
Volume 53

Issue 4 *Transcultural Negotiations of Holocaust
Memory*

Article 7

2011

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Max Silverman

University of Leeds, m.silverman@leeds.ac.uk

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Recommended Citation

Silverman, Max (2011) "Between the Local and the Global," *Criticism*: Vol. 53: Iss. 4, Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol53/iss4/7>

BETWEEN THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL

Max Silverman

*Memory in a Global Age:
Discourses, Practices and
Trajectories* edited by Aleida
Assmann and Sebastian Conrad.
London: Palgrave Macmillan,
2010. Pp. 248, 10 black-and-white
photos. \$85.00 cloth.

In the introduction to their coedited volume on memory in a global age, Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad ask some of the important questions relating to the new configurations of memory today:

How are memories transformed, mutually eclipsed and politically contested as they reach a wider audience and move into a supranational arena of attention? How do memories spread and travel around the world? How are memories changed when they transcend their former habitat and move into the framework of global spectatorship, traffic, and commerce? What role do the new media play in the construction and transmission of memories in a world of growing interconnectedness and intervisuality? (6)

In her own chapter, Aleida Assmann traces the process by which the Holocaust has gained global status in recent decades. She shows that, although this process of decontextualization of memory risks cutting the Holocaust off from its roots in local, personal, and social histories, the shared understanding of the event that emerges can, nevertheless, also serve as a humanitarian and moral compass for victims of trauma in other sites of racialized violence. She pursues a similar line of argument in

her chapter cowritten with Corinna Assmann on the iconic status of the Iranian woman Neda Agha-Soltan, who was killed in the antigovernment demonstrations in Tehran at the time of the Iranian presidential election in June 2009. The transformation of this local event into a global image of victimhood at the hands of an oppressive regime, and the consequent effacement of the specificity of the event itself, are portrayed by the authors in positive terms, as the broadening of meaning that the image has acquired in its evolution towards global status has constructed a cosmopolitan collective memory around human rights.

In a section dealing with state recognition of past oppression of minorities, Christopher Daase adopts a similarly positive view of the phenomenon of the official apology. Recognition allows the state and individuals to acquire a new moral code and is thus a means towards reconciliation and the formulation of a common history. However, in their chapter on the apology in 2008 by the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to the Indigenous people of Australia, Danielle Celermajer and A. Dirk Moses are more circumspect. They point up the ambivalent nature of apology culture: at its best it can lead to reconciliation and a new shared future, but at its worst (a criticism voiced by postcolonial and postliberal commentators) it can be seen as just another form of

colonialism, as “national elites . . . think they have solved the problem of Indigenous (or minority) alterity” (47). They maintain that apology is genuinely radical only if it leads to a new openness to the other and a renegotiation of the norms upon which the nation has been built. Apology culture is, of course, one of the consequences of the new politics of victimhood, whose dynamics (often competitive and distasteful) Jie-Hyun Lim dissects in a wide-ranging discussion embracing Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East.

An implicit tension in the collection surfaces if one reads the chapters against the yardstick of local versus global. When the debate is framed in terms of what happens to local memories in a global age (how they are transformed, what the role is of new media, and so on), the risk is to assume the singularity and autonomy of the memory in the first place (and its attachment to a specific identity) before globalization refashioned it. In his chapter “Globalization, Universalism, and the Erosion of Cultural Memory,” Jan Assmann clearly makes this assumption by maintaining the rigid distinction between *memory*, which is related to identity and difference, and *globalization*, which effaces all differences. For him, then, “the concept of global memory is a paradoxical notion” (123). The framing of the volume by the editors in their introduction does not go this

far but at times implies that memory loses its attachment to a particular identity once it moves into the global sphere. However, does "Holocaust memory," for example, become problematic only when it moves from the particular to the universal, or was it always a problematic (or hybrid) category? If one views singularity and generality, and local and global, not as binary opposites but as part of an ambivalent space between particularism and universalism, then the terms of the debate are not so clear-cut. The warning by Celermajer and Dirk Moses not to essentialize identity, which is sometimes implicit in the local-versus-global opposition, is one worth heeding. It is not simply a question of how memory becomes pluralized and transformed in a supranational space of accelerated information flows; it is also a question of rethinking the notion of the singularity and *uniqueness* of memory at a local level (and therefore reassessing Jan Assmann's rigid distinction between memory and the global).

Many of the essays do indeed avoid a reductive equation between memory and identity and offer a more flexible view of the relationship between the local and the global. In Sebastian Conrad's discussion of Japan since the end of the Cold War, it is rather the interconnections between the national and the regional that are at stake as a Japanese past intersects with

an emerging historical narrative on East Asia. Elizabeth Jelin's discussion of state violence in a number of South American countries since the 1970s shows that different memories of these events are part of an interconnected network of power relations and struggle. Berthold Molden makes a similar point in his discussion of the use of the Holocaust by left-wing intellectuals and activists during the Vietnam War. The interconnections perceived by Jean-Paul Sartre, Che Guevara, Stokeley Carmichael, and others between colonialism, genocide, and totalitarianism, and the composite rather than compartmentalized approach to oppression and liberation embraced by the civil rights and countercultural generation, highlight the complex and dynamic interrelationship between local and global processes. In their discussion of the attempt to use a statue of Bruce Lee to overcome ethnic tensions in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Grace Bolton and Nerina Muzurovic also demonstrate the ways in which the relationship between the local and the global always has to be negotiated. However, perceived solidarities across the lines of race and nation and the construction of hybrid memory are no more progressive per se than the ethnic or national stories they attempt to replace. The Jewish singer Matisyahu, discussed by Ana Sobral in her chapter on popular music and global memory, may

have fused Jamaican roots-reggae with musical forms from other places, but, if the words of his song "Jerusalem" (2006) are anything to go by, his version of Jewish history and identity seems as essentialist as any other reductive (even fundamentalist) memory of the past.

The editors rightly emphasize the importance of considering how memory sits within power relations. With this criterion in mind, the essays collected here offer fascinating insights into ways in which memory in a global age can work either as a new form of entrapment or as a means to the creation of human freedom and

solidarity. If the latter is to prevail, the sort of *critical cosmopolitanism* that the editors ultimately champion might indeed be a useful way of negotiating the tension between the local and the global in the new millennium.

Max Silverman is Professor of Modern French Studies at the University of Leeds. His most recent work is on post-Holocaust culture, colonial and postcolonial theory and cultures, and questions of race, memory, and violence. He is currently writing a book on connections between the Holocaust and colonialism in the French and Francophone cultural imaginary entitled "Palimpsestic Memory" and directing a four-year research project, in collaboration with Griselda Pollock, on concentrationary memories and the politics of representation.