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How to Forget the Unforgettable? On Collective Trauma, Cultural Identity, and Mnemotechnologies

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ABSTRACT
Nietzsche’s notion of “active forgetting” is employed to better understand the disruptive and destructive influence of collective trauma on cultural identity. Throughout the article genocide is taken as a cause of extreme trauma and used to illustrate this impact. Active forgetting in this context should not be confused with memories fading away; it is rather a positive and active force, a capacity which an individual, a society, or a culture needs to prosper. This notion provides guidance on how to banish the trauma to the extent that it ceases to paralyze the traumatized group. Technological skills that release negative emotions and ideas generated by the trauma from the collective memory—mnemotechnologies—are required to restore the capacity of forgetting.

KEYWORDS
Active forgetting; collective trauma; cultural identity; mnemotechnologies; Nietzsche

In the second essay of his Untimely Meditations (Nietzsche, 1997a), the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued that humans envy cows, and animals in general, because cows seem to live free of boredom and pain. Cows are happy because they lack the capacity to remember and, hence, have no past or present. In contrast to human beings, they are unhistorical. For Nietzsche, this observation of the difference between animals and humans was a preamble to a reflection on the liberating power of what he sometimes called “active forgetting.” Active forgetting in this context has nothing to do with memories fading away but is a positive and active force, a capacity that an individual, a society, and a culture need to live healthy and happy lives, have faith in themselves, and create a new future. Active forgetting enables selective remembering; it defuses and neutralizes past experiences that are not beneficial for present and future life. Nietzsche claimed that it is possible to live almost without memory, and to live happily in that state, as animals demonstrate. However, it is altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting.

Traumatized individuals show many different symptoms, such as sadness, anxiety, depression, guilt, anger, grief, fatigue, pain, confusion, despair, loss of self-esteem, and loss of trust. However, most experts agree that the key to understanding traumatic events or experiences is that they completely overwhelm the ability of victims to grasp and cope with what happened; that is, to integrate the ideas and emotions that are instigated by that experience in a conceivable and acceptable narrative (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995, p. 60). In Judith Herman’s words, “Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (1992, p. 33). In the longer run, traumatic events can damage mechanisms that are required to grasp unwarranted events, handle difficult situations, and live a “normal” life (Van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth 1996; Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, & Steele, 2006).

The traumatized subject can be an individual, but can also be a society or a culture. From this perspective, genocide can cause extreme trauma because the killing and injuring of thousands or even millions of human beings—who are reduced to the one dimension (e.g., religion, ethnicity,
skin color) that the perpetrator deems unacceptable—abolish all possible frameworks and mechanisms that enable survivors, as well as their descendants, to understand and cope with what has happened (Denham, 2008). It destroys all familiar assumptions and expectations about the world and other people (Kauffman, 2013; see also the broader “Shattered Assumptions Theory” of Janoff-Bulman, 1992). The self and world understanding of genocide survivors and their descendants could be violated to such a degree that it transforms and disrupts their identity (Sandole & Auerbach, 2013; Sigal, 1998).

This does not mean that cultural identity is considered here as static. It is dynamic and, therefore, subject to continuous transitions and change. There are, however, different forms of change: a culture can become stronger and flourish or it can become weaker and disintegrate. A necessary requirement for it to flourish seems to be the power of active forgetting. If active forgetting is, as Nietzsche thought, a necessary condition for a healthy and strong culture with a prosperous future, then conversely severe trauma can be a real threat to the identity of the affected group or community. I do not focus here on particular victimized groups or communities. However, to illustrate the explanatory potential of the proposed thesis, throughout the article I highlight the trauma caused by genocides. Genocide cases illustrate well how trauma can damage the capacity of active forgetting and severely disrupt the victimized group’s cultural identity.

In addition to helping understand the destructive workings of trauma, in this article I also propose how the capacity of active forgetting could be regained and a ruptured identity could be treated. From this perspective, active forgetting, as will be made clear, does not imply that victims of trauma should erase what has happened from their memory or pretend that it did not happen. Instead, the purpose of active forgetting is to banish the trauma by integrating it into the identity of a culture in such a way that it ceases to paralyze that group or community. This requires certain technological skills that release negative emotions and ideas generated by the trauma from the collective memory: mnemotechnologies.

### Cultural identity and collective trauma

#### Cultural identity

The first step in clarifying the proposed view of cultural identity is to say something about personal identity. To group the philosophical accounts of personal identity very roughly, it is useful to start with a distinction between two perspectives: a static and a dynamic perspective. Aristotle (Metaphysics, Book VII; see Aristotle, 1984, p. 89–94) was a proponent of the static perspective. Although Aristotle tried to do justice to change in his ontology, he argued that change always presupposes that there must be something (invariable) that changes. As a consequence, Aristotle attributed an invariable essence to the human being. The human being is an unchanging substance with variable qualities. This view corresponds to a frequently held conception of identity in everyday life: that, although a person undergoes many changes, he or she remains the same person. Descartes (1985) and Kant (2003) developed this view further by emphasizing the importance of independence and autonomy: What makes a person the same person also makes him or her a different person.

In contrast, Nietzsche represents the dynamic perspective. He defined human beings as “still undetermined animals” (Nietzsche, 2002, p. 56). In Nietzsche’s view, the essence of humans is that they have no essence; by their very nature, they have no nature. Unlike animals, which are largely determined by their instincts, the nature of humans is not pregiven. A similar interpretation of the human condition is expressed in Helmuth Plessner’s (1928) idea of “eccentricity.” According to this conception, humans are excentric in the sense that they are always outside themselves. The human senses are always mediated by such cultural artifacts as language and technology, and are therefore never natural (Plessner, 1928). Nietzsche and Plessner understood human identity not as something that is already established, but as something that has to be continuously developed, reinterpreted, and regained.
From the proposed perspective, the more dynamic view of identity is endorsed, but it goes beyond Nietzsche and emphasizes the importance of community in developing a strong and healthy identity (see also Aydin, 2007, 2009). In this view, a human is not born as an independent and autonomous creature in a vacuum, but is born into and develops in a social network. Humans try to make sense of the world through interactions with others. It is through such interactions that customs, habits, and beliefs help form an individual’s identity: The individual identifies with certain aspects of the surrounding society and assimilates what seems to be important, right, or just. These values and ideals are not coined individually, but are part of a tradition and are sustained because they provide orientation. This orientation enables individuals to develop a strong and healthy identity that reflects who they want to be(come).

Personal identity is, in this account, to a great extent a cultural identity, which contrasts with Nietzsche’s credo “where the state [society] ends, only there begins the human being who is not superfluous” (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 36). Here, cultural identity refers to the system of social values, beliefs, goals, and ideals that an individual might incorporate to develop a coherent personal identity (Aydin, 2008, 2009). Personal identity is, therefore, in a certain sense never completely “personal.” It is developed by an individual identifying with something suprapersonal (see also Taylor, 1992). Personal identity also involves taking responsibility for things outside of an individual’s control (name, skin color, language, religion) and making it one’s own (responsibility).

This view of the relationship between goals and ideals on the one hand, and human and cultural identity on the other hand, should not be confounded with fundamentalist doctrines that ground identity exclusively on a shared past origin that dictates which norms and rules must be obeyed. An essential characteristic of a goal or ideal is that it is something that has to be realized in the future; it is of the type of a would-be, not a has-been. Although the content of an ideal will to a certain extent depend on past experiences, it cannot be completely exhausted by them. Goals and ideals constitute identity not by virtue of the sheer repetition of what one was, but much more by virtue of efforts to realize what one wants to become, which often requires overcoming what one was. Since what one wants to become is a kind of directedness towards a possible future, the goals and ideals that one pursues are necessarily vague and general, and therefore susceptible to modification and improvement (see Aydin, 2008, 2009).

**Collective trauma**

“Trauma” is a term borrowed from the Ancient Greek meaning “wound” (Figley, 2012, p. 437). Initially, it was used in surgery to denote an injury from an external cause. In the current context of reflecting on the effects of traumatic events suffered by, for example, descendants of genocide victims, the focus is psychological (rather than physical) trauma. Psychological trauma can affect and damage bodily functions, but the source of the injury will still be psychological.

Psychological trauma is basically a type of damage that violates the familiar ideas and expectations about the world of an individual or society, plunging them into a state of extreme confusion and uncertainty. Typical causes of individual psychological trauma are sexual abuse and domestic violence, particularly in childhood. War or other types of mass violence often cause trauma that, besides individuals, involves a society or a culture (Bessel & Van Der Kolk, 1987, pp. 1–30).

From this perspective, genocide can cause extreme trauma because the deliberate and systematic destruction (in whole or in part) of an ethnic, racial, religious, or national group violates every possible assumption people might have about their world. One might be able, as Günther Anders wrote in his response to the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, grasp the killing of one person, or maybe of ten. But the killing of thousands and millions of people goes beyond every possible imagination (Eatherly & Anders, 1989, p. 12).

What makes genocide so difficult to incorporate into one’s belief system is that the perpetrators of massacres generally pick one (for some members of the victimized group, even arbitrary) characteristic that they deem evil or unacceptable and use this one dimension to justify their actions. So, for
example, the membership of a particular ethnic, national, or religious group can be sufficient for being classified as a target for elimination. No other or additional criteria are necessary (see also Schaal & Elbert, 2006). The inability to grasp this type of atrocities seems to apply specifically to genocides inflicted on civilians that have no part in the political arena and have neither arms nor a tradition of warring with the perpetrators.

This refers back to the idea introduced above that the ethnic, national, or religious background of people is part of their identity and, hence, is often significant. In discussing cultural identity, the importance of tradition in developing one's personal identity has been stressed. However, one's personal and cultural identity does not completely coincide with one's ethnic, national, or religious background. This is why the question “What have I done/we done to deserve this?” not only indicates that innocent people do not deserve to be victimized, but also is an appeal to be treated as a particular and unique individual or group with particular and sometimes deviant beliefs, motives, and desires.

Another reason that cultural identity cannot completely coincide with certain ethnic, national, or religious traits is that cultural identity, as elaborated in the previous section, is not a sheer repetition of doctrines derived from a past origin but an endeavor to realize what one wants to become, as an individual and a society, which sometimes requires overcoming what one was (see Aydin, 2009). When genocide reduces the individuals within a group to one dimension, this negates the possibility for people to be actually and potentially more than their background and more than their history. By reducing them to one aspect of their past, their future is also destroyed.

A trauma caused by genocide refers to an event of such violence that, from a psychological perspective, it causes an inflow of stress so strong that it defeats normally successful defense mechanisms. Diagnostic status and symptom severity of the experienced trauma are currently determined using, for example, the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Symptom Scale Interview (determining post-traumatic stress symptoms; Foa & Tolin, 2000) and the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (administering depression and anxiety symptoms; Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974). As a general rule, trauma stuns the subject and, sooner or later, brings about a disorganization of its psychic economy (Van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996). PTSD is basically a disorder in which the memory of the traumatic event comes to dominate the victims’ mind-set, diminishing their lives of meaning and pleasure (van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1991).

Several studies confirm long-term effects of trauma caused by genocide. Descendants of the 1994 Tutsi genocide survivors in Rwanda were at high risk of developing mental health problems, had a high trauma load, and missed family integration and support even 16 years after the genocide (Rieder and Elbert, 2013). In other studies, descendants of Armenian and Syriac Christian genocide survivors expressed feeling burdened by having to carry emotional memories of previous generations. They indicated that they have more difficulties living a normal emotional life, which is expressed in deep sadness, distrust of outsiders, and a damaged sense of their identity and reality (Cetrez, 2017; Kalayjian, Shahinian, Gergerian, & Saraydarian, 1996). Recently, Yehuda et al. (2015) indicated that children of genocide survivors can even inherit trauma in their DNA. This study revealed that Holocaust offspring had 7.7% lower methylation than control offspring, and had low cortisol levels associated with depression, emotional hypersensitivity, and social anxiety. If a traumatic event shared by an ethnic or religious group is not dealt with or paid proper attention, it not only can cause shifts, disruptions, and disturbances in the group’s cultural identity and hinder its ability to flourish in the future, but it ultimately can also lead to its obliteration (Kalayjian & Weisberg, 2002).

**The effects of trauma on cultural identity**

In this section, I elaborate in more detail on two relevant—and related—effects of collective trauma on identity. First, I further explain how trauma can bring about discontinuity and rupture in identity formation. Next, I additionally clarify which role the inability of forgetting plays in the destructive influence of trauma on identity, also taking into account more recent studies on forgetfulness.
**Discontinuity and rupture**

Individuals constitute to a great extent their identity by orienting themselves toward values, goals, and ideals that are provided by tradition—that some of these values and ideals might be rejected or seen as irrelevant does not undermine this view. This orientation makes it possible to relate different experiences to one another and make sense of them, thus providing self-understanding. Values, goals, and ideals allow individuals to integrate different facets of their lives and to give their actions, as Taylor (1992) said, a meaningful place in a coherent narrative. That is, individuals depend on values, goals, and ideals that are provided by a tradition and culture to give their lives a desired meaning and direction and to enable them to form a coherent, healthy, and strong individual and social identity.

Severe collective trauma can pose a direct assault on the continuity of individual and social identity (see Volkan, 2011). What makes a traumatic event so distressing and damaging is its violation of primordial assumptions that people have about themselves and the world. One of the major difficulties that traumatized individuals and groups face is reconciling the harsh and difficult-to-frame reality of extreme adversity with previously held, more benign assumptions about oneself, other people, and the world. After the traumatic event, the world is never the same again. The hate-based targeting of a group on the basis of one (for some members of the group, even arbitrary) characteristic makes integrating the atrocities in an intelligible narrative even more difficult. This discontinuity and rupture in their identity formation triggers in the traumatized individuals a search for meaning and closure: “Why did this event happen to me/us/our people?” “How could somebody kill so many human beings?” “How is this even possible?” And hopefully, “What can we do to cope with it?”

If the trauma is not sufficiently banished, the gap between the reality of the carnage and previously held assumptions about self, others, and the world become unbridgeable. Although these atrocities are part of the history and culture of the group that has experienced the trauma, they cannot be given a proper place in their current belief system. The trauma disorganizes the group’s psychic economy because the beliefs, values, expectations, and ideals that are part of its cultural identity are radically shaken, challenged, and disrupted. This inability to reconcile and resolve a dark episode of history can disrupt the organization of the values, expectations, and ideals of a victimized group to such a degree that it no longer can provide sufficient orientation and self-esteem (see also Volkan, 2011, pp. 87–89). As a consequence, the further development and flourishing of a group’s cultural identity can be severely disturbed and even completely obstructed.

**Destruction of the capacity of forgetting**

The discontinuity and rupture that a trauma brings about and its obstruction of the further development of a cultural identity, as touched on above, can be psychologically explained by the destructive effects it has on essential defense mechanisms. A healthy individual, group, or society is capable of overcoming great problems and difficulties if his, or her, or its defense mechanisms provide resistance against and a refuge from stressful situations.

Providing a psychoanalytical explanation of the effects or symptoms of collective trauma is not my aim here. A psychoanalytical idiom is used only instrumentally to point to one defense mechanism that is of crucial importance in this context: the capacity of active forgetting. Of course, the psychoanalytical concept of defense mechanism is used here anachronistically since the term active forgetting is derived from Nietzsche’s work—and he coined this term before psychoanalysis was developed. Nevertheless, this concept could help us to better understand the destructive impact of severe collective trauma on cultural identity and even suggest possible ways to deal with it.

Active forgetting was for Nietzsche, as indicated earlier, not a passive dissipation of painful memories as time goes by. It was not a weakness of the mind, but an active faculty that regulates the chaos of impulses and enables the selection of what should enter and what should not enter
consciousness. Active forgetfulness also provides some silence; it makes it possible to shut the doors and windows of consciousness for a while so the individual is not bothered by the noise of and battle with past demons. Active forgetfulness is an active ability to suppress negative and traumatic memories, which is a necessary condition for a culture to uphold and develop itself further. It is a kind of defense mechanism that blocks harmful thoughts, enables a positive spirit, and makes place for the new. Nietzsche wrote, “The person [or group, or culture] in whom this apparatus of suppression is damaged, so that it stops working, can be compared (and not just compared) to a dyspeptic; he cannot ‘cope’ with anything” (Nietzsche, 1997b, p. 35).

Nietzsche’s notion of active forgetting seems to be related to what current psychologists call “psychogenic amnesia” (also sometimes named “hysterical amnesia,” “functional amnesia,” or “disassociative amnesia”), which is a form of memory loss that has no neurological organic cause (Kopelman, 2002). Often a distinction is made between two types of psychogenic amnesia: loss of autobiographical memories, which might even amount to loss of personal identity (global psychogenic amnesia) and loss of episodic memories (situation-specific psychogenic amnesia).

Evidence of psychogenic amnesia has been documented in Holocaust survivors, refugees, and traumatized soldiers, and victims of other disasters (Bower, 1990; Brown, Schefflin, & Whitfield, 1999; van der Kolk and Fisler 1995). Inspired by Freudian psychology, psychogenetic amnesia is understood as an act of self-preservation, as a kind of subconscious self-censorship (Weiner & Reed, 1969). Memory loss is viewed as a form of “motivated forgetting” (i.e., a method that people employ to protect themselves by repressing or blocking the recall of anxiety-arousing, psychologically dangerous memories). Although these memories are difficult to retrieve, they still remain in storage. Repressed memories, some authors believe, can unconsciously affect victims’ behavior in a very negative way, for example, by manifesting themselves in nightmares or the inability to form stable relationships (Weiner, 1968).

The mechanism of such memory loss remains controversial (see Crews, 1995, on the “memory wars”). Critiques have argued that traumatic events are highly memorable and seldom, if ever, forgotten (McNally, 2005). Also several paradigms have been developed to test whether or not false repressed memories could be purposefully implanted within a subject (Ofshe & Watters, 1994).

Freud acknowledged Nietzsche’s insights into forgetting as a defense mechanism (Freud, 1941, p. 162; 1955, p. 497), which could explain the apparent similarities between Nietzsche’s notion of active forgetting and modern Freudian explanations of psychogenic amnesia. However, there are also differences. First of all, we should recognize that Freud—although he acknowledged that this tendency could also be found in “healthy people”—focused on how “neurotic people” repress painful memories (Freud, 1941, p. 163), whereas for Nietzsche active forgetfulness characterized healthy people and was a condition for health. It prevented people from completely identifying themselves with their past and, hence, destroying their future. For Nietzsche, the problem was not that people forget or repress memories, it was that people cannot forget, which also renders the question of whether people really forget traumatic events or whether false memories are implanted in their minds in attempts to render memory irrelevant. In his words:

He who cannot sink down on the threshold of the moment and forget all the past, who cannot stand balanced like a goddess of victory without growing dizzy and afraid, will never know what happiness is—worse, he will never do anything to make others happy. Imagine the extremist possible example of a man who did not possess the power of forgetting at all and who was thus condemned to see everywhere a state of becoming: such a man would no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself…. 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. (Nietzsche, 1997a, p. 62)

Another difference between Nietzsche and the Freudian approach is that Nietzsche applied his analysis not only to individuals but also, and even more prominently, to groups and cultures. According to Nietzsche, “There is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture” (Nietzsche, 1997a, p. 62). Without the power of active forgetting, a culture
would be paralyzed and lose all faith in itself. As a consequence, further development and flourishing would be stunted. Although Nietzsche can be read as a psychologist and has influenced psychology, he was primarily a philosopher and “physician” of culture.

A damaged capacity to forget seems to be characteristic of a culture with a collective trauma caused by atrocities such as genocide. Because of this damaged capacity to forget, the trauma experienced cannot be given a proper place in the identity of that culture. To use a Nietzschean metaphor, the trauma is too big to digest and, as a consequence, damages the metabolism of a culture, which hinders further growth and flourishing. That the trauma cannot be given a proper place does not mean that it is not part of the cultural identity of the victims and their descendants. It is paradoxical: They are unable to integrate the trauma into their cultural identity and, at the same time, they can never let go of what has happened. It becomes a monster that haunts them unceasingly, a monstrum, something beyond normal human bounds that cannot be categorized and identified and persistently disrupts their mental order. It is inconceivable but, nevertheless, ever-present. If the collective trauma is not dealt with, it will ultimately completely define the identity of a culture. Therefore, a culture will entirely coincide with its history, or even worse: with one dark page of its history.

In some scenarios the historical truth about the event might even, as envisaged in Volkan’s (1991) “chosen trauma” thesis, become no longer important. What becomes important is that through sharing the trauma, members of the group are linked together, making the trauma an inseparable part of the group’s identity. In a worst-case scenario, this trauma is reactivated by a leader who uses it to instigate resentment and perpetuate otherwise unthinkable cruelty against others (Volkan, 1997).

The Freudian, more modern, psychological approach comes closer to Nietzsche’s analysis of active forgetting when reflecting on and providing treatments for constant disruptive remembering and reimagining of traumatic events. Memory of the traumatic event triggered by later stimuli can be so strong and realistic that it is encoded almost as a new current event each time, rather than as an old memory (Grillon, Cordova, Morgan, Charney, & Davis, 2004; Roozendaal, Barsegyan, & Lee, 2008). Psychologists will then seek ways to refill memories in their proper place, which is in the past instead of the present. The beta-adrenergic blocker propranolol, for example, has been used to block neurons responsible for extreme emotional responses to memories so that, over time, the account of traumatic events becomes just another story without the old traumatic personal associations. These treatments are not uncontested: There are are studies that challenge the presumed positive effect of beta blockers on memory reconsolidation (Donovan, 2010). Although Nietzsche did not propose pharmacological treatments for the incapacity to forget, he did stress the need to find a way to tackle this “illness,” though he focused more on cultures than on individuals. For a culture to continue to flourish, it is of crucial importance to give traumatic events their proper place in its history.

Attempts to cope with a trauma can begin if the events that invoked the trauma are recognized. This requires stakeholders to support the capacity to forget; otherwise, genocide can become to a great extent the identity of victimized groups and their descendants. It can freeze time and continue to frustrate further development. But before discussing what can be done to support this capacity to forget, more light must be shed on the relationship between forgetting and remembering. Here, mnemotechnologies play a crucial role.

**Mnemotechnologies**

Nietzsche’s reference to his forgetful animals and his claim that it is possible to live almost without memory, but altogether impossible to live at all without forgetting, indicated that forgetting not only is of great importance for survival, but also that remembering is something that has been developed and that has been, in Nietzsche’s terminology, “bred.” This is expressed in the question that opens his second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*: “To breed an animal with the prerogative to
promise—is that not precisely the paradoxical task which nature has set herself with regard to humankind?” (1997b, p. 35). Promising something presupposes remembering what was promised. In the same section, Nietzsche elaborated on what he meant: “This necessarily forgetful animal, in whom forgetting is a strength, representing a form of robust health, has bred for himself a counter-device, memory, with the help of which forgetfulness can be suspended in certain cases” (p. 36). Remembering is not a natural faculty, but something that has been developed by virtue of certain technologies. It is an active desire not to let go.

Here, Nietzsche was addressing the question of how humans can breed memories for themselves—which is a necessary condition for the establishment of such moral categories as responsibility and conscience. His answer went against humanist interpretations of the origin of morality: Nietzsche believed that humans were able to breed memories for themselves by employing violent mnemotechnologies. In his words, “‘A thing must be burnt in so that it stays in the memory: only something that continues to hurt stays in the memory’—that is a proposition from the oldest (and unfortunately the longest-lived) psychology on earth” (1997b, p. 38). Remembering was bred by virtue of such violent practices as tortures, sacrifices, and ascetic extremes—in short, by inflicting pain.

The coercive and harsh mnemotechnologies inflicted on the “forgetful animals” by the creators of society (Nietzsche called them the “born organizers”) to breed memory are experienced as painful because these “semi-animals” can no longer discharge their raw impulses, drives, and aggression outwardly (Nietzsche, 1997b, pp. 56–59). Transforming the wild unpredictable semianimals into predictable social beings with certain cultural beliefs, values, and ideals (the humans as we currently know them) is accomplished by violently going against the active force of forgetting, which initially required the painful constraint of primal drives without which memory (and a collective history) could not be induced. In the long run, this cultivation is effectively sustained by what Nietzsche called the “morality of custom” (Sittlichkeit der Sitte), which referred to the customs, habits, and rules that shape and mould an individual in such a way that he becomes a member of a society (Nietzsche, 1997b, p. 36).

Although painful mnemotechnologies were required to inscribe basic prohibitions and taboos in the memories of semianimals, these technologies were not considered as necessarily harmful. From the interest of society burning a few “I-don’t-want-to’s” (1997b, p. 39) into the memory of these semianimals was a necessary and, in the long run, beneficial measure. Civilization and culture would be simply impossible without the capacity of remembering. Hence, it would be a great mistake to think that Nietzsche did not value the capacity of remembering. The renunciation of culture as such clearly was not his aim.

Whether Nietzsche’s evolutionary account of the emergence of remembering should be taken literally or whether it should be understood more as an allegory is still being debated (the latter seems more likely). However, it is clear that Nietzsche, although stressing the importance of forgetting, did not consider remembering as such as life-threatening. The few I-don’t-want-to’s that are violently inscribed in the memory of semianimals are necessary for building and sustaining a society, and establishing certain cultural beliefs and values. They do not have to structurally damage our capacity to forget (however, they could do that if they brought about a moral system that would hamper the possibility of the emergence of anything new). In contrast, traumatic ideas and experiences caused by, for example, genocide, that cannot be forgotten have as such no benefit. They do not contribute to building or further developing a society, but rather can do exactly the opposite, namely, damage the capacity of forgetting to such a degree that a society is no longer able to step outside its history and further flourish.

Having an intact capacity to forget does not mean that nothing is remembered. Active forgetting is selective remembering: It is the capacity to recognize and allow beneficial past forms of knowledge and experience as well as to recognize and neutralize harmful ones. Nietzsche’s objective was to warn us about particular types of knowledge and experience that could permanently damage the active force of forgetting. If certain traumas severely damage the capacity of forgetting, then it is no longer
possible to step outside of history. All the efforts and activities of a culture are subsequently interpreted in light of the trauma. Trauma is like having a stone in one’s shoe. Eventually, it not only will injure the foot, but also prevent the individual from going farther on his or her way, exploring other possibilities, and continuing to grow.

Nietzsche explicitly proposed the importance of achieving a balance between remembering and forgetting, between the historical and the new. He wrote, “The unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people and of a culture” (1997a, p. 63). Without remembering, we would not be moral creatures able to make long-term plans and take responsibility for our actions. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the importance of forgetting because, without forgetting, we would become resentful and embittered people, unable to begin afresh. Nietzsche was not attempting to negate the past or its significance, but to open up a possibility for the future.

**Active forgetting through mnemotechnologies**

Should people with a traumatic past just forget about it? Does this line of thought culminate in the message: “Stop moaning and get on with your life”? Of course, in the context of the argument I have developed, this is a rather naïve question since the problem is precisely that traumatized people or cultures do not choose to remember the trauma. Their capacity to forget has been damaged. A more satisfactory question is: What would it take to repair that capacity?

Repairing the capacity of forgetting requires restoring the balance between remembering and forgetting. Only then can a culture regain its capacity to, from time to time, feel unhistorical and create new history. The confused psychic economy of a culture could be restored if the discontinuity that was generated by the trauma, and continues to frustrate the further development of the culture, could be overcome. This can be achieved only by means of efforts that reconcile what has happened to the victimized group with the present ideas, expectations, and ideals of its descendants.

But what exactly does it take to come to terms with the *monstrum* and restore that rupture? This is a difficult question and a detailed, let alone a complete and definitive, answer cannot be offered. Rather, I propose a line of thought that might contribute to a suitable reflection on the question addressed and give a possible direction. On the basis of the proposed framework, active forgetting subsequently requires at least three types of efforts: recognition, (symbolic) processing, and sublimation. Genocide is taken again as illustrative example.

Reconciling with what has happened is possible only if, first of all, the genocide that caused the collective trauma is recognized (see Alayarian, 2008). Only then can a victimized group employ efforts to assign the trauma a proper place in its cultural identity. Without this recognition, processing the trauma is impossible. Indeed, for successful closure such recognition is required not only from the aggressor, its progenies, and the descendants of the victims, but also from other stakeholders (other nations, institutes, academics, lay people, etc.). Only then what has happened is maximally confirmed and can be granted reality and significance. Genuine recognition involves knowing: (a) what exactly happened (What kind of violence—killings, injuries, terror, isolation, etc. —was inflicted?); (b) who was involved (Who were the victims and who were the aggressors? How many people were victimized? Who else was involved?); (c) how it took place (Which methods and strategies were used?); (d) when it took place (What kind of time in history was it?); and (e) why it took place (What were the motives, goals, and considerations of the different stakeholders?).

Simply reconstructing these conditions and circumstances is insufficient to generate true understanding. The collective trauma caused by atrocities such as genocide is too big to grasp (recall the reference to Günther Anders). The purpose of reconstructing conditions and circumstances just confirms the reality of what happened, as well as in a certain sense framing it. This framing does, however, provide a way to work with, adapt, and modify what has happened in such a way that it becomes potentially identifiable (which is important to our second phase). It is a first endeavor to banish the *monstrum* and make it manageable. The efforts of activists and institutes who demand
recognition of their cause often focus only on recognition. But from my proposed framework, recognition cannot be the ultimate aim.

Recognition of what has happened is a necessary requirement for active forgetting. However, the actual practice of active forgetting takes place in the second phase: the phase of the symbolic processing of the trauma. The form that this processing takes depends very much on how the victimized group is organized. Therefore, this processing can be characterized in only general terms. Since we are dealing here with collective trauma, I discuss only collective ways of processing the trauma, although this does not exclude the possibility to process trauma individually by virtue of various idiosyncratic methods (see also Kalayjian & Eugene, 2010).

From the perspective I developed, processing the trauma means integrating and incorporating it into the identity of the victimized culture in such a way that the capacity of forgetting can be restored. This begs the question: How can the trauma be remembered and effectively suppressed at the same time? The answer to this paradoxical question is: through mnemotechnologies. Although the original mnemotechnologies that Nietzsche discussed were violent, their violent character is not a goal in itself but a means to make sure that the required belief, rule, or prohibition stays in the memory. The incorporation of a belief, rule, or prohibition is made even more secure by the “morality of custom,” through the practice of customs, habits, or rituals that gradually constitute the identity of a culture. Rituals are, as Durkheim (1933, p. 180) also indicated, processes that shape the expression of emotion, guide behavior, and offer meaning and closure, simultaneously strengthening the link of the individual to the social group and the group’s culture at large. These mnemotechnologies not only must restore the psychic economy and organization of the victimized group, but also give it a certain loose or vague orientation that enables further growth and flourishing.

Again, these customs, habits, and rituals are not intended to capture the trauma or make it comprehensible. Their purpose is to banish its monstrous dimensions and make it manageable. They are, therefore, symbolic. They refer to something that cannot be grasped completely. Banishing the monstrum and making it manageable by virtue of these mnemotechnologies could also be regarded as a kind of catharsis, as a kind of emotional cleansing or purgation.

In this context, these mnemotechnologies fulfill a double function. On the one hand, through customs, habits, or rituals, the trauma is remembered in the strongest sense of the word; namely, by making it part of the identity of the victimized culture. On the other hand, through the very same practices of culturally incorporating it, the trauma is also forgotten. Characteristic of customs, habits, and rituals is their automatic routines of behavior that are regularly repeated. By repeating it in a proper setting, the traumatic event is remembered and given the required significance. By appropriating it and making it an automatic part of cultural identity, it is banished and forgotten. It is remembered and forgotten at the same time. It is actively forgotten.

The kinds of customs, habits, and rituals that facilitate the trauma to be remembered and forgotten depend very much on the culture in question. For the ancient Greeks, the tragedies functioned as a means for catharsis. Modern religious groups that have experienced traumatic events could integrate rituals to remember and forget the trauma in, for example, their liturgy. They could even pay special attention to it on particular days in a year. Other “focal practices,” to refer to the American philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann (1984), could be monuments and the customs and rituals that are part of gatherings. Focal practices have an orienting and gathering capacity. They impose an attentive attitude toward certain things or events (also traumatic events) and, at the same time, incite positive energy.

This brings us to the third phase of dealing with the trauma, which is the phase of sublimation. Sublimation is understood here as the transformation of negative and destructive emotions or instincts, in this case the emotions caused by a traumatic event, into positive and constructive emotions, actions, and behavior. Nietzsche was the first to use this term in a psychological sense: “Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it is reinterpreted into sublimity” (2001, p. 164) A related concept that Nietzsche used to indicate how sublimation could be realized is “plastic power.” In his words, “I mean by plastic power the capacity to develop out of one self in
one’s own way, to transform and incorporate into one self what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds” (1997a, p. 62).

How can negative emotions and energy caused by a trauma be redirected and refocused in such a way that something positive is produced? Again this is a difficult question, which requires extensive and creative reflection. And again, only general indications can be given. Whether a culture is capable of sublimation depends first and foremost on how successful it was in processing the trauma adequately. By giving the trauma a place in its cultural identity and actively forgetting it, a group necessarily reinterprets the traumatic event. This is part of identifying and framing the *monstrum*. This process of reinterpretation is an essential requirement for successful sublimation. By reinterpreting it and incorporating it into its cultural identity, the victimized group gives the trauma a specific meaning and weight. Talking and writing about the traumatic event is already a form of sublimation. Artists might be able to use the emotions and ideas aroused by the trauma to create beautiful drawings, paintings, sculptures, films, photographs and music, which could inspire other victimized people to make something out of their lives. The process of reinterpreting and incorporating the trauma, as well as the catharsis, can bring relief and recover the power to regulate and orient the emotions and ideas that are evoked by the trauma. It can also allow a community to reflect again on its goals and ideals, and to take responsibility for its history and its future.

To apply our framework one last time to genocide cases: Often victimized groups have a rich historical and symbolic tradition that could offer them ample resources for processing and sublimating the trauma caused by genocide. In these situations, it is the responsibility of the international community to not obstruct, but to contribute to the reconstruction of what has happened and help find ways for the survivors to cope. Only then can historical and emotional connections within and outside the victimized community be restored and their past can, instead of paralyzing it, enrich their future.

**Conclusion**

Nietzsche’s notion of active forgetting can contribute to an understanding of the damaging influence of collective trauma on cultural identity. Severe trauma can disrupt the balance between remembering and forgetting, disrupt the balance between the historical and the new, and disorganize the psychic economy of a culture. Restoring this balance and repairing the capacity of active forgetting requires, at least, recognition of the event that caused the trauma, (symbolic) processing of the trauma, and sublimation of the emotions caused by the traumatic event. Within this context, mnemotechnologies fulfill a double function: on the one hand, the trauma is remembered in the strongest sense of the word through customs, habits, or rituals; on the other hand, through the very same technologies and practices of culturally incorporating it, the trauma is also forgotten. It is remembered and forgotten at the same time (i.e., actively forgotten).

The aim of the article was not to focus on a particular victimized group or community, but rather to offer a more general theoretical framework. It must be clear that my proposed thesis requires further expansion. Besides further theoretical investigation of the relations between trauma, active forgetting, and cultural identity, its explanatory potential is in need of further demonstration by applying it to empirically informed case studies of how particular mnemotechnologies have been used in identity formation of specific traumatized groups and cultures.

**References**


