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## **Embodied Memories, Embodied Meanings: Mind, Matter, and Place in the Works of Siri Hustvedt**

In *The Poetics of Space*, his now classic phenomenological study of how ordinary and intimate spaces inform our thoughts, memories, and dreams, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote about the significance of early childhood places for later orientation and development:

[...] over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. [...] We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme. The word habit is too worn a word to express this passionate liaison of our bodies, which do not forget, with an unforgettable house. (Bachelard 1994: 14–15)

Bachelard's tophilic exploration of our environments is a stark reminder of how we become bonded to abstract spaces. Yet, rather than attributing this close bond to a specific meaning attached to a space, for instance through a narrative, his account depicts this intricate relationship as a prereflective one. If there is meaning attached to a space, it is, for Bachelard, an embodied one, a feeling rather than a reflective or cognitive process. Lived or inhabited places have, in their materiality, a presence that acts on us, whereas our bodies, in turn, act on our environments and become their own agents of memory that “retain habitualized patterns” and “reproduce pleasurable, traumatic, and indifferent experiences that we have undergone in the past” in relation to a place (Trigg 2012: 12).

Bachelard's observations are remarkable in their own right, yet, they also help to illustrate a recent trend in (cultural) memory studies that puts new emphasis on embodiment and the significance of bodily and perceptual experience for acts of remembering (or forgetting). What had once been dominated by approaches that underlined the social constructedness of both individual and collective memories and had conceptualized memory as a predominantly cognitive capacity of our brains that was often rendered in analogy to computers, has turned into a debate where the body resurfaces as a container of and a “ground for the past to reappear” (Trigg 2012: 13). Next to the linguistic and symbolic medialization or narrativization of what once was, thus stands a prelinguistic and pre-reflective account of the past that is highly ambiguous: Not only because it may be hard to put into words, but also because it is both subjective (stored

in the living organism of an individual body) and intersubjective (situated at the border zone between the matter of the body and the matter of the world).

One contemporary writer who has repeatedly explored the relationship between embodiment, memory, and our storied and material worlds is Siri Hustvedt. In the following, I want to look at the role that the notion of body memory plays for her writings in order to show that the process of meaning-making in her work – both of the past and of oneself – follows a dialogical principle, combining an embodied take on the past and an encounter between the self and the (non-)human world. Before I will illustrate this argument with an analysis of *The Shaking Woman* and *The Sorrows of an American*, I will briefly sketch out recent theories of body memory and relate them to Hustvedt's essayistic work that can itself be seen as a highly innovative and important addition to (cultural) memory studies.

## 1. The Architecture of Memory between Mind and Matter

For more than two decades, memory studies have become one of the dominant thematic strands of literary and cultural studies as well as of historiography. They have blossomed into a vibrant field of interdisciplinary inquiry with manifold publications dedicated to the subject that are dominated, in part, by widely different approaches to an individual (and social) phenomenon which seems to elude any neat categorization or definition (cf. Schliephake 2014a: 303–312). For although it may seem clear enough what memory is – we all have a memory or can confidently say 'I remember' – the issue of how we store past experiences within our minds, how we retrieve them and how we ascribe meaning to them is another story altogether, leading to complex epistemological and ontological questions. The subject of memory is, after all, bound up with two fundamental problems that both the humanities and the sciences have been grappling with since at least the Cartesian divide, namely: *who* are we and *what* are we? On a subjective level, cognitive psychologists have underlined the significance of episodic or autobiographical memories for a personal sense of self or identity. For a long time, memory was viewed as a relatively stable mental faculty, situated in the realm of the mind. While this view has come under attack from both psychoanalysis and recently from neuroscience and has been replaced by a dynamic-functional model of memory, it has also been substituted by one that highlights the material and embodied fabric of this faculty (cf. Hahn 2010). The dualism that had long dominated the debate seems to increasingly give way to a more

unified approach that thinks mind and bodily matter together in order to explore how our human actions or capacities – like memory – function and how they can be seen as processes that are at the same time cognitive, emotive, and embodied (cf. Schliephake 2014b). As Bianca Maroia Pirani and Ivan Varga put it, “the memory of the body is an impressive refutation of the dualism of consciousness and the physical body” (Pirani and Varga 2011: xxx), while memory is now

conceived as a complex and diffuse mental faculty which does not reconstruct the past faithfully, but instead is responsible for a continuing process producing individual memories that depend on the meaning ascribed and the emotions linked to the embodied experience of the individual. (xii–xiii)

Only two decades ago, when cultural memory studies became a key topic in cultural studies and historiography, this definition would hardly have fitted into the dominant theoretical

frameworks of the day. Originating against the background of overall demographic shifts and political sea changes – above all, the slow disappearance of the generation that had survived the Holocaust and the fall of the Soviet Union – memory studies followed, at least in the humanities, a predominantly constructivist agenda: Rather than constituting an intrinsic mental faculty, memory was seen as a collective cultural phenomenon, socially produced and externalized in different media that made up, in their interplay and in how they interpreted the past, the topography of memory of a society. Especially European scholars like Pierre Nora (1989) and Jan Assmann (1992) conceptualized memory as a normative category with which social systems ascribe meaning to historic sites and construct a collective sense of identity, leading to a fundamental change in how history was seen: instead of forming a coherent chronological set of events with an unambiguous narrative, history came to the fore as a multi-layered and complex social phenomenon in which the imagination plays a central role. Accordingly, the focus shifted from the question of *what* happened in the past to *how* this past is actively remembered, symbolized, and collectively shared. Cultural memory studies, then, can be defined as a strand of cultural studies that explores the collective frameworks of individual remembering not as a primarily mental operation, but rather as a context-dependent social undertaking in which culturally decoded frames of meaning (e. g. narrative patterns, metaphors, symbols) play a fundamental role.

It was only towards the end of the millennium that this social constructivist view was broken up in favor of a more subjective conceptualization that highlighted the role of the individual in negotiating, selecting, and interpreting the past from a wide array of sources that could be both social and private. This also led to a re-surfacing of authors like Henri Bergson (2004) or Aby Warburg

(2010) in a debate that had thus far rather been dominated by the writings of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992). While the latter defined memory as a capacity that depends on the “social frameworks” (Halbwachs 1992: 35) in which we remembered the past and the way we made sense of our experiences through social interaction, the former highlight the role of the individual in making sense of his/her own past – a past that although it had to be made sense of through language, may not be integrated easily into the collective frameworks of the social surroundings that could, in the end, attain its meaning against dominant systems. Again, predominantly European scholars like Sigrid Weigel (1994) or Aleida Assmann (1999) underlined the subjective and bodily aspects of memory and laid emphasis on the affective and emotive character of remembering, thus also turning towards the repressed, subconscious or traumatic traces of the past engrained in an individual or social body. In fact, in their insistence on the material processing of memory through the matter, including also the neurons and nerve cells of the body, recent cultural memory studies can also be seen as being influenced by the so-called “material turn” that is currently re-shaping the humanities (cf. Schliephake 2013). In sum, the focus has shifted from a memory that is socially constructed to one of lived experience, thereby also opening the debate to an interdisciplinary dialogue with neuroscience, phenomenology, or psychoanalysis.

I would argue that it is exactly in this context that a writer like Siri Hustvedt can both enrich and broaden the debate (cf. Schliephake 2014b). Especially in her essayistic work, Hustvedt has repeatedly written about the role of memory in creative encounters with the world, in constructing a sense of self (incoherent though it may be), and in making sense of a past that may resist any clear interpretation. In her latest collection of essays, *Living, Thinking, Looking*, she sketches out a highly complex conception of memory that is, at the same time, narrative, material, intersubjective, and imaginative and moreover draws on a wide array of sources, at once consolidating the field and at the same time signaling new directions for future research. Thereby, her writings are not situated within any narrow disciplinary frameworks, but can rather be regarded as intellectual and discursive hinges or connecting links between various disciplines. In her insistence on the role of storytelling and the power of the imagination, she not only manages to offer vivid and accessible accounts of the subject within a de-pragmatized medium, but frames her remarks within the one medium that is itself central to how we make sense of the past: Whenever we tell of a past experience or retrieve it in our minds, we frame it in a symbolic or linguistic way in order to ascribe meaning to it and make it coherent. Whenever we remember, we inevitably *story* the past, just like we *story* ourselves.

As Hustvedt puts it herself,

as embodied beings we live in a world that we explore, absorb and remember – partially, of course. We can only find the *out there* in the *in here*. [...] Our thinking, feeling minds are not only made by our genes but also through our language and culture. (Hustvedt 2012: 31–32; emphasis original)

One of the primary ways by which our culture – as memory studies have shown over and over again – influences our individual acts of remembering is by providing us with narrative patterns, story structures or symbolical frameworks that help us in situating our past experiences within a meaningful setting that can be productively used for identity-shaping processes and for sharing with others. What is, however, important to note in Hustvedt's writing is that this process involves more than mere cognition but is already taking place on a level that is pre-reflective, or prelinguistic. Her insistence on the embodiment of all meaning, of all storied acts as it were, puts this claim into a new perspective and also problematizes a clear sense of self: "We become ourselves through others, and the self is a porous thing, not a sealed container. If it begins as a genetic map, it is one that is expressed over time and only in *relation* to the world" (70). Hustvedt's account of memory is one of bodily and sensual immersion in a world of intersubjective encounters, where we become open to both human and non-human others (343) that shape our sense of who we are. Memory, then, is both engagement and encounter – with others but also with oneself as another:

[...] self-conscious narrative memories gain their flexibility – motion in time – and their mutability – they are not reliable but continually reconstructed over a lifetime – in language. They depend on our ability to see ourselves as others see us. (210)

Conscious episodic or autobiographic memories are therefore, for Hustvedt, as much situated in the realm of the imaginary as they are in the traces of past experiences in the material world. Recovering these traces is never an arbitrary, stable process, but a highly creative and dynamic undertaking in which we become the agents of and within our own storied worlds: "Memory, like perception, is not passive retrieval but an active and creative process that involves the imagination" (95). What neuroscientists refer to as a "reconsolidation of memory" in the light of present contexts and interpretations of past experiences (94; 254–258), is for Hustvedt an indication that fictions and memories derive from the same imaginative and embodied impulses that are not so much cognitive or even conscious but rather emotional and subconscious: "Like episodic memories and dreams, fiction reinvents deeply emotional material into meaningful stories" (195). It is especially in instances like these that Hustvedt offers new perspectives on thinking about memory and how it relates the inner workings of the mind to the outer social contexts in which we live. Like the "imagination" itself, it be-

comes “a bridge between a timeless core sensorimotor affective self and the fully self-conscious, reasoning and/or narrating linguistic cultural self, rooted in the subjective-intersubjective realities of time and space” (195).

And Hustvedt’s own writings become a bridge between cultural scientific approaches to the subject that perceive memory as a primarily social phenomenon and those that underline its material and bodily undercurrents. Hustvedt can be seen as an intermediary between both positions, but her value as an interdisciplinary thinker does not stop here. Rather, in her wide reading and integration of phenomenological philosophy, psychoanalytic readings, and neuroscientific findings she has broadened the debate from crucial vantage points and has successfully combined empirical and narrative approaches. As she reminds us in *Living, Thinking, Looking*, “mind is matter” (28) and “all human states [...] are of the body” (27). Yet, rather than giving in to a mere medical materialism or neurological determinism, Hustvedt thinks sensory information is processed through chemical filters in our brains together with the imaginative and emotive interpretation of that very information, thus relegating the question of consciousness and creativity to another realm altogether, namely that of “feeling” (Hustvedt 2013: 114). Memory, too, although it is seen as a primarily mental faculty, “is consolidated by emotion” (2012: 103). And it is in this context that we have to account for memories that do not depend on active retrieval, that resist narrative structuring or sequencing and that are not rooted within a specific time or place: traumatic flashbacks and sensomotoric memories do not only involve bodily states of tension or anxiety, but are often clouded by feelings of fear, pain, or disorientation (192 and 212). They are clearly pre-reflective and pre-conscious and they illustrate that memories are embodied traces of the past, written into the material fabrics of the body that can re-surface involuntarily and at any time. The slightest sensory perception – no matter if it is a color, a smell, a space or if it is even unconscious – can lead to both episodic memories and flashbacks. It is this embodied and perceptual dimension of memory that I will turn to in the next section in the discussion of *The Shaking Woman*.

## 2. Shaking Up the Past: Embodied Memories in *The Shaking Woman*

Siri Hustvedt’s *The Shaking Woman, or, A History of My Nerves* is her 2010 book, a “hybrid work that is part essay and part autobiographic memoir” (Thiemann 2013: 367) and an intimate exploration of her own mind and body “in which she underscores the self’s embodied identity and its interrelatedness to the en-

vironment” (Marks 2014: 55). Starting with the account of a seizure from the neck down, which occurred during a memorial for her deceased father, and dealing with the involuntary, nervous shaking of parts of her body during subsequent public appearances, her book is a deeply personal exploration of the inner workings of the self and a probing quest for meaning. Based on an impressive presentation of the historical and philosophical issues that underlie the modern science of the mind – from psychoanalysis over psychiatry to neurology and neuroscience – her writing is a double helix of a narrative that fuses scientific discourses with personal memories and family history in a compelling intellectual odyssey that offers no easy answers. Rather than evading complex issues or controversial problems like the split between mind and body, she tackles them head on and sketches out an erudite narrative of questions that cannot only be dealt with in specialized scientific inquiries but also in storytelling. Hustvedt thus presents what one could call an embodied account of the self in which public discourses and the external material world interact with the personal psyche of the mind that is at once porous and dynamic. Instead of constituting a coherent or stable sense of self, we are constantly adapting to our surroundings and bodily feelings or motions. Once our bodies react in ways that are involuntary or unplanned, we have to make sense of their deviant behavior or symptoms. While these may be part of a larger socio-cultural clinical picture, identified and described by (socially constructed) scientific accounts, Hustvedt makes clear that they have their own history, embedded in personal narratives and memories that transcend any scientific sense-making. Their meaning, it becomes clear, often arises against or in opposition to conscious or linguistic frameworks, taking on a presence that is at once embodied and pre-reflective.

This could, in fact, be seen as an appropriate definition of the phenomenon of body memory, which indeed looms large in Hustvedt’s writing. Body memory can in this context be defined as a memory that “embraces the totality of our subjective perceptual and behavioral dispositions, as they are mediated by the body” (Summa et. al. 2012: 418). Thereby it is an implicit form of memory “rather than [...] a re-presenting or presentifying act of recollection,” which “designates the pre-thematic impact of preceding bodily experiences on the meaningful, and yet implicit, configuration of our actual experience” (418). It is also “a form of lived experience, which is constantly re-actualized and implicitly lived through by a bodily subject” (425). Body memory designates learned patterns of bodily movement, abilities or habits, a form of practical, pre-reflective form of knowledge – like walking or riding a bicycle – as well as implicit forms of remembering which are not processed cognitively or linguistically. The “life-long learning history of the body” (424) thus incorporates our earliest contacts with other beings – parents, siblings, relatives – that are sometimes referred to as “intercorporeal” or

“incorporative” (424). Traumatic incidents, too, that deactivate explicit, declarative forms of memory and activate implicit, procedural memory (432) are stored in the body (sometimes visibly in the form of a scar) and are acted out rather than being narrated. Instead of simply being implicated in the “formation of bodily habitualities,” body memory thus “embraces the different modalities of our situational and intersubjective being in and interacting with the world” and “is based on the co-relation between subjectivity and the world” (438). Resisting the computational metaphor that understands the mind as an information processor, body memory introduces the person as an embodied agent, where ideas and memories, too, are embodied and integrated into the brain.<sup>1</sup>

Although the involuntary shaking of Hustvedt during public appearances is not a form of body memory per se, there is clearly a memory involved that triggers a conscious sense of distress and nervousness, maybe even a fear of a loss of control. As she remarks herself in *The Shaking Woman*: “Everything associated with performance made me anxious and distressed. At any moment, the unruly saboteur inside me might appear and disrupt the proceedings” (Hustvedt 2010: 39). The mere anticipation of an external context – that of a public lecture, for instance – or the perception of an external stimulus activates a neurological reaction that translates into a bodily movement, namely that of the shaking of the limbs. What had suddenly started without warning has been processed through cognition and has turned into a fear of it happening again. As Hustvedt puts it: “Having to speak in public has become my tone or clap of thunder, and if there is a memory involved, it is implicit, not explicit, and the shaking itself doesn’t involve my higher self-reflexive consciousness” (115). Although the reason for her shaking is never entirely clarified, it is nevertheless characterized as a form of body memory, and the interaction between self, cognition, body, and world is repeatedly problematized as one of intersubjectivity and self-reflective processing of information. The narrative pattern of *The Shaking Woman*, which is marked by a series of starts and stops, may be a way of interpreting her symptoms through storytelling. Yet, the body has entered the picture as an interpreter of signs too – of thoughts, feelings, and external settings. As Pirani and Varga claim,

by inserting itself into every situation, the body carries its own past into the surroundings as a procedural field. Its experiences and dispositions permeate the environment like an invisible net that projects from its sense and limbs, connects us with the world and renders it familiar to us. (Pirani and Varga 2011: xxx)

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<sup>1</sup> António Damásio’s somatic marker theory can be seen as one example that highlights the integration of bodily states in the brain and shows how past experiences become emotionally coded. Cf. Damásio 2005.



Instead of presenting an objective account of a bodily symptom, the shaking woman then comes closer to what Shaun Gallagher calls “a brief indication of how bodily movement and the motor system influence cognitive performance – how the body shapes the mind” (Gallagher 2006: 9).

That this shaping does not necessarily lead to a coherent sense of self but can rather disrupt a sense of identity is underlined by Hustvedt herself when she points out that “the shaking woman cuts me in two,” causing “disruption and division” between “my narrating first-person subject” and “my recalcitrant body” (Hustvedt 2010: 165). Instead of belonging to that realm of episodic memory that can be revisited and reconsolidated over time in order to meet present concerns or needs of self-identity (58–66; 108–113), body memory eludes any such cognitive reworking, questioning the power of language to determine who and what we are. Yet, it would be wrong to interpret this agency of the body as a sign of the mind/body dualism that Hustvedt has repeatedly grappled with in her works. Not only is “the issue [...] one of perception and its frames, disciplinary windows that narrow the view” (79), but also one of accounting for a sense of subjectivity which “must,” as Hustvedt, reminds us, “include more than the narrating ‘I,’” also involving “an *actual material* body” (Hustvedt 2013: 121). In *The Shaking Woman*, bodily perception, memory, and narrative are brought into conversation with one another, leading to a highly complex and multi-layered account of the self. The self is, in this sense, not seen as an enclosed entity, but rather as a dynamic, ever-emergent phenomenon that originates in connection to the world and to others. It

develops from our early prelinguistic, intersubjective, emotionally coded encounters into increasingly flexible symbolic forms, through which we become others to ourselves and project ourselves into multiple imaginary selves and locations. (124)

The body is, against this background, a contact zone between the self and the world, where perceptual modes of information processing and cognitive interpretations merge and encounter a world where the body situates itself in relation to other bodies.

This may also be the reason why spatial perception and setting play such a fundamental role in remembering (cf. Schliephake 2012). Once a temporal and spatial anchor is missing, a memory – most often a trauma – cannot be integrated into narrative patterns. Ever since ancient mnemonic techniques, the close relationship between spatial organization and sequential memory has been underlined. In Nora’s words, “memory attaches itself to sites” (Nora 1989: 22) and environmental psychologists, too, stress the importance of memories of (childhood) places as “psychic anchors” (Marcus 1992: 89) for the formation of self-

identity. Carter, Donald, and Squires (1993) define place as “space to which meaning has been ascribed” (xii), while the development of “place attachment involves an interplay of affect and emotions, knowledge and beliefs, and behaviors and actions in reference to a place” (Low and Altman 1992: 5).<sup>2</sup> For Hustvedt, “places have power” (Hustvedt 2010: 99) and it is no coincidence that the place where her shaking began was an intimate place for her, the campus where her father had worked as a professor and where she had spent much of her early childhood (3). She relates how, days prior to the memorial, she had felt the presence of her dead father; a feeling that may have gotten stronger in the actual place that was intricately connected to her father’s life – including a memorial pine tree that had been planted in his honor. The return to this place is equated with a return of the past; the affective visit of the place is both a bodily as well as a mental undertaking, where a remembered past and a material presence (or absence) converge. And it is here that the body joins in the process of remembering a lost loved person. That this process of remembering her father, of facing his ghost, is for Hustvedt not merely a process that is acted out in a bodily manner is made clear in her 2008 novel *The Sorrows of an American* that I will turn to in the last part of my essay to explore how her experience of loss is explored in storytelling.

### 3. Body and Place Memory in *The Sorrows of an American*

Siri Hustvedt’s 2008 novel *The Sorrows of an American* is a deeply moving story about the return of the past, the agency of places, and the inherent meanings and secrets stored within material traces that include both bodies as well as objects. It is at once obsessed with memory and can be read as a dialogue with the dead. At the center of the novel stands Erik Davidsen, an aging and divorced psychoanalyst who is suffering from increasing loneliness as he tries to come to terms with the death of his father, Lars, a World War II Veteran and former university professor. He narrates the events that mark the year which followed his father’s death and which led to the retrieval and the unearthing of various family histories, past traumas, and personal stories about loss. Interweaving multiple

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<sup>2</sup> Modern neuroscience has come up with the concept of the cognitive map, where complex information is constantly ordered and re-ordered, so that in the end, the retrieval of memory can be said to be a creative process (Kandel 2007: 321–332) in which fragmented aspects of past experiences are retrieved and become reactivated based on present needs and concerns.

storylines, settings, and time layers, the narrative is both fragmented and striving for coherence, illustrating the imaginative and episodic character of memory and how it relates to the present as well as how it can come back to haunt daily life routines and disrupt a personal sense of identity. It is also a story of love and interpersonal encounter set against the background of a sociopolitical climate dominated by anxiety and insecurity in the aftermath of the terroristic attacks on the World Trade Center and the subsequent war in Iraq. Dominated both by present concerns and by the absence of what once was, *The Sorrows of an American* is, in the end, a moving meditation on how the imagination constantly works to transcend the barriers that separate the dead from the living, the past from the present, and others from the self – and how our memories inhabit the border zones in-between.

At various instances, Siri Hustvedt has hinted at the deeply personal and autobiographic background of her novel. In *The Shaking Woman* she relates how the character of Erik Davidsen became the version of an “imaginary brother,” “the boy never born to the Hustvedt family” (Hustvedt 2010: 5). During the writing process she immersed herself in a broad array of neuroscientific and psychoanalytic literature and opened herself to the imaginary other that was as much a product of her mind and the texts she had read as of the pre-reflective realm of the embodied emotions and feelings that are intricately connected to our ideas and memories: “[...] [W]riting novels is nevertheless a form of open listening to those imagined others, one that draws on memories, transmuted by both fantasies and fears. And it is an embodied act, not an intellectualization” (2012: 165). This personal immersion in the story does not lead to an autobiographical reflection of real persons or events, but to an imaginative transformation of internal impulses that are bound up with real life experiences. Thus, *The Sorrows of an American* was written during the last years of her father’s life and the final result grew “out of his death” (163; emphasis original). Accordingly, some sections of a memoir that her father had written found its way into the novel as a dialogue with the life story of her father and as a presence that was revived in the act of narrating. As Hustvedt puts it, “I now know I used those passages as a way to revive him, if only as a ghost” (39). Rather than a merely cognitive enterprise, this dialogue with the written autobiographical memory of the father became an embodied process. Thus, Hustvedt “typed [...] letters” her father had written “in order to feel them” and the “typing allowed his words to take on a physical reality beyond what I would have experienced by just reading them. My fingers can listen, too” (125). In a novel that is in many ways concerned with the importance of listening to the stories of others and the inner loudness that can come from loneliness, this practice found its way into the structure and contents of the fictional narrative. “The words of the text I had written fell some-

where between us,” Hustvedt writes about the speech she had planned for her father’s memorial, filling the absence or void left behind by the beloved deceased: “I felt his remembered voice” (2010: 125). And these embodied memories have become a dominant theme of *The Sorrows of an American*, a novel that is haunted as much by his ghost as by the traces that the memories of him and the grief about his death left in the body of the writer. Creativity and creation are therefore to be seen as embodied acts themselves that are connected to non-conscious, emotional processes: “[T]he book can know more than the writer knows, a knowing that comes in part from the body, rising from the preverbal, rhythmic, motor place in the self [...]” (2012: 39).

The dominant theme of how memories, the imagination, and matter interact as well as of how an absent past stays with us in the present is introduced right at the beginning of the novel (2008: 1–5). Erik and his sister Inga, a widowed writer whose life story shows striking similarities to Hustvedt’s own life, including a nervous shaking disorder, go through their father’s study, sorting out what had been accumulated in the course of a career, and unearth old letters and a memoir that hint at aspects of Lars’s biography which had thus far been unknown to his children. They set in motion a narrative whose trajectory spans almost a century and ranges from the Great Depression over the Second World War into the terror-ridden present. Lars’s writings that are embedded at crucial points in the narrative also suffuse it with ethnic details (in this case, of a Scandinavian community) and with predominantly rural places remote from the hectic city life of New York City, the primary setting of the novel. Early on, it becomes clear that these places connected to the life story of the father and his family take on their own powerful presence, reaching out into the present generation. The “particular smell” (2) and atmosphere of Lars’s office influences memory processes and functions as a perceptual placeholder of the absent father as much as the old family farm, where Erik meets his father in dreams (230–231; 250–252). Objects and places seem to possess their own mnemonic aura or agency that affects the living and that can be felt by coming into contact with them – for instance, in her old family home, Erik’s mother “feels Lars” and her “mother” who “are both with me in this place” (186). Along with the writings of Erik’s father, they function as material storehouses of memory, as embodied presences that carry the marks and traces of those people, long gone, that had come into contact with them. Places function as meeting points between the living and the dead and memories bound up with them have an auratic quality, accompanied by bodily feelings. Thus, “the memory” of a walk “across the Martin Luther College,” where his father had taught as a professor, “carries,” for Erik, “a trace of dry, sun-colored leaves lifted by the wind and a few intermittent snowflakes, tiny and hard against my face” (88). Place memories are therefore also environmental memo-

ries, “that fire the internal weather of our pasts” (159) and that can become, on a metaphorical level, the expression of inner feelings and emotions attached to past events.

The deep emotional quality of memories stored in the body is made apparent at various points in the narrative. They are typically bound up with intersubjective experiences, moments of inner turmoil as well as traumatic events that cannot be integrated into the linguistic structure of episodic memories and that somehow remain outside of narrative elaboration – articulating themselves mainly through body language. When Eric remembers how his father left for long walks during the night, without anyone in the family knowing why or where he went, the recollection of the sound the door made is present as “a memory in my body” (32). Although this is not a traumatic memory per se, it is nevertheless connected to a feeling of anxiety and confusion, originating in the fear of a young child being left behind by his father. The narrative symbol of drawers is, within the narrative, brought together with memories and pasts locked within the bodies of the characters. Instead of stabilizing the self or a sense of identity (80; 144), these are memory fragments that physically “hurt” (48; 195). Erik’s niece Sonia, who witnessed the terror attacks on the World Trade Center from her school, has been traumatized by the event (“she had silent ghosts inside her,” 65) and has a breakdown shortly before its anniversary while standing at a window. As Erik explains the incident: “The second anniversary opened an internal crack in Sonia, a fissure through which she released the explosive feeling that had horrified her for two years” (230). This is a moment when the body revolts against and resists internal (or external) images, official narratives or explanations of events and finds its own expression that cannot be controlled by mere cognition or rationality. This is a past moment that is relived in the present, that is acted out rather than told. Lars, who had himself been tormented by his experiences during fighting in the Philippines (69–70; 83–85) and by a family history haunted by loss, also relates a flashback and an uncontrollable trembling he suffered during a concert of the college choir after his return from the war in his memoirs (136–137). Like wounds that can hurt or maim a body externally, these are incidents or memories that hurt the body internally – the literal meaning of “trauma.” As *The Sorrows of an American* makes clear, while there can be no complete healing of this kind of wounds, they can nevertheless be integrated – if only in a painstaking and long process – within a narrative. And although this is often done in solitary retrospection, it is, like the conversations of Erik with his patients or the integration of Hustvedt’s father’s memoir into her fictional narrative, often a dialogical process, where the fragmented “I” depends on a “you” for coherence.

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