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ABSTRACT

Remembering and forgetting are linked as inevitably as life and death. Sometimes, forgetting is motivated by a biological disorder or brain damage, or it may be the product of an unconscious desire deriving from a traumatic event (psychological repression). But in some cases, forgetting can be consciously motivated (thought suppression). It is through the conscious repression of memories that we can find self-preservation and move forward, although this may mean, as Nietzsche suggests in his essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1997), that we create a fable of our lives. In Jonathan Franzen's novel *Purity* (2015), forgetting is an active and conscious process; the characters choose to forget certain episodes of their lives so as to be able to construct new identities. Their erased memories include murder, economic privileges following from illegal or unethical commercial procedures, and dark sexual episodes. Their obsession with forgetting the past links the lives of the main characters, and it structures the narrative of the novel. The motivated erasure of memories thus becomes a means by which the characters are able to to survive and confront their present according to a (fake) narrative that they have constructed. But is motivated forgetting possible? Can one completely suppress facts in an active way? This paper analyses the role of forgetting in Franzen's novel in relation to the need in our contemporary society to deny, hide, or erase uncomfortable data from our historical or personal archives; the need to make disappear stories which we do not want to accept, recognize, and much less make known to the public. This is related to how we manage information in the age of technology, to the "selection" of what is to be the official story, and to how we rewrite our own history.

In his family memoir, *Nothing to Be Frightened of* (2008), Julian Barnes states that "We talk about our memories, but should perhaps talk more about our forgettings, even if that is a more difficult - or logically impossible - feat" (p. 38). With this statement, Barnes points up the aporetic condition of talking about events that we no longer remember: how can we discuss something that has been erased, something that no longer exists? To do so is, as the author proclaims, logically impossible. Indeed, we cannot talk about what we do not know. But can we, as human beings, completely erase memories in a conscious way? Is there any way that we can then recover those lost memories? Are they hidden away, or simply destroyed? As we know, forgetting is sometimes motivated by neurological damage, or is the product of an unconscious desire (psychological

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repression). In other cases, forgetting can be consciously motivated (thought suppression). For some authors (among them, Nietszche, 1997), the conscious repression of negative memories enables self-preservation. Jonathan Franzen's novel *Purity*, however, questions this premise. For Franzen, active oblivion (thought suppression) is impossible and undesirable, and what remains, therefore, is the acknowledgment that forgetting is a human activity, while at the same time he considers it to be the force that destroys the very essence of what constitutes that humanity. For Franzen, memories can be covered up temporarily but never destroyed, unless, as we have said, it is caused by a neurological disease - in which case it would imply, according to the author, the inevitable obliteration of the human being, and the death of one's identity. We are what we remember - and once we lose that, the writer seems to think, we are nothing. This essay analyzes Jonathan Franzen's approach to memory as related to identity and history, and the role of active forgetting in his most recent novel to date, *Purity*.

Memory occupies an unprecedented position in critical theory nowadays. Remembering has become a crucial issue, as is evidenced by the proliferation of commemorative events, memorabilia, publications of memoirs, autobiographies and historical novels, revivals, remakes, etc. All this has reinforced a growing interest in cultural memory. However, although remembering the past is important in the construction of a (trans)national, cultural, generational or personal identity, the road to remembrance presents many obstacles. Some of these are external to the subject;

This essay analyzes Jonathan Franzen's approach to memory as related to identity and history, and the role of active forgetting in his last novel to this day, *Purity*.

political or socio-economical erasures of archival information, for instance, which destroy access to the past. Others are internal - as in the case of degenerative mental illnesses, like Alzheimer's, or short-term memory loss due to a traumatic event. At other times, these obstacles to memory are actively provoked by a subject who wants to erase the past, to forget events that (s)he does not want to be inscribed in his or her life. The importance of recalling the past is unquestionable but remembering is inevitably linked to its opposite.

The indissoluble connection between memory and forgetting was affirmed by Sigmund Freud (2017), who argued for the need to recover the repressed (forgotten) in the unconscious. Among other interpretations of the connection between remembering and forgetting in relation to history are those by Friedrich Nietszche (1997), Marc Augé (2004), and Paul Ricoeur (2004). Cultural memory critic Andreas Huyssen perceptively states the problem thus: "For the more we are asked to remember in the wake of the information explosion and the marketing of history, the more we seem to be in danger of forgetting and the stronger the need to forget. At issue is the distinction between usable pasts and disposable data" (2003, p. 18). Memories are important not only for what they transmit, but for what is silenced, what is necessary and what is not. As such amnesia, whether active or passive, challenges the presence of hegemonic narratives of the past; forgetting is thus associated with destruction and death and, as a consequence, it provokes fear. One of the reasons for this is the implicit dissolution of the identity of the subject via the disappearance of memory. Jonathan Franzen's father had Alzheimer's, and in a brilliant and moving New Yorker essay from 2001, "My Father's Brain: What Alzheimer's Takes Away," the author discusses his reluctance to accept his father's condition. The text is a reflection on memory and identity, and also on the family and the relationship among its members, a subject that is central to all Franzen's books. Memory is important for human beings in the sense that it keeps the past alive in the present, and provides an identity, stories to live by. Memory creates history, and when you lose that history, the author seems to think, you become nothing.

In Franzen's latest novel, Purity, all the characters except the titular protagonist seek very actively to forget their pasts. The motivated erasure of memories thus becomes a strategy that the characters use to survive and face the present according to a (fake) narrative that they have constructed. But is motivated forgetting possible? How can memories be completely suppressed in an active way? I am interested in exploring how the role of forgetting in Franzen's novel represents the need in our contemporary society to deny, hide, or erase uncomfortable data from our historical or personal archives, stories which we do not want to accept, recognize, and much less make known to the public. This is also related to how we manage information in the age of technology, how we handle the "selection" of what is to be the official story, and how we rewrite our own history.

In Purity, forgetting is not caused by aging or neurological damage. It is an active and conscious process by which the characters choose to forget certain episodes of their lives so as to be able to construct new identities. Their erased memories include murder, economic privileges derived from illegal or unethical commercial procedures, and dark sexual episodes. The obsession with forgetting the past links the lives of the main characters and structures the narrative of the novel. It is a novel about erasures and rewritings in which, as some reviewers have pointed out, we find the autobiographical elements which Franzen has covered in his non-fiction: a domineering

mother, an eccentric artist ex-wife, and a seducer and womanizing friend (David Foster Wallace), as well as the experiences of the writer when he was young in Germany (Tanenhaus, 2015). There is even an ironical implicit allusion to Jonathan Safran Foer, Jonathan *Savoir Faire* (Franzen, 2015, p. 206), the author of *Eating Animals*, that connects to the name of the author in a self-referential way: "So many Jonathans. A plague of literary Jonathans. If you read only the *New York Times Book Review*, you'd think it was the most common male name in America. Synonymous with talent, greatness. Ambition, vitality" (Franzen, 2015, p. 207).

Purity tells the story of Purity (Pip) Tyler (the connections with Dickens are obvious), a young girl to whom her mother refuses to reveal her father's identity. She raises her on her own, trying to keep her as pure as possible (hence the title of the novel). But Pip comes into contact

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with a German activist, Annagret, who in turn puts her in touch with Andreas Wolf, a hacker and seducer who works from his refuge in Bolivia on a project (the Sunlight Project) to disclose secret information to the world on confidential, political and economic issues (there are many similarities with Julian Assange, who is mentioned several times in the novel, and who at the time of writing is living in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London). The novel is, in Diane Johnson's words, "a complex narrative of fates intertwined and twinned, international crimes, dark secrets, a whirl of events unfolding at fairy-tale or comic-book speed." Other characters include Leila Helou, a Texan of Lebanese origin, and Tom Aberant, both journalists. Leila and Tom are lovers, but Leila is married to a writer and former professor who has been living at home in seclusion following an accident. In a strange nineteenth-century, quasi-Dickensian turn of events, at the end of the novel we discover that Tom is Pip's father, and, coincidentally, also the young man who Andreas met in Berlin after the fall of the Wall, and who knew Andreas's darkest secret: that he had killed a man when he was young. It was Andreas, we learn, who used Pip to find Tom because he wanted to know whether he was going to disclose his secret.

The novel is about knowing and not knowing, forgetting and remembering, hiding and unveiling secrets, both private and public, and the role of the media and the internet in these processes. Andreas and Tom are two sides of the same coin: Andreas, as a hacker, creates the Sunlight Project, while Tom is the founder of the Denver Independent, an online independent

journal. Both are concerned with exposing the truth. But what is the truth, exactly? Do you tell everything, or do you select it by erasing what is not convenient?

Franzen's previous novels dealt with previous types of paranoia: "political skulduggery in *The Twenty-Seventh City*, mysterious earthquakes in Strong Motion, mind-numbing pharmaceuticals in *The Corrections*, and ecological and military malfeasance in *Freedom*" (Tanenhaus, 2015). In his novel, Franzen unveils "the false idolatry of the digital age, its pretense of truth-telling and revelation, its ideological "purity" that reduces to monomania and fanaticism" (Tanenhaus, 2015). The issues at stake include defining what the truth is, what we can reveal about ourselves and the world around us to be able to build a better future, and what we should try to forget or erase, if this is possible at all. *Purity* demonstrates that the obsession of the characters with forgetting shows only that the past will always end up making an appearance, and that complete erasure is impossible. For Franzen, even though active forgetting could be potentially liberating, it is not so. Instead, it leads to destruction.

Purity demonstrates that the obsession of the characters with forgetting only shows that the past always ends up appearing, and that complete erasure is impossible.

This is a far cry from the notion of forgetting as beneficial, which was proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche in "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History" (1874). For the German philosopher, active forgetting is selective remembering, the recognition that not all past forms of knowledge, and not all experiences, are valuable for present and future life. For Nietzsche, history is useful as long as it serves the living. Animals (he gives the example of a cow) are happy because they live unhistorically, but the human being must carry the burden of the past. Happiness derives from sensing things unhistorically, and from living only the present moment. Living historically, thinking in excess about the past, can bring destruction:

> A man who wanted to feel historically through and through would be like one forcibly deprived of sleep, or an animal that had to live only by rumination and ever repeated rumination. Thus: it is possible to live almost without memory, and to live happily moreover, as the animal demonstrates; but it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting. Or, to express my theme even more simply: there is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thin whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture. (p. 62)

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So, remembering (living historically) and forgetting (living unhistorically) are both necessary, but the excess of either is bad: remembering too much leads to destruction, and according to Nietzsche oblivion turns human beings into happy but unconscious beasts. However, he affirms that the capacity of feeling unhistorically is to a certain degree more important, and more basic for humans, than living historically. Whereas forgetting everything is not desirable, selective memory, or active forgetting, is beneficial for human beings. Nietzsche's understanding of forgetting stands in marked contrast to that of Plato. While for Plato forgetting marks the collapse at the very origin of thought, for Nietzsche, forgetting is evoked for its potential to save humans from history, which is regarded, at least in part, as a disaster (Ramadanovic, 2002).

In other words, Nietzsche believes in the need for selective memory. That is to say, we should not avoid the past, but regard it critically. For the philosopher, there are three attitudes towards the past: historical, unhistorical, superhistorical, and three methods for history: monumental, antiquarian and critical (1874). The monumental method believes that the greatness of the past will be possible once again - magnifying the good deeds and erasing the bad moments - a deceitful approach; the antiquarian cultivates the past by emphasizing the customary, and traditional values - but this can lead to degeneration when the past no longer is "inspired by the fresh life of the present" (p. 75); the critical method implies being oppressed by a present moment, and having the desire to cast off the load of the past at any price (desire to erase it), and it passes judgement on history. Like the monumental method, it implies forgetting, but not magnifying. The critical method is for Nietzsche the most useful:

> If he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve a part of the past: he does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning it; every past, however, is worthy to be condemned for that is the nature of human things: human violence and weakness have always played a mighty role in them. (pp. 75-76).

But destroying the past is dangerous, as it implies rejecting our negative side: "For since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crime" (p. 76). By forgetting, or trying to erase that past, we try to give ourselves "a past *a posteriori*." This, according to Nietzsche, is problematic because the second nature is usually weaker than the first. Every person, society and culture uses the past sometimes monumentally, sometimes as antiquarian history, and sometimes as critical history for the purpose of living: "This is the natural relationship to history of an age, a culture, and a people with its history" (p. 77).

Franzen's novel addresses the relationship to history of individuals, people, and cultures. By locating the novel in the contemporary U.S. and in Post-World War II East Germany, he addresses several issues, such as U.S. capitalism, communism, and the access to information through the media and the internet: "it seemed as if the Internet was governed more by fear: the fear of unpopularity and uncoolness, the fear of missing out, the fear of being flamed or forgotten" (2015, p. 449).

The one thing that all the characters, except Pip, have in common is their desire to forget their pasts: Pip's mother, Anabel, wants to forget who her father is (Tom Aberant), and who she really is

(a rich heiress). She has raised her daughter in the ignorance of the money she might have had, because for her that money was crooked. Hers is a case of active forgetting, and the rejection of an identity she does not comply with. She did not approve of the methods her father used to earn money and has therefore decided that the only way to shed this burden was to erase her identity, as she told Tom before she married him: "The money is already ruining my brothers. I'm not going to let it ruin me. But that's not even the reason. The reason is the money has blood on it. I can smell it in my checking account, the blood from a river of meat. That is what McCaskill is, a river of meat. They trade in grain, too, but even there a lot of it goes to feed the river" (2015, p. 357).

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Andreas Wolf also has many secrets he wishes to consign to oblivion: from the relationship with his mother, from which we can infer a possible Oedipus complex which led to a life of sexual promiscuity, to a murder he committed to protect a woman, and which he confessed to Tom because he needed his help to bury the body (a metaphor for keeping the past hidden). Andreas's parents are members of the communist party, and he has caused scandal as a younger man by writing an acrostic in a poem making fun of the socialist regime. Later in the novel, Andreas asks his father to locate the files that the Stasi keeps on him, seeking to erase the traces of his crimes. By erasing the documentary proofs, he hopes to clear his conscience and to be able to forget that it had ever happened. His father helps him, despite not being his biological father. His real father is a former student of his mother's, who appears following some years in prison for treason; she writes a book about it unveiling the truth, a book which also has to be destroyed. When Andreas leaves the Stasi archives with a plastic bag containing his files and those about the disappearance of the man he had killed, he is faced with the TV cameras that are there recording the fall of the Wall, while the citizens are taking over the regime's institutions.

Andreas's parents are members of the communist party, and it was a big scandal when he was young and wrote an acrostic in a poem making fun of the socialist regime.

Trying to avoid being caught by the Stasi, Andreas pretends that he is there to monitor the work of the Citizen's Committee of Normannenstrasse. He accuses the Stasi of whitewashing in the archives: "This is a country of festering secrets and toxic lies. Only the strongest of sunlight can disinfect it" (2015, p. 167), as he tells the TV cameras. He suddenly becomes a media hero and names his new project Sunlight. However, while his job is to unveil everybody's secrets, he keeps his own files under his mattress (again, another metaphor for active forgetting). When me meets with Pip in Bolivia, and tries to seduce her, he tells her about his theory of secrets:

> There's the imperative to keep secrets, and the imperative to have them known. How do you know that you're a person, distinct from other people? By keeping certain things to yourself. You guard them inside you, because, if you don't, there's no distinction between inside and outside. Secrets are the way you know you even have an inside. A radical exhibitionist is a person who has forfeited his identity. But identity in a vacuum is also meaningless. Sooner or later, the inside of you needs a witness. Otherwise you're just a cow, a cat, a stone, a thing in the world, trapped in your thingness. To have an identity, you have to believe that other identities equally exist. You need closeness with other people. And how is closeness built? By sharing secrets.... Your identity exists at the intersection of these lines of trust. (2015, p. 275)

Pip responds to this theory by exposing Andreas's hypocrisy when he says that one has to trust a person to keep a secret, while at the same time his job consists of exposing others' secrets. "It's my identity" (2015, p. 275), he replies.

The ending of the novel, following full disclosure, suggests that no matter how hard one tries to forget and keep the past hidden, it will always reappear - sometimes to destroy one, as it is the case of Andreas, at other times to help you, as in the case of the money Pip finally inherits, and which allows her to pay her college debt. Andreas has to die because Tom was going to unveil the truth about him which he had tried so hard to forget. Moreover, the truth about Pip's real identity is finally revealed. Thus, the novel's "happy" ending, with Andreas's death, Tom and Pip finally reunited, Pip with her boyfriend, and Tom and Anabel "talking," or rather fighting, seems to indicate that active forgetting is not liberating, but may instead bring about madness and destruction. Like Plato, for Franzen, forgetting is a predicament of human beings (Ramadanovic, 2001), but complete forgetting is not possible because there is always something which cannot be erased.

For Nietzsche (1997), the most fruitful approach to history is based on forgetting certain things in order to be able to move on. This, for Franzen (2015), is a disgrace. Human beings should never forget. Forgetting equals death: secrets always rise to the surface because active forgetting is an imposture. The fabulation that one creates, the faked life that Anabel or Andrea try to lead by hiding their real selves, cannot succeed because human beings cannot step outside of history, of our stories. For Franzen (2015), whether we like it or not - even if we try to erase those parts of our lives that we dislike (as individuals, as people, and as cultures), and even if we actively attempt to forget - the past, history, can never be silenced.

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