# Introduction: Cultural Memory, the Past and the Static of the Present

"The past is not dead. In fact, it is not even past."
WILLIAM FAULKNER

The burgeoning field of study loosely known as "cultural memory studies" fills a strange gap between more traditional historiography and the anthropology of memory. Historiography in the more traditional sense embraces the stance that the past is knowable, verifiable to the extent that we have reliable evidence, and retrievable to some extent. It concerns itself with what happened in the past (and the many complications of knowing that). Cultural memory studies, on the other hand, address what Paul Ricoeur so aptly labeled "the mnemonic phenomenon," the dialogical process through which collectivities recall the past in light of present concerns that are in part shaped by this very past that is being recalled and refashioned in the present. For the scholar of cultural memory, the object of study is not the past, but the many projects memory undertakes: healing, denial, revision, invention, recreation and re-creation, forgetting. What is the relationship between history and memory? What should it be?

Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) may have anticipated this field ahead of his time with his late in life work *On Collective Memory*, published posthumously in 1950.[1] Halbwachs' work was significant, not only because of its relatively early date in this now vibrant discussion on cultural memory, but because he seems to be one of the first theorists to liberate the study of memory from the realm of the private and the individual. It was assumed in the mid twentieth century that while collectivities may undergo history, memory was a largely personal affair. Halbwachs, by taking dreams as private and inherently unshareable recollections of the past as his starting point, demonstrated how memory is not private, like dreams, but collective. Further, memory is not only essentially a reconstruction of the past in light of the present, but also a process largely determined by social forces beyond the control of a single individual. This paradigm shift, from the agency of the individual to the forces of social reproduction, is now a cornerstone of contemporary critical theory, but we note here the work of this early theorist in pointing out the broad path cultural memory studies would come to take more than fifty years after his death.

[1] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Cosner, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

In this brief introduction to this special volume of *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*, we survey a few of the prominent features and concerns of contemporary cultural memory studies. While not an exhaustive list by any means, this survey of concerns will help orient the reader to the kinds of issues being addressed by cultural memory studies today. These issues are: 1) the ever present tendency in cultural memory studies to argue for a "presentist" view of the past and the inherent problems with an over-reliance on this dialogical nature of remembrance at the risk of overshadowing historiography's role in creating a record; 2) the role of memory in amnesia and masking; 3) the creation of counter-memory as a mode of coping with painful or unthinkable pasts; 4) cultural memory as a form of historical revisionism and denialism; 5) the relationship between the project of remembrance and the transformation and even invention of tradition; 6) the institutionalism of selective memory through museum design; and 7) the dilemma of the new cultural memory studies paradigm and the need for what can be called "effective cultural memory," as a mode of honestly confronting the past in the task of truth and reconciliation.

## The presentist tendency in cultural memory studies

If the past is whatever we remember it to be, does it matter what ever really happened? This is the underlying concern with the tendency in cultural memory studies to focus on the role of the present in shaping memory. Lewis Cosner, the translator of Halbwachs' seminal work, noted in Halbwachs' directions set out in his work the firm insistence that memory is a socially constructed phenomenon. While Cosner does not try to disabuse us of this observation, he notes a disquiet with a view of memory that on the surface could appear to give the past no claim to a voice of its own. When Halbwachs argued that "no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections,"[2] he presents a strong case for what we know as a "presentist" view: that it is the present social context that makes the past not only meaningful but even retrievable at all. It is not difficult to see why standard historiography, always a work in progress but aiming for reliable evidence to lay witness to the past, would find such an insistence on the mechanisms of the present as having sole agency to be problematic. It is debatable whether Halbwachs was indeed the presentist that Cosner read him to be. But the fact remains that the tendency to insist that all memory is social and all social memory is informed by the present is a problematic tendency that scholars of cultural memory studies do well to address.

[2] Ibid., 43.

## The role of memory in amnesia and masking

Paul Ricoeur in his work *Memory, History, Forgetting*[3] explores how certain acts of remembrance also include an element of amnesia and masking. Why, for example, he queries, is the Holocaust so often invoked and remembered, and yet the Armenian genocide, the McCarthy era in the United States and the role of the French government in North Africa hardly recalled in collective memory of the past century at all? Ricoeur suggests that remembering can also be a way of forgetting, that the over-remembrance of one event allows for the careful forgetting of other events. Remembrance can be a way of focusing attention away from what happened in one arena onto what just as surely happened somewhere else. Ricoeur explores the phenomenon of forgetting as an almost necessary component of cultural memory. To remember as a society is to know what you need to forget. Yet Ricoeur calls for the very legitimate demands of justice being served in any nuanced understanding of how we remember and forget.

Here again, this kind of study of the past could not exist as a form of historiography in its own right, and the concerns of a presentist view of history shadowing a more traditional form of historiography are drawn into sharp relief.

## The creation of countermemory as a mode of coping with painful or unthinkable pasts

It was Michel Foucault who drew attention to the phenomenon he termed countermemory. In his essay entitled "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault argued for a separation of history and memory, and maintained that in fact countermemory is a strategy for displacing what he considered to be hegemonic processes of remembrance. Memories from the margins, from the oppressed can be regarded as countermemories to mainstream memory, but at the same time they also exist within the sphere of those hegemonic memories.[4] Later scholars, expanding the category Foucault delineated, have come to use the term countermemory more broadly: A countermemory is not the content of a memory itself, but rather the-role a particular memory is playing in a larger construct of remembrance. A countermemory can be fictive in nature, or it can be a form of excessive remembrance of one event at the expense of other events. It can be a memory whose job is to subvert the dominant memory, or it can dislodge the tenacity of the mainstream or obvious memory. And countermemory can be a way of Re-remembering the past, through a lens forcing one to review one's own past with a present agenda. In my essay in this volume, we see how

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[3] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

[4] In Michel Foucault, *Language, Countermemory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard, trans. Donald Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

the Sugihara narrative in Japan, as presented by the Sugihara museum in Gifu prefecture, can be seen as a kind of countermemory. What Sugihara did in Lithuania is well documented, but the manner in which the museum in Japan situates Sugihara almost in a historical vacuum, dehistoricized alongside other altruists from history, allows for this memory to be a countermemory to what ELSE Japan was involved in during the second world war. Present day Japanese schoolchildren and museum goers can re-remember the past of World War II as a powerful (and self-identifying) narrative of altruism and humaneness.

Foucault's term has also been expanded to apply to another kind of memory, namely fictively romanticizing the past so as to promote an agenda in the present. Nostalgia, never a reliable lens on the past, can be regarded as a kind of countermemory. Here, a presentist interpretation is in order, for what can rightly be known in the exploration of the forces producing countermemory is the present concerns than demand it, and not necessarily the past it claims to keep alive.[5]

## Cultural memory as a form of historical revisionism and denialism

Studying the production of historical revisionists and history deniers is rightly the work of scholars of cultural memory. Why do certain kinds of historical revisionism never succeed and others end up being successful beyond their promoters' wildest dreams? In Masaki Matsubara's paper in this volume, he explores one of the main centres of World War II historical revisionism in Japan, Yasukuni Shrine, and shows how the commemoration of the day of defeat, August 15, for Japan in World War II is in fact a public spectacle of revisionism. Revisionism is not merely a way of denying the past, but a way of being in the present. Exploring the nuances of historical revisionism and denial and the many projects it serves is rightly the work of scholars of cultural memory. But as Ricoeur and others suggest, the work of the cultural scholar cannot be neutral in the face of revisionism, for it is rarely benign.

## The relationship between the project of remembrance and the transformation and even invention of tradition

How do you remember the past when reliable sources for its recollection are scarce? Why is it necessary to make something which is actually new appear to be steeped in tradition? How does these "new" traditions assume a life of antiquity all their own? How do revival projects claim to be acts of restoration, when in fact they often, almost

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[5] See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, the Perseus Books Group, 2001.

as a rule, are actively and creatively inventing a past?[6] This kind of inquiry also falls within the realm of cultural memory studies. Can one remember a past that never happened or is fabricated? Lisa Kuly's article in this volume explores how the revival of the Hanamatsuri festival in Japan actually involves the selective use of an almost solitary historian, and has come to include a number of concerns that are decidedly contemporary. The revival of the Hanamatsuri festival is one of many cases of Japanese folk performing arts being resurrected and refashioned in Japan. The process of creating "authentic" relics of the past and the critiquing of authenticity discourses in their own right is also a part of the work of cultural memory studies.

## Institutionalization of hegemonic memory production through effective museum design

Can your most important memory be something that happened before you were born? Something you never directly experienced? One of the most dynamic areas of cultural memory studies is the exploration of the changing role of museums in our society. Where we once expected museums to "tell us what happened," we now go to museums to have an experience that allows us to "remember" the past, even if it happened before we were born or did not involve us. Museums can now make us all "victims" or "survivors," participants in the past who experience history first hand, in the virtual world of the museum. Brian Brereton in his article in this volume addresses the role of "hell theme parks" popular in contemporary Taiwan among people at different life stages, and suggests that these museums function as a kind of catharsis for childhood memories cast onto heavenly deities and demons. Further, in my piece, I suggest that the Japanese Sugihara museum invites participation, mimicry and even the possibility to rescue oneself from death as both victim and savior. What both of these forms of museum have in common is their focus on crafting an experience for the museumgoer, beyond imparting knowledge about the past or other realms.

Museum studies have become a field of cultural critique in its own right. These studies operate as an important part of cultural memory studies insofar as museums have become the locus of crafted collective memory.[7] In fact, it is apparent that museum creation and allowing museumgoers to have a certain kind of experience have become a central part of the politics of reconciliation and redress.

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[6] See the now classic book edited by Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[7] See the large volume exploring themes in museum design and cultural memory, edited by Bettina Messias Carbonell, *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2004).

## Truth and reconciliation: is there a past to remember?

The final dilemma for the scholar of cultural memory is to find a place for the past to speak for itself, not forever fragmented through the prisms of the present's claims to it or memory's claims to it. In fact, one could argue that in the end, this is precisely the discursive space that the cultural memory scholar clears. On the surface it seems naïve that the work of critical scholars should come round to asking the simple question: What actually happened? How can we know it? Can it be remembered and commemorated collectively with any accuracy? But this is precisely where the work of cultural memory studies gets its ethical thrust. Remembering the past can be a creative process, and situating oneself in a shared temporal web is a necessary part of being in a society. But insofar as the work of reconciliation and redress demands an honest confrontation with the past, what I will term "effective cultural memory," and when the work of collectively recalling the past becomes a means of abandoning the rightful claims of justice, the mnemonic phenomenon, to return to Ricoeur's phrase, must be brought into line with the legitimate claims of the past to speak with its own voice, however hard it may be to hear through the static of the present.

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Ithaca, New York, September 2007