

Exploring Strategies of Forgetting and Ignorance in Social Justice Education: Can We Forget What We Don't Know?

Jennifer Logue

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

In response to the cultural obsession with memorializing tragic and traumatic events that admonish us to “Never Forget,” Mario Di Paolantonio makes the case that we have much to gain from a rethinking of what it means to forget. Forgetting has many important uses, one of which, drawing on Nietzsche, he suggests, shields us from an ultimate and untimely breakdown of memory overload. Rather than disparage the inevitable and unruly forgetting we find in ourselves and in our students, Di Paolantonio urges us to acknowledge the *work* of forgetting and to recognize it as an active force bound up with human agency and creativity, as a strategy we deploy in order to live well with history and with ourselves.

In calling attention to the work involved in different forms of forgetting, the inevitable revisions and fabrications that constitute memory, and administered stories of official remembrance, Di Paolantonio warns us to be wary of the educator who, with the best of intentions, seeks to teach about traumatic historical events so that we never repeat them. Here, he cautions, we need to “reckon with a self-serving calculus that tends to accompany the desire to pedagogically manage memory,” as though it were something transparent we could predict and control. Indeed, how do we teach about a history that never ends and that we can never fully comprehend? Whose stories are centralized and whose inadvertently (and not) remain marginalized in its teaching?

When we acknowledge that forgetting is sometimes strategic and that memory is motivated, we need to wrestle with the fact that: “What we are urged to remember is bound up with how we are being urged to live ... the preferred life has its set of preferred memories.”¹ We ought to ask: What future do our memories have in mind? Whose interests do memorial museums actually serve? What and whom have been forgotten in their construction? Rather than asking how tragic events should be remembered, is it better to ask how they should be forgotten, as Di Paolantonio suggests?

Contrary to common sense thinking that assumes that forgetting is a mere *lack* of memory and an impediment to learning, Di Paolantonio makes the provocative claim that rather than learn *not* to forget, we need to learn *how* to forget. He introduces us to the work of artist Alicia Framis to show that in rethinking forgetting, we can grapple with tragic events before they become yet one more memorial. However, I’m uncertain that forgetting the Guantanamo prison she invites us to memorialize in the present is as viable a pedagogical strategy as Di Paolantonio suggests. In working towards an “ethic of forgetting,” he introduces us to yet another, even more radical and fundamental, form of forgetting that we have yet to sufficiently grapple with in education. There is, he posits, drawing on Blanchot, a more “originary forgetting”

that happens when we are faced with “the disaster,” an event that “radically imposes and *subjects us* to an extreme experience,” which cannot be registered, overcome, or mastered. Blanchot’s disaster speaks to a “radical *agnosia* in which we cannot sense or make sense of the world.” But I wonder how we might forget what we cannot know or process. How might we determine our complicity in forgetting if it cannot be registered?

While Di Paolantonio is concerned with the cultural obsession with memorializing tragedies and administering remembrance, I worry more about cultural efforts to censor the past and administer ignorance in the present. From the curricular omissions and silences in k-12 education, to the elimination of ethnic and women’s studies programs in higher education, should we not be more concerned with enforced forgetting and enforced ignorance rather than the “enforced remembrance” of which Di Paolantonio writes? I am not certain that an “ethic of forgetting” is the antidote to various forms of structural and compulsory ignorance that circulate in official stories of remembrance. There is already too much forgetting in the circulation of fake knowledge, false memory, mis- and dis-information in the virtual world of social media, and digital forms of personal and unofficial journalism. What shape would an ethic of forgetting take in the face of teachers being told not to discuss controversial contemporary events in their classrooms?

Di Paolantonio’s analysis has got me wondering about what forgetting and ignorance have in common, how they might be distinguished, and why it is important to ask. Both ignorance and forgetting can be strategic, and both shield us from difficult knowledge that threatens to shatter our worlds and sense of self. Both are inevitable in the face of what cannot be registered in a straightforward manner. But, is the active forgetting that enables us to live well with history (and ourselves) any different from, say, rational ignorance? And how would we account for different forms of complicity in different forms forgetting in such an ethic? Surely, to take an extreme example, the drives in the Germans and the Jews to forget the Holocaust render them differently complicit in forgetting, but how does this become ever more complex with the relentless marching on of time and the transmission of knowledge, its absence, and its erasure between the generations?

In her anthropological work on memory, forgetting, and ignorance, Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj helps to distinguish forgetting from ignorance, and shows that they are inextricably linked yet distinct. She provides us with fruitful analytical categories that can help us understand how the activity of forgetting can be an important survival strategy for one generation, but then produce a dangerous and structural ignorance in subsequent generations.² An ethic of forgetting may not, therefore, be a laudable aim. And just as Di Paolantonio asks us to think about the purpose and function of the memorial museum and administered remembrance, Raj asks us to think about how the celebration of national holidays like Independence Day creates official memories and stories of remembrance that most certainly hold aspects of a forgotten past in order to shape a very particular future.

Helping us grapple with dynamics of forgetting, memory, and ignorance in the making and unmaking of history and cultural identities, Raj shows us how the ac-

tive and strategic erasure of knowledge in one generation transfers into an absence of knowledge in subsequent generations, which can then become a dangerous and systemic ignorance that can be harnessed to disavowed political ends. She takes the particular example of how the national celebration of Independence Day in India coincides with Partition, the simultaneous event that split British India into India and Pakistan. She shows us how another side of Indian independence, Partition, remains on the margins of national collective memory in India, and is understood as an unavoidable, but less than tragic, event that enabled the new nation to gain its freedom.

This forgets the way that Partition displaced Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims who found themselves bereft of their lands and fortunes, were cast into the category of “refugee,” and forced to move across the seemingly arbitrarily established border into the areas that now defined the two new states. Raj traces the way that the displaced Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus adopted an active forgetting, similar to the first form described by Di Paolantonio, in order to be able to endure the pain of what they lost, and to protect their children from the suffering that happens when one is labeled an outcast. The children of the refugees, now Indian citizens, do not know that despite their religious differences, former Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu refugees shared interests, language, and a sense of community. The affinity shared despite religious diversity is now long forgotten, and there is a solidified notion of a unified Hindu Indian nation that ignores religious and linguistic difference. Raj equates this active forgetting and subsequent structural ignorance to the Rise of the Hindu right in Delhi and the ongoing demonization of Muslims there.

Can her analysis help us to make sense of the dangers of forgetting, the current disaster we face with regard to the Syrian refugee crisis, and the bolstering of Canadian national identity as we boast globally that we have successfully welcomed now 25,000 Syrian refugees (hardly a significant number in the grand scheme of things)? What are these refugees strategically forgetting? What are they being forced to forget? How will Canada as a nation benefit from the new forms of structural ignorance that we can predict will likely ensue? As the news both reports and ignores the atrocities faced by those forced to migrate across Europe only to be sent back again, what is being actively and forcefully forgotten? What escapes our ability to fully comprehend and adequately deal with this “disaster”?

Di Paolantonio’s call to rethink just what it means to forget is compelling, for we can then begin to deconstruct the motivations behind memories that too often seem innocent, unified, and complete. But we might also begin to trace out how strategic forgetting might not be the best strategy, as it can result in the structuralizing of ignorance. Such insight seems particularly relevant for teachers in the social justice classroom, where grappling with these realities is far from easy. Tensions between differently positioned students can run high. Further, there are times when positionality seems less significant and there are clearly shared strategies of forgetting and ignorance across lines of difference. The task is to begin to negotiate these tensions and to engage students in difficult dialogue about the disasters of our time in ways that can open us up to the ways we are all invested in various forms of forgetting and ignorance.

-
1. Adam Phillips, The Forgetting Musem, *Eurozine*. <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2005-06-24-phillips-en.html>
 2. Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj, "Ignorance, Forgetting, and Family Nostalgia: Partition, the Nation State, and Refugees in Delhi," *Social Analysis* 44, no. 2 (2000): 30-55.