

Memory and Italian Culture

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The interdisciplinary field of Memory Studies is a vibrant and expanding research area, as evidenced by the multitude of international journals, conferences, and scholarly networks that have emerged over the past two decades.¹ Astrid Erll defines ‘memory’ as ‘an umbrella term for all those processes of a biological, medial, or social nature which relate past and present (and future) in sociocultural contexts.’² While the ‘boom’ in Memory Studies can be traced to the turn of the twenty-first century, the field itself is often described as developing across three main phases.³

The first dates back to the 1920s and is associated with French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who developed the notion of collective memory. Halbwachs used this term to explain how memory, while occurring within the individual mind, is always shaped by social frameworks—that is, by the environment in which remembering takes place, such as the family, the nation, educational institutions, and religious or cultural affiliations.

The second phase is characterised by Pierre Nora’s nation-based *lieux de mémoire*, while a third phase, emerging in the 2000s, moved beyond a focus on the nation to explore memory as a dynamic, transcultural, and transnational process.⁴ More recently, Stef Craps has identified a fourth phase, concerned with environmental, ecocritical, and post-humanist issues.⁵ Among the many pivotal concepts to emerge from the field are Marianne

¹ These include the journals *Memory Studies* (established 2008), *Memory, Mind & Media* (established 2022) and *Memory Studies Review* (established 2024), the hugely-attended annual Memory Studies Association conferences, and the dMSA online weekly seminar series.

² Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, trans. by Sara Young (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 7.

³ Astrid Erll, ‘Travelling Memory’, *Parallax*, 17.4 (2011), pp. 4–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605570>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Stef Craps et al, ‘Memory Studies and the Anthropocene: A Roundtable’, *Memory Studies*, 11.4 (2018), p. 500, <https://doi.org/10.1177/175069801773106>.

Hirsch's postmemory, which provides a framework for understanding how memories are transmitted across generations,⁶ while Michael Rothberg's multidirectional memory opens up possibilities for examining how diverse temporal and geographical memory cultures can interact and influence each other.⁷

Italy is a particularly compelling case study when it comes to the dynamics of collective remembering and forgetting. Since Unification in 1861, phenomena such as mass emigration, colonial expansion, Fascism, the Holocaust, the women's movement of the 1970s, Genoa 2001, and the imminent threat of climate change—all explored in this special issue—have posed challenges to the development of a coherent national identity, resulting in what John Foot has termed 'Italy's divided memory'.⁸ Early career researchers in Italian Studies have recently applied theoretical and methodological insights from Memory Studies to reveal the complex mnemonic processes at work in Axis War literature (Bartolini),⁹ and in the literary memory of the Shoah (Josi).¹⁰ The generative term 'multidimensional forgetting' has been offered to encapsulate the 'interconnected network of self-absolving narratives' stemming from processes of 'erasure, disavowal, covering up, silencing, overlooking, displacing, occluding, blame-shifting, and rewriting the [Italian] past'.¹¹ Cultural production with a critical stance plays a crucial role in dismantling and reconfiguring such narratives, opening pathways towards greater historical responsibility.

The vitality and innovation evident within the field of Memory Studies are reflected in the work of postgraduate scholars in Italian Studies. The 2024 Society for Italian Studies (SIS) Postgraduate Colloquium, held at University College Cork, provided a forum for the presentation and discussion of this emerging scholarship. This special issue brings together seven Notes dedicated to Memory in Italian Culture, ranging across media—song lyrics, (post)colonial literature, watercolour paintings, a Holocaust memoir, feminist archives, journalistic writing, and a cli-fi novel—and encompassing various historical contexts from

⁶ Hirsch, Marianne, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

⁷ Micheal Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁸ John Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁹ Guido Bartolini, *The Italian Literature of the Axis War: Memories of Self-Absolution and the Quest for Responsibility* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2021).

¹⁰ Mara Josi, *Rome 16 October 1943: History, Memory, Literature* (Legenda, 2023).

¹¹ Stefano Bellin and Guido Bartolini, 'Italy's Multidimensional Forgetting: Narratives, Contested Memories, and Solidarity', *Italian Culture*, 42.2 (2024), pp. 91–108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01614622.2024.2429216>, p. 92.

the late 1880s to the imagined future. Applying theoretical tools from Memory Studies to each medium and context, the articles reveal the ways in which personal and collective memory are constructed, transmitted, and contested. These critical approaches to hegemonic memory narratives ensure that marginalised voices, such as those of southern Italians forced to leave their homes during the so-called Great Migration (post-Unification–WW1), colonised subjects, Holocaust victims, women, and victims of the widely documented police brutality at Genoa 2001, are heard. At the same time, rather than imposing a fixed ‘victim identity’ on any of the groups in question, the Notes demonstrate the need for continuous self-reflection, lest memory be instrumentalised against those who are currently Othered in contemporary Italian society.

This special issue opens with Elisabetta Visaggio’s ‘Singing *La Grande Emigrazione*: Watery Myths, Symbols, and *Metastoria* in Southern Italy’. The Note sheds light on the work of Ernesto de Martino (1908-1965), considered the “founding figure of contemporary Italian cultural anthropology”.¹² Visaggio explores how sung oral culture in Southern Italy, a form of communicative memory,¹³ serves to secure ‘human presence’, a term coined by de Martino to refer to what goes beyond the merely biological aspects of human life. In moments of societal rupture, such as widespread migration, human presence can be strengthened by repeating rituals that draw on a place’s *metastoria*: the practices and beliefs that remain fixed in a cultural landscape over time. Visaggio analyses how Southern Italian song lyrics remediate water symbolism belonging to the region’s *metastoria*, thus providing stability for societies at risk of depopulation.

Zoe Fox’s Note, ‘The Eternal(ly Changing) City: Demolition and *Roma Sparita* in Visual Culture from the Risorgimento to Fascism’, provides close readings of paintings by Ettore Roesler Franz (1845-1907) and Maria Barosso (1879-1960), revealing how the medium of watercolour painting played a role in the development of the collective memory of Rome in a period of rapid urban transformation, from the late 1800s to the 1940s. While Roesler Franz’s romantic works portray nostalgia over vanishing ways of life, those of Barosso expose the top-down attempts to control public memory, in which the Risorgimento-era notion of *Roma sparita* with its emphasis on what was *lost*, shifts to what

¹² Dorothy Louise Zinn. ‘An Introduction to Ernesto de Martino’s Relevance for the Study of Folklore’. *The Journal of American Folklore* 128, no. 507 (2015): 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.128.507.0003>, p. 4.

¹³ Jan Assman. ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory’, in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning (De Gruyter, 2008), pp. 109–18.

was *in the process of transformation*. As Fox affirms, this was indicative of the Fascist authorities' instrumentalisation of the arts to control an overarching narrative of Fascist progress.

Michele Baldaro focuses on memories of Italy's colonial past in 'Memory and Narrative Positionality. Depicting the Italian Doctor/Colonial Other Relationship in the Post-war Period'. Through an analysis of three literary texts published in the 1950s, Baldaro demonstrates how the figure of the doctor serves both to justify the colonial 'civilising' mission by presenting colonialism as a humanitarian endeavour, while at the same time rendering invisible structural racial and gender violence. Drawing on a theoretical framework encompassing narratology and postcolonial studies, Baldaro shows that the narrative point-of-view employed by the authors provides insight into how colonial memory is formed and transmitted. Careful attention to this construction allows for a decolonial reading of these ambivalent texts.

Matilde Piu offers a close reading of Włodock Goldkorn's hybrid memoir *Il bambino della neve* (2017) in her Note, 'Włodek Goldkorn "acrobata del tempo": Imaginative Memory and the Ethics of Remembrance'. Drawing on Hirsch's postmemory, Piu's analysis brings to the fore Goldkorn's desire to meet the void of the horror of the Holocaust with imaginative empathy: a means of relating to suffering that does not protect one with a closed historical narrative, but links the suffering of *then* to the dehumanisation of multiple ethnic groups in Europe *now*. Goldkorn's work encourages readers to undertake the work of historical responsibility by reflecting, as Piu points out, 'not only the trauma of the past, but the ethical failures of the present'.

Francesca Passasseo's Note, 'Archive as Memory: The Role of Repositories in Shaping the History of the Wages for Housework Movement' focuses on the archival preservation of memories of the transnational women's movement of the 1970s. In a comparative analysis of the 'highly curated selection' of mainly photocopied documents at the International Wages for Housework archive at the Bishopsgate Institute (London) and the overflowing array of sources at the *Lotta Femminista* archive (Padua), Passasseo explores how the curation of archives shapes and transmits the memory of social movements. While the *Lotta Femminista* archive resists a tidy, linear narrative of transnational feminist movements, the Bishopsgate Institute favours a chronological approach that excludes dissenting voices. Rather than pitting these diverging archival processes against each other, Passasseo embraces the contradictions that they lay bare, arguing that such a comparative

approach allows us to appreciate how archives function not only as a record of the past, but as active agents in the construction of collective memory.

Cristian Bergonzo and Giuliana Pala's contribution, 'An "Improper Medium" for Memory: Exploring a Recent Case of Memory Remediation', draws on Rothberg's multidirectional memory to analyse two journalistic texts by Massimo Palma: *Happy Diaz: Sette giorni di gioia e divisione a Genova 2001* (2021) and *Olanda, 1945: Anne Frank e i Neutral Milk Hotel* (2023). The authors' exploration of the former investigates how Palma refers to the suicide of Joy Division's lead singer, Ian Curtis, in 1980 as a means of expressing the tragedy of Genoa 2001. Curtis' death, signifying the shattering of the dreams of a generation, facilitated mourning for the as-yet unprocessed collective trauma of Genoa 2001. Their analysis of American indie band *Neutral Milk Hotel's* reference to Anne Frank in their lyrics reveals how the institutionalisation of Holocaust memory implies not a means of coming to terms with the past, but a blockage in traumatic time. Only music can make memory mobile, providing solidarity for the 'Genoa generation' and a means of expressing their lost ideals.

Giulia Bernuzzi's Note, 'Memory as Resistance: Contesting Climate Crisis and Identity', falls within what has been described as the 'fourth wave' of memory studies. Bernuzzi examines Antonio Scurati's *La seconda mezzanotte* (2011), a cli-fi novel set in post-apocalyptic Venice devastated by climate change and ruled by corporate elites, to explore memory as an active force of opposition and survival. Through this analysis, the paper demonstrates how cli-fi serves a dual purpose: projecting possible futures while revealing how collective memory can challenge dominant narratives and shape urban resistance to environmental destruction.

Adopting perspectives from multiple disciplines, historical periods, and media, this special issue furthers scholarship on the complex relationship between Italian cultural production and memory formation, while demonstrating that what constitutes 'Italian memory' far exceeds a national framework. We wish to acknowledge all those who have contributed to making this special issue of *Notes in Italian Studies* possible. We are particularly grateful to the Department of Italian at University College Cork for their unwavering support. Our appreciation extends to the Centre for Advanced Studies in Languages and Cultures at UCC and the SIS for generously funding the 2024 SIS Postgraduate Colloquium, and to the SIS Postgraduate Representatives Dario Galassini, Silvia Vari, Elisa Vivaldi and Max Fletcher for their dynamic involvement in organising the colloquium and coordinating this special issue. Finally, we extend our thanks to the two

keynote speakers, Professor Stefania Lucamante (University of Cagliari and Professor Emerita at the Catholic University of America) whose insightful talk was entitled ‘The Natural History of the Dead: from Ernest Hemingway’s WWI Narratives to Contemporary Historiographical Novels. History through the Lens of Nicoletta Verna and Ilaria Rossetti’, and Professor Silvia Ross (University College Cork), whose thought-provoking address focused on ‘Remembering World War II through Ruins: Wounded Bodies, Memory and Regeneration in the Postwar Florence of Aldo Palazzeschi and Michael Ondaatje’