



Posthuman Amnesia: Corporate Mnemonics, Non-Human Agency, and the Infrastructures of Memory in Chi Ta-Wei's *The Membranes*

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Abstract

This article examines Chi Ta-Wei's *The Membranes* as a paradigmatic text of posthuman memory under late capitalism, arguing that the novel reconceptualises memory as infrastructure rather than experience. The essay contends that the novel displaces mnemonic agency from human subjects to corporate, technological and environmental systems that govern the retention, circulation and erasure of the past. Through close readings of prosthetic skin technologies, corporate archives, embodied proxies and submerged urban environments, the article demonstrates how memory in Chi Ta-Wei's future world is outsourced and commodified, to be administered as a strategic resource.

Keywords: Science Fiction, Memory Studies, Posthumanism, Corporate Archives, Prosthetic Memory, Non-Human Agency.

Science fiction operates as a historical mode of critique rather than a predictive genre. As Fredric Jameson insists, science fiction “does not so much attempt to imagine the ‘real’ future as it attempts to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present” (152). The future in science fiction (henceforth SF) thus functions as a critical device through which the present appears as a completed historical system rather than a naturalized reality. What then seems speculative is, in fact, a mode of historical cognition.

Within this framework, technology can never truly be neutral. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay explicitly defines SF as a mode that “embeds scientific-technological concepts in the sphere of human interests and actions, explaining them and explicitly attributing social value to them” (388). SF's defining operation lies in its hesitation between the plausibility of technological change and its ethical, social and political consequences.

This hesitation exposes how technological systems are always already ideological formations rather than autonomous instruments.

Jameson's Marxist intervention also helps clarify the historical force of this operation. He argues that SF transforms, "the present into the determinate past of something yet to come" (152). By staging futures as already shaped by structural logics, SF allows readers to apprehend capitalism as a historically specific system whose effects can be mapped and critiqued. In this sense, SF renders ideology visible by projecting it forward as completed form.

In the information age, this critical function intensifies. As Sherryl Vint observes, contemporary culture is marked by "our ever-present anxiety that we might be missing something important, some bit of evidence" (9). Informational saturation produces paranoia rather than clarity, as data proliferates faster than meaning. SF responds to this condition by narrativizing information systems themselves, be it networks, databases, or archives, as total environments that structure perception, agency, history and much more.

Read through this lens, SF becomes a privileged site for analysing memory as a political problem. Since memory mediates the relation between past and future, any technological reorganisation of memory necessarily reorganises historical consciousness. SF, then, can be said to not treat memory as a mere metaphor or theme, it treats memory as infrastructure. Control over information thus becomes control over history itself, a problem that SF renders legible by transforming mnemonic systems into narrative form.

Memory studies has long emphasised the externalisation of memory as a defining feature of modernity. Pierre Nora's influential concept of *lieux de mémoire* (translated as sites of memory) names those sites, enumerated as archives, monuments, museums, media, etc. where memory once lived is preserved and communal memory has somewhat receded. As Nora writes, "memory crystallizes and secretes itself," in such sites because, "there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory" (7). In Nora's formulation, these sites compensate for the erosion of organic social memory, marking a historical shift rather than a political struggle.

Under late capitalism, however, Nora's framework must be refunctioned rather than merely plastered or applied. The contemporary problem isn't simply that memory has moved outside the human subject, it's rather that the infrastructures governing memory are owned and monetised by corporate power, managed as

a commodity. As Jameson argues, capitalism requires, “a managed memory of qualitative social change” to sustain its ideological narrative of progress (153). Memory becomes an apparatus to be curated and filtered, and periodically erased to stabilise the present as an inevitable entity.

This shift marks a decisive transformation in the politics of remembrance. Corporate memory infrastructures do supplement the state archive, but much more than that they replace it as the primary apparatus through which the recorded history is taken authority over and then carefully forgotten. Control over databases, networks or proprietary archives will inevitably determine what can count as evidence of the past. As John Fekete observes, late-capitalist ideology operates through simulation, transforming representation itself into a commodity (318). Then, memory, once externalised, can become fully susceptible to this logic and fall under its agents of change.

SF, especially contemporary productions, are attempting to render this transformation visible by narrating the recollected memory as a system. Archives cease to function as neutral repositories and instead operate as active agents that shape historical consciousness. The question is no longer who remembers, neither is it the Orwellian question of who controls what is remembered, it is rather who controls the conditions under which remembering is possible. By extending Nora’s insight into the terrain of political economy, SF can be thus read to expose how memory sites are reorganised as instruments of power rather than guardians of collective pasts.

In Chi Ta-Wei’s *The Membranes*, memory is neither private nor interior. It is organised and extracted, so as to be monetised through corporate systems that treat the body itself as an archival surface. The novel is set in a late 21st century future shaped by ecological catastrophe as rising sea levels have rendered the Earth’s surface largely uninhabitable and have forced humanity into submerged and sealed underwater urban environments. It follows a biotechnological saturation and the corporatisation of everyday life, and survival depends on advanced medical and informational infrastructures. Within this enclosed world data management is undifferentiated from memory preservation, and they are no longer private concerns but institutionalised processes governed by corporate entities that sit in for governments.

The narrative follows Momo, a young woman employed as a talented dermal-care specialist in a highly regulated medical-cosmetic industry. Her work involves administering genetically engineered skin

treatments, called the M-skin. It's designed to preserve youth and regulate bodily decay, but it also becomes an interface to seamlessly attach memory with informational systems. From the outset, Momo's body is embedded within networks of contractually obligated surveillance and data extraction. In this underground world, medical procedures have become mandatory and bodily interventions generate proprietary records owned by corporation-governments rather than patients.

As the story unfolds, Momo begins to encounter disruptions in her understanding of identity and personal history. She discovers that M-skin does not merely preserve the body but also records and stores memory as pure information, including intimate data and passwords. Skin, traditionally imagined as a boundary between self and the world, is here reconfigured as a recording surface and a corporate access point. It's an organic archive capable of storage and retrieval of memory. This revelation destabilises the distinction between biological embodiment and technological informational infrastructures, now that memory has been displaced from subjective interiority to external, manipulable systems.

The novel further complicates memory through a range of non-human agents. Corporate databanks function as centralised repositories of personal and collective history. They determine which memories are preserved and which are erased. Clones and engineered organisms appear as embodied proxies that inherit or carry memories not originally their own. The narrative keeps questioning identity and authenticity, and even disposability or expendability of the individual under such circumstances. Even the environment of the submerged city with its corroded architecture and polluted seas bears material traces of forgotten ecological and political histories, but this scarred environmental memory is one thing that truly resists official archival control.

Momo's personal trajectory is intertwined with these broader mnemonic systems. The events of the novel unfold her relationship with her mother, her gradual uncovering of erased or mediated pasts, her encounters with corporate secrecy, the non-existence of her body and above all the retrospective recollection of her fabricated present, all underscore the extent to which memory in this world is never fully personal. Acts of remembering do not lead to clarity or liberation but instead reveal deeper layers of infrastructural control. Information surfaces only through corporate channels, and recovered memories are already formatted by the systems that permit their retrieval.

Crucially, *The Membranes* doesn't frame memory loss or manipulation as an aberration to be corrected. Rather, it presents outsourced prosthetic memory as the normative condition of late-capitalist technoculture. Forgetting is not a failure of the individual but a programmed outcome of archival systems designed to manage history in the noble service of economic and political stability. In this sense, the novel shifts attention away from personal trauma or psychological amnesia toward the systemic organization of remembrance itself.

By embedding its narrative within medical facilities, data networks, cloned bodies, ecological ruins, and so on, *The Membranes* constructs a world in which memory functions as infrastructure rather than experience. Human subjects persist within this world, but they do so as nodes in larger mnemonic assemblages that exceed their control. This narrative framework provides a dystopian cautionary tale, a sustained meditation on memory, agency and history being reorganised under conditions of technological mediation and corporate power.

In this, Momo's body is surveilled and disciplined, in order to engineer it as a site of inscription upon which memory is recorded and circulated. Chi Ta-wei's novel thus literalises the transformation of memory into infrastructure by relocating it from consciousness to the commodified flesh. Early scenes establish the body as a contractual object embedded within corporate systems. Momo lives in an automated medical facility and sells personal health data as part of her employment contract. After an occupational injury, she undergoes a mandatory surgical procedure and reflects that she "would erase all memory of [the surgeries] if she could," yet compliance is unavoidable "for the sake of her career" (Chi 9). Memory here is already subordinated to labour discipline. Her desire to forget collides with the economic necessity to submit. Her body becomes a medium through which institutional memory in the various forms of medical records, procedural histories, biometric data, etc. is accumulated and owned by the corporate other.

This logic intensifies through the recurring metaphor of the membrane. Momo's work in dermal care places her at the interface of body and data. She applies genetically engineered "M-skin" treatments that function simultaneously as cosmetic enhancement and recording device. In a pivotal scene, Momo discovers that her mother's M-skin "had recorded [her] password," which she then "downloaded...to her computer" (42). Skin becomes an external hard drive, an organic surface repurposed as mnemonic storage. Corporate language saturates the transactions of memory. They are "insured," "leased," and governed through and through by

contracts. Momo's employers refer to patients as "clients," and bodily interventions are regulated by fine print that transforms intimate experience into proprietary data. ISM Enterprises is described as "the new century's arms and munitions industry parvenu," a firm whose power derives from its control over body-technology and information (113).

These scenes enact Marxist critiques of commodification. As Fekete notes, SF often exposes how capitalist ideology operates through simulation, transforming representation itself into a marketable object (318). *The Membranes* extends this logic to memory. At a corporate press event, genetic "memory enhancement" is marketed as a consumer product of lifestyle advertising. Subjective experience is alienated from the subject and reinserted into circuits of exchange. Throughout the novel, such metaphors of storage and finance recur. Characters speak of "archives of experience" and "memory stockpiles" as if recollection were a bankable asset. In one vignette, Momo's childhood memories are accessed through a commercial "Archive Contact" procedure, during which corporate historians extract her earliest recollections via a form of neural probe (67). Control over the sources of historical consciousness is itself dramatized. By turning skin and surgery into mnemonic technologies of data contracts, *The Membranes* successfully collapses the distinction between body and archive. Corporate mnemonics, then, are not background conditions of the novel's world, they are its primary mechanism of power.

A defining intervention of *The Membranes* lies in its displacement of memory from the human subject to non-human systems. The novel refuses the assumption that memory must ultimately reside in human consciousness. Instead, it depicts memory as distributed across bodies, machines, organisms, and environments. Of the several overlapping forms of non-human mnemonic agents that the novel presents the first are **prosthetic carriers**. They are the technological extensions that detach memory from the original brain and render it transferable. These include M-skin treatments, neural probes, biometric archives, genetic memory implants and so on. Such carriers resemble Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory (2), but Chi Ta-Wei radicalises the idea by fully externalising memory from the subject as already elaborated. Once stored in devices owned by corporations, the memories become commodities subject to manipulation and exchange. Second are **embodied proxies**, which are the living beings that function as vessels for memories they did not originally experience. Clones and engineered organisms populate the novel as mnemonic stand-ins. Their political function is ambivalent, as they may preserve the past against erasure, but they may also be exploited as expendable containers for memories deemed useful by dominant powers.

This dynamic echoes Hegel's master-slave dialectic, in which consciousness is mediated through domination rather than autonomy. Third are the **algorithmic archives**, the large-scale non-human systems that organise collective memory. Corporate databases and AI networks operate as the social brain of Chi Ta-Wei's future world. These archives curate information they are to store. By determining what is logged, retrieved, or even purged, they exercise sovereign power over historical legitimacy. Marc Bloch's claim that memory is "an act of will," (51) becomes literally enacted by algorithmic systems on behalf of institutions. Finally, the novel gestures toward **environmental memory**, the submerged city and its corroded infrastructure bear material traces of ecological collapse and forgotten histories. The environment itself becomes a recording medium as it stores un-erasable evidence that resists official archival erasure. Taken together, these agents form a non-human mnemonic architecture in which memory circulates through assemblages of bodies, machines and spaces. What matters is no longer who remembers, but which systems are authorised to remember on behalf of society.

Placing *The Membranes* alongside other contemporary SF treatments of memory clarifies the specificity of Chi Ta-wei's intervention. While many recent narratives explore artificial memory as a site of ethical struggle or subjective awakening, Chi Ta-Wei's novel is more pessimistic in that it systematically forecloses memory as a durable resource for individual resistance. Ted Chiang's fiction offers a good contrast. In "The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling," technological mediation of memory alters cognition but preserves ethical agency. Memory remains tethered to subjectivity and the past can still be critically interpreted. A similar logic operates in HBO's *Westworld*, where memory recovery functions as the condition of autonomy. Hosts (the humanoid subjects) begin to question the nature of their reality, once suppressed memories are accessed and resurfaced. To these humanoids recollection becomes the ultimate emancipation.

The Membranes, however, denies such a trajectory. Memory is never recoverable as personal truth because it is always mediated by corporate infrastructure. Even when fragments surface, they do so through systems beyond individual control. Remembering does not lead to awakening but to further entanglement. By foreclosing memory as a site of individual liberation, Chi Ta-Wei forces attention toward a systemic power rather than personal awakening. *The Membranes* compels a rethinking of memory as an infrastructure to be contested. It displaces memory from subjectivity to corporate systems of storage and the subsequent erasure. It exposes how historical consciousness itself has been reorganised under information-capitalism. Memory no longer guarantees continuity or resistance, it functions as a managed resource whose meaning is

determined by proprietary regimes. When memory becomes infrastructural rather than experiential, ethical appeals to remembrance lose their efficacy. Individual acts of recall cannot counter systems designed to absorb and erase them. The novel thus shifts critique away from subjectivity and toward the architectures that govern historical possibility.

The question *The Membranes* leaves unresolved is how to imagine futures not already formatted by archival power. Once memory becomes infrastructural rather than experiential, the problem facing the future is no longer how to remember, but how to imagine forms of life not already constrained by the systems that decide what can be remembered at all.

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