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MICHAEL ROTHBERG

Introduction: Between Memory and Memory

From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Noeuds de mémoire*

It would be impossible to overstate the influence of Pierre Nora's massive, multi-part *Lieux de mémoire* project, a series of volumes that conjoins rich contributions to an understanding of France and French culture with an innovative methodology for studying collective memory.¹ In the quarter century since the first volume was published in 1984—and in the two decades since Nora's introduction to the project first appeared in English in 1989—the concept of the “lieu de mémoire” or “site of memory” has been at the center not just of considerations of French negotiations with its national past but of studies of remembrance on an international scale. Drawing our attention to the way the past finds articulation in a wide array of “sites”—considered broadly to include not only monuments and museums, but also novels, cities, personages, symbols, and more—Nora's project has inspired reflection and scholarship on national memory in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain, among other places.² Although emerging from a commitment to the exceptionality of France's relation to its national past, the approach pioneered in *Les lieux de mémoire* has proven highly exportable as a model for the consideration of diverse memory cultures.

1. *Les lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992). In English: *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, 3 volumes, under the direction of Pierre Nora, English Language edition ed. Lawrence D. Krizman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia UP, 1996–1998); and *Rethinking France*, under the direction of Pierre Nora, trans. Mary Trouille (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001–2006).

2. On the translation of the *Lieux de mémoire* project into other languages and national contexts, see Pim den Boer, “*Loci memoriae—Lieux de mémoire*,” *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning in collaboration with Sara B. Young (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 19–25.

YFS 118/119, *Noeuds de mémoire*, ed. Rothberg, Sanyal, and Silverman, © 2010 by Yale University.

Yet, almost from the beginning and despite hailing Nora's project as an unprecedented scholarly achievement, critics have lodged a variety of complaints against both Nora's conceptualization of memory and the scope of the *Lieux de mémoire* volumes. One consistent set of criticisms has targeted Nora's polarization of history and memory and his seemingly progressive narrative of the former's eclipsing of the latter—hence, the central irony that a project that has helped stimulate a boom in the study of memory is premised on the demise of memory! As Nora polemically insisted in the first paragraph of his programmatic general introduction "Between Memory and History," "Memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists." In this story of an "accelerati[ng] history" overtaking "[t]he equilibrium between the present and the past," *lieux de mémoire* play a transitional role and serve as the "sites" of a "residual sense of continuity": "*Lieux de mémoire* exist because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience" (*Realms* 1: 1). As this nostalgia-tinged tale of decline indicates, Nora's innovative rewriting of the French past from a nonlinear, "site-specific" perspective remains indebted to a rather traditional teleological view of modernity. What he repeatedly calls "real" or "true" memory appears to give way to the artificial reconstructions of postmodern memory sites divorced from any organic community of remembrance. Without denying the profound transformations in the present's relationship to the past—in its "time-sense" or historical consciousness—it remains worth asking whether binary oppositions between history and memory or the real and the artificial can account for contemporary cultures of memory and new modes of transmission of the past.³

A second strand of criticism reveals the stakes of Nora's commitment to a linear and binarized account of history and memory. Notwithstanding Nora's avowed interest in a "polyphonic" approach (*Realms* 1.xxiii), the collection ultimately puts forward a starkly limited conception of the nation purged of many of its imperial adventures and minoritarian inflections—purged, in short, of phenomena that trouble the linear narrative of historical progress and the stark opposition between history and memory. Despite an emphasis on the

3. On the time-sense of modernity and postmodernity, see, respectively, Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); and Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992). Jameson is, as is well known, dubious about the state of historical consciousness in postmodernity.

local and the heterogeneous—on what volume three of *Les lieux de mémoire* calls “Les France”—the project has surprising absences. Of course, any attempt at an encyclopedic representation of a nation-state will generate an immediate list of overlooked features and will fail to encompass many histories that certain critics will find essential. Yet, the gaps in Nora’s sites of memory appear particularly glaring. In a long and largely appreciative review, for instance, Tony Judt observed the “bizarre” fact that “there is no entry in any of the volumes of *Les lieux de mémoire* on either Napoleon Bonaparte or his nephew Louis Napoleon, or even on the political tradition of *bonapartisme* that they bequeathed to the nation.” Such an oversight, Judt clarifies, not only ignores the extent to which France remains tied to “the spirit of Napoleon” and the “imperial ambitions” of the Bonapartes, but also suggests that Nora’s project cuts itself off from “Europe as a whole,” whose sites of memory “could [not] possibly neglect” Napoleon’s “battles, his laws, his depredations, his unintended impact on resentful national sensibilities in the Low Countries, Italy, and Germany.”⁴ Even more sharply—and more relevantly to our project in this volume—Perry Anderson has pointed out that the effect of the project’s admitted “Gallocentrism” and its seeming unease with certain social divisions has been that “the entire imperial history of the country, from the Napoleonic conquests through the plunder of Algeria under the July Monarchy, to the seizure of Indochina in the Second Empire, and the vast African booty of the Third Republic, becomes a *non-lieu* at the bar of these bland recollections.” As Anderson asks with respect to one of the turning points of the era of decolonization, “What are the *lieux de mémoire* that fail to include Dienbienphu?”⁵ In the selected (but still massive) English version of Nora’s collective project, the three-volume *Realms of Memory*, the scope of the sites considered narrows even further in its focus on the Hexagon, with the effect that “the contests and conflicts that are so amply documented in the collection are not about France per se but about the nature of its national identity,” in the words of Hue-Tam Ho Tai.⁶ Despite its debt to

4. Tony Judt, “A la Recherche du Temps Perdu,” *New York Review of Books* (December 3, 1998), 54.

5. Perry Anderson, *The New Old World* (New York: Verso, 2009), 161–62.

6. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory,” *American Historical Review* 106/3 (June 2001): 910. Tai’s essay provides an excellent review of the project as a whole and also focuses on differences between the French and English versions. Another useful account of *Les lieux de mémoire* can be found in Anne Whitehead, *Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 141–47.

new directions in critical historiography, the project under Nora's direction ends up reproducing a reified and ironically celebratory image of the nation-state it set out to deconstruct, as even he seemed to recognize in his afterword "The Era of Commemoration" (*Realms* 3: 609–37).⁷

This volume of *Yale French Studies* both takes inspiration from Nora's magisterial project of turning critical attention to processes of remembrance in modernity and shares many of the concerns critics have raised about that project's limits—its overly schematic approach to the history/memory couplet, its nostalgic plotting of loss, its reduction of Frenchness to the Hexagon, and, especially, its elision of France's long and complex colonial and postcolonial history.⁸ From an Anglo-American perspective, where postcolonial studies and various forms of minority critique have had a significant presence in the academy for more than two decades, *Les lieux de mémoire's* amnesiac relation to French colonial history and to the impact of decolonization and postcolonial migrations is startling—even more so when we consider Nora's personal engagement during the Algerian War of Independence and his devastating book on French Algerians.⁹ But here Nora is probably more symptomatic than unique. French society in general has been slow to respond to the "fracture coloniale" recently

7. In that afterword, Nora writes: "the very dynamics of commemoration have been turned around; the memorial model has triumphed over the historical model and ushered in a new, unpredictable, and capricious use of the past—a past that has lost its peremptory and constraining organic character" (*Realms* 3, 618). Here we see a replay of the organic/inauthentic and history/memory binaries from the introduction. We also have a foretaste of the increasingly aggressive position Nora will take through his involvement in the "Liberté pour l'histoire" movement (also discussed by Françoise Vergès in this volume) and in his comments on the "terrorist" nature of the counter-memory of minority groups. See Pierre Nora and Françoise Chandernagor, *Liberté pour l'histoire* (Paris: CNRS, 2008); and Jacques Buob and Alain Frachon, "'La France est malade de sa mémoire': Pierre Nora et le métier d'historien," in "Colonies: Un débat français," *Le monde* 2 (May–June 2006): 6–9.

8. This volume grows out of conversation and collaboration between the editors over the past two years. Besides taking part in this collective project, each editor has also been at work on his or her own investigation of "knots of memory" within and beyond French and Francophone culture. See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Debarati Sanyal, "Auschwitz as Allegory in *Night and Fog*," *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Resnais's "Night and Fog"*, ed. Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (Berghahn, 2010); and Max Silverman, "Interconnected Histories: Holocaust and Empire in the Cultural Imaginary," *French Studies* 62/4 (2008): 417–28; as well as forthcoming book-length projects by Sanyal and Silverman.

9. See Pierre Nora, *Les Français d'Algérie* (Paris, Julliard, 1961).

diagnosed by progressive French critics, even as—further irony—Anglo-American postcolonial studies marks an enormous debt to anti- and postcolonial Francophone thinkers and writers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and, more recently, Maryse Condé and Édouard Glissant.¹⁰

Inspired by those thinkers and others, we seek to offer a counter-image of memory that does not merely take an “additive” approach. Attempting to fill in the gaps and silences of Nora’s volume is not an adequate response to its limits; while such a project is necessary, it is somewhat different from what we have attempted here. Our volume starts from the assumption that more than a quantitative supplement is needed; rather, the limits of *Les lieux de mémoire* suggest the necessity of a new model—or models—of remembrance. In calling for such a new approach under the sign of “noeuds de mémoire”—knots of memory—we hope to stimulate further conceptualization of collective or cultural memory beyond the framework of the imagined community of the nation-state.¹¹ Nora’s project derives in part from Maurice Halbwachs’s contention that there are as many memories as there are groups, but that each group possesses a coherent language of remembrance—such a methodological *parti pris* leads to the result that the heterogeneity of “les France” gives way to an implicitly restricted notion of a homogenized France stripped of its colonies and the ongoing legacies of colonialism. A project oriented around *noeuds de mémoire*, on the other hand, makes no assumptions about the content of communities or their memories. Rather, it suggests that “knotted” in all places and acts of memory are rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference that exceed attempts at territorialization (whether at the local or national level) and identitarian reduction. Performances of memory may well have territorializing or identity-forming effects, but those effects will always be contingent and open to re-signification.

The project of rethinking French and Francophone sites of memory as *noeuds de mémoire* traces its inspiration to many sources, but, ap-

10. The allusion here is to the pathbreaking collection *La fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l’héritage colonial*, ed. Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

11. As den Boer points out, *Knoten* [knots] is one of the words Nora offers as a possible translation of *lieux* into German in his contribution to a volume on German sites [Orte] of memory. Despite this suggestion, however, we would still argue that Nora’s practice is more singular than the metaphor of knots as we use it here is meant to imply.

appropriately enough for such a non-nationalist project, one of the most important predecessors has been an Anglophone critic, Paul Gilroy. His 1993 book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* helped break the national frame of minority critique by promoting an African diasporic perspective that, crucially, refused any temptation of “ethnic absolutism” and thus concluded by staging an extended dialogue about the overlapping traumatic legacies of Atlantic slavery and the Nazi genocide of European Jews. Without traducing the specificity of either of these complex and painful histories, Gilroy opened up a space in which to explore the mutual imbrication of black and Jewish counter-cultures of remembrance.¹² In his follow-up volume, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (2000), known in the UK by the more suggestive title *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures, and the Allure of Race*, Gilroy continues to develop his cosmopolitan project by considering precisely those Francophone black Atlantic intellectuals, like Césaire and Fanon, who testified both to the ongoing catastrophe of colonialism and to the events—which they saw as related—of the Nazi genocide. “Why,” Gilroy asks, “does it remain so difficult for so many people to accept the knotted intersection of histories produced by this fusion of horizons?”¹³ In the decade since Gilroy posed this question, much has changed—but much has also stayed the same. Even as critics—including those represented in this volume—have begun to explore the “knotted intersections” of history and memory that cut across categories of national and ethnic identity, institutions of knowledge-production, nation-states, and many embattled communities continue to disavow the evidence of cosmopolitan impurity.

Noeuds de mémoire as we conceive them here are not static conglomerations of heterogeneous elements. As James Young and others have taught us, sites of memory do not remember by themselves—they require the active agency of individuals and publics.¹⁴ Such agency entails recognizing and revealing the production of memory as an ongoing process involving inscription and reinscription, coding and

12. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). See especially the final chapter “‘Not a Story to Pass On’: Living Memory and the Slave Sublime,” 187–223.

13. Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000), 78.

14. James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993).

recoding. Max Silverman's discussion of Patrick Chamoiseau and Rodolphe Hamadi's notion of "memory traces" illustrates such a production; in Silverman's intertextual reading, which closes our volume, the poetic means employed by the writer and the photographer reconfigure the ruins of the penal colony in French Guyana as a transnational palimpsest of uncanny associations. Silverman's essay joins those by Ross Chambers, Françoise Lionnet, Libby Saxton, and Debarati Sanyal in looking to prison or camp spaces as particularly resonant knots or nodes of memory—although all are careful not to reproduce a facile notion of the camp as the "nomos" or paradigm of a totalized modernity, as Giorgio Agamben's important and influential work risks doing.¹⁵

In attempting to conceptualize the knotted nature of collective memory, Halbwachs's notion of the "social frameworks of memory" remains an important starting point because it breaks the common-sense, methodological individualism of much study of memory.¹⁶ However, the metaphor of the framework may fail to capture the dynamism inherent in remembering—what we call memory's multidirectionality. As several of the essays collected here illustrate, memory emerges from unexpected, multidirectional encounters—encounters between diverse pasts and a conflictual present, to be sure, but also between different agents or catalysts of memory. *Noeuds de mémoire* are not particular to the post-1945 period—the primary focus of our volume—but there can be no doubt that the dynamics of decolonization, transnational capital, and globalized media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have accelerated the flow of the materials of memory across borders of all kinds and multiplied the possibilities of encountering alterity. Focusing especially on the technologies of modernity in a US context, cultural historian Alison Landsberg has argued that, "in a global cultural economy, the theory of collective memory as articulated by Halbwachs seems inadequate, for the very notion of global flows challenges the idea of stable shared frameworks." Contrary to Nora's lament about the loss of authentic memory cultures, however, Landsberg suggests—and many of our contributors confirm—that the dislocation of cultures in modernity is productive of novel forms of memory, which Landsberg deems "pros-

15. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998).

16. Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: PUF, 1952).

thetic memories": "Mass culture has had the unexpected effect of making group-specific cultural memories available to a diverse and varied populace. In other words, this new form of memory does not, like many forms of memory that preceded it, simply reinforce a particular group's identity by sharing memories. Instead, it opens up those memories and identities to persons from radically different backgrounds."¹⁷ Elizabeth Ezra's account in this volume of masks in the films of the Nouvelle Vague confirms Landsberg's insight about the possibilities of the prosthetic. Ezra shows how masks and other artifacts serve as indexes of intersecting regimes of objectification, which allows her to illustrate how mass cultural commodification does not simply stamp out difference but can also provoke unexpected juxtapositions. As history and modernity "accelerate," in Nora's terms, memory does not recede, but rather pluralizes and blurs the boundaries of identity; such pluralization and blurring need not be coded as loss.

Referring to Nora's introductory account of the replacement of "real" *milieux de mémoire* by "forgetful" *lieux de mémoire*, Dominick LaCapra has argued that Nora's polarized conceptions of memory and history and of authenticity and artificiality as well as his narrative of decline testify to a sense of loss at the same time that they represent a fetishistic "neutralization of trauma": "Nora feels that something essential has been lost, and—whether or not the loss is itself imaginary—the very opposition between history and memory serves to commemorate and assuage it."¹⁸ Neither sites nor knots of memory are necessarily limited to the evocation of trauma, yet as LaCapra suggests in his response to Nora, traumatic histories are often at stake in modern modes of remembrance, even if those modes sometimes disavow rupture.¹⁹ Readers will note the proximity of memory

17. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 10–11.

18. Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 18–19.

19. In his lucid, nuanced genealogy of the trauma paradigm, Roger Luckhurst takes inspiration from Bruno Latour and considers the concept of trauma as itself a "knot," a "hybrid assemblage" that "tangle[s] up questions of science, law, technology, capitalism, politics, medicine and risk." Focusing, as the contributors to this volume do, on knots of traumatic memory thus facilitates a particularly fruitful approach to central issues in French and Francophone culture, one that can move both horizontally across the social field and vertically through disparate layers of history. See Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 14–15.

and trauma in the contemporary French and Francophone—indeed, global—knots of memory explored here, but this proximity also raises a number of difficult and unavoidable methodological problems central to this volume's intervention.

First, it is necessary to acknowledge Kristin Ross's critical observation in her exemplary study *May '68 and Its Afterlives* that the obsession in memory studies with traumatic histories can threaten to displace other kinds of memory—in particular, memories of collective mobilization—with potentially deleterious, depoliticizing results.²⁰ While Ross is certainly correct that memory studies has skewed toward the study of catastrophe instead of toward alternative political possibilities, her separation of trauma and politics may nonetheless simplify the multidirectional dynamics of collective memory. The case of André Schwarz-Bart, for instance—considered here, via different critical lenses, by Ronnie Scharfman and Estelle Tarica—provides one telling example of how a deep investment in confronting trauma opens up a space for new imaginations of relation across difference, in this case for an imagination that links the Shoah with the legacies of slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean (which makes Schwarz-Bart another predecessor for Gilroy's cosmopolitan project). Solidarity, in other words, is a frequent—if not guaranteed—outcome of the remembrance of suffering, as Jim House's survey of imaginative and biographical links between French and Algerian anti-racist and anticolonial activists illustrates powerfully.²¹

Ross adds a second, legitimate concern to her critique of the contemporary configuration of memory studies, a concern shared by the scholar and memory activist Françoise Vergès in her reflections for this volume: not only has trauma predominated over politics, but memory of the Holocaust has predominated over that of all other traumatic histories. According to some hypothetical quantitative criterion, it is certainly arguable that the Nazi genocide of Jews has—at least since the late 1970s—been the object of some of the most developed cultures of memory both in the French-speaking world and elsewhere in Europe and North America. But again, the evidence considered here complicates the picture. From the early response of French intellectuals such as Alain Resnais, Henri Alleg, and Jean-Paul Sartre

20. Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

21. See also Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

(the subjects of essays in this volume by Ross Chambers and Debarati Sanyal), which merged opposition to the French war in Algeria to a nascent memory of Nazi genocide, to more recent transnational links such as those found in *Le dernier frère*, Nathacha Appanah's 2007 novel of almost forgotten Mauritian Holocaust memory, considered here by Françoise Lionnet, memory of the Holocaust has emerged in dialogue with—has grown out of and contributed to—memory of slavery, colonialism, and other human-made catastrophes. The contributions to this volume confirm that memory does not obey the restricted economy of the zero-sum game, but emerges in a general, productive economy of relays and ricochets, as Bill Marshall's Deleuze-inspired considerations of cinematic remembrance suggestively illustrate. Some of these multidirectional interventions may be more ethical than strictly political insofar as they focus on the reconceptualization of contact with alterity, as David Caron does here under the sign of "tact" in juxtaposing an AIDS memoir with a journal of the Nazi Occupation. Other examples, however, come even closer to the model of politics Ross has in mind: Libby Saxton, for example, considers an explicitly politicized invocation of the Holocaust at the multidirectional confluence of neoliberal globalization and anti-immigrant policy in her detailed account of Nicolas Klotz and Elisabeth Perceval's controversial film *La question humaine* (*Heartbeat Detector*, 2007).

No singular model of *noeuds de mémoire* emerges from this volume—nor was it intended to. Rather, in issuing a call to leading scholars of contemporary French and Francophone literature and culture to contribute to a multidirectional approach to memory, we have sought to open up new, yet-to-be created avenues for the study of the times and places of remembrance. New modes of associative reading and—as some of the contributions suggest—new modes of writing will be required that do not so much abandon as transgress the norms of disciplinary knowledge production. The transnational approach to collective memory requires a collaborative methodology, for once remembrance is freed from the (never actually) homogenous space-time of the nation-state, potential links and references multiply beyond the grasp of any one scholar. Although this volume ranges from metropolitan France across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and back toward Africa and the Indian Ocean, it makes no attempts at comprehensiveness: future knots of memory remain to be untied.