

Pre-workshop comment

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Trends in memory studies:

Since around 2000 there has been a critical backlash against theories of traumatic memory. The grounds of such criticism are described below, but can be summarized as concern over the over-extension of categories of victim and witness in some versions of trauma, as well as concern over the dehistoricizing and essentializing application of psychoanalytical models to acts and institutions of collected remembrance. Sociologists (such as Jeffrey Olick) have been particularly trenchant in their critiques of psychoanalytical models, but the alternative sociological models proffered do not sufficiently account for the affectiveness of past events and of historical representation. Nevertheless, sociology has informed a much needed general revision of and critical distance on traumatic memory. I would add that other important developments in cultural memory studies include the attempts to bridge neuroscience and culture in the modelling of cultural memory. For me, perhaps the most interesting new direction for cultural memory studies is the idea of transcultural or 'multi-directional' memory (see, for example, Michael Rothberg's very recent work in this area). Undoing exclusive versions of the past that service national and group belonging, but which also exert a homogenizing force on the group that remembers, this new concept of memory argues not only that cultural memory does not belong to or wholly define the group that remembers its foundational events, but that cultural memories of events may resonate with or reflect a number of other histories, experienced by other groups. Such acts of memory are thereby transcultural, and their cosmopolitan nature has political and ethical implications, destabilizing exclusive claims on the past that could inform the actions of a homogenized group in the present.

The above has defined cultural memory studies as a transdisciplinary field of enquiry. Literary and cultural studies (LCS) have certainly furnished cultural memory studies with the interpretive methods and tools for that kind of enquiry. However, LCS has also provided the interpretive method for dealing with textual specificity. As the following argues, the specificity of the texts of memory can sometimes be lost under theoretical regimes that see memory as reflected, unmediated, by its representations.

Truth of memory: fact and fiction

Recent versions of memory and trauma studies have investigated the transference of affect as a means of disseminating cultural memory, in and via institutional settings, cultural scenarios and historical representations (as in, for example, literary texts, museums, memorials, the cinema, television, and so on). While a transference relationship with past events is certainly possible, memory and trauma studies often attends to it at the expense of memory's mediation. Taking the example of an affective museum exhibit, the *mise-en-scène* or orchestration of transference (by which transference is provoked), the textual (artefactual) properties of the exhibit, the exhibitionary narrative that informs the meaning of its constituent parts, and the contextual discourses that relate to the political and ideological underpinnings of the museum and its exhibitions that inform the way the past is interpreted are often eclipsed in memory theory. What matters more than context, it seems, is the performance of memory. In sum, then, cultural memory is always mediated, not just in terms of its reconstruction of the past, but, as Susannah Radstone would argue, in terms of the mediation of those mediations. Perhaps another way of addressing this topic would be to insist upon the historical specificity of acts of recollection as well as of the events recalled. Under theoretical regimes in which the transference of affect is too easily assumed, where vicarious witnessing before affective texts and artefacts is emphasized in theory at the expense of the historical specificity of primary witnesses, their experiences, and also of contexts of recall (see above), memory needs to be

considered in a dialectical relation to history. This dialectic would not ascribe some kind of essential truth to history's claims on the past but would entail what Dominick LaCapra would describe as a 'post-positivistic' version of history that can frame memory but which could also be disrupted by memory.

Regimes of memory: spaces, texts, objects, bodies

My points about historical specificity and frameworks (above) suggest that the dissemination of cultural memory, which can also include the transference of affect, can know no limits – at least in certain versions of memory and trauma studies. The theorization of vicarious witnessing can confuse and conflate past events and the experience of representations of the past, which means that spaces, texts, objects and bodies in and by which remembrance takes place can be perceived as an unmediated and undifferentiated landscape of memory.

Trauma and memory

Some versions of cultural memory and trauma studies have drawn criticism, and rightfully so, on the grounds that memory is often theorized as unmediated. For example, the canonical trauma studies of the 1990s suggests that trauma constitutes a pure form of memory in terms of the literal inscription of trauma. Put differently, the theorization of trauma's resistance to cognitive assimilation and cultural symbolization leaves the traumatic event intact and unmediated in the unconsciousness of the witness – leaving that witness devoid of interpretive agency – and the force of the event can only be felt through failed or disrupted acts of representation. I find this problematic in its evacuation of the witness, who becomes a mere vehicle for the event, and because the implication is that the event remains free from the witness's acts of association and from mediation when recollected and represented. I would argue that trauma and memory are necessarily opposed in binary fashion and that the remembrance of trauma is always mediated. In this argument, I follow LaCapra's view that working through trauma does not necessarily preclude its acting out.

What is more, the logic of those influential studies of trauma (namely Cathy Caruth's, Shoshana Felman's, and Giorgio Agamben's) suggests that trauma can be transmitted textually or linguistically, in that the force of trauma can be felt in the failure of representation, which, in poststructuralism, is an inherent characteristic of language anyway. Therefore, experience of language is traumatic, over-extending categories of witness and victim. I would cautiously admit the transmission of cultural trauma, the transference of the past's affectiveness in certain cultural scenarios, but not in the universalizing terms just described. Even if the symptom is linguistic, trauma does not reside in language or other forms of representation, but historical representation may be used in the process of working through to reflect and gain critical distance on a pre-existing traumatization or transference relation with a past event.

It must be added here that the study of memory is not the same thing as the study of trauma. In my critical examples above, I've argued the way in which memory and trauma have become conflated. Not all memory traumatic, and not all memory that is of cultural value and significance is traumatic.

The politics and ethics of memory

A Levinasian ethics of memory is often too easily assumed in cultural memory studies. In Emmanuel Levinas's terms, the fundamental basis of one's situation in discourse is to be addressed by an Other – the infinity of the Other in the finite self. Historical representations of alterity will, by definition, or at least according to Levinas, generate or displace rather than contain otherness. This is the assumption of a particular type of memory studies, in which the remembering self is given over to or gifted to the Other in the act of remembrance. However, this is often a double movement in which

the self is also retained at the expense of the other. The assumption of an ethics of alterity often eclipses the political significance of acts of recollection. In a re-working of Levinas's ideas following 9/11, Judith Butler argues that our fundamental situation in discourse (as always addressed by an Other), and the 'sociality' of our embodied life, 'the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own' could be the basis of a new internationalized or globalized memory. Memory bound up in national grief and injury following 9/11 could, on the basis of this Levinasian understanding, be transformed into the recognition of otherness and of mutual injuries. However, I would argue that perhaps ethics might start with the remembering self, rather than with the remembered Other. Only by remembering the self in the remembrance of the other can the politics of memory be realized – one's stake in remembrance – and can self-reflexivity over an assumed ethical stance be taken – in which the question remains, does the other survive my remembrance?