

MEMORY FRICTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín, eds.

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195

It may seem that our world is caught in the present, swept up by the pandemic, climate change, migration, economic crisis and social unrest. Yet, many social movements of today (most notably Black Lives Matter/BLM and #MeToo) clearly call for another reconsideration of how the past is represented, commemorated, or silenced; of what may be deemed ‘important’ memories and which pasts and traumas are discarded as small and insignificant, or even shameful; and what the instruments are for making a former smallness big and impactful. These and many other questions are asked by the authors of the collection of critical essays intriguingly titled *Memory Frictions in Contemporary Literature* (2017), edited by María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín. On the one hand, the volume responds to the ongoing ‘memory boom’ of recent decades and the overflowing of traumatic narratives in literature, which may be seen as their natural vehicle. As Marc Amfreville, one of the contributors to the collection, suggests, “the reason why trauma has met with such success in literary and even social studies [is] the fact that it is radically indissociable from the question of representation” (107). On the other hand, the book is a timely response to the paradigm shift in trauma and memory studies, prompted by Michael Rothberg’s seminal work on multidirectional memory (2009), and an upsurge in studies of postcolonial and indigenous memory, postmemory, as well as negotiations between individual and communal memory.

The strong point of this book is the diversity of topics, materials and methodologies, including psychoanalysis, place theory, postcolonial studies, indigenous studies, as well as feminism, gender studies and narratology. An array of memories and traumas are addressed, often of a conflicting and disturbing nature, from the post-memory of the transatlantic slave-trade to commemorating 9/11, thus moving across time and space in multiple directions. As the editors stress in their detailed critical “Introduction” (Chapter 1 of the book), the purpose is to move beyond the Eurocentric model in memory studies and provide visibility for other memories, so far overshadowed by the magnitude of the atrocities of the Holocaust, but without creating a competition of suffering, which is one of the tensions of the ‘memory boom’ that the collection addresses. Martínez-Alfaro and Pellicer-Ortín propose instead to benefit from the “link between cultures” that memories of suffering and loss provide, “especially at a time marked by multiculturalism and the aftermath of decolonisation” (5). After providing a thorough overview of current debates, the “Introduction” ends by drawing attention to the inherent rich connotations of the word ‘friction’, so effectively chosen for the title, a word implying at once convergence and resistance, thus being multidirectional. As Robert Eaglestone so rightly points out in the “Conclusion”, each of the critical readings comprising this volume is of itself a “‘friction’, a complex interaction of text, ideas and critical sense” (278), making this book a model of good literary criticism, but certainly going much beyond just this.

Part I, titled “Experimentation and Genre: Formal Memory Frictions”, comprising three chapters, explores narrative and generic possibilities for communicating traumatic memories and the inherent vulnerability of subjects in possession of these memories. In Chapter 2, Jean-Michel Ganteau explores elegy as a literary vehicle allowing for a creative possibility emerging from traumatic responses. The nature of elegy lies in idealizing the past and reconnecting it with a painful present, becoming, in Ganteau’s view, a site of melancholia, pain, revision and negotiation simultaneously, as shown in Graham Swift’s *Last Orders* (1996), Nicholas Royle’s *Quilt* (2010) and Ann Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007). Focusing on mourning as performance and the politics of relationality, he shows how elegy may both tap into the utter vulnerability of all subjects, and become a site for the production of a “narrative democracy” while also revealing a potential for solidarity (38). In Chapter 3, Susana Onega scrutinises traumatic memory from an African American perspective on the basis of the late Toni Morrison’s *Home* (2012). Springing from Gavriel D. Rosenfeld’s tenet that the “politics of recognition” (42) of specific under-represented and oppressed social groups and the ‘identity politics’ emerging in the late 1980s had contributed to the ‘memory boom’ of the 1990s, with special attention to the history of oppression of ethnic minorities, women and homosexuals, Onega turns to the racial and gender tensions illuminating Morrison’s oeuvre to

show how the Nobel Prize laureate's creation has been instrumental in the "refocusing of perspective from the centre to the margins of US society and culture" (42)—an angle particularly topical in light of the recent BLM movement. In a nuanced and compelling manner, Onega explores narrative strategies employed by Morrison (including "self-fragmentation" [47], dialogic mirroring, traumatic dissociation, childhood as a trope and the borrowed structure of a fairy-tale) to discuss perpetrator trauma against the backdrop of the US-Korean war, the McCarthy era, racist eugenics and the Harlem Renaissance. Further on, in the third chapter of the section, Sandra Singer applies the narrative approach of multiperspectivity to explore Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* (2013), a novel blending Irish and African colonial experience, following Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory. One important consequence of applying the notions of multidirectionality and multiperspectivity, as stressed by Singer, is contesting the tendency of earlier memory studies to hierarchize suffering, recognizing only the "real trauma" (67) of a privileged group (most often on gender grounds, as theorized by Laura S. Brown [1995]), and proposing instead a multifocal and, thus, more inclusive representation, for instance of the often muted and silent suffering of women, as recounted in *TransAtlantic*.

197

Part II, titled "Collective Tensions and the Politics of Remembrance", engages with material representations of memory, such as memorials, places as sites of memory, food, and political tensions around these. In Chapter 5, Paula Martín-Salván meditates on the role of public art in producing a sense of communal and national identity through the experience of a traumatic event uniting a nation, or indeed segregating social or ethnic groups in what she sees as a peculiar hierarchy of mourners. Martín-Salván discusses Amy Waldman's 2011 debut novel *The Submission*, recounting the processes surrounding the controversial 9/11 in the US and the even more controversial process of its commemoration. Among the important questions asked in this essay are: "Who are the legitimate 'carrier groups' in the cultural trauma of 9/11?" (90); and what is the role of art in creating this legitimacy, particularly for American Muslims? In Chapter 6, Marc Amfreville examines the short story collection *Once the Shore* (2009) by South Korean American writer Paul Yoon, in which stories and characters are linked by fragmented memories, as well as by the human capacity to fill the gap of traumatic absence by imagination. In addition, Amfreville touches upon the environmental agenda present in the stories, prompted by the insular and oceanic setting and abundant natural imagery and symbolism present in the narrative. This aspect of the analysis could have been developed further, making for a fascinating ecocritical discussion. The section is concluded by Nieves Pascual Soler's discussion of Eduardo Machado and Michael Domitrovich's *Tastes like Cuba* (2007) in Chapter 7. Taking the subject of food as a medium of memory and national identity, as well as national,

familial and sexual tensions, the chapter is one of the most thought-provoking in the collection. It advances a compelling discussion of the protagonist's inner and outer conflict, his overcoming of various compartmentalizing pigeon-holes (of class while in Cuba, native/migrant identity in the USA and of a returning migrant back home) and eventually coming out as both queer and a nation's in-between, all through the semiotics and materiality of food. The insightful analysis in this chapter would have benefitted even more from a more explicit queer theory angle, as well as from Jopi Nyman's concept of "culinary memoir" (95), strengthening its theoretical output.

Part III, titled "The Haunting Presence of the Holocaust: Multidirectional, Transgenerational and Memorial Struggles", takes the Holocaust as a starting point in exploring other forms of genocide occurring throughout history and the world, in tune with Rothberg's concept of multidirectionality. First, in Chapter 8, Bárbara Arizti analyses Carmel Bird's *The Bluebird Café* (1990) and its representation of the extermination of Tasmanian aboriginals through the lens of the Nazi Holocaust while stressing her intention not to view the two genocides as rivals, but rather following Hannah Arendt's tenet of linking imperialism and totalitarianism. Next, in Chapter 9, Susanne Baackmann explores Rachel Seiffert's story "Lore" (2001) as an example of postmemory writings, in which the shift to perpetrator trauma in the second generation (the protagonist being a daughter of Nazi parents) contributes, as Baackmann argues, to the general shift of the focus in memory studies, presenting the position of the subject as more fluid and less fixed to earlier binaries, and thus contributing to our understanding of the great complexity involved in violent events of the past. In Chapter 10, concluding the section, María Ferrández San Miguel focuses on E.L. Doctorow's *City of God* (2000) as simultaneously an instance of "traumatic realism" (188) and an attempt to eschew being yet another "Holocaust novel" (189) proliferating in recent decades. Focusing on the literary representations of Shoah that Doctorow makes, she calls for what may be seen as the objective of the collection as a whole, to emphasise "the impossibility of coming to terms with the horrors that reside within human nature and the deeply felt moral duty to remember them, [...] in order to facilitate the necessary ethical, social and political change that would make another Holocaust impossible" (202).

The final section of the book, "Mapping Memories, Spatial F(r)ictions and Troubled Identities", continues the project of adapting Western trauma theory to more specific native realities. In Chapter 11, Silvia Martínez-Falquina discusses the problematics involved both in applying mainstream trauma theory to Native American experience and in developing a more culture-specific, indigenous trauma theory, including the novel concept of American Indian historical trauma (AIHT).

Focussing on Louise Erdrich's short story "Shamengwa" (2002), Martínez-Falquina convincingly examines narrative ways (such as focalization and multivocality, and the poetics of place) of expressing the relationality of truth and the power of storytelling, writing and the language of music as a means of overcoming grief and also of avoiding the dangers of a "single story" (216) about Native Americans, using Chimamanda Adichie's concept (2008). Next, Dolores Herrero's analysis in Chapter 12 evokes the space/place dialectic developed by Tuan, Augé and Lefebvre, used widely in environmental studies, and now entering trauma theory as well (Baker 2012). Herrero's discussion of narrative representation of place, movement, individual and communal memory, as well as ethical responsibility in Burmese-American Wendy Law-Yone's *The Road to Wanting* (2010) is among the strongest contributions to the collection. Finally, in Chapter 13, Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz returns to Louise Erdrich, this time focusing on her novel *The Round House* (2012), to examine communal memory, grief and vulnerability in a postcolonial setting, applying Toni Morrison's term "sites of memory" (260). Faithfully adhering to the 'postcolonial turn' in memory studies, Ibarrola-Armendariz inadvertently illuminates another important aspect of 'sites of memory', which he could have developed further, namely the material and environmental rhetoric applicable to indigenous experience, highlighted in the image of "flooding" (256) as both a metaphor for trauma *and* a way of dealing with it (through writing) and in the image of a buffalo as a "force" (260) and what we may call a transcorporeal connection of body, house and land.

Despite its diversity of topics, approaches and methodologies, the book achieves a remarkable unity by supporting a polyphonic and multidirectional approach to memory, and paying due attention both to the narrative, structural and literary peculiarities of the material, and its thematic, geographic and political scope. The chapters often form a multivocal dialogue with each other, illuminating similar issues from differing angles: for instance, the history of slavery, the Korean war, colonialism, the politics of mourning, the rhetoric of place, as well as polyphonic story-telling, multifocality and palimpsestic reading as a method. However, these dialogic connections are addressed in the "Introduction", but not within the chapters themselves. The collection would have benefitted from cross-referencing these interconnections, thus stressing its property as a unified monograph. Also, in addition to the laudable diversity in going beyond a Eurocentric model in trauma and memory studies, the authors may consider including in their future investigations such important angles as queer memory studies and queer black and racial studies, thus widening the proposed multidirectional paradigm even further, making it less straight and even more inclusive. Another intriguing aspect, hinted at in several chapters, but awaiting development in further writings by the authors, is drawing attention to the material, environmental connection of the precarious,

mourning body and the surrounding nature. This is only to stress that the proliferating field of memory studies has enormous potential for widening the paradigm in these directions, and I am looking forward to sequels of *Memory Frictions* by the authors of this profound and inspirational collection.

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