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Crises of Memory: Victimization and Forgiveness
Debra Kelly


In the introduction to *Crises of Memory*, Susan Rubin Suleiman asks if the ‘memory boom’ has run its course, while exploring the issue of whether the memory of the Holocaust (which is the focus of much, although not all, of her book) should be considered as part of the memory of the Second World War, or whether it should be seen as the other way around. This dominance of the narrative of victimization links her thinking to that of Michael O’Toole in *Postcolonial Haunting and Victimization*. Suleiman also raises the wider and much-debated issue of the relationship between history and memory. This is an issue that has been considered by several critics who, concerned by the vagueness and eclecticism of the ‘memory industry’ in historical studies (and indeed beyond, in museums and heritage work, for example), argue for the necessary primacy of the former over the latter, of understanding over emotion (as in the work of Charles Maier to which Suleiman refers). Such arguments pit the rights and responsibilities of the historian against those of the historical agent or witness (as advocated by Henry Rousso, again taken as a reference by her), an issue of particular poignancy when dealing with texts concerned with the memory of the Holocaust.
Following Régine Robin in her 2003 book *La Mémoire saturée* ['Saturated Memory’], Suleiman agrees that what is needed is a ‘critical memory’ to counteract this ‘saturation’ of memory in contemporary culture that has, in her view, been justly criticized in recent years as lacking in self-reflection and as worryingly prey to political instrumentalization. Michael O’Toole opens his analysis of the more recent works of Algerian writer Assia Djebar in just such a memory-saturated, contemporary geo-political scenario, the posture of the post 9/11 East-West confrontation in which the ‘new martyr figure’ haunts us and ‘requests our attention in acts of self-immolation, in disastrous spectacle’(23). It is a scenario in which colonial history is used as a justification for the consequent vengeance of victimization, and he ends his introduction on the question of ‘How shall we respond?’ to this ‘postcolonial haunting’ that represents, in his view, a international concern today.

Both of these studies then, the first dealing with a wide range of texts, films and historical agents and witnesses to the experience (largely French, but not exclusively so) of the Second World War, the second with the recurrent return of the ‘spectres’ of the colonial past and notably of the Algerian War in Assia Djebar’s more recent fiction, consider the notions of remembering and forgetting, trauma and survival, affirmation and denial, that is to say the emotions of memory, while also seeking to retain the rigour of historical circumstance and analysis. These studies, both proceeding by the technique of close textual reading, assure us that the ‘memory boom’ is not over. It is aware of the need for self reflection, it is acutely sensitive to the importance of both historical and contemporary contexts, it is changing rather than ending. Different types of questions are being asked – not the least of which is the place that is accorded within memory studies to the ‘victims’ of history, and whether the obsessive return of certain types of memories plays into a paradigm of
victimization. Does ‘memory’ inevitably turn into the consideration of ‘victimization’ in the context of war?

Susan Rubin Suleiman organizes her book into ten chapters – an introduction which, as indicated above, very usefully rehearses some of the recent and current memory/history debates and situates her own thinking in relation to this with clarity and candour. This is followed by eight chapters dedicated to a wide range of writers, historical figures and films that begin in the French experience of the Second World War, on ground that will be familiar to those in French Studies, and then moves out geographically to Central Europe and to varied concentration camp and Holocaust survivor experiences and narratives, before ending on a short, more speculative final chapter concerned with reflections on ‘Forgetting and Forgiving’.

Each of the chapters dedicated to written text(s) and/or films offers a rich, close textual reading in its own right, and the book provides suggestive readings to those interested in the individuals/historical contexts under discussion quite apart from the overarching concerns with memory to which the introduction and concluding chapter draw us. Each chapter is also embedded within a specific historical and theoretical context that is precise and often revealing, and that provides an exemplary model of literary/film analysis. Sartre’s three essays on the Occupation, so crucial in the construction of the image of postwar France, are framed within Pierre Nora’s lieux de mémoire [‘realms of memory’] project. The ‘Aubrac Affair’ and the national memory of the French Resistance, takes in the 1984 Lucie Aubrac memoir and the success of the 1997 film against the background of the 1987 Klaus Barbie and 1997 Maurice Papon trials. It also notably includes a very precise analysis of the transcript of the May 1997 Libération round table with the Aubracs and leading French historians of the Second World War, in which the historical context is balanced
against the concept of narrative desire. The commemoration of figures of the Resistance such as Jean Moulin and André Malraux is again placed within the context of the politics of national memory. The question of moral judgement after the Holocaust, focusing on an analysis of the award winning documentary *Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie*, is situated with reference to Adorno’s 1959 essay ‘What does “coming to terms with the past” mean?’ and serves to raise issues more generally concerning the ambiguities that the filmmaking process throws up aesthetically and thematically when dealing with the Holocaust.

After these chapters dealing with France (although of course the issue of the Jews in France under the Occupation already touches the wider European area), Suleiman turns, with reference to István Szabó’s film *Sunshine*, to the question of Jewish identity and the dilemmas of Jewish memory amongst the survivors who remained in Central Europe within the context of the post-Communist era. Once again she is as concerned with the aesthetics of the film as with its historical context, and ends with a series of questions that preoccupy the remaining chapters concerning the relationship between artistic creation (rather than the archive/history) and the past, memory, identity and personal/collective remembrance of the past. This moves with Jorge Semprun’s Buchenwald memoir, *L’Écriture ou la vie* [*Literature or Life*] (1994) to the issue of historical trauma (contextualized this time within the study of trauma and its relation to memory from the nineteenth century onwards, through shell shock, to the Holocaust and on to 9/11, providing a further link with O’Toole’s work), in order to inform a reading of the apparent ‘unreliability’ of literary testimony. Such unreliability manifests itself in a different way in the following chapter focusing on Binjamin Wilkomirski’s *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* (1996) (revealed as fraudulent) and of Elie Wiesel’s *Tous les fleuves vont à la mer* [*All Rivers
Run to the Sea] (1994), a text also concerned in a very different way with memory and historical truth, but also with genre (both texts were published as literary memoirs) and fact. These are analysed within the context of, for example, Paul Ricoeur’s thinking on fictional and historical discourses, and the discussion takes in, beyond the two main texts of analysis, a wide range of references from W. G. Sebald to Frank McCourt and again raises the question of the tension engendered by multiple versions, together with the recurrent fundamental question ‘to whom does the Holocaust belong’? The final chapter of textual analysis focuses on Georges Perec’s W ou le souvenir d’enfance [W or the Memory of Childhood] (1975) and Raymond Federman’s Double or Nothing: A Real Fictitious Discourse (1971) taken as examples of what Suleiman terms the ‘1.5 generation’ by which she means the child survivors of the Holocaust who were too young to understand the experience in adult terms or may not have any memory of it, and in whose narratives, she believes, there is a special place for literary imagination. She also speculates about the more general psychological and aesthetic implications of the choices made by these experimental writers, this time using Freud’s essays ‘Splitting of the Ego in the Defensive Process’ and ‘Fetishism’ as her theoretical framework. At times this book risks reading like a set of worthy essays on each of the authors and filmmakers despite its clear thematic overarch. However, in this chapter Suleiman includes an important section that relates back to the lieux de mémoire project and the whole consideration of the Second World War that brings the reader full circle and mitigates to a great extent against such a charge.

Suleiman is a fine close reader, while also expertly bringing together events and details that make up the complexity of her object of analysis each time. At her best (for example in the chapter on Semprun), she examines the notions of testimony,
literature and ‘performance’ when writing about lived experience and how fiction may tell more truth than factual narrative, which is not necessarily a startling revelation (we might think of Marguerite Duras, who does not figure here but could have done), but it is handled here to lead to the compelling question of the use of artifice in narrative memory and the performance of the unreliability of memory over time and in the working through of a trauma. She is also not afraid to talk of the pleasure that some of this writing gives (notably when analysing the experimental forms of Federman’s text) which may appear paradoxical considering the subject matter, but which is an essential element of the tension that literary texts may provoke when put to the service of history, and can lead to misplaced moral judgements being made by less aware readers, especially those with a political axe to grind. Textual ambiguity and complexity are not solely political and historical. Some of the projects analysed by Suleiman are not only those of witness/victim testimony, they are ‘writerly’ projects and the difficulty lies in tolerating the tension between a text or film’s historical context and its status as a work of the imagination that cannot be judged solely on political sensibilities. Is this a potential way out of the hold that ‘victimization’ may be seen to have on sections of memory studies?

Michael O’Toole places the term ‘victimization’ into the title of his study of the more recent work of Assia Djebar, which focuses on a set of texts that have received much less critical attention than those overtly concerned with her grand auto/biographical project of individual and collective memory that can be traced from the early novels, but more especially from Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement [Women of Algiers in their Apartment] (1980) through to L’Amour, la fantasia [Fantasia. An Algerian Cavalcade] (1985) and Vaste est la prison [So Vast the Prison] (1995). He succinctly resumes the overall historiographic project that can be
traced throughout her work: ‘Djebbar puts the occluded history of colonialism into narrative and acts as a postcolonial historian while continuously questioning the dangers that the very act of memorializing the colonial past presents [...] she both challenges and embraces revisionist narrative’ (10). A conceptual introduction places Djebbar’s work in a thought-provoking way not in the more familiar territory of Francophone Postcolonial Studies, but in the wider global context of the post 9/11 East-West discourse of the legacy of imperialism, of the status of the ‘postolony’ (taking up the term of Cameroonian theorist Achille Mbebe, whose work on the refusal to confront the inheritance of colonization responsibly can be seen as the overarching theoretical framework here) and of victimization. O’Toole begins with the apparently disparate collection of essays that makes up Ces voix qui m’assiègent [‘These voices that besiege me’] (1999). This is a collection of written texts that mainly have their origin in papers given by Djebbar and which are often referred to in critical commentary on her work but which have generally not been taken as a whole for analysis. O’Toole emphasizes those texts dealing with notions of spatiality, seeing and blindness and with Djebbar’s filmmaking experience which is key especially to an understanding of work published from 1980 onwards, and the development of a visual aesthetics which is strong in her work. More generally he analyses convincingly the image that Algeria constructed for itself post-Independence as a ‘nation replete with wartime heroes and mythological figures’ (39) and how Djebbar views Algeria in the postcolonial era differently.

O’Toole then proceeds with close readings of three recent texts, presented not in chronological order of publication, La Femme sans sépulture [‘The Woman without a Tomb’] (2002), La Disparition de la langue française [‘The Disappearance of the French Language’] (2003) and Les Nuits de Strasbourg [‘Strasbourg Nights’]
(1997), but in an order that allows him to build an argument towards his conclusion dealing with victimization rhetoric and looking forward to moving beyond haunting towards what he terms ‘postcolonial responsibility’ (119). The first of these narratives deals with the issue, seen as a danger here, of representing female resistance (as in the figure of the resistance heroine Zoulikha from Djebar’s hometown, the focus of the narrative) as a haunting site of postcolonial memory and the problems of the aestheticization process of colonial history. The problem of the aesthetics as well as the ethics of memory provides a further link to the concerns of Suleiman in her choice of writers and filmmakers and the forms of their creative production. O’Toole points to Djebar’s wariness (a characteristic of all her writing) of the inscription of a hidden colonial past to ‘transform contemporary Algeria’ (60), and the need for a complex form of colonial memory that both remembers the tensions of the past and calls into question conventional processes of commemoration, and where the construction of colonial history and its counter memories remain inextricably linked.

In the analysis of the enigmatically entitled *La Disparition de la langue française*, O’Toole again emphasizes the theme set up in his previous analysis – the ways in which the complexity of colonial history is simplified in the processes of commemoration of the nation’s status as a victim of that colonial history. And he ends by acknowledging the ambiguity of Djebar’s creative endeavour to challenge this, asking if another form of memory is in fact proposed in a text that ends on disappearance and loss, even perhaps then, on failure? Certainly, this narrative project makes clear, as throughout Djebar’s writing, the need for constant revision and re-writing. The inclusion of the third and final text, *Les Nuits de Strasbourg*, allows the comparative dimension of a narrative set in a different cultural and geographical space to that of Algeria. Here O’Toole sees Djebar as questioning how a history of violence
continues to haunt ‘in circumstances where postcolonial subjects have seemingly little relationship to the legacy of colonial violence and loss’ (102). Situated in a border town with a long history of suffering the consequences of imperialism, ideologies and war, Djebar wrote this text in 1997 during her time in Louisiana, acutely aware of the distance between herself and the continued violence in Algeria dating the beginning of the 1990s. She traces the legacies of history through three couples – Franco-Algerian, Judaeo-Germanic and Franco-Germanic (providing us yet again with a link to the histories also traced by Suleiman of course).

The prevalence of the theme and of the terminology of haunting in contemporary literary and cultural analysis has already been noted by a number of critics, notably within Postcolonial Studies. ‘Hauntology’ as it has sometimes come to be called following Jacques Derrida’s term, often takes as a fundamental reference (as is the case here) Derrida’s own work *Specters of Marx*, in which he writes of the necessity of learning to live with ghosts and spectres as a politics of memory, inheritance and generations, although O’Toole argues that Djebar differs from Derrida in her analysis of how formerly colonized nations should act. In addition to Derrida, the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (referenced here together with a number of postcolonial critics) has also received critical attention. A special issue of *French Studies* (ed. Best and Robson; not referenced in O’Toole’s book) in 2005 was dedicated to the ways in which memory has become a ‘dominant cultural obsession’ in France as in other European countries, amongst the post-Holocaust generation. The contributors sought to re-think the relation between memory and representation by highlighting not the failures of cultural memory, but what the editors call a different model of memory as innovation and creative representation, an aim that resonates with the work of both Suleiman and O’Toole. This journal issue includes articles in
which notions of haunting are insistently present, notably in those studies dedicated to Algerian Writing in French, in which Assia Djebar necessarily figures. The theme of haunting and the vocabulary of ghosts, spectres and phantoms, the terms often used interchangeably despite their very different origins, is not therefore new but continues to be topical in French and Francophone Studies, and has in fact been noticeable for some time in the postcolonial literary analysis of modern and contemporary Algerian writing in French. Nonetheless, O’Toole brings something new to the discussion, both in his selection of texts (as previously noted) – not least in terms of their content, since Djebar’s spectres are not only those of the Algerian War but also the victims of the Fundamentalist violence in Algeria from the early 1990s to the present, – but also in his approach through the notions of victimhood and martyrdom. As with Suleiman’s readings, the close readings here of less familiar texts will be useful to those with an interest in Djebar’s work beyond the way in which they are used here to build a specific argument concerning the place of the victim in these texts and the overall argument that Djebar addresses the Algerian War without succumbing to a form of postcolonial haunting that turns to victimization.²

The ‘memory boom’ is not over because we have not yet got to grips with the forms that memory might take in a contemporary culture which is at once instant, seemingly made on the spot, and yet ‘saturated’. While some critics, philosophers, and historians pick over the finer points of what collective memory is, for example, or whether it can in fact exist, writers, filmmakers, and creative artists of all kinds continue to produce the type of visceral memory-work produced in the context of a response to conflict, of which the work of Assia Djebar is but one example. Such work attests to the power of memory together with what some see as its attendant fault-lines and traps, others its potential to reveal to us both past and present. A
plethora of all forms of scholarly activity seeks to respond to such demanding productivity (and here I mean demanding in the sense of something that demands our attention). Both Suleiman and O’Riley thankfully raise more questions than they answer, and in so doing help to lead us away from the ‘memory boom’ into more sober ‘memory enquiry’. It is striking that both authors begin their work with definitions, Suleiman with the Greek root of ‘crisis’, O’Riley with the Latin and Indo-European roots of ‘spectre’ and ‘haunting’ respectively, indicative of the careful and cautious way in which cultural historians uncover the layers of the past and their pertinence to the present. The ‘turn to memory’ is at once a response to and a symptom of rupture, lack and absence. The discourse of cultural memory can mediate and reflect on difficult, contested and sometimes taboo moments of the past. The problem is that the appeal to memory over history may lead, as Susannah Radstone and Katherine Hodgkin warn in Contested Pasts, to the displacement of analysis by empathy, and of politics by sentiment, and we return necessarily to the history/memory debate already evoked here. On any site of conflict, whether as in the examples taken by Suleiman and O’Toole or beyond, there is equally a struggle for memory, and it is certain that memory makes claims that will not be acceptable to everyone.

The works under consideration in both of these thought-provoking books are works of the literary and/or of the filmmakers’ imagination that engage with memory work. All are interpretations of history and of personal and collective experience that haunt and continue to tell us much about the anxieties of contemporary culture, a culture which is in ‘crisis’ concerning memory, remaining entrenched in the notions of victimhood, guilt and retribution that mark the conflicts of the twentieth century. ‘How shall we respond?’ The question already posed by O’Toole can be raised again
in the face of the spectres that haunt the contemporary political landscape and make demands on both perceived perpetrators and victims. As he notes, writers such as Djebbar – to whom we can add Wiesel, Semprun, Perec, Federman and more – offer possible solutions in creative and/or conceptual terms. The issue of responses in practical terms remains. As Suleiman concludes, after as always placing her argument within a theoretical context – this time including Marc Augé, and again Paul Ricoeur, Henry Rousso and Jacques Derrida: ‘Forgetting without amnesia, forgiving without effacing the debt one owes to the dead. These are uncomfortable positions to struggle, with for both individuals and societies that have experienced – as all too many individuals and societies have in the past century – acts of collective violence and hatred’ (232). Yet, it would seem that memory studies need to come to terms with the victim in both conceptual and practical terms if it is to avoid a type of ‘colonization’ of the discipline by the victim and to continue to develop while not forgetting. Both of these studies, in very different ways, offer ways forward to help us to think about this. At the end of her introduction, Suleiman also suggests that we are asking the wrong question – a better question than ‘Why this obsession with memory?’ is ‘How is memory best enacted or put to public use?’ and she argues for both a poetics of memory and an ethics of memory. How indeed shall we respond to a call for a politics of memory that goes beyond that of the victim’s position, when we are faced both by a need for acts of memory and the difficult need for forgiveness, if not forgetting?

Notes

1 The ‘Aubrac Affair’ placed Raymond and Lucie Aubrac, previously nationally and internationally celebrated as Resistance heroes, under suspicion of having betrayed some of their comrades, and notably arguably the most famous Resistance hero Jean
Moulin who was subsequently tortured to death by the Gestapo. Klaus Barbie was head of the German Security Police in Lyon from November 1942 to late August 1944. Known as the ‘butcher of Lyon’, he became notorious for his part in the torture and deportation of members of the Resistance and of Jews during the Occupation and it was he who arrested and tortured Jean Moulin. Tracked down in South America, his trial more than forty years later brought about a new definition of ‘crimes against humanity’ in French law, and was as Suleiman points out: ‘a watershed in the history of French memories of World War II’ (80). Maurice Papon was a highly-placed French civil servant, put on trial for his part in the roundup of Jews in Bordeaux (1942-1944) and their deportation to Nazi death camps, symbolising official French collaboration in the persecution of the Jews under the Occupation. At the trial, his role as Paris police chief during the 17 October 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris by French security forces during and following a peaceful demonstration was also highlighted.

2 One caveat: assuming I have not misunderstood or misread the reference, there seems to be a mistake in the dating of \textit{La Disparition de la langue française}, identified as ‘appearing’ in 1991 during the beginning a period of escalating violence in Algeria following the rejection of the results of the elections won by the Islamic Salvation Front. Djebar may well have been working on ideas that would be incorporated into this novel given her writing strategy of constantly interweaving ideas, stories, and experiences throughout a range of texts over a long period of time, but it was published in 2003. It is \textit{Loin de Médine [Far from Madina]} that was published in 1991, and both texts are correctly referenced in O’Toole’s bibliography.
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**Filmography**

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*Sunshine* (István Szabó: 1999).