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INTRODUCTION

Human Rights Memory Media

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We can link the emergence, growth, and proliferation of memory studies to post-violent environments and processes by which communities must come to terms with human rights violations and traumatic events, ranging from genocide to the effects of environmental destruction. Some key questions inform these debates, and are valuable for popular communication research: What is to be remembered, and what forgotten? Who takes ownership of memories by presenting credentials to speak authoritatively about the past—the most direct victims of human rights abuses, or society at large? What conflicts over memory emerge when opposing interpretations are offered? Who takes the power to shape the memories of human rights abuses?

We also ask about the role of popular communication in shaping and framing human rights conflicts, and how media become engaged with memory processes. Media strategies for documenting abuses, encouraging intervention to stop them, and using memories as tools to search for truth and demand justice are central to our scope of concern. This special issue collects international perspectives on a perceived duty to remember human rights violations and to present and represent them in popular communication, and on a widely communicated need to refocus on memory at the service of justice. “Memory media” in the service of human rights emerge as a heuristic and as a trigger for reflective social action. The contributions included here offer examples of media initiatives and campaigns across an array of memory-making processes and the centrality of the memory media within each of them. They show a variety of media formats and strategies related to specific political, social, and cultural contexts, and demonstrate how interactions between human rights memory media and their publics and audiences open and broaden dialogical spaces at local, global, and diasporic levels. Not all contributions expressly engage with audiences’ decoding and uses of media. Rather, the overarching concern pertains to the goals of memory media campaigns and initiatives, their targets, and their desired impact. In the relation of these accounts, we discover the potentially transformative experiences of memory media in their participants and, potentially, in their own societies as well.

These articles engage with key concepts and theories in the field of memory studies. An important theory posits that remembering is a group activity, individuals remember as group members, and there are different mnemonic communities within a society (cf. Halbwachs, 1992; Ricoeur, 2004; Zelizer, 1995). Hirsch’s (1999) notion of postmemory is present in the analysis of memory practices by descendants of victims and survivors of mass violence who feel the burden and duty to remember, as Wardi (1992) theorized about the children of Holocaust survivors serving as “memorial candles” for their surviving loved ones. Also, exemplary memory at the service of justice was theorized by Todorov (1995) and is taken up in this special issue, as is the notion of spatial and temporal frameworks of memory (Halbwachs, 1992), and Nora’s (1989) concept of the lieu de mémoire, or realms of memory. Popular memory (Foucault, 2001) as a
countermemory and as an alternative way of remembering also orients the contributions in this special issue, as they all address palpable tensions between dominant/hegemonic memories and those memories from below that challenge them. Taken together, the contributors illustrate how writing memory is a dialectical interaction with the present day, reworking the continuity of conflicts, conversations, and negotiations over human rights. The political uses of memory represented in this special issue all embrace an activist agenda in the service of human rights, through television, film, YouTube, museum exhibits, and street demonstrations. Each case links the shaping of memory with participation in collective action. Generational matters are at the core of memory studies and center in both the inter- and intragenerational [re]construction and transmission of memories, which include the transmission of silences and fragmented stories that characterize the aftermath of traumatic events and attest to historically specific legacies of fear.

Six articles and one commentary piece follow. The human rights cases analyzed address genocide, dictatorships, state terrorism, sexual abuse, gender discrimination, and labor conditions, which are explored in relation to the Armenian and Cambodian genocides (Kaya; Canet), Trujillo’s dictatorship in the Dominican Republic (Blackmore), the Chilean dictatorship (Hiner and Castro), Indonesia’s annihilation of political opponents (Canet), Japan’s violations of workers’ rights (Synenko), and current mobilizations for women’s rights in the United States (Kitsch).

Lisa Blackmore’s piece, “Collective Memory and Research-Led Filmmaking: Spatial Legacies of Dictatorship in the Dominican Republic,” is about physical spaces and memorialization practices in the aftermath of Trujillo’s dictatorship, focusing on how people engage with this traumatic past through those sites. This exploration is done through her personal account, from the standpoint of researcher and filmmaker, of producing the documentary After Trujillo (Blackmore & Domínguez Dubuc, 2016). The project underscores the spatial dimensions of memory and its screenings have been used as a social heuristic, for example, for opening public forums for debates about competing memories of social space and histories of violence and conflict. These situations have led to some unpredictable stories caught on film, as individual subjects interact with memorial spaces while relating personal narratives of collective memory. Blackmore’s work challenges monolithic, static, and fossilized accounts of collective memory.

In “Women, Torture & Spectacle on Chilean Television,” Hillary Hiner and Daniela Castro study Pinochet’s dictatorship and the gendered perspective of political violence. Exploring television’s role in remembering atrocities, they focus on a late-night talk show and women survivors’ testimonies about the sexual political violence they endured. In analyzing how these women perform memory, the authors look closely at the content, words, tone, body language, forms of narrating their experiences, camera closeups, and sounds. The article incorporates audiences’ reactions to testimonies with explicit descriptions of brutal torture. The authors also consider the show’s paratexts taken from the Twitterverse and public commentary about the survivors to reflect the polarization of Chilean society. The survivors are either heroes to admire or communists to condemn, when presented with these first-person accounts of the dictatorship’s human rights abuses. The persistence of these ideological debates even decades after the events reflects the longue durée of the underlying social conflicts. While acknowledging the need for publicly diffusing this information, the authors express caution about what comes along with making a public spectacle of torture narratives. Hiner and Castro remind us of the need to question what to show, what to say, how to avoid the risks of torture porn, and how to convey
horror without saturating transmedia audiences with its details—and without risking the trivialization of political torture.

Carolyn Kitch’s commentary piece, “A Living Archive of Modern Protest: Memory-Making in the Women’s March,” takes us to the streets of Washington, DC, to join women’s massive demonstrations held the day after Donald Trump’s inauguration as President of the United States in 2017. Looking at the march as a memory-making process, Kitch observes how the marchers’ memory media were linked symbolically with iconic street demonstrations at the National Mall and elsewhere simultaneously, including with pro-immigration and climate change awareness. Highlighting the relevance of taking to the streets, the author describes the wide participation of marchers in writing memory and creating an “archive” of the millions of contributions and projects triggered by the march. Kitch describes the combined physical and cyber spaces, massive street presence, mainstream media coverage of a sea of pink pussyhats, and media produced by participants, as a developing, collective memory-making event.

Framed by Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, Duygu Gül Kaya’s “100 Voices after 100 Years: Remembering the Armenian Genocide in Diaspora” focuses on young people of Armenian descent in Toronto and their reconstruction of memories of the genocide through a YouTube project. It is about remembering events from far away both in time and location. The project, which incorporates new audiovisual testimonies and media coverage of the 1915 genocide, is another way of building an archive for illustrating memory-making in diasporic contexts. Through the production and posting of testimonial videos, young activists are breaking silences, publishing what had been shared before in strictly intimate familial spaces, and so writing memory via an online platform. Analyzing this mnemonic community’s initiative, Kaya argues that its members are involved in the inter- and intragenerational transmission of personal narratives, being inspired by their duty and commitment to remember the genocide. The political agenda is threefold: to inform and educate participants in making memories that can impact people’s thoughts and actions, to challenge Turkey’s official denial of the genocide, and to call for recognition and reparations.

In “Geolocating Popular Memory: Recorded Images of Hashima Island After Skyfall,” Joshua Synenko explores memory writing in Japan via a Hollywood film and Google Earth. It addresses Japan’s human rights violations and abusive treatment of the workforce in Hashima Island during Japan’s industrialization. The author links Skyfall, where the now desert island formed a setting for James Bond’s film adventures, with Google’s Street View Trekker service for Hashima, which invites audiences to pretend they are in the James Bond film. As an erasure of a past that would otherwise partly obscure Japan’s claims to modernity and progress, the island portrayed in the film and its mirror image in Google divulge no traces of that past. The now deserted concrete buildings that housed workers became Skyfall’s movie set. Discussing Japan’s successful UNESCO bid to recognize the island heritage status for Meiji-era sites of industrialization, Synenko argues that Skyfall and Google actually facilitated a mythological rewriting of history, with popular culture and social media performing together to effect a powerful memory loss. Analyzing this digital erasing of memory and Japan’s political use of it, the author offers new perspectives in the shaping of memories and the role that Hollywood and Google may play in the process.

Fernando Canet’s article, “The Filmmaker as Activist,” addresses the massive violence and genocide in Cambodia and Indonesia. It explores the role of filmmakers as memory agents, focusing on films by Rithy Pahn about the Cambodian genocide (1975–1979) and by Joshua Oppenheimer about the elimination of communist activists in Indonesia (1965–1966). Central to
Canet’s analysis is the filmmakers’ involvement with the perpetrators of mass violence, together with the question of why the perpetrators were given a voice in the Pahn and Oppenheimer films. As Canet shows, Pahn and Oppenheimer agree that listening only to those victimized by genocidal acts is not enough to understand the roots of violence, why people kill, and what can be learned to prevent the repetition of these crimes. In exploring these filmmakers’ commitment to remember the sometimes intertwined and sometimes disjunctive accounts of political violence, Canet draws attention to filmmakers’ role as human rights activists who document what they witness and assume the responsibility of the witness.

This special issue closes with Amy Freier’s “Museums and the Material Assets of Dignity and Memory: Confronting Loss Without Compensation in Expolio and Francofonia.” While the boom of memorial museums may be recent, when considering how societies remember, museums emerge as traditional spaces to archive and display objects related to historical events. Freier focuses on human dignity as a foundational connection for museums and memory. She centers on art and art museums via two case studies: an art exhibit with paintings about World War II and the Syrian conflict at the museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, Chile, and the Louvre museum as it is portrayed in the film-essay Francophilia. Recognizing the attention paid to the ethics of curatorial practices, the accumulation of objects, and the complicity of museums in colonial plundering, Freier argues that more attention is needed to how these matters relate to arts museums and art history. She also makes a case for exploring loss of life and dignity for the sake of building up museological acquisitions, art museums with histories tied to human rights abuses and memorial processes, and those whose social and cultural objects have been taken for display.

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