

INTRODUCTION: TRANSCULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY

Stef Craps
Michael Rothberg

During the 1980s, memory emerged as an urgent topic of debate in the humanities. By now, a great deal of research has been devoted to *collective memory*, a term developed by Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s to denote collectively shared representations of the past,¹ or *cultural memory*, a related concept coined by Jan Assmann in the 1980s that stresses the role of institutionalized canons of culture in the formation and transmission of collective memories.² Early work in memory studies focused on the ways in which memories are shared within particular communities and constitute or reinforce group identity. Very often, most notably in Pierre Nora's monumental *Lieux de mémoire* project, the nation-state has been taken as paradigmatic of such "mnemonic communities."³ However, with the aid of mass cultural technologies, it has become increasingly possible for people to take on memories of events not "their own," to which they have no familial, ethnic, or national tie. In recent years, therefore, the transnational and even global dissemination of memory has moved to the center of attention.

Arguments about the transnationalization or globalization of memory typically reference the Holocaust, still the primary, archetypal topic in memory studies. In the second half of the 1990s, for example, Alvin Rosenfeld,⁴ Hilene Flanzbaum,⁵ and Peter Novick⁶ called attention to the so-called Americanization of the Holocaust. While reaching back at least as far as the theatrical and cinematic versions of the Anne Frank story in the 1950s, this process of Americanization began in earnest with the enormous success of the 1978 television miniseries *Holocaust*, a media event that influenced popular reception and memory of the Nazi genocide across national and identitarian boundaries.⁷ The transnational resonance of the Holocaust did not stop there, though. According to Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, the global spread of Holocaust discourse has generated a new form of memory: "cosmopolitan memory."⁸ In their view, as in Jeffrey Alexander's, the Holocaust has escaped its spatial and temporal particularism to emerge as

a common moral touchstone in the wake of the Cold War, and can thus provide the basis for an emergent universal human-rights regime.⁹ However, both Levy and Sznajder's and Alexander's studies display what Avishai Margalit has called "the danger of biased salience" accompanying the construction of a shared moral memory for humankind: because they are generally better remembered, the atrocities of Europe are perceived as morally more significant than atrocities elsewhere.¹⁰

A common critical response to the privileging of the Holocaust is to provide a counterclaim for the uniqueness or primacy of other histories of suffering. However, what Michael Rothberg has identified as the zero-sum logic structuring this debate—whereby remembering one thing must come at the cost of forgetting another—is historically problematic, as well as politically and ethically unproductive.¹¹ Insisting on the distinctiveness and difference of one's *own* history can indicate a kind of blindness, a refusal to recognize the larger historical processes of which that history is a part. As Hannah Arendt,¹² Aimé Césaire,¹³ Paul Gilroy,¹⁴ A. Dirk Moses,¹⁵ and Dan Stone¹⁶ have argued, the Holocaust, slavery, and colonial domination are in fact interconnected, and by refusing to think them together (except in a competitive manner) we deprive ourselves of an opportunity to gain greater insight into each of these different strands of history and to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the dark underside of modernity. Moreover, claims for the uniqueness of the suffering of the particular victim group to which one belongs tend to deny the capacity for, or the effectiveness of, transcultural empathy.

This is not to say, though, that a comparative approach to the study of Holocaust memory is intrinsically more correct or beneficial than a noncomparative one. As Andreas Huyssen¹⁷ and Miriam Hansen¹⁸ have pointed out, Holocaust comparisons may work as *screen memories*—meaning that the Holocaust is remembered in order to repress other instances of historical oppression that are closer to home—or simply block insight into specific local histories. Conversely, the comparative argument may be exploited for revisionist ends and serve to relativize, dilute, or erase the memory of the Holocaust, as in the *Historikerstreit* of the mid-1980s. However, theorists of "postmemory" (Marianne Hirsch¹⁹), "prosthetic memory" (Alison Landsberg²⁰), and "multidirectional memory" (Michael Rothberg) insist on the ethical significance of remembering traumatic histories across cultural boundaries. Allowing for the transmission across society of empathy for the historical experience of others, cross-communal remembrance has the potential, at least, to help people understand past injustices, to generate social solidarity, and to produce alliances between various marginalized groups.

This special issue gathers a number of essays analyzing cultural artifacts—video testimonies, literary texts, historical accounts, and political polemics—that thematize the problematic of transcultural Holocaust remembrance outlined here. They approach this topic from aesthetic, historical, political, and ethical perspectives, examining the ways in which the memory of the Holocaust is invoked, mobilized, and represented; exploring the meaning of the new perspectives on the past that are opened up; and studying the ethico-political stakes involved in the reconfiguration of culturally prevalent concepts and frameworks of memory. The overall objective of this collection is to provide further insight into the value, limitations, and pitfalls of the comparative study of Holocaust memory, with particular attention to the central role the Holocaust has come to play in efforts to conceptualize, legitimize, or marginalize experiences of suffering across the globe.

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Stef Craps is a Research Professor in English Literature at Ghent University, where he directs the Centre for Literature and Trauma. He is the author of Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift: No Short-Cuts to Salvation (Sussex Academic Press, 2005) and has served as guest editor for a special double issue of Studies in the Novel devoted to postcolonial trauma novels (2008; with Gert Buelens).

Michael Rothberg is Professor of English and Conrad Humanities Scholar at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, where he is also Director of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies Initiative. His latest book is Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization (2009), published by Stanford University Press in its Cultural Memory in the Present series.

NOTES

1. Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser, Heritage of Sociology Series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); French original *La mémoire collective* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1950).
2. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung, und Identität in den frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1992).
3. Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–98); French original *Les lieux de mémoire*, 7 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–92).
4. Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “The Americanization of the Holocaust,” *Commentary* 99, no. 6 (1995): 35–40.
5. Hilene Flanzbaum, ed., *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
6. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).
7. For an account of the impact of *Holocaust* in Germany, see Andreas Huyssen, “The Politics of Identification: ‘Holocaust’ and West German Drama,” in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Theories of Representation and Difference series (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 94–114.
8. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, trans. Assenka Oksiloff, Politics History, and Social Change series (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006). See also the nuanced account of memory and globalization in Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Cultural Memory in the Present series (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
9. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Human Rights and Memory*, Essays on Human Rights Series (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Jeffrey C. Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The ‘Holocaust’ from War Crime to Trauma Drama,” in *Remembering the Holocaust: A Debate*, by Jeffrey C. Alexander, with Martin Jay, Bernhard Giesen, Michael Rothberg, Robert Manne, Nathan Glazer, Elihu Katz, and Ruth Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3–102.
10. Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 80.
11. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Cultural Memory in the Present series (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
12. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; repr., New York: Schocken, 2004).
13. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (1972; repr., New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); French original *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Réclame, 1950).
14. Paul Gilroy, “‘Not a Story to Pass On’: Living Memory and the Slave Sublime,” in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187–223; and Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
15. A. Dirk Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the ‘Racial Century’: Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, no. 4 (2002): 7–36.

16. Dan Stone, "The Historiography of Genocide: Beyond 'Uniqueness' and Ethnic Competition," *Rethinking History* 8, no. 1 (2004): 127–42.
17. Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," in *Present Pasts* (see note 8), 11–29.
18. Miriam Hansen, "Schindler's List Is Not Shoah: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (1996): 292–312.
19. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
20. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).