the mnemonic imagination
remembering as creative practice
emily keightley and michael pickering

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The nascent field of Memory Studies emerges from contemporary trends that include a shift from concern with historical knowledge of events to that of memory, from ‘what we know’ to ‘how we remember it’; changes in generational memory; the rapid advance of technologies of memory; panics over declining powers of memory, which mirror our fascination with the possibilities of memory enhancement; and the development of trauma narratives in reshaping the past.

These factors have contributed to an intensification of public discourses on our past over the last thirty years. Technological, political, interpersonal, social and cultural shifts affect what, how and why people and societies remember and forget. This groundbreaking series tackles questions such as: What is ‘memory’ under these conditions? What are its prospects, and also the prospects for its interdisciplinary and systematic study? What are the conceptual, theoretical and methodological tools for its investigation and illumination?

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The Mnemonic Imagination
Remembering as Creative Practice

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In memory of
Cyril George Keightley (1908–2008)
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Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering
Memory studies is an intellectually vibrant, yet still emergent field. Many disciplines meet there, but hardly as yet converge. Effective interdisciplinary synthesis will no doubt take some time to develop, and will be the work of divers hands. While we hope to make some contribution to this, our aim in what lies ahead is relatively modest. It is directed at certain critical issues in the recent study of memory which have so far been largely ignored, and at certain aspects of current thinking and practice which we believe should be reconsidered. The main area of neglect which we deal with, and address throughout the book, is the relationship between memory and imagination. Imagination and imaginative engagement are of vital importance in acts and processes of remembering. In focusing on both particular and divergent past scenes and scenarios, they help us integrate memories into a relatively coherent pattern of meaning that informs our sense of a life as we have lived it. They enable us to establish continuities and shifts in the trajectories of our experience over time, and creatively transform memory into a resource for thinking about the transactions between past, present and future. Yet in seeking to explore the significance of imagination for memory, we have to a great extent found memory studies deficient. Their relationship is one from which the field has so far shied away. The focus has been almost exclusively on memory, with little if any attention paid to imagination.

We find this rather curious because, in what are everyday occurrences and activities, using and relating to the imagination is commonplace. We read a novel and imaginatively interact with the characters and the narrative action; we listen to a piece of music and certain scenes or feelings are imaginatively generated; we watch particular films or television programmes and subsequently use them as imaginative resources.
In these examples imagination and memory act in concert, both at the time we are immersed in music or fictional narrative and subsequently, as what is given to us through our imaginative engagements with them becomes interwoven with our own social and historical experience. ‘Imagination’ here is given positive valence, but of course the term has various meanings and applications, which include those where aspersions are cast upon the veracity of a statement, as for example when what has been said is dismissed on the grounds that ‘you’re merely imagining it’. Even more negatively, the term may be used as if it were synonymous with wild fantasy, where doubts are levelled, sometimes with a kind of brass-tacks bullishness, at someone’s ability to recognise the demands and pressures of ‘the real world’, as in the accusation that ‘you’re living in cloud-cuckoo land’. The realm of the imagination is then utterly divorced from the realm of necessity or truth. So while our cultural and aesthetic experiences involving the imagination are many and varied, and the role of imagination in them is regarded as legitimate or appropriate, once used in a negative or pejorative sense the values of imagination for processes of recollection are inevitably called into question.

This is where the problems start, with the sundering of memory and imagination from each other. Memory is then confined to empirical tests of veracity, and imagination regarded as necessarily suspect in its relation to memory’s adherence to some ‘real world’ of the past. It is this hard-and-fast situation, where memory and imagination are rendered antagonistic by being separated from each other, that we want to challenge. In doing so, we take an immediate cue from various academic disciplines where imagination may be constrained by certain procedures of method or criteria of analysis, but is not rejected out of hand. When we refer to the sociological imagination or the historical imagination, this involves our capacity to move from one perspective to another, to alternate between individual and collective forms of experience, to bring large-scale, impersonal and local or intimate aspects of social and historical life into relationship with each other. Such moves are regarded as important components of sociological and historical interpretation and analysis, so is it really the case that memory studies is rejecting imagination out of hand? We cannot believe this is the case. It is, as we have suggested, more a matter of neglect, of it having been overlooked. But it is a serious omission, and one we need to redress.

The relationship between memory and imagination has not been entirely ignored in memory studies, but only by a small margin. Barbara Misztal, for example, does address the relationship in her book on
theories of social remembering, but devotes only five pages to it. There she cites various literary, philosophical and historiographical examples which illustrate the impossibility of splitting memory and imagination off from each other. This is useful, but limited. We need to go beyond selective quotations from a few celebrated figures, and beyond remarks which say little that is new or challenging in relation to conventional thinking. How memory and imagination relate to each other needs to be given concerted attention and considered afresh. The need is made stronger by the paucity or sketchiness of reference to this question being representative of a broader pattern in which the relationship is played down or skirted around, regardless of whether it is individual or collective memory that is being discussed. Memory is commonly seen as a constructive or reconstructive process, but when we look to see where imagination contributes to this process, we find a large and unacknowledged gap. The intention of this book is to fill that gap, and try to think anew about how the relationship between memory and imagination may be said to operate. Before we begin this task, we need to tackle another obscured relationship in memory studies.

This involves the vital partnership between experience and memory. It is only by first attending to experience and memory that we can start to rethink the relationship of imagination and memory. Experience is an important analytical category for memory studies because it is central to the relations of past, present and future that are germane to the whole field. The common distinction between experience as process (lived experience) and experience as product (assimilated experience – the knowledge crystallised out of previous experience) correlates with the equally common distinction between the process of remembering and memory as the product resulting from that activity. Experience provides the basis for thinking backwards and looking forwards, as it links up with memory and remembering in any given present, but how this linkage occurs is something that needs to be examined at the outset.

So experience is where we begin. The first chapter of the book discusses the dynamic relation between immediate and congealed experience on the one hand and remembering and memory on the other. In exploring this relation our approach to the remembering subject is cast in terms of our successive versions of self-identity as these are constructed over the course of time. We contextualise this in modern and late-modern times since it is characteristic of such times that we have come to believe the self to be continually transformable. This belief is itself predicated on acceptance of a self as able to be reconfigured. In modern times, we do not see ourselves as determined by our place in a
social or cosmic order; the modern subject is regarded as self-defining and self-realising. This is of course a contestable definition of the subject, and one that would need to be advanced with considerable qualification. In striving to avoid both oversocialising and undersocialising the remembering subject, we ground memory in experience since in our conception of it, experience as lived and interpreted is necessarily registered in the interspace between selfhood and social order. It is also through experience that we negotiate processes of change and patterns of continuity. In their mutual comprehension, the meanings we impart to experience through the ways in which we recollect it are neither determined from their outset nor constant over time. While unfolding in time, experience acts back on that process of development across time, and memory is key to this transactional movement. It is in such movement that we can first identify its creative potential.

Another reason for starting with an exploration of the relationship between experience and memory is that both are viewed as personal and social, situated and mediated, proximate and distant. Seeing how these dimensions are interactive is an important aspect of our project to rethink the relations between individual and collective memory, which we discuss in the middle of the book. In order to prepare the ground for this discussion, we spend the first half of the book developing the argument that our ability to turn experience as process into experience as product depends upon a mutually generative tension between memory and imagination. In much thinking about memory it is set up in strict opposition to imagination. Addressing this problem is the purpose of the second chapter in the book. For some the problem may seem somewhat chimerical if they do not see any hard-and-fast distinction between them as forms of knowledge, or regard them as having twinned roles in artistic creation. This kind of association has, for example, been a common feature of literary studies or art history with, among other things, imagination being accepted as significant for the aesthetic form in which memory is represented. But in wider public discourse the opposition is clearly, if not starkly apparent, and this has been replicated in contemporary memory studies, unwittingly or not, with a marked tendency to separate memory and imagination and, when imagination is exceptionally taken into consideration, to attend to their differences over and above their potential interaction. In order to see how this has come about, we chart the changing historical relationship between memory and imagination and consider the particular epistemological shifts which have been involved in order to assess what has been lost in their separation.
We also assess the various positions that have been taken in thinking about the relationship between memory and imagination. Increasingly, it is the sense of their mutual antagonism that prevails. In memory studies, the conceptual aggrandisement of memory has occurred in inverse proportion to analytical engagement with the role of imagination in acts and processes of remembering, while in contemporary critical discourse, imagination seems to be viewed with sceptical excess, as for example is evident in the weight of negative connotations acquired by the word ‘imagined’, which has become all-too-easily used as if it is only equivalent to whatever is regarded as fabricated, illusionary and ideologically tainted. Our own position is that memory and imagination are closely akin, though significantly distinct, and can only be considered as suspect or not in relation to the context in which their relationship becomes manifest. On the one hand this means that memory is a vital resource for imagining, and imagining is a vital process in making coherent sense of the past and connecting it to the present and future. The remembering subject is faced with far more vacant spaces than spaces filled with available memories, yet it is out of what remains or can be recollected at will that we construct the story of ourselves and our lives. Such a narrative is not built purely and simply out of memory. Life stories are constructed just as much out of how we imagine our memories as fitting together in retrospect. On the other hand of course, distortion, exaggeration, falsification, even outright invention may exist and these may derive from the imagination as well as from various ideological forms and frames. What we imagine may not necessarily be rooted in any verifiable memory, but the possibility of this does not in itself deny the positive role which imagination plays in the narrative development of a life-story or the reconstruction of past experiences. Our memories are not imaginary, but they are acted upon imaginatively.

Some of the problems in thinking about ‘memory’ may seem to stem from the term itself, for it is has an imperial scope and so embraces a vast territory that includes areas designated by the legend – ‘here be dragons’ of forgetting. That is why for many it makes sense to distinguish between forms and processes of remembering across a broad spectrum from cases of bodily remembering, where memory is felt as intense physical sensation, through mémoire involontaire with its joltingly evocative madeleine moments, to intentional memory as part of an effort to build up detailed and connected maps of meaning across entire lives or communities. We see the value in these typologies and draw on them in what follows; we also found them helpful in making certain distinctions and qualifications as we initially sketched out what
we wanted to say. But we have not engaged with them directly and substantively in this book because our primary interest is with intentional acts and processes of remembering as these operate in concert with imagination and imaginative engagement. Here again the value of memory has become rather inflated in its conceptual currency. We can illustrate this with reference to certain acts and occurrences in our memory which seem to have a dramatic presence, where we may say, because of this quality, that they are as real as when they happened. This is only true of their representation, for it can only be as representation that they exist in our memories, and over time they need to be imaginatively connected together if they are to contribute to the longer-term maps of meaning to which we are referring. Two considerations follow. Firstly, when we remember them we do not experience them in the same way as we would if they were to magically recombine in front of us and be materially as they were when first formed. They do not belong to experience in that way. While this may become a source of pathos or regret, it also provides us with a critical perspective on the interrelations of memory and imagination. What we remember and imagine are akin in the sense that we may describe them as vivid, faithful or lifelike, whereas we do not use these terms to describe what we experience within any particular present as we live it. We use these terms to distinguish between, say, a face and the portrayal of a face, or a face and the memory of a face. This is not to diminish the likeness or the memory in favour of the actual face, for memories and imaginings are both important in creating a credible likeness. They enable us to seem to perceive what is not there, and so make the absent present, or at least they do this when they are taken to be vivid, faithful or lifelike, yet what is absent can only appear present through its reconstruction in and across time. It has no other presence even though its cross-temporal reference may seem stacked with resonance. Secondly, while memories and imaginings are distinct from one another, when we make memories become vivid once again through the way we engage with them across time, or when they have a definite value for us as past experience that helps sustain us in a changed present, they attain a clear imaginative edge or form a distinct line of temporal connection which we have traced in our imagination, so helping to make past and present in some way cohere and have continuity across time.

It is because of such considerations that our central concern in the book is with remembering as a creative process. This is what is denied when memory and imagination are cast asunder. The transformative potential of memory is attenuated and the role of remembering is
limited to repetition of the past rather than being seen as central to
the creative production of meaning about the past, present and future
in their various interrelations. While this argument is balanced with
attention to the ethical dangers of postmodern relativism and of sub-
suming memory into fiction (in its pejorative sense), we give priority to
the argument itself because it was via thinking about what is lost in the
separation of memory and imagination that we were led to write this
book in the first place. That is why our central focus in what follows
is on rethinking their relationship so as to account for the mutually
productive ways in which they interact. How they interact may depend
upon what is being recollected, in what way, and why, but as already
noted, in memory the past is not directly transmitted to us in pristine
form; it comes back to us only in fragments out of which we puzzle
together their connections and distinctions, patterns and configura-
tions. Memory is mobile and formative, not merely repetitive; it is this
which gives memory its creative potential, but the potential is only
realised through the productive tension that arises between memory
and imagination. Through this tension imagination reactivates memory
and memory stimulates the imagination. The creative quality of these
interactions has a cross-temporal resonance, with memory necessary
in thinking of the future, and imagination necessary in thinking of
the past. It is in order to understand better what this involves that we
develop the concept of the mnemonic imagination.

This can be roughly characterised as an active synthesis of remember-
ing and imagining which is essential to our understandings of the rela-
tionship between past, present and future. It is through the mnemonic
imagination that our engagements with the past move through a series
of interactive dualities: the constitution of selfhood and the commis-
sion of social action; the interplay between experience and expectation,
memory and possibility; the relations between lived first-hand experi-
ence and mediated or inherited second-hand experience. Exploring
the movement between these dualities is crucial if a more fine-grained
comprehension of the ways in which past, present and future experi-
ence are brought to bear on one another in processes of remembering is
to be developed, and the full extent of the creativity that this involves
is to be recognised. It is because past, present and future co-exist in pat-
terns of continuity and discontinuity within the experiential manifold,
with the mnemonic imagination as the dynamic in which these patterns
are reconstructed and negotiated, that what has been taken over from
the past is continually being revised in order to accommodate an open
and continually unfolding future. This has become a commonplace of
modernity, with its future-oriented temporality generating a need not only for new experiences but also for the recurrent reassessment of past experiences. If memory is the medium of that reassessment, imagination is what animates the material on which it draws. Through the productive tension between them, the mnemonic imagination facilitates the transformation of experience as process into experience as product. This is the core of the mnemonic imagination, and through it as well experience is brought into a state of creative interaction with expectation and movements beyond it. The interaction may, for example, cause us to revise our expectations while our understanding of the past may be revised by our expectations having been exceeded. There are various possibilities that may ensue as a result of the interaction, and collectively they show how the mnemonic imagination is vital in providing us with a framework for comprehending past and future and so enabling action in the present.

In the first half of the book we are primarily concerned with establishing how the mnemonic imagination is vital for the processes of individual recollection and the assimilation of experience in the ways so far outlined. It is perhaps because we are attracted to the phenomena of memory as sociologists that we are sensitive, in this section of the book, to the dangers of adopting a sociologically hidebound approach. The main consequence of this is that, while we endeavour to see these phenomena primarily through social frames, we also try not to lose sight of the fact that, first and foremost, it is individual subjects who do remembering, and for whom memories are reanimated in a changed present. That is why we begin the book by dwelling on the ways in which individuals use their mnemonic imagination in helping to bring past, present and future into some cross-temporal pattern so as to sustain a sense of self-identity across the different periods of their lives. Across time we change, and since memory provides a complex set of links back into the past, much of our analytical focus is initially on how, in our particular life-trajectories, there are certain constituent features which define us in recollection even as we change, and help us relate our successive selves to each other in terms of who we were, are and might become. In such processes the creative work required is accomplished by the mnemonic imagination, and as such it is across time a key component of identity formation and maintenance. While it seems to us important that we give this careful consideration, that cannot of course be the whole story, and so after the first two chapters we step out from this initial analytical focus to show the relevance of the concept of mnemonic imagination to extra-individual phenomena as these are manifest in broader configurations of memory within societies.
This shift in our primary focus of attention is signalled particularly in Chapter 2 where we attend in detail to the relations between individual and collective memory. The greatest danger in thinking about these relations is setting them up as neatly separable domains of mnemonic action. This is quite false because no form of remembering is either individual or collective in any singular or unified sense. We may still lack adequate ways of handling the vital betweenness that arises across individual and collective memory, regardless of whether we are working towards a sociological conception of this or one oriented more to a cultural psychology of remembering, but this is no excuse for an all-too-convenient division of labour between, say, cognitive psychologists studying individual memory and critical sociologists devoting themselves to the study of collective memory. All too often these two dimensions of memory have been considered separately and the dynamic nature of their relationship has been neglected. In early psychological and some philosophical accounts, social aspects of remembering were ignored in deference to memory as an individual faculty. In contrast, more recent sociological accounts of collective cultural memory have obscured the role of the individual as an agent in the processes and practices of collective remembering. Along with the dangers of approaching memory either in an individualist or socially determinist manner, we emphasise the pitfall of reifying collective memory and speaking as if a social group or community remembers in the same way as an individual. This can be avoided by focusing conceptually on the relations between personal and popular memory, and the interplay between situated and mediated experience. Sociologically, this is the only way memory makes any sense at all. The key to these relations and this interplay is the mnemonic imagination. The mnemonic imagination facilitates the transactional movement necessary for their coexistence, and when necessary helps realign personal and popular memory through its interanimation of these two dimensions of identity and experience.

In taking up the common-sense distinction between lived, first-hand experience and vicarious, second-hand experience, we try to show how they act in co-relation even if they clash with or contradict each other. The kinds of second-hand experience primarily or in the first instance associated with media consumption which are most commonly identified and referred to are spatial in orientation and synchronic in occurrence. It is these which loom large when second-hand experience is being discussed. We use the opportunity of studying memory and remembering to offset this by attending to second-hand experience which is primarily temporal in orientation and diachronic in occurrence, for it is such
experience which is by contrast relatively neglected. Overcoming this neglect is vital in seeking to bring personal and popular memory back into view of one another. We conceive of these complementary dimensions of remembering as informing senses of continuity and duration, change and reorientation in people’s social and self-identities, and offer mnemonic imagination as a concept which allows us to develop a clearer understanding of how we continuously rove back and forth between these dimensions of our remembered experience. It is in this movement that mnemonic imagination contributes to the creation of social and cultural identities that are both durable and flexible over time. The interaction between personal and popular memory is thus reconceived as a dialogic and creative process in which mnemonic imagination negotiates and integrates individual and social elements of experience.

At this point we should add a caveat. In exploring the creativity of memory, our considerations of the potency of certain memories as well as the capacity of our imaginative powers have, at times, inclined us towards a way of writing of them that we would not finally espouse. This involves personifying memory and imagination, and speaking of them as if they are autonomous agents. It is a common enough tendency, and the examples we could cite are legion, but it is of course always people who remember and imagine, and in whom and for whom the mnemonic imagination gains operational force as they apply it to their thinking of past, present and future and the ways in which they interrelate. We indulge this occasional tendency in how we have written about the mnemonic imagination only for the sake of convenience, thus saving readers from elaborate reams of qualification and tiresome disqualifiers. We hope that by highlighting the distinction between remembering as experiential process and memory as experiential product that we shall, in the first half of the book, sufficiently disabuse readers of any confusion arising from this short-cut choice of phrasing.

From Chapter 3 onwards we try to keep individual and collective remembering in more or less constant view of each other. With this in mind, the remaining chapters of the book are designed to emphasise the value of the concept of the mnemonic imagination by showing in a more concrete way what happens when it is in active operation, and what is involved when such operation is thwarted by acts or representations that close down its access to the past, or when it is blighted by certain experiences that do not become available for its creative engagement. In two of these chapters we look at different forms of nostalgia. We argue that this distinctive modality of memory cannot simply be equated with an uncritical escapism and bland consolation
in the past, along with a concomitant loss of faith in the future. It cannot be reduced to a singular or absolute definition. Nostalgia is certainly a response to the experience of loss endemic in modernity and late-modernity, and it can certainly be trivial or become trivialised, but in its modern temporalised manifestations it is various and so not necessarily confined to a search for ontological security in the past. It can just as possibly be a response to the desire for creative engagement with difference, or a sign of social critique and aspiration. It is because of this variation, accommodating progressive, even utopian impulses as well as regressive stances and melancholic attitudes, that we attempt to reclaim nostalgia from its indiscriminate detractors. As Andrea Rítívoí has claimed, nostalgia prompts certain important questions regarding the function of remembering, and raises ‘distinctions between escapist fantasy and the imagination as repository of ideals, considerations of identity as a self-sufficient entity or as a culture- and context-bound entity’. She notes that ‘nostalgia encourages one to differentiate and to contrast, and as such, it functions as a potent interpretative stance, a tool of comparison and analysis’. This is very much as we approach it, focusing on it not simply because of the past/present contrasts upon which it is based, but more importantly developing it as an opportunity for demonstrating the diverse ways in which we respond to social and cultural change in modernity and late-modernity. Of course, nostalgia cannot be properly reclaimed and rehabilitated unless we also develop a critical account of the ways in which it is exploited and misused. We produce such an account in Chapter 5 where we introduce the concept of retrotyping as a way of showing how regressive forms of nostalgia are able to forestall or block the workings of the mnemonic imagination, and permit only ‘escapist fantasy’. Our discussion of retrotyping is linked with a critical interrogation of the thesis of cultural amnesia, and of Pierre Nora’s historical claims concerning lieux de mémoire.

Retrotyping is one particular way in which, usually for consumerist purposes, the past is rendered in such a way that the mnemonic imagination is denied active presence, and connections to present and future are stymied. In the last chapter of the book we attend to a quite different obstruction of the mnemonic imagination. This abides in the consequences of traumatic experience for the process of remembering, and for the ability of the mnemonic imagination to creatively energise the temporal tenses in our narrative understanding of past experience, so bringing the past to active account in the present for the sake of the future. In our discussion of these difficulties, we argue against the ways in which the term ‘trauma’ is so often used in a profligate and cavalier manner.