Plenitude, scarcity and the circulation of cultural memory

ANN RIGNEY
Utrecht University

An argument is made for the need to conceptualize cultural memory, not as merely derivative of individual psychology, but in terms of a 'working memory' (Assmann) that is constructed and reconstructed in public acts of remembrance and evolves according to distinctly cultural mechanisms. Foucault's 'scarcity principle' is used to show the role of media in generating shared memories through processes of selection, convergence, recursivity and transfer. This media-based approach, emphasizing the way memories are communicated, circulated and exchanged, allows us to see how collective identities may be (re)defined through memorial practices, and not merely reflected in them.

Keywords*: memorial media, memory frameworks, memory transfer, recursive remembrance, sites of memory*

In a story called the 'Encyclopedia of the Dead' the Serbo-Croatian writer Danilo Kiš evokes a magical library of 'memories'. For every person who visits that library, a book called *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* is waiting, and when it is opened, all the memories of every moment in that individual's life come back. In the world of the story, nothing whatever has to be lost, since with the help of a magical book, everyone's past in all its distinctive detail can be resurrected:

> For *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*, history is the sum of human destinies, the totality of ephemeral happenings. That is why it records every action, every thought, every creative breath, every spot height in the

survey, every shovelful of mud, every motion that cleared a brick from the ruins. (Kiš, 1997 [1983]: 56)

So that everyone will be able to find not only his fellow men but also – and more important – his own forgotten past. When the time comes this compendium will serve as a great treasury of memories and a unique proof of resurrection. (Kiš, 1997 [1983]: 43)

Kiš' Utopian archive exemplifies a certain tradition of thinking about memory which I will call here the 'original plenitude and subsequent loss' model. This involves looking at memory as something that is fully formed in the past (it was once 'all there' in the plenitude of experience, as it were) and as something that is subsequently a matter of preserving and keeping alive. Memory is thus seen as working at its best when a maximum number of original experiences are preserved for as long as possible. In practice, however, memories constantly disappear as they are transmitted from generation to generation: like water transported in a leaky bucket which slowly runs dry, they are continuously being lost along the way. Following this 'plenitude and loss' model, then, memory is conceptualized on the one hand in terms of an original 'storehouse' and, on the other hand, as something that is always imperfect and diminishing, a matter of chronic frustration because always falling short of total recall.

Now this 'original plenitude and subsequent loss' of memory is a widespread one, informing the work of Maurice Halbwachs among others. In his *La Mémoire collective* (1950), for instance, Halbwachs presents memory in terms of an original 'lived memory' ('mémoire vécue') that is carried and hence kept alive by the participants in some original experience. This 'lived memory' is constantly on the brink of extinction or erosion with the passage of time as the richness of experience fades and those who did the experiencing die out. At a certain point, the only way for the memory to survive is for it to be written down:

When the memory of a series of events is no longer sustained by the group involved and affected by them, who witnessed them or heard about them from the actual participants; when a memory has become a matter only for disparate individuals immersed in new social settings where the events have no relevance and seem foreign ['extérieurs'], then the only way to save such memories is to fix them in writing and in a sustained narrative; whereas words and thoughts die out, writings remain. (Halbwachs, 1997 [1950]: 130; translation mine)

Standing firmly within a longstanding tradition that privileges the

'authenticity' of oral communication over the derivativeness of writing (Derrida, 1967), Halbwachs saw texts as second best to the 'living' and 'internal' memory carried by speech and supported by face-to-face communities. Sources of information beyond the individuals and groups remembering their own experiences are seen from this perspective in a reductive way as artificial and hence inauthentic 'props'. At best, they are a matter of salvaging memories when all other possibility of preserving them is lost. The written medium allows things to survive, then, but in doing so it aggravates the loss of original plenitude by carrying 'lived' or 'internal' memory into what Halbwachs calls the 'external' sphere of history.

Discussions of memory in the humanities in recent years have been largely based on one version or another of this 'plenitude and loss' model. As is well known, the concept of memory entered into contemporary discussions by way of its opposition to history, and the opposition has been a tenacious one – witness, for example, such titles as 'Entre mémoire et histoire' (the introduction to Nora, 1997 [1984–92]), *History and Memory: Studies in the Representation of the Past* (the title of the journal founded in 1989) and *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (the title of Ricoeur, 2000). The relevance of the distinction is understandable since the current interest in memory has largely been driven by a desire to explore the various ways in which people remember the past and the many versions of the past that have fallen outside the purview of professional historians. As a result, 'memory' has tended in practice to become synonymous with 'counter-memory', defined in opposition to hegemonic views of the past and associated with groups who have been 'left out', as it were, of mainstream history. The study of such memories has been based on a belief in the importance and possibility of 'recovering' memories which were once there and which have since been 'lost' or 'hidden'. This recovery project is itself linked in complex ways to contemporary identity politics and to the desire of particular groups to profile their common identity by claiming distinct roots in a particular historical experience: to every group its own memory, as it were, an idea that seems to call for a Kisˇ-like encyclopedia where 'everyone will be able to find not only his fellow men but also – and more important – his own forgotten past'.

The 'plenitude and loss' model described briefly above has certainly led to an explosion of insight into the variety of ways in which societies deal with their pasts, and it has also led to the recovery of many marginal traditions in the historical culture. So the link between collective memories and identity politics remains an extremely important issue. But, as I shall argue here, understanding

this link may be better served by a different model of memory: a social-constructivist model that takes as its starting point the idea that memories of a shared past are collectively constructed and recon-structed in the present rather than resurrected from the past. What if uses of 'external' sources of information are no longer seen as regrettable manifestations of memory loss, but as the order of the day?

Vicarious recollection

The way towards a social-constructivist approach has been opened by the recent emergence of '*cultural* memory' as a concept, designating something different from 'memory' *tout court,* 'social memory' (as used by Peter Burke) or 'collective memory' (as used by Halbwachs and others). The work of Jan Assmann (1997) and Aleida Assmann (1999) has been extremely important in working out the concept of 'cultural memory,' though it should be noted that attempts to conceptualize the relations between the various aspects of collective remembering are still in full swing.

While the Assmanns are indebted in important ways to Halbwachs, they have helped put his insights into a new framework in which collective memory is seen as a thoroughly 'cultural' matter that is played out within the various social frameworks described by the French sociologist. In what follows, I elaborate on some of their insights in order to describe the evolution of collective memory in terms of cultural processes.

The term 'cultural memory' highlights the extent to which shared memories of the past are the product of mediation, textualization and acts of communication. These are not just regrettable deviations from some spontaneously produced memory on the part of participants, but rather a precondition for the operation of memories across generations, for the production of collective memories in the long term (Halbwachs's notion of collective memory is effectively limited to a couple of generations).[1] Jan Assmann distinguishes usefully between two phases of collective memory: *communicative memory* or living memory, corresponding to the earliest phase when multiple narratives by participants and eyewitnesses circulate and compete with each other, and *cultural* memory proper, corresponding to the much longer phase when all eyewitnesses and participants have died out, and a society has only relics and stories left as a reminder of past experience (Assmann, 1997: 48–66). Thus it is that, at a distance of almost a century, our shared memories of the First World War are

above all the product of books, films, commemorative ceremonies and various other forms of representation.

Cultural memory, in the way it is used here, is always 'external' in Halbwachs's sense, in that it pertains by definition to other people's experiences as these have been relayed to us through various public media and multiple acts of communication. When it comes to the formation of cultural memory in the modern age, moreover, the role of mass media and the new digital media (including local internet sites) is undeniable and, however one may judge the quality of the information conveyed, these modern media need to be taken into account as an integral factor in the production of cultural memory today. It is worth noting *en passant* that Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* provides many fascinating examples of the ways in which local memorial traditions are reproduced and transformed in a variety of media, but that the editor himself seems to argue that this is not 'true' memory but merely some modern derivative.[2] Derivative it may be, but no less deserving attention in its own right.

To the extent that cultural memory is the product of representations and not of direct experience, it is by definition a matter of *vicarious* recollection. The role of texts and other media and hence the degree of vicariousness obviously increases as the events recollected recede further in time. This suggests that it makes more sense to take mediated, vicarious recollection as our model for collective memory rather than stick to some ideal form of face-to-face communication in which participants are deemed to share experience in some direct, unmediated way. Indeed, Halbwachs himself seemed to point to the inevitability of mediation when he suggested that individuals seek to express the memory of their own experience in terms that are understandable by others, and that they may end up identifying with someone else's recollection even if this does not correspond in all respects with their own experience (Halbwachs, 1997 [1950]: 53; also Assmann, 1997: 35–7).

Communality, in other words, is based on the exchange of memories. The price of communality is a loss of literal accuracy, and hence of the plenitude and highly personalized memory that was celebrated in Danilo Kiš' fantasy. This is not the place to go into detail regarding the interaction between individual and communal memories. Suffice it to point out that, from the word go, 'cultural memory' – as the name says – is the result of distinctly cultural, rather than psychological or socio-psychological mechanisms (a point also made in Kansteiner, 2002 and in Olick and Robbins, 2000). People may have undergone comparable experiences, but the cultural memory of those experiences

is the ongoing result of public communication and of the circulation of memories in mediated form. The latter may circulate, moreover, among individuals and groups who have no actual connection in any biological sense with the events in question but who may learn to identify with certain vicarious recollections – thanks to various media. All of this suggests the need to focus more clearly on memorial practices, mnemonic technologies and on the cultural processes by which shared memories are produced.

In describing these processes, it is useful to recall an idea developed by Michel Foucault in his *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969) to the effect that culture works, not according to the principle of plenitude, but according to the principle of 'scarcity'– what he calls, the 'loi de rareté'. By this he means the fact that everything that in theory might be written or said about the world does not actually get to be said in practice. Culture is always in limited supply, and necessarily so, since it involves producing meaning in an ongoing way through selection, representation and interpretation. Accordingly, the limited number of things that are actually said about the world do not have any absolute value. Instead, they acquire a value that is relative to their usefulness in given situations and, *faute de mieux*, to the lack of immediate alternatives:

> The scarcity of utterances, the scrappy and incomplete character of the discursive field, the fact that in the end few things can be said, explains why utterances are not infinitely transparent, like the air we breathe; instead, they are transmitted and preserved; they are invested with value and people try to appropriate them; they are repeated, reproduced, transformed, and replicated, not just through copying and translation, but also through interpretation, commentary, and an internal proliferation of meaning. (Foucault, 1969: 156–7 translation mine)

Although Foucault's concerns were different, his idea of culture as characterized by 'scarcity', and hence also by conservation, repetition and duplication, has implications for our thinking about cultural memory. The principle of scarcity, as I shall argue in the rest of this paper, affects the workings of cultural memory in at least five ways: the selectivity of recall, the convergence of memories, the recursivity in remembrance, the recycling of models of remembrance and memory transfers.

1. Selection

Recollection begins not in the plenitude of experience but in the absence or pastness of the moment or period being recalled. Indeed,

'memory' is in fact a less appropriate term than 'recollection' or 'remembrance', since the latter rightly suggests an activity, a performance, taking place in the here and now of those doing the recalling. This is something that psychological studies of memory have made abundantly clear (Schacter, 1996, 2001), but that studies of collective memory have been less quick to take up. Whether a private or a collective matter, recollection is not a matter of stable 'memories' that can be retrieved like wine bottles from a cellar or, alternatively, that can be lost in transit. Instead, it is an active and constantly shifting relationship to the past, in which the past is changed retrospectively in the sense that its meaning is changed. Indeed, *anamnesis* may be even better than either remembrance or 'memory', since it emphasizes the fact that recollection involves overcoming oblivion (an-*amnesis*), and that forgetting precedes remembering rather than vice versa.[3]

Whether 'remembrance' or anamnesis proves the more useful term, the point is that memories are always 'scarce' in relation to everything that theoretically might have been remembered, but is now forgotten. This is painfully obvious when it comes to individual memories, but it also applies, mutatis mutandis, to cultural memory especially when one takes into account Aleida Assmann's distinction between 'archival memory' (*Speichergedächtnis*) and 'working memory' (*Funktions-gedächtnis)* (Assmann, 1999: 18–22). Archival memory is merely a latent form of memory, as Assmann describes it, in that it constitutes a virtual storehouse of information about the past that may or may not be used as a source for remembrance (this archival 'memory' is itself a selection with respect to all those things that have been definitively and irrevocably forgotten and are no longer retrievable). But being stored in an archive, be this an actual or a virtual one, is not the same thing as being remembered as part of 'working memory', and many potential memories remain perpetually unnoticed and unrecalled in the archive. (Alternatively, some things are 'remembered' for which there is no basis in the archive.) As the name suggests, 'working memory' is the result of all those selective acts of recollection that are actually performed in a society, and that together provide a common frame of reference for its members. Cultural memory can thus be described as a 'working memory' which is continuously performed by individuals and groups as they recollect the past selectively through various media and become involved in various forms of memorial activity, from narrating and reading to attending commemorative ceremonies or going on pilgrimages. In the very act of recollecting in public we consciously or unconsciously select those things, from the totality of everything which might have

been said, that are somehow relevant to the present. As Iwona Irwin-Zarecka argues in *Frames of Remembrance* (1994), the cultural recall of the past is governed by a system of relevance that gives priorities to certain aspects of the past and sidelines (effectively, 'forgets') others. The partiality of remembrance is not merely a shortcoming, then, but also one of the preconditions of its being meaningful for particular groups of people.

2. Convergence

Not only do cultural memories represent a scarce commodity in the sense outlined above, but they also tend to converge and to coalesce. Pierre Nora's concept of 'lieux de mémoire', or 'sites of memory', remains useful here in describing the process whereby places, texts and artefacts become the focus of collective remembrance and of historical meaning. As Nora put it, 'sites of memory', both actual and virtual locations, provide 'a maximum amount of meaning in a minimum number of signs' ('Un maximum de sens dans le minimum de signes'; Nora, 1997 [1984–92]: I, 38). As a result, sites of memory are constantly being reinvested with new meaning. Whether they take the material form of actual places and objects, or the immaterial form of stories and pieces of music, 'sites of memory' are defined by the fact that they elicit intense attention on the part of those doing the remembering and thereby become a self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment (this process recalls Foucault's reference to an 'internal proliferation of meaning'). Seen in this way, sites of memory can be said to function as a principle of economy in cultural memory, helping to reduce the proliferation of disparate memories and providing common frame-works for appropriating the past. Extending Halbwachs's notion of a 'social framework' (Halbwachs, 1994 [1925]), sites of memory might usefully be called 'cultural frameworks' for remembrance on the part of different groups.

The way in which historical meaning becomes focused on particular *lieux* can be illustrated, literally, by the case of Oradour-sur-Glane, site of one of the worst massacres of civilians by the Nazis in France. As Sarah Farmer shows in her book *Martyred Village* (1999), Oradour was symbolically and also physically 'cut off' from the surrounding countryside in the years following the war, surrounded by virtual museum walls. In the process, the devastated town took on a pre-eminent status in the national commemoration of the victims of Nazi violence and became the scene of government-organized commemorations, sometimes to the dismay of the local community of

survivors who wanted to mourn the loss of their fellow villagers in their own way, rather than have their memorials hijacked by the authorities. Even more significant for the purposes of my argument here is the fact that, with the consolidation of Oradour as a national memory site, other towns where atrocities had also been carried out but on a smaller scale ended up sidelined within the national arena (Farmer, 1999: 50). All roads seem to lead to the one *lieu de mémoire* at Oradour, as it were, symbol par excellence of Nazi injustice.

Once a site has emerged as a focus for remembrance, it may go on to attract geographically unrelated memories which then become concentrated in that single place. The end result is 'a maximum of meaning in a minimum of signs', as Nora put it. Thus the inhabitants of Oradour themselves contributed to this concentration of memories by naming streets in their new town after Lidice in Bohemia, where a comparable wholesale massacre of the population had been carried out, and after two other towns in France where civilian massacres had taken place (Farmer 1999: 133). Through the use of the placenames in the streetscape, these other massacres are virtually transposed to the site of Oradour and virtually displayed there.[4]

The conflation of memories is not just something that happens to actual locations, but also to 'sites' of a less material and more symbolic kind. The stories told about certain events also provide a cultural framework for remembering them, and just as actual locations serve to attract topographically unrelated memories, so too certain narratives provide a cultural framework for other stories. Later events are superimposed on earlier ones to form memorial layers as it were. Thus the annual celebration of 11 November in Great Britain has by now become an occasion not just for commemorating the end of World War I in its specificity, but more generally an occasion for commemorating British casualties in various wars. To take another example: Philippe Joutard shows how the memory of the Huguenot persecution in the Cevennes in the sixteenth century has changed in the light of intervening events such as World War II, so as to become effectively conflated with other acts of resistance to intolerance (Joutard, 1997). The various narratives tend to synergize into a repeating, indeed mythical structure for which the Huguenot struggle is taken as paradigmatic. In this sort of superimposition of one narrative on another, we can see how new frames of relevance help revitalize earlier memories and infuse them with renewed cultural significance. At the same time, the fact that the story of the Huguenots is already a heavily invested site of memory, albeit only among certain groups, helps ensure that it will also be recycled as a cultural frame in dealing with new events.

3. Recursivity

'They are repeated, reproduced, transformed, and replicated, not just through copying and translation, but also through interpretation [and] commentary'. Foucault was writing about utterances, but again his remarks can be applied to the realm of cultural memory. For it is through recursivity – visiting the same places, repeating the same stories – that a cultural memory is constructed as such. When acts of remembrance are repeatedly performed they can become part of a shared frame of reference. Arguably, texts and images play a particularly important role in this process, both because they themselves are infinitely reproducible and because they are tied down neither to any particular time nor to any particular place. Unlike material monuments, texts and images circulate and, in the process, they connect up people who, although they themselves never meet face-to-face, may nevertheless, thanks to stories and the media that carry them, come to share memories as members of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991 [1983]). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that particular stories in the form of novels or films enjoy such a high public profile because of their aesthetic properties and manner of distribution that they play a role as catalysts in the emergence of topics in public remembrance.[5]

While acknowledging the importance of the 'mobile media' (text, image) in the formation of cultural memory, it is equally important to recognize the intersections between different memorial forms. In an ongoing re-mediation of memories, stories are translated into monuments or into (annual) ceremonies, and vice versa. Repetition in different media is something that bears emphasizing here since most discussions of cultural memory have focused on isolated acts of remembrance rather than on the processes by which one type of remembrance feeds into another. As is well known, public remembrance manifests itself in many forms – as historiography, commemorative ceremony, legal process, artistic representation, monument – and uses in the process a variety of media (place, word, image, stone, gesture, ritual).[6] The 'working memory' of a particular community seems more often than not the result of *various* cultural activities that feed into, repeat and reinforce each other. The way in which different memorial media may take over and repeat certain memories can be illustrated with reference to the official rehabilitation of the French and British soldiers executed for desertion or insubordination during World War I. As Nicolas Offenstadt shows in a recent

study (1999), the official rehabilitation was the final stage in a series of different representations of the *fusillés*' cause, which included several novels and films alongside other manifestations.

With the importance of transmedial recursivity in mind, it is interesting to revisit Maurice Halbwachs's suggestion that memories tend to find spatial expression, in the sense that they seek to attach themselves to particular locations which can be visited in the here and now (Halbwachs, 1997 [1950]: 234). It is evident that monuments reflect a communal desire to hold onto the memory of some person or event, and to give tangible expression to this desire in a particular location. But it can be argued that particular places, and the monuments located there, function as repositories of cultural memories only by virtue of the stories that are told about them or by the rituals that are carried out there. Thus monuments can be seen as the outcome of a whole series of other acts of remembrance using other media, including text and image, that lead people to converge on that particular place. Although setting up a monument may seem like the culmination of public remembrance, it is in fact only the beginning of a new memorial phase. For monuments retain their value as agents of 'working' memory only as long as their significance is kept alive by the recycling of stories and commemorative events. As Reinhard Koselleck warned, building a monument may seem like the ultimate expression of a desire to remember, but it may also mark the first stage in the forgetting of an event if other forms of remembrance are not subsequently brought into play in an ongoing symbolic reinvestment of the site in question (Koselleck, 1979: 274).

4. Modelling

The extensive discussion of traumatic memory and forgetting in recent years has revealed the difficulties involved in finding an appropriate form in which to talk about painful experiences to third parties. But the problem is a general one and, in many ways, trauma and the relative inability to give expression to memories can be taken as paradigmatic for all our dealings with the past.[7] Indeed, collective remembrance in practice is the end product of tensions between limitations of various sorts:

(a) The degree to which certain episodes are retrievable from archival memory: some events were never 'registered' and are irrevocably lost; in other cases we only know that something occurred, but can never know the details.

(b) The degree to which one wants to recall, or alternatively to forget, certain episodes: recent discussions of trauma have emphasized the complexity of remembrance in the case of painful events that are remembered in great detail but that we would rather forget; while recent identity politics have demonstrated that the formation of new social groups is often linked to the recollection of events that, because of their past marginalization, are now difficult to retrieve.

(c) The repertoire of memorial forms available for giving public expression to remembrance: as suggested above, acts of remembrance are channelled through the various memorial forms that have evolved, and continue to evolve, with the emergence of different media. Models for remembrance are 'scarce' in Foucault's sense.

When these different parameters are taken into account, it becomes obvious that the desire to recall, the availability of information, and the availability of suitable models of remembrance do not always coincide, and the fact that they do not may be one of the reasons why new forms of remembrance are developed along the way. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, the emergence and continued importance of historical fiction as a memorial form can be linked to the difficulties of using the historiographical genre in cases where the desire to recollect certain marginalized aspects of the past is not met by the availability of archival evidence (Rigney, 2001).

Given these multiple constraints, collective remembrance needs to be conceptualized as an agenda or project, rather than as something that is always fully achieved in practice. Indeed, commemorative ceremonies can better be described in terms of a memorial gesture, a pious desire to remember on the part of those who survived or on the part of later generations, than as a matter of detailed recollection as such. In various ways, the desire to remember may fail to coincide with their 'memorability' or, to put this another way, with our ability to remember them in a cultural form. The fact that certain topics are socially relevant in principle, then, does not guarantee that they will be remembered or, if they are remembered, that the memorial forms used are suitable in any absolute sense. The lack of an automatic fit between relevance and memorability means that cultural memory evolves, not just through the emergence of new memorial languages, but also through the recycling and adaptation of old forms in new situations (indeed, new languages are themselves arguably just a more productive result of the same

processes of recycling and *bricolage*).

The point can be illustrated with reference to World War I whose horrors led on the one hand to experimentation with forms of representation (the argument of Fussell, 1975) and, on the other hand, to the recycling and *bricolage* of more traditional forms of remembrance that had been developed in the first instance with reference to different sorts of events (the argument of Winter, 1995). The principle of recycling can also be illustrated by reference to the bloody crusade against the Cathars and Albigensians, as this became a focus of interest in the nineteenth century and was incorporated into various national and regional frames (see Martel, 2002; McCaffrey, 2001). Thus Henri Martin, who incorporated the story of the medieval heretics into a national narrative based on the idea of a struggle between two races, the Northerners and Southerners (Martin, 1834), adapted this model from Augustin Thierry, who had used 'racial opposition' in writing his history of the Conquest of England (1824) (Martel, 2002: 36) and who had in turn been inspired by the work of Walter Scott (Rigney, 2001: 85). Similarly, modern recollections of the Huguenot resistance in the Cevennes were in large part shaped by Eugène Sue's novel *Jean Cavalier ou les fanatiques des Cévennes* (1840), that in turn was inspired by Walter Scott's novel *Old Mortality* (1816).[8]

Models of remembrance, like Foucault's utterances, are repeated, transformed and appropriated in new situations with the help of 'mobile' media. This means that one act of remembrance can stimulate comparable acts in other situations and within different social frameworks. The language in which memories are articulated is recycled, providing an intellectual hook with which relics of the past can be 'fished' out of the archive and brought into working memory.

5. Translation and transfer

Implicit in the foregoing discussion is the idea that public remembrance changes in line with the shifting social frameworks within which historical identity is conceived: one of the ways in which emergent groups (women, immigrants, religious and ethnic minorities) confirm their identity *as* group is by celebrating and reinforcing their sense of a common past. Indeed, the sense of sharing memories, of having a past in common, is arguably a precondition for the emergence of such groups in the first place. Whatever the chicken and whatever the egg, the identification of new groups seems to go hand in glove with the production of a 'counter-memory' that challenges dominant views on the past, points to lacunae in the cultural memory and, wherever

possible, attempts to bring new 'working memories' out of the archive
and into circulation.

The 'restoration' or 'emancipation' of minority memory communities
is often presented as a matter of 'recovering' an original autonomous
tradition or as a matter of rediscovering an ongoing 'undercurrent' in
collective memory. But following what has just been said about public
remembrance needing cultural models, I want to highlight here the
extent to which such memories, even as they build on distinctive
experience, are nevertheless constructed with the help of whatever
mnemonic technologies and memorial forms are available. This means
among other things that the pasts of particular groups are given cultural
shape and expression in relation to each other, and that models of
remembrance may be exchanged among groups with a similarly
marginalized position within the public sphere. The point can be
illustrated by reference to cultural activists within minority cultures in
the nineteenth century who, while often protesting their particularism,
nevertheless borrowed strategies from each other. Joep Leerssen's work
on comparative nationalisms in early nineteenth-century Europe
provides many striking examples of the ways in which cultural activists
emulated each other (discovering and editing popular epics, for
example, was a memorial activity that spread across Europe from
Ireland, to Brittany, to the Languedoc, and far beyond).[9] Closer to our
own time, the popularity of street 'carnivals' as a way of celebrating
immigrant cultures throughout Europe or the tendency to re-write
literary classics as a way of introducing postcolonial perspectives on
mainstream traditions (like Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les Limbes du
Pacifique* [1967] and J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* [1986]) illustrates this copy-cat
dimension to memorial culture.

That people copy from each other and imitate each other is
perhaps not in itself surprising – it is indeed a defining feature of
culture – but it is something that has received insufficient attention in
studies of collective memory. As *cultural* memory, forms of
remembrance spread and converge like other trends. That Pierre
Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* gave rise to equivalents in various other
European countries is just one more case in point.

The circulation of memories

When it first began to crop up in academic discussions, the concept of
'memory' seemed to invite considerations of the experience of the
past from *within* particular communities – witness the emphasis on
the 'internal' quality of memory as opposed to the 'external' character

of history in the passage quoted earlier from Halbwachs. Moreover, the concept of 'memory' has often been deployed as a framework within which attention can be drawn to 'hidden' or 'lost' aspects of the past, which are deemed of special importance to the identity of particular communities. This has led David Lowenthal (1996) among others to warn of a new sort of foundationalism where every group, every family, every individual is deemed to possess a unique, incommensurable and unalienable store of memories (as in the world of Danilo Kiš' *Encyclopedia of the Dead*).

Lowenthal's warning makes sense in face of the sometimes simplistic way that the concept of 'memory' has been used to designate a purportedly more 'authentic' alternative to historiography, because closer to past experience 'as it really was'. But if the concept of 'cultural memory' continues to be elaborated in the direction outlined here – as the result of ongoing cultural processes – then it becomes possible to conceive of the relation between memorial practices and the formation of collective identities in new ways. Once cultural memory is seen as something dynamic, as a result of recursive acts of remembrance, rather than as something like an unchanging and pre-given inheritance, then the way is opened to thinking about what could be called 'memory transfer'.

As presented here, cultural memory is always a form of vicarious memory. It is always 'external', to recall Halbwachs's term for one last time. With the help of various media and memorial forms later generations recall things *other* people experienced, and do so from the conviction that those past experiences have something to do with the sense of 'our history'. Representations of the past facilitate sympathy with respect to 'other' people whom we do not know in any direct way, even if we think of them as our ancestors, and even with respect to people who do not belong in any straightforward way to the 'imagined community' with which we usually identify. In other words, the act of remembrance itself may arouse interest in other people's experiences and sympathy for them. This suggests that the social frameworks, that Halbwachs saw as a precondition for sharing memories, may in fact be drawn, re-drawn and expanded as a *product* of memorial practices.

In this context, it is interesting to consider specifically the role played by artistic media in crossing and helping to re-define the borders of imagined memory communities. By virtue of their aesthetic and fictional properties they are more 'mobile' and 'exportable' than other forms of representation, whether in translation or the original, and are certainly more mobile than actual memory sites such as

Oradour. Certain stories travel and, increasingly within the modern world, they do so beyond the boundaries of the immediate community and beyond national boundaries. As such they may be instruments par excellence in the 'transfer' of memories from one community to another, and hence as mediators between memory communities.

The key issue then is no longer the fact that in this postmodern age memory communities seem to be proliferating, that the time when things could be reduced to a single grand narrative is over. Having recognized that there are multiple memory communities and that the national framework is but one frame among others, the key theoretical challenge is now to come to terms with the different types of connections and transfers possible between these communities. By replacing the plenitude–loss–restoration model of memory with the thoroughly 'cultural' view of memory, as I have been proposing here, we might hopefully gain more insight into the ways in which social frameworks are renegotiated and memories appropriated and transferred across groups through the mediation of specific memorial forms and particular texts.

Notes

1. Halbwachs (1997 [1950]: 115), for example, thematizes the finiteness of intergenerational memory.
2. Nora (1997 [1984–92]: 1, 23): 'On ne parle tant de mémoire que parce qu'il n'y en a plus'.
3. On the importance of forgetting to remembrance: Weinrich (1997); Ricoeur (2000).
4. On the relation between display and dislocation: Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (1998).
5. Rigney (2004) offers more on the role of literature as catalyst.
6. For an extensive discussion of various memorial media: Assmann (1999: 149–339).
7. Spiegel (1997) argues that 'trauma' has become paradigmatic in current conceptualizations of history (34–43).
8. For details on the influence of Sue and Scott, see Philippe Joutard's introduction to Sue (1978).
9. Leerssen (2004); also Leerssen's project on 'Philology and National Learning': http://cf.hum.uva.nl/natlearn.

References

Anderson, Benedict (1991 [1983]) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Assmann, Aleida (1999) *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses.* Munich: Beck.

Assmann, Jan (1997) *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen.* Munich: Beck.

Burke, Peter (1989) 'History as Social Memory', in Thomas Butler (ed.), *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind*, pp. 97–113. Oxford: Blackwell.

Derrida, Jacques (1967) *L'Écriture et la différence.* Paris: Seuil.

Farmer, Sarah (1999) *Martyred Village: Commemorating the 1944 Massacre at Oradour-sur-Glane.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Foucault, Michel (1969) *L'Archéologie du savoir.* Paris: Gallimard.

Fussell, Paul (1975) *The Great War and Modern Memory.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Halbwachs, Maurice (1994 [1925]) *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire.* Paris: Albin Michel.

Halbwachs, Maurice. (1997 [1950]) *La Mémoire collective.* Paris: Albin Michel.

Irwin-Zarecka, Iwona (1994) *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Joutard, Philippe (1997 [1984–92]) 'Le Musée du désert: la minorité réformée', in Pierre Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de mémoire* (3 vols), vol. 2, pp. 2653–77. Paris: Gallimard.

Kansteiner, Wulf (2002) 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory* 41: 179–97.

Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara (1998) *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kiš, Danilo (1997 [1983]) *The Encylopedia of the Dead*, trans. Michael Henry Heim. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Koselleck, Reinhart (1979) 'Kriegerdenkmale als Identitätsstiftungen der Überlebenden', in Odo Marquard and Karlheinz Stierle (eds), *Identität*, Poetik und Hermeneutik, vol. 8, pp. 255–76. Munich: Fink.

Leerssen, Joep (2004) 'Literary Historicism: Romanticism, Philologists, and the Presence of the Past', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 65: 221–43.

Lowenthal, David (1996) *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History.* New York: Free Press.

Martel, Philippe (2002) *Les Cathares et l'Histoire: la drame cathare devant des historiens (1820–1992).* Toulouse: Éditions Privat.

McCaffrey, Emily (2001) 'Memory and Collective Identity in Occitanie: The Cathars in History and Popular Culture', *History and Memory* 13(1): 114–38.

Nora, Pierre, ed. (1997 [1984–92]) *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard.

Offenstadt, Nicolas (1999) *Les Fusillés de la Grande Guerre et la mémoire collective (1914–1999).* Paris: Odile Jacob, 1999.

Olick, Jeffrey K. and Robbins, Joyce (2000) 'Social Memory Studies: From "Collective Memory" to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices', *Annual Review of Sociology* 24: 105–40.

Ricoeur, Paul (2000) *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli.* Paris: Seuil.

Rigney, Ann (2001) *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Rigney, Ann (2004) 'Portable Monuments: Literature, Cultural Memory, and the Case of Jeanie Deans', *Poetics Today* 25(2): 361–96.

Schacter, Daniel L. (1996) *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past.* New York: Basic Books.

Schacter, Daniel L. (2001) *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Spiegel, Gabrielle (1997) *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Sue, Eugène (1978 [1840]) *Jean Cavalier ou les fanatiques des Cévennes.* Présentation de Philippe Joutard. Geneva: Slatkine.

Weinrich, Harald (1997) *Lethe: Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens*. Munich: Beck.

Winter, Jay (1995) *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ann Rigney is Professor of Comparative Literature at Utrecht University. *Address for correspondence:* Utrecht University, Trans 10, 3512 JK Utrecht, Netherlands [*email:* Ann.Rigney@let.uu.nl]