

Memory, Place, and Ecology in the Contemporary American Novel

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Pierre Nora's dictum that "memory attaches itself to sites" (22) has come to be an influential premise in cultural studies and will serve as one of the central propositions of this paper. Implicitly, it contains one of the key arguments established below, namely that the interconnectedness between man and the places he lives in is not only determined by factors that develop out of present motivations or concerns, but that it is closely intertwined with the specific pasts of these places as well. Following this consideration, I will argue that both individual and collective memories, stored and mediated in stories about the past, can be seen as mental and cultural operations that serve to render natural environments meaningful, turning them into 'storied places.' First, some cultural scientific theories that deal with the 'social dimension' of memory will be examined, considering memory as something which is situated in the public sphere of a society, conserved and represented in topographies of memory which are integral to its self-image and depict the meaning of human actions with respect to time. Within this social process, imaginative literature plays a vital role—a role that is not, as I will argue, reduced to the mere representation of historical places, but which consists in the creative refiguring and reshaping of canonized images of such places as well as in their revaluation and even creation.

1. The Spatial Dimension of Memory

In contemporary cultural history, environmental psychology, and social science, 'memory' and 'place' constitute two central paradigms when it comes to the study of culture and are seen as "configurations of highly flexible subjective, social and material dimensions" (Buell 60). Both fields of study developed out of the crisis of historicism in the late nineteenth century and, although their mutual interaction and reciprocity have rarely been theorized or studied, have long been perceived as associated terms—one only needs to think of the metaphorical combination of the two in ancient rhetoric as *loci memoriae*. Only lately has there been a trend to investigate the interdependency of the two: Both the mental and the cultural operations connected to place appropriation and perception have been put into focus,¹ while the role of memory has been underlined as being crucial to the way in which people and collectives situate themselves in their

¹ For an overview regarding studies of place attachment see Low and Altman; for the role of 'place' in contemporary cultural scientific and historiographical studies see Ebeling.

natural environment. Thus, history is no longer thought of as mere chronological data, but has become “spatialized” (Soja 1-2), with histories being written about geographical spaces and/or specific historical sites. At the same time, ‘memory’ has come to the forefront of the debate as a “metahistorical category” (Klein 128) describing “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (Erl 2), particularly “the ways in which people construct a sense of the past” (Confino 1386).² It is especially the latter aspect which fuses the two theoretical realms, as David Glassberg points out: “A sense of history and sense of place are inextricably intertwined,” since “a sense of history locates us in space, with knowledge that helps us gain a sense of *where we are*” (*Sense* 7-8).

Place is, in this context, thought of as a kind of spatial container or framework of human action, as the stage of historical experience. Accordingly, Lawrence Buell notes that “there never was an is without a where” (55), while Carter, Donald, and Squires define place as “space to which meaning has been ascribed” (xii). As Low and Altman point out this can be due to “personal, group, or cultural processes” (5), whereby memories of certain places can function as “psychic anchors” which are crucial for the formation of (self-)identity (Marcus 89; cf. Low and Altman 9-10). While environmental psychologists hold that individual “memories embedded in place cannot be fully experienced by anyone else” (Marcus 112) and stress the importance that these experiences and the bonding with places have for childhood development, they also underline its social aspects, arguing that “our perceptions of the environment are shaped ... by the products of our larger culture” (Glassberg, *Sense* 116).

Therefore, “identity-shaping places” are not only perceived as “personal but also as cultural artifacts” (Buell 70), and are, in memory studies, seen as being connected to the communicative memory of a society and its *milieu de mémoire* in the sense of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who, in the first half of the twentieth century, explored how individual memories were established and confirmed through social interaction. In a famous expression, Halbwachs termed this phenomenon *les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, which suggests that individual memory was shaped by and interlinked with the “social frameworks” in which an individual was socially situated. He thus conceptualized memory not as an intrinsic mental operation, but as an external context with a spatial dimension. According to Halbwachs, it is mainly through shared “group memories” that groups create and sustain a “collective memory” and, closely intertwined with it, a “collective identity” (182; cf. Erl 8).

While these ‘identity-shaping places’ or ‘frames’ in/with which a certain group of people interacts, can be considered to be meaningful for this specific group, there are, on the other hand, places which have a high degree of meaning for society as a whole and which may not be part of the living tradition of communicative memory, but rather belong to the highly symbolical and political realm which Jan Assmann has termed ‘cultural memory.’ The cultural memory is made up of a highly conventionalized pool

² Memory studies are therefore mostly concerned with the “analysis of popular images and uses of the past” in socio-cultural contexts (Glassberg, “History” 371). However, it is “a term often used in an ambiguous and vague way,” “a wide umbrella term” (Erl 1) that has, as Confino critically notes, become “a label more than a content,” lacking “critical reflection on method and theory, as well as a systematic evaluation of the field’s problems, approaches, and objects of study” (1387-88).

of texts, images, and civic celebrations, as well as war memorials and public institutions such as—museums, archives, and historic sites—situated in the public space of a society, where we are, in consequence, often confronted with a whole topography of memory. Thus we not only live in our own storied places, but in historically and culturally storied places, which are an integral part of the ‘memory culture’ within society.³ In our daily lives, we are thus surrounded by what Nora has termed *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, which function as symbolic elements of the memorial heritage of a community. Nora sees these sites of memory as “real environments of memory” (7), as “the ultimate embodiments of memorial consciousness” (12), and conceptualizes them as having an almost dialectical quality: Not only are they “closed upon” themselves, “but also forever open to the full range of ... possible significations” (24), both having a spatial dimension “available in concrete sensual experience” as well as being located in the cultural imaginary, “susceptible to the most abstract elaboration” (18).

Abstract objects and spaces can thus be turned into historical sites and places, provided that there is “an intention to remember” (Nora 19). In consequence, social interactions, texts, and mediated images of “designated local historic sites or districts connect stories of past events to a particular physical setting” so that environments come to be considered as “historical” (Glassberg, “History” 376). Accordingly, Glassberg argues that “public histories” as well as “memories provide meaning to places” (*Sense* 18), illustrating the cultural operations which turn them, in the end, into cultural artifacts. In this context, he also points to the historian and nature writer Wallace Stegner who, writing about the sense of place, notes: “No place is a place until the things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments. Fictions serve as well as facts” (Stegner 202). This leads Stegner to conclude that “no place is a place until it has had a poet” (205). This quotation is very significant for the object of investigation at hand, since it clarifies that culturally storied places are not only the subject matter of politics and historiography alone, but also of imaginative texts and literature. In its presentation of places and what happened there, literature not only draws on oral accounts or historical sources alone, but on the imagination as well, becoming an integral part of the memory culture within society, representing and renegotiating it in textual form.

In the following, the theoretical groundwork established above will serve as the background for the examination of how contemporary American authors deal with historical places, how they turn them into sources of the imagination, refiguring and reshaping them in textual form. The array of historical places examined in the novels reaches from a canonized *lieu de mémoire* of nationalist American memory, namely the American West, to places appropriated by a hegemonic cultural power, to places that

³ The generic term ‘memory culture’ points to the plurality and diversity of references to the past in a social system and has become a cipher for all forms of historical sense-making and the varying cultural processes of production, in which images of the past are brought forth and represented. Thereby, it underlines the fact that there are not only different media and texts involved in the process of the discursive formation of memory within society, but also that it is made up of divergent, often opposing forms of group memory. A memory culture can thus be seen as a dynamic, heterogenous form of symbolical social discourse—a cultural ecosystem in the sense of Peter Finke, which is not only structured around specific cultural texts, but around places as well.

have thus far been marginalized by or left out of historical discourse. It will be argued that literature serves, in this context, not only as a means of subverting dominant images of historical places, but can also serve as a site of memory itself.

2. The Subversion of the 'American West' in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

The first of the historical places to be examined, the American West, can be seen as a *lieu de mémoire* in every sense of Nora's definition. While the term 'American West' refers to a wide-stretching geographical region characterized by a high degree of diversity, it has become an American monument itself, a "region" which is also "located in history and in the imagination" (Mogen 18). It has long functioned as the cornerstone of a nationalist historiographical discourse in which the West was equated with the 'frontier,' a term defined by Frederick Jackson Turner in his infamous and influential essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), which shifted the discourse about American identity away from the heritage of European culture and institutions and steered it towards a large, not yet fully explored region, located both in geography and in the imaginary, providing the background to a rich array of cultural objectifications and narrative traditions.

The concept of the West inspired by Turner and his frontier thesis has been romanticized and fictionalized as a story of the progress of civilization and the cultivation of free land, a story claiming that the individualism and freedom connected to it was forged in its wilderness. The term "wilderness" was, as Alan Bilton states, an imperialist construction, concealing the fact that "it was occupied by around 8 million inhabitants with complex social, religious and economic practices when Europeans first started to inscribe this blank page of unvarnished nature" (94). Moreover, it was also connected to the notion of Manifest Destiny—a term coined by John O'Sullivan in 1845—which legitimized "the cultural and material exploitation of the indigenous population as a divine mission to civilize the savage," extending "the myth of pastoral onto the great plains as a domestication of the wilderness" (Cant 157).

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* subverts and undermines these ideologies and images of the West. In his novel, which traces a group of scalphunters who hunt for Indians in the border territories between these two states, the West is not a place of regeneration and revitalization of the American spirit, but rather an all-consuming wilderness, which cannot be subjugated and which becomes a reflection of the inner wilderness and savagery of man. As a historical novel, it draws on factual, verifiable historical events in the Mexican-American borderlands around 1849 and 1850. While reviews and discussions of the novel mainly note its stark portrayal of violence, it can also be seen as a highly philosophical, even metaphysical text, a meditation on history and on the act of writing about it. Two aspects of the novel are especially important for the topic at hand: the first is the subversion of the canonized image of the West as shaped by the frontier myth and Manifest Destiny, the second is its description of nature, which challenges the anthropocentrism of these ideologies.

Repeatedly, McCarthy evokes images of "archetypal myths and mythic heroes" (Spurgeon 85) like the sacred hunters of the Western borderlands, roaming the wilderness by themselves in confrontation with the beasts of nature, or the military outfits pro-

tecting the settlers and fighting off the Indians. While these heroes feature prominently in the national narratives and embody both the individualism and superiority of the "American Creed," McCarthy "rewrites and reorders" the narrative foundation of these myths, "deconstructing the imperialist aims and justifications of the old myths while disrupting assumptions about the ideas and identities they were intended to uphold" (Spurgeon 85). McCarthy's hunters and soldiers are not civilized human beings fighting for a common good, but are equated with cannibals whose violence does not lead to regeneration but to devastation. Consequently, the novel counters some of the major premises underlying imperialist ideology which had, among other things, the pretense of subjugating and cultivating foreign territories and people according to their own "enlightened" view of the world. "The suggestion is," as Sara Spurgeon writes, "that the myth has always contained within itself the anti-myth" (100), that "behind the images and rhetoric of Turner's historical narrative of the West lies a 'barbarism' in need of telling" (Campbell 217).

The ultimate embodiment of this ideology in *Blood Meridian* is the character of Judge Holden. He incorporates not only the will to use violence against any form of opposition in the quest westward, but also the philosophical and ideological background on which the imperialist progress is based, namely the proto-Darwinist belief in knowing the world and its evolution as well as controlling it by the means of science, technology, and eventually history. Holden is a natural scientist, a geologist, embodying both the heritage of enlightenment and the belief in evolution which emerged in the nineteenth century. However, he is not only a lecturer, a mere "reader" of the world around him. Quite the contrary, he is also a manipulator and shaper of his surroundings, since he carries a little ledger with him in which he collects and copies "specimens," destroying the originals and following his ultimate belief that "whatever exists in creation without my knowledge exists without my consent ... Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth" (198).

Moreover, in writing about and recording the artifacts and historical relics which the scalphunters encounter on their expeditions and in chronicling their own deeds as well, he also becomes the historiographer of the New World, writing about people and things now lost or wiped out. The Judge is therefore also an archaeologist, his ledger being his attempt to master the world through his words, of being in control of meaning. What he suggests is the belief that whoever is in control of knowledge—and the right to interpret that knowledge—in the present is in control of the past as well. Judge Holden is therefore not only trying to gain total domination over the wilderness, but also over the wilderness of human history. In his ledger, he fuses both nature and culture into a new form of knowledge, albeit a perverted, a false one, since his language is one of omission and negation. In his drive to be a creator, an author of the order in the New World, he wants to literally overwrite the palimpsests of the West, making his history and account of it the sole source of authority. As he points out, he wants to be in total control of the memory of man, obliterating and silencing many aspects of the past in order to hold dominion over it. In this context, he can be read as a symbol of how American national historiography had denied the long cultural history of the West, presenting it as an unexplored territory instead, as a tabula rasa waiting to be written into. Judge Holden is in this respect the anti-archaeologist in both hunting down and killing the inhabitants of

this territory and in destroying any evidence of their past and cultural heritage.

The novel takes the reader back to the time before the national history was written, before Judge Holden's ledger was filled and the sources of the murderous acts were destroyed, tracing the path of extinction which historiography has omitted. It not only portrays the outcome of the near-extinction of the buffalo, "the enormous ricks of bones" on the plain (324), but also re-imagines the destruction of indigenous cultures, which are lost forever. After the massacre of an Indian tribe, the Tiguas, the narrative leaves the ravaging scalphunters for once, self-reflectively turning to the debris they have left behind:

Long past dark that night when the moon was already up a party of women that had been upriver drying fish returned to the village and wandered howling through the ruins. ... All about ... the dead lay with their peeled skulls like polyps bluey wet or luminescent melons cooling on some mesa of the moon. In the days to come the frail black rebuses of blood in those sands would crack and break and drift away so that in the circuit of few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died. (174)

While McCarthy's historical narrative does not aspire to revive and restore the cultural knowledge and life form which was destroyed "in this place," it nevertheless acknowledges and conserves its historical presence, retracing and unearthing its "ruins." As Parrish points out: "This is an account of a history lost to the historian. The battle that it depicts has no meaning except that a history has been lost, and it has no archive except what is *Blood Meridian*" (116). The narrative can thus not only be seen as a counter-memory to the cultural memory of the West, but also as a counter-archaeology, working in an imaginative space in which the historical erasure is undone and in which the decomposed bones of history are put together once again.

Especially with regard to the latter aspect, the narrative also reflects the possibility of creative regeneration, of imaginative resources which help revitalize the static nature of a monumental past. Consequently, in *Blood Meridian*, the land can neither be appropriated nor subjugated. The desert is a wasteland which invokes both an impending apocalypse and an ancient time long before mankind.⁴ What the novel thereby confronts is a self-image of civilized man which sees him as the maker of things and the ruler over nature, a view that has functioned as a "motivational force in nation-building" (Wallach 9) and that also (still) inspires ideologies of progress which invoke the Biblical commandment to "subdue the Earth."

McCarthy's narrative strongly opposes this concept. The characters move in regions

⁴ Everywhere, the riders not only find the ruins of forlorn, old villages and destroyed churches, but also monumental leftovers of a time preceding—and outlasting—civilization. The riders pass "trapdykes of brown rock running down the narrow chines of the ridges and onto the plain like the ruins of old walls, such auguries everywhere of the hand of man before man was or any living thing" (50) and "sandstone cities ... past castle and keep and windfashioned watchtower and stone granaries in sun and in shadow" (113), with "mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like the land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear" (47).

which “seem to rim the known world”; what awaits them beyond the borders of the world as man knows it is “mystery” and “silence”—two key words of the novel—and an all-consuming landscape whose description alludes to images of hell, referring to it as “a terra damnata of smoking slag” (61) with “the earth floating off in a long curve silent under looms of smoke from the underground coal deposits burning there a thousand years” (138). This is a region of the planet which cannot be known, cannot be explored, nor exploited, one which is adversary to man. In *Blood Meridian*, the West is not a wilderness to be cultivated or civilized, but a neutral space, where man can claim nothing for himself and is at the mercy of creation itself:

The horses trudged sullenly the alien ground and the round earth rolled beneath them silently milling the greater void wherein they were contained. In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

McCarthy’s narrative does away with an anthropocentric view of the universe, replacing it with a perspective which focuses on both the greater surroundings, “that great void” containing all things and “the very clarity of the articles” within it, taking on and embodying the “optical democracy” of the creational form to which all things succumb. The narrative thereby redirects the reader’s own optical standpoint toward the West and the Earth, challenging the notion of the world as a hierarchical space with man on the top of an evolutionary pyramid and giving way to a “biocentrism” and a “pastoral aesthetic,” “elevating nature ... to an existential rank equal to that of human beings” (Guillemin 73-79). In this way, *Blood Meridian* not only challenges the way in which the West has been portrayed and represented in cultural objectifications, but also negates the way in which it has been turned—through the act of naming, ordering, and embedding it within a historical discourse—into a site of memory. As Guillemin notes in his ecocritical reading of the novel, *Blood Meridian* transcends this discourse and “negotiates the meaning of human history ... within a meaningful nature, and thereby qualifies its existential status” (100).

3. The Re-Appropriation of Memory and Place in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*

While *Blood Meridian* deals with a highly canonized site of memory, the other two examples to be discussed below focus on places which have thus far either been removed or absent from the hegemonic cultural memory, or on places that have been occupied by a dominant cultural system while remaining a central reference point for the collective identity of a marginalized ethnic group—places, in a word, which can be said to be contested. Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977) deals with a place of the latter kind, namely the Laguna reservation located in the desert of New Mexico. The novel depicts the trauma of the war veteran Tayo, who has fought in the Philippines and who is, at the

beginning of the novel, numbed by severe shell-shock. As a half-Indian orphan, he has not only felt the oppression of Indians by the white culture, but is also an outsider in the Indian community in which he lives. Trying to find his way between the intolerant worldview of the white society, his alcoholic fellow veterans, and the Indian traditions, Tayo undergoes two ceremonies—a traditional one and eventually a successful one, infused with new elements—in order to be healed and to be finally reintegrated into his tribe.

Silko carefully invokes allusions to monumentalized aspects of the American past in her narrative, only to uncover its hidden meanings and destructive results in the figure of Tayo. Like his fellow Indian veterans, he is celebrated as a ‘war hero’ in the aftermath of the Second World War.⁵ While the American public and official histories have transformed the war in the Philippines into a cohesive narrative, which presents it as a heroic battle and the dead soldiers as martyrs who not only fought to defend their country but for the sake of world peace, Tayo is unable to come up with such a narrative that would allow him to embed his memories into a meaningful frame. Rather, he is haunted by the memories of his time as a soldier in the Pacific jungle, especially of his time as a prisoner of war. Tayo’s traumatic past is “revealed obliquely through stream of consciousness and multiple flashbacks” (Dennis 41) during the first part of the novel, becoming “a shuffled collection of images and experiences with little coherence” (Teuton 129).

The narrative repeatedly interweaves different time levels—the traumatic past of the war and the present merge, creating an imaginative space that reflects on the inner confusion of the traumatized veteran and gives insight into his state of alienation. He has not only lost his orientation in both time and space, but also his sense of self and, accordingly, his sense of place. When he is released from the military hospital and collapses at the train depot in Los Angeles, he hears Japanese voices that belong to Asian Americans who find him lying in the streets. His hallucinations lead him to confuse them with soldiers, which makes him think that he is back in a Japanese prison camp. In the face of a little Japanese boy, he believes to perceive his dead cousin Rocky. Confused by these impressions, he has a nervous breakdown, crying “at how the world had come undone, how thousands of miles, high ocean waves, and green jungles could not hold people in their place. Years and months had become weak, and people could push against them and wander back and forth in time” (18).

The narrative thereby illustrates the episodic memory of a traumatic moment which could not be depicted otherwise, since it self-reflectively points to the fact that memories constantly interact with the realm of the imaginary. His senses were corrupted as much in the past by the violent reality of the war as they are now in the present. His memories are often triggered unconsciously, mostly by various sounds which, in turn, become connected with violence and unbearable images thereof. Therefore, Tayo’s daily life becomes a struggle; he literally lives with—and in—a history that he cannot bear to call his own and that disrupts his orientation and weakens his will to live: “He

⁵ He has fought in the Philippines, where the American Army suffered the highest number of casualties during the war and, more importantly, he has survived the notorious Bataan Death March, still a traumatic *lieu de mémoire* for Americans, since many prisoners of war died of disease, exhaustion, and maltreatment by Japanese soldiers.

was tired of fighting off the dreams and the voices; he was tired of guarding himself against places and things which evoked the memories" (26). Thus, in a way, the war has never ended for him, but continues in the present as a fight with his own imagination. In this way, he becomes an embodiment of many war veterans, who, in a sense, never returned from the fighting. That Tayo's experience has a much broader scope can be seen in the fact that he feels guilty not only because of the death of his cousin, but also because he thinks that he is responsible for a terrible drought that has taken hold of the Indian reservation for six long years, since he has cursed the never-ending rain in the Philippine jungle. The drought becomes, in the course of the novel, the main metaphor for an unbalanced, disharmonious world and a postwar society unable to cope with the devastating heritage of a long world war.

Ceremony puts part of the blame for this condition on the army and its scientists, and by extension on the dominant structures of white society. Tayo has been treated in a military hospital in California, where he was given drugs which "drained memory out of his thin arms and replaced it with a twilight cloud behind his eyes" (15). Instead of restoring within him a new sense of his self and of his identity, the doctors work to eradicate his cultural roots by prohibiting him from using traditional Indian medicine and by cutting him off from the outer world. As Tayo self-reflectively points out, the hospital can be perceived as a 'non-place': "They sent me to this place after the war. It was white. Everything in that place was white. Except for me. I was invisible" (123). The sterility and plainness of the hospital reflect not only a prescribed erasure of the past, but also the 'whiteness' of American society as a whole and with it the negation of modes of cultural emotions and expressions foreign to hegemonic society. The drugs that Tayo gets also manipulate his sense of location, displacing him from his home on the reservation.

In this context, Silko's novel points to another aspect which lies at the core of the Indian desperation after the war: They had fought for a country which had dispossessed them of their territories and had exploited the natural resources of their reservations. "Every day they had to look at the land, from horizon to horizon, and every day the loss was with them; ... So they tried to sink the loss in booze, and silence their grief with war stories about their courage, defending the land they had already lost" (169). Silko presents her readers with *lieux de mémoire* of the physical landscape of the Indian reservation which have been appropriated by whites by means of law and intimidation. Thus, the whites fence in territories, build farms and houses, and instruct the Indians where to live—an aspect on which the medicine man Betonie reflects when talking about the town Gallup:

They keep us on the north side of the railroad tracks, next to the river and their dump. Where none of them want to live. ... You know, at one time when my great-grandfather was young, Navajos lived in all these hills. ... They had little farms along the river. When the railroaders came and the white people began to build their town, the Navajos had to move. ... It strikes me funny, ... people wondering why I live so close to this filthy town. But see, this hogan was here first. Built long before the white people ever came. It is that town down there which is out of place. Not this old medicine man. (117-18)

While Betonie's speech makes clear that Gallup and the Indian territories are a land ruled by the normative and economic systems of the hegemonic society, he nevertheless points to the fact that the Indian people have their roots there and are bound up with the country by their customs and traditions. It is in this context that Betonie eventually performs an old Indian ceremony infused with new elements to cure Tayo.

A vital part of Betonie's ceremony consists of restoring in Tayo a sense of the country of his ancestors. In many ways, old Betonie symbolizes the cultural memory of the Indian people, an "ethnic group memory" which is, to a large degree, "embedded in landscape features" (Glassberg, "History" 378). While the dominant whites have used its power and its money to make the land theirs, they cannot own it because they do not belong to it. To the Indians, however, the land is a storied place, described and conserved in many mythical stories, songs, and chants which Silko embeds and evokes in the novel. Consequently, the ceremony which Betonie conducts consists to a large part of stories—stories which help Tayo make sense of the places that surround him and of the pain and feeling of loss that brood in him. The land becomes, in this context, in its being connected to Indian history, a natural resource which is used to heal Tayo from his personal trauma and embeds his own story in a broader collective frame.

Already in the first lines of the novel, storytelling is established as a main concern and equated with a form of creating and preserving life. It becomes an ethical undertaking, "fighting off illness and death" and conserving the identity, the "life for the people" (Silko 2). Rather than being a static, superordinate textual structure, the story which is about to unfold is equated with an organism, a living thing that can be touched and in whose "belly" the reality which it reflects constantly changes. Storytelling, it is suggested, is not so much prefigured by an outer reality, but rather configures the social reality constantly, creating and shaping it. Storytelling thus becomes a being of its own, a life force on which all living things depend, and a way of reintegrating traditional Indian discourse into the present and of inciting a process of regeneration whose ultimate aim is to heal the sense of confusion and alienation at the beginning of the novel.

Tayo is sent on a quest to retrieve lost cattle in the mountains of the reservation. One of the primary ways by which Tayo learns to oppose the manipulative dominant discourse and to make sense of his past experience in order to regain a new sense of his self and of purpose is by transforming his traumatic past in the course of his quest. He re-establishes a connection with nature and the natural resources of the reservation, moving into the mountains in search of the cattle. All the while, his path is guided by Betonie's sandpaintings.

On his quest, he is supported by natural earth powers, which are rendered as personifications, while, on the other hand, persons that he encounters can be seen as embodiments of elemental forces of Indian mythology. The key figure, in this context, is the mysterious Ts'eh, who is equated with Yellow Woman, an Indian mythological figure, who helps him on his larger quest that consists of restoring the balance and harmony between the people and the land, so that the rain returns and the drought ends. She reconnects him with the country, teaching him about roots and plants that they gather together. Furthermore, she leads him to confront his past once again, transforming his traumatic memories into affirmative ones, encouraging him to "remember. Remember everything" (235). The visions and flashbacks that had plagued Tayo at the beginning of the novel are replaced with dreams of Ts'eh and dreams of love that also restore his

connection with the land: "He dreamed he made love with her there. He felt the warm sand on his toes and his knees; he felt her body, and it was as warm as the sand, and he couldn't feel where her body ended and the sand began" (222).

Memory becomes a life force and imaginative energy that does not disrupt the present, but that can enrich it by conserving aspects of the past that would otherwise be lost. The narrative suggests that the memories of the traumatic experience of the war can be replaced with other memories that remind Tayo of the love between him and his cousin and uncle and, in turn, become life-affirming:

The dreams had been terror at loss, at something lost forever, but nothing was lost; all was retained between the sky and the earth, and within himself. He had lost nothing. The snow-covered mountain remained, without regard to titles of ownership or the white ranchers who thought they possessed it. ... The mountain could not be lost to them, because it was in their bones. (219)

The collective identity, the feeling of belonging to the Laguna reservation, this *lieu de mémoire* can be, it is suggested, regained by reviving memories that have been overwritten by negative or destructive ones, by learning how to tell different stories of the past that do not concentrate on loss or despair, but on a deep connection to the land and its history which cannot be taken away from the Indians. The narrative pattern of the novel undergoes a transition itself. From a counter-discourse that criticises the hegemonic discourse of American society and presents its readers with traumatic images and experiences of the past missing from the canonized history and omitted from the cultural memory, it develops into a regenerative story about learning how to make sense of painful memory, restoring old traditions in the present and bringing about new forms of aesthetic expression and of cultural knowledge by fusing various stylistic and discursive threads.

Thus, the narrative self-reflectively ties the different story patterns together in the end, when Tayo's individual experience is placed within a broader collective perspective that not only encompasses that of the Indians, but rather extends to the whole world. His visions of devastation and despair become world-spanning webs whose connections are uncovered and made visible by storytelling itself. This revelation dawns on Tayo at a central place in the novel, namely the uranium mine that had delivered the raw material for the destructive power of the atomic bomb. It is here that the local history of the Indians and their country takes on a transnational perspective and is connected to world history. It is suggested that the trauma and desperation which has haunted the Indians for so long has been embedded in the earth itself, in a "circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colours of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter" (246). Storytelling becomes a way of uncovering the underlying connections of world history—not only of how geographically divided places are connected, but also of how people are connected to these places. In this context, storytelling is a regenerative way of reintegrating traumatic memories into a narrative frame, of restoring a balance between man and his natural surroundings, as well as a way of taking responsibility for the way we interact with the places we live in.

4. The Novel as a Site of Memory: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

While *Blood Meridian* subverts the canonized images of an American site of memory and *Ceremony* deals with a highly contested cultural place, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* seeks to revitalize historical events which have not yet found proper attention, and to present a forgotten past for the first time, (re-)imagining places of trauma or absence. As will be shown in the following, *Beloved* is not concerned with mere representation, but with new creation by revitalizing oral traditions of storytelling and by recreating a communicative memory of the black slave experience in its tracing the life and life memories of the escaped slave girl Sethe, who, together with her children, has fled from the cruel slaveholder, Schoolteacher, to Cincinnati. Although she lives in freedom there, she is afflicted by the past in many ways. 124 Bluestone Road, where she lives, is a ghost house, haunted by the ghost of her dead baby girl, Beloved, whom Sethe killed when Schoolteacher tracked her down in Cincinnati and tried to take her and her four children back into slavery. Ever since the murder of Beloved, the house is avoided by the community and has become a place of "spite" (3) and "grief" (6), as it is described in the opening pages of the novel. It is a symbol not only of the torment which Sethe's deed has inflicted on her own soul and on her loved ones, but also of the past that she tries to "disremember" and to "beat back" (86), namely the memory of her life as a slave on the Sweet Home plantation.

The novel eventually traces the lost and scattered fragments of the self, identity, and correspondingly history that slavery has left behind in its progression, while it moves from the outside, from historical surroundings and relics—*les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* in the sense of Halbwachs—into the inside, where it counters and opposes repression. Accordingly, historical experience "works through the unconscious" (Raynaud 48) in Morrison's novel, haunting the characters in their daily lives. Everyday tasks can become a torment for Sethe when she is filled with episodic memories of Sweet Home:

... rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (7)

Sweet Home is a place of trauma, where Sethe was raped and violated by Schoolteacher's nephews and where other slaves were tortured and killed. It is a place of commercial slave trade and slave work and is associated with horrible memories by Sethe, which are brought back in a state of suddenness and without intention. Although these memories are anything but "sweet" and the plantation was certainly not "home" for the slaves, Sethe cannot help but have almost idyllic images of it in her mind which do not correspond to the pain that she had to endure there. While she would like to demonize the place and to visualize it in darker images, she cannot do so. The narrative thereby reflects on how memory may reappear at any time, bringing with it not only innocent

memories of “beautiful sycamores,” but traumatic images as well. Although the latter may have been repressed, they are nevertheless there and may resurface, having branded themselves into the minds of the former slaves, where they continue to make up their identity—an identity filled with complexes and even a sense of guilt. Traumatic places are traumatic not because of the way they look or because of their location or natural environment, but because of the things that happened there—things which do not allow for a meaningful, coherent story to be told about that place, but rather resist presentability and tellability.

Consequently, the plot only develops slowly, in narrative starts and stops that fragment the text through variation and repetition. In order to re-enact the slave experience and to recover the slaves’ memories, the novel makes use of a multiperspective approach which not only reflects on the way stories are told, but also on how they are reconstructed to make sense of the past.⁶ Paul D, who is also a former slave of the Sweet Home plantation, comes to Bluestone Road after years of wandering. His arrival sets in motion a confrontation of the shared traumatic past by the two former slaves in whose turn the ghost is driven out of Bluestone Road and eventually comes back in the physical form of a young woman, Beloved. Together, Paul D and Sethe confront their shared history by talking about their past experiences, while their memories cling to places as well as colours, objects, or scents and attach themselves to a mnemonic landscape. History is thus never over, but it “exists always in the realms of the mind and senses as well as in specified places” (Ferguson 158) and becomes a fragmented network that fuses past and present, (dis)connecting space and time as well as the characters.

This “interconnectedness of minds, past and present” (Rody 93) is expressed through what Morrison calls ‘rememory,’ which reflects the omnipresence of the past in the deeper structures of reality (cf. Zapf 163-64) from where it can enter the characters’ senses at any time. Although (the act of) rememory can be linked to individual memory and experience, it “stands outside the subject” (Raynaud 56), a relic of the past that not only belongs to and haunts the ones who lived through it, but also their descendants, as Sethe reflects:

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there ... Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you ... (43-44)

⁶ The constant longing for and sharing of *history* and stories that the novel presents and creates, along with the character constellation it entails, are at the very core of Morrison’s re-enactment of communicative memory and allow her to produce a “symphony of voices through her use of interior monologues, streams of consciousness, flashbacks and ambiguously shifting narrative points of view” (Mitchell 89-90), filtering “the absent or marginalized oral discourse of a pre-capitalist black community through the self-conscious discourse of the contemporary novel” (Pérez-Torres 92).

Sweet Home becomes, in this context, the central relic of a torn and fragmented past, a traumatic place whose presence and effect can still be felt and lingers on. The slave experience is forever attached to Sweet Home's remnants from where it can reach out to other places, into the present and into the second generation's identity, making them slaves as well—slaves of the past and of memory, that is. In this sense, the former slaves have not only lost a part of their selves there, but have also taken a part of Sweet Home with them, which makes them fragmented selves. A fate that also dawns on the second generation and that can only be avoided by “disremembering” the past, Morrison's equivalent of forgetting or repressing.

However, the novel suggests that this is not an option. Its aim is conversely to counter forgetting, by visiting these places, these *lieux de mémoire* of America's cultural memory and consciousness and by unearthing their stories, for the slaves' experiences want to—have to—be shared and confronted to ensure survival. In fact, it is in this context that “storytelling becomes the text's self-conscious task,” functioning as a “talking cure” (Rody 91) for its characters, symbolizing the “double-edgedness of memory” (Raynaud 44), its haunting as well as healing aspect and the possibility of becoming coherent in/with the world again. As Raynaud points out, “untold stories must be told for repressed memories to emerge” (49) so that they can finally be exorcised.

A story of great importance which recurs constantly in the course of the novel and which can be seen as a kind of counter-story to the ones of killings and torture, is the story of how Denver, Sethe's daughter, was born. There are two relatively long accounts of this birth in the novel. In one instance, Denver imagines the circumstances of her birth on her mother's flight from Sweet Home. Like a medium, this story imaginatively stands—like a place—before her, something which she can enter at any time (“Easily she stepped into the told story that lay before her ...” [36]). The other instance occurs shortly after *Beloved* has entered 124 and Sethe tells her the story. It becomes the opposite pole to the story of the death of *Beloved*, regenerating the past in a positive way, refiguring and revitalizing the images stored in the cultural memory with new and other stories to tell:

On a riverbank in the cool of a summer evening two women struggled under a shower of silvery blue. They never expected to see each other again in this world and couldn't care less. But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern ... The water sucked and swallowed itself beneath them. There was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well. (100)

Denver's name functions like a *lieu de mémoire* of this moment, an answer to Amy Denver's plea “You gonna tell her? Who brought her into this here world?” (100). At the same time, her story can be read as symbolizing a new beginning for the slaves, leaving behind a condition of “death-in-life” and a revitalization of life energies (Zapf 155-79) by embarking on a new life in “freedom,” albeit with restrictions and torment, inflicted by traumatizing memories, or as Amy puts it: “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (Morrison 42). Denver's story becomes in this context, to echo the epilogue of the novel, “a story to pass on.”

Yet, while Morrison's text seeks to uncover the mnemonic fragments of the former slaves and to turn them, in the process of storytelling, into a coherent, meaningful

narrative, it becomes clear that this past can only be approached, that there remains something incommensurable which is beyond language. This aspect becomes apparent in the second part of the novel during a series of monologues reimagining the Middle Passage, i.e. the transfer of the slaves from Africa to America. The Middle Passage is an episode which is absent from the cultural memory of America—just like the places the slaves were taken from, the towns and landscapes in Africa which are conserved only in the songs and dances of the slaves and which are only alluded to in the course of the narrative. Apart from the ‘otherness’ of the slave experience which Morrison’s text seeks to convey, there is therefore another ‘otherness’ at work, which is, in fact, at the very center of this experience.

It is embodied by the return of the murdered child in the character of Beloved, who vividly and associatively—once in direct speech, once in an interior monologue—describes what it was like on that ‘other side’ Sethe sent her to. Her interior monologue is part of the series of the monologues mentioned above and, although initially told from her perspective (“I AM BELOVED and she is mine” [248]), evolves into an open narrative pattern:

in the beginning the women are away from the men and the men are away from the women storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men that is when I begin to be on the back of the man for a long time I see only his neck and his wide shoulders above me I am small I love him because he has a song when he turned around to die I see the teeth he sang through his singing was soft his singing is of the place where a woman takes flowers away from their leaves and puts them in a round basket. (250)

There is no punctuation in Morrison’s narrative at that point. The narrative disrupts and dissolves into associations that allude to the slave ships and the people who died on them, as well as to the place they have been taken away from, i.e. Africa.⁷

Hence, through her writing Morrison does not only reflect on this part of cultural memory, but reconfigures it, “reconceiving the historical novel as memorial” (Rody 89). Her novel thus becomes a place of commemoration itself which counters social amnesia and fills in the blanks of cultural memory; and in reimagining the slave experience it becomes a kind of custodian, a site of memory itself. Morrison not only seeks to replace or rewrite memory, but to shape and create it; since there has not been a *milieu de mémoire* which upheld (communicative) memory of the nature and consequences of slavery Morrison sets out to create a *lieu de mémoire* of it which had thus far been missing in America’s historical landscape and its cultural memory.

5. Conclusion

One of the main arguments of this paper has been that literary writing participates in the cultural operation of place-making, of “transforming otherwise ordinary environments

⁷ Beloved has, in this context, often been read as a symbol of the unnamed “sixty million and more” that the title page (re)calls from the dead (cf. Rody 96; Zapf 169).

into ‘storied’ places” (Glassberg, *Sense* 116). It can focus on culturally sanctioned and canonized *lieux de mémoire*, disrupting and undermining their former meanings, and turn them into an anti-monument, refiguring that monumental side of culture from which it takes its symbols. In this context, literary writing becomes a form of archaeology, imaginatively uncovering different layers of the past and stirring it up by evoking its omitted or forgotten aspects. At the same time, it can (self-reflectively) point to the instability and the fictional fabric of our topographies of memory, opening them to renegotiation and reflecting on the fact that cultural systems—and sites of memory—are bound and created within a dialectical process of “consolidation” and “liquidation” (A. Assmann 24).

Within this cultural ecosystem, literature can not only reflect on the frameworks of memories but can also become a kind of measure for their deficiencies and blind spots by focusing on aspects of the past which have thus far been marginalized or omitted, subverting dominant and canonized images of the past, with its poetological re-enactment and recreation of forgotten voices. Literary texts can turn into imaginative sites of the (re)negotiation and (re)appropriation of historical places, (re)connecting them to alternative memories and stories. Finally, literary texts can even take on the role of *lieux de mémoire* themselves, filling in the blanks of the cultural memory and providing a framework which enables remembrance.

With regard to the places that feature so strongly in our environmental perception and historical orientation, literature can thus be said to bring about a productive transformation of our topographies of memory in that it not only presents us with new perspectives concerning historically storied places, but also in that it broadens our perception of them by adding new meanings—and even places—to our cultural frameworks. History is, in this sense, not a cultural domain that is over and done with and stands as an unchangeable static symbolic construct in the public space, but rather a dynamic and shifting form of social discourse that not only involves texts alone, but that also interconnects and interacts with the way in which we perceive our environments and the places we live in.

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