

Review: *Peripheral Memories: Public and Private Forms of Experiencing and Narrating the Past*

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Elisabeth Boesen, Fabienne Lentz, Michel Margue, Denis Scuto, and Renée Wagener, eds. *Peripheral Memories: Public and Private Forms of Experiencing and Narrating the Past*. Bielefeld, DE: transcript Verlag, 2012. 288 pages. ISBN 3839421160, 9783839421161.

Elisabeth Boesen, Fabienne Lentz, Michel Margue, Denis Scuto, and Renée Wagener's laudable contribution to memory studies should mark a turning point in how we work through memory by introducing a new conceptual apparatus: that of peripheral memory, which is connected to a particular sense of 'memories on the move' (Boesen, 7). *Peripheral Memories: Public and Private Forms of Experiencing and Narrating the Past*, aims to develop new, exciting conceptual and theoretical adages, in addition to particular, local, and regional objects of inquiry. Altogether, the contributions consider memory as all at once an intertwining of individual and collective processes and actions, all at once a pressing matter of *translation* "between intrapsychic, cognitive processes on the one hand and public, cultural processes on the other" (11).

The contributing authors elucidate local, regional, and peripheral memory accounts through a variety of interview-based studies of subjects whose lifeworlds are founded in memory objects, processes, places, and spaces. Each contribution makes its own set of rich theoretical insights that should give rise to a more general conversation about 'memories on the move' in a post-social world. The collection's most admirable quality is its methodological innovation, which spans new empirical domains such as familial memory, intergenerational communication, autobiography, historical ethnography, and written testimony. Such a methodological variety, Boesen notes, is:

meant to be a complement to the majority of research that was and is dedicated to national memory; however it extends this discourse by taking on a reverse perspective to the one described. Most of the articles included here deal with the particular – with small, local, or regional memories – and with memories that can be labelled 'peripheral' – 'peripheral' in the sense that they were neither the focus of national or transnational (transcultural) memory culture nor a privileged subject of research. (Boesen, 8)

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This emphasis is reflected in the organization of the collection into three streams: “memory and family relations”, “public and private objects of memory”, and the “social constitution of memory collectives.” The topics covered by the contributions point to a shift in theoretical orientation from previous writings on the role of the nation in individual and collective memory towards a more localized and more complex undertaking of ‘memory work’ and a more expansive cultural memory perspective that, as Boesen describes, “is becoming even more pressing since, due to additional translation processes, the emerging memory framings are becoming ever more complex” (11).

The intention of this volume is to hear the deeply intertwining ‘moments’ of memory between individuals in social institutions who work on their own disconnect from dominant or majority memories. Boesen appears particularly disconcerted with the perennial focus within memory studies on *trauma*, a so-called ‘traveling concept’ that was fortified around the Second World War and the Nuremberg Trials. It is a particularly difficult and brave claim to make, especially because, as Boesen writes, trauma is a permanent fixture in the body of the victim of historical violence, and “therefore cannot be ‘worked through’”(13). How is it that memory might appear as something other than a haunting, as a shadow looming over subjectivity and identity, a testimony to the will of the past – and one that is radically different from the official records of history? This is why Boesen suggests it is time to focus less on “memory cultures” as stable objects than on a more mobile shifting coordinate of “memories on the move” (10). Thus, the turn to peripheral memories is intended to produce a collection ‘inspiring for memory research in general, and [that] can provide new impulses with regard to conceptual and methodological questions’(17).

Each of the three sections has these themes and concerns in mind. Anne Muxel’s contribution, a translation of her work *Individu et mémoire familiale*, speaks to memory as an intermediary bonding agent between familial relations and public life (27-31) and, in this manner, resonates greatly with Jan Lohl’s study of how, in both memory and obligatory forgetting, people are selective with their past events in the unfolding of family pasts (44). Memory studies, here, can thus address those events and incidents that families labour towards forgetting, as is illustrated by Daniel Jara’s contribution of post-dictatorship Chile (52-56). As Wagener finds in her study of family memory about the German occupation of Luxembourg, within a family, memory might oversimplify history in order that the family remains intact (76). But the problem may not lie with the definition of memory, so much as with that of family: Boesen’s article on Luxembourg families, for instance, shows how extended and non-human actors can act as a refuge for the survival of memories that may be forced from the family history offered by one’s immediate circle (96).

The second section, on objects of memory, approaches the ordinariness of

memory as shown in public exhibitions. For example, Gastenaver's study of how a rural imagination is transmitted through farmers' memories, gathered in the Collection of Biographical Records at the University of Vienna, uses an 'interdiscourse method', which this author describes as: a "realm where knowledge from specialist discourses is being processed by and for a broad, non-specialist public" (131). The focus then shifts to the cultural practices of memory collecting, regarding those social institutions that exhibit 'ordinary' memories within a 'trauma' framework. Elizabeth Carnegie does this in her study of UK museums (145-146), as does Delter Edwards in her analysis of orphans and 'post-orphan' public memory, which exhibits individuals whose lack of a coherent 'family-base' past constitutes a major part of their public narrative (166). Again, trauma haunts these articles as a concept traveling between internal and external, private and public, official and unofficial histories, as much as it works against those histories.

The final section on the social constitution of memory contains essays that ask us to give thought to the simultaneity of multiple perspectives and multiple memories, and to embrace how these contradict national history. We are thus returned to the original point of the book, that of bringing together contributions that produce a fascinating array of cases, from Joseph Maslen's study of how British communists from the 1940s feel that the 1960s was not so revolutionary a decade as media have constructed it to be (203), to Daniela Koleva's focus on the monadic 'mnemonic communities' (234-235) whose remembrances of national history conflict with those of official history. Alena Pfoser (246) and Jeanette Hoffman (262) both explore how youth occupy multi-perspectival positions. And, Hoffman's claim that memory allows us to experience the contradictions of history is one that especially resonates with the future of the field (276).

The central claim of this collection is intriguing, and the editorial admission that much was excluded offers hope that a second book will be forthcoming in due course. This collection of authors is theoretically attuned and methodologically courageous. They follow through on the editorial promise to deliver projects that are on the periphery of memory and memory studies, leaving the reader especially educated about the interplay of official and unofficial histories.