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# On the Limits of Mnemonic Migration in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*

The burgeoning field of memory studies reoriented itself profoundly in the second decade of the twenty-first century. The fascination, or perhaps obsession, with memory and remembering was very prominent during the twentieth century, with its world wars and other cataclysms, but the twenty-first century with its own set of seismic events required a reorientation of some of the key premises of memory and the study of it. Previous theoretical paradigms emphasised the importance of where memory is located and the intrinsic connection of memory to a discrete national framework or cultural sphere, but there was a major change in the terms, key concepts and ideas about memory during the first decade of the 2000s. The transcultural turn was perhaps started by Michael Rothberg's (2009) seminal study on remembering the Holocaust across borders and within the colonial and post-colonial context. Astrid Erll's field-defining essay on "travelling memory" (2011b) argued that the "inner complexity of cultural formations" seemed to be at odds with the methodologies and figures of thought that were available to memory studies at the time (Crownshaw 2014). The subsequent rise of transcultural paradigms in memory studies is both an indicator and a result of how much harder it is becoming to pinpoint clear delineations between ethnic and cultural identities, particularly in the wake of totalitarian forms of governance and mass migration. The realisation that any individual may hold "multiple mnemonic memberships" (Erll 2011b, 10) became the core conviction of this third wave of memory studies, as it has subsequently been dubbed. Movement and mobility became the dominant modes or characteristics of transcultural and travelling memory, as researchers explored the "incessant wandering of carriers, media, contents, forms and practices of memory" and the "ongoing transformations through time and space, across social, linguistic and political borders" (Erll 2011b, 11). Key to understanding this shift in memory studies is an appreciation of the power of aesthetic and symbolic form to produce a "mnemonic relationality" (Erll 2017) that supersedes national, linguistic and cultural borders.

The idea of mnemonic migration has been put prominently on the map by Eneken Laanes, Jessica Ortner, and Tea Sindbaek Andersen (Ortner, Sindbaek Andersen and Wierød Borčak 2022), and has in turn highlighted the vexed question of mnemonic reception as another aspect of the study of transcultural memory that has previously been largely neglected. The concept of travelling memory states that

it is important to trace "the paths which certain stories, rituals and images have taken" (Erll 2011b, 11), and also to study how these mnemonic artefacts and narratives come to function in the communities that they travel to. My understanding of the term mnemonic migration is that people can travel from one mnemonic context to another because "people, media, mnemonic forms, contents and practices are in constant, unceasing motion" (Erll 2011b, 12). But if they travel, do they also arrive?

The inherent mobility of memories means that mnemonic migration can occur without people needing to leave the comforts of their armchair. Mnemonic relationality and multiple mnemonic memberships are gained through the act of reading, interpreting and decoding a symbolic text. In essence, "mnemonic relationality directs our attention towards a structuring process: towards the acts of connecting and blending, co-constructions and negotiations that are necessary for bringing heterogeneous mnemonic elements into meaningful relations with one another" (Erll 2017, 6).

"Travelling transcultural forms" (Laanes 2021) allow migration from one mnemonic context to another. Specific forms of medial narration like the novelistic form produce and relate "changeable mnemonic assemblages" (Laanes 2021, 7) that are brought into contact with the preformed conceptions, expectations, and epistemological equipment of the individual reader. This means that the recipient must have some degree of transcultural mnemonic literacy for mnemonic migration to occur.

This essay addresses the process of mnemonic migration through reading and points out its limitations, both as a metaphor and as a reading practice. It starts with a *tour d'horizon* of influential contributions to the field of reception studies to help the reader understand and navigate the complex connection between reading and remembering, and the danger of confusing the two terms. Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's novel *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) is presented as an example of the literary strategy of mnemonic mannerism, which could hamper mnemonic migration through reading. I understand mnemonic mannerism as referring to the sheer abundance of mnemonic cues that a text sets out for the reader to make sense of. In Owuor's text, traces of historical legacies and allusions to them are scattered throughout the narrative in a largely obscure manner. A text that is mnemonically mannerist requires "initiated readers", in the phrase of Jihad Karim,[1] as such texts seem to cater to in-groups, in this case Indian Ocean collectives, rather than to potentially global audiences. Rebecca L. Walkowitz famously argues that "born-trans-

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[1] Jihad Karim is pursuing a PhD project at the Institute of English and American Studies of Goethe University Frankfurt, in which he conceptualises the idea of the "initiated implied reader".

lated" novels trouble the notion of "literary belonging" that a text generates, as such texts "block readers from being 'native readers,' those who assume that the language they are encountering is, in one proprietary or intrinsic way, theirs" (2015, 6). There is no advance "mastery or knowledge of the work" (Walkowitz 2015, 49), and the novel targets both an initiated and an uninitiated readership. Whilst this argument is entirely convincing for world literature and translation, it leaves the question of how and where *remembering* occurs in such texts. By the same token, what is the difference in literature between an interpretation that may be hampered, or "close-reading at a distance", and remembering? This essay and argument are motivated by the question of how we as observers, literary critics, and memory scholars treat texts that are so replete with mnemonic references that mnemonic migration and entering a different mnemonic universe becomes challenging to achieve. How do we allow for the reader that might be resistant, unable, or uninitiated? How do we treat the possibility of the critic making a mnemonic fallacy? Do we take mnemonic mobility and flexibility for granted? Do we remain content, then, with the idea of mnemonic potentiality and latency, and the assumption that mnemonic texts will unfold and function differently for different people? And if we do not accept this, then where do we go next?

## Reading as mnemonic mobility?

Let us start with the first premise that literature is a medium of memory, a carrier whose aesthetics and politics tie in with and shape collective memory discourses. Texts as mnemonic objects circulate and travel to other contexts, but they remain inert and their mnemonic action latent until they are read by a reader or an audience.

Two aspects need to be differentiated here, as there is memory *in* literature, and there is memory *of* literature, as Erll (2011a) has theorised. Memory of literature is conceptualised in literature's travelling forms of narrative templates like the coming-of-age novel, the picaresque novel, or the epos that have sustained certain constant features as they travelled through time, and were adapted in many different versions. Memory of literature can also mean formative narratives that were adapted over and over through time, like Homer's *Odyssey* (Erll 2018) and its re-writings for example, or Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a seminal text that was aped in numerous so-called Robinsonades. Memory *in* literature in contrast, is the many strategies that the literary genre with its protocols, aesthetics, and politics uses to describe the processes of remembering. It is concerned with how memory enters individual texts.

If we understand literature to be a carrier of mnemonic content, then reading and interpreting are the modes used to access this content. Remembering through literature in this way is then contingent on reading and interpretation. Memory enters literary texts through the linguistic and aesthetic encoding of mnemonic content, and it is the individual process of reception that should then in theory bring this textualised memory into being.

This understanding that a literary text has mnemonic latency arguably resonates with the aesthetics of reception of the literary theorist Wolfgang Iser (1994 [1987]), who argues that literary texts offer evaluative positions that are evoked by the aesthetic structures of the text, and require the reader to be actualised and brought into existence. Iser believes there is such a thing as a proper reading of a given text, one that is dehistoricised and detached from the reader's immediate environment of ideology and politics. I extend Iser's idea to argue that there is memory hidden in the aesthetic composition of a text, and that the reader can, but also must, detect and decipher these mnemonic positions. In the tradition of New Criticism, the literary critic becomes the model reader who supposedly catches all of the clues embedded in a text. In a similar vein, the model reader should be the model remembering agent, and it is challenging, if not impossible, to be that reader or to find that reader.

Narratologist Peter J. Rabinowitz (1987) responded to Iser's concept with a more nuanced understanding of the entangled nature of production and reception in literary texts. He stated that a text can be compared to an unassembled swing set, as it is an actual thing that offers opportunities for free play when completed, which can be more or less restricted depending on the particular model of swing, but that has first to be assembled (Rabinowitz 1987, 38). It comes with rudimentary directions, but you have to know what those directions are and how to do some basic work. It comes with its own materials, but the user must have some certain tools of their own. Most importantly, the instructions are virtually meaningless unless the user knows beforehand what sort of object they are trying to build. Someone who has never seen a swing before has only a small chance of building it successfully without cracking their head open (Rabinowitz 1987, 38).

The problem with Rabinowitz's swing model is readily apparent, because only if all the parts of the swing are assembled correctly can anyone ride safely on it. Equally, it can only operate properly once it has been assembled correctly. There is little, if any, room for error. A novel will not pose a health hazard to its readers whether or not they fail to make sense of it, and there is certainly more than one way of interpreting a text. Rabinowitz's model is interesting for the dynamics of mnemonic migration however, because it suggests that there is a certain basic mnemonic structure in texts, and that the structure can be accessed by tapping into its history. This approach supposes that there are mnemonic structures in

the text that are readily available, or that are simply and evidently there for anyone who knows what they are looking for. Readers can only make sense of a text in the same way they make sense of anything else in the world, which is by applying a strategy of simplifying it by highlighting it, by making it symbolic, and by otherwise patterning (Rabinowitz 1987). If you know that you are reading an explorer narrative, you will look for the representation of the exploration and the protagonists who do the exploring. If you know that *Robinson Crusoe* was trapped on an island for more than 25 years, you will look for similar experiences in the text's adaptations. This search for recognisable patterns and familiar plot structures "premediates" how the individual text is decoded and so preforms and potentially predetermines the reading experience (Erll and Rigney 2009). Whether or not the search for identifiable patterns opens up what Reinhart Koselleck calls the reader's "horizon of expectation" [*Erwartungshorizont*] (2004), or whether it actually narrows the scope of interpretation, remains unanswered.

Cognitive narratologist David Herman moves in a similar direction to Iser when he argues that any given text is replete with intentional structures that are more or less readily available to the reader (Herman 2009, 2012). He considers that stories are "grounded in intentional systems" and readers "assume that stories […] are told for particular reasons, in the service of communicative goals about which interpreters are justified in framing at least provisional hypotheses" (Herman 2008, 244). These structures of intent allow us to read a text in the absence of any creational agent like an author, as there are structures that are present but inert before the reader engages with the text. Herman's contention resonates with Ann Rigney's (2021) thoughts on textual mnemonic power, as she emphasises that the aesthetic agency of the literary helps determine which memory discourses and narratives are deemed worth writing about, and so worth representing and worth remembering. Psychologist Brian Schiff (2017) suggests that remembering is essentially a private mental act that is both embedded in and indicative of social practices, and that remembering unfolds against the backdrop of collectively negotiated symbolic universes. Erll and Rigney (2009) argue that cultural memory is contingent on the construction, recognition, and circulation of narrative patterns, and of mnemonic forms that are mediated, and which in turn remediate and premediate narrative patterns and "mnemonic schemata". All three approaches seem to have one thing in common in that they depend on recognition, familiarity, and comparison. The Robinson Crusoe example above illustrates this, because if memory in literature is a specific act of interpretation, then similar processes of patterning will occur and readers might compare the mnemonic references in a text with their own archive, which is their individual set of mnemonic references that are always already transculturally determined. The reader, however, is the person who may be the least aware of the transcultural nature of all

memories. If mnemonic migration is the mobilisation of mnemonic inventories in readers through texts, this process of comparison may simply lead to a reification of the existing mnemonic structures within a reader, and so could unfold without mobilising anything at all.

Moreover, this setting requires readers to ignore or downplay other aspects of the texts and read them predominantly through a memory prism. While this may work for scholars who read with an interest in and focus on memory, it does not necessarily help us theorise how a reader arrives at the point where they recognise the mnemonic grid of a given text, or how much of that grid they actually identify through the act of reading. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai reminds us that "neither images nor viewers fit into circuits or audiences that are easily bound with local, national or regional spaces", which leads him to conclude that product and recipient "are in simultaneous circulation" (1996, 4). Textual structures or textual intent are then in constant movement too, and so they may escape the grasp of the national and the cultural in the singular form. The unmoored text and the unmoored reader have become hallmarks of a specific brand of modernity, one that favours detachment over attachment. Walkowitz proposes for world literature that "[i]nstead of identification, these texts offer readers partial fluency, approximation and virtual understanding" (2015, 30) instead of the illusion of textual mastery that is so prominent in Iser and, to some extent, Herman. She insists that such born-translated texts "[f]orce readers to grapple with partial fluency" (Walkowitz 2015, 42), and thus face the potentially unsatisfactory experience of being distanced by the text instead of being drawn into it.

There are many more influential takes on the dynamics of memory and representation that could and should be listed here. There is also Alison Landsberg's idea of "prosthetic memory" (2004), where people take on the memories of other groups and wear them like artificial limbs. This implies that aesthetic mediation, through moving images for Landsberg, gives people the chance to affectively position themselves towards memories that are not their own, that they did not experience themselves, and that do not necessarily connect to their most dominant mnemonic membership. A lot has been said about the ethical pitfalls that such an approach to memory has to navigate, and so it need not be repeated here (Abel 2006), but the main issue for me is that Landberg's idea, like many of the approaches that I outlined in this tour d'horizon, emphasises the perspective of the observer and prioritises the production of mnemonic material over the vexed question of its actual reception. Prosthetic memory concerns the transportability of memories and their capacity to be externalised and shared. We cannot be sure though that consuming memory vicariously will lead to anything other than introspective navel-gazing by the reader rather than a full-scale mobilisation of their mnemonic inventory.

Most recently, Rothberg (2019) proposed implication as a strategy and an out-come of entangled remembering, an idea that has already become influential. This interesting concept addresses reception, as it seems to be a realisation that the reader can arrive at. Although Rothberg emphasises that implication is not to be confused with a subject position, it nevertheless suggests a reader who vicariously remembers through reading and realises their own implication in the structures of intent laid out by the text, and by the broader structures of oppression that form the extra-textual frameworks to which textual intent refers in Rothberg.

Implication and the implicated subject suffer from a similar problem to Land-berg's prosthetic memory, as in both cases the reader themselves and the act of reading become ethical, even if they are not explicitly ethicised. Prosthetic mem-ories function as extensions of the remembering mind if they are taken on in the intended way, so that trauma remains painful in its impact even if it is only taken on vicariously and in a heavily mediated manner. Implication is not primar-ily understood as the reader being implicated in constructing the textual aesthetics as in Iser, or in discovering intentional structures as in Herman. These positions and these experiences of being implicated or folded into memory discourses that are not your own cannot be understood as anything other than a moral posi-tioning of the reader towards what is vicariously remembered. Rothberg's impli-cated reader arguably closely resembles Iser's or Rabinowitz's model reader, who is at the centre of textual interpretation, but who takes on the function of a theoretical construct or a textual function and can hardly be regarded as a real person of flesh and blood.

There are, however, very real implications to memory literature, whether or not the experiences of other peoples are filtered through literary fiction. A lot of the mnemonic contexts we deal with are traumatic in nature, and many of the pro-tagonists and agents are scarred by the past. These texts are fundamentally diffi-cult to read because of the affective demands that they make, and many of them are also complex in their narrative structures, linguistic multiplicity, and aesthetic inventory.

> The more difficult the book the better. Difficulty is a challenge, an opportunity to struggle and to win, to overcome resistance, uncover the codes, to get on top of it, to put one's finger on the mechanisms that produce pleasure and pain, and then call it ours. We take up an unyielding book to conquer it and feel grand, enriched by the appropriation and confident that our cun-ning is equal to the textual tease that had, after all, planned its own submission as the ulti-mate climax of reading. Books want to be understood, don't they, even when they are coy and evasive? (Sommer 1992, 105)

Don't they?

# Mnemonic mannerism in Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*

In her 1992 essay on *Resistant Texts and Incompetent Readers*, Doris Sommer comments on the limits of reading as understanding:

> Some books resist the competent reader, intentionally. They mark off an impassable distance between reader and text, raising questions of access or welcome. These books produce a kind of readerly 'incompetence' that more reading will not overcome, because a rhetoric of socially differentiated understanding blocks the way. Resistance does not necessarily signal a genuine epistemological impasse; it is enough that the impasse is announced in this strategy to position the reader within limits. (105)

Some texts can indeed prove unruly for one reason or another. For Sommer, it is social difference that can hamper textual access and understanding. For this case study, it is the abundance of memory references that potentially exclude the uninitiated reader. As the previous section showed, it is difficult to pinpoint how we read and interpret, and what we as readers gain from texts and their symbolic configuration. The reasons why a text might be received as inaccessible are equally manifold, though the reasons why a reader would feel particularly welcomed by a text are also comparatively numerous. This section presents a unique case study, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's novel *The Dragonfly Sea.* To some readers this text may come across as resistant, inaccessible and challenging because of the background knowledge that is required to make sense of a large part of the narrative. *The Dragonfly Sea* may even be a case where mnemonic migration reaches its limits. The limitations that this text sets on mnemonic migration do not necessarily arise from its dense and challenging poetic language, or from the sheer intricacy of its plot, but from the overabundance of cues that the narratives set out for the reader, and that have a connection to mnemonic complexes. By mnemonic complexes I mean clusters of mnemonic activity that centre around a nodal point, usually a historical event with a major impact like 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror, the Holocaust and its legacies, or colonialism. Mnemonic activity means the different forms of memory work that unfold around these historical events, and this activity occurs in the forms of official, institutionalised commemoration or grass root initiatives, literary imagination and cultural production, or individual or collective memories rendered in some form of narrative (Rothberg 2009, 2).

Naturally there are some mnemonic complexes that are more visible than others. While I am writing this essay, I occasionally look at a globe that sits on my desk, to provide some orientation for me as I navigate oceanic literatures. It is only because of my interest in these literatures that I realised that this globe fea-

tures the seemingly most important expeditions, the ones that transformed the world permanently, while others were simply left out. My finger can trace the sea routes that James Cook took across the Indian Ocean, or Vasco da Gama's travels in the fifteenth century, or, most famously perhaps, I can see where Christopher Columbus went when he discovered the New World, which was, as we know today, not so new after all. What is blatantly missing from this globe are the sea routes that a Chinese explorer, Zheng He, took during the fifteenth century. Zheng He is supposed to have been the first to navigate and cross the Indian Ocean westwards and lay the foundations for the manifold Afrasian relations and entanglements that are increasingly visible today (Yuan 2020).

Kenyan author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor published her second novel in 2019, and in it she fictionalises the legacies of Zheng He's imperial endeavours. Set on the island of Pate, just off the Kenyan coast, this coming-of-age novel tells the story of the young girl Ayaana who is discovered to be of Chinese descent. Ayaana's heritage earns her the moniker "the Descendant" and gives her the chance to study in China. The trip is both free and costly, as she is a guest of the Chinese government, whose interests extend no further than the project of "excavating, proving and entrenching Chinese rootedness in Africa".

The novel's main protagonist is modelled on an existing person, Mwamaka Sharifu, a girl from Lamu Island in Kenya who was then 19 years old and who set out towards China to start a scholarship in 2005 ("Is This"). This scholarship was awarded to her as part of a series of commemorative events celebrating the six hundredth anniversary of Admiral Zheng He's first major voyage around the Indian Ocean. Zheng He is considered the first explorer to use a direct sea route westward (Yuan 2020). His expeditions were diplomatic in nature, and he presented gifts of gold, silver, porcelain and silk to foreign dignitaries, and in return, China received ostriches, zebras, camels or ivory, among other things.

Zheng He undertook as many as seven such Ming treasure voyages, as they were known, across the Indian Ocean, until he perished at sea in 1435. Legend has it that his fleet was shipwrecked, and the surviving sailors sought refuge on the islands surrounding the Swahili Coast. These sailors went on to marry local women and converted to Islam. Mwamaka Sharifu says that she is the descendant of sailors travelling with Zheng He, and thus lays claim to Chinese heritage. In 2002, Chinese experts visited her and did DNA tests to substantiate this claim scientifically, and perhaps unsurprisingly it was confirmed.

*The Dragonfly Sea* was quite quickly received and discussed within the field of postcolonial literature and beyond. It has been read as a contemporary Kenyan author narrating transnational encounters in and on the Swahili Sea to make a point about Kenya's place in the world (Otieno 2022). The Swahili Sea here becomes a point of reference for the multitudes of cultures and histories that exist along

the coast of the Indian Ocean. It is not India that is the centre of the Indian Ocean world, as the label suggests, as that world should much rather be considered a centreless space, characterised by movement and mobility and the need and desire for them (Hofmeyr 2012). The dragonfly is the symbolic animal for these movements, and *The Dragonfly Sea* explores the historical legacy and present condition of Afrasian relationships through a fictional, poetic prism (Achenbach et al. 2020). Owuor's novel is not primarily interested in evaluating Kenya's relationship with the former colonial powers from the West, but rather turns eastwards and reflects on these geopolitical entanglements. It thus showcases how re-calibrations of relationships between different parts of the Global South unfold, what their trajectories, aesthetics, and politics are, and how they relate to oceanic spaces (Hofmeyr 2012; wa Ngugi 2012). *The Dragonfly Sea* is deliberately expressive of indigenous epistemologies relating to the sea, seafaring, and a sense of community (Kosgei 2022). The novel also revolves around non-human agency and presents a case study of how such post-humanist approaches to representation, narration, and memory function in literature (Neumann 2021). In this regard, *The Dragonfly Sea* is part of a broader trend that the paradigms of production and reception of contemporary literature have shifted towards (James and Morel 2020).

*The Dragonfly Sea* is an unusual novel. It relishes the beauty and power of language and representation, and it brims with joy when it muses how the "*matlai* [easterly morning wind] conspired with a shimmering full moon to charge the island, its fishermen, prophets, traders, seamen, seawomen, healers, shipbuilders, dreamers, tailors, madmen, mothers and fathers", all against the backdrop of the "music of a rolling tide" (Owuor 2019, 5).[2] The ocean forms, entices, nudges, decides, selects, and condemns; it brings whatever it wants to Pate's shores, and sometimes with unintended consequences. The ocean's "song turns an illiterate boy into a seeker, traveller, reader, and sleuth" (17). The protagonists give themselves over to the "sea's service" in enchanted captivity, but "man and matter", as the narrative voice poignantly remarks, "not the sea, would rip the fabric of his being" (18). It comes as no surprise that the ontological distinctions blur when Muhidin, the illiterate-boy-turned-sleuth, first lays eyes on the main protagonist, Ayaana: "In that luster, he had glimpsed a being leaping in the ocean, cavorting like a baby pomboo, a dolphin. It had dived under water and emerged several meters away. It was not that Muhidin believed in the existence of djin, but as an explanation for the specter in the water" (19).

Indeed, Ayaana is not a *djin*, but a descendant, the mythicised and mytho-poetic missing link between China and Africa in general, and between Zheng He's

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2 In the following only the page numbers will be given.

imperial voyages and the Swahili coast in particular. In resonance with the real-life events and news coverage surrounding the apparent discovery of Mwamaka Sharifu, Ayaana is thrown into the middle of these geopolitical recalibrations that require a strong and convincing narrative backbone. The novel deals with this delicate position in the following manner:

> Ayaana. The child's name was not common to Pate. Ayaana—"God's gift." Of course, Muhidin knew her story. Everybody did. The child had come to the island one high tide seven years ago. She arrived in the arms of her then skeletal, mostly vanquished, on-the-tail-end-of-a-scandal mother, Munira, daughter of prestige—pale-skinned, narrow-eyed, as slender as a bird's foot, and just as delicate. Her previous haughty, loudmouthed, angular, and feral beauty had been sheared off and dimmed by whatever it was she had tangled with in two and a half years of life away from the island. (20)

The prodigy, the bridge between Kenya and China, is not of noble or prestigious descent; she came to the island on the tide and was born to a mother of questionable status. This spectral being with its somewhat exotic looks attracts people, attracts attention, and is almost sold to human traffickers as a result. As soon as her Chinese ancestry is apparently discovered, Ayaana becomes the centre of a mnemonic complex that reaches back to Zheng He's explorations across the Indian Ocean.

> "An eternal sea unites our people", concluded the intoning man. "Because of the water, we are one destiny. The string of destiny binds our feet." "Yes", echoed the Nairobi man. "'String of destiny'?" Munira frowned. The woman spoke slowly: "China is in your blood." And she looked at Munira as if she were a dear relative. (154)

Ayaana subsequently embarks on a journey to China, where she is supposed to receive a stipend. Her journey to China and her experience there is the focus of the second narrative strand of the novel and occupies the second half of the text. It stands in contrast to the idealisation and reverence that Ayaana is seemingly initially met with:

> "An emissary to China..." "...a bridge..." "Our friend..." "We desire her presence..." "...a Descendant..." "Yes." "...our Descendant..." "An ambassador..." "From the good-willed people of Kenya..." "To the good-willed people of China." "Yes." "Bearing the treasure of a neglected past." "Yes." "She'll find friendship..."
> "Yes." "...and kindness." "Kindness". (155)

This episode showcases the power of the literary aesthetic to represent mnemonic processes and entanglements. The musings about Afrasian connections that reach back for centuries but seem to culminate in this little girl with her supposed Chinese roots are rendered as free indirect discourse and so seem to reference a col-

lective voice. But this murmuring, this oblique shorthand is typical of Owuor's writing and makes this text a case of mnemonic mannerism that could make any mnemonic migration into Afrasian entanglements difficult for the uninitiated reader. It may prove difficult to grasp that Afrasian connections long predated colonial intrusion to Africa, and were part of a most intricate web of commerce that existed long before the advent of modern capitalism. The reader may learn from Owuor's novel that these increasingly visible connections, as evidenced by Sharifu's story and the fictional rendition of it, are examples of South-South solidarities that are often considered as antidotes to the persistent dominance of the political West in the global arena. Owuor's text also subtly hints that these South-South connections offer little potential for romanticisation, as they are by no means unproblematic or without their own internal hierarchies. An example of this is the scandal surrounding the fairly recently built headquarters of the African Union ("China"), where China staunchly denies the accusation that it planted listening devices in the walls and furniture and will be downloading sensitive material for years to come. The headquarters was built and paid for by the Chinese government. All these examples and anecdotes are steeped in their own mnemonic complexes and discourses, and how they relate to one another is an intricate web to disentangle. This is perhaps the most straightforward explanation of why the text only uses them in a veiled, mannerist manner.

What does mannerism mean? It has a long history as a concept, particularly in the visual arts and in literary criticism. The term etymologically links back to *maniera* [manner], which in its use in art, simply and plainly means style (Shearman 1990, 16). Towards the end of the sixteenth century, "it was understood that *maniera*, whether in people or works of art, entailed a refinement of and abstraction from nature" (Shearman 1990, 18, emphasis in the original). In very general terms, mannerism in the visual arts has come to be associated with affectation and artificiality as its main driving factors, and it is seen as a countermovement to the "balance and self-confidence of the Renaissance" (Anzulovic 1972, 4). John Shearman almost poetically holds that mannerism is "a silver-tongued language of articulate, if unnatural beauty, not one of incoherence, menace and despair, it is, in a phrase, the stylish style" (1990, xx) . As such, the term made its way into art history via the literatures of manner:

> The concept of *maniera* was borrowed from the literature of manners, and had been originally a quality – a desirable quality – of human deportment. [...] In turn the word had entered Italian literature from French courtly literature of the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. There *manière* [...] meant approximately savoir-faire, effortless accomplishment and sophistication; it was inimical to revealed passion, evident effort and rude naivete. It was, above all, a courtly grace. (Shearman 1990, 18; emphasis in original).

In the context of the literatures of manners however, mannerism was framed in the sense of transporting "unnatural, affected, self-conscious or ostentatious" (Shearman 1990, 18) poetic language and literary imagination. Such literary texts gained their apparent superiority through their linguistic and poetic virtuosity, and their "copiousness and abundance" (Shearman 1990, 22), but they also effectively made their symbolic universes rather inaccessible (Shearman 1990, 21). The ornamental language and affective style (Semler 1998, 18) provided the aesthetic frameworks and protocol for "eccentric expressiveness and extreme refinement" (Semler 1998, 21).

How does this relate to a mnemonic reading of Owuor's novel? *The Dragonfly Sea* is, as has already been stated, an example of linguistic and poetic virtuosity. The mental images, the plays on language and translatability or untranslatability in this polyglot narrative space, and the explorations of the entangled nature of human and non-human agency in the diegetic universe, are unusual, striking, surprising and sometimes rather challenging. This is particularly the case if all the mnemonic cues that the text drops as the two narrative strands unfold are taken into account. Consider for example the following scene, the representation of the impending Tsunami of 2004.

> If he had been a fisherman longer, he would not have been mesmerised. He would have known to read the action of fish that had abandoned their feeding grounds that day. He would not have tried to read or wrestle with the whirling, potent current coming in. The secret things of the sea revealed would not have transfixed him. He might have turned his body and boat to face the incoming, speeding, giant waves. He might have understood that he could not make it back to shore in time. He might even have heard the echoes of 250,000 people screaming from the shores along this ocean, as they were swallowed up in five seconds, and he would have heard the howl of broken people trying to hold on to them. Like Ziriyab Raamis, many had forgotten how to decipher the habits of animals that, before dawn, had, in a rush, sought to hide. The second wave caught his boat sideways, and splintered it. He was breathing in water, being whirled in and swept out, and swept in and out and in again. (102)

There is a certain sublime element to this rendition, as there is the calm before the literal storm, and then the moment of realisation that fate and oceanic providence are inescapable. The conditional tense used in this episode illuminates the fragile being-in-time of the protagonist, and his vulnerability on the ocean. It is also a cautionary tale of what can happen if you turn away from oceanic epistemologies. But although Pate Island is arguably as remote as can be, the novel portrays how its specific connection to the ocean means this tiny place is where the world's grand and uncanny memories come to meet. The text establishes connections with the Arab Spring, 9/11, the Tsunami that wreaked havoc in 2004, and human trafficking towards both the West in Europe and North America and the East in Russia. The combination of this plethora of seismic events and manmade catastro-

phes and the overarching mnemonic background of Zheng He's fleet and its legacy as the foundational moment of Afrasian connections make *The Dragonfly Sea* replete with mnemonic cues. None of these mnemonic complexes are spelled out for the reader, as they are subtly hinted at and left in the text as a trace of what came before and what might come after. Any process of interpreting a text must remain incomplete since there is no model reader or model reading, but remembering as reading is more dependent on contextual knowledge or "contextual literacies" (Appadurai 1996, 4) if a text is to be read through a memory prism. Notions like "partial fluency", or partial availability, remain confined to the realm of the conditional and the potential. Walkowitz and Appadurai among others state correctly that circulating texts subvert and undermine reading protocols and the expectations of audiences, but how mnemonic migration unfolds, or what the conditions for this mobilisation of mnemonic patterns are, remains unaddressed.

L. E. Semler succinctly remarks that one of the merits of the mannerist literary aesthetic is that it "assists in the construction, propagation and subversion of the socio-cultural formations in operation and, simultaneously, is modified by these forces" (1998, 16). In other words, a mannerist text plays with the conventions it is steeped in, mainly aesthetic ones but also socio-political ones, while at the same time affecting and changing these conventions. By obscuring certain aspects, it makes them visible. This implies that Owuor's novel caters to different types of reader, firstly because the global, transoceanic dimension of Owuor's entangled mnemonic legacies means that citizens of the world and those with knowledge of world history can make sense of the cues relating to the events of 9/11 or the Tsunami that shocked the tourism industry. Juxtaposing these individual events productively and presenting them as world history, or history with a global reach, is an achievement of this text. These grand narratives come to the shores of the tiny island, and reach the young protagonist Ayaana, who sets out to conquer her own mnemonic legacy. She herself represents the second type of reader that Owuor's text seems to target, which is the Dragonfly Sea audiences, as it is the Swahili Sea communities with their transcultural disposition and their unique historical legacies that may be able to decipher the encoded legacy of Zheng He's Treasure Voyages. These are the initiated implied readers that *The Dragonfly Sea* seems to write back to. More to the point, it is an act of "writing back to self" (Mwangi 2010), as it is aimed at the Afrasian communities, and not at any of the former colonial centres. As mentioned above, withholding something or impeding the reader's sense of mastery of the text marks an important departure from Iser's idea of the model reader and model interpretation, but it leaves us with the realisation that there are multiple audiences, and multiple registers and expectations that may or may not be addressed by the text.

What does this mean for the dynamics of mnemonic migration? There is some potential embedded in the text for seeing mnemonic complexes through someone else's eyes. Owuor does not follow the argument of L.E. Semler and her emphasis on the transformative powers of literary mannerism, but picks up on and represents two of the main forces that drive literary remembering. The first of these is the process of inscribing the radically local into global and globalised mnemonic narratives, and so positioning the Global South in general, and Kenya in this case in particular, firmly within the shifting geopolitical landscapes of power and visibility, and of disaster and warfare. Secondly, by invoking an in-group historical legacy, one that might arguably require specialist knowledge, *The Dragonfly Sea* sets itself apart from these grand narratives and invokes a different narrative in its own right, that of long-existing Afrasian connections, ambivalent though they may be. This specialist knowledge may arguably also be required within the group that is spotlighted, and there is no certainty as to how much is known about Zheng He and his crew in, say, Kenya. But in response to these shifting landscapes of power, Owuor's novel productively entangles local flavours, style, and epistemologies with some of the globalising mnemonic forces like the legacies of 9/11. This strategy makes it a challenge to gain a sense of mastery over the text, and to assemble the swing set as it were, because it remains doubtful whether the reader is indeed able to make sense of the plethora of mnemonic cues, and to subscribe successfully to one of the groups invoked by Owuor's narrative.

The issue is that the native reader and the non-native reader remain textual constructions, and potential audiences that can be actualised in *The Dragonfly Sea.* The act of interpreting a text works by selectively engaging with the linguistic clues that the text holds for the reader, and remembering vicariously is the outcome of that interpretation, and so requires the reader to go one step further, as they need to be able to contextualise historically and aesthetically what is offered by the text. While the different reading experiences may not hamper the act of reading, it seems that there is much that is yet to be said about the impeded vicarious remembering that does not simply unfold for the reader.

# Conclusion

Mnemonic migration depends on the reader being able to mobilise and potentially broaden their own mnemonic inventory through the act of reading. Mnemonic migration can be seen as the possibility for the reader to mobilise their own mnemonic inventory, and the chance to tap into their "space of [literary] experience" in the phrase of Koselleck (1997). The interactions between literary texts and their readers are by default highly subjective, but they are also conditioned by the cultural or

transcultural environments that the reader is embedded in. Mnemonic reading thus seems to be particularly reliant on the individual and collective dynamics of reception and interpretation coming together. Reading is, in this sense, a mode of remembering, and not its result. Writing is then a mode of remembering as well, and not its outcome. Remembering through literary texts, a process that is at the heart of mnemonic migration, presupposes interpretation and is contingent on it. But interpretation is not to be conflated with remembering, as it requires the additional step of being able to tap into the historical dimensions at play.

Mnemonic migration that is understood as requiring transcultural mnemonic literacy, especially in a mnemonically mannerist text like *The Dragonfly Sea*, is consequently not something that can be framed in terms of successful or unsuccessful reading. Partial interpretation can of course occur, as in any act of reading, and there is no model reader, nor any model reading of any text. Remembering through literature is, however, more than interpretation. Mnemonic mannerism can also be understood as an act of emancipation from the most visible mnemonic narratives that circulate in our globalised media cycles, like the narrative of 9/11. As I have shown, Owuor's novel caters to a Swahili Sea in-group and initiated readers. Counter to the argument of Mwangi (2010), this novel might write back to Afrasian communities, but such a text requires there to be initiated readers to be written back to. Framing literature as a mnemonic medium then also means thinking about its inability to deliver by mobilising mnemonic inventory. A text may cater to different audiences by appealing to their ability or inability to make sense of what is presented to them, but in terms of memory communities, it may end up reifying the boundaries around these communities simply because of the inaccessibility of the mnemonic content presented.

A lot of attention has been paid to the subject position of the observer, as they may well have a transcultural vantage point over the textual product. The participant or actor, which is how Erll (2011a) understands the communities that are written about and that write in a sense, may find themselves deeply embedded in structures that block mnemonic complexes from view if they do not relate to the immediate transcultural environment. How we can get beyond the point of speculating on how a text unfolds mnemonic potential, and how it functions within transcultural memory dynamics, could indeed be researched through sample reading groups and qualitative interviews, as Laanes, Ortner, and Sindbaek propose in their research project. There are certain limits to such an approach, as it remains difficult to structure the sample groups and to establish productive research paradigms for how to select and reach a target audience. Moreover, it will remain challenging to gain a sense of quantity and of how texts function when read by groups as opposed to individual acts of reading, particularly in terms of obtaining sufficient funding for such a large-scale project.

However, if we as memory scholars want to go further than being able to speculate about the impact and the functional potential of mnemonic carriers, we could indeed open ourselves up towards other research methodologies rather than the ones that are available to us from our disciplinary training. As a literary scholar, I am interested in treading new routes that would lead me beyond close and juxtapositional readings. Perhaps a turn towards data science and both quantitative and qualitative research methods from the social sciences could very well lead to new insights for transcultural literary memory studies.

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