

*THE WEIGHT OF MEMORY:
MEMORY FRICTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY
LITERATURE, A REVIEW.*

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PELLICER-ORTÍN, EDITORS.

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Memory Frictions in Contemporary Literature is a valuable contribution to memory studies that calls for a transformation of trauma studies from those with a focus on Euro-American events to a different kind where the multicultural and diasporic nature of contemporary culture is considered. As María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín, the volume's editors, indicate in the introduction, this is a book about "the frictions and tensions of remembering and forgetting in contemporary memory studies" (7). The compilation also raises questions on the possible forthcoming representations of such memory (6-7).

The volume is composed of fourteen chapters divided into 4 parts that, according to Robert Eaglestone, deal with the relationship between memory and politics, memory and trauma, and in a more subtle way, memory and ethics, following the postcolonial debate on memory studies (277). The authors discussed in the volume are from diverse countries and cultures, amongst them Native American, Australian, Burmese American, Cuban American, South Korean American, US American, British, Irish and African American. To study the texts the contributors apply a plurality of critical perspectives such as ethics, postcolonial studies, space theories, narratology, feminism, gender studies, psychoanalysis, biopolitics, etc. Finally, the issues the volume explores in relation to "memory" are of very different natures, from history to identity, religion, justice,

grief, mourning, vulnerability, melancholia, etc., which have all recently become themes of critical interest.

Chapter 1, written by the book's editors, is an introduction to the whole volume and deals with the beginning of the "memory boom" in the 1990s and the consequences of making memory "a central concern [...] on a global scale" (1). The authors refer to previous studies on this "memory boom" and they also mention that most of the chapters of the book focus on how memory is often distorted in a conscious way (3). Finally, the editors mention as well how several chapters refer to the different attitudes towards the duty to remember, bringing to the table the value of forgetting, in pursuit of a global morality that may help human rights to move forward. Chapter 1 is followed by Part I of the book which comprises chapters 2, 3 and 4 and focuses, as its name indicates, on "Formal Memory Frictions".

Chapter 2, written by Jean-Michel Ganteau, displays a view of human beings as vulnerable and shows how their conflictive memories are recreated, negotiated and sometimes even converted into strength. The frictions between remembering and forgetting are also at the heart of all stories. The author analyses the novels *The Sea* (2005), by John Banville, *Even the Dogs* (2010), by Jon McGregor, and *Quilt* (2011) by Nicholas Royle, and reveals how narrative elegies replace the ethics of melancholia with that of mourning when revising troubling memories. In doing so Ganteau moves beyond traditional modes of narrating trauma by looking at it as a creative possibility instead of focusing on its pathological aspect. The novels analysed in this chapter show some sort of fascination with trauma and melancholia but seem to overcome these with the practice of solidarity, which is a positive reading of trauma. In this aspect, on the potential of nostalgia and melancholia and the creativity that may arise from them there are recent studies worthy to mention like Alastair Bonnet's *The Geographies of Nostalgia*.

Chapter 3, written by Susana Omega, explores the healing potential of narrative in Tony Morrison's short novel *Home*, which is an example of the centrality of memory in Morrison's literary work. It follows the writer's legacy to portray the oppression of African American people in general and women in particular and shows how postcolonial literature offers storytelling practices to heal the colonial wounds. According to Omega, in the case of *Home*, there is an alternation of chapters with an intradiegetic narrator-character and an extradiegetic author-narrator which shows the narrator's split ego

and his state of self-fragmentation (47). At the end of the novel it is shown that the healing process for the perpetrators can be found within the same community where they inflicted pain. This is a positive ending for a novel that resembles previous works by Morrison like *Beloved*, which portrays the challenges of healing psychic wounds.

In chapter 4, which deals with Colum McCann's historical novel *TransAtlantic*, Sandra Singer analyses how the Irish writer uses Michael Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory (65). As explained in the book's introduction by its editors, amongst the techniques employed in *TransAtlantic* are the use of different perspectives, the blurring of the limits of time and space and the mixture of fictional and autobiographical genres (9). As Singer explains, multiperspectivity is used to enrich the usual singular perspective and multiple interpretations are fostered in McCann's novel by the use of historical and personal facts, male and female testimonies, internal and external perspectives and a shift between past and present tenses (66). In the end, the histories of *TransAtlantic* are in line with Rothberg's ideal of moral solidarity with victims, which is a positive way to look at trauma that appears as well in other works of this compilation.

Part II of the book, "Collective Tensions and the Politics of Remembrance", covers chapters 5 to 7 and illustrates how past traumas and injustice may become part of the dominating discourses about centralised power and other political issues. Memory may, therefore, open venues to challenge political systems and could be used both to reinforce the idea of the nation and challenge hegemonic power structures. Another interesting publication that deals with similar issues is *Twenty Years After Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, that states that remembering the past is a political process.

In chapter 5 Paula Martín-Salván explains how Amy Waldman's novel *The Submission* (2011) deals with the current politics of commemoration and challenges questions such as the role of art to help survive dramatic events. In particular, Waldman brilliantly focuses on post-9/11 USA and gives some light as for the dangers of manipulation and appropriation of the commemoration of a communal tragedy by some groups with specific interests.

In chapter 6 Marc Amfreville examines Paul Yoon's collection of short stories *Once the Shore*, to reflect on the contradictory nature of trauma and on how the setting, a South Korean island, serves as

the spatial element where the intertwining of individual and collective memories represented across time and space take place. Chapter 7, written by Nieves Pascual Soler chooses a non-Eurocentric topic to explore memory and trauma in *Tastes like Cuba* by Eduardo Machado. The novel delves into the role of food in relation to memory and identity construction and opens up a necessary path for future research about food memories since this topic and its connection with identity construction deserve further attention. Pascual Soler affirms that the memories that help maintain the individual and collective identities for exiles are in many cases related to food and suggests to look into other authors beside Machado. Nevertheless, her introduction to the chapter explaining the different types of memory (121-26) could have been omitted since the focus of interest is on Machado's memoirs.

Part III of the book, "The Haunting Presence of the Holocaust", consists of chapters 8 to 10 and deals with how disturbing memories appear to be negotiated through generations charged with the responsibility of dealing with the haunting burden of the past. It shows how connections are essential for individuals to establish their own sense of self but also how memories may be linked with traumas of the past that may affect the present, an inheritance later generations may rebel against. The chapter's authors appearing in part III revisit as well Holocaust representation and its controversy.

Chapter 8 deals with Carmel Bird's novel *The Bluebird Café* and shows how a singular history of trauma contributes to the visibility of other traumatic histories. Bárbara Aritzi particularly focuses on the Tasmanian Aborigines' extermination and investigates their genocide, concluding that it has many similarities with the Jewish Holocaust.

Chapter 9, written by Susanne Baackmann, looks into the course of memory and postmemory in Rachel Seiffert's "Lore", the middle story of *The Dark Room*, after considering the problematic status of the Holocaust's perpetrators' descendants. She also examines the novella as an example of the shift in narrative from the victim's perspective to that of the perpetrator. According to Baackmann, "Lore" belongs to an emergent series of explorations of difficult historical episodes that take a fresh look at easily accepted judgements.

In chapter 10, María Ferrández San Miguel also deals with the Holocaust in E.L. Doctorow's *City of God*. She explains how this

novel is a key element of Doctorow's literary project because of the emphasis given to the moral duty to remember the episode of German history instilling in his readers a sense of responsibility towards the suffering of others with the aim to make the repetition of a similar event impossible.

Part IV, "Mapping Memories, Spatial F(r)ictions and Troubled Identities", (chapters 11 to 13) addresses the necessity to reconsider the theoretical framework used until now to study Eurocentric memory and trauma theory. It also claims the need to deconstruct the current trauma paradigm and establish links between the Western and non-Western worlds in order to cope with similar disquieting memories. In addition the latter part of the book reflects on the relationship between memory and place and its multiple readings. In that sense, while place is sometimes presented as a site for death, conflict and destruction, and the setting for war and alienation in some cases, in others it is the framework where the damaged self can reorganise memories and feelings (Whitehead 147).

Chapter 11, written by Silvia Martínez-Falquina, deals with contemporary postcolonial debates on how appropriate it is to use conventional trauma theory to interpret non-Western literature, specifically the Native American one. Martínez-Falquina also focuses on the necessity for a "redefinition of the relations between writer, text, reader and critic" (213). She concretely deals with Louise Erdrich's short story "Shamengwa" and explains how memory frictions can help the fight for social justice in the Native American case.

In chapter 12, Dolores Herrero analyses Wendy Law-Yone's biographical novel *The Road to Wanting* (2010) and calls for a revision of the role of place, putting emphasis on the importance of place for identity construction and explaining how the past can be resurrected and assimilated by those who tried to bury it. Herrero also investigates the subject of mobility and its destructive dimension when it has been forced upon the protagonist, as it may lead to the loss of all identity feelings.

Chapter 13 deals with questions of sovereignty and jurisdiction that still cause trouble on American Indian reservations. Ibarrola-Armendariz particularly analyses Louise Erdrich's novel *The Round House* which focuses on the past sexual assaults of Native American women and the Indians' survival strategies in a hostile socio-political context.

In the book's concluding chapter, Eaglestone mentions three topics as central to the volume: the postcolonial turn in memory studies, the relationship between memory and politics and the interaction between memory and trauma (280). He especially underlines the strong connection between memory and politics as the fact of remembering in public help people share identities and form communities, an idea that also appears in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, a collaboratively authored book about sociology (2004). In fact, being well aware of the crucial relationship between politics and memory, many politicians make good use of the connection.

Nevertheless, as Paul Ricoeur (2004) and Marc Augé (1998) argue, memory is not the past, but a representation of the past, a trace, a sign or an indication of what happened. In fact Ricoeur points out that the representation of the past refers to a double process: on the one hand, it implies going backwards but on the other hand, it means seeing something once again and in that double process, literature constitutes an undeniably powerful tool.

Many chapters of *Memory Frictions* present literary works that deal with minority groups and their struggles to escape the exclusion and alienation imposed on them by hegemonic Western forces. By doing so the volume moves away from narratives where the Western world is the one mainly portrayed in an effort to give voice to the voiceless. The book also offers an excellent opportunity to meditate on how experiences of human suffering and pain can be found everywhere and on how human beings have been dealing with memory issues along history, echoing some stories and silencing others. In that sense "Memory Frictions" represents a positive contribution to memory studies and sets a precedent for other literary works with further hidden issues to come to light.

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