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978-0-521-16587-7 - Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives

Aleida Assmann

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Cultural Memory and Western Civilization

Functions, Media, Archives

Cultures invest great efforts into creating a long-term memory on the basis of oral transmission, media technology, and institutional frameworks. This book provides an introduction to the concept of cultural memory, focusing on the “arts” of its construction, particularly various media such as writing, images, bodily practices, places, and monuments. Examining the period from the European Renaissance to the present, Aleida Assmann reveals the close association between cultural memory and the arts, arguing that the artists who have supplemented, criticized, transformed, and opposed it are its most lucid theorists and acute observers. Her analysis also addresses the interaction of cultural memory with individual memory and the ways in which cultural memory supports or subverts social and political identity constructions. Ultimately, this book offers a comprehensive overview of the history, forms, and functions of cultural memory, which has become a central analytical tool for scholars across disciplines.

Aleida Assmann is a professor of English literature and literary theory in the department of literature, art, and media at the University of Konstanz in Germany. She has also been a guest lecturer at universities, including Rice, Princeton, Yale, and the University of Chicago. She is the author of several German-language books and has received international recognition for her scholarship, including the Max Planck Research Prize for History and Memory in 2009 and an Honorary Doctorate from the Theological Faculty at the University of Oslo in 2008.

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University of Konstanz, Germany



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Preface

To republish a book after twelve years is a great challenge, especially when it is a contribution to a field that has grown rapidly and changed beyond recognition. How individual and collective memory interact, how the past is tied to the present and the future, how it is continuously reconstructed, how it is reduced to what we want to live with, and how it continues to rupture and unsettle our identities – these and other mysteries have stimulated the interest and energy of researchers all over the world and the results now fill whole libraries. The quality of this worldwide cumulative and ongoing interest in the topic of memory goes far beyond the allegiance to a specific academic discourse or theoretical paradigm. It is, rather, an answer to global changes and challenges in our cultural moorings and a way to cope with two phenomena that became ever more pressing after 1989: a growing interest in questions of (collective) identity and transmission on the one hand and the new experience of traumatic or “hot” pasts that will not fade away on the other.

The book starts from the Roman “art of memory” that was designed to enhance the memory of the individual and moves to the arts of memory in general, that, in their plurality and interaction, are responsible for constructing, transforming, observing, and critiquing the cultural memory of a society. The following chapters document how deeply literature and the arts are rooted in and engaged with issues of personal, political, and cultural memory. The basic thesis is that to a large extent, the artists shape our memory because it is they who

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give to the transitory and ephemeral “a local habitation and a name” (Wordsworth), thus creating what “the world will not willingly let die” (Milton). The arts, however, are not only engaged in immortalizing persons, events, experiences, and values through their compelling narratives and images. The arts also provide a continuous discourse on the potentials and problems of cultural memory. This book argues that in literary texts and artistic works we can discover the most lucid theory and criticism of memory, long before modern theorists such as Freud, Warburg, and Benjamin entered the scene.

Over the last decade, my own engagement with the topic has moved in other directions as well. In two books and various essays that have appeared since this book’s German publication, I have explored the social and political dimensions of cultural memory, focusing on constructions of collective identity from social generations to whole nations within their respective historical contexts. Another book is in preparation that will more generally deal with the institutions of cultural memory. In the process of revising and translating the present book, I have refrained from making substantial changes in order to preserve a text that has attained its own historical place in the evolution of the memory discourse. Working together on the manuscript with David Henry Wilson was a continuous joy and challenge; he helped me to translate my often somewhat austere prose fraught with terminology into fluent, accessible, conversational English. Andreas Kraft assisted me in the irksome bibliographical task of finding English translations for many of the quotes and references used. The whole project was made possible through the generous funding of the humanities’ “cluster of excellence” of the University of Konstanz. However, long before these pragmatic problems were tackled and overcome, it was Werner Kelber from Rice University, Texas, who pushed the project of an English translation. He pursued this project over the years with an unfaltering energy, promoting it with the weight of his professional authority and personal commitment. I am also deeply grateful to Beatrice Rehl of Cambridge University Press, Brigitte Coulton of Aptara, and Valerie Neumann who have so competently assisted me in taking the book over its last hurdles on its long way to an English-speaking readership.

Konstanz, August 2011, Aleida Assmann