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Nicolas Argenti, *Remembering Absence: The Sense of Life in Island Greece*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019. Pp. xvii + 307. 30 illustrations, index. Paper \$35.00, Cloth \$75:00.

Nicolas Argenti conducted doctoral research in the Grassfields of Cameroon and that led him to consider memories of violence, a subject on which he co-edited an insightful volume (Argenti and Schramm 2010). Then his surname caught up with him. He turned his attention to his family's former homeland, Chios, site of a horrific massacre in 1822. The argument of this book is that such an event does not settle in a receding past. Argenti makes the case for a particular 'Aegean temporality', a qualitative, tempestuous time (*kairós*) of eternal returns as in the Orthodox refrain, *nun kai aiei*. The past remains accessible through intentional remembering, but it also bursts in via spontaneous reminiscences that overtake one in raptures of transcendence. Aegean temporality contrasts with standard Western time (*chrónos*) measured out quantitatively in units of seconds, days, and years held together by ideas of linearity and causation. For the denizens of Chios, everyday historical thought proceeds from the emotions and devotions of life in the present.

Argenti begins his journey (back) to Chios, by reflecting on the photographs of family members dispersed around the globe that he saw as a child in his family home in Paris. After 1822 the island itself never again became the center of trade, and being in diaspora would always contain an overtone of tragic loss. The pictures thus emitted melancholic signals beyond the comprehension of a child, but readily intelligible to adults. The 1822 massacre is the gravitational center of Chiot historicity holding everything else in its orbit, yet so powerful that no one dares look straight at it. As Flaubert, quoted in the epigraph of this

book, wrote: “Few will suspect how sad one had to be to undertake the resuscitation of Carthage.” Chiots live the aftermath of the massacre silently in a subliminal, collective *tristesse*. “We don’t remember the massacres” (18), people would respond to Argenti’s inquiries. “Ask us about the slaughter that is taking place now – then we will have something to talk about,” (18) they continued, referring to the economic crisis besetting Greece at the time of his research. In this solar system of tragedy, subsequent sufferings enter the gravitational pull of 1822 absorbing its energy, refracting its light, and relaying its message.

Perhaps the idea of trauma might capture the situation? Argenti rejects such a suggestion considering that the term “trauma” threatens to pathologize the islanders. The trauma paradigm roots down in a Western chrono-logic that assumes the past is over and can be left behind. Freud subscribed to this temporal ontology in his recommendation, for example, that proper mourning enables one to “move on” rather than dwell in pathological melancholy. Argenti contends that melancholia performs important existential work. In his words, periodic “topological transformations of collective memory” are not atavisms, but “a form of memory that is active, alive, and orientated to the future – the very opposite of anachronism” (93). The memory of trauma may indicate resilience rather than debilitating fixation (94). The Chiots are “mariners of time” (73) voyaging on the sea of their past, interpreting the present while anticipating the future.

In the body of this book Argenti presents a series of eclectic, well-observed case studies of people on Chios who bridge past and present in various ways. Fotis, the boat builder charged with sawing caiques in half to put them out of commission for fishermen seeking EU subsidies, expresses his horror at this new “crime against memory” (120). A joiner of planks to create the hulls that have insured the safety and livelihood of an island society, this articulator of tradition and memory is reviled by the disarticulation of the Chiot story. In another chapter, Argenti takes the reader to Anavatos, site of a legendary mass

suicide when the villagers jumped over the side of the cliff rather than endure capture by the Ottomans in 1822. Today an Asia Minor civic group organizes the annual commemoration of that event which involves their members dressing in traditional Asia Minor costume in a living heritage display at the site. In so doing, they mourn their own tragedy of 1922, a major planet inside the 1822 solar system. In melding these two historical events the Chiots reveal the “double helix of calamities” (65) that comprises their societal DNA.

Chapter Six considers the village of Kidianta, abandoned after a police raid in 1948 to round up leftists during the Greek civil war. Today the village is animated only once a year when former villagers and their supporters celebrate the heroes and the values of the Greek resistance. Giorgos, a child present during the events of 1948, comes alone to the silent village most days to drink coffee and spend time in the little space he has knocked together on his family property. He shows visitors around the sites where the events unfolded: a policeman shot, a villager shot in revenge, two brothers carted away to prison, one given the death penalty. Both Anavatos and Kidianta are landscapes of sacred memory where, like the stations of the cross, persecution is recalled in all its pain.

The following chapter visits the sole nun inhabiting Nea Moni, a monastery famed for its Byzantine mosaics, invitations to anamnestic participation in the eternity of Christ, the saints and the Panagia. Speaking from within the grips of the Greek crisis, Abbess Mariam, seer of her own visions of the past, occupies a monastery sitting atop the bones of many victims from 1822 (fig. 2.2). She reports hearing them chanting and ringing bells in “a form of shared collective memory, a *presencing* of the past” (202). Other chapters consider the rocket war between two parishes in the village of Vrontados on Easter Saturday, and the case of a blind fisherman who daily navigates to fish in waters between the island and Turkey.

Among the rich, original ethnographic case studies I found one of the most moving to be a story of the massacre told in old age by an eyewitness, Matthew Calvocoressi, to his 14-

year old grandson, Pandia, in 1888. Pandia then wrote it down in 1950 from memory, adopting the first person, as if he had himself been present at events. At that point in time Pandia could be identified as an “Anglo-French businessman” born in Nice (62). This case substantiates the power of emotion maintained in collective memory and illuminates the atmosphere in Argenti’s childhood home. Granted the appositeness of terms like collective memory to describe this and many other cases in the book, and even the word “remembering” in the book’s title, I wondered why Argenti felt the need to state on the very first page (xi) that this study moves beyond the memory paradigm. Presumably this was because of his resort to broader questions of time and temporality. Does that differentiate it from work done on memory, or expand and add to memory studies? A closer consideration of that matter might have been valuable. There can be no question, however, that this is an original and inspiring humanistic work, written in a rare prose style drawing in reference to literature, painting, music, philosophy and social science in such a way that it will surely capture the imagination of a diverse readership.

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REFERENCES CITED

Argenti, Nicolas and Katarina Schramm, eds. (2010). *Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission*. New York: Berghahn.