

Cultural Memory Studies and the Idea of Literature: A Cosmopolitan Critique

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Abstract:

This essay examines the implications of a turn to cosmopolitanism in humanities and social sciences for cultural memory studies. The essentialist-culturalist assumptions of cultural memory studies regarding identity and belonging are criticized from a cosmopolitan perspective. Contrasting the provincialism and parochialism of cultural memory studies with a universalist orientation in cosmopolitanism is expected to bring to light some of the possible ways in which an interdisciplinary dialogue can be established between the two.

Keywords: cultural memory studies, cosmopolitanism, world literature

Introduction

The implications of a turn to cosmopolitanism in humanities and social sciences remain to be explored for cultural memory studies (henceforth CMS). In this essay, we first review the contemporary status of CMS as a disciplinary paradigm, and then reevaluate some of its core concepts and assumptions from a cosmopolitan perspective, including the construction of “cultural memory” itself. Juxtaposing a universalist orientation in cosmopolitanism with a culturalist provincialism (and nationalism) in CMS will help bring to light some of the possible ways in which CMS and cosmopolitanism can benefit from an interdisciplinary dialogue. Insofar as “national literature” is claimed to play a pivotal role in shaping cultural memory, the idea of world literature can be used to suspend frontier views of literature and reinvigorate new forms of planetary literary humanism.

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Cultural Memory Studies

With modernity the past became a problem. To be “modern” according to Terry Eagleton meant “to relegate to the past everything that happened up to 10 minutes ago (...) Like a rebellious adolescent, the modern is defined by a definitive rupture with its parentage. If this is a liberating experience, it can also be a traumatic one” (2005: 7). In contrast to the enlightenment ideal of modernity as moving beyond infancy of pre-rational man and allegedly treading on the path of progress, the historical past did not simply vanish away, nor did it constantly haunt the present in a specter of trauma. As early as T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) the necessity was felt for imagining new ways of negotiating cultural heritage with the modern individual’s voice. This dilemma was later couched in oedipal terms by Harold Bloom in his *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). In early twentieth century, Freudian-Bergsonian views of memory as individual consciousness were giving way to a more culturally oriented perspectives. The shift was also reflective of the emergence of nation-states, the need for raising collective consciousness, and inventing traditions for the purposes of legitimation.

The last two decades has seen the emergence of memory studies as a new inter/trans/multi-disciplinary paradigm in the humanities and social sciences. The complex connections between culture and memory is now being studied in different fields including psychology, neurosciences, anthropology, history, sociology, arts, literature, communication studies, cultural studies, and media studies. Memory studies has given cognitive psychologists new tools and patterns for examining the neurological basis of remembering, creation and storage of autobiographical and historical memories. Topics like historiography, official/personal memories, rituals, historical monuments, tradition, myth, heritage, collective identity, and community are now at the forefront of critical analysis. In the contemporary context of amnesiac modernity and the hegemony of technocratic states, the preservation of memory may appear to be a political act in itself. For some marginalized groups and the so-called subaltern minorities, cultural tradition and heritage are tools for resisting global homogenization. Rooted in this view is a nostalgic desire for restoring the past.

From a memory studies perspective, culture is theorized as a set of complex and multidirectional processes of remembering and forgetting. Immediately enter the scene controversies over historical memory, representation of memory, memory politics, archive and canon, and in short, power. Remembering and for that matter forgetting is always entangled in the network of power relations. The study of this complex network of relations and omissions has led to various issues

which can be broadly summed up under the category of CMS. According to Astrid Erll,

“Cultural memory” is an umbrella term, which unites all possible expressions of the relationship of culture and memory – from *ars memoriae* to digital archives from neural networks to intertextuality, from family talk to the public unveiling of a monument. Cultural memory can thus broadly be defined as the sum total of all the processes (biological, medical, social) which are involved in the interplay of past and present within sociocultural contexts. It finds its specific manifestation in memory culture. (2011: 101)

Combining theoretical with empirical (e.g., psychology, ethnography, etc.) methods, memory studies addresses such issues as the relationship between mind, culture, and history, reconstructing the past through memories, formation of shared collective memories (official and popular), the relationship between history and memory, sites of remembrance, and the hermeneutics of memory. What matters in all these scholarly endeavours is an attention to the significance of the interplay of past, present, and future in a socio-cultural context. Erll defines CMS as an interdisciplinary approach to examining “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (2011: 2). Although the first use of the term collective memory (*mémoire collective*) goes back to 1900s, memory has always been a topic of reflection for the philosophers, social thinkers, artists, and writers. However, the contemporary emphasis on the culturality of memory is a specifically modern phenomenon.

An early harbinger of CMS was Maurice Halbwachs. What became clear in his studies was that individual memories were strongly framed by cultural contexts, more specifically, family, friends, and social groups. Moreover, remembrance of the past was found out to be directly influenced by the present circumstances. As Halbwachs put it, “The past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present,” which is always in accord “with the predominant thoughts of the society” (1992: 40). In this sense, memory was understood to be far different from history. The constructedness of collective memory for Halbwachs is analogical to the system of language and the whole cultural baggage attached to it (1992: 173). It is important to note that the distinction between cultural memory and history is sometimes glossed over in (literary) cultural memory studies as the demands of the present might force some to replace history with memory for appropriative reasons.

Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire* as places, events, and objects of national (French) collectivity has been at the heart of CMS. *Lieux de mémoire* or memory places (*loci memoriae*) refers to

any significant entity, material or immaterial, which has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of a community. Sites of memory are where culture crystallizes itself, and can include places such as archives, museums, or memorials; concepts or practices as commemorative rituals; objects as emblems or manuals; and symbols. (Whitehead, 2009: 161)

The materiality of cultural memory refers to any objects and figures which create a sense of continuity between the past and the present. It should be noted that sites of memory has both a literal (e.g., Lascaux, Versailles, the Eiffel Tower, street names) and figurative (tokens of cultural identity: the *Marseillaise*, Bastille Day, gastronomy, the memoirs of Chateaubriand, Stendhal and Poincaré) meaning in Nora's works (Connerton, 2006: 319); it may also refer to events (e.g., Bastille Day or the Tour de France) and symbols and objects (e.g., the French flag, "liberty, equality, fraternity"). Such a typology of memory remains to bear its impact on literary and cultural studies.

In Jan Assmann's view, cultural memory can be defined as "that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image" (1995: 132). Literature can be viewed as both material and immaterial carrier of cultural memory. The epic, for example, operates as a significant symbolic construct— whether rooted in historical facts or initiated by a search for a myth of origin – in the memorial heritage of a community. In this view, remediations of the epic in any form (written, visual, ritual, etc.) can work as a site of remembrance where a culture and for that matter a community redefines itself. However, the notion of "society's self-image" is predicated on the problematic assumption that there is a structure of collectivity which is expected to be preserved through revitalizing cultural memory.

In *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Memory, Archives* (2011), Aleida Assmann divides cultural memory into two types: functional memory and storage memory. She argues that functional memory is "group related, selective, normative and future-oriented" and operates mainly in the form of various symbolic practices (traditions, rites, canonizations, etc.). Storage memory, on the hand, is embodied in all kinds of material representations (books, images, films, museums, archives). These two types of memories are interconnected: "In functional memory, unstructured, unconnected fragments (of storage memory) are invested with perspective and relevance; they enter into connections, configurations, compositions of meaning – a quality that is totally absent from storage memory" (Assmann, 2011: 127). In other words, passive memories may become active when infused with meaning. The dichotomy of passive/active in memory studies is symptomatic of a hypostatizing perspective whereby an entity is given

functional force prior to its circulation within the network of individual agency. Put differently, memory without a *memory carrier* (i.e., individuals not the abstract notion of collectivities) does not exist as such. The objection that material sites and symbols are manifestations of memory is also misguided in that phenomenologically speaking an object without a subject to perceive it is an ontological non-entity. Moreover, the relational status of objects to individuals connotes the heterogeneity and diversity of the meaning of cultural memory.

The past is a dynamic semiosis. The present is the criterion for selecting and perspectivizing the past. (Erll, 2008: 5) In other words, any creation of the past is a re-presenting. Memory plays a crucial role in understanding a culture not because it is related to the past but because it operates as the frame for relating the present to the past (Terdiman, 1993: 7). According to Wang, collective memory can serve as therapeutic practice for a community and its members, as it comprises an active constructive process during which the members of a community participate in interpreting and processing shared past experiences (particularly traumas) into eventual memory representations, often in such forms as narratives, dramatizations, art, and ritual. She further argues that,

to understand the processes, practices, and outcomes of social sharing of memory, or collective remembering, one must take into account the characteristics of the community to which a significant event occurred and in which memory for the event was subsequently formed, shared, transmitted, and transformed. In other words, one must look into the social-cultural-historical context where the remembering takes place. (2008: 305)

Modes of remembering the past can have an immense influence on the present. Memory is an intersectional phenomenon in that it affects and is in turn affected by different social forces including religion, class, familial relations, and politics. Our present lives as individuals and collectivities are shaped in relation to the memories of the past and expectations from the future. For many CMS scholars, a community to exist needs collective memory. As Wang notes, “Throughout history collective memory has been central to the creation of community, from a small unit such as a family to an entire nation. The social practice of collective remembering allow the members of a community to preserve a conception of their past (2008: 307). It is through narrative that a culture organizes its conception of reality and identity. In this view, memories guide our moral choices. According to Joanne Garde-Hansen, the concept of memory destabilizes grand narratives of history and power, as “memory, remembering and recording are the very key to existence, becoming and belonging”

(2011: 18). Culturalists argue that narratives of cultural memory relate the past to the present, legitimize our actions and ideals, and define the identity of a community. The kind of identity politics envisioned in these approaches not only essentializes history but also assumes that identity is a narrative construct once and for all.

Paul Connerton (2006) has identified three main topics in cultural memory studies: mourning, typography of remembrance, and the experience of memory in modernity. Mourning refers to the study of remembering tragic pasts, traumas, wars, genocides, and any form of historical wounds on a relatively collective scale. Typography of remembrance is the study of “monuments, buildings, and entire landscapes as media of memory” (2009: 318). Finally, arguing that memory has a history, that is, the meaning, workings, and functions of memory has changed in the course of time, a group of scholars have been concerned with the problem of too-much/too-little memory in modernity. In *On the Difficulty of Living Together: Memory, Politics, and History*, Manuel Cruz presents a detailed analysis of memory and forgetting by defining their forms and uses, political meanings, and social and historical implications. According to Cruz, memory is not an intrinsically positive phenomenon but an impressionable and malleable one, used to advance a variety of agendas. He focuses on five memory models: that which is inherently valuable; that which legitimizes the present; that which supports retributive justice; that which is essential to mourning; and that which elicits renunciation or revelation (Cruz, 2016). One advantage of Cruz’s approach is that it highlights the diversity and malleability of memory within the contemporary network of relations and appropriations.

Too much emphasis on collective memory in contrast to individual memory might lead to the assumption that we are dealing with two different kinds of memory. In other words, one could object to a theory of cultural/collective/social memory by asking: Does a society have a mind? Does a society/community/culture remember? To answer these questions, it should be noted that cultural/collective/social memory is a metaphoric transference of the individual ability to remember onto the social field. The point is it is a metaphor, and therefore one should not hypostatize the concept of cultural/collective/social memory. Distinctions between cultural/collective/social memory and memory *tout court* are more analytical than ontological. The apparent opposition between individual and collective memory, evinced most intensely in the unfortunate disciplinary rivalry between psychology and sociology at the turn of the twentieth century is deconstructed in cultural memory studies. Individual and collective memory, as Paul Ricoeur notes, “do not oppose one another on the same plane, but occupy universes of discourse that have become estranged from each other” (2004: 95). Yet,

literary trauma studies turn to an ahistorical psychology of trauma which bellies the discursive grounding of memory and falls back in the pitfalls of psychoanalysis.

Cultural memory has often been a nationalist construct. For example, in modern Iran the canonization of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* as a memory-preserving text was motivated by a nationalist agenda, and advanced by the replacement of history with cultural memory, where the Arab invasion of Iran was considered to have totally ruined the previously flourishing Persian civilization, and thus there was a nostalgic desire to restore things to an uninflected course of history. This was a distortion of facts as it should be noted that "the Iranian civilization after the Arab invasion entered its golden age and attained its most productive period" (Omidshafar, 2011: 19). In this and similar visions of cultural/collective memory, there is a *politics of eternity* at hand, that is to say, an effort to perform "a masquerade of history (...) in a self-absorbed way, free of any real concern with facts. Its mood is a longing for past moments that never really happened" (Snyder, 2017: 117) and the politics of eternity, Timothy Snyder warns us, is a sign of fascism. To make another example, the summoning up of the story of Moses from the Bible in various literary and cinematic adaptations as a way of exalting the origins of a supposedly chosen people and reproducing a narrative of collective victimhood has led to more violence than reconciliation. For Julia Kristeva, "The exaltation of origins can take violent forms because one wants an enemy" (1995: 9). An obsession with a narrative of victimization, most notably the memory of World War II and the Holocaust, may more often than not be a retreat from transformative politics. (Maier, 1993: 136–152). Cosmopolitanism has the potential to free texts from cultural particularism and re-envision new forms of transnationalism and humanism.

Cosmopolitanism

What is similar to all above approaches in CMS is the assumption that memory belongs to certain ethnic, national or any other form of collective group. This is problematic in that a culturalist provincialism and parochialism forecloses the possibility of transcultural dialogue. While cultural memory and its purported concomitant identitarian function is defined by Jan Assmann as "reflexive participation in or the *commitment* to a culture" (italics added) (cited in Erll, 2011: 110), the cosmopolitan spirit can be defined as openness to "*being changed* by encounters with difference" (Skrbiš & Woodward, 2013: 10).

One way to understand cosmopolitanism is to consider it as a way of criticizing methodological and political nationalism. A critical form

of humanism is restored in cosmopolitanism not only as a normative stance but also as a concern with worldwide realities, including international humanitarianism, globalization, and transnationalism. To conceive of cultural memory as a totality devoid of individual diversity is to materialize discursive solidarity at the expense of multiplicity. The cosmopolitan vision for Ulrich Beck is “an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities” (2002: 18). Here, it is less than enough to emphasize the role of literature as an imaginative force in opening up new possibilities and visions for transnational belonging and global solidarity. Vertovec and Cohen have delineated six ways of understanding cosmopolitanism: as a socio-cultural condition, a worldview, a political project to build transnational institutions, a political project based on the recognition of multiple identities, a mode of orientation to the world, and a set of specific capabilities allowing to adapt to other peoples and cultures (2002: 1–22). Most philosophical approaches in cosmopolitanism have a normative dimension whereby openness to difference is an ethical obligation. In contrast to the fetishization of the past in CMS, a cosmopolitan orientation is concerned with changing the *status quo* and imagining alternative futures. Remembrance of traumatic histories, which has been the *raison d'être* of CMS, is more often than not a practice of politics of victimhood rather than an attempt at transitory justice and reconciliation. Robert Fine notes that cosmopolitanism “impacts upon the development of civil and political rights, on the exercise of moral judgments, on the practice of love and friendship, on the organization of civil society and on the formation of the nation-state” (2007: xii). The formation of transnational states is one aspect of the cosmopolitan worldview.

Culturalism is a process of identity-formation based on essentialist ideologies. A dialogic engagement with the other is possible only through a cosmopolitan disposition, where a willingness to be challenged and learn from other cultural experiences defies the spirit of localism and cultural self-immersion (Skrbiš; Woodward, 2011: 60). Cosmopolitanism emphasizes the communicative dimension of human semiosis and transcultural understanding. In light of current globalized world systems, political crises would require horizons of shared humanity beyond the iron cage of nationalism. Moral cosmopolitanism is based on the assumption that consciousness and identity are *de facto* intersubjective processes. To be a cosmopolitan is to enact a praxis of being a citizen of the world. The philosophical roots of cosmopolitanism lie in the enlightenment “ideal of open dialogue not only between fellow-citizens but, more radically, between all members of the human race” (Linklater, 1996: 296). Global diaspora, immigration, and refugee groups are some of the burning issues of our time which require a cosmopolitan orientation and transnational citizenship rights to be

effectively solved. In “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism”, Martha Nussbaum argues that a cosmopolitan commitment to world citizenship can be defended from four perspectives (1996: 3–20), including: cosmopolitan education is a basis for self-knowledge, for the more we know about others the more we know about ourselves; whether we like it or not the nation-state cannot solve all the problems facing it, especially those relating to ecology, population growth and food supply; moral obligations to peoples outside the nation-state are equally real and compelling, for territorial boundaries do not constrain democracy and morality; patriotic values can be dangerously close to jingoism.

Obligations to humanity beyond cultural historicity and localism as a principle of equal moral worth is the driving force behind cosmopolitanism. In this sense, history does not belong to a particular people or community. Individuals in contemporary world rely on a globalized intersectional network of relations and resources to create a sense of personhood and identity. Placing constraints on individual autonomy and the right to self-creation under the ethos of cultural/collective memory and compartmentalizing human heritage, e.g., literature, is neither a desirable moral nor political perspective. Cosmopolitanism should not be equated with a Eurocentric notion of universalism, although it has a normative universality in its approach to morality. As Pratap Mehta puts it, “universalism is considered imperious, presumptuous, depoliticizing, and a search for uniformity rather than contrasts. Cosmopolitanism is, by contrast, a willingness to engage with ‘the Other’” (2000: 622). The politics of identity and the search for roots in CMS is paradigmatically different from humanitarian rights and futurity theorized in cosmopolitanism. A promising prospect for the cosmopolitan turn in the humanities and social sciences is the grounding of universalism on philosophically and morally justified notions of human rights, where a third way between monistic universalism and dogmatic contextualism is expected to redefine moral orientations (Pogge, 2008: 110). The advantage of a discourse of human rights *contra* politics of identity/victimhood/eternity/etc. is that rights are accorded to individuals as well as groups. It seems that the heyday of culturalism is now gone and new forms of imaginative horizons for belonging and humanism are required.

Literature is important for both active cultural memory and reference or archive memory. The canon can be argued to constitute literature’s memory. Here, it is less than enough to emphasize the significance of canon-formation – inclusions and exclusions – in the constitution, preservation and circulation of memory. The appellation, “Literature” is itself the product of complex semio-historical processes. The upshot of a critical-cosmopolitan approach to CMS is expected to

provide theoretical and methodological suggestions for the reconceptualization of a CMS approach to literature, to wit, a new apology for the idea of world literature.



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