

A TIME TO REMEMBER, A TIME TO FORGET: FRED HAMPTON, NELSON MANDELA AND THE WORK OF MEMORY

Verne Harris¹

It's been an honour to hold the Follett Chair here at Dominican University. And I'll always be grateful for the space it has given me to step away from the hurly-burly of daily life in South Africa and pursue particular lines of enquiry together with the extraordinary people Dominican is able to congregate. A special thank you to President Donna Carroll and to Professors Marek and Salvatore, who have done so much to ease my way. Dominican practises a special kind of hospitality, where one is at once made to feel at home and worked to the bone.

For over three decades I have been a practitioner of what is often called 'memory work'. In the 1980s, as the struggles against South Africa's apartheid system unfolded into an endgame, I came to appreciate the power of memory as an instrument of resistance to the systemic forgetting and other forms of erasure deployed by oppressive regimes. During the country's transition to democracy in the 1990s, I participated in processes which relied on memory to ensure 'truth recovery', accountability, reparation and other forms of restitution. Through the 2000s I have been involved in promoting freedom of information, mobilising memory resources in support of social justice activism, and developing the Nelson Mandela Foundation's Centre of Memory.

¹ This paper was first presented as the 2019 annual Follett Lecture at Dominican University (Chicago) in April of 2019.

And yet, for a long time now I have been uncomfortable with much of the work I have participated in.² I've been troubled, often, by how memory is mobilised. And I've wrestled with what I call 'an imperative to forget'. Do human beings have a right to forget? What do we do with the experience – which I'm sure everyone in this room has had – of needing to forget? What do I do with experiences like the following:

- The people I've encountered who were tortured or violated in other extreme ways during the apartheid era and who choose not to revisit their pain; who do not want to be reminded of what they've been through; and who embrace forgetting as a path to healing.
- In the late 1990s, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process, I read surviving security files on former activists which contained damaging evidence of betrayal and reams of disinformation. The investigation team had been outraged at the evidence of massive systematic destruction of records by the apartheid state during the transition to democracy. But reading through these potentially damaging materials one of the team members, a former member of the liberation movement, turned to me and said: it might have been better if they'd destroyed everything.
- In Nelson Mandela's private archive there is content which we embargo and which, arguably, should never be put in the public domain. For instance, when he was working on his memoir *Long Walk to Freedom* together with Rick Stengel and they recorded their many conversations together, there were moments when he would pause and say to Rick: "But don't put that in the book." Do

² I first published a reflection on this disquiet together with Chandre Gould in 2014. (Gould and Harris 2014) Gould pursued this line of enquiry in her 2016 paper "The trouble with memory work". (Gould 2016)

we, today, carry a responsibility to expunge those sections of the record?

- When I worked for Nelson Mandela I saw things and heard things which I know should never be disclosed. They remain in my memory, locked in my psychic apparatus, but I wish I could erase them.³

So, an imperative to forget.

Last year when I visited Dominican University for the first time, I brought with me two books as travel reading. The first was that seminal work from the 1950s by Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks*, a devastating critique of colonialism and white supremacy and a call for black liberation. His final chapter is an analysis of what he calls ‘enslavement to the past’ and an injunction to people of colour to transcend history by seeking the meaning of their destiny in the present and the future. “I have not the right,” he says, “to become mired by the determinations of the past. I am not a slave to slavery that dehumanized my ancestors.” (Fanon 1952: 205)

The other book was the 2016 work by David Rieff titled provocatively *In Praise of Forgetting*, in which the author ranges widely both historically and geographically to show just how toxic memory work can be and to mount an argument that in many contexts “it may be time to give forgetting a chance.”⁴ (Rieff 2016: 101)

³ Hélène Cixous’ *Double oblivion of the ourang-outang* culminates in the central character choosing to consign a box of manuscript material to oblivion. (Cixous 2013) On the desire of collectivities to erase painful memories, see McDowell 2009.

⁴ The line of enquiry in Gould 2016 is also on the potential toxicity of memory work.

Both these books, for me, resonated strongly with the idea of an imperative to forget.

But I read a third book while I was at Dominican, one I happened to see in a local bookshop – Jeffrey Haas’ *The Assassination of Fred Hampton*. It tells the story of the Chicago Black Panther leader who was eliminated by the FBI and police in 1969 as part of a broader strategy to destroy the Black Panther Party. The murder and the conspiracy were covered up and it took more than a decade of activism by the family, community leaders and human rights lawyers to expose what had happened and to secure some measure of justice. The civil lawsuit (which concluded in 1982) and related endeavour could be typified as a work of both counter memory and of resistance to forgetting.⁵

(This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of Fred Hampton’s death. I want to dedicate this lecture to his memory and that of the other Panther who died that terrible night, Mark Clark. And to the cause of dismantling what bell hooks calls “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” (hooks 2013: 4))

So, by way of introduction I have sketched what I’m calling imperatives to remember *and* to forget. They pull in different directions, of course. To remember; or to forget. In dominant popular discourses as well as in much scholarly discourse, remembering and forgetting are cast as binary opposites, often linked to a chain of other related opposites – good-bad, light-dark, rational-irrational, functional-dysfunctional, youthful-senile,

⁵ For the Hampton family, the lawsuit was at least partly about telling Fred’s story. As his mother Iberia said: “The way he was described in the papers, people didn’t really know who my son was.” (Haas 2010: 129)

just-unjust, and so on.⁶ Listen, for instance, to historian Yosef Yerushalmi, who argued that it is uniquely Jewish to feel the duty of memory as a religious imperative to a whole people and who posed the question: “Is it possible that the antonym of ‘forgetting’ is not ‘remembering’, but *justice*?” (Derrida 1996: 77) Or listen to the hum of psychoanalytic orthodoxy insisting that there can be no healing without remembering. Or listen to the clatter of international transitional justice machinery, which demands of societies which have been through conflict and oppression that they put in place truth commissions and other special instruments of restitution to reckon with the past and, to use the language of the United Nations, “to guarantee non-recurrence.”⁷ In this discourse, remembering is linked to an embrace of both justice and healing, forgetting to impunity and woundedness.⁸

Which brings me to David Rieff’s book *In Praise of Forgetting*. In my reading of Rieff, he accepts the binary pair but attempts to turn it on its head by naming at least four dangers of memory work in the contexts of collectivity. First danger: it can be, and frequently is, used to foster fear and justify oppression. Even the holocaust, he argues, is invoked and deployed “to serve political agendas, the most obvious ... being to justify more or less any policy of the State of Israel with regard to its neighbours or to its Arab minority.” (Rieff 2016: 80) He references multiple instances from the late twentieth century to demonstrate how collectivities mobilise memory in support of plunder, genocide and other forms of atrocity. He names South Africa under apartheid, for instance,

⁶ Hannah Arendt (Arendt 1998: 169, 204-208) shows how in classic thinking virtue was equated with memory and a lack of virtue with oblivion. For the Greeks, Memory was the mother of the muses.

⁷ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “‘Transitional justice is not a ‘soft’ form of justice,’ says new UN Special Rapporteur Pablo de Greiff,” *Statements - Display News*, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=12496&LangID=E> (accessed May 19, 2014)

⁸ See Gould and Harris 2014 for a critical reading of transitional justice discourse.

the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, and Rwanda in 1994. Rieff could just as easily have taken us to these countries today to make his point more subtly. In Rwanda the weight of memory is used by the state to exercise an extraordinary degree of societal control and to squash dissent. In Bosnia today communities add memories of the 1990s to a store of ancient narratives which deepen divides between 'us' and 'them'. And in South Africa, too often history is deployed to mask failures of governance, disguise betrayal and shore up political support.

Human beings, it seems, learn very little from the past. And this is Rieff's second danger. Memory work, for him, never has a deterrent effect, so that we fool ourselves when we undertake it in service of non-recurrence. As he puts it graphically: "Auschwitz did not inoculate us against East Pakistan in 1971, or East Pakistan against Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, or Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge against Hutu power in Rwanda in 1994." (Rieff 2016: 83-84)⁹

Third danger: memory work is as likely to re-open wounds and unleash trauma as it is to bring healing. Rieff argues that a reductionist application of the psychotherapeutic model in the contexts of collectivity is full of danger: "what may be constructive for a therapist treating a patient's individual trauma could be highly dangerous politically when nations, peoples, or social groups act on their collective traumas." (Rieff 2016: 106) For some years after the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission completed its work there was a popular

⁹ Frantz Fanon takes a somewhat different tack in questioning study of the past. In the final chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* he quotes approvingly Marx's injunction to "let the dead bury the dead," and goes on to assert that "whether you like it or not, the past can in no way be my guide in the actual state of things." (Fanon 2008: 198-200) Chandra Gould (Gould 2016) takes it further, questioning the deterrent capacity of memory work, outlining a space characterised by the allure of violence and the dominance of righteous victims, and posing the question of whether the contemplation of cruel deeds might not in fact foster cruelty.

mythology around the way in which South Africans had come in their thousands to the Commission and found healing through the telling of their stories. Today the evidence is strong that relatively few found such healing. The Nelson Mandela Foundation confronted this reality in a direct and painful way in 2017, when they invited Rev. Frank Chikane to the launch of a new exhibition on the apartheid state's chemical and biological warfare programme. Chikane had been the victim of an attempt by the programme to poison him and had been a prominent voice in support of South Africa's 1990s reconciliation project. During a dialogue connected to the launch, Chikane indicated that he had thought that he had found healing from the trauma of his experience but that the exhibition content had brought everything back.¹⁰ Could it be fear of experiences like this which has led neighbouring country Namibia to choose not to have a truth and reconciliation commission and to turn the page on the past?

Fourth danger: memory work too often slides into what both Rieff and Milan Kundera call 'kitsch'.¹¹ This is engagement with the past which relies on a seamless metanarrative, discourages questioning, avoids complexity, excludes counter-narratives, selects bits that serve immediate purposes, and draws opportunistic moral lessons from the engagement. And, let it be said, is often geared to the making of money. Sound familiar? South Africa, I have to say, is easily as good as the U.S. at kitsch - different scale, but the same values. We have, for example,

¹⁰ Forgetting, of course, in principle, is always provisional. Triggers can cause the return of what has been 'forgotten'. Psychoanalysis can resurface what has left traces in the depths of the unconscious. And science is beginning to demonstrate how trauma is passed on to the generations which follow through tracings in DNA.

¹¹ Rieff references Kundera approvingly (p.80), but quotes only the polite bits. Here is Kundera's blunt definition: "Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence." (Kundera 1985: 248)

spawned a Mandela industry which uses commercialisation and commodification as powerful instruments of extraction. And which buttresses a dominant narrative of the founding father, of the origin myth, which elevates him above the many who contributed to our long struggles for liberation. And which promotes a popular national narrative that promotes particular interests and voices while diminishing if not excluding others. Remembering Mandela, forgetting others. Remembering a particular interpretive construction of Mandela, forgetting others. Remembering the icon and forgetting the complex, flawed, beautiful human being that he was.

So, back to Rieff and the dangers of memory work. Now I could counter Rieff with an equally compelling outline of the dangers of forgetting. But I think we begin to make sense of this fraught terrain most effectively by deconstructing the remembering-forgetting binary.¹² These are not two distinct, discrete and opposing categories. Rather, they fold out of one another. In all remembering there is forgetting. With each movement from immediate to short-term memory and back again, from short to long-term memory and back again, from consciousness to the unconscious, from memory to archive, with each movement there is selection and there is loss. Forgetting is imbricated in remembering. In the formulation of Jacques Derrida: “in anamnesis itself, there is amnesia.” (Derrida 1993: 51)

By anamnesis Derrida means memory as an object of a search or as intelligent reconstruction. As opposed to memory as an almost automatic, mechanical recall. As opposed to memory in the mode of remembrancing, where the flourish of imagination and of story are

¹² In the paragraphs which follow I rehearse arguments made at greater length by me in Harris 2012.

dominant. So, there are different genres of remembering, if you like. As there are different genres of forgetting. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, distinguishes between a 'founding forgetting' and a 'destructive forgetting'. (Ricoeur 2004: 443) The former is necessary, functional and healthy, the latter malevolent and/or dysfunctional and/or pathological.¹³ The problem is that it is not always clear whether we are reckoning with founding or destructive forgetting. The one can become the other. Arguably, they fold out of one another.

I'm suggesting an extraordinary complexity in this realm we call memory. In recent years the neurosciences have added to it even as they have shone light on how the human brain functions. The evidence is now overwhelming that individual human memory is far removed from the scenario, the metaphor, of a folder being retrieved from a cabinet or a hard drive. Memory, rather, is a complex play of remembering, forgetting, imagining and narrativising. (Pollan 2018) And the complexity is only magnified when we address dynamics in collectivities.¹⁴ So, a phrase - and a book title - like *in praise of forgetting* simply begs too many questions.

In my reading of the Rieff book, the real target of his critique is, in fact, 'remembrancing'. While he doesn't offer a formal definition of the term, he positions it between 'memory' and 'history' and argues that "at best, it is a consolation or an ego boost, while at worst it is a wallowing, no

¹³ So, for instance, Ricoeur argues that a founding forgetting is necessary to any form of forgiveness. The last section of *Memory, history, forgetting* is dedicated to the question of forgiveness. Hannah Arendt teases out another dimension of such forgetting when she argues that 'good works', to be good works, have to be forgotten instantly by the one doing them. (Arendt 1998: 74-76)

¹⁴ In the individual, remembering plays out in layers of the body, in cellular structures. In collectivity, the social body is at play, the complex cultural 'cellular' structures.

matter whether in past triumphs or past injuries and traumas.”¹⁵ (Rieff 2016: 35, 108-109) He is talking about kitsch. Now, a robust distinction between ‘remembering’ and ‘remembrancing’ offers an important analytical tool and I think is vital to my line of enquiry. I would define ‘remembrancing’ as memory work without deep historiography, critical analysis, dialogical knowledge construction, nor a social justice purpose. Remembrancing is the world of statues and coffee table books, of memorabilia and hagiographies, of merchandise and tourist heritage routes. It is the world of kitsch.

Nelson Mandela, both the man and the idea, attracted kitsch on a grand scale, for obvious reasons and whether he liked it or not. He was deeply uncomfortable with it.¹⁶ And when he mandated the Foundation in 2004 to set up a Centre of Memory in his name, he very precisely directed us away from the allure of remembrancing with four injunctions:

- Put the archive in the public domain. The deeds of donation which gifted his personal papers to the Foundation contained no public access restrictions.
- You don’t have to protect me. He would always insist that he never was a saint and discouraged the Foundation from assuming a gatekeeping role.
- Convene dialogue. He discouraged an approach built on the notion of the Foundation as experts determining memory content and construction for others. His mandate insisted on a dialogical

¹⁵ Not unrelated to the ‘wallowing’ Rieff names is what I call ‘righteous victimhood’, a state and a space in which the experience of being a victim is internalised and the subject becomes stuck in the past. Barack Obama, in my reading, names the state/space when he says: “the role of victim was too readily embraced as a means of shedding responsibility, or asserting entitlement, or claiming moral responsibility over those not so victimized.” (Obama 2007: 31) See also Gould 2016.

¹⁶ He resisted it, but often succumbed to it. View, for example, his forays into so-called art work and his public appearances with people like the Spice Girls.

approach to memory work, with collaboration and participation the watchwords.

- The fourth injunction he offered at a public event on 21 September 2004: “Today we are launching the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory Project ... most importantly, we want it to dedicate itself to the recovery of memories and stories suppressed by power. That is the call of justice. The call which must be the project’s most important shaping influence.” (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005: 98)

For Mandela the work of remembering, the work of memory, was justice. And it was *work*. Challenging. Difficult. Remembrancing, on the other hand, is easy. And it’s easy, whatever one’s intentions, to slip into remembrancing. (I think, perhaps, it is a human weakness, but that’s a line of enquiry for another day.) Certainly at the Nelson Mandela Foundation we feel the temptation. And, truth be told, often we fall into it. On a personal note, I have to confess to a weakness for kitsch – as I get older the pull of nostalgia seems to grow; I do like the odd coffee table book; I have an irrational weakness for Mandela, Steve Biko, Angela Davis and Che Guevara t-shirts; in the last week here in Oak Park I couldn’t resist doing a Frank Lloyd Wright tour; and you might have noted that in referencing the Black Panthers in 1969 Chicago I have relied on the convenience of ‘the big man’ – Fred Hampton - narrative rather than having drilled down into complexity.

As the fiftieth anniversary of Hampton's death approaches, I think it would be easy to mark it with a flurry of remembrancing.¹⁷ (Last year was the centenary of Mandela's birth, and around the world we saw just such a flurry.) Although I don't need to tell you that a Hampton flurry is unlikely. Black Panther Party histories are all but erased in public discourse, their imprint marginal in memory institutions and almost absent from curricula in the education system. But, in principle, Hampton remembrancing would be easy. The challenge would be to honour Hampton instead by digging deeply in the archive. By honouring simultaneously Mark Clark and the others around Hampton whose lives were damaged profoundly. By insisting on robust critical analysis; by going into the difficult spaces; by provoking dialogue. So, for instance, beyond biography, engagement with the founding programme of the Black Panther Party would be essential. As would engagement with Hampton's own resistance to patriarchy and other forms of hatred within the BPP and the broader movement. A reckoning with the extent to which the BPP had become infiltrated by the FBI would be important. As would assessment of weaknesses in strategy and tactics. As would reflecting on the relevance of Hampton's life and work to continuing struggles for justice. I could go on. My point is that memory work is not easy.¹⁸

As I draw to a close now, I want to return to my opening questions about forgetting: do human beings have a right to forget? And what are we to

¹⁷ One doesn't need to spend much time in Chicago to know that a flurry is unlikely. Black Panther Party histories are all but erased in public discourse, their imprint marginal in memory institutions and almost absent from curricula in the education system.

¹⁸ As a footnote to this, I wonder about bell hooks' critique of Manning Marable's book *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*. She lambasts Marable, accusing him *inter alia* of being an anti-Malcolm X critic, of demeaning his life and politics, and of failing to offer readers an understanding of the man behind the legend. (hooks 2013: 71-80) In my reading, Marable declines the temptation to slip into remembrancing and instead risks offending devotees by going into difficult spaces.

do with the experience of needing to forget? At one level, I have argued that forgetfulness is the very possibility of memory. At another, I have suggested that forgetting can be liberatory, on the one hand, while also arguing, on the other, that remembering has a lot to do with Paul Ricoeur's destructive forgetting. Here in the U.S., I think you'd agree with me, there has been a lot of destructive forgetting. In her seminal 1981 book *ain't i a woman*, bell hooks said the following:

“No history books used in public schools informed us about racial imperialism. Instead we were given romantic notions of the ‘new world’ ... we were taught that Columbus *discovered* America; that ‘Indians’ were scalphunters and killers of innocent women and children ... No one talked of Africa as the cradle of civilization, of the African and Asian people who came to America before Columbus. No one mentioned mass murders of Native Americans as genocide ... No one discussed slavery as a foundation for the growth of capitalism.” (hooks 2015: 119-120)

My older U.S. friends tell me that this analysis was accurate, and that over the last forty years not much has changed. This is the kind of forgetting we have to fight.

The family, friends and comrades of Fred Hampton fought a long battle against a forgetting which sought to protect perpetrators and condemn people like Hampton to the garbage bin of history. Arguably that battle won them the right, ultimately, to have the traces of violation removed from their living memory, or anamnesis; to have the active re-living of violation end. Humans have the need to find healing. And they have the right to forget.

This, in my reading, is Frantz Fanon's central argument in that final chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Let's listen to him one last time:

"I am a black man, and tons of chains, squalls of lashes, and rivers of spit stream over my shoulders." And yet: "In no way do I have to dedicate myself to reviving a black civilisation unjustly ignored. I will not make myself the man of any past. I do not want to sing the past to the detriment of my present and my future." (Fanon 2008: 204 and 201)

Fanon is not dismissing the ghosts of the past. The Fred Hamptons. Mark Clarks. Nelson Mandelas. Rosa Parks. He hears them. But he chooses to listen more closely to the ghosts of the present and the future – the living ghosts of the dispossessed, the oppressed, the wretched of the earth; and the ghosts of those not yet born.¹⁹

We delude ourselves if we study history – if we preserve memory – in order to enable the learning of lessons.²⁰ But we provide a critical resource to our societies when we study history in order to construct meaning, hold ourselves accountable, draw strength and be inspired as we heed the call of justice for the struggles of today. We honour those who have gone before by making a liberatory world for those who are yet to come.

In closing, I want to quote Barack Obama when he reflected on the shameful failures of the U.S. state response to Hurricane Katrina and remembers how just two months after the disaster he found himself at a

¹⁹ Fanon's listening to ghosts of the past, present and future, in the shadow of Karl Marx, was echoed in the 1990s by Jacques Derrida in his *Specters of Marx*. See also Fanon 2001.

²⁰ Barack Obama sounds a similar note in *Audacity of hope*. Having recounted US foreign policy through the twentieth century, he says: "I wonder, sometimes, whether men and women in fact are capable of learning from history." (Obama 2007: 322)

Rosa Parks memorial. He doesn't use the terminology I've been using, but the sensibility and the call to activism are the same:

“We sat in church, eulogising Rosa Parks, reminiscing about past victories, entombed in nostalgia. Already, legislation was moving to place a statue of Mrs Parks under the Capitol dome. There would be a commemorative stamp bearing her likeness, and countless streets, schools, and libraries across America would no doubt bear her name. I wondered what Rosa Parks would make of all of this – whether stamps or statues summon her spirit, or whether honouring her memory demanded something more. I ... wondered how we might be judged, in those days after the levee broke.” (Obama 2007: 230-231)

Friends, both here in the U.S. and in South Africa, right now in 2019, there are many levees breaking.

References

Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cixous, H. (2013). *Double oblivion of the ourang-outang*. Cambridge: Polity.

Derrida, J. (1993). *Memoirs of the blind: the self-portrait and other ruins*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx*. New York: Routledge.

Derrida, J. (1996). *Archive fever: a Freudian impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fanon, F. (2001). *The wretched of the earth*. London, Penguin Books.

Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks*. New York: Grove Press.

Gould, C. (2016). "The trouble with memory work: reflections on the Mandela Dialogues", <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/reflections-from-the-2016-mandela-dialogues> (accessed March 24, 2019). Nelson Mandela Foundation.

Gould, C. and Harris, V. (2014). "Memory for Justice", <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/content/page/nelson-mandela-international-dialogues-overview> (accessed March 24, 2019) Nelson Mandela Foundation.

Haas, J. (2010). *The assassination of Fred Hampton*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.

Harris, V. (2012). "Genres of the Trace: Memory, Archives and Trouble", *Archives and Manuscripts* 40,3.

hooks, b. (2015). *ain't i a woman: black women and feminism*. New York: Routledge.

hooks, b. (2013). *Writing beyond race: living theory and practice*. New York: Routledge.

Kundera, M. (1985). *The unbearable lightness of being*. London: Faber and Faber.

McDowell, S. (2009). "Negotiating places of pain in post-conflict Northern Ireland", in Logan, W. and Reeves, K. *Places of pain and shame: dealing with difficult heritage*. New York: Routledge.

Nelson Mandela Foundation. (2005). *A prisoner in the garden: opening Nelson Mandela's prison archive*. Johannesburg: Penguin Books.

Obama, B. (2007). *The audacity of hope: thoughts on reclaiming the American dream*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Pollan, M. (2018). *How to change your mind: the new science of psychedelics*. London: Allen Lane.

Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, history, forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rieff, D. (2016). *In praise of forgetting: historical memory and its ironies*. New Haven: Yale University Press.