

CONFERENCE REPORT

“Thinking Through the Future of Memory”, Inaugural Conference of the Memory Studies Association, 3-5 December 2016, Amsterdam

From 3rd to the 5th of December 2016, almost 200 memory scholars, as well as practitioners – such as memorial staff, artists, human rights activists, transitional justice lawyers – from many different countries came together in Amsterdam. Attendees included both junior and senior scholars from a broad range of disciplines, including experimental and social psychology, sociology, political science, history, art history, media studies, cultural studies, literary studies, anthropology and more. Also present were most of the leading figures in the field of memory studies, including Michael Rothberg, Astrid Erll, Ann Rigney, Daniel Levy, Jan Kubik, Erica Lehrer, William Hirst, Siobhan Kattago, Jeffrey Olick, Wulf Kansteiner, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, among others. Hosted at De Nieuwe Liefde, the conference included three roundtables with well-known scholars, thirteen panels, as well as two professional development events. The conference was organized by Aline Sierp (Maastricht University) and Jenny Wüstenberg (York University, Toronto).

Based on the premise that Memory studies is currently undergoing rapid expansion and is receiving growing recognition in academic and policy circles while the field's expansion has not been matched by concomitant advances in theoretical groundwork, methodological sophistication and professional organization, a central goal of this conference was to focus on these concerns and to bring together people working in different fields to exchange their expertise and ideas. A second aim was to take first steps in setting up an international Memory Studies Association that will gather under its umbrella all the already existing smaller scholarly groups working on memory issues, as well as providing a home to research-oriented practitioners and policy-makers. The panels followed the format of five short presentations, each designed to stimulate discussion with the audience, for which plenty of time was allotted. Panel topics included: Memory and Theory, Memory and the Arts, Memory Going Nowhere?, Memory Concepts, Memory Regions, Memory as a Field, Combining Disciplines, Connecting Scholars and Practitioners, Euro-Centrism in Memory Studies, Methodology in Memory Studies, Memory and the Media, Places of Memory and Places of Amnesia.

Each of the three Roundtables served as forums attended by all participants, during which many key questions were raised repeatedly, helping to stake out the most pressing issues facing the Memory Studies field. The Roundtables were: “Moving Memory” focussing on conceptual issues and featuring Astrid Erll, Michael Rothberg, Daniel Levy and Ann Rigney (moderated by Aline Sierp); “Do Memory Scholars Matter in Memory Politics?” with Jan Kubik, Roma Sendyka, Erica Lehrer and Aline Sierp (moderated by Christina Morina); and “Where is the Memory Field Going?” with Siobhan Kattago, William Hirst, Wulf Kansteiner, and Jeffrey Olick (moderated by Jenny Wüstenberg). (All three roundtables were recorded and can be watched on www.memorystudiesassociation.org). The Roundtable discussions revolved around the following questions: What can we do to develop memory studies as a field? How interdisciplinary can it be? How can memory scholars intervene in current politics, particularly in the light of the current rise of right-wing parties and movements, as well as populist forces, which instrumentalize memory in novel ways? How can memory

scholars and practitioners interact in a more fruitful manner? In addition, much of the debate revolved around the planned foundation of a new Memory Studies Association: How can it best integrate practitioners and scholars from the Global South? How should its membership be structured? What should future conferences feature? What role should the Memory Studies Association play in academia, memory politics, and as a hub for exchange between those inside and outside of academia? (How) can it function as an advocate for its members, particularly those who are junior or from marginalized backgrounds?

In addition to formal events, there were many informal opportunities for networking among conference attendees: at the reception at the start of the conference, during breaks, at the thematic dinner groups that were initiated by the organizers but led by participants, at a post-conference lunch meeting, and the “Black Heritage” walking tour of Amsterdam. Breaking out of the traditional conference format and asking participants to present short provocative think pieces turned out to be very beneficial for stimulating discussions. Overall, the conference was notable for the spirit of cross-disciplinary exchange and the sense of being engaged in a foundational moment for the field of Memory Studies. The conference was accompanied by vibrant activity on Twitter and Facebook, suggesting a considerable effect beyond Amsterdam.

The conference was generously supported by the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity, the Universiteitsfonds Limburg, the Centre for European Research at Maastricht University, Maastricht University’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the Access Europe project at Amsterdam University, the German Academic Exchange Service (supported by the German Foreign Office), the Council for European Studies, the Duitsland Instituut Amsterdam, the Institute for German Studies at Birmingham University, the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, the Canadian Center for German and European Studies at York University in Toronto, and the Frankfurt Memory Studies Platform.

The next conference will take place in Copenhagen from 14-16 December 2017. For further information and for impressions of the 2016 conference please visit: www.memorystudiesassociation.org