

Suturing the Past, Presenting the Present, Aspiring to the Future

Memory - History - Archive

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Memory has received an unprecedented amount of attention across disciplines in the last few decades (Klein 2000; Craig 2002; Kansteiner 2002; Radstone & Hedgkin 2003; Winter 2009)¹. Historians, archivists, anthropologists, sociologists, and media and cultural theorists have attempted to account for what Blight has aptly called the “memory boom” in Western society (Blight 2009). What has emerged is a focussed critique and analysis of what has been called the “crisis of memory”² and the anxieties that stem from it, has led historians, like Blight, to the conclusion that “the world is riven with too much memory; its obsession can paralyze whole peoples and stifle democratizing and universal principles” (Blight 2009, 249). The political implications of this “surfeit of memory” (Maier 1992) profoundly impacts both our relationship to the past and our ability to construct a political and ethical subjectivity. For archivists, memory is important for justifying the existence of archives. Archivists are no longer viewed as “neutral” and “objective” keepers of the past, but as active agents in the construction of social memory (Craig 2002; Schwartz & Cook 2002; Hedstrom 2010). However, the notions of “memory” and “archive” continue to evoke conflicting responses from both historians and archivists (Millar 2006; Cook 2009; Brockmeier 2010)³. Furthermore, understanding memory as both the process of “remembering” and the process of “forgetting” further problematizes the nature of the archive, and questions the traditional view of the archive as storage container where social memory is housed (Halas 2008).

My project in this paper is to analyze the relationship between archival culture and the culture of memory, taking into consideration what historians and media theorists have identified as some of the defining factors of contemporary society that mark its break from a continuous and trusted past. Archival culture is broadly defined to include both the archival profession, its theory, principles and practice, as well as “cultural” archival practices in the digital age. Archival culture has given rise to the desire to record and save everything for posterity in what has been referred to as “total recall” (Huysen 2000). Once thought to exist only in the realm of science fiction, “lifelogging” has emerged as a viable condition for the individual archive as I will explore in the case of the MyLifeBits project. In archival and historical discourses, memory is conventionally understood to mean “collective memory,”⁴ but this is becoming increasingly more difficult to define as “prosthetic memory”, “augmented memory” and “surrogate memory”⁵ have introduced an additional conceptual dimension that challenges a definitive boundary between what is considered to be “individual” rather than “shared” memory. In the light of this terminological confusion,⁶ I have chosen the term “cultural memory” to encompass both the conventional understanding of collective and social memory, as well as the “memory industry”, and the emergent memory practices among individuals in the context of a digital networked environment.⁷

What emerges from this analysis of archive, memory, and history is an uneasiness that I suggest underlies our reticence to accept the burden of memory in the information age.⁸ This uneasiness relates to the problem of *how to remember*. In other words, “memory” has become the defining catch-all concept for contemporary society, and we find ourselves unable to reconcile the anxiety of remembering too much with the fear of forgetting. There seems to be very little advancement in proposing possible solutions to this. Furthermore, the conditions of

postmodernity have led to a radical refiguring of both memory and the archive, heightening our cultural anxieties, and prompting archivists to pay closer attention to the discourse of memory. I will first give an overview of the historical relationship between “memory” and “archive” in order to frame the subsequent discussion of postmodernity’s influence on both historiography and archival science. I will then approach the problem of how to remember; first in the context of what Huyssen (2000) has termed “usable” and “disposable pasts” (28), and second, in a more radical context of “strategic remembering” which Landsberg (2004) identifies as an effect of “prosthetic memory”. The first approach focuses on the necessary aspect of *forgetting* which is often overlooked in both archival and historical treatments of memory; the second approach engages contemporary media and its reception, with a focus on the affective level of empathy. The question of how to remember also involves recognizing the value and meaning of remembering and forgetting, and to this end, I will conclude with a brief summary of the MyLifeBits project.

1) Archive - Memory

An examination of the relationship between cultural memory and archival processes has been recently revived in archival studies. In many cases, as Hedstrom (2010) points out, examining the salience of the archive as a metaphor for memory, has been successful in opening up a space for archival theory to dialogue with memory studies. By revisiting the power of the metaphor, both of the archive and of memory, in archival studies, archivists are beginning to see the need for more rigorous critiques of the archival principles of appraisal, provenance, and preservation.⁹ These principles when translated into practice and made transparent, have the potential to inform people’s expectations of both the function of archives, as well as the role of the archivist in today’s society.

Archivists have traditionally been viewed as the gatekeepers, preservers, or guardians of the past. In the early years¹⁰ of archival science, the age of “relative document scarcity” (Cook 2009), archives were inclusive, that is, everything was saved. The total administrative output of an organization would be passed on to the archives. Presently, in an age where it could be argued we are drowning in documents, the archival selection process determines the preservation of less than 5% of available documents, and even less of private collections (Cook 2009, 504).

Appraisal has become the most important principle of archival science. As Cook points out, the postmodern shift in archives is most recognizable in the change in the archivist’s role from a “neutral custodian” to an active “co-creator” of society’s memory (Cook 2009, 504). In considering the moral obligation of archivists in terms of cultural memory, Craig (2002) identifies a tension between two ideal representations of the archivist who is at once “the keeper who preserves the memory”, and “the documenter who inscribes memory” (288) in a memory institution such as archives. Craig argues that the “memorial model [of the archive] has particular pertinence to our ideas about the archivist’s responsibility for acknowledging those with no documentary voice” (288). Accountability in the archival profession is indeed a direct outcome of the changes in appraisal. Archivists need to take responsibility also in documenting their decisions. This would include, of course, the selection processes that would inevitably exclude rather than inscribe documents into the archives. If these decisions are made explicit, archival documents

become more than two-dimensional containers of information from the past.

Because they bind people to intentions and actions, archives, in their natural state, are a large-scale map of society’s documentary relationships as these are woven over time. (Craig 289)

This “natural state” of archives involves placing documents within a wider context of communications, intentions, and the processes surrounding their “archivization”. Archivization is a Derridean term that refers to all processes of communication, whether “personal, social, institutional, or technological” (Nesmith 2002, 30). Even as documents may enjoy their evidentiary status, they are also subject to the logic of the archive, which is a far cry from the objective status archives have enjoyed in the past. “The archivization produces as much as it records the event” (Derrida 1998, 17). Archives mediate reality through representations of the past, and archivists play a prominent role as mediators as they “fashion formative contexts for their work, which influence their understanding of recorded communication and position particular archives to do particular things” (Nesmith 2002, 30).

The goal for archivists at the turn of the twentieth century was to neutrally collect, store, and preserve history for the state (Cook 1997a). Epistemologically, the nature of archives underwent a shift in the mid-twentieth century, moving away from “use-based” approaches which catered to a narrow historical focus dependent on the changing interests of historians. In the 1970s and 1980s, this “statist approach” to archives gave way to the “societal approach”:

Believing that archives should reflect more globally the society that creates them, these differing “societal approaches”... represent a fundamental change in the archival discourse from one based on the state to one reflecting the broader society that the state serves. (Cook 1997a, 30)

The suggestion that archivists serve not the state, and are not just historians’ “handmaidens” (Cook 2009, 506) but serve the public in general, is a major shift in the meaning of archival appraisal. One such societal approach to archive management is the “total archives”

approach¹¹ which addresses the cultural function of archives in addition to fulfilling the state's requirements for the preservation of government documents:

“Governance” includes cognizance of the interaction of citizens with the state, the impact of the state on society, and the functions or activities of society itself, as much as it does the governing structures and their inward-facing bureaucrats. The archival task is to preserve recorded evidence of governance, not just of governments governing. (Cook 1997a, 34)

The total archives approach is thus also a political one. By focussing on *governance*, rather than government, provenance came to be understood as more than just the origin of the document. It not only involves taking into account the circumstances surrounding the generation of documents, but also anticipates the long-term socio-cultural value of the documents (Cook 1997b). Having expanded the principle of provenance to include the contextual aspects of a document's continued existence in the archive, archivists contextualized knowledge preserving the present for the future. Thus reflecting the present culture that informs the documents themselves. The present presents itself.

2) *Memory - History*

If we are to consider the recent preoccupation with memory in terms of historical periods, according to Charles Maier (1992), “memory has become the discourse that replaces history” (142). Where history was the dominant discourse of modernity, memory becomes the dominant discourse of postmodernity. From a postmodern perspective, there is no objective knowledge. In response to modernity's trust in the truth of the historical record, and the corresponding distrust of memory due to its fallibility, postmodernity insists that no text, document, or record is a pure product of, or witness to an action or event. “[T]he document is not

objective, innocent raw material but expresses past [or present] society's power over memory and over the future: the document is what remains" (Cook 2001, 8).¹² History and memory, though logically linked in ways that we would otherwise not question, have undergone a significant rethinking. Pierre Nora, a French historian, when writing of France's contemporary fetishization of memorialism, makes a distinction between "historical awareness" and "awareness by memory" (Nora 2002, 1). There is a tension between history and memory that Nora identifies as a shift in our relationship to information within a historical context (Frow 2007). The primacy of history for understanding our past has been replaced by the primacy of memory. What is at stake here is the authorial status of history:

History is what trained historians do, a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research; it tends to be skeptical of human motive and action, and therefore more secular than what we commonly call memory... memory is often treated as a sacred set of absolute meanings and stories... Memory is often owned, history interpreted... History asserts the authority of academic training and rules of evidence; memory carries the more immediate authority of community membership or family experience. (Blight 2009, 242-3)

Blight and other historians have begun to insist upon the separation of memory as a subjective practice, from history as an evidentiary, and thus a more objective practice. Nevertheless, if history's source material is the archives, and archives are less than objective repositories of the past, we must accept that history and memory are interdependent: "Memory motivates historical activity; historical research utilizes memory" (Maier 1992, 143). History's goal is to explain events of the past by interpreting the raw materials of the archive. But memory *experiences*: "Memories are to be *retrieved* and *relived*, not explained (Maier 1992, 143; emphasis added).

3) Archive - Culture

Paul Connerton, a social anthropologist, focuses on the mass media and the resulting commodification of memory to advance the claim that our preoccupation with memory is accompanied also with a kind of social amnesia brought on by the media, and which arises from the relationship of the media and the political economy that circulates it (2009).¹³ Several “temporalities” and “topographies” of forgetting, characteristic of modernity, inform his analysis. Among these, the acceleration of media production and consumption lead to a feeling of alienation, and the lack of continuity in living space and working patterns makes it difficult to forge any lasting connections, neither to people nor to place:

The current preoccupation with memory is surely, paradoxically, in part a concerted effort of cultural discarding, an attempt to *slow down* the processes of this communicative burden, by retrieving a mode of reflection outside and in opposition to the world of accelerated informational overload. (Connerton 2009, 79)

The phenomenon of “information overload” has been explored by librarians and cultural critics in an attempt to analyze the perceived effects of the information age on our ability to manage our lives. Information overload can be defined only in terms of subjective experience. This experience includes feelings of anxiety due to too much information and the inability to choose what might be useful. Accompanying this anxiety is the feeling of losing control over one’s environment, leading to attention impairment, and the inability to focus (Bawden & Robinson 2009). The media, according to Connerton, has an amnesiac effect on the viewer (2009, 80). The constant stream of news, whether it be updated by the minute online, or by the hour on

television, compresses our sense of time. Before we have adequate time to absorb what we have just read, or heard, a new bit of news has already replaced it, making the previous item obsolete:

[I]nformational overload is one of the best devices for forgetting, the function of the news media being not to produce, nor even to consume, but rather to discard, to consign recent historical experience to oblivion as rapidly as possible. (Connerton 2009, 84)

In a similar fashion, prolonged computer usage fixes our attention on the screen, creating an immediacy, where the passing of time escapes us (Connerton 2009). We become oppressed by the moment that is always fleeting, seemingly concentrating on one piece of information while always aware that we could be concentrating more fully or attending to another piece of information. Concentration is thus weakened. Always just at the edge of consciousness, we feel as though we are missing something, we could be doing something else, going to see something else, contacting someone we have been putting off, or thinking of other “better” ways to spend our time. Without allowing ourselves adequate time to reflect, “the perception of history appears as infinite distraction by an endless reserve of equal events” (Connerton 2009, 83). “Cultural forgetting” is further exacerbated by a “culture of mechanical reproduction” and the production of consumer goods inviting immediate and continual consumption in a culture of obsolescence: The new, the best, the most desirable products are daily displaced by newer, better, and more desirable products Connerton 2009, 145).

Connerton concludes that our culture of memory carries within it a paradox. We are simultaneously living under hypermnesic conditions where everything we watch and read in the news is continuously recycled in an “intensified archivalization” which cycles through a “comprehensive archive of cultural deposits” (Connerton 2009, 146). At the same time, our

present political economy is “post-mnemonic”. Connerton believes that this paradox is resolvable once we see that there is a causal relationship between these two aspects. Broken down, “our world is hypermnestic in many of its *cultural manifestations*, [excessive remembering] and *post-mnemonic* [excessive forgetting] in the structures of the political economy” (Connerton 2009, 146; emphasis added). These structures of political economy are “structures of time” which include labour processes, consumption, career structure, media and information production, as well as the production of spaces (Connerton 2009, 88). It is in the interest of the political economy to generate environments of forgetting -- the system needs to continuously produce consumers that will continue to consume.

Similar analyses of the culture of memory have been forwarded in the past. Andreas Huyssen (2000), for example, writes of manufactured memory, what he calls “media memory” (28), and which refers not to what has been “lived” or experienced, but instead to what has been marketed as nostalgia. This “memory” has been given a *simulated* life and value, temporary, useful only in the short-term, but never actually cultivated as a viable means of building a collective project that could counteract the “numbing” effects of the media (27) . Indeed, Huyssen doubts the possibility of the existence of “collective consensual memory” where the cultural “clashing” of fragmented social and ethnic groups continue to challenge the possibility of a cohesive society (28). Kansteiner (2002) tasks memory studies with differentiating collective from individual memory. He asserts that collective memory “only manifests itself in the actions and statements of individuals” who privilege contemporary interests (180). Furthermore, because collective memory is always mediated, it is better observed “through its effects than its characteristics” (Kansteiner 2002, 180).

Cultural memory is not permanent. It can change according to social needs and interests. Cultural memory is always willed, it cannot be spontaneous or involuntary like psychic memory. Cultural memory persists through repetition and willed recall -- it is a type of habit memory (Connerton 2009, 139).¹⁴ The creation of museums, and the preservation of documents in archives occurs consciously (Millar 2006). People come together to deliberately create these articulated and material “vehicles of memory” which function as “triggers” for psychic memory (Millar 2006, 111). How cultural memory is articulated, that is, how it “extends from the personal to the collective”, however, depends on the “memory tool”, and increasingly, this “depends on society’s technology, language, and sense of values” (Millar 2006, 121).

The technology of memory can be easily appropriated into a technology of the archive. Following Derrida, if every act of communication is an archivization, and a technology of language, it follows that a memory technology, will always already employ a logic of the archive since “the mutation in technology changes not simply the archiving process, but what is archivable -- that is, the content of what has to be archived is changed by the technology” (Derrida 2002, 46).

3) Archive - Technology

Technology informs archival theory and practice by aiding in making the process of archivization more transparent to the culture that informed them. This has become increasingly more important in the age of electronic records which require the active intervention of the archivist before the records are even created if they are to have any longevity. The principle of “access over time” (Brothman 2001, 79) takes into consideration not just the preservation of electronic documents, but the efforts required to keep the documents accessible in the future, migrating them to be compatible with constantly changing software and hardware. Thus in the

digital archive, “digital data represent the first medium collected by archives which can be totally dependent on the “archiving function” for its birth, the definition of value, and its continued life” (Koltun 1999, 123). We must be careful not to fall into the trap of assigning technology too much influence, however, as there is always the risk of technological determinism in these debates. Lubar (1999) in his discussion of the technology of archives explains:

A given technology only allows certain kinds of archives; only certain things get inscribed. Before voice recordings, there were only written archives; before movies, only words and voices and images. The archival record is shaped by our technology in a practical way. (16)

Writing in 1999, Lubar offers only a glimpse at the future forms of archival technologies. The archive’s role in society and in memory formation, I believe, is strengthened in an age of digital networks, where it is possible that the archive is no longer restrained in place -- as a storage medium, a safe, from which historians draw the raw materials in order to construct narratives and stories of the past. Archives, Lubar writes, “do the work of culture”, where culture is the “messy work of negotiating power and ideas and memory” (18). The archive, “through the cultural activity of History, can become Memory’s potential space... boundless, limitless space” (Steedman 1998, 78). In this conception of the archive, it is more often than not the historian who has access to the past. However, if we are to consider Appadurai’s notion of the archive as “aspiration”, the democratizing aspect of the electronic archive, a networked archive, the archive opens up to individuals who share, perhaps a common ethnic identity, to produce their own remembrances of the past, to document their own lives, re-constitute their own identities:

Thus we should begin to see all documentation as intervention, and all archiving

as part of some sort of collective project. Rather than being the tomb of the trace, the archive is more frequently the product of the anticipation of collective memory.

Thus the archive is itself an aspiration rather than a recollection. (Appadurai 2003, 16)

The electronic archive of aspiration becomes a very different conceptual archival space in a digital networked environment. Positioned as it is outside of the traditional archive, “the tomb of the trace”, this form of cultural memory is inherently political.

In the process of archivization, what is archived is not memory, but rather, documents that are stripped of their mnemonic content (that is that which is *lived memory*). What is left, is simply a trace. Furthermore, *that* something is archived in traditional archives deems it important enough to be remembered. What eludes the archive then is that which actually calls forth the memory of the past. “The archive is a history of memory by means of political techniques of compiling what is deemed to matter to political history” (Hutchens 2007, 44). Hutchens, in a provocative essay on Derrida, challenges archivists and historians (from outside their professions) with a sobering question: Can there be a “cultural history mindful of the violence of archivization, that is, mindful of the outcome of ‘becoming’ historical?” (2007, 41) It is the stripping of the document’s mnemonic content that makes the archive always political. Once memory is consigned to the archive, it is no longer cultural, but political (Hutchens 2007). And this politics, is also a politics of forgetting. The archive is hypomnesic; it forgets. Derrida explains:

[B]ecause of this very fullness, the hypothetical fullness, of this archive, what will have been granted is not memory, is not a true memory. It will be forgetting... the trace is at the same time the memory, the archive, and the erasure, the repression, the forgetting of what it is supposed to keep safe. That’s why, the work of the archivist

is not simply a work of memory. It's a work of mourning. And a work of mourning, as everyone knows, is a work of memory but also the best way just to forget the other, to keep the other in oneself, to keep it safe, in a safe -- but when you put something in a safe, it's just in order to be able to forget it... If there is pure forgetting, it's because the archive, in order to be safe, in a safe, should be external. (2002, 54)

The “forgetting” that Derrida is referring to is different from the forgetting we encounter in Connerton or Huyssen. Derrida's forgetting is the relegation of memory to an external place where we would no longer *have* to remember. Because we fear forgetting, we consign our memory to the archive, which then is a form of forgetting. This brings us back to the paradox of postmodern culture's obsession with memory. Because we recognize the need to remember, having been witness to many cases when evidence of violence and atrocities are simply wiped clean from state archives, incriminating documents destroyed, libraries burned, and lives erased from history, Derrida suggests that we are so afraid of the *potential* destruction of evidence, of knowledge, of cultural memories, that the archival urge is overwhelming. Archiving makes it safe to *forget*. But this forgetting is never total. It is not oblivion. The archive always opens up to the future, always opens to interpretation, to aspiration.

4) How to Remember

I have examined a variety of ways in which cultural memory and history interact, and the ways in which the archive is implicated in cultural remembering and forgetting. I will now introduce two possibilities of remembering so that we might be able to balance the present with the past as Maier (1992) would have it, in order to help orient ourselves towards a common future without being overwhelmed by a “surfeit of memory” and without giving in to the fear of forgetting. Throughout the paper, I have briefly discussed a few of the ways in which we

collectively and culturally practice remembering. We can remember historically, and this has been problematized in modernist discourse, because objectivity and truth have been challenged in historiography. The stories historians tell are subject to the processes already inherent in archiving. We can remember through memorialization, but as Klein (2000) explains, this kind of remembering “grounds the elevation of memory to the status of historical agent, and we enter a new age in which archives remember, and statues forget” (136). This remembering practice still keeps us oriented towards the past. We can remember through the media, but as Huyssen and Connerton demonstrate in their critiques, this turn to memory also engenders a culture of amnesia. Memories are mass-marketed for fast consumption and nostalgic effect. Huyssen, however, introduces one strategy of remembering which may counteract the effects of the media and result in “productive remembering” (2000, 37). This strategy involves discerning between “usable pasts” and “disposable data”.

What are “usable pasts”? What are “disposable data”?

In order to work these questions, we need first to acknowledge the implications of the terms. First, the past is both data (archive - selective) and history (stories from selective data). History then is a form of data that has been given value and meaning. Second, of this past that is presumably history, not just data, there are pasts that are usable, but towards what end, and for whom, Huyssen does not make clear. I would suggest that usable pasts are those that inspire continuity as a means of creating a collective project that can envision a productive future. Third, how do we recognize data? That is, the disposable kind that will never be usable in order to historicize the past? One way to answer this is to identify what is manufactured memory -- media memory -- what has not been ‘lived’ or experienced, and exclude this, or “dispose” of it.

Because the paradox of memory and amnesia emerges out of the need to “anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space” (Huysen 28) perhaps it is impossible to distinguish usable from disposable pasts until we have at least acknowledged that there is a causal relationship between the hypermnesic tendencies of our cultural practices, and the political-economic system which generates our forgetting (Connerton 2009, 146). I would add to this, that in archival practice, the move to contextualize social and political processes that surround the selection of archival collections would aid in this endeavour. An increase in transparency in the choices of archivists will not only ground our cultural memory in the present, but it will also expose absences -- what has been excluded from the archive -- which we can then begin to question, in the hopes that we will be in a better position to identify the processes that will help inform a collective future.

Another possible response to the question of how to remember may appear to be antithetical to the arguments put forward by both Connerton and Huysen. However, it is useful to consider Landsberg’s notion of “prosthetic memory” as it implies a similar conceptual response to the media industry. It betrays the same implicit reflection required to discern between disposable and usable pasts. Prosthetic memory involves a process of meaning making that affects the subjectivity of the receiver. This is not a passive reception of information -- rather, the prosthetic memories that the subject appropriates, alters her perception. Landsberg provides an excellent example, and I include it here, in its entirety, so that the reader understands the process involved:

For instance, a visitor to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, sitting in the glass room and listening to people recount their experiences of daily life in Auschwitz, begins to call up images in her mind or to imagine herself in the

narrator's position. As she listens, aurally "consuming" the stories, she is engaging in the process of meaning making, which both connects the narrative to her world and transmits images from that world to the survivor's narrative. Because the visitor is actively engaged in meaning making, as opposed to passively absorbing "information," because the voice speaks to her personally, she leaves with a more intimate connection to, and perhaps a greater capacity to understand, the traumatic historical event through which she did not live and to which she might not otherwise feel connected. (Landsberg 2004, 145)

Prosthetic memory, then, can be understood as a subset of cultural memory, but one that operates in a shared affective space. This type of memory is neither strictly individual nor entirely collective, but "emerges at the interface of individual and collective experience" (Landsberg 2004, 19). The most useful aspect of prosthetic memory, is that it is publicly circulated, whether through film, through memory institutions, such as museums and archives, or through the Internet.

Furthermore, prosthetic memories allow for "strategic remembering", the partial "appropriation of a commodity" which allows for a "grounded, nonessentialist, nonidentity politics based on recognition of difference" (Landsberg 2004, 152). Strategic remembering can be a means of connecting people empathically through their interaction with media. Where collective memory implies shared lived experiences, customs, and traditions that are reified in memory institutions, prosthetic memory is a shared affective transfer. This memory is felt in the body. Though the memory of the experience is never lived at first hand, as a technology of memory, prosthetic memory "through experiential and sensuous 'cognitive understanding'

increasingly allows for humans to experience empathy” (Landsberg 2004, 150). In this way, Landsberg contends, within the capitalist system of production, we can still act ethically.

While Huyssen insists that “there is no pure space outside of commodified culture, however much we may desire such a space” (2000, 29), Landsberg’s response is that we then can strategically carve out a space in the way we receive and participate in commodified culture, a space where we can respond ethically (Landsberg 2004, 149). Landsberg’s counterpoint is a valid one. Where Huyssen offers no clear solution to the marketing of trauma, Landsberg suggests that prosthetic memories cannot be owned, which is to say, as “public goods” they challenge the notion of private property by “subverting the capitalist logic that produced them” (147). Strategic remembering through the media offers one possibility of resisting a post-mnemonic culture, and prosthetic memories create affective bonds that cross cultures, distances, and time.

Huyssen’s call to focus on distinguishing “usable” from “disposable” pasts demands an active selection process in the formation of cultural memory. Both archivists and historians are implicated in this process. Archivists as they appraise documents, already impose value and meaning onto what is preserved; historians, in their interpretation of the documents of memory can take into account the inherent selectivity of the archive. A recorded life, however, is vastly more complex than a collection of documents ready for the archive. An archivist excludes (forgets) as well as inscribes (remembers). “Total recall”, contrary to what Huyssen might believe, is not an archivist’s fantasy (2000, 25). How does the development and increasing popularity of “surrogate memory” affect cultural memory, when the archive becomes omnipresent, ever available, all-inclusive, and total? What will the archival record look like when recording, preserving, and searching become the standard practice of daily life?

6) Archive - Memory Machine

In 1999, Microsoft researcher and computer scientist, Gordon Bell, embarked on a life project of “total memory”. Though initially spurred by the desire to transform his life into a paper-less existence, his project quickly evolved into recording and saving as much of his living experience as he could. Having spent four years scanning his papers, photographs, and other objects, he began to track and record every aspect of his informational existence. He records each page he visits on the Web, every telephone call, and saves every text-message and email. In addition, everything he reads, the music he listens to, and the movies he watches are all documented. The project is called MyLifeBits, and it is a case study in *Total Recall* (Bell and Gemmell 2009). Reading Bell and Gemmell’s book, *Total Recall*, is like reading a two-hundred page advertisement for a fashionable lifestyle you can never own. However, I have chosen to put it forward as a means of engaging the memory/archive debate in a more public and practical way. Bell and Gemmell’s prediction is that *Total Recall* will be commonplace in less than a decade. Bell observes, “Most of us are well along the path of outsourcing our brains to some form of e-memory.” (Bell and Gemmell 2009, 115). *Total Recall*, then, is the next natural step. Everything you see, hear, and read will be recoded and saved; your e-memory will preserve everything you want to remember, even the things you think you want to forget.

MyLifeBits promises to transform every aspect of life including work, health and education. Bell and Gemmell envision a process of learning where it is no longer necessary to memorize facts; where our knowledge is in the form of an easily accessible database. In the realm of education, lectures will be recorded and offered to students to watch and listen to at their own pace. Textbooks will be electronic, and the act of researching will be transformed. There will be no need to enter a library, or a school. Teachers will have their students’ strengths

and weaknesses documented and at their fingertips, so one-on-one teaching will be more efficient and streamlined (Bell and Gemmell 2009). Contrary to what Bell and Gemmell would have us believe the MyLifeBits project represents a mode of memory that is disconnected from knowledge. In the end, the idea of Total Recall is less about total remembering than it is about forgetting. I would suggest, the more we relegate our own information experiences to technological storage, even with the belief that we can retrieve anything at anytime, the more we defer the possibility of remembering. Without the continuing process of retrieval, reflection, and action, there is no sustained remembrance, and therefore no real learning.

Lifelogging projects, I feel, are relevant both to historians and to archivists. The increasing popularity of digital gadgets and their quick adoption by affluent and savvy Western consumers may, indeed, support Bell and Gemmell's prediction. But to what extent Total Recall will be universally embraced is unclear. Mayer-Schönberger (2009) in his book *Delete* warned of a society that has become obsessed with saving everything; where saving, has become the default. He also warned of the dangers of "total recall", where there is very little chance of any of these "memories" being deleted. "You will never be forgotten", seems to be the tag-line of projects such as these (Mayer-Schönberger 2009). For Bell and Gemmell, digital immortality, is one of the reasons why Total Recall will succeed (2009, 151). Would I not want to have my life, my experiences, my knowledge, archived for posterity, so that my children, and their children could learn about me first-hand?

Pederson (2008) in her critique of augmented memory identifies three concepts of memory that are thematically geared towards a "rhetoric of need": bio-memory is inept; bio-memory requires surrogacy; and bio-memory is a storage device (377). Bell and Gemmell's book is rife with such rhetoric. Indeed, chapter nine, "Getting Started" is devoted to "getting ready"

for the e-memory revolution, which lists and describes the various items you will need to begin logging your life (Bell and Gemmell 2009, 175). Curiously, in the literature of memory studies, the concept of “memory as storage” has been well-challenged, and I would even say discounted with the assistance of cognitive science, neuroscience, sociology, and anthropology (Brockmeier 2010). Nevertheless, “memory as storage” is the view of memory that will dominate, in the end, and dictate the success of augmented memory in the case of MyLifeBits.

Featherstone (2006) observes, “the will to archive is a powerful impulse in contemporary society” (595). An individual who has an unlimited capacity for storing digital information, will most likely not be very discerning in her archival processes, nevertheless

Archive reason with its thirst for detail sees everything as potentially significant and archivable. Today the new information technologies expand our capacity to record everything: to be is to record and to record in volume means to classify, index and archive (Featherstone 2006, 595).

Featherstone makes the problematic assumption that recording implies organization, classification and indexing of a life’s worth of digital data. This seems to me an unrealistic, if ideal, demand we make on the individual. Though MyLifeBits involves database software, and a user-friendly interface, it is difficult to imagine individuals not becoming overwhelmed by the amount of tagging and organizing a project like this would require.

Where the lifelogger has already described, organized and indexed her “memories”, it will be the historian who performs the act of appraisal (of sorts), but the archivist, it would seem, is obsolete:

Too many works have relied on secondary sources in the past. And the scope of original sources is about to explode as lifelogging increases. We shall have to see how society evolves to deal with the legacy of e-memories, but I presume that eventually many lifelogs will be opened to a trusted historian to excerpt, if not entirely released to the public... But for the historian it truly is a challenge, because a historian doesn't know what to search for or what can safely be ignored, having not lived the life in question. Thus, historians will become more and more adept at using data mining and pattern recognition, and will come to demand the latest in tools for comparing videos, performing handwriting recognition, converting speech to text, classifying background noise, and much more. They will rely on computing power to help summarize, classify, and identify anomalies. (Bell 2009, 129)

However much the idea of Total Recall repels me, what I find interesting about Bell's unbridled enthusiasm and confidence in his predictions, is that the system he is describing, the world that he envisions is actually quite solipsistic. I record everything about myself, store it, catalog it, organize it, and search it whenever I need to recall some bit of data or information about an event in my life. MyLifeBits is private and personal (Curry 1997, 16). However, if we take account of the social networking trends in computing today, where Facebook and Twitter, Flickr, and blogging is so absolutely about sharing in public (I might even go so far as to say "living in public") it would seem to me that MyLifeBits is actually not an evolution in cultural memory at all. Social memory evolves out of sharing experiences, beliefs, values, and actions. MyLifeBits is not an "intrinsically social system, one whose meaning or truth is guaranteed by the community

-- it operates outside of the community” (Curry 1997, 18). I expect that the rhetoric of “surrogate memory” will have to, at least, include a means of sharing one’s memories at will.

If Bell and Gemmell are right, and we are indeed entering an age of Total Recall, the place of historians and archivists will evolve once more. Archivists especially will have to explicitly address the role of memory (remembering and forgetting) in culture and participate more fully in memory discourse in an ongoing effort to “reflect the spirit of their times” (Cook 1997a, 26). A decade ago, Cook maintained that “the best archival theorists are those who have been able to recognize and articulate these radical changes in society and then deal *conceptually* with their impact on archival theory” (2000, 20). The most pressing radical change today is the shift from organizational to individual archiving. Hobbs’ (2010) call for archivists to refocus archival strategies toward the creation, maintenance, access, and meaning making of personal archives is a timely one in a number of respects. First, with the tendency to create more and more “digital memories” in an online networked environment, archival theory is in a good position to influence the ways in which database systems organize, store, preserve, and make available personal “digital memory”. Second, a turn towards the personal archive is concomitant with the recent memory discourse which seeks to better define the relationship between individual and collective memory. Private records, documents, texts, and other media recordings (video, photo, sound) have been part of the “total archives” approach for the last few decades. Finally, in as much as this is recognized as a very recent focus in archival studies, we may do well to seriously reflect on the future of personal archival practices, as projects such as MyLifeBits are poised to become both popular, affordable, and a “natural” progression towards digital collective life.

Both historians and archivists have an interesting and useful role to play in the contemporary cultural analysis of memory. While archivists select and provide cultural

documents, historians are the storytellers, the interpreters, and the producers of versions of the past. Augmented memory and Total Recall will challenge both professions in ways we may not yet be able to anticipate, but it is evident that in archival science at least, another paradigm shift is on the horizon. The archivist in the very near future, I imagine, will be one that moves beyond creating and maintaining archives, and participates in social archival practices that are heading toward a decentralized, associative, contextual, shared, networked archival thinking. It seems that we are heading towards a future where anyone can be the “librarian, archivist, cartographer, and curator” of their own life (Bell and Gemmell 2009, 5). Our fundamental assumptions of what an archive is and how it functions in society, as well as what society’s expectations are of the archive, will be completely redefined. One might ask, What need will we have of institutional archives? What need will we have of governance?

The archivist’s approach should be determined by the circumstances of creation, and this approach chooses to depart from insistence on formal notions of the record in order to gather the context of the individual life and document creating patterns and practices... we can look toward an archival theory that focuses less on biography from a public vantage point and more on how and why the individual functions in a certain way and how this, in turn, affects documenting.

(Hobbs, 231)

Archival principles will not become obsolete in a postmodern age, although the relationship between memory and archive will continue to evolve as cultural memory practices begin to mimic archival practices. The question of “how to remember” will guide both historians and archivists as they continue to reflect upon, and engage with contemporary memory discourse and popular conceptions of the archive. As I have illustrated, the “memory boom” is still with us, and

has become manifest in personal life where the obsession to record and save the total of one's existence is represented in the recent phenomenon of "total recall". An interdisciplinary approach to critiquing the possibilities and challenges that arise from new memory technologies will help us aspire to a shared future which can add value and meaning to our historical subjectivities.

Notes

¹ Guy Beiner (2008) in his review of the literature of social sciences and the arts and humanities states that of "11,800 references to collective/cultural/social/public/ popular memory" 9,500 of those references appeared between the years 1998 and 2008. "In Anticipation of a Post-Memory Boom Syndrome." *Cultural Analysis* 7: 107-12; also, a new journal entitled *Memory Studies* was launched in 2008.

² The critique of memory in contemporary culture is seen to arise from the "crisis of memory" that seeks to explain the anxiety of forgetting that is witnessed in a culture suffering from too much memory in a conceptual sense, referred to as the "memory boom" (Blight 2009), a "surfeit of memory" (Maier 1992) and an "upsurge in memory" (Nora 2002)

³ In 1999 a twin issue of *History of the Human Sciences* was dedicated to the archive. None of the articles were written by archivists.

⁴ In most cases, the word "memory" stands in for a conceptual understanding of "collective memory". When referring to memory in the context of neuroscience or cognitive science, organic memory is usually differentiated by terms like "psychic memory" "bio-memory", "individual memory", "personal memory", etc; see also, n.1 above

⁵ "Augmented memory" is defined by Pedersen (2008) as " a medium that people claim will be used to collect and store 'digital life'. Using body-worn devices and other technology, a person records information about everything, including every conversation, every body temperature change, every television show watched, and every trip to every place" (375). "Surrogate memory" means something very similar to "augmented memory", but implies that human memory is imperfect, and insufficient and in need of enhancement.

⁶ Historical memory and oral memory are usual exceptions to this confusion. Historical memory, for example, refers to objective and empirical, fact-based documents. Oral memory is generally used to refer to memory that is passed on through generations without being inscribed in writing.

⁷ I am following Jose Van Dijck's (2005) lead here, who borrows from Mieke Bal's use of the term "cultural memory" defined as a "cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one; cultural memory inherently refers to the mutual shaping of individual and collective, of self

and community, through various products and processes of culture” (127, n.1). “The Computer as Memory Machine.” In Smelik, Anneke & Lykke, Nina (Eds.) *Bits of Life: Feminism at the Intersections of Media, Bioscience, and Technology*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 113-28.

⁸ In a general sense, I use the term “information age” to refer to our contemporary culture whose dependence on information and communication technologies characterizes a wide range of cultural and economic activities. For a more detailed discussion, see Frank Webster’s *Theories of the Information Society*. 3rd Edition. London: Routledge, 2006.

⁹ Generally speaking, the process of appraisal identifies the value of records, and determines the length of time they should be retained; the principle of provenance generally refers to the process of determining the origins of records (usually a hierarchical method) and the mandates of the creators.

¹⁰ See also, for a more detailed history of archival work, Terry Cook’s (1997a) survey of archival practices from 1898 to present.

¹¹ Originated in Canada.

¹² Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, translated by Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992; quoted in Cook 2001, 8.

¹³ Paul Connerton has also published an influential essay on forgetting, entitled “Seven Types of Forgetting.” *Memory Studies* 1(1): 59-71.

¹⁴ Paul Connerton (2009) distinguishes between three different categories of memories: Cognitive, Personal, and Habit (139).

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