

AN ALTERNATIVE ALTERNATIVE TO
METAPHYSICS
PRÉCIS OF *MEMORY ASSEMBLAGES: SPECTRAL
REALISM AND THE LOGIC OF ADDITION*

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Memory Assemblages can be read as addressing the inevitable reference of anything that seems present to a slippery past. It can also be seen as concerning the insistent passing of the past – it never ceases to pass through us, who are engaged in retrieving what has been left from what is gone. A few weeks after the book was accepted for publication, an intense genocide promoted by my fellow Jews who have settled in Palestine began to unfold. The violence of colonization had been there for a century, but the events after October 2023 precipitated a deeper shift in how I see the past – the past of the Zionist enterprise, the past of these fellow Jews and of Jews in general, and my own past. As a consequence, I felt compelled to change my first name, from the Israeli *Hilan* ('tree') to the Arab *Shajara* ('tree'). To return to *Memory Assemblages* after more than two years of additional events and further reflection is to retrieve something else. According to the book, it is itself – just like its author – a memory assemblage and, at the same time, an ingredient in memory assemblages to come.

The book proposes and elaborates a spectral realist pan-mnemism. In broad strokes, this is the claim that reality can be seen not as composed by a landscape of full presences – objects, principles, laws, relations, properties, completed events – but rather by diachronic combinations of archives and addends that impact them. This pan-mnemism holds that we should replace full presences – which are complete in their own present time – with memory assemblages composed always by two diachronic poles: that of retaining and that of retrieving. It is involved with the spectral because it is about the coming back of things; though not quite the same as they were, they return with the addends that have come to

the picture as their surroundings cannot be kept with them. The entwining of memory and addition is thus a central tenet of the book – it is through addition that what has been archived is retrieved and it is upon what has been retained that any addition acts. Addition is the introduction of something from the exterior, from outside, from the outdoors – it is addition that ensures there is no synchronous totality and something else is always brought in. It is a figure of exteriority – as such, it is asymmetric and irreversible. The outdoors adds something to the past and it is this interplay between what was left and what is added that is in the kernel of reality which is thus irreducibly diachronic and insistently haunted by what has been.

Pan-mnemism is thus an ultrametaphysics in the sense that Catherine Malabou gives to the term: an effort to provide an alternative to the metaphysics (or presence). It is, thus, something that occupies the space of the different ways Martin Heidegger envisaged a departure from metaphysics, of the importance Emmanuel Levinas gave to exteriority to break away from the sameness embedded in ontologist thinking and of Jacques Derrida's effort to envisage what remains from a thorough deconstruction of presence. It is, thus, an alternative alternative to metaphysics, one that is inspired by Heidegger and Levinas and closely influenced by Derrida's focus on writing, on archives, on the supplement and on dissemination. It is informed by Malabou's criticism of Derrida – and partially by her own ultrametaphysical propositions – to propose an alternative that rejects traces (as it rejects memory traces) while also rejecting the prominence of form, advocated by Malabou. The force of addition in this ultrametaphysics is that of making sure that no content is ever provided by an archive alone – what is retained is blind until addends impact it and retrieve it. Memory assemblages are held to be ubiquitous: they are in theories, in ideas, in texts, in museums, in genetic codes, in the tree trunks, in the composition of the soil and in social configurations. They are diachronic composites that depend on addition – like inductive conclusions, they are hostage to what will still come to the picture.

Time is itself a result of addition – the diachrony of a memory assemblage is a result of an addend picking up different retained archives from different times all of which anterior to its arrival. This idea that the past is embedded in the assemblage is a consequence of the indexicalist nature of pan-mnemism. In my

previous book *Indexicalism*, I recommended a view according to which the world is itself deictic: that is, best described in terms of indexicals rather than substantives. This entails that the past cannot be fully replaced by a description of any kind – tense indexicals like yesterday or next year require no *de dicto* explications as ‘before the sun went down last’ or ‘after December’ for those explications inevitably would involve indexicals (like ‘after’, ‘before’, ‘last’, ‘down’ or even ‘sun’ and ‘December’). The past is thus an indexical and, it is as such, that it is brought to the picture by addends which are themselves indexical too – and thus situated. Ultrametaphysics, oriented by a suspicion of presences and of the present, has been concerned with time since Heidegger who equated the shift of focus towards the ontological difference and away from subsisting beings and the rejection of time as being less than constitutive. In one way or another, resolving reality in terms of a synchronicity is one of the metaphysical features that are to be exorcized. The spectral realism of *Memory Assemblages* conceives of reality deferring to the past while hostage to addition. The idea of *Verweisung* (referral, reference, assignment), importantly operative in *Being and Time*, is perhaps a central notion in pan-mnemism: the world is made of addends bringing up archives of all sorts, archives that are always beholden to addition. As a consequence of this diachronicity, anything refers – refers to something other than itself and, although it would certainly refer to various other things (to what is before it, to what is nearby, to what is different, to what is within it, to what is outside it), it refers to its past. To claim that things refer involves the idea that things are engaged in the activity of pointing, that they carry a reliance on something else. In particular, their reliance on their past. The claim thus concerns the ubiquity of a deictic quality – that of carrying its past.

The book emerges from the recent interest in philosophy and elsewhere by a less human-centered approach to thought and reality – this has been fueled by movements like Speculative Realism and New Materialism. It is also inspired by Alfred Whitehead’s philosophy of the organism which champions the idea that processes constitute reality – while his processes are mainly concerned with perception, my spectral realism insists on the centrality of memory. This centrality is a consequence of understanding the spectral turn that has started with some gestures of Derrida in *Specters of Marx* and developed in many directions in various areas and in different parts of the world – the book attends

to some of these debates happening in South America – as closely tied with issues in memory. The spectral turn brings the past, death, inheritance, promises, debts, traditions and the intergenerational quest for justice to the stage. Further, ghosts are at odds with the vocabulary of presence; they challenge the regime of visibility and suggest that perception has been overstated as a special key to reality. The spectral, however, with its insisting coming back, is similar to what memory – and not only remembering – does: memory also can be conjured by bringing something back and is often haunted by sudden, unexplained returns of something that was unsolicited. Memory can be treated as an *explanans* for many features of thought and the world – and not as something to be explained. The notion of memory assemblage – a portion of what was placed in retention associated with a retrieval action triggered by addends – is faithful to this spectral and mnemonic character of what is real.

Memory Assemblages engages with work on specters recently put forward in different areas – media studies, cinema, history, and social criticism – and in particular with the work of philosophers such as Gabriela Balcarce, Santiago Arcila, and Fabián Ludueña. Their accounts of specters are discussed and contrasted to the one proposed in the book. Spectral realism claims that ghosts, revenants, and other spooks are not going to be fully exorcised in favor of a transparent view of things that is incompatible with the workings of memory. Specters are part of how things are because the past and the future – and, in a sense, memory and addition – cannot be pushed into irrelevance. A spectral reality is crucially diachronic. What emerges then is the world as a field of inquiry where addends help uncover what was, often unknowingly, placed in retention. Thus, we cannot be sure that anything is fully forgotten – and this is what makes specters unpredictable and ensures that they elude the devices of control. Memory, and forgetting, are like a second life of the past, and a second life that has its effects on the first. The insistence of specters means that nothing is free from the traps of forgetting and remembering.

The book is associated with recent efforts to propose broad accounts of things informed by the philosophical work of criticism and suspicion carried on in the twentieth century. It is, nonetheless, a project that departs from much of what goes under the name of speculative realism as it argues that often speculation is committed to some tenets of the metaphysics of presence. If there is a speculative

argument in the book, it is an ultraspeculative argument that deconstructs the resulting general landscape that speculative arguments often assume and embraces a view that is not committed to totality. The book postulates no landscape of memory assemblages but rather a memory assemblage composed of other memory assemblages as the picture proposed dismisses full presences. A broader picture cannot be achieved unless it is itself, as much as what it is about, a memory assemblage. The book is thus a narrative that can be narrated in different ways. In contrast with *Indexicalism*, it is no paradoxical proposal, it is no general view to exorcise all other general views. Rather, it is a memory assemblage among others.

The book begins with the elaboration of the principle of addition, which is not a principle in the sense that it has no specific content – it is rather an operation that dismantles what has come before in a way that depends on that past consigned to memory. This operation is common to thought and reality, enabling a renewed stance on issues concerning nothingness, singularity, and traces. Addition appears as a central operation that, in a sense, washes up the past by reshaping it and rendering beginnings, in some respects, irrelevant. The chapters are organized around it (its principle, its diachronicity, its hauntology, and its logic). Several further figures of asymmetric addition are considered throughout the book – such as Derrida’s notion of the supplement, Louis Althusser’s remarks on Epicurean swerves, Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of struction, and the Marxist conception of the forces of production. These figures help to reflect on addition and its connection to the workings of memory. They also reveal the scope of addition and how it enables the exterior to impact all sorts of things. *Memory Assemblages* also proposes elements of a logic of addition, based on Derrida’s notion of the supplement and on scrutiny of the derivative character of negation. In doing so, it engages recent work by philosophers such as Sebastian Rödl and Irad Kimhi, who argue for a continuity between thought and being that is put into question by the notion of memory assemblages. As Paul Livingston has argued, if intelligence is indeed guided by consistency, this guidance is not detectable. This undecidability, which follows from results by Kurt Gödel, Alfred Tarski, and others, entails that thought is neither convergent nor transparent. An account of the logic of addition clarifies how thought and the rest of the world can instead be understood in terms of memory assemblages. This minimal logic, in which no

argument in the system is monotonic, is paraconsistent, since it is not the case that anything is entailed by a contradiction. In this way, the book indicates how negation can be thought of as a consequence of addition, suggesting that there is something ultimately more disruptive in addition than in negation. It further proposes that concreteness itself is a consequence of operations of asymmetric addition.

A coda explores the notion of production and how it can be modeled on addition. This entails a form of spectral Marxism not committed either to metaphysics or to the modern understanding of technology in terms of artificialization. It thus rejects the elevation of cognition above responsibility. The coda proposes a reading of the schizo in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* – the schizo, focused on production and indifferent to both registration and distribution – in terms of addition and memory. This spectral Marxism is aligned with salient ideas of Denise Ferreira da Silva, who criticizes the onto-epistemological tenets of modernity by examining the extent to which slave labor undergirds its economic, juridical, and ethical practices. The coda then advances a spectral, post-nihilist Marxism that situates central Marxist claims concerning the forces of production outside any metaphysical framework. Production appears as an analogue of addition and can thus be understood in its light. This might suggest that addition is the central figure of *Memory Assemblages*, but it is so only insofar as it brings memory – and with it specters, inquiry, justice, and excess, with which addition insistently deals – to the fore. The book thus suggests that we inhabit a diachronically hybrid world.