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Scales of Memory: Family Chronicles and the Agency of the Aesthetic

1 Scales of memory and the family chronicle

In her article "Remaking Memory and the Agency of the Aesthetic" (2021b), Ann Rigney explores the role of cultural forms in bringing "inert or occluded aspects of the past" (12) back into circulation and making them memorable. Cultural forms generate memorability either by "representing less familiar events through the lens of more familiar ones" (13), or by defamiliarizing and unsettling established narratives about the past bringing to the fore repressed or unacknowledged aspects of that same past. Broadly speaking, the former corresponds to what Michael Rothberg (2009) has theorized as multidirectionality, the latter resonates with what I have called the historical uncanny (Knittel 2014). In both cases, Rigney argues, it is the affective qualities of cultural forms that imbue them with agency. Taking the "(un)forgetting" (10) of colonial soldiers in European armies during World War I as her case study, Rigney argues that aesthetic forms can contribute to reshaping imagined communities by capturing individual attention and fostering openness to the memories of strangers. Importantly, she argues that memory studies should adopt a multi-scalar approach, considering how individual, micro-level acts of writing, reading, or viewing can reconstitute memory also at a collective and macro level.

The question of scale has recently come to occupy a central position in the humanities in the context of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene has destabilized traditional understandings of scales and scalability and disrupted our conception of individual agency (Ghosh 2016; Clarke and Wittenberg 2017). The sum of individual actions, insignificant in themselves, has come to affect the planet as a whole – but not in a linear way, as agency is distributed across humans, nonhumans, and technology, as well as time and space. Different things come to matter differently at different scales. Thinking about different scales in the Anthropocene context means thinking in terms of discontinuity or incommensurability rather than in terms of a smooth, linear zooming in and out between the small and the large. The influence of the Anthropocene discourse can be felt in memory studies in discussions about the scope and temporality of memory and has led to conceptualizations of memory as "planetary" (Bond et al. 2017; Craps et al. 2018) or "anticipatory" (Craps 2017), among others. These terms attempt to give form to the complex interrelations between human and non-human life worlds, between

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local, national, and global concerns, but also, and importantly, between historical and geological pasts, presents, and futures.

Implicitly or explicitly, however, scale has of course always been at the heart of the field, starting with the relationship between individual and collective memory (Assmann 2006), national and transnational memory (De Cesari and Rigney 2014; Kennedy and Nugent 2016), theorizations of individual or collective trauma (Bond and Craps 2020) and the vexed problem of individual or collective guilt and responsibility. Recent conceptualizations of complicity (Sanders 2002; Sanyal 2015; Mandel 2019; Mihai 2019) and implication (Rothberg 2019; 2023) describe scalar relations between individual agency and structures and histories of violence and injustice such as genocide or colonialism. The question of scale pertains both to the object of study and to the activity of studying it. Scales are conceptual or representational devices for describing relational arrangements between different-sized phenomena, between the local and the global, between the micro and the macro (Zylinska 2014). Cultural forms – novels, films, poems, etc. – can make visible scalar relations and perform scaling operations through their depiction of individuals and their relations to larger structures and processes.

Literary critics have theorized scale as both a writerly and a readerly enterprise, focusing on the one hand on scaling as a textual performance, with literary texts acting as "scaling devices" (Dimock 2013; McGurl 2013) that depict the spatiotemporal relationships between individuals and larger events, processes, and structures. A novel, for example, may focus on minute details of a person's life only then, apparently seamlessly to zoom out to reflect on world historical events, and vice versa. Scaling as a readerly performance, on the other hand, means to take into account multiple different and often incommensurable scales in the process of interpretation (Clark 2015). Timothy Clark distinguishes between three spatiotemporal scales of reading: first, the individual, psychological scale (thoughts and relations between characters), second, the (trans)national, (multi)generational, and historical scale (e.g. focusing on a particular historical period), and third, the planetary scale, which moves beyond the usual scope of literary analysis to consider an environmental history that unfolds over a much longer time frame. This has significant implications for how we approach the scales of memory in cultural representations. In what follows I will focus on one of the paradigmatic forms for the representation of scalar relationships and individual and collective memory: the multigenerational family novel or family chronicle. After a brief discussion of the affordances of the form itself, I will, with the help of two recent examples, sketch some elements of the writerly and the readerly practice of scaling as it relates to the question of implication in large-scale histories of violence against humans and the natural world.

Long a popular genre of world literature, over the past two decades the family chronicle has emerged as a powerful site, across languages and cultures, of the construction of the cultural memory of genocide – most notably the Holocaust – and other histories of violence. Emblematic of the "era of generational discourse" (Weigel 2006, 87), in which the category of the generation becomes a key to the cultural, public, and scholarly understanding of the experience and transmission of history and memory, these chronicles take as their central conceit the family tree, featuring often semi-autobiographical narrators who confront their parents', grandparents', and great-grandparents' entanglements in the violent histories of the past century and beyond, and their own implication in those histories.[1] Situated at the intersection of microhistorical and macrohistorical scales, the family chronicle explores how ordinary people become involved in violent regimes and how they make sense of this involvement after the fact. As such, it can make unfamiliar histories legible and memorable within a familiar form: the generational structure. Furthermore, the genre lends itself to the critical interrogation of overly schematic conceptions of perpetrators versus victims and instead allows for an exploration of complex – multidirectional – forms of complicity and implication, both synchronic (present-day) and diachronic (historical), as theorized by Rothberg (2019). Focusing on the trials and tribulations of different generations of a single family allows authors to place different, seemingly unrelated histories of violence side by side, without equating them. In so doing, the form makes visible connections between structures and histories of violence that in public discourse are often regarded as separate, defamiliarizing well-known histories.[2]

1 The list of potential examples is long, but some recent family chronicles that deal with questions of perpetration and implication include Per Leo's *Flut und Boden* (2015), a reckoning with the difficult legacy of Nazi crimes; Francesca Melandri's *Sangue Giusto* (2017), which revolves around Italian fascist colonial crimes in Ethiopia; Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory* (2021), which focuses on the legacies of Soviet repression and displacement; or Gabriela Wiener's *Huaco retrato* (2021), which deals with the long shadow of colonialism in Peru.

2 Recent examples of multidirectional family chronicles include Honorée Fannone Jeffers' *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois* (2021), which interweaves the histories of violence against Indigenous and enslaved people in the United States and Anouar Benmalek's *Fils du Shéol* (2015), which triangulates North African history with the Holocaust and German colonial violence in Namibia.

2 The Anthropocene and the Dendro-Chronicle: *Barkskins* (2016)

The Anthropocene discourse brings with it also a recalibration of the temporal and geographic scales of violence, making visible environmental degradation *as violence* against both humans and non-humans, and forcing us to rethink questions of responsibility (Knittel 2023). This "derangement" (Ghosh 2016) of scalar relations has left its mark on contemporary cultural forms – including, of course, the family chronicle. Indeed, the resurgence of this genre over the past two decades must also be seen in the context of the unfolding environmental crisis. Authors have re-imagined the genre to explicitly incorporate non-human presences and timescales. One particularly salient type in this respect is what one might call the dendro-chronicle, i.e. novels that take the conceit of the family tree literally by interweaving (fictional) family histories with the lives of trees and forests – and the *longue durée* history of deforestation. Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* (2016), Michael Christie's *Greenwood* (2019) or Ash Davidson's *Damnation Spring* (2021) for example, focus on the family histories of North American logging dynasties, charting the interactions between humans and trees across hundreds of years, a timeframe that corresponds to multiple generations in human terms, but a single lifetime for a tree.

Barkskins, for example, begins in the late seventeenth century with the arrival in Canada of two loggers from Paris and traces the story of their descendants up to the present day. It chronicles in detail the establishment of the global timber trading industry and its long-term impact on indigenous peoples and the environment, and in so doing shows how settler colonialism and global capitalist expansion have gone hand in hand with the destruction of indigenous lifeways and native ecosystems. It thus reveals – and makes memorable – the persecution and oppression of humans as historically and structurally bound up with the exploitation of non-humans. The novel features a large cast of more than 100 human characters who represent the myriad different ways in which humans participate in these interconnected histories of violence. Making visible the implications of individual actions on a larger scale, the novel raises the difficult question of human culpability and the "diffusion of agency in structural injustices" (Rothberg 2019, 51). At the same time, *Barkskins* gestures toward a wide perspective that is, in a way, more-than-human: because the human characters pass by quickly, the focus remains primarily on the natural world, and specifically the forests, which may change but are always present.

In its portrayal of generations upon generations devising ever more efficient ways of cutting down trees, *Barkskins* illustrates not only the crushing accumula-

tion over centuries of human destruction of forests and ecosystems but also a more general ability of humans to accelerate processes that would normally take much longer to complete. It does so by way of temporal scaling operations. The novel covers 320 years (1693–2013), but speeds up in the nineteenth century, and then again in the 1960s. Through this acceleration in narrated time, the structure of the novel also reflects two proposed starting points for the Anthropocene, which hold different implications for the responsibility of humans in the destruction of the planet: on the one hand, the industrial revolution (the beginning of capitalist expansion in the late eighteenth century), and on the other hand, the so-called "Great Acceleration" after the Second World War (the beginning of global consumer capitalism). *Barkskins* represents this acceleration of human impact on nature by ramping up the speed of the narrative over the course of the novel. The bulk of the novel takes place *before* the Great Acceleration, and this slow build up reenacts the temporal scale of the devastation. Moreover, by dwelling on the pre-industrial history of deforestation, the novel also alludes to a third possible starting point for the Anthropocene, namely the early seventeenth century, the point at which atmospheric carbon dioxide was at its lowest, owing to the colonial genocide of the Indigenous population of the Americas, which resulted in widespread *re*forestation (see Luciano 2015). Thus, the history of the Anthropocene is the history of European colonization and the trees bear witness to that history.

Barkskins and the other dendro-chronicles are thus explicitly concerned with the ecological dimension and seek to re-imagine the familiar literary form in more-than-human terms. While they may not necessarily bear all the hallmarks of cultural memory narratives (e.g. self-reflexive and/or unreliable narration, meta-commentary on remembrance and representation, etc.), I argue that they do important memory work in that they render the history of deforestation memorable and legible *as violence*, and in so doing they also challenge and make strange or uncanny the narrative of "manifest destiny," of the heroic and pioneering discovery and settlement of North America.

3 Reading for scale in the multidirectional family chronicle: *Ein unsichtbares Land* (2003)

The popularity of the family chronicle as a genre in recent decades speaks to a desire to understand how we as individuals are implicated in larger historical processes. In the German-speaking world, the family chronicle has been an important site of Holocaust memory, and more recently has also provided a space to recover the forgotten or repressed history of German colonialism and to link it to

other histories of violence. By and large, however, given that these family novels are primarily conceived as interventions into cultural memory – i.e. focusing on genocidal histories in a self-reflexive, metafictional mode – they tend not to be explicitly concerned with ecological violence.[3] Nevertheless, a reader attuned to the more-than-human scales of the Anthropocene will encounter an "ecological uncanny" even here, which has the potential to transform our understanding of these histories of violence. And here, too, the formal affordances of the family chronicle invite the reader to perform scaling operations, even beyond the explicit intention of the narrative itself.

This can be illustrated with reference to one of the best-known examples of a multidirectional German family chronicle, Stephan Wackwitz's *Ein unsichtbares Land* (2003, transl. *An Invisible Country*, 2005). The novel explores the links between the author's own family and the main traumatic events of twentieth century German history, in particular the Herero genocide in Namibia, WWI and II, and the Holocaust. A prime example of a post-memorial metahistorical family chronicle, it is constructed around material objects such as family photographs and the unpublished memoirs of the author's grandfather, as well as material objects and family heirlooms. Having survived both the Eastern and the Western Front during WWI, in 1921, Wackwitz's grandfather became a pastor in the German town of Anhalt in Poland, which is situated in close proximity to Oświęcim (Auschwitz). In 1933, the family emigrated to South-West Africa where they stayed until 1939. On the way back to Bremerhaven their steamer was intercepted and sunk by the British army, the family were interned in Canada and only returned to Germany after the end of WWII. Purely by coincidence, thus, the Wackwitz family "missed" WWII and the Holocaust (and of course the Herero genocide, since they moved to South-West Africa two decades after its occurrence). Nevertheless, the family history unfolds in close proximity to these events, both through geographical nearness and through ideological implication. This is precisely what the novel is preoccupied with mapping.

The novel as a whole can be seen as a masterful exercise in the historical uncanny, chronicling the incessant intrusion of repressed or silenced aspects of the past into the present. What contributes to this uncanny effect on a formal level is the constant juxtaposition of different temporal and geographic scales, and a collage technique of integrating passages from the grandfather's memoirs and other historical and literary sources, including photographs.

3 A notable exception in this regard is Christof Hamann's *Usambara* (2007), which I explore in greater detail elsewhere (Knittel and Forchieri 2024).

This juxtaposition of different temporalities serves as a productive tool for exploring complex scalar relations and unexpected connections between disparate times and places. The novel's narrated time spans from the Middle Ages to the early 2000s, it connects the local, the national, and the global, and carefully and self-reflexively places the histories of colonialism and the Holocaust as well as other traumatic histories of the twentieth century within a multidirectional constellation.

Throughout, the novel is concerned with the question of implication, particularly with regard to racist and imperialist ideology, which finds expression in the grandfather's autobiography, which Wackwitz quotes at length. While he is heavily critical of the latent racism in these passages, he nevertheless emphasizes the similarities between his grandfather's life and his own and betrays a fascination with and even admiration for his grandfather's adventures in South-West Africa. This highly ambivalent mix of disgust and pride comes to the fore especially in passages that deal with his grandfather's hunting exploits. An avid hunter, the grandfather kept notes on the animals he shot (even as a soldier during WWI), and his memoirs include detailed accounts of his safari-type excursions in Africa.

Wackwitz quotes several of these, notably the gruesome account of shooting a leopard, whose taxidermied skin and head he remembers seeing in his grandfather's study, as well as a story about how his grandfather killed a cobra that was sunning itself on a grave in one of the *Schutztruppen* cemeteries in Namibia, where the perpetrators of the Herero genocide lie buried. The latter episode is heavily overdetermined, as the narrator acknowledges: his grandfather, who had been elsewhere during the genocide visits the graves of the perpetrators, accompanied by a "Herero boy," a descendant of the victims, and unconsciously re-enacts the violence, killing this unsuspecting but highly symbolic creature. The narrator offers an array of symbolic interpretations of this incident, but at no point does he entertain the possibility of reading it literally, as an act of violence against nonhuman nature, and to connect it to the staggering number of dead animals that haunt the novel, including the leopard in the grandfather's study. Nevertheless, the preponderance of these nonhuman presences demands attention and resists purely allegorical or metaphorical interpretation. While the novel does not explicitly reflect on issues of ecology or extinction, its inherent multidirectionality invites an ecological reading that reflects on the direct and indirect connections between colonialism, genocide, and the large-scale devastation of the natural world. Such a reading, moreover, requires a relational approach across scales that significantly complicates our understanding of implication.

My aim in this chapter has been to sketch the affordances of the family chronicle for making visible the multidirectional links between different histories of violence across multiple scales. Reading at the planetary scale is not so much a question of reframing historical atrocities so that they would lose their historical

and ethical significance, which would open the door to problematic relativizations. Rather, it is a question of what Clark calls "unframing" our more traditional scales of interpretation in such a way that our implicit assumptions are called productively into question. Such a reading can open up a space in which phenomena belonging to different scales, places, and temporalities can coexist, making strange our habits of remembering.