

Remaking memory and the agency of the aesthetic

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mss**Abstract**

This article examines the role of the creative arts in renegotiating the border between memorable and unmemorable lives. It does so with specific reference to the (un)forgetting of the colonial soldiers in European armies during World War One. Focussing on the role of aesthetic form in generating memorability, it shows how the creative use of a medium can help redefine the borders of imagined communities by commanding the attention of individual subjects and hence providing conditions for a cognitive and affective opening to the memory of strangers. It concludes that future studies of transformations in collective memory should take a multiscalar approach which takes into account both the shifting social frameworks of memory and the small changes that occur in the micro-politics of viewing and reading.

Keywords

colonial soldiers, defamiliarisation, memorability, multiscalar analysis, resonance, World War One

Disabled histories

The municipal cemetery of the German city of Mainz is home to the graves of some 200 soldiers of the French army. The headstones are uniform in colour and size, though some of them take the form of Christian crosses while others are in the shape of an Islamic stele (Brandstetter, 2014). They carry the names of Senegalese and North African soldiers who had served in the French army in World War One and were then posted to Germany as part of the Allied Occupation of the Rhineland (1919–1930), where many of them succumbed to illness. The stones provide material and tangible evidence for the participation of Africans in European history and, as such, constitute an archival resource with the potential to counter xenophobic claims levelled against migrants from Africa that they do not share ‘our’ European history. Seen in this way, they could start to resonate with the interest in colonial troops that is slowly, if hesitantly, growing in Europe.

So far, this has not happened. These particular graves have remained largely ‘inert’ (Olick and Robbins, 1998) as far as collective memory is concerned. Indicative in this regard is the fact that they are simply overlooked in the extensive German *Wikipedia* article on the Mainz cemetery. While the article goes into detail about the many impressive graves of prominent local citizens and of the French military of earlier ages, it makes no explicit mention of the hundreds of colonial

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graves, although their collective material presence must make it difficult for visitors on the ground to overlook them.¹ To the extent that *Wikipedia* can be taken as reflecting priorities about which legacies should be remembered, these graves have apparently no significance. The silence surrounding this site bears testimony to the fact that all lives are not equally grievable (Butler, 2009), or to use the preferred term here, not equally memorable. Although their lives have been registered, these colonial soldiers have not ‘stuck’ in memory, that is, they have had no uptake in other media as part of the dynamic of remediation whereby collective memories are culturally generated (Erll and Rigney, 2009).

An estimated 4 million men from the British, French and German colonies served in the European armies in World War One, many of whom enlisted in the hopes of gaining independence for their home country by showing their loyalty to the Empire (Das, 2018: 75–115). The remarkable presence of dark-skinned soldiers, often marked out by different uniforms, created a ‘tremor in the European field of perception and representation’ (Das, 2018: 123) which inspired many drawings, photographs and descriptions on the part of Europeans. Together with the testimonies left by the colonial soldiers themselves in the form of memoirs and letters, this makes for a very significant archive (Das, 2018: 117–238). In the immediate aftermath of the war, the contribution of soldiers from outside Europe was remembered in official memorials and cemeteries, including not just the graves in Mainz, but also the *Monument aux héros de l’Armée noire* at Reims (1924), the *Neuve-Chapelle Indian Memorial* (1927), the *All India War Memorial* in Delhi (1931) and the *Basra Memorial* (1929) to the missing of the Mesopotamian campaign.² While built to honour the memory of the dead, these impressively large tributes to the colonial soldiers also reinstated racial and imperial hierarchies in the sense that their distinctiveness marked them out as foreign bodies within the French and British armies.

Not surprisingly, the earlier memorials became obsolete and hence side-lined within the context of decolonisation when the colonial soldiers fell out of the dominant ‘frames of remembrance’ (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994) both in Europe and in the former colonies. If seen at all within the framework of the newly formed nations, they were at best uncomfortable evidence of past subjection.³ Where the war memorial in Kolkota had originally been dedicated ‘To the Glory of God, King and Country’ when it was erected in 1924, the title of a recent book turned this into ‘For King and Another Country’ (Basu, 2015). In a parallel process of disengagement within post-imperial Europe, the public memory of World War One became dominated by white faces in Flemish trenches. Despite the existence of archival evidence and the personal recollections of combatants, the memory of the colonial soldiers became ‘inert.’ In the absence of stakeholders, they fell outside the dominant ‘social frameworks of memory’ (Halbwachs, 1994 [1925]) in Europe and, like the widows and orphans of typesetters, ended up in a mnemonic no-man’s land. In Stoler’s (2011) terms, they were ‘disabled’: overlooked as insignificant and cut off from the collective narratives sustaining identity. The silence surrounding the graves in Mainz has undoubtedly been aggravated by historical circumstances particular to the German context, but the case can nevertheless be taken as symptomatic of a long-standing failure across the continent to link the memory of World War One to the memory of European colonialism.⁴

Like other centenaries, the recent centenary of World War One was a moment of mnemonic stock-taking, triggering an archival spring-clean, many public events, and a veritable outpouring of publications, documentaries and archival projects.⁵ A significant number of these related to the role of non-Western soldiers whose public visibility was hereby greatly enhanced. Although this growing salience has not yet extended specifically to the cemetery in Mainz, the recent attention paid to this hitherto occluded group suggests that a tipping point is being reached in response to a perceived need to bring collective memory into a new alignment with the ethnic and racial composition of European society today.⁶ According to Santanu Das, the public recovery and celebration of

the memory of the Indian troops has been especially important in giving Asian-Britons a public stake in the national narrative about the Great War and hence in consolidating and legitimising their integration into contemporary British society (even if this is at the cost, as Das (2018: 406–417) warns, of overlooking their subordinate status in the army and the excessive suffering they endured in the cold trenches of Northern France). Ginio (2010) has also linked the renewed commemoration of colonial troops in France to ‘perceived strategic necessities in the present’ (p. 139) regarding the integration of citizens from former colonies while warning that commemoration also risks being instrumentalised to deflect attention away from the ongoing legacy of colonial inequality. Be this as it may, the growing attention to the colonial dimensions of the war has been regularly welcomed in headlines as a long overdue breaking of a silence: ‘Indians in the trenches: voices of forgotten army are finally to be heard’; ‘Why the Indian soldiers of WW1 were forgotten’; ‘The untold story of the Indian Army’; ‘Part of our history that should be declared Not Forgotten.’⁷

So how does memory change from ‘inert’ or ‘disabled’ to something active? From overlooked to ‘not forgotten’? These are key questions. Memory studies needs to understand better the dynamics whereby collective memory can be revised and remade in response to changing social conditions and changing social imaginaries. With this agenda in mind, and using the colonial soldiers as a case in point, this article analyses what it takes for inert or occluded aspects of the past to become memorable (again). In line with the theme of this special issue, my focus will be on the role of cultural forms in creating memorability. As I have argued elsewhere (Rigney, 2012: 17–48), the creative arts can be seen as catalysts in creating new memories, supplementing what has been documented with imaginative power and creatively using cultural forms to generate vibrant (if not always literally true) stories that may then be picked up and reworked in other disciplines. Writers, film directors and visual artists have historically played – and continue to play – a vital role in creating a public awareness of what is ‘off the record,’ to invoke the title of a recent animated film on South African soldiers in World War One (Morris, 2008).

In order to understand mnemonic change, I argue that we need to adopt a ‘multiscalar’ (De Cesari and Rigney, 2014) approach that does not assume a hierarchy between the intimate, local, regional, national and the transnational, but assumes that memory is produced at multiple scales. Studying what happens in the intimacy of reading and viewing is as crucial to analysis as larger-scale social and cultural developments. With this in mind, I will focus on the role of aesthetic form in changing memory or, to echo one of the headlines quoted above, in ‘unforgetting’ what has been overlooked.

Creating memorability

In her discussion of ‘disabled histories’ relating to colonialism, Stoler outlines a mnemonic pathology whereby people collectively fail to make sense of the evidence before their eyes and link it to what they already know about the past (her primary focus is on France but the point seems generally applicable). As a result of this particular condition, which she calls ‘colonial aphasia,’ the history of racism and its ongoing presence in today’s society is ‘disabled and deadened to reflective life, shorn of its capacity to make connections’ (Stoler, 2011: 122). People do not so much ‘forget’ or deny something as that they are incapable of registering it as meaningful because it does not fit any available frame (Goffman, 1974) or seem connected to received narratives. Building on Stoler’s work, Bijl (2015) has shown in fascinating detail how Dutch society, for the best part of a century, ‘failed to see’ the photographic evidence of colonial violence in the Dutch East Indies in the 1900s. People failed to register and hence remember the violence, Bijl (2015) argues, because they had no narrative frame to make sense of what was before their eyes; at least, no narrative frame that did not undermine an ingrained sense of Eurocentric entitlement. Although her terms are

different, Ginio (2010) explains the disregard for colonial soldiers along similar lines: 'Those who do not symbolise or embody a story with an accepted moral message are bound to be ignored' (p. 44). Such aphasia involves not only an unwillingness, but an actual incapacity to see due to a fear of unsettling and of being implicated and, underlying this, an imaginative failure to recognise the limitations of existing narrative frames. So, how do hitherto disabled histories become active?

In addressing this question, my analysis will draw on an understanding of memory which supposes that shared memory and social imaginaries are co-produced in an open-ended dynamic (for a more extensive account see Rigney, 2018). Key to this model is the existence of a structural tension between imagined communities and actual social formations and, consequently, a continuous feedback loop between narratives about the past and solidarities in the present. This tension can be observed in the contested space between ethnically homogenous national imaginaries and the reality of an increasingly multi-racial and multi-ethnic citizenry in Europe today. The protracted failure to recognise that 'If we are here, it's because you were there,' has long fed the belief, only now being slowly revised in face of huge resistance, that migrants from the global south 'do not belong' and do not share 'our' memory. As indicated above with reference to the centenary of World War One, however, the 'unforgetting' of a shared history can sometimes become a resource for redefining and extending the social imaginary. Accordingly, as citizens with non-European roots become more visible in Europe today, we can note the slow emergence of new 'systems of relevance' (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994): colonial soldiers become more memorable in tandem (but never quite at the same pace) with acceptance into full citizenship of their descendants.

While memorability is thus linked to the social frames which define belonging, social factors alone are not sufficient to explain the principle of 'differential memorability' (Rigney, 2016). For things worth remembering to be constituted *as* memory, they must also be translated into transmissible experience. This entails using available media and calling on a repertoire of cultural forms (memoirs, monuments, documentaries, exhibitions and so on) which act as carriers of memory and structure information in a meaningful way. It would seem that memorability-as-relevance (related to social frames) and memorability-as-meaning (related to mediation) are co-produced in a mutually reinforcing way that we are only beginning to understand. In what follows, I will concentrate on the mediation part of this dynamic, examining how the representation of experience helps to 'make' memory in the sense that it turns hitherto overlooked lives into memorably storied ones.

Mediation entails a complex process whereby media technologies and cultural forms are combined with inherited 'schemata' (Erl, 2011) or 'narrative templates' (Wertsch, 2002) in order to produce meaning. Although the terms used may differ, this basic model supposes that particulars are interpreted by being 'subsumed' into more generic patterns. They register in memory and hence start generating new versions of themselves because of their 'resonance' with familiar narratives (Armstrong and Crage, 2006). Seen from this perspective, trauma is one of the exceptions that proves the rule in being understood 'as the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge' (Caruth, 1995: 153). 'Disabled' histories, as described above, also resist being placed within the 'schemes of prior knowledge' but, unlike traumatic events, they do not continuously return in a disruptive way as 'unclaimed experience' (Caruth, 1996) and, instead, are overlooked.

Representing less familiar events through the lens of more familiar ones is an important strategy for extending existing schemes of knowledge to hitherto unarticulated experiences. As Rothberg (2009) showed with reference to the remembrance of the Holocaust in the age of decolonisation, different memories can help each other to emerge through a multidirectional process of mutual illumination whereby events at different sites are mapped onto each other in a non-reductive way that highlights both the similarities and differences between them. Following Rothberg's work,

multidirectionality has become a recognised strategy for enhancing the memorability of occluded histories and for linking hitherto disconnected groups by including them in the same narrative frame. The novel *Galadio* (2010) by Didier Daeninckx, whose *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1983) was discussed by Rothberg, applies multidirectionality as a narrative strategy in order to capture the history of the French-African soldiers stationed in the Rhineland in the aftermath of World War One. The novel thematises the experiences of the mixed-race son of one of these soldiers (many of whom had become romantically involved with local women) and shows how he falls in love with a Jewish girl just as World War Two is about to break out. By bringing these two lives together, *Galadio*'s personal experience of racism as a black European is articulated by being connected to, and hence implicitly compared with, the by now more familiar memory of the Holocaust. (It should be noted, though, that *Galadio*'s critical remaking of memory only goes so far: although it is critical of racism in Germany, it does not extend this critique to France.⁸)

Integrating memories into existing narrative schemata, however, is not the only way to 'enable' inert histories. Counter-intuitive though it may sound, defamiliarisation – or, more precisely, the defamiliarisation constitutive of aesthetic experience – also has a role to play in mnemonic change by disrupting our usual habits of identification and understanding of what is memorable. Where other essays in this special issue examine the transnational circulation and appropriation of narrative schemata, my concern here is with the more general question: how does the artful deployment of a given medium help create new sites of memorability?

The agency of the artistic

Roland Barthes usefully distinguished between 'readable' (*lisible*) texts – ones that make sense by being incorporated into existing scripts – and 'writable' (*scriptible*) texts – ones that scramble existing codes and, as a result, take readers out of their comfort zone (Barthes, 1973). Although it is recognised that the same text can be 'readable' to some degree while being 'writable' in other regards, aesthetic experience is usually associated with the 'writable' and with the sense of being taken into unfamiliar territory in a pleasantly unsettling way. The question of what makes a literary work special has yielded many answers in literary scholarship, but they usually come back to variations on the basic idea that a work of art has something distinctive – in its material form, in its theme, and usually in a combination of both – that is different to anything we have seen or heard before and thus compels our attention and stimulates our emotions. This 'singularity' (Attridge, 2004) gives a work of art its power to hold our attention and to move us. It is the singularity of a cultural carrier that makes it stick in memory and, in the process, enhances the memorability of its subject matter.

For this reason, it seems justified to refer to the 'agency' of cultural carriers, a term that is deliberately chosen here to challenge the notion that the arts are merely passive transmitters of the stories in people's heads. Following Latour's (2005) theory of actor networks, the arts can be seen as *actants* in a network that involves both human and non-human agents: particular constellations of words, images and sounds have the power to command our attention and to generate affect and interest in the lives of others. Felski (2008) has written in this regard of the 'enchantment' of literature, while others have spoken of the literary as an 'event' that occurs when a text succeeds in transporting a reader, capturing their attention, and bringing them to mental and affective states that are unscripted but no less real (Attridge, 2004). John Akomfrah described his *Mimesis: African Soldier*, a multi-screen installation about African orderlies shown at the Imperial War Museum in 2018, as 'a kind of sensational encounter' in which people are moved; but he also insisted that it is the work, and not the artist, that engineers this movement: 'I have to bring the work and a viewer together. And from that point on, my job is done.'⁹

Enchantment is not a word often used for memory. Nevertheless, the claim here is that the role of the arts in the remaking of memory, including memories of violence and distress, derives from their power to enchant; specifically, to capture our attention through mastery of a given medium. The fact that books and films are translated suggests their appeal to new constituencies and their ability to cross linguistic, cultural and national borders. Theories of memory have focussed, by and large, on the way individuals and groups bring their 'own' memory to expression; less attention has been paid to the fact that many narratives – in particular, ones made with artistry and imagination – circulate among constituencies who do not traditionally self-identify with the actors depicted. I argue that aesthetically crafted works help to shift, or at least temporarily suspend, the imagined boundary between 'us' and the 'other' (see also Rigney, 2012). Some narratives can generate interest where there was none before, and this is key to the role of narrative in facilitating transcultural communication (Bond and Rapson, 2014). By and large, the possibility of sharing memory across cultural and linguistic borders has been linked to the power of experiential modes of storytelling (Erll, 2011) to generate prosthetic experience (Landsberg, 2004). Scholars have thus emphasised the immersive power of narrative to make people forget that they are watching a film or reading a novel. As I shall argue here, however, drawing attention to the medium, rather than making it invisible, is also a way to generate interest in unfamiliar experiences.¹⁰ 'Complications of the form' (Shklovsky, 1965) disrupt habitual patterns of perception and hence create an opening for unfamiliar events and actors to register as memorable. In what follows, I use two examples to further develop this point.

Memorable mediations: Two examples

The first example is taken from Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Across the Black Waters* (1939) which, together with Mohammed Ben Chérif's *Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier* (1920), was one of the first cultural articulations of the experiences of non-European soldiers in World War One. Anand's work was written at the remove of one generation about the experiences of Punjabis in France and can best be described as belonging to the genre of historical fiction (Figueira, 1991, 2013). It begins as an inverted colonial arrival story with the Indian soldiers disembarking at the port of Marseilles, excited by their first visit to Europe and amazed by all the exotic sights and sounds:

'*Vivongleshindous! Vivelangleterre! Vivonlesalliés!*' . . .

'You don't know the meaning of that, do you?' said Lalu to Subah.

'*Ohe*, leave this talk of meanings, you learned owls', said Kirpu. 'Any fool can see that they are greeting us with warmth and hospitality. Come give a shout after me, "Long live the *Francisis!*"'

'Long live the *Francisis!*' the boys shouted and the calls were taken up, followed by roars of laughter.

Now the enthusiasm of the women in the crowd knew no bounds.

'*Vivonleshindous!*' they shouted and laughed. (Anand, 1978 [1939]: 14)

Using an experiential mode of narration (Erll, 2011: 158), the passage succeeds in evoking the European theatre of war from the perspective of an Indian focaliser. It invites its reader to share a defamiliarising view of Marseilles as a site of exotic adventure and cross-cultural exchange; indeed, as a place of enchantment. Crucial to this effect is the extensive use of dialogue which

allows the excitement of the protagonists to be ‘shown’ – and hence witnessed by the reader – rather than ‘told’ by a narrator. Crucial too, and central to the argument here, is Anand’s play with language to convey the perspective of the Punjabis. The repetition of words that are heard but not understood except in terms of the warmth they convey highlights their character *as* words, a self-reflexivity which Jakobson (1960) famously defined as the essence of the poetic. In line with the central tenets of Russian Formalist theory, poetry defamiliarises language by complicating the form and slowing down perception (Shklovsky, 1965). Anand’s English transcription of French as heard by the Punjabis confuses the aural and the visual aspects of language: it takes a couple of readings before it can be parsed (the words are writable rather than readable in Barthes’ sense). In this way, the very materiality of the medium is used to slow perception and engage our attention, a process that is central to aesthetic experience and, I would add here, to the *making memorable* of these events. The Punjabis’ enthusiasm will turn to disaffection and alienation as the novel progresses, but their existence as pleasure-loving and reflective beings is importantly staked out with the tools of aesthetics in this memorable beginning where the recruits are clearly constituted as ‘willful subjects’ (Ahmed, 2014) and not merely as victims.

My second example of ‘making memorable’ comes from Philip Scheffner’s film *The Half-Moon Files: A Ghost Story* (2008). While technically belonging to the documentary genre, this is also a highly crafted audio-visual artefact which exploits the materiality of its medium to achieve aesthetic effect. It takes as its central subject the prisoner-of-war camp at Wünsdorf near Berlin which, as of 1914, housed some 30,000 POWs, mainly colonial soldiers from undivided India.¹¹ During the war years, not only did local film-makers use the POWs as extras in the making of exotic films, but local academics also seized the opportunity presented by the overwhelming number of non-Europeans on German soil to conduct linguistic and ethnographic work.¹² This included measuring their skulls and using the latest technologies to record their voices and songs: photographs show turbaned POWs speaking into an enormous gramophone while a smartly dressed German professor looks on. In a secondary reworking of the extensive historical materials he had collected, Scheffner creatively curated images, film footage and the extraordinarily rich audio archive (now housed at the Humboldt University, Berlin) to create a singular composition which is far more than the sum of its archival parts. *The Half-Moon Files* is composed in such a way that the viewer gains a sense of daily life in the camp but is also made aware of just how little one can ever know about these lost lives; hence the subtitle of the movie ‘a ghost story’. Scheffner maximises the effect of his archival materials by using photographs and sounds one *after* the other where one would have expected sound and image to be overlaid in the manner of more traditional documentaries. As a result, the viewer is constantly made aware of a haunting gap between images, sounds and documentation, making the film ‘writable’, rather than ‘readable’ in terms of familiar scripts.

At one point, the movie zooms in on a soldier from the Punjab called Mall Singh. Thanks to the observations and meticulous reporting of the scientists (see Das, 2011), the dimensions of Singh’s skull and a couple of other bodily features are known. But the viewer of Scheffner’s film who is unfamiliar with these other sources knows nothing about Mall Singh except for the sound of his voice as it was recorded on 17 December 1917 at 4 o’clock in the afternoon. Scheffner orchestrates his materials in such a way as to allow this man from the Punjab to tell his own story through the recording (the sequence begins with an image of a needle as it hits the groove and begins to crackle). In the sequence that follows, Mall Singh refers to himself in the third person as ‘a man from India’:

There once was a man

He ate one pound of butter everyday in India

And drank one litre of milk everyday in India

He joined the British army

This man went to the European War

Germany captured this man

He wishes to go back to India.

Singh's story is remarkable for its barebones simplicity, and his longing for butter and milk is bitterly ironic when connected to the fact that many Indian recruits had been seduced into the British army by the promise of good boots and good food. In the film, these words are spoken in Punjabi (which for many Europeans will be as incomprehensible as French was to Anand's characters) and as the recording is being played, Mall Singh's image disappears and the screen is left black except for the subtitles. This unexpected disconnect between image and sound recalls Arthur Rimbaud's idea of poetry as involving an unsettling or 'deregulation' of the senses that brings the viewer or listener into unknown territory.¹³ We hear the actual voice of Mall Singh and, at the end, we even hear him cough in the dark – a moving moment in which Singh's physical presence is conveyed beyond language and sight. Scheffner's singular reworking of the sound archive encourages viewers to listen and, for the duration of the recording, to keep this man company in the here and now of the unfolding story. As with Anand's novel, Scheffner's narrative artistry inveigles the viewer into listening to the voice of a wilful subject, in this case one with physical needs, an attachment to the comforts of his own home, and the desire to 'go back to India.' This scene sticks in memory, as evidenced by the fact that it is a central point of reference in critical reactions to the film. Artistry has made Mall Singh memorable, meaning that his life continues to be remediated, including in the present article.

In a well-known phrase the poet Coleridge (1965 [1817]) talked about poetry as involving a 'willing suspension of disbelief for the moment' (p. 169). The artful narratives discussed above can be said to command our attention and, in the process, enforce a willing suspension of our traditional patterns of identification. They facilitate 'acts of affiliation across lines of difference' (Hirsch, 2012: 21) or what Rothberg (2014), with reference to migrant memory, has called 'unscripted new linkages' (p. 133). Mediation itself thus helps create the conditions for transcultural memory (which I take here to be the outcome of communication rather than a property of what is remembered). The enchantment of an artwork seduces people into suspending their traditional affiliations and generating new ones when we 'keep company' with strangers in the suspended time of listening or reading. In recognising the memorability of strangers, cognition and affect are entangled. It bears highlighting, however, given the emphasis in memory studies on traumatic experiences, that creativity is being used here not just to build empathic bridges to the *sufferings* of others but also to their desires and pleasures. As my examples have shown, artists can also use their medium creatively to open perspectives beyond trauma. By staging moments of joy, excitement and the hope of happiness on the part of wilful subjects who are also interesting personalities, artists make it easier to keep company with strangers. This provides different, more positive, and potentially more durable grounds for memorability than an abstract imperative to remember the lives of 'others'.

Between singularity and resonance

The two cases presented above show, in different ways, the power of artistically constructed narratives to disrupt habits of memory and create new sites of memorability. In making hitherto occluded

actors a focus of sustained attention, they help to relocate, if only in a minor way, the borders of the imagined community with which individuals identify; of course, a single work is never enough to overcome collective aphasia. The claim here is not that creative writers and filmmakers can effectuate systemic change, or that one novel or one documentary is enough to transform collective memory and permanently extend the boundaries of the collective 'we'. Instead, I argue that small qualitative changes do matter, and that systemic change can only be realised through collective processes on the one hand, and the mobilisation of individuals on the other. Goldfarb (2012) has referred in this regard to the 'politics of small things': those tiny but significant movements that help us collectively, though at different sites and only gradually, to re-invent the world. Following a similar appreciation of the small-scale, Hirsch and Spitzer (2015) have written about the importance of 'small acts of repair.' These small, qualitative changes occur at the intimate scale of reading and viewing – in the eyes, ears, and bodies of people who are – literally – *moved* by what they see.

Remaking collective memory begins with the disruption of old habits in the micropolitics of reading, viewing and reacting, with repeated small movements gradually acquiring larger-scale consequences. If new sites of memorability begin to emerge in the singularity of particular narratives, that memorability only becomes mainstream thanks to the gradual build-up of resonance (Armstrong and Cragge, 2006) between multiple variations on the topic. As it is repeatedly recalled on different occasions and in different media, a topic becomes more legible and easier for a wider audience to integrate into schemes of prior knowledge. If the voices of a 'forgotten army' were finally to be heard during the centenary, as the headlines suggested, this was because members of the public, and public institutions, had been gradually primed to notice and to listen.

The idea that the recent centenary marked the breaking of a total silence regarding colonial troops will be odd to anyone familiar with Anand's work, Scheffner's documentary, or the multiple other fictional and non-fictional narratives depicting colonial troops in World War One that have appeared periodically since the 1920s and with increasing frequency since the millennium (Annaud, 1976; Ben Chérif, 1920; Boyden, 2005; Morris, 2008). The parallel appearance of many works relating to World War Two, in helping to enhance the visibility of colonial troops in general, also shed light on World War One (Bouchareb, 2005, 2006, 2014; Diop, 1981; Grace, 2004; Mabon, 2003; Sembene and Sow, 1988). The accumulation of images and stories about colonial soldiers from different parts of the world and in different theatres of war gradually created what Chidgey (2018) has called a memory 'assemblage' around the theme of colonialism and the military which gained salience and meaning by virtue of repetition and resonance across different media. In an accumulative way, singular narratives start to become 'legible' by reference to an emerging narrative template in which colonial soldiers are subjects. In retrospect, these scattered representations marked small steps in the gradual emergence into visibility of this dimension of the two World Wars. New treatments of the theme belatedly provide context for works which on their first appearance were isolated by infusing them with new relevance.

When it was first published in 1939, for example, Anand's novel was an outlier among the growing literature on World War One (and, as part of a trilogy, was above all read within the framework of narratives of Indian independence). For all its aesthetic power, it could not resonate with similarly themed works on colonial troops. It took several decades, and the accumulation of other works on related topics, before it found an audience and entered the dynamic of remediation that is necessary for narratives to spread (Erll and Rigney, 2009). A singular work when it was originally published, Anand's work retrospectively became part of the larger pattern outlined above. Since 2000, *Across the Black Waters* has accordingly been republished multiple times and, in 2008, was also adapted for the theatre. In a parallel movement, *Ahmed Ben Mostapha, Goumier*, Ben Chérif's outlier novel from 1920, was republished at the start of the centenary in 2014. The resonance with comparably themed narratives, in combination with changing social frameworks, had gradually

created a context for retrieving these texts from the literary archive and giving them a second life in cultural memory.

As Olusoga (2014) and Das (2018) demonstrate, the recent ‘rediscovery’ of Anand’s novel also helped generate fresh archival research that has brought to light – and into ‘working memory’ (Assmann, 1999) – a wealth of hitherto overlooked documents, images and testimonies (including some of Anand’s own sources). Moreover, at least one commemorative centenary event in Great Britain featured readings from Anand’s novel.¹⁴ All of this suggests that collective memory changes only slowly and in a non-linear way, and that literature and the other arts have a distinctive role to play in what is a multi-sited and multi-medial process. Artistry not only helps to make certain topics memorable in the first place, but later also provides a collective resource for people to remember the past in terms of a vivid story and identifiable characters.

The epochal language in which the centenary was couched should not be taken to mean, however, that the history of the colonial troops has been fully retrieved, or that the re-alignment between social frameworks and collective narratives is complete. On the contrary, the continuous feedback loop between narratives about the past and solidarities in the present – mentioned earlier in this essay – ensures that memory is always work in progress. Even as the centenary was taking place, the arts were arguably already working towards making memorable other disabled narratives that will only fully resonate sometime in the future in the context of revised social imaginaries. In this regard it is worth noting that the centenary was rounded off in 2018 with new works by artists William Kentridge (*The Head and the Load* at the Tate Modern) and by John Akomfrah (*Mimesis: African Soldier* at the Imperial War Museum). These echo, but also challenge, the emerging consensus about the role of Indians in British memory culture in that they focus specifically on African soldiers, with an eye not just for combatants but also for the lower-ranked orderlies who were often recruited from sub-Saharan countries.¹⁵ *Pace* the discourse of ‘finally’ hearing the voices of the colonies in a definitive way, the recovery of the memory of one group has in turn flagged up the existence of other disabled histories and marginalised groups that have yet to be connected to the bigger picture. The latter includes ongoing racial inequalities as reflected, for example, in the Windrush scandal which broke in 2018 and effectively denied the memory of the contribution of Black-Britons to the reconstruction of the country after World War Two.

In conclusion: Multiscalar analysis

The preceding analysis has highlighted the role of the creative arts, and particularly the role of aesthetic form, in helping to remake memory within changing social frameworks. It has shown how the ‘small acts of repair’ that occur in the reading or viewing of art works contribute to the bigger picture. It has shown at the same time how mnemonic change occurs slowly, at different sites, and in the form of continuous realignments rather than in a single gesture whereby ‘silences’ are suddenly heard.

The more general lesson to be drawn from this analysis is the need for a multiscalar approach to the study of collective remembrance in which the ‘small’ and the ‘large-scale’ are considered equally important sites of observation. Only by adopting approaches that are attentive both to the ‘politics of small things’ and to larger systemic shifts, and that combine the close reading of particular texts with the study of larger discursive patterns, can we understand how cultural memory changes over the long term and how such changes feed back into social relations. The agency of particular narratives in effectuating ‘small acts of repair’ is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to change dominant narratives in which many people are already heavily invested. Conversely, we cannot explain systemic change without taking into account the slow changes of the social imaginary through creative acts of remembrance that take place at multiple sites and help to shape subjects and publics who are receptive to new voices.

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Notes

1. Thanks to Anne-Maria Brandstetter for guiding me to this site of ‘inert’ memory and for sharing with me her knowledge of its background.
2. Both the deployment of troops and their subsequent memorialisation were subject to racial hierarchies; indeed, the very distinction between combatant and non-combatant was loaded, the racial hierarchy stipulating that some groups (like the Nepalese and Punjabis, and the Senegalese) were ‘martial’, while other groups (especially from Sub-Saharan Africa) were only entrusted with more menial tasks; see Olusoga (2014: 41–60, 155–160); also Mann (2006). On racial distinctions in the demarcation of graves, see Crane (2013). Winter’s (1995) pioneering work on memory and World War One does not treat its colonial dimensions.
3. A similar marginalisation of the memory of those who had served in the British Army also occurred in post-independence Ireland; see Rigney (2007).
4. That African soldiers should be tasked with the post-war occupation of the Rhineland was experienced as a double insult (Nelson, 1970), a ‘Black Shame’ imposed on Germany. Anger extended to popular culture in the interwar period, as in Kreutzer (1921) whose title translates as ‘The Black Shame: A Novel of Disgraced Germany’.
5. Recent publications include Michel (2003), Das (2011, 2014a, 2014b, 2018), Fargettas (2013), Doherty and Donovan (2014), Dornel (2014), Ginio (2017), Morton-Jack (2014, 2018), Olusoga (2014), Omissi (1999), Singh (2014) and Stanley (2015). In 2014 and 2015, the contribution of people from the colonies to the French army since the late 19th century was highlighted in a series of documentaries for French television; the director was Bouchareb (2014), already well known for his feature film *Indigènes* (2006) about North African soldiers fighting for France in World War Two.
6. As late as 2014 at least one writer could complain of a ‘frustrating lack of research into the experience of the colonial troops’, meaning that one could read countless books about the two world wars and still discover ‘that Britain’s black and Asian citizens and other colonial subjects have been excluded’ (Bourne, 2014: 14).
7. Headline BBC 2 July 2015; headline Guardian 27 October 2018; Morton-Jack (2018); blurb to Basu (2015). The ‘voices’ of the ‘forgotten army’ referred specifically to a collection of oral history recordings with Indian veterans made in the 1970s by a team of American anthropologists but left in storage. These are now publicly available through the British library: <https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en/collections/world-war-I>.
8. Daeninckx’s unquestioning loyalty to France and Frenchness may explain why this novel has also made it into the school system in the form of annotated versions for schoolchildren.
9. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/John%20Akomfrah%20on%20Mimesis%3A%20African%20Soldier>
10. This distinction between immersion and awareness of form draws on Ryan (2001).
11. I am grateful to Philip Scheffner for generously making his documentary available to me in 2012.
12. Wünsdorf is the subject of several recent studies, including most importantly Das (2011) which refers to the sound recordings but does not discuss the reworkings by Scheffner. A guiding principle of the camp management was to ‘re-educate’ the inmates in such a way as to encourage anti-colonial movements against the British (particular care was taken of the Muslim soldiers, since Germany had strong ties at the time with the Ottoman Empire, and the first mosque in Germany was built in the camp).

13. Arthur Rimbaud, in a letter to Georges Izambard, 13 May 1871, defined the role of the poet as a matter of 'reaching the unknown through a deregulation of all the senses' ['Il s'agit d'arriver à l'inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens']; Rimbaud, 1958: 305–306).
14. See, for example, an event organised by the Bristol Radical History Group in 2014 that included readings from *Across the Black Waters*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyA4945Sp6A>.
15. Kentridge's installation was billed as 'telling the untold story of the hundreds of thousands of African porters and carriers who served in the British, German and French forces during the First World War'; reference is also made in the Tate's presentation to the participation of women: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/performance/head-load>. For more information about the background to Akomfrah's work as a project aimed at integrating African soldiers and orderlies in particular into British memory see <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/John%20Akomfrah%20on%20Mimesis%3A%20African%20Soldier>.

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