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MEMORIES AT STAKE

# MÉMOIRES EN JEU

Enjeux de société  
Issues of society

ENTRETIEN

**Simon Wauters**

Zalmen Gradowski  
mis en scène

PORTFOLIO

**Los Pozos,  
Alquife**



AU CARREFOUR DES ÉTUDES  
MÉMORIELLES, POSTCOLONIALES  
ET DE GENRE

AT THE CROSSROADS  
OF MEMORY, POSTCOLONIAL  
& GENDER STUDIES

ÉDITIONS  
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MEMORIES AT STAKE

# MÉMOIRES EN JEU

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# Au carrefour des études mémorielles, postcoloniales et de genre



© Priyanka Chhabra, 2018

Photogramme du film *Pichla Varka* de Priyanka Chhabra, 2018. Mme Suri est née à Gujranwala au Pakistan. Elle est venue en Inde avec sa famille en 1947, lors de la partition du Pendjab, et est restée à Kasauli pendant quelques mois, avant de s'installer à Delhi.



# Tracing Transnational Memory: From Celebration to Critique

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Récemment, la recherche sur la mémoire transnationale ou transculturelle est devenue plus lucide quant aux limites de la mémoire au-delà des frontières nationales ou culturelles. L'euphorie initiale s'est estompée : de nos jours, les critiques sont plus susceptibles d'attirer l'attention sur les facteurs qui entravent les flux de mémoire que de célébrer naïvement la mobilité mémorielle. Toutefois, la recherche contemporaine sur la mémoire conserve le potentiel éthique des paradigmes mémoriels transnationaux et transculturels.

Mots-clés : transnational, transculturel, mémoire, traumatisme, mobilité, éthique.

I

want to begin this essay by quoting the opening paragraphs of the editorial published in the first issue of *Mémoires en jeu*, which came out in 2016:

In this day and age, memories are shared less and less. Many of them feed identitarian thinking and, as a result, contribute to constructing the new walls that enclose our borders. Sometimes, memories are even exploited as new weapons. It is neither evident nor an established, irrevocable fact that memories are enhanced by maintaining links among themselves. It is a commitment, a critical position, and a multidirectional, transcultural, and transdisciplinary endeavour that *Memories at stake* endorses. (Altounian et al., p. 5)

What struck me upon reading these sentences is that the editorial team behind *Mémoires en jeu* starts by implicitly distancing itself from overly celebratory accounts of what Astrid Erll has called the “third phase” (Erll, p. 4) of memory studies, that is, the study of memory as a transcultural or transnational phenomenon. Rather than crossing borders, the editorial asserts, memories often reinforce them; rather than building bridges, they often help destroy them. At the same time, the editorial affirms what has become something of an axiom of “third phase” memory research – the notion that establishing transcultural linkages is an endeavour to be endorsed – albeit not uncritically: its added value is not to be taken for granted. The editors’ warning not to dismiss the abiding hold of the nation-state on collective memory is well taken, it seems to me, as is their caution against a wholesale valorization of “trans” dynamics. This

editorial marks what I see as a shift from a celebratory or euphoric moment in “third phase” memory studies to a more critical and reflexive one. It is this shift that I want to address here.

First, however, I will briefly chronicle the prehistory of this recent development. In her 2011 essay “Travelling Memory,” Erll helpfully distinguishes three phases in memory studies. The first phase encompasses the pioneering work of early-twentieth-century memory scholars such as Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, Frederic Bartlett, and – most prominently and influentially – Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs, as is well known, developed the concept of collective memory. Memories, according to Halbwachs, are inevitably shaped by collective contexts – one’s family, religion, region, profession, etc. – which he referred to as the social frameworks of memory. The second phase, which started with the publication of Pierre Nora’s seminal *Lieux de mémoire* project in the late 1980s and early 1990s, put forward the nation-state as the primary social framework of memory, thus effectively flattening Halbwachs’s more multilayered conceptualization. Nora shares Halbwachs’s tendency, though, to conceive of the various groups in which collective memory is located as homogeneous and closed entities. As Michael Rothberg points out, in an essay titled “Remembering Back: Cultural Memory, Colonial Legacies, and Postcolonial Studies,” this organicism makes their work less obviously useful for understanding processes of colonization, globalization, and migration, which by their very nature dislocate such communities. In fact, Nora’s magnum opus has been accused of colonial amnesia: it minimizes France’s imperial history to the point of making it a *non-lieu de mémoire*. The turn of the twenty-first century, finally, saw the arrival of a third phase of memory

studies, whose theorists and practitioners are united in opposition to the methodological nationalism characterizing the previous phase. Memory, they contend, transcends such narrow boundaries and must therefore be studied from a transnational, transcultural, or global perspective.

Indeed, it has become something of a truism in memory studies that the nation-state is no longer to be seen as the natural container of collective memory; hence, memory scholars are advised to take account of this new state of affairs and change their nationalist ways accordingly. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad, the editors of *Memory in a Global Age*, declare that “[t]oday, memory and the global have to be studied together, as it has become impossible to understand the trajectories of memory outside a global frame of reference” (Assman & Conrad, p. 2). In the same vein, Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney argue, in the introduction to their 2014 collection *Transnational Memory*, that “[b]y now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, it has become a matter of urgency for scholars in the field of memory studies to develop new theoretical frameworks, invent new methodological tools, and identify new sites and archival resources for studying collective remembrance beyond the nation-state” (De Cesari & Rigney, p. 2). Other important collections marking and contributing to this transition are Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson’s *The Transcultural Turn*, also published in 2014, and a 2011 special issue of *Parallax on Transcultural Memory* guest-edited by Rick Crownshaw. Clearly, the emphasis in memory studies has shifted from static sites of memory, considered definitive of national memory cultures, to the dynamic movement of memory across national and cultural borders.

Arguments about the transnationalization or globalization of memory typically reference the Holocaust, still the primary, archetypal topic in memory studies. In *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (from 2006; originally published in German in 2001), Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider contend that the global spread of Holocaust discourse has generated a new form of memory, “cosmopolitan memory,” which they define as “a memory that harbors the possibility of transcending ethnic and national boundaries” (Levy & Sznaider, p. 4). In the wake of the Cold War, “an age of uncertainty” marked by “the absence of master ideological narratives” (p. 18), the negative memory of the extermination of the Jews can serve as a universal moral norm, they argue, and thus help foster a human-rights culture and advance the cause of global justice. In an essay titled “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals,” published in 2002, Jeffrey Alexander puts forward an argument similar to Levy and Sznaider’s. Over the last fifty years, Alexander contends, the Holocaust, a specific historical event that was extremely traumatic for “a delimited particular group,” has become a universal “sacred-evil” (Alexander, p. 27) myth that holds out “historically unprecedented opportunities for ethnic, racial,

and religious justice, for mutual recognition, and for global conflicts becoming regulated in a more civil way” (p. 6).

## SITUATEDNESS

Levy and Sznaider’s book and Alexander’s essay, both landmarks in the field of transnational memory studies, have been criticized for their Eurocentrism. Instead of promoting transcultural solidarity, their claims about the universality of the Holocaust, which they see as a unique source of universal moral lessons that presumably cannot be learnt from any other event, can be interpreted as “a form of Euro-American imperialism in the field of memory” (Assmann & Conrad, p. 9). The key problem besetting many theories of transnational or transcultural memory is disregard for what Susannah Radstone, in an article titled “What Place Is This? Transcultural Memory and the Locations of Memory Studies,” refers to as the significance of the locatedness of memory and its study. Radstone points out that

there remains something more than a little paradoxical, as well as instrumental – and power, intellectual, economic, institutional, is clearly at issue here – about the attempt to produce a fully “globalizable” version of memory studies, for memory research, like memory itself (notwithstanding possibilities for transmission and translation) is always located – it is... specific to its site of production and practice. (p. 113-14)

One theory that exemplifies the globalizing thrust of memory studies and its attendant risks for Radstone is trauma theory, which has tended to be oblivious to two dimensions of location that it is vital to remember and pay attention to: “the location of the researcher and the locatedness of instances of transmission” (p. 117). Radstone argues this point at some length in this article and elsewhere; this observation is also the point of departure for my 2013 book *Postcolonial Witnessing*. There is indeed a tendency in trauma theory to forget its situatedness and to assume universal validity for what are in fact local definitions and models. This assumption goes hand in hand with a belief in the ethical potential of trauma theory, which explains part of its appeal. As Cathy Caruth has famously suggested, “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (Caruth, p. 11). With trauma forming a bridge between disparate historical experiences, trauma theory can allegedly contribute to the promotion of cross-cultural solidarity and the creation of new forms of community. In other words, the celebratory, optimistic tone characterizing the theories of the globalization of Holocaust memory that we have just looked at can also be heard here.

In fact, as I argue in my book, trauma theory is such a theory itself. After all, the impetus for much of the current theorization about trauma and representation was provided by the Nazi genocide of the European Jews. As is appar-



Mourning Soldiers statue at Langemark German Military Cemetery, Belgium.

ent from the work of Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra, trauma theory as a field of cultural scholarship developed out of an engagement with Holocaust testimony, literature, and history. It has primarily been produced in Europe and the US, and despite its universalist pretensions, is profoundly marked by the specific context in which it originated. For one thing, despite the omnipresence of violence and suffering in the world, most attention within trauma theory has been devoted to events that took place in Europe or the US, most prominently the Holocaust and, more recently, 9/11. The focus, in other words, has tended to be quite narrow.

Moreover, the far-reaching implications of the fact that trauma is rooted in a particular historical and geographical context have long been ignored by academic researchers. They have tended to take for granted hegemonic definitions of trauma that are not scientifically neutral but culturally specific, and which will have to be revised and modified if they are to adequately account for the psychological pain inflicted on members of non-Western and minority groups, instead of compounding it. Rather than promoting cross-cultural solidarity, trauma studies risks assisting in the perpetuation of the very beliefs, practices, and structures that maintain existing injustices and inequalities if it refuses to broaden its usual focus and continues to take

for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity. It does not help either for it to adhere to a prescriptive trauma aesthetic revolving around fragmentation and aporia that favours a narrow set of trauma texts by mostly Western writers and artists, and effectively condemns alternative modes of bearing witness to trauma to oblivion or irrelevance.

I think it is fair to say that in the second decade of the twenty-first century scholarship on transcultural or transnational memory or trauma has for the most part become a lot more clear-eyed about the limitations, exclusions, and pitfalls of remembering across national or cultural boundaries. As a result, the initial euphoria and optimism – which pervades the work of Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, Jeffrey Alexander, Alison Landsberg, and Cathy Caruth, to name just a few of the leading memory and trauma theorists who ushered in Erll's third phase – has inevitably dampened: it has been exposed as premature, naive, or unwarranted. Critics these days are more likely to draw attention to factors that impede the mobility and flows of memory; points of resistance to hegemonic, homogenizing dynamics; memory's role in border-making as opposed to border-crossing. De Cesari and Rigney invoke Anna Tsing's concept of "friction," which challenges the standard nar-





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Memorial stone at Langemark German Military Cemetery, Belgium.

rative of globalization as a seamless and abstract flow by pointing to concretely localized zones of awkward engagement between different actors.

### PROGRESSIVE COMMITMENTS

This is not to say that contemporary memory research has become a cynical undertaking. The honeymoon phase may be over, but as transnational or transcultural memory scholarship entered its post-celebratory phase, it did not abandon its progressive commitments and lapse into political quietism and despairing resignation. After all, critique is not a strictly negative endeavour but a crucial step in seeing more clearly, understanding more deeply, and, consequently, acting more responsibly. Speaking for myself, I conclude *Postcolonial Witnessing* by arguing that a revised, inclusive, culturally sensitive trauma theory can help identify and understand situations of exploitation and abuse, and act as an incentive for a sustained and systemic critique of societal conditions. By fostering attunement to previously unheard suffering and putting into global circulation memories of a broad range of traumatic histories, a more reflexive, pluralistic, and flexible trauma theory can assist in raising awareness of injustice both past and present and opening up the possibility of a more just global future. In so doing, it would actually deliver on the ethical promise of the field rather than giving up on it. It seems to

me that this process is well underway now: pluralization and diversification are among the most pronounced trends in recent trauma scholarship, though much work remains to be done.

Rothberg's influential work on multidirectional memory, too, is propelled by a fundamentally ethical impetus, which, however, does not stop it from noting the often uneasy, uneven, and unproductive ways in which memory travels transnationally and transculturally. This awareness is particularly evident in his article "From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory," in which he engages with "some of the more difficult and even troubling cases of multidirectionality" (Rothberg, 2011, p. 524) and nuances and qualifies the binary model set up in his seminal monograph from 2009. Even though public memory is "*structurally multidirectional*," Rothberg argues, in the sense of always being marked by "transcultural borrowing, exchange, and adaptation," the politics of multidirectional memory does not therefore "come with any guarantees" (p. 524). He sets out to develop "an ethics of comparison that can distinguish politically productive forms of memory from those that lead to competition, appropriation, or trivialization" (p. 525). He maps the different forms that public memory can take in politically charged situations, tracing "a four-part distinction in which multidirectional memories are located at the intersection of an *axis of comparison* (defined by a continuum stretching from equation

to differentiation) and an *axis of political affect* (defined by a continuum stretching from solidarity to competition – two complex, composite affects)” (*ibid.*). Memory discourses that combine differentiation and solidarity offer “a greater political potential” (p. 526), Rothberg maintains, than those that rely on equation and competition. He concludes that “a radically democratic politics of memory needs to include a differentiated empirical history, moral solidarity with victims of diverse injustices, and an ethics of comparison that coordinates the asymmetrical claims of those victims” (*ibid.*). The significant point this article makes, more explicitly and elaborately than the book, is that not all forms of multidirectionality are to be celebrated as inherently beneficial and politically progressive; indeed, differentiation/solidarity represents only one quadrant on Rothberg’s map, a useful tool for navigating the murky waters of comparative memory.

In an exchange with A. Dirk Moses included in Bond and Rapson’s collection *The Transcultural Turn*, Rothberg identifies “a divergence of emphasis” (Moses & Rothberg, p. 37) between his stance and Moses’s on the interaction of different traumatic memories in the public sphere. While Moses, as a historian, highlights real-world examples of memory conflict and memory wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East that challenge the supposedly cosmopolitan ethics of transcultural memory, Rothberg, whose disciplinary background is in literary studies, writes:

I maintain a degree of optimism about the possibilities that transcultural memory practices can offer, even for seemingly unresolvable conflicts such as the one in the Middle East. I think of Edward Said’s writings about the “bases of coexistence” in overlapping narratives of remembrance by Jews and Palestinians, or the photography/video work of the Israeli-British artist Alan Schechner that establishes solidarity between iconic victims of the Holocaust and Israeli occupation (*ibid.*).

Rigney, too, points to the aesthetic sphere as a place where the promise of transnational or transcultural memory is enacted. In a chapter in *Transnational Memory*, she comments extensively on the role of the arts in producing “new forms of connectedness across the boundaries of imagined communities” (Rigney, p. 353) within and beyond Europe. Taking her cue from Landsberg’s work on prosthetic memory, she argues that creative narratives can help create “thick” relations with other groups with whom one does not, or not yet, share a cultural memory.

To sum up: while acutely aware of the hegemonic dynamics of certain memory regimes and the power differentials between different memories and memory agents, contemporary memory and trauma research can be seen to hold on to the ethical potential of transnational and transcultural paradigms of remembrance without sliding back into naïve celebrations of mnemonic mobility. Forging

empathic communities of remembrance across national and cultural boundaries is of paramount importance, after all, in an era when contemporary geopolitics are dominated by manifold transnational concerns, ranging from terrorism to the global financial crisis, the threat of climate change, and the increasing numbers of migrants and refugees occasioned by political, social, economic, and environmental precarity. /

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