HMC Heritage, Memory and Conflict

Heritage, Memory and Conflict Journal (HMC)
2 2022, 1–5
DOI 10.3897/hmc.2.78980

Spaces of memory[1]

Cristina Demaria[1], Anna Maria Lorusso[1], Patrizia Violi[1], Ihab Saloul[2]

1 *University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy*
2 *University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands*

Corresponding author: Ihab Saloul (isaloul@uva.nl)

Published 12 January 2022

In the last decade, museums, memorials and monuments have become the battlefield for competing and conflicting visions of the past and the hegemonic or counter memories of the so-called "difficult heritage" or "traumatic heritage". Far from being mere spaces of musealization that freeze and fix dominant narratives of the past, spaces of memory are increasingly turning into sites of negotiations and reconfigurations of meaning in which social and political identities are debated, strengthened, or weakened in reference to the traumatic experiences of the past which they "represent". Yet, what does it mean to spatially represent a (traumatic) memory, and what is a space of memory?

In expanding and, simultaneously, problematizing Pierre Nora's (Nora 1996) category of *lieu de mémoire*, the way we think of spaces of memory aims at an in-depth examination of the peculiar yet specific ways of re-thinking the nexus between space and memory: how do we elaborate, activate, and make visible spaces for memory? This question points to the dynamic construction that underlines the production and connection of spatiality and memory, as well as to the coexistence of a plurality of meanings and experiences that characterize spaces of memory. Hence, when we refer to spaces of memory we think of both actual and material places and sites of commemoration and memorialization, as well as sets of more immaterial semiotic constructions, representing spaces that elaborate and interrogate the (traumatic) past through ritual practices, documentaries, and artistic performance. Spaces of memory thus include museums, former detention centers and camps, monuments, and memorials, some of which are indexically linked to past traumas[2]. This is so because those spaces of memory stand in the very place where violence and extermination occurred, and any intervention or artistic practice which investigates the multiple versions and their articulations that we can produce of the past, as well as the multiple ways of forming, interpreting, and experiencing the presence of the past when the latter assumes a spatial and relational dimension.

As Neyla Graciela Pardo Abril aptly writes in her article, "Art and Memory: Magdalenas por el Cauca", both the spatiality and rationality of spaces of memory is represented in the understanding of spaces of memory as:

> […] series of existential relations that guarantee dialogues and interactions related not only to strategies for context transformation, but also those ways of representation of violent events that define the condition of "victim". *In spaces of memory meanings of location, territory, areas of influence, ethical and political responsibilities, power relationships, and resistance exercises are recovered*. In spaces of memory, the knowledge linked to traumatic events is appropriated and socialized." (Pardo Abril, this issue, our italics).

All the articles in this issue delve into the multi-layered dimension of the nexus between spaces, spatiality, memories, and traumas that consist of, and, at the same

1 This open access special journal issue is generously funded by the EU research project, H2020-MSCA-RISE-2017 "SPEME- Questioning Traumatic Heritage: Spaces of Memory in Europe, Argentina, Colombia" (H2020 project number 778044). This publication is one of the deliverables of SPEME's dedicated research on spaces of memory and traumatic heritages and their transformations.

2 We refer here to the linguistic category of 'indexicality' as reformulated by Patrizia Violi in her book Landscapes of Memory (Violi 2017) to express the direct link that exists between certain spaces and the signs that have been devised to build it. Violi investigates in particular the case in which a monument, or a memorial, is located exactly at the place where a massacre or a traumatic event took place, thus expressing a direct link with that place, increasing its significance as a "trauma site". In linguistics, "indexical" is used to mean an expression whose interpretation depends on the context and varies as the contexts varies.

time, put into a productive tension. A more concrete, literal, and stricter acceptation of a "space of memory", as explained by Alejandra Naftal and Lars Ebert in the two opening articles of this issue, is that of space as the product of signifying practices, as a discursive and textual device through which the concept of 'memory' is worked through neither as an abstract nor fixed and codified system of knowledge.

As Ihab Saloul argues in his book, *Catastrophe and Exile in the Modern Palestinian Imagination: Telling Memories*, "memory is a volatile concept. The work of memory in all its forms, from historical essays to personal reminiscences, legal testimonies, and imaginative recreations, is not only slippery but also inherently contradictory. On the one hand, memory posits a past reality that is recalled outside the person's subjectivity. Yet, on the other hand, memory requires a narrator who is equipped with conventional cultural filters of generational distance, age and gender, class, and political affiliations, on whose authority the truth of the past can be revealed. Memories are narrated by someone in the present but nonetheless we still use them as authoritative sources of historical knowledge. Moreover, memories are always mediated, even in the flashes of so-called involuntary memory. They are complex constructions in which our present experience (individual and collective) conjoins with images that are collected by the mind from all manner of sources, including from our inner worlds. Furthermore, we are constantly confronted with images of the past, whether we actively observe them or not. Memory moves from the world of smell, sensations, habits, and images to the outer world via cultural forms such as myths, folktales, and popular narratives in the ways that we talk about traditions, national consciousness, and identities. The work of memory, then, must address itself not only to questions of what happened but also to how we know things, whose voices we hear, and where silences persist". (Saloul 2012: 4–6) Through the semiotic and cultural lens that we adopt here, memory is envisaged as an active force field of competing discourses within which individual and collective acts of remembrance are constantly re-negotiated, re-elaborated and recounted in often conflictual and contested narratives. It is a conception of memory not as an irrevocably deposited and defined notion but as an active and transformative force that reshapes the past as much as the future, as it interrogates the present, its politics and the subject positions that constitute forms and communities of remembrance and memory transmission. A multidimensional and multi-layered memory is, for that matter, what animates the trans-disciplinary broadening field of Heritage and Memory Studies, whose most cited and recognized authors are, not by chance, constantly referred to by the authors of this special issue.[3]

The shared assumption of this special issue as well as of the SPEME project research, is that for memory to be active and to have a transformative impact it must not be "musealized" and frozen in given and unquestioned forms of representation and communication. Instead, memory with its various forms of spatialization, exhibition and transmission, must reach out to new kinds of social actors, and must develop new forms of interaction with the political, social, and cultural contexts within which it is negotiated and promote innovative forms of expression. Here we come to another nexus that helps us to further problematize the category of spaces of memory as a set of dynamic processes of meaning construction and re-configuration, especially when exploring the impact of artistic practices within a memory site as a way of building a space of memory. Nowadays, spaces of memory do not certainly entertain an accidental relationship with different forms of trauma and artistic expressions. Rather they become sites of temporary exhibitions, theatrical and artistic performances, and, in some more radical cases, spaces of memory are themselves turned into works of art, making the boundaries between memorial commemoration and aesthetic experience ever more blurred. While many sites consecrated to the conservation and transmission of memory resort to art, contemporary artists seem to constantly re-elaborate and aesthetically transform several of the topics linked to (traumatic) memory. The works of Christian Boltanski and of other artists such as Doris Salcedo, Regina José Galindo, Ana Mendieta, Anna Maria Maiolino and Teresa Margolles, are but few seminal examples in this context.

Moreover, the resort to artistic expressions in memorial spaces and contexts is an attempt to answer one of the main and all-encompassing questions regarding these spaces: What do we make of places that oftentimes have been the stage of mass violence, of suffering and deaths; of places that bear the burden of collective lacerations, civil wars and conflicts between communities and actors belonging to the same country and the same culture? This question is debated in several articles in this issue in which artistic practices provide a possible alternative to the paralyzing opposition between an obsessive repetition of the traumatic event and an oblivion aimed at erasing all its traces**,** offering a way to think through, evoke or represent "what happened" in a symbolic form. A trauma is indeed not only the wounding of bodies and flesh; it is, first and foremost, the breaking of symbolic connections, the impossibility to integrate and balance cognitive, emotional, and symbolic elements of our experiences. Within this frame, artistic practices and expressions may gain an imaginative function able to reconstruct the lost connections, and to suggest new images and alternative thinking paradigms to reduce the

3 Obviously, it is impossible to summarize here the main categories and theories of the interdisciplinary field of heritage and memory studies, animated by a series of reflections that are partly shared and partly debated. See, for example, the work of authors such as Maurice Halbwachs, Aleida and Jan Assmann, Tzevan Todorov, Marianne Hirsch, Michael Rothberg, Georges Didi-Huberman, Ann Rigney and many others.

"hermeneutic gaps" that separate the past from the ways we have access to it in the present. The many thoughts and reflections advanced by the authors of this issue revolve around the premises discussed so far, as in the first two essays which are written by two professionals who work in museums and archives and who take us *inside* two emblematic spaces of Memory in Argentina (Naftal) and in the Netherlands (Ebert), while the third essay (Leoni and Borsari) immediately forces us to face all the contemporary challenges posed by what we could call the "enterprise" of memory making and cultural heritage in the 21st century as an endeavor defined by the constant tension between remembering and forgetting, gripped between an excess of memory and an excess of oblivion, whereby what is needed is often either to reactivate "dormant memories" or unmemorable, indescribable, ones. What is also at stake is how to retrace intentionally erased traces as was the case with Holocaust memories in Europe, and with the tragedy of the desaparecidos in Argentina (see also Tornay et al in this issue) or, else, with traces that have withered away due to the passing of time and the death of direct witnesses, while many other memories are celebrated with redundancy.

In addition, the authors in this issue do not limit themselves to a mere architectonical or urbanistic description of the logic and the narratives at play in a space of memory and the many signs it displays and exhibits. Instead, the authors also discuss the practices developed and envisaged around and within a place that is thus turned into a meaningful space; often time bottom-up practices following the paradigm of an active and transformative memory as discussed above.

Some practices are also the outcomes of a programed artistic research project, as the one analyzed in the articles of Pardo Abril's and Lizel Tornay et al. Others are the result of bottom-up movements of political resistance and activism, as in the case of the Hungarian monuments investigated by Reka Deim, where the direct intervention on a site of memory aims at contesting and challenging the government's official version of the recent national past. As such, several causes for reflections emerge, starting from the already mentioned role of art as an *ethical role* that appeals to artistic practices which do not take for granted what is true and appropriate, or what is wrong and inappropriate, but rather take a stand to re-establish a direct involvement and an intimate contact with the social, political and cultural dimension of any politics of memory and its spaces as spaces of trans-generational and transcultural transmission and convergences. Thus, the role of direct, physical experience as it gets *embodied in memory* practices and the spaces they transform, defies the idea of spaces of memory as a form of the archive neither as a stack of documents nor as a series of already established and closed narratives or as a fixed set of unchangeable symbols. On the contrary, memory becomes what is lived and experienced through a subject who is and, at the same time has, a body; a subject who is both a product of sensation and feelings and a member of a community thought of as a space of belonging, of constant negotiations, conflicts, and acknowledgments. To focus on experience means also to look at all these dimensions, to reflect upon a memory that is embodied in and through the very relationship between spaces and beings that produce, cross, and transform them. At stake here are also *memory affects and emotions*, such as nostalgia, or indignation and resentment when it comes to traumatic pasts, but also hope as a "structure of feeling" intended to question how one can remember without having hope for the future. Finally, what is repeatedly underlined in the essays in this issue is the topic of *memory and intergenerational transmission*. In this context, Marianne Hirsch's well-known concept of 'postmemory' (Hirsch 2012) is put under scrutiny not so much for its lack of relevance, but because, at times, it proves to be too encompassing and generalized. As such, the reader will not find theories of postmemory in this issue but rather concrete and actual examples of inter-generational transmission of diverse traumatic pasts such as the Argentinian "dirty war" and state terrorism; the European Holocaust in the Netherlands and Italy, as well as the armed conflict that has been lacerating Colombia for more than fifty years. Therefore, the questions we must ask are: how do we attract new and young generations to spaces of memory? How do we talk about and recount a (traumatic) past to subjects who are neither familiar with this past nor lived or experienced it? How do we develop alternative forms of knowledge that can trigger new ways of thinking around the often-overused slogan, "nunca mas" (never again), as a deeply felt commitment through narratives and images that unpack and balance discussions of concepts such as 'guilt', 'complicity', 'responsibility' and the 'victim-perpetrator' dualities and paradigms? How do we make something visible that has become invisible, of which no more traces are left?

It would be overly ambitious to claim that this special issue offers definitive answers to all these questions. Rather, the issue aims at re-formulating these questions, thus adding clarity and, at the same time, raising doubts on the many implications that surround the intertwining of space, memory, and artistic practices by giving concrete examples of how memory works, and of how spaces of memory may trigger relevant processes of identification, socialization, working through and possible forms of reconciliation. As we have attempted to argue, it is not only appropriate, but also necessary, to find new ways of thinking about the transmission of knowledge of the past to new generations, and to overcome the silences, the repressions, and the embarrassments that the traumas of the 20th century have produced. Furthermore, it is urgent to reflect on *active and participatory* processes of memorialization and heritagization to bring back to the center of any discussion on memory building the importance of enhancing the sense of *response and responsibility* of both individuals and local, national, and transnational communities with respect to both "what happened" in the past, and to what *will* happen.

What follows is a short itinerary among the articles that compose this special issue. Alejandra Naftal's article presents us with a concrete and exemplary case of a site of memory located in Buenos Aires – the *ESMA-Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights* where in 2015 the *ESMA Museum and Site of Memory* which Naftal directs was inaugurated. In this space of memory, the former *Casino de los Officiales* which is now turned into a museum, during the Argentine military dictatorship thousands of people were tortured, imprisoned and from there "prepared" for the flights of death in which prisoners were thrown out from planes to drown in the sea. Naftal recounts the many steps and the heated debates that preceded the opening of the museum, which is a space that represents concrete legal evidence of the crimes that have been perpetrated by the military Junta, and asks how should the former detention centers be treated? Most importantly, how do we conserve the traces and how do we exhibit them? And when facing traumatic events encompassing the torture and disappearance of hundreds of people, how do we turn this site of suffering, horror, and tragedy into a space for memory transmission and the preservation of testimonies for future generations? These questions haunt every attempt to "musealize" a trauma site, starting from how to differentiate acts and practices of documentation and preservation from the audience interpretative, and sometimes very diverse, reactions. In her article, Naftal engages with these debates and discusses how to conceptualize effective and respectful modes of representation of a recent traumatic experience that is still part of the living memory of a large part of Argentine society.

The article by Lars Ebert deals with another concrete case of a space of memory, that is of Herengracht 401 (H401) located in Amsterdam, the former house of a hermetic community of artists and scholars that was funded during the years of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands (1940–1945) and that was offered as a hiding place for a small community of Jews, some of whom managed to survive. Ebert follows the evolution and transformation of a place that witnessed different traumas and argues that artistic research and practices continue to play an equally, yet different, and surely not confined and hermetic role, today. This is so because the space of H401 has become an archive engaging with artists who, during their periods of residence and thanks to their sensitivity and experience, try to fill the "hermeneutic gap" that still separates the present from the past that is constantly re-invented and fictionalized without losing its power and its force, yet departing from any pre-conceived ideas of truth and authenticity.

In its two distinct yet dialogic parts, Giovanni Leoni and Andrea Borsari's article starts with a critique of memory tools and aids, and the paradoxes produced by the excesses of memorialization on one hand, and of the tendency towards oblivion, on the other. Leoni and Borsari explore new forms of remembrance that mix the experiential dimension and the urban public sphere, and hence, open up new pathways for the reactivation of dormant memories, counter-monumental strategies and uncoded amnestic traces. Moreover, by highlighting how the experience of political and racial deportation during World War II drastically changed the idea of memorial architecture, the article elaborates on the specificity of architecture as an art craft that not only represents but also builds places which do not only recount experiences but rather *generate* them. The article thus proposes to develop a new conception of "concentratory" architecture, along with its constructing or deconstructing potentialities that can rethink the relationship between the architectural work and the existing surroundings, and to bring the body and experience back to the center of the project.

Pardo Abril's article starts from a broader conception of spaces of memory whereby audiovisual representations of memory can become spaces of remembering and healing. The author analyzes a video production that is closely linked to a physical space, namely the Cauca River, where various hideous crimes were perpetrated between 1986 and 1994, within the framework of the yet-to-be-resolved armed conflict in Colombia. The video not only reproduces, but also participates in what became a ritual of memory on the river, thanks to the organization of an exhibition and procession that mobilized many of the people who struggled and suffered in that place. Through a discursive analysis of the audio-visual restitution of this performance of, and on, memory, the article explores the narratives, the semantic nuclei and the deep underlining values marking the difficult re-elaboration of the memory of this very recent, and for some still ongoing, trauma.

The article by Lizel Tornay et al focuses on the transmission of memory to the new and young generations. Choosing not to resort to the concept of 'post-memory', the article focuses on two heritage sites linked to the traumatic memory of the dictatorship ('the Park for Memory and Human Rights' and the "El Olimpo" memory site, a former Clandestine Detention Center) by looking at two artistic projects hosted by these two spaces and designed specifically for a young audience prompted to creatively "interpret" and represent them. Thanks to these two examples, the article reflects on how the recourse to an artistic reworking (be it with posters and drawings or with the use of poetry) produced by some of the youngest visitors of the Park of Memory and the "El Olimpo" may, on the one hand, keep the traumatic memory alive by highlighting lived and concrete aspects of these places, and, on the other, how it can stimulate further and broader reflections that go beyond the single traumatic event of the state terrorism, opening up to a more general discourse on the ongoing local and global violation of human rights.

Finally, Reka Deim's article examines the top-down dialectic of Hungarian national memory politics, taking into consideration, on one hand, the national poli-

cies that either impose, rewrite, or celebrate a certain vision of homeland history and public memory, and on the other hand, the practices of civil resistance to national memory expressed through forms of grassroots activism. The memory on which Deim reflects is that of Hungary during its periods of transition from the country's independence to its membership of the Soviet bloc, to the gaining of national autonomy from communism and the so-called "Third Republic" (1989-present), up to the establishment of Victor Urban's national-conservative government which many people consider either as authoritarian or as a government with 'undemocratic' features. According to Deim, the coexistence of several contrasting memories, expressed in symbolic monuments and museums that have triggered numerous demonstrations and bottom-up practices of resistance and opposition around them, has not always had effective and productive results. Moreover, the so-called "multidirectional memories" (Rothberg 2009) don't always have a positive outcome but rather often fail to build a collective and shared awareness. For Deim, multidirectional memories have an element of paradoxicality because while they manage to render different visions of the past explicit, they nevertheless increase conflict and internal turmoil that may even solicit the drive to silence them.

References

Assmann A (1999) Erinnerungsraüme. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses. Oskar Beck, Müunchen.

Assmann J (1992) Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen. Beck, München. https://doi.org/10.17104/9783406703409

Errl A, Rigney A [Eds] (2009) Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory. De Gruyter, Berlin.

Halbwachs M (1925) Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire. Alcan, Paris.

Halbwachs M (1992) On Collective Memory. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226774497.001.0001

Hirsch M (2012) The generation of Postmemory. Visual Culture after the Holocaust. Columbia University Press, New York.

Nora P [Ed.] (1984–1992) Les lieux de mémoire. Gallimard, Paris.

Rothberg M (2000) Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Rothberg M (2009) Multidirectional Memory, Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization. Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Saloul I (2012) Catastrophe and Exile in the Modern Palestinian Imagination: Telling Memories. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137001382

Todorov T (2004) Les Abus de la mémoire. Arléa, Paris.

Violi P (2017) Landscapes of Memory. Trauma, Space, History. Peter Lang, London. https://doi.org/10.3726/b10991