Crossroads of Memory: Contexts, Agents, and Processes in a Global Age

Laila Amine and Caroline Beschea-Fache

Memory as an academic field of inquiry as well as a subject matter of popular culture has soared with increased intensity since the 1990s. Interest in memory, both individual and social or collective, is shared across scholarly disciplines with a staggering variety of approaches, theoretical concerns, and methodologies. The sheer number of descriptions of memory: cultural memory, public memory, historical memory, official memory, popular memory, local memory, social memory, transnational memory, cosmopolitan memory, and multidirectional memory makes any attempt at an overview near impossible. Providing broad distinctions, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs describes three categories of memory: autobiographical memory (personal experience), historical memory (the ‘dead’ past as found in historical records), and collective memory (the active past that informs our identities) (Olick and Robbins 1998: 111). This collection of essays focuses on collective memory, what Halbwachs defines as ‘a social reality, transmitted and sustained through the conscious efforts and institutions of groups’ (Halbwachs and Alexandre 1950: 36).

In the last six years, scholars have engaged with the effects of globalization on the study of collective memory, emphasizing the de-territorialization, de-nationalization of memory cultures. While being attentive to the global circulation and transformation of collective memories, authors in this issue seek to revisit and critique some assumptions about transnational memory. Definitions of transnational memory as ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘multidirectional’ have generally been framed in opposition to the nation as the sole and natural container for collective memories. If national memory is made uniform via forgetting (Renan) and is said to be stable, linear, and fixed to a territory (Nora 1996–1998; Halbwachs and Alexandre 1950), descriptions of transnational memory are, in contrast, mobile, non-linear, shifting, and heterogeneous.

While authors of this special issue acknowledge how globalization has transformed our study of memory to reflect the transnational and global complexities of our worlds, many of these same authors take issue with the strict dichotomy between the national and the global, as well as the dominant views that transnational memories are necessarily forces of progress, that they weaken nationalist memories, and render place less relevant to memory cultures. Transnational memory, they argue, can in fact lead to the acceleration of nationalist memory and ideology. The French nation state, for example, reacts to its decreasing control over the representation of its past by creating
an increasing number of national museums and monuments celebrating its
history just when a domestic and transnational revisionist culture that interro-
gates official colonial history is gaining momentum. Though nation states are
no longer ‘the natural container of memory debates’ and memory debates are
connected across borders (Assman and Conrad 2010: 6), the authors question
the idea of a transnational memory transmission, by emphasizing how family
history is partly erased in migration. While most studies of transnational
memory focus on one direction, from the local to the global (Assman and
Conrad 2010: 6), authors in this issue of Culture, Theory and Critique inverse
this trend, examining the gap between global and local memories, as well as
the theoretical discrepancies between global theories of memory and local
practices. Against tendencies to think of memory as floating and unattributa-
ble objects, the authors stress that attention to processes of memory trans-
mision should go hand in hand with the contextualization of why some
memories emerge when they do.

Instead of pitting the national against the transnational camp, this issue
invites readers to consider the crossroads of memory and examine the encoun-
ters between different kinds of memory: hegemonic and minoritized, ethnic
and national, local and global, authentic and performed, and private and
public. Analyzing the encounters, juxtaposition, and collision of memories
means recovering specific contexts and meeting sites (material or imagined)
too often obscured in the recent theorization of memory.

Our intention, however, is not to re-anchor memory to a stable place, but
rather to better understand the processes, circulation, and mediation in
memory cultures and their relationship to questions of identity. The essays
thus consider objects of memory transmission, often generic, created in dom-
estic, cultural, and institutional spheres, from the family album, recipes, the
journal, the culinary memoir, to governmental archives and truth and reconcili-
ation commission reports. What interests us in these vehicles of memory is
their physical, imagined, and performative circulation across nation, the
investment of memory entrepreneurs, and the domestication of global dis-
courses that seek to bridge the ‘then’ and ‘now’, the ‘there’ and ‘here’, the
‘they’ and ‘us’, in ways that we believe should make us question some
assumptions about the global turn in memory studies.

The scholarship on transnational memory brought forth the need to
examine how our global world with its accelerated circulations of cultures,
technologies, ideas, and people has changed memory cultures. Describing
how seminal works of memory studies, such as Pierre Nora’s Realms of
Memory and Maurice Halbwachs’ On Collective Memory had straitjacketed con-
ceptualizations of memory to a fixed place and history, Julia Creet rightfully
asks, ‘[s]hould we not given our mobility, begin to ask different questions of
memory, ones that do not attend only to the content of memory, but to the
travels that have invoked it?’ (Creet and Kitzmann 2011: 6). The circulation
of transnational memory follows both expected and unpredictable paths. As
cultures, goods, and people travel across borders, memories access more visi-
bility, more interaction, and are transformed in the process. Consequently,
memory can no longer be conceived as a stable phenomenon trapped in a
non-changing past and on a static map of the world, but rather it is to be
understood as a transformative medium through which the world can be
revisited. Examinations of migration and how mass media representations and technologies circulate, and shrink time and space led scholars of memory to address how such movements and technologies have transformed both national and local collective memory (Creet and Kitzmann 2011; Levy and Sznaider 2006).

Creet’s question above emblematizes the global turn in memory studies as it interrogates the twinship of collective memory with nationalism on the one hand and with place on the other. As such, Creet’s collected essays, Memory and Migration opens with an indictment of Pierre Nora’s work Realms of Memory. According to Nora, ‘A lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community’ (Nora 1996: XVII). Creet critiques Nora’s view that memories attach themselves to sites, and that the absence of these sites make memory artificial because it is reconstituted and mediated. For Nora, realms of memory take their significance through their ties to a space. But, as Creet asks, how is memory constructed across national borders and how does migration shape its emergence, manifestation, and circulation? For some of the essays in this issue, remembering ‘takes place’ somewhere, such as the meetings of the truth commission in Canada, and the past is accessed in specific sites, such as the government archives on land grant adjudication process in New Mexico. In other essays, remembering is not bound to a site. Slave food recipes in African diaspora culinary memoirs bridge time and space, and serve to honor ancestors and their struggle. The family album of migrant communities links the ‘there’ and ‘here’ erasing distance and transporting viewers back in time. Unlike the traditional archive where memories are purportedly stored, the sites of memory examined in these and other essays shape how we remember, preserve, transmit, and interpret memories. The past is re-imagined through performances, practices, rites, and photographic techniques. Such focus shifts the attention from what we remember to how we remember and the implications of such a shift for memory cultures.

It is no coincidence that Creet’s collection utilizes migration as a cornerstone in developing new ways to conceptualize collective memory since the acceleration of transnational migratory flows was the prominent factor in displacing and foregrounding memory in the global landscape. The shifting study of memory culture from national to transnational frameworks brings forth an infinite number of avenues to approach memory. Steven Vertovec’s useful attempt to define transnationalism can help us locate multiple ways in which globalization interact with memory. Transnationalism, he claims, can be articulated around six main categories, which can overlap: a social morphology, a type of consciousness, a mode of cultural reproduction, an avenue of capital, a site of political engagement, and a (re)construction of ‘place’ or locality (2009: 4). Transnationalism, while paying attention to border-crossing movements, has also become an important lens through which the displacement and relocation of minorities and victimized communities can be studied.

For sociologists Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, the politics of recognition for victims of trauma or state violence is accelerated as the global sphere becomes the privileged site of memory cultures. In their examinations of memory and the Holocaust, Levy and Sznaider coin the phrase
‘cosmopolitan memory’ to describe a collective memory that is not restricted
to the nation or an ethnicity, but which can transcend and transform these.
The universalization of memories of the Holocaust has enabled other groups
to frame their own struggle against injustice, drawing on an
event that has become dislocated from time and space (2006: 5). Constituted
by new narratives that critique the heroic national pasts and that recognize
the history and memory of the nation’s ‘other’, cosmopolitan memory
marks the emergence of second modernity. It is the result of self-criticism
and a moral obligation to include the history of victims. For the authors, trans-
national memory has ‘the potential to become the cultural foundation for

The terms globalization and transnationalism respectively describe the in-
depth study of supranational networks and processes of border crossing for
people, goods, material culture, and media. They are also at times used inter-
changeably, as in this introduction, to point out the cultural practices and
images that are not tied to a specific space, but circulate across borders. ‘Glo-
localization’, as the local digestion of the global has been dubbed, describes both
how global culture is transformed in local spaces and how the supranational
context alters how people perceive their local space, solidarities, or identities.
The authors draw a picture of globalization as the promoter of a moral consen-
sus about human rights and as a medium for the dissemination of values and
norms to a transnational audience, superseding or at least competing with
those of the nation.

In this logic, the transnational focus is assumed to play the role of watch-
dog, screening national memory for its omissions and suppressions of mem-
ories of the ‘Other.’ Transnational memory seems to sit on higher moral
ground, pointing fingers at allegedly provincial nations, which are then
shamed into joining the ranks of the other ‘moral’ nations who recognize
their state’s past of violence and injustice. But the narrative of memory in a
global age is not simply one of progress, as the scholarship on the global
North and South divide, human rights, labor rights, race critical studies evi-
dences. The global does not transcend the power dynamics within nations
and is constituted by inequalities between North and South reminiscent of
colonialism with their shared lopsided access to political representation,
including representations of the past.

Michael Rothberg also stresses the progressive potential of transnational
memory with his concept of multidirectional memory, which seeks to chal-
lenge competition as the dominant framework for the conceptualization of col-
lective memory. Against the view that collective remembrance is necessarily
conflicting, at times driven by ethnic competition for national visibility, Roth-
berg seeks to move the reflection on collective memory towards visions of soli-
darity across race, nation, and ethnicity. Instead of rivalry, he invites us to
consider memory as multidirectional: ‘as subject to ongoing negotiation,
cross-referencing, and borrowing’ (2009: 3). As such, Rothberg uncovers the
intercultural dynamic in the construction of cultural memories, unveiling
the process of group identity formation through individual and group dialog-
gue with various traumatic pasts.

While Rothberg’s multidirectional memory refreshingly cuts across con-
ventional perimeters of race, nation, and ethnicity, it de-emphasizes state
censorship and silences the memories of ‘others’, which feed the nature of memory competition. Some of this issue’s essays address the juxtaposition of memories disseminated by the state and by raced subjects (in North America and Europe), as well as demonstrate the potency of conflict and power dynamics in the emergence and representation of collective memories. In Memory in a Global Age, Aleida Assman and Sebastian Conrad account for the continued relevance of competition or conflict, stating that globalization should not only be considered in its liberating and liberalizing nature, but also as subversive and counter-power (2010: 3). To understand the potential of memory as a subversive force means, for historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, considering both memory and silencing as active processes. Absences, Trouillot notes, ‘embodied in sources . . . or archives (facts collected, thematized, and processed as documents and monuments) are neither neutral or natural’ (Trouillot 1995: 48). By filling or pointing out these silences, actors of memory can constitute a counter-power.

Indeed, these agents or carriers of memory as well as the processes that underlie memory manifestations have become the principal focus of memory studies in a global age. ‘Who remembers?’ and ‘how?’ stress the importance of actors, media, and processes of memory (Ricoeur 2000: 733–734). Contextualizing memory, viz. identifying its carriers, vehicles, and how it operates, is all the more critical in understanding the phenomenon and its implications, since it is a shifting phenomenon and since transnational flows are so unpredictable. As memory travels faster, through countless channels, it is paramount to pay attention to its trajectories and be aware of its interconnectedness with diverse carriers (Vertovec 2009). Essays in this issue highlight both the agents of memory and their labor using Marianne Hirsch’s concept of ‘postmemory’, which describes the work of the second generation of Holocaust victims and survivors, and Elizabeth Jelin’s concept of ‘memory entrepreneurs’, which emphasizes the work of memory actors who organize efforts and create initiatives so as to intervene in the public sphere and gain recognition for their collective past (Jelin, Rein and Godoy-Anativia 2003: 139). Whether writers and artists are direct descendants of these histories of genocide and trauma or not, Hirsch and Jelin unearth the relationship between the memory-work of individuals and groups and the public visibility of memories. A sole focus on global medium and circulation would obscure the labors of grassroots activists and the organizing that sustain the visibility of collective memory. This memory work, nourished often by a sense of duty, is not unproblematic as Paul Ricoeur and Michael Rothberg reveal.

In the context of the struggle for some victimized minority memory to emerge, Rothberg admits that ‘many people assume that the public sphere in which collective memories are articulated is a scarce resource and that the interaction of different collective memories within that sphere take the form of zero-sum struggle for preeminence’ (2009: 3). This position vis-à-vis memory implies that for some memories to surface others have to be silenced or disappear, opening the door to extreme actions such as genocides, which are motivated in part by the desire to eradicate one community from memory. Rothberg’s entire project lies in deconstructing the notion of competition and his generous definition of ‘multidirectional memory’ presents the
phenomenon as a positively constructive and productive process. This brings up crucial questions: have all memories equal access to the public sphere? Is the notion of competition and hierarchy no longer relevant for the emergence of some memories?

Though his premise and conclusions differ from Rothberg, French historian Paul Ricoeur also concurs on the dangers of exclusive and restrictive approaches to memory in their relation to identity. Ricoeur identifies three main difficulties that line the route of memory, due to the tensions between memory and identity: repression, manipulation, and obligation. In the case of identity politics, narratives often distort memory by means of ‘upstrokes and downstrokes’, ‘silences and emphases’ (Ricoeur 2000: 735). Ricoeur also warns against the term ‘duty’ to remember. He argues that the terms ‘duty’ and ‘obligation’ to remember orients memory in contexts in which memory is merely an exhortation. In his view, the duty to remember also turns toward the future, which violates the natural course of anamnesis and ultimately short-circuits the work of time and history. This, he claims, could lead some historical communities into an unbreakable cycle of repentance or victimization. Ricoeur advocates a more organic work of memory that does not dictate, impose, and crystalize any particular mode or act of remembrance, often hidden behind particular political agendas. While the author rightfully points out how memory is transformed through the urge to commemorate events without historical distance and to uphold ideological imperatives, is memory work ever free of ideology and political motivation, even with historical distance?

According to Ricoeur, organic memory is threatened not only by the considerable politicization and commodification of memory, but also by the new temporality of memory and history resulting from the emergence of new technologies. In their most recent works at the turn of the twenty-first century, both Nora and Ricoeur point out the current difficulty for time to take its course. Local and global communities get shorter time spans to take in history and thus lack historical distance vis-à-vis certain events because time has incontestably accelerated. The ever-increasing speed of telecommunications, historical pace and technological progress have created a phenomenon of synchronization, in other words the temporal and spatial coordination of memory. This synchronization brings closer together the present and the past, and distant locations via simultaneous retransmissions, allowing communities to experience acts of remembrance at the same time and beyond spatial boundaries.

Our relationship to the past has also changed because the recent past is greatly accessible thanks to more systematic archival and memory work. Speed and proximity, coupled with the upsurge of images, generate a greater standardization of memory. Synchronization possesses a normative quality that leaves less possibility for outrageous revisionism on the one hand: although the reality of an event is often more complicated that it appears. On the other, the diminished variability may adversely affect memories that do not subscribe to the commonly accepted remembrance of a particular event. One must then assess the extent to which these memories risk relegation to the background in the name of truth and accuracy, and question systemic forgetting. When the technology available to record history as it happens guarantees a more accurate depiction of events, the question of
truth inevitably emerges; it is essentially a matter of whether what we remember is faithful to historical events to a certain extent. Piecing together the history of past wars and of genocides represented a challenge insofar as some elements were scattered, missing, and simply not recorded. More recent tragedies like the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center were recorded in their quasi-totality, leaving little doubt on the accuracy of the information and consequently shaping the memory of this particular event. What Ricoeur calls ‘residual memory’, is now in most cases digital, that is to say precise, accurate, and traceable, unless modified for ulterior political motives. Acting as snapshots of history, accurate photos and videos frame our memory of recent events: they serve as historical images, virtually indisputable. New deontological challenges surface with the commemoration practices and their political implications, hence the need to pay critical attention to the agents and the processes of memory.

The contributions in ‘Crossroads of Memory’ concentrate on revisiting contexts from a multifocal standpoint, examining in particular how the agents of memory, the vehicles of memory transmission and processes of mediation operate. They demonstrate that to understand memory, one must necessarily identify who remembers in order to observe how remembering takes place. Beyond necessary filial transmission, which ensured continuity and posterity, the question of who remembers, in particular in the context of collective memory, is crucial. Which individuals, communities, institutions, national, and international agencies remember reveal much about personal motivations and political stances on otherwise polemical historical events. In turn, commemorations and acts of remembrance in their various forms inform us on modes of historical consciousness, cultural reproduction, cultural politics, and reconstruction of place. Finally, memory should be examined not only as a medium that facilitates or allows the formation of identity, but also as a medium through which ‘a public, political discourse can be fashioned’ (Radsone and Schwartz 2010: 3) Observing memory processes therefore leads to a better understanding of what is concurrently at stake in the private, public, national, and global spheres.

Contributions

The present contributions engage simultaneously with local, national, and global sites of memory cultures, emphasizing the implications and politics of mediation. This collection presents particular instances that help locate and understand further how certain acts of remembering and forgetting reshape national and global politics. Each essay, while situated within the frame of the transnational memory map, stands at a crossroads, examining how the local and the global, the here and there, the now and then, intersect and interact. While engaging with the greater conversation on transnational memory, the present contributions invite a reflection around particular moments, modes of remembrance, and media of transmission. The crossroads of memory examined in this collection of interdisciplinary essays illuminate how memories can simultaneously carry multiple meanings according to one’s positioning. Embodied in the metaphor of the crossroads where flows of populations and cultures meet and leave trails (Appadurai and
Breckenridge 1989; Vertovec 2009), multilocality often highlights how memories shift as they circulate within and across local, national, and ethnic communities. The crossroads, thus, represents a site where multiple or different kinds of memory are constantly juxtaposed, contested, rearticulated, and mediated according to different individual social class, needs, historical contexts, and political ends. As such, the crossroads demonstrates the potency of conflict and power dynamics (evidenced in censorship and silences) in the emergence and representation of collective memories, and the multiplicity of memory practices.

In the proposed essays, the memorial legacies found for example in public memorials (Bond), town-twinning (Rapson), recipes (Halloran), the journal (Beschea-Fache), the photo album (Amine), the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Angel) and testimonies (Roybal) are often heteroglossic and polysemic. That is, they often juxtapose different spheres of commemorations through particular media of transmission. Although all papers converse with each other on a larger frame of reference, the first coupling brings together articles that address more specifically public displays of remembrance through public memorials or international town-twinning. The next trio of articles focuses on artifacts such as cookbooks, photo albums, and journals passed on in the private sphere, and examines the tensions and intersections with official memory. The final two contributions stress national attempts to include private memories into the larger national scope, and interrogate the limitations of memory when it is manipulated by a political agenda.

Warning against the general view that transnational memories – described as ‘multidirectional’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ – are necessarily ethical in their orientation, Lucy Bond studies analogies of the Holocaust in the commemoration of 9/11. Her examination of the public memorial culture of 9/11 reveals a marriage of discourses – transcultural mobilization of the Holocaust and national articulations of American exceptionalism – and teases out the dangers in adopting a template of remembrance without enough scrutiny of how it functions in the present moment. The use of the Holocaust as a frame for understanding the 9/11 attacks obfuscates, rather than highlights, democratizing forms of memory. This cosmopolitan memory reinforces nationalist logics and serves to promote military justifications bolstered by an ideology of good and evil.

Jessica Rapson also suggests a disjuncture between the theorization and practice of cosmopolitanism. In ‘Mobilizing Lidice: Cosmopolitan Memory Between Theory and Practice’, Rapson examines a recent activity which connects the site at Lidice to disparate international locations, and which furthers the collective effort to keep the name of the village alive in popular consciousness through the recent town ‘twinning’ of Lidice with Khojaly, Azerbaijan (February 2011) and proposed twinning of Lidice with Stoke-on-Trent, England (the planning for which has been under way since September 2010). Rapson demonstrates that together, Lidice, Stoke-on-Trent, and Khojaly form a network of mobilized memories. The two Lidice twinning campaigns came about as a result of different motivations, are characterized accordingly, and both emerge throughout this analysis as mobilizations of memory. In examining transcultural mobilizations of Lidice, Rapson assesses
the extent to which theoretical models of memory, in particular the move towards cosmopolitanism exemplified in Levy and Sznaider’s work, resonate with actual, instrumental memory practices taking place in the world around us.

While Bond and Rapson evoke the limits of theories of transnational memory, Vivian Halloran’s essay ‘Recipes as Memory Work: Slave Food’ turns attention to the role of performance in the claiming of an African heritage. Halloran traces a long history of cookbooks and culinary memories published by Afro-Caribbean and African American writers, including The African-American Kitchen: Cooking from Our Heritage (1994) by Angela Shelf Medearis, A Taste of Heritage: The New African-American Cuisine (1998) by Chef Joe Randall and Toni Tipton-Martin and culinary memoirs such as Ntozake Shange’s If I Can Cook/You know God Can (1998) and Austin Clarke’s Pig Tails ‘n Breadfruit (2000). While this gastronomic itinerary retraces the transatlantic route of slavery that ties the African diaspora, the culinary memoir articulates at times diasporic membership and at times nationalist fervor. The culinary memoir is simultaneously a space for honoring the endurance of slaves for transmitting an African heritage, and a means for their descendants to enter and embody the past, assimilating it into their identity by choosing to cook and eat like their ancestors. Utilizing Hirsh’s concept of post-memory and Paul Gilroy’s use of ‘vernacular’, Halloran illuminates the construction of a culinary tradition and how slave food recipes function as memorials or public monuments, as a site of individual and collective stories, as well as a palatable bridge for readers to enter and learn of a traumatic past.

Like the culinary memoir, the journal is an object of memory transmission that shapes questions of identity and legacy. Established nation states, like France, that hold a long history of immigration, sometimes fail to acknowledge the memory of their racial minorities, and their particular experience, in contrast with the hegemonic culture and identity of the majority. While first generations entertained a close relationship with the homeland and culture of origin, second-generation immigrants and other heirs of diasporas quickly adopted new customs and cultural practices (linguistic or otherwise) whether encouraged by their parents or by their country of adoption. Traditional transmission of private and national memory was thus disturbed because the cultural gap between diasporic generations increased. Beschea-Fache’s essay concentrates on The German Mujahid, by Algerian writer Boulem Sansal, a novel located at the crossroads of three national territories and histories. Here, two brothers embark on a memory quest after the murder of their parents and the discovery of their father’s Nazi past. The article demonstrates how diary as a genre is used to reconstruct the brothers’ lapses of memory, and ultimately becomes a tool in the quest for identity. Beschea-Fache examines how Sansal’s treatment of memory transmission questions the politics of memory in the private, national and international spheres and illuminates the limitations of a transnational heritage. Against the commonly-held belief that one’s sense of belonging is dependent on one’s community inclusion in the national history (Ernest Renan, Pierre Nora), Sansal’s protagonists help us rethink how national identity is produced.
Theories of transnational memory have predicted the weakening of nationalist memories. In her essay, ‘Double Exposure: The Family Album and Alternate Memories in Leïla Sebbar’s The Seine Was Red’, Amine shows that in the case of France, migration from the former colonies and the visibility of this population and their descendants led to an acceleration of nationalist commemorations. However, instead of pitting Algerian against French nationalist memories of the Algerian war, Amine suggests that we need to examine not just what we remember but how we remember, for some modes of remembrance work in the service of exclusion. By focusing on photographs and the family album, Amine shows that it is not just states that adopt linear, consensus-driven narratives of community that obliterate inglorious events, but also families as they suppress internal conflict in the representation of their past. In contrast to this model, La Seine promotes another mode of remembrance that is inclusionary, dissonant, and participatory. The photographic technique of double exposure becomes a medium for exploring a new mode of remembrance that would expose erasures, conflicts, and subjectivity in memory-making. Amine’s reading takes issue with Michael Rothberg’s notion of multidirectional memory in his reading of Sebbar’s novel.

While some states refuse to acknowledge their responsibility in past violence against its subjects, others like South Africa, Chile, Argentina, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Guatemala establish truth and reconciliation commissions linking communal and national needs to confront human rights abuses with a global medium and transcultural precedents. Naomi Angel demonstrates the need to examine the global medium of truth commissions in situ and in context, revealing how the local specificity of the Canadian case problematizes the global language of testimony and trauma, expanding and challenging our understandings of truth commissions. Analyzing a meeting of the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in Canada in 2008, Angel focuses on how local indigenous practices circumvented national expectations and model of remembrance. The Winnipeg meeting revealed the intersection of two imperatives articulated through the official language of apology and forgiveness, and the survivors’ language of affect and unhealed family memories. Survivors were able to dodge the commission’s national aims and address multiple audiences, using indigenous languages and traditional ceremonies. Furthermore, Angel highlights how the transnational and transcultural medium of truth commissions can function to strengthen nation building by projecting images of a historical shift between the government of the past which does not recognize its violence vis-à-vis indigenous populations and the government of the present that apologizes for its past actions. In reality, the issue of justice is muddled by the commission rule that confessions about the violence inflicted on indigenous children were to be voluntary and that the perpetrators could remain unnamed.

Initially designed to restore equality among its citizens, and support nation building, like the truth and reconciliation commission, the U.S. land grant adjudication process illuminated the disparate views of the past between indigenous populations and the national government. In examining a government archive in nineteenth-century New Mexico, Karen Roybal questions the strict distinction between history and memory, and argues that
testimonies taken by the Surveyor General Office during the land grant adjudication process determining the Mexicans’ property rights constitute an alternative historical archive within official records. Although the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was intended as a mechanism to end the Mexican American War and extend the right of United States (U.S.) citizenship to Native, African, and Mexican American citizens, Roybal argues the land grant adjudication process in post-war New Mexico formed a new political economy that adversely affected Mexicana’s property rights. The government essentially created a two-tier society privileging Euro-Americans and prejudicial to all others. Roybal analyses testimonies taken by the Surveyor General’s Office from 1854–1895 as an alternative historical archive within the official records. Roybal emphasizes the agency of Mexicanas/os in their property ownership and the complex relationship between marginalized Mexicana/o communities who were being dispossessed of their land and the U.S. government. This perspective helps understand processes of identity formation, and counter traditional historical accounts that elide the importance of matrilineal links to the process of land acquisition in pre-American society.

References