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Stef Craps: “Globalizing one particular memory and holding it up as a universal moral standard risks trampling or blocking out other memories”

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Authored books:

Bond, Lucy, and Stef Craps. *Trauma*. New Critical Idiom. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020.

Craps, Stef. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Craps, Stef. *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005.

1) Jan Assmann argues that the usual span of communicative (family) memory of modern people includes three generations (80-100 years). How deep is your family memory?

That's always sounded eminently plausible to me. It's three generations for me too, in any case. I remember talking with my grandparents as a child about when they were young, but that's as far back as my family memory goes. I know quite a few memory scholars who have a truly fascinating family history shaped by momentous historical events, which is often what led them to develop an interest in memory studies in the first place, but for better or worse, that's not the case for me. As soon as you go a couple of generations back in my family history, you find Flemish peasants, and it's Flemish peasants all the way down, so to speak—as far as I'm aware anyway. That's to say that I don't know of any earlier ancestors of mine whose lives were so profoundly disrupted by major historical developments that their memories have been passed down the generations.

2) The Second World War is the most significant trauma of the twentieth century, and it is still very sensitive in the “region of memory” along the former Nazi-Soviet front from Finland to Greece. How is the situation in Western Europe? Is the memory of the Second World War still alive in your family and across Belgium?

Yes, very much so, I would say, along with the First World War, as Belgium also saw some of the worst fighting on the Western front during that war. In Flanders Fields about a million soldiers from all over the world were wounded, missing, or killed in action between 1914 and 1918, many of them in the particularly bloody Battle of Passchendaele. Armistice Day on 11 November, which commemorates the end of the First World War, is a public holiday in Belgium, whereas 8 May—the day of the Allied victory over Nazi Germany in 1945—is not, or at least not yet: there have been some proposals to remedy this situation in recent years. The amount of commemorative activity that marked the centenary of the First World War in Flanders was truly astonishing. The most high-profile memorial museums and sites of conscience in the country commemorate the First or Second World Wars: the war cemeteries dotting the province of West Flanders, the In Flanders Fields Museum and the Menin Gate in Ieper, the former Nazi prison camp Fort Breendonk, and Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen, which served as a transit camp from which Belgian Jews and Romani were deported to Auschwitz. The world wars also have pride of place in school history curricula, and the conversations about the past with my grandparents that I most vividly remember are those in which they recounted their wartime experiences. While it is understandable, of course, that both of these wars occupy a prominent place in Belgian memory culture, I have often been struck by the contrast with the relative silence surrounding the country's colonial past, which is hardly publicly remembered—the American journalist Adam Hochschild, author of *King Leopold's Ghost*, has called this “the great forgetting” of the Congo atrocities. In fact, I have come to

suspect that what we have here is a good example of a Freudian screen memory, where remembrance of the world wars effectively serves to detract attention from Belgium's shameful colonial history in Central Africa.

3) Why did you become involved in memory studies? Was it influenced by your family memory, or there were other reasons?

I got into memory studies via my interest in the ways in which literature bears witness to traumatic events and experiences. I don't actually think my (plain vanilla) family history played much of a role in determining my research interests, though, as I said, that is indeed often the case with people who are active in this field. I wrote my MA thesis at the University of Leuven on Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, a novel that is a textbook example of what Linda Hutcheon has called "historiographic metafiction." These are postmodern novels that engage with history but do so in a very self-conscious manner: they construct versions of the past but make the reader aware of the construction process and critically interrogate inclusions, exclusions, interpretations, etc. My PhD also started out as a study of historiographic metafiction, in the work of the contemporary British author Graham Swift, whose novel *Waterland* is one of the best-known examples of the genre. However, as I was writing my PhD thesis, in the late 1990s, the focus shifted to trauma and ethics in Swift's novels. My PhD supervisor at the University of Leuven, Ortwin de Graef, had drawn my attention to the then-recent work on trauma by literary scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman. It is no coincidence that Ortwin took an interest in this emerging body of scholarship, as just like these scholars he had a background in deconstruction and poststructuralism. Moreover, also just like them, he had been deeply shaken by the Paul de Man affair—in fact, it was Ortwin who had discovered de Man's wartime writings while working on his own PhD. He saw trauma theory as an attempt by a beleaguered critical paradigm—textualism, say—to reassert and redeem itself by reinventing itself in an ethical guise. So I effectively inherited my interest in issues of trauma and memory from my PhD supervisor.

4) You are among the critics of the optimists, who prematurely ushered in the third "transnational" stage of memory studies and memory practices. You argue that an attempt to establish the memory of the Holocaust as the pattern of global memory has failed because it is limited by the Western context and non-Western people portray it as an imposition of the neo-colonial hegemony. Your opponents could argue that the "locatedness" of the Holocaust is less important than the pattern of unprecedented empathy towards the former paradigm "strangers," because for many centuries most Christians believed that Jews, who allegedly "crucified Jesus," are their "natural enemies." From that perspective memory of the Holocaust is the

engine of empathy towards all victims of world history, including victims of slavery, colonial exploitation, genocides, and so on. What in your opinion is wrong with that argumentation?

I have tried to help effect a shift from what I consider to be an overly celebratory or even euphoric moment in transnational or transcultural memory studies to a more critical and reflexive one. I argue for caution in the face of the sense of optimism that pervades the work of scholars such as Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, Jeffrey Alexander, Alison Landsberg, and Cathy Caruth, which ushered in what Astrid Erll's calls the "third phase" of memory studies. In my book *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, I show that claims about the universality of the Holocaust, in particular, don't always promote transcultural understanding or lead to an increase in democracy, tolerance, and human rights. I identify a tendency to underestimate the negative, harmful uses to which Holocaust comparisons can be and have been put, and to overestimate the globalization of Holocaust memory. After all, there are many parts of the world outside the West where the Holocaust is not a common reference. Hence, to assume that the Holocaust is a unique source of moral lessons that cannot be learnt any other way is to effectively relegate billions of people, predominantly in the global South, to a state of moral immaturity. This reflects a colonial perspective that seems to me to be in tension with the establishment of a universal human-rights culture to which scholars such as Alexander and Levy and Sznaider pay lip service.

5) How do you think it is possible to establish a viable global memory using another pattern (or maybe set of patterns) instead of the Holocaust, or global memory is an unrealistic project, because it is an eternal utopia?

Leaving aside the question of whether it is theoretically possible (opinion is divided on this point), I'm not sure "global memory" is something to aspire to, to be honest. I'm wary, in any case, of the likely implications. Maybe there are other ways to go about this, but it seems to me that globalizing one particular memory and holding it up as a universal moral standard risks trampling or blocking out other memories. I struggle to see the imposition of one collective memory (of the Holocaust, say) on communities preoccupied with other historical traumas that they themselves have suffered (e.g. Western imperialism) as anything other than a colonizing move that is unlikely to do those on the receiving end much good. I am all for transcultural and multidirectional mnemonic travel, and I recognize that this can generate social solidarity by enabling the transmission across society of empathy for the historical experience of others, but that's a different thing, in my view, than seeking to establish a "global memory." The sense of mutuality, equal footing, and two-way traffic that characterizes the former is absent in the latter, I fear.

Colour me suspicious, but advocacy for the elevation of a particular memory as universal and hence morally more significant, presumably, than other memories strikes me as a ploy to extend Western hegemony in the realm of collective memory.

6) The growing trend of far-right nationalism in many European countries is a challenge, which requires an adequate reaction from memory studies. Many of our colleagues believe that the agonistic approach of Chantal Mouffe is a remedy against anti-democratic forces. Do you believe that agonism could be effective enough to oppose supporters of antagonism, or are there other effective instruments to challenge the far-right threat?

That's a difficult question, to which I really wish I knew the answer! I remember reading an interesting 2016 article by Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen titled "On Agonistic Memory." Drawing on research undertaken as part of the EU-funded UNREST project and the work of Chantal Mouffe, they proposed agonistic memory—a reflexive, dialogic mode of remembrance that embraces political conflict—as a third way that could break what they saw as the deadlock between top-down cosmopolitan EU memory and bottom-up, antagonistic right-wing memory. Regardless of the theoretical merits of this appealing new model, though, I wonder whether, six years on, that ship has not sailed, given the extent of global democratic decline that we've witnessed in the meantime. While the far right was merely on the rise back in 2016, by now it is in power or very close to getting (back) into power in many countries—just think of Brexit, Trump, and Bolsonaro, along with other autocratic leaders such as Orbán, Modi, Erdoğan, and, of course, Putin, who were already around in 2016 but have consolidated their hold on power and become emboldened since then. Moreover, the (social) media landscape has become even more toxic and polarized, further shrinking the space for agonistic debate. Given this rather depressing context, I'm afraid I'm not terribly optimistic about the chances of successfully implementing an agonistic mode of remembering across society anytime soon.

One thing memory scholars could and, in my opinion, should definitely start doing more of, though, is engage with far-right memory culture, which is transnational but obviously not cosmopolitan—yet another reason, incidentally, why memory studies should refrain from uncritically embracing transnational dynamics. A better understanding of the reactionary memory politics of "the other side" may help the field develop more effective modes of resistant remembrance, which we are clearly in urgent need of. Such research is still rare, but Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg's 2018 article "Memory Studies in a Moment of Danger: Fascism, Postfascism, and the Contemporary Political Imaginary" provides an inspiring example. Another promising avenue for relevant future memory research would be to critically examine whether and, if so, to what extent and how the hegemonic post-Cold War memory culture, with its commitment to tolerance and the

protection of minorities, may be complicit in if not responsible for the contemporaneous resurgence of the far right. Some serious soul-searching would appear to be in order—as Valentina Pisanty argues in her thought-provoking 2021 book *The Guardians of Memory*, for which Rothberg wrote a preface.

7) What are your academic plans?

My latest research is at the intersection of memory studies and the environmental humanities. It focuses on how contemporary literature and culture more generally grapple with the aesthetic, ethical, and existential challenges associated with climate change and the Anthropocene, the proposed new geological epoch defined by human impact of which global warming is the most salient manifestation. While climate change is often discussed in strictly scientific, economic, or technical terms, it also raises profound questions of meaning, value, and justice, as it unsettles conventional ways of seeing and inhabiting the world. Climate change challenges the imagination, shakes the very idea of what it means to be human, and forces us to re-frame our relationship to the planet and to each other. I examine the human imaginative engagement with climate change via literary texts and other artistic works telling innovative stories that seek to facilitate the perspective shifts and the new ways of thinking and feeling that the Anthropocene imperatively demands. I have recently written a few essays and given some talks on ecological mourning, the process of coming to terms with environmental loss, and I suspect that these may coalesce into a book on the topic someday. In any case, I expect to do further research along these lines in the years ahead. The idea is to get a better grasp of how environmental loss is experienced, expressed, and managed by studying different creative practices of ecological mourning enacted by a range of writers, artists, activists, and institutions.

I'm not alone, of course, in turning my attention to the climate and ecological crisis in my work. There has recently been a surge of interest in environmental issues among memory scholars, which is unsurprising, perhaps, as our dire environmental predicament continues to deteriorate and hence is becoming harder and harder to ignore. However, for a long time that is exactly what happened, or so it seems to me. While I've been working on environmental memory since the mid-2010s, along with a handful of colleagues (including Rick Crownshaw, Lucy Bond, Jessica Rapson, and Rosanne Kennedy), I've often wondered at the paucity of panels and papers on environmental topics at memory studies conferences I've attended in recent years. In my introduction to a roundtable on memory studies and the Anthropocene that was published in *Memory Studies* in 2018, I announced the advent of a new, fourth phase of memory studies, one in which the field would start to think ecologically instead of merely socially. I'm pleased to see that more work of this nature is indeed beginning to appear, though it remains hard for the field to break with its persistent anthropocentrism and take account of the vast spatio-temporal

scales of the Anthropocene. Such work is being actively fostered by a new COST Action on “slow memory,” led by Jenny Wüstenberg, which aims to study the memory not of sudden, violent events but of various forms of slow-moving, more dispersed change, such as deindustrialization, neoliberal restructuring, and, indeed, environmental degradation. In fact, I’m excited to co-chair the Action’s “Transformation of the Environment” working group, along with Rick Crownshaw. I very much look forward to working with the members of our group in the years to come, in which I believe we will see the field make significant strides in its engagement with the planetary crisis.

Thank you for the interview!