

**A symposium
featuring
Cathy Busby,
Bridget Brown and
Thyrza Nichols Goodeve.**

THYRZA NICHOLS GOODEVE:

**“Memories—light the corners of
my mind, misty water colour
memories—of the way we were”**

Barbra Streisand

**If one’s memory of any given
situation is multiform and its many
forms are situated in place and time
from the perspective of the present...
memory has a history, or more precise-
ly histories. The claim that memory is
historical is itself subject to shifting
historical boundaries.**

Nathalie Zemon-Davis

The truth is, memory is a loaded concept to engage, formed as it is from the residue of wounded time. As such, the major ruse which any study of memory has to struggle with is the slippery, solipsistic, quite fierce susceptibility of memory to time and experience. While infinitely retrospective—memory *is* the past isn’t it?—any reminiscence gains its identity and style from its life in the present, a present understood to exist only *because* of its ability to call upon, and use, this undead past. Rather a heady conundrum we have going here, but it is what makes memory such a compelling category for cultural analysis. I’m less interested in the perception of it as a sacred form (memory as redemptive, capable of saving the individual or the culture) than the manner in which it has become profane, nearly a profanity or blasphemous threat (memory as suspicious, mendacious, even destructive because of its vulnerability to interpretation).

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, memory was the major dimension of literary modernism (Joyce, Woolf, Proust), and culture (Bergson, Freud), yet in Fredric Jameson’s depiction of the present, it is one of the very relics of the past whose loss marks the passing into post-modernism. As he puts it, it is “the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and memory”

**THE POLITICS AND ANXIETIES OF
MEMORY**

**Two camps battle
over memory. Should
it or should it not be
TRUSTED?**

which characterizes postmodernism (a cultural mode dominated by categories of space not time). Yet any perusal of popular magazines, talk shows, scientific studies, contemporary art or Hollywood films, reveals the omnipresence (not absence) of memory, even if memory appears dressed in the guise of a number of besieged and bizarre costumes: false memory syndrome; multiple personality disorder; recovered memories of alien abduction and satanic ritual abuse; Holocaust denial and the attack on memory; or the fragile nature of memory in the culture of AIDS. These various forms of millennial memory (appearing as they have in the last quarter of the millennium) are incidents of a particular kind of memory — traumatic memories induced by events which may never have happened (alien abduction, satanic ritual abuse, false memory syndrome) or which are of such force and confusion as to re-organize the very nature of the individual (multiple personality) or the possibility of memory itself (technoculture and AIDS). Along with the disturbing collection of social and individual traumas that Cathy's and Bridget's work will focus on, memory itself must be seen as undergoing its own bout of heady traumatization. Under attack,

while debunking alternative therapeutic practice, claiming that "recovered memory therapists... have become to the study of the mind and behavior what astrologers are to the scientific study of the stars and the planets. They have engaged in an enterprise based not on science but on impressionistic insight, myth, metaphor, and the powerfully persuasive nature of the therapy setting." The story fails to mention, however, the various metaphors memory scientists rely on. The oft quoted "memory expert," Elizabeth Loftus of Washington State University, counters what she sees as the myth that all memories are neatly filed away in the mind. She suggests: "Think of your mind as a bowl filled with clear water. Now imagine each memory as a teaspoon of milk stirred into the water. Every adult mind holds thousands of these murky memories. Who among us would dare to disentangle the water from the milk?" Of course anyone who has experience with dairy products knows that the folk-chemistry of separating milk from water has long existed. Compare this to the depictions of the mechanics of memory neurosurgeon, Dr. Wilder Penfield, relies on in his 1967 best seller *I'm Ok, You're Ok*: "...the brain functions



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called into question, susceptible to Satan, aliens, and remarkable stagings of falsity, memory is hounded from a scientific point of view, from a popular culture point of view, from a personal and familial point of view. It is characterized as something people don't quite know how, or whether, to trust. What does this say about our sense of historical agency at this moment, and our ability to use memory to challenge and provoke history, especially if it is, as Cathy Caruth calls it, a history "of experiences [we have] not yet fully owned"?

CATHY BUSBY: Last spring I happened to flip through a copy of the *London Sunday Times* magazine, and stopped at the feature story, "True Lies," about Joe and Sheila Skitt who had been accused of sexually abusing their daughter. The article expressed rage at the woman therapist who had worked with the depressed Jill. The Skitts' sense of ruin — "our future has been destroyed, our past poisoned" — set the tone of emotional loss on the part of the parents, while Jill's pain is not part of the story. The discrediting of Jill and her therapist continues as the story conflates recovered memories of child abuse with Elvis Presley visitations, and alien abduction memories. Mid-way through "True Lies," American psychologist Richard Ofshe invokes the inter-stellar

as a high-fidelity recorder, putting on tape, as it were, every experience from the time of birth, possibly even before birth." Which depiction of "memory" are we to believe here?

"True Lies" was not surprising in its approach of putting therapeutic practice on trial, claiming it was ruining innocent families. The American press, with the Canadian press close behind, has been at it since early in this decade — for example Carol Tavis' "Beware the Incest Survivor Machine," *The New York Times Book Review* (January 3, 1993), which was reprinted in *The Montreal Gazette*. In 1991 disclosures of memories of child sexual abuse by Miss America 1958, Marilyn Van Derber Adler, and television star, Roseanne, lent celebrity attention to this subject. It was also the year *The False Memory Syndrome Foundation* was formed, an organization representing those claiming to have been falsely accused of sexual abuse. The organization constructed a pathology called false memory syndrome and acted under the assumption that repressed memories are not truth, thus aggravating the split between believers and non-believers in accounts of memories of child sexual abuse.

The *Sunday Times* article suggests that going the way of the Americans would not be "cricket." Unlike some celebrated American cases, British courts have been reluctant to convict on

the basis of recovered memory without "objective evidence." Professor John Morton, an "expert on memory" from the Medical Research Council in London, who recently chaired a commission on recovered memory for the British Psychological Society, says he is confident that the community of psychologists in Britain is too sensible to follow the example set by Americans. "We are determined that with respect to the relations between clinical and experimental psychologists, and with respect to the prevalence of particular memory recovery techniques, we will not follow the U.S. We are not complacent, but we feel there is no need for panic." In concluding "True Lies," John Cornwell claims that the trend of convicting an abuse defendant on the strength of a plaintiff's recovered memory alone suggests the American justice system is regressing to the superstitious practice of "discernment," used in the Middle Ages to distinguish good from evil spirits. I do not want to suggest that recovered memories make good legal testimony per se, but to point out how they heat up the debate in psychiatry, psychology, and the law.

effort to fill in anxiety-inducing memory gaps — to account for what they call "missing time." It is only through hypnotic regression that abductees can know "THE TRUTH" about what happened to them, can locate and name the source of their free-floating anxieties and black moods. Feelings of powerlessness in the face of the unknown are augmented by their own powerlessness to control memory, to shape and articulate personal histories. For it is the expert "doctor" — not unlike the technically proficient alien itself — who controls the process of forgetting and remembering, who can manipulate the memory of the "ordinary person." In the end, the professional intervention that is central to their recovery involves the very control over memory that abductees feel they themselves lack, or by which they feel they have been victimized.

And yet once remembered, the extraterrestrial alien gives a name and a face to unidentifiable bad feelings — feelings of dislocation and dissociation. Remembering the alien is one way of coming to terms with the micropolitics of power in our everyday lives, a way to give form to, and ultimately treat, feelings of powerlessness that might otherwise not seem "treatable."



owl filled with clear water. Now imagine
k stirred into the water."

BRIDGET BROWN: In October 1994 Dr. Ruth Faden, chair of the President's Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, revealed that systematic effort to gain knowledge of the effects of radiation from experiments on humans had been planned at the highest levels of the U.S. Government. In a carefully worded public statement, Faden assured Americans that the official act of remembering and restructuring this unseemly slice of history was now underway: "We are now piecing together the story of the past, an unsuspected past, to help inform the future on these questions." In the rhetoric of the Clinton administration, Faden seemed to be saying, "We feel your pain. We will retrieve the nation's repressed, unsuspected past and narrate it into public memory." At the same historical moment the number of alleged abductees continues to grow. Hundreds of thousands of Americans struggle to remember being technologically violated: strapped to metal cots, drilled, probed and tagged. As they struggle to reconstruct individual unsuspected pasts, they are relegated to the New Age fringe, to talk show spectacle.

The process of remembering the alien is a painful one for most abductees. Alien abduction has, for them, come to be understood in terms of trauma, repressed memory, and recovery. Abductees often begin their painful therapeutic journey with the

Once abductees have remembered drilling, probing, even vivisection at the hands of this concretized, present cause, they can find a support group and commence recovery. And yet treating the traumatic memory of abduction as a private and personal issue reaffirms, in a sense, our powerlessness in the face of less tangible social forces. The therapeutic rhetoric of abduction narratives suggests that we can only confront our anxieties about government secrecy and the surveillance of human bodies on an individual level. Concern with the symptoms of alien abduction enables us to overlook political, cultural, historical sources of the sort of collective anxiety that these stories reflect. It also enables us to ignore the sort of collective, ideological hunch that these stories constitute — a hunch that the powers that be — those perceived to be in control of knowledge, power, technology, perhaps the government itself — might be somehow victimizing the "ordinary people" of this country.

Let me close with a couple of questions for discussion: First, to what extent is memory — as methodological alternative to history — a tool of contestation? In what ways does it enable us to "bear witness," to testify to past (and perhaps present) atrocities? Second, and perhaps more importantly, can memory account for events that matter so that, as George Lipsitz has noted, we do not lose track of "who's boot has been on who's neck"?

modification of Sheila and Joe Skitt

Discussion

THYRZA: The seminal case in the memory debates is the Eileen Franklin case. In 1989 — as an adult mother — she remembered witnessing her father rape and murder her childhood friend Susan Nason. Both girls were eight at the time. Eileen's memory was used as the primary evidence in a case brought against her father for the murder. The case is an important one to study because much of it revolved around whether memory — especially a recovered memory — was worthy as evidence. Experts were brought in to testify on both sides. Among the most prominent was Elizabeth Loftus who presented her work on the malleability of memory. It is based on experiments she conducted with her graduate students at The University of Washington; for her research she has become an internationally famous memory expert. She has just published a book with Katherine Ketcham called *The Myth of Repressed Memory*. On the other side was Dr. Lenore Terr, author of the wonderful *Unchained Memories: True Stories of Traumatic Memories Lost and Found*, who believes in the veracity and meaning of recovered traumatic memories. In her work she actually reads a person's present life in relation to "lost" traumatic memories. In 1990, George Franklin was found guilty of the murder of Susan Nason. In other words, at that time Eileen's repressed memory and such work as Lenore Terr's on traumatic memory were regarded as demonstrable evidence of the father's guilt. Subsequently, because of the wide currency of false memory syndrome the case was reviewed and the verdict overturned. Traumatic memory, at that point, lost its power as evidence.

CATHY: This reminds me of the abundance of films and videos, such as *To A Safer Place* by Beverley Shaffer (1987) and *Family Secrets*, Lorna Boschman (1989), both produced by The National Film Board of Canada, that document memories of child sexual abuse. The first documentary follows the protagonist returning to her childhood home and leading the viewer to the basement where the abuse took place. Visiting the physical site is part of the woman's process of remembering and recovering, while for the viewer it is a matter of witnessing the process. In the second film there is an uneasy recreation of an abusive grandfather taking his three or four year old granddaughter canoeing, while the voice of the adult daughter tells the story. These films are examples of private stories becoming public documentation, not in the sense of a relic, but as representations of memories.

THYRZA: It's as though memory's association with the private becomes a way to undermine it. In other words precisely because alien or false or satanic "memories" are of *individual* memories — not state secrets — then the phenomenon of these reminiscences is seen as the problem. It goes to what Bridget said in her opening remarks. There are clearly social, collective, and individual traumas experienced in a wide range of communities that have made people susceptible to stories which have become internalized as personal, private traumas.

LISA DUGGAN: Which brings up how sexual abuse — what started as a feminist critique in the name of victims of sexual abuse — has been taken up by the right wing which takes these memories, cut off from national narratives, and reinscribes them into a reactionary framework. Narratives that have been cut off, deemed private or crazy, are rewritten as, "well yes, your memory is the truth about the government, and the government is the jack-booted liberal thug, and it is the truth about your childhood and it was satanic child abuse daycare centre workers."

DAVID SERLIN: While Cathy, Bridget, and Thyra were talking, I was thinking about the differences between public memory and private memory, and how differently these are constructed. I'm thinking of public memorials, war memorials, statues or monuments that commemorate national events or heroes, and of course controversial places like the Vietnam Memorial or the Holocaust Museum. How different is it for a state, or a nation, or a group to memorialize an event than it is for an individual and their private memories? Recent books, such as G. Kurt Piehler's *Remembering War the American Way*, try to make sense of some of these issues. Who owns journals, photographs and documents or dictates them into narratives of collective memory that represent the nation, let alone "what really happened"?

JAMES POLCHIN: Interesting too in the case of the Holocaust Museum is that in one of the last parts of that museum, there's this big screen where people are talking about their remembrances and the last image on the wall that you see as you walk out is the American eagle with a sign worded something like "Remember the importance of freedom." So you move from the personal experience of the Holocaust to the national symbol of what this museum is really doing.

DAVID SERLIN: The other interesting thing about the Holocaust Museum is that it manipulates so many different kinds of media to try to get at that intersection of public and private memory. There are whole rooms filled with nothing but shoes or photographs, with very little textual description, the idea being that the non-verbal holds its own sense of collective identity, memory and authority. I think that it is in these objects that the intersection of private and public becomes so political. Last summer, I met a historian who worked as one of the academic consultants to the Holocaust Museum, and he told me that the museum at Auschwitz had donated all of this human hair. There was a huge debate between the historians and Holocaust survivors who sat on the board of directors about whether or not to make an exhibit using the hair. The survivors said, "We don't want that, it's terrible, it's not the kind of memory that we want to represent in this museum."

BILL BURNS: I make scale models and a lot of small objects. I meet a lot of folks in the supply shops and their hobbies are, in many ways, more ambitious than a lot of artists. For instance, they are members of large model-railway cults in industrial malls in the suburbs where people, mostly men, construct these models in groups. They build gigantic rail lines and their project is to reconstruct the halcyon days of the American railway, recon-

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structuring old-time urban and rural landscapes. Along with this tradition is a militia tradition that recreates civil war battles and Middle Ages battles. And with this I was thinking you can have simultaneous memories that are from the Middle Ages and from contemporary events. This is exactly what the militias are trying to do when they create a medieval battle; they are actually trying to create this kind of memory for themselves, so there is a kind of monument within their person, within their memory.

MARC SINGER: Public memories, it seems to me, often contain aspects that are private. If you are planning a Vietnam memorial, for instance, you're considering the public aspects of the war, the patriotism, the sacrifice of self for one's country, but you're also thinking about individual suffering, death and the family's loss. But what strikes me about this kind of private memory and how it is different from the kinds of private memory we've been talking about here is that these memories — of heroism in battle, for instance — contain a little kernel of what we want to uphold as our national ideals: a positive national self-image, the things that hold us together as a country, an example being the American eagle over the Holocaust Museum. Memories of UFO abduction and child abuse, on the other hand, are classified as entirely private because they reveal gaps in this national unity. They break unity down: instead of saying "Remember the cause of freedom," they say, "Remember fear, or paranoia, or sexual dysfunction, or powerlessness." And so a lot of these memories come to be subversive in a way, going against unity, but also sowing doubts about the established order more explicitly, as when UFO memories gradually transform themselves into government conspiracy theories.

THYRZA: That's great because it shows the productive aspect of memory at this point. What Marc is getting at is the productive story these memories tell which isn't about their truth or falsity. It's as though memory's shift from something perceived to be sacred and redemptive into something blasphemous is a way for people to explore a collective ambivalence about the family, the State, the public sphere itself. At a moment when political agency is at an ebb, the push is not toward a utopian future but a nightmarish confabulated past, which is really only a ruse — a politically unconscious one — for remembering the politically messy state of the present itself.

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