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MEMORY VOIDS AND THE NEW EUROPEAN HERITAGE: A PROPOSAL FOR STUDYING TRANSNATIONAL MEMORY

CHIARA DE CESARI

Introduction

How do we develop theoretical frameworks for studying collective memory and heritage-making in the age of transnationalism and globalization? There is a vast literature that demonstrates how memory and heritage are crucial for identity formation, yet most of this scholarship focuses on national frames. Even recent work that has begun to rethink memory transnationally assumes that national memories are constitutive of larger-scale processes. However, a debate is emerging as other scholars theorize that universalizing memories, like the Holocaust, can contain or evoke multiple narratives of the past. In this article I report on my current research, which seeks to contribute to this debate by providing critical reflection on the ongoing institutional project of creating a heritage for Europe. My research contributes to this debate by focusing on the materiality of memory and the everyday practices of its producers, but also by redirecting attention to the politics of inclusion and exclusion that govern even seemingly all-inclusive transnational memories.

An analysis of the project for a new European heritage provides an excellent opportunity to study memory-making beyond the dominant methodological nationalism of memory and heritage studies. Recently, there has been a flurry of initiatives by policymakers and intellectuals to promote a common European memory that would ‘thicken’ EU citizens’ weak European identity. Grounded in multi-sited ethnography, my research employs a novel conceptual approach, which—elaborating on Lynn Meskell’s model (2002)—I call negative heritage, in order to pay attention both to what European heritage includes and to what it excludes—that is, its memory voids. Five field-sites have been chosen for study, including three of the most important initiatives to create museums of Europe (in Berlin, Brussels, and Aachen) and two cases of forgotten transcultural pasts—the Arab–Islamic heritage of Sicily and the carceral heritage of Italian colonialism in Libya.

My working hypothesis is that this new heritage is constituted through a disavowal of Europe’s post-colonial, transcultural, trans-European histories,

particularly with regard to European entanglements with the Arab–Islamic world. At a time when EU investment in the European heritage project is not being matched by successful outputs, an urgent scholarly task presents itself, demanding critical reflection and analysis of ongoing attempts to institutionalize and construct a shared European heritage.

The New European Heritage

The problem of European memory has preoccupied scholars and policymakers alike for some time now. There is a growing awareness that a shared past forms the necessary basis for stronger bonds between European citizens and ‘thicker’ forms of transnational belonging and integration (Müller 2008). Working on the assumption of the ethics of memory—namely, the duty to remember the past after Auschwitz—scholars and policymakers have called for projects that target the production of a new European memory and have elaborated guidelines to implement this memory-making project (Assmann 2006, Eder 2005, Leggewie 2009). Recently, various European initiatives have been launched, from research programmes to museum projects, that explicitly combine remembrance and history-writing with the promotion of a common European identity. In 2000 the ‘Museums of Europe Network’ was created. Under the ‘European Heritage Label’ scheme, efforts are underway to create a network of European heritage sites. Among the new museum projects, the Brussels-based Musée de l’Europe opened in 2007 with a major exhibition planned to make it the ‘place of memory that Europe needs’, and to offer ‘a reasoned history of a Union portrayed as a diverse but unique civilisation’.¹ Yet these initiatives have encountered manifold obstacles. Originally conceived of as a museum, the Brussels project eventually became a travelling exhibition. The more experimental ‘Bauhaus Europa’, an exhibition and learning centre planned in Aachen to create a true European laboratory, has been stopped by a citizens’ initiative.² Indeed, several recent Museum of Europe projects seem destined to face difficulties, if not outright failure (as, for instance, in the cases of Berlin’s Museum of European Cultures and Marseille’s Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations; see Mazé 2009). This institutional project of creating a heritage for the new Europe is the central subject of my ongoing research. In this article, I sketch a project proposal for how to study this phenomenon and illustrate my work-in-progress.

At the centre of current debates on Europe’s heritage lies the question of what constitutes its content. Many scholars see the Enlightenment as the source of the values of pluralism, rationality, and democracy that are often considered the essence of European civilization (see Bauman 2004). Others emphasize the centrality of the Holocaust as the cosmopolitan founding memory for Europe (Diner 2003, Levy and Sznajder 2006). Concerning the deep past, many point to the Greek, Roman, and Christian roots of Europe, highlighting how ‘from the

Carolingian Empire forward, Europe had a predominantly Western Christian core with marked boundaries against the Islamic civilization as well as Eastern Christianity' (Spohn 2005: 4). These notions circulate widely in the public sphere, as shown by the calls made by several mainstream politicians to include a reference to Europe's Christian heritage in the EU treaty. Yet others, especially feminists and post-colonial scholars, criticize these discursive constructions as marginalizing women and minorities through a number of mnemonic exclusions, and argue in favour of 'de-eurocentrizing' European memory so as to include its 'others' (Passerini 2007, 2009; see also Gilroy 2004).

The crucial questions in this research revolve around what 'Europe' is forgetting today and how a 'European memory' is currently being constructed. This object—a transnational project of memory and knowledge production—so often seems to elude close scrutiny. So how best to study it? My research aims to provide answers to these questions by providing a multi-sited ethnographic account of what I term Europe's *negative heritage*, reworking Lynn Meskell's original definition (see Meskell 2002).³ This novel approach refers to the photographic process of creating negative as well as positive, or reversed, images, and uses this idea to rethink the dialectics of remembering and forgetting as crucial to transnational memory processes. An investigation of the European project of heritage-making must be carried out by paying simultaneous attention to what it includes *and* what it excludes—to its memory voids. My working hypothesis is that the new European memory is constituted through a disavowal of Europe's transcultural, trans-European histories, particularly colonialism and Europe's entanglements with the Arab–Islamic world.

Integrating insights and methods from post-colonial theory and the anthropology of transnationalism into memory and heritage research, my project illuminates the politics and ethics of European heritage-making. It also engages with the most significant questions raised by new transnational remembrance processes, characterized by dispersion and multi-sitedness. Whereas memory and heritage studies are still plagued by a certain methodological nationalism (see, for example, Beck 2007), I contend that an understanding of heritagization processes that cut across nation-states' boundaries necessitates a set of methodological innovations inspired by the principles of multi-sitedness, displacement, and lack.

Towards Studying Transnational Memory

Exemplified by the paradigmatic status of Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* or (national) sites of memory, memory scholarship focuses on *national* frames of memory (for an overview of this vast and interdisciplinary field, see Erll and Nünning (eds) 2010 [2008]). Good examples of this trend can be found in various edited volumes on European memory, which are in fact collections of national case studies (Eder and Spohn (eds) 2005, Lebow et al.

(eds) 2006). Borrowing heavily from memory theory and partly overlapping with it, the study of cultural heritage shows a similar focus.⁴ Traditionally, heritage studies have privileged the investigation of the relationship between heritage and nationalism, emphasizing heritage's instrumentality in the production of national identities and the state's legitimacy (Abu El-Haj 2001, Boswell and Evans (eds) 1999, Kohl 1998, Rowlands 2002). Often monopolized by the state's ideological apparatuses, heritage has produced highly selective representations of the nation that have been instrumental to the hegemonic projects of powerful groups (Hall 1999–2000, Herzfeld 1991) and to the exclusion of women, minorities, and the working class (Smith 2006).

Since completing my doctoral thesis, a study of Palestinian heritage-making inscribed in a transnational space (De Cesari 2009), a crucial objective of my research has been to investigate the ways in which cultural memory processes intersect with current transformations of the nation-state under globalization. Recent works that theorize memory in a transnational frame emphasize the intertwining of different collective memories.⁵ Some of these studies nevertheless assume that national memories are the building blocks of memory processes (for example, Schwenkel 2006). Other scholars theorize that universalizing memories like the Holocaust can contain or evoke multiple other narratives of the past (Levy and Sznajder 2006; see also Rothberg 2009). By redirecting attention to the politics of inclusion and exclusion that govern even seemingly all-inclusive transnational memories, this project intervenes in that debate; but it also engages with the debate about forgetting colonialism.

This larger debate is taking place in multiple, compartmentalized, national-level discussions (for Italy, see Ben-Ghiat and Fuller (eds) 2005, Del Boca 2003, Henneberg 2004; for France, see Stoler 2011). By broadening and transnationalizing its terms, my project bears directly on the project of European heritage-making. Anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler (2011) has argued that France's relationship to colonialism is not one of amnesia, but of aphasia, denoting an impossibility of articulation. Paul Gilroy (2004: 98) speaks of a form of post-imperial melancholia shaping contemporary British politics and characterizes the public inability to mourn the history of Empire as responsible for fostering racism and xenophobia. Responding to these scholars' injunctions to investigate present pasts, my research explores the mechanisms that allow for a history of (always asymmetric, often violent) interconnections to be obscured or rendered unintelligible.

Methodology, Approach, Concepts, Sites

The current making of a new European memory is both a project of knowledge and identity production by intellectuals and policymakers, and a cultural process distributed over a wide range of sites mobilized by increasing economic

and institutional integration and circulating ideas of 'Europe'. To grasp these complex interlocking cultural dynamics, I employ a three-part methodological strategy.

First, following a growing trend in anthropology (Marcus 1998), I use a multi-sited ethnographic approach. Whereas traditional anthropological fieldwork privileges the study of a single locality through long-term participant observation, more recent works have shown that a multi-sited approach is in fact better suited to the investigation of translocal and transnational social phenomena (such as European memory) that cannot be accounted for by focusing on a single place (Falzon 2009). This methodology is particularly well suited to studying the practices and world-views of bureaucrats, scholars, and policymakers, in other words, the functioning of modern, multilevel institutions such as museums and archaeological services, institutions in which the contemporary ethnographer cannot apply the traditional single-site method based on long-term residence. In multi-sited ethnography, the specific research sites are determined according to the particular problems or perspectives prioritized by the research design (Hannerz 2003: 207).

My research design is shaped by the theoretical concept of negative heritage, which provides the lens through which I view the project of European memory-making. Like a photographic negative, this heritage is the inversion of naturalized, hegemonic ideas of European heritage. This notion is shaped by the poststructuralist concept of the 'constitutive outside' (Butler 1993, Derrida and Kearney 1984), which implies a relational understanding of identity as presupposing alterity. Identities are constituted through their relation to what they are not, but this otherness is excluded and repressed in order to preserve the illusion of pure, self-sufficient identitarian entities (see Biesta 2003: 147–8). This approach allows me to analyse the transnational dialectics of remembering and forgetting through the simultaneous study of key memory-sites *and* memory voids.

My working hypothesis is that the heritage of Europe is constituted today through its negative relationship with the 'East' and with Islam in particular. A purified European heritage is being produced through a clear-cut separation from what it ought *not* to be, namely memories of trans-European interconnections and intermingling between East and West (see Said 1978). Building on the theories of post-colonial scholars of secularism (see, for example, Mahmood 2006), a key proposition under examination in this research is that a paradoxical logic guides this memory-making project. Arguably, the heritage of Europe is imagined as religious and secular at the same time, both a Christian heritage and the heritage of Enlightenment reason—by forgetting colonialism and erasing Islam as the radically non-European. Finally, particular attention must be paid to the materiality of memory (museum displays and ruins); the study of memory processes is namely combined with an *archaeology of silenced memories* and the recovery of forgotten sites of interconnected pasts.

The first two sites being researched are two top-down, institutional initiatives to create a positive European memory: the Musée de l'Europe in Brussels, and the more experimental Bauhaus Europa in Aachen. The Brussels museum represents the most institutional initiative to musealize Europe and house it in the European parliament's headquarters. Interestingly, Aachen's project was halted by a citizens' initiative. Through interviews with the protagonists and discourse-, media-, and display-analysis, I will explore the principles and values that informed these projects, and the problems they encountered. In the Aachen case, the focus will be on the dynamics that caused its failure. In addition to asking what the canon of European memory is, the more interesting questions are: what logic underlies it and who are the actors involved; what kinds of problems do these projects encounter; in which ways are they contested and by which actors? This part of the research will allow me to explore the modalities of transnational institutional memory-making, and to evaluate the place of colonialism, constructions of the 'East', and trans-European interconnections in official memories of Europe. Another site will also be considered in this context: Berlin's Museum of European Cultures, which is particularly interesting because of its setting within a complex that houses the city's collections of non-European art and culture.

Two more research sites will illuminate different aspects of what I call Europe's negative heritage dynamic. One is the Arab-Islamic heritage of southern Italy, with particular emphasis on Palermo. This allows closer exploration of the dynamics of institutional remembrance by zooming in on the regional and local levels of the EU. Among the many heritages of Sicily, the Arab-Islamic past represents a very important but fully neglected part of the medieval history of the island, one which is undeniably its forgotten golden age.⁶ In Palermo I will carry out an ethnography of heritage practices and conduct participant observation and interviews with bureaucrats, guides, archaeologists, tourists, and local residents around the archaeological and museum sites. By looking at the 'social life' (Appadurai 1986) of the material remains of Arab Palermo, I will explore the ways in which an emphasis on Italy and Europe's classical and Christian roots has silenced this cosmopolitan heritage in the local public and institutional discourse. While the first group of field-sites enables me to look into the highest institutional level of memory-making, the ethnography of the heritage of Arab Sicily will provide an avenue into what I call the 'bureaucratic routinization of oblivion' of past and present Mediterranean interconnections.

The final site concerns a strong and under-investigated case of cultural forgetting, namely the carceral heritage of Italian colonialism in Libya. While Italian school text-books rarely mention this obscure part of the national history, historical research has revealed that an eighth of the Libyan population died as a direct result of the Italian occupation between 1911 and 1943 (Del Boca 2003). One policy, implemented by the Fascist regime in the early 1930s to crush the anti-colonial rebellion, had a particularly devastating effect on

local life. Under this policy, almost all of Cyrenaica's inhabitants were interned in sixteen detention camps, while another camp held Libyan Jews during the Second World War (Labanca 2005, Salerno 2005, 2008). Today, these camps are non-sites of memory, fields of unnamed graves and scattered ruins that have never been studied or documented. I take these prisons to be sites of negative remembrance that mark the forgetting of colonialism and its erasure from contemporary imaginations of a shared European past and an inclusive future. The approach used here is both ethnographic and archaeological, and is grounded in the methodologies of material culture studies, particularly the archaeology of the recent past (Buchli and Lucas 2001, González-Ruibal 2008). This mapping project is designed to bring to light a forgotten past. Like most studies of materiality, this part of the research project aims to make particular things matter. Contributing to a nascent memory, this is an example of what Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas (2001) have appropriately termed 'archaeologies of future possibilities'.

Why This Is Important

The main objective of my ongoing research is to launch a critical reflection on the institutional project of creating a heritage for Europe. Despite increasing EU investment in this domain, successful results have been rare, as illustrated in part by the failure of several proposed museums of Europe. Moreover, an analysis of this project and its multiple levels offers an excellent opportunity to rethink the dynamics of collective memory beyond the dominant methodological nationalism of memory and heritage studies.

Heritage and the production of shared pasts that matter constitute fundamental moments in the imagination of political communities. They also have consistently exclusionary effects. Today, in the hegemonic imaginary of a purportedly secular public sphere, European heritage is built upon the pillars of classical antiquity, Christianity, and the Enlightenment. This suggests a history of progress counterbalanced by the Holocaust as the absolute evil, which is seen, however, as an exception rather than in the proper context of a long European history of racial thinking and racialized violence (Gilroy 1993). Acknowledging world-embracing pasts that exceed the continent as constitutive of Europe itself, however, can open up a space for imagining new forms of belonging and citizenship, and encourage new convivial socialities that would include many of those who live *in* Europe but are not considered *of* it.

Hence this research is also a contribution to the open project of making a new European memory. It shares the ethical aims of much memory work (Margalit 2002) and a belief in the duty to remember all the murderous pasts of Europe, so as to foster a sense of collective responsibility towards the other and a measure of scepticism towards othering discourses. It ultimately aims to

‘de-eurocentrize’ memory studies (Passerini 2009) and to pluralize the new European heritage by exploring forgotten trans-European connections and the oblivious making of boundaries out of transitory, porous, and unstable geographies. This, I believe, is a crucial endeavour for, as Stoler (2008: 195) argues, ‘the project is not to fashion a genealogy of catastrophe or redemption’. Instead (ibid.), ‘making connections where they are hard to trace is not designed to settle scores but rather to recognize that these are unfinished histories, not of victimized pasts but consequential histories that open to differential futures’.

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Notes

1. For further information, visit the Museum of Europe website at <<http://www.expo-europe.be/en/site/musee/musee-europe-bruxelles.html>>.
2. For further information, visit the Bauhaus Europa website at <<http://www.bauhaus-europa.eu/>>.
3. My approach differs from Reinhart Koselleck’s notion, common in the German literature, of ‘negative memory’ (*negatives Gedächtnis*), which refers to memories of negative events like genocides (see, e.g., Koselleck 2002). On forgetting, see, e.g., Connerton 2008.
4. Disentangling memory and heritage tends to be a fruitless endeavour (see Wilson 2009: 378), for much more can be extrapolated from their productive intersections. However, for the sake of clarity, I usually distinguish heritage as a specific, materially mediated, institutionalized, and hegemonic form of memory.
5. See, for example, the ‘multidirectional memory’ approach of Michael Rothberg (2009).
6. Whereas, for example, the archaeological literature on Sicily’s Greek and Roman past is immense, there are very few studies of the Arab period of Southern Italy. Guides only mention this heritage cursorily and tourists ignore this part of the island’s history.

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