

Abstract

Decolonisation was a major event of the twentieth century, redrawing maps and impacting on identity narratives around the globe. As new nations defined their place in the world, the national and imperial past was retold in new cultural memories. These developments have been studied at the level of the collective, but insufficient attention has been paid to how individuals respond to such narrative changes. This dissertation examines the relationship between individual and collective memory at the end of empire through analysis of 13 end of empire autobiographies by public intellectuals from Australia, the Anglophone Caribbean and Zimbabwe. I conceive of memory as reconstructive and social, with individual memory striving to make sense of the past in the present in dialogue with surrounding narratives. By examining recurring tropes in the autobiographies, like colonial education, journeys to the imperial metropole, political legitimacy at the end of empire and settler family innocence, I argue that the writers engage with collective memories about empire in their personal recollections. Such collective narratives pattern autobiographies so that the same concerns and rhetoric recur in widely different contexts, and they provide a narrative framework within which authors try to fit their own stories by corroborating or countering dominant accounts. The collective context affects what is remembered and how it is articulated, and at the same time individuals seek to affect how the collective past and their own role in it are remembered. As such, end of empire autobiographies offer a window onto the narrative present in which they are written and reveal how the authors want to position themselves. I argue that this dialogue between individual and collective narratives is crucial to understanding memory after empire.