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EDITORIAL

Victimhood and Perpetration in Times of Conflict

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In the current global conjuncture, marked by protracted wars, genocides, authoritarian populism, imperialism, and renewed colonial ambitions, the production of antagonistic binaries appears particularly acute. From Gaza to Sudan to Ukraine, oppositional logics are repeatedly mobilised to legitimise military aggression and territorial expansion. Such processes of differentiation are far from neutral and are instead deeply entangled with hegemonic and ideological practices (Hall, 1985), involving the production and circulation of (contested) heritage and memory narratives.[1]

Narratives of the past often advance claims of ownership over history, geography and suffering that facilitate the framing of the self through differentiation from an imagined "other". This "other" is constantly represented as alien and fundamentally distinct, produced through denial and conferring legitimacy within dominant frameworks. As boundaries between the in-group and the perceived "other" become increasingly entangled with ideas of threat, survival, and violence, practices of preserving and comparing heritage and memory acquire a distinctly political signification. Contemporary geopolitical conflicts make visible this process as well as the active role played by states and institutions in shaping historical narratives, policing vocabularies, and consequently mobilising categories such as "victimhood" and "perpetration". Although in general terms "perpetration" is used to refer solely to violence that has been committed, in this instance – drawing on the debate within Perpetrator Studies (Knittel and Goldberg 2019) – we use

1 We would like to thank Emilia Bebic for helping with the literature review for this editorial.

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the term to denote a more complex category in which different subjective positionalities, as well as political and media discourses, coexist. In this sense, and following the same logic we understand "victimhood" as a more complex phenomenon that concerns not only the pragmatics of violence, but also its narration.

Claims of victimhood emerge as particularly powerful and politically operative. Anchored in selective experiences of past suffering, they can be invoked to legitimise subsequent actions, consolidate moral authority and public support. Such claims are rarely uncontested. Rather, they are often negotiated and reconfigured through ongoing struggles over who can be recognised as the "ultimate or absolute victim" – a position that carries symbolic weight and moral legitimacy, while also enabling further claims, interventions, or acts of violence. Consider for example Israel's instrumentalisation of Holocaust memory as an unparalleled and singular atrocity and how such memory has been actively deployed by the state to motivate, legitimise, and obscure the ongoing genocide and violent expansionism in Palestine. The United States, meanwhile, has similarly mobilised discourses of threat and victimization – particularly in the context of the "war on terror" – to frame its actions as defensive, thereby normalising military intervention and deflecting scrutiny from its own forms of state violence, to justify aggressive incursions into Venezuela, positioning itself as a defensive moral force while pursuing "extractivist" and imperialist aims. Such processes demonstrate that the designation of victimhood and perpetration as neither fixed nor universal, but instead deeply entangled with contemporary political power, ideological imperatives and institutional agendas. These examples also point to a broader pattern: across different historical and geographical contexts, victimhood and perpetration have emerged as particularly powerful empirical and epistemic tools of antagonism. These categories appear undeniably useful, if not necessary, in their capacity not only to structure how past violence is understood but also to inform how a peaceful future may be imagined, including facilitating recognition of harm and attribution of responsibility in contexts of transitional justice, conflict resolution, or reconciliation. However, the reification of oppositional binaries may also serve to sustain adversarial dynamics into the future, inhibiting the facilitation of meaningful peacebuilding or inter-group understanding with the potential to engender further conflict.

This issue aims to interrogate and deconstruct the essentialising practices embedded in the binary categories of *victimhood*/ *perpetration* and the ways in which they operate within memory and heritage narratives today. Specifically, the issue places emphasis on *victimhood* and *perpetration* rather than

on 'victims' and 'perpetrators' to advance a critical conceptual shift that both foregrounds the pragmatic and performative dimensions of these categories and acknowledges their procedural and semiotic character. The articles in this issue are informed by a series of main questions: How are victimhood and perpetration constructed? What are the possibilities for the creation of these categories beyond the binarism of victim and perpetrator? What political, rhetorical and performative strategies does the framing of perpetration entail? How are cultural oppositions transmitted within public memory, and how are such categories mobilised and instrumentalised for violent ends? These questions are examined in this issue with remarkable analytical clarity and originality. Rather than concentrating primarily on who counts or is designated as "victim" or "perpetrator" for and by whom, the following contributions interrogate the epistemology of violence and morality by investigating how such forms of knowledge produce and shape dynamics of victimhood and perpetration within heritage and memory narratives. In this context, this issue highlights how these narratives operate as infrastructures through which violence is legitimised, while simultaneously moral authority is asserted, and political positions are articulated and sustained. The making of memory and heritage can therefore become not only a selective process but also a harmful one through which the creation and enforcement of singular historical narratives depend upon the simplification of history, or the erasure of multiple, interconnected identities.

As is widely acknowledged, critical shifts in heritage and memory studies scholarship have fostered the emergence of alternative approaches to difference that are less exclusionary, less reliant on strategies of "othering", and more attentive to zones of contamination and creolisation. Yet problems often arise when theory collapses into poor social practice, prompting the manifestation of the logic of opposition through forms of violence, domination, and exploitation. While simplified categories promise moral clarity in situations marked by uncertainty, they often do so by reducing complex histories, by obscuring relations of implication, by generating new forms of cultural exclusion, and by imposing fresh modes of symbolic violence (Rothberg 2019). As exemplified by the classic construction of rigid moral positions of "good" versus "evil", these binaries often bear little relation to the actual dynamics of social life and instead serve exclusively ideological agendas. Such reductive uses obscure the complex nature of (epistemic) violence, which is more accurately understood as a systemic, structural, and relational process rather than one reducible to isolated actions or individual agents. Moreover, binaries of victim and perpetrator operate not only as moral classifications but also as technologies that

organise conflict histories for public consumption, intergenerational transmission and the production of the so-called "grand narratives" of suffering. In such narratives, the privileging of certain subjects and forms of suffering, the assignment of moral innocence or guilt, and the foreclosure of ambiguity exposes the deeply political (and often malicious) nature of the discourse. As infrastructures of memory and heritage, then, these categories do not merely reflect past violence but actively participate in imaging and imagining possible futures in the aftermath of conflict. As such, they do not only have an enduring and profound impact on individual and collective self-understandings but also may function as a central axis of group cohesion, as well as informing self-imagination and group aspirations across time. In this regard, dissonant heritage scholars often focus on how the symbolisation of conflict, atrocities and collective suffering can highlight the political and emotional management of the categories of victimhood and perpetration for purposes that often go beyond the mere representation and mediation of the past (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1995; Meskell, 2002; Macdonald, 2008). Because of their sensitive nature, attempts to interpret or "resolve" traumatic pasts can have profoundly disruptive, if not dangerous, consequences. Intersecting with strategies of negotiating such pasts, the construction of essentialised categories of victim and perpetrator emerges as a form of mastering and taking control of histories that are difficult to integrate. As the contributions to this issue show, strategies for the management of difficult pasts entail various cultural significations and processes such as silence, erasure, displacement, or engagement, including collective amnesia or aphasia, deflective negationism, suppression or reimagination of disconfirming information, or open examination and mobilisation (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1995; Meskell, 2002; Sodaro, 2019; Anderson, 2020). In practical terms, this can take the form of downplaying connections to acts of perpetration while foregrounding, or selectively amplifying, experiences of victimhood, even though both strategies remain inherently limited.

More broadly, such forms of management often involve the reactivation of sensitive historical legacies in ways that are calibrated to contemporary political agendas, ones that may depart quite substantially from the contexts in which those histories originally unfolded. For example, while the notion of "historical truth" occupies a central role in engagements with traumatic pasts, truth claims themselves remain highly contingent upon the perspectives, interpretations and interventions of those who produce them. Rather than being self-evident, the ways in which the past is "exhibited" in heritage and memory sites are actively constructed

through extensive practices of ownership of the past which maintain and reproduce cultural stereotypes and designations. In dealing with heritage, heritage actors and institutions engage with imagined or actual negotiations not only with their own audiences and populations but also with other governments, international organizations, business partners, and visitors. In other words, while heritage and memory institutions exert ideological force through codified narratives and social orders, funders shape the mission and framing of museums and memorials, producing a top-down modulation of conflictual pasts which advance institutional prerogatives and broader political agendas. At the same time, bottom-up practices can also play a significant role in sustaining or disrupting such social categories. Indeed, commemoration practices, protests and activism are central in the formation of collective identities and affective communities (Rigney 2025). Moreover, heritage and memory practices do not operate as static repositories of the past but as dynamic infrastructures which can both emphasize divisions between groups and reinforce cohesion within them in contexts of communal threat. Thus, the production of collective memory deeply entwined with experiences of atrocity can be instrumental for sustaining internal unity while defining the boundaries of a society or state. In this sense, the negotiation of victimhood and perpetration not only reflects how societies manage the discomfort of violent histories but it also provides an ongoing effort to reconcile moral claims, identity formation, and political utility, while simultaneously adapting in a reactive and contingent manner to evolving technologies of memory transmission shaped by rapidly unfolding political developments and moments of heightened public attention.

Finally, this issue aims to highlight critical efforts to nuance the categories of victimhood and perpetration through appeals to positionality or structural constraints are not without risk. While practices of demystifying perpetration by situating acts of violence within broader historical, institutional, or structural contexts may offer analytical clarity, they can slide into forms of personification or humanisation that, when projected into the public sphere, ultimately obscure accountability. Similarly, interrogating the category of victimhood may entail a kind of devaluation of the experiences of those who have suffered violence. To avoid these counterproductive and undesirable outcomes, it is necessary to adopt interpretive approaches that balance analytical complexity with ethical clarity, resisting both demonisation and excessive generalisation, and ensuring that the pursuit of nuance does not dilute efforts toward justice or collapse responsibility into an all-encompassing and ultimately depoliticised category.

The articles in this issue

Several contributions in this issue foreground the active fabrication of moral certainty through heritage and memory practices, particularly in contexts marked by authoritarianism, occupation, or political polarisation. Miriam Saqqa-Carazo and Layla Renshaw's study of Francoist exhumations in post-Civil War Spain provides a revealing illustration of how these strategies take shape in practice. Focusing on the 1939 exhumations at Soto de Aldovea, the authors show how forensic procedures were mobilised by the Franco regime to reinforce a profoundly asymmetrical moral framework. Through the handling of human remains and an emphasis on personal belongings that was far from incidental, the regime elevated its own dead to the status of martyrs while recasting Republicans as perpetrators. Rather than functioning primarily as acts of recovery, the exhumations operated as rituals of political classification, prolonging the violence of the Civil War into the postwar period by bureaucratic and material means.

A similar logic of moral absolutism can be traced in Marco Simonetti's analysis of the Savur-Mohyla memorial complex in occupied Ukraine. In this case, the memory of the Second World War is deliberately reactivated to make sense of the present, as the occupying authorities in Donetsk draw a direct line between the Soviet struggle against Nazism in 1943 and the conflict in Ukraine, in 2014. By casting Ukrainian forces as ultimate, "fascist" perpetrators and the Russian-speaking population of Donbas as absolute victims, the memorial becomes a tool for legitimising occupation and violence.

The article by Salah Hussein Al-Houdalieh similarly foregrounds the power of materiality in framing the past. Focusing on the case of Tell Sebastia, Al-Houdalieh analyses the weaponisation of archaeology within the Israel-Palestine conflict. Through the application of a historical and ethnographic approach that considers both the site's stratified history and the voices of the resident Palestinian community, the article shows how Israeli state authorities and settler organisations have actively reshaped the archaeological narrative over time to privilege Jewish biblical heritage. Particularly urgent in the current political context, this article demonstrates how the site and the practices produced around it function as technologies of power within a broader framework of settler colonialism and military occupation.

While these three articles illustrate how moral categories are fabricated through material and institutional practices, other contributions emphasise the performative and affective dimensions of victimhood. Darija Davidović's examination of the commemoration of the Battle of Košare in

Serbia illustrates how victimhood is woven into nationalist performance. Analysing the twentieth anniversary of the battle as a theatrical event combining theatre, music, and film, Davidović shows how grief and heroism are fused into a single emotional register. Victimhood here does not stand in opposition to military pride; rather, it becomes its moral foundation.

This emotional politics of victimhood finds a different, yet related, articulation in Nicolaas P. Barr and Jazmine Contreras's analysis of Holocaust commemoration in the Netherlands. Introducing the concept of "proprietary victimhood", the authors demonstrate how right-wing actors have appropriated the institutional recognition of Jewish suffering to legitimise racist and Islamophobic agendas. In this configuration, non-Jewish white Dutch citizens position themselves as guardians of Jewish safety, claiming moral authority over Holocaust memory while redirecting fears of antisemitism toward Muslim communities.

As noted above, the interventions in this issue share a sustained commitment to complicating the binarism between victimhood and perpetration. A further illustrative case can be found in Susie Protschky and Melle van Maanen's analysis of Dutch politics in the aftermath of the war in Indonesia, which advances a pointed critique of binary moral frameworks within practices of remembrance. Taking as their point of departure Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte's 2022 apology for colonial violence, the authors examine how veterans' associations and diaspora organisations drew on narratives of trauma to resist implication in what was increasingly framed as an unjust war. What the article shows in concrete and empirical terms is that assertions of victimhood do not necessarily preclude responsibility; on the contrary, they may coexist with it, and in some cases actively work to conceal it.

In addition to its transdisciplinary scope and geographical diversity, this issue also has the merit of engaging with a broad range of empirical settings, including sites of memory and museums. Daria Khlevniuk's ethnographic study of Russian museums dedicated to Soviet terror provides a particularly strong example of the relevance of the reflections developed in this issue not only to memory politics and discourses, but also to how museums convey and attempt to normalise the past. Khlevniuk's article shows how figures responsible for repression are sometimes reinterpreted as benevolent or heroic, particularly in regional contexts shaped by authoritarian politics and local agendas. This reinterpretation challenges the assumption of a clear separation between innocent victims and evil perpetrators in the cosmopolitan memory paradigm, instead advocating a more nuanced and demanding agonistic approach (Cento Bull and Hansen 2015).

Marjolein Uittenbogaard extends this discussion of museum narratives through her analysis of the exhibition *The Failure of the International Community*, held at the Srebrenica Memorial Centre. Through her close reading of curatorial practices, the author shows how dominant narrative templates, polyphonically composed through space, images, and written texts, shape representations of Bosniak victimhood while simultaneously producing a form of distancing from discourses of perpetration. Uittenbogaard further demonstrates how the focus on international (and particularly Dutch) actors enables the emergence of a narrative of moral progress and redemption centred on Dutch atonement. This dynamic is particularly revealing of the power asymmetries inherent in transnational memory work and of the consequent marginalisation of local survivor agency.

Bart Zwegers' engagement with the case of Mussert's Wall likewise illustrates how spaces of memory can acquire so much symbolic power that they trigger polarising debates about a traumatic past and the acknowledgement of responsibility, highlighting how perpetrator heritage remains deeply unsettling even in democratic contexts. The controversy surrounding Mussert's Wall exposes a range of anxieties within Dutch society related to the legitimisation, normalisation, and extremist appropriation of the site. Beyond addressing an understudied form of difficult heritage, this Dutch case reveals that the challenge of preserving or repurposing perpetrator heritage highlights broader tensions over how societies negotiate morally compromised pasts in any cultural context.

Spaces of memory are polyphonic objects, and, as these contributions make evident, spatiality is not the only language through which their meaning is articulated. Images also play a central role in shaping what a given site seeks to convey. In this sense, visuality emerges as a crucial medium through which memory acquires emotional resonance. The importance of visuality is clearly illustrated in Geonyoung Kim's article, which takes the Jeju 4.3 Peace Park as its main case study. The author argues that museums function less as sites of narrative closure than as contested arenas in which meaning is negotiated, and in this sense play an active role in shaping moral positions in representations of the past. Through a close reading of exhibition images, artworks, and textual materials, the article explores how experiences of violence are structured within an officially curated memorial space, while also remaining attentive to forms of bottom-up narration that emerge inside a state-led institution. Taken together, this analysis shows how exhibitions can hold open multiple, and sometimes competing, interpretations of state violence and victimhood.

Finally, Dawid Grabowski also engages with the topic of visuality, drawing on Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory (Hirsch 2008) in relation to digital networks and media. Grabowski examines how images and testimonies from the 2023 war in Gaza have circulated on Instagram, and how these forms of communication affect the intergenerational transmission of memory, both spatially and temporally. Rather than unfolding through stable institutions, memory here is shaped by algorithms, by the speed of online exchange, and by practices of witnessing that take place in real time. In this environment, the categories of victimhood and perpetration are not only continuously reconfigured but also frequently coexist amid competing and contradictory narratives. Grabowski's article traces loose networks of digital affiliation and identification in which personal experience and collective trauma remain closely entangled.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue reflect the concern articulated at the beginning of this editorial: victimhood and perpetration are not static categories and can only be understood by investigating the processes through which they are produced and contested. This issue, we believe, has several merits. Most notably, the contributions collectively demonstrate how heritage and memory studies, through their interdisciplinary tools, provide a crucial framework for examining violent processes, their practices, and their subjects, particularly at a time when memory has once again become a terrain of political and symbolic confrontation. This special issue does not aim to provide definitive answers. Such an ambition would be both unrealistic and misplaced, particularly given the rapidly changing global dynamics in which we are writing. Rather, the issue argues for the need for sustained critical reflection on the ways the past is mobilised in the present, and on how engagements with memory might open space for less violent and more just futures.

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