Issues connected with memory and history have long been recognized as crucial to magic realism. As Geoff Hancock has declared, “magic realism reminds us that our memory is in a state of crisis. How do we preserve the past, especially when it depends upon spoken words or painted images?” (Hancock, 33). Canadian engagement with the question of history and memory is specific and complex at least partly due to the enduring, though false, myth of Canada’s “newness”, of it being a peaceful and fair country with no history. Towards the end of the 1960s a Canadian immigrant poet could still write, somewhat ironically, but nevertheless expressing a more widely held sentiment: “[…] if I had to call the U.S. of A. my home / It might be more than my selective memory could handle. / But being a Canadian / By conscious and considered choice / I have to remember no one & nothing” (Jonas, 117). A plethora of histories and memories, thus banished from collective memory, has now resurfaced, but the crisis of memory undoubtedly lingers as, according to Pierre Nora, it is a universal condition of “forgetful modern societies” (Nora 1989, 8) rather than a specifically Canadian predicament. “We speak so much of memory [Nora writes] because there is so little of it left” (Nora 1989, 7).

It seems that in Canadian texts of magic realism attempts to preserve the past and overcome the crisis of memory usually consist in a specific engagement with history and memory resulting in the literary creation of what Nora has famously called les lieux de mémoire. Those are necessitated by the contemporary crisis of memory, created by “a play of memory and history” (Nora 1989, 19) in order to activate remembering and provide a counter-force to traditional historical discourse. Such sites of memory, created as a result of a conscious will to remember, become markers and makers of identity (Nora 1989, 12), reminders of what makes communities of different kinds special and specific, and thus they often function as agents of variously conceived decolonization. As concerns related to decolonization often form the core of magic realist novels, issues connected with memory are also central to their plots and themes. Not only do the authors of many Canadian
magic realist texts make their characters create “sites of memory” within them, but by doing so they fashion the texts themselves into textual lieux de mémoire.

The classic of Canadian magic realism, Jack Hodgins’s *The Invention of the World*, in a way chronicles the shift from traditional forms of memory – closely linked by Nora to peasant culture, which he calls the “quintessential repository of collective memory” (Nora 1989, 7) – to contemporary psychologized, atomized memory (Nora 1989, 15-16). The process functions also as one of the key motives of Jane Urquhart’s *Away*. The space of traditional, communal memory, related in her novel to wholeness and balance, and taken care of by the women of the family, who circulate family stories by memorizing them, is shown dying; at the end fragmentation and forgetfulness seem to win. In Hodgins’s novel the shift is marked figuratively by the migration of Donal Keneally’s Irishmen from Ireland to the New World. Back home the community lives steeped in myth and magic, which form the very fabric of its life. This worldview is mercilessly exploited by Keneally, whose biggest swindle is perhaps the hijacking of this collective memory. As he is born essentially rootless, by the mother who has lost all memory (Hodgins, 10), it is easy for him to claim mythical roots, and thus to insert himself into the communal memory, “a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition, linking history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins, and myth” (Nora 1989, 8).

While in Hodgins’s novel this traditional worldview is transplanted with the community to the Vancouver Island, it takes root there only tenuously. It survives with and inside the community, and almost disappears with its disintegration. As the time passes, communal memory “experienced collectively” (Nora 1989, 16) is replaced by the individualized archival memory, “nothing more in fact than sifted […] historical traces” (Nora 1989, 8), represented by Becker and his attempts to chronicle the life of Donal Keneally and his Revelations Colony of Truth. Becker in a sense attempts to become what Nora calls a “memory individual”: “the psychologization of memory,” Nora explains further, “has […] given every individual the sense that his or her salvation ultimately depends on the repayment of an impossible debt” (Nora 1989, 16). Minority and majority groups alike produce such self-appointed guardians of their “identity”, which is produced in retrospect. Becker’s debt seems to be, again, the debt to the lost wholeness, or totality of the past, not a particular group or community. As the reader learns, he
Lieux de mémoire,  
_or Canadian Magic Realism Revisited_

has chosen to nest on a certain piece of this world and to make a few years of its history his own. The debris of that history is around him and he will reel it all in, he will store it in his head, he will control it; there will be no need, eventually, for anything else to exist; all of it will be inside, all of it will belong only to him. Becker wants to be god (Hodgins, 8).

His attempts to imaginatively reconstitute part of the history of the island might be interpreted as rising from “the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally” (Nora 1989, 12), which is how Nora explains the origin of _les lieux de mémoire_. Becker’s archive, the tool for his “invention of the world”, becomes itself a site of memory, attesting both to the crisis of history and the contemporary belief in the regenerative force of memory. Becker does not re-construct, he does not search for history and its hard, objective facts, but rather creates, invents, conjures up using the store of individual memories of the community members. The past is there to be shaped into a story, not to be recreated. Out of the chaos of fragments, Becker attempts to create a narrative continuity, which is to allow him to set the story free and at the same time finally to possess it (Hodgins, 11). Always present is the crucial determinant of _les lieux de mémoire_: the intention to remember (Nora 1989, 19). Becker’s chaotic archive is, however, made finally into a story by readers of the novel, who are thus in a sense assigned the role of “memory individuals” themselves. The inadequacy of the “official” archive as an anchor for memory is, at the same time, underlined by the episode in which Julius Champney reimagines the historical event of capturing and hanging of two native men, adding, at the end, the question one of them might have asked: “You could tell us, first, what we done” (Hodgins, 315; Hodgins’s italics). Conscious that there exists no record that the question was ever asked, Champney nevertheless clings to his version of the story, believing it to be as plausible and reliable as any archive. “[…] The voices existed out of time, anyway, and belonged in the end only to him” (Hodgins, 315). This underlines the inadequacy of historiography, and the individualized nature of contemporary memory, but at the same time also the decolonizing capacity of magic realism and contemporary mode of memory alike.

The two modes of narration in the novel, which George McWhirter calls “the legendary heroic versus the investigative and historic” (McWhirter, 460),
might be interpreted as reflecting on the narrative level either the memory/history split underlined by Nora, or the two modes of memory. The fact that the legendary heroic mode is used also to talk about contemporary events (for example about Maggie and Wade), not simply about Keneally and his followers, suggests the text’s ambition to become itself a site of memory commemorating the traditional mode of memory, based in myth. As Becker declares: “Myth, […] like all the past, real or imaginary, must be acknowledged. […] Even if it’s not believed” (Hodgins, 406-407). In the novel, the myth is confronted and acknowledged during Becker, Maggie, and Wade’s pilgrimage to Ireland, which also helps Becker to admit the failure of his original intent. The acknowledgement and validation of myth and memory might similarly be found in Urquhart’s *Away*, in which they are also connected to Eileen as the “memory individual” of the family and Irish immigrant community.

That Hodgins’s Vancouver Island becomes itself a topographical lieu de mémoire for some of the characters, but also perhaps for the readers, is not specific to his oeuvre. In many works of Canadian magic realism place itself becomes “a symbolic element of the memorial heritage” (Nora 1996, XVII) of the communities described, a storage of memory and a marker of difference. The magic and the symbolic power of the selected setting often issues from the combination of familiarity and strangeness it offers, from the fact that the place, be it British Columbia (in novels by Jack Hodgins), Cape Breton (in Alistair MacLeod’ prose) or Ontario (in Jane Urquhart’s novels), becomes a character in the novel, and it often evokes the lost home, and similar ghosts, but at the same time offers uniqueness and newness, special qualities that set it apart from other places.

Thus Keneally chooses Vancouver Island for his colony because, in spite of its mountains and trees and lack of sheep, its climate evokes rainy Ireland. The houses of the colony are placed in a circle around a well symbolizing the source of life, on a hill, with the House of Revelations itself facing the sun. The design explicitly recreates ancient holy places in Ireland, and the House of Revelations, a symbolic “altar”, is, as Keneally tells his people, to “be a monument to their success” (Hodgins, 158). Although Keneally’s intent is to induce the servitude of his people, the colony indeed becomes a monument to the country left behind and its traditions. What is more, the story of the colony functions, as Stephen Slemon points out, as a “metaphorical representation of the process of colonization which serves to transform the novel’s regional setting into a metonymic focal point for English-Canadian culture as a whole” (Slemon, 412).
Hodgins’s book itself becomes a site of memory, a textual space functioning as a monument to the author’s vision of magical British Columbia, although, as Laurie Ricou points out, the author also burlesques the myth of the uniqueness and newness of the province (Ricou, 162). The capacity of magic realist texts to become sites of memory monumentalizing regions is, however, best exemplified by Alistair MacLeod’s works. While his characters are capable of creating only the most private lieu de mémoire, little shrines of private remembrances shot with deep consciousness of tradition and magic that have been with their people for generations, the author’s intention is clearly to textually memorialize the Cape Breton way of life, beliefs and attitudes that have been rapidly disappearing. Just like Hodgins’s Vancouver Island in many ways evokes Ireland, in MacLeod’s texts Cape Breton reiterates, most often, Scotland and its traditional patterns of life. As I have argued elsewhere, the fictional space in many of his works might be defined as that of spacialized memory, in which through the agency of place the present is always imbued with the past (Rzepa, 56). Written as an expression of the will to remember, they nonetheless express the belief in the essential impossibility of communicating what is remembered. For the characters and, given his preoccupation with those topics, also for the author, “the quest for memory” becomes here indeed “the search for one’s history” (Nora 1989, 13), both communal and private. They also seem to try to pay “an impossible debt” by using memory to create an identity compound of an “authentic” Cape Bretoner of Celtic origin. No wonder as the motivation for the creation of magic realist texts and sites of memory seems to be similar: “a sense of cultural loss and recovery” (Faris, 134). MacLeod’s texts verify Nora’s claim that “it is no longer genesis that we seek but instead the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer” (Nora 1989, 18).

Many works of magic realism center in one way or another on objects that function within the narrative space as portable lieu de mémoire, most often becoming anchors for the memory of a family treated itself as a small community and as an element of a broader community. Thus the hope-chest smelling of cedar in Anne-Marie MacDonald’s Fall on Your Knees evokes for Materia the never-seen Lebanon, which becomes the mythical country of happiness for her and a bolster to her Lebanese identity, which she constructs separated from her community, on the basis of the stories of the homeland that she was told as a child. Her daughters continue the work of transforming the chest into a site of memory, making it the repository of painful, repressed memories.
Beth Weeks’s mother’s scrapbook in Gail Anderson-Dargatz’s *The Cure for Death by Lightning* is a site where the everyday life of both the family and, though to a lesser degree, of the community is commemorated. At the same time it is a deeply personal document, its pages made from “the backs of letters, scraps of wallpaper, bags, and brown wrapping, and […] paper [mother] made herself from the pulp of vegetables and flowers” (Anderson-Dargatz, 1-2). Paper clippings, recipes and remedies it contains function as anchors for personal memories and, for Beth, as evidence of what is remembered. They are interspersed with brief personal remarks, sometimes functioning as links between events from the life of the community and personal concerns connected with the family; such is, for example, the effect of writing Beth’s name with an exclamation mark underneath the funeral notice of a local girl mauled by a bear and a warning of bear attacks. It expresses love and concern, but Beth reads it also as a warning not to touch the scrapbook. The scrapbook appeals to all the senses and thus is capable of waking most intimate memories as its pages, turned many times in the course of everyday cooking and baking, exude familiar kitchen smells. It also seems to be the only space in which the mother feels free to voice, however cryptically, her concerns connected with her teenage daughter and her budding sexuality. As the bear attack in the novel gains a sexual context and is metaphorized to stand for the dangers of pubescence and sexuality, the one-word note expresses more than it might seem at first glance.

The other outlet for the mother’s emotions in Anderson-Dargatz’s novel is provided by the ghost of her own mother to whom she talks constantly. As in many other magic realist novels, also here the ghost functions as a visualisation (though for most characters invisible) of memory, or, to be more specific, the visualisation of concerns of the past that are carried over into the present. “Because ghosts make absence present,” writes Lois Parkinson Zamora, “they foreground magical realism’s most basic concern – the nature and limits of the knowable […]” (Zamora, 498).

According to Wendy Faris, “magical realism can be seen […] as a manifestation of a perennial cultural need, for a sense of contact with cosmic forces that extend beyond material reality and the individual and the discourses that accommodate that contact” (Faris, 75). It is, to a large extent, through ghostly presences that magic realist novels aim at satisfying the need of retaining some connection with the past and dealing with it in a way different from traditional historical inquiry. Hence the importance of memory, especially in its collective, cultural aspect. The question of discourse that
Faris mentions is also essential in the conceptualization of at least some magic realist novels as sites of memory. In some of the novels literary techniques employed mirror on the formal level the definition of les lieux de mémoire as uniting apparent oppositions: according to Nora sites of memory are “simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial […] immediately available to concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration” (Nora 1989, 18). His words can well be used to describe magic realist texts, which, by definition, are celebrations of hybridity and a coming together of opposites. The discourse of magic realism constitutes a specific subversion of realism from which it draws, and thus also, in a sense, a subversion of the discourse of history on which it often depends. The defocalization of magic realist texts, to use Wendy B. Faris’s term, i.e. the fact that “the narrative […] seems to come from two radically different perspectives at once” (Faris, 43), that is the magic and the real, coupled with the tendency of the genre to, as Faris says, “remember the future’ – in other words to use the past to reorient that future” (Faris, 80), have the effect of legitimizing memory, and make the genre a perfect space for the creation of textual lieux de mémoire.

Works Cited


