THREADING LAYERS OF MEMORY INTO FAMILY TREES: FAMILY COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND JEWISH MEMORY BY TWO CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN WRITERS

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The notion of memory in the debates on self-writing and the autobiographical genre in Latin American literature only started to be a major topic of debate in the past ten years. Sylvia Molloy proposes that family collective memory is part of this debate: "the past, in Spanish America, appears to be, very consciously, a family affair" (*At Face Value* 159). This "family affair" however, seems relegated to support the postulation of the self or at least to explore the tension between the self and the communal.[1] This analysis focuses on the mechanics of a polyphonic place of enunciation. Family genealogies bring to the fore important issues of memory and identity. They tie the private to the public and the self and the family to society and to the nation.

Las genealogías by the Jewish Mexican author Margo Glantz, and *El libro de los recuerdos* by the Jewish Argentine author Ana María Shua explore the notion of collective memory. How do these families remember their past? What do they remember? What triggers the act of remembrance? Who remembers with them? These questions intend to stress the multiplicity of levels by which memory, narrative and identity overlap and render configurations of a collective sense of self.

I will address memory as a cultural and social construction (Bal vii) in two narratives that concentrate on Jewish families. Memory is a highly debated matter in Jewish thought.[2] Thus, is their Jewish tradition an important factor in the way that these families remember? Can their construction of the past be referred to as "Jewish memory"? My goal is to analyze memory's potential to inscribe and construct cultural categories.

In Maurice Halbwachs' famous text, *On Collective Memory,* he proposes that most of our memories come from our family and friends, that we acquire our memories in society. Each family's particular experiences shape the collective memory intended to assure family union and continuation.[3] In Glantz's *Las genealogías* and in Shua's *El libro de los recuerdos* the sense of union and continuation of the family rests in their constant revision— and often disagreement—of those events that most affected them. Both authors narrate[4] the family story from a collection of fragmented memories.[5] Is this fragmentation connected to their experience of Diaspora and thus, to a "Jewish" version of family union and continuation in Latin America?

Drawing the Family Tree Together

In *Las genealogías,* Margo Glantz translates interrupted anecdotes and dialogues as well as documents and images to sketch her family's genealogy from her own rather assimilated standpoint. Most articles about *Las genealogías* address the author's self-configuration as well as issues of gender and the autobiographical genre in this text.[6] Instead, I discuss the interview process that configures her family sense of collective memory, because it highlights the role of memory in constructing cultural categories.

Las genealogías was originally published as a series of installments in the Mexican newspaper *Unomásuno.* In this multi-layered text, Glantz focuses heavily on her family history. She braids together a series of interviews that she conducted with her father, mother and family friends. During these interviews, the family members interrupt one another's renderings of past events. These interruptions facilitate a collective version of the family genealogy that entails everyone's active participation. Moreover, in this family, sometimes people remember for one another. "Mi padre corrige la infancia de mi madre y ella oye con impaciencia ciertas versiones de la infancia de mi padre [...]"(98). Glantz stresses the fragmented nature of this genealogy when she mentions that her mother, Lucía, offers her memories in tiny pieces of

paper: "me entrega cachitos de papel, 'cachitos de vida,' en donde se condensan las historias y se despliegan los diplomas" (48).

The author and narrator reflects about the process of building the family collective memory throughout the text and from the very beginning of the interview by making a passing comment: "Prendo la grabadora [...] Quizá fije el recuerdo" (17). In the context of this discussion, this comment is very revealing because it presents memory as an ever-evolving matter that changes as the family discusses past events. For example, after her father's assertion that he was born in Cremenchug, and his brother in Novo Vitebsk, both in the Ukraine, Margo admits that she and her mother looked at each other with surprise, because "[...]los datos varían cada vez que se le da cuerda al recuerdo. No importa, las capas de la memoria se montan sobre la escritura como se montaba el techo de dos aguas sobre la casa de mi padre [...]" (20). Memory is portrayed here as a narrative phenomenon, facts change every time her father narrates the story of his origins, and with every change a new layer of memory is threaded into the family tree.[7]

She also wonders whether memories may become weakened by their constant retelling: "¿Será el recuerdo un goce debilitado? Se debilita quizá por el extenso manoseo al que se lo somete: los recuerdos regresan siempre y nos quedamos anclados a un acontecimiento [...] (99). The events that the Glantz family discusses the most are those from their Jewish life back in the Ukraine, their immigration process and their life in the New World—mainly Mexico and New York city. With the unavoidable return and revision of family memories, they are in danger of fading, and thus, of falling into oblivion, but they may also become enriched. The only certainty is that they will transform.

Jacobo Glantz's memory is marked by the traumatic events of his childhood. Margo's comment about his ever-changing memory merges into a direct quotation of him describing the house, and how he used to hide in the roof when there were pogroms. In fact, traumatic events also marked the daughter's memory who admits that in her childhood, when she went to see documentaries of concentration camps, she identified with the girls that were destined to gas chambers: "Generalmente, se

parecían a mí, y de esas visiones se me ha quedado adherida a la piel una sensación de culpa cotidiana, la de haber podido escapar al número que se ostenta cerca de la muñeca derecha o a esa marca indeleble, la estrella amarilla, que se cosía al abrigo [...]" (45). Her experience brings to mind Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory." Postmemory is the experience of the second and third generations of survivors of the holocaust in relation to the trauma of the first generation. The second generation "remembers" the atrocities from representations, that is, from the narratives they hear and the images they watch growing up. These "representations" eventually become their own memories (Hirsch 8, 9). Margo Glantz's sensation at the movie theatre, and it's lasting effect, is a good example of postmemory. She feels guilt for surviving the tragedy of the Shoah, a tragedy that in reality directly affected her parents and grandparents' generations.

For the Glantz family, memory is often linked to collective Jewish experiences—as it is evident by Jacobo's memories of the pogroms and Margo's identification with children who perished in the *Shoah*. In Jewish tradition, the collective memory of traumatic events creates a sense of unity; it brings the Jewish people together.[8] However, this family's memories are not always traumatic. Lucía Glantz, Margo's mother, holds dear her memories of the Jewish school in the Ukraine (29). Moreover, while their life in the New World also had its pitfalls—Jacobo was attacked by a pogrom in Mexico City—their immigration process had plenty of happy moments. Shortly after arriving in Mexico, they started to associate with key figures of the cultural scene. In addition, Jacobo became well recognized as a Yiddish poet in New York.

Memory and identity are tightly intertwined in this family's genealogies. But what is the role of memory in Jewish tradition? Yosef Yerushalmi posits "As Israel is enjoined to remember, so is it adjured not to forget. Both imperatives have resounded with enduring effect among the Jews since biblical times."[9] The verb zakhar (to remember) appears one hundred and sixty nine times in the Hebrew bible and the verb to forget also has a major role in it. In fact, memory is an essential part of being Jewish. Because as Yerushalmi says: "Only in Israel and

nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people [...] If the command to remember is absolute, there is, nonetheless, an almost desperate pathos about the biblical concern with memory, and a shrewd wisdom that knows how short and fickle human memory can be" (9-10). This is why memory needs to be transmitted through "ritual and recital" (11).[10]

In *Las genealogías*, family memories are repeated in a ritualistic fashion. Margo's responses to her father address that repetition: "Ya me lo dijiste [...] ¡Papá, ya me lo contaste!" (81). But her pleas cannot prevent him from retelling a new version of the same story. Margo also suggests that her family forgets: "Dicen que la memoria 'se porta a sí misma' y quizá esto se aplique también a los olvidos. Quizá haya memorias repetidas, contadas en la mente de cinco o seis maneras, apenas con variantes [...] La memoria se desplaza, se subordina al olvido, se liga a la identidad y todo da la vuelta" (128-129). Memory in Jewish tradition combines the ritual act of remembering with oblivion and identity. These three elements are intimately related in Margo Glantz's *Las genealogías*. The set of events that form this family tree reflect the fact that they are Jewish. The ritualistic manner in which they are remembered also reflects Jewish tradition. Moreover, the author admits in an interview that the very purpose of writing this text was a quest against oblivion.[11] Yet oblivion is memory's constant shadow.

What Does the Book of Memories Say about That?

In *El libro de los recuerdos*, Ana María Shua explores the concept of family collective memory through the creation of a text within the text that is identically titled. This "genealogy of myth"—as Ilan Stavans calls it (viii)—is the Rimetka family's collection of memories. Like every such collection, its inclusions and exclusions are very suggestive. How does this "mythical" text develop the Rimetka family's sense of collective identity? Memory, identity and, especially, oblivion play a crucial role in their Book of Memories.[12]

Memories help consolidate the sense of unity in a group because, to a certain extent, they stem from the contact a person has with his/her social environment. In that sense, memory has the potential of inscribing and constructing cultural categories. This analysis attempts to question the normalizing potential of memory in the Rimetka family's act of self-configuration. Moreover, Shua narrates the Rimetka family's story from a collection of fragmented memories. Is this fragmented style reflecting their Diasporic experience? Does it establish the cultural category "Jewish family" and more specifically, "Jewish immigrant family in Latin America"?

The Book of Memories echoes Margo Glantz's text, for they are both attempts at building a family genealogy. However, disagreement is more emphasized in the Rimetka family's exchanges. Shua's narrative is a collection of memories fragmented—but also put together—by the family's chronic disagreement on the way things used to be. These disagreements prompt a "ritualistic" revision of past events. In that respect, the text inscribes the mnemonic act within Jewish tradition. Furthermore, the set of memories that are "ritually" revised in Shua's text also reflects that the Rimetka family is Jewish. Shua's text focuses on the three main topics I highlighted in Glantz's *Las genealogías:* the grandparents' Jewish life in the Old World, their immigration experience and their life and that of their descendants as Jews in the New World—Buenos Aires in this case.

Differently from the Glantz family, the Rimetkas' dialogue takes place without ever specifying who the speaker is. This creates the effect that the different points of view belong to one—however fractured—plural point of enunciation for the family. The constant disagreements among the different members thread a textual fabric that renders a "family" version of past events. Many statements are presented as direct contradictions, for example: "El abuelo Gedalia no comía chancho porque está prohibido por la religión. El abuelo Gedalia no comía chancho en público. El abuelo Gedalia era un chancho." (Shua 19) These obvious disagreements—which are meant to be humorous—explain why the Rimetkas need a narrative that offers them the possibility of union and

continuation; even if what keeps them together is dissent.

Moreover, Harold Bloom reminds us in his foreword to Yerushalmi's text, that zakhar in Hebrew means both to remember as well as to act. Therefore, the Hebrew term for memory is more concerned with the act of remembering and interpreting[13] than with the actual past (xvi). The concept of Jewish memory reflects an "obsession" with revision and interpretation of the Hebrew bible that is central to the tradition. The Rimetka family's disagreements mirror this obsession.

Notwithstanding, many of their discussions end with questions such as "what does the Book of Memories say about that?" Curiously, the mythical text within Shua's text has the last word in family disputes.[14] It is perceived to be a trust-worthy source of authority that simply states the "facts":

> El Libro de los Recuerdos es nuestra única fuente absolutamente confiable. Por eso es tan fácil enojarse con él. Porque lo que dice es cierto, pero nunca dice todo, nunca dice ni siquiera lo suficiente. Las personas, a veces, mienten o deforman o exageran o dan su propia versión: interpretan. Pero el Libro de los Recuerdos se limita a presentar los hechos tal como sucedieron, tal como si estuvieran sucediendo en el momento en que lo consultamos. También contiene documentos originales de autenticidad verificable (109).[15]

This reference to the Book of Memories as an impartial source is inconsistent, for it is constantly reproducing disparate interpretations of past events as the example of grandfather Gedalia's abstention from eating pork demonstrates. The Rimetka family's disagreements about specific events in the past reflect the concept of "Jewish memory" because they prompt a ritualistic retelling and revision of the past. The same disagreements that represent the collective identity of this family prevent the fossilization of the family collection of memories. Therefore, the text that the Rimetkas produce does not postulate itself as representative of the cultural category "Jewish family" or "Jewish

family in Diaspora." Nonetheless, this story does reflect the experience of Diaspora through its fragmented style. *Dia* in Greek means "apart" and *speirein* means to "spread" or to "sow" (Shreiber 275). Writing in Shua's *El libro de los recuerdos* disseminates and spreads—but it also sows—the memory of a Jewish family in an Argentine context.[16]

The "only absolutely trustworthy source" about the past of the Rimetka family is under constant scrutiny.[17] The narrator suggests that it lacks crucial facts needed to reconstruct the real story (109). Lack of information and oblivion play a crucial role in the Book of Memories "... a veces se acuerda de cosas que no pasaron nunca, a veces se ablanda y le da descanso a la memoria por hacerle un favor a alguna gente" (119).[18] An example of this is when the family discusses the suicide attempt of Judith, one of the author's aunts: "En el Libro de los Recuerdos hay páginas en blanco y también páginas arrancadas" (48). Another page that is torn from the Book of Memories, narrates when Pinche sees his wife at the coffee shop with another man. "Si no está en el Libro de los Recuerdos por algo será: será que no es algo para recordar. ¿Pero algo se puede preguntar? Todo se puede preguntar. Pero no todo se puede contestar." (71). These missing pages represent oblivion, an element that is as important as memory and identity in rendering this family's genealogy.

The Rimetkas' sense of collective identity takes shape in their Book of Memories. This is due to the events they choose to include and those they decide to leave out. As the narrator suggests, memories are always being inscribed into the book, so if some memories are not included, that is not because they are too recent, but because they have not yet become part of the family collective memory (190-191). The Book also changes subjects sometimes.[19]

The missing pages, the silences, and the changes of subject interrupt—like oblivion—the narrative of memory. The tension between remembering and forgetting in the ritual revision of the Rimetka family's past recalls Yerushalmi's assertion that in Jewish tradition one must remember, even if human nature tends to forget. Moreover, the connection between memory and oblivion is also an expression of the

Diasporic experience. In the process of geographic relocation memory becomes threatened by the dispersion of the social groups that keep it alive.

In the Book of Memories the different expressions of oblivion represent the limit that memory confronts in its potential to establish cultural categories. The missing passages make it impossible for the Rimetka family to be put forth as a representative category. The version of "Jewish family" that this text formulates becomes fragmented by abrupt changes in narrator, disagreements, forgotten events and changes in subject. These factors present a chaotic family dynamic. On the one hand, this image can be read as stereotypical; on the other hand, this family dynamic maintains the collective the Rimetkas' point of enunciation in conflict and it impedes their characterization as homogeneous or representative.

Also, oblivion, silence and interruption, the agents that threaten memory, introduce another crucial problematic in Jewish thought. It is in oblivion and in silence—the factors that interrupt the construction of collective memory –that the inevitably foreign character of the Jew stands out. This is because Jewishness resists any narrow or enclosing formulation that may render it representative. Oblivion defies memory in a similar way that foreignness makes it impossible for the Jew to be defined as an unquestionable identitary category.

Finally, the choice of language used in the Book of Memories is highly significant because this family's genealogy is written in the language of the land of adoption. Why is it written mostly in Spanish and not in "the other language," "the language of lullabies" or "the language of numbers and insults," as the Rimetkas call the Yiddish language? In this household, Yiddish has become "the intimate language." This is because Silvestre, the oldest of the Rimetka sons, out of a desire to fit in, said that his teacher mandated that Spanish only should be spoken at home. His father was very happy about the idea, for he would do better at work and could poke fun at his wife, who struggled with the Spanish language (25-27). The choice of language reflects the gains and losses and the fragmentation of cultural categories that takes place during the

immigration process. The disruptive effect the Spanish language has on the family is also part of the Jewish experience in Diaspora and the different family members' ideas about life in the New World.

In conclusion, I propose that Jewish tradition is an important factor in the way that these two families remember. The main events that they bring back for revision and reinterpretation, and the ritualistic manner in which they proceed, demonstrate that their construction of the past is intimately linked to Jewish tradition. To that extent, these texts produce "Jewish memory." Also, both authors present their family histories using a fragmented narrative style. The fragmentation reflects their experience in Diaspora.[20] These families were broken apart, not only geographically from those who stayed behind, but also because of different approaches to life in the New World.[21] The fragmented narrative style, the ritualistic revision and the set of memories included in Glantz's and Shua's family stories offer a Jewish version of family union and continuation in Latin America. Their texts reveal memory's potential to inscribe and construct cultural categories. However, they also show the important role oblivion plays in families' collective sense of identity. Memory and oblivion are identity's inevitable partners in plural, as well as individual, quests for self-configuration. Margo Glantz and Ana María Shua successfully portray complex renditions of the family collective within an increasingly rich tradition of Jewish memory writing in Latin America.

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NOTES

[1] Oftentimes "[t]he past evoked is molded by a self-image held in the present—the image the autobiographer has, the one he or she wishes to project or the one the public demands. [...] Equally important are the emphasis on collective memory and the reliance on what might be called a mnemonic lineage. Family romances are reservoirs of memories [...] the Spanish American autobiographer forays into the

past through familial, most often maternal reminiscence" (Molloy 8-9). In the nineteenth century "family life" or the "*petite histoire*" used for self-validation, was excluded from historical texts, it was mainly used in historical novels. Tales of family life become more integrated—sometimes as History —to autobiographies in the twentieth century (83, 161).

[2] Lionel Rubinoff said that "[...] to be a Jew is [...] to be part of a community woven by memory" (150).

[3] "[...] since the family's recollections become more precise and fixed in their personal form, the family progressively tends to interpret in its own manner the conceptions it borrows from society. [...] but this logic and these traditions are nevertheless distinct because they are little by little pervaded by the family's particular experiences and because their role is increasingly to insure the family's cohesion and guarantee its continuity" (Halbwachs 38, 83).

[4] The memories presented in these texts can be considered "narrative memory" for they are narrated as a story and they are emotionally charged (Bal viii).

[5] Fragmentation was also introduced to Latin American autobiographies in the twentieth century as an aesthetic narrative style that stems from surrealism and *ultraismo*. See Molloy's analysis of Norah Lange's *Cuadernos de Infancia* (132).

[6] See Guadalupe Cortina, "Margo Glantz: descendiente de los libros." *Invenciones multitudinarias: escritoras judiomexicanas contemporáneas*. Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2000; Graciela Guenmo, "Señales de una autobiografía: *Las genealogías* de Margo Glantz." *Hispanic Literary Autobiography, Monographic Review/ Revista Monográfica* IX (1993); Elizabeth Otero-Krauthammer, "Integración de la identidad judía en *Las genealogías*, de Margo Glantz" *Revista Iberoamericana* 132-133 (Julio-diciembre, 1985) y Magdalena Maiz-Peña, "Sujeto, género y representaeión autobiográfica: *Las genealogías* de Margo Glantz" *Confluencia* 12 (Primavera 1997).

[7] Margo Glantz reminds us that memory can be repeated a thousand times but it will never be the same. "Repetir un acto mil

veces condensa el recuerdo, pero los recuerdos traicionan aunque se recuerden mil veces en la mente [...]" 82.

[8] It is believed that "national destruction and exile" are the main reasons for the full development of Judaism. (Bamberger 32-33).

[9] "The collective memories of the Jewish people were a function of the shared faith, cohesiveness, and will of the group itself, transmitting and recreating its past through an entire complex interlocking of social and religious institutions that functioned organically to achieve this." (Yerushalmi 94).

[10] This is also why there is a conflict between Jewish memory and Jewish historiography. In his foreword to the 1996 edition of *Zakhor*, Harold Bloom suggests that "Scripture has been replaced by history as the validating arbiter of Jewish ideologies, and the replacement, [Yerushalmi] believes, has yielded chaos...since it cannot credit God's will as the active cause behind Jewish events, and it cannot regard Jewish history as being unique." (xix).

[11] "MGP: What led you to write a text like *Las genealogías*?/ MG: I wanted to know where I came from, who my parents were, [...] I wanted to understand how it could be that, though I loved my parents so much and they were so close to me, I didn't really know who they were. I wanted to know what world I came from, what their reality was like—so different from mine." (García Pinto 119).

[12] In Shua's novel, the mention of this text always appears in capital letters. In fact, all family "myths" are capitalized. Some examples are the rich and controlling sister-in-law, or the "Dumb Turk", the family household is the "Old House" and the "Crazy-Lady-Around-The-Corner" is well the crazy lady around the corner.

[13] Bloom also suggests that Jewish writing is deeply invested in interpretation. "What Jewish writing has to interpret, [...] however indirectly, is the Hebrew Bible." (Yerushalmi xxiii).

[14] "El abuelo Gedalia Rimetka, siempre elegante pero muy flaco, subió al barco en Odessa y se puso a cruzar el mar....—¿Seguro que fue en Odessa? Los inmigrantes no se embarcaban en Odessa. El Libro de los Recuerdos, ¿qué dice? —El Libro de los Recuerdos dice

que el abuelo Gedalia subió al barco, tenía diecisiete años y usaba un sombrero de ala corta. (Shua 12).

[15] The validity of the Book of Memories sometimes is also challenged, "...en ese caso lo que diga el Libro de los Recuerdos no tiene ninguna importancia porque coinciden testimonios, acciones y documentos..." (Shua 99).

[16] This text includes cultural elements representative of Argentina such as the country's passion for soccer and historic events as the chapter dedicated to the Dirty War (1978-1982).

[17] The narrator directly questions its validity "...en ese caso lo que diga el Libro de los Recuerdos no tiene ninguna importancia porque coinciden testimonios, acciones y documentos..." (Shua 99).

[18] The Book of Memories keeps its secrets but it is difficult to keep things from it "...al Libro de los Recuerdos es mucho más difícil engañarlo y si a veces no dice toda la verdad es porque no quiere y no porque no sepa." (Glantz 128). When speaking about the different transformations of the old house, a family member says "Después te cuento en privado que acá están anotando todo lo que decimos" (142).

[19] A good example is when the Rimetkas discuss the duration of Judith and Ramón's romance: "Tío Pinche dijo que tía Judith anduvo como dos años con el tío Ramón antes de casarse. Tío Silvestre dijo que estuvieron tres años de novios. Tía Judith dijo que noviaron cuatro años enteros, a escondidas. Tío Silvestre decía que el abuelo Gedalia era un tigre jugando al dominó. El Libro de los Recuerdos le da la razón." (54).

[20] For a history of the Jewish Diaspora see also Daniel J. Elazar, "Jewish Religious, Ethnic, and National Identities: Convergences and Conflicts." *National Variations in Jewish Identity*. Albany: SUNY P, 1999.

[21] In Glantz's *Las genealogías*, the parents and the narrator's level of assimilation differ. This is not a matter of conflict. In Shua's *El libro de los recuerdos,* the different reactions to the use of Spanish in the household show this family's diverse approach to the New World.

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