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Transnational Memory *Reconsidered*

Since it became more widely adopted in memory studies around a decade ago, *transnational memory* has offered a very capacious, plural, malleable analytical category through which to study narratives and uses of the past in the present. What makes this category good to work with is its inclusivity and plasticity. Under its banner, scholars have made space for a diversity of new themes and approaches in memory studies. It has also proven to be "plastic" in Catherine Malabou's (2022) sense of the term, that is, a category open to mutation and transformation and, as such, particularly useful. I think of it as a fluid, elastic space, hospitable and generative, facilitating a coming together, an assembly of diverse projects and trajectories that converge around a set of pressing matters in order to change knowledge production about memory. In what follows, I review key approaches and themes that have dominated the transnational memory agenda in the last decade.

Concepts do not emerge in a vacuum; their ground must be prepared for and nourished. From the late 2000s onwards, several scholars at the forefront of memory theory were thinking along transnational lines. Ann Rigney had created momentum at Utrecht University around her collaborative research on the dynamic mediation of remembrance by bringing together many enthusiastic junior researchers and hosting some of the most interesting theorists of memory (Erll and Rigney 2009a). The forum for rethinking memory that she created was itself transnational as it consisted of a busy local program of events with an international dimension and an active network crisscrossing the world, or at least some parts of it. In 2009 Michael Rothberg published his book on *Multidirectional Memory*; Astrid Erll (2011a) was working on notions of transcultural and travelling memories. Aleida Assmann was also thinking with the transnational at the time. Important points of reference were the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission dealing with apartheid's crimes and Cape Town's District Six museum as well as the work on post-apartheid heritage by University of Western Cape's historians like Premesh Lalu and Ciraj Rassool (e.g., Lalu 2009). Along with many others, these scholars were frequent guests in Utrecht. There, conversations were intense, deeply enriching, programmatic; participants had a sense of being part of a paradigmatic shift. There was a consensus that the traditional focus on dominant national memories, monuments and other institutionalized sites and practices had exhausted its explanatory potential; or rather, that there was much more beyond them to be investigated – a kind of constitutive outside of national memories made of movements and contestations. It is out of these ideas and conversations, and the vibrant

network that sustained them, that the category of transnational memory was crafted (De Cesari and Rigney 2014).

A set of concerns that memory studies had previously neglected came to shape this approach. Scholars in the field were busy exploring the impactful changes of "memory in a global age" (Assmann and Conrad 2010) with a special focus on the Holocaust as spreading cosmopolitan discourse promoting a generalized ethical culture of human rights (Levy and Sznaider 2002). Yet, topics of diaspora and migration remained poorly researched in studies of memory, despite the latter's crucial role in keeping migrant communities together and shaping their identities and social lives across global ethnoscapes. Also, crucial issues of slavery and colonial memory were given little attention – which was surprising especially if one considers the popularity and reach of media and literary phenomena such as the American TV series *Roots* and the work of African-American novelist Toni Morrison, for example. This lack of engagement testified to the truth of Ann Stoler's theory of colonial aphasia (2011), or the idea that the afterlives of colonialism (Hartman 2008) continue to exert a profound influence on the present but are not addressed in both public and scholarly discourse.

Another issue of growing relevance to public life and memory studies was the question of European memory and heritage. Indeed, the European Union had developed a memory-centered narrative defining itself as emerging from the ashes of WWII and the Holocaust – as the latter's radical negation – and in terms of a cosmopolitan identity dissolving the opposition between self and other in an embrace of diversity. This narrative was both at its peak (with the EU being awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 2012) and already in crisis on multiple fronts. It was not only Eurosceptics who were questioning this narrative of the EU as inclusive force for good rooted in a profound awareness of history. There were also scholarly and activist critiques of its fundamental exclusions. Critics exposed a resurging sense of European superiority embedded in this narrative as well as a novel form of moral and epistemic imperialism towards what was and is deemed non-European (perceptible, for example, in the trope of Europe as beacon of human rights). The EU, in essence, was using memory to foster a shared continental identity and legitimate itself in the face of its failures, crises and critics. This involved a politics of regret centered on the Holocaust and, increasingly, also on the crimes committed by communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

Colonialism was largely absent, or only nominally present, in these institutional policies of European memory. As such, these policies continued to reproduce containerized ideas of Europe as separated from the rest of the world and thus, silently but effectively, exclude postcolonial citizens from Europe's (imagined and real) community. Furthermore, European memory policy created a dilemma and discursive split along the East-West axis: by promoting anti-communist memory as

articulated by nationalist, right-wing elites in Eastern Europe and beyond, the EU contributed to a form of historical revisionism that rehabilitates anti-communist nationalists who had been Nazi allies during WWII. All these concerns became key topics in transnational memory. But the main goal and achievement of those scholars who mobilized the term was not to add overlooked topics to the memory studies agenda. There was a more foundational drive to this work.

Transnational memory fundamentally took aim at the methodological nationalism and problem of scale in memory studies, that is, at the then largely unquestioned centrality of the nation(-state) as unit and framework of analysis (De Cesari and Rigney 2014; Wüstenberg 2019). Cultural memory was viewed as shaped by and contained within national boundaries. It was viewed as isomorphic with national culture and the national territory. Within these boundaries, the research focus was on canonic sites conveying the national memory narrative, as in the case of Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* approach that long dominated memory studies. Yet, this framework was lacking not only in its poor grasp of obviously transnational phenomena such as migrant and diasporic memory. Another key problem was its limited conceptualization of how national memories and national canons are constituted. Transnational approaches view them as multidirectionally constituted by the agency of an interplay of social, political and symbolic forces beside the nation-state.

In nation-centered analytics, the state is a monolithic entity and the central actor in memory making, barely disturbed by counter-memories pressuring it from below. The relationship between memory actors is viewed as a matter of static, antagonistic opposition. Furthermore, the various scales of memory (local/from below, national, international/global) are conceived as nested containers. If local/grassroots memories are (separated from but) contained within the nation, national memories together combine a kind of mosaic within the larger, world heritage container. For example, the World Heritage List run by UNESCO is organized by country – being essentially made up of national subsets of cultural properties. Many formations of memory, however, do not fit into this neat scheme as they are constituted by and constitutive of complex interplays of cross-scalar phenomena. Between the late 2000s and the early 2010s, then, memory studies was becoming increasingly aware that even the most territorialized national narratives are connected with transnational processes in multiple ways, but these links are obscured. Even memory studies' hallmark case of the French *lieux de mémoire* was shown to be grounded in a constitutive exclusion of the colonial past (Stoler 2011). Ann Stoler further demonstrated that scholars should not conceive contemporary societies' relationship to colonialism in terms of colonial amnesia and forgetting, but illuminate what is rather

an occlusion of memory, an inability if not unwillingness to address and take responsibility for colonial duress (2016).

Similarly, Nora's idea that sites of modern, institutional memory had replaced local memories based on community, kinship and intergenerational transmission did not stand the test of a growing body of rich and detailed studies. My own work on Palestinian heritage and memory at the time shed light on the ambivalent contiguity between grassroots counter-memories – already transnationalized by diasporic conditions – and an equally transnational cultural development discourse promoted by local civil societies and NGOs as well as international donors. More generally, across the Global South, (post)coloniality combined with neoliberal policy changes and cultural capitalism had created a fertile ground for new transnational development discourses emphasizing culture and participation, driven by an alliance between international institutions like UNESCO's World Heritage and increasingly NGOized local civil societies. In many contexts, this alliance has sidestepped and taken over functions from states, weakened by neoliberal reforms and budget cuts, and postcolonial failure. Also, EU supranational memory policy, to a certain extent, builds on a similar logic by working via dispersed civil society projects. Yet, this multiplication of actors of governance and memory and the complexification of their relationships did not cause the withering away of the nation-state; to the contrary, ethno-national memories have experienced a resurgence especially in the political imaginary of new right-wing populist movements (De Cesari and Kaya 2020). All these topics continue to be explored by scholars of transnational memory.

What has changed since the early 2010s? Which lines of inquiry are being pursued? What is transnational memory today? Arguably, it continues to offer an open conceptual space fostering diverse inquiries with a commitment to explore memories beyond the nation and analyze matters of transnational agency and power. Yet, three intertwined issues have taken center stage within and beyond this space and memory studies at large: the explosion of colonial memories afforded by digital platforms and memory-related activism (Rigney 2018a; Fridman 2023; De Cesari and Modest forthcoming). Decoloniality, digitality, and memory activism have been articulated with and propelled one another, resulting in a significant shift in tropes and modalities of memory formation. The context now is that of a transnationalized global public sphere becoming more decentralized, polarized, and interconnected in uneven, asymmetric ways. Across this transnationalized space, memory activists' networked initiatives have spread a new sense that the so-called colonial past is not past at all, and that the many "colonial durabilities" that shape the present must be addressed to achieve social justice and peace. Colonialism' invisibilized heritage of racialized inequalities endures, reproducing structural "duress" for a major portion of the world's population (Stoler

2016). Racism is part of this heritage – a kind of "implicit memory" (Erll 2022; De Cesari 2023; see also Wekker 2016) – operating at both the institutional and individual level. Arguably, there is a widespread sense that colonial heritage must be dealt with in order to move forward.

Two major socio-political movements of our times, significantly named after the related hashtags, epitomize the networked production of colonial memory for socio-political change, and the effective mobilization of mnemonic tactics to highlight and fight structural racism: #BlackLivesMatter and #RhodesMustFall. While there are differences between the two, they share key aspects that are particularly relevant for scholars of transnational memory (Jethro and Merrill 2024). They are decentralized, resourceful, creative, consisting of a multitude of loosely connected chapters or simply groups inspiring each other across borders. They mobilize art and memory for a political cause, communicating over social media. Activists use the latter to circulate and magnify highly symbolic, performative physical actions that target sites of celebratory colonial memory, most prominently, statues of major colonial figures across worlds (Rhodes, Colston, etc.). These are attacks on memory sites: statues have been thrown in rivers, or painted over, and feces have been thrown at them (Rigney 2023). Activists perform these attacks in order to expose the violent matrix of the institutions of our social life, which remain imbued with colonialism, all hidden in plain sight. Coloniality not having vanished, the emancipatory work of transnational memory then consists, now, in engaging with this heritage of race.

Since October 2023, memories of the Holocaust are omnipresent in narratives of Gaza and Israel/Palestine – on all political sides – in a kind of asymmetric, antagonistic multidirectionality. Transnational memories are reproduced and transformed while being activated as interpretive lenses to read present events and as affective media through which those events are experienced and acted upon. The memory of the archetypical genocide is being mobilized by the Israeli government to legitimize its Gaza campaign that for many scholars and "plausibly," the International Court of Justice is genocidal (e.g., Goldberg 2024; see also Bartov et al. 2023). The most violent form of racism is perpetrated in the name of a fundamental anti-racism battle, the fight against antisemitism, and a militarized memory. This calls then for a thorough investigation of the specter of race in memory, and of the dangers of uses and abuses of memory and proliferating antagonistic multidirectionalities.