



The MSA conference 2017:

Reflections on themes and the development of Memory Studies as a research field

Ortner, Jessica; Andersen, Tea Sindbæk

Published in:
Memory Studies

DOI:
[10.1177/1750698018811991](https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698018811991)

Publication date:
2019

Citation for published version (APA):

Ortner, J., & Andersen, T. S. (2019). The MSA conference 2017: Reflections on themes and the development of Memory Studies as a research field. *Memory Studies*, 12(1), 88-90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698018811991>

The MSA conference 2017: Reflections on themes and the development of Memory Studies as a research field

Memory Studies
2019, Vol. 12(1) 88–90
© The Author(s) 2018
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1750698018811991
journals.sagepub.com/home/mss



Jessica Ortner

University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Tea Sindbæk Andersen

University of Copenhagen, Denmark

With the second annual Memory Studies Association (MSA) conference that took place from 14 to 16 December in Copenhagen, we were hoping to continue and develop the momentum and enthusiasm of the first MSA conference in Amsterdam. Yet, the initial ambition of attracting at least 200 people to the Copenhagen-conference was completely overshadowed when we received more than 650 proposals, many of them for full panels. The high quality of the proposals was truly impressive and illustrated what a vibrant and varied field of research memory studies is. Among the many proposals, there were hardly any that were not really interesting and relevant, both academically and for the societies we live in and take part in. Though we aimed to be inclusive and accommodate as many as possible, we still had to turn down several 100 good proposals. Thus, we hope that the upcoming MSA conference in Madrid in June 2019 will be able to host even more papers and panels in order to insure that the broad thematic scope, rich multidisciplinary and global relevance of memory studies as a research field will be even better represented there.

The conference in Copenhagen ended up hosting 598 registered participants and a total of 481 contributors who presented their work in 80 panels, roundtables, turbo talk sessions and poster presentations.¹ Other activities included a mini-film festival and a book raffle in which participants could win each other's research publications. As the MSA takes a special interest in supporting young researchers, the conference also launched a special PhD program—MSA-forward, which presents a report of its activities elsewhere in this issue—and a mentorship program that aims at building up networks between young academics and senior scholars. We are glad to point out that a total of 104 successful applications came from PhD students. An additional number of 18 PhD students were accepted for the MSA-forward graduate conference that took place prior to the main conference. In our eyes, this confirms that memory studies keep posing exiting research questions also for new generations of researchers.

Corresponding author:

Jessica Ortner, Department of English, Germanic and Romance Studies, University of Copenhagen, Emil Holms Kanal 6, DK-2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark.

Email: ortner@hum.ku.dk

Though most of the participants came from the United States, Canada and Europe, the conference attracted participants from no less than 43 countries including South Korea, Congo, India and Tunisia. Since it is a declared aim of the MSA to become a global organization, we hope this is only the beginning of connecting memory studies across and beyond the borderlines of western academia.

Also research-wise the conference demonstrated variety. The participants applied methodologies derived from fields such as sociology, geography, anthropology, psychology, literary studies, pedagogics, political science, semiotics, and media studies. As diverse were the topics discussed in the sessions. A random survey of the program reveals subjects such as memory politics in the Soviet and Yugoslav successor states, remnants of the Holocaust, the genocide in Rwanda, Spain and Lithuania, gender questions with regard to memory constructions, migration, diaspora, postcolonial memories, the role of memory in activism, the digitalization of memory, the aftermath of totalitarianism in Latin America, as well as memory struggles, war, and massacres in Asia. The participants scrutinized mnemonic media ranging from museums, memorial institutions, archives, literature, movies, digital media, and graffiti to the body as mnemonic trace.

The latter was connected to one of the highlights of the conference: a performance by the Rwandan survivor, Théogène Niwenshuti, who was invited from South Africa to dance a testimony of the Rwanda genocide, his survival, and the loss of his father. Another key event, Marianne Hirsch' keynote 'Stateless Memory', focused on feminist diasporic artists from different parts of the world: Mirta Kupfermanc, Wangechi Muthu and Hayv Kahraman. Their articulation of the experiences of exile constitutes a "stateless memory" as it evades the space-time of the nation-state that progresses toward pre-ordained futures. Thus, not only the content of their memories but also their mode of remembering has a subversive power that imagines alternative perceptions of citizenship, national belonging, and home. A panel debate between Jan Gross, Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Cecilie Banke discussed recent developments in Holocaust memory in Poland and Gross' personal position in relation to this. The conference's concluding event was a screening of the documentary film *The Look of Silence* about regime mass killings of suspected communists in Indonesia in the 1960s, followed by a discussion between the film's director, Joshua Oppenheimer, and Annette Hill about the making of the film and Oppenheimer's role and responsibility as editor, witness and by implication also memory agent.

Vis-à-vis the multitude of the above named topics and methods, one might doubt that it is possible to derive any overall conclusions from the conference. Without being able to do justice to the multiplicity of themes and objects of investigation, we want to highlight some major topics: First, the concepts of transnational, traveling and global memory established by the "third wave of memory studies" constituted a major framework for many of the papers. It was manifested in contributions on migration, (internal) displacement and diaspora-societies of all kinds. An example is Rosanne Kennedy's talk on "Australia's Refugee Camps in national and transnational memory," which was part of a panel that focussed on traveling and displaced memories (panel 26).² Also the panel connected to the Memory Research Platform at the Goethe University centered on "Memory concepts across the Globe" (panel 35). Other panels again approached global and transnational memory cultures from the angle of World literature (panel 43), film (panel 62), or creative arts (panel 74). Closely connected to this topic, entangled and multidirectional memories were discussed repeatedly as well (panel 58, 41, 79).

A number of papers addressed the opposite notion of the ongoing relevance of national, family and local memory constructions as well as the multi-scalar dimensions of cultural memory (panel 44). Many of those papers re-located memories to specific landscapes or sites (panel 39) or were concerned with the relation of memories to territories and "hard borders" (panel 33). Family memories were frequently addressed with regard to transgenerational transmission of memories.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory echoed in papers on torn families (panel 9), panels on transgenerational memories (panel 17), and even politics of (post)memories (panel 71).

The indisputably most prominent topics of the conference were trauma, genocide, war and violence of all kinds. Participants discussed ways of remembering different genocides (panel 2, 29) and traumas in the still underexposed context of Asia (panel 23). Others revisited the Holocaust (panel 59), investigated "genres of traumas" (panel 53), and highlighted the aspect of traumas from diverse angles (panel 32, 49, 64, 73). A quick search of the program reveals 51 hits on the word trauma, 9 on genocide, 50 on war, and 13 on violence. Even the themes of reconciliation (panel 16), recognition (panel 78) and peacemaking memories (panel 66 and 76) that were also significantly present take their starting point from an initial trauma that has to be healed through memory or amnesia (panel 18). In this context, it was somehow encouraging that one panel had the declared aim of "rethinking trauma" (panel 45), focusing on traumas of perpetrators, survivors of genocide or even memories of hope. Exactly this panel and the paper by Ann Rigney on "The afterlives of hope" was one of the starting points for this special issue which has as its aim not to dismiss trauma, but rather to insist on the importance of positive memories as well.

Notes

1. These data have been produced and kindly provided to us by Sarah Gensburger, The National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), Mathilde de Saint Léger (CNRS) and Sara Dybris McQuaid (Aarhus University). The full results will be made available in an article to come about "Where do memory studies come from?"
2. For the full program, please consult the Modernist Studies Association (MSA) website available at www.memorystudiesassociation.org/copenhagen-conference-2017-program/ (accessed 14 October 2018).

Author biographies

Jessica Ortner achieved her PhD degree in May 2012 with a thesis on the Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek, focusing on Jelinek's literary strategies of representing the Shoah and broaching Austria's national socialist past. She received a grant from The Carlsberg foundation for a project on Holocaust literature written by the second and third generations—a project that included a wide corpus of German and Austrian writers. Financed by a grant from the Danish Council for Independent research, she currently works on a book project which scrutinizes imaginations of Europe in contemporary German-language migrant writing. Her latest publications include "Flight, Expulsion and Resettlement in Contemporary German Literature" (2018), "The Reconfiguration of the European Archive in Contemporary German-Jewish Migrant-Literature—Katja Petrowskaja's novel *Vielleicht Esther*" (2017) and *Poetologie "nach Auschwitz."* Narratologie, Semantik und sekundäre Zeugenschaft in Elfriede Jelineks Roman *Die Kinder der Toten* (2016).

Tea Sindbæk Andersen is Associate Professor of East European Studies at the Department of Cross-cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen. Tea's research focuses on the contemporary history of Southeastern Europe, especially on issues related to uses of history, cultural memory, identity politics and popular culture in the Yugoslav area. She is the author of *Usable History? Representations of Yugoslavia's difficult past from 1945 to 2002* (Aarhus University Press 2012) and, with Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, editor of *Disputed Memory. Emotions and memory politics in Central, Eastern and South-eastern Europe* (De Gruyter 2016) and *The Twentieth Century in European Memory: Transcultural Mediation and Reception* (Brill 2018). From 2012 to 2016, she was vice-chair of the European research network *In Search of Transcultural Memory in Europe* funded by EU/COST. Tea is a member of the executive committee of the Memory Studies Association (MSA) and co-hosted the MSA annual conference in Copenhagen, December 2017.