks like the one in Hanau happen, checking in with each other, and recognizing our responsibility not to ignore racism and fascism but to stand in solidarity with victims of right-wing terror and racism and to work toward a more just and empathic society in our writing, research, and teaching.

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At the Expense of Black Humanity: White Abolitionist Performativity

A Black studies and postcolonial lens provides a critical tool for understanding the German eighteenth century. When we think of late eighteenth-century works, Enlightenment notions and enlightened social agendas often come to mind. If the Enlightenment stands for progress, unity, reason, equality, and justice applicable to all of humanity, slavery clearly contradicts those ideals, and the abolitionist movement would seem to exemplify them. But there are two sides to the abolitionist coin. White German-language cultural productions of an abolitionist nature are in fact emblematic of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno’s “dialectic of the enlightenment.” That is, white abolitionist works present a critique of slavery and thus express anti-slavery views while at the same time justifying some form of Black servitude to white people.

The late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century dramatic genre of Sklavenstücke (slave plays) is a case in point. They articulate a nuanced critique of slavery and thus bear witness to an early German-language discourse indicative of abolitionist currents. In addition, these plays offer enlightened humanitarian sentiments as interventional commentary on the transatlantic slave trade. Two examples are Zamor und Zoraide: Ein Schauspiel, in drey Aufzügen (1778) by Freiherr von Nesselrode zu Hugenpott (1750–1799) and Die N****sklaven. Ein historisch-dramatisches Gemälde in drey Akten (1796) by August von Kotzebue (1761–1819). Barbara Riesche categorizes these plays within the subgenres of revolution plays and plantation plays, respectively (118–119). Enslaved Black African characters in these plays are emblematic of the experience of the horrors of slavery (Riesche 123–124).