

# Voluntary forgetting and the weight of collective memory

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## Introduction

Once upon a time, Hayden White famously conceptualized historical narratives as a form of literary genre, a ‘discursive turn’ in which the product (the text itself) is focused upon, rather than the rendering of an objective account of the past (Sutermeister, 2005). Might not the same be said of our current relationship to news? The twenty-four hour news cycle would have us believe that we are continually in a period of history in the making. Yet it seems incumbent now more than ever, in what appears to be a new age of authoritarianism, to inquire whether our mediated sources of ‘information’ have taken an unprecedented discursive turn for the fanciful. If the narratives on which we rely, whether from relatively contemporary sources or from the deeper past, are not neutral, involving ‘ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications’ (White, 1987: ix), then why not acknowledge freely the extent to which our relationship to our current information is consciously constructed? In much the way that the historiographer’s tale ‘also represent[s] only a selection of historical events’, may we not be done with purity and accept that ‘thus, truth is limited’ (Sutermeister, 2005)? ‘History is therefore never history, but history-for,’ wrote Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1972); so too, with one of history’s ‘primary sources’, the mediated mass media—it is intentionally ‘news-for’.

I will not be referring below to the more transcendental expressions of collective memory—what James Wertsch terms ‘the strong version of collective memory [that] assumes some sort of collective mind or consciousness [which] exists above and beyond the minds of the individuals in a collective’ (2002, p. 21). Some of these approaches belong to the realm of the phenomenological, or, for example, to Jungian psychology that maintains a belief in the non-explicable inherited collective consciousness, ‘a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. ... It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents’ (Jung, 1981, p. 43). Other approaches belong to a separate, parallel discussion on forms of collective identification (such as *ethnies*, or ‘imagined’ constructs such as ‘the nation’). However, my purpose below is to give a critical account of the

lineage of memory studies in order to suggest an explanation for our current addiction towards remembrance through voluntary forgetting.

### 1. Forms of identity and allegiance as collective experience: Social frameworks of memory

The collective memory field, 'a memory boom of unprecedented proportions' as Huyssen described it (1995, p. 5) is considered to have mushroomed during the 1980s although scholars differ as to whether this is a first-, second- or perennial-wave phenomenon (Russell, 2006; Blight, 2009; Kastner, Najafi and Connerton, 2011). As Paul Connerton explains, 'In some sense, memory studies is really a phenomenon of the last quarter century. One hundred years ago, there would have, of course, been studies of memory—by Freud, by Bergson, by Proust—but they would have been primarily interested in *individual* memory. What's happened in the last quarter century has been a turn toward *cultural* memory. And because of this turn, the term *memory studies* has acquired currency' (Kastner, Najafi and Connerton, 2011).

The field ascribes its origins largely to the work of Bergson disciple and Durkheim contemporary, Maurice Halbwachs, who died in Buchenwald in 1945; but David W. Blight, who claims 'at least two major memory booms' — the first one taking place 'during 1890-1920, leading up to and transformed by World War I and its staggering losses'— locates Halbwachs in the first rather than the second 'boom', along with other 'major intellectuals who probed memory in their work ... including Henry Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, ... and others' (Blight, 2009, p. 243). Chronologically, this is of course an accurate observation, yet as we shall see, Halbwachs' understanding of memory was rather different from the 'major intellectuals' who dealt in individual memory, the province of the newly-emerging fields of stream-of-consciousness literature, psychiatry and psychology; it represented a revolution of aspect. Yet for English-speaking theorizers of collective memory, Halbwachs is most often associated with the 1980s 'boom' as his work took considerably longer to reach us in translation. The unfinished *La Mémoire Collective* (*The Collective Memory*) published posthumously in 1950 in French, only became available in English in 1980 (Halbwachs, 1980), when it emerged as a seminal text for Anglo-Saxon collective memory theorists. An earlier work published in 1925 in French, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (*The Social Frameworks of Memory*) became available in English still later, in 1992, through Lewis Coser's translation (Halbwachs, 1992).

The timing of the publication of these two translations may go some way to explaining the emergence of the theoretical boom, but other forces, too, were at work. For Andreas Huyssen, the turn towards memory is to be contrasted against 'an age of emerging supranational structures' when

'the problem of national identity is increasingly discussed in terms of cultural or collective memory rather than in terms of the assumed identity of nation and state' (Huysen, 1995, p. 5). Yet the growth of globalization, global governance and of cultural identity politics (actually an expansion of the rights movements of the late 1960s and 1970s) also took place in a climate of frenetic national memorializing.

Huysen's theory is that 'the current obsession with memory' is not merely a form of millenarian neurosis, but rather 'a sign of the crisis of that structure of temporality that marked the age of modernity with its celebration of the new as utopian, as radically and irreducibly other' (Huysen, 1995, p. 6). We are, quite simply, alienated by high-tech modernity, made anxious by the future, by the apparently speeded-up linear propulsion towards futuristic technologies that may lead to unknown outcomes; with this comes the anxiety of losing the familiar past, and the fear of memory's apposite, forgetting.

Connerton—who found certain aspects of forgetting not only malign but also benign (in Kastner, Najafi and Connerton, 2011) — does not attribute the memory 'boom' to 'any single factor' but rather to a 'confluence of three powerful forces coming together'. Maier, meanwhile, considers that our 'surfeit of memory' is due to the fact that 'at the end of the twentieth century Western societies have come to the end of a massive collective project. ... the end, or at least the interruption, of the capacity to found collective institutions that rest on aspirations for the future' (Maier, 1993, p. 147). Here, of course, one thinks immediately of the challenged European Union.

Discussing the rise of ethnicity and identity claims, Maier believes that ethnicity has 'trumped' all other visions for the future, leaving nothing left to us except to remember:

... as we extend recognition to more and more ethnic fragments - Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Moldova, etc., etc. - we are confused by their claims. Nations in the modern era were more than gene pools; they were layered communities - often hierarchical, to be sure, with subject and ruling ethnic groups. ... they encompassed larger aspirations than ethnicity. ...The modern nation-state grew out of ethnicity, not toward ethnicity. ... In the twilight of Enlightenment aspirations to collective institutions, we build museums to memory, our memory. (Maier, 1993, pp. 147-149).

For this reason, surmises Maier, we (by this presumably he means long-established nation-states) have become so 'preoccupied' with *lieux de mémoire*, 'landscape and place ... sometimes monuments'. In an era of globalization and 'permeable' frontiers, when 'concept of spatial coherence ... has faded as a property of nations', do these *lieux de mémoire* act as a form of surrogate for 'self-definition'?

Perhaps; but many inter- and intra-group claims are still founded on territoriality as spaces of memory. Observe Luminet *et al* (on the political crisis between Walloons and Flemings in Belgium, to whom an entire issue of the journal *Memory Studies* is devoted), 'political conflicts surrounding the integrity of nation states systematically involve conflict of memories (e.g. Licata et al., 2007; Rosoux, 2004). ... these conflicts most often include the ignorance — or the rejection — of the other group's memory' (Luminet, Licata, Klein, Rousoux, Wolff, van Ypersele and Stone, 2012, p. 4). The Israel-Palestine conflict is another example out of many; almost all post-colonial states also preoccupy themselves with the legacies of such memory conflicts.

Not only political developments but also epistemological trends play a part in explaining the turn to memory. Pennebaker and Banasik (1997) attribute the construction of the collective memory field to the theoretical possibilities opened up by Kenneth Gergen's 1973 social deconstructionist movement, and his consideration that 'social psychology was a form of history ... history itself was an impartial truth with social psychological findings serving as archival reminders of the ways people thought and behaved at the time the studies were conducted' (Pennebaker and Banasik, 1997, p. 3). Although they rightly point out that 'history itself is highly contextual' (one might add, relational) they concur that 'social psychological processes help to define history ... Just as the key to the future is the past, the key to the past is the present' (Pennebaker and Banasik, 1997, p. 3). While psychological research into memory concentrates on the individual, 'history is constructed through the shared memories of multiple people' (Pennebaker and Gonzales, 2009, p. 171), a claim strongly influenced by the ideas of Halbwachs and echoed by James Wertsch (Wertsch, 2002; Wertsch, 2009).

Whatever the factors contributory to the timing of the theoretical boom—political or epistemic—none of them would have been possible without Halbwachs' particular contribution to the polysemous issue of memory: the sociological anchoring of individual memory within the memory of groups, for 'it is in society,' wrote Halbwachs, 'that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that people recall, recognize, and localize their memories. ... It is also in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 32). This is not only a universal property, but it is also specific to each social group, since 'the particular nature of the group and its collective experience ... shapes its collective memory ... [and] creates a shared memory and identity' (Russell, 2006, p. 796). Consequently, 'every group has its own collective memory and that collective memory differs from the collective memory of other groups' (Russell, 2006, p. 796). Halbwachs allows that individuals will have their own 'take' on their group's collective narrative (Wertsch, 2009), but since individuals are raised in that group's society, their memory will be framed by everything they absorb from peers and other elements of that social setting (Halbwachs, 1980). Memory—and hence, identity—becomes 'distributed' or 'multivoiced' (Wertsch,

1991, 2007) or 'multidirectional' (Rothberg, 2009) relying not only on individuals in the collective, but on different members of the collective retaining or sharing different segments of a narrative, mediated by 'cultural tools' such as 'narrative texts' (Wertsch, p. 8, 2007), maps, history textbooks, media or other tools that are available in the sociocultural setting of the group (Anderson's 'print capitalism' develops this notion with regard to the rise of national groups [1983, p. 52]). A group's memories are thus rarely 'the product of an isolated speaker or cognitive agent'. (Wertsch, 1991, p. 6), and while individual memories are thus 'socially framed', 'the groups themselves also share *publicly articulated images of collective pasts*' (Olick, 2008, p. 156) i.e. representation in all its various forms. 'For this reason,' explains Olick, 'Halbwachs distinguished between "autobiographical memory" and "historical memory." The former concerns the events of one's own life that one remembers because they were experienced directly. The latter refers to residues of events by virtue of which groups claim a continuous identity through time' (Olick, 2008, p. 156).

The implication, however, is that a group's collective memory reconstruction is mostly a memory of a *lived experience*, as distinct from a historian's scholarly analysis, although the latter account is equally likely to be subjectively shaped by moral interpretation and the exigencies of coherent narration, as Hayden White and others note in the ongoing debate over historiography (Domanska, 1998; Sutermeister, 2005; White, 1973, 1987, 1999).

The 'lived experience' does not necessarily have to be consecutive, according to Kansteiner (2002, p. 190) :

Physical and social proximity to past events and their subsequent rationalization and memorialization does not have to coincide. There is no natural, direct connection between the real and the remembered. On the one hand, collective memories might exclude events that played an important role in the lives of members of the community (for instance, the memory of WWII in Japan). On the other hand, socially and geographical[ly] distant events might be adopted for identity purposes by groups that had no involvement in their unfolding (as in the case of Holocaust memory).

Such memories are, in any case, 'mediated phenomena' and what is of interest is the 'means of representation' (monuments, architecture and other sites of memory, cultural artefacts, other visual, aural or discursive means) that tells us much about how such collective memories evolve (Kansteiner, 1990, p. 190).

Certain aspects of collective memory (here scholars do not precisely agree on which aspects, or cannot determine which aspects Halbwachs intended) are not static phenomena, frozen in time,

but they aggregate to a certain 'concretion' that marks a group's identity or claim to exceptionality (although this too, can be contested: *Nous sommes tous Charlie* / We are not all Charlie). Nevertheless, 'the creation and maintenance of a collective or historical memory is a dynamic and psychological process', argue Pennebaker and Banasik (1997, p. 4). The more historical significance that an event has to a community, they argue, the more it will be remembered collectively; but such collective remembering will nevertheless still greatly depend on the more transient issue of our current circumstances and needs. Citing the 'critical period hypothesis' (events that take place during the ages 12-25 are most remembered, according the psychological research of Rubin in the 1980s) they also surmise that that there is a 'generational effect' regarding which events are most collectively recollected in recent history (such as the Kennedy assassination, the Apollo moon landings, the Vietnam War; one might add the collective of memory of 911 events, which are gradually beginning to subside in reference, and to be more localized to New York City). This concurs with Halbwachs' notion that when a generational group that preserves a memory disbands or passes away, that collective memory (or site of memory) will also diminish and fade away.

## 2. Individual versus collective memory

One of the key conceptual challenges to collective memory theories has been the perennial debate over individual versus collective memory. Klein (2000, pp. 130-135) takes issue with what she terms the hypostatization of 'the New Structural Memory'. Citing Michael Schudson, (Schudson, 1993), she retorts:

... the public has gotten memory wrong, and the "social-scientific tribe" has gotten it right, says Schudson. Not only is memory "essentially social," it is located in "rules, laws, standardized procedures, and records books, holidays, statues, souvenirs." Memory may also "characterize groups" by revealing a "debt to the past" and expressing "moral continuity." ... Memory is not a property of individual minds, but a diverse and shifting collection of material artifacts and social practices ... Memory here becomes "structural," provided we use that word with sufficient flexibility to invoke both the notion of "social structure" typical of recent social history and the notion of systems of difference common in the high structuralism descended from Saussurean linguistics.

Take away the individual from memory, asserts Klein, and what remains is objectivized culture.

A further perspective on the individual versus collective memory debate is colourfully

encapsulated in Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam's discussion, 'Collective memory – what is it?' (Gedi and Elam, 1996, pp. 30-50). In a willful misreading of Halbwachs—who did not get to finish or refine his theories—they characterize collective memory as 'a fabricated version of that same personal memory adjusted to what the individual mind considers, rightly or not, as suitable in a social environment'. For Gedi and Elam:

There is no mystery here; the mechanism of collective memory and the mechanism of personal memory are one and the same and located in the same individual mind. "Collective memory" is but a misleading new term for the old familiar "myth" which can be identified, in its turn, with "collective" and "social" stereotypes. Indeed, collective memory is but a myth. (p. 47, 1996).

These kinds of pronouncements ignore the interplay of the social and personal, and best illustrates the 'danger in drawing stark distinctions between individual and collective processes ... [and] ' can encourage the tendency to isolate the work of one discipline from that of another', notes Wertsch (Wertsch, 2002, p. 35) namely, psychology, versus other social sciences such as sociology and anthropology. 'The distinction between individual and collective memory may not be as ironclad as current disciplinary divisions would suggest,' observes Wertsch (2002, p. 37).

Jan Assmann (2008, p. 109) finds a median way between the dualism of the individual-social collective memory standoff by characterizing memory as a phenomenon composed of three levels. 'On the *inner level*,' explains Assmann, 'memory is a matter of our neuro-mental system. This is our personal memory, the only form of memory that had been recognized as such until the 1920s'. However, 'On the *social level*, memory is a matter of communication and social interaction. It was the great achievement of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs to show that our memory depends, like consciousness in general, on socialization and communication, and that memory can be analyzed as a function of our social life (*Les cadres sociaux; La mémoire collective*)'. It is also memory that 'enables us to live in groups and communities, and living in groups and communities enables us to build a memory' (Assmann, 2008, p. 109). Because of these social and linguistic features of Halbwachsian memory, Assmann prefers to call it 'communicative memory' and introduces another clarificatory term, 'cultural memory':

Halbwachs ... was careful to keep his concept of collective memory apart from the realm of traditions, transmissions, and transferences which we propose to subsume under the term "cultural memory." ...we insist on including the cultural sphere, which he excluded, in the

study of memory. We are, therefore, not arguing for replacing his idea of “collective memory” with “cultural memory”; rather, we distinguish between both forms as two different *modi memorandi*, ways of remembering. (Assmann, 2008, p. 110)

Assmann’s ‘cultural memory’ is ‘a kind of institution’ available in symbolized form – from the temporal (rituals and commemorative days) to the spatial (sites of memory); in this he also included objectivized cultural objects, noting, ‘Things do not “have” a memory of their own’ but they act as a ‘trigger’. ‘They carry memories which we have invested into them ... dishes, feasts, rites, images, stories and other texts, landscapes, and other “lieux de mémoire” ... ’ (Assmann, 2008, p. 110-111). ‘On the social level,’ he adds, ‘with respect to groups and societies, the role of external symbols becomes even more important’:

... because groups which, of course, do not “have” a memory tend to “make” themselves one by means of things meant as reminders such as monuments, museums, libraries, archives, and other mnemonic institutions. ... In order to be able to be reembodyed in the sequence of generations, cultural memory, unlike communicative memory, exists also in disembodied form and requires institutions of preservation and reembodyment. (Assmann, 2008, pp. 110-111).

### 3. Collective memory versus history

The dialogic relation of collective memory to written history provides a further major theoretical challenge to memory scholars. Halbwachs and many other theorists of collective memory are clear on the ‘distinct boundaries’ of ‘history and memory’ (Blight, 2009, p. 241):

History and memory have distinct boundaries, and we should maintain them as best we can. ... History is what trained historians do, a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research; it tends to be skeptical of human motive and action, and therefore more secular than what we commonly call memory. ... *Memory is often owned, history interpreted.* [Researcher’s italics.] Memory is passed down through generations; history is revised generation after generation. Memory often coalesces in objects, sites, monuments; history seeks to understand contexts in all their complexity. History asserts the authority of academic training and rules of evidence; memory carries the more immediate authority of community membership or family experience. (Blight, 2009, p. 241).



History functions as abstract 'semantic memory', rather like earlier forms of prehalbwachsian collective memory, asserts Russell (2006), while Halbwachs' version of collective memory more closely resembles personal and subjective 'episodic memory', except that it is shared within groups, 'It belongs to particular groups, takes lived experience as its object, is part of that group's identity, and cannot be transferred from one group to another' (Russell, 2006 p. 798). Moreover, while memory is very much about the past, it only exists in the present, if it is 'alive' and lived by 're-presentation' in the community (or by the individual), as Huyssen (1995, p. 3) explains:

The temporal status of any act of memory is always the present and not, as some naïve epistemology might have it, the past itself, even though all memory in some ineradicable sense is dependent on some past event or experience. It is this tenuous fissure between past and present that constitutes memory, making it powerfully alive and distinct from the archive or any other mere system of storage and retrieval.

Rothberg (2009, p. 3) concurs with this, reiterating Richard Terdiman's definition that 'memory is the past made present ... a contemporary phenomenon, something that, while concerned with the past, happens in the present'. He emphasizes the non-static, active nature of memory; it is 'a form of work, working through, labor, or action' (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3).

What Halbwachs intended by collective memory, writes Peter Novick, author of the influential *The Holocaust in American Life*, 'is in crucial senses ahistorical, even antihistorical' (Novick, 2000, p. 3):

To understand something historically is to be aware of its complexity, to have sufficient detachment to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities, of protagonists' motives and behavior. Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes. (Novick, 2000, p. 4)

Some historians, however, uphold that such dichotomizing is profoundly problematic. Winter (2009, p. 254) dislikes the 'stylized and unpersuasive analytical distinction between history on one side as documented narratives and memory on the other as free-floating tales that may not be true'. In fact, says Winter, 'Historians think otherwise and work to bring the two closer together' because 'increasingly, over the twentieth century and beyond, the space between history and memory has been reconfigured' (2009, p. 254). There is a middle ground, a 'varied set of cultural practices that

may be described as forms of “historical remembrance” says Winter, (2009, p. 254).

Nevertheless, the most controversial challenge to the hierarchical domination of ‘intellectual and secular’ history over ‘magical’ memory was issued by French-Jewish historian Pierre Nora, who asserted that ‘history is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it’ (Nora, 1989, p. 9). For Nora, ‘Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition,’ (Nora, 1989, p. 9). Discussing the shortfalls of both memory and history, Nora maintains that:

Memory is life, borne by living societies found in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present. ...Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative. (Nora, 1989, p. 9)

Mourning the rupture of modernity and the disappearance of ‘the remnants of experience still lived in the warmth of tradition ... [that] have been displaced under the pressure of a fundamentally historical sensibility’ Nora famously averred that ‘We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left’ (Nora, 1989, p. 7). In similar vein, writing of the current ongoing preoccupation with memory, Huyssen (1995) describes it almost as a form of collective grief or anxiety; are we losing our memories? Are we losing our minds?

Kerwin Lee Klein suggests that memory has emerged ‘in an age of historiographic crisis precisely because it figures as a therapeutic alternative to historical discourse’ (Klein, 2000, p. 145) but not all critics were in favour of Nora’s attempt to restore collective memory to historical consciousness and the practice of historiography, as Rothberg (2010) notes; accusations of the ‘polarization of history and memory’ provided ‘a central irony ... a project that has helped to stimulated a boom in the study of memory is premised on the demise of memory’ (Rothberg, 2010, p. 4). Rothberg prefers ‘a synthesis that also gives weight to the individual experience’. ‘Not strictly separable from either history or representation,’ suggests Rothberg, ‘memory nonetheless captures simultaneously the individual, embodied, and lived side and the collective, social, and constructed side of our relations to the past’ (Rothberg, 2009, p. 4).

Others, including Tony Judt, Perry Anderson and Hue-Tam Ho-Tai (2001) took political issue with the design of Nora’s project, which ‘purged’ France of ‘many of its imperial adventures and

minoritarian inflections ... phenomena that trouble the linear narrative of historical progress and the stark opposition between history and memory' (Rothberg, 2010, p. 4). Connerton found 'a very powerful undercurrent of nostalgia' in Nora's enterprise; France as a previously colonizing power in the grip of 'a politics of nostalgia' (Connerton, in Kastner, Najafi and Connerton, 2011).

In the course of attempting to reconstitute memory and displace national history, the wheel had come full circle for memory boomers, as Zwigenberg (2014, pp. 4-5) notes:

While many historians seek to displace the dominance of the "nation" in their work, students of the history of memory tend to cling to the nation with peculiar stubbornness. The familiar effort to interpret the past as part of a national culture has led to what Sebastian Conrad aptly named "a tunnel vision of the past," which marginalizes entanglement with other national memories as well as the influence of the counter-memories of minorities and others.

Wertsch (2002) also concludes that 'it is often quite difficult to categorize an account of the past unequivocally as either memory or history' citing as his example 'official histories produced by the state and unofficial histories produced outside of its purview' that 'both include elements of collective remembering as well as history' (p. 20). This is well illustrated in the ongoing 'memory politics' controversies over the content of contested school history texts in Japan, Palestine and Israel, as ministries of education mine history in search of what Wertsch (2002) refers to as a 'usable past' to shore up allegiance to a collective identity.

Nora's huge undertaking was not the only work that is considered to have been a landmark in the 1980s 'memory boom' that has continued until now; nor was it the only work to have 'rework[ed] history's boundaries' (Klein, 2000, p. 128). Hue-Tam Ho Tai notes:

The importance of scholarship on the Holocaust in American studies of memory has been profound. As Michael Schudson observed: "There are two kinds of studies of collective memory—those that examine the Holocaust, and all the others. Even people whose own work lies in that second group find Holocaust studies inescapably important, capable of illuminating every corner of the general topic with intellectual clarity and urgency." By its very nature, Holocaust scholarship focuses on memory that is not linked to national identity or imagination. (Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 2001, p. 916).

Indeed, scholarship on the Holocaust provides the overarching link between collective memory and trauma scholarship, as the work of Ruth Leys, Dominic LaCapra, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman,

Dori Laub, Arthur Kleinmann, and Veena Das and many others testify. Widely considered to be the critical founding trope of the social construction and commodification of trauma, the relevance of the Holocaust is paramount. It has become at once a transcendental symbol of the greatest evil and also of its infamous, mundane 'banality' (Arendt, 1964), an aggregated suffering fused into a collective experiential gasp of horror. Tragically since then, and before then, there have been other genocides, but this is the one that caught the theoretical imagination.

#### 4. Ethical challenges for history and memory: counter-memories

Some scholars are uncomfortable with the polarized memory debates coming from the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (history versus memory; the individual versus the group). Such polarities, they infer, cast a questionable light on the grave business of accounting for the past and commemorating it; they miss the ethical 'concern with memory and the obligations—if there are any—to remember; or, for that matter, to forget and forgive' (Margalit, 2000, p. ix).

Susan Crane questions who has the right to represent history and memory, to 'speak for others'? Such questions offer 'a rich discussion of the responsibility for and participation in collective memory, in which historians will still play a part,' she asserts (Crane, 1997, p. 1374). 'I am trying to imagine a new form of historical consciousness,' explains Crane, which will 'avoid the pitfalls that the concept of collective memory suggests to those who fear its nationalist, revisionist temptations, as exemplified recently in the American controversy over the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian in 1994-1995' (Crane, 1997, p. 1375).

If history's challenge is how to effect the inclusive representation of the widest range of voices, a new form of historical consciousness might give greater weight to the restorative and reconciliatory role of acts of collective remembering, memory work and witnessing in restorative justice acts, such as the truth commissions of Latin America and South Africa.

The proliferation of 'peoples' tribunals' equally engages in memory work and witnessing equally. Taking their cue from the International War Crimes Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, a number of Asian women's NGOs convened in Tokyo in December 2000 for the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal on Japan's Military Sexual Slavery to hear accounts of women forced to work in comfort stations:

In the early 1990s women broke almost five decades of painful silence to demand apology and compensation for the atrocities they and others suffered under Japanese military sexual slavery during the war in the in the 1930s and 1940's in the Asia-Pacific region. The victimized

survivors, euphemistically called “comfort women” came forward to recount how they were conscripted and trafficked through force, coercion, and deception and confined to “comfort stations” or, more accurately, sexual slavery facilities, wherever Japanese troops were situated, including on the front lines. (Tokyo Tribunal, 2001)

In a similar vein a decade later, the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, an ‘International People’s Tribunal’ which was ‘created following the international community’s inaction regarding Israel’s recognized violations of international law’ (<http://www.russelltribunalonpalestine.com/en/about-rtop>) convened sessions in London, Barcelona, Cape Town, New York and Brussels from 2010-2014 to hear witnesses and to engage in transitional justice memory work, while the Israeli NGO Zochrot (<http://zochrot.org/>) actively researches collective memory of the Palestinian *Nakba* and carries out acts of remembrance in order to:

... challenge the Israeli Jewish public’s preconceptions and promote awareness, political and cultural change within it to create the conditions for the Return of Palestinian Refugees and a shared life in this country. To do so, Zochrot will generate processes in which Israeli Jews will reflect on and review their identity, history, future and the resulting discourse through which they conceive of their lives in this country. Our focus on the Jewish target audience derives from its practical and moral responsibility for Palestinian refugeehood, as well as from its privileged power position under the present regime. (<http://zochrot.org/en/content/17>)

So too, the World Tribunal on Iraq, an informal global civil society ‘reclamative justice’ project, met from 2003-2005 in various European locations, in New York City, in a number of cities in Japan including Hiroshima; Jakarta, Mumbai and a culminating session in Istanbul:

This counterhegemonic tribunal model challenged the dominate discourse on the war in Iraq, thereby attempting to influence who could write the history of the war, whose voices would be heard, what account of the events and processes would prevail, and, from this discursive struggle, what understandings of justice would contest or support conduct in the global community. (Gerson, 2013, p. 88)

Allowing for marginalized voices to be heard is one part of the memory work equation, yet at present this frequently takes place in settings that have no official jurisdiction; how then does such public remembering relate to forgetting, and finally, to healing, if this is the sole recourse to justice

that is available? ‘Since forgetting is not voluntary, neither is forgiveness,’ claims Avishai Margalit (Margalit, 2002, p. 203). The latter, he says, ‘is a change in the mental state of one who was wronged’ (Margalit, *loc. cit.*). It is more beneficial for the psychological health and social wellbeing of the victim (or victims) than the carrying of ‘poisonous’ resentment and ‘vengefulness’ toward the offender; it is not a forgetting, but rather, a ‘covering-up model’. Since memory cannot (and ought not) to be voluntarily blotted out, ‘What ought to be blotted out is the memory of the emotion in the sense of [not] reliving it’, writes Margalit (2002, p. 208) describing forgiveness almost in terms of working through the effects of PTSD. This, finally, is memory’s ‘ethical challenge’.

### 5. Temporal, spatial and cultural dimensions of memorialization

In Section 1, we noted how the expansion of the contemporary collective memory field was sparked largely by translations into English of the work of Maurice Halbwachs, published some 40 years after his death. Yet Pierre Nora’s controversial multi-volume series on French national memory (discussed earlier), through the perspective of *lieux de mémoire*, is far more widely known; as G r me Truc comments, many theorists in English offer ‘a few obligatory quotations ... and seem unaware of Halbwachs’ modifications to his theses on memory’ (Truc, 2011, p. 147). For Francophones, Halbwachs is continually being reevaluated, a “rediscovered sociologist” (Jaisson and Baudelot 2007) whose works are constantly republished and subject to stimulating new interpretations’ (Truc, 2012, p. 147). Most notable is the republication of Halbwachs’ final work before his death, *La Topographie l gendaire des  vangiles en Terre sainte:  tude de m moire collective* (*The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land: A study in collective memory*; only its Conclusion is translated in the Lewis Coser edition of Halbwachs’ works). Halbwachs made two trips to Palestine (in 1927 and 1939) to carry out field work for *La Topographie l gendaire* in preparation for the realization of the fullest expression of his own sociology of memory, putting into practice a methodology that offered prospects of transference and generalizability for other studies of the temporal, cultural and spatial dimensions of memorialization. In *La Topographie l gendaire* Halbwachs articulated how symbolic representations of space arise from social frameworks of memory and the mental images of groups; how commemorative sites in the Old City of Jerusalem attributed to the Passion became agreed upon and were sacralized through a combination of the construction of Christian doctrine and the claims of pilgrimage. In this, he was something of a pioneer; it is regrettable that his methodology and conclusions cannot be resourced to in order to illuminate present territorial contestations in Israel/Palestine. However, the critical work of Eyal Weizman (2012), Jeff Halper (2009) and the Foundation for Middle East Peace (<http://fmep.org>)

with its former (until 2014) bimonthly *Report on Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Territories* represents ongoing topographical contested memory work in the region.

Halbwachs' notion of a topography of memory has been adapted in different forms through memory work in states recovering from political violence in Latin America. Conte (2015) gives an account of the work of the 'Topography of Memory' section of NGO Memoria Abierta (Open Memory) that 'systematises and produces documentation about sites, buildings [architectonic memory] and spaces that were used as spaces of temporary detention and clandestine detention centres, as well as spaces of recognition and remembrance' (2014, p. 86). Aguilera (2015) discusses the growing number of private and semi-private memory initiatives to those who suffered from political violence as a result of 'Chile's 9/11' (General Pinochet's 1973 coup) in the form of 'memorials, memory sites in ex-detention centers, and the Museum of Memory and Human Rights'; in both Argentina and Chile, these sites that mark what Derek Gregory calls 'a geography of violence' are deeply contested.

While Halbwachs' study traced sacralization of space through social frameworks, the ways in which 'the sacred has moved outside the churches and into secular space' is equally a feature of contemporary life, according to historian Jay Winter (2009, p. 252). 'Commemorative sites, alongside museums and exhibitions, are now repositories of the sacred; they are the churches and cathedrals of modernity' writes Winter (2009, p. 252). Dates for commemoration ceremonies at commemorative sites may also overlap with the sacred calendar, as Winter notes; it chimes with the collective 'conviction ... that the moment recalled is both significant and informed by a moral message' (p. 253). Yet these new sacred arenas and practices of memory may also be sources or sites of contestation, often by who or what is omitted or included in the representation. As Ross (2008, p. 8) notes: "Symbolic landscapes communicate inclusion and exclusion, hierarchy, and portray dominant and subordinate groups in particular ways. The meanings a symbolic landscape conveys invites us to ask: Who is present and who is absent in public representations?"

Such symbolic landscapes become most controversial particularly when they appear to 'sacralize war and the political order that governs it' (Winter, 2009, p. 255, citing Klein, 2000) or when 'moral doubts persist about a war or public policy' (Winter, 2009, p. 253). Paul Cummins and Tom Piper's striking 2014 Remembrance Day poppy art installation 'Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red' in London, wherein 888,246 ceramic poppies (symbolizing fallen soldiers) filled the moat of the Tower of London, was not without deep controversy (Jones, 2014; O'Callaghan, 2014). Volunteer poppy planters stressed the personal, pacific remembrance qualities of the memorial in response to criticism, 'going to view the poppies does not stop anyone from remembering those who lost their lives during this war regardless of where they came from. Any life lost to war is one life too many'

(Fishwick, 2014). Meanwhile, every time a Japanese prime minister visits Yasukuni Jinja, the Tokyo shrine to Japan's World War II dead that houses Class A war criminals, there are vigorous (sometimes violent) protests in neighbouring Asian nations that suffered from Japanese imperialism, particularly China and South Korea. Ran Zwigenberg's study (Zwigenberg, 2014) of how the Hiroshima Peace Park Memorial and the August 6<sup>th</sup> commemorative practices were established as a 'bright flash of peace' gives an account of how these sites performed multiple purposes of censorship against war crime, propaganda (for both the Allied Forces and the defeated Japanese) in the name of world peace, and disaster tourism as recovery from war. 'Pacifists have used sites of memory for precisely the opposite purpose,' comments Winter (2009, p. 255) and the Hiroshima Peace Park site also serves political opponents of Prime Minister Abe's revision of the 'no-war' Article 9 in Japan's American-imposed constitution and the Global Article 9 anti-war movement (<http://www.article-9.org/en/>).

Finally, symbolic landscapes are generally represented as timeless, particularly in their 'never again' injunction when they commemorate traumatic loss. They challenge time; but 'one of the few genuinely constant attributes to collective memory is that it is likely to undergo change' (Wertsch, 2002, p. 46). Likewise sites of memory, as Winter, echoing Halbwachs, remarks; they only serve to remind us of their impermanence (and ours), and the 'presentism' with which we approach them:

These very sites are as transitory as are the groups of people who create and sustain them. ... These associations are bound to dissolve, to be replaced by other forms, with other needs, and other histories. At that point, the characteristic trajectory of sites of memory, bounded by their creation, institutionalization, and decomposition, comes to an end.  
(Winter, 2009, p. 267)

## 6. Conclusion

I have attempted to describe the trend towards collective remembering, tracing its lineage and development into a major theoretical field. Empirical studies in the sociology of memory press on creatively despite (or because of) the lack of resolution to methodological and theoretical challenges, and because there is no end to memory or the equally critical question of forgetting. Not all memory is traumatic, but the notion of collective trauma, in which a painful event is still more historically present, is deeply embedded in the landscape of collective remembering and represents a further theoretical expansion of the field.

I have also inquired into how the workings of the interdisciplinary collective memory theory



may offer clues to our present situation. In an intriguing piece entitled, 'Donald Trump's Authoritarian Politics of Memory', historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat (2017) draws our attention to 'the memory games that accompany authoritarians' rise' rather than their forgetting. We should take note when she observes how the process commences:

While authoritarian rule begins with the leader in office, the boundaries for what can be seen, said, done, and recalled are often set earlier. Even before he takes power, a savvy strongman has used a combination of intimidation and flattery to begin to colonize the nation at the emotional and bodily level, preparing it to accept his coming crackdowns and extralegal actions--and remember them as necessary and justified. (Ben-Ghiat, 2017)

According to Ben-Ghiat, 'two parallel projects' are underway, 'aimed at unsettling the mental habits and moral foundations of American democracy'. There is the cult of personality, and then there is the 'culture of threat' that 'not only desensitizes them to the effects of bigotry but also raises the possibility of violence without consequence'. Critically, implicit in the desensitization is the *forgetting* of moral boundaries, of what is acceptable and what can be relied upon as a source of information about the real, for the 'deference to the leader allows another crucial element of authoritarian rule to fall into place: the discrediting of all alternate sources of information'. Ben-Ghiat reminds us of one of the then-president-elect's many excoriations of the media, as he tweeted on January 8th: "Media is fake!" He is, observes Ben-Ghiat, 'preparing Americans for the onset of a new era in which truth is what Trump wants it to be'. Against this, we must all beware.

We should not lose sight of how the president 'signaled his attitudes about violence and memory' with bruising clarity, recalls Ben-Ghiat, arising onstage 'with fog swirling around him ... like a rockstar' to greet the Republican Party faithful as he assumed the mantle of president elect to the strains of Queen: this is 'a man with no past', who speaks only of the future. Americans must be on guard, warns Ben-Ghiat, lest 'that fog will come to cloud their own minds, letting them follow the easy path of quietness and passivity. The task is to keep it at bay—and pay attention to what and how Americans are being encouraged to remember.' It is an admonishment that ought to resonate not only with Americans, but with Europeans as their core unitary project drifts apart; and all others too. None of us is above or without history, and always in danger of forgetting.

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