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Traumatic Memory and the Postcolonial: Disruptive Genealogy

Abstract: To what extent has postcolonial studies been influenced by developments in memory studies that privilege trauma theory and its accompanying vocabulary of violence, the wound and victimhood? Although this approach has provided a much-needed focus on how past violence continues to affect the present in invisible ways, it tends to foreclose a broader intersectional analysis of cultural works in which traumatic memory, loss and mourning are always articulated with other, often contradictory and paradoxical, processes. I will apply this approach to the film *Memory Box* (2021) by the Lebanese filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, in which the return of the past can be read not only in terms of a genealogical transmission of the trauma of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) but also as a knotted story about time, culture and media. Can postcolonial theory open up cultural works to ambivalent encounters in a way that readings through the lens of traumatic memory rarely allow?

Keywords: Memory, trauma, genealogy, Lebanese film, remediation, the rhizome

1 Introduction

As J. Roger Kurtz (2018: 1) writes in his introduction to a volume on trauma and literature, “(w)e live in an age of trauma [. . .] Indeed, the vocabulary of trauma seems ubiquitous.” Trauma theory has certainly become widespread in postcolonial cultural studies and its accompanying vocabulary of violence, the wound, transmission, belatedness, haunting, victimhood and melancholia do, indeed, seem ubiquitous. In this chapter, I will argue that although this approach has provided a much-needed focus on the ways past violence continues to affect the present in invisible ways, it tends to foreclose a broader intersectional analysis of cultural works in which traumatic memory, loss and mourning are always articulated with other, often contradictory and paradoxical, processes. I will apply this approach to the film *Memory Box* (2021) by the Lebanese filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, in which the return of the past can be read not only in terms of a genealogical transmission of the trauma of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) but also as a knotted story about time, culture, media and affect. Is our response to the legacies of the past at a crossroads? Can postcolonial theory

open up cultural works to ambivalent encounters in a way that readings through the lens of traumatic memory rarely allow?

2 Postcolonial cultural studies, traumatic memory and genealogy

Much has been written about the development of a trauma-based model of cultural memory studies in the 1990s. American theorists Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, Dominick LaCapra and others combined a Freudian approach to trauma with a post-structuralist methodology to analyze, predominantly, cultural works on the Holocaust. Postcolonial critiques of this model of trauma pointed up its Eurocentric bias – focusing on the Holocaust to the virtual exclusion of non-European moments of extreme violence –, its application of “western” theory (Freudian and poststructuralist), and its privileging of “western” modernist techniques as if they were universally applicable (see, for example, Craps 2013).¹ The call, then, was to decolonize trauma studies by adapting, extending and refashioning its remit, especially with a view to questioning the Caruth and Hartman Freudian/post-structuralist understanding of trauma. As Irene Visser (2011: 270) puts it “(i)n the dialogue between trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies the central question remains whether trauma theory can be effectively ‘postcolonialized’ in the sense of being usefully conjoined with postcolonial theory.” Visser argues for a “more comprehensive conceptualization of trauma and (. . .) possible directions in which to expand trauma’s conceptual framework, in order to respond more adequately to postcolonial ways of understanding history, memory and trauma” (2011: 270; see also Visser 2018). Nicole Sutterlin endorses this observation when she writes “as the scope of trauma studies is expanding, the question arises whether other forms of what is now termed ‘trauma’ were long developed in non-Western contexts” (2020: 20).²

1 The problem with this critique is that it risks viewing the West and its “others” in binary terms. As Gianmaria Colpani, Jamila Mascot and Katrine Smiet (2022: 10) note, using Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty as guides, the “critique of the colonial pretension of gaining immediate access to the colonized world is not counterbalanced by the postcolonial affirmation of a native subject armed with self-transparency. Access is not an option for the colonizer, just as transparency is not an option for the postcolonial subject.”

2 See Sylvia Martinez-Falquina (2015: 834–838) for a useful guide to the decolonial “emendations” (838) to trauma theory.

Rather than question traumatic memory itself as a useful way of developing postcolonial studies, many postcolonial critics thus saw the need to extend the scope of traumatic memory studies to make it fit for purpose for postcolonial studies. In recent years this call has certainly been heeded. The volume *The Future of Trauma Theory* (Gert Buelens et al. 2013) took a significant step in this direction, as did the more recent *Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* (2020). In their introduction to the Routledge volume, Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja acknowledge this generalized acceptance of trauma theory in cultural works across the globe when they write “(t)here is now a wide recognition of how past violence leaves marks on the present and future, how the past haunts us and how past injustice needs to be remembered and worked through so that we can avoid repeating it” (2020: 3).³ Despite Michael Rothberg’s warning to be “suspicious of over-generalizing the trauma concept” (2014: xiii), it is possible that this is precisely what has happened.⁴

The generalization of trauma theory in postcolonial studies does not mean that it has not had its critics, nor that traumatic memory studies has gone unchallenged (see for example Kansteiner 2004 and Radstone 2007). Anne Rigney (2018: 369) suggests that “it is time to think critically about the cost of [the] apparently natural link between memory and trauma, lest we become definitively locked into it.” Heeding Rigney’s call, I focus here on two interrelated aspects of traumatic memory studies that might prompt us to rethink the model itself. The first is related to genealogy and time and the second concerns the universalizing tendency of traumatic memory studies, which can reduce complex works to formulaic readings of trauma, haunting, victimhood and melancholia.

The relationship between traumatic memory and genealogy – that is, the way in which trauma is transmitted (often unconsciously) through the family to successive generations – has been central to many cultural works in recent years that deal with the legacy of extreme violence. The French literary critic Dominique Viart (2009) has coined the term “*récits de filiation*” [“narratives of parentage”] to describe this literature. An accompanying body of critical literature has developed since the 1990s that considers, predominantly, the children and grandchildren of survivors of the Holocaust but also the generations who come after other traumatic

3 The extent of the interaction between postcolonial studies and trauma studies is evident, for example, in the case studies included in the collection *Memory and Postcolonial Studies* (Göttsche, ed. 2019). See Nicole Sutterlin’s chapter in the *Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* for a detailed account of the expanding history of trauma studies.

4 For example, Martínez-Falquina (2015: 843) suggests that “it might even be argued that all post-colonial theory – which deals with colonial relations, racism, or gender violence, to name but a few of their main concerns – is always related to trauma in some way or another.”

moments of extreme violence and atrocity, such as slavery and the violence against indigenous peoples (see for example Schwab 2010). The most significant contribution to the theoretical debate around second generation trauma is undoubtedly Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, by which trauma can be transmitted from survivors of genocide or extreme violence to their children. For Hirsch (1997), postmemory takes place within the family and photographs are the major triggers for the transmission of trauma to the next generation.

Hirsch modified this model of familial traumatic memory by positing what she called "affiliative" memory, describing the difference between "postmemory" and "affiliative memory" as that between "an intergenerational vertical identification of child and parent occurring within the family, and the intra-generational horizontal identification that makes that child's position more broadly available to other contemporaries" (2012: 36). Although affiliative memory shifts the direction of transmission away from a biological and vertical relation, and also recognizes the role of media in the shaping of traumatic memory, the biological family is, nevertheless, still the primary framing of this model. As Anne-Marie Kramer observes, citing Hirsch, "(i)n both familial and affiliative postmemory, identification with the experience of the previous generation is made possible through the idiom of family, which becomes 'an accessible lingua franca easing identification and projection across distance and difference'" (2011: 431).⁵ Thus, although affiliative memory stretches the mode of transmission beyond the family frame to a whole generation, it nevertheless still adheres broadly to the genealogical principle.

Hirsch's formulation of affiliative memory has been expanded further with other transcultural and transnational models of memory that challenge the vertical axis of genealogy and suggest more complex and multilinear modes of transmission (for example, prosthetic (Landsberg 2004), traveling (Erll 2014), multidirectional (Rothberg 2009) and palimpsestic (Silverman 2013). Astrid Erll notes that "(w)ith the transmission from (familial) inheritance to (societal) heritage, the preoccupation with genealogy enters the area of cultural memory" (2014: 396). Even postmemory itself, however, is not a pure and transparent form of transmission from one generation to the next prior to the intervention of social and cultural vectors of memory, as photographs (the primary means of transmission, according to Hirsch) are themselves cultural forms which necessarily disrupt the direct vertical and genealogical line of the family frame. Perhaps, then, Erll's suggestion that the passage from familial inheritance to societal heritage is where genealogy "enters the area of cul-

⁵ Maria Roca Lizarazu (2018: 172) makes a similar point: "While 'affiliative' postmemory transcends the realm of biology, involving, in theory, any number of individuals and generations born after the event, it still remains indebted to 'the idiom of family', drawing on the family as a symbolic resource."

tural memory” should be modified to account for the fact that genealogy is itself never a pure and unmediated process of transmission as it is always profoundly articulated with history and culture.⁶

The binary oppositions between genealogy and culture, and between vertical and horizontal modes of transmission, certainly need to be deconstructed (see De Cesari and Rigney 2014: 5–6). It is, however, a larger question that interests us here, namely, whether fluid notions of memory challenge the primacy of traumatic memory itself. This is not so much a question of whether secondary witnessing, “prosthetic” memory and empathic identification raised by the cultural transmission of trauma can still be classified as traumatic. It is, rather, the extent to which any definition of trauma (primary, secondary and so on) is sufficient to characterize a complex cultural field. Let us take, for example, the question of time. The belatedness of traumatic memory depends implicitly on a notion of the cyclical nature of time, as the wound of the past surfaces and resurfaces across generations. Yet, as Silke Arnold-de Simine observes (2018: 152) “(i)f the temporality of belatedness and endless repetition that is associated with trauma becomes universalized as the structure of reality itself, it is increasingly difficult to envisage other temporalities, such as time as change and the reparative possibilities that might bring with it.” We might add that it is not only the temporality of belatedness at stake; the whole poetics of trauma – haunting, ghosts, victimhood, melancholy and so on – is also universalized so that other aesthetic strategies become difficult to envisage.

The lesson that I would like to draw, then, about the disruption to genealogy of horizontal modes of transmission is not simply that trauma can be transmitted in multiple ways beyond the (vertical) family frame but that the interconnected memory traces thus established go beyond the reductive framing of traumatic memory itself. The composite and hybrid nature of memory cannot be contained by any single explanatory framework, be it that of trauma or any other process. By universalizing trauma as an explanatory principle of memory, traumatic memory becomes a tautology. It is only meaningful if we recognize it as an impure form (Silverman 2019), as the originating wound and the cyclical temporality

6 Lizarazu (2020: 17–18) highlights the problem with viewing the transmission of trauma as a transparent process: “(The) link between trauma, transmission and the (photographic) medium ultimately rests on the common misconception that both traumatic experiences and visual media are somehow realms of the immediate and nonrepresentational because they are not accessed verbally in the first place. (. . .) As such, the visual image and the experience of trauma are essentialized and naturalized as something that stands outside the dynamics of cultural configuration and symbolic representation. Hirsch conceptualizes photographs as transparent carriers of (traumatic) affect across time, space, and subjective boundaries.”

of its transmission are always articulated with other non-traumatic processes and temporalities.⁷

3 Disruptive genealogy and remediation in *Memory Box*

The fifteen-year civil war in Lebanon was concluded by the Taef Agreement of 1991. However, the underlying causes of the war – especially sectarian violence, a political system (confessionalism) that fosters communitarian division and competition, external influence (especially Syria and Iran) and corruption – are still in place, leading many commentators to suggest that the official conclusion of the war changed very little. Official silence about the war (there are no official accounts or memorials) and state censorship mean that those years of conflict cannot be properly discussed yet continue to haunt contemporary political and social life. As a subtle and allusive way of challenging this amnesia, experimental film-makers in Lebanon have often adopted the symptomatic poetics of traumatic memory, that Mark Westmoreland (2013: 734) has called an “alternative aesthetics.”⁸

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige grew up in Beirut during the civil war and, since the early 1990s, have collaborated on projects that span film, video, photography and art installation. The model of traumatic memory would appear to be a useful way to describe their “alternative aesthetics” in relation to post-conflict Lebanon, as characters in their films often seem haunted by an invisible past and show the affective and melancholic symptoms of trauma (see, for example, *A Perfect Day* [2005] and *Je Veux voir* [2008]). Their pronouncements on their practice, however, demonstrate a certain dissatisfaction with seeing their work solely in this light. In their eyes, the trauma model reinforces the stereotype of the faceless victim:

Dans les tourments de la région, les médias montrent des visages réduits à une fonction, à une forme de réaction: la victime. Une victime sans nom, sans réelle histoire (. . .) (T)rop

⁷ It is not possible here to discuss in detail the distinction that needs to be made between Freudian trauma theory used in a psychoanalytic context and the generalization of that theory to inform poststructuralist analyses of cultural memory (see, for example, Kansteiner 2004 and Radstone 2007). Suffice it to say that this conflation has often been responsible for reductive readings of cultural works through the lens of traumatic memory.

⁸ For critical works identifying this phenomenon in Lebanese cinema, see for example Toufic 1993, Westmoreland 2010 and Rastegar 2015 on ghosts and vampires, and El-Horr 2016 on melancholy.

souvent, la manière dont (les visages) sont présentés les privent de singularité; ils deviennent simplement un statut, celui de la victime (. . .) Dans notre partie du monde, on a, en quelque sorte, perdu nos visages.

[In the turmoil of the region, the media show faces reduced to a function, a form of reaction: the victim. A victim without name, without any real history (. . .) Too often, the way in which (faces) are presented deprives them of singularity; they become simply a status, that of the victim (. . .) In our part of the world, we have, in a way, lost our faces.] (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013: 105)⁹

Re-establishing the singularity of the face entails detaching the image from stereotypes of conflict and violence, resisting dominant imaginaries, and transforming the image into an open-ended space of potential and possibility. The word they have used consistently to describe the liberation of the image from preconceived ideas is “latency”: “Latency is the introduction to the possible, to the state of becoming” (cited in Westmoreland 2010:181). Latency shifts the focus of art from an Orphic obsession with looking back (and hence turning the past into stone) to one rooted resolutely in the unscripted present (Silverman 2021). They have said “(n)ous travaillons peu sur le passé ou les guerres civiles en elles-mêmes mais plus sur les traces et les conséquences de ces dernières sur notre présent” [“We work very little on the past or on civil wars per se but rather on the traces and the consequences of these in our present”] (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013: 103). This is an art of encounter rather than return, one which aims to restore otherness to the world rather than recycle political or ideological dogma.

I will argue that, although, on one level, the model of traumatic memory captures significant aspects of *Memory Box*, the film also displays many features of the directors’ familiar aesthetic practice that escape this framing. *Memory Box* draws on the personal experience of Hadjithomas and Joreige as teenagers during the civil war, especially Hadjithomas’s notebooks and Joreige’s photos of the time. It is a family drama involving three generations of women. Teenager Alex lives with her mother Maia in Montreal. Maia’s mother Teta (Alex’s grandmother) lives nearby in the city. There are tensions between Alex and Maia and between Maia and Teta, the cause of which becomes clearer when a box of Maia’s photos, notebooks, letters, cassettes and other belongings from her teenage years in Beirut in the 1980s arrives at her house. The items in the box had originally been sent by the teenage Maia to her best friend Liza Haber, who had left Beirut with her family to go to Paris to escape the violence of the civil war. Over two decades later, Liza is killed in a car accident and her mother returns Maia’s teenage belongings to the adult Maia in Montreal. The arrival of the memory box brings back Maia

9 Translations from French are my own except where stated.

and Teta's past in Beirut, which they have repressed since their arrival in Montreal but which still haunts their everyday lives. Alex subsequently learns about a family past that has never been spoken and, once revealed, allows her to see her mother and grandmother in a new light. But rather than learn about this past as a passive recipient of her mother and grandmother's experience, Alex remediates and reanimates the material in the box by taking her own photos of her mother's original photos and notebooks and sends some of these to her friends. Alex thus becomes an active participant in the (re)creation and transmission of the past and her engagement with an experience she has not lived merges with her mother's lived experience. Maia and Alex eventually return to Beirut to attend the memorial service for Liza and Maia rediscovers the friends she has not seen since she left Lebanon as a teenager.

In many ways, *Memory Box* fits the postmemory, family-frame model perfectly. The inter-generational family dynamics in Montreal involve secrets, silences and lies as a means of repressing traumatic memories from the past. When the memory box arrives, and threatens to disrupt the status quo, Teta tries to hide it from Alex, describing it as "a bad memory" and tells Alex "the past upsets your Mum and will destroy all our hard work." "Let's celebrate Christmas in peace," she adds. Later she messages Maia to say "Don't look at the box, the past stinks, and don't show (the box) to Alex." Maia accuses Teta of not telling her about Liza's death and of hiding her notebooks. "Enough lies," she shouts at her mother. Alex reacts similarly to Maia's attempts to hide the past. "We never share anything," she complains. Later she tells her friend Lynn that her mother never tells her anything about her past: "She lies all the time." And when Maia discovers that Alex has been looking at the contents of the box, despite being told not to, Alex shouts at her "your whole life is a lie, you've never told me anything." Gabriele Schwab's powerful discussion of the "psychic deformations passed on from generation to generation" (2010: 3) at the heart of the haunting legacy of trauma, (heavily influenced by the theory of the crypt by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok), aptly characterizes the inter-generational family life in the film.

The arrival of the memory box brings this life of deceit to the surface and triggers an encounter with traumatic events that have long been repressed. As in Hirsch's formulation of postmemory, photographs play a central role in the transmission of past trauma to the next generation. Other details reinforce the vertical, trans-generational transmission of past moments. Teta arrives at Maia's house with a Christmas tree, a symbol of family tradition (the family tree); Teta teaches Alex how to make stuffed vine leaves, a favorite dish of Maia's father, especially at Christmas; Teta speaks Arabic to both Maia and Alex, despite the fact that she has lived in Montreal for twenty-five years and Arabic is not Alex's mother-tongue; photographs of Maia's father and brother are brought out every Christ-

mas, causing Alex to say to her friend Lynn “we eat with the dead and ghosts”; Alex is vacant when out with her friends, affected by the inherited family trauma; when Maia and Alex go back to Beirut, Teta directs them on the phone to her husband’s grave; Alex sends Teta photos from Beirut. On one level, then, the memory box allows each woman to work through the repressed family past and fill in the gap of a broken genealogy in order to come to terms with past trauma and grief.

Alongside the vertical structure of transmission, however, a number of elements suggest a more horizontal principle of connections. Even within the family, the line of communication is not direct but dispersed. Teta’s communication with Alex in Arabic, when Alex’s first language is French, suggests interpretation and translation rather than unmediated communication. Maia’s position is more clearly “in-between” as she is bilingual (talking to Teta in Arabic and Alex in French) and has an English-speaking lover. As for the memory box and its contents, they have circulated in time (from the 1980s to the present day) and in space (between Beirut, Paris and Montreal), constituting a literal example of what Astrid Erll (2011) has called “travelling memory.” The journey of this material through time and space crosses political, cultural and ideological frontiers between “East” and “West,” and “north” and “south,” and between different time-sequences.¹⁰ The hybrid nature of this journey, made up of superimposed times and places, renders problematic the notion of a direct transmission of memory between generations on which the genealogical principle depends. Furthermore, the linearity of genealogy is complicated further when Alex takes photos of the contents of the box on her phone and sends a selection of these to her friend Lynn. Alex’s remediation of Maia’s original material clearly extends transmission beyond the framework of the family.

How traumatic, though, is the past that returns? And how “authentic” is the material in the memory box anyway? As a teenager in Beirut in the 1980s, the blasts and flares of the civil war, and the fear and anxiety of Maia’s parents in

10 Can one say that this horizontal journey connects memories of the Lebanese civil war to memories of other moments of extreme violence too? The intergenerational, “family frame” transmission of trauma in the form of postmemory implicitly recalls the memories of the Holocaust for second and third generations. More importantly, perhaps, “Canada” (or “Kanada”) was Auschwitz prisoner slang for the warehouses which stored the stolen belongings of (mostly) Jews murdered in the gas chambers, as these storage facilities resembled “the land of plenty.” The French sculptor and photographer Christian Boltanski created an art installation called “Réserve, Canada” in 1988 in which he used clothes to echo the Nazi warehouses. Ernst van Alphen (1997: 113) observes that, for camp inmates, “Canada” “stands for a country of excess and exuberance where one wants to emigrate because it can offer a living to everybody.” Teta and Maia have emigrated to Canada to escape the atrocities of the civil war but are haunted by what they have left behind.

their apartment, provide the constant backdrop to everyday life, but Maia is more interested in music, dancing and meeting up (secretly) with her boyfriend Raja. British and American new wave and punk music (Blondie, the Stranglers, Killing Joke, Sique Sique Sputnik, Kansas) and “western” clothes (short skirts, flared trousers) are *de rigueur* for these young Lebanese friends. Maia’s past life in Beirut is defined more by a mixture of emotions related to teenage life than one determined solely by the violent conflict, and more by cultural hybridity than any sense of a “pure” and “authentic” Lebanese identity. When Maia discovers a packet of cigarettes in the memory box and lights one, it seems to function like a Proustian madeleine, bringing back her hidden youth. However, in the box, there is a photo of her smoking next to a photo of a Hollywood film star also holding a cigarette, whose pose the teenage Maia is self-consciously imitating. The past self that returns is, therefore, not simply determined by the trauma of that period but by acts and emotions that are themselves shaped unavoidably by history and culture.¹¹

Family history in *Memory Box* is not a pure and direct line from generation to generation but always a place of convergence for diverse histories, spaces, times and, especially, material practices. For this history is, above all else, shaped through the media that transmit it. Alex’s remediation of Maia’s photos and notebooks is only one aspect of this. Maia herself spreads the photos, tapes and notebooks of her past life on the basement floor of her house so that they form a sort of fragmented mosaic. When a shape begins to form and her past in Beirut unfolds in (more or less) chronological fashion – going out with friends, her love affair with Raja, arguments with her parents, bomb blasts and violence on the streets, the depression and decline of her father – this history is not presented as a transparent narrative but one that is subject to the tension between the still photos and photo-strips in the box and their speeded-up transformation into moving image, and between the analog technology that Maia uses in the 1980s and the digital technology of Alex’s remediation in the present. Family history is, thus, always held between the still and the moving image, between representation and lived experience, and between past and present. It is also shadowed by the histories of photography and film themselves, and the constantly evolving encounter between the amorphous and fleeting nature of life and the demands (both constraining and liberating) of new technologies. Story-telling and forms of representation are inextricably intertwined. Occasionally the image dissolves into light and color, which portrays the night sky

11 Self-referential quotes from other works by the directors (for example, the ubiquitous cigarettes in *A Perfect Day* [2005] or the sunsets in the exhibition ‘Se Souvenir de la lumière: Two Suns in a Sunset’ [2016–2017]) also subvert the authenticity of the past that returns and disperse it across a broader cultural intertext.

lit up by the flares and explosions of war while, at the same time, highlighting the material pixelations of digital film.¹² The central lie that will eventually be revealed in Maia's back story – that her father did not die a martyr, resisting the armed militias that had forced the closure of the school at which he was principal (a heroic story constructed by Teta) but committed suicide – only emerges through the photos that the teenage Maia took of his corpse, the undeveloped negatives of which are still in Maia's camera that returns in the memory box.¹³ And, even then, the line between truth and fabrication, and between reality and fantasy, is blurred. As Maia says to Alex, "Sometimes I invent things. I don't know what's real and false. Sometimes it's as if I've dreamt it."

The recordings of Maia's past life in Beirut that return in the memory box constitute an archive that needs to be read and deciphered to work through the family's traumatic past. The memory box as archive, however, is, like all archives, an unstable guide to truthful recollection. Not only are the stories of the past situated in an intermediary world between Maia's recollections and Alex's re-imaginings, and between reality and fantasy; they are also shaped by the media and technology of the time of recording in the 1980s, the digital remediation in the diegetic present and the techniques of the filmic present, not to mention the historical influences and cultural intertexts between the 1980s and the present. A stable past is always dissolving into a fluid present. The memory box as archive is, thus, not a reliable picture of the past but rather a performative act in the present in which the movement of the body and the movement of the image are in constant dialog. Traumatic memory itself is only a part of this encounter. Its belated temporality intersects with the other diegetic and filmic temporalities established in the film (those of the still and moving image, for example), and the melancholic victimhood associated with the transgenerational wound of trauma is offset by the exuberant acts of creation and imagination, both diegetic – in the form of Alex's reanimation of Maia's original images or the freedom of dance – and filmic on the part of the film-makers themselves.

The instability of the image must also be coupled with the changing patterns of sound created by the sound engineer and film director, Rana Eid. Eid has

12 These images are also an echo of an earlier project by Hadjithomas and Joreige entitled *Wonder Beirut* (composed of multiple installations between 1997–2006) in which their invented photographer Abdallah Farah burns idealized postcards of Beirut from the 1960s to depict the destruction of the city during the civil war.

13 Undeveloped film is a further reference to the *Wonder Beirut* project. In the third part of the project, entitled "Latent Images," Abdallah Farah keeps a number of reels of film in drawers without developing them, thus gesturing to the latent possibilities of film before their crystallization into fixed images.

worked on many films in the recent new wave of Lebanese cinema, frequently building up a multi-layered soundtrack of underground and everyday life in Beirut (see for example her film *Panoptic*, 2017). In *Memory Box*, it is not only the sounds of war in Beirut that return but also the exuberant sounds of the city (hence the importance of music), all of which are in contrast to the other-worldly sounds of Montreal and the constant pinging of incoming WhatsApp messages on phones. Once again, the prism of trauma theory does not capture this multi-layered and highly sensual soundscape.

Although *Memory Box* is certainly a family drama about a traumatic past, a model of traumatic memory does not, in itself, provide a sufficient methodological framework to appreciate the different levels, temporalities and textures of the film. *Memory Box* is more concerned with the multiplicity of performative encounters in the present than with the belated effects of past trauma. As Hadjithomas says about the use of images in the film,

it's about their temporality and re-activating, today, something from the past to make something new. We're not interested in nostalgia, we are interested in the present, and the effects of the images or events from the past in the context of the present. (Mezaina 2022)

For Hadjithomas and Joreige, to transform the image from a symptom of trauma into a creative performance is “how you can liberate yourself from the past and be able to have another relation to your present” (Hadjithomas 2017).

4 Rhizomatic knots of memory

In our special issue of *Yale French Studies* in 2010, in which we attempted to re-think cultural memory beyond the frontiers of nation and community, Michael Rothberg, Debarati Sanyal and I used the term “noeuds de mémoire” [“knots of memory”] to define the convergence of different spatio-temporal memory-traces (Rothberg, Sanyal and Silverman 2010). This was, in part, a play on words on, and challenge to, Pierre Nora’s nation-bound and resolutely non-postcolonial “lieux de mémoire” [“sites of memory”]; but it was also with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s idea of the “rhizome” in mind. In his introduction to the collection, Rothberg (2010: 7) wrote that “‘knotted’ in all places and acts of memory are rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference that exceed attempts at territorialization (whether at the local or national level) and identitarian reduction.” The rhizome is multiple, non-linear and hybrid, and denies origins and dualisms, especially the dualism which opposes verticality and horizontality. The rhizome is about entanglements and encounters that cannot be contained by

chronology, linearity, causality and genealogy. In their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* entitled “Rhizome,” Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 11) write “(t)ransversal communications between different lines scramble the genealogical trees (. . .) The rhizome is an anti-genealogy.” They later repeat this last statement and describe the rhizome as an “antimemory.” It has no beginning and endings, only “middles”: “A plateau is always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end. A rhizome is made of plateaus” (1988: 21). A rhizomatic understanding of memory would seem to be incompatible with traumatic memory (despite the fact that, in our collection, most articles did indeed deal with the entanglements of different moments of extreme violence and trauma), given that traumatic memory’s belated temporality, stemming from an original wound, is premised on a beginning and a causal effect. At the very least, the “rhizomatic networks” of “knots of memory” propose an understanding of memory that is not simply, and exclusively, related to trauma.

Perhaps the most interesting exponent of rhizomatic networks in a postcolonial context is the Martinican writer Edouard Glissant. Glissant acknowledges his debt to Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome in his concept of a “relational poetics” (Glissant 1997) which, as Neil Allier (2019: 2) observes in his interesting discussion of the anti-genealogy of Glissant and Deleuze, “develops most visibly in the creolized spaces of the Antilles.” Glissant’s critique of origins and linearity suggests that Caribbean history and culture cannot be understood simply with reference to the traumas of the slave trade and colonialism but must be seen through the prism of multiple relations of which those traumatic histories form a part.

Hadjithomas and Joreige have a similar approach in their work on Lebanon. How do you talk about a traumatic past without reducing it to trauma? Hadjithomas addresses this problem directly:

When one talks about war, it’s usually about the trauma; but in my case, I was writing about having fun, dreaming, loving, and living. It was another way to talk about the war, because during a war, you continue to live your life and films don’t usually show that. (. . .) We both worked a lot on the idea of what do you do with elements that are not considered traumatic – in the interest of making something different, but without sidelining the trauma. (Mezaina 2022)

The result is a film that does indeed create a space for rhizomatic connections between other elements, processes, temporalities and encounters, “without sidelining the trauma.” The final sequences of *Memory Box* leave us in an ambiguous space – between past and present, sunrise and sunset, mourning and joy, still and moving image, and between representation and profilmic life – to the accompaniment of the track “Let There be Light” by The Bunny Tylers. The memory box has, in a sense, allowed Teta, Maia and Alex to work through the previously un-

spoken trauma while still acting it out, not in melancholic fashion but as agents of their own present.

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