American Public Memory and The Holocaust: Performing Gender, Shifting Orientations by Lisa A. Costello (review)

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Lisa Costello considers what and how society remembers about the Holocaust as we move further into a post-survivor era. As a rhetorician, Costello looks to fill a gap in scholarship that examines “how gender is performed in public memory processes to reengage, shift, or ‘queer’ audience orientations” (2). To this end, each chapter in this volume examines a “public memory artifact” (13). Public memory includes embodied knowledge, texts, videos, films, and museums “that perform memory, subvert binary gender constructions, and reorient audiences to connect” with the memory in question (7). Costello is especially interested in public memory created and shared by survivors and their families. This important monograph encourages readers to consider the relationship between gender, performance, and rhetoric in previously unexplored ways.

The introduction is centered in the field of linguistics, and, at times, is steeped in theoretical language that may present challenges to readers in other disciplines. Chapters are connected through rhetorical concepts, most notably the idea of kairos, “a force of time that is sometimes in opposition to chronos (as chronological time) because it exerts pressure at unexpected moments” (7). Kairos, Costello explains, “is catalyzed by the movements between ‘discursive moment(s)’ (such as the discursive moment that a film is released and discussed), when a rhetor addresses the reader or listener” (7). In simple terms, kairos is an interaction between the creator and the listener, viewer, or reader, intended to jolt the ones taking in the creation out of their present space and into a different one. These rhetorical concepts are deployed throughout the volume, but each chapter can stand alone and is framed both within the field of rhetoric and outside of it.

The first two chapters of the volume deal with film, including documentary, Hollywood movies, and recorded survivor testimony. In Chapter One, “Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah and the Opening of Testimony Archives,” and Chapter Two, “Schindler’s List and its ‘After-Affect,’” Costello carefully considers not only these two films, but also previously unexplored outtakes from Lanzmann’s epic Hungarian film Son of Saul and recorded survivor testimony residing in the University of Southern California Shoah Oral History Archive. Costello asks if these visual representations of public memory will “remain simply chronos, a point on a timeline, or will it become kairos, that force that can open dialogic witness” (46). With this question, she suggests that they are powerful
enough to engage the viewers in a rupture in time, that viewers will respond emotionally and consider how to take the film into their own lived experiences. In this way, embodied memory lives within more individuals.

Costello then shifts to written texts as forms of public memory and concentrates her argument around gender. Chapter Three examines two auto/biographies written by women. Ruth Kluger and Ruth Levy were survivors; Anne Levy is Ruth Levy’s daughter. This chapter argues that women survivors delayed sharing their lived experiences because, historically, “women simply do not tell important stories – men do” (88). Costello does not summarize the texts written by these women but examines them, again, through the rhetorical lens of kairos. She argues that the authors wrote in response to the Holocaust, to bear witness, but, more urgently, to “warn humanity” (94). In this warning, that history was not inevitable and can repeat, Costello sees the written narrative as engaging readers across time and space.

Costello’s strongest chapter examines two films by and about the descendants of Holocaust survivors: the 2012 Israeli documentary Numbered, and a short 2009 Australian video called Dancing in Auschwitz. Both films are controversial in different ways. Numbered documents Israeli teens who have tattooed their grandparents’ numbers from Auschwitz on their own bodies. Dancing in Auschwitz is a music video, of sorts, where a Holocaust survivor and his descendants literally dance at Auschwitz and in other sites of terror to the disco song “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor. Rather than a focus on an analysis of the appropriateness of either the actions or the filming, Costello returns to ideas of kairos and chronos, encouraging readers to engage with the videos as a way of claiming victory over genocide, as a way of reclaiming places and bodies that were once sites of terror.

The final chapter, “Performing Gender in Local Holocaust Museums,” considers local Holocaust museums as sites of public memory. Here, Costello drives home her argument that Holocaust memory has shifted from private to communal. She aims to explain “how affective anchors and calls for social responsibility perform memory by directing bodies through spaces and recontextualize the past as a kairotic, consequential force in the present that requires audience response” (151). While she begins with a brief consideration of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, much of the chapter focuses on smaller local museums in Texas, Florida, and California. Her analysis of physical layout and exhibit content is interesting and leaves the reader wanting more.

Despite the at times opaque prose, which may unfortunately limit its appeal to specialists in rhetoric and linguistic studies, American Public Memory and the Holocaust is ultimately a strong volume. Grappling with its concepts is rewarded with useful insights, and the book would
be a fine addition to advanced graduate classes focused on Holocaust memory, as well as for scholars in the field of linguistics. The way Costello connects often separate concepts of gender, performance, and rhetoric offers an original lens through which to consider Holocaust memory.

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With the proliferation of cultural representations of people leaving the Hasidic community—such as Netflix’s miniseries Unorthodox—and scholarship on the subject, one is left to wonder about the fate of those who are discontented by their Hasidic life but unable or unwilling to leave it. Ayala Fader’s fascinating work fills this gap in the literature by introducing the reader to what she calls “double lifers,” people whose “life-changing doubt” has caused them to reject some or all of their community’s beliefs and values but who nonetheless continue to outwardly conform to Hasidic norms of behavior.

Fader makes clear that life-changing religious doubt is rarely only “theological disagreement or rejection of certain religious texts” but also includes emotional and social disconnects with established community norms, institutions, and leadership hierarchies (124). In addition, there is a continuum of doubt, and men and women, due to their different social responsibilities and engagement with the outside world, have unequal opportunities to participate in online exchanges and in-person activities that give expression to their doubt.

By deftly melding together a plethora of diverse sources—WhatsApp text messages, posts to private Facebook groups, posts from the Orthodox Jewish blogosphere, cartoons from Orthodox community circulars, Orthodox anti-internet children’s playing cards, interviews with and participant observations of double lifers, along with public pronouncements by and interviews with ultra-Orthodox rabbis, activists, and therapists—Fader brings to life the milieu and inner turmoil, as well as the humor and playfulness, of the double lifers. This diversity of sources highlights Fader’s belief that scholars of religion cannot simply consult the doctrines and publications of leaders but must also analyze the material culture the religious community produces.