

## Literary place and cultural memory

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## 29 Literary Place and Cultural Memory

**Abstract:** In contemporary theory, the role of memory has been underlined as being crucial to the way in which people and collectives situate themselves in their natural environment and construct a sense of the past. In the present chapter, the ecocritical concepts of 'space' and 'place' will be seen as connecting links that can be used to bring ecocriticism together with the interdisciplinary study of cultural memory. By focusing on the spatial dimension of memory it becomes possible to integrate the natural world into the overall conceptual framework of 'memory cultures,' since it is not merely to be perceived as the background to cultural processes but rather as a central actor within them. These aspects will be examined with the help of three contemporary American novels, Philipp Meyer's *The Son*, Louise Erdrich's *The Round House*, and Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds*.

**Key Terms:** Cultural memory, space, place, ecology, storytelling

Waves gently ripple across a grey sea under an overcast sky. The landscape looks desolate and unforgiving, made hard by a cold climate. Small hump-shaped islands overgrown with pine trees lie in the water. As we enter one of them by boat, a wooden path leads us through the forest that becomes ever thicker as we approach the other end of the island. Suddenly our path leads us into a tunnel, through the earthen heart of the place itself. Just when the dim light at its end suggests an exit, the path abruptly stops. A cut has been made into the landscape. We can hear the soft rhythm of the waves that pass through the cut underneath our feet. When we look up, we see the other half of the island, laid open with mechanical precision. Into the firm layers of earth and stone that make up its interior, a stone slab has been embedded. Names are carved into it that can be read clearly from where we stand. Yet, try as we might, we cannot reach out and touch the engravings, nor can we reach the other side of the island. The excavation is too wide to be overcome by physical effort. All we can do is look and wonder and feel the void that has been left in this place and it slowly dawns on us that we have no other choice but to turn back.

This is what a visitor to one of the planned memorial sites of the 2011 Norwegian massacres might feel. On July 22<sup>nd</sup> of that year, the right-wing extremist Anders Breivik went on a killing spree that left 77 people dead, most of them teenagers who spent their holidays in a summer camp on the secluded island of Utøya. Swedish artist Jonas Dahlberg's concept was chosen unanimously by an official committee in a closed competition and will be built on the neighboring island of Sørbråten. It is a highly unusual and creative, but also controversial concept that has incited heated debates in Norway. Instead of making monuments or sculptures that are often used for commemorating historic or traumatic events and that are visible manifestations

of memory built into a landscape, Dahlberg's concept is a meditation on absence and literally uses the landscape itself in bringing about what he sees as the ultimate illustration of loss. Instead of adding something to a natural or built surrounding, his "Memory Wound" is about taking away, about creating distance by splitting the earth in half and by engendering a visual rupture in a natural environment that becomes, in turn, a silent monument itself (cf. the artist's website <http://www.jonasdahlberg.com>).

Dahlberg's concept is a good example of how memory and place combine to make up integral parts of our collective cultural landscape. The design of a museum or monument is never arbitrary, but rather a complex social as well as political undertaking in which many different people and interest groups are involved. And it is an undertaking that is always accompanied by aesthetic and creative forms of expression and procedures. Cultural memory is thus about two things at the same time: About integrating historic events that political decision makers or society as a whole deem worthy of remembering into our collective frameworks and about using forms of symbolic expression and world-making that allow for a meaningful depiction and (material) manifestation of the past. In this context, the particular places that are connected with a historic event play a fundamental role as spatial containers that can attest to what happened there, but that are likewise marked by the absence of what once was. The latter aspect makes clear why places are never self-explanatory per se, but rather need narratives and interpretations that attach meaning to abstract geographical space. It is in this context, that imaginative literature gains its importance and potential in our memory cultures – not only because it ascribes meanings to sites, but also because it can tell alternative stories connected to locations, unearthing marginalized or forgotten narratives, and because it can create new (imaginative) places that, like Dahlberg's "Memory Wound," uncover and symbolize traumatic experiences, deeply entrenched in our collective consciousness. In the following, literature will be characterized as a form of cultural ecology that constantly interacts with our ecosystemically organized memory cultures. The ecocritical concepts of 'space' and 'place' will thereby be seen as connecting links that can be used to bring ecocriticism together with the interdisciplinary study of cultural memory. Moreover, by focusing on the spatial dimension of memory it becomes possible to integrate the natural world into the overall conceptual framework of 'memory cultures,' since it is, as Dahlberg's work of art shows, not merely to be perceived as the background to cultural processes but rather has to be seen as a central actor within them.

## 1 Ecocriticism and Cultural Memory Studies

Until recently, ecocriticism and cultural memory studies have rarely converged. While the former has mainly been concerned with studying the interrelations between the

non-human world and cultural formations and has thereby sought to challenge traditional notions of 'nature' and 'culture,' the latter has explored how societies make sense of their history by creating a common set of cultural denominators based on shared readings of the past. And although ecocriticism has focused more broadly on how humans have appropriated and transformed natural space and cultural memory studies have studied the way in which societies ascribe meaning to historic sites and construct their collective identity based on specific events, both fields of research have more in common than one would usually suggest.

First of all, both developed at a similar time: When ecocriticism became a distinct strand of textual interpretation in Anglo-American literary studies during the 1990s (cf. also 70 Introduction), cultural memory studies developed as a new paradigm within cultural studies and historiography. Grounded in poststructuralist thought and the postmodern ambivalence towards grand narratives, the emergence of memory as a key term in historical discourse aimed at introducing a meta-category that would allow for a new type of history (cf. Klein 2000); namely a history, where the focus shifted from the question of *what* happened in the past to *how* this past is actively remembered, symbolized, and collectively shared.

Secondly, both ecocriticism and cultural memory studies are areas of research that have arguably been, at least in their early stages, "more practiced than theorized" (Confino 1997, 1386), easily giving way to essentialist notions of nature or the collectivization of individual psychological phenomena. Whereas ecocriticism sought to recover the extra-textual category of 'nature' from the firm grasp of social constructivism without reflecting on the linguistic mediatedness of the very notion, cultural memory studies were keen on positioning memory in contrast or even in opposition to history as a form of 'lived experience' without keeping in mind that historiography itself is an integral part of the memory cultures within a society.

Thirdly, connected to these aspects is the political impulse of both fields, since both did not primarily grow out of disciplinary contexts, but rather out of pressing social concerns: While ecocriticism developed out of the environmentalist movement and addressed issues of environmental degradation, injustice, and pollution, cultural memory studies coincided with the fall of the Soviet Union as well as with the death of the generation that lived during the Second World War, especially of Holocaust survivors. Both fields of research can thus be seen as counter-discursive undertakings, focusing on aspects that were either marginalized in hegemonic discourse or that could not be adequately dealt with by politics alone.

Fourthly, imaginative literature and imaginative world-making have featured prominently in both areas of research from the very beginning. Literature is here seen as a central medium that can stage social issues, political shortcomings, and cultural blind spots in a deprivatized medium and that can integrate marginalized, forgotten, or entirely new aspects into our common systems of knowledge. This culture critical impulse is thereby accompanied by a more regenerative or therapeutic impulse

that seeks to settle imbalances and traumatic experiences within an overarching cultural framework.

The fifth and final common aspect is the central position that notions of space and place take on in the theoretical underpinnings of both ecocriticism and cultural memory studies. From the beginning, ecocritics emphasized the importance of the ties between people and their natural environments for engendering a sense of environmental awareness (cf. 712 Ecocriticism and Place Studies). In the same vein, cultural historians have underlined the way in which the history of a people is often connected to entire topographies of memory. And although the spatial dimension of memory will be further discussed in the following paragraph, it is important to note that it is exactly this shared interest in the spatial organization of perception and knowledge that has led scholars to bring both fields of study together. Goodbody (2011) and Schliephake (2012) have both illustrated how ecocritical readings of fictional texts can benefit from a cultural memory approach and have underlined in how far cultural memory studies can incorporate environmentalist notions of space and place into their considerations of how individuals orient themselves in time.

Before I will elaborate further on these ideas and points of convergence, let me briefly sketch out some subject areas within ecocriticism where the interplay between memory and space plays a fundamental role and could benefit from a stronger interdisciplinary exchange with memory studies: The first one is an area of research that originally stems from environmental history but that has been integrated into the framework of the 'environmental humanities' more broadly, namely the study of the long-term effects of environmental pollution on natural habitats and human organisms. Notably Rob Nixon (2011) has, in his influential study *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, shown how spatial and temporal aspects interrelate to make and re-make environmental pollution. Drawing on man-made catastrophes like the Bhopal or Chernobyl Disasters, Nixon shows how the natural and built surroundings of specific technological sites become polluted with toxins whose effects play themselves out over long periods of time, removed from (media) attention. While his approach is mainly concerned with coming up with a concept that can be used to hold political systems accountable for the slow degradation of natural areas and the deterioration of living conditions due to environmental pollution and to develop ethical positions on risk scenarios, it also opens up new ways of thinking about how an event like Chernobyl or Fukushima can be stored and remembered in our memory cultures. On the other hand, cultural memory studies can lend ecocritics concepts for analyzing the way in which political and social systems deal with such events through an interplay of the highlighting and the silencing of certain aspects associated with it.

The second sub-strand of ecocriticism that lends itself to a closer connection with cultural memory studies is the one that has traditionally been mainly concerned with notions of space and place, namely the paradigm of Bioregionalism. As Lynch, Glotfelty and Armbruster (2012, 2) have put it in their collection of essays *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*, bioregionalists seek "to address

matters of pressing environmental concern through a politics derived from a local sense of place.” As they point out, “one key dimension” of developing a sense of place “involves the creation of art” (10), while the “imagination,” in general, is seen as “one key to developing new and better ideas about how to live in our specific places” (11). Their book is important since it lays emphasis on “the cultural dimension of bioregionalism that has been undertheorized” (12). However, an integral part of this cultural dimension are the memories and specific histories that have, over the centuries, become attached to specific bioregions and that are not merely issues of sensual perception, but of cultural construction and knowledge. The stories and narratives associated with particular bioregions (Aberley 1999, 14) as well as their distinct environmental, “bioregional histories” (Flores 1999, 44) are also cultural phenomena, where both ecological *and* economic issues are of fundamental importance. Against this background, it can be studied how the notion of ‘bioregion’ has become a part of our memory cultures by being associated with specific narratives and in how far cultural memory itself is influenced by the sensual perception of natural geographic systems. There are many more points of convergence that allow for a closer interdisciplinary exchange between ecocriticism and cultural memory studies, some of which will be further illustrated in the remainder of this chapter by discussing the spatial dimension of memory and the way in which the non-human world can be seen as an active agent in our memory cultures.

## 2 The Spatial Dimension of Memory

Ever since antiquity, the close relationship between memory and place has been a recurrent cultural phenomenon – one only needs to think of their metaphorical combination in ancient rhetoric as *loci memoriae*. The Greek poet Simonides, who was said to have invented the mnemonic technique, attached images of the things or facts he wanted to remember to specific imaginative places (usually associated with a house or building) that he could easily recover while strolling through his imagination. According to Frances Yates (1966) this technique was a widely practiced cultural phenomenon until early modern history and had a huge influence on how knowledge was stored and symbolized in Western culture. Even modern neuroscience has underlined the importance of spatial perception for the way our memory works – the perception of space and the storage of memory are interlinked through the creation of a 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, 295–306) in which fragmented aspects of past experiences are retrieved and become reactivated based on present needs and concerns. It may be surprising how prominently words usually associated with human culture like “imagination” and “creation” feature in studies concerning memory, which is not an objective

storehouse of the past, but rather a manufacture of past images that are embedded in culturally encoded frames of meaning – and it is exactly this latter aspect of how we make meaning of our pasts that has become a main concern and even the starting point of modern cultural memory studies.

Cultural memory studies began to evolve shortly after the founding fathers of psychology and psychoanalysis like Sigmund Freud or Henri Bergson proclaimed that memory was predominantly a stable individual phenomenon closely interlinked with our own sense of subjectivity. Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist who was influenced by Emile Durkheim and Marc Bloch and who was to die at the hand of the Nazi regime in the concentration camp of Buchenwald, challenged this belief and came up with the notion of *les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. According to Halbwachs (1992), memories were not so much a distinctive feature of our individual brains, but were rather dependent on the “social frames” in which we remembered the past and the way we made sense of our experiences through social interaction. Memory was thus no longer solely perceived as a 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. Accordingly, memory was re-located within an external, collective context and became an inherent cultural trait which did not only take place in our brains, but rather in the social settings of daily interaction. In consequence, memory moved from the internally imagined landscapes of *ars memoriae* to the real, concrete spaces of the physical world.

It was the French historian Pierre Nora who, in the late 1980s, drew on Halbwachs in the theoretical conception of his immensely influential notion of *lieux de mémoire*. Nora’s (1989, 9) *lieux*, his sites of memory, were about places, objects, or simply symbols stored in the collective consciousness that functioned as containers of traditions that had lost their prior meanings and contexts but that were nevertheless important for the formation of group identities and national self-images. As he famously stated in his introduction to his multi-volume tome, “memory attaches itself to sites” (1989, 22), to concrete manifestations, relics, and landscapes of past events. However, the distinctive feature of these *lieux* is not their physical or geographic reality, but rather their imaginative quality: “A purely material site, like an archive, becomes a *lieu de mémoire* only if the imagination invites it with a symbolic aura” (19). In other words, imaginative texts, mediated images, and social interactions combine to “connect stories of past events to a particular physical setting” so that environments come to be considered as “historical” (Glassberg 2008, 376). “Memories,” thereby, “provide meaning to places” (Glassberg 2001, 18). As the American nature writer Wallace Stegner (1992, 202) has put it, “no place is a place until the things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments.”

The role of memory – and with it, of imaginative world-making – has thus been underlined as being crucial to the way in which people and collectives situate themselves in their natural environment and construct a sense of the past. Place is, in this

context, thought of as a kind of spatial container or framework for human action and as the stage of historical experience so that, in the end, a sense of place is deeply intertwined with both individual as well as collective memory. Environmental psychologists, too, stress the importance of memories of (childhood) places as “psychic anchors” (Marcus 1992, 89) for the formation of self-identity. Against this background, Carter, Donald and Squires (1993, xii) define place as “space to which meaning has been ascribed,” 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). “A sense of history and a sense of place” become therefore “inextricably intertwined” (Glassberg 2001, 7), with “our perception of the environment” not solely shaped by personal dispositions, but “by the products of our larger culture” (116).

From these considerations it is only a short way to ecocritical notions of ‘space’ and ‘place’ that are likewise based on the experiential base of the social and physical world and on the tight bonds that are formed between people and places through the means of perception, stories, and symbols. Cultural memory studies can become a central ingredient in activating environmental concern by showing how we become bonded with an environment and how the relationship we have with a place is mediated by the larger cultural frameworks in which we are situated. As geographer John Agnew (1987, 28) reminds us, our common notion of environment and “place [...] combines elements of nature (elemental forces), social relations (class, gender, and so on), and meaning (the mind, ideas, symbols).” This leads Lawrence Buell (2003, 67) to note that “places themselves are not stable, free-standing entities but continually shaped and reshaped by forces from both inside and outside. Places have histories; place is not just a noun but also a verb, a verb of action.” As Edward Casey (1998, ix) puts it, “nothing we do is unplaced.” This dynamic relationship with the places we live in should remind ecocritics of the culturally mediated frames of meaning that help us to make sense of our experiences and of our perceptions of the environments we live in – a landscape may come across as natural, but there are always (hi)stories attached to it that are waiting to be unearthed and/or determine how we interact with them. This leads David Harvey (2009, 176) to conclude that there is not solely a cognitive or emotional element involved in place attachment, but also a normative and an ethical one: “In making places [...], we make ourselves, and as we remake ourselves, so we perpetually reshape the places we are in, materially, conceptually, as well as in how we live in them.” It is in this way that the past of places reaches into our present and into our futures.

While the latter aspect can be incorporated into ecocritical notions of space and place from cultural memory studies, ecocriticism can likewise influence the way we think about our memory cultures and about the sign systems that help us to make sense of our individual and collective pasts. The topography of memory that is a defining characteristic of our modern nation states is an integral part of what Jan and Aleida Assmann (1992 and 1999) have termed the “cultural memory” of a society. The



cultural memory is made up of a highly conventionalized pool of texts, images, monuments, and civic celebrations, which are intricately bound up with the realm of politics and the way in which “communities imagine” themselves. Although the cultural memory of a society is thus marked by a high degree of stylization and normativity, it is nevertheless, as they have repeatedly pointed out, also multilayered and heterogeneous, since cultures are also characterized by the circulation of multiple and often divergent accounts of the past. Next to the highly stylized and politically sanctioned cultural memory, there is also the realm of what they have termed “communicative or social memory.” It usually consists of small groups spanning a few generations and of their interaction that has been made the focus of attention of oral history, but that is also often marked by a tendency to include marginalized or forgotten aspects or alternative versions of historic events. This means that our perception of a particular environment or site associated with a specific past may be dominated by a certain narrative, but that there are, at the same time, multiple accounts of the history written into it that can be unearthed and that can run counter to each other. Our memory cultures are therefore, just like the places that they invoke or consist of, never stable, but dynamic and ever-shifting repositories of our cultural frameworks. They possess, in other words, a porosity and openness which can make room for new accounts of the past to enter into our collective memory and can thereby be compared to ecosystems which have long been metaphorically used by proponents of cultural ecology to describe cultural processes.

The German scholar Peter Finke (2006, 175), for instance, has, drawing on ideas first brought forth by Gregory Bateson, described culture in ecological terms by defining it “as an ecosystemically organized product of overall evolutionary processes.” This view is vital for questioning the anthropocentric autonomy of cultural systems by thinking about how natural processes and energies interact with sign-making systems and by showing the “high degree of independence and self-organization” that they have gained “in the process of cultural evolution” (Zapf 2008, 142). For, as Finke has repeatedly stressed, cultural energies constantly act and re-act upon each other in the complex energetic relationships that make up our cultures so that cultural systems stay open to change and evolution. The interplay of feedback processes and creative energies that characterize culture and that are metaphorically captured in the notion of a ‘cultural ecosystem’ can, I would argue, fruitfully be applied to cultural memory studies. The realm of cultural memory is, after all, made up of a broad range of cultural media, political interest groups, and natural or built environments whose constant inter- and co-relation makes up our mnemonic cultural frameworks which do not, as has been shown, only possess a normative and stylized quality but also a highly imaginative and creative quality that persistently acts upon its source. This also explains why culturally storied places are not only the subject matter of political interest groups and historiography, but also of imaginative texts and literature. Instead of functioning as a static container of historical self-images and identities with unanimous views of the past, the cultural memory can therefore be conceptual-

ized as a cultural ecosystem in the sense of Peter Finke, one that is open to negotiation, conflict, and, eventually, change. Against this background, the next paragraph will be concerned with the way in which imaginative literature can be said to serve as a cultural ecological force within cultural memory, re-imagining and refiguring it in textual form.

### 3 ‘Storied Places’: Literary Place-Making and the (Non-)Human World

Conceptualizing our memory cultures metaphorically as ecosystems allows us to integrate and to analyze more fully the role that literature and imaginative world-making can play within them. As Peter Finke has shown, our cultures are not only dominated by the external contexts and environments in which they are situated, but they are also characterized by the “internal landscapes” (Finke 2006, 175) (cf. Zapf 2008, 145) that are created through the reception and reading of forms of art. They are, as he maintains, vital, since they “restore the richness, diversity and complexity of those inner landscapes of the mind, the imagination, the psyche, and of interpersonal communication which make up the cultural ecosystems of modern humans, but are threatened with impoverishment by an increasingly overeconomized, standardized and depersonalized contemporary culture” (Finke 2006, 146). Elsewhere I have discussed in how far our modern memory cultures reflect this trend by becoming integrated into a calculated cost-benefit approach or by turning into tourist attractions that are in danger of losing their prior meaning (Schliephake 2014). I have argued that imaginative literature cannot only become a meta-discourse that critically engages with this development, but that also works to imbue the narratives attached to our memory sites and mnemonic environments with new meanings and/or alternative histories. One of literature’s primary functions within our memory cultures is thus to turn the sometimes abstract or distant spaces they consist of into “storied places” (Glassberg 2001, 377; Schliephake 2012, 95–98). Accordingly, literary place-making is central to the way we orient ourselves in our larger environments and to how we translate the perception and experience of our external world into the ‘internal landscapes’ of the mind that cultural ecologists invoke.

In her monography *Erinnerungsräume*, Aleida Assmann (1999) has underlined the central importance of literature for rendering, interpreting, and challenging the meanings of our memory cultures. She perceives ‘places’ as central containers of memory, since their material quality attests to the presence of the past in the contemporary world. And although the authenticity of these places sometimes constitutes a problem – once they have turned into ‘historic sites’ that are restored etc. – their special ‘aura’ allows for an encounter with the past. Narratives and storytelling attached to these places are vital for imbuing them with meaning, while the immediate contact

with a place is, in imaginative literature, often also associated with epiphanies where the past or repressed aspects thereof suddenly return. In the same vein, but under different premises, Lawrence Buell has discussed the integral importance that literature and creative world-making can take on in processes of identity-formation by creating fictional or imagined places to which individuals or collectives cling their memories. This is a phenomenon that can be perceived with many diasporic communities all over the world where the conception of a 'native land' plays a fundamental role. As Buell (2005, 73) remarks, "the fact that the imaginer hasn't been there and maybe never will hardly lessens the intensity of such storied or imagined places to induce longing and loyalty [...] It's entirely possible to care more about places you've never been [...] than the ones you know firsthand." This comment reminds us that literary place-making does not have to be rooted in the concrete presence of a physical reality but can rather transcend the material and social contexts in which we live.

In so far as these considerations help to show how literature can actually function within our social and collective worlds, they also underline the importance of the analysis of place-making processes within literary and cultural studies. In order to analyze them and to show how they interact with our ecosystemically organized memory cultures, I propose two functional models that stem from cultural ecology as well as from cultural memory studies. Hubert Zapf's conception of the "function of literature as cultural ecology" (2002; cf. also 77 Cultural Ecology of Literature) posits the interrelatedness between literature as a mode of exploration and a balancing factor and the wider cultural contexts and the human (and non-human) worlds in which it is situated. In Zapf's view, imaginative literature is a deprivatized discourse that "acts like an ecological force within the larger systems of cultural discourses", where it both "appears as a sensorium and imaginative sounding board for hidden problems, deficits, and imbalances of the larger culture" and "symbolically articulates what is marginalized, neglected, repressed or excluded" within it. By engendering "plural perspectives, multiple meanings and dynamic interrelationships, literature becomes the site of a constant, creative renewal of language, perception, communication, and imagination" (Zapf 2008, 148). I would argue that this potential of fictional texts can be seen with regard to our memory cultures in general and with regard to their 'storied places' in particular. Imaginative literature can, against this background, become "imaginative sites of the (re)negotiation and (re)appropriation of historical places, (re)connecting them to alternative memories and stories" by either critically reflecting on deficiencies and blind spots within our memory cultures or by becoming the placeholder of a forgotten or repressed memory, by, in other words, turning into *lieux de mémoire* themselves (Schliephake 2012, 110).

This approach is similar to the concept of literature as an integral part of cultural memory brought forth by a research group at the University of Giessen (see Erll 2005; Erll and Nünning 2008). Based on Paul Ricoeur's triple mimesis developed in *Time and Narrative*, they distinguish between the (1) memory cultural pre-figuration of literary texts in which literature draws on the symbols and elements taken from

extra-textual reality that literature can reflect on in its full spectrum; the (2) literary configuration of those contents through literary means (e.g. metaphors, intertextuality) and thereby the creation of new relationships between the different elements of our memory cultures that allow for new and different perspectives on them; and the (3) collective refiguration of those perspectives in the act of reception so that literature re-connects with the reality system and integrates new aspects that have thus far been repressed or marginalized into our cultural frameworks (see Erll 2005, 150–155). These mimetic relations show a strong resemblance to Zapf's (2002) triadic functional model of literature and illustrate how literature constantly interacts with our memory cultures that are made and re-made by a wide array of cultural texts. This model can also be used for the analysis of the ways in which memory sites are incorporated and depicted by textual means and how texts can help to transcend their prior meanings by attaching new semantic connotations to them, thus breaking up traditional interpretations of historical places.

Before I want to engage in some exemplary readings of contemporary fictional texts with this theoretical framework in mind, let me briefly address an aspect that has thus far been neglected (especially in cultural memory studies): So far spaces and places have figured as the objects of anthropocentric memory and storytelling. Yet, I would argue that places themselves have a strong narrative agency – not only because they can attest to historical events, but because they have a history themselves, removed from human intention or control. I mean a history in a geomorphological sense (that can be read in the rings of trees or the layers of soil) as well as in a biophilic sense, where they have functioned as the habitat of beings long vanished from the earth. The German director Wim Wenders (2005) claims that there are places which demand us to invent stories and characters attached to them. Places therefore are not only storied, but they do story. One only needs to think of the accounts of faraway lands and natural phenomena encountered by Greek seafarers that would inspire early myths like the *Odyssey*. Rock formations, straits, shifting dunes, or thick forests have always resonated with a sense of wonder and fascination and they have played a prominent role in the way in which humans have, over the centuries, imagined our world and the places we live in. Imaginative literature attests, in ever new scenarios and ways to the strange narrative agency that places themselves possess and it may be seen not so much as a medium with which humans have described the world, but with which they have learned to listen to its many non-human voices.

## 4 Readings

### 4.1 Philipp Meyer – *The Son* (2013)

In the following, I will try to show in three exemplary readings how contemporary American authors deal with the interrelatedness between memory and literary place-making, how they reflect on historical places as an inspiration and how they subvert their mnemonic quality by the creation of new places that they draw on in order to illustrate, undermine, and re-figure our memory cultures. Thereby, I also want to address the narrative agency that the non-human world and places themselves possess. A good starting point for analyzing these aspects is Philipp Meyer's breath-taking family epic *The Son*, published in 2013. Its narrative follows the rise of the fictional McCullough family from early settlers beyond the frontier to one of Texas's leading oil dynasties. Interweaving different time layers and narrative strands and spanning five generations, *The Son* is about the transformation of the space between what is now South Texas and North Mexico and about the merciless toll it takes to build and sustain an empire. Rich in historical detail and the description of the ways of life of early settlers, Indian tribes, and the natural geography of the lands that once rimmed the imaginary borderzone between civilization and wilderness, Meyer's novel works to invoke manifold myths connected to the 'West' – from Indian captives and lonesome rangers to oil tycoons – and to cleverly subvert them in an intricate mixture of literary styles and perspectives (the memoir, the journal, and third-person narration). It thereby manages to play on many motives connected to one of the foremost *lieux de mémoire* of America's national heritage, namely the 'frontier,' and to de-construct it in showing that the narrative of the progress of civilization and of the domestication of the wilderness and the Indian 'savage' contained its own destructive impulse, based on a rigid world view of excluding opposites (nature – culture; Indian – Mexican – White) and of the brutal subjugation of the respective 'other.'

The narrative tone and the main motives of the novel are introduced right from the beginning, in the first-person narration of Eli, the hundred year old patriarch of the McCullough family, who was born in 1836 as "the first son" of the newly founded republic of Texas. After an Indian raid on his home, he was abducted by Comanche and worked as their slave until he got introduced into the tribe and became a hunter himself, learning the ways and world views of the Indians that are strongly opposed to the Western culture that he finally re-enters when his tribe succumbs to disease brought by white settlers and starvation due to the depletion of wild life. Working his way up from being a ranger and a colonel in the Confederate Army, Eli soon leaves his Indian teachings behind and becomes a ruthless proto-Capitalist who makes a fortune, first by breeding cattle, later by the drilling of oil. It is mainly through his perspective and his manifold adventures that the landscape is introduced as a primary

narrative force within the novel. He literally learns to read his natural surroundings from the Indians and becomes a talented tracker of the movements of animals and humans. The narrative trajectory therefore starts out with the spectacular description of the natural sceneries that young Eli discovers beyond the settlements of his early youth and that characterize the first part of the novel which begins to shift to the rendering of rugged wastelands that dominate the second half and that have lost their old fertility and greenery, marked by the signs of oil drilling and urbanity. As Eli ruminates right at the beginning: “[...] the land and the animals that lived upon it were flat and slick [...], and even the steepest hillsides overrun with wildflowers. It was not the dry rocky place it is today [...] – the country was rich with life the way it is rotten with people today” (Meyer 2013, 6).

*The Son* thereby sets out to offer a meditation on the transformation both of the nature of South Texas and of the human society that settles there. Yet, rather than just constituting the mere background to the action, the natural environment is often brought center stage in the narrative, which evokes the age old history that is written deep into its material fabric. The novel engages in a literary archaeology that seeks to unearth the environmental history of the natural spaces it describes and that pits it against the human history that constantly works to transform the natural into a built environment. Thus, the young Eli marvels at the “stone creatures” that can be found “in every river and sea bank” beyond the settled land and that are larger “than anything still alive on the earth” (Meyer 2013, 66). However, this place is “a blank space on the map” (67), far removed from the scientific gaze and cultural control of Western human civilization. Only enormous herds of buffalo use the canyon as a water source, while “figures” that are “scratched into the rock” tell of ancient times long forgotten in the cultural memory (66). Against this background, the novel constantly reflects on the material traces that are embedded in the ground and that, once unraveled, begin to tell a different story of the ‘West’ and of the Earth altogether. Since they have to be made sense of, they are turned into sources of the imagination that nevertheless resist anthropocentric interpretation and appropriation. And although the remainder of the narrative sketches out how the rich vegetation and wildlife of the Western plains were destroyed through human settlement, stock farming, and oil drilling, it remains a counter discursive force within Meyer’s novel that constantly embeds the actions of the protagonists within a far larger framework that cannot be overcome by any cultural or human force.

The brutal and technological subjugation of the land is equated with the unrestraining violence that characterizes human relationships within the narrative. *The Son* is concerned with describing “the blood that runs through history” (Meyer 2013, 629), or rather through human history that is marked by the merciless struggle over territory and shifting power formations. At numerous times within the narrative, bones and weapons of ancient Indian tribes and Spanish conquistadors are found by digging in the earth, next to the bones of animals that have long become extinct or depleted on the plains of the West. These are markers of history, but they also func-

tion on a metaphorical level as a past that is unearthed within the narrative, as a way of rendering the violence that has been written into the landscape itself. The digging and drilling of soil is thereby equated with hidden traumas deeply entrenched in the collective consciousness of the McCullough family and the social structures in which they live which are dominated by exploitation, slavery, and murder. The material signifier of this trauma is the mansion of the Garcia family. Originally set on a rich, watery parcel of land adjoining the McCullough territory, it is taken over, in a brutal display of power, by Eli McCullough with the help of his sons and some rangers, through the killing of the Garcia family on an ominous legal pretense. While Eli justifies the killing as one of the many social Darwinist acts that have dominated his whole life, his son Peter is deeply traumatized by it, constantly haunted by the “shadows” (2013, 777; cf. also 132) of the past that he re-visits by tending the graves of the Garcias and by falling in love with Maria, a survivor of the massacre who he eventually follows into Mexico, abandoning his own family.

The Garcia mansion is thus integrated into McCullough land, but it is not lived in – it rather takes on the presence, first of a ghost house, then, once the generations who knew the truth about the killing have died, into a ruin attesting to the times of the early settlers. The novel reflects on the way in which memory clings to material traces and how it shifts with the transformation of the environment in which it is set. While the house of the Garcias is in the process of literally being taken back by nature, with animals nesting in it and weeds growing through the walls, the land on which it is set is likewise transformed by human agency. At first by the overgrazing with stock cattle that use up the grass and water, later by the oil rigs that pollute the area and, in the end, turn it into a badland. Accordingly, Jeannie, Eli’s great grand-daughter who becomes the last exponent of the McCulloughs’ powerful rise and makes a fortune with oil, tries to “see the land as it once had been” (Meyer 2013, 229), but is unable to do so, having to rely on the stories that her great-grandfather had told her. The story thereby reflects on the way in which the settlement of Texas and technological progress have disturbed and transformed an age-old natural ecosystem and offers, on a meta-layer, a meditation on how stories and narratives attached to a landscape become one way of illustrating the interrelations that have marked human – nature relationships. It also attests to the way in which the anthropocentric story of progress has turned foul by corrupting the natural balance of the land and the social systems of the people living on it. While it thus undermines the hegemonic view and the cultural memory of the ‘West,’ it also unearths the non-human history of the place as a factor that constantly acts upon humans and their imagination.

## 4.2 Louise Erdrich – *The Round House* (2012)

Another example that lends itself to an exploration of how cultural memory and literary place-making interact is Louise Erdrich’s 2012 novel *The Round House*. Set on the

fictional Indian Ojibwe reservation in rural North Dakota, an imaginative place that Erdrich has conjured again and again in her work, the novel self-reflectively plays with the narrations, legal frameworks, and social systems that make up our environments and that qualify their existential status. Literary place-making functions, for Erdrich, as one way of imaginatively sketching out a portrait of contemporary Indian (and American) life and of combining diverse aspects of lived experience into an unsettling territory whose geography stands in for countless real Indian reservations, dispersed all across the U.S. Her story is itself a hybrid, drawing on diverse literary traditions like the whodunit and the coming-of-age story, while also incorporating oral forms of storytelling and mythical folktales. At the center stands Joe Coutts, the narrator of the story, who grew up to become a public prosecutor and who relates the traumatic incidents that marked the summer of 1988, the year when he turned thirteen. His first-person narration revolves around the brutal rape of his mother, her ensuing trauma and the frustrating quest for justice against the background of a moving story of friendship and of the loss of innocence. Although the novel is primarily told from the perspective of young Joe, official judicial documents and oral mythical accounts of the Indian heritage of the Chippewa are repeatedly interwoven into his account to unravel the dysfunctional social systems, grievances and maimed life energies in which he grows up.

The beginning of the novel opens with one of the main motifs that will constantly recur in the course of the narrative, namely the prying out of some seedlings that have grown into the foundation of the Coutts' family home. "Small trees had attacked my parents' house at the foundation," the narrator relates right at the beginning and marvels at how "it was almost impossible not to break off the plant before its roots could be drawn intact from their stubborn hiding place" (Erdrich 2012, 3–4). The violence against non-human life forms and the struggle against an agency that can hardly be repressed foreshadows the brutal assault of the mother by an unknown offender which occurs only a few pages later; on a metaphorical level, however, they point far deeper, namely at a traumatic past that is, in an act of remembrance, unearthed and brought to light as well as to their own cultural roots which are likewise tied to a specific geographical region and which are hard to be eradicated, try as one might. The latter aspect is reflected by Joe's reading through an extensive amount of judicial literature, especially through Felix Cohen's *Handbook of Federal Indian Law* that his father, a local Indian judge, keeps in his study. The official language of land use regulations which had deprived Indians of their traditional ties to the land and which resettled them in reservations is thereby pitted against the old Indian stories and narratives that explain how the Indians are connected to the land of their ancestors as well as how they have repeatedly been severed from their traditions. The trauma that will haunt Joe's family for the remainder of the story is thus brought together with a repressive legal framework and social system that dominates and regulates the daily life of the Indian population.



The main narrative symbol which uncovers the precarious legal situation of the Indians and which, at the same time, comes to undermine the official language, is the place where the crime was committed and which gives the novel its title, namely the round house. An old ceremonial place, the round house itself possesses a high symbolic aura, imbued with many mythical stories, but the strip of land on which it is located tells another story altogether, since it stands on an intersection of reservation land, federal territory and a strip of “fee land,” sold by the tribe. Since it remains unclear on which parcel the crime was committed, it cannot be decided which type of law applies. Moreover, the offender, Linden Lark, turns out to be white and cannot be prosecuted by a tribal court so that he is soon released from custody. Joe, who sets out, at first, to find the perpetrator and later to kill him together with his friend Cappy in an act of self-administered justice, is clearly startled by the round house when he first goes there in search of evidence. His experience of the place is dominated not so much by his cultural knowledge, but by perception:

a low moan of air passed through the cracks in the silvery logs of the round house. I started with emotion. The grieving cry seemed emitted by the structure itself. The sound filled me and flooded me. [...] The place seemed peaceful. There was no door. There had been one, but the big plank rectangle was now wrenched off and thrown to the side. The grass was already growing through the cracks between the boards. I stood in the doorway. Inside, it was dim although four small busted-out windows opened in each direction. (Erdrich 2012, 70)

The round house seems to possess a strange agency of its own and almost becomes a living thing in Joe's description that seems to mourn its own battered appearance which hints at the violence perpetrated in and on this place itself. For, as Joe learns from old Mooshum, the round house had once been an integral part of the upholding of the old Indian traditions and of community life. Not only had it been used as a place where Indians could practice their religion hidden from the supervising gaze of Catholicism, but it was also seen as a spiritual place symbolizing regeneration and redemption. In three consecutive dreams, Mooshum relates interconnected mythical stories that tell about how the round house was built following troubled times within the Indian tribe and in the life of a young Indian called Nanapush who, after having defended his mother's life against crazed agitators, hunted the sole buffalo left on the plains in order to provide food for his tribe. The structure of the round house should commemorate the body and the interior of the buffalo, which provided shelter for Nanapush during a terrible snowstorm and whose spirit appears in the young man's mind, explaining that: “The round house will be my body, the poles my ribs, the fire my heart. It will be the body of your mother and it must be respected the same way. As the mother is intent on her baby's life, so your people should think of their children” (Erdrich 2012, 251).

Consequently, the round house can be seen as a storied place, a place to which the cultural memory of the Indian population is attached but which has lost its old integral function for community life and identity. Rather, it has become multilayered,

since it embodies both the scene of a crime as well as the multi-tangled intersection of abstract administered and owned spaces. The violence and trauma attached to the place have thus maimed its old life-giving energies, which are, however, uncovered layer by layer in Erdrich's novel which works to restore the old oral accounts of how Indians interacted with the land and how they settled their own legal affairs. Thereby the overimposing cultural systems of jurisdiction and ownership are repeatedly questioned within an imaginative framework in which other meaning-making systems like ceremonial dances, dreams, and visions are rendered through literary means. Against this background, Erdrich's novel opens a lot of room for reflection and raises serious moral and ethical questions, which are, in the end, delegated to the reader who has to decide on how to judge the vigilantism of the children and who to blame for the acts of violence committed within the narrative. Erdrich's highly readable novel therefore becomes a serious ethical undertaking in which literary place making and cultural memory combine to unearth a contemporary tragedy deeply rooted within the traditional legal frameworks of the U.S. today – yet, like the seeds that Joe's mother sows and that begin to bloom once she is healing, there is also the feeling that regeneration is possible.

#### 4.3 Kevin Powers – *The Yellow Birds* (2012)

My last example, Kevin Powers' deeply moving and stirring 2012 novel *The Yellow Birds*, is also a story about deep-seated trauma and harrowing loss, dealing with the memories of the Iraq war veteran John Bartle, who remembers his time in the army, the street fights in the city of Al Tafari, and his return home in a complex narrative, whose inner coherence only develops slowly, marked by numerous chronological leaps and narrative ruptures that become, in turn, a meditation on the nature of memory and the way in which the human imagination works to overwrite the perception of a distinct place with the images of an absent, far-away past. John is tormented by the sense of guilt he feels about the death of his fellow private, Daniel Murphy. Originally, John had promised Daniel's mother to watch over him; yet, John cannot console his friend when he begins to drift away due to severe shell shock and when he leaves the army camp disoriented, only to be found badly mutilated in the city of Al Tafari shortly after. Unable to stand the sight of the disfigured corpse and unwilling to send his friend home like this, John and the war-scarred Sergeant Sterling throw his body into the Tigris river, thus covering up his death. Ridden by guilt and his sense of loss, John writes a letter to Daniel's mother that will confine him to army prison for a few years, where he "tries to piece the war into a pattern" (Powers 2012, 216), but comes up short. In the end, it is "a wash" (218), with "half" his "memory" being "imagination" (186), a "misguided archaeology" (138) of the characters, places, and things he has seen or done. *The Yellow Birds* disrupts our general sense of the stability of time and place

and breaks it open in order to reflect on a traumatic war experience that has long entered into America's cultural memory.

The content of the novel thus has a bearing on its structure, fragmenting it into bits and pieces that the reader has to make sense of, while the instability of the memory clings to places that begin to meld into one another in compelling and awe-inspiring passages of nature writing. The thoughts and memories of the narrator drift into one another, as he is constantly, in a trick of the imagination, brought to other places in his mind. When John sits in a war trench in Iraq, he "thought of home, remembering the cicadas fluttering their wings in the scrub pines and oaks that ringed the pond behind my mother's house outside Richmond," so that "the space between home [...] and the scratched-out fighting positions we occupied, collapsed" (2012, 78). In the same vein, the perception of the places of his childhood seems to change once he has returned from war. When he is driven from the airport to his home, he catches himself "making strange adjustments to the landscape:"

I stared out at the broad valley below. The sun coming up and a light the color of unripe oranges fell and broke up the mist that hung in the bottom-land. I pictured myself there. Not as I could be in a few months swimming along the banks beneath the low-slung trunks and branches of walnut and black alder trees, but as I had been. It seemed as if I watched myself patrol through the fields along the river in the yellow light, like I had transposed the happenings of that world onto the contours of this one. (Powers 2012, 109–110)

The narrative thereby reflects on the way in which the perception of natural landscapes and memories that were attached to them become disrupted by another sudden image or association triggered by subconscious impulses in the body or the mind and how they become, in turn, overwritten with the images of other memories and places so that a past trauma constantly reaches out into the present, stirring up the stable framework of one's identity and sense of self and belonging (cf. 728 *Beyond the Wasteland*). When he walks along the river that runs by his house, he suddenly imagines "one man fall in a heap near" its "banks" (2012, 125). His landscape at home becomes littered with the bodies he saw at Al Tifar, where they literally "were part of the landscape" (124). He thus "disowned the waters of" his "youth. My memories of them became a useless luxury [...] I was an intruder, at best a visitor, and would even be in my home, in my misremembered history" (125). The literary place-making of the narrative thus works to create an imaginative space in which the inner workings of the mind of a traumatized war veteran are brought to light and in which his episodic memories are self-reflectively brought into relation with the realm of the imaginary.

In this context, it is interesting to note the vital importance that nature and the perception of the non-human world have in the novel. From its opening lines, "the war tried to kill us in the spring" (Powers 2012, 3), to its poetic ending, the non-human world and its geographical landscapes possess an agency that can offer, despite the harrowing events that go on around them, a sense of quiet and even peace, but that can also be marked by the signs of the past that lead to sudden, violent images that

become, in the end, associated with natural spaces. The beautiful “fields of hyacinth” (14) and the orchards surrounding the city of Al Tafari were once the markers of a peaceful community life, but they have turned into places of death, where enemies are hidden and where shells of mortar have left “wounds in the earth” (19). Accordingly, the title of the novel, which invokes colorful, singing birds is actually taken from a U.S. Army Marching Cadence quoted in the epigraph, which is about a man who “lures” a “yellow bird” inside “with a piece of bread” to smash “his fucking head.” The literary place making of Powers works the same way, creating moments of sheer beauty that suddenly burst open with unspeakable acts of violence. He thus manages to offer a shocking account of the Iraq War that is as compelling as it is devastating, leaving a lot of room for reflection. In the end, the permanence of the aching loss and the absence of Daniel is transcended by the narrator in his imagination, when he pictures how the disfigured body of his friend is washed clean by the waters of the Tigris that carry him onwards into the ocean: “And I saw his body finally break apart near the mouth of the gulf, where the shadows of date palms fell in long, dark curtains on his bones, now scattered, and swept them out to sea, toward a line of waves that break forever as he enters them” (226). Powers’ novel therefore illustrates that the inner workings and the “inner landscapes of the mind” (Finke 2006, 175; Zapf 2008, 145) are every bit as important in our memory cultures as the historic sites and monuments that make up its material fabric.

In conclusion, my three examples show, each in its own way, how literary place making and cultural memory interrelate and interact and how literature can be said to be an active agent and integral part within and of our memory cultures. Literature not only functions as a medium of reflection that constantly tries to point to their shortcomings and to fill in their blanks, but that also creates new imaginative places that enable remembrance and that become place-holders of a past in danger of vanishing or being forgotten. In describing how individual memory works, in unearthing traumas and their cultural and social undercurrents and in showing how place perception influences (and is likewise influenced by) the internal landscapes of the mind, literature can be said to be a cultural ecological force within our ecosystemically organized memory cultures.

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