Community of Memories

TXT Magazine
Twelfth Issue 'Community of Memories'
Published in 2025

TXT Magazine is edited and produced by students of the Book and Digital Media Studies Master Program at Leiden University, and published by Academic Press Leiden.

This edition was made possible by the KB, the national library of the Netherlands.

ISBN: 978-9074372275
ISSN: 2405-6146

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TXT Magazine XII

TXT
MAGAZINE

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Editor's Note

We have always told stories.
To ourselves.
To each other.
To the world...

We have used script to convey information, to communicate in desperation, to learn, or for the simple gesture of making each other laugh. And the book – vague as its definition can be – is both a tool and a treasure full of yellowed paper, old and new book smells, shared fears, and shared smiles. A powerful symbol of connection and memory.

For this edition of TXT, as always managed by the current cohort of Book and Digital Media MA students at Leiden University, we have chosen to connect two themes very dear to us into a new one:

Community

There are vibrant communities around the book and adjacent media and we believe that it is important to highlight these connections, especially in times that feel like they aim to tear us apart.

Memory

As any booklover can attest, books hold memories. They conjure emotions and connect us with our old selves, as well as to many bookish souls before and next to us. Memories can be personal or broad, they can be erased and created and often, they are connected to written words and books.

Honoured, as we feel, to carry on the legacy of this very magazine, we have added our own spin, while connecting to those who have done this master's programme before us. We hope you will enjoy the broad variety of topics collected in this issue – offering a fascinating blend of ideas and interpretations of our theme. These include scholarly articles as well as creative pieces to represent a small fraction of the diversity books can inspire.

We thank our sponsor, the KB, for making this edition possible, and our supervising professor Dr. Peter Verhaar, for supporting us and lending us his expertise. We also extend out heartfelt gratitude to the entire team – fellow students whose creativity and enthusiasm for this project brough this issue to life.

And of course we thank you, the reader – who has picked up this book, be it in printed or digital form. On behalf of the whole team, welcome to the twelfth edition of TXT magazine:

Community of Memories

~Lena Ryzhova & Celine Kock~

"Preserving the Past and Serving the Present": An Interview with Maaike Napolitano from the KB

Interview by Lena Ryzhova & Nikki Van Balkom
Article by Carla Campos Casanova

Maaike Napolitano began her career at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (Henceforth KB) in The Hague, as an intern in the Special Collections department, where she focused on the localisation and dating of medieval manuscript fragments—specifically maculature.

Her academic background in history, with a specialisation in medieval book history, codicology, and bibliography, informed this early work and shaped her long-standing connection to the material aspects of book culture. Although she initially hoped to remain in the manuscripts department, the absence of available positions at the time led her to explore a wide range of roles within the institution. Over the past two decades, she has held more than a dozen different positions across the KB and different universities, including coordinator, team leader, project employer on European initiatives, and project leader.

One of her most significant roles was as product owner and coordinator of *Delpher*, a digital platform that offers access to millions of digitised Dutch newspapers, books, and periodicals. She led the project for seven years, managing both the technical and front end teams. After seven years, she felt she had pretty much done everything around Delpher and needed a new challenge. She was appointed head of the Marketing and Education Department where she gained experience as a manager by, among other things, implementing two reorganisations.

While she acknowledges how much she learned from this job, and enjoyed the projects and colleagues, she openly reflects that her personal passion lies elsewhere.

In November last year, Napolitano assumed her current role as head of the Collection Expertise department (*Collectiekennis*). In this position, she manages a team of approximately eighteen curators and collection specialists responsible for the care, interpretation, and contextualisation of a broad range of collections, from medieval manuscripts to digital born books and websites.

Though her daily responsibilities are now managerial, she underscores that the physical presence of the collection continues to be of emotional and intellectual importance. She describes the experience of handling a manuscript as fundamentally different from engaging with its digitised surrogates— "touching a manuscript is feeling history," she remarked. While she no longer reads Latin fluently or conducts codicological research herself, she values moments when colleagues share newly acquired materials, offering her brief but meaningful tactile encounters with the historical record. For Napolitano, these moments are the highlights of her work and make her proud to be part of the KB.

"What meaning do you give to the phrase 'Community of Memories'?" we asked Maaike Napolitano. She acknowledged the ambiguity of the term, noting that its interpretation can vary depending on context. For her, however, the phrase evokes a physical space, specifically, the library itself. "With 122 kilometres of books housed in this building, I feel the presence of history here," she said. "It's a place where knowledge and memory are collected and preserved. In that sense, the KB functions as a community of memory."

But she also pointed to forms of memory that are spatially

present yet materially absent. "A community of memories can also be something less visible," she added, referring to websites as geheugenvannederland.nl, where digital heritage on different themes has been brought together digitally. Or the Waalsdorpervlakte, a site in the Dutch dunes where, during the Second World War, members of the resistance were executed. "There's nothing to see really, just dunes, birds, and plants. But I know what happened there, and when I'm there, it feels like history is present. It's that feeling."

In that sense, Napolitano suggested that the idea of a Community of Memories can be physically rooted in archives, or it can just exist in the silent weight of a historical site. And, while she is enthusiastic about the upcoming move of its physical collection to a high-tech preservation facility near Delft, which is certainly a big step forward, our interviewee also acknowledges that the feeling of that huge amount of books under your feet will soon change.

This sense of presence, whether felt in the quiet stacks of the KB or in the open air of a historical site, led Napolitano to reflect on what makes her work so deeply meaningful. When asked to reflect on a particularly memorable moment in her work, Napolitano emphasized the profound emotional connection that handling historical artifacts can evoke. She described the unique experience of physically touching medieval manuscripts (or any other historical object), contrasting it with the common practice of studying digital copies or viewing protected museum exhibits.

"When you touch the vellum or the paper, you're really in contact with someone from eight or nine hundred years ago," she explained. For her, the tactile encounter creates an unparalleled closeness to history that no screen can replicate. Napolitano likewise shared a more personal story about a seemingly common

book, a States Bible from the late nineteenth century, that wound up in her office simply because someone wanted to discard it. Though it was neither unique nor expensive in the usual sense, she retained it as a concrete reminder of the emotional resonance that physical objects may evoke. “It looks good. I have to say,” she reflected.

Building and maintaining a Community of Memories is no simple task, as the work of organizing the KB’s vast collections makes clear. As Napolitano explained, most contemporary books arrive at the library through a deposit system. Dutch publishers send one copy — digital or physical — of each publication to the KB, so in many cases no selection is needed, the books simply arrive, forming a living record of the present. But looking to the past is more complicated.

Filling historical gaps in the collection demands careful thought. Librarians must weigh historical importance, physical condition, and budget, all while staying open to the unexpected—a rare manuscript suddenly up for auction, for example, or a donation that sheds light on an overlooked story. It is a process shaped by both strategy and serendipity, revealing just how much care goes into preserving what might otherwise be lost.

Deciding what to remove from the KB’s collections is no less complex than choosing what to keep. As Napolitano noted, historians are naturally inclined to preserve, which makes the process of deaccessioning especially difficult. She described the ethical and logistical dilemmas that arise, particularly when dealing with large sets of duplicates, like the extensive collection of Donald Duck comics, where evaluating condition and completeness can take months.

Any decision to let go of materials also requires careful coordination with other institutions in the Dutch academic

library network (UKB), to ensure that no unique copy is lost in the process.

In the end, Napolitano emphasized the constant struggle between historical preservation, realistic restrictions of time and resources, and the necessity for effective administration. In a world where millions of goods require care and maintenance, sometimes "talking is more expensive than just leaving it as it is." This pragmatic approach reflects the delicate balance required to keep the KB as a living, breathing community of memories, with each item—whether a prized document or a small Bible—having its place in the common repository of history.

As the digital landscape continues to evolve, so does the KB's strategy for collection and preservation with its upcoming transition to a state-of-the-art, robot-managed facility. "No one will even be allowed to enter the storage facility," Maaike Napolitano explained. "It's better for the books. 99% of the collection will actually benefit from this."

The futuristic design reflects a larger transformation in how physical collections are preserved and accessed. With automation providing perfect storage conditions, the KB focuses diligently on improving digital accessibility. And, as Napolitano noted, metadata is more crucial than ever. "You can't find anything without it." While in the past, a conservator might visually identify materials by walking through the stacks, "Now you have to search in the catalogue and all the information on the items has to be there, in the metadata," she said.

Digitisation plays a central role in this evolution. Major projects, such as the extensive medieval manuscript initiative and Metamorfoze, a preservation programme funded by the Dutch government, seek to make rare items accessible while preserving their originals. However, the process is both time-consuming and

meticulous. "You still have to photograph every page, name every folder. It's fast, but also slow," Napolitano admitted.

When asked how the KB approaches controversial or problematic materials, Napolitano was clear: "We don't change the past." Instead, the KB takes responsibility for preserving even the most uncomfortable parts of history: some materials, like illegal publications, are stored securely and remain inaccessible, even to staff, while others are made available with context, often accompanied by disclaimers or metadata changes to reflect contemporary understanding without altering original titles.

Curation, she stressed, does not mean censorship. The library receives regular complaints, especially around books tied to sensitive cultural topics like Zwarte Piet, but its stance remains firm. "Yes, we have the book. No, you don't have to read it," Napolitano said. "It's history (...) and it existed, and someone has to preserve it to provide a fair representation of the past."

This commitment extends to the KB's newspaper archive, including politically charged publications from World War II. While certain controversial titles now display a content warning, Napolitano expressed concern that these disclaimers could suggest passive support of other, less flagged materials; still, she remains open-minded. "Perhaps in 20 years, our perspective will change," she admitted.

From digitization to difficult histories, the KB navigates an intricate landscape where memory, technology, and ethical stewardship interact. What emerges is a philosophy based on transparency and trust: trust in future generations to interpret the past responsibly, and faith that preservation, in all its complexities, is more significant than suppression.

But what does this particular outlook look like in practice? It takes the form of reading rooms where medieval manuscripts

are treated with care but remain accessible. It includes digitization projects that prioritize public access over exclusivity. It also surfaces in internal conversations between departments committed to the dual responsibility of the library: preserving the past and serving the present.

"Sometimes it is a very tricky contradiction," Napolitano noted, and her perspective is guided by a spirit of openness. "For preservation, it is best to keep publications in a perfect warehouse and never take them out again. But even if we know that we will cause minimal damage to the publication by opening it, we have to let people have access to our collections. Otherwise, what's the point of preserving them?".

This morality extends beyond formats and into questions of cultural presence. Although the KB is not formally responsible for promoting Dutch culture or curating national narratives, it frequently supports cultural memory in subtle, meaningful ways, and while these initiatives are not part of a fixed editorial strategy, they reveal a sensitivity to the ways in which memory and identity are shaped.

Importantly, the KB does not seek to impose interpretations. "We have everything," Napolitano said. "We can't highlight everything. But we can help people find what they need. That's our job." At the heart of this approach is a deep respect for the reader. The KB fosters 'meningsvorming,' a Dutch term that describes the act of forming meaning for oneself. There is no perfect English translation, but it implies a personal, interpretative process of engaging with information. By preserving diverse, and at times conflicting, materials, the KB upholds the principle that individuals should have the freedom to form their own understanding of the past.

"Even if you don't agree with something, it should still be preserved," Napolitano added. "You need all the sources to form your own opinion and that's our purpose."

This is not merely about access to information, but about the conditions that make meaningful engagement with history possible. The KB does not dictate memory, instead, it provides the space for memory to unfold, to be questioned, and to be shared. In doing so, the KB contributes to what might best be described as a Community of Memories: a collective, evolving landscape in which individuals, cultures, and generations participate.

It is a community that does not require consensus but thrives on coexistence, critical inquiry, and mutual respect. By preserving the past without rewriting it, the KB invites future readers to take part in a conversation that is never closed. Such a duty of care confirms a modest and enduring reality: memory does not belong to institutions, but to people, it is in this shared custodianship where the library's most lasting value resides.

The Classical Text as a Memory Site: Active Readings and Uses of a Consecrated Textual Monument

By Domianos Tzoupis

Canonical and classical texts are often considered monuments by communities of readers. Canons are selections that bestow certain texts the status of 'exemplary', 'genre defining' or 'exceptional', thus preserving a certain kind of tradition. As for classics, they constitute the foundations of canons but, in addition, are singularized and considered to have "potential meaning" or "surplus" of meanings, which enables them to survive criticism and convey meanings applicable to diverse contexts (Jauss 21; Mukherjee)[1].

Naturally, such texts become "memory sites", namely "common points of reference within memory communities", providing "a placeholder for the exchange and transfer of memories among contemporaries and across generations" (Rigney 345). Such texts, as Rigney argues, can preserve memories, stabilize and frame certain experiences in memorable ways, and become objects of discussion, recollection, and commemoration (350–52).

Scholarly debates around the notion of 'classicalness' generally stress this quality of *monumentality*: classics shape, establish, and disseminate resilient discourses and models of life across time. Thus, they help people interpret experiences, produce knowledge, and set boundaries and standards regarding diverse issues (indicatively: Alexander; Altieri; Moore; Lukes). In this regard,

1 Consider the difference between two canonical philosophical texts: Plato's Ion and the Republic. The former is simply canonical, as it belongs to the genre-defining Platonic dialogues and sets an example of how to write philosophy. The latter, however, is both canonical and classical: it has survived time and criticism, attained a consecrated status, and decisively shaped key philosophical discourses diachronically.

classics are celebrated for their "*foundationality*" (Turner 18): they lay the foundations on which subsequent generations can draw. Or, to recall Charles Taylor, texts like the classics are part of traditions that help people make "qualitative distinctions" and decide whether some action, thought, desire, or mode of living is significant and worthwhile (17–20).

The classics' role as points of reference for communities is at the heart of my research. I studied, in particular, Greek university students' engagement with classical texts from the Greek antiquity, exploring how these texts can be read by contemporaries as heritage of the past, addressing their present and their personal and social considerations (Tzoupis). I focused on classics from the 5-4th century BCE, produced in the context of what has become known as 'classical Athens': I centered on these texts as exemplary, telling cases of the broader 'genre' of classics.

My main research interest concerned the specific 'accomplishment' of texts, namely, how "readers go about 'doing reading'" in specific situations and contexts (McHoul 114). I investigated how readers encounter a specific text: how they engage with its 'content', how they receive, adapt, and use it in their current localities/settings. Such questions invite reflection on the place of past monuments (here, intangible textual heritage) in present conditions, on the dialectics of "persistence and malleability" in their reception (Rigney 349), and on the dynamics of "commemoration", which involves ***both*** preserving the past ***and*** repurposing it (Zelizer).

Natalie Heinich, a prominent sociologist of evaluation, has effectively delineated the boundaries of such discussion. In particular, engaging with a cultural object's meaning and value involves engagement with: (1) the object's properties, (2) the subject's dispositions, and (3) the surrounding institutional and

sociocultural framework – an argument reminiscent of Gadamer's famous hermeneutic principle regarding the "fusion" of different horizons in the process of interpretation/understanding, namely the fusion of the original context of the text, the context of historical developments/traditions, and the context of the present moment of interpretation (Gadamer 305, 367).

Regarding the reception of classical literature, scholars have emphasized different aspects of such a 'model'. Scholars like Bloom or Adler have focused on textual properties, highlighting respectively the texts' "aesthetic strength" (mastery of language, complexity of communicated knowledge), or their "substance" and meaningful content. Others, like Guillory, Bourdieu, or Leypoldt, have stressed the power of institutions and the influence of socio-cultural conditions in consecrating certain texts as authoritative monuments.

Finally, others have brought forth subjective factors and dispositions. For instance, many have paid attention to the inherent *presentism* in receiving the past, which involves actively/creatively engaging with textual properties (i.e., framing the text, or decontextualizing and purifying it) with the intention to address current preoccupations, needs or desires (indicatively: Lowenthal; Solomon; Inglis and Thorpe; Armitage). Moreover, some have remarked the *affective* side of engaging with texts that have become classics (whether ancient or more recent): readers can be emotionally impacted and attracted by their authority and quasi-sacred status, and thus have the motivation to appropriate the "classic" to serve their distinct purposes (Rose; McElduff).

My research engages with the aforementioned literature, focusing more on the empirical reality of reading. By centering on the micro-practices and nuances of reading, I wish to modify the above models of reading, by arguing –and showing through

examples– that reading is practiced simultaneously in a ***dual manner***: (1) individuals consistently invoke and appeal to the text's properties (i.e., like form/language, content and structures, which 'prescribe' possible meanings), the discourses and knowledge it makes available, and its perceived objective universal value, and undeniable authority; (2) individuals practice active readings that push textual boundaries, and creatively reshape and repurpose them, decontextualizing and recontextualizing the text to adapt it to the concerns of contemporary communities.

Thus, the past is *dramatically changed* and reappropriated, while also remaining *intact* as an authoritative resource. It is in this regard that ancient texts are received as memory sites: while community members invoke the '***objective***' value and monumentality of texts, they simultaneously appropriate them as they will, actively and creatively, to navigate present realities.

Cases of Commemoration

Two different readings of a classic are discussed. The data are part of my aforementioned study on how university students in Greece encounter, interpret, and attach meaning to an exemplary ancient Greek text. I focused on Plato's allegory of the Cave from the *Republic*, which discusses the education of philosophers. The text tells the allegorical story of a prisoner living inside a cave, who is eventually liberated, exits the darkness, attains knowledge of the outside world, and decides to return to the dark cave to liberate others (only to be resisted and killed).

Data were collected through two rounds of interviews I had with participants, and through solicited diaries.[2] The two readers

2 All data were processed and stored in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018 in the UK. I secured the informed consent (written or oral) of all participants. I employed either pseudonyms or only the first names of participants (as is the case in this paper), depending on their personal choice. All data were collected in Greek, and what is presented here has been translated by me.

discussed have different degrees of knowledge of ancient texts. The aim is to indicate common patterns in how diverse members of the same community commemorate textual monuments.

The case of contemporary Greek readers and their relation to their consecrated (intangible) heritage is theoretically relevant for understanding the uses of heritage, particularly since classical antiquity has been the cornerstone of Greek national identity. Ever since the 19th century, Greek historiography has established a dominant narrative of cultural continuity between antiquity, Byzantium, and modern Greece (Paparrigopoulos), while antiquity has been accepted as an ideal worth striving for (Kouzelis 123ff.; Herzfeld, 'Towards an Ethnographic Phenomenology of the Greek Spirit'; Herzfeld, *Anthropology through the Looking-Glass*).

Drawing on past democratic ethos

The first case is Anastasis, an undergraduate student of International and European Studies. Anastasis is an avid reader of literary, philosophical, and scholarly texts. In our first interview, he emphatically stressed his love for reading. Reading has been a source of intellectual cultivation and emotional support: it has helped him in creative writing; it is the main source of information on various topics (e.g., philosophy, social sciences); and it is a means of self-care and psychological support in difficult times.

Anastasis particularly emphasized his admiration for and attachment to ancient Greek classical texts, which he first encountered at school. During the first interview, Anastasis described ancient Greek texts as the "*basis*" for diverse aspects of life and contemporary achievements, including science, scientific methodology, and philosophical debates. He went on by celebrating the unique contributions of ancient Greece and their absolute relevance today:

> In every field there's something ancient Greeks engaged with in some way or the other […]! To understand how much contemporary societies have progressed, we need to recognize how we've ended up here in the first place. And also recognize that, maybe, what the ancients achieved, they achieved it with means that might be missing today. […] What's missing from the Western World is the right education about these texts, the right education so that common citizens can function properly within a democratic state, learn and apply their rights, and improve society more directly.

Anastasis' attitude echoed generalized discourses that idealize antiquity (see Kouzelis 123ff.) and that have been disseminated institutionally, particularly through education. He underlined antiquity's uniqueness and sacredness, noting how crucial ancient cultural production has been for the West and its self-understanding as a progressed society. Anastasis understood progress mainly as the development of democratic politics and the recognition and securement of human rights.

From that perspective, he notably mentioned that something of antiquity's accomplishments, values, and mentality "*might be missing today*". As he explained, he meant the spirit of progressive and democratic culture conveyed by the ancient classics, which is crucial for democratic education and progress in contemporary societies that are in crisis.

In that sense, Anastasis' discourse about antiquity reflected his affective attachment to it: a strong trust and attraction towards consecrated cultural objects that provide a feeling of fullness and meaningful experience (to recall Leypoldt 74–76), and a "desire for singularity" (to use Rose's term), which implies striving for

something consecrated and legitimate in order to appropriate it for present purposes.

Anastasis' reading of the Cave allegory conformed to his attitude towards antiquity in general. He has been familiar with the Cave since high school, since the text was part of his preparation for university entrance examinations. Thus, he is an informed reader with knowledge of the original text, its co-text, historical context, and the available scholarly interpretations. Against this background, Anastasis' general impression of the allegory may appear somewhat surprising.

Anastasis took the central textual narrative of the prisoner's liberation and ascent towards the light to be about education and proper cultivation. He maintained that it conveys universal truths about the quest for truth and its applications to civic life. He said in particular:

> One of the main themes […] is that a person should never lose sight of truth; they should grasp what is or isn't true. We have *failed* in that! […] And while we, Greeks, want to say that our culture is so rich, the basis of so many things, in reality we haven't managed to stay faithful to this authority [of antiquity] at all.[…] And the reason this text is timeless is because many of the problems it raises largely concern Western culture. We see evidence of this in American politics. […] if we look at what Republicans promote and the authoritarian measures they take in some states, we can get what Plato tried to warn us about: the dangers concerning democratic culture, the dangers concerning people's search for what is really true. We still face the same challenges, the same problems.

Evidently, Anastasis finds that the Cave communicates a certain model ideal for life. Therefore, he accepts that the text has a certain 'content', a 'substance', making available to readers a specific cultural grammar to understand their own lives (Adler; Altieri).

Additionally, he applies this grammar to contemporary socio-political preoccupations: he refers to a democratic crisis that involves the rise of conservatism and authoritarianism, the suppression of human rights, and the confusion regarding what truly constitutes an ideal, healthy civic life.

The Platonic narrative becomes particularly relevant for Greek reality as it reveals the lack of progress in Greek politics. This is what Anastasis later describes as a lack of liberalism, tolerance, respect for human rights (e.g., the LGBTQ+ community) and secularism. Simultaneously, the Platonic text shines as an authoritative cultural resource (cf. "*this authority*"), which can be inspiring for overcoming today's socio-political crisis. However, this transposition of the text's cultural grammar from its original context to contemporary reality is striking. It is not only because Anastasis decontextualizes a text of the past to speak about the present, but also because he radically transforms and repurposes it in the process.

Anastasis knew well the context of the allegory in the *Republic* and the debate about philosopher-kings and the shortcomings of Athenian democracy. Nevertheless, he seemed confident enough to bypass elements of elitism, authoritarianism, and anti-democratic sentiment, and isolate the textual narrative of liberation and enlightenment to re-appropriate it for present considerations.

Therefore, in Anastasis' interpretation there clearly coexist, as already argued in the introduction, (1) the invocation of the ***objective textual content***, (2) ***socially established discourses***

around idealized antiquity (e.g., democracy), and (3) the ***personal concern*** for community civic life that justifies the ***active appropriation*** of a textual monument.

Criticizing and adapting the text

The second case is that of Anna. Anna is a postgraduate student of pharmacy, without previous experience of the Cave. However, like Anastasis, she reads avidly and has diverse and eclectic reading tastes. In our first interview, Anna said she prefers works that invite reflection and discussions on serious social matters. They have "*something to offer*" content-wise, or have been considered "*significant*" and have become part of people's cultural life and conversations. This is why she likes classical texts, modern and ancient.

Regarding her general relationship with antiquity, Anna has cultivated a strong intellectual and emotional bond with it. She mentioned she enjoyed learning ancient Greek in school, participated in cultural activities related to antiquity (e.g., a drama club that staged ancient plays), and confessed that encountering ancient monuments elicits a sense of cultural continuity with the past. Anna also invoked ancient texts' monumentality, authority, and consecrated status.

As she said, these works must be valuable since they have survived for long and have been consecrated by people who "*know better*", who have expert knowledge. The fact that ancient classics have been legitimized strongly indicates that they are valuable and useful in contemporary life, both as resources for national identity and as cultural grammar to make sense of situations in everyday life. However, it soon became clear that Anna **did not revere** antiquity as the ideal past and roots of the Greek nation.

"*It's annoying we've placed antiquity on a pedestal and consider it perfect*", she mentioned. I figured then that Anna would probably adopt a complex approach to the Platonic allegory: she would show respect but also refrain from accepting its ideas and values uncritically. Our subsequent discussion confirmed my expectations. Anna said she liked the allegory and considered it classical, a valuable and profound text that challenges readers. Yet she also voiced objections, for example regarding its elitism.

Anna found that the allegory discusses the individuals' struggle to be enlightened and their subsequent encounter with the collective. As she explained, her interpretation resulted from an intense and reflective reading process during which she tried to follow her "*instinct*" and only talked about what she read. She noted she had searched for what other people had said (e.g., articles, video-commentaries) but eventually tried to "*forget*" about them and focus on the text and the associations it elicited. Anna presented herself as *simultaneously* attentive to the text, aware of the diverse available intertexts, but also very keen to express herself and her spontaneous and unmediated experience.

She was a reader attentive to textual affordances but also eager to appropriate the text and consider its resonance with her own life. This attitude allowed her to interpret the allegory as a vessel of certain grammars/narratives (thus, having specific content), and simultaneously to associate these grammars/narratives/content with her own context and afterwards make value judgments. For example, Anna could argue that the text exhibits an idealized version of someone who managed to attain the Good, the absolute, and then reflect on that narrative/model of life from the present vantage point, considering its implications and consequences.

Perhaps the most indicative part of Anna's active interpretation was how she responded to the narrative of the enlightened

individual's return to the darkness and their killing by other prisoners. That part of the narrative reminded Anna of a recent hate crime in Greece, when LGBTQ+ activist Zak Costopoulos/ Zackie Oh was murdered by an angry mob in Athens in 2018. Anna said she was inspired by the allegory's story and the idea of the Other who is killed because they pose a threat to existing structures, beliefs, and morality:

> The text reminded me of this a lot. That the [enlightened] person could be someone different from others, in whatever respect, and that the others acted against that person, because of what they had learnt.

Anna drew on the narrative of the enlightened individual who found truth or knowledge and is different in that regard from others. Despite feeling that the narrative has elitist overtones (for Anna, the narrative reflects people who "*become self-righteous and consider themselves superior*"), she transposed it to the present and turned it into a narrative about any kind of unacceptable difference within a community. Interestingly, despite insisting she was attentive to textual affordances and openly voicing criticisms of the text's elitism, Anna appropriated the text to express herself and address contemporary socio-political preoccupations in Greece.

The classical text elicited strong affective responses and reorientated the reader towards situations from one's personal and social experience that are *vaguely* analogous to situations and discourses in the text – a mode of reading succinctly captured by Lahire (93). The shocking, cruel, and strange situation in the Cave called forth structurally similar cases (e.g., the other/us binary opposition) from contemporary socio-political contexts of Greece, in which violence, cruelty, and othering take place.

Despite the text seeming a bit strange or even problematic (due to elitism), it could still help us understand and comment on life in times of social and moral crisis. In this, recognizing the text's classicalness was important. Anna repeatedly used the phrase "*who am I to judge?*". She felt she could not make informed value judgments about the Cave and thus refrained from any substantial criticism. This probably explained why she carefully navigated cases that made her uncomfortable (like elitism) and eventually repurposed them.

Moreover, her attitude towards the Cave was informed by her feeling that the text helped her reflect more substantively on certain issues. When I provocatively asked whether texts like the Cave are ultimately passé, she argued that they have historical significance: they provide the "*foundations upon which modern societies have been built*"; our own "*moral code comes from them*". Ultimately, for Anna, it is through (and against) classics like the allegory that Greeks like her can see and relate to their own (socio-political) situations.

Conclusion

These cases illuminate a certain typology of reading, a certain possibility of receiving classical textual monuments. Contemporary readers still treat the classics as sources conveying certain authoritative discourses, certain grammars, and models of life: they refer to objective properties, substance, and content, and in doing so, they appeal to some universal, idealized, and consecrated value (even when criticizing the text).

However, they also creatively and reflectively appropriate the text's content and value: they decontextualize, radically transform, and imaginatively adapt it to contemporary concerns, and address socio-political issues (in this case, crises in civic life). This duality

permits us to shed light on particular uses of heritage in the midst of communities during their unsettled lives and crises.

We accommodate for both subjective and idiosyncratic uses of a textual monument that comment upon the life and state of the community, and the invocation of its objective value, its legitimacy and sacredness as the basis/warrant for such subjective/idiosyncratic uses.

Acknowledgments

This research could not have been done without the constructive and thought-provoking observations and feedback by Angélica Thumala-Olave and Liz Stanley. Moreover, the project has received funding from the A.G. Leventis Foundation.

About the Author

Damianos Tzoupis has recently completed his doctoral studies in Socio-Cultural Studies at the University of Edinburgh and now works as a tutor at the university. Additionally, he studied Greek Language, Literature and Classics, with a special interest in Platonic philosophy. His research interests involve classics and reception, cultural sociology and the sociology of reading, cultural heritage and Greek nationalism.

For his doctoral research, he studied the ways Greek university students read, experience, appropriate and use ancient Greek texts in the contexts of contemporary personal and social life in a crisis-inflicted Greece. His dissertation (Dwelling in/on Plato's Cave: Active Readings of a Classical Allegory and its Appropriations for Personal and Social Reflection, 2024) argues for a distinct type of active and reflective reading, which on the one hand respects and reproduces the established legitimacy and singularity of ancient classics, and on the other appropriates, adapts and imaginatively transforms the texts themselves.

He has published several papers centred on practices of reading ancient texts, on the idea and impacts of classicalness and the connections between consecrated heritage and national identity.

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"Classics *lay the foundation on which subsequent generations can draw.*"

Damianos Tzoupis


春蚕到死
陵郡士

Words in Clay: Inscribed Ceramics as Vessels of Memory and Community in Imperial China

by Miriam Merlini

In imperial China, inscriptions on ceramic vessels—whether etched, painted, or moulded—played a key role in society by conveying information, asserting authority, and enabling cultural expression.

From the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1050 BCE) onwards, inscriptions on oracle bones and bronze vessels recorded divinations and significant events, ("Shang Dynasty") providing valuable insights into ancient practices while underscoring the written word's crucial function in legitimising power and preserving history. As Chinese civilization evolved, inscriptions became increasingly prevalent across different media, including stone steles, paintings, and ceramics.[1] Chinese ceramics have long been valued for their aesthetic quality, technical mastery, and cultural significance.

Beyond their decorative or functional purposes, ceramics often carried profound meaning through their forms, colors, motifs, and, crucially, their inscriptions. This paper examines the evolving role of these inscribed works of art, considering their function in preserving and transmitting cultural memory. Due to the broad nature of this topic, the study focuses on key examples, acknowledging that much remains to be uncovered. In gathering and interpreting the inscriptions discussed, digital resources were

1 In this essay, I use "ceramics" as a broad, general term that refers to a wide range of fired clay objects, including porcelain, stoneware, earthenware, and celadon.

essential for understanding the historical context and significance of the ceramics examined.

Inscriptions as vessels of memory in imperial China: an overview

In imperial China, ceramic vessels bearing inscriptions—etched, painted, or moulded—embody a dynamic interplay where text and material culture merge to create objects of profound artistic and historical significance (Zhang 224-227).

Whether a simple mark of authorship, a poetic verse, or a formal dedication, these texts establish a tangible link between the object, and the individuals, communities, and historical moments that they gave life to. They often provide vital contextual details—names of patrons or artisans, places, and even specific dates—transforming ceramics into portraits of the societies that produced them, revealing not only the technical mastery behind their creation but also the cultural, political, and spiritual worlds they inhabited.

This cultural significance can be found in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), a period that witnessed the production of some of the most celebrated porcelains in history. For example, the David Vases (Figure 1) are masterpieces of both artistic and documentary importance.

Their delicate blue-and-white surfaces, adorned with intricate decorations and dragon motifs, are further elevated by rare and historically significant inscriptions encircling their necks:

> Zhang Wenjin, from Jingtang community, Dejiao village, Shuncheng township, Yushan county, Xinzhou circuit, a disciple of the Holy Gods, is pleased to offer a set comprising one incense burner and a pair of flower vases to General Hu Jingyi at the Original Palace in Xingyuan,

> as a prayer for the protection and blessing of the whole family and for the peace of his sons and daughters. Offered on an auspicious day in the 4th month, 11th Year of the Zhizheng reign. ("The David Vases")

Dated 1351, these inscriptions are the earliest known on blue-and-white porcelain, and records the dedication of the vases to a Daoist temple in Xingyuan (modern-day Wuyuan County) by a man named Zhang Wenjin. The inscriptions serve as crucial evidence that blue-and-white porcelain production was already well-established in Jingdezhen—China's most renowned porcelain center—by the mid-14th century.

Figure 1: "David-vases", blue and white porcelain, height: 63.80 cm, 1351, Jingdezhen kilns. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London.

Beyond their historical importance, the texts also highlight the cultural and religious role of such objects. The act of offering these vases, along with the prayer for the protection of the family and peace for the children, emphasizes the spiritual purpose behind these objects. Additionally, the vases themselves, masterfully crafted and adorned with powerful symbols like dragons, reflect the integration of artistic expression with religious and cultural beliefs.

Another example of this interplay between text, artistry, and devotion is a stoneware jar dated 823 CE (Figures 2 and 3), bearing a deeply personal inscription:

> In the third year of the Changqing period, the Buddhist believer Bo Sidu respectfully made this vessel as an offering to the Great Buddha ("Jar").

The presence of an explicit date and a named maker makes it an exceptionally rare artefact, providing a glimpse into the personal and spiritual motivations of its creator. Placed within sacred spaces as offerings, these kinds of vessels became silent witnesses to devotion, reinforcing the profound relationship between material culture and religious life in Chinese history.

Similarly, dedications and personal inscriptions can commemorate special occasions and even more practical information, thereby embedding the ceramics with layers of meaning that reflect both individual lives and societal values. An expression of this is the presence of sentences that can be translated as "A bottle of good grape wine"(Figure 4) ("Bottle with inscription") or "while eating" (Davison 23), and the frequent use of auspicious Chinese characters—such as "happiness", "longevity", "wealth", and "rectitude" (Figure 5)—which imbued ceramics with positive connotations and well-wishes.

Figure 2 and 3: Stoneware jar with underglaze painting, height: 235 mm, 823, Changsha kilns.

© The Trustees of the British Museum, London.

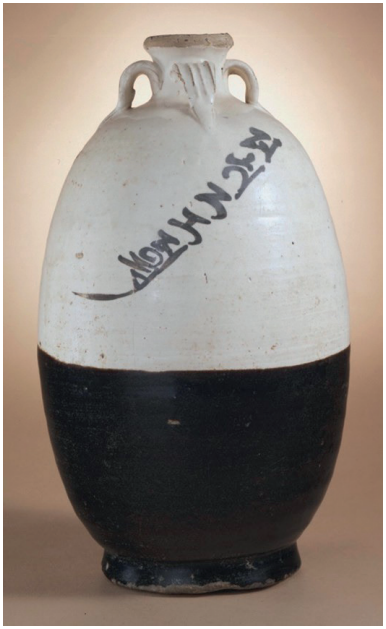

Figure 4: Stoneware bottle with Phags-pa (a square script used for writing Mongolian between 1269 and 1368) inscription meaning "a bottle of good grape wine", height: 26.67 cm, Yuan Dynasty, Cizhou kilns.

© The Trustees of the British Museum, London.

Figure 5: Stoneware celadon adorned with the "longevity" character (shou) imprinted in its central medallion, diam. 17.9 cm, XV century, Longquan kilns.

© Baur Foundation, Geneva. In Crick, Monique. Chinese Trade Ceramics for South-East Asia from the 1st to the 17th Century: Collection of Ambassador and Mrs Charles Müller. Fondation Baur, 2010.

Figure 6: Headrest moulded in the form of a reclining girl, stoneware, length: 28.5 cm, 1115-1234, Cizhou kilns. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London.

Sometimes, ceramics also feature delicate inscriptions, such as the phrase "The wind rustles flowers under a snow-white moon" ("Pillow"), painted on a Cizhou-type ceramic headrest from the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), shaped like a reclining girl (Figure 6).

More than simple decoration, these poems expressed romantic ideals and aesthetic reflection, capturing the fleeting beauty of nature and love. Such sentiments deeply resonated with the literati, for whom artistic and literary pursuits were markers of cultural identity. In fact, scholarly culture played a pivotal role in shaping both the artistic and intellectual landscape, particularly during the Song dynasty (960–1279), when supportive policies and a booming market encouraged the rise of new social classes like merchants and the gentry (Von Glahn 213-240). As a result, ceramic production flourished and diversified, catering to a wide range of tastes and economic means.[2]

At this point, it is evident that inscriptions on ceramics have always served as powerful markers of identity, also enabling artisans, workshops, and patrons to assert their presence and legacy. For example, ceramics could bear phrases such as "the ceramics made by the Zheng family are the best in the world", (Wang and Mei 98-103) not only reflecting the pride of the commissioner but also offering insights into regional styles, family traditions, and the affiliations of specific workshops. These textual elements transformed ceramics into statements of craftsmanship, lineage, and artistic reputation too.

A remarkable example of this practice is another Cizhou-type glazed stoneware pillow from the Northern Song dynasty, dated to 1071 (Figure 7). The central inscription, "everlasting peace in family and state", conveys a wish for stability and harmony.

2 The Song period can thus be considered one of the most significant eras of ceramic development in Chinese history. For further information see: Guy, J (2003) 186; Lu, Y (1979) 94; Heng, D (2009) 152-173

Further inscriptions on the pillow add layers of historical context. One records the exact date of decoration: "decorated on the nineteenth day of the third month of the fourth year of Xining (1071 AD)."

The other "pillow of the Chao family, originally from Yedi, permanently recorded" links the object to a specific family, reinforcing the role of ceramics as personal heirlooms and commemorative artefacts ("Inscribed Pillow"). The presence of such inscriptions elevates ceramics beyond their functional purpose, turning them into vessels of memory.

Figure 7: Inscribed stoneware pillow, width: 19 cm, height: 13 cm, 1071, Cizhou kilns.
© The Trustees of the British Museum, London.

The politics of ceramics: the written world as tool of imperial power

Apart from the topics discussed thus far, inscriptions on Chinese ceramics also had political significance, serving as a powerful tool to reinforce imperial legitimacy and cultural heritage. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the imperial court played a leading role in artistic patronage and the shaping of aesthetic tastes (Merlini 39-42). Porcelain pieces produced in Jingdezhen often bore inscriptions celebrating imperial patronage, with the function of legitimising Ming rule.

One of the most notable manifestations of this practice was the use of imperial marks. Reign marks on porcelains, initially serving to assign production periods and designate imperial use, underwent a significant transformation in Chinese ceramic production. They evolved into powerful symbols of imperial authority, property, and assured quality, effectively functioning as early forms of branding.

This shift from a strict regulatory tool for quality control and tax payment to a trusted emblem of value and origin highlights the changing role of inscriptions in Chinese material culture. The visual semiotics of these reign marks often imitated the form of an official seal or stamp, drawing a clear parallel with the potent sign of individual authority and ownership that a personal signature or stamp held in the modern world.

These imperially marked wares, often of the highest standard, also played a role in diplomatic exchanges, being bestowed upon select honored subjects of the empire and given to tributary states like Korea and Japan, eventually reaching Middle East and Europe. This dual function reflects both the state's ideals of control and the evolving dynamics of commercialization and prestige during the Ming era (Schaefer 239-265).

The practice of inscribing ceramics with these kinds of marks, predates the Ming dynasty. Marks like the character '*guan*' (meaning 'official') appeared as early as the late Tang dynasty and were traditionally thought to indicate governmental or ceremonial use.

However, these inscriptions were neither strictly regulated nor consistently literal. Terms like '*guan*' were often copied by smaller workshops, especially for pieces made for the open market. Excavations have uncovered *guan*-marked ceramics not only from Tang contexts, but also from the Liao (907–1125), Five Dynasties (907–960), and Northern Song periods, including tombs and temples (Krahl 44-53). This widespread presence of such copied marks challenges assumptions about their 'official' status, especially since similar marks have been found on ceramics from kilns with no clear governmental ties. (Krahl 44-53)

Despite this ambiguity, these inscriptions provide valuable insights into the social and economic functions of ceramics. They highlight the intersection of status, commerce, and artistic tradition, revealing how textual markings were used not only to denote authenticity or imperial prestige but also as a means of marketing and emulation.

The Mongols consistently demonstrated a keen interest in art too, often with the evident aim of legitimising their rule. This led to the introduction of new themes and subjects that reflected the multicultural nature of the Yuan empire (indicatively: Merlini; Vainker; Crick; Krahl).

Through early forms of oversight, elements of Tibetan Buddhism and Middle Eastern traditions were incorporated into Chinese ceramics. Objects bearing unidentified scripts, likely used for sacred Sanskrit texts, and Mongolian or Arabic calligraphies became quite common, highlighting the diverse

cultural influences at play (Teller 36-37).

It was in this context that *Shufu* ceramics emerged. At the beginning of the 14th century, ceramicists refined a new white glaze known as luanbai (Wood 60-61), with pieces often bearing the characters "*shu*" (meaning "central") and "*fu*" (meaning "palace"). Research by Rose Kerr and others (Gerritsen 241-273) suggests that these inscriptions referred to the Ministry of Military Affairs ("*Shumi Yuan*"), as historical documents like the Yuandian zhang and Tongzhi tiaoge frequently pair these two characters as an informal abbreviation. Another inscription, "*tai*" ("great, grand") and "*xi*" ("happiness, joy"), may instead be linked to the "*Taixi Zongyin Yuan*", the office for overseeing ceremonies and ancestral rites (Gerritsen 241-273).

These connections led scholars to view *Shufu* wares as "official" objects associated with the Mongol court. However, the relationship between the Yuan government and *luanbai* production remains a matter of debate. Anne Gerritsen's analysis suggests that *Shufu* wares were not diplomatic gifts nor reserved for high-ranking officials, but likely commissioned for practical uses by government offices, as the inscriptions imply (Gerritsen).

Despite their bureaucratic ties, the exceptional craftsmanship made these porcelains highly sought after across the empire and beyond. Some pieces reached Safavid Persia, the Ottoman Empire, Southeast Asian courts, and Buddhist temples in Japan (Gerritsen 241-273). Several hypotheses emerge from this evidence. Firstly, the Yuan court may not have prioritized porcelain commissions. Secondly, inscriptions may reflect specific governmental orders rather than an imperial production system.

Finally, high export volumes indicate strong external demand. Although luanbai porcelains did not necessarily hold high status

at court, versions both with and without inscriptions[3] were widely traded along Southeast Asian maritime routes, as confirmed by discoveries like the Sinan (c. 1323, Korea)[4] and the Temasek (mid-14th century, Singapore) shipwrecks.[5]

Shufu porcelains thus served as vessels of both memory and identity. Their inscriptions embedded them within the bureaucratic world of the Yuan dynasty, while their circulation reshaped their meanings in new social, political, and ritual contexts. Whether handled by merchants, officials, or religious figures, they functioned as tangible remnants of imperial administration, and key agents of artistic and technological exchange.

Their widespread dispersal, from shipwrecks to distant courts, attests not only to their commercial appeal but also to their enduring role in shaping and preserving cultural identities across time and space.

When discussing imperial power and inscriptions, it is impossible not to mention the Qianlong Emperor (1736–1795) of the Qing dynasty (1636–1911). Deeply engaged with the intellectual heritage of the Chinese tradition, he collected ancient wares and often inscribed them with his own poetic compositions. Through the addition of his verses, Qianlong embedded these artefacts within a broader cultural discourse, aligning them with the ideals of the literati tradition while simultaneously asserting the imperial scholarship and the emperor's role as a learned patron of the arts.

His intervention was not merely antiquarian. It actively wove these artefacts into a broader imperial discourse on virtue,

3 *Luanbai* porcelains without inscriptions began to be exported primarily from 1324, when the empire prohibited the export of pieces bearing imperial marks. For further information see: Crick, M (2020) 153; Gerritsen, A (2012) 241-273.

4 For further information see: Gunn, G (2011); Fan, J., Li, H (2020) 1-14; Brown, R.M. (2004) 40-55; Crick, M (2020) 219.

5 For further information see: FLECKER Michael, "The Temasek Wreck (mid-14th Century), Singapore: Preliminary Report", in *Temasek Working Paper* series, N. 4, 2022, pp. 23-30.

governance, and cultural memory, embedding his own legacy into China's scholarly tradition.

Cross-cultural dialogues: the role of Chinese Ceramics in global trade and cultural identity

The inscriptions on Chinese ceramics are powerful symbols of the cultural exchanges that shaped global trade networks, especially with the Islamic world, Southeast Asia, and Europe. They provide tangible evidence of how cross-cultural interactions influenced ceramic production and consumption. The wide circulation of Chinese ceramics across these regions not only fueled economic growth but also sparked artistic and intellectual exchanges, leading to the incorporation of foreign motifs and languages into inscribed wares.

The presence of Arabic inscriptions is one of the most beautiful examples of this phenomenon (Figure 8). As early as the Tang dynasty, maritime trade with the Middle East along the Silk Road encouraged the integration of Islamic artistic elements into Chinese ceramics.

Figure 8: Changsha ware with graphical calligraphy of "Allah", Tang dynasty (618-907).
© In HE Renke et al., "Comparative Historical Study of Changsha kiln Ware: Design for Persian Islamic need", in International Design Journal, Vol. 5, Issue 3, 2015, pp. 1031-1038.

These wares became key commodities, valued not only for their economic worth but also as reflections of China's artistic traditions and cultural identity (Merlini 9-23). The Belitung shipwreck (c. 830 CE), which contained over 60,000 Changsha wares, bears witness to the long history of Sino-Islamic artistic and commercial exchanges.[6]

By the Yuan period, the integration of Arabic script on ceramics became not just a stylistic flourish, but a powerful symbol of the era's cross-cultural vibrancy. This was an empire where the vast Mongol Khanates, stretching into the Middle East, fostered an unprecedented blending of East and West. The presence of Arabic inscriptions on Chinese porcelain reflected not only the significant Muslim presence in China but also the political and cultural influence of the Mongol Empire (Vogelsang 312-318).

The growing demand for Chinese porcelain in the Islamic world was thus intertwined with the Mongols' own imperial ambitions, creating an ever-deepening relationship between two worlds. These inscriptions became vessels of memory, anchoring these ceramics firmly in a shared cultural and political identity that transcended geographical and religious boundaries.

The Ming dynasty carried this exchange to new heights. Under imperial supervision, the renowned Jingdezhen kilns produced ceramics for both domestic use and export to regions such as the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Persia. Inscribed ceramics, in particular, served as diplomatic gifts and cultural emissaries, fostering goodwill and facilitating intercultural exchange.

This trend gained particular momentum during the reign of the Yongle Emperor (r. 1402–1424) and the naval expeditions led by the Muslim admiral Zheng He (c. 1371–1435) between 1405

6 For further information see: Guy, J (2019) 1647-1653; Leibner, H (2014); Kimura, J (2022) 97-129; Flecker, M (2010) 101-119; Park, H (2022) 45-69; Miksic, J.N. (2009) 70-99; Flecker, M (2015); Gunn, G.C. (2011) 42.

and 1433. He reached over thirty countries, including Hormuz (Iran), Jeddah (Arabian Peninsula), and even the east coast of Africa, facilitating commercial and diplomatic exchanges, while legitimising and extending Ming supremacy.[7]

Inscriptions continued to play an indispensable role in these exchanges during the reign of the Zhengde Emperor (1506–1521). As Chinese ceramics continued to incorporate Arabic and Persian texts, they transformed into profound objects of reflection—moral, spiritual, and philosophical (Figure 9). The mingling of secular and religious themes in these inscriptions underscored the fluidity of cultural boundaries and the permeability of artistic traditions.

Figure 9:
Tile with Quranic inscription and Zhengde reign mark, blue and white porcelain, height: 458 mm, 1506-1521, Jingdezhen kilns. The British Museum, London.
© Photo of the author.

7 For further information see: Merlini, M 39-42; Manguin, P (1991) 41-54; Tai Y.S (2011) 85-92; Schottenhammer, A (2017) 202-205; Wang, G., Wu, Z (2014) 51-62.

Even imperial reign marks appeared on ceramics destined for export, illustrating the increasingly fluid relationship between state-sponsored production and global trade (Caterina and Giunta 257-278).

Beyond the Islamic world, inscriptions on Chinese ceramics also played a pivotal role in Southeast Asia and Europe, where Chinese artistic traditions not only found enthusiastic adoption but were also reinterpreted by local cultures.

In Vietnam, for instance, the presence of Chinese characters on ceramics is a testament to the profound literary and artistic influence China held during periods of political dominance and commercial interaction. These inscriptions were more than mere decorative elements—they conveyed auspicious meanings, elevating the ceramics as symbols of status, cultural refinement, and a shared artistic heritage that transcended borders. The cultural exchange was not one-sided, however.

Just as Chinese ceramics permeated Southeast Asian markets, local artisans began to adapt and reinterpret them, infusing their own regional styles and indigenous inscriptions into the pieces. This exchange underscores the dynamic nature of artistic and cultural interactions, where both influences—Chinese and Southeast Asian—blended and evolved into unique new forms.[8]

This fusion of styles extended to more complex forms of production, notably in *Swatow* wares and *Kraak* porcelain—two types of export ceramics that became highly sought after respectively in Southeast Asia and Europe.[9] These pieces illustrate how Chinese artisans were not simply exporting a fixed tradition, but were engaging in a dialogue with their international

8 For further information, see: MERLINI Miriam, *Cina e Vietnam sulla Via delle Porcellane: un'analisi della ceramica vietnamita e del suo rapporto con il "Ming Gap" (1352-1567 ca.)*, op. cit.
9 For further information see: Caterina, L., Giunta, R (2012) 257-278; Crick, M (2010) 320-328: Vainker, S.J. (1991) 145-154; Ma, H (2012) 1218-1226.

consumers, tailoring their productions to meet diverse cultural and aesthetic expectations.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges posed by the availability of sources and the vast scope of the subject, this study has highlighted how inscriptions on Chinese ceramics function as enduring vessels of memory, preserving both personal and communal narratives. Whether through poetry, dedications, or names, these texts transformed ceramics into more than mere objects of utility or decoration; they became instruments of remembrance, linking individuals and communities across time. By embedding messages that ranged from private expressions of devotion to public declarations of patronage, ceramic inscriptions played a crucial role in shaping cultural identity, reinforcing the ties between makers, patrons, and viewers.

Beyond their immediate contexts, inscribed ceramics also fostered and reflected the formation of distinct social networks, from the imperial court to local artisan workshops and scholarly circles. The presence of inscriptions—whether marking an offering to a temple, commemorating a significant event, or asserting the reputation of a specific ceramic production center—underscored the social, economic, and intellectual dimensions of ceramic production.

These objects did not merely document history; they actively participated in it, serving as tangible links to religious practices, familial lineage, and political authority. Their ability to communicate across generations ensured that ceramics functioned as material anchors for collective memory, embedding historical consciousness within everyday life.

The significance of ceramic inscriptions extends into the

present through the increasing role of digital technologies in their documentation and interpretation. The expansion of online databases and digitised catalogues has facilitated unprecedented access to these artefacts, allowing scholars and enthusiasts alike to engage with them in new ways. These digital platforms do not simply preserve historical material; they also contribute to an evolving discourse, forming virtual communities dedicated to the study, discussion, and reinterpretation of inscribed ceramics.

In this sense, digital archives themselves can be seen as extensions of the inscriptional tradition—modern tools that continue to shape the ways in which Chinese ceramics are studied, understood, and remembered.

About the Author

Miriam Merlini is a graduate in Languages and Civilizations of Asia and Mediterranean Africa from Ca' Foscari University of Venice, with a specialization in Chinese Studies. Her academic interests lie at the intersection of history, art, and philosophy, with a particular focus on the cultural dynamics of East and West.

Her MA thesis explored the development of Vietnamese ceramics and their historical and aesthetic relationship with the renowned Chinese ceramic tradition. By analyzing archaeological, artistic, and historical sources, she highlighted how Vietnamese production—long considered secondary or derivative—deserves recognition. Her research emphasizes the originality of Vietnamese artisans in creating decorative forms and motifs that, while inspired by Chinese models, reflect a unique cultural identity shaped by centuries of exchange and transformation.

Miriam currently works as an intern at a marketing agency in Milan, where she continues to cultivate her interest in cross-cultural communication and visual culture.

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Memories of Things Read Incidentally: How Medieval Monks Remembered through Studying the Bible

By Marco Mostert

Imagine a student who, before the availability of large digital text corpora, wanted to look up something in the Vulgate, the Bible in Latin. The standard critical edition of the Vulgate came in two handy volumes of 1980 pages (*Biblia Sacra*). But how could you look up a particular word that you vaguely remembered was used in the Bible? For that, you had to use a concordance, an alphabetically ordered book containing all occurrences of all words appearing in the Bible.

The first concordance of this kind was already completed in 1230, under the supervision of cardinal Hugo of Saint-Cher. Until the recent arrival of the internet, concordances were available in hefty printed tomes. If you used the concordance made based on the Vulgate, it came in five hefty tomes which together provided 5699 columns. All the individual words in the Bible, in alphabetical order, could be looked up. Each occurrence of any word was accompanied by information of the book of the Bible, and its chapter and verse, and was also provided with a short quotation giving some context (*Novae Concordantiae Bibliae*).

Nowadays a concordance is no longer needed, as anyone can find a good edition of the Vulgate on the internet, and in a matter of seconds all occurrences of any word can be searched for and found. If a cumbersome five-volume concordance is still found on the shelves of a library, it feels like an oversight on the part of the

personnel. The concordance may be relegated to a depot without impeding most readers' research.

Now let us imagine a student around the year 1000, who would like to 'look up' a word or a name in the Latin Bible. Making a full concordance had not been possible yet. The individual books of the Bible and the chapters within these books could be identified, but in some cases these chapters had not yet been subdivided into individual verses. Bibles in one volume were also relatively rare, and if they existed, they were extremely cumbersome to handle. They were often luxury copies, and a modern concordance would probably have taken more than the five volumes of the most recent concordance to the Vulgate.

So how did students of the Bible find relevant fragments a millennium ago? First, they needed to know Latin, as most often biblical texts were available only in that language. However, Latin was no longer anyone's mother tongue. Even where it had once been spoken, it had developed into one of the Romance languages that are still spoken today. To become someone who could understand Latin, one needed to learn the language. In monasteries, schools were available to the boys; most of these were able to provide a basic education, and some offered excellent teaching in Latin.

Additionally, they needed to learn how to read as well, to be able to give voice to the Latin texts that were central to the monastic life. Reading could have been learned at home already, from one's mother (Clanchy). Some boys, at an early age, entered the community of monks that formed a monastery. But the texts that were sung during the services that punctuated the days and nights of the monks were learned in another way. Consider, for example, learning a book of the Bible containing 150 psalms. These psalms were sung during the monastic liturgy and in this way, by hearing the psalms being sung day in, day out, week in,

week out, one could learn the text by heart. To get to know other texts, whether biblical or not, forms of (almost) silent reading were employed, because monks did not have their own cells yet, and they did not want to disturb the other monks. (Cavallo 87-101)

In some cases, we have evidence of the intellectual life of a monastery because the monks left their marks in the monastery's manuscripts. In the case of the monastery of Fleury, at Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire, even boys who had only just finished learning to write using a stylus on a wax tablet were allowed to write their names on the fly-leaves of a manuscript.[1] And those in the monastery's school who were already getting an education in the 'liberal arts' could find pleasure in some jokes, which presupposed, for instance, basic knowledge of Greek, or of Latin epigraphy (Mostert 102-107).

After they had finished their schooling, Fleury monks made notes in their abbey's manuscripts. In a manuscript of the Latin translation of Flavius Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, a text written in 94 CE and copied at the beginning of the ninth century CE, one reader copied a line which had apparently pleased him. A next reader added a line which he had liked – and afterwards many other readers added to this list of favorite lines. In the same manuscript, as well as in many others from the library of this monastery, there are pen trials that copy the Fleury ex-libris, usually in a slightly abbreviated form.

The full text reads: "This is the book of abbot Saint Benedict of Fleury. If anyone were to steal it, let him be damned together with Judas the traitor, Annas and Caiaphas" (MS Berne). The monks believed that their books helped them to form their community,

1 MS Berne, Burgerbibliotheek 118, f. 1r, "Ualterus pu[e]r et monachus" ("Walter, boy and monk"). See for information on the manuscripts mentioned Marco Mostert, *The Library of Fleury: A Provisional List of Manuscripts* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 1989).

and that thieves of books were as bad as Judas, who had betrayed Jesus, or as the two high priests who interrogated the Son of God. The monks' shared memories were in large measure textual in nature.

Fleury was exceptional in the number of manuscripts containing texts belonging to the seven *artes*, to other scientific disciplines, and to the Latin classics; needless to say it also was well-stocked with texts of a theological nature, such as bibles and commentaries on the books of the Bible, and obviously it had the texts necessary to celebrate the liturgy of the sacraments and the monastic hours.

Fleury boasted a manuscript which had been put together from five pre-extant manuscripts, dating from the ninth century to the turn of the eleventh century.

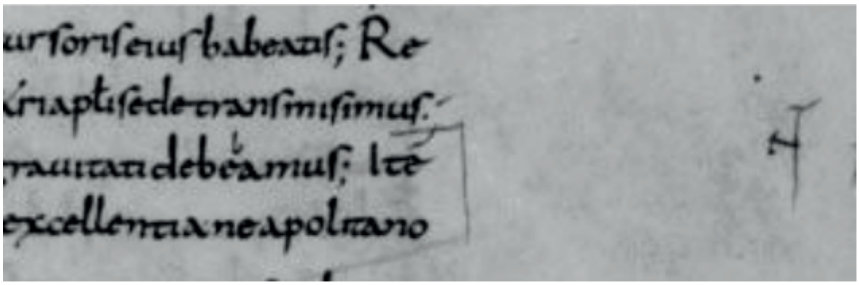

Figure 1: MS Paris. Bibliothèque Nationale, Latin 2278, f. 56r. Nota'-sign in the right margin. This manuscript was written in the ninth century. At the end of the tenth century, it was annotated by the abbot of Fleury, Abbo.

This composite manuscript[2] contained among other texts four medico-botanical glossaries. These glossaries give down-to-earth information on how to distinguish herbs (for instance "the herb aniseed [*anesus*]: its leaves are like those of coriander ...") and there is also information on how these herbs can be used for medical

2 MS Berne, Burgerbibliothek 118. See also Otto Homburger, *Die illustrierten Handschriften der Burgerbibliothek Bern: Die vorkarolingischen und karolingischen Handschriften* (Berne: Selbstverlag der Burgerbibliothek Bern, 1962), pp. 42-44 and Tafel 3.

purposes.[3]

In another composite manuscript, consisting of five parts, there is a text in a tenth-century quire (on ff. 16r-v) which deals with the case of someone who was apparently ill because he was an adulterer, the medical history of the patient ending with the verdict "and it is not the medicine that is to blame but the wound [of adultery]."[4]

In three ninth-century manuscripts, a reader has made 'Nota'-signs in the margin to remarks of a medical nature.[5] Clearly, there was an interest in this kind of knowledge at Fleury. How many readers (and therefore Fleury monks) were interested in medical lore is impossible to say, because one 'Nota'-sign looks very much like the next one: it consists of a capital 'N', with an elongated second ascender which, through a horizontal stroke at the top, is made into a 'T'. Together, this spells 'N[O]T[A]' (see Figure 1). Whenever a subsequent reader sees a previous reader's 'Nota'-sign, the eye is drawn to the sign and to the text marked by it. Considering that the first reader 'notified' the presence of medicinal matter, a second reader who was also interested in medicinal matters could not but make a mental note of the matter that interested both him and the previous reader, who had made the 'Nota'-sign.

How could an early medieval monk augment his knowledge of herbal medical lore? For instance, by remembering that he had come across it in his reading of the Bible. There are quite a few flowers and plants mentioned in the Bible.[6] Not many of them occur in a context of healing or medicine, however.[7]

3 MS Vatican, Reg. lat. 1260.
4 MS Vatican, Reg. lat 1709, ff. 16-23.
5 MSS Orléans, Bibliothèque Municipale [now renamed: Mediathèque] 83 (80), 84 (81), and 85 (82).
6 See the article "Bloemen en planten"in Madeleine S. Miller and J. Lane Miller, *Algemene bijbelse encyclopedie* (Wassenaar: Servire, 1974), pp. 98-101 (a translation of Harper's Bible Dictionary).
7 But see Jeremiah 8:22 and II Kings 20:7.

Yet, if a monk had found an explanation of a biblical passage mentioning a plant, be it in the form of an exegetical treatise or in a sermon, there would be a good chance that some herbal medical information would be included in such a commentary. In biblical exegesis, answers were sought to a series of questions. Three of them dealt with the meaning of the contents of the Bible (what you should believe, what you should do, and where you were going).

Preceding this was the exposition of the literal meaning of what you read in the Bible, and when you read about flowers, plants, or herbs you might be given some information as to their medicinal properties. Having commentaries at hand on the book of the Bible in which a particular plant occurred, you had a good chance of finding what you were looking for.

The first question you would have to ask yourself, therefore, was: can I remember where in the Bible the names of plants occur? This meant that you had to know the Bible by heart. Was that possible for an ordinary human being unaided as yet by anything resembling a concordance? For the concordance would be developed only in the twelfth or thirteenth century. The answer is that there were several ways of training your memory, thereby making it possible to retain astonishing amounts of text.

First, there was the method of voicing the text. This meant transforming the letters on the page into audible sounds. This practice was already in place in the heyday of Roman Antiquity, in the time the Latin classics were written, and also in the later Roman Empire, which was centred on Constantinople. It was still practiced at the beginning of the twelfth century. In the *Life* of Saint Cyril of Philea (in eastern Thrace, on the Black Sea), the story is told of how the saint wanted to learn the Psalter by heart when he had decided to become a monk.

Unfortunately, he had only a single copy of the text and

had to give this to a poor man so that he could sell it. During the following night he was able only to recite half of the Psalter. Then someone dressed in white appeared, who asked Cyril why he had only learned half of the Psalter. When the figure in white understood the situation, he invited Cyril to get up and recite the Psalter with him not once but twice. And so, the saint, even if he had lost his book, could keep all of the text of the Psalter in his memory (Cavallo 87). Texts could be memorized through listening to them being read aloud.

The story about Cyril's learning the Psalter by heart may raise an eyebrow or two. However, credible feats of memory are recorded slightly later in western Europe as well. In the twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor explained how you could remember all of the psalms by first looking at their number and their first words, and how you could assign a 'place' to them in your memory. To do so, you needed to concentrate on everything you could see on the page, including the colors of the ink, the forms of the letters, etc.

For this reason, fixing in your mind how the text looked in the very manuscript you had before your eyes was of the utmost importance. And because "memory likes brevity," you should in fact work with short chunks of text (which nowadays one would say fit human short-term memory).[8]

When you had managed the Psalter and you were able to juggle these chunks of text in your memory, you could start on other texts, for instance on the other books of the Bible, and memorize them as well. One of the main ideas of the arts of memory was to remember the positions chunks of texts had to one another and

8 The text of Hugh can be found in translation in Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 261-266.

how, together, they constituted the text.[9]

Let us return to our monk who is interested in herbal medicinal knowledge. If he had managed to memorize the entire Bible, he ought to be able to find those places where plants are mentioned in his memory. If he had not accomplished this feat of memory, he might be able to read the Bible for himself and take note of those chapters in which plants are mentioned. He might be disappointed in either case, however, with the small amount of information on the individual plants mentioned. It might be worthwhile, therefore, to consult also the commentaries on the books of the Bible present in his library.

There were quite a few of these in the early medieval library of Fleury, either in the form of treatises or as sermons.[10] Exegesis, as we have seen, included as one of the ways of interpreting the Bible the quest for the literal meaning of the text. If a commentator had found any knowledge of the medicinal properties of the plants mentioned in the Bible, he might have provided his readers (and, in the case of sermons, also his listeners) with this 'literal' knowledge. If our monk had been interested in finding out what the commentaries in his library said about mint and rue (Luke 11: 42), or about mustard seed (Luke 17: 6), he could have looked for Bede's eighth-century commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke;[11] for information on mint, anise, and cumin (Matthew 23: 23) he could

9 The above is a summary that does not do justice to the topic of medieval memory. I have merely picked and chosen some 'chunks', hopefully allowing the reader to understand the interest of the medieval arts of memory. Before starting on Mary Carruthers, you might want to read Joshua Foer, *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), especially chapter five, "The memory palace".

10 Nowadays, the manuscripts of Fleury are dispersed over several libraries. Those that were considered less interesting remained at the monastery until the French Revolution. As biblical exegesis was not high on the list of manuscript collectors in the Renaissance, except for a clutch of manuscripts that by way of the monks of Saint-Germain-des-Prés ended up in the Paris Bibliothèque nationale de France, most texts on this topic can now be found in the Orléans Mediathèque. See the recent *Catalogue des manuscrits médiévaux de la Bibliothèque Municipale d'Orléans, ed. Élisabeth Pellegrin (†) and Jean-Paul Bouhot* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2010). Unfortunately, marginal notes and additions made on the flyleaves of these manuscripts have been treated in a stepmotherly fashion.

11 MS Orléans, Bibliothèque Municipale 72 (69).

look up the ninth-century commentary by Hrabanus Maurus on the Gospel of St. Matthew[12], and so on. Maybe he would find what he was looking for.

We do not know of any author from the monastery of Fleury who wrote at length on herbal medicinal matters. But we do know something about the ways the Fleury monks may have gathered information in preparation of a text on these matters. Quite possibly, as such a prospective author belonged to the elite of the scriptorium, he might have been allowed to copy the name of a plant that interested him in the margin of a page, next to where he had found this name. Even if the evidence of his intellectual endeavors would be limited to only a few of these names, recorded as marginalia, he is to be considered a scholar. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to say more based on a few names in the margins of different manuscripts. But we have been able to at least reconstruct how scholarly monks might find the kind of information they were interested in by using their memory of the texts they had learned – almost as if by accident.

The monks of Fleury and their contemporaries in abbeys across medieval Europe used their literate skills to create memories that can be found to this day on the flyleaves of the manuscripts they produced. These monastic communities were formed not only by the texts which were the reason for which they produced their manuscripts. They were also informed by annotations and additions in the margins of those texts, and even on the flyleaves of those very manuscripts.

12 MS Orléans, Bibliothèque Municipale 68 (65).

About the Author

Marco Mostert is Professor emeritus in Medieval History at Utrecht University. His main interest lies in the history of medieval written culture.

He has published on the manuscripts of Fleury from 1989 onwards) and has gradually widened his interests to encompass studies of almost all forms of writing known in the Middle Ages. He is the editor of Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1999-), in which to date 62 volumes have been published, and more volumes are on the way.

Apart from medieval written culture, literacy, and communication, he is also interested in (early) medieval history, e.g., but not exclusively, of the Low Countries.

See for a full list of publications: https://www.uu.nl/staff/MMostert/Publications>.

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Loch Ness
S
COTLAND.
ORKNEY
ISLES
NORTH
FIRTH

The Highlands and Lowlands of Sir Walter Scott

by Aurelia Rani Ghotra

The Act of Union of 1707 casts a long shadow in Scottish history. This legislative measure formally united Scotland and England under a single parliament and fundamentally altered Scotland's political and economic landscape. With increased control exerted by the English government, tensions simmered between the aspirations for Scottish independence and the realities of British rule. Sir Walter Scott's historical novel *Rob Roy* captures the complexities of this period by portraying the struggle between Scottish identity and the influence of the British state. It serves as a compelling historical lens through which to examine the Union's multifaceted impact on Scottish society.

The story is set in early 18th-century Scotland and follows Frank Osbaldistone, an Englishman sent to live with his Scottish relatives after refusing to join his father's business. While in Northumberland and later in the Scottish Highlands, Frank becomes entangled in political intrigue and family betrayal. Alongside many characters, he meets Nicol Jarvie, a pragmatic and commercial Glasgow magistrate and the mysterious Rob Roy MacGregor, who is a real-life Scottish folk hero and outlaw likened to Robin Hood. He symbolises resistance to English rule and loyalty to Highland values. Though Rob Roy does not appear until later in the novel, his presence dominates the story's themes of honour, justice, and cultural identity.

A reading of *Rob Roy* offers insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by a nation in transition. Scott uses the

contrasting landscapes of the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands to explore the complexities of Scottish identity. He thereby highlights the tension between tradition and progress in 18th-century Scotland. The primary objective of this paper is to examine how Sir Walter Scott shapes the Scottish national identity through landscape in *Rob Roy*. He draws a vast and panoramic history of Scotland, especially of the relationship between the Scottish Highlands, a novelistic 'outland', and the more anglicised Lowlands. Moreover, Scott challenges the Highlands and Lowlands distinctions and transforms the broader perception of Scotland to foster a renewed sense of national pride among its people.

First, it is necessary to situate *Rob Roy* within the broader historical landscape of 18th-century Scotland and its national identity by exploring which political, economic, and social forces shaped Scotland. Michael Lynch states that national identity is "a concept that belongs in the political historian's vocabulary" (441). Regardless of the commonalities in ethnicity, culture, class, and religion among a group of people, what truly establishes their unique national identity is their capacity to envision themselves as members of a community that has a historical past and can envision a future as citizens of an independent political entity. Additionally, it is through a collective understanding of their political history and aspirations for the future that individuals, with national consciousness, derive their understanding of how to think and behave as modern patriots (Lynch 441). This means that the past is a powerful source of legitimacy for those who would change the present for a new future.

The Act of Union from 1707 intended to foster political stability and economic growth, the union centralised power in London, dissolving Scotland's parliament and raising concerns over national identity and autonomy (Lynch 608). Economically,

Scotland faced uneven benefits, with traditional industries declining under competition from English merchants (Scott, Paul 284). Highland clanship was viewed as a threat by the English, prompting efforts to dismantle traditional Highland culture. The Highland Clearances saw clan-based agriculture replaced by profitable sheep farming, hence displacing many Scots through forced evictions (Lynch 97). Gaelic culture was actively suppressed, including bans on language and tartan clothing. The methods employed during the clearances were often ruthless and inhumane, with tenants being forcibly removed from their homes and villages, sometimes through violence or coercion. (Trevor-Roper 198).

Clan chiefs were pressured to adopt English nobility practices, yet these economic shifts led to hardship and social upheaval that fundamentally altered the Highland cultural landscape and identity (Somerset 196). While Scotland experienced a gradual rise in influence and economic prosperity, this period coincided with a decline in its distinct national identity. When a nation loses its independence, its subsequent history somehow does not fit into the threads that it went into before (Pittock 202). By the time of publication of *Rob Roy* in 1817, three generations had grown up without knowing an independent Scotland.

Linda Colley argues that British identity formed in response to external conflicts, coexisting with but not erasing distinct national identities (6). Critics like Edwin Muir claim Scott romanticized Scotland, reinforcing stereotypes rather than presenting an authentic national identity (Muir 11-12). While there may be some validity to this claim, this paper contends that a pristine and singular understanding of national identity is unattainable, as the notion of collective identity is inherently constructed and arises from deliberate fabrications.

Therefore, assuming that collective identity is inherently fictitious and crafted through deliberate narratives, texts, including novels, play a pivotal role in preserving and shaping identity. Scott's depiction of the Scottish landscape arrived at a crucial moment in Scotland's history, as the nation sought to assert its uniqueness.

From the rough terrain of the Highlands to the bustling streets of Glasgow, Scott's vivid descriptions evoke a sense of place that is intimately tied to the novel's characters' sense of self and identity. The historical context in which *Rob Roy* is situated holds significant importance, not just in its historical aspect, but also in its spatial dimension. The portrayal of the Scottish landscape aims to accentuate Scotland's national identity. Matthew Johnson explains in *Ideas of Landscape* that when landscape is viewed as a representation, it becomes a product of the mind, influenced by sensory perception, personal experiences, and cultural identity. Literature serves as a means to render landscapes tangible and communicable, offering valuable insights into individuals' perceptions of their surroundings within a specific historical period (3). Scott's rendition presented Scotland as a place of sublime beauty and allure that encourages exploration to where "Man alone seemed to be placed in a state of inferiority, in a scene where all the ordinary features of nature were raised and exalted." (343).

By portraying Scotland as a land of towering mountains, deep lochs, and poetic traditions, he fostered a sense of pride among Scots and heightened its appeal to outsiders. His use of picturesque and sublime elements presents Scotland as both majestic and accessible, striking a balance between the awe-inspiring and the familiar. "Despite the uncertainty of my situation, a view so romantic, joined to the active and inspiring influence of the frosty atmosphere, elevated my spirits (…)" (Scott 383). This passage

illustrates how the landscape influences the protagonist's emotions, reinforcing the connection between nature and identity. Scott differentiates between picturesque and sublime landscapes, with human presence marking the former as inviting, while the latter remains vast and overwhelming (Passarella 71). His preference for the picturesque makes the Highlands more approachable, aligning with his nationalist message while also appealing to British readers (Bisson 110). Through *Rob Roy*, Scott redefined the perception of Scotland, transforming it into a land of romantic adventure while preserving its cultural distinctiveness.

On one hand, the Scottish Highlands are portrayed as picturesque, sublime, and poetic, evoking a sense of awe and grandeur. On the other hand, they possess a dark and dangerous aura that is characterized by their primitive "ugly savage" (Scott 258) and lawless nature. The Scottish clans residing in the Highlands are depicted as bold, resourceful, and heroic individuals who are deeply committed to their clan leaders, such as Rob Roy. However, their lifestyle often veers into violence, disorder, and fear. The Highlanders' appearance and characters are often directly linked to said lifestyle:

> "The dusky mountains of the Western Highlands often sent forth wilder tribes to frequent the marts of St. Mungo's favourite city. Hordes of wild, shaggy, dwarfish cattle and ponies, conducted by Highlanders, as wild, as shaggy, and sometimes as dwarfish, as the animals they had in charge" (Scott 237)

For Scott, both the virtues and shortcomings of the Highlanders are intricately linked to their homeland, which is marked by a combination of untamed beauty and desolate barrenness. Interestingly, the appearance of Rob Roy is as tied to, and

distinguished by the Highlands and the Lowlands because Frank barely recognises Rob Roy upon meeting him in the Highlands. The kilt allows him to describe "a fell of thick, short, red hair, especially around his knees,- which resembled in this respect, as well as from their sinewy appearance of extreme strength, the limbs of a red coloured Highland bull." (Scott 374).

Characters like Rob Roy and Helen MacGregor are seemingly emerging organically from the rugged terrain of the Highlands. Helen MacGregor possesses "a masculine cast of beauty" with "strong, harsh, and expressive" (Scott 349) features. Moreover, Frank remarks that " the Scottish Highlanders, whose feelings, I have observed, are often allied with the romantic and poetical" (Scott 410). This aligns with the romantic setting of the Highlands.

Socially and culturally, the Lowlands and Highlands differed significantly. The Lowlands were characterized by a more cosmopolitan and progressive outlook, influenced by Enlightenment ideas, urbanization, and the spread of education. In contrast, the Highlands retained a more traditional and patriarchal social structure, organized around clan loyalties, kinship ties, and feudal customs. Clan chiefs exercised considerable authority over their followers, and traditional Gaelic culture, language, and customs prevailed (Lynch 608).

The ambivalence of Scottish attitudes toward the Highlands stems from their proximity, as the Highlander occupies a spatial and cultural position that is both distant and accessible. This spatial dynamic is evident at the Highland and Lowland border, where the interaction between Self and Other occurs through repeated border crossings. Lowlanders venture into the Highlands for various purposes, including pacification, improvement, trade, and intermarriage, while Highlanders descend from their mountain strongholds "[i]t is always with unwillingness".

When they engage in similar activities in the Lowlands, it is "like tearing a pine from its rock, to plant him elsewhere". Scott adds that "even then the mountain glens were over-peopled, although thinned occasionally by famine or by the sword, and many of their inhabitants strayed down to Glasgow" (Scott 237).

The coexistence of different stages of development in the Highland and Lowland worlds within overlapping spaces complicates their relationship. The significance of writing on the Highlands lies in its role as a site for the negotiation of Scottish national identity amidst the consolidation of the British Union post-Union. This context highlights Scottish reactions to the changing political landscape and the challenges of defining their identity within a larger imperial framework.

Consequently, Scott's novels establish a unique yet static Highland "Scottishness," nostalgically preserved in the past and devoid of any challenge to a synthesized "Britishness." Scott contrasts the economic and cultural shift of the Lowlands, which emerged as a commercial and industrial centre in the 18th century, with the traditional and romanticized Highlands (Smout 356). Though Frank must journey to the Highlands to confront the Jacobite threat to his father's business, much of *Rob Roy* takes place in northern England and the Lowlands, particularly Glasgow.

Glasgow, a thriving commercial hub, represents modernity, rationality, and commerce. Scott describes it as "a place of considerable rank and importance" (Scott 237). Nicol Jarvie, a magistrate and merchant, embodies Glasgow's values of law and trade. He is depicted as "a petulant, conceited Scotch pedlar, with whom there was no dealing" (Scott 262). Jarvie is a staunch supporter of the Union, acknowledging past opposition but ultimately embracing its economic benefits: "But it's an ill wind

blaws naebody gude — Let ilka ane roose the ford as they find it — I say let Glasgow flourish!" He highlights how trade with the West Indies, facilitated by the Union, has brought prosperity to Glasgow: "since St. Mungo catched herrings in the Clyde, what was ever like to gar us flourish like the sugar and tobacco trade?" (Scott 312). While the world of Glasgow and Nicol Jarvie may appear mundane compared to the wildness of the Scottish Highlands, it represents the future, poised for triumph over the untamed chaos of the Highlands.

Yet, Rob Roy complicates this binary opposition. While Glasgow represents stability, it is not as static as it seems. Scott acknowledges that the prosperity of Glasgow was partly fueled by Highland migration (Scott 237). It serves as a reminder that the perceived boundaries separating the romanticized Highlands and the commercial activities of Lowland Scotland are not sharp. Rather, Frank comes to realize that the Highlands are inherently intertwined with his father's business ventures. Frank's realization forms a pivotal aspect of his transition from adolescence to adulthood, characterized by his father's notion of "learning to live like a man" (Scott 74). This journey does not involve a rejection of the Highlands but rather an understanding that portraying them solely through the lens of romance and narrative is inadequate. Instead, it involves acknowledging the fluidity of experience categories, where distinctions between them blur in the authentic formation of identity. Frank is caught between these two worlds, representing the changing social landscape of Scotland.

The novel highlights the complex relationship between Highland and Lowland cultures. Rob Roy, the Highland outlaw likened to "Robin Hood" (Scott 20), and Nicol Jarvie, the pragmatic businessman, share mutual respect and display each other's qualities. Rob Roy, though a warrior, takes financial matters

seriously and considers commerce for his sons, while Jarvie bends Lowland legal formalities and even wields a heated poker in the Highlands.

Rob Roy serves as a narrative that challenges such fixed distinctions, revealing to Frank that while there may be a perceived divide between the Highlands and Lowlands, these regions are fundamentally connected. This connection becomes evident, to some extent, through the character of Rob Roy, who effortlessly travels between what is initially perceived as separate realms. This also raises the question of where do Scotland and Scottishness begin, and where do they end.

Expressing affinity with the Highlands reflects a nationalist aspiration to blur the distinction between Highland and Lowland regions, aiming to establish a unique Scottish identity within a "multinational" but imperial Great Britain where Scots and English share common ground. However, this identification also perpetuates imperialist views of the Highlands as fundamentally different and separate from the modern, civilized nation. Indeed, the perceived primitiveness of the Highlands often serves as a prime example of Scottish distinctiveness.

Situated at the intersection of nation and empire, representations of the Highlands oscillate between self and other, revealing the complexities and contradictions in the construction of national and imperial identities. The untamed Highlands and its inhabitants gain significance only when modernity relegates them to symbols of its past. However, Sir Walter Scott offers a unique perspective in *Rob Roy*, where the titular character embodies a resilience that defies oblivion, unlike the Jacobite nobility. Rob Roy represents a fusion of past and present, as the modern era seeks to idealize the natural man while integrating real savagery into the expanding horizon of the imperial economy.

The juxtaposition of savagery and modernity in *Rob Roy* reinforces rather than negates each other, with Clan culture maintaining its sovereignty. While it may appear peripheral compared to industrialized centres, it remains the nucleus of its society, governed by its laws (Womack 150).

It is important to mention Franco Moretti's astute observation regarding Waverley, stating that "near the border, figurality goes up" (45). Moretti posits that areas adjacent to a boundary often appear unfamiliar, leading elements and realities near the border to expand, assuming figurative and unrealistic attributes. When faced with a border, the use of metaphors and other rhetorical devices can be particularly effective, owing to the cognitive and emotional role of metaphors. Symbolism associated with borders offers a means to grapple with the emotional impact of encountering unfamiliar territories (45).

Therefore, these metaphors serve as a tool for articulating the unknown encountered by individuals, simultaneously capturing and expressing it. In *Rob Roy*, too, the distinction between reality and imagination blurs, with entities inhabiting such realms exhibiting affiliations with both domains, as exemplified by the character of Rob Roy, who travels between the Lowlands and the Highlands. Thus, Rob Roy does not just function as a historical figure that authenticates the novel, but he can also be seen as a symbol of the distortion of borders and boundaries within Scotland that unify a traditional past and a progressed present. The historical incidents in *Rob Roy* serve as supplementary elements to the narrative, offering modest illustrations of the broader issue Scott explores. He looks into the plight of people stripped of their identity and uprooted from their homeland.

To summarise, despite economic growth following the Union, Scotland faced an identity crisis, as fears of cultural assimilation

into England grew. The loss of independence left Scots struggling with the fading memory of their former kingdom. Scott's *Rob Roy* explores these tensions through themes of landscape, Scottish identity, and societal conflict to paint a vivid portrait of 18th-century Scotland.

Through the Highlands' and Lowlands' contrasting landscapes, Scott illustrates the complexities of Scottish culture, highlighting the ongoing struggle between tradition and progress. The novel's depiction of the Highlands as both majestic and hazardous serves as a backdrop for exploring the resilience and complexity of its inhabitants, such as the enigmatic Rob Roy and the tough Helen MacGregor. These characters embody the virtues and flaws of Highland life, while also challenging conventional perceptions of the region. The Scottish clans inhabiting the Highlands are characterised as courageous, resourceful, and fiercely loyal to leaders like Rob Roy, yet their lifestyle often veers into violence and disorder.

Scott connects both the virtues and the flaws of the Highlanders with the landscape itself, comparing its wild grandeur with desolate barrenness. In contrast, the Lowlands represent a burgeoning hub of commerce and modernity, epitomised by cities like Glasgow. Characters, such as Nicol Jarvie, symbolise this transition, embodying pragmatism and business acumen in contrast to the romantic individualism of the Highlands. Through the interactions between characters from these disparate worlds, Scott delves into themes of cultural clash and mutual influence. Rob Roy and Nicol Jarvie, for example, exhibit traits and values that reflect both their Highland and Lowland backgrounds, blurring the lines between the two. This clash between tradition and progress shape Scottish identity in the novel.

In Scott's symbolic interpretation, the Scottish Highlands

symbolise a romantic yet ultimately doomed culture of the past. Ultimately, *Rob Roy* presents a nuanced exploration of Scottish identity that is ultimately tied to the landscape. Sir Walter Scott's novel continues to resonate today by inviting readers to explore the complexities of national identity and the enduring legacy of Scotland's past.

About the Author

Aurelia Rani Ghotra holds an MA in English Language and Literature, with a research focus on 19th-century women writers and feminist theory. She is currently continuing her graduate studies at Waseda University in the Global Literary and Cultural Japanese Studies program. Her current research examines 19th- and 20th-century English and Japanese literature in relation to questions of cultural identity.

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PEACE

Love in Conflict: Wartime Love Letters, Memory, and the Evolution of Intimate Communication

by Vanessa Köstner

"My Dearest Will, I feel I must write you again dear altho there is not much news to tell you. I wonder how you are getting on. I shall be so relieved to get a letter from you" (Chitticks).

"Dear Lizzie, it's nearly six months now since I saw you. How I long for you and the children. God bless you all. I love you more than ever" (Mudd)

The lines above are written between a wife and her fiancé and an officer to his wife during wartime. These letters provide an intimate insight into the emotions and daily struggles of people separated by war at a time when other forms of communication were unavailable. Love letters serve as powerful memory keepers, preserving emotional connections despite physical separation.

While letter writing—especially love letters—has been a common practice throughout history, scholarly focus on its role in war remains limited. Drawing on texts such as *Love in Time of War* by Deborah Montgomerie, *Communication of Love* by Eva Lia Wyss, *Ancient Love Letters* edited by Tiziana Drago and Owen Hodkinson, and *From Love Letters to Miss You* by B. Lee Cooper, this study examines the transformative power of wartime letters in shaping identity and intimate communication.

The following sections will explore the role of letters as memory artifacts that preserve emotional bonds, function as historical and cultural records, and influence the language of love

and longing in correspondence literature. Furthermore, this paper will analyze the construction of identity, which is created through written intimacy, highlighting self-presentation and gender roles in wartime correspondence offering an insight into cultural reflections through these exchanges. Finally, the discussion will shift to the timelessness of love letters, considering how digital communication has altered letter writing while emphasizing the continued significance of handwritten messages in preserving emotional connections.

Beyond their function as communication tools, love letters serve as historical and cultural records, therefore creating memory artifacts. They preserve emotional bonds and offer unique insights into the nature of wartime relationships. The handwritten words maintain an intimate connection between loved ones, even in the most uncertain circumstances. Wartime correspondence allowed couples to sustain their relationships despite immense challenges, offering reassurance and stability when physical presence was impossible (Hunter 374). Montgomerie further explores how letters provided emotional refuge for soldiers, helping them to hold on to their pre-war identities and maintain a sense of purpose through messages of love, hope, and longing (Damousi 246-247).

This can be seen in an example from the postal museum collection. A correspondence during Second World War between Jimmy and Frieda highlights his longing of being back by her side and giving him a purpose to survive: "I'm sick and tired of the sun dear, how I'd love to be lost with you in a thick London fog, stumbling over everything and everybody in an attempt to find our way along…' (*The Postal Museum*, E17181/38)

The language of love and longing within these letters also played a crucial role in shaping the perception of romantic expression used in future correspondence literature.

Wartime letters frequently contained coded messages, poetic expressions, and symbolic references that influenced personal communication and broader cultural narratives (Twells 740).

For example, a Romanian soldier wrote: "I picked flowers in the mud; keep them in remembrance of me" (Cobb 157). The phrase "flowers in the mud" can be seen as poetic expression through the contrast of a delicate flower in the midst of harshness of the war. Through this symbolic speech the soldier is able to express his feelings indirectly without the risk of breaking censorship or emotional restraint. These expressions allowed them to cope with the terror of war and provided them with a sense of emotional stability.

The longing and uncertainty expressed in these letters have influenced literature, music, and other cultural artifacts. Cooper (17-18) notes that wartime letters inspired many songs, poems, and stories, embedding their themes into collective memory. For instance, the popular song *Roses of Picardy* (1916) by Frederic Weatherly and Haydn Wood became an international hit, illustrating how love letters influenced artistic expression (*Song of America*).

In addition to preserving emotional bonds, love letters played a significant role in shaping personal identity. Soldiers and their loved ones used letters to construct and express idealized versions of themselves. Hunter (171-173) argues that letter writing is not merely an act of communication but also a means of self-creation. Soldiers did not solely present themselves as warriors; they portrayed themselves as loving husbands, devoted sons, and hopeful dreamers (Acton 77-79). Given the dehumanizing effects of war, letters allowed individuals to reclaim and affirm their identities beyond their military roles and hold on to their pre-war selves.

This can be found in the correspondence between Master Sergeant Jesse Lare and Mildred Patterson during World War II. In a letter dated September 27, 1944, Jesse writes: "No, I am not crazy for writing you twice in one day, just head over heels in love with you!" By expressing love and longing, Jesse reinforces his role as a devoted partner, contrasting the dehumanizing aspects of war. Montgomerie reinforces this idea, highlighting the symbolic power of handwritten letters as authentic expressions of deep emotional investment (Damousi 246-247).

Beyond individual identity, wartime letters also reflected broader societal norms, particularly regarding gender roles. Twells (734-735) observes that men often wrote to reassure their partners, while women wrote to sustain and nurture their relationships. Both genders conformed to the expectations of society. Male soldiers expressed longing and determination, while their wives emphasized patience and emotional support. This pattern confirmed traditional gender roles while simultaneously allowing space for emotional expression that might otherwise have been constrained by wartime expectations of masculinity and stoicism (Das 52-60). Love letters captured the complexity of gender identity, contrasting the extremes of social norms and individual expression.

Cultural reflections further shaped the content and meaning of these letters. Through cultural factors, the senders and receivers could communicate with each other, but also connect with other soldiers and families, creating communities. Factors that shaped cultural reflections –such as class, race, and nationality– influenced letter-writing styles and expectations (Greenhalgh 135-136). These had an impact on correspondences and communities. The rigid social structures of the time were evident in many archived letters, particularly in cases where soldiers from marginalized groups

navigated both racial discrimination and military hierarchy. An example is First Lieutenant James William Alston's 1918 letter describing his experience as the only black officer in a French hotel.

He writes "There are about one hundred officers at the hotel and I the only colored one so you know I am lonesome" (Alston 1918). This offers the receiver not only an overview of his situation, but also communicates his feelings of imbalance with other soldiers and loneliness. His reflections on social acceptance and exclusion underscore the broader cultural significance of wartime correspondence (Schwender 235). These letters thus functioned not only as personal confessions but also as artifacts shaped by the sociopolitical contexts of their time. Hence, it allows future generations to experience memories and communities through the written correspondence.

Despite technological advances, handwritten love letters remain powerful expressions of emotion. The authenticity and vulnerability captured in the correspondence create emotional connections that transcend time. While digital communication has become the dominant medium in the twenty-first century, questions remain about its ability to replicate the depth of traditional communication through handwriting. As Montgomerie (45) states, "AI may generate love letters, but it cannot replicate the trembling hand that wrote them." Handwritten communications convey individuality, effort, and emotional weight in ways that digital messages often lack.

Furthermore, the act of handwriting a letter requires intention and dedication, distinguishing it as a more significant gesture than sending a quick text. Carruthers (86-87) suggests that, in an era of instant messaging, the deliberation required for letter writing feels almost radical. This explains the modern resurgence

of handwritten letters as sentimental tokens rather than practical communication tools. Fox (679) similarly argues that while digital messages are fleeting, handwritten letters hold a permanence that enhances their emotional significance. The shift from handwritten to digital love letters has transformed how intimacy, memory, and community are experienced. On the one hand, it is possible through preservation and digitisation to keep the permanence and emotional depth of handwritten letters, which can be shared through generations.

On the other hand, digital messages tend to be fleeting, fragmented and easy to lose. This weakens their role in shaping lasting memories or fostering emotional communities. Unlike the reflective self-expression found in letters, digital communication often lacks narrative and intentionality. As a result, love becomes more immediate but less anchored in personal or collective memory (Fox 680; Hunter 343).

As previously mentioned, the shift from handwritten to digital love letters raises concerns about memory preservation. This concept involves the safekeeping of artifacts and records of the past that include emotional moments. This is evident in the contrasting ways letters and digital messages are handled. While wartime letters have been carefully archived and studied, the same cannot always be said for digital messages.

Cooper (18) questions whether text messages will ever be valued and preserved in the same way as traditional letters. As digital communication becomes the norm, the challenge lies in ensuring that intimate messages are not lost to technological obsolescence.

Nevertheless, online archives and digital preservation efforts are beginning to play a role in safeguarding modern love letters, protecting and preserving the physical letters and digitised

versions, allowing contemporary expressions of affection to be documented for future generations.

In summary, wartime love letters served as more than mere correspondence; they preserved memory, shaped identities, and influenced cultural expressions of love. Despite the evolution of communication methods, the need for emotional connection remains constant. Handwritten letters continue to be cherished for their authenticity and intentionality, standing in contrast to the ephemerality of digital messaging. As Cooper (15) poignantly asks, "Will a text message ever be held the way a love letter is treasured?" This question encourages reflection on how love and intimacy are communicated in the modern world and how these expressions will be preserved for the future.

About the Author

Vanessa Köstner currently works as a Data Steward at the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs at Leiden University. Soon, she will be joining the Open Access Department at the Technical University of Munich. With a Master's in Book and Digital Media Studies, she was able to combine her two main passions: literature and libraries.

Coming from a background in literature with a specialization in British Romanticism, she has always been fascinated by the emotional depth and beauty of written letters and poetry. This fascination evolved into a deeper interest in digital heritage and archiving, where she explored the ways we preserve and provide access to cultural memory. Especially to experience a different side of libraries, as they connect past and present.

Her academic focus was on the digital archiving of audiovisual materials, which allowed her to gain insight into the challenges and possibilities of safeguarding digitised media. She is eager to continue expanding her expertise in this field, particularly with open access, digital preservation, and scholarly communication in mind.

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"Love letters remain powerful expressions of emotion."

Vanessa Köstner


Home
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MARIE ELIŠÁKOVÁ
NAR. 1883
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MORTO 1944
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ELISABETH BENDIX
GEB. BERNHARD
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Pavement Narratives: Exploring Stolpersteine as a Literary Medium in the Fabric of Collective Memory and Digital Age

by Anna Sophia Schwaiger

"A person is only forgotten when his or her name is forgotten" (Talmud).

As people walk through the streets of European cities, their eyes can be drawn to the ground by an unexpected glow. Every day, passersby 'stumble' over these shiny stones that emerge from the pavement and quietly tell stories of a dark past: 'Here lived...' you can read there, 'murdered' or 'liberated'.

The 'Stolpersteine' (literally 'stumble stones') are a memorial installation created by the German artist Gunter Demnig (1947). Covered with a 96 x 96 x 100 mm brass plate bearing a handmade inscription, the artist lays small memorial plaques in the pavements in front of the houses where victims of National Socialism last lived on their own accord. The installation serves to commemorate individuals who were deported and murdered during the Holocaust, committed suicide, fled persecution and death, or were liberated from extermination and punishment camps. The purpose of the Stolpersteine is to preserve the collective memory of those who were systematically targeted by the National Socialists, including Jews, Sinti and Roma, political dissidents, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and victims of euthanasia ("Stolpersteine").

Each stone serves as a poignant reminder of a life lost to National Socialism. The hand-crafted inscription, employing hammer and chisel, briefly documents the victims' fate and confers upon each victim an individuality that differentiates the stone production from that of a mass production. Generic inscriptions are avoided so as not to homogenise this heterogeneous group ("Stolpersteine"). Demnig first installed stones in Cologne and Berlin in January 1995 without official authorisation.

By August 2024, the open-ended project had grown to encompass over 107,000 stones in 32 European countries ("Stolpersteine"). It is the largest decentralised memorial in the world, although it is still only a symbolic fraction of the total number of Holocaust victims, as it would be too great an undertaking for one artist to lay over 6 million handmade stones. Decentralising the stones enables collective remembrance across Europe. Outside of Germany, Stolpersteine were first laid in the Netherlands, which still has the largest number of stones, second only to Germany. Estimates suggest that there are 10,000 Stolpersteine in total, around 1,600 of which are located in Amsterdam (Stichting Stolpersteine).

Since the installation of Stolpersteine is a decentralized and ongoing process managed by various local initiatives, there is no central registry and figures can only be considered estimates. Although Gunter Demnig's foundation maintains a database of the stones he has laid, not all installations are consistently reported or coordinated, especially as the project has expanded internationally.

In order to address the paucity of comprehensive documentation, digitisation initiatives such as Stichting Stolpersteine in the Netherlands have emerged since around 2020, aiming to systematically document and map Stolpersteine,

and to ensure that information about individual stones and their histories is widely accessible through digital platforms.

The Stolperstein is reinstated symbolically within the community (Osborne 384), thus establishing a public connection between the past and present. In 1925, the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) theorised the direct interdependence between contemporary society and the past, which he outlined as follows: "we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings" (6). Stolpersteine represent a form of historical preservation. They mark the locations where the victims experienced the initial horror, whilst restoring their names, narratives and places in society. Halbwachs believed that memories are socially influenced.

Therefore, the collective memory of a group is fundamental to the formation of cultural identity, the culture of remembrance and the historical reappraisal of a group (Halbwachs 38). Jan and Aleida Assmann later differentiated collective memory into communicative memory (based on oral tradition) and cultural memory. Cultural memory includes long-term, formalised memories maintained through media communication and plays an elementary role in forming collective identities (Assmann 119). The increasing digitisation of Stolpersteine should further strengthen the memorial's role in cultural memory. As memorial stones, Stolpersteine serve as what the historian Pierre Nora calls "lieux de mémoire" (places of remembrance), to crystallise collective and influence cultural memory (Nora 7).

The article examines how Stolpersteine are used as a literary medium to shape collective memory and develop a culture of remembrance in the digital age. Combining book and literary studies with approaches from cultural and memory research, the

paper argues for recognising Stolpersteine as a literary medium. It, thus, aims to improve understanding of innovative historical communication, as well as to extend the methods of book studies to non-traditional text carriers in the public sphere. The article will first provide an insight into Stolpersteine as a literary medium and then outline their significance for collective memory in the context of digital culture.

Stolpersteine as a literary medium

The Stolperstein is distinguished by an inscribed text that conveys information about the victims' lives factually and concisely. It can thus be regarded as a textual medium (Wrobel). For a textual medium is primarily characterised by objectivity and serves the functional communication of information, for example an instruction manual. However, taking it a step further, I regard Stolpersteine as a literary medium as well, characterised by a greater emphasis on linguistic and aesthetic design to achieve a narrative and emotional effect.

Literary studies have often shown how 'memory' is processed in individual genres and how the culture of remembrance is represented narratively. Stolpersteine are part of the culture of remembrance in response to the crimes of National Socialism. They speak for the victims of the Holocaust and are thus an expression of a 'narrative memory' that retrospectively raises the voices of the victims. Publicly situated, these stones are a medium of communication (Gumpert and Drucker 258), offering a permanent auditory presence to the victims' stories.

In addition, the inscriptions challenge interpretations and, as an integral component of the memorial, they evoke emotional responses. It's only through the textual inscription that the political impact of the stone and its capacity for remembrance are realised.

The inscription on each Stolperstein is in the language of the country where it is installed. Despite these language differences, the stones follow transnational linguistic rules (253). The inscription starts with 'Here lived', followed by the victim's name and details of the person's life and fate: deported, murdered (including place and year) or 'fate unknown'. The word 'emigrated' is replaced by 'escaped' (including year and place of escape). Suicides are described as 'escape into death', and for survivors of a concentration camp, the word choice is 'liberated' instead of 'survived'.

It is a concise narrative of its own, pillorying the horrors of National Socialism. The brevity of the inscribed text does not contradict its definition as a literary medium. In literary research, there has been extensive discussion of 'traumatic pasts' in written mediums. Astrid Erll argues that the constraints and capacities of literary representation are revealed within the framework of remembering violent histories (Erll 2). This view is corroborated by contemporary witnesses, such as Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, who explained that "the things we had to say were so monstrous that they would be incredible. […] We became aware that our language lacked words to express this offence, the demolition of a man" (Levi 17).

The Stolperstein directly refers to such gruesome events, at which point literary memory reaches its linguistic limits. In the words of Ruth Leys: "A crisis manifested at the level of language itself" (Leys 267). The brevity and documentary character of the inscription thus creates a new form of communication that considers the limits of language and can be understood as a literary expression in the framework of violent history. As described by Levi, the limits of linguistic representation are such that it is impossible to provide a more comprehensive account;

there are simply insufficient words to adequately express the past. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the events should be kept silent. Instead, the Stolperstein offers a middle ground: it names the historical facts, while the deeper meaning must be individually created by each observer. In this manner, Stolpersteine elicit contemplation not solely on the events they commemorate, but also on the profound challenge of narratively articulating traumatic pasts and loss.

Oliver Jahraus, a German literary and cultural scholar, conceptualises the role of literature as a mediating element in the structuring of individual consciousness and social communication. According to Jahraus, the meaning of a literary text is each being constituted and processed as part of an interpretive act (Jahraus 2), in the interaction between text and reader (reception). This process is evident in the Stolpersteine, which function as text carriers in the public sphere (a mode of communication) that only develop their full function as a medium of remembrance through the individual interpretation (conscious engagement) of the inscriptions they carry. In this process a production and reflection of meaning takes place, which in turn enables social communication about the stories associated with the inscription and, if you will, enables the establishment of a social ethic of remembering the Holocaust.

Simultaneously, the individual interpretation can never fully exhaust the potential of a text, so that a surplus of meaning inevitably remains. This is evident in the Stolpersteine, where it is impossible to fully comprehend the past behind each inscription. The inscription on the stones has a documentary character, but not an explanatory one that would instruct the recipients or already interpret what is written, thus inviting ongoing reflection and interpretation by each recipient.

Therefore, the reception of the Stolperstein "relies entirely on existing sources of Holocaust memory" (Harjes 147). This concerns the required prior knowledge of the recipients, the archival and document research on the fate of the deportees, as well as other textual documents, such as those provided by relatives as part of the digitisation of the stones. Paratexts accompany the Stolpersteine and influence how they are received.

The framework within which the meaning of the Stolperstein is generated thus moves between individual perception and the existing knowledge of a collective culture of remembrance. The individual emotionally charged encounter with the Stolperstein, prompted by reading its inscription, is fundamental to its effectiveness as a memorial. The reception of the text inscription is therefore decisive. The way someone 'stumbles' over the stone, accompanied by a moment of pause and reflection, illustrates how the stone functions as a literary medium, where remembrance is not considered fixed but actively created and processed through personal interpretation – precisely as Jahraus defines the function of a literary medium.

Stolpersteine can only be fully comprehended when their literary capacity is considered. In this sense, the Stolperstein can be conceptualised as a literary medium, particularly in the context of digitalisation, where the stones' literary potential is expanded into the digital realm.

Digital Age

As a literary medium and a means of communication, Stolpersteine are not passive conduits for memory. In contrast, they can be regarded as a dynamic repository, through which past times are actively expressed, a "technology of memory", as media scholar Marita Sturken puts it (Sturken 9). Emphasizing that

memory is not merely transmitted, but rather shaped, structured and mediated by specific objects, practices, and media, with the Stolperstein serving as a notable example. These stones serve not only as vessels of historical memory but also play a continuous role in shaping historical interpretation and fostering public engagement.

By expanding the Stolperstein into digital space, it can be adapted and reconfigured within a dynamic culture of remembrance that spans social groups, historical periods and media environments. The digitised Stolpersteine deal with traumatic stories, while their performative dimensions extend further into public space. The advent of digitisation has led to new ways of remembering the Holocaust within a digital culture of commemoration that needs to be further explored (e.g. Glawion).

Since 2020, Demnig and his team have been working on a freely accessible database to provide information about Stolpersteine with a digital street map. The digitisation process transforms the locally bound memorial stones into nodes of a dynamic network. This network helps to fill the narrative gaps in the victims' biographies across QR codes, online archives and linked biographies. The project relies on the voluntary participation of relatives, who provide supplementary material (e.g. letters, photos, audio samples) for the reconstruction of the respective victims' identities and fates. They also give legal consent to the digital publication and digitisation of the stones ("Stolpersteine").

Since this consent is given voluntarily and not all relatives choose to participate, gaps may remain in the digital documentation and in the reconstruction of some victims' histories. The digital availability of additional information elevates the victim's identity from a mere name on the stone to a person fully remembered, thus strengthening the role of individuality in honouring the

victims (Osborne 381). Simultaneously, the listing of previously laid stones establishes a digital, translocal and transnational network for researching and remembering the Nazi past. The addition of these documents extends the archival function of the Stolpersteine by further uncovering and preserving aspects of contemporary history.

These supplementary sources also reinforce the argument for regarding Stolpersteine as a literary medium, as they introduce further personal testimonies and multi-layered narratives, which serve to transform the stones from mere textual objects into dynamic repositories of memory, interpretation, and storytelling. This expanded context also influences the interpretative act of reading: the additional digital documentation ensures that the meaning of the inscription is shaped not only by the recipient's emotional response but is additionally informed by historical documents and contextual information.

The inclusion of these text-based documents facilitates the establishment of intertextual relationships between the stone, the digital text and paratexts, which collectively serve to frame and enrich the stone's inscription. This process establishes the literariness of the Stolpersteine on both a physical and digital level: the stone's textual core is augmented by digital information. This corresponds to a hypertext system in which linked biographies expand the stone inscription into a multi-perspective narrative, creating a non-linear text structure with a hypertextual network. The Stolperstein can thus be conceptualised as a hybrid literary medium, realised through the interaction between stone, user and digital network, and developing its literary potential through its digitisation.

The digitisation of Stolpersteine is progressing in leaps and bounds, with apps and databases enhancing the stories of life and

suffering while making history and remembrance visible in digital space. Often subsidised by the state as part of political education work, these apps allow users to explore the history behind the Stolpersteine in the place where it was written.

In Germany, notable examples include the open network Erinnerungskultur digital ("ERDI"), the Stolperstein Guide App for Saxony (developed in 2020/21), and the digitisation project Stolpersteine NRW by Westdeutscher Rundfunk. Stolpersteine have been digitally mapped and recorded as virtual memorials using Google Maps APIs (Bose). Smartphone cameras scan the Stolpersteine on-site and immediately provide supplementary information, including personal letters from the victims, historical photographs, and GPS coordinates that delineate routes from one Stolperstein to the next. The digitised content is sourced not only from relatives but also from the Israeli memorial site Yad Vashem, memorial books from the German Federal Archives and analogue archive files (Oellig).

The physical Stolpersteine are extended virtually through augmented reality, with the potential for interactive elements such as the lighting of a digital candle or the placement of a personalised, public message of support on the 'digital stone'. These comments are then made accessible to other users, thus facilitating a novel form of participation in collective remembrance. Connected by the Stolpersteine and their associated stories, individuals gather in the virtual realm to engage in digital remembrance, thereby forming a digital memorial community. The Stolpersteine thus function as a unifying element. Public acts of commemoration, such as the sharing of emotions through the comments, cultivate a sense of belonging and foster collective memory and emotional solidarity that transcends both geographical and temporal boundaries. The public visibility of these comments allows even

silent readers to be part of this commemorative community. In this way, public remembrance becomes an inclusive practice, enabling participation by all individuals, irrespective of whether they elect to contribute a digital comment or engage silently in private reflection. Digitisation thus has the potential to strengthen the sense of community in collective remembrance.

Concurrently, the public visibility of the comments facilitates a 'social reading' that exerts further influence on the (shared) reception of the stones. While the open accessibility of the comments section promotes inclusivity, it also raises significant questions regarding the moderation of inappropriate or offensive content, particularly in the sensitive context of Holocaust remembrance. A systematic examination of how digital memorial platforms navigate the tension between openness and content regulation promises to yield valuable insights into the governance and dynamics of public digital commemorative cultures.

The number of digital stones is also growing in other countries, including the Netherlands. In 2024, Stichting Stolpersteine, the Dutch initiative supporting the Stolperstein project, developed a digital Stolperstein app together with students from Fontys University. The app uses a similar principle to bring the stories of 15,000 Stolpersteine in the Netherlands and Belgium to life digitally. The War Sources Database in Amsterdam supplements the app by providing information on deportations, family members, birthdays and survivors via a map ("Innovative Stolpersteine App").

By digitising Stolpersteine and placing the memorials in a digital public sphere, the Stolperstein project exponentially expands its influence on the contemporary cultures of remembrance. For "[t]he more inclusive a memorial or commemorative practice, the more it will contribute to collective identity" (Harjes 140).

At the heart of this is a commemorative experience that includes empathy and social responsibility, helping to preserve the memory of the horrors of the Nazi era across generations. Digitisation strengthens the social function and longevity of remembrance and offers foreign cultural heritage communities low-threshold access to the practices of remembrance for the victims of the Holocaust. The digitised Stolpersteine, for instance, further enable immigrant communities from countries without a tradition of collective Holocaust remembrance to gain insight into and participate in European commemorative practices.

Topicality and relevance – moving into the future with memory

The Stolperstein is a repository of knowledge, a catalyst for cultural identity and new (digital) discourses. Digitisation, in particular, can promote interaction between the Stolperstein and the individual by supporting the fundamental process that underpins a culture of remembrance: the continuation and updating of memory. This remembrance is largely characterised and guided by literary products, including archive documents (in the preparation for the stone setting), short biographies (in the digital reception) and the stone itself (textual inscription).

Understanding the Stolperstein as a literary medium opens new fields of research and opportunities to perceive the stones as a mediating medium of communication in a transnational culture of remembrance. Further fields of research can be found in the aesthetics of reception in public spaces (e.g. how does reading in passing differ from traditional literary reception?) and in participatory literary research (e.g. how can the participation of citizens in 'Stolperstein research' create new forms of collective writing and remembrance?). In general, the participation

of citizens in Stolperstein research decentralises knowledge production, as lay researchers become co-authors of the victims' biographies. For them, as for the general public, the act of remembrance is not merely a matter of looking back, but rather it is a constant effort to look towards the future. We are currently at a stage where the final generation of direct witnesses to the Holocaust is gradually passing away. Their accounts are entrusted to succeeding generations, who are responsible for preserving the past and nurturing a culture of remembrance.

One contemporary approach to this endeavour involves the creation of digital spaces dedicated to commemoration. Whether this new approach – and, consequently, the transition to succeeding generations – will be successful, and to what extent collective memory is diverging from history, still remains a matter of speculation. The social acceptance of the Stolperstein project, both in Germany and elsewhere, is indicative of a fundamental willingness to anchor Holocaust remembrance in everyday society.

In the context of mounting anti-Semitism, Stolpersteine have at times become the target of acts of defacement and destruction. These commemorative stones have been referred to as 'stones of offence' and are occasionally forcibly removed or vandalised (Meisner). As political sentiments have an impact on the perception and reception of the stones, it is important that the role and significance of the Stolpersteine in and for the collective memory be continuously protected.

Consequently, Stolpersteine have been associated not only with commemorating victims of the Holocaust but also symbolically represent a commitment to combat all forms of dehumanising violence against Jewish people and minorities. In the post-catastrophic archive, where only ash remains (Derrida

94), it is even more important to preserve the stories of those who once were silenced, ensuring that their names are not forgotten. The Stolperstein as a literary medium keeps these stories alive, as the stones speak through their inscriptions and digitised texts. And therefore, some stones are worth stumbling over.

About the Author

Anna Sophia Schwaiger was born in Nuremberg, Germany, in 2001. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Book Studies and German Literature and Language from Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg. She is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Textual Cultures and Digital Transformation at the Institute of Book Studies in Erlangen.

Her academic interests focus on the intersection of literary and book studies, particularly the mediation of literature and literary content, and the general significance of literature in society. She is fascinated by the multiple voices within literary texts, with a particular emphasis on socio-political and religious dimensions and how these voices shape and reflect literary discourses and society.

Additional research interests include Jewish and Christian references in literary works. Alongside her studies, she works as a student assistant in the University's Office of Research and at the Institute of Book Studies.

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"A culture of remembrance: *the continuation and updating of memory."*

Anna Sophia Schwaiger


everything
is
fine
love,
your
government
x
Margaret Atwood
The Handmaid's Tale

On Memory, Autobiographical Writing and Resistance: Deconstructing Gilead's Strategies of Surveillance and Book Censorship in Margaret Atwood's The Testaments

by Niki Karamanidou

The role that memory plays in the construction and preservation of a community across time constitutes a major concern of Atwood's duology, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood skilfully raises the question of what happens when communal memory is manipulated by the authoritative power that governs the community. Or even worse, when communal memory is completely erased for the benefit of the selected elite.

Throughout the novel *The Testaments* (2019), a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), it is shown that a community can easily fall victim to the appetite of a greedy patriarchal dictatorship when rich sources of memory, such as books and historical records, are censored.

The story is set in the dystopian Republic of Gilead—formerly the USA—a tyrannical, patriarchal regime ruled by an authoritarian military organisation, the Sons of Jacob, who have assassinated the members of the former democratic government and taken control of all social and political affairs. In this patriarchal society, women are placed in casts according to their role and purpose in the society:

- The 'Reproduction for Handmaids', who are assigned to a Commander in order to bring them an heir,
- The 'Servitude for Marthas', who are responsible for the domestic affairs of the Governor's houses, such as cooking and cleaning,
- The 'Aunts', who study theological texts and legislation of laws that dictate women's social status,
- The 'Wives' who bear a purely decorative role.

All matters of authority and power are placed in the hands of men, who govern and control society through the enforcement of a strictly religious social code that dictates and prescribes every aspect of social and individual organisation.

The Handmaid's Tale is a product of a rather turbulent socio-political period, that is the 1980s. Celeste Deale argues that "Atwood drew on biblical themes, Puritan history, and the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu to construct Gilead's social and political order and comment on American and international politics of the 1980s" (5).

Deale explains how Atwood's desire to discuss the complex, social, theological and political conditions of the 1980s and their effect on the establishment of physical standards of women and their self-determination led to a seminal novel which continues to have a great impact on society, literature and cinema. *The Testaments* explores the insidious surveillance and censorship of communal memory in Gilead in depth, and shows that the discussion of the patriarchal efforts to subjugate and manipulate the female body through censorship is still relevant today, perhaps more so than ever.

Although previous research, such as the work of Manshi Yadav and Palak Arora, has touched upon the importance of architecture, identical social grouping and language in the

formation of communal memory, little has been explored in terms of how books, diaries and historical records affect communal memory in relation to Atwood's duology *The Handmaid's Tale*. More specifically, Yadav and Arora argue that "[m]emory culture extends beyond mere recollection of historical events; it involves creating a collective identity and socially constructing meaning" (6).

This paper intends to contribute to the existing debate by exploring how communal memory and its manipulation can be traced in the exact absence and destruction of literary and historical works. This censorship and destruction are partially responsible for the foundation of the authoritarian Republic of Gilead and the consequent control of the female body.

More specifically, the paper focuses on the central character of Aunt Lydia, who is the headmistress of Ardua Hall, the place where women are trained to become Aunts. Aunt Lydia, who was a judge in the former democratic republic, represents the most emblematic case of resistance against Gilead's authoritative rulers, insidiously fighting the regime's practices as she is considered to be one of the patriarchal system's most valuable collaborators.

As this paper argues, Aunt Lydia's most powerful weapon and mode of survival throughout her gradual ascension in Gilead's social pyramid is her close connection to the last remnants of communal memory, that is, the forbidden archives, books and records that remain hidden within Ardua Hall, and most importantly, her autobiographical work.

The present paper is divided into two sections, the first of which explores the authoritarian regime's practice of surveillance and Aunt Lydia's efforts to secretly preserve communal memory. The second section discusses the systematic censorship exercised by the patriarchal regime, which aims to empower the regime itself

and the active resistance against this censorship of communal memory.

Surveillance, Autobiographical Memory and the Recording and Preservation of Communal Memory

In order to examine communal memory, it is crucial to first analyse individual units of memory and how these constitute a part of communal memory. The importance of Aunt Lydia's recollection of her past life, the trials she faced when she was arrested by the Sons of Jacob and the moral sacrifices she had to make to secure her life and overthrow Gilead's authoritarian system, is best reflected in her systematic 'conversation' with the hypothetical reader of her autobiography. Jennifer Wallach argues that "Autobiography […] can give us a unique window into the interplay of thoughts and feelings, into how the universe felt from one particular point of view" (448).

In the chapters narrated by Aunt Lydia, the heroine expresses her feelings, thoughts and hopes for the future. She records memories of her childhood and past adult life, and connects them to her current state, offering a subjective experience of a woman's life in Gilead. For instance, she recounts that as a child she had read a book called *Aesop's Fables*, which she had borrowed from her school library. Of the fables, she remained ensnared by the one in which the characters Fox and Cat discuss their different strategies of evading the hunters and their dogs (Atwood 254).

After Gilead, she used to ask herself whether she was the cat, who climbs a tree when in trouble and observes carefully, or the fox, who uses her cunning and tricks but is ultimately killed (Atwood 254). In this act of recalling, Aunt Lydia juxtaposes her childhood memory with her adult life, as comparing herself to Cat, who survives through the act of climbing the tree, just as

she survives by adapting to the new regime and climbing Gilead's social ladder through complicity and cooperation.

The series of chapters narrated by Aunt Lydia, as there are other narrators in the novel as well, describe her gradual transformation into a powerful Aunt in the authoritarian Gilead. Through her memories, Aunt Lydia is able to hold on to the lost aspects of her former life. A life where men and women had equal rights. She begins her narration by explaining that "[o]nce before the advent of the present regime […] [she] was a family court judge, a position [she]'d gained through decades of hardscrabble work and arduous professional climbing, and [she] had been performing that function as equitably as [she] could" (Atwood 36).

She appears to take great pride in her previous occupation, education and professional success, and she bitterly comments that she had hoped that her virtue would be praised until the day she was captured (Atwood 36). Through the elaborate narration of Aunt Lydia's memories, Atwood aims to stress the importance of individual and communal memory for the preservation of a communal identity, whereby Aunt Lydia's autobiography contributes to the body of communal memory that Gilead tries to obliterate.

More specifically, as Aunt Lydia addresses her hypothetical reader, who could be anyone, her words keep her memories alive in a regime where memory is heavily censored and surveilled. It is not a coincidence that at the time she reminisces about her old life, there is a closing hymn playing, written by the Sons of Jacob, which goes as such:

> "Under His Eye our beams of truth shine out, We all sin;
> We shall observe you at your goings-out. Your comings

> in. From every heart we wrench the secret vice" (Atwood 34).

The hymn constitutes both a warning and a threat to the Aunts in Ardua Hall, where every movement is monitored and every vice is punished.

It becomes obvious that the aim of Gilead's surveillance and social monitoring is to discourage any disruption to the approved communal memory. Surveillance prevents women from having access to books, historical records and any other artefacts that may evoke feelings of nostalgia for the old democratic society. The new communal memory is dictated by the regime's patriarchal interpretation of the Bible, which buried the previous sense of communal memory.

This transition is expressed symbolically in the novel, as Aunt Lydia describes that the elite force of spies, namely the "Eyes hold sway in a former grand library. It now shelters no books but their own, the original contents having been either burned or, if valuable, added to the private collections of various sticky-fingered Commanders" (Atwood 63). Books and memoirs, the backbone of communal memory, have been replaced by new texts designed to construct and maintain a new kind of communal memory intended to keep women subdued and compliant.

This state of affairs, as portrayed in the fictional world of Gilead, is a deliberate attempt to expose an underlying sickness in our society. Deale stresses that "Gilead served as a wake-up call to the world around us. With the re-election of former President Trump in the 2024 election, Christian nationalist voices have become louder and stronger than they have ever been" (23).

It is for this exact reason that Atwood's sequel is invaluable in discussing the dangers of political efforts to create a communal

memory and a conservative framework that aims to control the female body, voice and rights.

Aunt Lydia's autobiographical passages serve not only as a personal record of memories and feelings, but also as an effort to preserve the communal memory that Gilead's regime wishes to completely obliterate. More specifically, the character argues that sometimes she considers herself as "the Recording Angel, collecting together all the sins of Gilead" (Atwood 277).

Her act of collecting documents and recording information concerning Gilead's members from all walks of life enables the preservation of a hidden memory bank, which Aunt Lydia aims to bring back to the light, to expose the Commanders' corruption and suppression of the actual communal memory.

Interestingly, her collection of hidden works includes "[her] personal selection of prescribed books, off-limits to the lower ranks. *Jane Eyre*, *Anna Karenina* … [along with] another set of files, accessible only to a very few… the secret histories of Gilead" (Atwood 35), all of which are accessible to her because of her involvement in Gilead's political affairs. Yadav and Arora highlight that in *The Testaments* "individuals' memories are tinted with limited accessible knowledge, ensuing a generation with a cultural memory of 'mis- communicated' theocracy" (4).

Therefore, Aunt Lydia's recording constitutes an act of defiance and a practice that aims to retrieve and restore this inaccessible memory. Finally, Aunt Lydia further supports the preservation of suppressed communal memory by sharing this secret treasury of memories and records with some trusted students in Ardua Hall. All in all, Aunt Lydia's autobiography constitutes an indicative example of resistance, resilience and active remembrance.

Censoring Communal Memory, the Birth of Gilead and Resistance

From the very first chapter of the novel, Aunt Lydia is seen pondering the creation of a monument, a stone statue erected "as a small token of appreciation for [her] many contributions" (Atwood 3) to the Republic of Gilead, thus acknowledging her complicity in the perpetuation of this authoritarian system. Immediately after this reflection, Aunt Lydia touches upon the predicament of the censored communal memory, explaining that she "write[s] these words in [her] private sanctum within the library of Ardua Hall — one of the few libraries remaining after the enthusiastic book burnings that have been going on across our land" (Atwood 4).

This practice of book burning is a motif present in many dystopian novels and echoes the dangers of censorship in an authoritarian system. The most characteristic literary example is Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 45*, which is concerned with the practice of book burning as a strategy for manipulating society and turning its members into subjects with no will or resistance left in them.

In *The Testaments*, book-burning has the same effect on the community, denying its members access to the unapproved body of communal memory that might otherwise unite and empower them. Aunt Lydia proceeds to criticise the practice of book-burning, repeating humorously Gilead's philosophy that "the corrupt and blood-smeared fingerprints of the past must be wiped away to create a space for the morally pure generation that is surely about to arrive. Such is the theory" (Atwood 4).

Pierre Nora argues that:

> "[in a nation's] -symbolic history, which points up the links between the material base of social existence and the most elaborate productions of culture and thought […] the goal is […] to show how each element reflects the whole and is involved in the entire national history" (xix).

In the case of Gilead's authoritarian regime, the goal appears to be quite the opposite. The previous system of social organisation has been deemed inconvenient to the patriarchal leaders of the new status quo.

Therefore, their first strategy to take control is to dispel any potential connection to the past democratic values. This can only be achieved through the complete obliteration of the significant carriers of communal memory, i.e., books and historical works. The terms 'bloody', 'pure', and 'corrupt' are used to emotionally manipulate public sympathy for their cause. More specifically, they are employed by the patriarchal leaders in order to justify the atrocity of book burning. They frame it within a theological narrative that dictates the creation of a new, pure society, which is expected to blindly follow the patriarchal leaders, claiming to be God's messengers.

Aunt Lydia's criticism of the current state of society becomes apparent as she explicitly addresses the reader, confessing that over "the years [she has] buried a lot of bones; [and] now [she is] inclined to dig them up again" (Atwood 5) if only for the edification of the unknown reader. The heroine thus enters into an unofficial contract with the reader, promising to reveal truths that she has helped to bury. Aunt Lydia's address to the reader is an interesting authorial choice that creates proximity with the reader and encourages them to pay close attention to the series of

revelations and testaments that are to follow.

In order to access the historical artefacts and books, which are the remnants of communal memory, Aunt Lydia has inevitably had to sacrifice the values she used to uphold in order to cooperate with the corrupt, authoritarian leaders who have butchered equality and democracy. However, it can be argued that her degree of complicity is actually what enables her to insidiously fight the very political system she serves.

In particular, Aunt Lydia explains to the reader that knowledge "can be made profitable in non-monetary ways: knowledge is power, especially discreditable knowledge" (Atwood 35). The power of knowledge is the key to bringing down Gilead's patriarchal tyrants, as this paper argues. In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault argues that power "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (119). Aunt Lydia's power is both the source and product of knowledge and classified information, as she has access to this information because of her powerful role in the hierarchy through her complicity.

Through the character of Aunt Lydia and her active role in the preservation of communal memory, Atwood underlines the importance of active resistance to any efforts that seek to manipulate memory and knowledge in order to control and oppress communities. She reminds the unknown, universal reader that freedom and democracy are values to be constantly demanded and fought for.

Furthermore, it is through the control and dissemination of hidden knowledge that Aunt Lydia manages to disempower Gilead's authoritarian structures, as she starts handing out pieces of that knowledge to Agnes Jemima, one of the students in Ardua Hall. Thus, from a Foucauldian perspective, Aunt Lydia gains more power through the dissemination of knowledge to her associate,

since Agnes and the body of classified knowledge are utilized for the deconstruction of Gilead.

Agnes, who was taken in by Aunt Lydia at Ardua Hall to save her from marrying the powerful Commander Judd and so becoming one of her spies, narrates how Aunt Lydia started to hide various records and books under her desk "all [of which] held evidence of various crimes" (Atwood 305-7). This practice of information dissemination signals Agnes' gradual transformation into Aunt Lydia's agent, as she is to transfer this classified information to Canada.

Through Aunt Lydia's and Agnes's collaboration, the author comments on the determining role of active collaboration between members of a community for the preservation of communal memory. She also comments on the importance of collaboration for the preservation of the community itself.

Yadav and Arora argue that "The idea of memory as a construct of collective remembrance has been toiled over by psychologists and anthropologists" (3), and indeed in the novel, memory appears to function as the backbone that holds the body of the community together.

The novel ends with Aunt Lydia's successful mission to expose Gilead's corruption to the Canadian state, which can now openly oppose Gilead's corrupt government, and to preserve and restore the supressed communal memory she has saved from destruction.

In the final chapter of her autobiography, she reveals her plan to end her life so as not to become a liability should she be captured by Gilead's authorities. Louis Althusser has discussed in his work on state apparatuses and ideology that a subject is a being "who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission" (701).

During the Gilead regime, Aunt Lydia pretends to be a subject who bows to Gilead's authority, but the reader knows that she has neither renounced her freedom nor submitted to the enforced destruction of communal memory.

Her initial collaboration with the regime, apart from being a survival strategy, can be seen as a way to ensure that she would actually take part in shaping the political framework, in order to take it down at the right time. Finally, her decision to sacrifice her life for the benefit of her community is what liberates the character from the subjection she has been forced to endure. The heroine tenderly addresses the reader for the last time, imploring them to treat her autobiography as "a fragile treasure box, to be opened with the utmost care" (Atwood 403).

In this sentimental address to the unknown reader, who is compared to a close friend throughout the novel, Aunt Lydia acknowledges the importance of the discourse that takes place between her and the reader. More significantly, she highlights the importance of her autobiography both as a record of her existence and as a more authentic account of Gilead.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the importance of autobiographies for the preservation of individual and communal memory in Margaret Atwood's The Testaments. Memory has been examined as a central component and requirement for the constitution of a democratic society. It is in this light that the censorship and control of communal memory and the destruction of literary works appear to have contributed to the rise and thriving of authoritarian regimes. The paper has commented on the author's emphasis on the importance of active resistance and communal cooperation for the preservation of communal memory and communal

well-being, in situations in which such values are threatened by misinformation, manipulation and injustice.

It has also illustrated the significance of The Testaments as a literary narrative that gives voice to the concerns regarding the current socio-political conditions, whereby authoritarian systems that censor memory and knowledge are either already present or just around the corner. Atwood appears to emphasize through the absence and destruction of books and records in Gilead, the restorative and revolutionary power of autobiographical writing.

Finally, this paper has exemplified how Aunt Lydia's practice of autobiographical writing, remembrance, as well as the records she kept, are not only a powerful example of resistance, but also a testimony, or rather a testament to the inestimable value of books and memories to a community.

About the Author

Niki-Grigoria Karamanidou is an independent scholar and EFL teacher focused on literature-based education. She has received a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature and a Master's degree in English and American studies, both from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

Her research interests touch upon selected works of Native American literature in relation to issues of environmental destruction and its close connection to identity, space, social injustice, dislocation, and transcultural negotiations.

She has presented in the 4th "Eco-nnections: The Humanities in a Time of Climate Change" Symposium in the NKUA in Athens (2024), in the SANAS Biennial Conference "American Futurisms" in Geneva (2024), and in the "American Indian Workshop" of the University of Madrid (2025).

Amongst her works are the following: "On Care and Agency: Examining the Revolutionary Reading, Writing and Book Sharing Experiences in Markus Zusak's The Book Thief (2007), published in TXT (2024), "Voice and Silence of the Gendered Subaltern in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein", published in the SASE Journal (2025) as well as "After the Ruin: Narrating Ecological Disaster and Envisioning Communal Restoration in Thomas King's The Back of the Turtle", which is to be published in 2025.

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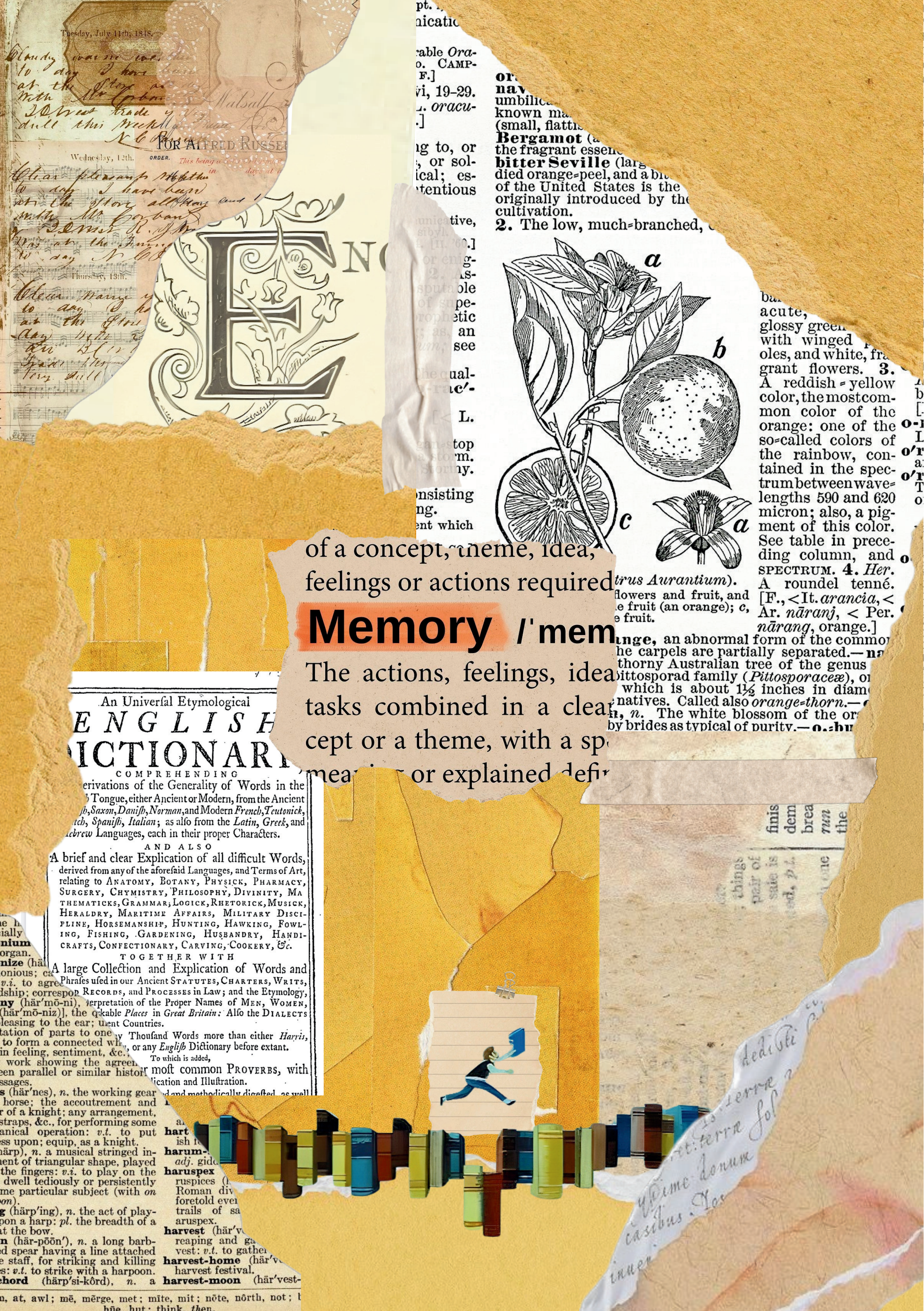
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English, Empowerment, Exclusion?

by Bertus van Rooy

English has become the most commonly used language around the world and dominates the other languages when it comes to the publication of books of all kinds: literary, academic, technical writing and popular non-fiction. The dominance is not due to the large number of first-language speakers that English has, as other large first-language communities like Mandarin Chinese, Hindi or Spanish do not rival English in the total volume of printed or online publications. Rather, English has attained this position because of the very many second-language speakers who select English as a medium of written communication, which is in turn the consequence of historical events related to 19th-century colonisation and 20th-century, post-World War II globalisation (Van Rooy).

The quest for a lingua franca is a long-standing one, motivated by the desire for better communication across linguistic and cultural barriers. To succeed in the quest, such a language has to be used and understood in a similar manner, which serves as a force that promotes the convergence of linguistic choices made by the many users. Yet, the converging force of a shared language does not exist in isolation – it is always counterbalanced by diverging forces. Divergence is not only manifested in different languages, but also in different ways of using "the same language".

Individual speakers, seeking to make their acts of communication stand out, invent new expressions that set them apart from other users of the same language. Such inventiveness is seen in literary creativity and in advertising, in impromptu performances of street poets and the verbal gymnastics of

politicians, but even in the day-to-day communication of ordinary people. Differentiation is not only individual, though, but also functions at a group level of various orders of magnitude. Typical ways of using a particular language are often associated with groups of people – groups that come about in a range of ways, such as people living in a particular area who are sometimes regarded as speaking a particular dialect, or people who regularly engage in the same activity and develop activity-specific language, such as lawyers or sporting fans.

The use of a common language suggests that a global community of English users comes into existence. Such a community builds a single set of memories through their writing for a global audience, who in turn acts as the global readership to come to share those memories. The memories are created by reading and writing, but to the extent that there is an asymmetry in who gets to read and write, the promise of a global community does not actually materialise. Various interests and processes compete in this global community. Such competition often plays out linguistically as competition between convergence and divergence in the use of English.

Let us look at two examples of such competition, before trying to think through the implications for the kinds of communities that form around English books, and the kinds of memories that are preserved.

The first example concerns the public field of translation, focussing on the intra-lingual translation of the Harry Potter novels from British to American English. The second concerns the invisible practice of editing academic texts, often with a requirement that a text by a non-native speaker be checked by a native speaker. The issues boil down to simple questions about the choices that are available: who gets to read what, who gets to write

what, and under what conditions and constraints do people write.

Writers often choose English to share their writing because they believe that this will enable them to reach a wider audience. For a native speaker like J.K. Rowling, the author of the *Harry Potter* series, this was a self-evident choice, not one that she has written about or was asked about extensively in interviews. When Rowling wrote the *Harry Potter* novels, she chose more than just "English".

She chose a particular brand of English that we usually refer to as British English (henceforth BrE). BrE itself is not a unitary thing, since it includes regional and social diversity, but for the sake of argument, one can take BrE as something established in its own right, that can be differentiated from American English. J.K. Rowling's BrE includes representations of regional and class dialects within English (and also from the rest of the British Isles).

This is exemplified, for instance, by the words of the character Hagrid imitating the West County dialect of English, as examined by Rika Santika. She identifies how Hagrid drops final consonants like /t/, /d/ or /v/ in words like *just*, *first*, *and*, and *of*, shown through the orthographic imitations *jus*', *firs*', *an*' and *o*' (27-29); how he reduces the vowels in the pronunciation of function words like *to*, *you*, *your* and *for* to *ter*, *yeh*, *yer* and *fer* (30); and how he adjusts his grammar through auxiliary verb omission ('I Ø bin waitin' fer half an hour already.') or double negation ('That wasn' no werewolf an' it wasn' no unicorn, neither," (32). The internal divergences within BrE are used as part of a characterisation technique that ultimately serves as a vehicle for social criticism in the novels.

The *Harry Potter* novels also reflect, more generally, lexis that is characteristic of widespread (including standard) usage in Britain. Some of these lexical choices are relatively unused in the

relevant senses in the United States, such as the words *crumpets*, *rubbish*, *blimey*, or *pitch*, which, as Philip Nel points out, were changed ("translated into American English") in the American editions, especially of the first few *Harry Potter* novels. This is not a discovery of some veiled truth; the American publisher did so openly. The American editor, Arthur Levine, collaborated with JK Rowling in making these changes, in order to ensure maximal accessibility of the novel for young American readers.

Nel observes that the practice is not limited to the *Harry Potter* series, but well-established. It is also asymmetrical: American readers are given Americanised versions of British texts, but non-American readers are seldom given Briticised (or Australianised, Dutchified or Indianised) versions of American texts. The divergences of BrE are coerced into convergence with American English for the apparent reason that American children would not understand the text well enough to enjoy a pleasurable experience.

British content is occasionally adjusted as part of the endeavour. To take a closer look at one example, Nel points to an important change of the quidditch *pitch* changed to quidditch *field* (268), where the idea of a pitch evokes associations with the game of cricket, popular in Britain but relatively unknown in the USA. Further cricketing allusions in the British text, e.g. to the potentially indefinite, or at least open-ended and potentially very long duration of a quidditch game, are thus lost on the (American) reader. We observe that, as part of the linguistic coercion, substance can also be erased from the text and thus ultimately not be available to become part of the global storehouse of memories. Thus, the contribution of different writers in English to the global storehouse becomes asymmetric.

The editing of academic texts is another form of textual rewriting that forces convergence in an asymmetrical way, as formal texts, books and scholarly journals published by academic publishers are often subjected to professional editing, irrespective of who the author is.

However, there is a not-so-subtle undercurrent in this process, most clearly visible in the guidelines for academic authors on the websites of academic publishers. To take a semi-random example, the *Journal of Oral Biosciences* is the official mouthpiece of the Japanese Association for Oral Biology. However, it is published by one of the established international academic publishers, Elsevier. On the page "Guide for Authors" (https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/journal-of-oral-biosciences/publish/guide-for-authors), a range of issues are addressed, including the desired length of submissions, ethics, authorship and inclusive language, and at some point turns to a topic under the heading "Language (usage and editing services)".

This is the only section on the page that makes use of bold typefont to highlight a point, and reads as follows.

> **"Language (usage and editing services)**
> **From September 1st, 2021, all manuscripts must be edited by a native English speaker prior to submission, preferably one with a specialized knowledge of medical editing. Authors must submit a certificate of proofreading when submitting their manuscript.**
> Please write your text in good English (American or British usage is accepted, but not a mixture of these). Authors whose native language is not English MUST have the manuscript edited for language accuracy prior to submission. Authors who feel their English language

> manuscript may require editing to eliminate possible grammatical or spelling errors and to conform to correct scientific English may wish to use the English Language Editing service available from Elsevier's WebShop (https://webshop.elsevier.com/language-editing/) or visit our customer support site (https://service.elsevier.com) for more information."

If you are not a native English speaker, which one may assume is the case for many scholars who are members of the Japanese Association for Oral Biology, you are required ("must") to contract a native speaker as editor.

An additional requirement, formulated less insistently, is that such a native speaker "preferably" has "specialized knowledge of medical editing". Non-native speakers are also advised to "use the English Language Editing Services" of the publisher. The message is quite clear: (only) native speakers of English are qualified to have their own say, while non-native speakers are to be filtered through the medium of native speakers.

A Japanese academic association, albeit with clear international engagement, chooses to communicate scientific findings in English, but the English has to be changed into "native" English.

The stated goal is "to eliminate" such divergences as "possible grammatical or spelling errors and to conform to correct scientific English", but in practice, this enforced convergence goes further. The idea of linguistic quality is often alluded to in this context, as identified in a study on editing practices in the Netherlands by Alison Edwards. One of the editors who completed her questionnaire volunteered the following perspective:

> "I have noticed that international journals frequently publish papers that do still have Dutch (or other 'foreign') features in them. I attribute this not to 'acceptance' of these features as a special form of English, but to the fact that not all journal editors are equally language-conscious. In fact, many editors of international journals are not necessarily native speakers themselves and may not be able to judge the linguistic quality of papers. (22)"

Another editor in the same study did not use the notion of "linguistic quality", but opted for rather more straight-forward characterisations of what the desired outcome of the editing would be – to write like a native speaker.

> "Dunglish [Dutch-flavoured English] is taboo. If you want to publish in an American journal, write like an American; in a British journal, write like a Brit. (21)"

It is unclear how one would apply this logic to the Japanese provenance of the *Journal of Oral Biosciences*; one presumes that prospective authors will not be required to write English like a Japanese for a Japanese journal. One may counter that this journal is no longer a Japanese journal, since it has clear international aspirations and distributions. This is true, but then this is similarly true for many journals that have British or American provenance. It seems as if some voices are more legitimate than others, which in turn need to be fixed before they can be published.

In other words, there are conditions that non-native voices need to comply with before they can be heard. The situation is not unlike the more blatant reality of colonial and missionary control over the production of writing (in English and indigenous languages) in the 19th century. The printing presses and diffusion

of ideas were controlled by native speakers loyal to the colonial masters and determined what the indigenous populations of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia could read and also publish (on South Asia, see Kachru; on South Africa, see De Kock).

This asymmetry of voices raises serious questions about the extent to which English genuinely serves as an equitable medium of wider, international communication. It seems as if English serves in the first instance to facilitate international access on the receptive side: many people are able to read English and make sense of content presented to them. However, as a medium of expression, Ts & Cs apply. Divergent voices, non-natives but even sometimes non-American natives, need editing and other forms of coercive convergence before they can expect to be published.

In the editing process, the original voice of the author is subjected to a process of transformation to converge on somebody else's ideal of language. It is not necessarily because of the requirement to conform to American or British English, to the extent that these two labels are meant to refer to two systems of spelling systems with slightly different vocabularies. In practice, Henry Widdowson notes, these national standards mainly have scope over aspects of the language that serve identity functions (such as accents, spelling variants like *-ise/ize*, or idiomatic choices like *filling in/out a form*). The standards are seldom directed at communicative effectiveness – one is obliged to "write like an American [or] a Brit" as the participant in Edwards's project asserted in the quotation above.

Even more problematic is that this may even extend to the content that some voices would like to convey, as the editing of *Harry Potter* series shows. Returning to the 19th century British Empire: the colonial subjects were included as readers who were supposed to learn from the fountains of Western wisdom but were

not supposed to add to the storehouse of memories through their publication.

Rather, the colonial subjects who received formal education were expected to act as intermediaries in transmitting the memories of the colonial centre to the colonised periphery. It appears as if the globalised world of the 21st century reproduces many of the same steps. There are celebrated exceptions. Fiction authors from postcolonial settings have sometimes asserted their right to write in their own voice. The Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe proclaimed the following in 1965.

> "What I do see is a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language. So my answer to the question, Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing? is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: **Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I should say, I hope not**. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience." (Achebe 29, emphasis added)

Similar sentiments have been expressed by other African and Asian authors, trying to break free from control over their voices, for instance Salman Rushdie who claimed back in 1982 that "the Empire writes back with a vengeance".

However, for every author who gets to a point where they can claim the right to use their own voice, many others have to filter their message through a medium that is controlled by others. The extremity of the situation is such that even J.K. Rowling, before she became famous, was so pliable in the hope that the American editors would publish her *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (eventually converted to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*), that she said the following in an interview, "I would have let them call me Enid Snodgrass if they published the book." (cited by Nel 274)

So, the challenge in a world with English as the lingua franca is to be as inclusive in who gets to write as who gets to read. Publishing and distributing books by non-traditional voices enriches the global fountain of ideas in English and challenges the stronghold of native speakers. It would render the global English-using community more inclusive of the memories produced by all its members. Sadly, this theoretical possibility is not always realised; the non-traditional, divergent, voices are not as free to find articulation and when they do, they may be subject to all kinds of control, by native speaker editors and publishers, to converge upon their ideals of language, but at times also content. There is a severe risk that asymmetric convergent practices will reinforce echo chambers for those native speakers who have books adjusted and translated to make it easy for them, while the rest of the world get to read a much wider range of ideas and experiences.

This might not sound all that bad, since it imposes the obligation on native speakers of English to break free from their echo chambers and share the global English-using community with others on equal footing. However, in a world where special value is placed on ideas expressed in English, particularly in academic scholarship, the privilege of native speakers with the

right background is continually reinforced. Conversely, writers from the rest of the world, and their ideas, are (potentially perpetually) placed in a subordinate position, battling to have their memories given an equal share of the global storehouse. All Englishes are equal, but some are more equal than others. English could be a useful tool to empower many, but there are severe risks that have not been resolved adequately yet. Therefore, English doesn't yet empower even-handedly.

About the Author

Bertus van Rooy is a professor of English linguistics at the University of Amsterdam since 2020 and is also chair of the department Modern Foreign Languages and Cultures.

Previously, he taught English and Afrikaans for 21 years at the North-West University in South Africa and retains an appointment as extraordinary professor with the University. His primary interest is world Englishes – the shape, use and users of English across the world, with particular attention to the contact between English and other languages. He investigates phenomena like linguistic innovation and grammatical changes in the complex contact situations where English is used, together with societal attitudes towards languages and language use.

He is the author of World Englishes: The local lives of a global language (2024)*, one of the editors of* African Perspectives on the Teaching and Learning of English in Higher Education (2023)*, additionally a co-editor and contributing author to the* Blackwell Handbook of World Englishes (2025) *and the* Syntax of Afrikaans on taalportaal.org (2020).

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"All Englishes are equal, but some are more equal *than others."*

Bertus van Rooy

Imagine You Go to a Book Club, But No One Is Talking: A Brief History of Silent Book Club(s)

by Aline Franzus

You are on your way to a book club meeting, but once you walk into the room, expecting the usual hum of conversations, you are instead greeted with silence. Not the you-can-hear-a-pin-drop kind, but the quiet buzz of a room where no one is talking. There are still some background noises: a soft Lo-fi playlist creates a calm and focused atmosphere, book pages are turned, coffee cups softly cling against their saucers, and behind the café's counter, the barista prepares another oat milk cappuccino for a latecomer (that's you).

You scan the room and yes!, there's one more seat left at that table in the back corner. You make your way over there. You don't know anyone sitting at that table, but they smile at you briefly while you sit down, and you smile back. Now that you are seated, you fish the book you decided to read tonight out of your favorite tote bag, take a sip from your hot and foamy drink, and begin to read.

After a while, the noises of chairs being pushed back and people getting up pull you back into reality. What felt like 10 minutes has turned into an hour of reading. You lift your eyes from your book's pages, close the book and get up. Gradually, people drift toward a table in the middle of the room. A fellow reader explains that everyone is stacking the books they read—a way to share recommendations and spark conversations among readers. "That's nice," you think. You add yours to the stack, too.

Noticing a copy of Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo*, you scan the room, wondering who had been reading it—and whether they'd be up for a conversation about the author's latest novel.

Reading Together in Silence

What may sound counterintuitive at first, describes a communal reading practice that has recently experienced a boom—or rather a revival—across the globe: reading parties. During these bookish gatherings, groups of readers meet all around the world in all kinds of locations for what they sometimes call "introvert happy hour" ("Read with Friends"). It is a form of community building where silence is a criterion for participation.

While not every reading party follows the same structure, most encompass a social phase and a phase of quiet reading, and it may be exactly this soft guidance that constitutes the charm of reading parties—people can sit back and follow instructions on when to read and when not to read. Usually, there is no assigned reading; everyone just brings whatever book they are currently reading or what is next on their TBR-pile. All genres and reading formats are welcome—from ebooks to audiobooks, from poetry to prose, from fiction to non-fiction, and from classics of the literary canon to comic books. There is even a savvy abbreviation for it: BYOB = Bring Your Own Book ("Read with Friends").

Before and after people settle in for an hour of silent reading, there is plenty of time to mingle—to connect with friends and strangers alike, to order food or drinks, and to share thoughts on what you are currently reading. It is a low-pressure social opportunity, and for those who prefer to skip the chitchat, there is always the option to just "read and leave". Introverts may find the appeal in socializing without conversation, but reading parties attract introverts, extroverts, and ambiverts alike.

Some enjoy the solitude in community, while others see it as a dedicated time off screens. For many, it serves as a third space—an environment that allows them to focus on something they cannot easily prioritize in their daily lives, as well as a place to connect with new like-minded individuals. Hence, although one's relationship with the text is still mostly private, there is an opportunity for interactions beyond the words on the page.

In an opinion piece in *The Washington Post*, guest writer Stephanie Shapiro writes: "In a society that favors production over reflection, just reading loses out. Forsake all mundane obligations and spend the day reading and, the fear is, you have nothing tangible to show for it" (Shapiro). In a time when reading is often considered to be disruptive to life's supposedly productive tasks, reading parties offer a designated realm that comes without the pressure of having to check off yet another thing on your to-do list. In other words, reading parties offer the perks of being in bookish community and optional socializing—without the downsides (at least perceived as such by many) of assigned reading or book club homework.

Silent Book Club(s)

Of all the reading parties organized around the world, there is one in particular whose name (brand, and registered trademark) now enjoys global recognition: Silent Book Club (SBC). Initially founded in 2012 by the two friends Guinevere de la Mare and Laura Gluhanich in San Francisco, CA, SBC has grown into a movement of readers with local chapters scattered across the globe ("About Us"), the vast majority of which have been added within the last two years.

Eight years after its founding, SBC reached 200 chapters ("200 Chapters"). Then, in just two years, it skyrocketed: 500 chapters by October 2023 ("500 Chapters"), over 1,000 by May 2024 ("1000

Chapters"); and by the end of the year 2024, SBC encompassed a global network with over 1500 chapters across 55 countries ("Your Favorite Books of 2024"). In that year alone, at least 30,000 SBC meetups were organized ("Your Favorite Books of 2024").

So, why this recent boom? While the first wave of new chapters can primarily be attributed to reports by the traditional press, and especially to a 2019 piece by npr (Axelrod; Gluhanich in "A Silent Book Club"), the recent surge in SBC gatherings is presumably connected to videos of SBC meetups going viral on social media (see e.g., @anyonereadthis).[1] One could, however, also wonder whether the aftermath of the pandemic and a renewed longing to build community outside of the online realm contributed to SBC's recent success. The need for easy access to in-person events that can generate a sense of genuine togetherness has perhaps for a long time not been as great as it has been after years of social distancing, endless Zoom events, and lost connections due to an increasing polarization of society.

Now, according to their interactive map, allowing readers to locate their nearest chapter, the majority of SBCs are hosted in North America and Europe ("Find Your Local Chapter"). While SBC chapters remain concentrated in the West, they have spread worldwide—from Kolkata, India, to Taipei, Taiwan; from Jeju Island, South Korea, to Barranquilla, Colombia. Across all sorts of climates (political and otherwise), people are bonding over their shared love for books.

Similar to the diverse portfolio of locations, SBC meetups can be manifold. Some SBC chapters meet once a week, others gather once a month. They meet at their favorite neighborhood bar or café, local bookstores, libraries, or whenever it is sunny out, in a

1 During the editing process of this piece, SBC co-founder Laura Gluhanich made an appearance on Oprah's Book Club, which will presumably lead to the founding of many more chapters worldwide ("Wally Lamb").

park. Sometimes there are special events, bookish outings, or book swaps, and sometimes they meet online like they would during the pandemic. What all gatherings have in common, however, is that they are led by volunteers, and are hosted in public spaces so that anyone has the opportunity to join one of these silent community meetups.

Not So Silent Book Clubs

Although the recent surge in chapter numbers might make one believe that this is a novel concept, the idea of reading in community is not new. For example, in 17th to 19th century Europe, salon culture was a cornerstone of intellectual and artistic exchange. As a form of "elite sociability" (Vincent 329), salons were hosted primarily by influential women, known as salonnières, who brought together writers, philosophers, and artists for lively discussions on literature, politics, and philosophy (see e.g., Vincent 327–351). In salons, reading was often a communal activity—literary works, essays, and poetry were read aloud and then discussed, fostering debate and social exchange.

This contrasted with the solitary act of silent reading, which became increasingly common with the rise of print culture and individual literacy. Over time, salon culture spread across Europe and, recently, saw a modern-day, post-pandemic revival (McCarthy; Rubin). Throughout time, salon culture thus adapted to different national traditions but maintained its core function as a space for networking and creativity (see e.g., Schellenberg 25—43).

Similarly, as DeNel R. Sedo observes in her introduction to *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace* (2011), the phenomenon of shared reading is a "long-standing practice that has served different functions in various places and times" (2). So maybe, besides asking "Why this recent boom?", we could shift

our attention to the question: "What can we learn from this recent revival in shared reading practices about the needs and desires of our contemporary society?"

Present-day examples of shared reading or Mass Reading Events (see, for example, Fuller & Sedo, "Brewery") are television shows like *Canada Reads*, celebrity book clubs like *Oprah's Book Club* or *Reese's Book Club*, as well as city-, region-, or nationwide reading programs known as "One Book, One Community," where a series of activities around a chosen book are organized for members of a community (Fuller & Sedo, *Reading* 3—4). A prominent example thereof is Seattle Reads—"a city-wide book group," where Seattleites "are encouraged to read and discuss the same book" picked by a committee made up of both community members and library staff.

Seattle Reads was founded in 1998 as the first "One Book, One City" program and was so well-received that similar reading programs have sprung up in all 50 states, as well as internationally. Typically, the public library provides extra copies of the respective year's title and invites the author to come and speak at local events ("Seattle Reads"). This year's pick is *You Are Here: Poetry in the Natural World* (2024)—a poetry collection edited by the twenty-fourth Poet Laureate of the United States, Ada Limón ("About Seattle Reads 2025").

Programs like this encourage the general public to engage with literature individually (while reading) and collectively (while in conversation), to connect with friends, neighbors, and strangers alike, and to make memories based on shared experiences. As Danielle Fuller and DeNel R. Sedo write, Mass Reading Events allow people to see their "imagined community temporarily but physically realized" ("Brewery" 17) and while encounters during these events "may well be ephemeral, […] they are capable of

producing significant moments of identification or affective connection among participants" ("Brewery" 16-17).

Similarly, SBC invites readers to engage in shared experiences of quiet reading while also fostering a sense of connection with those around them. It creates a space where people can bond over their mutual love of books and form meaningful memories in a low-pressure social environment—memories that may be able to form new connotations about what leisurely reading means to us as individuals. In this sense, the practice of reading together in silence may also tap into a broader nostalgia for remnants of the analog world, echoing the renewed appreciation for vinyl records, film photography, or the charm of indestructible Nokia phones.

Monetizing Reading Parties

Today, SBC is just one out of many different trade-marked reading parties. And it was not even the first one. Former *The Stranger* editor-in-chief, Christopher Frizzelle, started his own silent reading adventure back in 2009. Moved online during the pandemic, his in-person reading parties have been hosted at Hotel Sorrento in Seattle, WA, since the first meeting, and are accompanied by live piano music.

However, admission is not free in this case. To be able to participate in the event, one needs to pay for one's seat at the table or fireplace in advance.[2] Frizzelle's reading parties, with their elegant setting, are understandably appealing. Yet, the price tag that it comes with raises questions about the event's community building aspect. Their website features a *Crosscut* quote that reads: "It really does create the sort of community we're all craving right

2 Tickets start at $12 for a barstool, can go up to $65 for a table of four, or to $35 for a single chair at the fire This merely covers the seat itself and includes neither tips for the musician nor the $25 minimum on food and drinks per person. As a remnant of social distancing during the pandemic, you can also still buy tickets for the virtual version of the same reading party. Reading online costs $10-20, depending on how much you would want to tip the musician upfront ("Silent Reading Party;" "Virtual Reading Parties").

about now" ("Silent Reading Party"). And so, if Frizelle's events aim to build community, then it is arguably one that is curated.

Similar versions of paid reading parties pop up around the globe. For example, New York City's *Reading Rhythms* was founded by three friends in 2023 to counter "annihilated attention spans, too much socializing, [and] the treacherous enchantments of the iPhone" (Young). Their events "create belonging through reading all over the world" ("What is it?"). This belonging, however, comes with a price tag, too. Tickets are around $20 in the US and the events are oftentimes sold out. Their project now expands beyond the borders of the Big Apple to, among other locations, California, Canada, and Italy ("Reading Party Tickets").

While I appreciate the enthusiasm and dedication of those who organize paid reading events and I can understand where they are coming from (organizing reading parties can be a lot of work), I also feel that community building and "creat[ing] belonging"—whether centered around books or not—is most beneficial when it remains open and accessible to everyone. If events like this are gatekept, one might wonder how inclusive and genuine this sense of community building really is.

Hosting in Silence

With SBC, everybody is welcome to join. It does not cost any money to become a member, or to launch your own chapter—which is exactly what I did. While I was living in Seattle, WA, I joined one of the city's many SBC chapters and soon fell in love with the concept, the people, and especially the sense of community that grew out of those meetings.

Most conversations began with a "What are you reading today?" and "Is this your first time here?", and it was through questions like these that I started interacting with people—some

of which I'm still in contact with today. I added books to my TBR-list, and I learned about books I will probably never read in my life. Two years ago, I had no idea that SBCs existed, yet, when I joined their bi-weekly meetings and reading in silence with strangers soon felt magical, I knew that I would eventually want to bring the concept to Münster, Germany.

When I decided I would move back to my home country, I was already thinking that my friend Anna would like the idea, too. So, while I was still busy roaming bookstores in the US, I could not help but wonder what it would be like to be on the other side of a silent reading party.[3]

Figure 1: Logo of the Silent Book Club Münster.

© Aline Franzus.

Being a co-host has been a very rewarding experience thus far. Since our first meeting in October of 2024, we have been feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of people showing up and sending words of appreciation. Not knowing how many people to expect, we ran out of space during our first meeting when over 30 people showed up. Now, we average around 80—120 people, our Instagram handle counts over 2000 followers already (@silentbookclub.ms), and I still have trouble believing that this many people marked their calendars, put on their winter boots, and biked through Münster's cobblestone streets—just to read in quiet camaraderie. I feel that I have learnt something new at every step of this process.

3 For the sake of transparency, I would like to add that I was not the first person who brought the concept of SBC to Germany. There are multiple SBCs scattered throughout the country and continent, hosted by wonderful volunteers. Go see if there's one near you, and if there is not, why not consider founding your own chapter?

I got to meet all kinds of new people in the city I live in, I got to be in conversation with local cafés, bars, and bookish institutions; I got to play around with design ideas for posts and posters, and I got to make a lot of decisions together with my co-host, Anna, which simultaneously feel very important and probably are not at all—depending on how you look at it. This includes decisions about where to host, how to advertise, who to collaborate with, or how to communicate.

For instance, we decided to use English as our main language of communication to reach out to and include international communities, but in doing so, we asked ourselves, who are we potentially and unintentionally excluding in the process? I know what it is like to be just another reader among many others, and how different it now feels to step into a position of responsibility. It is a bit like growing up—like discovering that the magic of Christmas wasn't Santa, that in fact, books are not real. Did I say books? I meant Santa.

During this process, I have had the chance to consciously and critically reflect on questions of positionality, profitability, and responsibility: In how far do I claim cultural authority over this shared space, this reading community? Do I present myself as a kind of spokesperson for a bookish community? What kinds of advantages, power, or authority do I gain from hosting SBC? Even if I am not monetizing community, am I profiting from building a reading community in other ways, and if so, does that still align with my own morals and values? What kinds of responsibilities come with having a platform, even if it is small? Am I thinking too much?

For the sake of ending on a positive, yet equally honest, note: I believe in the power of books, of community, and of building community, not just through reading, but also across diverse

groups of people. There are a lot of wonderful things to be said about the concept of SBC, but one of the things I come back to again and again are the complexities of what has come to be known as the loneliness epidemic (Johnson). In 2023, the World Health Organization declared loneliness to be a "global public health concern" (Johnson).

I keep thinking about how in this light, SBCs can not only incentivize us to carve out some reading time every so often, but also to be a low-pressure community setting where people can meet and mingle that might otherwise never have met and mingled, and still find they have so much in common. Maybe this sounds romanticized or idealistic—but sometimes, we might just need a touch of idealism in our lives.

About the Author

Aline Franzus is a graduate of the MA program "British, American and Postcolonial Studies" at the University of Münster, where she also holds an MEd in German and English Studies.

Her research interests lie at the intersections of literary, cultural, and book studies, particularly in US-American contexts, and including memory and censorship studies. During the 2023-2024 academic year, she was a DAAD fellow at the University of Washington in Seattle, WA, where her love for old-growth forests and the towering trees that define them was rekindled. Her master's thesis explored some of the implications and ramifications of contemporary US book banning and how it shapes today's cultural industries, such as publishing. Speaking of which, she would like to use this bio statement to suggest that you read a banned book once in a while.

Aline also organizes the Silent Book Club chapter in Münster, Germany—mainly as an excuse to expand her ever-growing TBR list. When she is not thinking, reading, or writing about books, she is likely tending to her recently planted vegetable seedlings, or baking bagels.

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"There is an opportunity for interaction *beyond the words on the page."*

Aline Franzus


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Memory of Reading in the Digital Age: Backlisted and The Book Review Podcast

by Nataliya Tolstopyat

"No matter how deep or obscure your interests are, there is a podcast for you, or there is (relatively) little stopping you making your own", Dario Llinares and others suggest in their introduction to the book "Podcasting: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media" (2). In the past few years, there has been a clear surge in the number of podcasts with book-related content.

Readers can currently choose from a wide range of podcasts that focus on various genres, authors and themes. These podcasts are platforms for discussing literary works and trends in publishing, hosting interviews with authors, and promoting reading, thereby contributing to the broader literary discourse.

For example, the *New Books Network*, founded by historian Marshall Poe, is a consortium of podcasts whose style and identity are formed around the goal of introducing "serious authors to [a] wider public" ("New Books Network"). It features interviews with academics and authors of new non-fiction books across various subjects, thereby enriching public discourse on literary topics ("About the New Books Network").

Similarly, Corey Olsen, known as "The Tolkien Professor," launched a podcast series of the same name that investigates the works of J.R.R. Tolkien ("About the Show"). His efforts have made scholarly discussions on Tolkien's literature accessible to a broader audience, exemplifying how podcasts could bridge the gap between academic analysis and public interest in literary subjects.

There are many other independent literary (informally known as 'bookish') podcasts[1], produced by ordinary readers who aim to share their love of reading, as well as those organized by different parties from the publishing industry, such as publishers or booksellers.

Their audio shows are available on multiple platforms thanks to the Really Simple Syndication (RSS) web feed technology which enables subscribers to receive automatic updates on new content, such as articles, podcasts and news reports. This protocol ensures that podcasts in our apps, like Spotify or Apple Podcasts, are up to date and in chronological order without any extra steps ("How Do RSS Feeds Work?"). Podcasters upload their audio files on one platform and they are then sourced by other platforms to create an easier user experience for listeners (Llinares et al. 8–10).

At the same time, it has been suggested that podcasting should be viewed not only as a media object or a distribution technology, but also as a specific cultural form (Bonini 26). Tiziano Bonini describes podcasting as:

> "A complex hybrid cultural form constantly reproduced by an evolving network of different, and dynamic, clusters of human (audio producers, editorial curators, software developers, graphic designers, listeners) and non-human actors (platforms, recommender algorithms, mobile media devices, distribution technologies, and internet infrastructures)." (26)

The nature of podcasts can be investigated further and more systematically from the perspective of media convergence. This phenomenon describes the merging of several aspects of information and communication technologies, infrastructures

1 For an in-depth discussion of the term ‚Bookishness', see Pressman.

and media content (Flew and Rui Liu, 27). Media convergence is traditionally investigated through technological, industrial, and social dimensions. This concept of media convergence provides an opportunity to investigate how modern media ecosystems work.

Henry Jenkins (2006) defines convergence as the "flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences". This definition highlights how traditional boundaries between different forms of media have eroded, leading to an interconnected media landscape in which digital platforms, print media, and audiovisual content coexist and enhance each other. Although some researchers claim that one can see podcasts only as a reiteration of radio (Llinares et al. 26), they remain ecosystems that demonstrate their own rules and conventions in terms of convergence.

Podcasts about books are not only forums for literary discussions but can also be seen as spaces of collective memory. Examining literature, authors, genres, and publishing histories, they actively engage with what Alison Landsberg (144) calls *prosthetic memory*. These are memories that individuals acquire through media engagement, even if they have not lived through the experiences themselves (Landsberg 146).

Readers engage, for example, with the books they haven't necessarily read or wouldn't have encountered otherwise. Podcasts thus contribute to the trove of cultural memory, shaping how literary heritage is remembered and shared across digital communities, sometimes even without prior encounter of listeners with books and stories featured in podcasts.

This article aims to investigate through the modified framework of media convergence how two podcasts on book-related content, *Backlisted* and *The Book Review*, build their community of

listeners, contribute to the literary landscape and create space for memory of books and readers. The modified framework includes four selected aspects of convergence: Technological, cultural, economic and social. The following sections examine what each of these four dimensions of convergence imply.

Technological Convergence

Technical convergence, firstly, results from the conversion of content into digital formats. The content which was formerly transmitted via different media can now be consumed and interacted with within a single digital device (Jenkins 293). For bookish communities, technological convergence has created multiple opportunities for engagement. Readers can access audiobooks, e-books, book reviews, and podcasts from the same device, facilitating a more immersive and uninterrupted literary experience. A user can, with one click, switch from the audiobook to an e-reader app and post a direct review all within one device. Podcasts, in particular, can serve as a bridge between traditional literary culture and digital engagement, allowing listeners to engage with authors, critics, and fellow book enthusiasts.

Cultural convergence and participatory culture

Technological convergence often coincides with a convergence of different actors. While there was previously a strict division between producers and consumers of information, digitisation has revolutionized how communities form and interact by providing diverse channels for communication and engagement. Heeremans describes podcasting spaces as "relatively open, accessible, and democratising internet distribution technologies (Heeremans 58), so any amateur podcaster may record and publish their episodes at any time. In addition to users becoming producers of their own

shows, their listeners can engage in co-creation and circulation on new content (Jenkins 290).

For instance, individuals now can comment in online forums, leave their questions to hosts in social media groups, and live-stream events using their smartphones, tablets, or computers, breaking down some of the traditional barriers to community participation. As such, listeners have an opportunity to become prosumers (Llinares et al. 26; Jenkins 246). This type of convergence has led to the emergence of participatory cultures, where users actively contribute to content creation, sharing, and discussion.

The rise of artificial intelligence and machine learning has expanded the capabilities of cultural convergence. Personalized content recommendations on platforms like Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Fable and Goodreads use AI-driven algorithms to connect users with content that matches their interests, further deepening their engagement with literary communities (McHugh 181).

It should be added that negative cases, like the Fable AI controversy (Folta), could arise from the use of AI in digital community building as well. The app Fable, used by readers to track their progress and comment on books,released a "Reading Wrap" in 2024 that aimed to provide app users with personalised statistics of their reading that year. Unfortunately, their AI-generated summaries featured racist, sexist and homophobic comments and suggestions. Thus, AI involvement in personalization of content should be taken with caution.

Economic Convergence

Economic (or industrial) convergence refers to the collaboration and blending of different media industries, leading to innovative content production and distribution methods. This convergence

has enabled traditional media entities to adapt to digital trends, thereby reaching wider audiences and fostering community growth (Jenkins 110).

In bookish communities, industrial convergence has manifested in the growing connection between publishing houses and digital media platforms. Large publishing companies such as Penguin Random House and HarperCollins have partnered with literary podcasts, YouTube channels, and social media influencers to market their books, present their authors, and engage with readers. These partnerships help amplify books beyond traditional print advertisements and bookstore promotions, reaching a global audience via digital channels (Llinares et al. 16).

Social Convergence

The social aspect of convergence implies simultaneous use of different media. Henry Jenkins does not explicitly use the term "social convergence" in Convergence Culture (2006). He refers to the social dimension of convergence when he writes that convergence occurs "within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others" ("Convergence" 3) and it implies connecting information from various platforms and devices ("Convergence?"). Furthermore, social convergence can be seen as forms of communication and content exchange that became common due to social media proliferation (Flew and Rui Liu 27). Because of processes of social convergence, personal and communal communication channels increasingly blend, allowing individuals to engage in both private and public interactions within the same platforms.

In bookish communities, social convergence is evident in the rise of virtual book clubs, author Q&A sessions, and interactive social media campaigns. Platforms like Reddit and

Discord host book-centric discussions that complement podcast content, creating vibrant literary conversations beyond the audio experience. For podcasts there are various ways of simultaneous communications, and even content creation.

For example, listeners simultaneously may be listening to a podcast on their phone and writing a comment or review of the book featured in the podcast. They can comment on podcast episodes, suggest future topics, and even participate in live-streamed podcast recordings, which illustrates direct communication with podcasters either in the studio, or in the chat. This strengthens the connection between content creators and their audience.

So, how do independent literary podcasts *Backlisted* (Figure 1) and *The New York Times* hosted *The Book Review* fit within this version of a media convergence framework?

Figure 1: Backlisted Podcast logo and subtitle ("Backlisted")

Backlisted is a literary podcast co-hosted by John Mitchinson and Andy Miller, focusing on bringing new life to old books (Mitchinson). Each episode features a discussion about a specific book, often with guest contributors, aiming to rekindle interest in lesser-known literary works.

Technological Convergence

The *Backlisted* podcast exemplifies technological convergence by integrating various digital platforms to distribute and promote its content. The podcast is accessible through its official website

and available on multiple podcast platforms (e.g. Apple Podcasts, Spotify, etc) and on different devices. This multi-platform presence ensures that the podcast reaches a broad audience, catering to different listening preferences and developing a sense of intimacy (Berry 402).

Economic Convergence

Backlisted operates at the intersection of publishing and digital media. First, John Mitchinson, one of the co-hosts, is a co-founder of Unbound[2], a crowdfunding publishing platform, who brings his expertise in the field to the book discussions.

This connection bridges the gap between traditional literary culture and contemporary digital content creation, also because it often relies on discussions with authors, critics, and other literary figures (traditional authorities of the publishing industry), thus facilitating collaborations that enrich the content and provide diverse perspectives on the featured books.

Third, the choice of books in *Backlisted* follows the "give new life to old books" motto, as hosts choose them from the traditional literary canon to promote and reignite interest in these texts. At the same time, they present these classical books through a series of episodes with casual discussion, which makes literary criticism more accessible to listeners in the conversational podcast format.

Cultural Convergence

The podcast fosters a vibrant community of fans by encouraging listener participation and interaction. Listeners are invited to share their thoughts on episodes and the books discussed through social media platforms, creating a two-way communication channel that enhances engagement.

2 https://unbound.co.uk/password Currently, the website is not available to the public due to acquisition by Boundless IP Ltd. Registered users still should have access via their login details.

For instance, *Backlisted* has an active presence on platforms like X (Twitter), Instagram and Bluesky[3], where listeners share their thoughts on episodes, comment on featured books, and engage with the hosts. In addition to digital interaction, hosts invite their audience members to attend live events and take part in book clubs. With the focus on "old books" ("Backlisted") their listeners come into contact with the stories these books tell, and even have an opportunity to win a physical object, sometimes even a rare edition of a book (see Figure 2).

Backlisted promotes not only reading and re-reading classic canon, but allows people to come into contact with different editions that have their own history and charm. Interactions with books can also follow some rituals or steps, for example when the book for the coming episode is announced two weeks in advance, or listeners are invited to read a Christmas novel together with the hosts before the episode about it is released.

Figure 2: A give-away of the original Virago Modern Classics books by Backlisted on X.

3 Bluesky handle @backlisted.bsky.social

Social convergence

Moreover, as agents of participatory culture, listeners might as well suggest books for discussion in the podcast, this way enhancing the sense of shared ownership. The hashtag #BacklistedPodcast allows for ongoing conversations that extend beyond the episodes themselves, creating an interactive book-loving community.

In addition, older books featured on *Backlisted* often gain *renewed* attention, with discussions spilling over into book-related forums. This multi-platform interaction reflects how social convergence enables podcasts to amplify their influence beyond the audio format. *Backlisted* also offers a Patreon membership, providing subscribers with additional content and benefits (see Figure 3).

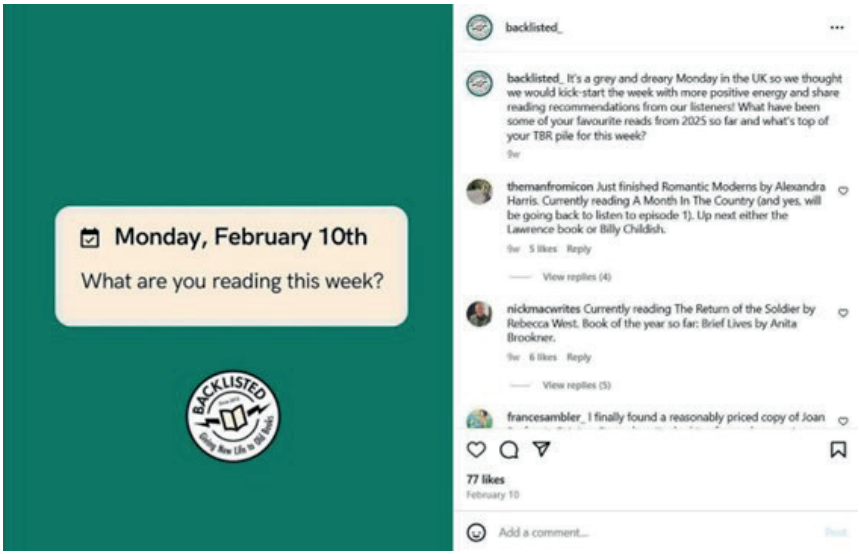

Figure 3: Post inviting listeners to share their reading recommendations in the comment section on Instagram (@backlisted_)

This model not only generates revenue but also strengthens the sense of community among dedicated listeners by offering them exclusive content and a closer connection to the hosts of the podcast (McHugh 255).

Below we can see an example of additional options to which supporters of *Backlisted* on Patreon have access. For example, early access to ticket sales for live events, an opportunity to sit in on a podcast recording or free membership of the reading club including book postage expand what direct and indirect interactions listeners can have with podcast hosts. Moreover, listeners may suggest what books will be read and discussed by hosts in future episodes (e.g. Master Storyteller tier in Fig.4). It can be interpreted as an element of co-creation in terms of podcasting, while also being an element of engagement for the audience.

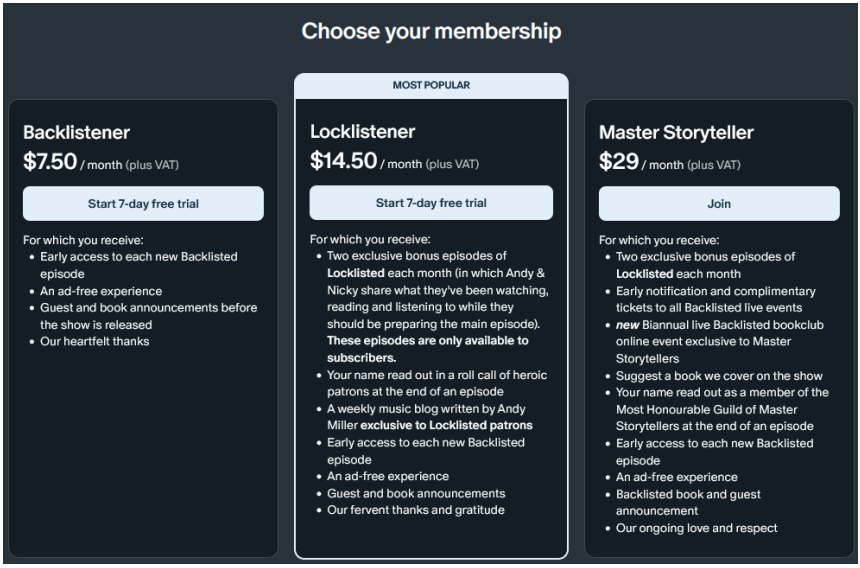

Figure 4: Backlisted membership plan on Patreon

On December 21st 2024 the hosts of Backlisted posted their New Year's greetings on Instagram:

> "It's been a wonderful year for Backlisted. As we look back on some of our highlights, we want to say a warm thank you to all our fantastic guests, our listeners, the team @foylesforbooks for helping us host some great live events and our thriving community on Patreon. We so appreciate your generosity in lending us your ears.[...]" (@backlisted_ 31 December 2024)

In this post they highlight multiple social interactions they engaged in: live events, Patreon supporters, as well as guests and listeners, who constitute the centre of their community.

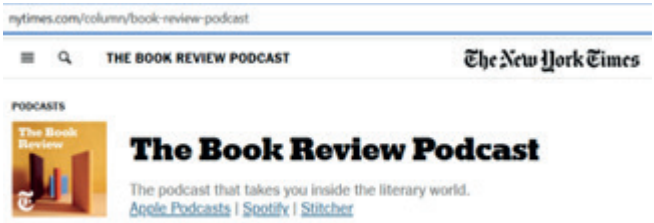

Figure 5: The Book Review Podcast thumbnail logo and the subtitle ("The Book Review Podcast.").

The Book Review (Figure 5) is a podcast produced by *The New York Times*, featuring discussions on the latest books, interviews with authors, and insights into literary trends (The New York Times). Hosted by editors from *The New York Times Book Review*, the podcast provides listeners with professional critiques and in-depth analyses of contemporary literature.

Technological Convergence

As a product of *The New York Times*, *The Book Review* podcast benefits from the newspaper's robust digital infrastructure. Episodes are available on *The New York Times* website, integrated seamlessly with related articles and reviews via links and embedding of the podcast track. In addition, the podcast is

distributed across major podcast platforms, ensuring accessibility for a wide audience, as listeners don't have to be on the New York Times web page to access the podcast.

Economical Convergence

The Book Review podcast represents industrial convergence by merging traditional print media with digital broadcasting of its audio content. *The New York Times*, a longstanding traditional print newspaper, expands its reach and adapts to changing media consumption habits through the podcast. This way not only the podcast benefits from substantial support and promotion, but the newspaper also engages in the popular modern discourses via audio format.

Cultural Convergence

Through the lens of social convergence, several trends can be observed. First, listener interaction and engagement – while *The Book Review* podcast does not have a dedicated forum, it fosters engagement through The New York Times' social media platforms, such as X and Facebook. Readers and listeners often comment on book-related posts, share their opinions, and discuss episodes with fellow literature enthusiasts online.

Second, the podcast frequently features interviews with authors, publishers, and literary critics, making it a participatory space where audiences can hear directly from industry professionals. This guest participation helps foster a sense of literary ecosystem around the podcast.

The Book Review Podcast fills the literary sphere with formal and informal discussions around stories, with focus on writing and publishing. This form of book discussion allows listeners to enrich their own knowledge of books and to feel like part of a group, part

of a community. They passively engage with professionals in the sphere when they listen to a podcast, and actively interact with each other on social media or in person to exchange impressions and thoughts on books.

Social convergence

Further, there is a general tendency towards cross-media influence: episodes often influence book conversations across multiple media channels. For example, a book featured on *The Book Review* podcast might trend on X, be reviewed in *The New York Times*, or be recommended on other literary platforms, contributing to a larger, interconnected literary community, where listeners can investigate book recommendations on their phone, while listening to the podcast on their laptop, for example.

Overall, curating their presence across different platforms allows *The Book Review* to interact with readers, for instance by asking them to submit questions in chat, and the podcast hosts responding in a short video format with further book recommendations (see Figure 6).

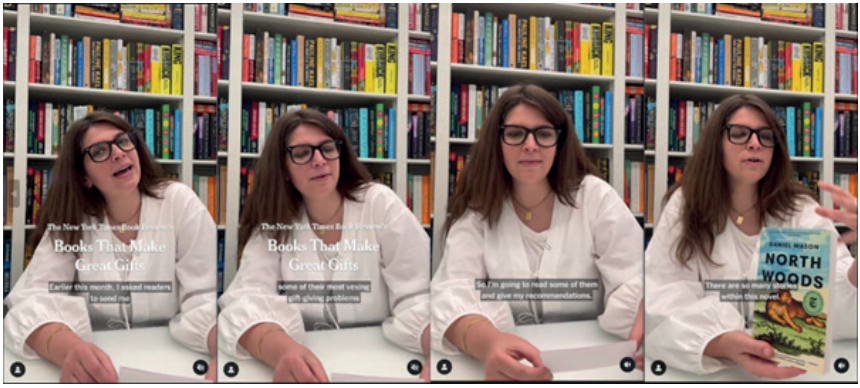

Figure 6: Joumana Khatib, an editor at The New York Times Book Review, recommends a few books to readers looking for gifts for their loved ones in the Instagram reel for The Book Review Podcast account (@nytbooks).

It is worth noting that communication with podcast hosts happens via multiple platforms and social media channels for a technical reason. Podcasts have to rely on these platforms for exchanges with their audience, as not all comments across podcasting platforms (e.g. Spotify, Apple Podcasts, etc.) are collected and sent to the hosting platform directly (Haahr and MacLean). As a result, podcast hosts aim to interact with their community members on social media or forums, rather than manually follow the comments left to individual episodes across all platforms.

Memories of Books Gone by

Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memories (144) could be used to describe the memories that podcast listeners develop as they share in the stories and experiences of the hosts, even if the book of the episode has not been read. Here, one can argue that all podcasts have an opportunity to form the ways their subjects will be remembered. Accessibility of all episodes of *Backlisted* or *The Book Review* permits the spread of formal literary criticism, as well as casual discussions of a books' merit and importance through time and space, as far as digital communities allow.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine how two literary podcasts, Backlisted and *The Book Review Podcast*, function within a landscape of literary content and thus foster a community of listeners and shape the ways books and stories are remembered. The podcasts' activities in the field of book-related content production were examined through a modified media convergence framework that builds on Henry Jenkins's framework to structure the podcasts' technological, industrial, cultural, and social convergence dimensions.

Technological and industrial convergence allow both investigated podcasts to spread the word about new and old books while moving between various online and offline platforms (printed newspapers, social media platforms, live meetings with listeners, videos on YouTube or Instagram, audio on Spotify and Apple via RSS feed, etc.).

As Dario Llinares commented: Convergence culture certainly buttresses the assertion that podcasting is 'just another distribution channel' offering consumers access points to content that is increasingly produced with such mobility in mind. (Llinares 127) In addition to these points of digital accessibility, these literary podcasts engage with their audience, as per social convergence rules. Listeners of podcasts, who are commonly also readers of discussed books, can influence the content podcasters create via suggesting discussion and recording of works that they find interesting.

Moreover, they communicate with podcasters and their teams indirectly via comment sections across all platforms that these podcasts are presented on. Direct communication is also possible in case of live recording or a Q&A hosted by the podcasts.

Another useful solution here is donation platforms (e.g. Patreon) that frosted the subscription-based community of devoted fans. *Backlisted*, for example, actively uses Patreon subscriptions to sustain the podcast (together with advertising), but foremost, to communicate directly to the dedicated audience of their podcast. Meanwhile, *The Book Review* is supported by the *New York Times* newspaper platform, which allows them to focus on production of book-related content and not financial survival of their podcast.

Another common trait that both the independently produced *Backlisted* and newspaper-sponsored *The Book Review* share is the

connection their book discussions create between listeners. Hosts share their opinions and experiences of reading and critiquing the books, which not only promotes the books and literary discussions but also fosters ties within the community of their fans.

While listening to a formal or casual podcast discussion, they create shared memories of reading, of stories and of mutual understanding of (or disagreement on) their values in cultural space. Listeners can re-visit older episodes at any time (they usually remain accessible unless hosts take them down) as if looking through a library of previously discussed books.

This way podcasts contribute to the memory of the literary community. Here, however, lies the difference between the two: *Backlisted* aims to give new life to old books thus directly reaching to the past and remembering and rethinking literary canon with the modern perspective of ordinary (albeit well-read) readers.

Conversely, *The Book Review* stems from a long lasting tradition of publishing, editing and formal reviewing (due to its The New York Times roots), which it further institutionalizes via interviews with literary critics and authors as staples of the literary sphere.

Finally, the scope of this article is limited and leaves more space for further investigation of growing interconnectedness between podcasts, authors, readers / listeners and various technological platforms and methods that enable growth and proliferation of literary communities both in virtual and physical worlds. For further research, one just needs to find the right literary podcast, no matter how "deep or obscure your interests are" (Llinares et al. 2).

About the Author

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Don't Forget

Memento Meminisse: The Impact of Digital Textuality on Memorisation

by Peter Verhaar

The history of technology has demonstrated repeatedly that tools and techniques can have unintended side effects, to such an extent that these effects can begin to undermine the functions for which these technologies have originally been developed.[1] A trajectory of this nature can clearly be observed in the technologies that have been designed to support and augment human memory.

Throughout history, humans have developed a plethora of external devices to preserve, retrieve and communicate information, to complement the internal recollections held in the biological memories of individuals. One of the most consequential technologies for storing and disseminating knowledge and information is undoubtedly writing (Ong; Schmandt-Besserat). Because of the written word, we can still familiarise ourselves with the emotions and experiences of communities who lived centuries ago.

However, the possibility to externalise human memory has also provoked criticism. In a well-known passage from Plato's *Phaedrus*, Thamos explains to Teuth — the Egyptian god of the underworld who invented writing — that when readers place too much trust in the written word, this will eventually lead to a degradation of their human memories (Plato 75). In a similar vein, the 15th-century editor Hieronimo Squarciafico warned that the arrival of the printing press may weaken the human faculty to recall, since an "[a]bundance of books makes men less studious" (Lowry 28; Ong 79).

1 For examples, see (Petroski; Ategeka).

Misgivings such as these are ostensibly based on the assumption that our internal physical memory needs to be exercised, and that the capacity to memorise withers when we outsource this task to external tools. As such, the devices that were developed to support memory may paradoxically result in a higher level of forgetfulness.

The externalisation of memory has undeniably entered a new phase following the advent of the digital medium. In the past few decades, the numerous advances in digital technology and connectivity have initiated an unprecedented increase in the volume, velocity, and variety of the data that is generated (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 9). Unsurprisingly, this expansion in the amount of data has been accompanied by many innovations in data storage technologies. Digital memory has become available in ever expanding quantities, to growing numbers of people and at progressively lower costs.

According to Kryder's law, the amount of data that can be stored in a given memory space doubles approximately every 18 months (Walter). These digital data are often managed in dedicated data centres, serving as custodians of our communal memories. While it seems safe to claim that we can currently access more information than any generation before us, our growing dependence on digital devices and digital memory has also been a major source of concern. Neuroscientific research has suggested that an excessive exposure to information on screens can lead to structural changes in the regions of the brain that are associated with attention and memory (Manwell et al.).

In Manfred Spitzer's influential monograph *Digitale Demenz*, it is argued that the use of smartphones can cause cognitive decline and, more specifically, that it can exacerbate conditions such as ADHD and amnesia (Spitzer).

To some extent, the admonishments that are expressed about the impact of digital devices echo the criticism that was levelled earlier against memory externalised on physical media. Similar to the implications that are discussed in Plato's *Phaedrus*, the studies investigating digital amnesia indicate that the adoption of external memory technologies discourages the employment of internal memory, and that this eventually leads to an atrophy of mnemonic skills.

There are also reasons to assume that the impact of digital storage media is more severe and more harmful than that of paper-based media, nonetheless. Based on a survey of recent neurological research on digital amnesia, Ali et al. observe that a frequent use of digital devices can diminish grey matter in crucial brain regions, and that it can critically be linked to cognitive impairments (Ali et al.). To determine whether the implications of the digital medium are indeed fundamentally different from those of earlier media, it can be helpful to examine the properties of the digital medium that may contribute to the cognitive effects that have been found.

The view that the use of digital devices can quicken a degradation of mnemonic skills can be connected, firstly, to the searchability of digital text. On the digital medium, we can make use of text retrieval systems that enable us to locate the documents that are most relevant for a particular search question, among the billions of resources that are accessible via the web. This level of searchability is evidently unattainable in the case of paper-based books, but it can be both a blessing and a curse.

Sparrow et al. have conducted a range of experiments which suggested that when people are faced with factual questions, they are primed to think about search engines. The study showed additionally that people are less inclined to commit information

to memory when they expect that they can easily find the information online. Instead of processing and internalising the new knowledge itself, people primarily remember how they have accessed the knowledge. This phenomenon has been referred to as the 'Google Effect' (Sparrow et al.).

It can be expected that this development has been amplified in recent years by the advancements in generative AI. Instead of retrieving a set of documents, which potentially contain the needed information, chatbots based on Large Language Models can immediately provide answers, summaries, and insights, and do so without forcing users to rummage through a set of links. We can assume that the cognitive laziness triggered by the Google Effect has been exacerbated by what we may refer to as the 'ChatGPT Effect'.

The consequences associated with searchability are further reinforced by the portability of digital information. Paper books cannot easily be carried around, and it may be argued that such restraints in the portability, combined with the limited searchability, stimulates readers to memorise information. In *Too Much to Know*, Ann Blair explains that, in the early modern period, various techniques were in use to transfer the knowledge contained in printed texts to the biological memory.

Unlike physical books, the documents that disseminate digital information are weightless, and they can consequently be accessed via a digital device at any location, provided that they are charged and connected to the Internet. Portable devices offering access to information can be viewed as instances of what Chalmers and Clarke have described as extensions of the mind. People increasingly keep their smartphones near them, and this results in an intimate and semi-continuous coupling between the brain and the external cognitive system (Clark and Chalmers; Kirsh 129).

The automaticity of the use of digital devices discourages proactive forms of information gathering in the biological mind, and the internal mnemonic skills may wane as a result of underuse.

Studies concentrating on the implications of the Google Effect have largely focused on our inclination to forget individual facts. Additionally, various scholars have suggested that when we read longer texts on digital devices, we tend to remember less of their contents than when we read texts on paper. Among other explanations, it has been hypothesised that our capacity to recollect what we read correlates with our ability to develop cognitive maps of these texts (Hou et al.; Jabr). During the interaction with a physical book, we typically receive visual and other sensory clues which help us construct a map of the central topics of the text.[2]

Critically, such visual clues are often lacking during our interactions with digital texts. On web pages, texts can be presented as long, uninterrupted units; in the case of ePub files, the possibility to change the font size or to rotate the text can likewise undermine the typographical fixity needed to produce a cognitive map. Many studies have indicated that, without such possibilities to anchor the contents into space, people find it more difficult to recall the contents of a text or to reconstruct the temporal and chronological aspects of a literary narrative (Mangen et al.; Morineau et al.).

Furthermore, numerous researchers have postulated that screen reading induces a more superficial form of textual engagement, and that such shallowness can jeopardise retention. The 'shallowing hypothesis', for example, states that the casual and haphazard mode of reading, which is characteristic of our interactions with social media, increasingly affects our general

2 Ann Blair concurs that "[p]age layout in both manuscript and print could also facilitate recall of material from the look of the page on which it appeared" (Blair 76).

reading attitude (Annisette and Lafreniere). Instead of reading texts carefully and attentively, readers tend to skim texts and to limit the reading to the main topics only. Consequently, they can allocate less time to the development of deep reading skills, such as critical thinking, inferencing, and showing empathy.

It has been shown, additionally, that the distractions caused by hyperlinks and by notifications can bring about a diminished concentration (Baron 77). When our engagement with the text becomes more superficial, this also means that there is less information in the short-memory and, subsequently, that there is less information to be transferred to the long-term memory.

In addition to the observation that digital information may be more difficult to remember than analogue information, there are several factors which can complicate the ability to access the digital information in the first place. One factor which may hinder an effective access is the sheer scale of the information that is available on digital storage systems. It has been estimated that private and public ICT infrastructures collectively created and consumed 149 zettabytes in 2024.[3]

The statement made above that digital information is more searchable than information on paper does not hold true in all cases. Search tools can generally be employed effectively only if resources are machine-readable, or if resources have been described with rich metadata. Given the incessant proliferation of resources lacking these properties, it becomes progressively difficult to extract meaningful information from digital storage systems. Such copious amounts of recondite data can lead to a state which may be referred to as 'hypermnesia' (O'Gorman; Mechoulan).

While the term 'amnesia' denotes a dearth of memories,

3 https://www.statista.com/statistics/871513/worldwide-data-created/.

hypermnesia can be viewed as a condition in which people fail to use their memory effectively because of an overabundance of information.

The accessibility of digital information can also be undercut at a more fundamental level because of the evanescence of digital memory. Storage devices such as hard disk drives, magnetic tapes, and flash drives all have limited lifespans (Deegan and Tanner 18), and the devices and the file formats that are used to preserve our heritage may also become obsolete. As storage devices are often rewritable, files can generally be modified or deleted quite easily. The ephemerality of digital information is particularly noticeable on the worldwide web.

A study conducted by the Pew Research Center has shown that about 25% of all the web pages created in the period between 2013 and 2023 have disappeared (Chapekis et al.). Furthermore, the longevity of digital information can be placed under threat by cyberattacks, accidental deletions, or the deliberate destruction of digital infrastructure during conflicts. Next to such calamities, data can also vanish as an outcome of politicisation.

For example, it was found that during the first month of the second Trump administration, some three thousand datasets have disappeared from data.gov, the website that had originally been built to provide access to the open data of the US government (Koebler). Several pages and data sets have likewise been removed from the websites of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ostensibly to comply with presidential executive orders.

As borne out by these alarming examples, digital information can be highly unstable. Incidentally, such instances of *damnatio memoriae* serve as counterarguments against the view that digital memory can extend cognition (Clark and Chalmers 17).

Clark and Chalmers argue that external technologies can become part of the extended mind only if users can place a high level of trust in their continued availability and in their responsiveness. In short, there are various reasons to be cautious about the growing reliance on digital memory technologies.

While physical memory technologies may have led to specific forms of forgetfulness as well,[4] it seems reasonable to assume that the consequences of delegating information to digital storage systems can be more severe because of the searchability, the portability, and the evanescence of digital information. Simultaneously, it should be noted that the more precise nature of the implications for our mnemonic abilities is still open to scientific debate.

In some of the more recent studies focusing on the cognitive effects of reading substrates, it was found that the differences between reading texts on paper and reading them from screens have become less pronounced as a result of continuous innovations in screen technologies such as e-paper (Margolin et al.; Siegenthaler et al.). The findings that were reported in the paper on the Google Effect by Sparrow et al. were subjected to two reproducibility tests, but in both cases, researchers were unable to arrive at the same results (Hesselmann). At present, there is no widespread scientific consensus regarding the question whether the memory loss that results from the use of digital devices can also be reversed (O'Gorman, para.4).

Irrespective of the exact impact on cognition, however, the possibility to externalise memory calls for a reconsideration both of what we remember and of how we remember.

4 Elisabeth Eisenstein explains that, following the introduction of the printing press, scholars began to rely less heavily on the internal retention of knowledge. This also had an effect on the nature of the texts that were produced: "As learning by reading took on new importance, the role played by mnemonic aids was diminished" (Eisenstein 66).

At a societal level, it is important to ensure that all the information that is considered to be worthy of remembrance can indeed be safeguarded for future generations. The long-term accessibility and usability of our cultural heritage crucially depends on the work of public institutions which can select, appraise, and organise the relevant materials, and that unceasingly take actions to protect our heritage against threats imposed by media obsolescence, natural decay, or political interference. In the academic domain, individual researchers are encouraged to archive publications, data sets, and research software to enable current and future peers to replicate findings.

Furthermore, many countries have formulated legislation to warrant the protection and the re-use of public sector information in archives, so that governments can eventually be held accountable for their activities. Recent developments have re-emphasised the importance of making sure that the legal frameworks that have been agreed upon to preserve public information cannot easily be overruled (Thylstrup and Ovenden).

It needs to be added that the decision to salvage selected materials simultaneously implies the acceptance that non-selected materials may fall into oblivion. Such processes of forgetting can clearly be beneficial as well. Alongside the argument that storing everything uncritically would have enormous ecological implications, selection also enables us to focus on what is most valuable and most relevant. There has been a dramatic expansion of the capacities of external memory, but this does not mean that these must be leveraged to the fullest. The attempt to capture everything could easily lead to a dysfunctional form of hypermnesia.

At an individual level, the potential risks associated with externalisation similarly urge us to reflect on what may be

outsourced and what ought to be committed to the internal memory. It appears to be inevitable that the process of offloading the biological brain causes a degree of forgetfulness. Based both on scientific research and on anecdotal evidence, it has become evident that people who use smartphones find it more difficult to remember phone numbers, birthdays, or street names. Nonetheless, the fact that we cease to memorise practical information is not necessarily a sign of cognitive degradation.

For specific types of information, it is arguably sufficient if they can be retrieved from an external medium at the moment they are needed. Given the enormous quantities of information we need to process on a daily basis, the occasional use of digitally enabled shortcuts seems justifiable. It still seems important to ensure that our biological memory can offer us immediate access to the information we consider to be crucial for how we function as individuals and as members of a community of memories. Our own episodic memories directly contribute to our self-understanding, and knowledge of the nature and the history of the objects, practices, and events that have shaped our communal memory similarly helps us to make sense of the world we live in.

The convenience afforded by external memory should not obscure the advantages of developing internal mnemonic skills and of accumulating general knowledge. Storing information dependably in the biological brain can help us to become more creative, and to develop our critical thinking. It can also help us to become more erudite and more insightful. When we have immediate access to disparate threads of knowledge, this enables us to see more connections and to have more serendipitous realisations.

In line with the neurological dictum that unused brain cells tend to lose their function (Shors et al.), it appears to be of crucial

importance to continue to exercise our biological mnemonic abilities. Some studies have conjectured that we can actively combat the cognitive decline induced by digital devices. In the research that was conducted by Sparrow et al., for example, it was observed that people actually make efforts to remember items if they are convinced that there is no external backup (Sparrow et al.).

This finding suggests that attitudes and expectations are important factors informing our ability to recollect. The use of search engines may indeed affect our inclination or our motivation to memorise, but it may be argued that they do not inevitably affect our neurocognitive ability to recall. The stance that digital media leads to amnesia under all circumstances would evidently amount to technological determinism. The negative effects that may result from the use of digital memory technologies can potentially be cancelled out if we make conscious efforts to memorise some of the information we access online, or if we simultaneously make use of printed sources to support our learning. Considering the potential ramifications of digital amnesia, it is worth exploring whether the many mnemonic techniques that have been developed in Ancient Greece and during the Middle Ages can still be effective today.[5]

Other antidotes may include a digital detox, brain training games, or a more rigorous sleep regime. The suggestion to abandon digital memory systems entirely would be nonsensical, however, as it needs to be accepted that memory has become a hybrid phenomenon. Digital technologies have opened up a wealth of new possibilities for storing and organising information, but such opportunities should not impair our human ability to make use

5 One of these was the method of loci, or the memory palaces. It was an established strategy in which visualisations of spatial environments are summoned up to reinforce the recollection of information. A second widespread aid to memorisation was note-taking. Such processes of making verbatim copies of relevant passages manually helped scholars to consolidate the knowledge more firmly in the human mind (Blair 75).

of this information. Outsourced memory ought to be viewed primarily as an augmentation of our biological memory, and not as a substitution.

It is paramount to make sure that the knowledge that matters is committed to memory, and that we simultaneously sharpen the metacognitive skills that are needed to navigate the expansive digital storage systems that are available today. Eventually, in doing so, we need to strike a careful balance between remembering and forgetting.

About the Author

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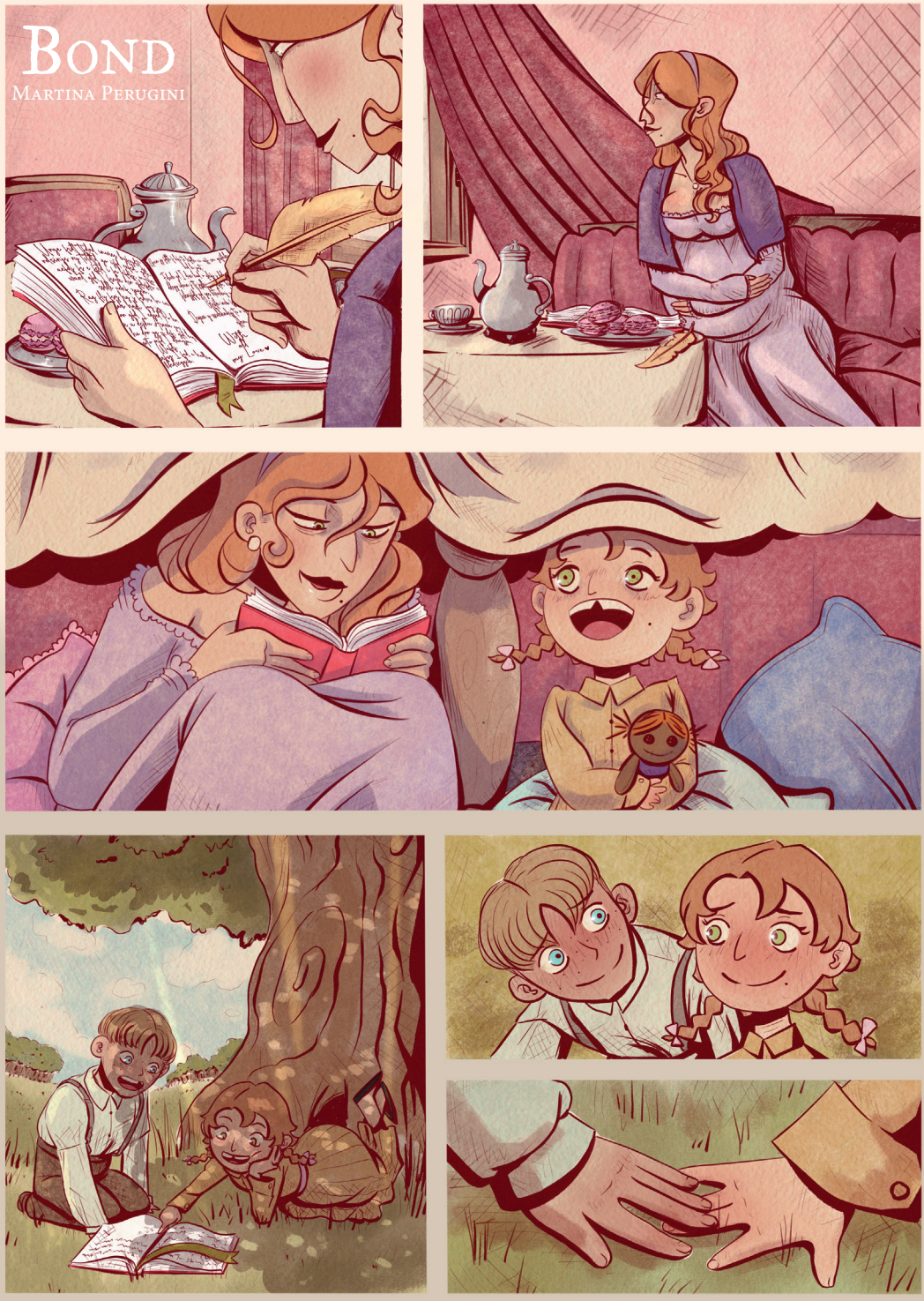
"We need to strike a careful balance *between remembering and forgetting."*

Peter Verhaar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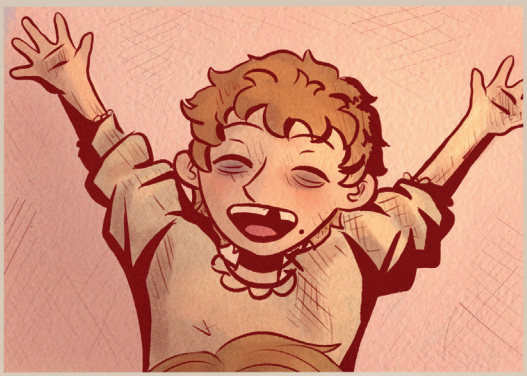

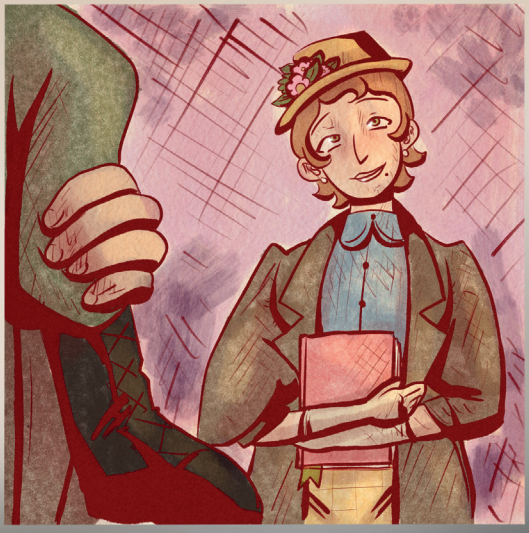

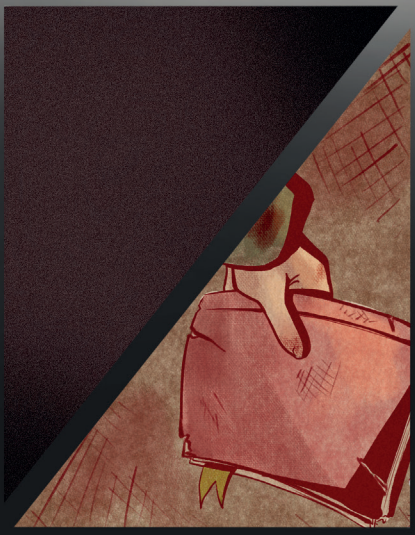

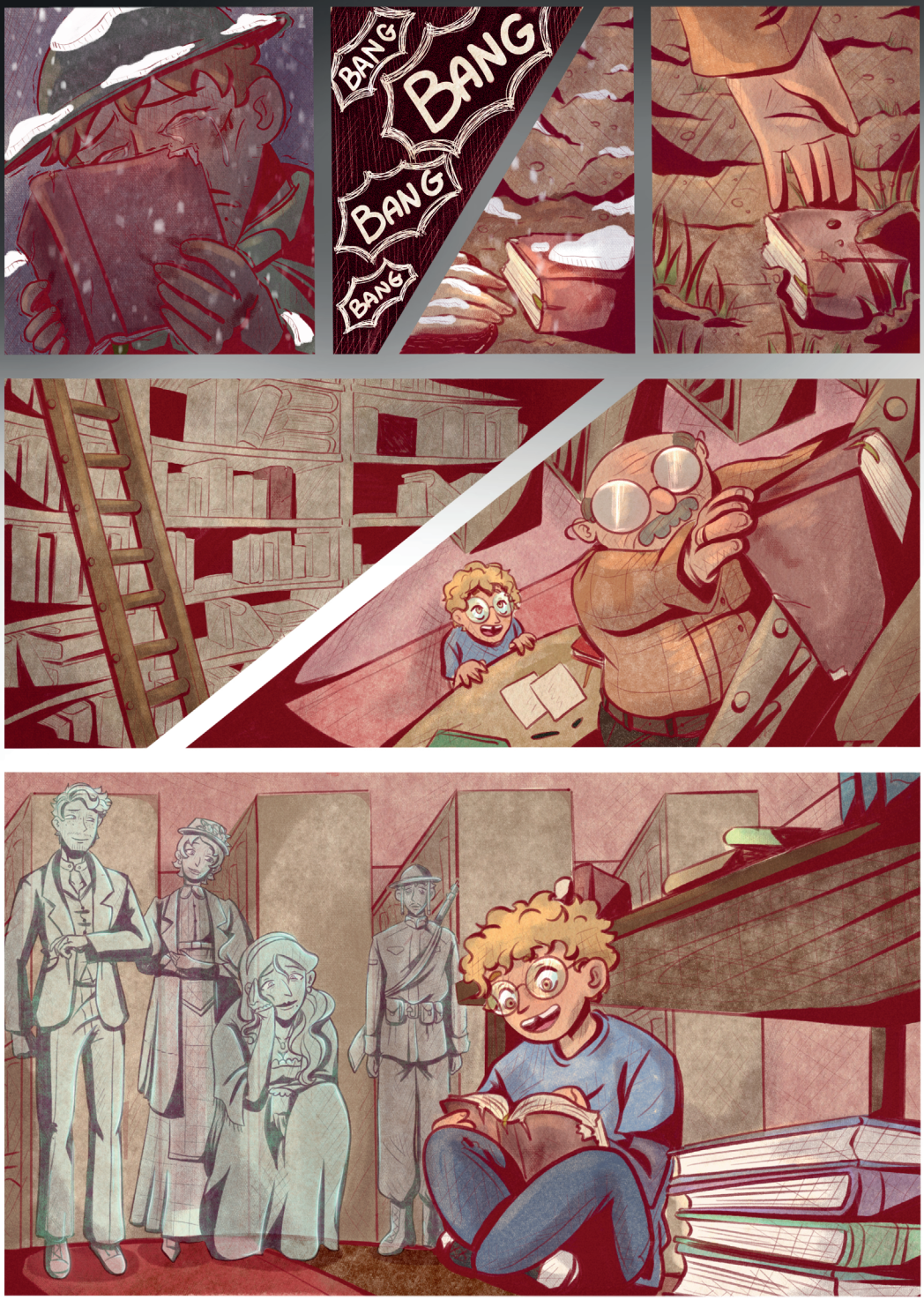
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THE BUSINESS OF MEMORY

A reflection piece by Hanna Olters

"Paradise for the disappearing objects and everyday diversions of the past might simply exist in being remembered and mentioned."[1]

All I know about Mary is that, in the summer of 1930, she visited her aunt in Scotland. I'm holding a letter she sent home to Canada. The black ink has faded to brown and the paper is delicate along the decades-old folds. Her prose is much like her cursive – neat and achingly sincere, as only a child's can be.

Her letter survived, tucked away in a book that is meant to be my actual focus. Since 2023, I have been the cataloger in a rare book dealership, and letters such as Mary's are not uncommon. People will leave all manners of things in books. Nonetheless, I now have a decision to make: is the letter *valuable*? Do I include it in the description of the book that held it or toss it out?

I did neither. In the few minutes Mary and I had spent together, I felt we had formed something of an asymmetrical friendship and I couldn't bring myself to throw her words away. I kept the letter, and still have it now.

This encounter with Mary was the first time I was asked to make such a call, but certainly not the last. As I don't have the desire (or space) to keep every piece of old paper that happens to cross my desk, the question of *value* is one I pose quite often. But *value* is a tricky term. There is no one definition. As a member of a dealership, the potential *market value* of any particular item is generally going to be one of the most important considerations.

1 M. Stepanova. In Memory of Memory: A Romance (New York: 2021 [2018]), p. 19.

However, in a business where every object is unique (including the books - each is a survival with its own story), how does one assign a price? How does one monetize memory, and what role do I as an individual play in this process?

At its most basic, my job is to describe *things*. I look at the object in front of me. I check for damage. I count pages, plates, and maps. I record my findings. Sometimes this is enough. The internet has made it possible to locate and compare copies of similar objects and so gather the information necessary to price an object according to current market standards. Any link to prominent figures or significant historical events (the more direct the better) will of course also impact the number that is ultimately chosen. But what if nothing comparable exists? What of diaries, letters, scrapbooks, or collections of drawings?

It is in these cases that the process of value *creation* becomes most apparent – a process I've come to view with an almost morbid fascination. Value is such a highly problematic, subjective, and fluid concept (one man's trash, beauty in the eye of the beholder, etc.), but there is something cold about the translation of one's analysis into a price tag (the morbidity has more to do with the thrill that comes along with a particularly high number). Yet, a dealership is a business that needs buyers. To have a buyer, there must be a price.

In order to even begin this process, the object (or group thereof) must first be placed into a historical context. As a cataloger, I must argue why and how the item in question can aid in our understanding of a certain moment in time – essentially, why should this item not be forgotten? I find this to be most exciting when there is some element of mystery. Perhaps I'm looking at a collection of botanical sketches by an unknown woman or a family's 19th century photo album. It now falls

to me to reconstruct the stories of not only the object, but the people to whom they once belonged. I do my best to place them back into their context, to turn them from things into artefacts – to create historical, memorial *value*. In this way, there is some overlap between the cultural service performed by booksellers and archivists. Archivists work to preserve not only objects, but their meaning.[2] This allows future generations 'direct insights into past events.'[3]

However, archivists are record-keepers in a way that I am not. They are custodians, whereas I function more as an intermediary. Nevertheless, many of the objects I handle and describe will be acquired by memory institutions such as archives, libraries, and museums. The objects and stories I work to preserve are then able to become accessible to an audience of students, researchers, and, (potentially) the lay public – and so become part of a culture or community's collective memory.

'How objects are handed on is all about story-telling.'[4] So says Edmund de Waal in his brilliant memoir *The Hare with the Amber Eyes*. His book, which chronicles his efforts to learn about his family history through an inherited collection of Japanese netsuke, is essentially a masterclass in exactly that kind of story-telling through objects. Yet, we can never forget that the story-telling will never be *objective*. Regardless of how much research archivists, librarians, de Waal, or I invest into our stories' descriptions, we are all still individuals with our own stories that will inevitably bleed into everything we produce.

This is something I think about whenever it comes time for me to write my descriptions. There are going to be certain stories

2 International Council on Archives, 'What are archives?' <https://www.ica.org/discover-archives/what-are-archives/> (03.03.2025).
3 Ibid.
4 E. de Waal. The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance (London: 2010), p. 17.

or objects that I feel an emotional connection towards, and then there will be some that are simply a task to check off for the day. While I still always try to maintain the standard of my work, I can't say for sure if there isn't a difference when I feel that certain something, that human element no one can control.

This takes on a different dimension when I'm handling an object that I know is steeped in tragedy. The inescapable reality of working on the past is that, for every seemingly innocent letter written by a Mary, there will be another that is an obvious artefact of suffering. Survivals from Canada's colonial past, the Holocaust, or the Soviet regime have all been placed before me. In these cases, it is not only the notion of assigning monetary value that becomes more conflicting and morbid, but the prospect of benefitting from their sale.

I believe it is here that a sense of responsibility and discernment is asked on the part of the dealer. As the intermediary for such objects, I want to do my best to find them a proper home. What constitutes *proper* is, of course, subjective – not only in regards to my thoughts and feelings as an individual, but the unique nature of a given object.

However, my personal, overarching approach relates to accessibility. I want as wide an audience as possible to be able to view and learn from such items, and this generally translates to cultural institutions with the means to organize, store, and potentially digitize historical material. This is especially important when handling objects that were born from dark, difficult times.

In terms of pricing, we exist in a capitalist context where monetary and cultural value are often intertwined and occasionally conflated. Price and value are not the same. However, a price tag can function as a means to communicate (perceived) value. It can be a tool. I have decided that this item is important. I have decided

that it demands a certain price. I have decided this is something worthy of remembrance. I feel immensely privileged to engage in my work. It is a privilege to work with the dead. They are brought forth from the past, even if only for a moment – they are being remembered, they are not forgotten.

I want to deliver their story to a more permanent custodian. Navigating the complexities of memory and commerce is a challenge, but one I embrace. I am a participant in the shaping of a shared, collective memory - this can mean finding an institutional buyer with scholastic usership for a collection of letters or mentioning someone like Mary in a brief essay. Catalogers and dealers are integral to the creation of a cultural memory. There is no price that can be put on this daunting and wonderful responsibility.

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EXCOMMUNICADO

Zain Hussain

commune with me on exclusion
from communities crass and caring seldom
defined by cunning and confusion
and hand signs reading '******* not welcome'
while your sayings sting like sticks and stones
you suckers will never see me soft or silent
let me teach you what it takes to break bones
and what it means to get verbosely violent

see
my complexity
needs no sympathy
my melancholy
breeds necessity
no community
seems to reckon me
this fragility
be the death of me

now
for the sake of our forsaken history
make me naught but an afterthought
thrice misled means you can miss me
even with a perfect parting shot
bullied, belittled and twice maligned
one moment of liberty is all I require
to right that wrong and be left behind
no memories of you is all I desire

so hold your tongue and mark my words
please keep that faith as if you care
I'll wish the world to you and yours
but best believe I won't be there
find me as the phantom of negative space
ruling the blanks betwixt the warp & weft
unmasked yet best beheld without face
that by the time you read this has long—

FINDING MY FLOW

Naomi Groenendijk

Wind howling, Leaves crisping, Whispering, Rustling,
Alluring me to come closer.
Pressing me forward in a stream of noise.
It feels so beautiful, so lyrical, exceptional and wonderful.

As I am deaf to my surroundings, I hope for some salvation.
I let them guide me, welcome me,
orchestrate me with their songs.
I hear their noise, there's so much noise,
So much so, they leave no room to call my own.

Where are my thoughts?

There's no going back, it's too much,
too much noise, too much pressure,
Too little space to think for myself.
Just go with the flow, it whispers. Just go with the flow.
Flow, where's my flow? What is my flow?

Is it the stream of flow they tell me to follow?
Or is it in these pages laid out before me?
A state of mind that I enter, A portal to another's mind.
Words upon words upon words to swallow.

Voices from others who've created narratives to be shared.
But they don't tell me what to follow
or
which way I should go.
They do not speak furiously, as if afraid that I'll get scared.
Instead,
they show me possibilities, making more room for my own.
Such gentle voices, speaking softly, sounding like my friend.

The cruel, cold stream turns pellucid, and I can finally see.
I don't need to follow anyone else but me.
Now, I have a Voice, a Thought, an Idea, a Feeling,
A Feeling of Belonging, A Feeling of Breathing.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AT NIGHT

A short story by Celine Kock

Natalie was sure she had cracked the code. She just needed to see the manuscript one more time to verify, which was precisely why she was currently hiding in the utility closet of the library's most hidden toilet.

Since the conference last week, Natalie had not been able to stop thinking of the manuscript's 'unsolvable code'. The book was a gorgeous gem with an embroidered binding from the Elizabethan era, and tomorrow, the museum it was loaned from, would collect it. She needed to see it today.

So, when she saw the cleaning staff, she stalked the tired woman for a solid hour and distracted her with stupid questions when she was about to lock the closet. Luckily, the onslaught of words worked, the woman ended up leaving without locking the closet, and Natalie could crouch between rolls of toilet paper and soap bottles.

She rubbed her lower back. She'd been in here for three hours now, waiting to ensure everyone had left. The library closed at midnight. It was now two am. It should be clear. It should be possible for her to get to the manuscript. In theory.

Slowly, Natalie pushed the door open. She flinched when the automatic lights turned on. Deep breaths. She could feel her heart beating fast. She swallowed. Her throat was dry.

Does the library have guards at night? Security systems? Could I go to jail for wanting to look at a manuscript?

Maybe she could pretend that she was locked in - which she kind of was. She definitely was, actually. She should have thought

of that beforehand.

As quietly as possible, she crept into the hallway like she was one of those demons in Roman toilets. She shook her head and got her notebook out of her backpack. She held on to the paper like it was a talisman. A week's worth of research was in there.

She'd found traces of Victorian book-clubs that discussed the manuscript, comments by generations of book historians, all kinds of enthusiasts and scholars. Now it was her turn, the collected knowledge of people long gone between her fingers.

Soft moonlight fell in through the glass roof, making it easier for Natalie to find her way through the maze of hallways and stairs, before she arrived in front of the door labelled: 'Special Collections'.

She opened it. No alarm rang.

Beep. Natalie whirled around.

The sound had been quiet, far away. It was probably just a printer complaining that cyan was empty. Her hand held on to the door handle like it was a lifeline. Suddenly, the rows of books loomed over her, looking like they were hiding ghosts within their shadows. She wanted to run back to the toilet paper and cleaning supplies, but her legs wouldn't move.

A mix of long and short stitches, the fading effect in the petals of red and gold flowers. The image of delicate embroidery on the manuscript's binding solidified in her mind. A one-of-a-kind binding for a one-of-a-kind book.

Natalie counted to three and entered the special collections' department. Rows of tables filled the middle of the room. Shelves with cushions for the books and open stacks on one side, big windows that gave view to the canal and a clear night sky on the other.

Now, the difficult part began, because she didn't have the key

to the storage rooms. She was hoping she could find one or get in another way. The thought: *Damn, I'm more stupid than I thought I was*… was interrupted when she heard footsteps.

Shit! She got caught.

She opened cupboards only to find them full of books in boxes. Think! It was dark. She could hide anywhere. The steps stopped in front of the door just as Natalie dove under one of the tables. She would be in plain view should the security person turn on a light.

The door was opened slowly and carefully. Then, an electric torch shone. Someone with light steps hurried towards the storage room. The counter was between Natalie and the stranger.

Natalie crept out from under the table and felt like she was a demon watching from the shadows. Trying not to make a sound, she stood up and looked over the counter to see-

"Dr. Ellyn?"

Dr. Ellyn shrieked; the torch shone right into Natalie's eyes for a blinding instant. Orange-red spots danced in her vision like flames.

"Natalie! What on earth are you doing here?"

The History of Books' professor was not wearing one of her usual colourful business suits but trainers, joggers, and a loose t-shirt. For a moment, they just stared at each other.

"I'm sorry, I really wanted to see the manuscript again. The embroidered one." Could she still make a run for it? Would anyone believe Dr. Ellyn if she said she saw one of her students in the library in the middle of the night?

But Dr. Ellyn sighed and pressed her badge to the scanner. "Come along then, they wouldn't let me see it either."

Natalie didn't need to be asked twice. She followed her professor, who examined the rows of boxes. It would have taken

Natalie ages to find the right one, but Dr. Ellyn found it before Natalie even had a chance to take it all in.

"We need to be quick. I just wanted to see-"

"The title page", they said in unison.

Natalie opened her notebook. "Whoever came up with this code was some mad genius. I'm sure it was either a very elaborate joke, someone's passion project or something very important is hidden in those pages."

Dr. Ellyn took the precious codex out of its box. This was the first time Natalie saw this kind of binding up close. It must have taken ages. She'd done some embroidery herself and couldn't even imagine her stitches this clean.

"You think this could be a product of pure passion?"

"Have you ever been to a cosplay convention?"

Dr. Ellyn lifted her brows and Natalie shrugged. "I think it's possible."

Slowly, Dr. Ellyn opened the book. It creaked quietly, not like it protested, but more of a hint that it was alive.

The title page showed a crest with a key and a pair of wings and horns. A scholar from the 1950s, Natalie had stumbled upon, thought it might be a reference to a long-lost fairy tale. The title was cleanly written in Roman script but resembled no known language.

Putting together the research a resolute and bored grandma had done in the late 1880s, the book-club's notes, and whatever else Natalie could find, she had assembled a guide. She opened the page and started deciphering letter by letter. She scribbled them in pencil in her notebook, barely glancing at them.

"Wait, has it always said that?" Dr. Ellyn leaned closer, her eyes sparkled with suspicion. "I thought an *s* and *l* had been here", she pointed to the second word, "but now neither are."

"Maybe you misremember?" Natalie hadn't paid that much attention, she had been too invested in the speech about secret codes to remember specific words.

Natalie finished the translation and when she read it out loud, the pencil fell from her hand and the torch turned off, leaving them in total darkness.

"This is for the demons lurking in the shadows."

About the Creative Creators

in order of appearance

Martina Perugini, *known artistically as Senca, is an Italian artist specialising in character design, comics, and illustration. Her work is rooted in fantasy themes, drawing inspiration from her passion for role-playing games.*

She primarily works in digital media, combining fantasy elements with a cartoon-inspired style. Through her characters, she creates stories set in imaginary worlds filled with real emotion, inviting viewers into realms of adventure and wonder.

Hanna Olters *is a rare book cataloger and bookseller. Following her undergraduate studies in English and Scandinavian Studies at the Humboldt University of Berlin, she completed her master's degree in Book and Digital Media Studies at Leiden University. She has been a part of the team at Bjarne Tokerud Bookseller, Inc. in Vancouver, Canada, since 2023.*

Zain Hussain *is a poet, author and Master's student of the MA Book and Digital Media Studies. Born and raised in The Hague, his writing aims to stylishly portray the human condition in its most genuine, grotesque and absurd form. Currently rewriting and editing* Imprimatura*, a Dutch literary novella and* Apotheosis*, a dark fantasy novel.*

Naomi Groenendijk *is a 19-year-old first-year Arts, Media & Society student from the Netherlands. Born in China, she was adopted by a loving Dutch couple. Regardless, her Chinese roots are still a source of inspiration.*

She creates paintings and drawings, though she is open to exploring other mediums as well. Besides exploring various cultures, she loves to wander through museums and bookstores. Before her study at Leiden University, she pursued her creative career at Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, but soon discovered she longed for a deeper understanding of society and the arts.

In her spare time, you can find her reading all kinds of books, visiting Comic Cons with friends, or learning about fashion. On social media, she is an active bookstagrammer and a freelance writer for Geekish.nl.

Celine Kock *is the editor-in-chief of this TxT edition and a student of the MA Book and Digital Media Studies. She has a bachelor's degree in Buchwissenschaften (book studies) and English Literature and Culture and loves to write creatively in her free time.*

Most of her publications are in German and were published under the pseudonym Cel Silen. She loves to explore a mix of fantasy and realism and appreciates a good amount of humour and coziness in her writing to take a break from reality. You can find more information and a list of her publications at www.cel-silen.de.

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