

# Editorial: Memory Studies

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This special issue of *Alternation* is the result of the Memory Studies Symposium that we organised in September 2013, but our academic research and personal interest in the field of memory has a long history for each of us. In 2012, Sabine proposed the introduction of an interdisciplinary postgraduate degree programme in Memory Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). It was meant to provide a rigorous theoretical grounding for students with undergraduate foundations in many different academic disciplines and draw on staff resources and research expertise from across the university. The initial research for this initiative revealed that a substantial number of academic staff and postgraduate students, mostly from the Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, but also from as far afield as Mathematics, concern themselves with researching aspects of personal or collective forms of memory. The proposed degree in Memory Studies was eventually rejected by the university on the basis that ‘memory is too narrow to qualify as a designator’. Philippe then suggested organising a symposium that would bring together interested parties across the university and locally based institutions (notably museums and archives). The well attended one-day event served as an initial platform for networking, sharing information and showcasing current research undertaken in the field. The multifaceted character of the papers presented and the debates they engendered, certainly illustrated how ‘wide’ the field of memory is. Participants voiced an interest in repeating and expanding the initiative, as well as publishing the best papers in a special journal issue.

In a most recent study based on an on-line survey with self-identified memory scholars worldwide, Segesten and Wüstenberg (unpublished manuscript 2014) investigated the extent to which Memory Studies has established itself as an academic field internationally and to what degree it

has been institutionalized. Although offered in one form or another at many universities in Europe and beyond, Memory Studies still struggles to be recognized as a separate disciplinary field. While some individual scholars play an active role in defining the boundaries of the field and promoting its institutionalization, on the whole, Memory Studies remains characterized by a high level of fragmentation and its research agenda is more multidisciplinary than interdisciplinary. The authors note three key developments that must occur for a field to be recognized: firstly, the scholarly articulation of the field through scientific production; secondly, the offering of specialized programmes by higher education institutions; and thirdly, the endowment with dedicated research funding from public and private donors.

The question remains whether Memory Studies should indeed be formalized and institutionalized. This point has been raised in the inaugural issue of the journal *Memory Studies*, established in 2008 as one of the most significant publication outlets and platforms for scholarly debate in memory research, which in itself has contributed much to delimiting the field. Radstone (2008) examines the opportunities, but also the disadvantages afforded by the prospect of institutionalization. The latter include, among other, the enshrinement of canonical texts and concepts and the risk of reification into orthodoxies that discourage critical testing and further investigation, hence turning conjectural speculations about memory into ‘fact’. While some may argue that memory may be more productively explored within the ambit of established disciplines, there can be no doubt that to some extent, Memory Studies has already emerged as a distinct multidisciplinary field.

The surge of interest in memory began in the late 1970s, forging a symbiotic relationship between scholarly research and societal practice. On the one hand, the so-called ‘memory boom’, ‘memory wave’, ‘memory craze’, ‘turn to memory’ or ‘memorialist trend’ is characterized by a broad-based societal interest in the past which manifests itself, among other, in the proliferation of monuments, memorials, museums, commemorative events and festivals, historical documentaries, and war movies, as well as a host of other, critical and popular forms of engagement with the past, including the striving for historical justice through recourse to the suppressed memories of marginalized groups. This trend has been accompanied and partly fuelled by

the scholarly interest in memory, both collective and individual or personal forms of memory (Radstone & Schwarz 2010).

The academic study of collective forms of memory, on the other hand, has its roots in the 1920s, notably with the pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs and Aby Warburg, both of whom independently pursued very different approaches with the same aim, to develop a general theory of memory. It was primarily the re-discovery of Halbwachs' work in the 1970s and the pioneering work of the French historian Pierre Nora (e.g.1984) that forms the foundations of the current interest in memory (Assmann 1999). Since then, a deluge of scholarly work has been produced, contributing to the expanding debate and entrenching a critical discourse that has impacted on many disciplines. Among the most influential early conceptualizations of collective memory, Paul Connerton's (1989) book on social memory and Jan Assmann's (1992) definition of cultural memory stand out, but a host of sub-categories and new conceptualizations have been developed since.

The period of the late 1970s and 1980s is not only associated with the booming interest in collective forms of memory, but also with major developments in the study of individual or personal memory. This occurred as a result of increasing collaboration between the previously separate work of cognitive psychologists and clinical neurologists or neuroscientists. The integration of research on the mind and on the brain in the field of cognitive neuroscience has revolutionized the understanding of personal memory and sparked new interest in the field of memory (Schacter 1996). One of the key insights of this interdisciplinary research, paralleling developments in the field of collective memory, refers to the constructedness of memory, the recognition that memory is not merely recalled from some internal storage reservoir, but always actively reconstructed. Both individual and collective forms of remembrance and forgetting are contingent on context and purpose (Bietti *et al.* 2014).

The link is still weak between studies of collective memory, including social memory, cultural memory, public memory, generational memory, communicative memory, etc. typically studied by social and political historians, oral historians, political scientists, religious studies scholars, cultural geographers, heritage scholars, philosophers, etc. and individual or personal forms of memory, e.g. notably autobiographical memory, episodic memory, and semantic memory, typically investigated by discursive and cognitive psychologists, neuroscientists, biologists, but also

cognitive linguistics, sociologists and historians. Also significant in research is trauma memory, an ever expanding field of enquiry within Memory Studies, which implies particular ways of remembering and forgetting, individually and collectively, in the context of intensely painful events. Interdisciplinary work that connects scholars from the humanities and social sciences with those in the natural and health sciences and links the study of individual to that of collective forms of memory holds much promise for truly innovative research and groundbreaking insights based on unique methodologies.

The relevance of memory in the South African context has a long tradition in academic research in some disciplines, notably history. During the 1980s, for instance, oral history was used to bring to light alternative memories, of dispossessed land dwellers or underpaid black workers for example, with a view to challenging the dominant historical narratives promoted by the state. Oral history projects such as the Centre for Popular Memory at the University of Cape Town and the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work at the University of KwaZulu-Natal made concerted efforts to help people affected by apartheid, HIV/AIDS and other forms of traumatic situations to retrieve, preserve and process their memories. In terms of public discourse and societal visibility, memory became pivotal during the second half of the 1990s through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), where personal memories of trauma – persecution, violence, torture and death – were publicly shared and broadcast throughout the nation and beyond. The TRC was seen as an important catalyst to reconciliation and nation-building by the newly elected democratic government and quickly became an internationally respected model. International consensus about the role of memory in post-conflict societies is widely shared and the field of transitional justice, itself an burgeoning niche area of academic enquiry, is based on the notion that future peace and stability depend on finding ways of coming to terms with the past (Rigney 2012).

As participation in the Memory Studies Symposium has illustrated, the academic interest in memory is extremely diverse and multifaceted at UKZN, ranging from engagement with trauma testimony and political violence to issues of identity and resilience. Yet a common thread ran through the papers read on that day, including those which are published in this issue of *Alternation*. Memory is always a re-creation, using the past to

make sense of and adapt to the present. Vehicles of memory range from oral history interviews and documentaries to cultural reminiscences and literary productions. They allow, in multiple and dynamic ways, a re-appropriation of the original story.

The five papers presented here all combine theoretical reflection and empirical data, mostly collected in South Africa. In his discussion of a set of life stories of student teachers and teachers described as successful, Michael Samuel argues that, in contrast to the positivist paradigm, life story research brings multiple facets of truth and truth-making into its research agenda: the truth as lived, the truth as experienced and the truth as told. Life history research is a process of re-searching, re-looking at accepted truths in circulation around a particular phenomenon. For their part, Sagree Govender and R. Sookrajh use Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concepts of arborescent and rhizomatic systems, as expressed in the metaphors of the tree root and canal rhizomes, to describe the lived experience of Indian diasporic women in South Africa. Their paper shows how these women choose to break away from some of the cultural memories inherited from their motherland while maintaining others. The path followed by these memories is all but linear. On gender issues, for example, the contradictions are apparent.

Reflecting on the oral testimonies of Congolese refugees in Durban after having witnessed horrendous scenes of murder and rape in the forest while fleeing rebel armies in the eastern DRC, Alain Tschudin suggests that, in these narratives, a form of 'memory work', similar to what Freud describes as 'dream work', is carried out. This kind of memory, which is akin to imagination, allows them to put in words an otherwise unspeakable experience, developing a form a communication and creating the conditions for resilience. The refugees from the Congo experience what Roberta Culbertson (1995) has called the 'survivor's paradox': they do not want to remember, but their memories haunt them. They are unable to speak but they feel the need to tell their story.

In their paper, Philippe Denis and Philani Dlamini examine how the memories of the residents of Mpophomeni, a black township in the Natal Midlands which experienced forced removals, unfair dismissals, political violence and gang warfare in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, changed from the time of apartheid to the present day. Comparing residents' testimonies from the time of the Sarmcol strike, during which a third of the township's

breadwinners lost their job, and political violence to the post-apartheid era, they show a process of diversification and complexification of memories. In recent oral history interviews, the residents draw a picture of the Mpophomeni community very different from the image which the written documents and the oral testimonies collected at the time had been giving.

This selection of papers provides a glimpse of the variety and diversity of theoretical and methodological approaches to scholarly investigations centered on issues of memory. Another outcome of the 2013 Memory Studies symposium was the request for another, more substantial conference. This came to fruition with 'Memory in Africa. 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Memory Studies Conference', held at the University of KwaZulu-Natal on 14-15 November 2014 – a two day, international event which demonstrated the topicality of memory work in academia in South Africa and beyond and will in turn result in the publication of other papers.

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