The Spirit of Mourning

How is the memory of traumatic events, such as genocide and torture, inscribed within human bodies? In this book, Paul Connerton discusses social and cultural memory by looking at the role of mourning in the production of histories and the reticence of silence across many different cultures. In particular he looks at how memory is conveyed in gesture, bodily posture, speech and the senses – and how bodily memory, in turn, becomes manifested in cultural objects such as tattoos, letters, buildings and public spaces. It is argued that memory is more cultural and collective than it is individual. This book will appeal to researchers and students in anthropology, linguistic anthropology, sociology, social psychology and philosophy.

PAUL CONNERTON is a research associate in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, and an honorary fellow in the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies at the University of London. His recent publications include *How Modernity Forgets* (Cambridge, 2009).

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History, Memory and the Body

Paul Connerton

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by
Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107648838

First published 2011

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Connerton, Paul.
The spirit of mourning : history, memory and the body / Paul Connerton.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-1-107-01139-7 (Hardback) – ISBN 978-1-107-64883-8 (Paperback)
1. Bereavement–Psychological aspects. 2. Memory–Social aspects. I. Title.
BF575.G7C648 2011
155.9′37–dc22

2011012437

ISBN 978-1-107-01139-7 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-107-64883-8 Paperback

To my sister

Contents

Preface

This book is about the inscription of memory within human bodies, and about the many ways in which memories are incorporated in institutions, histories and traditions. The inner dialectic of the book is that between what lived bodies undergo, retain and express pre-linguistically and the explicitly verbal language that acts to conceptualise and specify what is happening in bodily experience. The book argues that the semiosis that occurs at the bodily level has its own articulateness, history and purposes.

The arrangement of the book is organised in two broad clusters: a first, Chapters 1–3, is concerned with the relationship between narrative and cultural memory; while a second, Chapters 4–7, treats the relationship between the body and cultural memory.

The first three chapters set the stage. The first, on 'The birth of histories from the spirit of mourning', recounts the dark times of genocide, world war and totalitarian regimes that characterised the last century and whose shadows reach deeply into the present, while it also contains substantial forays into earlier history. A second chapter reminds the reader that the topic of forgetting is itself forgotten in most discussions of memory; I argue here that there are at least seven ways to forget, three of which are constructive and even necessary, while four of them are forced upon human beings against their will or interest. In 'Silences', the third chapter, I acknowledge the widespread resort to reticences in its many practices and across many cultures. This chapter is strategically placed, since by its very topic it brings to a halt the glib and verbose tendencies of late modern life, and incidentally much of its scholarship, in order to dive under the chatter down to a core of what matters most in human experience.

The first chapter in the second half of the book, on spatial orientation, seeks to establish that what is conventionally called 'cultural memory' occurs as much, if not more, by bodily practices and postures as by documents and texts. This memory *takes place* on the body's surface and in its tissues, and in accordance with levels of meaning that reflect human sensory capacities more than cognitive categories. Here I seek to show that culture happens as and in the lived body.

The fifth chapter offers a deconstruction of Gadamerian hermeneutics as failing to take account of the corporeal roots of interpretation and understanding, showing this approach to be a sophisticated but insistent logocentrism of verbal language and text. Here I seek to demonstrate that long before the level of 'tradition' in Gadamer's sense is reached, the body must be operative in the dynamics of oral speech and the actual pronunciation of words: building on the pioneering work of Parry and Havelock, I here stress the importance of the continual re-enactment of certain basic motions of tongue, lips and hands.

In 'Tattoos, masks, skin', I extend my thesis by taking a careful look at tattoos, scarifications and the use of masks as these arise across a multitude of cultural settings, seeking to demonstrate that these skin signs are not merely decorative, but highly expressive of certain cultural interests and values: they literally embody, on the surface of the skin, matters that are normally considered to exist at the level of institutions, governments and family genealogies.

A last chapter on 'Bodily projection' brings my thesis about bodily actions and traces into the realm of the habitats that surround the human subject: buildings and public spaces, as well as natural environments. I argue that these are not, as is too often assumed, simply prior in status but can be considered as projections of bodily states and attributes in three major forms: empathic, mimetic and cosmic. This brings my book full circle, showing the full scope of my thesis and its wide applicability to architectural, social and natural dimensions; each of which must henceforth be construed as expressions and outcomes of a profound bodily memory that precedes them.

The illustration on the front cover of this book exemplifies at once cultural remembering and cultural forgetting. It is taken with permission from Johannes Fabian's distinguished work, *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (University of California Press, 1996). Fabian there describes the ambition of the Congolese painter Tshibumba Kanda Matulu to paint the entire history of his country; thanks to Fabian's foresight anyone wishing to do so may see a collection of some one hundred of Tshibumba's paintings in Amsterdam. Not least of Fabian's merits is to have rescued Lumumba, represented here by Tshibumba in prison, from relative oblivion. Only Africanists and those who lived through those times will easily recognise the portrait of Lumumba, although in 1960 he was sufficiently important and highly regarded for his African political rivals and the CIA to collude in his murder. As it happens, the author of the present book remembers seeing on Pathé News a filmed sequence of Lumumba shortly before his death; he was a prisoner in the African jungle, sitting on a chair with his hands tied behind his back. Patrice Lumumba was a man with a memorably beautiful and noble face, and I still recall vividly my revulsion on witnessing how his captors wrenched his chin from side to side in derision.

Acknowledgements

A number of friends have read earlier drafts of this book in whole or in part, and I am grateful to all of them for making this a better book than it would otherwise have been. They are: Peter Burke, David Forgacs, Russell Keat, Michael Minden, Yael Navaro-Yashin, Graham Pechey, Marilyn Strathern and Martin Thom. I am grateful to John Sutton and the other reader for Cambridge University Press for their particularly generous and helpful comments on the penultimate version of my manuscript. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Graham Pechey for his indefatigable patience and kindness in making available to me a vast body of research material which, without his help, I would have found far more difficult of access. Clare Campbell has typed the entire volume efficiently and uncomplainingly. My copy-editor, Fiona Sewell, exhibited a capacity for rigorous reading that was beyond praise. Finally, I should acknowledge that an earlier version of Chapter 2 appeared in *Memory Studies*, Volume 1 (2008), and a much abbreviated variant of the same chapter was published in *Proceedings of the British Academy* (2009); a shorter version of Chapter 4 appeared in the *Journal of Romance Studies*, Volume 3 (2003).