Amnesiology: Towards the study of cultural oblivion

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Abstract
It is generally accepted that memory is a dialectic involving both remembering and forgetting. Also, there is agreement among cultural memory scholars that acts of memory seek to counter the effects of forgetting: they serve the imperative to remember and impede the work of forgetting. This article develops the concept of amnesiology to explore forgetting and forgetfulness not as a failure of memory but as a made condition, produced and reproduced. Focusing on Jonathan Safran Foer’s Tree of Codes, a book which was carved out of Bruno Schulz’s The Street of Crocodiles, it inquires into the relationship between memory performance and the production of oblivion and explores the role of language and literature in it. As I argue, the die-cut pages of Tree of Codes invite reflection on the narrative and technological dimensions of memory as well as on the role silence, repression and absence play in it as technologies of forgetting.

Keywords
Agnotology, cultural memory, forgetting, Jonathan Safran Foer, lethotechnics, mnemonics

Forgetting is a form of remembering.  
(Terdiman, 1993: 250)

‘[O]ne day all past culture will be completely rewritten and completely forgotten behind the rewrite’, the Czech dissident writer Milan Kundera (1985 [1971]: 8) writes in the introduction to his play Jacques and his Master. Kundera’s statement of cultural pessimism is not devoid of irony, of course, since it introduces his own rewriting of Diderot’s Jacques le fataliste. It is also quite disdainful of popular culture: ‘Adaptations of great novels for the screen and stage are nothing more than a kind of Reader’s Digest’. The good-high/bad-low distinction notwithstanding, what is interesting here is the connection Kundera makes between adaptation as an omnipresent mode of cultural production and forgetting – a connection, moreover, that is congruent with recent psychological research on retrieval-induced forgetting (Stone and Hirst, 2014), as I shall discuss further.

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In Kundera’s (1985 [1971]: 10) view, Jacques and his master, written as homage to Diderot and to the genre of the novel, memorializes the Enlightenment author and his novel, commemorating them in a spirit of admiration. As such, the play is an act of cultural remembrance – a performance, literally, that seeks to make ‘remembering in common’ possible (Connerton, 1989: 39) and to affect what is remembered and what is included in the ‘the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity’ (Assmann, 1995: 130). In contrast, the adaptations that are the object of Kundera’s scorn are said to form a screen for past culture. They produce not memory, but oblivion.

Kundera is not the only one to express worries about ‘our hopelessly forgetful modern societies’ (Nora, 1989: 8). Writing from a nearby Parisian location, French historian Pierre Nora (1989) introduces what would become a central concept of memory studies, the lieu de mémoire (the memory site), by similarly bewailing the disappearance of ‘real’ memory: ‘We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left’ (p. 7). In Nora’s (1989) perspective, the lieu de mémoire compensates for this loss. It ‘originate[s] with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally’ (p. 12). The ‘most fundamental purpose of the lieu de mémoire’, he adds (Nora, 1989), ‘is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting’ (p. 19).

It is to this work of forgetting that this essay addresses itself, developing the concept of amnesiology for cultural memory studies. To do so, it builds on the ground-breaking work done recently in the field of agnotology (Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008) to address forgetting and forgetfulness not as a failure of memory – a disremembering – but as inherent to it; ‘a form of remembering’, as Richard Terdiman (1993: 250; emphasis deleted) says; ‘a component of memory itself’, as Marc Augé (2004: 15) puts it. It is generally accepted that memory is a dialectic involving both remembering and forgetting. Also, there is agreement that acts of memory seek to counter the effects of forgetting: commemorations are designed to help people remember/not forget and monuments are erected so that historical figures and events be available for recall, functioning as if they were knots in the handkerchief of the urban fabric. As this simile based on an out-dated mnemonic illustrates, the technologies at a culture’s disposal for the production of memory shape this memory, giving form to what is remembered as well as how (cf. Plate and Smelik, 2009). The ‘management of memory’ (Wills, 2008: 240) to a large extent determines its performance, both in the sense of ‘act’ or action – the doing of memory – as well as meaning its productivity and functionality (cf. McKenzie, 2001). Framing, producing, selecting and recollecting, these technologies also produce oblivion. Amnesiology explores forgetfulness and the state or condition of being forgotten in this light: not as a lapse of memory, nor as memory’s flipside, but as something actively produced – a made condition, produced and reproduced, that requires being studied in and for itself, and, consequently, needs its own set of tools.

**Introducing a new term and a new field**

For Proctor and Schiebinger (2008), forgetting and the forgotten are part of agnotology, which they define as ‘the study of ignorance making, the lost and forgotten’ (p. vii). Ignorance, as they argue, is produced and maintained, ‘in diverse settings, through mechanisms such as deliberate or inadvertent neglect, secrecy and suppression, document destruction, unquestioned tradition, and myriad forms of inherent (or avoidable) culturopolitical selectivity’. And indeed, there is no denying that ‘collective amnesia’, as scholars in memory studies have been studying it, is integral to epistemology, formative of the structural base of knowledge – of what we know and of what we remember. The reason I nonetheless propose a new term, however, is not simply to
add to an already complex vocabulary, but to name a specific field within memory studies. In the inaugural issue of *Memory Studies*, Roediger and Wertsch (2008) argued for the need to develop ‘methodologies and theories that pertain specifically to issues in memory studies as prolegomena to the success of the field’ (p. 19). This essay wishes to contribute to this development by establishing the centrality of forgetting to cultural memory studies and sketching the contours of the study of culturally produced forgetting. Building on ‘amnesia’, meaning ‘loss of memory’, ‘amnesiology’ is a term whose meaning is easy to grasp. Suggesting a certain pathology to the cultural conditions for forgetting, it may therefore be a better alternative than ‘lethotology’, a term that takes not amnesia but Lethe as its root – a more literary but also a more obscure reference. Lethe, indeed, is Greek for oblivion, forgetfulness and concealment. In Hesiod’s (1953) *Theogony*, Lethe is the personification of forgetfulness, while in later Greek and Roman mythology, it becomes a river in the Underworld: in Virgil’s (1990) *Aeneid*, most notably, the drinking of its waters cleanses the souls that are to be reincarnated so that they may go ‘unmemoried’, as Robert Fitzgerald (1990: 186) puts it in his translation of the poem. Producing necessary forgetfulness, Lethe forms a structural part of the Ancient worldview. This productivity is retained in the adjective ‘Lethean’, meaning ‘pertaining to the river Lethe’ and hence ‘pertaining to or causing oblivion or forgetfulness of the past’. Although it is found in the poetry of Milton and Tennyson and in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), ‘Lethean’ is not current usage, its underuse offering further proof of the need to develop a terminology and a methodology for the study of the production of oblivion.

Whatever the complexities of naming this new field, much more troubling is its object of study. For what do we call what is not available or accessible for recall? The lack of a language specific to forgetting has often been commented upon (e.g. Passerini, 2003; Weinrich, 2004). Etymologically, ‘to forget’, like the Dutch ‘vergeten’ and the German ‘vergessen’, all derive from the Old Saxon ‘far-getan’, composed of *getan meaning ‘to hold, grasp’, preceded by the prefix ‘far’ (which becomes ‘for’ in English, ‘ver’ in Dutch/German). The etymological sense is thus ‘to miss or lose one’s hold’; the definition given by the OED is ‘To lose remembrance of; to cease to retain in one’s memory’. Remarkably, forgetting is only defined in terms of failure and of loss of something else, which is memory. This definition keeps being reproduced throughout the literature. For instance, in his essay ‘Remembering and Forgetting: Narrative as Cultural Memory’, Jens Brockmeier (2002) speaks of remembering as ‘the radiant hero in the limelight’ and of forgetting as ‘the shady villain … lurking behind the scenes’ (p. 15). Similarly, asked to speak at a conference on ‘The Uses of Forgetting’, Yosef Yerushalmi (1996 [1989]: 108) recoils in horror. As he writes in the ‘Reflections on Forgetting’ that form the postscript to the second edition of his book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*:

‘The Uses of Forgetting’. In the Hebrew Bible they are not to be found. The Bible only knows the terror of forgetting. Forgetting, the obverse of memory, is always negative, the cardinal sin from which all others will flow.

However, the problem is not just that forgetting is defined in negative terms. It is that if we want to talk about what is forgotten, we stumble upon a fundamental lacuna. Consider these phrases: The process of remembering produces memories; the process of forgetting produces — Neither in English nor in my native Dutch is there a word for what is forgotten. What is not remembered is not only unavailable or inaccessible psycho-cognitively, it is also unavailable in language. In this sense, the identification of amnesiology as a theoretical direction in memory studies is itself a critical intervention integral to agnotology since it raises questions such as the following: Why do we know so little about forgetting? Why do we not even have a word for that which is forgotten? And
why do we make so little use of the words we do have – ‘Lethean’, for instance, but also verbs such as ‘to oblivion’ and ‘to oblivionize’, as I shall discuss further on?

The fact that the object of the study of amnesiology does not have a name of its own, however, does not mean it has not been discussed. I have already quoted Yerushalmi’s ‘Reflections on Forgetting’, reflections which were prompted by an invitation to speak at a conference on the uses of forgetting, the proceedings of which were published in 1988. Since then, many scholars have sought to put forgetting on the agenda of memory studies. Luisa Passerini (2003) explored ‘Memories Between Silence and Oblivion’ and Paul Ricoeur devoted the final pages of Memory, History, Forgetting (Ricoeur, 2000, 2004: English translation) to the subject. More recently, Paul Connerton published his article ‘Seven Types of Forgetting’ in the inaugural issue of the journal Memories Studies (Connerton, 2008) and, 1 year later, his book How Modernity Forgets (Connerton, 2009), and Ann Whitehead (2009) concludes her book on Memory in Routledge’s New Critical Idiom Series with the suggestion that ‘a discursive shift is beginning to take place from memory to forgetting’ (p. 154). She adds (Whitehead, 2009), and this is the last sentence of her book, ‘[F]orgetting, paradoxical as it may seem, constitutes a crucial if not essential element in the future trajectory and direction of “memory” studies’ (p. 157). In fact, the literature on forgetting is considerable, ranging from reflections on memory in relationship to forgetting, to studies devoted to the art and uses of forgetting.3 Following earlier inquiries into how memory works such as Metaphors of Memory (Draaisma, 1995, 2000: trans.) and Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older: How Memory Shapes our Past (Draaisma, 2001, 2004: trans.), the Dutch psychologist Douwe Draaisma recently published a book on the subject titled Forgetting: The Mind’s Survival Mechanism (Draaisma, 2010, 2015: trans.), while historian Willem Frijhoff (2011) devoted attention to ‘Remembering as an Art of Forgetting’, inquiring into the conscious and unconscious processes of selecting, disremembering and overlooking at work in historiography. Internationally, Harald Weinrich (1997, 2004: trans.) broke new ground with his book Lethe: Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens while the interdisciplinary collection of essays Forgetting (Della Salla, 2010), which identifies itself as ‘the first scientific [volume] devoted to [forgetting]’ (p. 1), brings together the available knowledge on the subject as it can be found in experimental and cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, behavioural neuroscience, neuroimaging, clinical neurology and computing modelling.

As can be seen from the titles of Augé (1998, Les Formes de l’oubli) and Ricoeur (2000, La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli), however, there are languages – languages other than the Germanic ones to which I have referred above – in which there is a word for that which is forgotten. In French, for instance, to forget is ‘oublier’, and what is forgotten is ‘un oubli’ – a polysemous word that encompasses a number of types of forgetting, for it translates as forgetting, lapse of memory and also as omission and oversight. The existence of this word in French – as well as derived words, such as ‘oubliettes’, which refers to a secret dungeon with only a trapdoor, through which people were literally thrown into oblivion, for it was designed for people condemned to be locked up for life – suggests that it is Germanic languages which produce the lack of a language to speak about forgetting. ‘Ignorance has a history and a political geography’, the authors of Agnotology maintain on the book’s back cover (Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008), and so, it would seem, does ‘oblivion’, a term whose etymology speaks volumes about its history and cultural geography. Oblivion refers to the condition or state of being forgotten. Its Latin root, ‘oblivisci’, means ‘to take away’, and so suggests it is active, not the passive loss of memory implied by its Germanic counterpart. The different words and the different languages thus already imply a different episteme and a different understanding of how forgetting works and whether oblivion is produced actively or passively. Insofar as words shape how we think and act, the differences are significant, in themselves illustrative of how oblivion is culturally induced in diverse settings and at all kinds of levels, including that of language.
The specificity of forgetting

Yet, there is another reason why we need a new vocabulary, and this is because, although it is an inseparable aspect of memory, when formulated as a problem, oblivion is also distinctive. The problem is one already reported by Cicero, namely, of remembering what one wants to forget and of forgetting what one wants to remember (cf. Weinrich, 2004: 12). To remedy the latter problem, elaborate arts of memory have been formulated: mnemonics, theatres of memory, a memory palace, loci. Nora’s (1989) lieux de mémoire, designed to ‘block the work of forgetting’ (p. 19), clearly belong to this tradition. In contrast to such ars memoriae, how does one formulate an ars oblivionalis, an art of forgetting? How does one forget what one wants to forget? There is no letho-technique equivalent to the mnemonic knot in the handkerchief or note scribbled on the back of a hand. As Umberto Eco (1988) states in ‘An Ars Oblivionalis? Forget It!’ (p. 259), ‘[t]here are no voluntary devices for forgetting’. An anecdote about the philosopher Immanuel Kant and his servant of 40 years, Martin Lampe, illustrates this well. As recorded by Kant’s early biographers, Lampe was fired after nearly a lifetime of service, possibly because of excessive drinking, although it has been suggested the dismissal was prompted by the presence of Kant’s biographer, Wasianski (Weinrich, 2004: 68). The fact is that Lampe had become so much part of Kant’s life that the ageing philosopher felt the need to make a special note of it to himself: ‘Der Name Lampe muß nun völlig vergessen werden’ (‘The name Lampe must now be completely forgotten’). This, however, proved an impossible task, to which the note in itself paradoxically attests. Forgetting, at least at the individual level, cannot be so simply induced or called upon – not, that is, by using the same techniques as employed for its opposite, remembrance. As Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis attests, however, human psychic life is constituted by all kinds of lethotechnics. For Freud, dreams, neuroses, repression and parapraxes are all memory disturbances – failures to remember, dis- or mis-remembrances – and the unconscious is the locus where ‘nothing is past or forgotten’ (Freud, 1999: 378). This makes psychoanalysis a ‘mnemo-analysis’ (Terdiman, 1993: 241) and psychotherapy, the restoration of memory.

It should be noted that there is a form of psychotherapy called EMDR – acronym for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing – that induces a kind of forgetting since it helps people who suffer from post-traumatic stress to process recurrent distressing memories, reducing the distress they cause. Building on these insights into the workings of memory, neuroscientists have found they can achieve the same result using drugs, disrupting the way memories are stored and even making them disappear (Gray, 2007). In addition, recent psychological research into retrieval-induced forgetting has shown that ‘the rate of forgetting depends on the relation between what is not said and what is said’ (Stone and Hirst, 2014: 318). Proving that ‘not all silence is mnemonically equal’ (Stone and Hirst, 2014: 315), such research suggests that the partial silence and recall that can be found in retelling (to an interlocutor, but also to oneself, in those ‘conversations between me and myself’ that constitute thinking according to philosophers from Socrates to Hannah Arendt), as well as in rewriting and adaptation, may be a most effective tool of forgetting. On the whole, however, as Matthew Arnold (1998 [1877]) puts it in his poem ‘Absence’, ‘we forget because we must/And not because we will’ (p. 94). In consequence, lethotechnics still mostly belong to the domain of fiction, where they are explored in literature and film, for instance in Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004), in which a couple that has fallen out of love proceeds to have each other erased from their memories, in a procedure likened to ‘a mild form of brain damage’ comparable to a ‘night of heavy drinking’, performed by a company appropriately named Lacuna Inc. The idea obviously had a wide appeal, as witnessed by the online sale of a blue Lacuna Inc. T-shirt advertising Memory Management with the slogan, ‘Remember, with Lacuna you can forget’, as well as Lacuna Inc.’s Facebook page, where recurring comments are ‘I wish you were real’ and ‘I need an appointment’.
What can be deduced from the fact that lethotechnics is still mostly science-fiction is (1) forgetting works differently from remembering, (2) thinking about forgetting is a lot less developed than thinking about remembering and (3) collective oblivion may work differently than individual oblivion. As is well known, at the level of cultural and collective memory, there are all kinds of lethotechnics that are applied. Techniques designed to foster collective amnesia include: the Spanish ‘pact of oblivion’, wrapping the Civil War in silence; the French law that criminalizes references to someone’s past if the activities fall under a law of amnesty (Whitehead, 2009: p. 155); archives that are locked or burned; people who are ‘disappeared’ – thrown into the sea, or in the ‘oubliettes’; sites that are destroyed; traces that are erased; and new names and alternative stories that are circulated. Cultures, nations and groups of people have been practising the arts of forgetting since time immemorial, as when ‘monotheism became rooted in ancient Israel’, as Yerushalmi (1996 [1989]) writes: ‘the entire rich and awesome world of pagan Near Eastern mythology was suppressed and forgotten so that all that was remembered was its prophetic caricature as mere idolatry, the worship of inanimate figures of wood and stone’ (p. 113).

Oblivion, in other words, stands at the heart of culture as founded on identity and remembrance – a culturally and politically induced oblivion not unlike the psychic processes structural of identity analysed by Freud, for it is produced and maintained by silence, misremembering and disremembering, but also by (mis)representing, writing and rewriting. Jacques, in a scene from Milan Kundera’s (1985 [1971]) rewriting of Diderot’s Jacques le Fataliste I evoked at the beginning of this essay, puts it succinctly. To his master he explains,

|Our story, sir, isn’t the only thing that’s been rewritten. Everything that’s ever happened here below has been rewritten hundreds of times, and no one ever dreams of finding out what really happened. The history of mankind has been rewritten so often that people don’t know who they are anymore. (p. 96) |

### From memory studies to oblivion studies

Amnesiology seeks answers to the questions how and why ‘we’ forget, inquiring into those moments and acts of interruption or disruption that are productive of oblivion, as well as those that serve to maintain oblivion, such as silence, omission and repetition. This opens the field of memory studies to a broad spectrum of inquiries, ranging from specific cases of cultural oblivion and collective amnesia, to theoretical inquiries into the relationship between memory and knowledge on the one hand, and oblivion and ignorance on the other, and how individual oblivion is produced culturally. In The Social Frameworks of Memory, Maurice Halbwachs (1992 [1952]) states that ‘it is in society that people normally acquire their memories’ (p. 38). His point is that it is in society that distinctions between what is worth remembering and what is not are formulated, as it is in society that the technologies facilitating certain forms of remembrance while hindering or altogether preventing others are devised. This might then be reformulated as including forgetting: it is in society that people acquire their memories and their ‘forgets’.

A case in point is the commodity, understood as suppressing the memory of its own production process and, consequently, as having lost its capacity to remind people of where it has been, its history and travels. In the opening chapter of Capital, Marx (1987) describes how products of labour become commodities, arguing that ‘the existence of the things qua commodities, and the value-relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom’ (p. 436). What he calls ‘the Fetishism of commodities’ establishes a disconnection between ‘the men’s hands’ and the product of their labour. Building on Marx’s analysis, Terdiman theorizes this disconnection as a ‘perturbation in the realm of memory’, redefining the commodity process as one
in which products of labour are ‘cut … off from their own history’. Referring to Bourdieu’s notion of ‘genesis amnesia’, he argues (Terdiman, 1993; his emphasis) that ‘the enigma of the commodity is a memory disorder’ (p. 12). Earlier, Adorno (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999) had already observed that ‘all reification is a forgetting: objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects: when something of them has been forgotten’ (p. 321). The present concern for ethical consumerism, with people increasingly becoming aware of the moral choices implied by their purchasing decisions, is then properly the concern of a memory culture awakening to its obliviousness and seeking ways of re-establishing its relationship to the past through anamnesis.7

Made necessary by a commodity culture that requires of products they first be emptied of their significance so that they can be branded and give new symbolic meaning, the process whereby knowledge about the commodity process is not passed on is exacerbated in a globalized world, where leather shoes labelled ‘made in China’, for instance, may be made of the hides of cows that grazed on Dutch soil. It is such disconnections, such failures to transmit what is known and such refusal to mark them as memorable that cultural oblivion studies should address. Mobilizing one memory while suppressing another, contemporary consumer culture is a memory culture formed around highly selective processes of remembrance that organizes oblivion. Amnesiology is then a tool for addressing the politics of culturally induced oblivion: it enables us to inquire into the dynamics of remembering and forgetting as a process that stands at the heart of culture.

Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes*: ‘a book that remembers it has a body’

Amnesiology starts from the recognition that forgetting is central to and constitutive of culture and that language is crucial to it, since it determines what can be said, expressed and ‘committed to memory’, as the expression goes. It is therefore not surprising that it is in literature as an art of language that some of the most interesting explorations of culture as the product not of remembering, but of forgetting, are currently taking place. In a recent letter to the editor of *PMLA*, Paul Ardoin (2013: 1007) suggests Jonathan Safran Foer’s (2010) *Tree of Codes* is ‘about the impossibility of finished representation, as well as the failure of any inscription – particularly the printed book – to do anything more than represent itself, making the book a sort of monument to its own useless materiality’. Rather than reading Foer’s project as about ‘the impossible book’, as Ardoin does, I propose instead to view it as speaking in self-conscious ways to writing as an *ars oblivionalis*. As I shall argue in the remaining of this essay, its material form constitutes an anamnesis of the work of forgetting that underlies the production of cultural forms. As such, it presents a useful case study for sketching the contours of amnesiology.

Foer’s first two novels, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Foer, 2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Foer, 2005), may be said to explore issues of memory and, especially, postmemory (Hirsch, 1997, 2008). Both are narratives of loss and recovery, the former by telling of a Jewish American college student named Jonathan Safran Foer who travels to Ukraine in quest of the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis, the latter by intertwining the story of a 9-year-old boy’s quest for his father killed in the 9/11 attack on New York with the story of his grandparents, whose lives are marked by the 1945 bombing of Dresden.

Including black-and-white pictures, blank pages, words crossed out or circled in colour, pages of text written in numerical code or printed in increasingly tight typography so as to eventually become illegible, and a flipbook, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Foer, 2005) was already engaging with the conventions of literary narrative as remembrance, revealing the materiality of the textual medium to give shape to the text. With his third novel, Foer cuts as it were new ground.
Tree of Codes is a book carved out of another book: for its creation, Foer cut into the pages of his favourite book, Bruno Schulz’s (1977 [1934]) collection of short stories The Street of Crocodiles, and sculpted a new, haptic book that ‘remembers it has a body’, as Foer likes to say (Wagner, 2010). A challenging book to produce – the publisher was turned down by many printers before finding one in Belgium who would make the book that was said could not be made, collaborating with bookmakers across the Low Countries8 – Tree of Codes is Foer’s response to digitalization and the rise of the e-book, the result of his inquiry into the question, ‘what [do] books look like, what they will look like?’ (Wagner, 2010).

A visual, tactile, ‘interactive paper sculpture’, as one design blog puts it (Fast Company), Tree of Codes is not only an experimentation with the codex, the book in its familiar modern form, with sheets of paper bound together and supplied with a cover. ‘Laying bare the device’, as the Russian Formalists referred to the process of defamiliarization (cf. Shklovsky, 1965), it is also an exploration of the narrative and technological dimensions of memory as forgetting. With its die-cut pages, Tree of Codes hinders reading for the plot, causing self-conscious awareness of the act of reading as decoding and recomposing in its readers instead, as they are to find their own way into the text, the eyes searching across the die-cut pages for words to form meaningful units, the next word in the sentence and the structuring punctuation. It is not just that, as Kiene Brillenburg Wurth (2011) observes, ‘When we read Tree of Codes, our eyes … perform an act of overlooking, of forgetting, that Foer forces us to make with his obliterations’ (p. 3). Rather than simply drawing the reader into participating into the process of oblivioning, the cut-out words entice reflection on the work’s composition process through selective discarding and creative destruction and invite thinking about the roles that silence, repression and absence play in it as technologies of memory that are above all technologies of forgetting.

Taking the truism that texts are made of texts to the next level, Tree of Codes embodies intertextuality as textual transformation, literalizing the book made of another book. The title is illustrative. Tree of Codes is retrieved from Street of crocodiles. In Foer’s die-cut text, it is found as ‘tree of cod es’ (Foer, 2010: 88 and passim; spaces in the original), the first and last letters of ‘street’ having been cut away, as well as the letters ‘cro’ and ‘il’ in ‘crocodiles’. Recomposed into new words, the regrouped letters form a new text and a new meaning. In Tree of Codes, however, the text is arrested mid-way in its process of composition, which is left as were it incomplete. It is as if composition as the linear arrangements of words separated by single spaces – a form that was developed historically, but that has become so familiar as to be automatic – has yet to happen. Or, to put it another way, it is literature as ‘scissors and paste’, as James Joyce (1966: 297) once recognized, but then without the paste. As such, its opposite is Graham Rawle’s (2005) Woman’s World, a ‘graphic novel’ composed entirely of fragments of text found in 1960s women’s magazines, assembled and collaged into a new text. Showing text to be composed of (preexisting) text (fragments), the pasted phrases that make up Woman’s World emphasize re-composition and the work of gluing rather than that of discarding that necessarily precedes it. In contrast, in its materialization of (inter)textuality, Tree of Codes reveals texts to be as much the product of forgetting as of remembering. This is certainly no new insight. Mikhail Bakhtin (2004 [1981]: 293–94), who may be credited for being the source of much contemporary thinking about narrative texts, already pointed to the need for the writer/poet to strip the word of all past intentions, accents and connotations. In his perspective, words remember the contexts in which they have been; they are shot through with the intentions and accents of others and need to be appropriated, ‘transformed into private property’ by being ‘expropriated’, stripped of their contextual overtones. In consequence, he writes (Bakhtin (2004 [1981]; emphasis in the original), ‘Everything that enters the work must immerse itself in Lethe, and forget its previous life in any other contexts’ (p. 297).
Tree of Codes makes palpable the truth – and it is worth observing that in Greek, truth is ‘aletheia’, which is thus construed as the opposite of forgetfulness, literally meaning ‘un-forgetfulness’ or ‘un-concealment’ – that writing is forgetting. As it shows through the materiality of its die-cut pages, the work of writing, its labour as ‘scissors and paste’, is to oblivion (or oblivionize: both verbs are still extant) – to take away, cut out and discard. The conventions of narrative and of the printed book are designed to make us forget that writing oblivions. Tree of Codes intervenes in this process. It reveals the conventions to hide the truth of writing and, performing the memory of its act of oblivioning, functions as its lieu de mémoire, the locus for its recollection.

Yet Tree of Codes speaks not just to narrative and printed book conventions. Oblivioning one of the two surviving texts by the Polish writer Bruno Schulz, ‘one of the most important artists of the 20th Century’ according to Foer (2010: 137), killed in 1942 by a Nazi officer, its erasure stands for and metonymically refers to those other erasures: Schulz’s own killing and that of his family, the murdering of the European Jews, the disappearance of his artwork and papers, including the manuscript of a novel, given ‘to gentile friends for safekeeping’. In the sense that it engages with the codes and conventions of writing to speak of human, social and cultural erasure and loss, Tree of Codes may be likened to Georges Perec’s (1969) La Disparition, a lipogrammatic novel written without using the letter ‘e’. Born of Polish Jews who had emigrated to France, his father killed in the French Army, his mother deported and murdered, presumably in Auschwitz, Perec is known for his experimental writings – novels such as Les Choses. Une histoire des années soixante (Perec, 1965; translated as Things: A Story of the Sixties), which rhetorically conveys the consumerism of the age through endless lists of material objects, and La Vie mode d’emploi (Perec, 1978; translated as Life: A User’s Manual), which tells of the lives of the inhabitants of a fictitious Parisian apartment block through a complex narrative system based on a series of writing constraints. For Perec as for the other members of the Oulipo group (Oulipo stands for Ouvroir de littérature potentielle), the self-imposed constraint imposes a limitation that is to yield new, ‘potential literature’ and stimulate creativity. Yet, La Disparition is more than a clever literary tour-de-force – the ‘e’ being, in French as in English, the most common letter and hence a difficult one to leave out. As Warren Motte (2002) explains,

the absence of a sign is always the sign of an absence, and the absence of the E in A Void [as La Disparition is translated in English] announces a broader, cannily coded discourse on loss, catastrophe, and mourning. Perec cannot say the words père, mère, parents, famille in his novel, nor can he write the name Georges Perec. In short, each ‘void’ in the novel is abundantly furnished with meaning, and each points toward the existential void that Perec grappled with throughout his youth and early adulthood. A strange and compelling parable of survival becomes apparent in the novel, too, if one is willing to reflect on the struggles of a Holocaust orphan trying to make sense out of absence, and those of a young writer who has chosen to do without the letter that is the beginning and end of écriture. (p. 5)

As in the case in La Disparition, the erasures made tangible in Tree of Codes are also signs of other erasures, things and people taken away, oblivioned. Like the disappeared ‘e’, the cut-out words point to a broader discourse on erasure, disappearance and oblivion, this time coded in the materiality of narrative as ink imbedded in paper made of wood pulp and recycled paper products. Tree of Codes tells the story of an ‘enormous last day of life’ (Foer, 2010: 11). A narrative of coping with death and disappearance, it is told in the first-person by a nameless narrator reminiscing about his youth and parents, especially the father, whose death marks a turning point in the narrator’s life and relationship to his mother. Because it is extracted from Schulz’s The Street of Crocodiles, whose setting is Drogobych, the Polish writer’s native city, Tree of Codes can be read as a text about his erasure, besides that of many other people, their lives, memories and things.
It is important to observe that *Tree of Codes* does not let itself be read in the traditional way, for each page opens onto future text through its cut-out bits. Adding proleptic depth to the narrative’s linearity,10 these windows onto the past (Schulz’s text) and the future (the narrative that is unfolding; what will happen next) place the here and now of reading – its performance of the ‘where am I’ in the text – within time’s multidimensionality. Uncovering narrative depth through the layers of the book’s pages, *Tree of Codes* also reveals reading, as we are wont to practise it, to necessitate the erasure of the traces of what has been left out. Indeed, to allow the text to emerge so that it can be read, it is necessary to efface the traces of writing’s process of oblivioning disclosed by *Tree of Codes*, for instance by using a white sheet of paper to insert behind the page to be read and so to obliterate its view. Obliterating what might be called its ‘negative intertextuality’ (cf. Jameson, 1983: 137), such violence that has to be done to *Tree of Codes* for its narrative to be readable is the violence of remembering as forgetting. Instead, *Tree of Codes* insists we remember that forgetting is integral to remembering – indeed, that remembering is a form of forgetting, and that acts of cultural remembrance need to be looked at in this light, as performances of memory that are also performances of oblivion.

**Conclusion**

‘And yet, and yet – the last secret of the tree of codes is that nothing can ever reach a definite conclusion. Nowhere as much as there do we feel possibilities, shaken by the nearness of realization’ (Foer, 2010: 95). Capturing the sense of potentiality that is liberated in *Tree of Codes*, Foer’s phrase suggests the book’s function as anamnesis of writing as oblivioning is to reveal possibilities, its coded matter inscribing, ‘The feeling of no permanence in life transformed into an attempt to express wonder’ (Foer, 2010: 67). This wonder is first of all the wonder of the bibliophile for the marvels of the codex. ‘The tree of codes was better than a paper imitation’ (Foer, 2010: 96), Foer states in the book’s final reference to its own title. Insisting on the material dimensions of reading that get lost in the digital e-book, *Tree of Codes* shows books to be more than endlessly reproducible and transferable text. Books are artful objects: crafted matter, they have a body, carry weight, unfold in space and emit scent, touching and moving their readers by being manipulated.

Forming a site for the experience and recollection of the material dimensions of book reading, *Tree of Codes* encodes remembrance as oblivion. Conceiving of memory as a problem of representation, Terdiman (1993) argues in *Present Past* that ‘forgetting is a form of remembering’ (p. 250). Today, however, few are the scholars who would maintain, as Terdiman (1993) does, that ‘just as everything is representation, everything is memory’ (p. 8; emphasis in the original). In the wake of the linguistic turn, attention to materiality, practices and performance have shifted attention to those other dimensions of cultural memory. Foer’s *Tree of Codes* belongs to this new age. Exploring the material dimensions of writing, it uncovers remembrance’s work of forgetting. The materiality of the codex reveals remembering to be a form of forgetting. Poised on the threshold of going digital, literary culture is a crucial area for amnesiology as a field within contemporary memory studies.

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**Notes**

1. Although Kundera takes pains to distinguish his play from those debased forms he calls adaptations, there is no denying that the distinction is difficult to maintain, foremost expressive of a certain unease vis-à-vis shifting definitions of the concept of originality (cf. Plate, 2011: 3–4).
2. For a discussion of the knot in the handkerchief as a mnemonic structural of memory, see Terdiman (1993: 16).

3. A discussion of forgetting would not be complete without reference to Derrida’s (1979) meditation on Nietzsche’s phrase ‘I have forgotten my umbrella’ (pp. 122/3–142/3) at the end of Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles. Arguing that digital technologies are overriding the human capacity to forget, Viktor Mayer-Schönberger (2009) pleads for the introduction of ‘digital forgetting’ in Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age.

4. Cf. also Paul John Eakin’s (2008) notion of narrative identity, which similarly posits forgetting as the basis of identity, since it implies that identity is narratively constructed through the stories we tell about ourselves – to ourselves and to others – stories that we learn to tell in culture, for as he argues, ‘our recognition by others as normal individuals depends on our ability to perform the work of self-narration’ (p. 152). To be recognized as ‘normal’ individuals means then to unlearn other ways of telling stories, forgetting other ways of being, as it were.

5. ‘Genocide, after all, is an exercise in community-building’ (Gourevitch, qtd in Appadurai, 2002: 46). Gourevitch’s sentence throws a sinister light on the notion of identity as based on memory shaped by oblivion, for instance in the work of Augé (2004): ‘Remembering or forgetting is doing gardener’s work, selecting, pruning. Memories are like plants: there are those that need to be quickly eliminated in order to help others burgeon, transform, flower’ (p. 17). In a footnote to his essay ‘Collective memory and Cultural Identity’, Assmann (1995) already briefly touched on the dangerous forms that the ‘inevitable egoism of cultural memory that derives from the “need for identity”’ (p. 130, Note 17) may take.


7. Related to this is Tales of Things, which is part of Chris Speed’s TOTeM research project exploring social memory in the emerging culture of the Internet of Things and which seeks to ‘transform how we will treat objects, care about their origin and use them to find other objects’. See http://talesofthings.com.

8. Design being an integral part of the work, the colophon provides information about the full production process, including the name (and copyright holder) of the die-cut pages design, Sara De Bondt, and that the work was printed by die Keure in Belgium, die-cut by Cachet in The Netherlands, hand-finished by Beschuutte Werkplaats Ryhove in Belgium and bound by Hexspoor in The Netherlands.

9. We speak and write so little about the process of forgetting that the verb ‘to oblivion’, meaning ‘to put into oblivion’ and in use since 1659, is unfamiliar, as are the related ‘to oblivionize’ (in use since 1593) and ‘to oblivate’ (in use since 1661). Whereas my spelling checker does not know these words, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) reassures me none of these verbs are obsolete.

10. I am deriving the term ‘proleptic’ from Genette’s (1972) structuralist narrative analysis in Figures III, where it refers to an anticipatory narrative anachrony.

References


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