

Collapsible spaces and distant storyworlds in (trans-)cultural memory studies

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ABSTRACT

Rebecca Walkowitz's observation that contemporary novels tend to be "born translated" involves the notion that they equally tend to be "born in motion"; they are often already, conceptually, on the road to faraway readers during their moments of conception. A first, more narrowly defined objective of my essay is to examine the narrative strategies used in Dave Eggers's *What Is the What* (2007) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) that facilitate and respond to this dimension of motion in particular travels of memory. In a broader scope, this analysis will be embedded into an appraisal of the potentials of recent theorizing both in narratology (i.e. the study of narrative) and in memory studies to understand the dynamics at play in the reception of far-travelled narrative memory media. It is a central proposition of this essay that the two research fields share an amplitude of common concerns with regard to questions of reception and should therefore be brought into a close dialogue. The present study explores how some of these intersections between narratology and memory studies can be approached through the notions of "distance" and "proximity."

KEYWORDS

Memory studies; narratology; space; distance and proximity; storyworld; nomadic texts

Introduction

The dimensions of "travel" and "locatedness" that this special issue on memory studies has chosen as its central analytical categories describe aspects that have likewise acquired increasing relevance in the study of narrative fiction. While narrative texts travel (Ryan 2012), they are simultaneously determined by their anchoring in specific settings and by the inflections that the locatedness of their readerships bring to bear on them. Two recent novels that are characterized to a large extent by the travels that both the texts themselves and the characters within them undertake are Dave Eggers' *What Is the What* (2007) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2009). Both novels narrate violent experiences of African civil wars—the Second Sudanese Civil War (1985–2005) and the Biafran War (1967–1970), respectively. What is more, both address their accounts to readerships whose previous encounters with (memories of) these conflicts have been superficial at the most, and who can therefore be described as "distant" readers.¹

From Rebecca Walkowitz's observation that contemporary novels tend to be 'born translated'² (2015) I derive the notion that they equally tend to be "born in motion"; they are already, conceptually, on their way to faraway reading contexts during their moments of conception. A first, more narrowly defined objective of this essay is to examine the narrative strategies that facilitate and respond to this

dimension of memory travel in *What Is the What* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In a broader scope, this analysis will be embedded into an appraisal of the potentials of recent theorizing both in the study of narrative and in memory studies to understand the dynamics at play in the reception of far-travelled narrative memory media. The two research fields share an amplitude of common concerns with regard to questions of reception, and it can therefore reasonably be assumed that it should prove profitable to both fields to be brought into a close dialogue. The present study explores how some of these intersections between narratology and memory studies can be approached through the notions of "distance" and "proximity."

What Is the What's "collapsible spaces": distance and proximity in memory studies

Dave Eggers's *What Is the What* is peculiarly subtitled "*The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel*", breaching the conventional division between fictional and nonfictional publications. The novel was written by Dave Eggers following several years of interviews with Valentino Achak Deng, a Sudanese refugee who doubles as the first-person narrator and protagonist (i.e. autodiegetic narrator) of the book. On the last pages of the novel, he states:

I speak to you because I cannot help it. It gives me strength [...] to know that you are there. I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us. (434–435)

The second person addressed in these lines cannot unequivocally be attributed to any diegetic entity, or in other words, to a character within the narrated world. As a consequence, readers will be likely to understand the “you” here as reaching out to them personally. While the narrator’s pronouncement of a “space” that separates himself from the reader, then, positions the latter as *distant* from Valentino and the world that he inhabits, his characterisation of this separating space as “collapsible” simultaneously provides a possibility of proximity. What is required for the production of such a proximity, however, is a particular agency on the part of the reader: she is encouraged to “collapse” the pronounced space by understanding Valentino’s experiences as reaching beyond the fictional storyworld and into her own life world.

The second-person address and the invitation for proximity grant the reader a certain authority, assuring her of her ability to mentally (re-)construct the world that Valentino inhabits in an accurate manner: if Valentino did not trust his reader to imagine the storyworld³ in such a way that it closely resembled his own perception of it, proximity would not be possible.

The accuracy of the reader’s mental representation of the storyworld is of central concern to Valentino because he positions the reader as a secondary witness⁴ to his experiences, whose “eyes” and “ears” he covets because it is through these that the reader is able to bear witness to Valentino’s memories. *What Is the What* is a memory novel in a twofold sense: first, it stages the act of remembrance through its narrative structure; and second, the novel functions as a medium of collective memory (Erl 2011, 120ff.) that transports Valentino’s account of the Sudanese Civil War into a wide array of real-world contexts.

The space which the reader is invited to collapse by *What Is the What*’s narrator can ultimately only be translated into her own subjective perception of a mental distance between herself and Valentino. This perception will, in turn, have an effect on the form and quality of the memory which she might form in response to Valentino’s narrative. Generally speaking, literary representations of the past can fulfil a wide array of different functions that are shaped by their respective “*modi memorandi*”—their “modes of memory” or “possible horizons of reference to the past” (Erl 2011, 31). Stephanie Wodianka has proposed that different modes of memory are best distinguished on the basis of the respective proximity or distance that characterises a remembering subject’s relation to three principal aspects of a given memory: (1) to the object of memory, (2) to (an)other remembering subject(s), and (3) to the process of memory (2009, 36).

- (1) The first aspect refers, in Wodianka’s terms, to a temporal dimension, in which a person will perceive a given memory object (e.g. a remembered event) as either relatively distant or proximate to her own reality. While Wodianka’s model conceptualises the continuum between subject and object only in temporal terms, it is equally conceivable to project this relative distance as a spatial, social, or cultural one—or, in the most plausible version, as an amalgam of the above. Wodianka emphasises that the deictic centre from which the respective distance is measured is always the person who engages in the act of memory, so that the distance to the memory object must be understood strictly as a cognitive product: it is the subject’s perception of distance and thus also and crucially a subjective distance.⁵ This aspect describes the notion of the “distant reader,” as defined in the introductory section of this paper.
- (2) The identificatory dimension describes a person’s relation to other subjects, real or fictional, who engage with the same memory object. Identification, in this dimension, translates into proximity (Wodianka 2009, 39). This aspect is targeted by Valentino’s proposition that the space between himself and his reader be “collapsible.” As proximity between two individuals must involve a degree of shared reality, the reader’s conception of the narrated world is a factor that can work to either facilitate or hinder proximity in the dimension of identification. Memory novels implement different strategies to encourage or dissuade readers to imagine a shared reality with storyworld participants. These strategies take effect on the reader’s engagement with the fact that the text stages an act of remembrance, which may be foregrounded by references to what Wodianka calls the “process” of remembrance:
- (3) In the modal dimension, a remembering subject relates to the memory process on a continuum ranging from complete ignorance to acute awareness of the fact that she is engaging in, and with, an act of memory. In this aspect, a conscious engagement of the subject with the second constituent of the relation entails distance rather than proximity: a highly reflexive engagement with a respective memory would imply an obstructed relation to the memory process, whereas unawareness of the mnemonic procedure would imply proximity. The reason for this reversal of conceptual roles lies in the fact that attention paid towards the process

emphasises rather than suppresses any distortive elements that stand *between* a subject and an “actual” memory (see Wodianka 2009, 38).

In *What Is the What*, Valentino’s proposition that the space between the reader and himself should be interpreted as “collapsible” encourages the reader to believe that she has an accurate understanding of his particular way of experiencing his world, thereby supporting the creation of proximity between the reader and the protagonist. This, in turn, may serve to reduce the reader’s perceived distance to the object of Valentino’s memories, which revolve around the civil war in Sudan. In Wodianka’s terminology, these considerations correspond to a close subject-subject relation that also tend to effectuate a reduction in distance between subject and object. In addition, proximity to the third aspect of the memory act—the processual character or “mediacy” (in contrast to the “immediacy” of direct experience) of the remembrance—is established through the narrator’s direct address to the reader (which simultaneously implicitly recalls the real-world Valentino whose experiences the novel professes to recount). This breach of the divide between fictionality and the “actual world” may work toward lessening the degree of “mediacy” and storyworld distance for the reader. David Herman observes that in cases where a narrative “you” addresses readers, the result is “a fitful and self-conscious anchoring of the text in its contexts, as well as a storyworld whose contours and boundaries can be probabilistically but not determinately mapped” (Herman 2004, 332).

Prosthetic memory and the locatedness of the reader

The complex and incomputable ways in which texts can be “anchored” in different contexts have been particularly central to research in memory studies over the past decades. A reconsideration of memory’s relation to specific contexts has initiated the recent “transcultural turn” in the field: most of the “older” theories of collective memory share an (often implicit) assumption that memory is immobile, implying “a geographically bounded community with a shared set of beliefs and a sense of ‘natural’ connection among its members” (Landsberg 2004, 11). The observation that memory narratives are often “nomadic texts” (Ryan 2012) whose dissemination is not necessarily confined by ostensible geographical or cultural boundaries invalidates simplistic “container culture” approaches to the study of memory.

Alison Landsberg’s theory of “prosthetic memory” attempts to conceptualise the dynamics and implications of memories which are (mass-) medially transported into reception contexts that are non-proximate to the spaces

which the memory narratives refer to. She proposes that prosthetic memories should be understood as

memories that circulate publicly, are not organically based, but are nevertheless experienced with one’s own body—by means of a wide range of cultural technologies—and as such, become part of one’s personal archive of experience, informing not only one’s subjectivity, but one’s relationship to the present and future tenses. I call these memories prosthetic [...] because, like an artificial limb, they are actually worn by the body; these are sensuous memories produced by experience. (1997, 66)

Landsberg’s wording in this paragraph is symptomatic of one of the most frequently encountered vaguenesses in memory research. It concerns the location of actual memories: Landsberg’s concept of prosthetic memory seems somewhat blurry where the question of locatedness is concerned—on the one hand, she suggests that these memories circulate publicly, but on the other hand, she also proposes that they are “worn by the body.” This inconsistency can only be resolved by conceiving of the “circulating” memories as a different kind of entity than the “worn” ones: the former can only be mediated representations of memory objects, whereas the latter would be the result of an individual’s processing of such a memory medium.

In an article subtitled as “methodological critique of collective memory studies,” Wulf Kansteiner (2002) has critically pointed out that

[m]ost studies on memory focus on the representation of specific events within particular chronological, geographical, and media settings without reflecting on the audiences of the representation in question.

This critique chiefly targets an often too-readily accepted assumption of a congruence between representation and reception, in the sense that the concerns of the media that can be encountered in a given cultural setting should correlate to the perspectives of their users. The significance of the “perspective of the user,” in an almost literal, deictic sense, becomes particularly evident where a respective medium concerns itself with the remembrance of a non-proximate context. Susannah Radstone has argued that the *locatedness* of the user should be understood as a principal factor in memory processes, especially where “traveling” media are concerned. While she asserts the mobility of memories as an “incontrovertible” fact, she suggests that this observation should direct us to

attend to those processes of encountering, negotiation, reading, viewing and spectatorship through which memories are, if you like, brought down to earth. How, for instance, does the location of a computer screen and its viewer in Cieszyn intervene in the process of engaging with and making sense of the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre? For

while it may be the case [...] that on the web, ‘you can be anywhere,’ the senses and sensibilities that we bring to the web are woven through with our locatedness in histories, in place, in culture—all of which play their part in producing the never random associative leaps that constitute the rhetorics of memory. (2011, 110–111)

With regard to *narrative* memory media, the culturally grounded “associative leaps” that Radstone defines as essential to the particular character of memory practices here can by extension be described as a crucial factor in the construction of *storyworlds*. What notions, precisely, a given reader associates with the cues that a text provides her with in order to mentally construct a coherent narrated world heavily impact her reading experience. Understanding the construction of storyworlds (in memory media) as acts of memory, I propose that a reader’s perception of her own distance or proximity towards this world is of central concern.

On the phenomenology of distant storyworld construction

Marie-Laure Ryan (2012) has defined the storyworld as encompassing both the story space—i.e. “the space relevant to the plot, as mapped by the actions and thoughts of the characters”—and the respective ways in which this space is extended or “completed by the reader’s imagination on the basis of cultural knowledge and real world experience” (2012). Although Ryan lists only the topographical “voids” (2012) that *separate* places within a storyworld as dependent on gap-filling projections on the part of the reader, readers must similarly flesh out the locations that are actually mentioned in the textual discourse.

David Herman has pointedly captured this dynamic in his characterisation of the act of reading as a process of “mapping words onto worlds” (2010, 146). The question that arises from this proposition is how readers “use textual cues to build up representations of the worlds evoked by stories” (2010, 146). Since the spaces represented in narrative texts necessarily always remain underspecified by the textual material (Walsh 2008, 153), readers must themselves infer further details in order to model storyworlds into coherent and comprehensive spaces. However, this cognitive completion of storyworlds is not limited to topographical elements; instead, it also involves normatively inflected assumptions about the spaces in question. As Edward Soja (1996) has famously argued, the material dimension of a given space cannot be grasped separately from the culturally shaped symbolic projections which it is always already imbued with. Marie-Laure Ryan has argued that the inferential processes which are carried out in readerly

storyworld completion follow the logic of a “principle of minimal departure,” according to which the world of the text is to be understood as “identical to the actual world except for the respects in which it deviates from that model, either explicitly or implicitly, both in its own right and by virtue of any genre conventions it invokes” (Walsh 2008, 153).

What Ryan terms the “actual world” in this definition is elsewhere described by her as the reader’s “own experiential reality” (2008, 447)—a notion that inflects the ostensibly neutral and factual properties of the former concept with a strong touch of subjective perspectivity. On the one hand, this subjective inflection is a necessary acknowledgement of the fact that a reader’s “own experiential reality” is the only one she has access to, therefore constituting her only possible resource for storyworld completion. On the other hand, the subjective dimension simultaneously complicates the principle of minimal departure, as it is doubtful that readers will assume their own experiential reality to be in complete congruence with the assumptions that others—for instance, the narrators of stories—may have about the world.

Edward Said’s notion of “imaginative geographies,” which describes a “universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs,’” (1995 [1978], 55) illustrates that the inferential processes at work in the construction of storyworlds will often tap into mental models that are symbolically and, by extension, politically charged. Indeed, one may argue that the construction of an imaginative geography for the distant storyworld can, in a sense, be regarded as an act of appropriation of that context (see Neumann 2009, 119) by the reader, who invests herself with interpretative and, by extension, productive power over the represented world. This is not a problematic circumstance in itself—after all, each reader will construct (and thereby appropriate) her own storyworld, so that the constructed spaces remain individually confined. The observation does, however, take on a different quality in conjunction with the conception of a narrative text as a medium of collective memory which transports particular encoded memories from one context into another.

Narrative texts can deploy different strategies to impact the confidence with which readers complete storyworlds. *What Is the What* is highly reluctant to make the reader aware of her presumable shortcomings in projecting accurate characteristics of civil-war Sudan. The novel insists instead on its narrator’s capacity to establish a shared reality with his reader even while he falls short of achieving the same with any of the characters inside the narrated world. This assures the reader of her capabilities in reconstructing (and relating to) Valentino’s world, and thus encourages her to imagine herself as the ideal witness

to his account. The novel's hesitance to call the reader's storyworld-mapping competences into question answers to a commonly assumed congruence between a remembering subject's proximity to another subject and to the object of memory. *What Is the What's* broad invitation to proximity stands at least partially in contrast to *Half of a Yellow Sun's* continual warnings against an overly confident attitude toward her skills in retracing the narrated world.

Storyworld-mapping competences in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* regulates the reader's proximity to the novel's three memory dimensions (sensu Wodianka) by repeatedly staging attempts to map its storyworld as flawed: the narrative world is presented through the eyes of three characters (who function as focalizers), none of whom prove to be quite successful in appropriating the spaces they inhabit.

These three focalizers are Olanna, a London-educated Nigerian academic; Ugwu, a village boy who works as a houseboy for Olanna's husband Odenigbo; and Richard, a British journalist who has come to Nigeria to write a monograph about precolonial Igbo-Ukwu art. All three of them invariably become involved in different dimensions of the Biafran secession from Nigeria and thereby participate in the struggle over the appropriation of geographical space in a very literal sense. But in much the same way as the political project of the establishment of a Biafran state fails to succeed, the characters are continually denied the competence to "map" and understand their world. Susan Strehle accordingly describes Olanna, Ugwu and Richard as "limited witnesses" (2011, 667) and observes that "Adichie's three centers of perception are unreliable but careful watchers, made vigilant by uncertainty and anxiety" (2011, 663).

The focalizers' inability "to know events beyond the horizon" (Strehle 2011, 667) that delimits their range of sight is powerfully illustrated in one of the last scenes of the novel. Here, the quite literal "darkness" that Richard experiences when he passes out after having received a blow to his nose from the fist of Colonel Madu (who is not by coincidence positioned by the narrative as more competent in his world-mapping skills) is metaphorically extended to Richard's limited access to the storyworld: "Darkness descended on him, and when it lifted, he knew [...] that his life would always be like a candlelit room; he would see things only in shadow, only in half glimpses" (Adichie 2009, 430).

To a significant extent, Richard's acknowledgement of his own perceptual limitations is brought about by a development that haunts *Half of a Yellow Sun's* ending and denies the novel narrative closure: Richard's partner and Olanna's twin sister Kainene has gone missing after having embarked on

a secret trading trip across the border. It is noteworthy that Kainene's disappearance does not leave the focalizing characters with the certainty that she is no longer a part of the same world as themselves (a certainty that a witnessed death would have provided); instead, it leads to an anxious uncertainty that is produced through their inability to determine her spatial whereabouts: in this way, the loss reflects and emphasises their limited ability to "map" the narrated world.

While the narrative is largely reluctant to claim interpretative authority over the object that the novel "remembers," one of its elements displays more confidence about providing a complete and accurate account of the war: the chapters of the novel are interspersed with short excerpts from a book-within-the-book with the title "The World Was Silent When We Died," (Adichie 2009, 82) which recounts some of the events witnessed by characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun* and provides political explanations for the development of the conflict. Throughout the novel, the reader is led to believe that this book is penned by Richard, and it is only on the last pages of the novel that she learns that the British journalist gave up on the project halfway through, and that its author is in fact instead Ugwu. On the face of it, the village boy's authorship invests the book's description of Biafra with a sense of legitimacy and authority that is evoked by Ugwu's apparent position as an authentic representative of the Igbo population, as an automatic "insider" by birth—a position that stands in sharp contrast to Richard's marked foreignness to the African context as an "imperial" immigrant. This view is reflected in Amy Novak's suggestion that the revelation of Ugwu's authorship marks "the exit of the Western subject from narrative control" (2008, 40).

Ugwu's own claim to narrative control, however, itself remains questionable in light of the fact that he is, in Strehle's words, "characterized from first to last by what he does not know" (2011, 669). When he first takes up his work as Odenigbo's houseboy in the university town of Nsukka, Ugwu quickly becomes afraid of being sent back to his village "because he [...] did not know the strange places Master named" (Adichie 2009, 10). Whenever Ugwu speaks about the political circumstances of the war throughout the story, his words tend to merely parrot the perspectives of others:

Ugwu was not sure how America was to blame for other countries not recognizing Biafra [...] but he repeated Master's words to Eberechi that afternoon, with authority, as though they were his. (Adichie 2009, 295)

Ugwu's seemingly authoritative view of Biafra and his appropriation of the storyworld through his aspiration to narrative control in "The World Was Silent" is

therefore cast by the overall narrative entirely as an outward appearance rather than as his actual ability to “map” that world accurately. In fact, what Novak has referred to as “the Western subject’s narrative control” is not fully cast aside through Ugwu’s authorship because part of what he appropriates in his depiction of Biafra are Richard’s observations and ideas—he even uses the same title for the book that Richard had decided on when he was still determined to write about Biafra.

Half of a Yellow Sun’s refusal to claim an exhaustive perspective on its memory object can perhaps be understood as a word of caution towards its reader, warning her to not be too confident about her own storyworld-mapping skills and, by extension, about her ability to understand the memory object that the novel is concerned with. The design of this proposed containment of the reader’s interpretative power can also be analyzed in the terms of Wodianka’s model of distance and proximity. While the “mediacy” of Adichie’s novel is not staged as a memory act in its narrative structure, the figural narrative situation in which the focalizers function as “limited witnesses” to the memory object can equally be described as (potentially) producing distance between the reader and the processual dimension of the novel’s “remembrance” of Biafra. As a result, the reader is discouraged by the medium from taking an overly knowing perspective on the storyworld—and, since this storyworld is unambiguously (to be) modelled after the real-world context in which Biafra existed for a few years, it follows that *Half of a Yellow Sun* does not encourage readerly proximity to this memory object in a broad sense.

At the same time, however, the novel does invite projections of proximity to the focalizers’ personal *experience* of the memory object, so that it suggests itself to differentiate between a readerly distance toward the storyworld that is “defined as ‘given,’” and a potential proximity to what Herman has described as the “private worlds” (2009, 76) of individual storyworld participants. This more nuanced encouragement extended towards readers of *Half of a Yellow Sun* demonstrates the relevance of Wodianka’s distinction between a remembering subject’s proximity to other (in this case: fictional) subjects versus her proximity to the object of memory. While the two dimensions are commonly seen as interdependent, this example shows that it may be necessary (and productive) to assume relation between the two to be more complex.

Conclusion

Memory travels—and the acceleration of a global media marketplace has reinforced the intensity with which it does so. This calls for enquiries into the dynamics and implications not only of the particular geographically recordable routes that a memory medium may take, but also of the ways in which this medium can be received

and used in a new context. The perceived “transformation” which a memory may undergo on its routes is, of course, owed to the fact that the travelling memory medium is an entirely different entity than the memories that it may prompt a consumer to create, in conjunction with other media that recall events and contexts that she associates with the same memory object.

The metaphors used in Alison Landsberg’s suggestion that memories from and of non-proximate spaces can (and should be) “worn by the body” (1997, 66) as “prosthetic memories” point to the problem that media users may adopt these memories in ways that overwrite the specificities of the remembered object(s), which, for narrative memory media, I have interpreted as implicated in the respective storyworld of such a text. As memory novels with a discernible consciousness of their mobile nature, Dave Eggers’s *What Is the What* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* represent two different medial strategies of addressing the confidence with which readers may “map” their narrated spaces, inviting them, to different extents, to produce cognitive proximity.

Notes

1. This notion bears no relation to Franco Moretti’s method of “distant reading”, a computer-assisted and data-centric approach to the study of literature (Moretti 2013).
2. In Walkowitz’s (2015, 3f.) words, “born-translated literature approaches translation as medium and origin rather than as afterthought. Translation is not secondary [...] to these works. It is a condition of their production.”
3. Following David Herman, I use the term “storyworld” here not merely in the sense of a world that is “socially and institutionally defined as ‘given,’” but as also encompassing “private worlds [...] or subworlds [...] consisting of characters’ beliefs, desires, intentions, memories, and imaginative projections” (2009, 76).
4. A secondary witness bears “witness both to the witness and to the object of testimony conveyed by the witness” (LaCapra 2001, 62).
5. This rule of subjectivity applies not only to the subject-object relation, but also to the subject’s relation to the two other components of a memory act that Wodianka discusses—the memory process and other subjects: in each of these dimensions, distance and proximity are to be understood as cognitive variables (2009, 37).

Notes on contributor

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