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Gender and the Right to Memory

Anna Reading

When US and UK troops invaded Iraq in 2002 many of the Iraqi National Museum's 5,000 year old treasures were destroyed and looted. The then U.S Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld was quoted as saying, 'freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things.' The re-opening of the museum in Bagdad in 2009, established in 1926 by a British woman, Gertrude Bell, was hailed as a return to stability: a national public memory institution on the road to democracy.

Occupying armies and dictators often destroy public archives and sites of memory. They smash sculptures, run roads through cemeteries, ban languages, burn books, ransack museums. Acts of terror as well as the gendered colonial legacies and cultural mixedness of complex pasts are erased.

Part of what Primo Levi (2002) calls, 'the demolition of a man', and what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2005) terms the reduction to 'bare life' during such states of exception includes a war on the public uses of the past and what can only be termed 'non-memory'. This non-memory is not simply forgetting or the state censoring of particular memories. It is a void in terms of the public and mediated record of events.

Despite the seeming pervasive ubiquity of media, especially in developed countries, atrocities can happen with no mediated record of what took place. There may be for some period of time during and after a state of exception only the personal and private memories of those directly involved. Non-memory also involves at its core the demolition and the violation of gendered norms, boundaries and identities of a given society, as Levi's words imply.

The past is not gender neutral and neither is its public invocation in the present. This is what makes the debate about the Right to Memory and how this is gendered important.

Human rights are gendered

The Right to Memory debate has emerged in part within the context of the Right to Communicate, which has sought to extend the civil liberties of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially Article 19. At the transnational level the Right to Memory is situated within work on human rights with an emphasis on creating and preserving archives such as the work by UNESCO and the Working Group on Archives and Human Rights within the International Council on Archives (see Arkivforeningen, 2008).

Yet, the potential Right to Memory, the right to a symbolic representation of the past embedded within a set of interventions and social practices, carries with it complex and contradictory implications in terms of gender in the context of today's media environments.

As with discussions of human rights more generally, if we are not mindful, gender becomes an adjunct to rights arguments rather than central to them. Human rights writer, Anne Cubilie who has examined women's testimonies worldwide, including those from Afghanistan, Argentina and Bosnia believes:

'As long as human rights are understood as a universal category associated with the male and public realms, and women's rights are seen as corollary to rather than a fundamental

aspect of the discourse, women will never have the benefit of the full range of human rights protections that men have' (Cubilie, 2005: 32).

The debates emerging around a Right to Memory and its absence in international covenants need to consider the significance of gender in relation to cultural memory in a number of ways.

Testimony and witnessing

Cultural memory and its publically embedded social processes include bearing witness, testifying, archiving, curating, memorialising and commemorating, as well as the production of autobiographical, artistic and mediated renditions of the past. These are, in various ways, informed by and inform gendered roles, values and norms. For example, women were rarely used as witnesses in medieval Europe; the word of a female witness in some cultures still carries less weight than that of a male witness in relation to particular judicial cases.

An unequal gendered legacy of witnessing and testifying within public cultures and world faiths can impact on the kinds of stories, photographs and artefacts that are gathered. It can also impact on who they are gathered from, what is documented and preserved in public archives as well as the subsequent symbolic representation in public memory institutions, in public memorials and in the writing of histories that are then used in schools.

At the same time, how memory works in relation to gender is dynamic and travelling: it is not fixed or always directly linked to identities: it can change in different locales and times. Women can also play a significant public role: with the disappearances and detention centres of Argentina, the Grandmothers' of the Plaza de Mayo were and are crucial in the development of a public archive for the memory of the disappeared.

It is not simply that women's cultural memories may be forgotten and men's remembered, but rather how these resonate or not with what is acceptable or not in the public sphere in relation to gendered norms and values in a particular historical and cultural moment. Hence the public controversy in Israel in relation to disaffected women conscripts testimonies who had been in the Israeli army. While it may be generally easier or more acceptable in public memories to have recognition of women as victims, it is more problematic when women are shown as army conscripts trained to kill, or as terrorists, or as perpetrators or as sexually active (rather than raped).

The Right to Memory if we are not mindful of differing gendered legacies could result in the socio-legal right for some men in public to tell their story more loudly, be believed, and for particular stories that reinforce or are that are useful to gender oppression to be symbolically represented in archives and memorials. Likewise, past stories of forced abduction, sexual slavery and mass rape may go unheard because of the need to return to a gendered 'normality'.

In post-genocidal situations, 'non-memory' can mean that there are few or no gender specific artefacts: if not mindful of this, general artefacts are then used as an inappropriate metomyn for the differing experiences of men and women. After the Holocaust, some public memory institutions and museums, for example, initially displayed the striped top and trousers of male prisoners, as representative of both men and women's experiences, publically forgetting that women prisoners wore thin dresses and were often deprived of underwear even in the sub zero central European winter.

A gendered jigsaw

An understanding of the ways that symbolic representation and embedded social memorial practices are gendered is crucial to understanding the particularities of a regime of occupation, of colonialism, of genocide. Memory is a gendered jigsaw or rather a multi voiced dialogue in which men and women's stories are momentarily secured and then mobilised. A gendered understanding of memory rights needs to include the recognition of how the same story has different meanings for men and women.

When Primo Levi writes, 'What happened to the others, to the women, to the children, to the old then we could establish neither then nor later: the night swallowed them up, purely and simply,' (2000: 26) he was expressing his loss not simply as a Jew, but as a Jew who was a man. Being forced to watch your wife, sisters and daughters disappear, being made to witness them being raped, having your beard shaved off, or the opposite, being killed because you are a barber who cuts men's beards, are gender specific humiliations to being a man designed to strip away complex ethnically situated masculinities.

Attempts at democratic peace building have worked best when there is some recognition of these dynamics of gender in relation to memory, the ways in which gender cuts across the private and the public, the ways in which it is situated within a bigger picture of political right – or wrong. A sense of these gendered dynamics is an important part in the on-going process of peace-building in Northern Ireland for example: some projects such as the audio-visual recording of memories at Armagh Prison have involved the careful inclusion of both men and women's stories as terrorists, prison warders and policy officers. Likewise, work within post-apartheid South Africa is suggestive of the positive use of gender inclusive testimony in processes of transitional justice.

Digital media, gender and memory

There are also particular ways in which gender and cultural memory works in today's digital media environment: digitisation means that symbolic and mediated representations of the past can be easily captured, stored, globally connected and rapidly reassembled. Digital and mobile media might seem to offer some way of ameliorating communicative and memorial inequalities: the movement for citizen journalism, and the shift from audiences into 'prosumers' able to produce their own media content, for example, might seem indicative of this.

Certainly in some instances digital media technologies offer new democratic possibilities: the rise of the camera phone worldwide crosses both gender and economic divides; its data uploaded to the internet results in the possibility for rapidly globalised digital witnessing of the abuse of law and collective atrocities. A cameraphone video after the Iranian elections in June 2009 of the shooting of Neda Agha Soltan was within minutes rapidly transferred around the globe leading within hours to demonstrations in diasporic communities worldwide, as well as the rapid establishment of on-line memorials.

The 'globital memory field'

Yet, although digitisation does allow for the rapid creation, transfer and storage of digital memories, gendered memories need to be understood as situated and constituted through what elsewhere I have termed the 'globital memory field'. This globital memory field is far from being either global or digital: rather it is uneven and patchy, with spots of concentration as well as areas with little or no connectivity. Despite the impact of DIY media, giant media corporations and state memory institutions still remain powerful players, able to securitize and mobilize public cultural memories.

The inequalities of gender take place within a political economy of memory in which some memory agents are more powerful than others, and in which some countries and corporations hold greater memory capital. Developing countries while able to leapfrog particular technologies remain hampered by access to connective technologies. With information poverty there is also a poverty of public memory, which disproportionately affects women – in particular, women in Africa which has the least developed telecommunications network. Although, as Sally Burnheim, of Article 19 points out, again there is the need to be mindful of pockets of concentration and unevenness: Botswana and Rwanda have some of the most sophisticated digital telecommunications systems in the world.

Any consideration of memory in relation to communication and human rights needs to consider the gender disparity index and how this varies in different local contexts worldwide. Anne Cubilie says that UN agencies and NGOs should recognise the difference between cultural norms and juridical policies in relation to memory. Trying to include the memories of women in places where there are juridical policies that serve to exclude and restrict women can result in violent punishment, even death. In contrast, acting to include women's memories where cultural norms serve to marginalise women can result in local levels of resistance.

Mobile memories

Memories are also trans-national and trans-cultural. It is no longer (was it ever?) possible to contain memories within national boundaries. Memories are mobile: they travel with people and without people; different memories rebound off each other. American cultural memory academic, Michael Rothberg, calls this 'multi-directional memory'. His examination of questions of witnessing and their intersection with the legal in relation to the memories of the Holocaust and Apartheid South Africa suggests a 'thinking of justice beyond filiation, linear temporality, and commensuration' in relation to post-catastrophic reparation. This is also the case when thinking through the right to memory and its implications of gender justice: it is non-linear, not necessarily filial or commensurate.

The Right to Forget

In debates about the Right to Memory it is also important to be attentive to how the invocation to remember might obliterate some cultures' emphasis on the need to forget or remember using modalities that don't involve museums, archives and monuments that name the dead. Some cultures maintain social cohesion through particular rituals of forgetting or through the conscious not-naming of people or events. Some use very different modalities to remember.

In some cultures, the possessions of the dead should be destroyed: to display a dead woman's dress in a museum is then an insult. To publically name the dead may result in contamination; to forget might keep one safe from a different and more powerful culture. Any discussion of the Right to Memory needs not only to be mindful but also to be knowledgeable about how gender might be articulated or not within these different gendered contexts.

When the Iraqi National Museum was first established in 1926 by Gertrude Bell, while she was a respected upper class highly educated diplomat free to travel the world, she was also honorary secretary of the Women's Anti-Suffrage League which had sought to prevent women back in Britain having the vote. The Museum may have been reopened but democracy will be unstable if the complexities of the political economy of gendered cultural memory remain adjunct rather than central to the building of both civil society and its public memory.

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