



MSA Working Groups:

Witnessing

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Memory & Trauma

Virtual Work-in-Progress Session,
Summer 2025

May 29, 2025, at 9:00 a.m. (EST) via Zoom: <https://virginiatech.zoom.us/j/87697106647?pwd=T3NXbjNSc0YxbmNPMFR3QzNkOXILZz09>

Scholars share current work-in-progress in the fields of Memory and Trauma Studies, with discussion and helpful insights to follow, all are welcome.

STEFANIE HOFER:

"How Do I Live with My Desert?":

Tracing Memory Landscapes in the Namibian Film *Taste of Rain*

Abstract: Despite the deep wounds from Namibia's brutal war for liberation from South Africa, Namibia's political leaders opted for blanket amnesty and the creation of a heroic "master narrative" in 1990. *Taste of Rain* (2012) challenges these memory politics by highlighting the need to confront the lingering effects of past actions. The film accomplishes this on the personal and collective levels by depicting the failing love between Rachel, a mourning mother, and Ray, a former guerilla fighter, both struggling with unresolved memories. Rachel carries the burden of her daughter's death in a car crash; Ray wrestles with his role in his brother's killing during the war. Through the lens of the protagonists' sense of moral failure, the film challenges a prevalent notion in trauma studies, namely that trauma is exclusively reserved for victims. Applying the concept of "moral injury," I will showcase how the film uses the desert landscape as an allegory for psyches in distress, the inability to find a path to healing through amnesia, repression, and moral impunity after "wrongdoings." This paper contributes to recent efforts in trauma studies to include representations of perpetrators and deconstruct the binary division between perpetrator and victim in an attempt to encourage "difficult dialogues" after (mass) violence.

Stefanie Hofer is an associate professor of German at the Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures at Virginia Tech. She has published on contemporary German literature and cinematic depictions of Germany's struggle to come to terms with Nazi atrocities and left-wing

terrorism. Her current research focuses on the role of autobiographical narratives in post-traumatic healing. Most recently, she co-edited (with Idit Gil) a special journal issue titled “Wounded Scholar—Healing Witness” in *Life Writing*. Her work has also appeared in publication venues for German Studies (e.g., *German Life and Letters*, *Seminar*, and *Women in German Yearbook*); Cinema Studies (*Film Criticism and Film International*); and Psychoanalysis (*American Imago*).

ALLAN MARTELL:

**An information approach to change:
a systematic literature review of memory activism and information activism**

Abstract: The goal of this presentation is to present the early results of a systematic literature review of memory activism and information activism. Memory activism refers to “the strategic commemoration of a contested pasts in order to achieve mnemonic or political change by activists working inside or outside state channels” (Gutman & Wustenberg 2023, p. 5). Information activism, on the other hand, “describes a range of materials and processes constituting the collective, often unspectacular labor that sustains social justice movements” (McKinney 2020, p. 2). Both types of activism share a concern for addressing inequalities of power, unmet needs across national borders, and a commitment to promoting justice. However, the interplay between the two remains poorly understood. By exploring and contrasting the research in both bodies of literature, this study aims to explore avenues for future work at the intersection of memory studies and information science, such as how information contributes to an understanding of public consciousness and historical narratives. Our early results suggest that some of the literature on memory activism focuses on grassroots counter-memories, while underrepresenting the role of conservative movements in operationalizing identity. There is also evidence of a correlation between the role of digital tools in spreading misinformation, but the affordances of information systems in shaping memory remain underexplored. On the other hand, the information activism literature demonstrates that information systems can empower people and similarly raise concerns about misinformation and censorship. Here, information systems, especially social media platforms, are presented as sites for dissemination alternative narratives to hegemonic discourse and to access information otherwise unavailable to marginalized subjects, though not always centered on historical narratives. Information activist literature also warns about the dangers of using digital platforms for disseminating misinformation. In this sense, both fields emphasize the continual interaction between opportunity and risk of information systems. Similarly, activism, whether mnemonic or informational, is shown as a site of resistance and shaped by a concern to overcome systemic injustices.

Allan A. Martell is an assistant professor at the Department of Information and Library Science at Indiana University Bloomington. Martell explores how societies negotiate social memories of violence. His work has been published in academic journals such as *Archival Science*, *Archivaria*, and *Memory Studies*. He earned an MS in Digital Media at Georgia Tech, a PhD in Information at the University of Michigan and worked as a postdoctoral researcher at Louisiana State University. <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Allan-Martell>

References:

Gutman, Y., & Wustenberg, J. (2017). *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*. Routledge.
McKinney, C. (2020). *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478009337>