



Sonja Hegasy and Norman Saadi N. (eds.).- Special Issue: Memories of Violence, Social Live and Political Culture in the Maghreb and Mashreq, *Memory Studies* 12 (3) (2019), 354p.

This Special Issue of *Memory Studies*, edited by Sonja Hegasy and Norman Saadi (both from Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient) is the outcome of a memory research project in North Africa and Middle East started in the aftermath of the so-called “Arab Spring.” Thus, the varying contexts of uprisings have permitted to comprehensively articulate the research questions on the issue of memories in this vast region – at length ignored as contexts for memory and trauma studies.

Indeed, many countries from MENA region are undergoing increasing processes of protest and counter-protest, sociopolitical upheaval, resilient authoritarianism and violence, in the midst of which people are actively engaging memory, including violent and traumatic experiences, and testimony as modes of social, cultural and political critical inquiry and activism. This special issue includes a number of case studies depicting how memory of violence and trauma is proactively engaged in the present to maintain and initiate social livelihood and the emerging social ethos of public and political cultures in political contexts sized by a tense tension between a tendency to acknowledge past violence and a reactionary movement to exploit this very acknowledgement for political ends. Thus, the contributions to this volume share an interest in the processes of subjectivation by which memories of pasts are not a solidified psychological, social and political state, but continuous becoming, lines of flight and movement of deterritorialization: wandering “passages into unscripted futures”. The contributions discuss how people strive to transform public sites into milieus of memory, initiating contexts for exchanges between memories of events and what in the process transpire as events of memory.

Sonja Hegasy chose four cases studies of archival activism, in Morocco, Egypt and Lebanon, to examine similarities and interconnections across the MENA region, particularly in the aftermath of the 2011 protest movements when many initiatives have been launched to contest the very foundations of how to approach the past through the archive. The author considers the “archival activism” as a way to liberate archive and hence history from the authoritarian control and manipulation, thereby putting the archive as a social environment of memory-making where very different actors articulate alternate perspectives to substantiate claims to justice and advance human rights causes. The archive is hence experienced as dynamic environment, rather than as a site, where memories are embodied, expressed and actively mobilized by both professionals and ordinary citizens to substantiate opposite historical claims – notably by shedding light on the gray areas of the past and by underlining the neglected parts of it as well as the dissonant voices and readings. In other words, this *ecological conception* of memory points to the more progressive social and political agencies of subverting established political history, by stressing the significance of

alternative and marginal *re-sources* – documents, voices, images –, *dispossessed archives*, as new models of archiving and historization.

In the same vein, On Barak's paper focuses on the conflicted memories of October 1973 War in Egypt, framed as victory and embodied as "the main emblem of history" – becoming a political, national and cultural factor of consolidation and mobilization: "a platform for the liberalization of the Egyptian economy, of nationwide urbanization, of new approaches to politics and truth, and for the cementation of the regime in Egypt for the decades to follow." But this magnified history/memory of the war has also its contenders in various political and academic circles who seek to challenge the politics, the structures and the imaginaries built on. The author reflects on the current articulation of memories of violence and the struggle over "meaningful and agentive engagement with history," in which "archiving" gained increasing prominence, especially during the 2011 uprising, as protestors have contested the legitimacy of the established version of the war and its aftermaths, reanimating thereby historical events and documents as *milieu* of political, cultural and scientific contentions and reconsiderations.

In another war context, Nikro depicts not the written document but the image as a milieu of memory deployment. Considering Wadad Halwani's documentary film, *The Last Picture...While Crossing*, the author examines how the photographs of the disappeared are embodiment and experienced by relatives both as intimate and emotional relationships and as "repertoires" of public activism. The author subtly reflects on the seizing tension between the two lived experiences – the personal embodiment of the disappeared memories and their political opening –, apprehending the photographs as a dynamic memorial space, or as meshwork, where personal memories are transposed into public advocacy. In other words, the photographic embodiment of the memory of violence is experienced as efforts to preserve and memorialize a past becoming present and situate this as a transformative practice of social and political engagement.

The volume includes another essay on photographs as material embodiments of memory of an armed conflict. Michael Baers's essay discusses a collection of photographs of Moroccan soldiers involved in the Sahara conflict and the sociopolitical becoming of this collection: their treatment and mobilization by the Front Polisario. The main argument of the paper focuses on the relationship between the conflict and its photographic medialities – as "new modalities of being-in-common." Thus, like Nikro's argument, the photograph and its circulations is viewed as memorial dynamic space for partisan activism and social exchange.

The concept of "emplacement" of memory is also central to Laura Menin's contribution. The author foregrounds the voices of two former prisoners of Tazmamart – the Moroccan infamous secret prison of the so-called Years of Lead – to reexamine the value of "bearing witness" not only in terms of memory of the past, but also of how in the present victims and survivors engage emplacements of memory in respect to current modalities of public culture and political activism. As eloquently put by the author, the political and judicial limits of the process of reconciliation in

Morocco (absence of accountability, the erasure of Tazmamart as a site of memory, lack of justice, economic marginalization, denial of healthcare and pensions...) “are all open wounds” in the lives of the victims, including her interlocutors, “which continue to make Tazmamart a site of contestation between competing politics of memory.” In this perspective, the erased Tazmamart is not a lieu of memory but an open *milieu* resilient to any memorial erasure or domestication. Menin shows how the prison destruction and the state’s attempts to impede the ‘emplacement’ of the memory of its survivors has encountered the firm resistance of the families and the communities determined to “emplace” and keep alive this memory.

The notion of “emplacement” resonates with Andermann’s dynamic and fluid conception of “placing,” (Jens Andermann, “Placing Latin American memory: sites and the politics of mourning,” *Memory Studies* 8 (1) (2015): 3-8.) conceived in Latin American contexts as radically emergent activity and proactive agency, accompanying initiations of memory as practices of public intervention and protest, and as thick temporality, articulating the potential unfolding of the present into the future. “Emplacement memory,” as a people’s resilience and capacities to maintain memories of place, also represents the core of Katharina Lange’s paper, which discusses the formation of Lake Assad in Syria that brought about a “submergence” and violent loss of place. She focuses on the memory work of rural populations forcibly displaced as a consequence of this supposedly “national” and “modernizing” project. In this light, the concept of “submerged memory” comes to include a range of forms of spatial and temporal mediations, including discreet and vocal contestations over the historicity and socioeconomic change in this part of Syria.

The overall argument of all these contributions deals the “social life of violent memories” – including the social life of intergenerational memory –, pertinently stressing the emergence of possibilities to engage personal and intimate experiences of violence and trauma and “make them public,” through political activism and cultural productions. The contributors are interested in how people “work on memory” to articulate the past as a pressing concern in and for the present and how this social practice involves constructive adaptations of material and imaginary resources. In this regard, this issue makes at least one major theoretical significant contribution. By apprehending these memorial practices as *milieu*, or social environments of memory-making, the authors focus on social memory as processes of subjectivation and becoming.

In other words, rather than grasping memory as *lieu*, formal remnants of the past, the volume focuses on how memory practices emerge from and constitute “errant rifts and voids brought about by alternative modalities/medialities” (orality, photography, film, vestiges..) of articulating past and present temporalities, stressing thereby the socio-political agencies, processes and sensibilities involved in such milieus of memory. This theoretical perspective stands out from both social and collective memory studies, which place more emphasis on structure and repetitiveness, and from cultural memory analyses, which neglect the transformative power of memory, that is, how memory practices *initiate milieus* as sites of social ex-change and political advocacy.

This conception of memory as social environment is somehow reminiscent to what the anthropologist Paul Farmer refers to as “resocialization of memory,” (Paul Farmer, “The Banality of Agency: Bridging Personal Narrative and Political Economy,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78 (1) (2005): 125-35.) that is, the social and political articulation of singular and collective experiences of violence which are not detached from the society that produced it and of the “political economy of brutality” which stimulated it and continues to do so, always in renewed forms. In this perspective, memory is understood as a radical political and social practice to counter dominant historiographies, while elaborating alternative discursive, material, imaginary and symbolic resources to situate past experiences as urgent concerns in and for the present and the future.

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