

Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction

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## Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction

**T**he cover image for this volume, “Self Portrait (Ellis Island),” evokes several of the issues and assumptions suggested by the relationship between cultural memory and gender. Produced in 1988 by the U.S. photographer Lorie Novak, the image is a projection: a photograph of a slide of a woman’s face floating in an empty room with peeling plaster walls, an open door, and a rough earthen floor.<sup>1</sup> The woman’s head is bifurcated at the point where floor and wall meet. The face fades into the doorway and the hall behind it; the color of her skin merges into the earthen tones of the floor; the dark curly hair disappears into the ceiling. Pushed back to the two sides of the room, the carpet becomes an asymmetrical décolletage, creating the illusion that the room and her chest are one and that to walk into the room is to have access to the interiority of the person.

The caption tells us that this is a self-portrait: the head is a photograph of the photographer. Although in the image the self of the portrait mysteriously hovers in space, the title firmly situates her in a particular place, Ellis Island, where generations of immigrants and refugees from Europe first entered the United States. “Self Portrait (Ellis Island)”—the two terms are parenthetically related, as though Ellis Island qualifies the notion of “self,” or of “portrait.” The image is at once a portrait of Ellis Island and a self-portrait in Ellis Island.

The relationship among these terms is as ambiguous as the situation of the artist’s body and head in the space she does not quite inhabit: she is both photographer and subject of the image, both behind the lens and in front of it, both in the Ellis Island space and elsewhere. The image is

We are grateful to Susan Brison, Jonathan Crewe, Susan Gubar, Ivy Schweitzer, Leo Spitzer, Marita Sturken, Diana Taylor, and Melissa Zeiger for their incisive readings of this introduction.

<sup>1</sup> Of this technique, Novak has written: “I was creating color photographs of empty rooms in which superimposed ‘projections’ form the visual analogue for psychological and emotional states” (1999, 15).

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that of a phantom, and surely Ellis Island is haunted by the ghosts of those who, like Lorie Novak's ancestors, arrived there to make a new home in the United States. But this ghost is not from the past; it is the artist's own self-portrait in the present. In an uncanny reversal, the artist haunts the point of entry for prior generations as much as she herself is haunted by this key site in U.S. cultural memory.

Novak's image is an act of memory, a public art project produced when Ellis Island was being rebuilt as a museum. It shows memory to be both public and private, both individual (it is a self-portrait) and cultural (the self is shaped by, and thus conveys or represents, its group history and identity). Memory is firmly situated in the present yet looks toward the future; it is the encounter between the "self" of the portrait and the space that resonates with history. The present is thus composed of numerous layered temporalities that come together in Novak's projection. Novak, the artist, becomes a retrospective witness who has opened a door to the past and invited her viewers to join her in its exploration. She has done so in the space that is in itself a doorway to a new home, marked by the traumas and the nostalgias connecting those who passed through there to the places they had left. Novak has projected herself into the space of the past, a space that was empty until she brought memories to it, and she has permitted memories to be inscribed onto her own body, thus assuming their burdens. Allowing her own bodily boundaries to decoalesce, she has offered herself as an agent of memorial transmission. In occupying this position, she is at once the descendant and the ancestor mediating the memory of future generations.

Except for the fact that the face and the body hovering in the space of the room are clearly female, the image does not explicitly raise the question of gender. Yet it certainly invites speculation as to how gender inflects the experiences of immigrants arriving at Ellis Island and the acts of testimony, such as Novak's, that evoke their histories. How, for instance, does the position of finding oneself on the threshold of a new citizenship shape assumptions about gender and sexuality? How do old and new world constructions of gender collide in this space of transition? How does the role of the female witness or agent of transmission differ from that of her male counterpart? How do feminist theories of empathy and intersubjectivity, of space, of solidarity, of the body and bodily memory, indeed of photographic representation itself, inflect our reading of the image? In posing but not foregrounding the question of gender, Novak's photograph points to its elusive yet pervasive presence in the making of cultural memory.

### The field

For the last thirty years, feminist scholarship has been driven by the desire to redefine culture from the perspective of women through the retrieval and inclusion of women's work, stories, and artifacts. This period has also seen an explosion of literary and cultural production by women in numerous languages and cultures that in itself has shaped much of the cultural memory of the late twentieth century. Much of recent feminist scholarship touches directly or indirectly on questions of cultural memory. For instance, feminist writing on sexual abuse and violence against women has been intensely preoccupied with memory, trauma, and transmission in the family and in society.<sup>2</sup> Debates about recovered memory have divided feminists throughout the 1990s. Feminist readings of autobiography and memoir, and feminist practices of oral history, have struggled to define the gendered manifestations of these literary genres and have thus analyzed gender differentiations in acts of personal and cultural memory.<sup>3</sup> Preoccupations with the gendered politics of decolonization, exile, migration, and immigration have given rise to questions about the archive and about the transmission of memory across spatial and generational boundaries.<sup>4</sup> And historical and literary analyses of the institution of slavery and its legacy have provided an idiom for representing the difficulties inherent in the transmission of cultural trauma. Often vilified as divisive, numerous black feminists have nevertheless produced literary, cinematic, and critical texts that focus centrally on the gendered nature of the atrocities of enslavement and the ways in which that experience is bequeathed and recalled in the narratives and on the bodies of subsequent generations.<sup>5</sup>

Thus feminist studies of sexual abuse, autobiographical literature, migration, and slavery have either assumed gender to be relevant to cultural memory or have engaged it explicitly. But scholars working in other areas of cultural and collective memory—especially national memory and counter-memory, nostalgia, memorialization, legal memory and testimony, and the memory and “postmemory” of the Holocaust—have only recently be-

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Spillers 1987; Herman 1992; Culbertson 1995; Painter 1995; Haaken 1998; Sturken 1999; Brison 2002.

<sup>3</sup> A selective, but by no means exhaustive, list might include the following: Benstock 1988; hooks 1989; Lionnet 1989; Nussbaum 1989; Miller 1991; Kuhn 1995; Leydesdorff, Passerini, and Thompson 1996; Smith and Watson 1998; Gilmore 2001.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Ganguly 1992; Pratt 1992; Sharpe 1993; McClintock 1995; Lee 1999; Saldívar-Hull 2000.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., McDowell 1989; Smith 1993, 1998; Dubey 1995; Hartman 1997; Rody 2001.

gun to engage with feminist theoretical analyses of gender, sexuality, race, nation, and class. The unspeakable victimization of the Holocaust, like the dehumanization of slavery, has come to shape much recent thinking about trauma, memory, memorialization, and transmission. Yet, unlike scholars of slavery, many interpreters of the Holocaust have actively resisted making gender differentiations among witnesses and analyzing how representational paradigms might be gendered.<sup>6</sup> And the major recent theoretical work on trauma has yet to grapple fully with the mark of gender.<sup>7</sup> This special issue of *Signs* responds to the “uneven developments” (to borrow Mary Poovey’s [1988] phrase) of feminist studies and memory studies.

To date there have been very few sustained efforts to theorize in such general and comparative terms about memory from the perspective of feminism. To our knowledge, the first attempts occurred at a 1986 conference at the University of Michigan, published as a special issue of the *Michigan Quarterly Review* on “Women and Memory” and edited by Margaret Lourie, Domna Stanton, and Martha Vicinus in 1987. These editors and authors use the concept of “memory” to define the field of women’s studies as a form of “countermemory” and feminist scholarship, literature, and art as means of redressing the official “forgetting” of women’s histories. While some of the *MQR* essays do address gender differences in the act of remembering, most expose the psychological and political structures of forgetting or repression that have disempowered women or enabled them to veil their own painful past lives. Essays on history, literature, and psychoanalysis are supplemented by poems and visual texts that are in themselves acts of memory. The themes in this historic volume on women and memory are so consonant with the burgeoning theoretical work on cultural memory in such fields as Holocaust studies, memorialization, trauma, and testimony of the late 1980s and the

<sup>6</sup> Recent scholarship on gender, national memory, and countermemory includes Lowe 1996; Sturken 1997; Brear 2000; Yuhl 2000; McAllister 2001. Work on gender and legal memory includes Williams 1991, 1995; and Matsuda 1996. On gender, sexuality, and nostalgia, see, e.g., Greene 1991; Probyn 1996; and Rubenstein 2001. There is a substantial and contested literature on women’s experiences in the Holocaust that distinguishes it from the experiences of men. See, e.g., Ringelheim 1984, 1990; Goldenberg 1990; Rittner and Roth 1993; Ofer and Weitzman 1998; and Kremer 1999. For feminist analyses of gender and the memory and memorialization of the Holocaust, see, e.g., Hirsch and Spitzer 1993; Horowitz 2001; and Kahane 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Caruth 1996 and Leys 2000.

1990s that one can only wonder why memory studies and feminist studies developed on parallel but separate tracks.<sup>8</sup>

We believe that this issue of *Signs* on “Gender and Cultural Memory” provides the first occasion since 1987 for an interdisciplinary and international dialogue between feminist theories and theories of cultural memory. The 130 submissions we received from a dozen countries attest to the lively interest in this field and the multiple sites in which it is being formulated. And yet, in each of these sites, both “gender” and “cultural memory” are complex and contested concepts used and understood in a variety of ways. In spite of these important differences, however, the essays in this volume attest to the significant theoretical intersections between feminist theory and theories of social and cultural memory, intersections that can only be clarified when the question of gender is posed explicitly. More important, their interdisciplinarity reflects the richness of memory studies, even as their feminist methodologies engage many of the most recent preoccupations of the field.

#### **Cultural memory and gender**

Our own understanding of the term *cultural memory* is indebted to Paul Connerton’s notion of an “act of transfer” (1989, 39), an act in the present by which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and therefore often contested, norms, conventions, and practices.<sup>9</sup> These transactions emerge out of a complex dynamic between past and present, individual and collective, public and private, recall and forgetting, power and powerlessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, conscious and unconscious fears or desires. Always mediated, cultural memory is the product of fragmentary personal and collective experiences articulated through technologies and media that shape even as they transmit memory. Acts of memory are thus acts of performance, representation, and interpretation. They require agents and specific contexts. They can be conscious and deliberate; at the same time, and this is certainly true in the case of trauma, they can be involuntary, repetitious, obsessive.

In a variety of ways, feminist theory can provide a valuable lens through

<sup>8</sup> A more recent conference and book explicitly connect gender and memory in the much more specific context of the memorialization of World War II and Nazi crimes in the two Germanies as well as abroad. See Eschebach, Wenk, and Jacobeit 2002.

<sup>9</sup> See also Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999.

which cultural memory may be studied. Indeed, gender, along with race and class, marks identities in specific ways and provides a means by which cultural memory is located in a specific context rather than subsumed into monolithic and essentialist categories. Moreover, gender is an inescapable dimension of differential power relations, and cultural memory is always about the distribution of and contested claims to power. What a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender. Finally, the cultural tropes and codes through which a culture represents its past are also marked by gender, race, and class. The authors in this volume use tools that feminist scholarship has developed and apply them to an analysis of the dynamics of gender and power in the work of cultural memory.

### **Technologies of cultural memory**

The contributors to this volume both analyze and use a range of technologies through which cultural memory is articulated, and they reflect on the ways in which performative practices, representational media, and cultural frames of interpretation might be gendered. For Novak in “Self Portrait (Ellis Island),” memory is visual and spatial. Places, she suggests, are marked by the events that occurred in them and the people who passed through them. Photographic images become vehicles of transmission. But her work also makes clear that images need an explanatory narrative to become meaningful: the image depends on its caption and its date, or at the very least it requires some recognizable context.<sup>10</sup> Through its suggestive *mise-en-scène*, her image elicits multiple narratives from its viewers, narratives about the people who arrived at Ellis Island, or about the artist who chose to take her self-portrait there. These narratives are based on historical knowledge; on cultural myths and symbols; on desire, identification, and imagination; on denial and repression. They are fragments of stories, responding to the limited fragmentary clues on which they are built. In presenting the image to us, Novak subjects it to our frames of interpretation, frames that tend to take narrative shapes.

Some of the essays in this volume focus on the visual and cinematic transmission of cultural memory (Bennett, Salomon, Sieg, Stevens). Others find literary narratives to be the most resonant vehicles. Ranging from biography (Moynagh, Sieg, Stevens), autobiography and personal writing (Childers, Bardenstein), to film (Sieg, Stevens), opera (Moynagh), and fic-

<sup>10</sup> For a nonnarrative conception of cultural memory based on performance and other nondiscursive systems of communication, see Taylor 2002.

tion (Gubar, McDermott, Yukins), literary genres enable an analysis of the mediated nature of cultural memory and the ways in which, in Connerton's terms, "to remember . . . is precisely not to recall events as isolated, it is to become capable of forming meaningful narrative sequences" (1989, 26). Besides visual, cinematic, and literary genres, we also encounter other modes of transmitting cultural memory, such as the law (Campbell), oral history (Giles, Hershatter, Kaplan), ritual (Bold, Knowles, and Leach), national myth (Boose, Moynagh), food (Bardenstein), bodily practice (Childers, Bennett, Kaplan, Salomon), and even silence (Gubar, Kaplan, McDermott).

Cumulatively, the essays in this volume would seem to suggest that cultural memory is most forcefully transmitted through the individual voice and body—through the testimony of a witness. This is not to say that the witness tells only of her own memory; as Maurice Halbwachs has made clear, "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (1992, 38). The stories our authors discuss represent individual identity as shaped by membership in one or several groups. But in focusing on the singular story, they can better highlight difference and particularity of context, eschewing the generalizing and homogenizing tendencies of identity politics. Cultural memory, they seem to suggest, can best be understood at the juncture where the individual and the social come together, where the person is called on to illustrate the social formation in its heterogeneity and complexity. The individual story, whether told through oral narrative, fiction, film, testimony, or performance, also serves as a challenge and a countermemory to official hegemonic history. This is particularly poignant in Charlotte Salomon's fragmentary "Postscript" to her visual autobiography *Life? or Theatre?* in which she suggests how one woman's life is shaped by the intersections between familial abuse and depression, on the one hand, and the historical catastrophe of World War II and the Holocaust, on the other hand.

Indeed, at this juncture of private and public, gender may be seen as a determining factor. Women's history as counterhistory that restores forgotten stories to the historical record certainly illustrates this point. But beyond this explicit instance, the technologies of memory, the frames of interpretation, and the acts of transfer they enable are in themselves gendered, inasmuch as they depend on conventional paradigms and received cultural models, on codes that are culturally shared and available. Furthermore, experience, as well as its recollection and transmission, is subject to gendered paradigms. But gender, like memory, must be grounded in context if it is not to remain an abstract binary structure. The individual and group narratives we encounter in this volume allow us to see the factors that shape



gender and thus the intersectionality and articulation of gender, race, class, and sexuality (Smith 1998). Identity, whether individual or cultural, becomes a story that stretches from the past to the present and the future, that connects the individual to the group, and that is structured by gender and related identity markers. Thus, Carol Bardenstein shows in her essay on Middle Eastern food memoirs that the experience of exile reshapes the memory of home to the point even of reconfiguring gender roles in connection with the production and transmission of food knowledge. And for Judy Giles, the oral narratives of two working-class women who came of age in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s redefine dominant understandings of modernity, revaluing nostalgia and continuity rather than fragmentation and rupture. For Mary Childers, moreover, autobiographical reading becomes the mode through which to bear witness to the cumulative trauma of poverty. Yet she finds the personal voice a risky choice for those who wish to avoid the discourse of victimization that characterizes many memoirs of the underprivileged.

The essays in this volume allow us to conclude that the representational media that function as technologies of memory perform important cultural memory work in constituting and consolidating group identities.<sup>11</sup> This is certainly true for the cultural recall of traumatic events. As Mieke Bal claims in her introduction to *Acts of Memory*, “Art—and other cultural artifacts such as photographs and published texts of all kinds—can mediate between the parties to the traumatizing scene and between these and the reader or viewer. The recipients of the account perform an act of memory that is potentially healing, as it calls for political and cultural solidarity in recognizing the traumatized party’s predicament” (Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999, x). Essays on the memorialization of violence against women (Bold, Knowles, and Leach), sexual torture in Chile (Kaplan), child memory of the Holocaust (Gubar), and the visual representations of cultural violence in Northern Ireland and Colombia (Bennett) show that the testimonial exchanges and what Susan Gubar has described as the “empathic identification” between teller and listener are significantly gendered. In her essay on the Serb imaginary, Lynda Boose shows the negative side of a cultural memory of victimization that is invoked not as a form of healing but as an incitement to war. Meanwhile, Maureen Moynagh interrogates the Cana-

<sup>11</sup> For Annette Kuhn “memory work” is “an active practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude toward the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory. [It] undercuts assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered” (Kuhn 2000, 186).

dian national myth by exposing its implication in the gendered history of the Atlantic slave trade.

Strikingly, nostalgic narratives perform a similar and similarly gendered kind of cultural memory work to traumatic ones. Nostalgic narratives are often dismissed as inherently conservative, if not reactionary and escapist, yearnings for an idealized past that disable political action in the present on behalf of social change.<sup>12</sup> As the essays by Gail Hershatter on Chinese rural women's memories of 1950s socialism and Bardenstein on the food memoirs of Middle Eastern exiles suggest, however, nostalgia mediates narratives and rituals that evolve out of gendered historical experiences. The longing for a lost home or group identity can serve as a form of critique rather than idealization. Sinead McDermott rereads Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* as a text that replaces the narrative of the abusive father with the mother's lost story, thus showing how nostalgia can perpetuate a necessary engagement with the past and act of witnessing in the present. Feminist narratives can thus resituate the politics of nostalgia by recuperating devalued, marginalized, or repressed cultural formations.

#### **Agents of cultural memory**

Unlike the traditional archives of history, the archives of cultural memory consist not only of the stories, images, or documents of the past but also of the "acts of transfer" without which we would have no access to them. Cultural memory is, in James Young's words, "received history"; as "the combined study of both what happened and how it is passed down to us" (Young 1997, 41), it includes the addressee or cowitness as well as the witness. An act of telling and listening, performing and watching, it is, most important, an act of retelling or, in the language of performance, of "twice-behaved behavior."<sup>13</sup> And it acknowledges the unavailability of the original experience and the fragmentary and mediated nature of the reconstruction. Indeed, as Deborah McDowell has put it, "what we call the past is merely a function and production of a continuous present and its discourses" (1989, 147).

The essays in this volume closely analyze various agents of cultural memory, as well as the acts of transfer they enable. They show the interactions between transmitter and receiver, primary and secondary witness, teller and listener, subject and historian, scholar and activist, character, writer, and critic to be inflected by gender, race, nation, and generation. In this volume,

<sup>12</sup> See especially Williams 1974; Vroman 1993; and Boym 2001.

<sup>13</sup> See Schechner 1985, esp. chap. 2.

as in much of the work on cultural memory, we often find these transactions to be located in the family between parents and children (Bardenstein, Childers, Gubar, McDermott, Salomon, Yukins). In these family plots, parent/child transmission is interrupted by the violence of war, totalitarianism, exile, or sexual abuse. Nevertheless, the sons and daughters in the chain of familial and thus also of cultural memory attempt to bear witness to the fragmented, interrupted, and mostly traumatic stories they have inherited through verbal, visual, and bodily acts of postmemory (Hirsch 1997, 1999, 2002).

Yet the boundaries of family are often enlarged to include illegitimate children (Yukins) or “witnesses by adoption” (Gubar). The family appears both as an object of nostalgia, a space of potential protection from the public violence of the twentieth century, a home and a haven, and, contrarily, as a dangerous and violent traumatizing space in its own right. It thus offers a site in which not only the particularities of listening, empathy, and identification but also the appropriations and distortions, the power differentials that characterize the transmission of cultural memory and the work of countermemory, can fruitfully be identified.

A number of our essays locate the work of memory outside the family in the public domain of politics (Boose), the law (Campbell), social movements (Bold, Knowles, and Leach), art (Bennett), and the scholarly and artistic work of history and biography (Giles, Hershatter, Kaplan, Moynagh, Stevens, Sieg, Watson). The relationships established here between primary and secondary witnesses, however, both resemble and exceed the frame of familial relationships. Listening and retelling, especially in the case of individual or cultural trauma, require empathy as well as distance—being able to say “it could have been me” but at the same time asserting that “it was not me.” Dori Laub has characterized the act of listening to the trauma of the Holocaust as a shared vulnerability and intersubjectivity, and his description is certainly applicable beyond the specific context of Holocaust testimony: “There are hazards to the listening to trauma. Trauma—and its impact on the hearer—leaves, indeed, no hiding place intact. As one comes to know the survivor, one really comes to know oneself and that is no simple task” (Felman and Laub 1992, 72).<sup>14</sup> In this volume, forms of acknowledged—successful or failed—transference are discussed in the work of historians (Giles, Hershatter, Kaplan), writers and filmmakers (Gubar, Sieg, Stevens), lawyers and prosecutors (Campbell), and visual artists (Bennett).

<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes has also theorized a form of “active listening” in his essay “Listening” (1991). For feminist analyses of listening, see Greenberg 1998 and Chun 1999. On the historian’s transference, see LaCapra 1994.

The authors in this volume gender the transference acts of memorial transmission. In her essay, for example, Jill Bennett argues that women's bodies are more likely than men's to be assigned the cultural work of mourning and pain that is located in the body. Gubar finds an unconventional and transformed masculinity emerging from the empathic identification required by the suffering of the Holocaust. Maurice Stevens reads Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* as a celebration of black nationalist identity that relies on the disavowal of the feminine and the homoerotic. And Temma Kaplan defines a feminine and feminist line of transmission leading from the daughter-activist-witness to the mother cowitness and eventually to the historian, whose scholarly work becomes an instance of resistance and a form of activism in its own right. As such, it inserts itself into the best traditions of feminist activist scholarship.

The essays in this volume map the role of the addressee on a spectrum that runs from empathic identification and acknowledged transference all the way to appropriation, suppression, and failed listening. In her oral history work with rural Chinese women, Hershatler interrogates her own position as well as that of her local cointerviewer. Katrin Sieg explores multiple and imbricated levels of appropriation in her discussion of the relationships of biographer and subject, filmmaker and print source, and German witness and Jewish victim in the retellings of the story of Aimée and Jaguar. The memorializing responsibility burdening the descendants of trauma survivors hovers between identification and appropriation in Elizabeth Yukins's essay on the transmission of the memory of slavery in *Corregidora* and *Paradise*. Julia Watson retrieves, translates, and interprets Charlotte Salomon's brief and allusive autobiographical fragment from the perspective of her present, adding a great deal of explanatory material that supplements and thus profoundly transforms the original. And Kirsten Campbell's account of the silencing of the rape victim in human rights tribunals calls for an ethics of legal listening by which the bodily trauma of rape does not invalidate the credibility of the witness.

### **Feminism and cultural memory**

Feminist art and scholarship have worked to restore to hegemonic cultural memory the stories that have been forgotten or erased from the historical record. But feminism has done more. It has defamiliarized and thus reenvisioned traditional modes of knowing the past. Theorizing cultural memory through the lens of feminism does not merely foreground the dynamics of gender and power. It also applies feminist modes of questioning to the analysis of cultural recall and forgetting. We hope that this volume

will enable readers to consider both the intersections between feminist theories and theories of memory and what we might think of as some distinctly feminist strategies of cultural memory work.

Feminist studies and memory studies both presuppose that the present is defined by a past that is constructed and contested. Both fields assume that we do not study the past merely for its own sake; rather, we do so to meet the needs of the present. Both fields emphasize the situatedness of the individual in his or her social and historical context and are thus suspicious of universal categories of experience. Beyond these broad points of convergence, developments in feminism and work on cultural memory demonstrate that the content, sources, and experiences that are recalled, forgotten, or suppressed are of profound political significance. What we know about the past, and thus our understanding of the present, is shaped by the voices that speak to us out of history; relative degrees of power and powerlessness, privilege and disenfranchisement, determine the spaces where witnesses and testimony may be heard or ignored.

From feminist and other varieties of social history, we have learned that public media and official archives memorialize the experiences of the powerful, those who control hegemonic discursive spaces. To find the testimonies of the disenfranchised, we have turned to alternate archives such as visual images, music, ritual and performance, material and popular culture, oral history, and silence. We have recovered forgotten texts and have learned alternate reading strategies from them. From feminist literary and cultural criticism we have learned to be what Judith Fetterley (1978) has called “resisting readers” who interrogate the ideological assumptions that structure and legitimate coherent linear narratives and who can decode narrative repetition, indirection, signifying, and figuration. We have learned to question claims to narrative reliability, seeking instead to understand alternative ways in which truthfulness might be assessed and used. Perhaps most important, we have learned how to analyze and document the practices of private everyday experience, recognizing that they are as politically revealing in their own way as any event played out in the public arena.

The authors in this volume have identified feminist modes of knowing and listening that facilitate the work of memory and transmission. They have been acutely aware of the pitfalls of using memory in the service of identity politics and in the interest of affirming a shared past of victimization rather than envisioning a different future. They have been sensitive to the differences separating the primary from the secondary witness, and they have defined the active and activist listening, empathic identification, and solidarity required to imagine the experiences of the other, and therefore of the past. Feminist theories of intersubjectivity; nonappropriative

identification, or *allo-identification*, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term (1990, 59–63); and coalition building across difference might fruitfully illuminate the work of cultural memory.<sup>15</sup> A feminist cultural memory would be particularly conscious of granting the pastness and the irretrievability of the past, the irreducibility of the other, and the untranslatability of the story of trauma. It would engage in modes of knowledge that are embodied, material, located, and thus also responsive and responsible to the other. Feminist modes of listening, as some of the essays in this volume show, can become ethical and political acts of solidarity and, perhaps, agency, on behalf of the trauma of the other. Significantly, however, they would also warn of the risks of even such a well-intentioned identificatory practice and the inevitable appropriations that inflect a politics based on empathy. They would remind us that forgetting and suppression must be contested by active remembering and that the practice and analysis of cultural memory can in itself be a form of political activism.

### The volume

The sixteen essays in this volume cannot fully reflect the international and interdisciplinary range of current feminist scholarship on cultural memory. Yet they do come from literature, film, visual studies, history, and legal studies, and they do contextualize their analyses in the United Kingdom, China, Serbia, Canada, the former Yugoslavia, Chile, the United States, Colombia, Germany, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Egypt, and France. Their historical range is, however, limited to the twentieth century, a focus that we did not initially intend but that enables a greater theoretical and methodological coherence than would otherwise have been possible. It also reflects the period of the most significant cultural production by women in a number of different cultures and languages.

The four sections into which the essays have been grouped—"National Countermemories," "Acts of Testimony," "Dis/Identifications," and "The Gender of Nostalgia"—define some of the strategies of feminist cultural memory work that the essays perform. The first group of essays on "National Countermemories" challenges the making of national identities, mythologies, and historical periodization by reinserting forgotten stories or exposing unacknowledged assumptions. The essays in the second section, "Acts of Testimony," look at the gendered implications of what it means to bear witness as an individual and a member of a collective and what it means to be heard. Like those in the previous section, the essays grouped under "Dis/

<sup>15</sup> See Silverman 1996.

Identifications” define the relationships between primary and secondary witnessing, envisioning a feminist politics of listening and warning against the pitfalls of appropriation. The final section, “The Gender of Nostalgia,” recuperates narratives of home in the service of reconstituting identities fractured by exile, loss, and violence. In ending with an unpublished fragment written in the 1940s, we acknowledge the importance of recovering forgotten works by women and of reinserting them into our present. In addition, Charlotte Salomon’s “Postscript” qualifies any sense that the consequences of cultural memory work are inevitably salutary.

Given the number, range, and quality of submissions we received and accepted, we decided early in our editorial process that we would forgo book reviews or a roundtable in order to make space for additional essays. In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, however, we realized that we were in the extraordinary position of being able to document how various overlapping and disparate cultures make sense of, theorize, and gender a moment of cultural trauma. So as the contributors worked through their final revisions and we outlined our introduction, we decided to invite approximately seventy feminist artists, scholars, writers, and activists from different countries to reflect on the gender implications of this moment of cultural memory in the making. We are grateful to the twenty-one writers and artists who on short notice contributed pieces about such diverse topics as the gendering of the World Trade Towers as architectural structures; the construction of Afghan women by liberal Western feminists; the suppressed and exclusionary racial, gendered, and sexual tropes contained in notions of national identity; the emergence of the working-class male hero; and mourning as a response to terrorism.

The temporality of journal publication makes such a venture inherently problematic: at a time of crisis and rapid social and political change, what one thinks at any one moment is quickly superseded by events. As the authors of the roundtable are keenly aware, their statements may well seem out of date by the time this issue appears. If we were hoping to learn something about the workings of cultural memory through the roundtable on September 11, we will at the very least have been able to appreciate the ways in which cultural memory shifts in relation to an ever-changing present moment.

We are grateful to the editors, and the editorial and production staffs of *Signs* and the University of Chicago Press, for their support and good humor throughout our work on this issue. Each of the 130 contributors has taught us something about gender and cultural memory, and we only wish we had more space so as not to have had to make such excruciatingly difficult choices. The sixteen authors and twenty-one roundtable contrib-

utors promptly and patiently revised their essays. We are especially grateful to the numerous anonymous external reviewers who have taken time from their own scholarship to devote detailed attention to our contributors' manuscripts. The hard work and dedication of so many testifies to the ongoing significance and promise of this topic. We hope that this issue will contribute to an ongoing dialogue about gender and cultural memory.

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