

In Anticipation of a Post-Memory Boom Syndrome

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It would seem that at any given moment an academic journal is publishing an article, perhaps even a themed issue, on memory. We are evidently witnessing what Jay Winter has aptly labeled a “memory boom” (2000). The number of publications is overwhelming. The *ISI Web of Knowledge*, which combines citation indexes in the social sciences and in the arts and humanities, yields over 11,800 references to collective/cultural/social/public/popular memory, of which some 9,500 appeared during the last decade (1998-2008). It is reasonable to assume that these tentative figures fall short of the actual number of relevant publications, which span many disciplines and often do not use distinctive adjectives. Google Books lists 936 books published in the past decade alone with “social memory,” “collective memory,” “cultural memory,” “public memory,” or “popular memory” in the title (and 166 books with titles that refer to memory and narrative). Google Scholar lists over 41,000 items with titles that include one or more of these terms. There are two journals exclusively dedicated to this topic (*History and Memory* and *Memory Studies*), and numerous periodicals have devoted special issues to this theme. H-Memory, an online discussion network launched in 2007, features

constant debate on what is now recognized as an interdisciplinary academic field in its own right: “...how humans remember and represent that memory, be it through literature, monuments, historical works, or in their own private lives”.¹ All in all, the literature is extensive. How does one separate the wheat from the chaff?

Memory is a slippery term. Despite all that has been written, its meaning is not self-explanatory. Unreflective and uncritical references to memory inevitably induce banal conclusions. “Collective memory”, conceptualized by Maurice Halbwachs (1925,1950) in the interwar period, remains, in the words of James Wertsch, a “term in search of a meaning” (2002, 30-66), and contemporary research displays discomfort with the vacuous ways in which it has been applied. In particular, scholars have deemed the connotations of homogeneity implied by the term “collective” to be problematic. In the early 1980s, a group based in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham developed a neo-Marxist model of “popular memory,” which stemmed from two sets of dialectics: between popular and dominant memories and between private and public memories (Popular Memory Group 1982). A complementary study preferred the term “public memory” in order to signify the battleground between dominant and subordinate social frameworks (Bommes and Wright 1982). John Bodnar, whose study of American commemorations focused on the “intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions”, also employed this term effectively (1992, 13).

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While these terms have persisted, other terms have also been added. "Social memory" surfaced in the late 1980s and has since gained currency (Burke 1989; Connerton 1989, 6-40; Collard 1989; Nerone and Wartella 1989). It was employed in a fruitful collaboration between the anthropologist James Fentress and the medievalist Chris Wickham, who sought to dissociate collective memory from a Jungian notion of "collective unconscious" and to redress what they considered to be an over-emphasis on group identities and a neglect of individual consciousness in the writings of Halbwachs and of his mentor, Émile Durkheim (Fentress and Wickham 1992). Calling attention to inequalities, shifting affiliations and social contestations, Elizabeth Tonkin's study of African oral history also preferred "social memory" (Tonkin 1992). Later in the 1990s, "cultural memory," originally conceptualized by Aby Warburg in the 1920s in reference to works of art (Gombrich 1989, 239-59), came into vogue, thus identifying the field more firmly with the wider "cultural turn" and aligning it with the ascent of cultural studies (Carter and Hirschkop 1996; Ben-Amos and Weissberg 1999). The Egyptologist Jan Assman examined transitions between social and cultural memory, distinguishing between codified cultural memory and its more fluid, informal initial appearance as "communicative memory" in primarily oral social interaction (1995). The transition from the study of testimonies of Holocaust survivors to the "second generation memory" of their children has generated yet another term: "postmemory"

(Hirsch 1997). In all of these studies, reference to a discernable identity implies that the amorphous fluidity of memory can be contained and scrutinized in static form. Indeed, Pierre Nora's highly influential concept of "lieux de mémoire" locates memory in specific sites from where it can be excavated (1984-1999). In contrast, those who have followed Paul Connerton's use of the verbal noun "remembering" prefer to put an emphasis on the dynamic processes of construction and continuous reconstruction, on memory being in a constant state of flux (Connerton 1989; Middleton and Edwards 1990). Despite the conceptual diversification implied by this terminological variation, however, much of the burgeoning literature is ultimately derivative and tautological. Though the mushrooming of memory studies shows no signs of abating, "memory fatigue" is imminent. There is an imperative for an infusion of innovative research agendas that would offer new directions for development.

Given that the appearance of what has been diagnosed as a "narrative turn" (Plummer 2001, 185-203) occurred more or less simultaneously with the contemporary re-emergence of interest in memory, it is not surprising that narrative, though not the only form of remembering, is a central theme in memory studies. The interrelationship of memory and narrative is clearly a topic that can benefit from critical interdisciplinary work, and the three essays in this volume of *Cultural Analysis* offer valuable contributions. At the same time, honing in on their shortfalls can serve to highlight lacunae in the current "state-of-the-arts" on this subject.

Sara Reith's glowing appraisal of the storytelling of the Aberdeen Traveller Stanley Robertson attests to the richness of memory traditions associated with landscape. Yet it lacks a comparative dimension without which the distinctiveness of remembrance in Scottish traveller culture cannot be properly appreciated. There are various forms of "vernacular landscape", which I have classified elsewhere as "topographies of folk commemoration" (Beiner 2006, 208-30) and, as anthropological and folklore studies have shown, these can be found in many different traditional societies. Moreover, Reith's analysis of Robertson's reminisces of the Old Road of Lumphanan fail to consider the ethnographic present in which the traditions were recorded, evidently in socio-cultural conditions remote from when they were originally experienced and with other listeners in mind. In consequence, her conclusion that memory is "not 'entirely in the past,' but in the consciousness of its eternal presence" is neither novel nor unique to traveller tradition.

Ihab Saloul's discussion of "performative narrativity" in Mohammed Bakri's poignant film *1948* grapples with traumatic remembrance of the catastrophe caused by the foundation of the State of Israel and the ongoing suffering of the Palestinian people. A striking *bricolage* of genres, which includes storytelling, theatre, poetry, ethnic music, and personal testimony, distinguishes the film from more conventional documentaries on the subject, such as Benny Brunner and Alexandra Jansse's *Al Nakba: The Palestinian Catastrophe 1948* (also produced in 1998), and from the growing archives

of Palestinian eyewitness testimonies, such as the al-Nakba Oral History Project which has documented hundreds of interviews on PalestineRemembered.com. Drawing on a concept of exilic narrativity, which he has written about elsewhere in relation to "a fragmentary narrative composed from a plurality of narrative voices," Saloul demonstrates how the interweaving of performative aesthetics into a documentary movie extends past confrontations into a continuously troubling present. This probing analysis breaks new ground as far as the conceptualization of cultural memory is concerned, yet a post-structuralist sensibility would call attention to its neglect of the socio-historical contexts of cultural production and popular reception. It is hardly a coincidence that the film, which dramatizes the bitter disillusionment of a Palestinian actor who has had a highly successful career on Israeli stages, was made in 1998 in response to the jubilee celebrations of Israeli independence. When discussing memory, it is too easy to forget that films, like plays, books, paintings or any other form of cultural production that addresses the past, do not in themselves remember. Therefore the question of audiences is crucial for understanding the dynamics of remembering. Perhaps one of the most telling screenings of *1948* was in 2002 at the bi-national *Oasis of Peace* village (Neve Shalom / Wahat al-Salaam) outside of Jerusalem. It was apparent at the screening that the film elicited different responses from Jewish and Arab viewers. Further, Bakri, who had just witnessed the massive destruction of the Jenin refugee camp in the Occupied

West Bank (the topic of his subsequent movie *Jenin Jenin*), indicated that conveying the story of Palestinian suffering to Jews was a primary goal of the film.²

Developments in neuroscience and neuropsychology that shed new light on how memory functions within the brain are mostly neglected by the concurrent "Memory Boom." Timothy R. Tangherlini's original essay boldly proposes to bridge the two by suggesting that Multiple Trace Theory (MTT) can elucidate the physiological structures and biological processes through which people learn, store, remember and perform traditions. His experiments echo those of Frederic Charles Bartlett, the former Cambridge Professor of Experimental Psychology, which were also applied to the study of folklore (Bartlett 1920). However, unlike Bartlett, who defined memory as "an effort after meaning" (1932, 44-5), or his contemporary, Halbwachs, who examined how memory was shaped by surrounding social frameworks ("cadres sociaux"), Tangherlini is more concerned with a positivist "pass the parcel" concept of transmission of memory which does not adequately accommodate the regenerative and inventive dynamics of remembrance. It should also be admitted that, in its current stage, micro level neuroscience is still grappling with the most elementary functions of memory (Segev 2007) so that its ability to address the kind of questions raised in advanced analysis of narrativity is at best limited.

So, what could be the new frontiers for cutting-edge Memory Studies? I have emphasized the importance of incorporating comparative analysis into case studies, though it should be acknowl-

edged that this objective entails striving to keep abreast of ever growing crops of new publications in the field. I have also stated the need for studies of cultural memory to transcend the examination of texts (in the broadest sense of the term) and to exhibit a critical awareness of the contexts in which memories are generated and represented. To these demanding yet elemental guidelines, I will suggest one more direction which shows promise of breaking new ground.

If Paul Ricoeur's monumental *Time and Narrative* (1983) was seminal to the emergence of interest in narrativity, his subsequent tome *Memory, History, Forgetting* may be another landmark for Memory Studies insofar as it forcefully demonstrates the centrality of forgetting to our understanding of memory (2000, 536-592). Whereas it is self-evident that there can be no remembrance without forgetting and practically all studies acknowledge the inherent selectivity of memory, the study of social/cultural amnesia is still in its infancy. Contemplating the overall neglect of forgetting in psychology, Jens Brockmeier proposed a cultural-psychological approach to narrative as a means of exploring the dialectics of remembering and forgetting (2002). Forgetting is the topic of thought-provoking treatises by David Gross (2000) and Marc Augé (2004), and more recently Paul Connerton has outlined a preliminary classification which allows for more subtle distinctions between "types of forgetting" (Connerton 2008). Aspiring to move beyond these initial steps, a sustained focus on forgetting would require revisiting many of the sources associated with memory and

rigorously interrogating gaps, omissions and absences in the narratives. It would also facilitate further debate on the more ethically charged topic of forgiving, which is intrinsically tied to forgetting (Ricœur 2000, 593-658; Margalit 2000, 183-210). In its conciliatory sense, forgetting can play a role in assuaging the lingering wounds of aggrieved memories. These are surely pertinent issues for our times. When re-examining the relationship of narrative and memory, let us remember not to forget about forgetting.

Notes

1. <http://www.h-net.org/~memory>
2. http://nswas.org/bhc/updates/1948_02.htm

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