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# MEMORY STUDIES

## *Looking beyond memory studies: Comparisons and integrations*

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Projects in memory studies are best driven by topic not tradition, because the phenomena under investigation are usually interactive, not neatly compartmentalized. This imposes open-endedness not only in tracing diverse activities of remembering across the spread of relevant disciplines, but also in looking beyond memory altogether in order better to understand its diverse manifestations.

In different contexts (theory-development, descriptive case study, interventionist manipulation, and so on) the balance shifts between pinpointing particularity and seeking pattern. It is notoriously difficult, as Steven Brown noted in *Memory Studies* 1(3), to identify 'the limits and extent of this aspect of human conduct that we are calling "memory"' (2008: 262). Building on Brown's robust acceptance of this uncertainty, this editorial encourages the comparison of memory studies to other projects, or other domains of enquiry. Brown worked through an analogy between memory and sexuality to point to 'a set of fundamental obstacles' to the study of 'memory'. The comparison with sexuality, among its other effects, warns of the dangers of fixing concepts, strategies and institutions too firmly and too fast.

But are there any other domains for comparative analysis that, used for different purposes, might reveal clues and options as well as pitfalls? What is the state of memory studies in relation to the interdisciplinary study of dreaming, say, or of gesture, or emotion, or colour vision? Or, for other purposes, we might spy on the interdisciplinary study of jazz, say, or of gardens, or sport, or diagrams, or cloth, or martial arts, to ask whether and how the multiplicity within each of these domains is acknowledged and mapped in case study or in theory.

The activities and phenomena in most of these domains, as in remembering, are complex and highly structured, involving at once many distinctive dimensions that specific analyses may try to map and tap: neural, affective, kinesthetic, sensory, material, interpersonal, historical, political, cultural, technological, and so on, where each dimension named in this truncated list is itself wildly heterogeneous. Brown argues that because instances or activities of remembering usually occur across many such dimensions at once, 'an implicit barrier is set against establishing the analytic priority of any particular aspect of the practice': he goes on to diagnose various forms of anxiety at the unbounded nature of the resulting projects (Brown, 2008: 269).

But there are good reasons for comparative analysis across disciplines and sub-disciplines, for looking beyond the boundaries of memory studies, beyond the wish to avoid sealing off and reifying a homogenized subject-matter. Memory is often in use when it is not explicitly in question. We often have to sneak up on it: as Barbie Zelizer noted in this journal's first issue, 'one of the key lessons of contemporary memory studies is that vast and intricate memory work is being accomplished all the time in settings having little to do with memory per se' (Zelizer, 2008: 80). So each of the domains and topics listed above overlaps with memory studies, bearing a stronger relation to remembering than mere analogy. Some specific theoretical, historical and empirical questions about jazz or gesture or cloth, for example, are at the same time questions about remembering (Berliner, 1994 and Monson, 1996 on jazz; Clark, 2008: 123–33 and Katsman, 2007 on gesture; Jones and Stallybrass, 2000 and Stallybrass, 1993 on cloth). So memory studies is not insulated and isolated from these and other domains of enquiry.

Within the neural and cognitive sciences of memory, likewise, institutional pressures towards specialization hang in the balance against general acknowledgement of the dynamic interactivity of the processes under investigation. Those brain systems and processes that are actively engaged in our activities of remembering are not sealed off and isolated, but are rather certain integrated and coordinated activities of context-sensitive sensory, kinesthetic, linguistic, emotional and motor systems (Rubin, 2006).

Critics worry that a notion of memory that encompasses activities spanning brains, bodies, small groups and material objects is simply too generic, and the systems in question too motley, to form the basis of productive research (Adams and Aizawa, 2008; Rupert, 2004). Steven Brown's recommended response to such concern is to crank up the shock and anxiety, asking for more 'transversal links', concepts or models to articulate relations across disciplines that they then unsettle (Brown, 2008: 266–8). As I interpret this call, the study of specific and constrained forms or contexts of remembering requires the moulding and fusing of concepts and methods from distinctive subdisciplines, in projects driven by topic rather than tradition. This is because, as many papers published in *Memory Studies* so far demonstrate, remembering itself often involves the interaction or coordination of different processes operating at different timescales across different parts of complex systems, each with its own distinctive histories, formats and dynamics.

Big history or cultural norms sedimented in body, brain or group show up again, for example, in particular small stories or momentary conversational turns about the personal past, or layered in embodied routines and 'ghost gestures' (Behnke, 1997; Murakami, 2003; Samudra, 2008); plastic, biosocial brains carry the idiosyncratic traces and dynamic tendencies of culture-ridden personal experience (Calvo-Merino et al, 2005; Draganski et al, 2004; Malabou, 2008; Mithen, 2008); fragments of erased or suppressed histories end up seeping or 'bleeding through' at unexpected angles (Klein, 2002, 2008). The phenomena themselves are motley. The requisite pluralism is demanded by the world, not imposed by theorists' whim.

Institutional, practical and institutional tasks are set by the resulting need to care for both particularity and pattern: memory studies requires both experiment and

ethnography, so as both to hone in on processes at single dimensions, *and* explode out to attend to interaction and spread. Memory studies can play a central role, for example, in the development of cross-disciplinary fields such as neuroanthropology and cognitive archaeology (Downey, 2008; Malafouris, 2008), in which phenomenology and cognitive science might be natural allies rather than glaring antagonists.

What forms of longer-term immersive collaboration are workable across disciplines? What sizes and types of small teams, with how much diversity, are appropriate for distinctive projects? How do we develop the right kinds of interactive listening and mutual concept-sharing for boundary spanning over time? Knowledge management and distribution are dizzyingly creative and complex challenges for memory studies, because very few corners of the arts and the humanities, or of the cognitive, social or natural sciences are entirely or in principle irrelevant. There are specialist skills, methods and literatures in extraordinarily precise multi- and subdisciplinary corners, which may turn out to be just what need to be accessed. So projects that contrast or integrate memory studies with related projects elsewhere across the disciplinary spectrum help, because comparative analyses are often also integrative: in sometimes looking beyond memory studies, the raw materials – the concepts, methods, and transversal links – for better doing memory studies may become accessible.

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