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Systems of Memory: Beyond the Matryoshka Doll

Social memory studies has often operated in terms of oversimplified dichotomies: individual versus collective memory, official versus vernacular memory, public versus private memory, and cultural versus communicative memory, among others. In contrast, more recent work has recognized multiple levels of memory-- for instance the personal, familial, local, national, regional, and world-- and the complex ways in which these interact. This lecture will explore how the personal, familial, local, national, regional, and world form analytically distinct discursive systems that carry, shape, and transmit memory in distinctive ways. But it will also emphasize that these different systems are not merely nested, like Matryoshka dolls; these multiple memory systems serve as force fields through which a variety of symbols and meanings "travel," as new theory puts it, and the meanings they organize always imply and are shaped by all the other systems simultaneously. The result of this recognition may be a vastly more complex model of social memory processes, but this complexity is one appropriate to the increasingly complex reality in which social memory operates.

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