Introduction: Transcultural Negotiations of Holocaust Memory

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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, 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. 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.” 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, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Peter Novick 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. 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.” 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. However, both Levy and Szaider’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.

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. 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, Aimé Césaire, Paul Gilroy, A. Dirk Moses, and Dan Stone 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 Huyssen and Miriam Hansen 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 Hirsch), “prosthetic memory” (Alison Landsberg), 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 ethicopolitical 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.

Four of the five essays included in this issue have their roots in an international collaborative research project on new directions in trauma studies hosted and funded by the Flemish Academic Centre for Science and the Arts (VLAC: Vlaams Academisch Centrum), a Brussels-based institute of advanced study, in the spring of 2009. We gratefully acknowledge the support of VLAC, which provided an exciting and stimulating research environment, and of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts (KVAB: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten), whose financial assistance helped to make possible the conference (contactforum) in which the project culminated and at which preliminary versions of three of the essays gathered here were presented as papers.

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