


Memory, Identity, and Narration: A Book Review of New Work by Assmann and Conrad and Tilmans, Vree, and Winter

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## Simona MITROIU

### Memory, Identity, and Narration:

#### A Book Review of New Work by Assmann and Conrad and Tilmans, Vree, and Winter

Cultural memory is related to identity and the way in which people define themselves as individuals and as members of a social and cultural community. Memory and its narration result not only from the permanent contact with others, but also from the interaction with the semiotic objects which surround us. The construction of identity has a narrative structure that includes past events and new information resulting from negotiations between past and present experiences, anticipative predictions, dreams, and desires. There are not many contemporary studies in the field of memory studies and narrative identity which include a theoretical approach in order to offer interpretative tools. The two volumes I review in the present article bring forth substantial contributions and innovative directions for scholarship.

*Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories* is a collection published in 2010 edited by Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad. Assmann is a prominent scholar known especially for her work in cultural memory and Conrad is a specialist in the field of global history. The volume focuses on the political and ethical aspects involved in the process of dealing or "appropriating" the past as defined by the concepts of victimhood, painful memories, genocide, reconciliation, and mourning. The volume aims at offering offer "an insight into the various problematics of memory in a global age" (10). Many aspects related to memory studies are not covered but this may be a way to avoid becoming too dispersed, as the articles in the volume concern in particular relations with traumatic pasts and the way this past is reconstructed and integrated into the present in the form narrative structures and collective memory. The volume is divided into four parts: "Witnessing in a Global Arena," "Moral Claims and Universal Norms," "Global Memories and Transnational Identities," and "Global Icons and Cultural Symbols." The power of cultural symbols to attract people and to establish connections is introduced from the start. The volume contains different studies about the Holocaust, violence in Latin America and Australia, and about diverse countries from Vietnam to Japan and Korea.

It is natural to ask in what manner globalization is related to memory and to the process of dealing with the past. In their "Introduction," Assman and Conrad offer a logical argumentation, underling the fact that in the past years discussion on collective memory have shifted from national to transnational perspectives, that is, from approaches which defined their subject by geographical boundaries to global positions. This change has obviously affected the way different actors become carriers of memories and traumas. Transnational networks, corporations, and organizations may have a political agenda that requests the acknowledgement of traumatic past events, sometimes imposing a form of retribution for these past sufferings. In this process of transmitting the memories at a global level, mass media and the internet are the most used paths, establishing new forms of democratic participation by means of social networks. With a global audience, almost any political act related to memory (i.e., commemorative events) can become visible for a transnational public, forcing the need to respond to moral and ethical claims (see, e.g., Bodnar; Cash; Gillis; Margalit). In the following, I discuss some of the main directions in *Memory in a Global Age* including its theoretical structure and the concepts presented in the volume around which the process of an "appropriation" of the past can be achieved in a global arena.

One of the most important concepts that guide the discourse in the volume is that of victimhood and its correlates in the larger frame of the transnational memory: apologies, public remorse, financial reparations, commemorations, the image of the victims in different societies, punishment, responsibility, etc. The category of victim includes also those who are not on the current political list for public apologies, such as "comfort women" used as prostitutes by the Japanese army, a category presented in Conrad's study. Christopher Daase underlines in his study the new practice of acknowledgement and apology for a political past injustice as a form of political reconciliation. Questions raised in his study indicate the necessity for an elaborate theoretical framework in which the practice of apology and public display of remorse can be defined. Another fundamental question underlying the process of offering narrative structure to the traumatic past concerns the issue of guilt and whether it should or should not be applied to individuals in recent generations who were involved in past actions.

Despite the well elaborated theoretical and practical analyses, the volume seems to miss the connection between memory and collective identity, a relationship where a variety of arguments for future research could have been found. Collective identity, without which we cannot define ourselves as social human beings, includes traumatic memories, as seen from the perspective of both victim and victimizer. As Maurice Halbwachs shows, these disturbing components are also found in the collective identity of the generations which were no actors in past events: in a moderate form, these traumatic memories of the past pass on across generations alongside moral guilt. Despite the disturbing elements of the past, collective memory needs to include these elements in a positive narrative structure that works towards acceptance of the traumatic events and even shameful memories. This implies a sort of auto-manipulation of memory that helps to come to terms with collective guilt. Christopher Daase observes that people who reject the possibility of collective guilt are those who accept and support the idea of national pride (this latter is a situation playing out, in particular, in Central and East European countries of the former Soviet empire). In these cases we can speak not only of a kind of "sweetening" of the past but also of a form of oblivion in order to avoid disturbing elements of memory and the narration of memory.

Intriguing are also issues raised around gestures of political apology: Danielle Celermajer and A. Dick Moses study processes of apology in the Australian context focusing on the sufferings endured by Aborigines. Acceptance of the shameful past is translated into forms of public acts of regret, materialized in commemorative events in the so called events of the Sorry Day. The volume offers also a theoretical and methodological framework for analyzing and assuming a transnational politics of public regret after acts of political repression and violence. Thus, Elizabeth Jelin's research on the Latin American case presents a detailed example of how repression and apologies can transcend national boundaries thus becoming powerful elements in a sort of rewriting of the past in line with the new socio-political ideals. In a way, in many instances a politics of remorse contests the official version of the past and enables legitimating acts which determine the future of a given society. Individual and collective healing goes beyond victimization in a long and complex process (see, e.g., Rigney). This process requires time, public debates, acceptance, but also the consequence of public remorse and apology. To confront the past means to clarify it, to practice recollection and maintain an ethical public appeal to the memory, avoiding, however, what Tzvetan Todorov has termed the "abuses of memory" and that may appear in the form of commodification and touristic exploitation of the past (see also Ricoeur).

Jie-Hyun Lim underlines the different problems that result from de-contextualization, but also from the over-contextualization of a past event. Characterizing collective memories as "floating" elements, Lim explores historical responsibility and solution such as keeping a veil of silence on what was considered a shameful past. Previous studies have shown that this generally results in a sort of blockage, translated into the incapacity to incorporate and/or surpass the past, that is, to resolve the identity crises resulting from the covered event (see, e.g., Connerton; Dubar; Robins). In her study Assmann discusses the Holocaust as a global icon, a concept used in the last part of the volume with regard, for example, to public figures commodified by the media apparatus or to victims of political violence such as Neda Agha-Soltan. The global icon is defined by Assmann as a universal symbol separated from historical content and characterized by its fast and easy propagation within global media channels. When all the national references and symbols have only the power to remember the past conflicts, the global icon becomes a political tool used to bring people together. This is the case presented by Grace Bolton and Nerina Muzorović: their study concerns a divided community in Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina), a community that cannot find any neutral symbol in its collective memory able to reunite and heal past wounds. What this community needs is a shared "site of memory" (Nora), but everything reminds the community of its separations and traumas. Bolton and Muzorović show that the appeal to the global icon does not have the expected positive results at the community level and that identity crises are not easy to surpass. In this case, the use of global symbol instead of a national one cannot replace the practice of accepting the past by means of debates, remorse, and apology.

On the whole, *Memory in a Global Age* presents a large range of research with well documented studies, serious theoretical grounds and, more importantly, models for future developments in the field. In my opinion what is missing is a more defined introduction that would frame the cases and conclusions presented, even at risk of being contested in the future. The title should also provide a better idea of the contents within the volume.

The second volume I review here is entitled *Performing the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*. The collection is edited by Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree, and Jay Winter and deals with the relation between memory, history, and identity in the specific social context of modern Europe. The main assumption in the volume is the affirmation that "remembrance is performative" (7) and so are all the processes and acts of recollection whatever their form. The set of acts working towards the performance of memory reassert the past while renewing it, that is, they include the present in its narrative structure thus reiterating collective identity. These acts can be located at the level of speech, movements, gestures, and also at the level of art. Jay Winter points out that differences and overlaps between memory and history, what he terms "the sphere of historical remembrance" (14) signalling that they are not just performative but also coordinated.

Authors in the volume present work in variety of disciplinary perspectives and the fact that despite the challenge imposed by this variety, the structure is based on a common theoretical ground developed especially in a theoretical framework. Each study contributes to make connections between the articles thus offering a unitary vision. The volume is structured in four parts: "Framework," "The Performative Turn," "Media and the Arts," and "Identity, Politics, and the Performance of History," each presenting different conceptual and practical aspects of performing the past. In "Framework" Assmann presents and further develops some of her past studies and concepts (see "Canon"), as well as the theoretical frame for the study of collective memory. She uses three criteria to distinguish different dimensions of memory: spatial and temporal extension, group size, resistance to change, and "volatility or stability" (40). The result is a typology of four formats of memory: individual, social, political, and cultural memory, all discussed in reference to German memories, a case that can reveal interesting ideas, especially because there are few studies on this subject and a strong theoretical ground seems to be missing.

In the next two studies — "Repetitive Structures in Language and History" by Reinhart Koselleck and "Unstuck in Time, Or: The Sudden Presence of the Past" by Chris Lorenz — the authors offer a comprehensive and useful analysis of history and language including various theoretical approaches. Offering the examples on Northern Ireland, in "Bonfire Night" Peter Burke proposes a complex approach to "co-memorations" as a form of "participation in collective performances" (106). He also discusses problems related to the interpretation and meaning of the commemoration processes. In a different manner, the same problem is approached by Jane Caplan in one of the most interesting studies in the volume. Caplan looks at the "tattooed body as theatre of memory" (119) in reference to powerful and permanent memories resulting from a strikingly traumatic event such as the 9/11 attack. This sort of imprint materialization becomes a public recognition of the event, thus incorporating performatively trauma into identity in order to assume it as part of the public self-image. Further, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitz present studies which concern graphical and visual representations such as the photograph and Alessandro Portelli concentrates on the transformation of oral history into written form and vice versa.

The third section of the volume is dedicated to arts and media and includes four studies which focus on classical music, as well as literary examples and films. One of the studies that draws my attention is Ann Rigney's "Many Afterlives of Ivanhoe" in which Rigney offers some key concepts and conceptual references which are necessary in order to establish a common ground for the field of cultural memory. Taking into consideration Maurice Halbwachs's ideas regarding the relation between collective memory and socio-historical frames, Rigney emphasizes a "literally performing identities in the modern world" (211) as a way to shape identity by choosing narration to confront identity crises. Employing concepts such as "performative appropriation" and "remembrance as re-enactment" Rigney underlines once more the importance of the interdisciplinary approach in studies of cultural memory. Similarly, Joep Leersen takes as point of reference the definition of the reading act as a "nodal point" (235) in dissemination and transmission of cultural memories, while Frank van Vree uses "indigestible images" from various nazi concentration camps and films as a form of remembering and performing the past. Van Vree's article suggests possibilities for new directions of research as he offers a detailed analysis of the changes in image representation with regard to the ethics of memory and the usage of images as legal evidence. This study, among others, shows the difficulties inherent to the process of integrating and performing the past into collective memory and identity since the inclusion of certain events is uncontrolled.

The last part of the volume is dedicated to identity at the political level and to institutional performances such as the importance of museums as places housing "official" memories. Here

states hold fundamental roles with museums becoming the foundation of new politics, as it was the case in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The case of restitution as a means of remembrance is analysed by Stanislaw Tyszka who correlates the restitution of certain parameters, in this case those taken by the communist regime with collective remembrance. Tyszka's research is based on two types of discourse and restitution programmes: the Czech and the Polish. In the final study in the volume, "European Identity and the Politics of Remembrance," Chiara Bottici underlines once more the need to focus on symbols capable of defining collective identity. Bottici manages to raise once more relevant questions regarding the relation between performances of the past, narrative structure, and collective identity and shows that despite theoretical assumptions, reasons and examples invoked in symbols can sometimes not simply assume constructive roles in the "politics of remembrance" when their objects are traumas of the past. Overall, *Performing the Past* proves to be a well documented and well written volume that contains some of the most inciting studies in the field and offers alternatives and models of research using an elaborated theoretical framework.

The two volumes reviewed here raise new questions and motivate novel directions for empirical studies of the narration of memory and identity and stimulate new debates for the development of new theoretical and conceptual aspects for the interdisciplinary study of collective identity and memory studies.

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Reviewer's profile: Simona Mitroiu <<http://uaic.academia.edu/SimonaMitroiu/CurriculumVitae>> conducts research at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University. Mitroiu's interests in research include individual and collective identity, European cultural identity, the role of the cultural memory in the construction of identity, and the concept of memory from the perspective of identity formation. Her recent publications include "Walter Benjamin e il potere seduttivo di Asja Laciš," *Muse ribelli. Complicità e conflitto nel sentire al femminile* (Ed. Aldo Marroni and Ugo Di Toro, 2012) and "To Collect in Order to Survive: Benjamin and the Necessity of Collecting," *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* (2011). E-mail: <[simona.mitroiu@uaic.ro](mailto:simona.mitroiu@uaic.ro)>