CHAPTER 6

Uses and Abuses of Environmental Memory

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Abstract

This chapter defines four spatiotemporal scales according to which “environmental memory operates”: “biogeological” memory, “personal” memory, “social” or “collective” memory, and “national” memory. The chapter assesses seriatim the kinds of work of eco-cultural retrieval that each of the four modes of memory characteristically performs. The range, flexibility, and limitations of each memory mode – as well as how they interrelate and stand opposed to one another – are illustrated by reference to pertinent historical events/contexts and by copious examples from world literature of the past two centuries – especially but not wholly Anglophone – and from the global “south” as well as the “north.” These in turn are conceived within a critical framework that rests on a synthesis of perspectives from collective memory studies, phenomenology, developmental and experimental psychology, sociology/anthropology, and life science, as well as literary criticism and theory. A series of concluding reflections respond to the fundamental normative questions that underlie the whole inquiry: How much reliance is to be placed on memory as carrier of environmental understanding and thereby as stimulus to environmentalist intervention? To what extent, might memory – as variously defined – serve as a recuperative resource for re-envisioning nature in an era of environmental crisis?

Keywords

environmental memory – environmental amnesia – biogeological memory – collective memory

1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to make a preliminary case for the importance of “environmental memory” to the difference between conscienceful and insouciant inhabitation of the planet, and thereby to the viability of earth’s environmental future. To that end, it is well to begin by confronting squarely the elusiveness
of our two master terms and, to an even greater degree, the underlying concept itself.

“Environment” and “Memory” are both notoriously elastic signifiers. “Environment” is definable either with a tilt toward the sociocultural or to the material, and “material,” which in turn may refer either to the other-than-human or to the human-built – or to both comprehensively given the inextricability of those two domains in practice. Environment is also often employed metaphorically, as in “hostile” or “welcoming” environment. “Environment” may also apply to hugely different spatial scales, from local to planetary – and to discrepant degrees of distance or intimacy: either spectatorial detachment from one’s external surroundings or interactivity with them, as in early English usage. (Until the early 1800s, the Oxford English Dictionary shows, it was characteristically employed as a verb, to “environ.”) Likewise “Memory” may refer either to the mindwork of a particular individual or paradigmatic person (as in cognitive science, phenomenology, or traditional mnemonic regimes that assist recall) or to some social process or collective product. I shall use both terms quite flexibly, but in ways that my context should help make clear.

By “environmental memory,” an uncommon term with no set definition, I shall mean the sense (whether or not conscious, whether or not accurate, whether or not shared) of environments as lived experience in the fourth dimension – i.e., the intimation of human life and history as unfolding within the context of human embeddedness in webs of shifting environmental circumstance of some duration, whether these be finite time spans (a lifetime, a generation, an epoch, a dynasty), or stretching back indefinitely into remotest pre-history.

As to the larger stakes of my inquiry, what first drew me to the subject was the possibility that literature and other expressive media might act as carriers of environmental memory over against the inertial force of what the environmental psychologist Peter Kahn, Jr., has called “environmental generational amnesia” (Kahn 2002, 106–114). Although this condition is doubtless as ancient as the sense of obligation for elders to impart wisdom to the young, it has been aggravated in modernity, as Kahn points out, by accelerating anthropogenic environmental change since the industrial revolution, such that each generation seems to start from a baseline assumption of a more deteriorated environmental status quo as the new normal. My sense of the importance of this insight as a key to (mal)formation at the individual level has been strengthened by the evident importance of actual – and no less powerfully – imagined environmental embeddedness to the self-understanding, morale, solidarity, and dissension of social groups. Finally, increasing concerns voiced both among communities of scientists and within the public sphere about the
phenomenon of accelerating anthropogenic climate change (v. Zalasiewicz et al.; McCarthy) that broach the view that the Earth may have entered a new geologic era – the age of the “anthropocene” – seem to make it all the more urgent, for the sake of the planetary future of humans and nonhumans alike, to develop robust, shared conceptions of environmental memory that extend much further back in time than the history of homo sapiens itself, let alone the lifetimes of particular individuals.

Although self-evidently the environmental humanities lack standing to preach to experimental psychologists, sociologists, and climatologists on matters of fact, the case is quite otherwise in respect to the assessment of the shaping – and misshaping – of effective environmental memory at whatever level. Here such qualitative factors as the power of rhetoric, image, narrative, and belief to shape discourse, move minds, and prompt action become much more central, indeed preeminent.

Accordingly the present chapter focuses on thought experiments in envisaging the operations of environmental memory across three or four different spatiotemporal scales, or “environmental timescapes”:

1. “biogeological” time: i.e. human life imagined as participating in an ongoing process of planetary unfolding ever since time began;
2. individual lifelines imagined as shaped through symbiotic relation to place;
3. narratives of communities and nations imagined as formatively shaped by social or collective processes of remembering crucial interdependencies between people and physical environment. That most of my exempla are literary reflects the happenstance of my expertise at the risk of belying my conviction that all expressive media potentially have significant contributions to make toward the advancement, the understanding, and also the critique of environmental memory. A longer version of this project will attempt to redress this imbalance.

2 Biogeological Memory

The American wildlife biologist Aldo Leopold, sometimes called the father of modern environmental ethics, declared that “one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds” (Leopold 1991, 237). For the conscienceful scientist, that is, the awakening of environmental memory exacts a high price: distress at land abuse and shrinking biodiversity
others seem not to notice. His best-known book was written against that: *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), a classic of American nature writing whose first and longest section centers on an abandoned farm Leopold had bought during the Great Depression partly as a family retreat, but mainly as an environmental restoration project. One way the author gives weight to such otherwise unremarkable acts as sawing wood and planting trees is to stretch his readers’ horizons of environmental memory decades and even centuries back into the past. Toward the start, he tells the story of regional history in reverse while cutting through the rings of an oak tree that sprouted in the mid-nineteenth century. Later he recalls the history of settler-culture marsh draining that had drastically shrunk wildlands and migratory bird populations since the time of first Euro-settlement. Such thrusts obviously seek to persuade us to see ourselves as remorseful legatees of the one-sided co-evolution of land and settler.

*Sand County Almanac’s* focus on the consequences of Euro-settlement, however, mind-expanding though it is, looks foreshortened by contrast to the vista of Osage writer John Joseph Mathews, sometimes called the Native American Henry David Thoreau. Here is how Mathews frames his own experiment in solitary cabin living in the 1930s and “40s, a project of ten years” duration as against Thoreau’s two years and a fraction.

Long before I came to the blackjack [a species of pine that defines the bioregion] as an insignificant bit of life, made powerful by a birthright resulting from man’s progress through the centuries, the ridges had no topographic importance but were a part of high lands capped either with sandstone or a later member of the carboniferous limestone, now a part of the Mississippi Delta, or resting on the floor of the Gulf of Mexico.

The memoir’s dry reportorial tone reinforces the core idea of a spatial and historical horizon so vast that the individual person almost disappears, giving an ironic turn to the grandiose phrase “man’s progress through the centuries” and miniaturizing the persona as “an insignificant bit of life.” Writing concurrently with Leopold during World War II and its aftermath, and as an elder of an embattled tribe on whose behalf he dutifully spends much time each year lobbying in Washington DC, Mathews is no less aware of the world’s woundedness, of how the “Amer-Europeans,” as he calls them, ran “berserk on the new continent” (227). If the passage I quoted seems to shut out history and politics, that is because of the underlying sociobiological conviction that not just *this* generation but all of *homo sapiens* remains at a primitive stage of evolution, more bound than we prefer to recognize to the organismic life-cycle
and to an exceedingly slow process of natural selection that perforce works the same way for all species. With weird-sounding but rigorous self-consistency Mathews repeatedly uses the epithet “ornamental” to mark any thought or act that would tempt one to feel otherwise, himself included. He admits to enjoying radio broadcasts of football and opera but immediately belittles such activities as “ornamental,” compared to the biotic limits within which his mind/body lives out its small life.

All this makes for a quite different sort of environmental memory work from Leopold’s. Leopold, wanting to reverse human degradation of natural systems, puts front and center the figure of the anxiously conscientious practitioner of good land stewardship (“Whoever owns land,” he insists, “has...assumed, whether he knows it or not, the divine functions of creating and destroying plants” [Leopold 1949, 67]). Mathews, by contrast, although no less convinced that *homo sapiens* is but one member of a larger land community, opts for a kind of cheerful fatalism, hopeful that the species will become less destructive but certain that it cannot evade evolutionary law.

The historian Simon Schama complains in *Landscape and Memory* that environmental historians always undermine what’s most original about their project – “assigning the land and climate the kind of creative unpredictability conventionally reserved for human actors” – by routinely “dismal” plots in which the environment always loses (Schama 11). He is right about the plot, but not about the complaint.Planetary history, especially since industrialization, *has* been a story of incremental human impact. But environmental imagination, considered as a memory-(re)construction project, is not bound to that one plot. Aesthetic texts are as-if statements that potentially reorient vistas by pressing the contrast between the “is” and the “might be” (*cf.* G. Gunn 152–153; Buell). They can build on the biocentric premise of necessary human interdependence with land either in Leopold’s way or in Mathews’. Or in other ways entirely, as ecotopian science fiction’s invention of alternative worlds. In Ursula LeGuin’s “Vaster than Empires and More Slow,” for example (LeGuin 109–154), a crew of astronauts confront an unknown planet comprised of a network of sentient plants of global scope. The novella teases out the implications of bioengineer James Lovelock’s theory of earth as a single holistic macro-organism, which he insists on calling Gaia, after the Greek earth goddess, to the delight of neopagans but to the perplexity of many scientists, who have forced Lovelock into hedging and recalibration as to the exact nature of Gaian “being”: in particular, as to what weight, if any, to attach to the personification except as an arresting metaphor for a biomechanical process (Lovelock 1988, 15–41; Lovelock 2006, 15–38). LeGuin, by contrast, is free to concoct thought experiments about human alienation from planetary holism without bogging
down in technicalities. This flexibility to frame alternative scenarios for environmental memory is potentially one of art’s strongest suits.

Nor does science fiction or any other genre have a monopoly on it. To take a quite different kind of example, New Zealand field biologist Geoff Park’s Ngā Urorā: the Groves of Life is a scientific travel narrative in the tradition of Darwin’s The Voyage of the Beagle and Wallace’s the Malay Archipelago that follows the author’s sorties into remnant wildlands, shuttling mentally back and forth as he goes, along a time scale from prehistory to European contact to the present; between settler and first peoples’ voices, often internally divergent as well as mutually dissonant; and zooming out and back from this or that rare plant under view to its distribution throughout Polynesia and the intertwined natural history of its migration there and its uses as foodstuff by human and animal. All this Park does in pursuit of the claim that the unlikely but hoped-for survival of “the sense of native plants, soils, climactic cycles and life forces as necessary ingredients of how we actually live” is certain to be “as much a matter of spirit and ritual as of ecology and policy” (Park 332). The ritual the author has in mind here is not Maori primordialism but the kind of attempted conjuring from fragments that his book itself tries to perform.

In its evocations of present-tense existence as part of ongoing planetary time, biogeological memory work’s mind-expanding power thereby envisages the present moment not only as the product of almost-unimaginably remote pasts but also as the threshold of the remote future – including the accumulated impact of human action both past and present upon generations as yet unborn. Such consciousness-raising is surely indispensable to responsible earth citizenship, but it also has its potential risks. In particular: to the extent that the biogeological strives toward retrieval of some paradigmatic regional or continental or planetary memory, it can transmit itself as nobody’s memory, as a generic condition of theoretic rather than immediate import for an individual person’s lifeline. Consider another biologist’s reminiscence of a “morning meditation next to a mountain lake on a backpack trip to Montana” on the Zen koan “When did your life begin?”:

I initially contemplated my parents and those few ancestors of which I was aware. As an evolutionary geneticist, my mind traced the DNA that had been passed down from generation to generation since the beginning of human time. I seamlessly traced the DNA back to the ancestors of our species on the savannah of Africa. And beyond. My journey did not end until I reached the beginning of life on Earth.

Allendorf 205
This recipe for instant planetary-time memory-recuperation isn't likely to "click" unless the reader can relate to it as a possible real-life experience. The vaster the time scale the more difficult this is to transmit, especially in such a miniform fashion as this passage (or even the slightly longer texts from which I have excerpted it). Doubtless that's partly why Al Gore's documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) supplemented its striking but schematic hockey-stick-shaped-graph in Gore's blackboard presentation of climate change with more intimate footage showcasing the family farm in rural Tennessee, canoeing on wild and scenic rivers, and so forth. That is surely also one reason why the mind-stretching exercise just quoted is cast as in the form of an autobiographical anecdote, and why the literary renditions of biogeological memory cited above by Leopold, Mathews, and Park all favor the device of foregrounding a persona embedded within a contemporary locale struggling to comprehend vast stretches of time past. For biogeological memory to become lived experience, it must become personalized somehow. This brings me to the second of my four memory frames.

### 3 Environmental Memory as Extension of Personal Being

In introducing the idea of “intergenerational environmental amnesia,” Peter Kahn, Jr., spoke for a group of developmental psychologists and environmental educators alarmed by attenuated existential contact with the natural world, particularly among children. Journalist Richard Louv has coined the term “nature-deficit disorder” to mark the foreshortened mental horizons and consequent long-term risks not only for environmental memory *per se* but also, he suggests, for mental and physical well-being from discouraging twenty-first century children to roam free in wild spaces (Louv).

It remains to be seen whether contact with the natural world or lack thereof really does correlate with the increase or the alleviation of autism and attention deficit disorder – as exposure to plants, natural scenes, or even images of nature *has* been shown to facilitate recovery from illness or surgery (Ulrich 73–137). But without question concern for this general issue is a longstanding theme for *literary* history, including of course the salubrity of renewed contact in adulthood with natural landscapes familiar from childhood.  

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2 Edith Cobb's pioneering study *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (1977), which argued for a correlation between exceptional adult creativity and reported experiences of having located, explored, and identified with special outdoor play-spaces during "middle childhood"
Wordsworth’s poems of recuperation of the creative spirit through memory work activated by return, both existential and vicarious, to youthful haunts canonized this vision for Anglophone literature two centuries ago. Thoreau claims much the same in a journal entry from his first summer at Walden later adapted for his book that reveals more about what brought it into being than the book itself:

Twenty three years [ago,] when I was 5 years old, I was brought from Boston to this pond, away in the country which was then but another name for the extended world for me – one of the most ancient scenes stamped on the tablets of my memory – the oriental asiatic valley of my world.... That woodland vision for a long time made the drapery of my dreams.... Some how or other it at once gave the preference to this recess among the pines.

THOREAU 173–174

This goes a long way toward explaining “Why Walden? Why go there?” “Why make such a fuss about its unique luminosity?” Throughout both the Journal and Walden are scores of passages that anticipate going there or returning to it afterward in body or in dream. Walden’s specialness as an imagined place and its power to induce others to devise neo-Walden ventures of their own arise from the eloquence with which the book has communicated Walden’s imprint as the dream place, the “oriental Asiatic valley of my world,” instilled at a time of life when (in the remembrance, anyhow) no firm distinction existed between country space and personal space.

Other writers have spelled out more fully the cumulative effect of such memories over time, dramatizing for instance how childhood environmental memory returns in deepened form – as in Scots novelist Neil Gunn’s autobiographical Highland River, which recalls growing up in a working-class coastal community:

the river became the river of life for Kenn [aged 9]. He never approached it but with some quickening of breath or eye. When his years had doubled and he was a soldier in France, he could more readily picture the parts of it he knew than the trench systems he floundered amongst. In zero moments it could rise before him with the clearness of a chart showing the

(between infancy and adolescence), has been broadly if not uniformly confirmed by the more empirical research of such recent psychologists as Louise Chawla (1986, 1992, 1994) and Peter Kahn, Jr. (2002, 2003).
main current of his nervous system and its principal tributaries....in one vivid moment, it could produce that brightening of the eye that is more than the smile that follows, intimate and yet aloof, like something half remembered and with the quality of loneliness about it that is perhaps more native to man's essential nature than any other quality, and that visits him finally with a strange new dignity before death.

N. GUNN 33

Three stages of consciousness intertwine here: the boy's excitement; the soldier's compensatory displacement of the labyrinthine trench system by the image of the river course; and the narratorial re-framing, which qualifies the memory as a flicker rather than a constant but further solemnizes it as a definer of personal being. The return of the mental map of the river way in the trench is more than nostalgic flashback to boyhood rambles; for the original place imprint, as the reader has previously been told, was intensified by the sense of danger at poaching on forbidden ground for the laird's fish and game. Highland maze and trench maze are both landscapes of danger, giving extra torque to Wordsworthian reminiscence, in *The Prelude*, of nature having "fostered" his soul “alike by beauty and by fear” (Wordsworth 45).

The environments so early imprinted as to condition adult personhood need not be pristinely “natural.” The Granadan-American poet Audre Lorde told environmental psychologist Louise Chawla that her own special places from childhood were first a site by the edge of the Harlem River and then a tiny park by an urban redevelopment project. Of the latter she says

*That* place, the green, the trees, and the water, formed...my forest of Arden.

I would write about beautiful scenes. It was the only green place I ever saw....I will never forget, after my first book, some students said, “Miss Lorde, would you call yourself a nature poet?” And I thought, ‘What? Me?’ And then I realized how wedded to these images I was. And they come from this pocket park.

q. CHAWLA, 109

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3 Neither are the remembered landscapes of Wordsworth, Thoreau, and Gunn, of course; but they are more easily mistaken as such given their rurality and given how those authors remember them in retrospect, through green lenses as it were. The latter also holds true for the two writers next discussed below, but the element of doublethink is much more unmistakable.
Today even landscapes of despoliation and toxicity may be held up as environmental memory’s paradigm scenes. However much a damaged environment may serve as a carrier of negative emotions, it may be felt as no less richly bound up with the sense of personhood. One of the post-Rachel Carson cancer-survivor memoirs that dramatizes this is *Body Toxic*, by Susanne Antonetta, who spent her summers in girlhood near Tom’s River, New Jersey, a marshland district that suffered from some of the worst industrial pollution in the United States.

I have malformed reproductive organs, tumors, weird botched pregnancies and more…. As children, even in the womb, we were changed, charged and reformed by the landscape….what did it was the small white fish and the blackberries and the air itself.

*Antonetta* 148

We loved things that soaked and flooded, or seared and burned and wizened…. Smallish and spindly needled pines, white cedars here and there, ash; a sparse tree line and brackish water, so weedy it looked like a cauldron of wigs.

*Antonetta* 13

Antonetta’s (designedly) scattered and associative reminiscences express a striking, unstable fusion of sprightliness and griefwork. The author cannot recall her childhood romps without rueing their after-effects, yet that does not altogether poison exuberance at environmental memory’s role in her self-fashioning. The result is a hard-edged “material memoir” of anti-toxicification protest (Alaimo 94–110) that dramatizes in the process the long-term enticement of the very environment that malformed her.

In pondering these passages of recollected experience we must not overlook, however, the opposite side of memory work: forgetting. All of them succumb more or less to what Paul Ricoeur calls “the pitfall of the imaginary,” *i.e.* the assumption that memory must re-present itself as image. “This putting-into-images, bordering on the hallucinatory,” warns Ricoeur, “constitutes a sort of weakness, a discredit, a loss of reliability for memory” (54). Thoreau, Lorde, and Antonetta obviously offer not one hundred percent accurate recall, but – as they themselves at different moments confess – distillations involving necessarily selective recuperation of memory both as residual and as process. Even if they willed otherwise, as the authors all at least obliquely hint, they could not have avoided underrepresenting memory’s pre-conscious dynamics and ultimate ineffability, as well as a number of other processes that can be represented: such as how memory gets thinned, fragmented, disowned, repressed, even faked.
Such subtilizations are more overtly on display in Ibuse Masuji’s Hiroshima novel, *Black Rain* (1969), which turns on Uncle Shigematsu’s desire to discharge his self-imposed duty to arrange a proper marriage for his niece in the face of rumors a half-dozen years later that she must certainly have contracted radiation sickness. At this book’s core are the various diaries and memoirs Shigematsu gathers – his, his wife’s, his niece Yasuko’s, and other area residents as well – in order to prove to the go-between that he himself, who became only slightly ill, was more gravely exposed to fallout than Yasuko, who was barely sprinkled by the shower of black rain. Of course she really is ill; she’s been concealing it for some time; and what’s more Shigematsu too is in denial, even as he writes his moment-by-moment journal of the fateful day and its aftermath. The coda added after the niece falters shows that he has long known but refused to face how even a number of transient visitors died from “simply walking in the ruins” of the devastated city (Ibuse 219).

Shigematsu’s obsessive yet also aversive recollections of how nuclear apocalypse indelibly reshaped him and those around him involve multiple defensive evasions: lingering on detail to avoid thinking about the big picture, hyperconcentration on performance of daily duty and banal social ritual, managing the grotesque and horrific by logging it as matter-of-factly as possible, indulging in mental roundabouts and digressions. At one point or another it draws on the entire set of memory dysfunctions that psychologist Daniel Schacter provocatively terms “the seven sins of memory”: “transience” (fading out over time), “absent-mindedness,” “blocking,” “misattribution,” “suggestibility,” “bias,” and above all “persistence” (traumatized stuckness) – and in so doing anticipates Schacter’s follow-up argument that these memory “failures” are also adaptive behaviors necessary in some sense for survival.

Here *Black Rain* differs instructively from the American John Hersey’s nonfiction bestseller *Hiroshima* (1946), which also personalizes ecocatastrophe by tracking intertwined lifelines but which always stays on task, tightly controlled by the superintending narrative voice – by contrast to Ibuse’s dispersion of focus amongst an array of befuddled centers of consciousness. *Hiroshima* is much less invested in memory psychology than in reconstructing a cross-section of outcomes.

The contrast between these books follows largely from the differing weights attached to individual as against collective or social memory. This brings me to my third frame.

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4 Despite my admiration for the rigor and intricacy of historian Geoffrey Cubitt’s distinction between “social” memory as process versus “collective” memory as ideological artifact (Cubitt 16–17 *et passim*) I use the terms interchangeably here as indeed they tend to be in ordinary usage.
4 Environmental Imagination as Collective Memory Work

Incipiently for *Black Rain* but especially for *Hiroshima* narrative of community is ultimately the more consequential project in terms of which individual life-lines become orchestrated.

That *Hiroshima*’s agenda is the more overtly collective also suggests the dependence of rendition on interpretative context. Not simply genre difference but also cultural outsidership drives Hersey’s emphasis on the composite portrait of a cohort – a far less intimate reading of nuclear trauma than Ibuse’s. So too, to take a middle-ground example, W.G. Sebald’s deployment of semi-disengaged outer narrators to frame oblique figurations of Holocaust victimage in *The Emigrants* and other works. Sebald’s central characters are highly individuated – Austerliz, Max Ferber, Paul Bereyter, and the rest – but the narrator does not presume to be able to create their psyches from within. Their tangled processes of memory and forgetting are no less attentively rendered than in Ibuse, but by means of the performances and speculations of the observer-participant narrators.

These differing choices between intimacy vs. distance, person-focus vs. group-focus as preferred modes of scripting point to the divergent pathways that memory studies itself has taken in social theory as against phenomenology or experimental psychology.

Memory studies are doubtless fated forever to debate as to whether memory is better theorized at the level of the person or the social group. The first framer of collective memory theory, Maurice Halbwachs, insisted that “no recollections...can be said to be purely interior, that is...preserved only within individual memory” (Halbwachs 165). Against this it has been urged, also plausibly, that group memory is a fiction resting on “mystical transpositions of individual psychological phenomena onto imaginary collectivities” (Klein 135). I myself favor the commonsensical difference-splitting view of anthropologists Paul Antze and Michael Lambeck, in their critical collection *Tense Past*, that self and community are both “imagined products of a continuous process” (Lambeck and Antze xx). On one hand, even documentary sociographs like *Hiroshima* allow for some measure of differentiation among life worlds. On the other, even idiosyncratic reminiscences like Proust’s of the teatime event that launched a multi-volume memory-retrieval quest, or Benjamin Franklin retrospectively fantasizing his future bride glancing out her genteel window upon the impeccuous teenage runaway eating his roll on a Philadelphia street – these are not uniquely personal but also in some sense socially conditioned framings of behaviors themselves socially conditioned.
Both Hiroshima books participate in a sub-tradition of collective environmental memory narrative with long roots but special salience since the collateral impact of Euro-modernization and mass-scale genocide: memorial reconstruction of traumatized or obliterated place-based communities. The first canonical Anglophone instance dates from the late eighteenth-century: Oliver Goldsmith’s elegy, “The Deserted Village” (1770), which laments depopulation of the English countryside wrought by acts of enclosure or sequestration by landed gentry as they built their opulent estates. But arguably an even more symptomatic case, this from the late colonial era, would be Indo-Anglian novelist Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1939), which recreates the geography, rituals, and social texture of a small town violently dispersed for resisting the authority of the Raj and its territory reallocated for the fancy estates of (Indian) city-dwellers. The two forms of forcible land enclosure – one at the imperial core, the other at the periphery, though literally worlds apart – are bound together as interconnected forms of domination of peasant cultures by moneyed elites. I call *Kanthapura* the more symptomatic text because it registers more fully the whole doleful history of disruption, often extinction, of communities and cultures on the Europhone periphery that was ultimately more crucial than home country property ownership *per se* in consolidating home-country wealth.5

*Kanthapura*’s emphasis on violent dispersal might also be set beside Native American novelist Leslie Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977), a work of imagined communal reconstitution. *Ceremony* turns on the plight of a damaged youth stigmatized as the bastard son of a white father and Indian mother fallen into prostitution and then further traumatized by the shock of combat and captivity in the Pacific theatre in World War II. Gradually he is healed by means of a series of increasingly complex rituals that congeal the fragmented memories haunting him around an awakened sense of belonging to his place-based Laguna Pueblo culture of origin that is framed not merely as a personal quest but also as a communal healing. Whereas *Kanthapura* memorializes communal disintegration, *Ceremony* reassembles collective environmental memory, figuring its transformation from a psychically destructive force that induces mental chaos, guilt, anomie, desire for self-annihilation – into a potential solidifier of

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5 For more on the sociocultural logic of the historical link between forms of enclosure in the mother country and its imperial periphery, see especially Williams and Marzec. *N.b.* The link is further confirmed by the Anglo-Canadian rejoinder poem by Oliver Goldsmith’s nephew and namesake, *The Rising Village* (1825), which celebrates the emigration of the Deseret Village’s dispossessed inhabitants to British colonial North America.
personal and collective well-being. Key to both performances is the evocation of landscape as chronotope – as a socially shared environmental timescape where every niche and place name has symbolic significance encoded in a shared body of stories orally told and retold to bind members of the community together.6

Such narratives of restoration (or obliteration) of place-based communities – “ecosystem people,” Gadgil and Guha call them in their environmental history of India – have been especially central to the most important ecocritical initiative of the last decade, environmental justice ecocriticism, which has also been one of the principal catalysts for the dramatic environmental turn within the past few years. The connection is understandable given the status of witness narratives by ecosystem people as carriers of “counter-memory,” i.e. subversion of orthodox understandings by invoking “localized experiences with oppression...to reframe and refocus dominant narratives” (Lipitz 213).7 Environmental justice criticism seeks to identify, voice, and frame the memories of the environmentally disenfranchised, whether this be an African American neighborhood in Cleveland displaced by redevelopment; an Australian aboriginal tribe fighting multinational mining interests; the Ogoni of the Niger Delta pitted against both Shell Oil and their own central government; or ad hoc communities of urban homeless anywhere (Washington, Rosier, and Goodall, items 8, 19, 25, 9).

Not that collective environmental memory literature deals solely with marginal groups. Nor that either the environmental-justice imaginary nor environmental justice ecocriticism must reduce simply to critical melodramas of big-white-guy villains vs. little-nonwhite-guy victims. To take just one additional pair of examples, Amitav Ghosh’s novel The Hungry Tide (2004) and Jake Kosek’s semi-autobiographical ecocritique, Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern Mexico (2006) demonstrate the contemporary complexity of the discourse both in contemporary literature and in critical theory. The Hungry Tide adjudicates between types of enclosure in the Sundarbans swamp-land archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, sympathetically pitting the claims of a thriving and industrious community of displaced ecosystem people against those of the corrupt neocolonial officials and distant global-green backers of

6 See Basso’s ethnography of Western Apache story-based toponymy for an account of this praxis.
7 Silko’s Ceremony is one of Lipsitz’s chief examples. “Counter-memory” is a “Foucaultian” term not actually employed by Foucault himself (v. Foucault 1973) but, as Lipsitz explains, developed by subsequent cultural theory as a more explicitly contrarian successor to the Foucaultian concept of “genealogy.”
the Bengal tiger preserve where the community squats, but more complexly against the claims of a more benign enclave on a proximate island, a combination of frontier hospital and peasant enterprise zone whose matriarch refuses to aid the illegal settlement lest her own be jeopardized. Understories is a study of clashing rhetorics over forest policy in Northern New Mexico that counterpoints a basically pro-Hispanic perspective with Native American and radical green voices along with Forest Service spokespersons to show the Rashomon-like contestedness of bioregional memory there.

5 National Environmental Imaginaries

Scholars of the phenomenon of nationalism would seem to envisage national memory as a more decisive driver of collective memory formation than the bioregional-scale imaginaries foregrounded by Rao, Silko, Ghosh, and Kosek. The most seminal work of contemporary nationalism theory stipulates that “finite if elastic borders” are crucial to the idea of nation as “imagined community” (Anderson 7). Others broadly agree that even if a collective sense of connection “to a particular geographical place” is not the most powerful motivator of nationalist sentiment (the writer just quoted puts it fourth, after social solidarity, historical continuity, and “active” identity) (Miller 25), nonetheless “sovereignty implies space” (Lefebvre 280). Environmentally-charged images of territorial holism have certainly long served as charismatic nationalistic rallying cries, from Shakespeare’s green “scepter’d isle” for England to the “sea to shining sea” of Katherine Lee Bates’s hymn “America the Beautiful” and many if not all modern national anthems. British cultural geographer John Rennie Short further contends that certain specific territorial forms – wilderness, countryside, and city – have been particularly amenable to the production of “national environmental ideology” underwriting state formation (55); and although he focuses specifically on the Anglophone world (u.k., u.s., and Australia), his argument could doubtless be extended much further if not universally.

On the other hand, it could be replied that collective environmental memory – in literature and the arts, at any rate – embeds itself more tenaciously at local, regional, ethnic, and diasporic levels than at the comparatively abstract level of the national. During the heyday of the quest for “the great American novel,” for instance, writer-critic Mary Austin argued that attempted renderings of a paradigmatic national environment or lifestyle could not hope to yield anything better than such overgeneralized cartoon stereotypes as Sinclair Lewis offered up in his best-selling novels Main Street (1920) and Babbitt (1922) because the texture of national lived experience was too variegated by
ethno-environmental regional particularities (Austin 132). That did not prevent Lewis from becoming the first U.S. winner of the Nobel Prize for literature; yet Austin’s critique seems validated by the archive of works examined so far. Only the two Hiroshima texts come to being works of national imagination in respect to the conception of lived collective experience; and even then via the synecdoche of Hiroshima as total war-struck Japan.

That said, it would be foolish to deny that national imaginaries may have significant environmental underpinnings. When jurisdictional borders correspond to ecological ones, as in island nations like Iceland, that might seem to make best *prima facie* sense. But even when not, physical environment may be crucial to collective image formation, even – indeed sometimes especially – when imagined territory does not correspond to political unit, as in German *Heimat* expansionism under the Third Reich (Morley and Robins), or in modern Chinese aspirations to establish control over the farthest bounds of empire in imperial times, including Tibet, Taiwan, and the Indian northeast. In such cases, the nationalist environmental imaginary seems to have been intensified by the strength of the unfulfilled desire for actualization. Nineteenth-century American settler-culture desire to “civilize” the “wilderness,” registered and by and large seconded by Euro-American creative writers from Cooper, Bryant, and Irving onward seems reprised, *mutatis mutandis*, by the late twentieth-century Han Chinese desire to transform the inner Mongolian grasslands by transforming it into a familiar and more productive agricultural heartland, plangenty chronicled in Jiang Rong (Lü Jiamin)’s autobiographical novel *Wolf Totem* (2004).

National self-images and stereotypes also obviously get further shaped by territorial markers of historic import: battlefield sites, monuments, public buildings (as the attackers of 11 September 2001 well knew when they targeted the Pentagon, White House, and the twin towers of the World Trade Center), or the lines of cultural-geographic demarcation like the Mason-Dixon line that marked off the American (U.S.) south from north. The most comprehensive inventory of these to date for any nation, the French *lieux de memoires* (“memory sites”) assembled by Pierre Nora and associates, includes all of these types and more.

*Pace* Mary Austin, skilled, inventive wordsmiths can and have powerfully enlisted the power of synecdoche to make localized memory sites memorably represent crucial aspects of *national* heritage in ways that can fortify either hegemonic versions of national sentiment – as in Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address (the new birth of freedom proclaimed therein symbolized by the swift transformation of the bloody battlefield into a cemetery park) – or counter-memory, as in Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream speech” at the Lincoln
Memorial. Yet the resonance of canonical memory sites are easily beclouded or effaced by competing interest groups with conflicting agendas, as with Glen Beck’s 2010 “restoring honor” rally at the Lincoln Memorial aimed at creating a right-wing counterpart to King, and – more directly to the point of the present chapter – by the foreshortening of actual eco-scapes to reductive encapsulations, as when a Bierstadt painting or Ansel Adams photograph is taken to stand for what the whole Rocky Mountain west is, was, or should be. Nothing is easier than to fall into self-contradiction or self-caricature over these, as with Australian “bush,” which is routinely stretched to include a hodgepodge of discrepant landscapes. To register so vast an environmental gestalt as Australia or the US almost inevitably means resorting to breathless Whitman-style catalogue, or the redundant proliferation of Sal Paradise’s bus and auto transits in Kerouac’s *On the Road*, or the flyover approach of Jean Baudrillard’s *America*, whose knockoff reduction of US-ness to the two paradigmatic landscapes of desert and supercity unconsciously parodies Whitman and Kerouac. So albeit imagined “nationness” can powerfully inflect and reflect environmental memory, but it is at perpetual risk of dwindling into cliche, or a chaos of competing attempts at branding.

Perhaps national environmental memory’s most intrinsically powerful recourse is the “thick” synecdoche, as in Ibuse’s *Black Rain*, which intertwines all the dimensions of environmental memory simultaneously, delivering a narrative of community involving highly individuated actors who experience an ecological cataclysm of world-historical proportions.

6 What Good is It?

Environmental memory is clearly not an unmixed good. There are legitimate grounds for skepticism. First, it is impossible to remember everything, and even one who could would be like Borges’ Funes the Memorious, whose prodigious memory renders him dysfunctional. Then too some element of agreed-upon forgetting is needed in order to achieve truces, amnesties, social healing (Margalit; Suleiman 215–232). Kosek’s *Understories* stresses the exacerbating contention over rightful heritage in Northern New Mexico between Hispano dating of environmental injustice back to U.S. conquest in the mid-1800s as against Native American back-dating it to the Spanish conquest of first peoples 250 years earlier. Memories can freeze individuals and whole societies in states of melancholia.

Second, environmental memory can mislead even when “correct”: can seduce societies into suicidal behavior when they employ practices that worked
effectively elsewhere, as when farmers who settled the fertile-seeming American Midwest hastened and aggravated the worst ecological disaster in U.S. history, the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, by not adapting their methods sufficiently to arid land conditions. Third, that collective environmental memory narrative (like all memory work) straddles between truth and myth opens it up to all sorts of wish-fulfillment, like the unkillable myth of the so-called “ecological Indian” (Krech), based on the idealization of a stable pre-contact primordium that never was.

With this range of general concerns in mind, but most especially the late twentieth century boom in Holocaust studies, historian Charles Maier has decried what he calls a contemporary pathology of “memory surfeit,” as betokening a retreat from “transformative politics” into a retrograde identitarianism (Maier 136–152). That this charge can apply to scholarship as well as public culture seems clear from the most massive monument of environmental memory studies to date: the multi-volume collaborative lieux de mémoire project, which has been criticized with some justice for pining after an organic Frenchness. Indeed Editor-in-Chief Nora has in effect described his project as the upshot of the fall into modernity, distinguishing between what he calls

*true memory*, which today subsists only in gestures and habits, unspoken craft traditions, intimate physical knowledge, ingrained reminiscences, and spontaneous reflexes, and *memory transformed* by its passage through history, which is practically the opposite: willful and deliberate... psychological, individual and subjective, rather than social, collective, and all-embracing.

*Nora 1: 8, 1*

This *cri de coeur* is an arresting instance of autocritique driven by nostalgia: the professional historian recoiling, or so it seems, against the rigorous empiricism to which he *qua* historian is supposedly committed.

Despite whatever can be said against it, however, environmental memory has constructive uses that cannot be denied. It can be put to practical advantage by the disempowered, indeed by all social actors, as seen in thousands of community and regional advocacy movements today worldwide. Politicized environmental memory work can get results – provided that it gets enough notice.

Second, environmental memory is a powerful existential reality, often if not uniformly crucial to human well being. A colleague who has volunteered worldwide as an emergency physician for Doctors without Borders and other humanitarian agencies told me that she and her fellow workers with refugees in post-conflict situations find that environmental loss often cuts deeper even
than human loss. One study of displaced Palestinian communities bears similar witness.

The village — with its special arrangements of houses and orchards, its open meeting-places, its burial ground, its collective identity — was built into the personality of each individual villager to a degree that made separation like an obliteration of the self.... Thirty years after the uprooting, the older generation still mourns.

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Doubtless such reported memories — and likewise the far more copious archive of testimony by displaced diasporic Jews — are liable to after-the-fact reshaping through social conditioning and personal wish fulfillment (Schudson). But that only corroborates the power of the environmental memory imprint as energizer, whether to undermine, to lift up, to traumatize.8

Third, environmental memory can correct against the hallucination of human autonomy either of person or of species, a bias reinforced by accelerating techno-scientific change. Its correction cannot guarantee but can help promote a more self-conscious awareness than now exists of humans evolving over time within environmental contexts certain to shape us more than we shape them. That an increasing fraction of humans even in the developing world are not ecosystem people, do not live traditional place-based lives, and do not therefore have access to the environmental markers and attendant social rituals that Pierre Nora fondly recalls and the characters in Raja Rao and Leslie Silko find indispensable to cultural survival makes the search for compelling visions of environmental belonging all the more needful. Here the arts of environmental imagination are a potential resource as activators of the sense of interdependence between the who and the where of existence that, in itself, is anything but fictional, which people ignore at the peril of denying not just earth’s needs but their own.9

8 Although my examples here are of displaced communities, compensatory memorialization can work powerfully at the private level as well. See for instance cultural geographer Divya P. Tolia-Kelly’s research on the “process of creating landscapes of enfranchisement” in one’s home using material objects that evoke remembered landscapes by diasporic women of south Asian descent living in England (Tolia-Kelly, 157).

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Works Cited


