

Ottoman transcultural memories: Introduction

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Abstract

This introduction lays out the context and aims for the special issue's focus on Ottoman transcultural memories. We explain the pertinence of transcultural memories for the Ottoman Empire, and we discuss contemporary politicizations of Ottoman nostalgia, or neo-Ottomanism. We define the key terms in our analyses, rooting our approach in memory studies, and distinguishing a transcultural approach to memory from comparable approaches in postcolonial studies. The introduction further sets out how the special issue refigures memory studies, transcultural and Ottoman studies. The issue's contents are outlined, with the interdisciplinary and transmedial contributions necessarily driven by the diverse archives of Ottoman transcultural memories. Creative selections are informed by the affective resonance of Ottoman transcultural memories, in turn refiguring postmemory.

Keywords

empire, interdisciplinary, nostalgia, postmemory, transmedial, transnationalism

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This special issue draws together contemporary approaches to memory and the transcultural turn in cultural studies in order to explore the rich, sometimes contentious and highly topical memories of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman Empire covered a vast, geographically expansive territory (from Buda to Baghdad) and was one of the most historically extensive (1300s–1922). However, it has not yet featured as a focused project in memory studies. Indeed, it remains underrepresented outside the specialist, Ottoman field, including in postcolonial studies, cultural and, more recently, transcultural studies. Our focus on Ottoman transcultural memories is timely not just for academic reasons but also politically, culturally and ethically. Since the break-up of the Empire, many of the former Ottoman territories have become regions of recurrent conflict. These include, among others, Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Kurdistan, Armenia, Turkey, Cyprus and Ukraine. As the present-day conflicts in these sites hinge on various arguments about history and contested borders between cultural groups (religious, ethnic and national), this special edited volume, dealing as it does with transcultural memories that were variously inherited, remembered, refigured or repressed across a number of different political geographical areas of the Ottoman Empire, is particularly compelling now in unravelling some of the issues that lie behind and beyond today's news headlines.

The overarching goal of the special issue is to introduce within memory studies, cultural studies and transcultural studies, as well as to Ottoman studies, the concept of Ottoman transcultural memories. This we identify as the remembered past dynamics of cultural exchange between the different groups that made up the Empire, its diverse ethnicities, nations, religions and cultures such as Turks, Armenians, Kurds, Greeks, Jews and Christians. The key question for the special issue is, can the Ottoman Empire be remembered as transcultural? That is, to what extent, how and to what effect did encounters and exchanges take place between groups in the Ottoman past? How were these encounters and exchanges transformed into violent acts during the final years of the Empire? But also, in what sites, media and moments do cultural memories of the Ottoman past continue to be exchanged post-Empire? Our approach is derived from memory studies since we embrace an awareness of how the moment of remembering constructs and mediates the past, and since it is very much built therefore on established work in memory studies, including in this journal. In assessing the evidence of transcultural memories, we examine the sometimes rather nostalgic claims that can be made in the present about the harmonious Ottoman transcultural past, and we pay attention also to the transcultural and transnationalistic shifts that instead enabled violence. Furthermore, we consider how such claims are being deployed, sometimes with very troubling political implications, markedly differently from the ways they are viewed within academic and artistic contexts, in the international public sphere of cultural memorialisation.

Ex-Ottoman nation states, and Turkey in particular, have promoted a return to 'Ottoman values' as a way of igniting nationalist fervour. For example, under the auspices of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's son, Bilal Erdoğan, Istanbul's Ethnic Sport and Cultural Festival (2017) transformed an area of Istanbul, which is usually used for political rallies, into an Ottoman encampment for the 4-day event. At the event, Bilal Erdoğan stated that 'we want to revive our traditional values, beginning with our sports, in order to move forward with these values' (Deutsche Welle, 22 May 2017). On another occasion, in March 2016, at an event celebrating the Ottoman sultans held in Ankara, the First Lady, Emine Erdoğan, praised the practice of having institutional concubines – women that the sultan kept in his harem – stating that the 'harem was a school for members of the Ottoman dynasty and educational establishment for preparing women for life'. These women were educated in whichever discipline they showed the most promise, such as calligraphy, music or foreign languages (Deutsche Welle, 10 March 2016). President Erdoğan himself presided over the 563rd anniversary celebrations in May 2016 in Istanbul to mark the taking of the city from the Byzantines. The main feature of the spectacle to symbolise the anniversary was the recreation of a 563-strong Janissary army in full costume (Deutsche Welle, 29 May 2016). However, Erdoğan's

greatest project, in what his critics have called a ‘neo-Ottoman revival’ (Carney, 2014; Türeli, 2017), is the construction of the Camlica Mosque on the Asian side of Istanbul which, with its six minarets, is steeped in Ottoman symbolism inspired by the Blue Mosque on the European side of the city which was constructed by Sultan Ahmed I in the seventeenth century (*The Times*, 9 May 2016). Such nationalist revisiting of the Ottoman Empire denies the transcultural exchanges that characterised the Ottoman society at the time and recurrently throughout the Empire.

The nostalgia for a heavily mediated version of the Ottoman Empire has been deployed not only for the purposes of populist nationalism within Turkey. As work by Ayhan Kaya and Ayşe Tecmen (2019) shows, ‘Neo-Ottomanism’ – that is, the retelling of Ottoman history in a ‘selectively constructed heritage and history narrative’ – carries ‘both a national and an international dimension’. Under Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party [JDP] rule, a selective historical narrative of the Ottoman Empire has been instrumentalised as part of Turkey’s foreign policy. The Ottoman Empire has been drawn upon by the Turkish government in order to develop closer economic, political and religious ties between Turkey and other ex-Ottoman territories, and yet in this retrospective falsification of the Ottoman Empire put out by the JDP, Turkey’s hegemony is historicised and reinforced by the Empire, rather than genuinely decentred and challenged. What is striking in the state’s use of Ottoman memories is that post-imperial Turkish nationalism can not only coexist with, but has actively sought to reanimate, a version of imperialism. This paradoxical deployment of the Ottoman *Empire’s* history in Turkey’s *nationalist* foreign policy has a counterpart in the JDP’s domestic policy. Within Turkey, nostalgia for an idealised version of the Ottoman Empire’s cultural and religious diversity – the state’s much self-publicised multicultural tolerance – has been used not to include, but to exclude and even to restigmatize, minorities who challenge this ideal (Kaya and Tecmen, 2019).

We foreground the word *transcultural* to explore Ottoman memories, therefore, because our investigations suggest this term holds particular pertinence for the Ottoman Empire’s geography, and continued resonance in relation to the post-imperial geopolitics, of the ‘millet’ structure (where different ethnic and religious communities were organised along secular lines in terms of their administration and social, cultural and financial support), and the network of cultural groups that distinguished the Ottoman Empire. This ‘bricolage’ organisation undoubtedly made the Ottoman Empire an ‘empire of difference’ (Barkey, 2008). That is, the Ottoman Empire was both an empire made up of difference and also a different formation of empire, with difference (diversity) at its institutional heart. Furthermore, even while we do not jettison them completely but instead think about their overlap and complicity, we choose *transcultural* to investigate Ottoman memories over other, related, but not reducible, terms, which have been variously evoked in relation to the Ottoman Empire: *postcolonial* (Aksan, 2008, Göçek, 2012), *orientalism* (Deringil, 2011; Makdisi, 2002; Said, 1978), *co-existence* (Bryant, 2016; Doumanis, 2013) and *cosmopolitan*. The latter especially has been applied by historians to the Ottoman Empire, although perhaps of all terms for cultural encounters most controversially (Freitag, 2014).

Transculturalism is best suited to describe the non-nation-based multiverse empire of the Ottomans. Rather than implying a centre-periphery model of occupation of colonies and a temporality of subsequent histories as postcolonial theory does, transculturalism focuses more on the permutations of ‘multidirectional contacts’ (McLeod, 2013) that might be produced unpredictably across a diverse expanse, culturally as well as geographically. In turn, therefore, imperialism and orientalism clearly play a role in the context of the Ottoman Empire, and we therefore consider at points their implication alongside transculturalism. However, the transcultural constructions of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman Empire render it unlike the nation-based British and French Empires, which have to date dominated postcolonial studies and studies of imperialism and orientalism.

Furthermore, we select transcultural over cosmopolitanism since, as has been cogently and substantially noted by several critics in Middle Eastern studies, cosmopolitanism has ‘clouded

rather than clarified Middle Eastern scholarship' and has therefore lost status as 'a reflexive, generic piece of shorthand that promises to draw together and organize scholarly interventions when in fact it camouflages productive differences' (Hanley, 2008: 1346; see also Zubaida, 2002, 2013). Our project is to reveal and place centre stage precisely these differences and the dynamics of exchange between them. This is particularly important in relation to the Ottoman Empire as such exchanges can often take place via different social classes who do not share the same levels of social or cultural mobility or access, as well as non-Western groups, in ways that are typically glossed over or not captured at all by the concept of cosmopolitanism, with its Western philosophical genealogy (Douzinas, 2007). There has been an initiative to describe a cosmopolitanism transformed by the vernacular (Stephanides and Karayanni, 2015b). In one innovative reading very relevant for our context of Ottoman memories, this has resulted in a recasting of the Alexandrian-born poet, Constantin Cavafy, whose Greek family hailed from Ottoman Istanbul, as both cosmopolitan Hellene and transcultural Asian (Stephanides and Karayanni, 2015a). However, given our focus on memory, we found that the transcultural turn in memory studies, as distinct from philosophical cosmopolitanism, can encompass our project of discovery of flows of difference, which a model of co-existence also ignores.

In fact, the trajectory of memory studies from 'the collective to the cultural to the transcultural' (Crownshaw, 2011: 1) provides the strongest spur for bringing the newest research on the Ottoman 'empire of difference' into memory studies. As transcultural memory is an "umbrella term" . . . the result of a dynamization of the idea of memory, brought out by new research agendas' (Erll, 2015), it lends itself well as a conceptual category to investigate the as-yet unexamined transcultural memories of the Ottoman Empire. In attending to Ottoman transcultural memories, we in turn instigate change in the field of memory studies. In a new and integrated context, we embrace and build upon the invitation, recently made in a special issue of this journal, for '*expanding the temporal horizons* of memory studies by paying more attention to long-term developments' and also '*going beyond Europe as a frame of reference*' (Erll and Rigney, 2018: 272; emphasis in original). Spanning the Asian, European and African continents, as well as six centuries, the Ottoman Empire, we contend, is an opportune canvas for meeting and indeed exceeding both demands. The topic of Ottoman transcultural memories radically expands transcultural memory both temporally and topographically, and indeed in other profound ways, by bringing a subject that is not studied in Western universities in mainstream history or cultural studies to the very forefront of our interdisciplinary humanities and contemporary enquiry.

A transcultural approach to Ottoman memories both refigures popular assumptions of the Ottoman Empire as a 'Muslim Empire' (Omaar, 2013) and provides a substantial new contribution to Ottoman scholarship which has, historically, been organised according to disciplinary differences. While it should be noted that this very journal, *Memory Studies*, has led the way by including a handful of individual articles (Assmann, 2018; Bakshi, 2012) related to Ottoman memories, it also needs to be pointed out that none of these articles has foregrounded the concept of Ottoman *transcultural* memories, as this special issue seeks to do in focused and extended fashion. Applied to the Ottomans, transcultural memory can overturn popular assumptions of the ex-Ottoman geographies in countries such as Turkey, and instigate new transdisciplinary and transmedial research. Michael Rothberg's (2009) work on 'multidirectionality' also frames our approach to developing memory studies through our Ottoman focus. Rothberg's multidirectional approach to memory runs parallel with the 'multidirectionality' found to distinguish transcultural studies (McLeod, 2013). In effect, our focus on Ottoman transcultural memories draws together and dovetails these approaches.

What is at stake in the 'trans' dynamic is particularly crucial for relations between, say, Muslims, Jews and Christians, during the time of the Ottoman Empire as well as now. Does the nature of the 'trans' in 'transcultural' consist simply in exchanges between cultural groups, as in 'across' or trans-action; or can we also find evidence of some sense of 'beyond', as well as 'betweenness'?

Instances of transportation and transformation strengthen recent conceptions of all cultural memory as transcultural. Applied to the Ottoman context as an analytic lens, transcultural memory moves the concept of memory away even further from the earlier strong inclination in memory studies for collective memory (Assmann, 2004; Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995; Connerton, 1999; Halbwachs, 1994 [1925], 1997[1950]; Nora, 1984–1992). In this way, we aim to develop the dynamics and constituents of the transcultural in transcultural memory, with reference to a new archive of texts and of historical encounters.

The transcultural turn in memory studies is not only an invitation to think about how memory is itself a form of transcultural exchange and offers the possibility of unravelling acts of solidarity; transcultural memory is also a demand to return to remembered acts of violence and their ongoing determination of conflicts and tensions in the present. In a seminal book on the topic of transcultural memory broadly, transcultural memory is described as ‘the ethical potential of acts of solidarity consolidated by the construction of empathic communities of remembrance’ (Bond and Rapson, 2014: 6). We would agree with such a definition but also suggest that it is partial and needs revisiting. (Indeed, in a recent book charting the movement of memory studies, the editors strike a more tempered note about the value of transcultural memory, with the acknowledgement that ‘transcultural frames of memory . . . are . . . contested, contingent, and both politically and ethically ambiguous’ (Bond et al., 2017: 6). As Astrid Erll (2015) notes, transcultural memory is not simply opposed to categories from postcolonialism such as hybridity and third space, but was itself ‘prepared’ by such postcolonial analyses.

We thus take a critical approach to the dynamics of transculturalism in transcultural memory. Susannah Radstone’s (2011) argument that ‘the very best of a transnational and transcultural approach to memory [. . .] combines an attentiveness to the locatedness of memory’ (p. 114) serves as a warning for us to attend to the co-option or recolonization of memories. If ‘we have learned that our rhetoric of the “trans” was perhaps a bit too euphoric’, as Aleida Assmann (2017: 77) notes of some of the first formulations of transculturalism and transnationalism applied to cultural memory, we approach Ottoman transcultural memories warily, with a recognition at the outset of how some constructions of Ottoman history as transcultural can obfuscate nationalist and other paradoxical uses of this history. This form of mobile memory, in which transcultural memory can be nationalised or transnationalised, continues to displace the locatedness of archives that tell very specific stories troubling an Ottoman grand narrative of transculturalism. The material in this special issue can be found in forms of cultural memory that have been little discussed, in respect of Armenians, Jews, Greeks and Kurds. While our attention to these Ottoman transcultural memories provides a rebalancing of memory studies, which at least in its first stages was focused on more recent and European memories – above all, the Holocaust – this is not a hemispheric volte-face, entailing a simple switch to the ‘East’, since the Ottomans crossed this division too. In attending to the ‘locatedness’ of the cultural memories that we examine, we seek also to develop thinking in memory studies more widely about the prohibitions, as well as productivity – fundamentally, the power structures – of transcultural memory, its complicity in the violence of empire as well as of nation state.

The special issue asks what we can learn from reading Ottoman transcultural memories through a range of genres, geographies, cultures and historical moments. Drawing on Astrid Erll’s (2011) notion of transcultural memory as ‘the incessant wandering of carriers, media, contents, forms, and practices of memory, their continual “travels” and ongoing transformations through time and space, across social, linguistic and political borders’ (p. 4), we consider the different ways in which transcultural exchange takes place on the level of genres, media and languages. And, because the travelling and border-crossing of representation is an inevitable and intrinsic part of the Ottoman Empire’s expansive and extensive imperial legacy, transculturalism takes place to a remarkable extent, and often to very creative effect, in these representationally transcultural and transgeneric/

transmedial forms of remembrance. We follow through the current interest in the manner and medium of remembrance as inseparable from memories to consider how representational forms control, interrupt or may challenge content. The forms we analyse in themselves raise political, cultural and ethical questions, which we discuss in relation to ownership, veracity and interpretation. And they do so through elements of representation, mediation and figuration, such as imaging, narrative, design, perspective, curating, archiving, performance and reception. To analyse the Ottoman Empire's various constructions, the selection of material for the special issue is therefore strongly interdisciplinary, with essays covering different representational genres and media, including fiction, life writing, photography, film, music, architecture and the archive. These are examined from a range of methodological perspectives, namely history, art history, film studies, literary studies, architecture studies, biography studies and musicology.

With the recognition of memory as always already mediated (Erll and Rigney, 2018), there is a growing interest in memory studies in detailing the diverse *ways* in which memory is mediated. This has included analysis of remediation: that is, the representation of one medium in the form of another, coinciding in memory texts often with the diachronic and/or historically repeated returns to signal cultural memories. Remediation is a key figure for us here, since again the long history of the Ottoman Empire and its diverse cultural media provide grounds for developing and honing this concept in memory studies. Many of the texts we include in themselves incorporate, or are composed of, historically prior texts. While there is a need to pinpoint and ground within their generic traditions the forms of mediation (Brunow, 2015), as Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney (2014) note, there is also an urgency for memory studies to move beyond 'methodological nationalism' in order 'to develop new theoretical frameworks, invent new methodological tools, and identify new sites and archival resources for studying collective remembrance beyond the nation-state' (p. 2). A new and diverse archive requires new, or at least appropriately selected and sharpened, tools. Thus, this issue includes work that is interdisciplinary not only collectively across the issue but also individually in each of the contributions themselves. Such methodological interdisciplinarity is necessary for examining memories which in themselves often conjoin different genres and media, over different historical moments. Erll's (2011) 'research perspective' definition of transcultural memory applied to the Ottoman Empire has the effect of taking Ottoman studies beyond 'established research assumptions, objects and methodologies' (p. 9) in the resulting interdisciplinarity of approach.

As Ottoman transcultural memories have given rise to some really vital, memorable and multimodal creative work, we also include a creative section in this special issue, featuring poetry, visual art and songs by contemporary artists and performers, alongside a memoir of the Ottoman Empire's transcultural culinary arts. As well as absorbing the latest work on transcultural memory, the special issue is therefore strongly guided by Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which foregrounds creative and affective ties to memory content. As Hirsch (1997) writes, 'Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation' (p. 22). Consequently, there is an emphasis in our content on imaginative, affective and creative forms of representation, with a particular interest in genres which also recur in Hirsch's own criticism, life writing and photography. However, this issue also gives postmemory a much longer history, since Hirsch arrives at the concept of postmemory in relation to the Holocaust, and in contrast the Ottoman Empire ended over a century ago. Ottoman transcultural *postmemories* are not limited to the generation after an event but show the, sometimes massive and uncanny, transhistorical legacy of memory.

With a dedicated section on new work by photographers and artists who use photography in their art, we seek a greater understanding of photography's distinct relationship to postmemory and

trauma. For, as Hirsch (2008) writes, photography's 'phenomenology' of both 'referentiality' and 'iconic power' (p. 107) makes it distinct in transmitting transcultural memory as well as memory more broadly. Photography has particular importance in relation to the Ottoman Empire as a medium for transcultural memory, as its technology was introduced transculturally, from outside the Empire, and travelled across Ottoman territories, just as the Empire was beginning to break up, and relations between cultural groups were becoming subject to the pressure of nationalist movements. Photography appeared as a technology, in other words, at the same time as both Empire and transculturalism were in the process of transforming from historical reality to memory.

This special issue arises as a result of a 2-year, international and collaborative research project which we coordinated as part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded international network under the Translating Cultures strand (ottomancosmopolitanism, n.d.). Our content is made up of work especially commissioned for this research and this journal. Some of it has been developed or inspired from the best of the contributions to our workshops, conference and exhibition events, but none of it has been previously published. Reflecting the diversity and reach of our original project, the contributions to the journal special issue include specialist research on Ottoman transcultural memories by scholars representing an array of humanities disciplines and theoretical approaches (Gabriel Koureas, Jay Prosser, Colette Wilson, Jacob Olley); auto-ethnographic archival research by an early-career researcher (Nora Lessersohn); and creative work from a food writer (Claudia Roden), an artist (Aikaterini Gegisian), a photographer (Leslie Hakim-Dowek), a performance poet/artist (Alev Adil) and a musician (Suna Alan). Finally, we include a section reviewing some recent relevant books, with reviews written by those who might be understood as the new wave of Ottoman transcultural scholars (Ayşe Ozil, Bahriye Kemal, David Low).

This special issue not only puts Ottoman transculturalism on the map of memory studies but, in the wealth of material it offers and the variety of the approaches used by our contributors, we hope it will attract further research into our topic.

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Leslie Hakim-Dowek is a visual artist of Lebanese origin based in London. Her practice mainly focuses on issues of identity, migration and memory often combining photography, archival material and text. She is a senior lecturer at the University of Portsmouth and was the Visual Advisor for the AHRC 'Ottoman Pasts, Present Cities: Cosmopolitanism and Transcultural Memories' Research project (2013–2014), which included a conference, workshops and an exhibition at the Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck College, London. The latter titled *East and West: Visualising the Ottoman City* was curated by her and included artists/photographers Aikaterini Gegisian and Paris Petridis and was accompanied by a catalogue – online version: www.issuu.com/vtoc. She has widely exhibited here and abroad including group exhibitions such as *iCrossing* curated by Yasmina Reggad and Max Houghton for the Brighton Fringe; *The Dead* curated by Val Williams and Greg Hobson for National Media Museum and Montreal 'Mois de la Photo'; Modern Art Oxford; Manchester City Art Gallery, Impressions Gallery. She undertook a portrait commission for the Olympics in London 2012 organised by the Photographers Gallery and Gulbenkian Foundation. Her work is included in many private and public international collections.