



## Materiality and Memory: Objects to Ecologies. A Response to Maria Zirra

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In her close reading of Seamus Heaney's *Station Island*, Maria Zirra vividly shows the workings of a 'vibrant memory object' in the form of a stone that cuts into the poet's hand. Her focus is on the poetry of Heaney and its evocation of an object, but many other examples can be adduced at a time when stories about objects have arguably become part of a cultural trend. Edmund De Waal's bestselling family memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes* (2010) offers another case in point: it shows how a set of beautifully-crafted netsuke, whose presence in the writer's pocket worked as a mnemonic gadfly, and triggered a convoluted search for the story of his family. It was arguably De Waal's own capacity in turn to evoke these objects vividly for his reader that made his book such a success.

With the theoretical insights of posthumanist materialism we can attribute the cultural fascination with objects to the power of the objects themselves. Where traditional cultural theory linked the love of objects above all to the whims and tastes of connoisseurs, new materialism challenges such anthropocentrism and recognizes that objects themselves have agency. They fascinate through their shape, texture, color, and size. They capture earlier moments and promise us stories by outliving the time in which they first came into being. Crucially for memory studies, their materiality often secretes more meaning than that which was consciously inscribed in them, making them into what I have elsewhere called 'accidental archives'.<sup>1</sup> They thus trigger searches and storytelling like those of de Waal. They disrupt narratives, as in the Heaney poem discussed by Zirra. They evoke love, attachment, and acquisitiveness, as is borne out by the drive to collect them.<sup>2</sup> They move us in their smallness or awe us by their sheer volume.<sup>3</sup> By threatening to disintegrate, they demand to be looked after and, as multiple restoration projects show, they activate our sense of caring.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, as in the case of the Rhodes statues in Cape Town and Oxford, they provoke anger and the urge to destroy them.<sup>5</sup> In short, materialities have an active role to play in the production of memory, triggering and shaping recollection and linking people to each other across generations. They are 'vibrant' in that they generate action and affect in other parties; or, to echo Bruno Latour as well as Jane Bennett, they are actants in a network constituted by human and non-human interactions.<sup>6</sup>

It is in the light of such concerns that Zirra proposes a 'New Materialist Memory' embedded in posthumanist philosophy, and she implicitly does so as a radical new departure. There are indeed very good reasons for embracing posthumanism as a new vantage point that compels us to see the human and non-human in their mutual interactions and as part of a much larger multi-species ecology. At the same time, the issue of materiality also serves as a reminder of the importance of not generating disciplinary amnesia in posthumanist memory studies by overemphasizing its newness. Or to put this more positively: the advent of posthumanism offers a new vantage point to return to paths not (yet) taken in memory studies and to uncover a prehistory of current concerns and of missed opportunities. If it is true to say that materiality and objects have become a red-hot topic in the field of cultural research and in cultural practices, it is equally true that they were always already a central concern in heritage studies, museum studies, and archaeology (Ian Hodder's powerful work on human-material entanglements is based in this field).<sup>7</sup> Mention of this material-based tradition is absent from Zirra's survey of memory studies. This absence can be explained by the fact that not all materialisms are posthumanist, but also by the fact that the historical fault-line between the study of material and the immaterial runs very deep. Indeed, one could say that memory studies, as practiced in departments of literary and cultural studies, has developed in parallel to heritage studies, with both parties addressing similar issues but often operating with different concepts and referring to a different canon of disciplinary authorities. Both sides have had their own tunnel vision. The divergence between material and immaterial memory can arguably be dated from a fissuring of document-based history and the material-based fields of antiquarianism and archaeology, and between natural history and human history, at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> More disciplinary memory is needed to map the splitting of physical and human history which we are now in a position to knit together again. The first great benefit of the new materialism, then, is that it provides conceptual grounds for recuperating these alternative traditions within memory studies and for linking the production of 'intangible' memory in the media and the arts to the more material- and artifact-based concerns of those working in the field of heritage studies.

At the same time, posthumanist materialism calls for a radical rethinking of some of the methodological premises underpinning both heritage and memory studies as currently practiced. In particular it challenges those approaching memory studies from the fields of literature and culture to go beyond methodological textualism, that is, the study of discrete objects. Crucially, new materialism implies that scholars study the interactions between the symbolic, the material, and the human within the broader ecology in which they operate. To be sure, it has long been recognized that textual artifacts gain their meaning and affect by virtue of their relationship with other objects (W.G. Sebald owes much of his success to the fact that his written work so successfully evokes the memory-laden materiality of buildings and places). But posthumanist materialism goes further: it calls for a truly ecological approach that shifts attention away from discrete artifacts towards the

continuous interactions between humans and non-humans, between mediations and materialities, within particular social and physical environments. Such an ecological approach implies not just theoretical, but also methodological innovation. It means taking the multi-sited dynamic interplay of actants as our object of research and not one privileged site. In the future, the close readings of single texts or testimonial objects, as practiced so vividly by Zirra, may be part of that picture, but never the whole story.

Even more fundamentally, posthumanism reframes the object of memory studies by bringing natural history and human history together within the same frame. It extends its purview from the realm of human suffering and achievement to other species and to all aspects of the physical environment, including the history of human-nonhuman interactions through economic exploitation. This has practical implications for memory practitioners: future museums or cultural narratives about the industrial memory of coal-mining, for example, may no longer just be concerned with labor but should address the environmental impact of fossil-fuel culture in relation to climate change and resource depletion. Posthumanism also has practical implications for scholars of memory: where recent work has studied the phenomenon of colonial aphasia (our failure to make sense of the things we do not want to see), future work can be expected to extend the study of aphasia to the entanglements of humans, other species and the material world as being an hitherto overlooked and yet crucial aspect of memory dynamics.<sup>9</sup> Andreas Huyssen has argued that the very desire for collective memory is fuelled by the built-in obsolescence that makes objects malfunction prematurely, while Anna Reading has highlighted the political economy and environmental cost behind the heritage industry.<sup>10</sup> The planetary damage caused by such profligacy is in turn generating the need for new narratives to calibrate the past, present, and a very uncertain future.

A central tenet of posthumanism, as Zirra explains, involves recognizing that agency is distributed and that humans are not the only act in town. This does not make the issue of human responsibility and accountability redundant, but arguably more urgent. Here too memory studies should at least listen to earlier practice-based reflections on conservation. In a moving and erudite lecture given in Istanbul on the occasion of his being awarded the Forbes prize, the historical-geographer David Lowenthal presented a contemporary view of long-term stewardship.<sup>11</sup> Drawing on a long tradition of thinking about conservation and restoration, Lowenthal argued that each generation needs to assume the role of trustee and has a duty to care for what is inherited from the past for the sake of the future. These are not just human legacies, Lowenthal insisted, but also the material and natural environment which is not ours to deplete and destroy. 'Caring for the future' is how Lowenthal terms this duty. He was referring specifically to material heritage and the physical environment which he already saw as inextricably linked. But his eco-mnemonic concerns can be extended to memory studies more broadly as it too takes on the challenge of dealing with deep time and interspecies relations, and faces new questions and objects of study at a time

of growing social inequalities. How can human remembrance, including the memory of earlier disciplinary moments, be deployed in helping us ‘care for the future’?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rigney, “Things in the Archive.”

<sup>2</sup> On the notion of the ‘amateur’ as lover of objects, see *ibid.* On collections see for example Bann, *Under the Sign*.

<sup>3</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*; also Hirsch and Spitzer, “Testimonial Objects.”

<sup>4</sup> Lowenthal, “Omens.”

<sup>5</sup> Jethro, *Aesthetics of Power*.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Latour, *Reassembling*.

<sup>7</sup> Hodder, “Entanglements.” See also Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*; Bennett and Joyce, *Material Powers*.

<sup>8</sup> Momigliano, “Ancient History.”

<sup>9</sup> The term ‘aphasia’ is used here following Stoler, ‘Colonial Aphasia’ to designate a particular form of forgetting resulting from a failure to ‘make sense’ of what is seen; see also Bijl, *Emerging Memory*.

<sup>10</sup> Huyssen, “Present Pasts;” Reading, “Seeing Red.”

<sup>11</sup> Lowenthal, “Omens,” 236.

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