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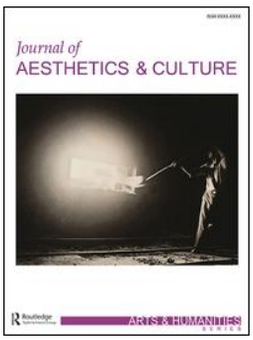

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Aspects of memory acts: transnational cultural memory and ethics

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Abstract
In the paper I use arguments from Ludwig Wittgenstein, John L. Austin and Judith Butler to show how the concepts of collective memory and of performativity can help to formulate some ideas about what an ethics of memory can deal with. The positions of speakers or agents and the question of responsibility play a fundamental role in this argument.

Keywords: *collective memory; cultural memory; remembering; performativity; speech acts; ethics; responsibility; philosophy of language*

In what sense can we think about an ethics of memory? What can an ethics of memory in global contexts be about since, according to Jeffrey Blustein, memory is always contextual? For whenever we speak about memory, there are questions of when, what, how, whose, how much, and to what purpose.[1] Contextuality always implies a multitude of aspects, in the sense of these questions about particular contexts as well as in the sense of looking at each particular memory act under several different aspects. Analyzing the contextual uses of memory acts will allow us to go beyond the sharp binaries between the individual and the collective, between the national and the global, and beyond the binary between history-as-it-was and memory as something collectively construed. Astrid Erll calls this last binary a "dead end in memory studies"; all of these binaries are dead ends. In order to get out of this impasse, she suggests "a notion of different *modes* of remembering in culture".[2] In the following paper I will use arguments from Ludwig Wittgenstein, John L. Austin, and Judith Butler to show how the concepts of collective memory and of performativity can help to formulate some ideas about what an ethics of memory can deal with. The positions of speakers or agents and the question of responsibility will play a fundamental role in this argument.

In his so-called private language argument Wittgenstein argues against theories of meaning that attempt to define the meaning of language in terms of private, mental acts.[3] His argument is to be read as a reductio ad absurdum of the idea of a private *memory* and of the possibility of private language meaning as well. If the notion of a valid or the right memory is not to become completely arbitrary, then there cannot be any memory at all that could be founded in a private manner. Just as we are not able to create a private language, memory has no private, inner foundation. Memory is largely framed and facilitated by social factors.

Maurice Halbwachs's notion of "collective memory",[4] which is very much similar to the Wittgensteinian account, has been used and extended by Jan and Aleida Assmann in their theory of cultural and communicative memory.[5] The first step in articulating their theory was the distinction made between "communicative memory", which contains all the memories an individual shares with her/his group, and "cultural memory", the memory of tradition that serves to

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keep present longer-lasting memories and worldviews.[6] Aleida Assmann suggests dividing the practices of cultural memory along the lines of the distinction or relationship between remembering and forgetting in their more active and more passive forms.[7] Remembering in its active form consists of the acts of selecting and collecting. Its principle is the *canon* as embodied in museums, monuments, and canonical texts. Remembering in its passive form consists of acts of accumulating and its principle is the *archive*, for example, the storehouse stuffed with objects. Forgetting consists of more passive acts like neglecting, disregarding, or losing and more active ones such as negating, destroying, and censoring. Following these lines of thought, we find classifications of types of memory among the individual, the communicative, the cultural, the canon-like, and the archive-like. And there are further classifications. Harald Welzer, who did empirical research about how families remember Nazi crimes and the Holocaust, found empirical evidence for three types of memory: the social, the autobiographical, and the communicative memory.[8] Alison Landsberg in her 2004 book on the US-American mass culture of memory developed the concept of "prosthetic memory".[9] Other scholars use the term "post-memory".[10] These theories are based upon the claim that our individual and social memories are increasingly "indirect" experiences, construed through medialization and dislocation. Such memories then are considered as similar to artificial extensions of our bodies, ourselves, and our experiences.

I would suggest that instead of holding on to the distinction between various kinds of memory *cases*, further research should give more attention to different *aspects* of memory acts. A useful account for looking at aspects of memory acts is Austin's theory of speech acts.[11] In developing this theory, he changed it in an important way. Initially he thought that constative utterances give factual descriptions of the world and are either true or false, while performative utterances are acts that do not describe the world, but do something by speaking, e.g. give a promise or cry out for help. But then he came to notice that utterances cannot simply be divided by a sharp distinction between cases of constative utterances on the one hand and performative utterances on the other. He changed his theory and stopped looking for different *cases*, but for different *aspects* of utterances. One and the same utterance can have a descriptive force and an acting, performative force at the same time. We can take this as a methodological paradigm for memory studies and ask: How are memory acts carried out in specific contexts? How can memory acts be explained in different contexts of research? What are the specific performative forces and implications of doing so? By asking *how* memories are negotiated, we can find different uses of memory in research contexts and in historical, empirical contexts.

Austin always stressed the importance of the social conventions as limiting and facilitating performative acts. This can be useful for cultural memory studies in order to illustrate that as there are limited speakers' rights there are limited rights to do certain memory acts. You need to be in an adequate position to perform certain memory acts. According to Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, we can take into account some important further features of linguistic performativity in order to talk about other acts and practices as well, not only linguistic acts, and in order to formulate an ethics of memory. The most important feature is that contexts of uses cannot be fully controlled by single individuals in intentional ways. Because linguistic meaning cannot be achieved by private acts of meaning, it exists only in forms of social practices. Thus, single individuals cannot fix meanings or new contexts arbitrarily. But they are responsible for their uses of words, especially if the words and utterances have been used in dangerous contexts before. Jacques Derrida's concept of the "iterability" of signs is relevant here.[12] Something can become a sign if and only if it can be repeated and thus "re-iterated", i.e. a sign must be quotable or repeatable in order for it to be meaningful. Every single word, every sentence, every meaningful action is in this sense a quotation. And in using signs, symbols, and specific actions, we set them free, we spread them into the world, so that others can and will quote and repeat them again. Thus we cannot control or restrict the future understanding and uses of our signs, sentences, and actions. Speaking and acting are not conceived of as sovereign, autonomous practices. And all signs, symbols, and actions can be *resignified* by others in new contexts, if they are in an adequate position to do so—but again, this resignification is not some-

thing that can be completely and intentionally controlled.[13]

All this applies to cultural memory acts as well. We should know that meaningful social practices like memory stem from certain contexts, in some sense are repeated by us and cannot be arbitrarily controlled. We can ask here not only about the rights of agents or speakers to do certain acts, but about the responsibility for these acts as well.[14] To consider memory acts as performative cultural practices and quotations does not weaken the concept of responsibility. It would be wrong to conclude from this view of memory as an active process of constructing to think of memory as the autonomous ruler of the past. Theories dealing with processes of social construction are often met with the critique of idealism or voluntarism. This misunderstanding comes only if the collective, social framework of the constructing processes and the impossibility of private remembering are neglected.

In their theory of Holocaust memory, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider make use of the concept of the transnational concerning the ethics of memory. In their 2001 book, they talk about "cosmopolitic memory", pointing out how the Holocaust has been universalized and now serves as a global, universal point of reference, for example in discussions about human rights.[15] The authors ask how the political and cultural forms of collective memory are changing in times of globalization. In some passages of the book, they make an almost paradoxical move. On the one hand, they consider cultural memory in times of the so-called second modernity as dislocated and "transnational".[16] Although pointing to differences and specific cultural contexts, they then re-invent the universal on a global level when writing that there is a "higher principle" going back to the negative memory of the Holocaust, and that cosmopolitism means "universal values". The price we pay for this new, global universalism is the "de-contextualization of history". Human rights discourse is thus seen here as a de-contextualized discourse and one that resists historical contextualization. And because cultural memory is seen as based upon "representations", "global representations"[17] are now needed. On the whole, this generic European, Atlantic, or even global perspective neglects the differences between the specific local, social, and political contexts.

If we ask what status we want the concept of memory to be given in our own research, we can show that transnational research in the sense of post-global and comparative research should not be a unifying undertaking.[18] Looking for aspects of memory acts allows polyphonic memory acts to be found as well and acts that are polyvalent in themselves.

How can this general demand for considering aspects of memory acts be operationalized for an ethics of memory?[19] Some principles of an ethics and politics of memory can now be spelled out: Discerning aspects of memory acts (instead of cases) allows us to go beyond the binaries of the individual/the collective and of the given/the construed past. In order to account for the aspects of memory acts in research concerning the ethics of memory, it is useful to ask "how questions" about memory acts and aspects of memory acts. How are memory acts performed in this or that context? Who has a claim that something be remembered or forgotten? How are such claims and obligations to remember or to forget brought forward? Who are the "we", the collective that might be obliged to remember or to forget? How is this "we" established? Because memory is based upon performative social practices, no single individual or voluntarily acting subject can set the rules for what should or should not be remembered. Rather, memory and processes of remembering are always negotiated, implicitly, consensually or not, sometimes even violently, and in the form of war. During these negotiations, speakers' and agents' rights are not evenly distributed. Because memory is based upon performative social practices, an individual or a group needs the social authority and must be in the right position to claim that certain memory acts should be done or what should not be remembered any more. For example, groups and agents who suffer violence, hate speech, or suppression are in a position to claim certain memory acts, while the perpetrators and related groups or agents are in a very different position.

The example given below is about the speaker's positions and the risks and chances of memory acts in transnational contexts, using the concepts of performativity and resignification in order to think about responsibility and an ethics of memory. In September 2010, a group of Swedish, French, and German actors developed a theater

project called "The Invisible Empire" at Leipzig.[20] They worked out a performance of a "Human Zoo" that was to some extent very similar to the human zoos that existed in Germany (as in other colonialist countries) between 1870 and 1940. As if they were in a zoo, the actors presented themselves to the gaze of visitors for 17 whole days. This performance by white male actors (who can be regarded as belonging to the group of perpetrators of colonial domination) presenting themselves as if in a "human zoo" had the goal of exposing the normally invisible domination of male Whiteness by quoting, remembering, and resignifying specific practices from the colonialist context. The performance was accompanied by a kind of documentation of the Leipzig Human Zoo during the 1930s with historical announcements and historical documents that could be understood as also referring to the actual performance, thus potentially leaving visitors unclear about the real character of the performance. It was a difficult undertaking because you might ask who has the right to do such quotations of colonialist contexts. By using the context of theater and critical aesthetics and providing texts and other material from the context of Critical Studies of Whiteness to frame the events taking place, the project succeeded in giving a critical frame to memories of colonial Whiteness. But the question remains a serious one about responsibility and agents' rights to perform memory acts.

A very different case of performative memory acts took place in the German town of Augsburg in 2005, where a so-called African Village was organized in a public zoo, where there would be an "exotic atmosphere". Soon a wide range of protest letters had been published. Two main arguments were raised against the organizers. First, the "African Village" was very similar to the "human zoos" that took place during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Second, the organizers failed to recognize the historical dimensions of their project. It was possible to organize the "African Village" in a zoo, *because* there had been the colonial "human zoos" and because of the Nazi racial policies and crimes. Critics emphasized the obligation to remember German colonialism and racism; while the organizers deliberately shut out these memories and called for "tolerance", thus pretending that it could be possible to act in a sphere cleaned of any inconvenient memories.[21] But the theory of collective frames and cultural memory shows that no one can voluntarily decide what things we need not or should not remember.

Notes

1. Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 24.
2. Astrid Erll, 'Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction', in *Cultural Memory Studies,* ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 1–15, here: 6.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), PU 258. As commonly used, the text is cited by the number of the remark and not by reference to pages. The argument can merely be alleged at this place; for further details of interpretation see: Steffi Hobuß, 'German Memory Studies: The Philosophy of Memory from Wittgenstein and Warburg to Assmann, Welzer and Back Again', in *Flerstemte Minner,* ed. Alexandre Dessingué et al. (Stavanger: Hertervig Academic, 2010), 22–34.
4. Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997).
5. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* [Cultural Memory: Writing, Remembering and Political Identity in Early Civilizations] (München: Beck Verlag, 1992).
6. Jan Assman in his work as an Egyptologist finds the origins of cultural memory in the ancient Egyptian commemoration of the dead. Thus, the theory of cultural memory goes back to a collective thought that includes the idea of an obligation to forget neither the victims nor ideas of salvation in past traditions. This idea is closely connected to an ethics of memory.
7. Aleida Assmann, 'Canon and Archive', in *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook,* ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2008), 97–107.
8. Harald Welzer et al., *'Opa war kein Nazi'. Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* ["Grandpa was no Nazi". National Socialism and the Holocaust in the Memory of Families] (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992).
9. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
10. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

11. John L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words. The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975).
12. Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1–24.
13. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 1–42, 72–102.
14. Judith Butler investigated utterances of hate speech and looked for possibilities of putting these utterances into new contexts. In her recent works, she has turned to questions of ethics and investigated the ethical implications of putting utterances, actions, and images in new contexts. See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*; Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2009).
15. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter: Der Holocaust* [The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age]. 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Publishers, 2007).
16. Ibid., 27–30.
17. Ibid., 41–45.
18. As stated in the beginning, an ethics of memory will always be contextual. See Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory*, 24.
19. This is at the same time placing an ethics of memory, because morality with its universal dimension will not achieve these results. Following Avishai Margalit's distinction between ethics and morality, ethics is concerned with particularity and the relationships between for example friends and family members anchored in a shared past, while morality is about more universal aspects of shared humanity. See Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6–10; See also John Sundholm, 'The Cultural Trauma Process, or the Ethics and Mobility of Memory', in *Memory and Migration. Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*, ed. Julia Creet and Andreas Kitzmann (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 147–66, here: section 6 'Trauma, Time, and Ethics'.
20. Schauspiel Leipzig, *The Invisible Empire*. http://www.schauspiel-leipzig.de/invisibleempire/ (accessed April 9, 2011).
21. For a more detailed illustration see: Steffi Hobuß, 'Verhandelte und versäumte Erinnerungen, koloniale Blickverhältnisse', in *Erinnern verhandeln. Kolonialismus im kollektiven Gedächtnis Afrikas und Europas* [Negotiating memories: Colonialism in the African and European Collective Memory], ed. Steffi Hobuß and Ulrich Lölke (Münster: Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2007).