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Memory

Radstone, Susannah, Schwarz, Bill

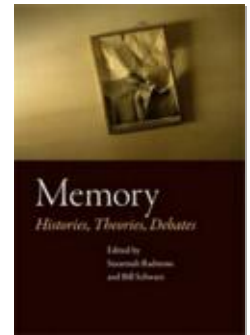
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Afterword

Luisa Passerini

The present state of memory studies requires a particular attention to the transmission of what has been accumulated in this field since the 1970s. That was a decade in which many of the energies that had been employed in direct political activism during the previous decade were translated into cultural terms, opening up new areas of research, in which memory was central. I am thinking of the role memory has played over the past four decades in the constitution of cultural history and cultural studies in general, and more specifically of gender studies, cinema and literary studies, area studies, age studies, and so on. There was thus a passage from an accrual of memory—instigated with the hope, or the illusion, that such an act could be directly political and could immediately give the voice of the past back to the present—toward an increasing attention to interpretation. Such attention led many oral historians, for instance in Italy, to develop the concept of subjectivity—and of memory understood as subjectivity—as a central aspect of historical research. Another element that was brought to consciousness for the historians working in these new territories of history was the consideration that, in Stuart Hall's terms, these new types of history inevitably involve a dislocation from active political work. One essential aim of these historians, if they want to be faithful to the original function of their discipline, must therefore be to maintain a tension between the practice of their discipline and the political and social situation in which they live, as well as to ask themselves how their own work relates to social justice and how can it serve as a resource for the future. All this is particularly relevant to the issue of memory and especially to that of oral memory. Of course, the genealogy of the interest for memory in the second half of the twentieth century is more complex than this brief sketch can say, since it involves great historical questions such as the role of the Shoah in that century and for our present. However,

the two components I have hinted at are precious for understanding orality within the present dynamics of memory and the problematic connected with it. This is the point of view from which I have read *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*; it is true that the book encompasses a larger area of research and reflection than that of oral memory, but its contributions are also very important in light of it.

The importance of transmission, of which teaching is a major aspect, is linked with the general assumption—seminal for this volume—that memory and forgetting today inform and reorganize the terrain of politics. This means that the very definition of politics—or of what constitutes the political today—is modified by putting memory at the center of the problem. In fact, the attention to memory opens up new ways of conceiving the relationships between the cultural and political, and specifically the link between politics and daily life. Memory cannot help presenting the daily dimension of any event and process, and although its rendering of the political value of such dimensions is often hidden and cryptic, it is the task of interpreters of memory to make that value explicit. In my own ongoing research in the field, which is concerned with age and aging, I see memory's potential politics in rescuing the link between aging and memory from the stereotypes that make such memories repetitive and banal. The commonplaces that we collect about this link—for instance, that aging opens the way to the world of memory—can be deconstructed in such a way that meaning is given back to what has become a stereotype devoid of concrete sense. It is the reference to the individual or the group that remembers that allows us to situate historically and make concrete what is remembered and what is not. The issues of forgetting and silence are indeed equally important for understanding the political reverberations of memory.

This is actually possible only when we move, as this volume does, from generality to concrete analysis. This does not mean that we abandon generality, but that we consider it historically, critically valorizing the thinking of such writers as the second section of Part 1 of this volume considers. I found it particularly useful to follow the itinerary that this part maps from Bergson to Deleuze, as it invites us to reflect on our own position in respect to those authors and to take a stand in the history of memory. We cannot ignore or reduce the importance of this step, first, in taking responsibility for the past of theories of memory in a pedagogy aimed at ourselves, and second, in making possible the transmission (and in particular the teaching) of present day problems of memory in a way that cannot be done without first reconsidering where such problems come from and on what basis we can found our theoretical understanding of memory, whether oral, written, or visual.

In some chapters, an issue comes to the fore that is crucial today in the ongoing transformation of the sociohistorical disciplines: the value of emotions in the production and the study of memory. For instance, Felicity Callard and Constantina Papoulias analyze the recent emotional turn in the humanities and parts of the social sciences, and show that attention to affect expands the category of experience. Thought, affect, experience, and memory are thus linked together in corporeal memory and more generally in

embodied modes of memorialization, while the concept of emotional memory negotiates the distinction between affect and representation. In Steve Goodman and Luciana Parisi's chapter on postcybernetic memory, affect is understood both as the unfolding of the past into present experience and as the way in which this experience acts on the past to unravel a new future, so that memories are an affective impingement of bodies that act on bodies, which Goodman and Parisi define as material relations neither confined to individual subjects nor specially human, enlarging the concepts of both memory and affect.

My own itinerary through the book does not in any way exhaust its potential, but it may be worth reporting as an example of a possible transversal reading. I appreciated the first section of the second part of the book, which provides a good bridge between theory and its application to the practice of a discipline (Freud, for instance, keeps reappearing in different perspectives). The section shows the variety of psychological and psychoanalytic approaches available in studying the unconscious and, through it, human subjectivity, making for a pluralist yet specialist approach. We are taken across disciplines on a picaresque tour of the "curious landscapes of contemporary memory research" (Sutton, Harris, and Barnier). We learn that autobiographical memory is only one of a range of tasks that human memory performs, as are the identity functions, to which oral history has accustomed us. Having perused what, for some of us, is an unknown world, where we are introduced to different types of memory (procedural, declarative, episodic, semantic), we find ourselves coming back to our known world of the humanities and social sciences, as cognitive psychology opens up toward it. As the broad field of memory studies unfolds for us, we venture into the physioanatomy of the brain and the physiology of memory, in the dynamic and interactive approach proposed by Howard Caygill. Here too, new ways are opened up: by exploring the relationships between cultural processes of memory and the formation of individual memory, we can avoid a reductive privileging of one side over the other.

But for me the real emotion came when reading the chapters in the second and third sections of Part 2, first of all the one closest to my own field of oral history, in which Sally Alexander uses oral life stories as well as autobiographies of twentieth-century Londoners to unearth some of the "underlying feeling" that generated a sense of class and social justice. In other words, I was moved to see that the theories and ideas presented earlier on in the book—especially that of the dynamic between the conscious and unconscious—could be translated so convincingly into historical narrative and conjugated with events of death, war, poverty, and fascism. In this narrative, individual women appear through their memories, and the story of the single individual is contextualized within family stories that pre-date his or her birth. The importance for the individual of others' memories, a point Alexander deals with historically, reappears in a reflexive form in Mark Freeman's chapter about the spontaneous process of narrativization, or the transformation of memory into narrative.

History as a discipline is conjured again when Jay Winter defines “sites of memory”—the physical sites where commemorative acts take place—around our need to link our lives with salient events of the past in a space between history and memory, one where cultural practices of the present animate historical remembrance. Thus the very notion of “sites of memory” is historicized: such sites are shown to vanish when they lose meaning for people but remain capable of being resurrected when people decide once again to mark the moment they commemorate; since sites of memory are so deeply linked with the subjective decisions of human beings, they become as transitory as the groups of people who created them in the first place. In Paula Hamilton’s similar historical perspective in a chapter on public responses to an Australian TV miniseries on a Japanese camp for prisoners of war, negotiations over remembrance take place in a public space that is individually negotiated and yet encompasses larger collectives than in previous times.

This is a useful reminder that memory is based not only on words, as we oral historians are accustomed to understand, but also on images, which give rise to visual narratives. The topic is picked up by Susannah Radstone with reference to the analogy between memory and cinema, not on the ground of memory as cinema and cinema as memory—equations we are used to—but rather on the more intriguing terrain of cinema/memory, a world situated within the mind, yet positioned between the personal and the cultural as it melds cinematic images with the inner world’s constitutive scenarios. The resulting configuration of memory and cinema as mutual and inseparable dissolves conceptual frontiers between inside and outside, individual and cultural, true and false. This is in fact a result of the book as a whole and a tendency present in most chapters, which pose questions that lie open to future research, so that one feels immersed in a work in progress, one that converges from different directions of research and thought. In fact, many chapters in this volume end either by posing direct questions or by appealing to future steps to be taken.

Another achievement of this book is its multidisciplinary. For instance, its authors acknowledge the importance of ritual for the study of memory from different perspectives: the historical (Winter), as well as the anthropological, which is actually the original birthplace of such recognition, anthropology having always acknowledged the role of ritual as conscious repetition, a form of shared memory discernible in the processes of memorization and transmission, as Stephan Feuchtwang shows.

Perhaps most interesting for me is the last part of the book, significantly titled “Controversies.” Its tone is anticipated in the chapters of the first section of Part 1. I take as exemplary of this tone the work that Bill Schwarz does to tease out the implications of the long debate on Pierre Nora’s *Les lieux de mémoire*, interpreting it as a symptom of the degree to which memory still has to carry the burden of a historical practice incapable of engaging with temporality. A similar capacity for unpacking memory’s implications is shown in the chapter by Ghassan Hage, based on interviews with Lebanese migrants living

near Sydney, on their memories of food from Lebanon, and showing that migrant memory is not different from any other memory; or in Annie Coombes's chapter, which, on the basis of women's testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, concludes that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory but that the embodied forms of the stories those women tell provide "collective instruction," in Susan Sontag's term.

However, this capacity to take stock of a long debate and at the same time add something innovative to it is particularly vivid in the chapter by Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer on the aporia of the necessity and the impossibility of bearing witness to the Shoah. According to Hirsch and Spitzer, the effort to understand the contradictions at the core of Shoah witness testimony has provoked a radical rethinking of the workings of memory and transmission, in particular a foregrounding of embodied practice and affect and a focus on the unspeakability of trauma. The chapter's final part points to two interpretive uses of witness testimony: one linked to an idiom of exceptionalism and uniqueness that potentially furthers nationalist and identity politics, and the other connected to cosmopolitan or transnational memory cultures capable of promoting the global attainment of human rights. In this sense, one can legitimately say that representations of the Shoah potentially give rise to a new memory that is not based exclusively on the affect of victimization but includes the memory of the perpetrators, the complicity of bystanders, and the "memory" of descendants, coupled with that of various primary and secondary sources. All this requires the effort—particularly important for me and for my own work deconstructing Eurocentrism—to decontextualize the Shoah from its European specificity.

As if responding to the point Hirsch and Spitzer make about descendants, Eva Hoffman faces the problem of those who came after the Shoah, the inheritors of traumatic historical experience. Today these inheritors must develop the ability to separate the past from the present, to recognize that there is something outside the horror of the Shoah, to grieve for the dead and at the same time bring mourning to its end.

Although this book is wide in its multidisciplinary, I could not help reading it from my specific point of view, which is to look at the advantages that these many paths of research present for historiography. In this sense I value the appeal by Stephan Palmié to challenge the existing boundaries of history, on the basis of a revisitation of the history and memory of slavery in the New World that asks that we study any claim on the past as a proposition issuing from, situated within, and aiming to make an impact on a larger contemporary discursive and social field. In the same way I appreciate Catherine Merri-dale's passage from the diffidence toward memory with which she opens her chapter—stemming from her interest in Russia's violent past and based on a variety of sources—to her conclusion that the most important insight that Soviet stories offer today is a tale of survival in extreme circumstances and of the dignity that this confers on the survivors.

This book is at once bulky and unfinished. After being immersed for some time in its vast contents, having accepted the sudden changes of perspective that take place in the passage from chapter to chapter and part to part—and yet having perceived the many subtle recurrent connections between chapters and parts—I appreciate how this collection brings up to date the most crucial questions concerning memory today and yet does not claim to solve any of them once and for all, but invites every one of us to revisit and discuss our own work as well as its interconnections with other disciplinary fields and other approaches.