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Memory, Migration and Literature

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More often than not, memory is taken to be the storehouse of past experiences situated in a local context. However, recent theories have moved the focus to the process of memory which, in any present moment, allows the past, collective or individual, to emerge as a construction that works as a strong driving force of identity formation. In this perspective the memory process selects features of the past and turns them into more or less coherent structures, which then will have to be checked out with others in order for them to exercise their role as valid interpretations of the past and building blocks of present and future identity. Memories are therefore dialogical phenomena shaped by discussion, or more broadly by exchanges in various media, concerning the selected features, their configuration and the identities they promote. Today, the globalized flows of migration open up a new set of problems for the understanding of memories and their functions. When migration becomes a dominant experience across the globe, the concepts of locality and of local experiences changes and raise a new question: can we imagine and attach any meaning to globalized memories? Today, a huge amount of literatures from all corners of the world takes issue with this question, the so-called literatures of migration, where the literary imagination suggests answers to the open question of what memory might mean in a globalized world. To address this question, the Greek-Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas' novel *The Slap* (2008) and the Australian context will serve as my point of reference.

Literature of Migration

Christos Tsiolkas' internationally bestselling Australian novel *The Slap*, from 2008,[1] followed by a successful TV adaptation, belongs to the type of texts which Rebecca Walkowitz has called the 'literature of migration'.[2] The term is borrowed from Leslie Adelson but is further developed in opposition to 'migrant literature'.[3] The latter term refers to the writer and his or her personal and cultural origin, while the former embraces all literature written under cultural conditions defined by flows of migration, no matter the origin of the author. One underlying claim is that once migration has become a significant cultural reality it shapes both the lives of those who migrate and those who live where migrants pass through or settle. The wider and

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more important claim is that this cultural reality is of increasing global significance with cultural impact beyond literature, art and media, including also literatures that conceive of themselves as local but, nevertheless, are part of the larger cultural context of multiple types of migration in today's world. Accepting both claims as the point of departure for an understanding of literature, memory and culture also enables us to see literature as a key to understand the embodied consequences of globalizing cultural processes for individual identity formation based on human interaction in the everyday life experience of people around the world. This embodiment defines the plot, the characters, the theme as well as the structure of enunciation in *The Slap*.

In the novel, eight people of different generations and cultures living in Melbourne at the beginning of the twenty-first century act in turn as the protagonist of one of the eight chapters, their voices representing different positions in a society composed of people from different cultures. The eight characters and their families and friends form a community that is shaped by recent migrations from Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific region, but also include marginalized Aboriginals and white Australians, who have a longer Australian family history, which is also fashioned by social and geographical movements, although within the country. The migrants or marginalized characters are not just coming from a troubled background to a well-established community with a shared sense of history and identity. Rather, the cultural heterogeneity they expose is a general distinctive feature of the community they arrive in, as is the case in a rapidly growing number of places around the world.

In Australia, this diversified normality is turned into a locally specific social formation, both propelled by the amalgamation of transnational colonial and post-colonial structures and by the particular Australian regional and social divisions between white and non-white Australians. From the beginning of independent Australia in 1901, this dichotomy was translated into the principle of 'White Australia'. This notion functioned as the ideological underpinning of the emergent nation, giving prominence to the descendants from the old Anglo-Celtic migration and only opening the door to new immigrants with the same European pedigree. Hence, it imposed an ethnic hierarchy on all the ethnicities then existing in Australia, a vertical order that fostered the rich pejorative Australian ethnic slang for ethnic groups, at times with a touch of humour (wogs, dagos, lebs, abos, and so on).

After the Second World War this ideology gradually lost its firm grip on politics, immigration politics included, but remained the ideological backbone of the national identity. Since the 1970s it has been officially challenged by the new politics of 'Multicultural Australia', open to immigration from other parts of Europe as well as from the neighbouring countries in the Pacific. As in most other countries influenced by the global flows of migration, the Australian society clearly has moved and still moves towards a multicultural reality in demographic terms; however, the ongoing conflict between the values derived from the notion of White Australia and those generated by the multicultural reality continues to define the ideological climate.[4] Migrants from regions outside the Anglo-Celtic sphere are now gradually being socially and economically integrated; but with regard to identity formation and

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ideological recognition they are situated in a void both outside their own ethnic group and outside the white Australian mainstream. A similar discrepancy is known in various forms in all societies having migration as an important social component, and it has become the centre of gravity of literatures of migration, charging them with a general cultural significance beyond any local setting of the texts, Australia or elsewhere.

Personal Memories and Embodied Tradition

In *The Slap*, the social and ideological core is a family of Greek immigrants, but surrounded by partners, spouses and friends who together represent the postcolonial hybridity of Australia but also, ironically, push the characters of pure Anglo-Celtic descent into the wings of the social scene. Even when contested, the family values set the agenda for all interactions, whether peaceful or antagonistic. The names of eight of these characters serve as the titles of the chapters. First *Hector*, a public servant and the son of the Greek couple, Manolis and Koula, immigrants after the Second World War; then his wife, *Aisha* of mixed Malaysian origin, a veterinarian with her own clinic, and his cousin, the successful car dealer *Harry*, and his father *Manolis*. To these four are added Aisha's two friends, the neurotic writer-journalist *Anouk* living for some time with a TV celebrity half her age, and a close childhood friend from West Australia *Rosie*, with a dysfunctional and poor family background who previously lived on the edge and is now in a fragile marriage. Finally, there are two chapters devoted to Aisha's assistant, the teenager *Connie* who has a crush on a flattered Hector, and to Connie's school mate *Richie* who also is infatuated with the well-trimmed Hector and eventually accepts himself as gay.

All find themselves in a transitional phase in their lives – those in their forties: young(ish) or middle-aged? The teenagers: adolescent or adult? The older generation: Greek, Australian or just dying? The well-established aboriginal colleague now with his wife converted to Islam: real Australian or not? They, or their parents, have all moved from different places to Melbourne, a huge intersection of roads of migration.

Hence, they are forced to activate, construct or live with hidden personal memories in order to re-contextualize themselves and redefine their identity in a new context with a rapidly decreasing collective anchoring. There is no physical, social or ideological space where they can locate their memories. However, memories have a profound impact on their identity while the characters at the same time have a hard time trying to integrate the half hidden past with a new life experience without ever being able to push it aside. The consequence is that their memories become free floating fragments, more and more incomprehensible for those who carry the memories and inaccessible for other people from their multicultural environment.

This memorial volatility suddenly becomes transfixed as a piercing and biting actuality for everybody. This happens during Hector's 40th birthday party, which opens the novel. Rosie's three year-old son Hugo, spoiled by his overprotective mother, threatens the other kids, and Harry's son in particular, with a baseball bat and is slapped by Harry. Everybody reacts differently, forcing themselves to redefine

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their mutual relationships and to reflect on what it takes to have a collective set of norms and values that can frame their identity and a shared understanding and discussion of social events beyond the daily routine, like the slap. The incident reveals another dimension of memory at work in migrant environments besides the more or less troubled *personal* memories. That is the *embodied traditions* which the protagonists constantly re-enact as a memory they do not reflect upon, but which materializes when translated into their values, attitudes, actions and interactions in their everyday environment.[5]

At Hector's party, the family meets to celebrate its unity, the embodied memory of a stable social order, confirming it by almost stereotyping behaviour and speech. But what happens to Hugo reveals the family as powerless when they have to cope with the slap, and it finds them unable to prevent a social eruption that sends friends and family away from each other in all directions, eight of them to be separate protagonists, each in his or her own chapter. A discomforting doubt seeps into their minds: is it at all possible to share personal memories and a collective memory practised as an embodied tradition beyond individualized fragments? In their present life world they are all shaped by geographical and social replacements, confronted with personal transitions in their different stages of life, and placed close to the periphery in the local culture, in spite of apparent social success. They have to realize that their personal memories are met with indifference and that their embodied traditions, are at best, memories of less general importance than they like to believe and, at worst, simply irrelevant to others. This situation is dealt with in all literatures of migration, as well as in *The Slap*, and defines the role of memory in this globalized context.[6]

I have introduced the novel mostly in generic terms as a typical example of the modern literature of migration. But before I leave the generic level, a few words on how to approach memory studies more broadly in a globalized context. Can we attach any meaning to a notion of globalized memory, given the fact the memory builds on diverse types of embodied local experiences?

Globalized Memories?

In a 1957 Festschrift for Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt contributed the paper 'Karl Jaspers: a Citizen of the World'.[7] This kind of citizen is no longer just the enlightened cosmopolitan of the eighteenth century, he is also the anonymous individual absorbed by the constant if not increasing and still continuing flows of post-Second World War refugees and migrants from different geographical areas. The largest groups come from war zones, from established but failed nations, e.g. from the former Yugoslavia or Eritrea, and from non-existing nations, e.g. Palestinians or Kurds. Belonging to a 'proper' place is not part of their collective memory. In this context, Arendt reflects on the role of memory. If we replace the idea of a primary local anchoring of our lives with the idea of world citizenship to define the collective and individual identity of people, would this shift define their memory? No, she says.

Her claim is that world citizenship shows a categorical difference from a national or local citizenship, because the former cannot be attached to a world state in the

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same way as the latter can be rooted in a local national state. Therefore, there can be no reference to a shared past or a collective vision of a shared future, only a series of shared present moments that never aggregate into a collective vision. In other words: a collective memory in any form is impossible, and therefore world citizenship cannot produce any individual or collective identity, only destroy existing memories and dissolve any productive identity formation.

Although we know that all memory processes involve simultaneous forgetting and recollecting in order for them to emerge at all, Arendt has a surprisingly conservative view of memory. For her it is only a content, its nature and function entirely defined by the unified local past it refers to, not by the activity that constructs the reference to the past and the effects of this process. Hence, with its lack of any primary local context, memory in a globalized context of what she calls world citizens is for her non-existent.

Postcolonial Caribbean writers such as Derek Walcott and Edouard Glissant defend the opposite view. In the 1970s and 1980s, they explained that localities once touched by colonialism, which to them basically comprise all localities whether central or peripheral, are from then on inextricably blended with the translocal world. According to Glissant in *Le discours antillais*[8] it is precisely this amalgamation of broken memories that shapes the foundation of shared local memories, not a pure and identifiable past prior to colonialism. In the essay 'The Muse of History',[9] Walcott takes the same position when he characterizes this basic complexity as 'bitter': 'there is a bitter memory and it is the bitterness that dries last on the tongue.' For both, the idea that the unified locality with its own enshrined past is a normal and natural basis of memory and identity, is but a vain illusion which stands out most clearly as an impossible idea in the former colonies, Australia being one of them. Hence, Arendt's dichotomy, local memory or no shared memory at all, is simply a wrong opposition, given the fact that we all live in translocal cultures, wherever we activate memories to understand ourselves.

The position exemplified by Walcott and Glissant leads us to the following claims concerning memory:

- Memory is an act of the present – memory is an act that gathers fragments, true or not, from the past that are stored in texts, objects, images, visions and dreams. Memory tells us how things *are*, namely memorized here and now by somebody, but not how things really *were*.
- The effect of this act is that memory is fashioned in such a way that the past is turned into an understandable structure that allows us to understand ourselves and our contexts in the present and in view of the future.
- Being a construction, the role of the medium of memory moves to the foreground. Hence, media history and memory history go hand in hand. Here, literature and language play an essential role, also when non-verbal media shape memories. There is no immediate access to the past and, being media bound, memory is negotiable through collective communication

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within a community and is shaped on the conditions of the media landscape of any given historical period.

- Also, when memories work in a globalized context they always emerge in a local process, bound as they are to situated and embodied human experiences embedded in language and communication. This embedding provides any local experience with a translocal perspective, at times hybrid, multiple and loaded with conflicts. Memories are about embodied encounters across social and cultural differences and function as instruments for us to orient ourselves in such contexts.

Of these four aspects, Arendt only highlights the common present. But for her this aspect inevitably entails loss of memory, not the possibility of actually producing, negotiating and changing memories to open this present in new directions.

When we take a look at the role of the medium of memory, as Walcott and Glissant do by focusing on literature, it is important to note that literature has a double orientation.[10] On the one hand, literature is a process that gives form to human experience. Human experience, broken or not, is always local; it takes place as it were. But literature is always invested with translocal motifs, genres, metaphors, symbols, plots; characters travel across cultural boundaries in order for any local literature to come into being and, hence, to suggest interpretations of a local life world. Literature makes possible a shared understanding of human experience, but it does so by turning it into memory in a translocal perspective. This process of *travelling* across cultural boundaries is exploited by all literatures of migration, and also in *The Slap*.[11]

On the other hand, literature is a media-specific, primarily verbal, formal process that constructs communicative structures and strategies to capture the nature of and chart the limits of collective values and meanings inside a language community, where this literature is produced and circulated in interaction with other media. Memories are not common by their content, but may become a shared resource through communication within a community that establishes the relevant content as well as the limits of the shared universe of memory. This communication could be termed *negotiation*.[12] This idea has been important in memory studies from Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory to Michael Rothenberg's multidirectional memory.[13] The limit of this negotiation is essential to *The Slap*.

Negotiation and Travelling in The Slap

I will take the last point first, the formal structure. The novel's overarching structure of enunciation is defined by the eight chapters with eight different protagonists who also appear as mere characters in other chapters. All key characters are seen both from within and without and they present their different view on the same events, on themselves and on the other characters, adding something that is unknown to the others. Using free indirect discourse, Tsiolkas does not turn them into first person narrators, but works on a fluctuating boundary between inner and outer space which,

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therefore, is subject to constant reinterpretation and negotiation. What can be shared and what cannot in terms of knowledge, judgement and understanding is never settled once and for all.

Therefore, what we see and hear and how it is put into perspective remains an unsettled matter of dialogue and negotiation, and also for the reader. Each character adopts a different position to the central event, the slapping of Hugo. To establish a shared memory of it would require an ongoing negotiation between the characters, both of the slap itself and, more importantly, of their personal and collective background and identity, which each of them invests in their understanding and evaluation of the slap. Thus, the incident reopens the relationship between personal memories and memory as embodied tradition, turning both into disconnected fragments.

Doing so, the novel shows the impossibility of negotiating a new common ground through dialogue. Negotiation is not a delimited act, as a court case is, but an ongoing process in the characters' daily lives as a challenge they have a hard time coping with. They live in more or less disconnected and individualized bubbles, simply because their constructions of memory only come to play a role in their identity formation when communicated and accepted by others, not with reference to a shared past. This dialogue is precisely what they are not able to perform. Walcott's bitter taste is what is left on their tongues, which only a few of them can come to terms with and only on an individual basis.

Now to the first point, the travelling of notions and features that bind literatures of migration together across cultures in a translocal perspective that unleashes the processes of memory. In *The Slap*, the family is the basic social and cultural unit. Ideally, the family unites individual and collective identities and is the storehouse of memories as embodied tradition. In this position it generates the norms that define which personal memories are important and can be made public and which ones must remain hidden. It serves as a shared background for all characters and, therefore, as the reference point of the negotiations of memory found between the characters.

However, the family is not an unquestioned unit, but a cross-cultural reality that comes in many forms, as also here – from the Greek extended family via the modern nuclear family to other forms of cohabitation, such as bohemian partnerships and gay couples. Hence, for all characters of the family, as well as alternative partnerships, it is actually less a unit than a collection of broken experiences: the Greek family had to migrate; for some the family means a traumatized childhood; for others it is dream, attractive and frightening at the same time, and ex-marital affairs fly under the radar of shared memories; divorce is a reality as is domestic violence behind closed doors. Thus, the family is itself a matter of differentiation and negotiation or, as for the older Greek generation, a fading ideal from a lost world with no alternatives. It is never a perfect match of individual and collective memory with a form that is recognizable and accepted by everybody. Tsiolkas' *Dead Europe* (2005) even expands the fractured family haunted by the past with a magical and mythical dimension.

In other novels by Tsiolkas, although less so in this novel, as well as in numerous examples of literatures of migration, the role of the family on the collective level

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corresponds to the role of the body on the individual level, particularly in *Loaded* (1995), *The Jesus Man* (1998) and *Barracuda* (2013). Both body and family have a collective and individual dimension. The family is a collective unit charging the ideal individual behaviour with the clear goal of reproducing the family structure. The body, on the other hand, is marked by collectively recognizable features of gender and ethnicity, often categorized in stereotypes, but is also the site of individual explorations of sexuality and cross-ethnic relationships in order to mark a self-defined individual identity beyond the contested standards of the family.

The painful awareness of the tacit friction between body and family comes out when Hugo is slapped by Harry during the festive family event. In the flash of a second the slap challenges everybody's understanding of both body identity and of family norms. For some of the characters the slapping of the boy is a violent transgression bordering on a crime against humanity and actually prohibited by Australian law. For some it even appears as an unforgivable act of child abuse; for others it is an unfortunate mishap that can be reconciled by regret and forgiveness; for yet others it is just a trivial affair between kids and adults when kids act outrageously. For Rosie, the mother, it is an unforgivable wrongdoing. She presses charges against Harry, but loses the case, and the attempts to stage a reconciliation before they meet in court are fruitless. Rosie is as unforgiving as Harry is insincere in his remorse. There is no shared space to find a common ground and the judicial platform only pushes people further apart. Nobody is able to use the episode to redefine or re-contextualize their memories, personal or traditional, in order to reorient their view of the slap, and their reactions spiral self-destructively out of control.

At the same time, the issue of forgiveness enters in all eight chapters as a possible though often futile option to get beyond the otherwise irreconcilable differences between the memory-based identity constructions and the normative structures that support them. Even when successful, forgiveness and reconciliation have only a limited range as we can see in the final words of the novel. Here, Richie has got a lover and finally accepts himself as gay, and he is also accepted as such by friends and family. This happens after his attempted suicide following the disclosure of his anonymous mobile phone harassment of Hector because of his anger over the affair between Connie and Hector which, he is led to believe, may have involved a rape. This idea turns out to be based on innuendos from Connie on what has actually happened in her non-consummated relationship with Hector. Here, we follow Richie's thought rendered in free indirect discourse:

> As he closed his eyes he ran through the only certainties in his life. There really were only two that mattered. Two. That was an alright number. That his mother was the best mum in the world, and that he and Connie would be friends forever. Soon, unexpectedly, like the future that has begun to creep up on him, sleep did come. (Ref. 1, p. 483)

In spite of Richie's apparent happiness, it is the bitterness that dries last on his tongue, as Walcott puts it. Actually, Richie is only reconciled when enclosed in his own cocoon, which includes just two other persons. The situation is formulated in absolute

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and non-negotiable terms – 'best in the world', 'forever' – which turns his reconciliation with the world into nothing but a fragile dream, as absolute as the different positions taken by everybody else. And that the future is not an open space to conquer, but only something creeping up on him in his sleep. All characters are locked up in their individual confinement.

Re-contextualization and Forgiveness

Fragmentation of memory is the tenor of all Tsiolkas' novels, while forgiveness has been an issue of increasing importance, particularly in *The Slap* and *Barracuda* (2013). Tsiolkas adopts a cautious view, based on the fragility and limitations of forgiveness, also when it seems to be the only way to thaw deep-frozen antagonisms.[14] The South African *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* from the mid-1990s, chaired by Desmond Tutu, generated global attention on large-scale collective reconciliation processes.[15] Here, the project was to move a country and its individual citizens across ethnic division lines beyond the traumatized collective memories from apartheid. In addition, on an individual level, in psychology and philosophy, a similar process has been explored as a way to move beyond traumatic experiences but with the emphasis on the individual capacity to transcend atrocities through forgiveness.[16]

The notion of forgiveness disseminated today has often been cast in universal terms as a general human capacity empathetically to embrace other human beings beyond social and cultural divides. This comforting conception may prevent us from seeing its historical particularity as a predominantly Christian notion disseminated worldwide by European colonization, and with an anthropological foundation based on ideas about a universally human capacity for empathy as formulated during the Enlightenment and later translated into Human Rights discourse.

Instead, forgiveness should rather be looked upon as a particular cultural coping strategy with an inherent claim to universality, parallel to various other coping strategies in non-European cultures, often based on retribution rather than on reconciliation and coexisting with and often opposed to forgiveness as the primary coping strategy. What all such strategies share is their attempt to re-contextualize events that transgress cultural norms in order to enable communities and individuals to nevertheless cope with normative transgressions on any scale, whether coping means retaliation, sacrifices to divinities, revenge, various penalties, recompensation, execution or reconciliation. In this context, forgiveness is not unique, but is one among several culturally and historically determined coping strategies with the aim of restoring a cultural norm system in order to allow a shared social life to go on.

Therefore, the scale of the transgression to cope with is not determined only by its number of casualties and degree of cruelty, but also depends on its contextualization. Even iniquities on the level of apartheid, the Holocaust or the atrocities of the so-called Islamic State bring forth context-dependent differences in evaluation, including distortion of facts.[17] They all go beyond any legal category which, by a meaningful verdict, can measure out a proportional penalty: how many years are reasonable and acceptable in the case of genocide? But such acts are, nevertheless, always measured and

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scaled by a certain context-dependent sense of justice which, at times in opposition to court decision, dictates what is conceived as acceptable for coping with atrocity.

Similarly, and on the same ground, minor events in one context may acquire huge proportions as major transgressions in another. This is precisely what happens when Hugo has his ear boxed and the family affair is brought to court: the whole business then becomes an irreversible blow to the entire life of a fractured family and its friends. The characters place the event in different normative contexts defined by the values they embody as memories of traditions and of past experiences of what is right and wrong. This background is now emphatically reinvested to make this episode confirm the relevance of precisely those values. Surely, the characters do not want things to go awry, but they lack the imaginary capacity to envision an alternative context for the slap where it could be looked upon differently, in particular contexts that are relevant for the other characters. In other words, a context where the value of their personal memories and the tradition they embody can be negotiated in relation to the multicultural context in which they all now live.

On a personal level, they all hide memories for and from each other: Harry has a past of domestic violence against his wife which Aisha and Hector know about but also keep silent about; Rosie has a past history of a traumatic neglect of Hugo, which is brought up against her in court; Aisha has a one-night stand at a conference which she is silent about when Hector admits his innocent flirt with Connie. Their attitude to the slap is part of their attempt to hide their own painful memories. Re-contextualizing the slap before it unintentionally grows to a real calamity might have forced them to open the door to their own memories, too. But they are all locked up in a normative structure generated by their different and now completely unchangeable embodiments, only insisting on what they perceive of as unforgivable, as Aisha does to Harry when she unforgivingly reminds him of how he once hit his wife. At the same time they prescribe forgiveness as a useful instrument for others to change their perspective. Only Richie reaches some relief at the end, by re-contextualizing himself as openly homosexual, being accepted by others and now forgiven by Hector, Aisha and his mother for his confused attack on Hector. In contrast, an embittered Rosie leaves Melbourne and Hector and Aisha's marriage is invaded by a vague mistrust.

Forgiveness may work as a means to reconcile conflicts which law, religion or ethics and other formal or informal versions of traditional values cannot solve.[18] Therefore, and in tandem with memory, forgiveness becomes another core theme of the literature of migration when normative conflicts become an essential part of the narrative. Often forgiveness is identified with a feel-good attitude, mainly aiming at forgetting injustice, or a tear-soaked reconciliation once and for all polishing the halo of forgiving individuals. But with the emphasis on coping and re-contextualization, forgiveness can be seen differently in relation to both memory and literature. Forgiveness is the possible outcome of a renegotiation of personal memories, as well as embodied traditions, and can never happen without this process.

- Forgiveness is not about forgetting, but about remembering, often a very painful remembering. We remember what we have to forget, as it were.

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In fact, forgiveness itself is most often a heavily contested intervention in an escalating deadlocked zone where conflicting norms have been challenged by transgressive actions. Atrocities have to be moved to a normative context where they can be remembered in a new way. That is what much imaginary writing on the Holocaust is about, where the unspeakable is turned into a narrative or another aesthetic form that is collectively recognizable and open to a new shared understanding.

- Forgiveness is not an act that once and for all settles a case like a verdict after the last appeal or a peace treaty; is it the opening of a continuous process of a fragile and repeated confirmation of the validity of the new context. Forgiveness is always a risk which may not reach a final reconciliation.
- Forgiveness occurs as an individual act, but is a manifestation of the limits of collective norms. Laws or fixed norms, formalized or not, are not able to cover all conflicts of social life. Some conflicts are of such magnitude that no legal system can contain them in their entirety, but we have to deal with them nevertheless. And smaller acts, like a slap, will enter the same domain the moment one of the involved parties chooses to place it in a context that gives it the proportion of a crime against humanity, as Rosie does when her son is slapped.
- Forgiveness is always a verbal act or conditioned by verbal acts. Here it comes close to literature, which is predominantly verbal, a set of performative speech acts. Such acts have the capacity to establish a real event that materializes in language without at the same time presenting a truth claim. As an act it is a real social event that nevertheless may refer to an imaginary universe. But if the utterer has a formalized or collectively acknowledged authority in relation to particular speech acts, then a truth claim, or other claims beyond discussion, can be part of the performance. This is what happens when a judge utters a verdict. In contrast, in literature, as part of the very nature of its performative acts, authority and truth always have to be negotiated.

None of these criteria apply to the way Tsiolkas' characters go about forgiveness in any of the eight chapters, all of which, nevertheless, suggest forgiveness as a tool to break the ice. The re-contextualization of the slap to a legal framework only makes matters worse. No one is willing to take the risk of renegotiating with the others the balance between what is remembered and what is forgotten, or to take a new look at themselves and their deeply buried painful memories and the traditional values which for them legitimize the fixed boundary between open and hidden personal memories. At the same time, everyone thinks of forgiveness as a singular event. If it cannot once and for all redress the social balance, keep the hidden memories in place, and together with them the norms that guide their individual lives, then it is worth nothing. So, when they finally try explicitly to ask for forgiveness or to forgive, their attempt emerges as a speech act performed half-heartedly and through gritted teeth.

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One example is Harry's visit to Rosie to apologize for his slapping the boy and avoid a court case, which would eventually result in the break-up of the social relations whatever its outcome (Ref. 1, pp. 121–132). Pushed by Harry's wife Sandie, but behind Harry's back and supported by Aisha, Hector tries to convince Harry to see Rosie and ask for forgiveness. They all see this gesture as an isolated definitive act. With Tsiolkas' blend of direct speech and free indirect discourse we see Harry explicitly agree, although reluctantly, while his thoughts move in a different direction. According to his traditional patriarchal family norms Rosie is nothing but white trash, and to show he was wrong is a humiliation. He cannot understand why two family members, his cousin and his wife, put him in this shameful situation. This double orientation for and against forgiveness is reflected in his response to Hector: 'I will give it a go. For Sandie's sake.' He does not want to mend his violence, but to save peace in the family. The moment Hector has left Harry yells furiously at Sandie and pulls her by the hair before he leaves to have sex with his mistress. The following day in Rosie's house their exchange is laconic, confrontational and pointless: 'I've come to apologize' – 'Not fucking accepted.'

In Tsiolkas' *Barracuda*, the protagonist Dan Kelly ponders on the dilemma posed by serious forgiveness. He recognizes that forgiveness presupposes a radical re-contextualization of tormenting memories. But the process may rip one's identity apart without any certainty that the pieces can be put together again in a new way. Forgiveness is not a soothing but a challenging process, confrontation being the easy choice: 'Dan could have kicked [his dad]. […] it would have been so easy to do, to walk away and never be forgiven.'[19] Later, during a funeral, he imagines his future filtered through forgiveness but also releases memories that mark its limit:

> You didn't always have to give it back. In the somber chapel, Dan Kelly discovered that there were some things that you could not be forgiven for, and those were the things that you carried into the next life, if there was such a place; and if there was no next life nor any God, the consequence was the same: if you were not forgiven, you would die with regret. (Ref. 21, p. 485)

If memory and literature are old bedfellows, together with forgiveness as a particular coping strategy activating and activated by the processes of memory and invested with imaginative power, literature and memory will even more strongly reflect the cultural conditions of the world today. *The Slap* explores this relationship, but with a rather pessimistic view of the human ability to reorganize individual lives and rebuild common ground. As with memory, Tsiolkas has little confidence that people can get out their individual confinement of personal memories and embodied traditions of values by performing the mutual act of forgiveness. The only thing the characters can verbalize is ambiguous invitations to forgive, but most often what they consider unforgivable is carved in stone. Their capacity to reconsider their memories together with other people in order to re-contextualize transgressive actions is limited and happens only in rapidly passing moments, like Richie's comforting vision before he falls asleep. They will, like Danny Kelly, die with regret, but, unlike him, they will hardly realize it.

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This is a typical point of view articulated by literatures of migration: the individuals living together in the same physical space occupy separate social and memory universes without shared normative contexts. Tsiolkas is describing the inevitability of the individualization of life in a world of globalized flows of migration and also the narrow limits of the human capacity to embrace the shared bitterness (as does Wallcott) of their memories and to imagine new contexts for a common life. The imaginary writing of literature insists on the complexity of the problem and thereby it keeps the possibility alive against all odds.

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5. In social theory the notion 'mediated social interaction' is often used to indicate that no social interaction, however spontaneous it may appear, happens without the use of various cultural tools, discourse in particular, but also objects, institutions and behaviour. The relation to collective memory of this mediation is underlined by James Wertsch, among others, in *Voices of Collective Remembering* from 2002 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), cf. his *Mind as Action* from 1998 (Oxford: Oxford University Press). However, embodiment as a crucial aspect of mediation is only rarely taken into account, but Henri Bergson does in *Matière et Mémoire* (1896) (as do Sigmund Freud and Maurice Merleau-Ponty). Memory may emerge in the present as embodied habits which are decontextualized repetitions of past experience like the use of a keyboard, separated from conscious reflection when performed, but not when interrupted by, for example, a slap. I am developing the relation memory, mediation and embodiment further in an ongoing collective enterprise 'Text, Action, Space', now working with a project 'Exploring Texts, Media and Memory' (www.folk.uib.no/hlils/tasweb).
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