

Thoughts on Transformative Inclusivity in the Memory Studies Association (MSA)

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Abstract: This essay is a call that the MSA, as aspiring global entity, turn toward *transformative inclusivity*, not mere diversity. It asks, isn't it better to risk doing the true thing now, rather than burdening the future?

Beginnings

Formally inaugurated in December 2016, the Memory Studies Association (MSA) is a theory-method-and-praxis association of scholars, practitioners, and activists from varied academic disciplines, fields of practice, and activism alive around the world.¹ The first of the organization's stated nine ambitions is the need "to move beyond the Euro/Anglo centrism that has underwritten—though not exclusively, and that is the point!—the development of the field."² Indeed, not only is the MSA's stated ambition to move beyond Euro/Anglo centrism (and I would include Eurocentrism), it is also to create an association attractive to scholars, practitioners, and activists globally. Euro/Anglo centrism is inherently intellectually honest when documenting European/Anglo history, however defined. Eurocentrism, on the other hand, insists on the supremacy of Europeans, insists on the classification of humans (and the natural world), insists on the supremacy of the "white race" and its ways of knowing and being. This is the foundation of the modern knowledge system imposed on much of the world from the Spanish and Portuguese (Iberian) conquests that spawned the Atlantic slave trade to the terror of colonization whose long shadow haunts today with the cries: Black Lives Matter.

This ambition to create a global association was first realized during the second annual conference held in December 2017 in Copenhagen about which the organizers wrote that "though we aimed to be inclusive and accommodate as many

people as possible, we still had to turn down several hundred good proposals” because the “initial ambition of attracting at least two hundred people to the Copenhagen-conference was completely overshadowed when we received 650 proposals, many of them full panels.”³ Ortner and Sindbæk Andersen, in less explicit terms, also highlight the North American and European-bias of the MSA, while celebrating its global reach represented by the 43 countries at the conference in Denmark. The authors end their short reflection essay noting that “the indisputably most prominent topics of the conference were trauma, genocide, war, and violence of all kinds. ... [But...] it was encouraging that one panel had the declared aim of ‘rethinking trauma’ ... [and the importance of] memories of hope [within Memory Studies].”⁴ These two articles, as well as one by Hanna Teichler and Rebekah Vince “MSA Forward: Memory Studies Moving Onward and Upward” (2019) on rising Memory Studies scholars in graduate programs, reflect not only the ideas of the MSA founders, executive board members, and key personnel, they give us a view of the desired ambitions, the work done, and that still needs to be done, to realize an association currently focused in and on the Global North. It is in the spirit of “memories of hope” that I offer my harried thoughts on “Race and Diversity in the MSA.”

Currents & Realities

The foregoing snapshot of the MSA’s emergence highlights the importance of imagining what I will here call the need for *transformative inclusivity* within the MSA and beyond (further elaborated further below). This is not in any way to suggest or to generalize my personal experiences within the MSA since its founding to be that of everyone who is neither European nor (white) American—nor, even, of or from the Global North by birth or naturalization. It is, rather, to think beyond the contemporary fashion in many organizations and entities of putting out diversity

statements with every new “diversity” crisis. What some of these diversity statements elide are the bits of iron and wood wedged into the skins of those forever marked as “the first” or “the only” or “the other” in most of our institutions—in the public and private sectors—institutions deeply invested in Eurocentrism, if for some, subconsciously so.

MSA membership is scattered across a wide variety of disciplines and programs, a true strength on the face of it. However, a little scratching of that multidisciplinary surface reveals the deep inequities brought into the MSA from individuals’ own professions and professional bodies. Historically, “diversity work” was done by those affected; many obliged by history to remember that their presence in spaces that historically excluded them would see them as human, too, by doing the historical or research work that would show that they, too, are human, despite “scientific evidence” to the contrary. One need only remember the history of Jews in Europe, or the place of Africans in the European imagination. The call for diversity, therefore, was historically the work of those marked by “difference” and engineered powerlessness within imperial and colonial sociopolitical and economic systems of thought and practice that valorized the (Western) European above all else. Though much has changed over the past fifty years or so, calls for reform and/or inclusion is often met with the derisive sneers that tell the speakers that their calls are “mere activism, not scholarship,” and professional bodies are there to uphold professional standards of scholarship. The subtext is that those so excluded need just hunker down, play the game, and maybe in the process earn the right to speak up. That work does not get done because, as the saying goes: Who wants to be the only Black or ... person who has nothing else to offer but race, gender, or some diversity issue?! Or, who wants to do all the unpaid dirty work of cleaning up after white supremacy and the patriarchy working on race and diversity while others are publishing and garnering awards because they are “nice” people who do “proper” scholarship? These responses are also informed by the historical reality that those in

positions of power often coopt the strategies and language of resistance offered by those so marginalized. However, this does not, and has not stopped those so affected from speaking out against injustice. Professional bodies remain some of the most resistant spaces for change, and I will dare to argue that these bodies uphold a form of (soft) white supremacy by being gatekeepers of power and for those in power. Indeed, even the venerable American Historical Association (AHA) has begun its process of reckoning with the profession's role "in the dissemination and legitimation of racist historical scholarship that has had a deep lasting influence on public culture."⁵

Daring Truth?

This essay, therefore, is an invitation to do the work needed to transform the MSA, as aspiring global entity, toward ***transformative inclusivity***, not mere diversity. Isn't it better to risk doing the true thing now, rather than burdening the future? In the records of this professional association, per historical section above, diversity ***is*** already an integral part of the MSA as there are many members of the association from diverse socioeconomic classes, (dis)abilities, genders, sexual identities and orientations, nationalities, ethnicities, among many other human expressions whether inherited, invented, and ever in flux in our human lives on this planet. So, rather than aim for moving "beyond the Euro/Anglo centrism," *how about taking the risk to imagine new communities of care, and therefore of transformative inclusivity from the design stage of a new system?* Angling for a narrowly or ill-defined diversity, to my mind, is still Euro/Westerncentric because the question is: diverse from what or whom? Diversity as an idea suggests that there is a normal and/or default setting (e.g. the white or patriarchal) that needs to be liberal and magnanimous to open itself up to those Others who will then be tolerated In time, this tolerance translates to #MSASoWhite or #MSASoHeteroNormative or some other expressive "hashtag" that critiques the stated ambition of transcending Euro/Western centrism

while the lived and remembered experiences of being nonwhite or nonWestern or nonEuropean within the MSA means others have stifling experiences within the MSA. These members want to participate but become gun-shy about “being too much” and/or being perceived as tokens eager to make white people comfortable in their whiteness as they normalize the privilege of those in positions of soft and hard power regardless of heritage.

I also understand that arguing for inclusion might be read by some as itself a problematic lens because it capitulates to the original design flaw in these educational systems we call academia. Academic spaces as the oppressed always knew and know, were originally designed for heterosexual European (now white) men (and males who could hide their other identities) as spaces of imperial and domineering power over mind and matter, including domination of this very planet. These systems, one might say, were designed for the exclusive use of their designers and their like-bodied descendants. That women within the same culture or the working classes within the same culture or other “different” groups within the same “white” culture were excluded from that original design is argument enough against calls for diversity, let alone, inclusion. What is needed, the argument might go, is outright revolution, instead. I can see that argument—it’s one I have considered myself in writing this essay—hence the phrase *transformative inclusion*, rather than mere inclusion. One of the reasons is, we now live in a deeply unequal but fundamentally networked global community today. This reality calls for transformative inclusion of not just all our human stories, but of the Earth itself. Calls for transformation within a professional body like the MSA should not fling insults at “activists,” rather, it ought to be seen as a call or invitation to all of us in the business of theory-method-and-praxis making to step up to the plate and choose just (scientific) knowledge systems in service of local and global communities; and, indeed, in service of this planet whose dust we are in our varied skin colors.

Being born European, and/or being white, is what history has given those born as such. Choosing whiteness—the inherited soft and hard power structures—is what memory holds and uses to reinvent inequity and injustice within academia and without—including its innocence of race as a construct. To my mind, diversity and inclusion has to mean way more than the desire to transcend Euro/Anglo centrism especially for white people whose immediate inheritance these professional bodies are. All of us operate in inherited white heteronormative and classist structures and our being in them (we now called Black, Indigenous, and People of Color+, BIPOC+) means our acceptance of painfully learned fluencies in academic knowledge systems that historically objectified “the native” / “the black” / “the woman” / “the disabled” / “the homosexual,” and indeed this very Earth, our home in the cosmos. Inherited privileges and aspirational privileges have to be sacrificed to create not just something new, but transformative knowledge systems. To paraphrase Audre Lorde: My silences did not protect me. Your silence will not protect you⁶—the time to act is now.

Designing Anew?

For most of us MSA members, our disciplines are the bedrock of our professional lives; yet, most of those disciplines have a record of the histories of oppressive and exclusionary practices born in Europe and scattered around the world by old and new imperial structures. Radical push back within academia has often meant co-construction of newer disciplines within those old power structures. Thus, rather than merely diversify the MSA beyond Euro/Anglo centrism, I suggest that the MSA as a “young” association with a once-in-a-founding opportunity, take the lead designing and implementing a **transformative inclusivity strategy** to the best of our abilities.⁷ The idea is not to be perfect or to try to be everything to everyone; rather, it is to create an association conscious of history’s long durée, and memory’s power to spotlight the reality that just because the MSA has a few BIPOC+, those

abled-differently among us, etc., it does not mean we are equal in our diversity. Even among “white people,” we all know, there are all sorts of power structures and struggles. To that end, as the MSA reckons with Europe’s global imperial and colonial past (Anglo/Franco/Luso/ ...) in academia and beyond, let’s aim to build a global association that does not reinvent old power structures in the name of scholarship or professionalism – whether in the USA, South Africa, Chile, or Vietnam. Indeed, how do we “develop the MSA into an organization that remains open to input from all interested parties and flexible to the changing nature of the field as memory studies evolves”⁸ without trying to be everything to everyone?

If you would like to participate in the MSA's initiative to design anew, then join us on our journey of reckoning and potential reconciliation. I, for one, was visibly invisible at the 2016 Council of European Studies Conference in Philadelphia, where I took a keen interest in the conversations on memory studies, and in the “Research Network on Transnational Memory and Identity.” I was at the inaugural conference in Amsterdam in December 2016; and in Copenhagen in 2017 after which I withdrew from a writing commitment because of “race innocence in the MSA” (my words). I was also in Madrid (2019), and Warsaw 2021. Now is the time for an MSA Team that can participate in designing a platform for a transformed inclusive MSA. Tomorrow belongs to itself. Today is ours to seize and mold so we can live knowing we dared the truth in order to realign with our planet through one small organization, the MSA.

The MSA is currently soliciting funding to host a retreat toward transformative inclusivity, and a call will be sent out for those interested in designing a new future--after reckoning with the past--to register and join us in designing and implementing this initiative. Our success depends, in part, on all our courage to right (and write) the wrongs of history and to dare imagine new futures of kinship with ourselves and this Earth, our ground of being in the cosmos.

¹ Thanks for hearing me out. Please note that I have used “” the first time so as not to clog the paper with “” for every “understood” word.

² Jeffrey K Olick, Aline Sierp, Jenny Wüstenberg, “The Memory Studies Association: Ambitions and an Invitation” *Memory Studies*, 10, 4 (2017), 492, emphasis in the original; see also, MSA, “By-Laws” at: <https://memorystudiesassociation.org/about>

³ Jessica Ortner and Tea Sindbæk Andersen, “The MSA Conference 2017: Reflections on Themes and the Development of Memory Studies as a Research Field,” *Memory Studies*, 12, 1 (2019), 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵ Sarah Weicksel and James Grossman, “Racist Histories and the AHA,” *Perspectives in History*, February 2021, [Scholarship, Racism, Historians](https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-2021/racist-histories-and-the-aha): <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-2021/racist-histories-and-the-aha>

⁶ Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1986), 41.

⁷ As I was revising this essay I learned that the American Psychological Association is doing reparative work on similar issues. See: <https://www.apa.org/about/apa/addressing-racism/historical-chronology>

⁸ Olick, Sierp, Wüstenberg, “The Memory Studies,” 493.