VII
Afterword: Whither Memory Studies

Looking back on the history of memory studies, at least two distinct phases are discernible: A first phase in the 1920s and 1930s, with Maurice Halbwachs, Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, Frederic Bartlett, Karl Mannheim and others as protagonists; and a second phase starting roughly in the mid-1980s, with Pierre Nora’s work on _lieux de mémoire_ as its most prominent manifestation. After those two phases, the first characterized by pioneering research that extended across a broad spectrum of academic disciplines, the second equally open to a range of different perspectives on memory, yet more thematically focused on national remembrance and traumatic events – will there be a third phase of memory studies? Or will the field merely consolidate and continue in the mode established since the mid-1980s?

The question is ‘Whither memory studies?’ In a recent article entitled ‘A Looming Crash or a Soft Landing’, Gavriel D. Rosenfeld (2009) articulates one now rather common idea among memory studies’ critics about the future prospects of the field, namely that after more than two decades’ intensive work done on the Holocaust and the unearthing of historical injustices all across the globe – from the Aboriginals’ ‘stolen generation’ to apartheid – we have now arrived at a point of saturation with ‘memory’. Instead of continuing to deal with memory and the past, such critics argue, we should start looking at the present and future. Rosenfeld considers ‘9/11’ as the tipping point and beginning of the demise of memory studies and sums up: ‘In such a world, the study of memory … may increasingly appear to be a luxury that a new era of crisis can ill afford’ (ibid., 147).

I would rather claim the opposite: Today (and whether this is more an era of crisis than any other age is also open to debate) we cannot afford the luxury of _not_ studying memory. If we want to understand ‘9/11’,...
the actions of Islamic terrorists, or the re-actions of the West, we must naturally look at certain mental, discursive, and habitual paradigms that were formed in long historical processes – via cultural memory, as it were. We must try to understand the different ways in which people handle time, and this refers not only to their ‘working through the past’, but also includes their understanding of the present and visions for the future. If we want to get our heads around current wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and on the African continent, the rise of China and India, global warming (ibid.) – and especially around the ways that people make sense of these experiences and from there begin to deal with them (or fail to do so) – then we have to acknowledge that many of the ‘hard facts’ of what we encounter as ‘economy’, ‘power politics’, or ‘environmental issues’ are at least partly the result of ‘soft factors’, of cultural processes grounded in cultural memory.

However, the prerequisite for using memory studies as a tool to either address the pressing questions of our age or to do innovative and challenging work on historical constellations is freeing the field from restrictive definitions. Memory studies is not reducible to ‘commemoration studies’, ‘national remembrance studies’, ‘Holocaust studies’, or ‘trauma studies’ – although it comprises these research areas and draws on the methodologies developed in them. I have argued in this book that memory studies is interested in the entire spectrum of possible interrelations between past, present, and future as they take shape in sociocultural contexts. It is only such a broad definition of the field that will enable its further development and prevent it from repetition and a certain predictability of its findings. With the opening up of memory studies’ horizon we can lay the foundation for future memory research that addresses the social, medial, and mental dynamics at work whenever people deal with, or are influenced by, the past and from there address their present reality and future prospects.

What are, then, promising roads for memory studies to take while it leaves behind the narrowing self-definitions, thematic restrictions, and methodological nationalism that were characteristic of its second phase and enters its third phase? Conceiving of memory as process and movement, rather than as a phenomenon that is fixed in time and space, might challenge and help to rethink some fundamental categories of memory studies – among them Halbwachs’ *cadres sociaux*, the ‘memory site’, and the idea of culture. A transcultural perspective on memory will help to address not only ‘memory in a global age’, but also those mnemonic dynamics which were not apparent under the ‘national paradigm’ predominant in memory studies since the 1980s. It might,