

The Transcultural Turn

Interrogating Memory Between and Beyond Borders

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DE GRUYTER

ISBN 978-3-11-033752-5
e-ISBN 978-3-11-033761-7
ISSN 1613-8961

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data are available on the internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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Cover illustration: ● ● ●

Typesetting: PTP-Berlin Protago-TEX-Production GmbH, Berlin

Printing: ● ● ●

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper

www.degruyter.com

A. Dirk Moses and Michael Rothberg

A Dialogue on the Ethics and Politics of Transcultural Memory

Dirk Moses:

This is a timely book. Memory studies, so long focused on “the nation” as the master unit of analysis, has joined the trend in the humanities and social sciences to study its chosen phenomena in a globalised and transnational – or, rather, transcultural – mode. We are not talking about intercultural encounters between distinct traditions that otherwise bear no relation to one another. This book goes further, making “transculturality” its object of inquiry rather than solely discrete ideas or memories whose circulation can be traced or boundary crossing analysed. That is, the very constitution of local memories, especially those pertaining to war and occupation, are shot through with references to other cultures and nations, and not only of oppressive ones. Traumatic memory is necessarily analogical: we did not just suffer; we suffered like this or that, or we suffered more than or differently from them. Even claims to unique suffering are implicitly comparative, that is, transcultural.

Without analogues, it is difficult to successfully bid for recognition, because the common sense of a public sphere will ascribe significance to certain types of suffering and not to others. As a number of chapters here note, the Holocaust has been held up as representing the West’s common sense standard of suffering. How and why it has come been constructed as the “gold standard” in the Western memory regime is being investigated by scholars, Michael Rothberg among them. His notion of “multidirectionality” brilliantly captures the spatial quality of memory. Transculturality gestures to the temporal dimension of memory’s analogical aspect. Contemporary memories are not only interpolated by other cultures but incorporate within them an archive about their relations in the past, whether stories of victory and exultation, defeat and humiliation, or relative coexistence, if with an emphatic sense of hierarchy.

The editors and some authors here plead for an ethics of transcultural memory; consciousness of implication in others’ mnemonic archive makes subjects “acknowledge our implication in each other’s suffering and loss, and to begin to imagine a more equitable future in which such violence might be minimized through an acknowledgement of our common humanity, grounded by the awareness of our mutual experience of histories of destruction”. Just as I applaud this cosmopolitan ethic, I ponder its challenges. Consider the ugly debate transpiring today about the “double genocide” thesis in Eastern Europe and particularly in Lithuania. Since the independence of the former Soviet Baltic republic,

which chafed under Soviet rule for generations, ultra-nationalist political forces have insisted on describing the Lithuanian experience as genocide, and indeed the country's parliament has passed a law broadening the United Nations definition to include deportations and attacks on cultural ("spiritual") genocide. Not for nothing is the institution dedicated to the Soviet occupation called the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania. By contrast, the Holocaust is marginalized in Lithuanian official memory, not least, say critics, because heroes of the resistance – nationalists – were co-perpetrators of the Holocaust of Lithuanian Jewry, of whom only 5% survived.

The same memory constellation is apparent across east-central and northern Europe, that is, where relatively smaller countries were occupied by the Soviets: "the Russians". The "double genocide" thesis, which posits that Baltic and Slavic peoples were subject to Soviet genocide just as Jews were victims of the Nazi genocide, is of course a species of totalitarianism theory. Its point is to replace the hierarchy of genocide apparent in the West's memory regime – with the Holocaust at its apex, as in the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust in 2000 – with an equalized memory field. That is why the new states of east-central and northern Europe prodded the European Union to pass the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism in 2008, and establish the Platform of European Memory and Conscience in 2011; they are dedicated to researching and memorializing the crimes of totalitarianism. As in Lithuania, Poland's bearers of this memory project are also those dedicated to national(ist) memory and resistance against Russian imperialism, in this case, the Institute of National Remembrance and the Warsaw Rising Museum.

These developments represent a full frontal assault on the Western memory regime. It is certainly transcultural, but hardly cosmopolitan. Regrettably, the canard that Jews in this region – called the "bloodlands" by Timothy Snyder in his recent book on Stalinist and Nazi crimes in the 1930s and 1940s – supported the Soviet Union and were therefore attacked by their Christian neighbours when the Nazis passed through, is apparent in this debate. Also unfortunate is the zero-sum game structure of these rival memories; to isolate the Holocaust – or more concretely, say, the Jews of Vilnius – as an object of memory is experienced by Lithuanian nationalists as an unbearable effacement of their nation's travails under communism. It is "Jewish memory" rather than Baltic memory, indeed a form of Western domination. Likewise, for many others, the double genocide thesis, while not denying the actual killings, though soft-peddalling local collaboration, is an unbearable flattening out of distinct forms and intensities of violence (see <http://defendinghistory.com/>). What are the ethics of transculturality in this situation?

Michael Rothberg:

The Transcultural Turn is dedicated to exploring new tendencies in memory studies from a tri-focal perspective that suggests the need for attention to theoretical *definitions* of actually existing transcultural and transnational connections; the ethical and political *problems* that attend the circulation of memories; and the *possibilities* for counter-narratives and new forms of solidarity that sometimes emerge when practices of remembrance are recognized as implicated in each other. The rich essays collected here offer just that mix of interventions: they trace diasporic networks, delve into dispiriting conflicts about the past, and chart constellations of unexpected relationality. Such a multi-levelled approach to collective memory is necessary in our dynamic, globalizing world. Yet, as Dirk Moses argues pointedly in his remarks above, the actually existing realm of transcultural memory often seems primarily to be a place of bitter contestation, competitive claims, and righteous victims. How, he asks, can we actualize truly cosmopolitan attitudes and transcultural ethics in such treacherous terrain?

Before returning to this critical question, let me step back for a moment and consider the framing of this book in terms of *transcultural* memory. The category “transcultural” operates in the vicinity of other adjectival qualifiers that have recently emerged in the rapidly growing field of memory studies – most prominently “transnational” and “global”, as the editors of this volume suggest. Within that constellation of terms, the term transcultural does a particular kind of conceptual work. It points us toward the fact that the founding texts of collective memory studies are not simply or uniquely embedded in the assumption that remembrance can only be understood in *national* and *local* frameworks – an assumption thus in need of *transnational* and *global* methodological innovations. At an even deeper conceptual level, these theories have reproduced assumptions about what constitutes a *culture* that are no longer tenable; they have assumed that only discrete and homogenous cultures and social groups can become bearers of memory. Astrid Erll has usefully traced this assumption back to a conception of ‘container-culture’ inherited from the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (among other sources), a conception that persists in much recent work on collective memory. In the foundational theories in the field, “cultures [...] remain relatively clear-cut social formations, usually coinciding with the contours of regions, kingdoms and nation-states”; there is, in other words, “an isomorphy between territory, social formation, mentalities, and memories” that blocks recognition of transcultural dynamics (Erll 2011a, 7). Even as we have begun to acquire a usable history of memory studies – for example, through Erll’s own work (2011b) as well as the creation of valuable new source books such as *The Collective Memory Reader* (Olick et al. 2011) – we need to turn a critical eye on the background assumptions of the field.

Thinking of memory as transcultural means seeking to break through the isomorphic imagination that underpins – still valuable – models such as Maurice Halbwachs’s “collective memory”, Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*, Jan and Aleida Assmann’s “cultural memory”, and Avishai Margalit’s “ethics of memory”. In contrast to these models, which risk inadvertently instituting ‘ethnified’ notions of memory, the wager of a theory of transcultural memory is that other collective agents of memory exist who are not indebted to the Herderian notion of discrete cultures. Transcultural memory also offers a vision that cuts across the different scales evoked by the frameworks of transnational or global memory. That is, there is nothing inherently transcultural about transnational or global dynamics and nothing inherently monocultural about the local. A transnational formation such as Europe may be tendentially monocultural in its ideology or effects – note the attempted construction of a common “Judeo-Christian” culture in contemporary Europe that excludes Islam – and globalization has long been recognized as having homogenizing effects as well as being a force for heterogeneity. Meanwhile, most locales are deeply transcultural – not only cities (like the Berlin discussed in the essays of Tomsy and Meyer) but also the villages whose assumed homogeneity served as Nora’s nostalgic model for the idealized *milieu de mémoire* that preexisted the intrusion of modernity. The transcultural turn offers a necessary intervention into the study of memory at all these levels: it draws attention to the palimpsestic overlays, the hybrid assemblages, the non-linear interactions, and the fuzzy edges of group belonging.

But if the focus on the transcultural is a valuable methodological intervention – directing us toward heteromorphic constellations instead of isomorphic territories of memory – how does it help us to *evaluate* the plateaus, problems, and possibilities offered by the disparate practices of memory discussed by the contributors to this book? What, indeed, are the ethics and politics of such an approach? Dirk Moses draws our attention to one of the “hottest” zones of memory conflict: that unfolding in the territories of the former Soviet bloc where multiple legacies of extreme violence coexist in explosive constellations. In describing the current conflict over the “double genocide” thesis, he already suggests some important parameters for the ethics of memory. When transcultural analogies and comparisons emerge, they often fall into two extremes: an “isolation” of histories from each other and a “flattening out” of differences between histories. These extremes represent the far ends of a continuum that runs between what we could call *equation* and *differentiation* and that constitutes one of the important axes of a transcultural ethics of memory. At the extremes of this *axis of comparison* we find attitudes represented in the current double genocide debate and much of the worldwide discourse about the Holocaust: relativization, on the one hand, and sacralization, on the other.

This distinction is recognized by many scholars¹ but I now believe we need a more nuanced approach. In formulating an ethics of memory, we need to supplement the axis of comparison with an *axis of political affect*. The affective axis asks to what ends the comparison is being made; here a continuum runs from *competition* to *solidarity*. Thus, for instance, the discourse of double genocide often represents more than a thesis about historical comparison: it represents a competitive assertion that seeks to seize the ground of recognition from people with other experiences of suffering. So, for that matter, do sacralizing discourses of the Holocaust's uniqueness. Mapping practices of memory across these two axes of comparison and affect establishes four larger categories with distinct political valences and opens up the possibility of degrees, gradations, and tendencies within those categories (competitive equation, competitive differentiation, and so on).

An ethics of transcultural memory, in other words, would ask both *how* and *why* histories are imagined in relation to each other. Whether we equate or differentiate histories and whether we do so for reasons of solidarity or competitive antagonism matters. That doesn't mean such an ethics can always give us the 'right' answers to the kinds of dilemmas Dirk Moses describes, however. My personal predilection is for visions of history that opt for a *differentiated solidarity* – that is, that allow us to distinguish different histories of violence while still understanding them as implicated in each other and as making moral demands for recognition that deserve consideration. But the notion that we as scholars can 'choose' how collective memory should be articulated is false. Here we need to move, I think, from the *ethics* of memory to the *politics* of memory. We need to ask: what are the *material conditions* – social, economic, political – that lead to memory conflict and what are the material conditions in which ethical approaches to the past become possible?

Dirk Moses:

Michael Rothberg's points are so well made that I don't need to elaborate further on them. What I would like to explore is the relationship between a politics of memory that leads to differentiated solidarity – the attractive ethical vision also advocated by Lucy Bond and Jessica Rapson – and an investigation of the remembering subjects' material conditions. The latter is a socio-anthropological exercise, a scholarly undertaking animated by an analytical rather than activist or political ethos. It is a *precondition* to a politics of memory with ethical poten-

¹ See for example Tzvetan Todorov (2003, 159–64).

tial. At the same time, it is also a transcultural praxis, because ideally it engages empathetically with all “sides” of memory conflicts.

Transcultural scholarship, as exemplified in this volume manifests a choice to analyse memory conflicts for the sake of understanding them rather than participating in them in a partisan manner. Investigating the material conditions of memory in a transcultural spirit, as Michael Rothberg suggests, then, is in itself an engagement in the politics of memory with ethical effect. If successfully executed, actors in memory conflicts could gain some critical distance to their memory commitments after confrontation with scholarly accounts of their activism; they would understand better what they are *doing* when advancing specific arguments and making certain claims. It allows the scholar to challenge the politician’s manipulation of memory, whether in the “bloodlands” or the Middle East. It is no accident that universities – as institutionalized sites of rationality – and academics are routinely attacked by nationalists for selling out the country’s narcissistic narrative – whether apologetic or self-congratulatory – by empirically challenging its claims and by exhibiting the transcultural ethics implicit in its praxis.

As an example of contestable partisan memory, take the entreaty, in 2009, of Asaf Shariv, Israel’s consul general in New York, that Holocaust education in Gaza would solve the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. Condemning Hamas’s refusal to allow the Holocaust to be included in an UN-sponsored human rights eighth-grade module, he declared that “To deny history and the humanity of victims of genocide is to prepare for future atrocities”. Without mentioning the blockade of Gaza that oppresses its population, or the civilian casualties that Israeli forces inflicted there, let alone the fact that most Gazans are refugees from Zionist forces’ ethnic cleansing campaigns in 1948, he noted that, in contrast to the Palestinian indoctrination of hate, “The first word that every Israeli child is taught in school is shalom, peace. I know that when peace is a word that is taught to every child in Gaza and the West Bank, then peace will be around the corner” (Shariv 2009). What the consul was asking his readers to believe was that Holocaust education would end the regional conflict, though he did not provide details, nor give any indication of agreeing with the proposition that ending the occupation would be part of a just peace.

A transcultural analysis that attends to the material conditions of the conflict might observe that the consul was in fact arguing, or hoping, that Palestinians renounce their national claims, consent to the annexation of the West Bank and subservience within Israel, or even leave Palestine, once they understand the Jewish Holocaust experience, and that the consequent claim of Jews, as the universal victim, trump those of the aggressor, the Palestinian. This is memory invoked to deny the history and humanity of Palestinian victims in Gaza and else-

where. Given this agenda, who could be surprised that Palestinians are wary of Holocaust education? Not that I think that learning about the Holocaust is a bad idea for Palestinians – or indeed anyone. I don't. But in this mode, it represents the far end of the banalization-sacred spectrum mentioned by Michael Rothberg, perhaps even joining both ends.

The transcultural analysis would continue by challenging the consul's lazy culturalist assumption that *hasbara* – simply changing narratives – will resolve major geopolitical and national conflicts. Instead, one might study the production of memory in the subject's body and how this body is affected by its material conditions, whether those of war, occupation, exile, rape or incarceration. Powerful affects are experienced in all these cases, and the psychological literature tells us how they are literally *inscribed* into the brains and mental processes of its victims.² Resistance and revenge narratives are the ineluctable cultural responses to these experiences, constructed to invest the exiled or occupied subject with the dignity that his and her humiliating material conditions have stripped from them.³ It is hard to see realization of transcultural memory's ethical potential while those conditions obtain. Just as hard is it to see the transformation of those conditions when its masters feel terrorized by history, a legacy of previous trauma whose effects are transmitted through the generations in stories of suffering that convince them that they are actually victims, or potential victims, vulnerable to the same fate as their ancestors. Analysing paranoia and the cultural sources of its self-automatization belongs to a material analysis as well.

Michael Rothberg:

Dirk Moses has advanced this dialogue on transcultural memory in important ways. On the one hand, he has deepened our reflections on the ethics, politics, and *analysis* of acts of memory. On the other hand, he has supplemented our discussion of one geo-political hotspot – the Eastern European “bloodlands” – with another unavoidable and even more tension-filled site: the Middle East. As his contribution demonstrates, a theory of transcultural memory has the greatest chance of developing when dialogue is established between methodological questions and case studies of cultural exchange and conflict.

Let me start with the methodological question of the relation between analysis, activism and the politics of memory. Dirk Moses usefully distinguishes different social arenas in which struggles over the past play out – from educational institutions such as the university and the school to the more properly political

² I briefly discuss the literature in “Genocide and the Terror of History” (2011, 90–108).

³ Exemplary is Ghassan Hage, “‘Comes a Time We Are All Enthusiasm’: Understanding Palestinian Suicide Bombers in Times of Exiphobia” (2003, 65–89).

realm of diplomacy and on to the trauma-marked bodies of victims of extreme violence. Such distinctions are necessary both for understanding the dynamics of memory and for preserving a space of critique outside immediate ideological demands. Yet I would also emphasize the permeability of these different realms to each other: conflicts over the ethics and politics of memory often take place in the interstices of various public and private spaces. In particular, I would point to the intertwined production of knowledge and memory about the past by activists and scholars. Academics can also be activists, while activists outside the academy often contribute insight into events that have remained taboo among more institutionally bound scholars. The most powerful example of the former type would be the late Edward Said, not only a paradigm-changing literary and cultural historian, but someone who worked tirelessly to reshape the public narratives about the Palestinian past and present and who had a distinctly transcultural approach to the intersecting memories of all the players in the Middle East conflict. The French activist-scholar Jean-Luc Einaudi would provide an example of the second type; his basic research on the 17 October 1961 massacre of peacefully demonstrating Algerians in Paris not only preceded academic scholarship on this “forgotten” event, but has also helped stimulate the public, transnational and transcultural memory work around October 17.⁴ This transcultural and “transdisciplinary” bleeding into each other of different realms was especially dramatic during Einaudi’s powerful testimony about the 1961 massacre of Algerians at Maurice Papon’s trial for crimes against humanity pertaining to the Nazi genocide of European Jews.

I am certain that Dirk Moses would agree with me about the transit between different realms of memory work, but there still may be a slight difference in emphasis here between the two of us because of disciplinary assumptions about the relation between memory and history. That is, as a historian, he emphasizes the power of empirical historical research to interrupt nationalist narratives and check the memory manipulation of overt ideologues, although in a recent article he has speculated on the reasons for resistance to this mode of reality checking in the Middle Eastern case (Moses 2011, 106–108). Coming from literary and cultural studies, where there is a greater skepticism about the status of empiricist claims, I am less likely to see a clean break between memory and history, and I am rather less sanguine that humanist scholars are always quite so objective and distanced as he implies. We all know about the university positions held, for instance, by perpetrators of recent atrocities in the Balkans. But even beyond such dramatic cases, ideology – say, neoliberal ideology – shapes scholarship in

⁴ See, among other works, Jean-Luc Einaudi, *La bataille de Paris: 17 octobre 1961* (1991).

more banal ways every day as well. Even here, however, I suspect we are largely in agreement. I would readily admit, for instance, that an important part of Ein-audi's intervention with respect to the October 17 massacre was his uncovering of hard facts about the past, while Dirk Moses ends his last remarks with the very astute suggestion – which is indeed central to his own work – that psychological states and cultural contexts shape actions in the present as well as practices of remembrance.

Discussion of the subjective and objective conditions of memory brings us back around to the question of conflict and the possibilities of transcultural memory. On the topic of Holocaust memory and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict I think we have another case of a large degree of overlap and a divergence of emphasis. Dirk Moses's example of the consul general's offensive attempt to instrumentalize memory of the Shoah is a powerful one, and I can only concur with his analysis of its implications. At the same time, and despite the existence of many more such outrages (really, on all sides), I maintain a degree of optimism about the possibilities that transcultural memory practices can offer, even for seemingly unresolvable conflicts such as the one in the Middle East. I think of Edward Said's writings about the "bases of coexistence" in overlapping narratives of remembrance by Jews and Palestinians, or the photography/video work of the Israeli-British artist Alan Schechner that establishes solidarity between iconic victims of the Holocaust and Israeli occupation.⁵

My point could also be put in slightly less rosy terms, though, closer to those of Dirk Moses: I don't see how we can have *any* optimism about the situation in the Middle East at all without a belief that *some form* of transcultural exchange – including, but not limited to exchange about the past – can evolve between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians living under occupation as well as in Israel and the diaspora. To be sure, such an evolution has to be accompanied – or, more likely, *preceded* – by radical change in the basic political conditions of Palestinian life, by an end to the occupation and blockade. Ultimate reconciliation will only be possible, however, when cultural change joins political transformation – and cultural change will have to include a painful, but unavoidable transcultural memory work. This is true for other hotspots of remembrance, too, such as Turkey, where

⁵ On Schechner and Said, see my attempt to work out a transcultural ethics of memory in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in "From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory" (2011, 523–48). A comparison between this essay and Dirk Moses's "Genocide and the Terror of History" (2011) provides an illuminating picture of the commonalities and differences of emphasis in our approaches to transcultural memory. Both of these essays were presented as lectures at the 'Transcultural Memory' conference organized by Lucy Bond, Rick Crownshaw and Jessica Rapson in London in February 2010.

rabid genocide denial continues, while, simultaneously, tens of thousands of citizens march in memory of an assassinated Armenian-Turkish journalist and carry signs that read “We are all Hrant Dink. We are all Armenians”.⁶ Such a dynamic of denial, conflict and solidarity represents the current dialectic of transcultural memory. This volume helps us make our way through the contradictions, constraints, and possibilities of the transcultural turn.

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⁶ See Sebnem Arsu, “Thousands in Turkey Protest Verdict in Journalist’s Murder” (2012).