

Tracing American Memories around the World

Andrea Zittlau

Abstract:

Transnational American Memories is an ambitious book which unites concepts of Memory Studies with those of transnational American Studies. The contributions employ different approaches (e.g. historical, cultural, and literary criticism) to both fields of research and illustrate how interdisciplinary perspectives can broaden the understanding of individual and collective memory. The articles address particular sites and events in and related to the US as well as different media (e.g. text, film) and the processes in which they create and shape memory. The innovative contributions succeed in bringing Memory Studies beyond the focus on local or national sites without losing the idea of American national identity formation. Thus the book becomes particularly useful for scholars of American Studies, and those who focus on Memory Studies will find many turns and conclusions of the texts surprising and enriching.

How to cite:

Zittlau, Andreas: „Tracing American Memories around the World [Review on: Hebel, Udo (ed.): Transnational American Memories. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2009.]“. In: KULT_online 27 (2011).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2011.597>

© by the authors and by KULT_online

Tracing American Memories around the World

Andrea Zittlau

Hebel, Udo (ed.): *Transnational American Memories*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2009 (Media and Cultural Memory / Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung 11). 460 pp., hardcover, € 99.95. ISBN: 978-3-11-022420-7

This volume combines two widely discussed fields of research—the one of collective/cultural memory and the one of transnational (American) studies. Based on Maurice Halbwachs' pioneering work, Memory Studies has developed into a "multifaceted and multivocal paradigm" (p. 1) with "seemingly endless extensions of the scope of scholarly explorations of commemorative practices and platforms of memory" (p. 1). Despite being at the crossroads of many academic disciplines and scholarly traditions, Memory Studies have proven to be particularly fruitful to the field of (New) American Studies. Since the 1980s the discipline has redefined itself within its interdisciplinary connections and its transnational dimensions. Udo Hebel's *Transnational American Memories* seeks to address "the transnational trajectories, implications, and politics of U.S.-American cultures of memories and sites of commemoration" (p. 2). Its 19 essays and an epilogue address different sites and media of memory that all share a geographical scope beyond the boundaries of North America. As such they enrich both the field of Memory Studies and that of American Studies.

The book is not divided into chapters. Rather, as Udo Hebel explains in his introduction (see p. 3), the contributions have been arranged thematically. The first group of essays looks at (literary) texts as "repositories of and agents for the representation, recovery, and transformation of collective and individual memories over time and space" (p. 3). An innovative and well-written example of this group is Mita Banerjee's contribution, "Roots Trips and Virtual Ethnicity", in which she successfully brings together Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and the image campaign of the Jewish Museum Berlin. Banerjee looks at the way both institutions of memory—the literary text and the museum—virtualize memory and raise awareness of ways in which "the past cannot be contained" (p. 145). Whereas the Jewish Museum Berlin's image campaign plays with the unexpected, Foer's novel not only deals with the issue of heritage tourism but also visualizes the absence of Jewishness from Eastern European life. Banerjee illustrates memory on levels of the private and the public, the communicative and the cultural, of literature and architecture and its transnational dimensions not only in the form of travel (Foer's protagonist), but also in bringing together case studies from different hemispheres.

Other texts discussed in this first group include poems by Rita María Magdaleno (Juan Bruce-Novoa); the writings of John Smith, Cabeza de Vaca, and Jacques Cartier (Astrid M. Fellner); a

novel by Julia Álvarez (Carmen Birkle); immigrant letters (Orm Øverland); James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (Hans Bak); William Peter Blatty's autobiographical writings (Nicole Waller); and the 9/11 narratives of Jonathan Safran Foer and Don DeLillo (Alfred Hornung).

The second unit of essays deals with memories of war. The four contributions look at memorials of World War I, the Second World War, and the Korean War. The essays by Volker Depkat and David William Seitz deal with the transnational commemorative practices of the American soldiers who died in Europe during World War I. Kristin Hass looks at the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul and the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, which were both completed in the 1990s, and elucidates how the war is remembered in both locations as "a singular national triumph" (p. 267). In an essay about the concentration camp site Dachau, Ingrid Gessner introduces a different perspective on Holocaust memory, not the one of the Jewish victim or the American liberator, but rather that of the Japanese American liberator, and links it to the history of Japanese internment camps. She does so in bringing in two literary works—*The Gate of Heaven* (1996) by Lane Nishikawa and Victor Talmadge, and *Light one Candle: A Survivor's Tale from Lithuania to Jerusalem* (1995) by Solly Ganor. And, although the Holocaust is often the focus of Memory Studies and has thus been addressed in countless academic papers, Gessner, like Banerjee, sheds new light on the subject in using a transnational perspective.

The third group of essays addresses the "spatial implications of memory studies" (p. 5) and deals with "specific locations of national commemoration" (p. 5). Here Birgit Däwes looks at three different cinematic transformations of Ground Zero, "the twenty-first century's most contested site of cultural memory so far" (p. 287), and argues for how the site has become "glocal space" (Roland Robertson). Astrid Böger analyses Chicago's World Fairs: the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, the 1933 Century of Progress Expositions, and the 1992 Age of Discovery Fair that did not, in fact, take place. The Taras Shevchenko Monument in Washington, DC is at the centre of Kirk Savage's article. It deals not only with Shevchenko's role in Ukrainian and Soviet formations of national identity but also with the monument's role in international politics and the resulting problems of transnational memorization. Juliane Schwarz-Bierschenk looks at "Topographies of Transnational Memory in the Upper Rio Grande Valley" and offers a particularly interesting analysis of the exhibition at the El Camino Real International Heritage Center. The last essay in this group has been written by Birgit Bauridl and deals with African American Philadelphia Murals as sites of memory as well as counter-narratives.

The final two articles do not form a group, but rather stand for themselves. Michael Kammen reflects on memories of artists who immigrated to the United States—as did, for example, Man Ray and Saul Steinberg—and David W. Saxe discusses the transnational memory of the Magna Carta as crucial in the formation of the United States constitution. In his "Commentary Epilogue" Edward T. Linenthal succeeds in bringing together the many issues raised, methods employed, and discourses of memory and transnationalism. He does so by asking fundamental questions about the essence of memory: "Is there a 'public' that shares a single memory?" (p.

447); can a community be traumatized like an individual? (see p. 447); and how do transnational labours of remembrance challenge boundaries? (see p. 449). Linenthal thus turns the book into a powerful key to the complexity and problems deriving from the variety of memory concepts.