

Berlin Program GSA Distinguished Lecture  
June 30, 2016

Irene Kacandes

Dartmouth College / German Studies Association

# Memory Work for/in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## Report



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Opening Remarks and Introduction: Paul Nolte, Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut,  
Freie Universität Berlin

Commentary: Maxi Obexer

The Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies was pleased to welcome Irene Kacandes, The Dartmouth Professor of German and Comparative Literature and GSA president, at the annual Berlin Program GSA Distinguished Lecture on June 30th, 2016. Delivered just two days after the Istanbul Atatürk Airport attack, the lecture provided a timely reminder of how memory work can be harnessed in addressing trauma and promoting solidarity with the traumatized. Kacandes, whose current work in memory studies focuses on generational memory of the Second World War and the Nazi judeocide, illuminated the role of such historical memory studies work in addressing contemporary world problems.

Kacandes began her presentation by problematizing popular dictums such as “never again” and “never forget” in relation to the atrocities committed during the Second World War. Kacandes pointed out that in a post-war world, most people do not have first-hand memories of the war. Forgetting implies having had a memory; how can we forget something that we ourselves never remembered? Secondly, she underlined that the imperative nature of such statements is off-putting, and that such negative imperatives may invite rebellion (as seen, for example, in contemporary right-wing extremism in Germany). Finally, Kacandes drew attention to the problematic nature of the implicit “it” (“never forget it”) in these statements, which indexes specific crimes like the Nazi Judeocide while leaving others, such as genocide in Darfur and Cambodian, unspoken.

As an alternative to these dictums, Kacandes proposed the concepts of co-witnessing and post-memory as crucial tools in understanding trauma. Using Leslie Morris' concept of post-memoirs as a form of responsible memory work, she demonstrated how many literary representations of the Holocaust such as Wilkomirski/Dössekker's *Bruchstücke* and Sebald's *Austerlitz* do not reflect post-memoirs. In contrast to these works, a post-memoir, she argued, must reflect the post-memory gap, or the difference between the post-rememberer (the author) and the actual rememberer/experiencer (the protagonist). She argued that better examples of post-memory and post-memoir might be centered around “testimonial objects” as described by Hirsch and Spitzer. Such objects are created, acquired, and saved in the context of a traumatic event, and thus bear witness to the memory traces they hold and the process of their transmission. Kacandes recounted a compelling example of such a testimonial object - a piano belonging to Tessa Uys, a South African concert pianist. The piano served as a point of memory and a testimonial object in

Uys' discovery of her family history as Uys uncovered her mother's Jewish roots. Uys' mother had taken the piano with her as she fled to South Africa after being expelled from the Reichskammer in 1936 Nazi Germany. For Tessa Uys, the piano thus represents a testimonial object which symbolizes her mother's conscious act of resistance to the crimes perpetrated against her.

In her own act of post-remembering, Uys donated the piano to the Jewish Museum in Berlin. In doing so, Uys committed the kind of deliberate act of co-witnessing that Kacandes argued is crucial to representing past trauma. Co-witnessing, according to Kacandes, poses a solution to the innate inability of the traumatized to act in the present. The presence of a listener or post-rememberer such as Tessa Uys allows the traumatized person's story to surface. Meanwhile, the act of co-witnessing itself points at the present and distances the co-witnesser from a past that only others remember. Kacandes compared co-witnessing to the assumed co-construction of meaning between speaker and listener in Conversation Analysis. In co-witnessing, there is similarly no passive/active dichotomy between the co-witness and the experiencer. Instead, the trauma narrative is co-constructed by the experiencer and co-witnesser. In co-witnessing, Kacandes argued, allies of the traumatized find a powerful tool to show that they consider what happened to be a crime.

Co-witnessing can thus be as simple as speaking about and writing about others' trauma. However, how we speak and write about others' experiences, Kacandes pointed out, is tricky. To demonstrate this, she analyzed Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder* as both a positive and negative model of co-witnessing. Specifically, she argued that *Dora Bruder* represents a positive model of co-witnessing as a paramemoir, or a transhistorical, transcultural memoir which creates intersubjectivity and empathy between the author and subject, thereby fostering similar compassion in the reader. However, she argued that *Dora Bruder* is not a perfect model of co-witnessing. Problematic aspects of *Dora Bruder* include the author's over-identification with Dora and the lack of credit given to other eyewitnesses and co-witnesses to the events of the book. Importantly, Kacandes stressed that her own analysis of *Dora Bruder* as a model of co-witnessing represents an important act of co-witnessing in and of itself.

Bringing the relevance of memory work even closer to the present, Kacandes concluded her talk by analyzing internet hashtags of the form *Je Suis (Paris, Charlie, Brussels...)* as acts of co-witnessing. While the intended performative force of these phrases is to express solidarity with victims, Kacandes suggested that the use of the first person singular pronoun encourages over-identification with the traumatized. This brings to the fore, for example, the problem of who is allowed to call themselves Parisian, Belgian, etc. She also remarked on the fact that this hashtag echoes the phrase "Nous sommes tous les juifs allemands" ("We are all German Jews") as used by (non-Jewish) French students during the unrest of May 1968 in France. Finally, Kacandes described her own recent act of co-witnessing in reporting on the rape of 30 children in a Turkish Refugee Camp. In her article, Kacandes points to the fact that this atrocity has largely been ignored in the Western media, as well as by Angela Merkel, who praised the camp in the wake of an EU agreement to return migrants to Turkey.

In the words of moderator Paul Nolte, Kacandes' lecture comprised just part of an interdisciplinary as well as multimodal event. The evening began and ended with a short musical performance by Berlin Program Post-Doctoral Fellow Michael O'Toole on Oud and David Benforado on Ney. Their performance of Lavtaci Andon's *Hüseyni Peşrev* and Kemani Tatyos

Efendi's *Hüseyini Saz Semai*, inspired by the picture of Greek refugees in Aleppo on the lecture event flier, represented the multiethnic and multireligious musical milieu of early 20th-century Istanbul before the traumas of WWI. Like the picture itself, the music thus demonstrated the role of memory work in drawing attention to largely forgotten aspects of the past. Maxi Obexer's commentary emphasized the application of Kacandes' messages to literature and theater, reminding the audience of the relevance of co-witnessing to Kacandes' own paramemoir, *Daddy's War: Greek American Stories*. The talk and events of the night thus highlighted Kacandes' practical and timely message, relevant to literature, music, theater, art, and mass media alike: our own values are reflected in who's suffering we are willing to speak and write about.

**Report written by Lindsay Preseau, July 2016**

Lindsay Preseau is a Ph.D. Candidate in Germanic Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley and is currently a Doctoral Fellow in the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies. Her research addresses the role of multilingualism in language contact and change in both historical and contemporary Germanic. Lindsay's current project investigates the role of English among newly-arrived refugees and youth with migrant backgrounds in Berlin.

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