



The Dynamics of Memory: Geography and Language in John Phillip Santos's and Ilan Stavans's Memoirs

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Introduction

The memoir is a creative space of reflection that superimposes personal memory upon historical and national remembering. It is a literary genre that forces us to meditate on the function of amnesia and remembrance in the way we construct the narratives of our lives. An increasing number of Latino/a memoirs call our attention to the growing and vastly diverse Latin American communities in the United States. In particular, two recent memoirs by Latino writers, John Phillip Santos and Ilan Stavans, reveal how culture, religion, and society shape memory. Santos's *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation* (1999) seeks memory through place, foregrounding the history of reterritorialization, contemporary Mexican and Texan-Mexican geography, and the remembrance of the Mayan ruins and the Aztec empire. In contrast, Stavans's *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (2001) seeks remembrance through literary texts that link the histories of the Jews with Latin America, Europe, and the United States. The distinctions are shaped by the authors' personal relationship to both geography and language. Santos recalls his Mexican identity through the streets of San Antonio—land that was taken and reshaped by the United States. Stavans recalls his Jewish identity not through land, since Jewish land was not made official until 1948 with the establishment of Israel, but through stories told in different languages and in different countries. Both authors have a link to Mexico. Santos grew up in what was once Mexico and his family is Mexican, north and south of the border; and Stavans was born and raised in Mexico.

John Phillip Santos has traveled far and witnessed life and death throughout the world as a filmmaker, producer, journalist, and writer. His education includes a degree in philosophy and literature from the University of Notre Dame and a degree in English literature and language from Oxford University. He was the producer of broadcasts on culture and religion for CBS News. One project that stands out is the Emmy-nominated *From the AIDS Experience*. Part I of the two-part series, "Our Spirits to Heal," examined the role of spirituality in the lives of two people with AIDS. Part II explored AIDS in the African-American and Latino communities in New York City and Newark, New Jersey. Another noteworthy project Santos worked on in the same year (1987) is *Blood of Kings*, a video study of Mayan art and ritual. While these works may at first seem unrelated, they informed the memoir that Santos later sat down to write in 1994. In the AIDS project, a central theme is surviving an epidemic that wiped out entire communities, bringing shame to some families and forcing all to reconsider the implications of disease and death. In the Maya project, the focus is on revisiting a lost empire. In both cases traditional, Western modes of living and dying are challenged. What is left after one dies? What is remembered?

His questions stem from confronting death and dying throughout the world in different communities. Death shapes the scenes throughout *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation*. For example, Madrina asks repeatedly, "Y ya se murieron los Santos?" and the reply is, "S' Madrina, ya se murieron todos los Santos."¹¹ When death and the loss of an entire family are at stake, the question that initiates the author's journey into knowledge and self-creation is "Who are we. . . ? We may be latter-day Mexicanos, transplanted into another millennium in El Norte, but we are still connected to the old story, aren't we?" I am led to ask, "What story?" And to this musing, the author responds several lines later: "It sometimes seems as if Mexicans are to forgetting what the Jews are to remembering. We have made selective forgetting a sacramental obligation. Leave it all in the past, all that you were, and all that you could not be. There is pain enough in the present to go around. Some memories cannot be abandoned. Let the past reclaim all the rest, forever, and let stories come to their fitting end."

The fine line between forgetting and remembering haunts the author. Santos's statement about Mexicans forgetting and Jews remembering is modified by Ilan Stavans; for him, remembering is not always good. He explains, "I felt throughout my childhood that Mexican Jews never made themselves part of the environment. . . . Nostalgia, my father has a

disposition toward it, but I don't. I am not the least sentimental toward the Mexico of my past. Immigrants turn their place of origin into a frozen tableau. . . ." He offers insight into how memory can be alienating because the community freezes the country of origin in a past that no longer exists. Consequently, exile/migrant communities like his own in Mexico end up being isolated in the new country as well as severed from the country of origin and life as it has evolved there. Memory in such a case cannot be such a positive attribute, but rather a hindrance. Stavans compares his father's nostalgia with his own sense of reality. His reality is based on the here-and-now. For this reason, he adopts New York City as his real home. New York City is a place that prides itself on its ever-changing effervescence, perhaps truer to memory and its perpetual loss than any other cityscape.

Ilan Stavans, born in Mexico to Eastern European, Jewish immigrants, attended the Colegio Israelita de México where he received a secular Jewish education and learned Yiddish, loving "its cadence, its hallucinatory beat." In his memoir, he tells us that "Yiddish, for me, was truly the mother tongue, whereas Spanish, the street language, the one I most often used, was the father tongue." Early on in the text, Stavans makes us understand that language grounds his identity; but as we read on, we learn that it took travels far and wide, and readings in various languages, to confirm this connection. Consequently, we read a text that almost contradicts itself as he shares his passions for more than one language at different points in his life. Stavans's education includes a B.A. from the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, an M.A. from the Jewish Theological Seminary, and an M.A., an M. Phil., and a Ph.D. from Columbia University. His publication record is as extensive as it is diverse. His earlier scholarly and creative production includes *The Hispanic Condition* (1995) and *Growing Up Latino* (1993); and his most recent writings include *Conversations on Jewish Culture: Ilan Stavans and Hillel Halkin* and *Against Oblivion: Latin America and the Holocaust*. These selected titles underscore Stavans's three major areas of research and writing: Latin America, Latino/a culture, and Jewish history. His devotion to the text and remembering is rooted in his observance of Jewish tradition. He notes that:

Through the very process of remembering, the Jew swears loyalty to his ancestors and successors and inscribes himself in the flow of history: he is, inasmuch as he remembers who he is and where he is from. His obsession with the Bible, the testament of his promise to God, is therefore symbolic: the book contains the scenes of the past, and the key lies in periodic rereadings to keep the text alive. The synagogue is the only religious temple where the object of adoration is a text, a written document that affirms and confirms that the past is not a mere invention but divine and earthly truth deposited in history. ("Memory and Literature," 102)

Nonetheless, Stavans is very attuned to the continual sway of amnesia, even in Jewish culture. While both Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno admonished that amnesia is the malady of modern society, they could not do anything about the need to forget that affected many who escaped Hitler's systematic genocide. Stavans's memoir, like any other text of intellectual meditation, cannot escape the dialectics between amnesia and remembrance.

In the introduction of the edited volume *Acts of Memory*, Mieke Bal states that "*cultural memory* signifies that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one . . . cultural memory for better or for worse, links the past to the present and future." She continues, "The memorial presence of the past takes many forms and serves many purposes, ranging from conscious recall to un-reflected reemergence, from nostalgic longing for what is lost to polemical use of the past to reshape the present." Santos's and Stavans's are "acts of memory" that contest the erasure of Mexican history and Jewish connections in the geography, politics, and national imaginary of the United States and Latin America. Situating cultural memory as a link between the past, the present, and the future is one objective of the work of contemporary Latino/a memoirs that seek to illuminate a nebulous past shaped by migrations, displacement, and (in the case of the annexed territories, Texas and California) reterritorialization.

On memory

The study of memory, especially vital in global, technological culture, has a long history dating back to the Greeks. It is central to Plato's philosophy where he pondered the distinction between *mneme*, memory, and *anamnesis*, remembrance. A quick survey through different dictionaries reveals much about the culture and history of memory etymologically linking Latin, British, Gaelic, English, French, and Spanish idioms to remembrance, kindness, mourning, and longing. For example, in Gaelic, remembrance, *cuinhne*, comes from the Middle British *couff*, related to the Latin *menini*. Middle British *couff* is also the root of the Gaelic *caomh*, meaning tender and kind. The action of mourning also has a root in remembrance from the Sanskrit *Smer*, to remember, to long for. In Spanish, the word *morri-a* means to long for a home that has been left behind. It is employed mostly but not exclusively to longing for Galicia. Longing necessitates memory: What are we longing for? Can we remember accurately what we left behind? When we return to a land, does the present not seem to clash with the memories that were tucked away and regularly recalled in our minds? Ancient studies of memory posit it as a tool through which a place is recalled through images expressed through words.

From ancient times memory was a central topos for philosophers and learned men. The English scholar Frances A. Yates researched the early works on memory in her seminal text, *The Art of Memory* (1966). She pays special attention to the *Ad Herennium*, a textbook about the history of the art of memory written by an unknown teacher of rhetoric in Rome circa 86-82 B. C. E., which argues that memory is one of the five parts of rhetoric (*inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*,

pronuntiatio) fundamental to oration and debate. According to Yates, early texts of memory distinguish between natural memory (which originates in thought) and artificial memory (to memorize according to a strategy). Memory was a tool for the Greeks that linked place and description.

Yates's text is full of fascinating stories from antiquity. However, for the purposes of this essay, the most striking story Yates tells introduces the book. It is the story of the poet Simonides, who was chanting a lyric for the banquet of a nobleman of Thessaly named Scopas. In his panegyric he praised Scopas and the two gods, Castor and Pollux. Scopas was angry that he had to be one of three and not the sole recipient of praise. He told Simonides that he would pay for only one third of the panegyric and that the other two-thirds should be collected from Castor and Pollux. Just as this altercation was taking place, Simonides was told that two young men requested his attention outside the banquet hall. Simonides went out and found no one; at that instant the roof caved into the banquet room, killing everyone there. Castor and Pollux paid for their share by saving the poet's life. But that is not the moral of the story. When friends and family came to claim their dead, they could not do so because the bodies were so badly mangled. Simonides had memorized the exact place in which each person was seated. The families rescued their loved ones thanks to the poet's excellent memory of place. According to this story, orderliness is basic to memory, and memory is basic to the recuperation of orderliness (the families could recuperate their loved ones and mourn them appropriately). Yates's objective in telling us this story is to explain memory as tool and art. My purpose in telling this story is to note that it was a tragedy of lethal proportions that necessitated memory as an act of recovery.

Central to the ancient art of memory is order and repetition. Over the past five centuries this sense of order has been chronically overthrown with the advent of larger communities displaced from their lands and communal histories. Recuperation of a national or mythic past (Mayan empire, Mexico before U.S. expansionism), denunciation of past violence (dictatorships, genocides), attempts to make sense of traumatic experiences (wars, famine), territorial displacement (diaspora communities such as African Americans and Jews), and reterritorialization (Texas, Lower California, and the West Bank), have made the need for memory in the past two hundred years essential to the project of human continuation, survival, and understanding. As a matter of course, memory studies have become central to our analyses of representation in a complicated, contemporary global culture.

The literature and critique of these conflicts is rather extensive. Andreas Huyssen, for example, is particularly concerned with a need to think through national memory debates, see them as not only global but also as regional. He argues that while the content and context of many of the issues are site-specific, and while many of the theories call globalization to the fore of the debate, "globalization and the strong reassessment of respective national, regional, or local past will have to be thought together." Specifically, he explores the relationship between memory and forgetting:

But what if . . . the boom of memory were inevitably accompanied by a boom in forgetting? What if the relationship between memory and forgetting were actually being transformed under cultural pressures in which new information technologies, media politics, and fast-paced consumption are beginning to take their toll?

Huyssen's essay is concerned with memory in the age of technological reproduction where, he argues, many memories are artificially constructed and therefore more easily forgotten. In his book *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, he focuses on how and if the past will be remembered. He says, "the mode of memory is *recherché* rather than recuperation." Thus he juxtaposes natural generational forgetting to reliable representation: forgetting and memory are a given in the structure of representation. He poetically exposes a double problematic:

Twilight memories are both: generational memories on the wane due to the passing of time and the continuing speed of technological modernization, and memories reflect the twilight status of memory itself. Twilight is that moment of the day that foreshadows the night of forgetting, but that seems to slow time itself, in an in-between state in which the last light of the day may still play out its ultimate marvels.

Memory for Huyssen is as palpable and ephemeral as twilight. He points to the implications of memory for national and political changes such as the reunification of Germany; he interrogates the function of memory in a culture that has transformed the museum from a "mummifying institution" into a "life-enhancing" space. In particular, he calls for "thinking memory and amnesia together." I agree with him that the dialectic between memory and amnesia is one we must focus more attention on. In addition and in contrast, it is important to emphasize that the two also enter a dance of intertextuality and mutual exclusivity at different points for cultural, religious, and subjective reasons.

In Latin America, post-dictatorship memory is a topic of much contested debate. For example, "What happened during Pinochet's years in power?" "Who remembers those who disappeared during Argentina's dirty war?" Pinochet's arrest in Britain in 1998 highlights the division between the Chileans who remembered him as a good leader and those who wanted, or needed, to forget the terror he imposed on those who did not go into exile, disappear, or be executed. The tense relationship of remembering and forgetting after the plebiscite in 1988 and the democratic elections of 1989 led Chilean-American author Ariel Dorfman to write his play *Death and the Maiden* (1992). The play focuses on the feelings

of a woman who is visited by a stranger temporarily stranded near her house. She swears that he is one of the men who tortured her while she was in prison. But she cannot prove this because she was blindfolded during the sessions of rape and torture; she has only a voice to remember the identity of the torturer. Her husband wants to be fair; lacking proof of his wife's accusation, he generously offers the stranger accommodations for the night. The evening becomes a nightmare for the woman who recalls with chilling accuracy the torture she was subjected to. Eventually, she ties the man up and insists that he admit he did horrible things. He never admits anything. Was he really the torturer? Did her memory fail her? Did she need to accept that what happened was in the past? Can she ever accept that her torturers are free somewhere? By not remembering her past every day of her present, was she betraying her desire for justice, or was she allowing herself a present free of the memory of pain that would otherwise destroy her?

Examples of Latino Memoirs: Distinguishing Between Traumatic Memory and Constructive Memory

The memoir is a space where the dialectics of memory and amnesia are foregrounded most succinctly. In the United States in particular, memoirs link individuals to lost cultures and national histories. Memoirs serve as personal testaments that, for example, allow the Irish to remember their trajectories of hardship, sacrifice, migration, and adoption of a new nation. Memoirs such as those written by Elias Canetti and Primo Levi expose the ravages of the Holocaust, and do not allow us to forget the unspeakable and unthinkable horrors of war and genocide. As a genre in Latino/a culture, the memoir embodies a search for identity through fragments and for memory through loss.^[2] Each author engages in a distinct search for personal meaning through the act of writing the memories that he/she can recapture. In general, this search for meaning is necessitated by a melancholic condition produced through continual experiences of alienation during which loss, assimilation, and integration are negotiated to differing degrees but never totally overcome. In the past fifty years, Latino/a cultural production has worked toward rejecting exploitation, struggling for access to the benefits of the dominant society, and rejoicing (somewhat ambivalently) in the hybrid nature of "life on the hyphen,"^[3] in the melting pot, in the barrio, or in the borderlands. Strategically, we as members of growing Latino/a communities have needed to piece together an identity based on inherited national traditions from the Latin American countries that have shaped our cultural and linguistic circumstances. We need to cultivate the intercultural intersections that inform our lives within the different social spaces we occupy.

Such cultural intersections result in permutations of Latino/a identifiers.^[4] These permutations are created by losses that disrupt family narratives. For example, in *Hunger for Memory* (1982), Richard Rodríguez recalls that during his childhood, the first piece of his Mexican identity he had to abandon was his Spanish language. His parents, wanting only the best for their children and emphasizing education as a sure route into U.S. society, chose to speak only English in the household. During the 1950s, long before multiculturalism was in vogue, many parents insisted on denying their native language in order to enforce their children's assimilation; parents tried to protect their children from the ostracism they themselves were subjected to as a result of not speaking the national language of the United States. Assimilation in such instances was based on *strategic amnesia*: forget your language and your culture and, perhaps, your brown skin will be overlooked. *Strategic amnesia* meant to forget deliberately, to erase a part of the past so as not to be different from the status quo—the all-American families whose lives appear to be less disjointed by multiple cultures, languages, and memories. Education offered the path to this amnesia.

At one point, Rodríguez read Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* where he recognized himself in the description of the scholarship boy. Rodríguez found comfort in not being alone, in the realization that there are many other scholarship boys divided between two worlds—home and school, working-class status and upward mobility. Still, he felt alienated. He became angry with his parents for encouraging him toward classroom English, for pushing him away from the comfort zone that they themselves represented. Becoming a lettered man was painful, and he could not escape that pain. Yet, he states, "Those times I remembered the loss of my past with regret, I quickly reminded myself of all the things my teachers could give me. (They could make me an educated man) . . . I evaded nostalgia. Tried hard to forget. But one does not forget by trying to forget. One only remembers. I remembered too well that education had changed my family's life. I would not have become a scholarship boy had I not so often remembered." For Rodríguez, the determination to forget only emphasized the pain this *strategic amnesia* caused in him. This strategy to erase parts of his history failed. He was caught between the past that informed him and the possibility of the future that negated him. Even more problematic for him were his family's gendered Mexican traditional codes: men were not allowed to verbally reveal their emotions. "Men did not speak about their unease in moments of crisis or danger." He was trapped between two worlds, one that repressed his need for communication and one based on rhetoric and expression. He found himself divided between the macho man that showed no pain and the lettered man dedicated to rhetoric, persuasion, analysis, and writing. Eventually, he wrote *Days of Obligation* (1992), which he referred to as a conversation with his Mexican father. It can be read as a look backward through Mexican geography; it can be understood as his attempt to bridge the gap between the child who was Mexican and the man who worked so hard to sever that part of him in order to become an American man of letters.

In contrast to Rodríguez's individual journey as a scholarship boy divided between two worlds, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera* (1987) resists the narrative of *strategic amnesia*, consciously abandoning her cultural and family history in favor of *strategic memory*, creating a memory for border life in which many different cultural, linguistic, and historical elements clash and integrate to make a new reality. As a politically engaged lesbian Chicana feminist, Anzaldúa

cries out through poetry and essays for a Mestiza culture that recognizes the historical transculturation^[5] of the borderlands. She introduces her text with the following invitation: "Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our invitation to you—from the new mestizas." Anzaldúa's text, written five years after Rodr'guez's, challenges the scholarship boy. She points to the exploitation that annexation brought with it. Communities erased their pasts to fit in, go unnoticed, and have the opportunity to work for a future of their own. According to Anzaldúa, "the Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it." Anzaldúa resists the rigidly defined roles women are subjected to by family, church, and class. She writes: "For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother." But to resist these options she, like Rodr'guez, engages in severance from the geography that defines her:

To this day I'm not sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother, disengage from my family, *mi tierra, mi gente*, and all that picture stood for. I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me.

Unlike Rodr'guez, who tells himself to forget, Anzaldúa tells herself to remember. Her task is to recall, recreate, and break down the subject-object duality that tortures her. She does not want to abandon her past or her present, but she needs to resist the strictures of her culture in order to create a different kind of future for the borders. Although anger and resistance may be the initial emotions that take her on this journey, more than one section in the book reveals a deep sadness that she, like Rodr'guez, cannot extricate herself from. Anzaldúa's decision to turn to history, her own history, one that may not be found in history books, has brought her harsh criticism from the historians. Nonetheless, it makes a point: she can escape her anger and her melancholic condition if she can create a narrative that honors herself and her people. As a result her history must be dual, sensible, even glorious. Her path leads her to writing. She confesses that "writing is my whole life, it is my obsession." Writing is Anzaldúa's personal tool of cultural testimony. Although the politics of Rodr'guez's *Hunger of Memory* and Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* are radically different, they underscore the conflicts of border/Latino identity. For both of these writers, the tensions of identity make memory a central place of struggle and questioning.

Santos's Memory

For many, being Mexican in the United States entails assimilation and shame. Santos underscores these feelings growing up Mexican in San Antonio and becoming a Mexican-Texan-American adult. He tells us that:

To be a child in San Antonio, dark-skinned, with a Latino surname, to be "Spanish," was to be something other than poor, downtrodden, backward, and desolate, which is how Mexicans had been made to feel over our long history in Texas. Eventually, we took those feelings into the secret holds of our own hearts.

Remembering his childhood, Santos feels that it was not a bad thing to be Mexican, but with time he understands that he and his people internalized the labels and criticisms that continue to be waged against them on this side of the border. The Mexican-American community is intensely marked by loss, severance, and struggle. Although the territories were annexed, the people were not welcomed. Consequently, they were dis-membered from the body of land that they were a part of. Sadness was the most powerful resulting emotion. It is with this sadness that Santos writes his memoir, searching for a past to call his own, investigating the incidents that have silenced his family history, and seeking a narrative that would end the shame of generations.

Santos's memoir suggests that memory is an intangible thing. It is a mystery—a void defined by lack of knowledge, family secrets (things too terrible to remember or tell), and severance from a concrete community of origin. This intangibility holds true for many in the numerous Latino/a communities (Argentine-American, Chilean-American, Cuban-American, Dominican-American, Puerto Rican, Salvadoran-American, Mexican-American/Chicano, etc.). The memory that many Latinos/as cling to is a uniquely U.S. American one. Often, Latino/a lives are defined by experiences only in the United States because travel to the family land of origin is infrequent or non-existent. In some cases, the land of origin has been mutilated and reconstructed. This situation promotes fading language, multiple ethnic and racial affiliations, and continually evolving mythologies of a lost past. What have our forefathers failed to tell us? What have they forgotten? Can we recuperate any kind of "authentic" identity? Can we even try to think in terms of authenticity?

The concept of authenticity was precluded from much of the Latin American literature of the 1940s and 1950s. For example, 1953's *Los pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*) by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier underscores the impossibility of return, and thus the fallacy of an untouched place of origin. The protagonist of the novel takes a voyage to the center of the Amazon seeking pure nature and the origins of mankind, far from the civilization that has shaped him. During his trip, he falls in love and has a child with an indigenous woman. At a certain point, he must return to his real life but cannot take his family with him right away, so he promises to come back for them. Unfortunately, he loses the path that can take him back to the heart of the jungle. He can never retrieve his steps, never return to the heart of mother earth. His landing in

the jungle already symbolized the loss of an "authentic" state of living. The planes flying over the jungle and the impending proximity of civilization had already begun to erode the core of the jungle's "purity," reproducing the very act of colonization that occurred five centuries earlier. Furthermore, the native woman is at once a site of origin (mother earth/fertile soil) and violation (woman who can be used, like the Malinche who was forced to betray her people to help the conquistador). *The Lost Steps* is about more than the lost path that made his return impossible; rather, the lost steps represent nature already adulterated by civilization.

In a similar manner, few of the Latino/a communities in the United States can re-trace their steps to a memory of origin. We should meditate on how the hyperbolic performance of Latino/a identity is a meta-act that masks the sadness resulting from the loss of a memory of origin. We Latinos/as need a past to propel our present, to identify with, so as not to get lost in the miasma of imagined communities and U.S. ethnic and racial hierarchies. We must negotiate between the sadness of a lost past and the need for a present grounded in a strong personal, communal, and national history; particularly, we must accept loss as part of our history. In order for this to occur, we need to cultivate a space of investigation, invention, and evolution that both recovers our lost history and allows for it to be lost. Literature responds to this need and offers us what Myriam Chancey has called a "safe space."

But before entering this safe space of literature, what propels us to engage in the process? Missing an official history is synonymous with not having meaning, which leaves a void in our memories. Latino/a history is stolen (as in the case of the annexed territories), colonized (as in the case of Puerto Rico), and reconfigured (as in the case of immigrants who fled their nations because of cold-war violence they could not endure in their own homes, such as those from Salvador and Nicaragua). To survive the passage of the migrations, our united but differing Latino/a communities must forget many parts of traditional culture and time. By forgetting, meaning is denied; anger would be an appropriate response to this theft (because foreclosure of meaning is a theft of history). Melancholia is a potential consequence. Who are we? How do we fit into discourses of the United States? How do we negotiate family stories from Latin America and national histories between Latin America and the United States? A deep unnameable sadness lurks within every Latino/a writer.

Santos's resolution to write is driven by his search for answers. Structurally, the plot of his memoir revolves around his grandfather's mysterious death, which brought shame and despair to its members (especially the author's father and uncle). His death is also synonymous with other deaths, other mysteries of conquests, faith, and traversed geographies. Santos includes a photograph of the 1939 newspaper article which reads: "*Se trata de Juan Santos de 49 a-os. Su cuerpo fue encontrado flotando muy cerca de la calle Simpson. Es el cuarto suicidio que ocurre en pocos d'as del a-o actual /* Regarding Juan Santos, 49 years old: His body was found floating very close to Simpson Street. It is the fourth suicide to occur in several days of the present year." The headlines give a succinct verdict on the tragedy. But as the author delves into the details, he notices that his grandfather's lungs did not have water in them. Therefore, he could not have drowned. Furthermore, the water where the body was found was too shallow for someone to drown in under normal circumstances. There were no bruises, no marks of fighting or resisting an aggressor. The grandfather had been suffering a deep depression and had talked about "going away."

Santos investigated the death. He sought out the policeman who had tried (according to the newspaper article) to resuscitate Juan Santos in vain. This gentleman was living in a nursing home, and his memory did not register this particular life, of the many lives he must have seen move onto another dimension during his long and honorable career. The author also tried to talk to his uncle, whose eyes watered at the mention of the event from many decades ago. His cousin quickly took the elderly man by the arm and led him away. The uncle was simply too old and too frail to recall such a traumatic memory. Then there was Santos's father, who did not want to remember. Eventually, his mother told him what she knew in the hushed confines of an empty room. John Phillip Santos concludes that, besides the trauma of the event, the family felt shame. And it is this shame that the memoir will dissolve by unearthing the true events and exposing the depth of the loss. Santos states:

Once I became aware of the mystery of Juan José's death, it felt as if the source of the centripetal pull toward the past inside of me had been revealed, as if all of the stories that had been told of the family's past were only meant to distract us from this one memory. After my grandfather's death in 1939, the Santos and the Garcia families maintained their cult of secrets and forgetting around his demise. It was not a conspiracy. It was more a collective intuition. When you seek to forget something, as opposed to gradually forgetting, what is the difference between forgetting and remembering? Whether we remember or forget, we are conjuring around the same ineffable quantity. First we reveal it. *A suicide. A murder. An ambiguous death in a river.* Then we erase it.

Still, the more I was aware of that absence, and all that it touched, the unanswered questions, the rumors, the contradictions—the more it seemed to conjure images and stories out of a mysterious, unnameable place in the past no one had ever spoken of.

This lack of discussion, that piques the author's curiosity and leads him to journey into the nebulous domain of the unknown, forces him to reconcile himself with other losses also shrouded in mystery, forever irretrievable. What happened to the Nahuatl who seemed to abandon great structures and disappear into thin air? How could the legacy of the Aztec

empire be recovered from the fires of its conquest by the Spanish? How could the rural conditions that had once been the source of Mexican and Texan nourishment and, later, their sufferings, be revisited? A new ending was being sketched: the Santos family was dying and neither he nor his brother (at least at the time that this text went into print) had children of their own to continue the family name and its memory.

The end of a family lineage is compared to the loss of the San Antonio of the author's youth. In the 1960s, the house his entire family lived in was torn down to make way for the McAlister Freeway. The urban renewal movement of the period endorsed official and systematic repression of the Mexican past. The downtown Mexican markets and food stands were pushed out, as well as the old-fashioned Mexican presence. The model city of the future did not include Mexican history. Santos's mother's family was part of the emerging Mexican-American bourgeoisie who wanted to be both modern and Mexican. Although Santos's Uncle Lico was initially involved in the prospect of shaping a model city for the future, he eventually found himself caught between two worlds: the familiar Mexican barrio and the anonymous new urban space. The San Antonio of his childhood recollections gave way to a new urban metropolis where his great aunt, once a distinguished *Se-ora* of the neighborhood, became invisible amid the new bustling and growing crowds. Over and over again, Santos seems to be telling us—with every detail of the changes to his old hometown—that everything is lost. Being both Mexican and urban, as his mother's family had hoped, was impossible.

Throughout his text, Santos juxtaposes assimilation and modernization in U.S. culture with memory and the recuperation of ancestral history. For example, he tells us that "American culture" takes root in San Antonio during the 1960s when he is learning to speak and write English properly, "listening to the Beatles in [his] father's pickup truck, mourning JFK, and watching *The Beverly Hillbillies* and going to Disneyland." These experiences informed "the secret sciences of the American way of life, the streets of San Antonio were an umbilical tether to a past that otherwise seemed to be disintegrating, memory by memory."

The disintegration of the old ways of the Mexican family, and the loss of the geography of a Mexican-identified San Antonio from his youth, is compounded by continuing losses. While he was in England doing research in the Codrington Library of the Bodleian, Santos received word from Texas that his ninety-five-year-old great-uncle Frank had died in his sleep. While he was searching for knowledge in the dusty books of chronicles that had been scripted for posterity, the ancient texts of Coahuila, he lost a direct link to his increasingly more distant past and family history. In 1994, Santos returned to arrange his notes and write his memoir in San Antonio, described as "the ruin city of my birth, where the ancestors are buried, and where the family's past has settled over creation in the dust of a hundred years." Even more tragically, Santos's father was killed suddenly in a car crash as his memoir was being completed for publication. The book is ultimately a *testimonio* of the family's movement in time. It is a "testimony of the idea of self as a kind of mosaic of intuition, memory, forgetting, and vision."⁶¹

Santos's memoir is also his haven. He writes, "In the *Inframundo*, the underworld, all that has been forgotten still lives. Nothing is lost. All remembrance is redeemed from oblivion." His memoir is his gift to his family, his letters of redemption from the shame that forced his grandfather's death into silence. Writing memory is synonymous with seeking continuity in life in order to forestall the eventual and inevitable death and transformation of all things. *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation* is an ode to compassion in our short and inexplicable lives to the place that we occupy in a world that is global and solitary.

Stavans's Remembering

Ilan Stavans's work posits an antithesis to sadness, by arguing for remembrance as the only route to the continuation of a culture and, consequently, its future. His interest in memory and remembrance has informed numerous writings, including critical articles and a novella, "The Invention of Memory." His novella is about a Czech Jew who travels through Europe and who has control of the mnemonic tool to the point that he has almost-total recall. This character, Stavchansky, is diagnosed with a rare degenerative disease that will eventually deprive him of his brilliant memory; consequently, he decides to return to his mother's birthplace to "lose his memory." Stavans, whose family name is Stavchansky, proposes the possibility of Mexico as being a place of forgetting. Does he suggest that Jewish history is forgotten in Mexico? Does he imply that it is safer, or easier, to forget in Latin America, a land of many diaspora Jews, remembering to the point of isolation and marginalization? Or is it a coincidence that his fictional character who bears his family name should return to Mexico, the country the author grew up in, to forget?

"Memory and Literature," first published in *Cuentistas Jud'os* in 1994, may have been his initial answer to his own 1991 story. In it he refers to readings that have inspired him to write further on memory; he mentions his novella and he cites the work of the Columbia University professor Hayim Yerushalmi who argues that remembrance is central to the identity of the Jewish people. Stavans synthesizes Yerushalmi's point as follows:

The Jewish people . . . has preoccupied itself with preserving the collective memory since time immemorial; this appears to be its prime directive: to remember and to be remembered. In fact, the collective identity is linked to this duty of remembering, of stopping time from erasing the details of the past.

Stavans continues in his essay, "We remember that which we forget." Reminiscent of Rodr'guez and Santos, forgetting

creeps into Stavans's argument; however, his final objective is to establish the crucial importance of remembering for literary history, for theological studies, and for the Jewish community. While forgetting and remembering shape a fundamental tension in Jewish studies, forgetting is equivalent to sin, lies, and paganism, and remembering is the only perfect path, Israel's duty. *Zakhor*, "to remember," is the only way to maintain history; according to Yerushalmi, "the Jewish imperative to participate in an infinite line of memories . . . contains in its heart a duality that is impossible to resolve." This loyalty to remember the ancestors also precludes the sadness necessitated in mourning the ancestors. Memory is thus a tool that never abandons one to loneliness and melancholia; it is a constructive device.

Later in the essay, Stavans argues that a Jew is not born but made. What is remembered is recalled, created and recreated; it has little to do with each person born Jewish and more to do with the Jewish ancestors who tell their stories of Jewish history. "The individual does not remember personal scenes but foreign ones; and more than remember, he invents them." Stavans asserts that imagination and memory are closely linked mental faculties. Consequently, to remember is to re-create, thus adapting the narratives of the past to the realities of the present. To this end, Stavans compares Greek memory and remembrance to Jewish memory and remembrance, arguing that while they both "fight to save memory from being forgotten," the Greeks focus on the truth, objectivity, whereas the Jews allow themselves to engage myth, subjectivity. With this essay Stavans makes some cultural and historical observations about memory, but offers no real answers. That may be impossible; he agrees with Yerushalmi, "Memory is the most fragile and problematic of our faculties."

Stavans's memoir, focused on the attainment of knowledge, oscillates between the inevitable forgetting forged by time and the structured remembering written by the will. The section in his memoir, "The Rise and Fall of Yiddish," which at first seems to be based on the demise of the Yiddish language, actually offers a much more complex intertext, a presentation of his grandmother Bobbe Bela's memoir. Her memoir exposes, among other issues, the frailty of memory and the importance of selective family narrative.

Bobbe Bela's history, as Stavans points out, is based on survival and stubbornness. For her, survival depended on forgetting the unpleasant things: "*más vale olvido que pena* / better to forget than to suffer." And the stubbornness lay in her ability to foreclose entire languages that defined her in the past, as well as erasing distressing people from her family history. She spoke Polish, Russian, Yiddish, and a bit of Hebrew. Upon her arrival in Mexico she abandoned Polish and Russian, never spoke them again, adopted Spanish, and learned some broken English. She did not want to recall the past, in particular the deaths. Three of Bela's five siblings perished under the Nazis; several of her nieces and nephews were killed in Auschwitz; her mother died and is buried in Pultusk; and almost everyone else ended up in the gas chambers. According to Stavans, "history, in her view, was a cruel monster ready to obliterate everything in its path." It makes sense that her immigration also meant a search for a new identity and new possibilities of life, family, and happiness. Memory of the horrors from her youth had to be erased; remembrance of her native Yiddish and her religion had to give her strength.

Her diary/memoir talked about the different children, their jobs, their successes and, to a lesser degree, their failures. Stavans tells us that her memoir is pervaded by an unspeakable fear, even though the only time she mentions pain and tragedy is when her husband Zeyde Srulek died. The absence of words to describe her murdered siblings, the power of the Nazis, or the memory of her parents produces a void in story and memory. This could be trauma, but after so many years it has most likely become a way of locking herself, in fear and in silence, into a conclusive amnesia.

Stavans asks why his grandmother wrote *Mi diario: un peque-o relato* / *My diary: A brief tale*, in Spanish. He admits that he had been speaking of his intention to write a memoir of his own, and he supposes that she wanted her version of history to be considered in his telling of his own tale. The thirty-seven pages, typewritten by Stavans's mother, speaks of her youth, her love for her husband, and discloses the plots of the novels she would have written if she had had the education. Her memoir, or at least what Stavans has chosen to share of her memoir, highlights her literary aspirations and her identity as a voracious reader. Stavans questions her motives for this small diary:

Memoirs are subjective, manipulative, driven by our desire to improve our prospects in human memory, and one as rudimentary as Bela's is no exception. Her flattering self-portrait is in sharp contrast with the domineering, exploitative, conservative lady she has always been, at least within family circles.

His critique of her motives for writing her life story is somewhat harsh, and leads me to question his relationship to the production of his own memoir. Is Stavans divulging his objective for writing *his* memoir? Does he want to convince his readers, and perhaps himself, that he comes from a genetic lineage predisposed to literature and languages? An earlier chapter describes his father as an excellent actor, one who could remember everything. Does this heritage also signal Stavans's mnemonic abilities? Does his memoir seek memory, not through relatives and stories of death and violence, but through reading, writing, and their place in his personal and professional development?

Stavans's memoir confirms his *raison d'être*, not only to write but also to accept himself as a Yiddish- and Hebrew-speaking, Mexican-bred, Spanish-speaking, New York, American public intellectual. His memoir reflects his obsession with great literature and his quest to be a part of the great literature of the world in any language, even on borrowed words.

Depression for him is not incited by the deaths of his ancestors, but rather by the thought of not writing. His own death once concerned him; he did not know where he would be buried. Place, geography, is too erratic for him, for his family history where different relatives are buried in different countries. "Death is the ultimate equalizer. Nothing of us remains, except memory. And memory—our memory, once we depart—doesn't belong to us anymore but to tradition." He confesses his greatest fear, "To be left to oblivion—is there a worse ignominy?" Language becomes his tool of continuity. He tells us emphatically:

Yes, literature was the answer—My Promised Land, an authentic home, and a portable one at that, which I was able to carry around with me.

I want to be about the languages I bestow upon myself—or, rather, the languages that chose me—and how they define or deform who I am.

In the end, we learn that Bobbe Bela has become senile. Her "memory is empty" and she cannot recognize anyone. She remembers one name, Ilan; she repeatedly asks for Ilan from Warsaw. Time and geography have become indecipherable.

Stavans's last chapter, "The Lettered Man," describes a leisurely meeting he has with his close friend Richard Rodr'guez. A revealing reconstruction of their conversation confirms Stavans's complicated relationship to both memory and geography. Stavans says he left Mexico and never looked back. Rodr'guez replies that the Mexico of his memory is a lie. He warns him to be careful because he is a lie too. Everything changes; everything has changed. His memory is an artificial construction. To be Mexican-American, or Jewish-Mexican-American, not only means to remember a lost past, but also to forge an imaginary geography; returning over and over again would, of course, change that imaginary place. But Stavans is not worried about geography; his focus is on language, and stories can do anything. His freedom lies not in accepting, forgiving, and letting go (as for Santos), but rather, in knowing that forgetting is a natural eventuality.

Conclusion

John Phillip Santos situates Latino/a memory in the desire for knowledge where abandoned memory is retrieved from the haze of mysteries, of family secrets, cultural shame, and individual guilt. He identifies a melancholic condition that affects him personally, seeks to recover his family and cultural history, and then accepts the losses that time imposes on all history. Santos reminds us that even though the lands (now Texas) had been "Mexican for nearly three centuries—Texas had been taken over by los Americanos in 1836. . . ." Thus, "after moving freely north and south for generations, the Santos family was left on the north bank of this vanishing memory—*nafragios*—shipwrecked beyond the border. No one now remembered when Texas was Mexico, was Nueva Espa-a, was wilderness before the Europeans came." The images conjured by this second quote—*nafragios* and wilderness—draw out the history of annexed communities. Similar to immigrants, members of such communities seek to forget the painful losses in order to more effectively integrate themselves into the new political structures that surround them, and thus cultivate amnesia. Unlike immigrants, however, they have a deeply engraved memory of the land; therefore, forgetting becomes synonymous with abandonment, stagnation, and betrayal. This split between the need to forget and a constant remembering creates a deep—and often undiagnosed—melancholia. Consequently, the sadness must be named, the pilfered histories must be recovered from erasure, and the losses must be accepted in order to move toward the future. Santos engages with this process of healing through his memoir. He delves into the multiple losses, questions the mysteries, and seeks atonement. The author concludes, "Eventually, for the Santos, there were no more places of origin, just the setting out, just the going forth into the new territory, new time."

Stavans's memoir shows how the Jewish diaspora intersects with the stories of Mexican and Mexican-American history. Not through a claim on land, but rather, through a claim on language and stories, Stavans creates the possibility of Jewish-Mexican-American cultural continuity. His memoir introduces the dimension of Jewish history in Latino/a culture. Stavans says the following:

We remember that which we forget . . . for this reason, imagination and memory are mental faculties that are closely linked: to remember is to recreate. Remembering is not a return to the past but the adaptation of a past event to the circumstances of the present; it is a reorganization and the giving of new meaning to what was lost.

His position on memory and its role in the human psyche seems to contrast sharply to Santos's. Stavans's construction of history through creative memory seems calculating and cold; but as Stavans has demonstrated through Bobbe Bela's memoir, constructed memory is yet one more function of forgetting and remembering that allows individuals and communities to survive their pasts. In effect, both Santos and Stavans expose the need to be in the present, at peace with the past and hopeful about the future.

NOTES

1. "And have the Saints/Santos family died?" "Yes, Godmother, all of the Saints/family have died." All translations are mine unless otherwise stated. In this case I have chosen to emphasize the wordplay the author engages in. Santos is the family name, but it also means the saints. In Spanish, the meaning is, all goodness, as well as all of the family members have passed away.☞

2. Recent memoirs include Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*, Ariel Dorfman's *Heading South, Looking North*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, Richard Rodríguez's *Hunger of Memory*, Pablo Medina's *Exiled Memories*, Virgil Suárez's *Spared Angola*, and Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's *Next Year in Cuba*.☞

3. I refer to Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's *Life on the Hyphen*, in which he argues that Cuban-Americans of his generation are "one-and-a-halfers." That is, their childhoods are in Cuba but their adulthoods and livelihoods are in the United States. That makes them one Cuban and one-half American.☞

4. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) exposes the hybridity of language and history that have shaped Chicano culture, and socio-linguist Ana Celia Zentella's *Growing Up Bilingual* (1997) points to the multiple influences that have created Puerto Rican barrio culture and language, such as African American Vernacular English, Puerto Rican Colloquial Spanish, Standard English, Standard Spanish, and Spanglish. Within very different fields Anzaldúa and Zentella share a goal that consists of recognizing the disintegration of the concept of a "pure history" or a "pure language," thus legitimizing new language formulations and historical versions. ☞

5. Here I adopt Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's use of the word. He claims that transculturation refers to cultures that interact with each other to the point that they change, interadopting different elements of each, without negating one or the other. ☞

6. Santos's words during a telephone interview with the author, October, 2001☞

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a Mexican soap opera star; his grandmother, who arrived in Mexico from Eastern Europe in 1929 and wrote her own autobiography. Masterfully weaving personal reminiscences with a provocative investigation into language acquisition and cultural code switching, *On Borrowed Words* is a compelling exploration of Stavans's search for his place in the world. ...more. [Get A Copy. Kindle Store.](#) The LA Review of Books published an essay by Ilan Stavans in which the writer and translator reminisces about his *Memoir of Language: On Borrowed Words*. A memoir, Stavans wryly observes, is “driven by our desire to improve our prospects in human memory,” and he found Bobbe Bela’s diario, as she called it, no exception. Stavans’s attitude toward memory is an ambivalent one. Despite the tricks memory can play, and despite the temptation to bend it in the service of the self that one wants to project, it is the faculty that rescues past experience from oblivion. The author has good reason to dread oblivion. Stavans’s choice of language for his most personal writing (he also produces criticism and other essays in Spanish), while less surprising than his grandmother’s, is one earned through a process of seemingly aimless drifting about most of the continents of the world and reflecting on the merits of the available tongues. Ilan Stavans is the author of numerous short stories and more than 15 works of nonfiction, including *Quixote: The Novel and the World* and *Resurrecting Hebrew*. His many awards and honors include an Emmy nomination, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Pablo Neruda Medal,... [More about Ilan Stavans.](#)

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