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## *Memory studies: For and against*

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### Abstract

This article examines the opportunities and risks afforded by the consolidation of memory research into the subject area of 'memory studies'. Debates about memory culture outside the academy and within academic memory research have hinged on its perceived over-personalization of the political. However, memory research is often informed by a broader ethical turn that understands itself to be transforming politics. The article argues that this split results in part from the over-generalizations produced by the travelling concepts of a transdisciplinary memory studies. It concludes that the politics of memory culture and of memory research might be best analysed and practiced within the disciplines and by means of the research methods from which memory studies borrows.

### Key words

personalization; politics; transdisciplinarity; trauma

The rapid growth of memory research across the humanities, social sciences and sciences during the 1980s and 1990s has been much commented upon (Huysen, 1995: 5; Radstone, 2000a: 1–22; Kansteiner, 2002: 1; Rossington and Whitehead, 2007: 4–13). Already in 1998, the call for papers for our interdisciplinary conference 'Frontiers of Memory'<sup>1</sup> had proposed that it was time to reflect upon the increasing prominence of memory across a wide and interdisciplinary field. The publication of the first issue of *Memory Studies* foregrounds and draws attention to a further and related development evident in publications and courses<sup>2</sup> – the consolidation of memory research into what is fast becoming institutionalized as the new academic field of memory studies. I have written elsewhere of the risks posed by an unreflexive relationship between academic memory research and a broader field of memory culture (Radstone, 2000a, 2000b, 2001). In this article, I want to focus, rather, on questions raised by the incorporation of memory research into 'memory studies'. The incorporation into academic subject areas of emerging and new areas of research – particularly those that have their roots and hearts as much in extra-academic political and cultural movements as they do in

scholarly activities – has been met with ambivalence in the past. Here, I am thinking particularly of the mixed feelings aroused by the consolidation into an academic subject area of cultural studies, though the introduction of women's studies into university courses and departments met with a similar response. In what follows, I want to stay with my own mixed feelings concerning the establishment of memory studies in order to examine the opportunities and risks afforded by this development.

One common sentiment expressed concerning the institutionalization of cultural studies has been regret about the subject area's tendency to de-politicize what began as a field in which political commitment and scholarly research were inextricably combined.<sup>3</sup> No equivalent response has accompanied the establishment of memory studies. This may be due to the dominance – in the humanities and social sciences in particular – of studies related to post-catastrophe, trauma and witnessing – a dominance related to concerns with the ethics of memory.<sup>4</sup> Memory studies' concerns with ethics may appear to fully address the politics of memory. But in my view, the conjoining of the ethical turn that is currently informing humanities research more generally with the establishment of memory studies as a transdisciplinary subject risks screening as much as it reveals of the politics of memory.

As was and remains – if only in part – the case with cultural studies, memory research goes to the heart of many of the issues at the forefront of contemporary political debate and struggle. These include the political effects of the continuing presence of the past – and particularly of past hurts – in the present and the contemporary challenges posed to peoples and individuals by the uprootings from memory's props and materials forced by migration, refugeedom and exile. The question of the holocaust's impact upon individual and cultural memory arguably initiated perhaps the most continuingly influential strand of research within memory studies.<sup>5</sup> Feminism, too, has embraced the capacity of 'memory work' to investigate, interrogate and even, ultimately, transform our relationships with our remembered selves (Spence, 1986; Haug, 1987[1983]; Kuhn 1995). It is true that 'the study of memory turns academics into concerned citizens who share the burdens of contemporary memory crises' (Kansteiner, 2002: 179). But this formulation risks turning two-way traffic into a one-way street, for it is often personal/political engagements with the burdens of historical and contemporary injury and wrongs that bring people – as students, for instance – into academic memory research in the first place, and that sustain both commitment to particular projects and the continuing vitality and relevance of the field. Research on the memory-worlds of first-, second- and third-generation migrant communities and speculations concerning the memories communicated beyond the domains of the ethnic and familial by, say, photographs and films of or about those experiences<sup>6</sup> demonstrate particularly sharply three linked features of much memory research: its urgent and committed engagement with varied instances of contemporary and historical violence, its close ties with questions of identity – and, relatedly, with identity politics – and its bridging of the domains of the personal and the public, the individual and the social.<sup>7</sup> These same features could be said to characterize, also, research undertaken in some strands of history, cultural studies, women's and feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies and refugee and ethnicity studies. To get closer to the particularity of memory research – and to the source of my

mixed feelings concerning its incorporation and formalization into 'memory studies' – I want to focus on memory research's transdisciplinary conceptualizations of processes that it posits as taking place within and between the liminal memory spaces that it has imagined. The felt urgency of memory research's questions – particularly about the impact of injuries of the past and the present upon memory, culture and identity – have fuelled memory research's speculations, drawing researchers – often with personal or familial links to their chosen field – into exploration and debate about, for instance, the legacies of the holocaust, apartheid, slavery and sexual abuse. But it is these early, conjectural and often yet to be tested speculations concerning the movements, transmissions and processes of memory that the institutionalization of 'memory studies' risks hardening and reifying into orthodoxies. Enshrined within canonical texts and concepts, these orthodoxies threaten to transform speculation into 'fact'.

Drawing on sources including, but by no means limited to Halbwachs's seminal sociological investigations of the role of social institutions in the transmission of memory (1980) and Pierre Nora's multi-volume study of French memory places (Nora, 1984, 1996–98), memory research has coined a wealth of concepts to describe memory that exceeds the personal. Terms including 'cultural', 'public', and 'social'<sup>8</sup> have been appended to memory to begin explorations of the complexities of past/present relations as they are mediated through the materialities and processes of public, social and cultural institutions and practices. The invention of these imaginary topographies of memory is more usually understood to derive from scholarly interests in the (conjectured) memorial aspects of cultural, social and institutional processes and practices, or, less charitably, from the attempt to reinvigorate tired disciplinary perspectives by means of the incorporation of concepts associated with memory's currently auratic status within and outside the academy. But the invention – the imagining – of 'cultural', 'social' and 'public' memory may be related, also, to the politics driving much memory research – to the need to demonstrate the continuing and broader than personal political significance of issues that might otherwise be consigned to the level of the individual or the familial. An emphasis on the cultural, public and social realms of memory arguably militates against the consignment of memory-related issues to the domains only of the private and the personal, emphasizing, at the same time, that where memory is concerned, the personal *is* political.

The argument that memory research's explorations of cultural, public and social memory may militate against the consignment of particular issues to the field of the personal may seem to turn on its head common critiques levelled both at academic theories of memory, as well as at memory culture more generally, namely their propensity to individualize and over-personalize issues that ought properly to be regarded – in part at least – as structural and political. Kirwin Lee Klein has pointed to the links between memory discourses and identity politics and has raised important questions about the mobilization of terms associated with individual psychology for the discussion of social practices (Klein, 2000). Meanwhile commentaries on the recent boom in the publication of memoirs (Fass, 2006: 107) have linked the success of memoirs about succumbing to illness – so-called 'pathographies' (Hawkins, 1993) – and memoirs concerned with the overcoming of suffering – so-called 'misery memoirs' (Adams, 2006) – with an emphasis on trauma that 'individualize[s] at every turn' (Segal, 2007: 9).

Critiques such as these have linked the individualization of theories and cultures of memory with the attenuation and fragility of the spheres of public life and politics, as well as with the decline in availability of those abstract conceptual frameworks within which individual experiences might once have been placed and understood (Brown, 1995; Turner, 1996; Luckhurst, 2003). Two aspects of these critiques are the stress they place on processes of identification with suffering as replacements for more traditional modes of political allegiance formation and the universalism of their comments. While I have myself put forward similar arguments (see particularly Radstone, 2005) and while I agree that memory research and memory culture do share a language and concepts that might be described in terms of personalization, such critiques obscure as much as they reveal. First, the critique of the memoir, for instance, as individualizing or over-personalizing takes the memoir's realism at face value, producing a literal reading that assumes that the subjects inscribed by memoirs are coincident with and can be mapped straightforwardly onto suffering 'persons' or 'individuals' with whom actual readers can then identify. Absent from such accounts is adequate attention to the literary as literary – to the complex play of tenses and tropes, narration, point of view and address that together constitute the complexity of texts and the reading experiences that they offer. Second, the assumption that memoirs of suffering invite specifically empathetic identification *with* suffering extends this face-value reading to a problematic assertion about the reading positions invited by memoirs of suffering – memoirs that *may* invite multiple identifications not only with suffering, but with the voyeuristic or triumphalist observation of suffering, for instance.<sup>9</sup> Critiques of the memoir move beyond assertions about the reading positions offered by texts, however, connecting the identifications with suffering that they supposedly proffer with the formation of actual, if fragile communities. While textual analysis might complicate and extend these limited readings of the positions offered by texts, the exploration of hypotheses concerning the negotiation of those positions by *actual* reading communities would require contextual reader research studies.

Current memoir criticism's tendency to follow a literalist and uncritically realist path might be related, in part to the contemporary status of memoirs – the only prose narratives 'which are accorded the suspension of disbelief (Conway, 1998: 5). Yet this is not the whole story, for under the rubric of memory research, the critical reception of prose works other than memoirs is currently following a similar path – a path influenced, I think by the ethical turn within memory studies. For instance, many analyses of W.G. Sebald's magisterial prose-work *Austerlitz* (Sebald, 2001) – already a canonical text within memory studies – have treated it as a trauma text, reading its complex narrative literally as the fictionalized testimony of a child survivor of the *Kindertransport*. This is a reading that substitutes literalism for the *text's* complex relationship *with* realism and reading positions. The irony of this literalism is worth noting, given trauma theory's insistence on the sheer difficulty, if not impossibility, of the representation of traumatic experience. But I want to draw attention, here, to a further irony – given memory research's keenly political origins and drives – associated with reading *Austerlitz* only as trauma text, for this is a reading that places limits on the questions that can be posed concerning *Austerlitz's* textual *politics*. A reading that placed *Austerlitz* within the

context of, say, German literature and critical theory and that treated the text as text, rather than as fictionalized reflection of historical actuality might be better placed to analyse the politics of the complex reading positions proffered by this enormously rich work. This would be an approach grounded, however, not in the theories and concepts currently espoused by memory studies – and here I am thinking, particularly, of trauma theory and its associated concepts – but in one or several of the longer-established and diverse theories and methods of literary analysis.

How might the speed with which memory studies is tending to foreclose on the further analysis of its objects of study best be understood and how might this tendency be limited? Part of the explanation for the hastiness with which terms such as ‘trauma’ become attached to texts and other cultural phenomena lies in memory research’s close relationship with the ethical turn shaping humanities research more generally. But the transdisciplinarity of memory studies is also relevant here. Advocates of transdisciplinarity celebrate its irreverence, its unpredictability and its quest for connections amongst areas within which common ground has previously remained invisible, unexplored or unrecognized. But transdisciplinarity carries risks, too. Transdisciplinarity produces ‘travelling concepts’ (Bal, 2002) – concepts that may become attached quite rapidly to diverse phenomena including texts, practices and cultures. In memory studies, trauma has become one such concept. Concepts such as trauma may appear to bridge the gap between the personal the social, as well as forming links between diverse cultural phenomena. As such, the travelling concepts of memory studies offer much to researchers who come to the field urgently in quest of deeper understanding of questions that may be as personal as they are scholarly. But without careful disciplinary embedding and testing, concepts such as trauma may appear to explain more than they actually can. As Wulf Kansteiner has argued, memory studies’ assertions concerning cultural and social memory have yet to be supported, on the whole, by research on reception and negotiation. Kansteiner proposes, therefore, that memory studies might pursue these tasks by looking to and borrowing from the research methods of media and cultural studies (Kansteiner, 2002). This is a useful proposal to which I would add a supplement born from the experience of teaching those two subjects. Both cultural and media studies are themselves interdisciplinary subjects that borrow *their* research methods from disciplines including anthropology, film and literary studies. In my view, then, memory research might currently be most productively practiced *within* the disciplines from which media and cultural studies borrow, rather than within the transdisciplinary space of ‘memory studies’. But would the embedding of memory research within disciplines including literary and film studies, as well as anthropology and sociology enable deeper analysis of the complex politics of texts and practices? This may only provide part of the answer.

A paradox lies at the heart of current writings within memory studies. In one dominant strand of the subject, we find a preponderance of writings on trauma testimony and witnessing – writings that mobilize terms drawn from ethics and that see their own practice in ethical terms. In my view, these critical writings forget modes of textual analysis of the (not always politically ‘correct’) reading positions, identifications and fantasies made available for negotiation by practices and texts, including those

associated by such criticism with trauma, testimony or witnessing. Another strand of writings in memory studies has produced critiques of what one commentator has termed 'traumaculture' (Luckhurst, 2003). As we have seen, these accounts associate the turn to trauma in western culture (including, in some cases, within the academy) with the atrophy of a political public sphere. On these accounts, identification with wounds (Seltzer, 1997), trauma and victimhood takes the place of more traditional affiliations with others, rooted in abstract understandings of the workings of power in the social and public spheres. These latter critiques do not tend to take as their objects of study the texts that have produced trauma criticism – including Holocaust testimonies. Instead, their critical focus tends to fall largely on the culture of the contemporary western (white?) and mainly middle classes,<sup>10</sup> proffering as alternatives to wound or trauma culture, avant-garde art practices that are seen to mobilize *and* critique the culture within which they are embedded.<sup>11</sup> Though these analyses of culture do not straightforwardly pit the culture of an educated middle class against 'popular culture', their assumptions concerning the (lack of) politics in the cultures that they critique, together with their espousal of the avant-garde, are reminiscent of that cultural elitism against which cultural studies pitted itself. For the Gramscian cultural studies developed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, a cultural movement or practice is never straightforward or without internal contradiction – it is always a field of struggle.<sup>12</sup> What seems absent, then, from analyses of trauma or wound culture is that attempt to understand culture – including these versions of memory culture – as ambiguous, as struggle, as a grey area. There is a marked split, here, too, between memory studies' view of its participation in the ethical turn as political and critiques of trauma and wound culture that view it as symptomatic of a culture within which politics – understood as the practice and understanding of supra-individual structures of power – has become attenuated to the point of inaccessibility. This is a view of contemporary culture that universalizes from a particular reading of the experiences and culture of a fraction and that seems to me to be profoundly at odds with the understandings and experiences of many of those students drawn to memory research – students whose experiences may be informed, for instance, by first-, second- or third-generation migrancy or refugeedom, or by encounters with feminist and left politics.

Perhaps this split might best be mended in the classroom, where the politics that brings many to memory research might encounter and negotiate with the politics that the analysis of texts and practices can reveal. These will not be easy or straightforward encounters. As it is developing, memory studies, with its travelling concepts and hardening orthodoxies, risks proffering *answers* to the urgent questions brought to it by students who come in search of identifications, meanings and knowledge and who might too readily mistake the orthodoxies of memory studies for the answers and recognitions that they so urgently seek. But if it could take up research methods for exploring the complexity of these and similar encounters and acknowledge what it does not know, then this might constitute the undoing and the making of memory studies.

## Notes

- 1 The conference was held on 17–19 September 1999 at the Institute of Education, University of London. It was organized by Katharine Hodgkin, Constantina Papoulias and myself. Selected papers were published in two volumes (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2005; Radstone and Hodgkin, 2005).
- 2 The consolidation of memory studies is confirmed by the rapid growth of undergraduate and postgraduate modules currently being offered that include memory in their titles. The back jacket of Rossington and Whitehead (2007) states: '*Theories of Memory* provides a comprehensive introduction to the rapidly expanding field of memory studies.'
- 3 Here I am thinking particularly of the work undertaken by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies under the directorship, especially of Stuart Hall – a tradition that was continued in the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of East London. That department, now incorporated into a larger school, convened a conference in July 2007. Titled 'Cultural Studies Now', the conference aimed to raise the question of the fate of a politically engaged Cultural Studies in the 21st century.
- 4 See, for instance, Margalit (2002). For a recent publication that demonstrates and engages critically with the field of memory studies and ethics, see Arruti with Plant (2007).
- 5 A comprehensive bibliography of texts on holocaust memory would be far too extensive to reference here. Influential texts include Felman and Laub (1992); Young (1993); Caruth (1995, 1996); Hirsch (1997).
- 6 See, for instance, Fortier (2000) and Hirsch (1997).
- 7 Certain important strands of memory research do not exhibit these characteristics. Here, I am referring mainly to the study of memories – or, importantly, what are taken to be memories – as this is being undertaken in studies of literature, film and other media as well as in history and the social sciences. These characteristics are not found so frequently in studies of memory itself, as these are currently being undertaken in philosophy, the neurosciences, cognitive psychology and also history. Memory research of the sort I am discussing here need not, of course, concern itself only with historical and contemporary violence. Memory research's potential to engage with memory's less troubled territories has remained, however, less defining of the subject area than has its engagements with suffering.
- 8 On public memory, see, for instance, Thelan (1990); Bodnar (1992); on social memory see Fentress and Wickham (1992); on cultural memory see, for instance, Kuhn (2002).
- 9 For an extended version of this argument see Radstone (2001).
- 10 As well as analysing 'traumaculture's relations with legal and psychiatric discourses, Luckhurst's essay (2003) discusses avant-garde art, British broadsheet journalism and the literary works of, amongst others, Martin Amis. Seltzer's 'Wound Culture' (1997) focuses on films such as *Crash*.
- 11 For Luckhurst, it is the artwork of Tracey Moffatt that provides a counter-cultural example. Also relevant, here, is Marianne Hirsch's advocacy of the photo-montages of Lorie Novak (Hirsch, 1997).
- 12 For works produced by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies see, for instance, Hall and Jefferson (1989).



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