

Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies

Series editors
Andrew Hoskins
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Glasgow, UK

John Sutton
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Macquarie, Australia

The nascent field of Memory Studies emerges from contemporary trends that include a shift from concern with historical knowledge of events to that of memory, from 'what we know' to 'how we remember it'; changes in generational memory; the rapid advance of technologies of memory; panics over declining powers of memory, which mirror our fascination with the possibilities of memory enhancement; and the development of trauma narratives in reshaping the past. These factors have contributed to an intensification of public discourses on our past over the last thirty years. Technological, political, interpersonal, social and cultural shifts affect what, how and why people and societies remember and forget. This groundbreaking new series tackles questions such as: What is 'memory' under these conditions? What are its prospects, and also the prospects for its interdisciplinary and systematic study? What are the conceptual, theoretical and methodological tools for its investigation and illumination?

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Erica L. Johnson · Éloïse Brezault
Editors

Memory as Colonial Capital

Cross-Cultural Encounters in French and English

palgrave
macmillan

Editors

Erica L. Johnson
Pace University
New York, NY, USA

Éloïse Brezault
St. Lawrence University
Canton, NY, USA

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FOREWORD: MEMORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

In his landmark book, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (1995), Andreas Huyssen explains the obsession with memory and the past that marked the end of the last century by invoking the “crisis of the ideology of progress and modernization” and of teleological views of history. Losing faith in progress, Huyssen argues, we turned to the past. While some did so in the spirit of nostalgia, I would argue that the study and practice of memory primarily provided a powerful means to revise the past so as to be able to enlarge the present, contesting official histories and dominant voices. Many scholars and practitioners of memory embraced this critical potential, retrieving and making space for forgotten and suppressed experiences. They searched for appropriate genres and media through which to articulate counter-histories rooted in small personal stories and their embodied material traces. Memory as a revisionary, corrective endeavor was meant to bypass the nation as a primary historical category, instead of locating itself in subcultural or transnational and transnational spaces and counter-hegemonic discourses.

And yet, this volume asks, is memory necessarily progressive? Whose voices and whose stories dominate memory discourses and practices? In what ways are hegemonic national and colonial archives still dominant in the generation and transmission of memory across generations? *Memory as Colonial Capital* participates in a more recent *postcolonial* turn, working in tandem with a *transnational* or *transcultural* turn in the practices and studies of memory. But, as the essays in this volume make clear,

just as transnational memory practices do not necessarily supersede the national, neither does the postcolonial necessarily supersede the colonial.

In fact, this volume suggests that, problematically, memory itself has become a form of transnational currency connecting subaltern histories with one another and offering them to a global readership fascinated by narratives of violence, suffering, and resilience. As trauma and victimhood have become dominant paradigms, and testimony an important genre defining our moment, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman have argued that we are situated in an “empire of trauma” that regulates human rights regimes, memory politics, and the economics of reparation. Both Martha Minow, in her nuanced discussion of “victim talk,” and Wendy Brown in her work on “wounded attachments,” have demonstrated some of the troubling ways in which trauma and victimhood are often invoked to undergird a politics of identity based on shared suffering. In a more affirming vein, Michael Rothberg has argued for a “multidirectional” memory that would avert the zero-sum game that results when we pit stories of victimization against each other. Instead, he suggests, we need to look at the ways in which memories of violent pasts are often entangled and interrelated. In a similar vein, I have argued for a “connective” rather than a comparative approach to memory: we can connect violent histories to one another, even if each is particular and, in its own way, incomparable. This multidirectionality and connectivity reveals some of the structures of political violence, its experience and its transmission, but has the chance of eschewing the erasure of particularity and difference.

Memory as Colonial Capital is both a welcome and an important intervention in these cautionary arguments. In using the notion of “cultural capital,” it concentrates our attention on the publishing market and on its power to shape the stories and histories that get told, published, exchanged, and commodified, often also determining the languages in which they are written. The book focuses specifically on Francophone and Anglophone works emerging from French and English colonial and postcolonial contexts. In this specificity, the essays point precisely to the differences between these contexts, and the difference that language, nation, and translation can make in conceptualizing memory and the past. In the context of the current eagerness to embrace transnational and comparative approaches, it reminds us to be sensitive to the resistances of memory acts and practices of exchange, and to the divergences

and untranslatabilities of local cultures and histories. At the same time, it reminds us that sensitivity to individual and local specificities could also involve a slippage from small, local stories to the pitfalls of nationalism and ethnocentrism and a repetition of colonial power structures.

How can memories of violence and colonialism be mobilized for a transcultural and decolonial future that resists identitarian, nationalist, and colonial ideologies? This volume advances this discussion by resisting some of the assumptions on which memory studies have perhaps too unthinkingly been relying.

Marianne Hirsch
Columbia University

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Éloïse Brezault

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Erica L. Johnson

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

Erica L. Johnson is an Associate Professor in the English Department at Pace University and the author of *Caribbean Ghostwriting* (Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2009) and *Home, Maison, Casa* (Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2003). She is also the co-editor with Patricia Moran of *The Female Face of Shame* (Indiana UP, 2013) and *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First-Century Approaches* (Edinburgh UP, 2015). She has published widely on modernist and postcolonial literature.

Éloïse Brezault is an Assistant Professor at Saint Lawrence University and the author of *Johnny Chien Méchant par Emmanuel Dongala* (ACEL, 2012), on the representation of child soldiers in Dongala's novel, *Johnny Mad Dog*. She has published a collection of interviews with Francophone African writers, *Afrique, Paroles d'écrivains* (Mémoire d'encrier, 2010). She currently works as the associate editor of the academic journal *Nouvelles Études Francophones*, and she has written numerous articles on Francophone African literature and postcolonial studies.

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