

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88098-5 - Women's Writing in the British Atlantic World: Memory, Place and History, 1550-1700

Kate Chedzoy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

*Introduction: 'A place on the map is also  
a place in history'*

On 10 July 1666, Anne Bradstreet's house in Andover, Massachusetts burned down. In a poem commemorating the loss of her home, she characterizes the smouldering ruins as a much-revisited site of memory, keeping all that she has lost painfully alive in her mind:

When by the ruins oft I past  
My sorrowing eyes aside did cast,  
And here and there the places spy  
Where oft I sat and long did lie:<sup>1</sup>

Representing a beloved home as a tenderly domestic memory theatre, Bradstreet makes an orderly inventory of the places in the ruined house where fond reminiscence belonged. Each of the objects carefully placed within it – 'Here stood that trunk, and there that chest' (l. 29) – summons up memories of love, hospitality, storytelling and sociable conversation. The house is presented not merely as a domestic space, but also as a site of familial memory and history. The poem itself is the textual trace of the continuing existence in memory of the house and the loving relationships associated with it.

'Some verses upon the burning of our house' was not published in Bradstreet's lifetime. Its survival as a memorial to the domestic history recalled in it was ensured when Anne Bradstreet's son Simon '[c]opied [it] out of a loose paper' after her death, in an act of filial commitment to his mother's emotional and literary legacy. The history of its transmission testifies both to the vulnerability of women's compositions, which were so often lost to the documentary record – like Bradstreet's late revision of her long historical poem the *Four Monarchies*, which 'fell a prey to th' raging fire'<sup>2</sup> – and to their remarkably tenacious survival. The poem is thus a document of loss and survival; of memory and pleasure, mourning and hope. In its subject, its form and method, and the bare fact of its

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88098-5 - Women's Writing in the British Atlantic World: Memory, Place and History, 1550-1700

Kate Chedzoy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

continued existence and circulation, it furnishes an apt emblem for this book's examination of the intertwined histories of place and memory in early modern women's writing.

The first modern scholarly edition of Anne Bradstreet's writings was introduced by the poet Adrienne Rich in 1967, just at the moment when feminist scholarship was beginning to restore women's texts to the landscape of the literary past. If, as Rich contends, 'a place on the map is also a place in history',<sup>3</sup> how does attending to the memories of women like Bradstreet change our understanding of the maps and histories of the world they inhabited? This book examines some of the many ways in which women writers of the early modern British Atlantic world imagined, visited, created and haunted textual sites of memory. In doing so, it argues for the value of making new connections between two important areas of Renaissance studies – the politics of space, place and nation; and memorial and historiographic practices – that, thriving separately, have not been adequately considered in relation to each other. It also introduces gender into the debate. In Western culture, Memory has traditionally had a female form, that of the Greek goddess Mnemosyne. Yet women have been accorded only a limited place in scholarly work on the arts and uses of memory. The words and deeds of men dominate such aegis-creating studies as Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* series and the *Lieux de mémoire* project directed by Pierre Nora.<sup>4</sup> Yet because memory is crucial to understanding oneself as a social subject, gender is inevitably at the heart of its workings. Introducing a special issue of the feminist journal *Signs* on *Gender and Cultural Memory*, Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith contended that the act of reinscribing women's memories in the historical record 'challenges the making of national identities, mythologies, and historical periodization by reinserting forgotten stories or exposing unacknowledged assumptions'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, women's studies can be seen 'as a form of "counter-memory" and feminist scholarship, literature, and art as means of redressing the official "forgetting" of women's histories' (4). Informed by and contributing to the increasing importance of memory in feminist scholarship, this book examines how women record and make sense of their own memories, and how women are remembered. If, as Marita Sturken says, cultural memory is 'a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history',<sup>6</sup> how did early modern women's engagement with the politics of memory inscribe their stories into history?

The period covered by this book was a time of recurrent international and civil conflict; cataclysmic changes in the relations between political

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88098-5 - Women's Writing in the British Atlantic World: Memory, Place and History, 1550-1700

Kate Chedzoy

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

and religious institutions; and immense social and topographical transformation, brought about by material and cultural influences including enclosure, urbanization and colonial ventures overseas. The interrelation of all these factors changed the conditions of daily life and altered the quotidian experience of time and place for many women. In these uncertain times, the act of writing – in prose and verse, in prayers and commonplace books, for print publication or familial manuscript circulation – enabled women to voice experiences of belonging and displacement in a changing world. Recollecting their experiences and drawing on the resources of well-stocked memories, they created texts which mediate between history as it is lived and as it is written. This book situates women's writing from all parts of the British Isles and from the wider British Atlantic world in the context of the cultural and historical changes that made the need for certain kinds of memory work so pressing in the early modern period. It begins to limn the implications for women of the processes which put local, regional, national and transnational understandings of place and belonging under unique pressure, transforming the place of the 'Atlantic archipelago' in a wider world, and affecting the lives of everyone who inhabited it.<sup>7</sup>

Women left textual traces across many genres and modes of transmission of their efforts to recollect, interpret and communicate their experiences in a changing world. The documents of their memories speak of how women reimagined, responded to and commented on their changing world in many different ways. Such texts speak of the experiences, for example, of Brilliana Harley, who defended her Herefordshire home against siege during the British civil wars; Ann Taft, a single woman living in Virginia in the 1660s, who owned slaves and engaged in business with trading partners in Connecticut, Jamaica and other British colonies; the 'Lady of Honour' who composed 'The Golden Island' as a poetic exhortation to Scots to support the (ultimately disastrous) 'Darien Scheme' to colonise Panama; or Katherine Evans and Sarah Chevers, who voyaged together to the Mediterranean as Quaker preachers.<sup>8</sup> How did women perceive and represent the conflicts and changes that were transforming their world? How important was a sense of location and belonging in shaping women's articulation of autobiographical and cultural memory at a time of geopolitical change and crisis? What work did memory do to imagine, understand, contest or question the changing meanings of location in the early modern British Atlantic world? And how did that world consider memory to be shaped and sustained by place? Addressing these questions, I argue that the formation of textual

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88098-5 - Women's Writing in the British Atlantic World: Memory, Place and History, 1550-1700

Kate Chedzoy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

sites of memory is at the heart of early modern women's writing as a textual practice that is both personal and political. In other words, it is through the processes and practices of memory work that women's writing engages with and comments on the huge political and geographical changes of the period.

In the century and a half that intervened between the two acts of union – the period covered by this book, roughly – the English government sought, by means of a range of commercial, administrative and military measures, to extend and consolidate its authority over the other parts of the British Isles. Taken together with wider processes of economic and social change at work throughout these islands and beyond, these measures often had a damaging effect on the linguistic and cultural diversity and distinctiveness of Wales, Ireland and Scotland. Yet at the same time, England was itself a fissured and volatile place, caught up both internally and in its relations with Wales, Scotland and Ireland in a series of civil conflicts that repeatedly shattered the peace of the British Isles throughout the latter part of the period. The story of these changes has been told in various ways: as the subjugation of the Celtic countries to English domination; as an uneven movement towards the welding together of disparate elements in a united modern Britain; and as one phase in an ongoing series of interactions and exchanges between administratively linked, but culturally diverse, countries.<sup>9</sup> However the emphasis falls, the story has tended to be one in which the words and deeds of men have been foregrounded.

This relative absence of gender as an analytical category from work in the disciplines of both history and literature on the 'British problem' has been paired with a metropolitan and anglocentric bias in much feminist literary scholarship on the period, which has only recently begun to attend adequately to the nuances of gendered identities by matters of nation, region and locality. Yet as participants in and witnesses to these changes and their consequences for the ordinary inhabitants of the British Isles, women had much to say about them. This book situates women's writing of the early modern period in relation to the historic changes that refashioned the political and cultural relations among the four constituent nations of the British Isles, and that also changed the meanings of those islands' location in a wider Atlantic cultural and political world. Reading personal and literary compositions which reflect on early modern women's experiences of place, belonging and dislocation, we can begin to glimpse their tentative, fragmentary perceptions of the changing cultural geographies of their world. Articulating an emergent sense of national

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88098-5 - Women's Writing in the British Atlantic World: Memory, Place and History, 1550-1700

Kate Chedzoy

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

identity would, at various later dates and in diverse ways, become an important component of women's writing in Wales, Ireland and Scotland. But although, as Dermot Cavanagh succinctly puts it '[o]ne influential means of distinguishing the early modern period has been to emphasize its increasingly distinct forms of national consciousness',<sup>10</sup> such forms are generally not yet articulated in women's writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whichever part of the British Atlantic world it comes from.

This avoidance of the national may be at least partly explicable in terms of the forms and subjects of women's texts, which at this time were generally more likely to engage with the personal, the local and specific, or with the transnational concerns of religion, rather than with national questions. What this writing does reveal is a range of particularized identifications and affiliations – religious, familial, political, linguistic, affective – which interacted with and complicated those grounded in place. Studying these may both disclose the significance of the local, regional, national and transnational for women, and also tell us a great deal about the multiple modes of belonging from which national imaginings would have to be fashioned. Memories – autobiographical and collective – are a strong thread in the fabric from which national identities are made. This is in part because, as Philip Schwyzer argues, such identities require the nation's putative subjects to accept 'the affective and political claims of the dead', and of those yet to come, to membership of the same transhistorical community.<sup>11</sup> But it is also because national ideologies have been very effective at appropriating nostalgia, recognizing that intimate memories of home and displacement profoundly shape people's sense of place and belonging.<sup>12</sup>

Dwelling in and travelling through Wales, Ireland, Scotland, New England, the Chesapeake and the Caribbean as well as England, literate women wrote in several languages of landscapes that were changing even as they inhabited and traversed them. As mapped only by the cultural reference points employed by the women mentioned in this volume, the new Atlantic world that Britain increasingly moved in and helped to shape extended from the slave ports on the west coast of Africa to the Puritan towns of Massachusetts; from Sligo to Barbados, London to Swansea, and from Wester Ross to Kent. The immense historical, political and economic processes that generated such movements made themselves felt in the details of everyday life, as women used New World commodities in their cooking, received letters from migrant relatives, and followed the rumours of war in oral gossip, newsbooks and ballads.<sup>13</sup>

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88098-5 - Women's Writing in the British Atlantic World: Memory, Place and History, 1550-1700

Kate Chedgzoy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Ireland, Wales and Scotland, newly incorporated into the embryonic British nation-state; London and the regions of England; and the newly claimed British territories in New England, the Chesapeake and the Caribbean, were all changed and obliged to come to a new self-understanding in this complex and volatile context, in which both archipelagic and Atlantic relationships became of increasing significance. Placing early modern Welsh history in a European context which in many ways is also an Atlantic one, Michael Roberts insists that we acknowledge the reciprocity and volatility at stake for all parties when 'neighbouring cultures which were themselves undergoing transformation' were brought into new forms of contact because of the transnational processes of change that were reshaping the world they shared.<sup>14</sup> What were the implications for women in particular of these processes in the early modern British Atlantic world? And what does it mean to locate women's writing in the context of that world?

As an historical and geographical concept, the 'Atlantic world' foregrounds the interrelations of time and place that shaped the social world in which we now live. Work within an Atlantic frame is characteristically interpersonal and intercultural in its focus, foregrounding interactions, encounters and exchanges as crucial historical processes. This Atlantic history is the story 'of the creation, destruction and recreation of communities as a result of the movement . . . of people, commodities, cultural practices, and ideas'.<sup>15</sup> These changes and movements did not only affect those who experienced them most immediately, through transatlantic travel and migration. They also came to influence the meanings that place, belonging and mobility could have for those who remained at home. Thinking about British literary histories in an Atlantic context does not just require us to consider the literary implications of moving westwards into the Atlantic, travelling to, visiting, or settling in New England or the Caribbean. It also demands that we pay new attention to the changing meanings of what it meant to live in the archipelago of islands we now know as the British Isles, as they took up their place on this new map of the world.

In an age when communications between Bristol and Barbados could be quicker and more reliable than those between Kent and the Highlands of Scotland, the Atlantic 'linked' the maritime societies that bounded it and 'exposed them to each other', serving to connect rather than separate old and new worlds.<sup>16</sup> As a result, a 'new transatlantic world of human meetings' came into being in the seventeenth century, and significant numbers of women began to make their lives in this new

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88098-5 - Women's Writing in the British Atlantic World: Memory, Place and History, 1550-1700

Kate Chedgzoy

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

world.<sup>17</sup> Migration became a conduit for a new awareness among people who remained in Britain of the implications of such settlement and the nature of the world in which it was taking place. This understanding was conveyed through correspondence with distant friends and relatives, publications, returning travellers, exotic visitors and trade.

It is not the case, then, that in order to justify the use of the Atlantic perspective we have to demonstrate that women in Anglesey, Edinburgh or Nottinghamshire had some direct connection with or experience of the new possibilities of travel, encounter and exchange opened up by the creation of the Atlantic world. And indeed this is not obviously true of most of the writers I discuss in this book. Rather, the new map that is drawn enables us to see these women, and the location in a wider world of the communities they inhabited, differently. By positioning all the writers I study within the British Atlantic world rather than locating Lucy Hutchinson and Hester Pulter on one side of the ocean, as aspirants to the canon of English literature, while situating Mary Rowlandson and Anne Bradstreet on the other, as founding mothers of American literary history, I contend that these women shared a common cultural world and frame of reference – despite the many differences in the ways in which they inhabited it. To speak of Britain as part of an emergent Atlantic world is not just a matter of adopting a more concise and elegant terminology for the geopolitical complexities thrown up by early modern Britain's mobile frontiers. Mapping a cultural, commercial and political world which was profoundly 'intercolonial, international, and transatlantic',<sup>18</sup> the Atlantic perspective allows the telling of more complex stories about the variety of ways in which people experienced the early modern period's transformative processes of nation-building and state formation.

The British Atlantic world was shaped in dialogue and competition with other European Atlantic ventures, as part of a process of imperial expansion which was often violent and oppressive. A full account of women's participation in that process would need to attend to the lives of women whose voices have not, for a variety of reasons, been inscribed in their own texts of memory, or made audible and legible on the terms of the historical record. Women like Weetamoo, the Native American military leader Mary Rowlandson considers as her mistress in captivity, or Aphra Behn's fictional Imoinda, as well as all the anonymous, silent women slaves and Native Americans who populate *Oroonoko*, must stand as ciphers for the numerous other women who are not my subject here, and to whom I have not done justice.<sup>19</sup>

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88098-5 - Women's Writing in the British Atlantic World: Memory, Place and History, 1550-1700

Kate Chedzoy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Scholarship on the Atlantic world is only just beginning to register the voices and presences of such women, as represented by Sarah Layfield, the eight-year-old 'mulletto gyrl' brought before a Bermuda court in 1640 for uttering 'foolish and daingerous words touching the person of the king's majesty', or Francis the 'Ethyopian' or 'Blackymore maide' who left a deathbed spiritual testimony to a radical congregation in Bristol later in that tumultuous decade.<sup>20</sup> Undoubtedly, more attention to the lives and voices of those women whose histories have so far been occluded in scholarship on the Atlantic world is necessary,<sup>21</sup> and it is incumbent on feminist scholars to develop the skills and methodologies that will make that work possible. Taking in texts in Dutch, French, Spanish, Latin, German and Portuguese as well as the languages I am concerned with, considering the cultural contributions of African women and women from indigenous American communities, and requiring extensive new archival research, such a project will have to emerge from the kinds of transnational collaborations, networks and exchanges that have in recent decades so dramatically reshaped our understandings of British and European women's cultural production in the early modern period.<sup>22</sup> Too often, women's words languish in historical oblivion not because they were excluded from the storehouse of culture, but because we had either not equipped ourselves with adequate notations of their places in it, or found aids for locating them. Identifying the tools and archives that will enable us to attend to all the women whose lives were changed will represent a further stage in the collective project of feminist memory work in which this book itself participates. With very few exceptions, the history of the Atlantic world that has so far been written has represented men as the central actors in these intercultural, intercontinental dramas. It is past time for women to take their place on that stage.

This book sets out, then, to explore how women's writing gave expression to the everyday, intimate consequences of the major geopolitical changes that took place in the British Isles, and in Britain's transatlantic colonies, in the seventeenth century. It traces how women employed the resources of memory to record their responses to the changing conjunctions of time and place. The women whose writings are discussed here inhabited a cultural world in which memory was a form of disciplined labour, requiring the individual to store and record things to be recollected, in an orderly fashion that would facilitate their later retrieval and use.<sup>23</sup> Construed as a primarily individual activity, this memory work nevertheless served to locate the remembering subject 'in



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88098-5 - Women's Writing in the British Atlantic World: Memory, Place and History, 1550-1700

Kate Chedgzoy

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

relation to various social institutions and practices'.<sup>24</sup> More recent theorizations of memory emphasize different formations of remembering. The study of cultural or collective memory, for instance, examines the processes that generate shared narratives of the past. Analyses of traumatic memory trace the meanings of its ability to elude the intellectual and ethical disciplines of the remembering mind, surging up unbidden to disrupt the subject's relation to the social.<sup>25</sup> This book examines how women used all these kinds of memory to make sense of and reflect on their experiences in a changing world.

The origins of Renaissance memory practices have often been traced to an anecdote concerning the Greek poet Simonides.<sup>26</sup> His feats of memory reveal some of the resonances between Renaissance and contemporary concerns with both mnemotechnical disciplines and the politics of remembering. Performing at a banquet, Simonides escaped a sudden roof-collapse which crushed and killed the other guests. When grief-stricken relatives came to claim their loved ones for burial, Simonides was able to identify the dead by employing a memorial technique which used a visual stimulus to associate the thing to be remembered with a particular location. He could thus recall the identities of all the guests by summoning up a mental image of where they were seated at the banquet. Born out of a moment of violent crisis and loss, Simonides' mnemotechnique serves purposes which are not merely mnemonic, but also memorial, enabling the dead to be identified, buried and mourned by the living.

The story of Simonides illustrates two crucial aspects of memory work: the labour of training one's mind in special techniques and practices that can be used to store, retrieve and employ knowledge; and the emotional and ethical work of recalling and bearing witness to that which must be remembered, even where such remembrance is painful or dangerous. In the late twentieth century, this notion of memory work as purposeful intellectual, political and emotional labour has been employed to designate an undertaking, at once critical and personal, which 'takes an inquiring attitude toward the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory'.<sup>27</sup> This conceptualization of memory would have been readily understood in early modern Britain, where it was similarly conceived as a practice, technique or discipline, which required training, commitment and use on the part of the individual. Both Renaissance and modern theorizations of memory work agree that it provides a richly varied and flexible method for both self-exploration and social investigation. It is uniquely capable of highlighting the interrelations of personal

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88098-5 - Women's Writing in the British Atlantic World: Memory, Place and History, 1550-1700

Kate Chedzoy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

experience, historical and social context, and mnemotechnical practices and technologies in mediating and shaping the ways in which memory can be lived, recollected and articulated.

An important resemblance between Renaissance and modern conceptualizations of memory work is the shared perception that memory dwells in material and imagined places. For students of the Renaissance arts of memory, this was manifested when the remembering subject was encouraged to construct in imagination a theatre or palace, locating within it systematically visual images of those things which were to be remembered.<sup>28</sup> The mental pictures of happy domesticity conjured up in Anne Bradstreet's recollection of her house before its destruction by fire, in the poem discussed at the start of this Introduction, bear witness to the pervasive influence of such techniques on early modern writing. Maurice Halbwachs indexed the continuing power of spatial metaphors for the twentieth century's more interior and psychological conceptualization of memory when he remarked that

recollections are to be located . . . with the help of landmarks that we always carry within ourselves, for it suffices to look around ourselves, to think about others, and to locate ourselves within the social framework in order to retrieve them.<sup>29</sup>

Thinking of memory in spatial terms offers a way of understanding it as situated within a network of social relations. Memory, for Halbwachs, involves a multi-directional relationship between the remembering self and the social world in which the act of memory is located. His theorization of the social nature of memory echoes Anne Bradstreet's realization that places remember the people who inhabited them, but that the evanescence of that memory must be inscribed, in writing or some material monument, if it is to endure.

In the late twentieth century's resurgence of interest in memory as a cultural phenomenon, this spatial understanding of it has most influentially been articulated in French cultural historian Pierre Nora's claim that '[m]emory attaches itself to sites'.<sup>30</sup> The notion of 'sites' is used literally and metaphorically in both the Renaissance and contemporary frameworks of memory with which I engage in this book. Works such as William Camden's *Britannia* (1586), 'a chorography of England that used as sources not chronicles but monuments, thus transforming the whole of England into a vast memory space',<sup>31</sup> demonstrate that the monumental understanding of memory as something that inheres in places was already available in early modern England. Chorography is a mode of writing the