Troughing the *imago* and failing differently: Taking an iterative approach to history in Arkady Martine’s “A Memory Called Empire”

*A Memory Called Empire* opens with a quotation from Guy de Maupassant’s short story *Suicides*: “Our memory is a more perfect world than the universe; it gives life back to those who no longer exist.” As you (hopefully) expect from the title and the quotation, this is a novel intensely concerned with the power(s) of memory and history – personal, group, and cultural. It is part of a welcome (and ongoing) proliferation of novels, novellas, and short stories that interrogate how spacefaring empires might actually function, challenging and interrogating long-standing and unexamined assumptions about the form(s) such empires take, including Banks’ *Culture*, Scalzi’s *Interdependency*, Leckie’s *Imperial Radch*, Dickinson’s *Masquerade*, and de Bodard’s entire oeuvre, particularly her *Xiya* universe.

This paper begins with a summary of its focus novel, followed by a brief overview of ancient approaches to history. I will then discuss imagos, one of the pivotal narrative elements, in the context of the Dream of Scipio, Ursula K. Le Guin’s Carrier Bag Theory of history, and Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory. After further analysis of the novel, ending with a reformulation of Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, I conclude by reiterating the importance of flexibility and adaptability.

*A Memory Called Empire* is a space operatic murder mystery set against the backdrop of an imperial succession crisis. In the words of Catherine Baker’s review of the novel for *Strange Horizons*, it “is both a tightly woven political thriller and an exposition on empire, poetry, knowledge, and power.” Mahit Dzmare is a resident of Lsel Station, a small resource-poor mining station struggling to maintain its tenuous independence from the ever-encroaching Teixcalaanli Empire. Chosen as Lsel’s ambassador to Teixcalaan after her predecessor’s
unexpected death, given almost no time to prepare, Mahit is immediately thrust into the
diplomacy, court intrigue, and literary context of Teixcalaanli culture. Due in large part to
Martine’s work on Byzantine history, Teixcalaan bears many of the hallmarks of that
(in)famously bureaucratic empire, even as it is deliberately exoticized through Classical Nahuatl-
inspired vocabulary and terminology. This marked Byzantine influence necessarily brings with it
the imprint of both Roman and Athenian social and political institutions. Teixcalaan defines
itself in much the same way that Byzantium, Rome, Athens, and most empires define(d)
themselves: creation of a barbarian other, and the expectation and presumption of deep cultural
knowledge.

For the Teixcalaanli, this primarily takes the form of poetry, recalling the prevalence of
both the Neoterics and the Augustan circle in the Roman empire, as well as the poetic patronage
of the early Greek tyrants. With the help of her cultural liaisons, Three Seagrass and Twelve
Azalea, Mahit struggles to acclimate to her new position, She is hampered by the fact that her
imago, a memory recording device which I will analyze in more detail in a moment, has not been
updated with her predecessor Yskandr’s experiences for the past 15 years. After managing to
retrieve the up-to-date imago from Yskandr’s corpse and the failure of her implanted imago,
amidst rising tensions both within the city and between Teixcalaan and Lsel Station, Mahit
manages to implant the up-to-date imago and incorporate its knowledge, then play a small role in
quelling a military coup and negotiate a treaty ensuring Lsel’s independence.

Drawing connections to one of my home disciplines, and to the topic of one of this
panel’s other papers, I want to take a bit of time to discuss ancient theories and understandings of
history before continuing. Herodotus, the so-called “father of history” wanted people and events
to keep their κλέος, their fame or glory. Thucydides more self-consciously wants his history to be
a monument, lasting forever; κτήμα εἰς αἰεί. Polybius presented history with an exhaustive level of detail, incorporating as much information as possible with little editorializing or selection. Still, he marvels at the impressive τύχη (good fortune) which accounts for much of Rome’s rise to Mediterranean dominance. In contrast to his Greek predecessors, Livy’s history is both teleological and heavily biased. He closely follows Polybius’ version of events – sometimes almost word for word – but doesn’t refrain from omitting or inventing details provided that such actions help him in his goal of providing his readers with exemplars. These different historical methodologies and modalities exist in conversation with each other, and can inform our readings of this particular text.

With the overall setting and narrative established, I want to focus in on Martine’s version of the imago. At the beginning of Cicero’s The Dream of Scipio, Scipio Aemilianus reports that his grandfather’s ghost appears to him and utters the words, “Ades…animo et omitte timorem, Scipio, et quae dicam trade memoriae” (De Republica 6.10), which translates to, “Be present in your mind, let go of your fear, and entrust what I say to your memory.” Significantly, within the previous few lines this ancestral apparition is described using a particular word: imago. It can refer generally to an image, representation, or likeness; used here, it is referring more specifically to a wax death mask. Such masks were apparently highly prized possessions of elite families, who displayed them prominently in their houses and wore them during funerals in an enactment of the concept of mos maiorum, ancestral custom. Through this ritual, wearers of the masks symbolically brought together both their own positive aspects and those of the masks’ personae. Younger family members could then “follow in the footsteps” of their ancestors, with the hopes that this small scale ritual version would then continue across the span of their public and private
lives. This enshrining and codification of tradition is an important through-line for both Teixcalaanli and Stationer cultures, although they take *markedly* different forms.

Stationer imagos are not wax death masks, nor are they the Jungian/Lacanian imago, that psychoanalytic idealised cultural point of identification linked to repression and the subconscious. Stationers imagos are recording devices that store the entire personality and memories of their users, ensuring continuity and preservation of knowledge and expertise by creating chains of experiential understanding. These imagos do not preserve the past as a monolithic, imposing entity; they are the past as a living, breathing, and changing thing, informing and advising the present to help chart the way into a better future. In effect, bearers of imagos become instantiations of Ursula K. Le Guin’s Carrier Bags. Le Guin articulated a collective, rather than individual, historical endeavor in which all actors – both human and nonhuman – are rooted in a shared existence, implicitly positioning the carrier bag *against* Walter Benjamin’s ragpicker. This ragpicker is an isolated, appropriative, thoroughly *human* figure, envisioned as picking through and collecting fragments and discarded remnants of history and memory.

And I want to pick this apart a bit more, since the ragpicker is a male human. This is a specifically gendered and focalized embodiment and outlook. In contrast, the carrier bag is a *thing*. Here, I do not mean “thing” as a simple non-human lesser object. This is “thing” in its capacity as a Latourian actant, as an actor, something that *acts* and *reacts*, existing in a network of other such actors. The carrier bag has its own matter and (most importantly) agency. It *acts* on humans, just as they act on it, and together and separately they act on the world around them. Put another way, the carrier bag is an assemblage of material, intents, and intersections of and with other things.
Reading Martine’s imagos in this way has powerful implications for their function within the narrative. They are breathing, thinking, moving loci of reflection, interchange, and evolution – in what I read as a possible echo of Octavia Butler’s “God is Change” in *Earthseed*. Each imago (and its user) is persistent, quietly enduring and adapting to an unpredictable and potentially chaotic present. Here can be seen echoes of Herodotus and Thucydides, writing as they were against the backdrop(s) of rising internal and external tensions, and open conflict(s) in the fifth century BCE. Thucydides does not name any of his sources and largely presents a single version of events, whereas Herodotus includes story variants and argues for what he considers most probable. In a particularly notable scene, Mahit enacts a similar value-judgement, when she must reconcile her own memories with those of the old imago and those of Yskandr’s up-to-date imago. She has conversations with two different versions of the past as she attempts to integrate the two imago-forms without losing herself in the process, succeeding in large part because she has the intensive psychotherapeutical and historical training to retain her sense of self.

In addition to the narrative itself, particularly the richness of the imagos, *A Memory Called Empire* contains one of my all-time favorite meta-narrative elements: excerpts from in-universe texts. These serve to flesh out areas or components of the world that are ancillary to the primary narrative, and can contain useful or illuminating information. Martine uses several of these excerpted sections to incorporate details about Lsel Station that we as readers would not otherwise receive, since Mahit herself is not present. Similarly, other excerpted texts are transcripts of news bulletins from the frontiers of the empire – far away from all of the narrative’s focus – which introduce several characters prior to their actual narrative appearances, including one of the primary antagonists of the story. More germane to this paper’s overall focus are selections from anthropological studies and Teixcalaanli poetry. In one particularly
memorable instance, a poem that Mahit and her cultural liaison compose within the narrative as a private message reappears later as an excerpt, reworked and categorized as a protest song. All of this serves to provide concrete examples of the sheer quantity, scope, and longevity of Teixcalaanli cultural output.

Teixcalaan is functionally ossified under the weight of this literary production. There is so much accumulated cultural knowledge that almost any sentence can contain a poetic allusion, every outfit a political statement, and historical narratives remain so embedded in the cultural consciousness that every action is immediately compared to one or more antecedents. Martine deftly wields this to give a Teixcalaanli flare to the adjective “Byzantine,” such that simple messages must be written in encoded poetry on individual rolls of paper and sealed with wax, to be broken open and decoded, simply to transmit a lunch invite for the next day. Aspiring bureaucrats cram centuries of epic poetry into their heads in order to succeed in competitive examinations, and political maneuvering at the court takes place via proxies in poetry competitions. With apologies for the spoiler, this is also precisely why Six Direction, the Teixcalaanli emperor, ends his life in the way that he does. His ritual suicide transforms him from an ailing old man into a archetype, a unifying figurehead, a metamorphosis achieved because it follows a long-standing, preserved (albeit archaic) imperial tradition that citizens across the empire are able to recognize, understand, and rally behind.

One of the most striking features of this intense Teixcalaanli focus on culture, particularly literature, as a unifying factor, is its apparent omnipresence. It pervades life to an almost obsessive degree, and arguably stifles the Teixcalaanli citizenry – possibly by design. Teixcalaanli are expected, almost required, to be walking, talking encyclopedias, to have learned
as much as possible by themselves in order to surpass and outshine their peers, in the process constantly renewing the overarching cultural apparatus.

Pivoting back to Lsel Stationer culture, it is markedly less competitive, seems to have a stronger sense of community (albeit a threatened one), and while there is a definite focus on the importance of precedent and history, the imago-lines set Stationer history and ontology apart from Teixcalaanli. Stationer history informs the present, but Teixcalaanli history shapes it, distorts it with its own weight. The enduring image of Benjamin’s angel of history, borne back ceaselessly into the future but forever facing the past, is deeply pessimistic, albeit true from a certain point of view. I argue that this bears a striking resemblance to the Teixcalaanli view. If I may take some liberties: for Stationers, and especially Mahit, the angel is still carried into the future, but it stands firm, staring forward blindfolded, trusting its current footing and the wind itself. With apologies for this somewhat belabored metaphor, I want to stress once again the inherent pessimism and weight on Benjamin’s angel, and suggest the imago as its opposite.

The Lsel imago is a potent metaphor for living with history without letting it define us. The ways in which we talk about, understand, and even conceptualize historical narratives matter. It is an unfortunate truth that many countries are currently in arguably historic circumstances, as oppression, xenophobia, and racial division raise their ugly heads in the open once again. The temptation to look backwards at all the times these things have happened before, to bemoan their latest recurrence, is undeniably strong. But the real work of addressing these issues, of fighting back, comes when we recognize that we collectively have the power to change the narrative, learning from history and memory to write a new future.