



# The Venice Ghetto at 500: Site-based Approaches to Memory Studies

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay traces the expansion of memory studies as a discipline through the lens of the Venice Ghetto and reveals how a particular memory-space can be used comparatively to study other, far-flung spaces. The Venice Ghetto has a site-specific history and local regime of memory. But, as an archetype whose blueprints have been used globally, we can also deduce patterns of memory that can be applied to the psycho-geography of other site-specific places. After visiting the Ghetto during the summer of 2016—the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding as the world’s first ghetto—we have taken a more psycho-geographical approach to teaching the relationship between space and memory, with the objective of bringing the field of memory studies into the globalized, twenty-first century.

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The 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Venice Ghetto in 2016 inspired an outpouring of scholarship, commemorative exhibitions, and public discussion of the legacy of religious discrimination and segregation.<sup>1</sup> The Venice Ghetto Collaboration, founded by an interdisciplinary and mutually supportive working group of humanities scholars interested in a set of shared questions, develops projects that examine both the specificity of the Venice Ghetto and the symbolic power of ghettos more generally. The Collaboration recently launched its first digital project, “Approaches to Teaching the Ghetto in a Global Context.” This tool, developed to help teachers create and tailor courses on the broad topic of ghettos, is divided into modular units, each of which provides a set of learning objectives and suggested reading assignments. Beyond teaching the history, conditions, and



lived experience of the Venice Ghetto, we want instructors to encourage students to consider the connections between the physical spaces of global ghettos and the way that historical ghettos are imagined, remembered, and memorialized.

The term “ghetto” originated with the founding of the Venice Ghetto in 1516. In the midst of a war, the Republic of Venice allowed Jews to move to their island city so that the state could more easily borrow funds from Jewish moneylenders. To prevent Jews from “contaminating” or converting Venetian Christians, however, they restricted their residence to a small island in the neighborhood of Cannaregio that had formerly been the city’s copper foundry—*il ghetto*, from the Italian root *gettare* meaning “to cast” or “to throw.” This was not the first time that Jews were forced to live in a segregated, confined and guarded space, but as other cities in the Papal States like Rome and Florence likewise began establishing Jewish quarters, they referred to these areas by the name “ghetto” (Goldman & Trotter, 2018).

From the Venice Ghetto’s founding until the gates finally fell in 1797, the Ghetto was a densely crowded but also intensely vibrant space. Jews were allowed to practice their religion and established several synagogues; they also governed their own communal affairs, ran commercial enterprises, creatively renovated what little space they had and supported artistic and literary production. They nonetheless lived under the scrutiny of the state, paid exorbitant taxes, and rented from exploitative landlords who neglected their buildings (Sennett, 1994). After the Napoleonic invasion that brought down the Venetian Republic, Jews steadily abandoned the ghetto and scattered throughout the city (Bassi, 2013). A Jewish presence nonetheless remains; a small number of Jewish residents still live in the neighborhood’s tall apartment buildings, several kosher restaurants operate along its narrow streets, Chabad occupies a storefront, one congregation still worships in the largest of the Ghetto synagogues, and the Jewish Museum of Venice anchors the large Campo di Ghetto Nuovo.

“Approaches to Teaching the Ghetto in a Global Context” reveals how the Venice Ghetto, as a particular memory-space, can be used comparatively to study other, far-flung spaces. The Venice Ghetto has a site-specific history and local regime of memory. It is at once a memory space and a living space, where visitors see the past and the present in juxtaposition. Observing residents and tourists entering and exiting the old walls illuminates the difference between past confinement and the present freedom of movement. The density of buildings and people

highlights how confinement affected Ghetto dwellers, but the endurance of Jewish residents and Jewish institutions also reveals how confinement created lasting traditions, networks, and structures that supported and sustained the Ghetto's community. The Ghetto is an archetype whose blueprints have been used globally, however, and exploring the physical space of the contemporary Venice Ghetto also reveals patterns of memory that can be applied to the psycho-geography of other ghettos across time and space.

How has the Venice Ghetto as a kind of global metaphor come to influence other sites and eras as an organizational model for cities, as a simultaneous symbol of exclusion and inclusion, as a marker of difference? The term "ghetto" traveled to the United States with Jewish immigrants, who referred to their densely but (mostly) voluntarily populated Jewish neighborhoods as "ghettos." As Jim Crow laws in the South and restrictive covenants in northern cities segregated African Americans into urban neighborhoods, "ghetto" increasingly crept into black discourse as a descriptor of these neighborhoods because the term drew a useful political parallel between anti-Semitism and racial discrimination. Although the strategies used to restrict Jews and African Americans to certain residential spaces differed widely, the results were similar: a cycle of disinvestment, decaying housing, and the foreclosure of economic and educational opportunities reinforced arguments for why the majority should isolate the minority. In this way, to restore the memory of the ghetto as a physical space—not just a policy or abstract descriptor—opens up comparative potential (Oren, 2018).

As part of opening memory studies up to new comparative possibilities, the study of history and literary places must now account for physical space. Our working group seeks to uncover the many stories that have attached themselves to this place and expands upon the idea of a traveling ghetto that has come to mean different things in different spaces and different historical contexts. Our research plots the traces that still mark the Jewish quarter and expands this exploration to embrace a conception of a "memory space that travels." Our discussions engage with questions of authenticity and of porous borders, the importance of tactility, and the layering of meanings that have attached themselves to the word "ghetto." This article in part addresses a tension that is found in memory studies itself: between those memories that are intimately bound to place—site-specific remembrances that orbit a particular space—and the inherent mobility of memory in the twenty-first century.

On the one hand, we collectively ask what it means to inhabit a space using more than our sense of sight. How do we encounter place through the tactile and experience its daily, social rhythms? Robert Bevan, in *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War* (2006), argues that our connection to architecture is key to preserving our cultural memory. Drawing on the seminal work of Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1989), Bevan, too, argues that memory dwells in place, that it "... takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects" (Nora, 1989, p. 9). However, Bevan builds upon Nora's work to ask what might happen when these memory sites are destroyed, or in this case, radically altered over time. He notes that certain spaces inspire a call to remember—an observation that is particularly relevant with respect to the globally iconic site of the Venice Ghetto. Bevan writes that these sites of layered memory can "result in an especially strong power of place—a psycho-geography, an 'awareness' of the past (rather than an architectural avatar of a petrified spirit) that is dynamic, handed down by the people rather than recorded on the very stones" (p. 16). But, Bevan warns, "If the touchstones of identity are no longer there to be touched, memories fragment and dislocate" (p. 16). As our working group's discussions have highlighted, the Ghetto today is very different than the lived, communal space of 1516. The vibrant Jewish community that once inhabited its walls has dwindled in numbers, but its symbolic resonance as a global metaphor continues to mark its importance as a "touchstone for memory." Our Collaboration explores the possibilities of maintaining and encouraging a dynamic and palpable relationship to this site—understanding that the Ghetto itself can function as a container for memory—while simultaneously considering how it might also serve as a model for memory work across time and space.

For, in addition to recognizing the importance of maintaining a relationship to the physical site of the Ghetto itself, our group seeks to emphasize that this place has implications for memory work that move beyond the literal gates of the Ghetto. In *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies* (2016), editors Lucy Bond, Stef Craps, and Pieter Vermeulen consider the defining characteristics of what it means to do memory studies in the twenty-first century—a moment in which memories are conceived of as fluid, flexible, and mobile. Their book is organized around what they identify as the four key concepts of "memory dynamics": that memory is transcultural, that it is transgenerational, that it is transmedial, and that it is transdisciplinary. Our project is in dialogue with these new developments

in the field, as we consider how the Ghetto of Venice might serve as a model for the practice of collective memory work that is at once rooted in a particular place, and at the same time mobile. As Bond et al. (2016) describe:

Memory, it is safe to say, is not what it used to be. Previously thought to be anchored in particular places, to be lodged in particular containers (monuments, texts, geographical locations), and to belong to the (national, familial, social) communities it helped acquire a sense of historical continuity, memory has, in the last few years, increasingly been considered a fluid and flexible affair. In a globalized age, memories travel along and across the migratory paths of world citizens. In a digital age, they are forwarded from cameras over smartphones to computers and back in unpredictable loops. In the process, they redefine the relations between different generations, as geographical and medial transfers affect the uptake of memories by people who can no longer be said to simply inherit them. Meanwhile, the study of memory spans and complicates the boundaries between academic disciplines, generating a multifaceted and evolving field of research (p. 1).

Memory in the twenty-first century “circulates, migrates, [and] travels”; “it is more perceived as a process, as a work that is continually in progress, rather than as a reified object” (Bond et al., 2016, p. 1). As we argue, the Venice Ghetto itself might be thought of as a blueprint for this kind of memory work, where place-based memories are carried across time and space. Visitors to the Ghetto of Venice encounter a site that provides a model for examining key theoretical questions both inside and outside of its physical borders: What is the meaning and historical significance of the Venice Ghetto 500 years after its founding? What has the space come to mean in the context of the contemporary landscape? How has it traveled across space and time to other sites and regimes of segregation?

In order to address some of these questions, in July of 2016, a group of early-career humanities scholars met in Venice for a workshop and conference. The theme, “The Ghetto of Venice: The Future of Memory in the Digital Age,” asked participants to examine the complexity of the Ghetto as a concrete space and as a global metaphor. Over the course of a week, workshop participants met to discuss foundational texts on the Venice Ghetto by historians, literary scholars, and ex-

perts in memory studies. Outside of the classroom, participants took advantage of the commemorative exhibits throughout the city, which displayed representations of the Ghetto in art, architecture, and photography.

For the historians participating in the workshop, the visit to Venice's ghetto grounded the scholarly abstraction of the historical space in an architectural reality. Benjamin Ravid (1992), one of the foremost scholars of Venetian Jewish history, defines a ghetto as a space that is compulsory, segregated, and enclosed. This definition synthesizes the conditions of state power, religious discrimination, and built environment that Ghetto dwellers experienced in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Without visiting the Venice Ghetto, however, it is difficult to grasp what the lived experience of a compulsory, segregated, and enclosed neighborhood was for the Jews of the Venice Ghetto in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although scholars like Ravid emphasize the discomforts that accompanied living with so many other Jews in such a constrained area, it is difficult to visualize just how small the Ghetto is. By walking its streets, visitors can count the unusually high number of doors into each building, an indication of how densely families must have been packed into that space. Conversely, the main campo (square) of the Ghetto stretches far wider than one would guess from the historical accounts. Venetian Jews would have depended on that open, public space as an escape from the crowdedness and heat of Ghetto apartments.

Visiting the Ghetto also reveals how the built environment and the lived experience of the Venetian Ghetto were co-produced and mutually constitutive. Today, at the entrances to many homes, there are indentations in the stone doorframes where non-Jewish residents have removed a mezuzah, a decorative box containing a scroll of parchment on which the most important Jewish prayer has been written. Jews place these at the entryway to their home to fulfill the biblical commandment to inscribe the words of the prayer on the doorposts of their homes. With the mezuzah, the Ghetto's Jews built Judaism and Jewishness right into the walls, the same walls that contained them and kept their Judaism from contaminating their Catholic neighbors. Compulsory segregation and enclosure protected certain aspects of Jewish observance and expression, like placing the mezuzah on the doorway, while at the same time the Ghetto negated the necessity of performing Jewish identity because the Ghetto's walls already marked Jews and Jewish space. Seeing such a tactile example of what it meant to early-modern

Jews to be compulsorily segregated and enclosed by the Venetian state makes this abstract definition real and physical. Scholars and students exposed to the psycho-geography of the Ghetto empathize more deeply with the decisions of the historical actors that lived there.

For scholars of literature participating in the workshop, the Venice Ghetto prompted an important question: what is the relationship between space, memory, and storytelling? How can we reanimate places through the act of narration? Todd Presner, David Shepard, and Yoh Kawano (2014) describe what they call “thick mapping,” a practice with which we are very much in dialogue. “Thick maps are conjoined with stories, and stories are conjoined with maps,” the editors explain, “such that ever more complex contexts for meaning are created ... In this sense, ‘thickness’ arises from the never-ending friction between maps and counter-maps, constructions and deconstructions, mappings and counter-mappings” (Presner et al., 2014, p. 19). Furthermore, Presner, Shepard, and Yoh (2014) assert that histories take on more meaning the more they “interact” and “intersect” with one another (p. 35). As our group connects the many instances in which the Ghetto is revisited in literature—both the original site of the Venice Ghetto and those spaces inspired by this model and paradigm of urban segregation—it is possible to trace networks, instances of interaction and intersections, knotted histories that span both time and geography.

By pulling various literary works that have been inspired by the actual site or organizational principals of the Venice Ghetto into conversation, a bigger picture emerged. Examples of literary works that touch upon the legacy of the Venice Ghetto (included on our syllabus) are wide-ranging: Chilean-Jewish author and human rights activist Marjorie Agosín’s *Cartographies: Meditations on Travel* (2004); Prague-born author Egon Erwin Kisch’s *Tales from Seven Ghettos* (1934/1948); and British writer Israel Zangwill’s short story, “A Child of the Ghetto” (1898). These stories represent webs of memories that have traveled from the tangible site of the Ghetto through the bodies of visitors that touched and were influenced by their passage through it. These projects are ripe for the transmedial work of Story Mapping, as the passages from literary texts enter a digital realm. Characters’ footprints, once encoded on the page of the text, are now made visible on geocoded maps. We can read poems about the Ghetto in the Ghetto, and record these acts of reading on smartphones, locating the practice with cartographical specificity. We

can tag, circulate, and share photographs and video, creating a network of experience around the site of the Ghetto to be experienced remotely.

For example, by mapping the movement of Agosín-as-narrator's passage through place, one can trace the complexity of ways in which Jewish spaces, including that of the Ghetto, are revisited, re-inscribed, entangled, and recycled in her poems. In *Cartographies* (2004), Agosín visits sites of Jewish importance globally, while she simultaneously works through her experience of exile in the period of the Chilean post-dictatorship. In this literary reflection, the space of the Ghetto, as well as globalized Jewish spaces as a broader category, become ways of thinking through the more expansive themes of exile, displacement, national belonging, and exclusion. Through her prose-poems, Agosín complicates the idea of a static geography, weaving personal place-based memories into a complex web of Jewish sites of global significance. Reflecting upon her travels across four continents, she explores both the category of exile and a certain longing for home. We can use this work to think about the re-inscription of meanings of place, and how sites of memory can come to embody overlapping stories that span both space and time. Juxtaposing these literary works with the reflections of historians, sociologists, and other humanistic disciplines paints a bigger picture of the importance of this particular and grounded place, and the myriad ways its legacy and its memory can be explored in the classroom context.

The workshop concluded with a two-day conference where participants presented their research on various aspects of the Ghetto, beginning the work of fostering a truly interdisciplinary conversation centered on the importance of place-based memory and scholarship. The members of this workshop went on to form the Venice Ghetto Collaboration in order to support this work. Through the lens of the Venice Ghetto, we continue our efforts to think about issues such as transcultural and intergenerational transmissions that are so central to the contemporary field of memory studies. How can the legacy and importance of this place-specific site live on for future generations, despite a dwindling Jewish community living within its borders? By bringing together a community of scholars in various humanistic disciplines, we have fostered a sense of transdisciplinarity in the Collaboration's work. Our desire is to continue producing research and pedagogical tools that make the ghetto, rooted in the Venice of 1516, relevant to the space of the global, twenty-first-century classroom.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> One of the most important intellectual achievements of the 500th anniversary of the Ghetto was the production of the exhibit catalogue entitled *Venice, The Jews, and Europe 1516–2016*. The exhibit was located at the Doge's Palace from June 19–November 13, 2016.

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