



Regula Fuchs

Remembering Viet Nam:  
Gustav Hasford, Ron Kovic,  
Tim O'Brien and the Fabrication  
of American Cultural Memory



Peter Lang

How does American culture deal with its memories of the Vietnam War and what role does literature play in this process? *Remembering Viet Nam* is a fascinating exploration of the ways in which authors of Vietnam War literature represent American cultural memory in their writings. The analysis is based on a wide array of sources including historical, political, cultural and literary studies as well as works on trauma. It begins with an examination of American foundation myths – their normative, formative and, most of all, their bonding nature – and the role institutions such as the military and the media play in upholding these myths. The study then considers the soldiers' and war veterans' minds and bodies and the stories they tell as key sites in the debates over the war's place in American cultural memory. The multilayered approach of *Remembering Viet Nam* allows the investigation of Vietnam War literature in its whole breadth including the debates instigated by the works examined and the influence these narratives themselves have on American cultural memory. Most importantly, the analysis uncovers why American foundation myths – despite their being thoroughly questioned and even exposed as cultural inventions by authors and reviewers of Vietnam War literature – can still retain their power within American society.

Regula Fuchs was born in Maur, Switzerland in 1966. After working as a primary teacher for ten years, she read English literature and linguistics as well as history at the University of Zurich. During her studies, she taught English to IT apprentices and high school students. In 2010, she received her Ph.D. and now works as a teacher trainer and teacher of English methodology at the Zurich University of Teacher Education.

Remembering Viet Nam:  
Gustav Hasford, Ron Kovic, Tim O'Brien and  
the Fabrication of American Cultural Memory

European University Studies  
Europäische Hochschulschriften  
Publications Universitaires Européennes

**Series XIV**  
**Anglo-Saxon Language and Literature**

Reihe XIV      Série XIV  
Angelsächsische Sprache und Literatur  
Langue et littérature anglo-saxonnes

**Vol./Band 466**



PETER LANG

Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

Regula Fuchs

Remembering Viet Nam:  
Gustav Hasford, Ron Kovic,  
Tim O'Brien and the Fabrication  
of American Cultural Memory



PETER LANG

Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Oxford · Wien

**Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**  
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:  
A catalogue record for this book is available from *The British Library*, Great Britain

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fuchs, Regula, 1966-  
Remembering Viet Nam : Gustav Hasford, Ron Kovic, Tim O'Brien and the fabrication of American cultural memory / Regula Fuchs.  
p. cm. – (European university studies. Series XIV, Anglo-Saxon language and literature ; v. 466 = Europäische Hochschulschriften. Reihe XIV, Angelsächsische Sprache und Literatur ; Bd. 497)  
Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-3-0351-0165-2

1. American literature–20th century–History and criticism. 2. Vietnam War, 1961-1975–Literature and the war. 3. War stories, American–History and criticism.
4. Hasford, Gustav–Criticism and interpretation. 5. Kovic, Ron–Criticism and interpretation. 6. O'Brien, Tim, 1946–Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PS228.V5F83 2010

810.9'358597043–dc22

2010045492

This thesis was accepted as a doctoral dissertation by the Faculty of Arts of the University of Zurich in the spring semester 2010 on the recommendation of Prof. Dr. Martin Heusser and Prof. Dr. Fritz Gutbrodt.

ISSN 0721-3387  
ISBN 978-3-0351-0165-2

© Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2010  
Hochfeldstrasse 32, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland  
[info@peterlang.com](mailto:info@peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.net](http://www.peterlang.net)

All rights reserved.

All parts of this publication are protected by copyright.  
Any utilisation outside the strict limits of the copyright law, without the permission of the publisher, is forbidden and liable to prosecution.  
This applies in particular to reproductions, translations, microfilming, and storage and processing in electronic retrieval systems.

Printed in Switzerland

## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank all those authors and critics whose work has influenced this paper in any way. I am especially grateful to Jan Assmann, whose brilliant theory of cultural memory formed the basis for my investigation. Richard Slotkin and Elaine Scarry are likewise authors to whose work I am indebted. Gustav Hasford, Ron Kovic and Tim O'Brien made their memories and thoughts about the Vietnam War accessible to me through their impressive narratives and for this I would like to thank them. However, it is to Martin Heusser to whom I wish to express my warmest thanks. His lectures inspired me to read English and American literature in the first place and it was also him who drew my attention to Vietnam War literature. Always ready to discuss any kind of question as well as contributing important ideas to this paper, he provided invaluable support during the whole process of writing. Many thanks also to David Matley, who proof-read my paper with the greatest care. Any errors that remain are mine alone. My family and friends have always looked after the bookworm in their midst and for this I would like to thank them with all my heart. But most of all, I want to thank my husband, for his unfailing support, for making me laugh, simply – for everything!

## A Note on Spelling

The spelling *Viet Nam* is used to refer to “an independent nation in Southeast Asia with its own people, language, and culture” – the spelling *Vietnam* to refer to “an American formulaic identifying a continuing ‘experience’ in Southeast Asia ... in the United States, and elsewhere” (Slabey ix). Where authors are quoted, their spelling is, of course, retained.





# Contents

1	Introduction .....	9
2	Jan Assmann's Theory of Cultural Memory .....	15
3	American Cultural Memory and the War in Viet Nam .....	35
4	Representing Cultural Memory .....	61
4.1	Normative, Formative and Affective Aspects of Cultural Memory .....	66
4.1.1	The Military and the Media in <i>The Short-Timers</i> .....	67
4.1.2	The Media and the Military in <i>Born on the Fourth of July</i> .....	75
4.1.3	Cultural Influence versus Personal Choice in <i>The Things They Carried, In the Lake of the Woods</i> and <i>July, July</i> .....	79
4.2	Key Sites of Cultural Remembering: Soldiers, Veterans and Their Stories .....	89
4.2.1	Degeneration Through Violence in <i>The Short-Timers</i> .....	91
4.2.2	The Role of the Body in <i>Born on the Fourth of July</i> .....	109
4.2.3	Storytellers and Stories in <i>The Things They Carried, In the Lake of the Woods</i> and <i>July, July</i> .....	117
5	Transforming American Cultural Memory? .....	163
5.1	Gustav Hasford's Black Satire .....	164
5.2	Ron Kovic's Autobiography .....	168

5.3 Tim O'Brien:	
New Forms and a Multisensory Style of Writing .....	170
5.4 Critical Approaches .....	207
5.5 Representing Vietnamese People .....	215
6 Conclusion .....	225
7 Bibliography .....	237
8 Index .....	251

# 1 Introduction

Decades after ending, the Vietnam War still remains present in American society. In *Late Thoughts on an Old War* Philip Beidler writes, “I find, with an ever deepening conviction, that individually and collectively Americans can’t let go of the Vietnamese war, of what happened to us and the Vietnamese there” (4). Whereas many people wish to remember the war and insist on its significance for American culture, there are others who simply try to erase it from national memory.<sup>1</sup> Emory Elliott observes in 2005 that memory loss seems to be “a national infirmity as well as an obsession” (227),

When the current administration announced its plans to invade Iraq, world allies, historians, political analysts, journalists, and millions of people everywhere asked, how can they do this again? Don’t they remember Viet Nam, Somalia, Korea... (227–28)

Writers of Vietnam War literature and poetry such as W.D. Ehrhart and Tim O’Brien see their writing as strongly connected to America’s way of dealing with its memories of the Vietnam War. W.D. Ehrhart explains that American politics force him to write about Viet Nam – about what he experienced there and what America as a nation learned and did not learn (“Roundtable Discussion” 223). Tim O’Brien points out that he “has always been less fearful that America will forget the war than that it will remember it simplistically ...” (Ringnalda *Fighting and Writing* 5) and that in his books he crusades against the Vietnam War and wars that are analogous (Herzog *Writing Vietnam, Writing Life* 111).

Considering O’Brien’s and Ehrhart’s statements and, at the same time, the academic world’s persistence in discussing and analysing Vietnam War literature – a persistence that becomes evident in innumerable articles, dissertations and monographs that have been published over

1 In 1989, President George Bush told the American nation to forget about Viet Nam: “The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory” (Franklin *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* 26).

the years and are still being published nowadays – and also considering Philip Beidler’s and Emory Elliott’s comments, it becomes obvious that in America a battle is taking place as to how the Vietnam War should be stored in the collective memory of the American nation.

History does not reflect a past reality but is a “construction of a moral story about the past out of traces that remain” (Rosenstone 28). Traces of the past can be various items, such as official documents but also private letters, diary entries or personal memories and the stories which are constructed from these. In selecting from these traces, the past may be recreated in many different ways by a society. However, which of the many possible forms of the past is finally officially acknowledged remains connected to questions of power. As traces of the past, the works discussed in this paper, that is, Gustav Hasford’s *The Short-Timers*, Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* and Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, *In the Lake of the Woods* and *July, July* become essential in the struggle about America’s collective memory.

Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural memory provides the basic structure for the investigation of Hasford’s, Kovic’s and O’Brien’s work. Assmann’s theory is of crucial importance because it depicts how essential cultural memory becomes with regard to the formation of national and personal identity. According to Assmann, memory is a socially and culturally based phenomenon with normative, formative and affective components. Assmann distinguishes between a communicative and a cultural memory and his theory provides new insights concerning the persistence of myths and the relevance of literary representations with regard to collective memory.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars such as Emory Elliott, Milton J. Bates and Richard Slotkin, to name but a few, all point to the significance of American frontier myths with regard to what happened in Viet Nam. Moreover, they mention the persistence of these myths in the present.<sup>3</sup> However, no scholar

2 Assmann’s theory will be presented in detail in chapter 2.

3 In *The Wars We Took to Vietnam*, Milton J. Bates talks of “our cultural captivity to myths of the frontier” and of a “compulsive power of bad habits” (47) and Emory Elliott argues that “[s]elective memory enables primary cultural myths, such as Americans’ divinely ordained errand into the wilderness, to penetrate the deepest level of the cultural psyche, or political unconscious, so that facts cannot prevail over sacred destiny” (228).

has yet applied Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory to Vietnam War literature.

In *Regeneration Through Violence* Richard Slotkin traces the development of myth in American literature and other media over the centuries and describes processes of transformation on the surface of these myths and reasons for these changes. He argues that for the America of the early years printed literature had been the most important vehicle of myth (19).

Through repeated appearances and recastings in the literary marketplace, a narrative which proved viable as a bestseller or a vehicle for religious or commercial persuasions would be imitated by more or less professional writers... Thus the experience would be reduced to an imitable formula... When enough literature had been written employing the convention, it might become a sort of given between writer and audience, a set of tacit assumptions on the nature of human experience ... and on the nature of reality. At this point the convention has some of the force of myth: the experience it portrays has become an image which automatically compels belief by a culture-wide audience in the view of reality it presents. Thus in tracing the development of the conventions of narrative literature, we are tracing the development ... of a distinct world vision and an accompanying mythology emerging from the early experiences of Europeans in the wilderness. (20–21)

In modern society it is the mass media which provide the means for translating historical events into “the various story-genres that constitute a public mythology ...” (Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation* 8). Slotkin points out that in Western movies the “connection to the characteristic images, characters, and references of frontier mythology is observably direct” (25). In the works discussed in this paper, the connection to the frontier mythology that Slotkin describes is likewise, to borrow Slotkin's expression, made ‘observably direct’ by the authors. Memory is a central topic in all these works and by depicting and investigating processes of individual and collective remembering, the authors pose uncomfortable questions with regard to the war's relation to America's cultural memory.

In *The Short-Timers*, Gustav Hasford portrays how cultural institutions such as the military, the Church but also the media try to keep the old myths alive and how soldiers react accordingly, on the one hand ridiculing the myths, on the other hand unconsciously re-enacting them. Strategies of coping with the war experience such as the soldiers' grotesque behaviour in certain situations pose disturbing questions to the

readers. Memories of the Vietnam War are not only stored in the minds of individuals, in literature or in film but memories are also made visible through the body of a person. Ron Kovic calls himself a “living reminder” of the war (166). His was one of the countless bodies that were wounded and deformed during the war and remain visually present in American society long after the war itself. Bodies can be used for political purposes and they can be turned into symbols by society before, during and after wars as is made clear in *Born on the Fourth of July*. Ron Kovic’s work becomes important to this study with regard to the role of the body and its significance for the collective memory of the American nation and not least with regard to the persistence of American myths in the minds of individuals.

Tim O’Brien’s presentation of the feelings and thoughts of his characters challenges the myth of the American hero. Moreover, his discussion of issues of fact and fiction and his depiction of memory processes in *The Things They Carried* become important with regard to collective memory and questions regarding its construction. In *In the Lake of the Woods* O’Brien investigates the role of Vietnam veterans in American society with regard to the struggle concerning the war’s place in the collective memory of the nation. O’Brien also points to the My Lai massacre and stresses its similarity to other incidents of America’s past. In *July, July*, finally, O’Brien portrays individual people who all lived during the time of the Vietnam War and now, thirty years later, exchange their memories of that time. Each individual remembers the past, that is, the time of the war in Viet Nam differently. Positive and negative feelings are woven into a collective fabric for the readers and thereby the process in which collective memory is constructed in society is imitated. Tim O’Brien presents new perspectives of looking at the war experience and his special way of storytelling could be seen as transcending culturally fixed boundaries concerning not only form but also content. Richard Slotkin points out that it is both the producers and the consumers who participate in affirming or rejecting mythic values. If a work of literature or certain kinds of mass media become very popular over the course of time, this points to certain tendencies in a society.

The development of new genres, or the substantial modification of existing ones, can be read as a signal of active ideological concern in which both the producers and consumers of mass media participate – producers as exploitative promulga-

tors and “proprietors” of their mythic formulations, consumers as respondents capable of dismissing a given mythic formulation or of affiliating with it. (*Gunfighter Nation* 8)

The popularity of Tim O’Brien’s work could thus be interpreted as an indication of what Slotkin calls ‘active ideological concern’ albeit only in some parts of American society.

In 1996 Bruce Franklin speaks of “an astonishing body of literature, film, and music generated by the war and its aftermath,” and observes that the “immense output of Vietnam War literature shows no signs of dwindling, and the recognition of its value has been steadily increasing” (*The Vietnam War in American Stories, Songs and Poems* 2). Milton J. Bates maintains in the same year,

The body of Vietnam war narratives published to date embraces not only the combatants’ experience but also that of American doctors, nurses, missionaries, journalists, USO volunteers, entertainers, and civilian officials and workers who spent time in country. It includes stories told by Vietnamese men and women on both sides of the conflict, also by soldiers and civilians from France, England, Australia, New Zealand, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and several other countries. If the war zone is expanded beyond Vietnam, the stories include those told by all whose lives were touched or whose imaginations were quickened by the war. (*The Wars We Took to Vietnam* 219)

Collective memory is always made up of the memory of individuals. Depending on their own experiences and on what they learn of others’, on their cultural and individual background, and on their readiness to engage with questions asked in connection with the Vietnam War, individuals will remember the war in different ways and will contribute their version to the collective memory of their nation. Yet some voices seem to be given more weight than others in the negotiations regarding how to remember the war. There seems to be a tendency in American society to regard Vietnam veterans’ representations of the war as more authentic than those of other people. Bettina Hofmann argues that this “myth of authenticity” implies that only the eyewitness has the competence to talk about the war – women’s voices and stories are automatically excluded from the discussions (203). However, not only women’s voices are excluded by the myth of authenticity but also the voices of all other people whose lives were touched in any way by the war, including the voices of the following generation. This study focuses on

the voices of three American Vietnam veterans, certainly not because only they have a right and the knowledge to write about ‘their’ war but because of the way in which the particular authors portray and challenge America’s cultural memory and investigate memory processes in general. The American nation consists of people of many different cultural backgrounds and as Emory Elliott states, “it is only in periods of extreme national crisis ... that a broadly shared national cultural memory is acknowledged and embraced by a large majority of Americans” (230). Consequently, one should speak of various cultural memories instead of only one cultural memory in connection with the Vietnam War. Yet, this paper cannot deal with all the different cultural memories present in American society. Likewise, this study does not discuss war literature by Vietnamese writers although this is again problematic with regard to American cultural memory as will become clear in the course of the study. Like memory itself, this paper has to be highly selective and will concentrate on what I would like to call the white western version of America’s cultural memory because it became such an important factor for the beginning and the continuance of the war in Viet Nam.

The study will first investigate Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural memory and then apply it to American cultural memory and Gustav Hasford’s, Ron Kovic’s and Tim O’Brien’s writings. The study will not deal with the authors’ comprehensive work but focus on their most important representations with regard to cultural memory. In Gustav Hasford’s *The Short-Timers*, Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* and Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, *In the Lake of the Woods* and *July, July* the Vietnam War serves as a background for the investigation of important human issues and whereas all three authors openly challenge what could be called America’s most persistent cultural myths, they are at the same time still caught in their own cultural background and inadvertently re-write myths of American culture in their narratives. It remains to be seen whether the books by the three authors and the discussions they have provoked, still provoke and will provoke in the future will ultimately have an impact on the cultural memory of the American nation.



## 2 Jan Assman's Theory of Cultural Memory

In his groundbreaking study of cultural memory Jan Assmann explores how human beings remember their past and argues that our memories are socially and culturally based phenomena. Assmann points out that the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs already claimed in his studies on *mémoire collective* that individual memory was impossible outside a social context: "There is no possible memory outside those frames that are used by the people living in a society in order to preserve and re-access their memories" (Halbwachs 121, quoted in Assmann *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 35; my translation).<sup>1</sup> Halbwachs argued that human beings only develop their memory through interacting with each other (Assmann *Religion and Cultural Memory* 1). Assmann explains that whereas he takes Halbwachs' concept of memory as the starting point for his theory, he will further argue that memory also has a cultural basis since only then can we understand that human beings are anchored through their memories in a time frame reaching back over thousands of years (1). He further states that in his last book, *Topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre Sainte*, Halbwachs, too, stepped over the boundary between what he called "*mémoire vécue*" and "*tradition*," that is, from the social into a cultural realm of memory (9, emphasis given).

Whereas Halbwachs denotes the collective as the subject of the process of remembering, Assmann makes it clear that it is always the individual human being who in dependence on others and on frames given by a society remembers its past (*Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 36). The extension of the term memory from a psychological into a social and a cultural field is not to be understood metaphorically according to him. "What is at stake is not the (illegitimate) transfer of a concept derived from individual psychology to social and cultural phenomena, but the *interaction* between the psyche, consciousness, society, and culture" (*Religion* 9, my emphasis).

1 "Es gibt kein mögliches Gedächtnis ausserhalb derjenigen Bezugsrahmen, deren sich die in der Gesellschaft lebenden Menschen bedienen, um ihre Erinnerungen zu fixieren und wiederzufinden" (35).

Apart from Halbwachs, Assmann mentions Nietzsche, Warburg and even Freud as contributing important aspects to his theory of cultural memory. Whereas Halbwachs shows that people develop their memories through their relationships with others, Nietzsche maintains that people need a memory in order to be able to build these relationships (5). Nietzsche's notion of memory differs considerably from Halbwachs' "self-regulating, diffuse, 'communicative' memory ... in which remembering and forgetting interact" (5).

... Nietzsche postulated a different, special memory that he called the "will's memory," where in his words, "forgetfulness is suspended in certain cases," namely in those instances where a promise is to be made... This memory is not provided for in nature; man has "bred" it into himself so as to be able to live in a society which has been culturally constructed. (Assmann quoting Nietzsche *Religion* 5)

For Nietzsche, pain is the most powerful means to produce this special kind of memory; he mentions "sacrifices, torments, pledges, [and] cults" in this respect (5). Nietzsche thus establishes a connection between cultural memory and violence (93).

Nietzsche, like Halbwachs, sees memory as a social phenomenon (93). However, it is not a shared past which is remembered by Nietzsche's 'memory of the will,' but promises and obligations towards others (88). Halbwachs, on the other hand, stresses the affective quality of collective memory and the individual's need to belong to others. Through the reconstruction of the past, a group identity is established and in the same way individuals convince themselves of their belonging to a group (94). Whereas Halbwachs "insists on the affective nature of collective memory," Nietzsche sees culture as a system of norms and rules (94, 6). Unlike Halbwachs, he disregards the wish of the individual to belong to a collective identity. "Thus Nietzsche simply ignores the fact that society's interest in subjecting the individual to its purposes is counter-balanced on the side of the individual by the natural (and in Nietzsche's eyes, banal) desire to belong and to develop a social identity" (6).

Assmann also mentions Aby Warburg's studies with respect to his theory of cultural memory. Whereas for Nietzsche collective memory has a subjugating function, for Warburg it is a form of liberation through which human beings deal with their fears and with the overpowering impact of the surrounding world on their senses (94). Warburg is interested in memory as manifested in cultural objectifications (94). In his

study *Mnemosyne* he portrays a pictorial memory of the Occident (169). The difference between Halbwachs and Warburg is similar to the difference between Halbwachs and Nietzsche,

It is the line between “communicative” and “cultural” memory, between memory as an autopoietic system and memory as a cultural institution made visible in signs, symbols, images, texts, and rituals, that is, in “writing” in the broadest possible sense. (95)

Unlike Warburg, Halbwachs “avoids as far as possible all reference to objective cultural forms. There is a dividing line for him here beyond which we have to speak not of memory, but of tradition, historiography, and the like” (95). A further difference between Warburg and Halbwachs is that whereas Warburg sees the past as influencing the present, Halbwachs sees the present as reconstructing the past (170).

According to Assmann, it is useful to consider these various aspects when forming a theory of cultural memory: with Halbwachs it is important to see the connection between memory, consciousness and communication; with Warburg it is important to see collective memory as made visible in cultural objectifications and to understand these as a form of liberation; yet with Nietzsche it is also important to see memory as a means of providing norms, even to see it as a means of subjugating human beings. Different cultures choose different forms of collective memories and thus it is important to consider the various theories mentioned (95).

Another theorist Assmann refers to is Freud. Freud’s theory is important because Freud localises collective memory in the unconscious (96). Whereas Nietzsche sees pain as instigator of memory, Freud speaks of trauma in this respect. And whereas Nietzsche regards religion as “systems of cruelty,” Freud sees religion as a form of “obsessional neurosis” based on “repressed truths” (5–6). According to Freud, the murder of Moses lies at the heart of this collective repression (96).

Assmann points out that Freud as well as Halbwachs and Nietzsche all insist on “the frontier of the body, refusing to cross it in the direction of culture with its symbolic forms and archives” (6). Assmann, on the other hand, maintains that it is important not to confine and thus reduce the concept of memory to the body and with it “to the neural basis of consciousness, and the idea of a deep structure of the soul that can be passed down biologically” (8). For him, memory clearly has a cultural

basis and not only a social one (8). It is exactly because cultural memory is not biologically inheritable that it has to be constructed and handed down from generation to generation (38). The past is “a social construction” and content “results from the needs and frames of the present. The past is not naturally given but a cultural creation” (*Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 48; my translation).<sup>2</sup>

Jan and Aleida Assmann distinguish between what they call communicative and cultural memory. They use the expression ‘collective memory’ as a generic term. (*Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 45). Their notion of communicative memory refers to Halbwachs’ concept of memory (*Religion* 3).

This memory belongs in the intermediary realm between individuals; it grows out of intercourse between people, and the emotions play the crucial role in its process. Love, interest, sympathy, feelings of attachment, the wish to belong, but also hatred, enmity, mistrust, pain, guilt and shame – all of these help to define our memories and provide them with a horizon. Without such definition they would not imprint themselves on our minds; without a horizon they would lack relevance and meaning within a specific cultural context (3).

Referring to instances of ‘false memory,’ Assmann argues that incidents like these clearly point to the social and affective components of collective memory. The need to belong to a group may be so strong that even what has been learned only via communicative processes and has not been experienced by individuals themselves can be regarded as personal memories and individuals may be convinced that they have personally experienced these very events (4). Assmann speaks of the “connective” or “bonding” nature of memory to express this need of human beings to belong to others (11). According to Assmann, the desire to belong can be as strong as the normative and formative influences in a culture (6). Individuals feel the need to share their memories, that is, to communicate with others and if the memories are significant enough they force their way to a “visible *outer* world of symbols, texts, rituals, and monuments, and form the basis of a cultural memory that can last hundreds or

2 “... die Vergangenheit ... ist eine soziale Konstruktion, deren Beschaffenheit sich aus den Sinnbedürfnissen und Bezugsrahmen der jeweiligen Gegenwart ergibt. Vergangenheit steht nicht naturwüchsig an, sie ist eine kulturelle Schöpfung” (48).

thousands of years” (178, emphasis given). People construct these “memory aids” in order not to forget what they do not want to forget (8).

In “Les Lieux de Mémoire” Pierre Nora argues that the French people’s attitude towards their national past has changed (25). They find themselves confronted with

the brutal realization of the difference between real memory – social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies – and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past. On the one hand, we find an integrated, dictatorial memory – unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins, and myth – and on the other hand, our memory, nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces. (8)

Nora maintains that we construct “*lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory” (7).<sup>3</sup> In the lieux de mémoire, memory “crystallizes and secretes itself” (7). Specific objects “codify, condense [and] anchor France’s national memory” (25). The objects may be monuments such as “the *château* of Versailles or the cathedral of Strasbourg” but also the monuments built for the dead in French villages, symbols such as the French flag or the French national anthem, manuals such as “textbooks used by all French children,” basic texts such as the “Declaration of the Rights of Man” or even mottos such as “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité” (25). For example, the children’s book *Tour de la France par deux enfants*, “an inventory of what one ought to know about France, an exercise in identification and a voyage of initiation,” was at one point in time very successful then almost forgotten and one hundred years later reprinted again (20). Nora states that “a close reading shows that as of its publication in 1877, the *Tour* portrayed a France that no longer existed ... [and that] it drew its seductive power from a subtle enchantment with the

3 As one example of these changing environments Nora points to the “disappearance of peasant culture, that quintessential repository of collective memory” (7). Another example he describes is the change from the Third Republic, a time in which “[t]he holy nation ... acquired a holy history,” to the time when “this particular synthesis came apart under the pressure of a new secularizing force ... during the crisis of the 1930s in France ...” (11).

past” and in 1977, “when an industrial France stricken by economic crisis discovered its oral memory and peasant roots, the *Tour* was re-printed, and once again entered the collective memory” (20). Nora explains that the essence of this lieu de mémoire is, on the one hand, “its original intention” yet at the same time “its return in the cycles of memory” (20). What Nora calls a “subtle enchantment with the past” can also be found in the American fascination with the cowboy figure and the countless films and stories invented about the American West and its inhabitants. The cowboy figure could be seen as a lieu de mémoire for American society. The attributes that Nora describes for his lieux – the “capacity for metamorphosis, and endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications” which ensures that the lieux can persist over time – can also be found in the cowboy figure and make it possible for the cowboy to be later transformed into the Marine, as will be seen in chapter 3 (19).

Nora’s lieux de mémoire help the French people not to forget what they do not want to forget. In this respect the lieux are identical to Assmann’s ‘memory aids;’ they are means that help us to remember what we do not want to forget. Yet, not only objects can serve as mnemonic devices, even whole landscapes are used by different cultures in order to help individuals to remember their collective memory.

In *The Songlines*, Bruce Chatwin describes how the Aborigines store their collective memory in the landscape of Australia. A “labyrinth of invisible pathways ... meander all over Australia and are known to Europeans as ‘Dreaming-tracks’ or ‘Songlines;’ to the Aborigines as the ‘Footprints of the Ancestors’ or the ‘Way of the Law’” (2). The Aboriginal creation myths tell how the ancestors lay sleeping below the surface of the earth. They were then awoken by the sun, rose and called out their own names (“I am – Snake ... Cockatoo ... Honeyant ...”) and then walked across the country naming waterholes and trees, calling all things into being, singing their way all over the world (72–73). These songs contain the Aborigines’ collective memory of their land and their history and they even cross language barriers. “A Dreaming-track might start in the north-west, near Broome; thread its way through twenty languages or more; and go on to hit the sea near Adelaide” (58). It is the melody that remains the same and which can be recognised by the people across language barriers (58).

Regardless of the words, it seems the melodic contour of the song describes the nature of the land over which the song passes. So, if the Lizard Man were dragging his heels across the salt pans of Lake Eyre, you could expect a succession of long flats, like Chopin's "Funeral March." If he were skipping up and down the MacDonnell escarpments, you'd have a series of arpeggios and glissandos, like Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsodies." Certain phrases, certain combinations of musical notes, are thought to describe the action of the Ancestor's *feet*... An expert songman, by listening to their order of succession, would count how many times his hero crossed a river, or scaled a ridge – and be able to calculate where, and how far along, a Songline he was. (108, emphasis given)

The musical phrases became "map references" (108). Only part of the song was owned by each tribe, but sometimes when the elders of a clan decided it was time to sing the whole song cycle from beginning to end, all the song owners of a clan assembled and each song owner sang his part of the ancestor's footprints in the correct sequence (58). Chatwin argues that the reason for this kind of collective memory may lie in climatic conditions. "Most of Outback Australia was arid scrub or desert where rainfall was always patchy... To move in such landscape was survival: to stay in the same place suicide" (56). Chatwin's work becomes important for this study because it shows how certain events of the present become part of, that is, are woven into the collective memory of a people under certain conditions. When the British tested an H-Bomb at Maralinga and contaminated the surrounding landscape, many Aboriginals died. Later a new song was created by the community in order to integrate the event into their collective memory. One Aboriginal song now tells of an ancestor who failed to perform a certain ritual and consequently, swarms of maggots stripped the countryside of its vegetation. The ancestor then caught all the maggots and imprisoned them beneath a hill. Since then the maggots have been breeding underground (77). If the railway company cut into this specific hillside "there'd be a gigantic explosion. A cloud of flies would burst upwards and cover the whole earth and kill every man and animal with poison" the Aboriginals contend (78).

Assmann observes that the more terrible events are, the more powerful the urge towards symbolism and public debate becomes (*Religion* 178). Although Assmann is referring to Auschwitz here, his argument seems applicable to the testing of the H-bomb and the transformation and integration of the event into Aboriginal collective memory, as de-

scribed by Chatwin, and to the Vietnam War and the debates regarding its storage in American cultural memory.

Assmann states that after decades of silence, the debate about Auschwitz is only just beginning and that it will not end very soon; “Auschwitz has become part of a normative past from which future generations will derive values and guiding principles” (178–79). The same might be said with regard to the war in Viet Nam. Cultural objectifications such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial only became possible after a certain period of time had passed. As has been pointed out in the introduction to this paper, the war’s significance for American collective memory is still being discussed. Not what might be called facts, but the negotiation of values forms the most important part of these discussions.

Assmann’s communicative and cultural memory have different structures in terms of content, form, media and time frame. However, it depends on the actual culture how distinctive the differences between the two concepts of memory become. It is often more appropriate to see these aspects on a scale tending to one side or the other than as completely different categories (*Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* 55).<sup>4</sup>

Communicative memory lies within the time frame of three to four generations, that is, it embraces approximately 80–100 years and contains experience in the form of individual biographies. Cultural memory, on the other hand, is of a mythic past or a past clearly remote from the present (56). Assmann points to the phenomenon of the “floating gap,” which implies that whereas individuals of oral societies remember a lot about the immediate as well as the mythic past of their society, there is an information gap regarding the time in between (48). Often, individuals themselves do not perceive this gap consciously but it is very apparent for researchers (48). In literary societies a similar phenomenon can be observed. Memories do not reach further back than eighty years (51). “Instead of myths of origin follow, separated through a ‘float-

4 Harald Welzer points out that the separation of memory into a communicative and a cultural memory as Jan and Aleida Assmann undertake it is basically an analytical one. In his view the two categories merge in the memory of individuals and groups. Welzer sees this as the reason why cultural memory can also change in the course of time. Certain aspects disappear, others gain new importance and are added to the cultural memory of society (15).



ing gap,' the historical dates of schoolbooks and memories related to monuments, in short, official history" (51; my translation).<sup>5</sup>

Cultural memory is a past distilled into and collected around symbolic figures. It could be argued that cultural memory is history transformed into memory and thus into myth (52). "Myth is a founding history. Through myth a society's present can be explained as originating from its past" (52; my translation).<sup>6</sup> "The difference between myth and history or so-called facts is not an issue within cultural memory. What becomes important is not a factual account but only what is remembered about events," Assmann points out (52; my translation).<sup>7</sup>

Communicative memory is constructed in informal contexts, that is, through everyday interaction; cultural memory, on the other hand, is enacted in ceremonies. Whereas communicative memory is about personal experience within living memory, cultural memory contains cultural objectifications (56). The cultural memory of a society has normative and formative aspects. Cultural texts such as proverbs or generally texts which provide guidelines for correct behaviour may be called normative. Texts such as myths and legends, on the other hand, may be called formative because they provide a group with origins and identity (*Religion* 104). Formative and normative aspects are present in all these texts at the same time, but the emphasis shifts to one side or the other (104).

In literate societies a wide range of memories is made accessible to the individual through the medium of writing (29). In non-literate societies, on the other hand, it is difficult to distinguish between connective and cultural memory (21). Assmann maintains,

Only with the emergence of writing does cultural memory "take off" and allow the horizon of symbolically stored memory to grow far beyond the framework of knowledge functionalized as bonding memory. Only cultural memory enables the individual to dispose freely of his stock of memories and grants him the opportunity to orient himself in the entire expanse of his memory spaces. (21)

5 "Hier folgen dann, durch ein 'floating gap' getrennt, anstelle der Ursprungsmythen die Daten der Schulbücher und Monumente, d.h. die offizielle Überlieferung" (51).

6 "Mythos ist eine fundierende Geschichte, eine Geschichte, die erzählt wird, um eine Gegenwart vom Ursprung her zu erhellen" (52).

7 "Der Unterschied zwischen Mythos und Geschichte wird hier hinfällig. Für das kulturelle Gedächtnis zählt nicht faktische, sondern nur erinnerte Geschichte" (52).

Only a part of all the knowledge available in a society is used by its members and Aleida Assmann thus suggests that we distinguish between a memory of ‘storage’ and one of ‘function’ (*Erinnerungsräume* 134; my translation).<sup>8</sup> Because the borders between the two forms of memory are fluid, she sees the possibility of change and renewal (134). In “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity” Jan Assmann states, “Which past becomes evident ... and which values emerge in its identificatory appropriation tells us much about the constitution and tendencies of a society” (133). He further points out that cultural memory may under certain conditions free a collective from the pressures of connective memory (*Religion* 21). Assmann mentions conflicts such as those between the people of Israel and Palestine, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or between the people of Serbia and Kosovo. These conflicts are irreconcilable because the groups in question are influenced by strong emotions stored in their connective or bonding memory (21). “Political cults of the dead play a particularly disastrous role in such conflicts. In line with the slogan ‘You shall not have died in vain,’ obligations toward the dead are used to justify a duty of revenge and intransigence” (21). As Ron Kovic shows in *Born on the Fourth of July*, and as will be discussed in chapter 4, the American government used a similar strategy during the war in Viet Nam in order to convince the public that it was necessary to keep fighting. The only possible solution to end disastrous conflicts like these consists in acknowledging the memories of the other groups, their sufferings as well as one’s own mistakes, and in finding thus a common past, Assmann maintains (21).

Assmann writes that there are many incidents in history in which suffering was one-sided and for which official recognition is still non-existent. He argues, however,

The day will come when memorials will be erected by Americans for the Africans who were carried off and enslaved and for the Indians robbed of their land; by the Israelis for the Palestinians who were driven out; by the Russians and Chinese for the murdered opponents of the regime; by the Catholic Church for the victims of the Crusades and the Inquisition... (23)

Assmann points out that “[i]n such acts of recognition of the suffering caused to others through no fault of theirs we can discern the outlines

8 “Speichergedächtnis;” “Funktionsgedächtnis” (134).

of a universal form of bonding memory that is committed to certain fundamental norms of human dignity” (23).

In February 2008, the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, officially apologized to the Aboriginal people for the injustice, humiliation and suffering their culture had undergone at the hands of white society. Aboriginal children had been taken away from their families in order to be raised in institutions with the aim of integrating them more easily into white society, a project that had, of course, dismally failed. It was the first time that an official apology had been made by the Australian government. Rudd, moreover, made it clear that to say sorry was only the beginning and that other measures needed to follow (Wälterlin 7). Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper followed on 11 June 2008 with an official apology to the Native Canadian population for crimes committed against them by the white population (Calonego 9). As in Australia, native children had been taken away from their families in order to be raised in so-called residential schools. As in Australia many children had been abused in these institutions. Whether these official apologies will be further inscribed into collective memory through cultural symbols, such as the monuments Assmann mentions, remains to be seen.

I would like to point out here that the process of apologizing can more easily take place after a certain amount of time has passed – after contemporary witnesses and perhaps also their immediate descendants have died – that is, not within the time frame of communicative memory. To officially acknowledge acts of injustice committed by one’s nation against others seems to be an extremely difficult process as can be seen from Switzerland’s recent efforts to deal with its role during the Second World War. Our personal memories are, of course, subjective. Scientific approaches to the past, that is, approaches which consider as many aspects of an event as possible and try in this sense to be objective, may seem completely far-fetched or wrong to people who were immediately concerned by the events in question. With regard to the Vietnam War this means that an official American apology will become more likely the more time has passed.

Different societies use different strategies in their attitude towards historical events. Assmann mentions Claude Lévi-Strauss’ concept of “cold” and “hot” societies in this respect (*Religion* 11). Hot societies “remember their history, in order to have history and to make history”(11).