
The Holocaust has generated more academic literature, memorials, museums, college courses, research centers, and controversy than any other event in history. Two questions emerge: 1) when did this deluge start, and 2) why do we need another anthology to disentangle the remembrance of the Holocaust—as the editors of the volume under review propose? Allow me to start by answering the first question.

In the few cases that the Holocaust was portrayed in the immediate post-war years, it occurred with a notable universalism since it was triggered by the play and film that followed the publication of The Diary of Anne Frank (1952). After Adolf Eichmann’s capture in 1960 and his trial in Israel in 1961, the Holocaust was presented to the American public more thoroughly than ever before. Hannah Arendt’s coverage of the trial for the New Yorker opened up the wounds of many for whom her collective characterization of Eichmann as driven by the “banality of evil” was simply too much to bear. Her rendering of the Holocaust as organized by bureaucrats and therefore explicable seemed outrageous and impossible. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973) many Americans came to view Israel’s situation in a Holocaust framework, with American Jews focusing on the embattled Israel, which the Arabs notoriously wanted to drive into the sea.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the desire for a revisionist German historiography set forth by neo-conservative historians like Andreas Hillgruber and Ernst Nolte ignited the German Historikerstreit (Historians’ Debate) in the 1980s. At the same time, the Holocaust had entered the mass-media circuit with the television series Holocaust (USA 1978; Germany, January 1979) and again with the documentary film Shoah (1986). Ten years later, Daniel Goldhagen’s best-selling book Hitler’s Willing Executioners (1996) was passionately discussed on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, an assessment of why “the Holocaust has come to loom so large in our culture” (1) was eloquently provided by Peter Novick in The Holocaust in American Life (1999). By asking “why now? […] why here?” (2), Novick chronicled contemporary Holocaust representations, such as the opening of the United States Holocaust Museum on the Mall in Washington D.C. He argued that “[e]very generation frames the Holocaust, represents the Holocaust, in ways that suit its mood” (120). Tim Cole,¹ Hilene Flanzbaum,² Edward Linenthal,³ James E. Young,⁴ Jeffrey Alan Shandler and Beth S. Wegner,⁵ all provided the empirical framework for such an assessment.

It is here that the contributions in the collection of essays by Marius Henderson and Julia Lange pick up the conversation. The articles originated at the international conference “Entangled Memories: Remembering the Holocaust in a Global Age” (9–11 October 2014, Hamburg) which also lends its title to the present volume. In the 2010s, it is by no means the (academic) remembrance of the Holocaust that is at stake,⁶ but the fact that Holocaust commemoration has undergone a “cosmopolitization” (Levy and Sznaider)⁷ and has indeed become a supranational phenomenon which needs a critical scholarly re-assessment. So to answer my second question: yes, we do need a volume like Entangled Memories to understand the remembrance of the Holocaust in our present global age, to trace “transnational […] memories of the Holocaust in North America, Western and Eastern Europe, and Israel” and beyond (Henderson and Lange 5).
Junior and senior scholars from the United States, Canada, Israel, Great Britain, Sweden, Austria, and Germany convened in Hamburg to talk about American, French, British, and Postcolonial Holocaust literatures. They represented the fields of American Studies, English and Judaic Studies, Modern Polish Studies, Women’s and Gender Studies, Political Science, Art and Architecture History, Musical Studies, Digital Culture and Performance, Film and Media Studies, and were joined by a playwright and theater historian, two curators, and a vocal artist. The heterogeneity of the nations and scholarly subjects involved already exemplifies the advantage and problems of such an approach. While the range of perspectives promises a comprehensive and multivocal treatment of the subject, the danger lies in an entirely unconnected juxtaposition of different voices. The editors counter this tendency towards disintegration by stipulating two themes that inform each essay’s argument. The first theme deals with the emergence of distinct “national commemorative cultures and their historical variability”; the second asks about the emergence of transnational patterns, “the interplay between national, local, and global perspectives in the medial construction of the historical event” (Henderson and Lange 5). However, despite the editors’ sincere efforts, not every essay succeeds in tackling one or both of these aspects adequately.

This is definitely not the case with the volume’s opening essay by the renowned Holocaust memory scholar James E. Young, who artfully traces and connects national and transnational aspects already in the title of his essay, “The Memorial’s Vernacular Arc between Berlin’s Denkmal and New York City’s 9/11 Memorial.” The essay, which is an adaptation of the introductory chapter of Young’s The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between (2016) is also a personal narrative of his involvement in the selection process for the World Trade Center Site Memorial as well as in memorial processes in Boston, Berlin, and Buenos Aires. At the end of his essay, Young mentions the unbuilt National 9/11 Memorial proposals, which he hopes will be on display one day. The interested reader of this review might be referred to Lester Levine’s 9/11 Memorial Visions: Innovative Concepts from the 2003 World Trade Center Site Memorial Competition (2016).

By not only transcribing but also narratively enhancing the interview Laura Katzman, Gabriella Paulix, and Sonja Longelius conducted with Gunter Demnig, these three authors present new insights into the history of the Stolpersteine project. Demnig, whose earlier artworks were more temporary—as one can see in his time-based art and media creations of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—understands Stolpersteine as permanent traces, “An Art Project for Europe” (61). Katzman, Paulix, and Longelius rightfully refer to them as a “counter-memorial” that differs from more officially sponsored counter-memorials because of their incomplete and decentralized nature and reliance on private volunteers and sponsors.

In his essay, Andrew S. Gross shows how W.D. Snodgrass’s sequence of poems The Fuehrer Bunker is an example of confessional lyricism and a poetics of memory, which forces readers to engage in memory-work and face the horrors of the past. Neither Snodgrass’s The Fuehrer Bunker nor the actual reconstructed bunker is “a memory of the Holocaust” (Gross 94), but the lyrical creation of discomfort serves “as aid to remembering historical events that lie beyond the sensorium of direct expression,” as Gross notably demonstrates (71).

Three essays deal with contemporary fictional re-imaginations of the Holocaust from Great Britain, Ireland, France, and Poland. Sue Vice scrutinizes Sebastian Faulk’s A Possible Life (2012), Mary Chamberlain’s The Dressmaker of
Dachau (2015), Holly Müller’s My Own Dear Brother (2016), and John Boyne’s The Boy at the Top of the Mountain (2015). While these novels, Vice convincingly argues, do not directly address the Holocaust, they are able to focus on the Nazis’ T4 euthanasia program (Müller, Chamberlain) and on more abstract ethical and intellectual dimensions of the Holocaust (Boyne, Faulk) because of their authors’ relative geographical distance to the places of atrocity. By examining Rachel Seiffert’s The Dark Room (2002) and Philippe Grimbert’s Un secret (2004), Melanie Hauser skillfully exposes how national narratives of Holocaust memory are reflected and contested by the fictional characters’ actions in both novels. Jan Borowicz, in his excellent analysis of Polish Holocaust writings that mark the borders of what can and should be represented in terms of “radical brutalization and sexualization of the Holocaust experience” (212), masterfully shows how postmemory in Magdalena Tulli’s novels Italian High Heels (2012; Włoskie szpilki) and Noise (2014; Szum) neither assumes the position of forgiveness, nor rests on the mechanism of repression but that of denial, “just under the skin, ready to burst at any time” (227).

Borowicz, however, not only deals with fictional representations but—like four other contributions in Entangled Memories—also addresses the pitfalls of performing the Holocaust. While Borowicz turns a keen eye to Bożena Keff’s play Work about the Mother and Homeland (2008; Utwór o matce i ojczyźnie) and Zyta Rudzka’s drama Brief Exchange of Fire (2014; Krótka wymiana ognia), Samantha Mitschke provocatively asks about the laughability of the Holocaust. In pairing two theatrical productions, Roy Kift’s Camp Comedy (1999) and Eugene Lion’s Sammy Follies (2003), she traces the development of, and the differences between, British and American Holocaust cabaret, concluding that both performances battle any hint of Holocaust fatigue and make audiences remember. In his transcribed performative talk, artist and vocalist Tobaron Waxman poignantly addresses issues of historical and contemporary Jewishness. Jana Seehusen reads Mareike Bernien and Kerstin Schrödinger’s experimental short film Rainbow’s Gravity (2014) as—what Seehusen calls—“performing documentary” (481-83) since it uses performative strategies in its treatment of research material and presentation of historical documents. In her keen essay, Tanja Schult deals with a particular form of performance: the display of Auschwitz tattoos by survivors as well as children and grandchildren of survivors. The reason to replicate the former stigma lies precisely in its performative gesture, the reclaiming of a symbol misused by Nazis (271) and its recharging with positive meaning. Schult is both interested in those who survived with the number, when she looks at a documentary like Numbered (2012), as well as in those without a personal connection, e.g., in the People Not Numbers temporary tattoo project. Although the first-person plural voice (“we”) of the essay is somewhat disturbing, it convincingly shows that subsequent generations with commemorative tattoos act as active agents to avoid closure and to counteract oblivion.

A set of different medial transformations is addressed in the articles by Benjamin Meyer, Jonas Engelmann, and Jenna Ann Altomonte. While Meyer and Engelmann both deal with forms of musical commemoration in their respective essays, Altomonte reviews Christian Bolzanski’s mixed-media installations and asks how that which Marianne Hirsch has termed “the generation of postmemory” influences Bolzanski’s creations. Readers fascinated by Altomonte’s essay will be interested to peruse Homay King’s Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality (2015), which Altomonte unfortunately neglects in her analysis. While Meyer argues that commemoration through music is hardly conceivable, he convincingly makes the case for a commemoration with
music. This immediately makes sense to readers, who might be reminded of Irish singer Enya’s single “Only Time,” which was used by several radio and television networks worldwide in their coverage of the 9/11 attacks and became a commemorative hymn in the aftermath. Mayer takes two classical musical scores as case studies and shows how Heinz Werner Henze’s Symphony No. 9 and Chaya Czernowin’s opera Pnima … Ins Innere empowers audiences to commemorate atrocities in their own ways. Engelmann examines Jewish pop- and sub-cultural practices after the Shoah in James Sturm’s and Joann Sfar’s comics and in Jewish Punk by the Ramones, Chris Stein (Blondie), Alan Vega (Suicide), Phranc (Nervous Gender), Thee Silver Mt. Zion Memorial Orchestra, and Richard Hell and the Voidoids. In both instances, comics and punk music, Engelmann detects the celebration of rootlessness, where constraints and exclusionary concepts (purity, blood, soil, roots) become voided.

Three more essays truly explore the transnational dimensions and supranational developments of Holocaust memory. Oliver Plessow’s contribution on Holocaust education serves as a comprehensive and knowledgeable introduction to the following essays by Ljiljana Radonić on the Europeanization of the Holocaust and by Kaya de Wolff who applies the discursive patterns of Holocaust remembrance rhetoric to the debates about the Herero-Nama genocide. Plessow discusses the formative agents in the field of transnational Holocaust education, from the staff of museums and memorial sites, survivors, journalists and politicians, expert teachers and university scholars, to non-governmental and governmental institutions in the United States, Israel, Germany, Austria, Sweden, France, the Netherlands, and Poland. It becomes clear that Holocaust education is mostly a project of the ‘West’ that thrives “in a globalized world where English is the lingua franca” (238). Plessow notes that “the question of how Communist mass crimes, and particularly the atrocities committed under Stalinist rule, compare to Nazi misdeeds” (343) resurfaced since the early 2000s, and Radonić’s essay attests to this trend. She sees a problematic homogenization of victim narratives when Nazi and communist crimes are equated to different degrees in memorial museums in Slovakia, Croatia, Latvia, Estonia, and Hungary. Both Radonić’s and de Wolff’s essays thus elucidate the question Plessow asked, namely “how are the colonial crimes to be reckoned with in comparison with Nazi and Communist crimes?” (344). The answer to this might be an agreement to use a more open global designation, such as “genocide memory.”

Despite minor editorial inadvertencies, such as referring to full-fledged essays merely as papers, switching between designations of Second World War and World War II, and the absence of hyphenation, this is a highly readable volume recommended as course reader, accessible introduction to the field, and excellent collection of case studies, ranging from treatments of literary, cinematic, aesthetic, to musical and digital representations of global Holocaust commemorations.

INGRID GESSNER (Feldkirch, Austria)