

## 1. On Autofiction and Cultural Memory

As suggested in the introduction, bringing autofiction and cultural memory into dialogue with each other presents a number of challenges, mainly because the former is chiefly concerned with individual self-narration whereas the latter is more about social processes. Moreover, there is no single definition of autofiction, the varieties of which seem to have expanded rapidly over the past three decades. This chapter proposes to draw upon that open-endedness by treating it as an opportunity for developing a new way of thinking about what autofictional writing can achieve, specifically by exploring connections between these apparently contrasting fields. First through a brief discussion of the emergence of autofiction, then of cultural memory and finally by drawing together points of connection between the two, the chapter argues that autofiction has the potential to contribute to new forms of cultural memory when it is applied by writers from marginalised, dispossessed or disempowered communities in order to combat that same marginalisation and dispossession.

### The Rise of Autofiction

As autofiction research and scholarship have increased in recent years, so too has our understanding of its background and origins become more multifarious. Until recently the conventional account of the emergence of the term *autofiction* was that it was developed by the French author and academic Serge Doubrovsky as a response to his compatriot Philippe Lejeune's research into forms of autobiographical writing, especially *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975); and that the first published use of the term was made on the back cover of Doubrovsky's 1977 novel *Fils*. Lejeune had argued that to write an autobiography is to enter into a pact with the reader, who is entitled to assume that the 'I' who narrates the autobiography is the same as the 'I' who wrote it, and that the autobiography is therefore both referential and truthful. This autobiographical pact, Lejeune argued, differs from a fictional pact, whereby readers are made aware in advance that the events narrated are not real and need not refer directly to the author or his or her own experiences. Lejeune produced a now-celebrated table classifying what kind of writing is produced within each pact. These were then sub-divided further into cases where the author's name is the same as the protagonist's name; and cases where they are not. Where the work follows the fictional pact and the author's name differs from the

protagonist's, the work is designated a novel. Where the author's name is the same as the protagonist's and the work adheres to the autobiographical pact, the final product is designated an autobiography. However, Lejeune had no term for cases where the work is presented as a novel but the author's name is also the same as the protagonist's. This box at top right on his summarising chart is simply graded out (Lejeune 1975: 16-17).

This is a possible starting point for autofiction scholarship because Doubrovsky's use of the term autofiction can be seen as a means of addressing the question left unanswered by the gap in Lejeune's classification: how to conceptualise works where author and protagonist share a name, but the work is referred to as a novel rather than an autobiography. Building on Doubrovsky's work, Philippe Gasparini has proposed ten criteria for designating a work as autofiction, as follows:

- 1) onomastic identity of the author and hero-narrator;
  - 2) subtitle: 'novel';
  - 3) primary importance of the narrative;
  - 4) pursuit of an original form;
  - 5) writing that aims to 'immediately articulate';
  - 6) reconfiguration of linear time (through selection, intensification, stratification, fragmentation, disorientation);
  - 7) a significant use of the present tense;
  - 8) an effort to only tell 'strictly real facts and events';
  - 9) the urge to reveal one's self truly;
  - 10) a strategy that requires active engagement from the reader.
- (Gasparini 2008: 209, my translation)

In other words, autofiction is initially defined as a form of fiction based on real events, in which the author appears as main protagonist and narrator under his or her own name (rather than in the form of a thinly disguised avatar, as in works that would be better considered autobiographical novels than autofiction) in a creative work specifically designated a novel. The possibility of treating Doubrovsky's coinage of the term as a direct response to Lejeune has been strengthened by Isabelle Grell, who has shown that although his first published use of *autofiction* was not until 1977,

Doubrovsky had jotted it down in his notebook in New York (where he taught) in 1973 (Grell 2014: 9) – the same year as Lejeune published an article entitled ‘Le pacte autobiographique’ which subsequently featured in the 1975 book of the same name.

From here, according to the conventional narrative (e.g. Ferreira-Meyers, 2018) the field subsequently known as autofiction would expand and emerge, spreading around France and a number of other Francophone countries in North Africa and the Caribbean before being picked up by writers across Europe as well as the English-speaking world, other parts of Africa, South America and Asia. However, this conventional account has recently been challenged. Myra Bloom has shown that the first published use of the term autofiction was made by the British-American novelist and critic Paul West ‘in a *New York Times* review of Richard Elman’s novel *Fredi & Shirl & The Kids*’ in 1972, a year before Doubrovsky’s notebook entry (Bloom 2019: 4). A different start date again is proposed by Dan Sinykin, who has argued that from 1965 onwards, especially in the USA, the emergence of a small number of large multimedia conglomerates having ownership of what were previously smaller and more numerous independent publishing houses ‘ripened the conditions for the contemporary trend toward autofiction’ (Sinykin 2017: 465) by placing a high economic premium on properties such as marketability and relatability, which is often seen as a hallmark of autofiction because of its commitment to honesty and self-revelation. Bran Nicol suggests that autofiction was ‘introduced to American readers’ by Jerzy Kosinski in the article ‘Death in Cannes’ in 1986 (Nicol 2018: 258), while Max Saunders has described it as ‘Edmund White’s term’ (2010: 329).

The crucial point here is that these chronological inconsistencies need not necessarily suggest factual error on any individual part as much as they suggest multiplicity of origin. One possible way of reconciling the differences is to consider the relationship between the French word *l’autofiction* and the English word *autofiction* an example of what linguists refer to as a *faux ami*, or false friend. *Faux amis* are words in French that look identical to words in English but nevertheless mean something different from them and hence are prone to lead casual would-be interpreters into error. Applying the concept of the *faux ami* to the relationship between the French word *l’autofiction* and the English *autofiction* is potentially

illuminating because it would suggest that Edmund White's autofiction (and Kosinski's) and Doubrovsky's *autofiction* are different words (one in English and one in French), and that as such they might mean subtly different things that can be applied in alternative ways. Saunders acknowledges this when he draws attention, between different forms of autofiction, to 'a different mode of generic fusion, in which rather than saying a novel is based on autobiographical fact, it is intimated that selfhood is itself already fictionalized' (Saunders 210: 328-29). Although he does not say it, in this distinction, the writing of novels drawn from strict autobiographical fact corresponds to a Doubrovskian style autofiction, whereas using autofiction to interrogate how selfhood is constructed in writing is closer to that practised by Elman, White and Kosinski.

In other words, there are many different contexts in which the emergence of autofiction can be situated. If Lejeune's research into forms of autobiography was a key context for Doubrovsky, then his autofiction is distinguished from autobiography mainly on stylistic grounds, i.e. both narrate events that are strictly real, but autobiography does so using the conventions associated with nonfiction whereas autofiction does so using the looser, creative techniques associated with a modernist experimental novel. It must be noted that identifying stylistic differences between autobiography and autofiction has been one of the most contentious elements of the field from its inception, mainly because it would be naïve to assume that autobiography is written in a straightforwardly factual way, without the distorting effects of memory, the emotions and biases of all kinds so that an element of fictionalisation is also necessarily operative in autobiography. For this reason, Arnaud Schmitt has proposed replacing the term *autofiction* with *self-narration*, thereby creating less of a binary distinction between the former and autobiography (Schmitt 2010: 122). Doubrovsky's autofiction can therefore be seen as a gradually more nuanced response to the category of autobiography as it had been conceptualised in the early 1970s. Jacques Lecarme suggests that the two relate to each other in a dialectical way, which implies that there is an unresolved tension between the impulse to truth understood in a factual sense, and the revelation of truths through symbolic narratives that are nevertheless fictive. Arising from this distinction between different kinds of truth, whereas Lejeune saw no difference between autofiction and an autobiographical novel, Lecarme sees autofiction as a

new form, particular to the prevailing cultural conditions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

As autofiction research and scholarship has extended outwards, not only has the concept become increasingly refined and elaborated, but there has also been a gradual change in emphasis away from stylistic questions and towards sociological ones. This is the case, for example, in the work of Ricarda Menn (2018), to whom there is a tension between autofiction as generically distinct from autobiography and autofiction as a variant of autobiographical writing, which nevertheless responds to the dominant cultural conditions of the time in ways that differ from earlier autobiographies. Marjorie Worthington has suggested that for English-language writers in particular, those conditions include anxieties about the nature of authorship in an age of both 'literary celebrity' and the proliferation of 'new media' (Worthington 2018: 79, 65). Bran Nichol echoes Worthington in suggesting that a renewed concern over the institutional settings in which authorship occurs has been an important setting for the development of autofiction, especially in North America. In addition, he notes the further context arising out of the public nature of 'literary scandal,' and the growth of so-called 'reality' genres in both literature and other media (Nicol 2018: 257).

If there are several different contexts in which to locate the emergence of autofiction, there are also as many correspondingly different varieties of it. To some, it is an egocentric genre, dedicated to navel-gazing and self-celebration. One effect of this indulgence is that it risks becoming complicit in the neoliberal capitalist order since, as Sarah Wasserman points out, its characteristic emphasis on 'subjectivity, the incessant drive toward the new, the tyranny of the individual' are also 'the very hallmarks of neoliberalism' (Wasserman 2022: 566). Moreover, in the specific case of the USA, Worthington has drawn attention to the fact that 'by far most American autofiction is written by white men' (Worthington 2018: 19), prompting Wasserman to wonder, 'How is it that a genre frequently dedicated to the minutiae of the writer-protagonist's life has largely evaded the criticism made of novels that focus on the interiority of privileged subjects?' (Wasserman 2022: 562).

If autofiction was no more than the self-congratulation of a privileged minority it would probably not detain us very long. However, Wasserman also responds to Worthington's comment about the whiteness of American autofictions by suggesting that that this is a 'symptom of how the term itself has been constituted,' whereas the category of autofiction 'would appear very different were critics to include earlier [African-American] works, such as Audre Lorde's "biomythography," *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) or James Baldwin's "semi-autobiographical novel," *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), as early instances of the form' (Wasserman 2022: 583). Her identification of a potentially alternative tradition in autofiction, that both pre-dates the term itself and expands its parameters beyond the confines of a socially and racially privileged few, suggests the possibility of a whole different approach. In doing so, she echoes the recent method of Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor, whose own 2021 collection *The Autofictional* took a step towards 'a more global perspective by shining a light on select underrepresented practices, traditions, and cultures, both within and outside of Europe, and by putting these into dialogue with the more established traditions' (Effe and Lawlor 2021: 5).

This book picks up on the possibility of an expanded approach to autofiction by adding a further context in which its evolution should be understood: the legacy of imperialism and the unresolved historical injustices arising out of the colonial era. Its central argument is that because autofiction blends truth and fiction in a highly self-conscious way, and because it has the capacity to modulate between individual voice and collective experience, autofiction has the capacity to operate as a form of testimony or witness-bearing with regard to past cultural and/ or political struggles. In doing so it also has the capacity to restore to contemporary view experiences and conflicts that have been historically marginalised or overlooked and thus contribute to a new form of cultural memory.

### **Origins of Cultural Memory**

According to Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning cultural memory studies came into being at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the work of Maurice Halbwachs on *mémoire collective* and in the last two decades has 'witnessed a veritable boom in various countries and disciplines' (Erll and Nünning 2010: v). During the course of that boom, researchers in different fields have identified several possible starting

points for the emergence of the idea of cultural memory itself. Andreea Paris cites the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929)'s concept of *social memory* as having 'enriched' Halbwachs's initial concept of collective memory (Paris 2017: 96). Renate Lachmann suggests that the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam in 1922 proposed 'an elaborate theory of cultural memory which owes some of its constituent ideas to Henri Bergson's notions of time, duration, evolution, and memory' (Lachmann 2010: 308). Dietrich Harth argues that after the (separately pursued) work of Halbwachs and Warburg in the first half of the twentieth century, the study of cultural memory fell into obeisance for some time so that it was not until the 1970s in the work of the Moscow Tartu Semiotic School of thought centred on Juri Lotman that a 'loose affiliation between "culture" and "memory"' was once again established (Harth 2010: 93). In addition, Harth also draws attention to the vital contribution made by Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory and to a more recent group of American philosophers including Patricia Cook to the field of cultural memory studies.

Clearly the origins of the notion of cultural memory are multiple and heterogeneous. There is however considerable consensus that the pivotal figure in the establishment of cultural memory as first a concept and then a field of study was Jan Assmann, working at the Egyptological Institute of Heidelberg University in the 1980s. Appropriately for the subject, Harth identifies a series of public lectures delivered to mark a specific memorial event, the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the university in 1986, as a 'crucial step' in the establishment of cultural memory (Harth 2020: 88). The resulting publication *Kultur und Gedächtnis* ('Culture and Memory,' 1988) edited by Assmann and Tonio Hölscher can be seen as something of a manifesto for the field. Assmann's essay 'Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität' ('Collective Memory and Cultural Identity') which opened the volume was among the 'seminal works initiating this new history of memory' (Grabes 2010: 34). His book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* appeared in 1992, with an English translation, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination*, in 2011. By this time the field had been firmly established.

At its most basic, cultural memory is the term used to refer to the process by which individual memories are transposed onto the social plain. It provides not only access to the past but also an orientation and perspective on the present. Cultural memory has the capacity to generate a shared sense of history, a collective identity based on knowledge, understanding and meanings that are widely held, and perhaps even a common purpose. Like any cultural category that offers to instil a dominant set of values it has also provoked critical attention, significant debate and at times fierce contestation. As Grabes puts it, 'in a dynamic culture which is constantly changing, the contest over which of the cultural achievements of the more distant or more recent past will be able to secure a position in cultural memory finds its most prominent expression in the competing canons that serve as its archives' (Grabes 2010: 318).

Looking back in 2010 at the development of his central tenets surrounding cultural memory, Assmann acknowledged that his coinage of the term was directly as a result of his engagement with Halbwachs's concept of collective memory. In an attempt to clarify the distinction between various forms of this, Assmann proposed the term *cultural memory* as a contrast to what he calls *communicative memory*, where both are versions of the wider category of collective memory. Communicative memory can approximately be equated with living memory. It has no institutional basis and is not operationalised by any of the material means which typically form the basis of public commemorative practices such as statues, anniversaries, specialist journals or learned bodies. On the contrary, it exists in daily interaction between people and is handed down directly from one person to another where the senders and recipients are in close physical and temporal proximity to each other: no more than eighty years apart, Assmann suggests, or members of three to four adjacent generations. After this time, living memory expires and whatever collective memory we have of earlier times, periods or events depends less on the passing down of memories in daily human interaction but is dependent instead on those same material and institutional practices which communicative memory does not require. He goes on:

This information, however, is not committed to everyday communication but intensely formalized and institutionalized. It exists in the forms of narratives,



songs, dances, rituals, masks, and symbols; specialists such as narrators, bards, mask-carvers, and others are organized in guilds and have to undergo long periods of initiation, instruction, and examination. Moreover, it requires for its actualization certain occasions when the community comes together for a celebration. This is what we propose calling 'cultural memory.' (J. Assmann 2010: 112)

Cultural memory, then, is constituted by the vehicles that carry it, which can in turn be considered congruent with the category of *lieux de memoire* or sites of memory proposed by Pierre Nora. A site of memory need not be a particular place, but can as readily be an object or artefact in which memory is invested, a story by which it is transferred or an image that conveys it. In turn, this means that the conceptualisation of cultural memory has recourse (like the conceptualisation of individual memory) to a particular notion of storage, where the term memory refers simultaneously to the process of storing and the process of retrieval as well as to what is stored. The group of people among whom these forms of cultural memory are performed and circulated can then be referred to as a memory culture.

Perhaps the most important thing about cultural memory is that it enables the cultivation of a collective identity in the present. It exists in the form of foundational myths, myths of origin and common history and when these are reaffirmed in the present they offer to inculcate within a particular community, group, society or nation a feeling of shared values and hence a structuring principle of what that particular group stands for. Without this relationship between understanding of a common past and the cultivation of a collective identity and purpose in the present, memory itself ceases to be the object of discussion and instead collapses into abstract knowledge. Or as Assmann says: 'Memory is knowledge with an identity-index, it is knowledge about oneself, that is, one's own diachronic identity, be it as an individual or as a member of a family, a generation, a community, a nation, or a cultural and religious tradition' (J. Assmann 2010: 113-14).

Harth sees the relationship between culture and memory as one where culture is reckoned as 'an authoritative, symbolically coded "world of meaning"' in which the collective memory provides 'a repertoire and generator of values which transcend

the span of a lifetime and create identity' (Harth 2010: 88). In the process of drawing on that stock of values, a given social group arrives at a consensus surrounding the common acceptance of particular self-images which are in turn solidified through the canonisation of specific religious, historical or cultural traditions at the expense of others. Not only does this mean that forms of cultural memory also necessarily entail forms of forgetting of anything that is not canonised, it also has the effect of placing a very positive premium on the role of script-based cultures, and on writing in general, in the process of collective remembering. According to Harth:

*Kultur*, in this view, unfolds as a dense fabric of writings before the eyes of those who read and are able to interpret what they read. These are both abilities acquired through learning, and in earlier times were mastered by only a few, very powerful elites, and which even today are associated with privileged access to the general culture and corresponding group loyalties. Illiteracy, inadequate mastery of the written word, and hermeneutic incompetence would, according to this understanding, exclude large majorities and entire social classes from participation in the *Kulturelles Gedächtnis* [cultural memory] and its rewards of identity creation. (Harth 2010: 93-4)

Jan Assmann's primary field of study was ancient Egypt, and his examples of the cultural myths that give rise to cultural memory by providing both a narrative of common origin in the past and one of shared purpose in the present include both Moses and the pharaohs. It is easy to see how in this context the importance assigned to writing in the generation of cultural memory brings in its train some consideration of the scribal or priestly class who in those societies had privileged access to the technologies of written communication, which most people could not access. In this sense, cultural memory studies is a projection into the distant past of what in the study of cultures and societies since the Industrial Revolution Raymond Williams refers to as cultural materialism: 'analysis of all forms of signification, including quite centrally writing, within the actual means and conditions of their production' (Williams 1983: 210). Herbert Grabes has pointed out that when the category of English literature started to be constructed in Britain historically, it included not only poetry and imaginative works but also philosophy, theology,

history, law and scientific texts: 'it would, of course, be easy to show that "literature" in this broad sense was and remains of great value for cultural memory because written texts are the most explicit testimonies of past culture' (Grabes 2010: 38-9). This too echoes a comment made by Williams in *The Long Revolution* in 1961 where he draws attention to the fact that the structure of feeling inherited from a given period is often particularly visible in the arts and literature of that period, because 'here, in the only examples we have of recorded communication that outlives its bearers, the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible, is naturally drawn upon' (Williams 1961: 53). However, few researchers have made connections between cultural memory studies and cultural materialism. This is a significant omission because the purpose of analysing culture materially is not only to identify the power structures in a given society or the culturally sanctioned ideological structures that support them, but actively to challenge and change them. When such a challenge is brought to bear on the domain of cultural memory, this raises significant questions about the process by which a common culture is constructed and what experiences, lives and values are omitted or marginalised as a result.

As mentioned above, forms of cultural memory bring with them corresponding processes of cultural forgetting because the concept of cultural memory depends on a notion of storage and retrieval which according to Aleida Assmann is marked 'by a notorious shortage of space' (A. Assmann 2010: 100). Not all of the myriad myths, legends, texts, beliefs, objects and artefacts from the historical past can be carried forward with common recognition in the present so that collective identity is based on the retrieval from cultural memory of a limited number of these things which are positioned in such a way as to appear both foundational and normative. In the process, others are allowed to lapse out of collective memory. This is why Aleida Assmann has emphasised that to remember some things is also to forget others, and that acts of forgetting can be both actively fostered or passively experienced just as acts of memory too have an active and a passive side: 'The institutions of active memory preserve the *past as present* while the institutions of passive memory preserve the *past as past*' (A. Assmann 2010: 98).

Having made this distinction between active and passive forms of memory, she goes on to propose referring to those institutions that actively maintain an image of the past in the present as a *canon*; and those passive forms that store memory by preserving merely trace elements of the past thereby preserving also their pastness as an *archive*. Implicit in this distinction is the possibility that if artefacts are taken out of the archive and circulated, disseminated, interpreted and above all invested with emotional and identarian values in the present they would not only move from archive to canon but also change the canon itself. That is, they would change the construction of cultural memory for the whole culture, which in turn would entail challenging, transforming, altering or expanding the collective identity politics of that culture. Such a process would be of particular importance for people on the periphery of a particular culture, who live within it but whose values, lives, histories and experiences have nevertheless been overlooked, neglected or simply left out of its collective identity. Such people might include those marginalised as a result of race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, language or sexuality. For this reason, Seyyed Mehdi Mousavi, Farideh Pourgivi and Bahee Hadaegh propose supplementing cultural memory studies with a 'cosmopolitan orientation' that is 'concerned with changing the *status quo* and imagining alternative futures' (Mousavi, Pourgivi and Hadaegh 2018: 68).

In other words cultural memory is not stable. On the contrary, it is subject to an open-ended and continual process of ratification and renewal. Jan Assmann has warned that owing to the special role played by writing and hence by a scribal class in its generation, cultural memory gives rise to particularly canonical forms of the past and thus 'has an inherent tendency to elitism; it is never strictly egalitarian' (J. Assmann 2010: 116). Scholars such as Charles Moseley are unconcerned by this elitism: 'canons are by definition top down, not bottom up, élitist rather than democratic' (Moseley 2017: 67). Harth takes a different view, arguing that 'society's acceptance of norms and values does not depend on a "sacralized," written, or in any other form symbolically coded canon' because they are based on the processes of negotiation and agreement 'that are part of common experience' rather than the exclusive preserve of a cultural elite (Harth 2010: 94). But one person's negotiation could be another's contestation, which is why Ann Rigney has detected a 'shift from "sites" to "dynamics" within memory studies,' arguing that this shift brings with it a

corresponding change in emphasis 'from products to processes, from a focus on cultural artifacts to an interest in the way those artifacts circulate and influence their environment' (Rigney 2010: 346). Jan Assmann concurs, pointing out: 'Transitions and transformations account for the dynamics of cultural memory' (J. Assmann 2010: 118). Moreover, one of the most significant transitions that can take place is when something that has previously been located at the periphery of a memory culture is brought into a new position at the centre of that culture – moving, that is, from the archive into the canon.

According to Aleida Assmann, the three 'core areas' of cultural memory are religion, art, and history (quoted in J. Assmann 2010: 100). She could have added a fourth, literature, because numerous researchers of cultural memory have commented on the particular role literature plays in both the dissemination and the contestation of forms of cultural memory. For example, in an article about the ethics of literary addressivity in the age of globalisation, Roger D. Sell has argued that when a literary text draws on the resources of cultural memory, it does so in a way that is 'shot through with frequent and radical discontinuities, alternatives, and contradictions, and is open to recall and use in many different ways' (Sell 2012: 209). In the last instance, the fundamental alterity of the text enables it to operate as a space for dialogue between author and reader that avoids imposing a single perspective on the reader and instead recognises the infinite heterogeneity of all readers, thus envisioning a post-postmodern form of globalisation that is based on equality rather than Western hegemony.

Rigney's account of the relationship between literature and cultural memory is a paradoxical one according to which, since fiction has the freedom to invent rather than merely to record or demonstrate, it lends itself to a particular form of remembrance because 'narrators who are free to design their own stories can more easily evoke vivid characters and give closure to events' whereas non-fictional genres such as history or biography might 'end up with a more historical and authentic story, but also a less memorable one, than the producers of fiction' (Rigney 2010: 347). Aleida Assmann makes a similar point when she notes that '[w]hile historians have to adjust their research and questions to the extension and range of the archives, literary writers may take the liberty to fill in the gaps' (A. Assmann

2010: 106). She goes on to cite Toni Morrison as a writer who deals with gaps in the historical record, where the gaps in question surround the historical imposition of slavery in the Americas, which, because it is a history of violent rupture and fragmentation can be seen as 'wounds in memory itself, the scar of a trauma that resisted representation and can only belatedly, long after the deeply destructive events, become articulated in the framework of a literary text' (A. Assmann 2010: 106).

Literature, then, can contribute to cultural memory by telling emotional truths in fictional form. Peter Burke takes a slightly different approach to the relationship between literature and cultural memory, drawing not so much on paradox as on dialectics to argue that the former both produces and is produced by the latter: 'memories as active, shaping texts, but also memories as passive, themselves shaped by earlier texts, especially literary classics' (Burke 2017: 21). Renate Lachmann observes that the most appropriate term for conceptualising how literature contributes to the processes of cultural memory is therefore intertextuality: 'Intertextuality demonstrates the process by which a culture, where "culture" is a book culture, continually rewrites and retranscribes itself, constantly redefining itself through its signs' (Lachmann 2010: 301). This implies that fictional texts make possible not only an encounter between author and reader but between canon and archive, in which 'literature recovers and revives knowledge in reincorporating some of its formerly rejected unofficial or arcane traditions' (Lachmann 2010: 306). In such a reckoning, the text participates in processes of cultural memory both as a means of storing cultural knowledge and (when read) as a means of retrieving what is stored. The whole field of literature can thus be seen as an archive or repository of cultural memory, which is expanded and enlarged each time a new contribution is made to it. Where the new contribution narrates a story, history, incident or experience that has not been widely documented but that is nevertheless pertinent to a sub-culture within the society as a whole, the localised forms of knowledge and memory within that sub-culture are tantamount to a form of extra-textual archive, the narration of which in textual form thus enables the transition from archive to canon and breaks down previously existing forms of exclusion.

### **Towards an Autofiction of Cultural Memory**

The history of cultural memory studies sketched out above can be summarised in the following way. Drawing on diverse sources and origins in the early years of the twentieth century especially Warburg and Halbwachs, and then on later scholars such as Pierre Nora, the concept of cultural memory became established in the work of Jan Assmann and the Heidelberg school in the 1980s. As it underwent a transition from a mere concept to a wider field it also experienced various theoretical elaborations and modifications. Thus whereas the work of Assmann and his contemporaries emphasised the role of a priestly or scribal class in forging a common culture based on shared identity through recourse to the past, subsequent scholars have drawn attention to the process by which those members of a community whose lives are not adequately reflected by the common culture might set about to question, challenge and change it. Literature has a specific role to play in this process of contestation and in the dynamics of cultural memory more generally because literature is inherently intertextual, on the one hand receiving images and ideas from the past and on the other transmitting them to new audiences in new contexts so that they are in the process expanded and transformed. As scholars of cultural memory increasingly recognised this capacity of literature to contest that present orientation on past narratives, they naturally became interested in the relationship between literature and cultural memory.

During this same period, the concept of autofiction was emerging within the field literature. Because autofiction itself is typically interested in the problematics of memory, scholars of cultural memory could scarcely fail to be interested in its emergence. However, no detailed or sustained consideration of the relationship between autofiction and cultural memory has been attempted. It now remains to undertake this work. There is perhaps surprising congruence between the fields of autofiction and cultural memory, glimpsed by the suggestively parallel histories of the fields, not only in the gradual convergence of the latter with the former, but in the wider fates experienced by each. Wolfgang Becker argued in *Art Worlds* in 1982 that new fields of creative endeavour require both symbolic figureheads and institutional homes in order to become recognised as such. It could then be said that Serge Doubrovsky was such a figurehead for autofiction and Jan Assmann for cultural memory. Much of the early French work on autofiction took place at the Colloquium

of Cerisy, and the Heidelberg school provided an equivalent institutional basis for the then-emerging field of cultural memory.

In the interim, both fields have expanded beyond the institutional homes provided by Cerisy and Heidelberg and arguably have surpassed the work of their pioneers. In fact, the work of a number of cultural memory theorists subsequent to those of the Heidelberg school can be read partly as a form of reaching towards the concept of autofiction and in the work of one or two such scholars the word itself even succeeds in making a brief appearance, although typically as no more than a brief discussion treating it as an interesting subvariant of the wider category of cultural memory. For example, in a reading of William Golding's novel *Pincher Martin* (1956), whose eponymous narrate tells his story at the moment immediately before death on a remote island during World War Two, Pia Brînzeu discusses the way memory is represented in literature and how this has the capacity to resonate with a wider world by evoking the complex dynamics of the culture and society from which the memories emerged. Such resonance depends not on the memories themselves, or even on their objects, but on the way the objects become cathected as bearers of symbolic meaning. She thus argues that 'scholars should feel encouraged to link cultural memory to narratology' in order to highlight the way in which 'the dynamics of individual remembering can be linked both to national remembrance and to the transnational circulation of memory' (Brînzeu 2017: 87). Cultural memory studies therefore has the potential to be enriched by the addition of concepts from the field of narratology, which in turn is where the study of autofiction first arose so that there is an implicit node of connection between the two fields in Brînzeu's account.

Birgit Neumann makes a comparable argument for the benefits of bringing narratology and cultural memory studies together to their mutual enlargement on the basis that 'works of fiction have specific, genuinely literary techniques at hand to plumb the connection between memory and identity' (Neumann 2010: 333). Interestingly she suggests that: 'For a long time, no genre designation existed for texts which represent processes of remembering. However, recently critics [such as Ansgar Nünning] proposed the term "fictions of memory" to designate such works' (Neumann 2010: 334). The term 'fictions of memory' has a deliberate ambiguity built into it. On the one hand it refers to those literary texts in which the process of



remembering – in all its complexity and unreliability – is represented. On the other hand, owing to this unreliability it also hints at the idea that all memories are themselves fictions and that memory itself is elusive, ever-changing and impossible to pin down. In other words, it need not only refer to specific works of literature but can also refer to the broad stories ‘that individuals or cultures tell about their past to answer the question “who am I?”, or, collectively, “who are we?”’ (Neumann 2010: 334).

Although Neumann uses the term *fictions of memory* to designate a genre for which she found no prior term existed, it seems there is a high level of congruence between fictions of memory and autofiction. Both are typically focalised on a narrator looking back on a particular experience in the past and attempting to invest emotional meaning and significance on it in the present. They thus take the form of narrative retrospection or analepsis. Moreover in classical autobiographies which presuppose the possibility of a coherent reconstruction of the past, she suggests that such analepses tend to be arranged in linear, chronological order, ‘bridging the gap between a specific past event’ and ‘a moment in the present at which the process of remembering is initiated’ (Neumann 2010: 336). By contrast, in contemporary fictions of memory, writers are more doubtful of the possibility of marshalling the past into a single, teleological narrative of the self so that ‘this chronological order is dissolved at the expense of the subjective experience of time’ (Neumann 2010: 336).

Arguably, autofiction is a term that refers precisely to those fictions of memory in which a linear timeframe is disrupted in the face of the subjective experience of both time and recollection; this is what distinguishes it from autobiography. These connections between autofiction and fictions of memory imply a useful overlap between autofiction and cultural memory, especially if autofiction is considered to situate the individual within a wider culture rather than embodying some kind of retreat by the former from the latter. To elucidate this component of autofiction therefore requires a grasp of the relationship between Assmann’s *communicative* and *cultural* memory, or between narratives that are apparently concerned with individual experience and the positions they come to occupy within the wider culture transcending the individual. Understanding this relationship in turn necessitates a consideration of how a person can remember something of which they in fact have

no memory because they did not experience it. This is the whole basis of cultural memory. In a paper arguing that it is important for the development of civic and democratic structures, Thomas Docherty illustrates the paradox using the example of a citizen of Berlin born after the fall of the Wall in 1989, walking along the line indicating where the Wall used to be and reflecting on what it means to her:

she is in a place where she is remembering, certainly; but what she is remembering in a certain sense has nothing to do with her. If the memory is of an absence, she, paradoxically, is the very absence in question: she simply was not there when the Wall was (Docherty 2017: 58-9).

If cultural memory is precisely the memory I have of something I did not experience this paradox has a precise parallel in autofiction. Gérard Genette has argued that autofiction is a form of narrative evoking a fictionalised version of the author which may bear some resemblance to extra-textual reality but may equally be highly fictional and which Genette considers authentically so precisely because it is not pretending to be real: 'I, the author, am going to tell you a story of which I am the hero but which never happened to me' (Genette 1993: 76).

With the growing recognition that literature has a specific role to play in the construction, contestation and dissemination of cultural memory has come a corresponding realisation that writing has a testimonial dimension which means not only documenting and recording past experiences but also making them present. For example, in a highly original reading of autofictional works by French-speaking Caribbean writers, Renée Larrier has proposed a powerful idea of 'témoignage' (Larrier 2006: 8), or bearing witness to the injustices of colonial history. Specifically, she says:

privileging of the *I* in Caribbean prose literature is one direct response to particular historical circumstances. The dispossession that resulted from slavery and its legacy of economic exploitation makes challenging the dominant discourse urgent. For one, first-person narratives narrow the gap created since the colonial period, during which travelers' diaries, government documents, handbooks for male settlers, and colonial literature constructed

an image of the Caribbean that excluded the perspective of the majority population. Caribbean autofiction challenges the authority of travel narratives that were among the few first-person accounts about the Caribbean. (Larrier 2006: 6)

The specific ways in which autofiction affords Caribbean writers the opportunity to bear witness to historical anti-colonial struggles against slavery, oppression and inequality will be explored further in Chapters Four and Five. Larrier's emphasis is on how autofiction can be used to enter into a dialogue with the dominant (i.e. colonial) accounts of the New World from the colonial period, which were mainly written in nonfictional genres such as travel writing and diaries. It is therefore logical that the gradual convergence between cultural memory and autofiction has been especially prominent in the discipline of life writing.

Noting a growth of interest in nonfiction genres such as journals, letters, travelogues, biographies and autobiographies (including unpublished ones) during the twentieth century, Max Saunders proposes to treat such forms as historical documents. That is, instead of assuming that they give us privileged access to the experiences they record, they should be seen in the context of the wider social processes of which they were part and from which they cannot therefore be isolated. When looked at in this way they provide not so much evidence of objective historical facts as indicators of complex historical processes surrounding the creation of common values: 'Rather than giving us direct access to unmediated memory, what such texts reveal is, instead, memory cultures. When we study life-writing as a source for cultural memory, that is, our conclusions will also be literary-critical ones: interpretations of the ways in which memory was produced, constructed, written, and circulated' (Saunders 2010: 322-23). He gives feminism, and the histories of sexual, racial and class identities as forms of identity politics that each turned to forms of life writing as ways of establishing 'biographical counter-cultures' (Saunders 2010: 327) during the twentieth century. By contrast, the rise of poststructuralist theory during the third quarter of the century posed a challenge to these forms because poststructuralism is anti-foundational, disavowing the possibility of any essential truth claims at all. One response for practitioners of life writing in the face of this challenge, Saunders reasons, was for forms of biography and autobiography to adopt elements of

postmodern fictional practice marked by such typically postmodern attributes as self-conscious narrativity and meta-fiction. He mentions Barthes's *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975) as an example of the postmodern turn within life writing and then goes on:

This turn, coinciding with the increasingly auto/biographic turn in twentieth-century fiction, has produced writing which nomadically crosses the borders between biography and fiction. 'Faction' or non-fiction novels – like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) or Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979) – narrate real-life content in novelistic forms and styles. Edmund White's term 'autofiction' similarly claims a different mode of generic fusion, in which rather than saying a novel is based on autobiographical fact, it is intimated that selfhood is itself already fictionalized. (Saunders 2010: 328-29)

Here at last in a discussion ostensibly about forms of cultural memory is an explicit recognition that autofiction has a potentially meaningful contribution to make to it. That is not to say, however, that this extract alone represents a detailed extrapolation of that contribution and should really be seen as no more than a suggestive first step in undertaking such work. Interestingly Saunders attributes the concept of autofiction to the American writer and gay rights campaigner Edmund White rather than to Serge Doubrovsky, as is more usually the case. In fact White has referred to his own practice as 'gay autofiction' (White 1995: n.p.) and possibly the most useful convergence between autofiction and cultural memory made by Saunders is the suggestion that when forms of life writing participate in the processes by which cultural memory is created and passed on, 'Such work is often avowedly inspirational in its aim, offering a sense of historical solidarity for oppressed minorities, and seeking to record counter-cultural memories that official cultures tend to repress or try to forget' (Saunders 2010: 327).

In a separate article discussing the relationship between literature, memory, history and psychology Peter Burke has drawn attention to the capacity of literature to both shape and be shaped by developments in each of those other fields and hence to participate in the process of making contemporary meaning through the construction of a memory culture. As with Saunders's discussion of how life writing can restore to

contemporary view aspects of cultural memory that dominant cultures tend to repress or forget, Burke discusses the capacity for life writing to operate as a form of testament to a writer's past and therefore to correct or change errors in how the writers themselves have been perceived and hence set the record straight:

For a vivid example, fictional in every sense, I turn to a novel by the Spanish writer Juan Marsé, *La muchacha de las bragas de oro* (1978), in which the protagonist – one can hardly say the hero – is the writer Luys Forest, a former supporter of the Falange, who is writing his memoirs in order to persuade the world that he was always a liberal. In other words, he is attempting not only to write his memoirs but to rewrite his life. The French have a word for it: 'autofiction' (Burke 2017: 23-24).

Unlike Saunders's counter-cultural forms of life writing, Burke's fictional example can be considered *counter* counter-cultural, the fictional protagonist of *La muchacha de las bragas de oro* using the fiction to reconstruct how he is perceived. As with Saunders, Burke sees a possible connection between cultural memory and autofiction more or less in passing and stops short of undertaking a lengthy exploration of how each informs and is informed by the other. His example is a fictional character, but in a more properly autofictional work the narrator would be the real empirical author. This status would present a challenge to readers, not knowing whether the events narrated are strictly true or not (a difficulty they would not have, for example, if they were reading works that adhere to Lejeune's novelistic pact and hence knew that the narrative is invented). An important intervention in this debate has been made by Arnaud Schmitt, who notes that readers cannot necessarily know whether the purportedly truthful elements of a text really are true or not and therefore are in a position of choosing whether or not to accept such works in the sincerity with which they appear to be offered: 'At its best, self-narration can be a post-postmodern form of personal expression based on the reader's decision to give a text the benefit of the doubt and open a dialogic interaction with a potentially empirical person through a literary text' (Schmitt 2010: 135).

This restoration to theories of autofiction of the role of the reader in determining which works are authentic instances of self-narration and which are merely

fabricated is paralleled in cultural memory studies by the work of Andreea Paris, whose research found that ‘there are almost no references to the reader as instrumental part in the formation of cultural memory’ (Paris 2017: 96) and who then set about addressing that deficit. Reasoning that cultural memory arises out of the rendering common what originates as individual memory, and that memories cannot exist independently of the individual rememberers who hold them, this leads her to argue that cultural memory too cannot exist without a specific group of people to play the role of rememberers. Since it has been established that literature has a specific part to play in constructing cultural memory, the role of the rememberer is often then the same as the role of the reader: ‘with respect to literary studies, the multiplicity of memories that establish literature as cultural memory could not exist without readers’ (Paris 2017: 106). Yet it is axiomatic of reader response theory that the role of the reader is to construct the literary work while reading it, thereby transforming an (unfinished) text into a (completed) work. When such an insight is applied to the construction of cultural memory, the role of the reader is thus to activate specific forms of memory rather than allow them to drop out of collective awareness. Or as Paris says drawing on Aleida Assmann, the specific part played by the reader of literary texts in the generation of cultural memory is to ‘keep the canon as an active form of remembering [...] instead of turning it into a passive literary archive’ (Paris 2017: 106).

This distinction between active and passive is at the heart of the dynamics of cultural memory. The implication of the theoretical developments in cultural memory studies that have been discussed in this chapter is that literature in general and autofiction in particular participate in those dynamics in highly specific ways. Not only is it possible to conceive of autofiction as making a shift from the individual plane to the social in exactly the way that cultural memory elevates individual memories onto the collective level, but also and more importantly this approach to autofiction proposes to treat individual rememberers as living archives, that is as people carrying embodied forms of knowledge and identity that they have either experienced directly or have received as a result of communicative memory through contact with one or more immediately preceding generations. When the forms of cultural memory embodied in those people become externalised as written texts they undergo the transition from archive to canon. In cases where this transition is made on behalf of oppressed minorities,

relating experiences or events that have previously been allowed to lapse out of the collective literary or historical consciousness of the dominant culture they have the effect of challenging historical forms of injustice, iniquity and inequality. In other words, the object of bringing cultural memory studies and autofiction together is not merely to narrate the past but to provide a new orientation on the dominant ideology of the present.