Engaging Memory

An Introduction

MARIA THERESIA STARZMANN

> This is my soul. It is a good soul.
> It tells me, "Come here, forgetful one."
> And we sit together.
> We cook a little something to eat,
> then a sip of something sweet,
> for memory, for memory.
>
> Joy Harjo (2012) *Crazy Brave: A Memoir*

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In many of Berlin's neighborhoods, small garden plots lie nestled between apartment complexes and busy city streets. These spaces, colloquially referred to as *Gartenkolonien* (garden colonies), answer to a common yearning to escape the humdrum of ordinary life. Originating in the mid-nineteenth century, the inner-city gardens offer working-class families an opportunity to while away their time on weekends and holidays. The gardens are, however, also part of an imaginary geography that emerged out of a particular colonial discourse in Germany, which largely excluded the lower classes from the colonial encounter abroad (Short 2012). For the urban poor, who were unwanted as settlers in the colony and exploited as factory workers in the metropole, the garden colonies served as refuge just as much as they embodied a shared desire to travel to far-flung places.

In the contemporary German cultural landscape, a curiously nostalgic ring surrounds the idea of the colony. Many garden colonies, such as the Dauerkolonie Togo (permanent colony Togo) in Berlin-Wedding, were founded after Germany had lost the entirety of its overseas territories in 1919, emerging as melancholic reminders of a powerful colonial past. Remarkably, neither the gardeners of the early twentieth century nor those of today have necessarily been to the "places in the sun" that are referenced in the names of their metropolitan retreats. How then can colonialism be subject to nostalgic recollection in contemporary Germany?

Excavating Memories

Starting out from this question, the introductory chapter to this volume explores the crooked paths that memory takes, tacking between recollection, imagination, and amnesia. It suggests that memory does not extend through time in linear fashion, but is replete with fissures and tears. As we attempt to mend the webbing of our memory, new holes continue to emerge. Just as the nostalgic recollection of colonial grandeur is hinged on amnesia regarding colonial violence, remembering cannot be decoupled from forgetting (Fletcher 2012; Hasian 2012: Rosaldo 1989; Stahl 2008). Given that the silences and amnesias of the past resonate in the present, the memory of German colonialism is fundamentally shaped not only by what is remembered but also by what is forgotten. For those who spend free evenings and weekends in the garden colony, the former German overseas territories can serve as a positive point of reference—a reminder of a once-glamorous imperial past—while the racism and economic exploitation performed against indigenous populations is eclipsed.

Because remembering is a social process, some memories but not others get established as meaningful or significant depending on present-day requirements and social expectations (Assmann 1995; Lutz and Gawarecki 2005). The formulation of memories is contingent upon knowledge of the past just as much as it relies on an active practice of not knowing (cf. Taussig 1999). Memory is selective and fickle. While there must be "a will to remember," as Pierre Nora (1989: 19) put it, such will also comes with an agreement about which aspects of the past to forget. In the Dauerkolonie Togo, for example, residents regularly run up the imperial war flag with the goal of remembering Germany's colonial past. In doing so, they

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advance a partial and revisionist view of history that does not engage the scars of colonialism, which mark the memories of many survivors and their descendants (Soyinka 2001). As Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995: 119) has pointed out, the purpose of celebrations such as raising the flag is precisely that they "impose a silence upon the events that they ignore, and that they fill that silence with narratives of power about the event they celebrate." The nostalgic view of the colony encourages citizens to sidestep the question of the links that exist between past and present racism in Germany, and in doing so they refuse accountable political practice as well as possibilities for transitional justice.

Considering that the production of silences is an active part of remembering, this volume understands memory as a contested field that is embedded within contemporary political relations. Because social groups assign different values to memories, some authors have suggested that there exists a political economy of memory (Hamilakis and Labanyi 2008). As memories are selected as meaningful in the present, remembering and forgetting function as strategies of power. This collection of essays decidedly does not explore the distant past alone, but looks into our contemporary life worlds and the forms that memory takes in the present.

When we set out to put together a book that seeks to "excavate memories," we did not strictly think of our most familiar research techniques: of archaeological excavations that use test pits, trenches, and stratigraphy in order to interpret a layered history of how people in the past referenced an even more distant past. Rather, with this book project we respond to an interest we share in exploring the links between memory and materiality and specifically how material culture is used to reinforce particular readings of the past as meaningful in the present (cf. Shackel 2003a). Drawing on as well as going beyond other scholarship in the field of archaeology (e.g., Mills and Walker 2008; Shackel 2000, 2003b; Van Dyke and Alcock 2003) and memory studies (e.g., Küchler 2002; Lowenthal 1985), we favor an analytical approach that may best be described as engaging in archaeological ways of thinking about memory.

The material world constitutes the context within which practices of remembering and forgetting are performed, with material culture both enabling and limiting human practice. Through the encounter with particular objects or spatial configurations that are already imbued with meaning—storied landscapes, memorabilia of past lives, mawkish keepsakes of child-

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hood fantasies—our practices give shape to narratives about ourselves, our families, our culture. The emerging stories are never whole, however, because every act of remembering includes a dimension of forgetting. The unremembered aspects of history accompany our memories as absences and silences.

To excavate memory is then an attempt at making present—in the sense of manifesting (González-Ruibal 2008)—those stories of the past that have been concealed or silenced and responding to them in politically and ethically accountable ways. For us, this does not mean to pull out into the open memories that hurt. We are well aware that such a move can be empowering only if it is initiated by the survivors of past suffering, lest such revealing intensify trauma. Rather, we seek to focus not on what is forgotten or remembered but on how processes of remembering and forgetting work. That is, we look at the kinds of memory practices that social groups deploy in order to constitute themselves as dominant or, alternatively, those they use as tools of liberation.

Strategies of Remembering and Forgetting

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This chapter is written less with the intent of establishing precise terminologies than with the aim of discussing working principles of memory and for clarifying the processes by which memory seemingly fails us. Considering that memories are ascribed meaning in the present, my introduction illuminates how remembering works through knowledge practices, bodily engagements, and experiences of space. Other scholars have referred to such active processes of memory making as “memory work” (Mills and Walker 2008). I draw on this concept suggesting that memory work typically plays out on a daily level, often involving routine practices through which memories become enacted and embodied, but occasionally also relying on unique or specially planned performances.

It has been suggested that memory work involves a dimension of forgetting as well, which results in the abandonment of social memories (Holtorf and Williams 2006). Forgetting is not simply a form of erasure or oblivion, however, but a fragmentation of social memory. Memories do not disappear altogether. As in the case of the Berlin flag raising, they undergo a shuffling in which one memory gets substituted for another. The complexities of memory work are due to the fact that memories are constantly being produced, altered, and abandoned. This is an important insight, because it