

## *The Ghetto Intern: Culture and Memory*

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*“The community with him [sic] begins in my obligation to him. The neighbor is a brother” (Levinas, 1974/1981, p. 87).*

### Introduction

My first year as a doctoral intern I (Heather) worked at an African-American social service agency in a tough part of town in Portland, Oregon, and it was there I came to understand that cultural memory is everything but private, it is something we live into together. Simply put, “Memory is relational” (Ullman, 2011, p. 269) and “everything but static and past tense” (Stern, 2011). I also learned that cultural memory and collective identity are political in ways we do not understand.

*This paper is about awakening from history only in order to enter the dream of memory.* The old saying is that, “history is written by the winners” but cultural memory is remarkably more complicated than the propositional description of historic events. It is not a record of “what happened” but a sociolinguistic creative meaning making process (Bill Adams, personal communication, June 1, 2011). Histories can be contested. Memory, on the other hand, never adheres to the strict true or false dichotomy. Are dreams true or false? No, they are what they are.<sup>1</sup> Memory is like searching for the Divine, it cannot be found, only revealed in mysterious and small details. In other words, memories are the intrudings of the infinite, creating as an effect the idea of a finite (Peter August, personal communication, May 25, 2011). Memories are not “representations” of the past nor are they a kind of mnemonic system of subjectivism to mediate all of consciousness. Memory is a collectively constructed way of interpreting experience.

In his book, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America*, Philip Cushman stated, “The configuration of self, even a configuration composed of an absence, is socially constructed by those in power. The self is always a product of a specific cultural frame of reference, configured out of moral understandings and local politics” (1995, p.12). These moral understandings and local politics are born from a collective cultural memory. *But what then is the phenomenological relationship between memory and policy?* What does it look like when memory and political power play out in daily life? How do social constructions, in which memory plays such a crucial role, come to have real political consequences?

### The Internship

On a cool September morning I met my supervisor Ron for the first time in a small office at the agency where I had been assigned. Ron was legend in the hood. He made things happen for people. He wore an African print shirt, round silver spectacles and jeans. African masks hung directly in back of him on the wall. To the right was a

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<sup>1</sup> Avishai Margalit, known for *The Ethics of Memory*, asks whether memory is “involuntary like the muscles of the heart, or voluntary like the muscles of the hand?” (p. 56). He creates a compelling description of the involuntary nature of memory while maintaining the argument that memory remains a deeply ethical aspect of personal and communal life.

large black and white photo of the two African American medalists in the 1968 summer Olympics. They stood on the Olympic platforms with their heads bowed and their right fists, covered in a black leather gloves, launched up into the sky in determined protest. The white officials stood beneath the two athletes with blank expressions on their faces. I had forgotten the names of the athletes.

Assuming Ron wanted more details of my previous work as a therapist with children and families, I handed him an updated resume. He looked briefly through the pages and then tossed it on a growing mound of papers on his desk that seemed to go with the multiplying used coffee mugs. The smell of fermented cream hung in the air and there was a long pause. If I had been paying close enough attention at the time I would have noticed that both of us were about to cross over an invisible threshold. We seemed to be working backwards and forwards in time until some silent agreement was made outside of time altogether. It was the moment of interaction when we were both historical and instantaneous; in this first face-to-face encounter, we had entered the birthplace of memory, giving life to detail and texture and history was on the “hither side” of that present moment (Levinas, 1974/1998, p.12)

He asked, “Where are you from?” And when I let him know that I was from Chicago he seemed to relax a little and replied, “That will help you.” He squinted at me as though he were trying to see me from afar; his head back, chin tilted upwards. The navy colored pantsuit I wore felt uncomfortable. The lining of the pants stuck to the inside of my thighs and I wondered why I felt compelled to wear it in the first place. When I looked at Ron again I decided that he was squinting because he was trying to see me into the future of the agency and into the world to which he belonged. Ron said, “You have a moment? I need to run an errand and you could come with.” I said, “Sure.”

Ron and I walked outside and met the cool fall air, the smell of dead crushed leaves and gasoline. A car rolled past us on the street with large silver rims and hard rap music beating out of the speaker. We got into an old truck that had furniture loaded in the back. Dressers, chairs, lamps, and bed frames stuck out at all angles; tangles of knotted rope held it down. Ron told me that the furniture was for people who had survived hurricane Katrina and had moved with only the clothes on their backs. Ron started the old cranky engine and we headed to a local Baptist church.

Ron would often stop the truck to talk with people who were walking along the street. When he spoke he hung at least half his body outside the driver’s side door. Both arms out, gesticulating, hand shaking and greeting others. His voice became louder, tonal, animated. I was not introduced to others because in many ways I did not exist yet, at least not in his community. I was a white intern in a navy pantsuit: a passenger in a foreign country merely along for the ride.

We pulled up out in front of what looked like a large brown house. The front of the house had stained glass windows made of geometric patterns in bright colors: red orange, green, yellow, purple and blue. There was a single turquoise door to the left through which a man and woman emerged. They came and helped us unload the truck. The inside of the church the rows of pews with illuminated with a pale light coming in through the side windows. Light blue velvet covered the benches of the long pews and old worn bibles peered out from wooden pockets behind each seat. Many people moved about gathering furniture, clothes, toys, canned food and other household items. In the back of the building was a kitchen the emitted the aromas of southern cooking.

Ron directed me to a man who was in the process of assembling furniture. As we worked together we talked about Katrina and what had happened in New Orleans. He said, “The belly of America has been split open, and it is time for a new birth. We can’t go back now.” Towards the end of our talk, as I was about to leave, he said, “You know, your people hung my people.”

There was nothing noble about my initial reaction to this profound statement, since what struck me in that moment was that it was only the first day of my internship. I thought, “My god, if this is the beginning, how do I get through the rest of the year?” I had already landed in the heart of a cultural elegy and was totally unprepared for the recognition of memory, of ancestry, despair and protest at such a level. Jan-Werner Muller (2002) said,

Minorities have advanced the recovery of unrecorded history and the social recognition of their particular collective experience. Memory is marshaled as a grievance and claim on political resources, and groups are eager to have their individual historical experience recognized (p.2).<sup>2</sup>

But it seemed that this man’s comment was less about the recasting of historical pain and guilt and more about something that both of us were in together in that moment. This was not about the “politics of recognition” or a more generic “class unconscious”<sup>3</sup> (Botticelli, 2007) but about how memory mattered in our immediate relationship (Altman, 2004).<sup>4</sup>

There were three paths I could have taken in response to the fact that “my people” had “hung” his people: psychological, historical, and ethical.

A psychological response, may have considered his feelings of overwhelming grief and anger. A deep empathy or feeling of being-with may have been called forth by this moment in order to achieve some sort of mutual healing. Or even worse, some sort of diagnostic label relating to post traumatic stress may have neatly categorized his comment making it his painful memory and not mine. Instead, he introduced me to dread and shame.

From a historical perspective there is no end to the list of how the white man and his armies have decimated cultures. Oregon’s first constitution prohibited African-Americans from even entering the state, and had the largest number of Ku Klux Klan, members outside of the south (<http://www.ohs.org/education/oregon>). I could have talked about how whites have come to internalize the myth of their racial superiority via what Ngugi Wa Thiong’O (1983) called the cultural bomb. He stated,

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<sup>2</sup> “According to Soloveitchik (2009), in ancient Jewish law, a Jewish slave was exempt from positive commandments with a fixed time. The reason for this is that a slave’s time is not his own and so the slave was thought to lack the time experience of a free person. Being liberated from slavery thus means attaining a sense of time as our own, historical awareness, memory, anticipation, appreciation of the moment in a wider context, human subjectivity. So-called primitive peoples (slaves, and women, too, as first pointed out by Simone de Beauvoir) were thought to lack a sense of history and subjectivity, which became the privileged possession of the colonizer (Brickman, 2003). Freud’s famous notion that the unconscious is timeless thus structuralizes as internal the relations between the colonizer and colonized” (Aron, 2011, p. 288).

<sup>3</sup> Originally Stanley Aronowitz’s term, though expanded upon the relational psychoanalytic literature by Botticelli (2007) and Hartman (2007). Hartman uses the term to “describe the unformulated experience of class in unconscious territory” (p. 210).

<sup>4</sup> Neil Altman (2004) articulates how history may be reenacted in the dyad

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves...<sup>5</sup>

This degree of violence lives in a realm wherein meaningful creation of symbolization and understanding are short-circuited. Our ability to formulate and assimilate experience is undermined and is left as a sort of haunting, floating ghost. Sociopolitical trauma and racial oppression continue forward in this manner within cultural memory. As Margalit (2002) writes, "The wounds of insult and humiliation keep bleeding long after the painful physical injuries have crusted over" (p. 120).

Or I could have taken an ethical approach to this collective memory and suggested, as the philosopher Levinas (1961) has asserted, that what takes place in the Other is more primordial than everything that takes place in me. I could have endured the shock of otherness in order to undo the egoic project of the "I." Furthermore, with Levinas, I understand that history is comprised of a "series of crimes" (1976/1990b) wherein the "filthy, criminal tide of man [sic]" plays out, and I am more responsible for it than anyone else! I am not just of the same white race or genus as the lynching mobs of the previous generation. I am the one responsible for the hanging of this man's kin---my hands performed the memory that tortures him.

I believe that what I said in that moment was an attempt to integrate all three perspectives. I took a step towards him and said, "Then your people need to lead my people. And those of us that are ready will follow you." The man at the church looked stunned and took a step towards me. I felt scared. But I also felt that the only way out was the way through. I had to lean into this thing, this textured, gritty world that was so much bigger than me. We bantered back and forth for quite some time. His last words to me were, "Just remember that all the messengers in this community pay with their lives." And then he walked away.

It was months before Ron allowed me to see a single client or family for psychotherapy. Instead, I went on errands with people from the agency, sat in on parenting classes with Mrs. Wells, went to local diners and followed case managers around into different homes in the neighborhood. I asked Ron one day, "When will you let me see clients?" He replied, "When people know your name." And that was all he said. No elaboration of theory or his thoughts on the process of the internship. No list of indicators that would add to the invisible readiness quotient. Ron had an idea, I think, that was not that unlike the ideas of Lacan. We are born into language, born into a line of names and signifiers. We are assigned a place in language by the name we are given. Perhaps, what he also meant was that I had to be "born" into the community before I could work there. People not only needed to know my name, people actually had to give me a name, which is what eventually happened. In those neighborhoods I was first known as "Heat-Mac" and then "Little Mac." For reasons that are still unclear to me, the names just appeared or disappeared.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Cushman's (1995) description of the "minstrel stage" in the course of American history.

Eldridge Cleaver (1968) once said, "Because you're white/your white meat is nightmare food/White is the skin of evil." At first I wondered about the nightmare that white privilege had created in the world. Then I began to see violence and dishonesty in the words I spoke and in my name and my place in language. Language was not innocent, cultural memory was not innocent. This was the message from the man at the church: we all have blood on our hands.

Ron would know when it was time. And he would know by some small subtle gesture, rather than some dramatic event; some miniscule clue that I was unconscious of would let him know that something had changed. I like to imagine that he would have seen it in the way I walked because no matter how sophisticated our psychological abstractions become, if they are to be meaningful, they must retain their intimate ties to our embodied modes of conceptualization and reasoning.

Meaning and experience are united in the way we move and walk in the world through our bodily interactions, our cultural institutions, our linguistic tradition, our historical context and our memories. As Wilber (1995) stated,

I must look into the whole network of shared social practices and 'background unconscious' of linguistically (and prelinguistically) structured meanings and intersubjective exchanges that constitute the "pre-understanding" or "background" or "foreknowledge" of the particular worldspace or worldview---all of the contexts within contexts within contexts that structure the interior values and meanings of a culture, some of them explicit (requiring understanding) and some of them implicit (requiring excavation). (p. 134)

### Seeing Clients: The Great Flood

Eventually, Ron introduced me to a mother who wanted her son to have therapy. It was common practice at this agency for the therapist to make visits in the home of the client. It allowed the therapist to observe the actual lived world of the client and to participate in that world.

When I stepped into William's (pseudonym) apartment I noticed a fan whirled in the corner of the apartment and blew some candy wrappers across the living room. Torn children's books, crushed plastic toys, were also strewn across the maroon carpet. A small African-American girl named Tylina sat on the kitchen counter top as her brother made her some Ramen noodles. Tylina began to scream that the noodles were too hot to eat and her older brother Jamal told her to shut the fuck up and then called to the back room, "Mama! Someone here to see you---a white lady."

It was difficult for Ms. Vera to walk given her large size but she managed to lumber down the hallway and find her way to the couch across from me and sit down. Ms. Vera had a view out the iron gated screen door, which was kept locked at all times. A police siren blared outside as we made our verbal introductions. The legal size yellow notepad on my lap seemed too large and out of place. I began the initial interview.

"I understand you have some concerns about your son William?"

"Yeah. He been fightin'. He gets angry all the time and has knocked people out. He yells and cusses people out. He has played with fire, he has even stuck himself with needles, put matches up in plugs and has burned himself to make a tattoo. I am worried the streets will take him."

"The streets are scary out there. You must feel scared for your son."

“Well, you see everyone has died. William’s father and grandfather were murdered in a dice game when William was 10 months old. His stepfather died of diabetes, and his uncle (my brother) died when he was 8 years old.”

Ms. Vera looked tired and sad but she continued to talk. She spoke slowly with long pauses as she tried to remember the past. She explained her past episodes of drug use and how during these times she could not tend to her kids the way she had wanted.

A skateboard scraped the sidewalk outside followed by the sounds of people shouting. The wooden entrance gate banged shut and heavy feet fell on the steps. Ms. Vera said, “Now this is William.” A shadow appeared on the porch first and then William’s tall, thin figure appeared behind the iron gated door. “Mama can you open the door?” he said with a tone of irritation. It seemed easier for me so I just stood up and unlocked the bolts. William looked surprised but quickly hid his expression as he entered the house.

“William this is Ms. Heather, she will be doing your therapy.”

William shook my hand and looked me in the eye. He was polite but cool. He had high cheekbones, full lips, and wide large eyes. His skin was much lighter brown than his mother’s and this, William told me later, bothered him. He wore baggy jeans and a black sweatshirt top. He said, “I’ll see ya’ll later,” and he disappeared to the back of the house.

William and I continued to meet with for the remainder of the year. He told me once that when rage flooded his body he thought about killing people. He said that horrible images would come to his head and that once they started they were hard to stop. He said, “If I were not afraid of consequences, I could really hurt people. But I don’t want to go to jail and I don’t want to die.”

As I began my relationship with William Ron said I had begun to ask the right questions and had started to learn that subject and object, self and other, psyche and culture, person and context, figure and ground, practitioner and practice, live together, require each other, dialectically and jointly make each other up (Hook, 2004).

One day I asked Ron about William, “Was this PTSD in the traditional sense but qualified in the context of the African-American experience?” Ron stared at me and said, “Whose tradition?” I looked confused and he continued, “What I need more than anything, Heather, is for you to understand your white experience. Are you free enough to understand your own experience?” At that moment I could not tell: was I the oppressor or the oppressed or both? In my work as a white therapist in a black community I wondered: Whose memory was I going to serve?

It was at this point I learned about the 1948 flood in Portland, Oregon. One evening I had lingered around the agency office talking with a case manager about the families and children on her caseload. She mentioned to me that many of her families needed to move father North due to the gentrification of local neighborhood and rising rent prices. She said, “People can’t afford rent after white people move in. It is the modern day version of the flood.” When I looked confused and replied, “What flood?” Her face twisted into a knot of despair. She said, “Baby, don’t you know?” She went on to explain how the Columbia River swelled fifteen feet above normal, and not unlike the levy in New Orleans, the embankment that served as a dike broke. The water that punched a hole in the embankment flooded 18,000 people out of their homes and altered race relations in Portland forever.

As the river rose, her grandmother grabbed important documents, photos and a change of underwear for each of her kids. Then they made their way to North Denver Avenue, with toothbrushes and a bag of clothes in their hands and waited. They stayed in friend's houses until they could find a place of their own again. The entire city of Vanport, Oregon disappeared and 6,000 members of the African-American community were displaced. As she told her story and the story of Vanport, I experienced a kind of emotional whiplash; the mental picture I had of a culture, place and time snapped in and out of alignment in rapid succession.

In my mind's eye I imagined what it would be like to wake up with the taste of oblivion in your mouth. The threat of a swollen river, of a hurricane, war or disease challenge us, not in terms of "moral sensibility" but in terms of recognizing that you are not separate from anyone else's experience in a complete way. In Africa, there is a notion called Ubuntu that says, "I become a person through other persons." Or as Martin Luther King Jr. said,

All this is simply to say that all life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny...strangely enough I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way the world is made. I didn't make it that way, but this is the way, the interrelated structure of reality (as cited in Frady, 2002, p.56)

This is why the pathologies of any culture are derived from inequalities present in wider social structures and cannot be reduced merely to the internal psychological workings of individual subjects. To be in a different culture means that I must let the culture carry me beyond myself so that I can resonate with the interior depth of the people I wish to be in relationship with. The historical, social and political images of that particular culture are held to the heart--then I must let them have their way with me. The depth in me, the lived experience must empathically align itself, intuitively feel into, the corresponding depth or lived experience that I seek to recognize in others.

In the last few weeks of my internship I noticed when I drove down the street to work I too stopped the car and hung my arms and head out the window to talk with someone I knew. And I thought to myself: "the belly has been spilt open." There was no turning back.

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