

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking technologies of remembering for a postcolonial world

Emily Keightley 

School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Loughborough University, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK
Corresponding author: Emily Keightley, email: e.keightley@lboro.ac.uk

(Received 6 October 2022; accepted 9 October 2022)

Abstract

This article sets out some of the analytical moves that are necessary to developing a distinctive area of research called postcolonial memory studies. A key barrier to synthesising insights from postcolonial and memory studies has been a reductive approach to analogue and digital technologies which operate as vehicles for memory. Three analytical moves are needed to decentre, or at the very least de-naturalise the technological narratives and ecologies of Europe and the US. Media memory studies needs to draw more effectively on postcolonial studies to position mediated memory as inextricably connected to the legacies of colonialism and empire; develop a much broader account of media infrastructures emerging from what is increasingly characterised as ‘global media studies’; make an empirical and analytical shift away from the primacy of digital communications technologies and to explore technologies, not just as artefacts but as knowledge generating cultural practices. The combined value of these three shifts in approaches to media and communications technologies in memory studies research has considerable potential for developing postcolonial media memory studies research which offers a thorough and empirically grounded analysis of the complex ways in which the legacies of colonialism shape and structure the ways in which practices and performances of remembering are mediated in contemporary social life. This shift towards postcolonial memory studies can be seen as part of the wider project of what Anna (Amza) Reading has in this volume called ‘rewilding memory’ by rethinking ‘the underlying ecologies of knowledge within studies of memory’.

Keywords: Digital memory; Memory technologies; Media studies; Colonialism; Postcolonial memory studies

Introduction

In recent years accounts of the relationships between digital technologies and memory have abounded, exploring the transformational potential of networked communications for engaging with the past in the present. These accounts draw on insights from a cluster of connected fields: media and communications, cultural studies, and memory studies. Media and communications research emerged as a distinct field within the social sciences, coalescing in the 1970s around a broad set of concerns with the personal, social, and cultural impact of media and communications technologies, industries, and content on both

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use.

local and global scales. Since the late 1990s, a particular focus of the field has been the role of digital media technologies and the ways in which they have reconfigured individual experience, social relationships, and political and economic structures and processes. Over a similar period, cultural studies research emerged from the humanities. While some concerns with media overlap with communication and media research, it has focused on examining the symbolic content cultural forms and its flows across time and space, explicitly interrogating the politics of cultural production and consumption. Memory studies meanwhile, has emerged from an intersection of sociology, social psychology, and cultural history, and has been primarily concerned with the nature and potential for fostering relationships between the past and the present through both the psychological faculty and social processes which comprise acts of remembering. In the last 30 years, media and cultural studies and memory studies have been in ever closer dialogue, united in their concern for the ways in which the ubiquity of media and specifically digital media increasingly informs the character of remembering in contemporary social life. Work in this overlapping terrain has become widely known as media memory studies, and its more specific digital variant as digital memory studies.

The ways in which digital media have been understood as impacting on memory in contemporary social life has tracked the wider scholarly opinion of the social value of digital media more generally. In the late 20th century, technological utopianism abounded, heralding the potential of digital technologies to create a total archive and to make the past itself 'open access'. More recent appraisals of digital technologies have been more critical and their negative consequences for ethical, normative modalities of making the past meaningful in the present have been interrogated (Hoskins 2018a). Media memory studies has centralised the role of media technologies, and digital communication technologies in particular, as a key, if not the key, structuring feature in contemporary experiences and practices of remembering. This trajectory of research has provided invaluable insights into the historical development of remembering as an embedded part of communication practices, and has been crucial in developing accounts of the socio-temporal character of late modernity. However, the technologies and mnemonic histories on which this body of research tends to be premised have been subject to critique. The field of memory studies has, for a number of years, tended to take for granted a somewhat proscriptive understanding of the technologies of memory, based on a linear developmental history of technologies as artefacts, from the pen to chemical photography, from electronic legacy media to digital, networked technologies. Like media history and media archaeology, digital memory studies 'has largely focused on the European context and concentrates on the historical change from written culture via technical media (e.g. photography, cinematography) to the digital code of computers' (Werkmeister 2016, 238).

While it has long been recognised in communication and media studies that 'communication technologies have enabled the establishment and maintenance of systems of power over distance' (Flew and Liu 2016, 25), media memory studies has been slow to consider the explicitly postcolonial contexts and character of the technologies which are ascribed such central status in contemporary processes of remembering. While the central concern of media memory studies has been to understand the transactional relationships between past, present, and future, and to consider the role of cultural and communicative processes in the mediations between the temporal tenses, postcolonial studies has been primarily concerned with the legacies of European colonial projects from the 18th onward, and their social, political, economic, and cultural reverberations over time, especially with reference to imperial violence. Postcolonial inquiry has interrogated the legacy of colonialism, not only in former colonies, but also in former colonising states. Postcolonial societies are in this sense, relationally produced, formed in the residual

dynamics of colonial relations. A lack of attention to the ways in which contemporary memory is entangled with the particular politics and power structures of colonialism and decolonial processes has stymied the potential of media memory studies to, on the one hand, address and substantively critique the role of memory and remembering in the maintenance of political, economic, and cultural inequities embedded in globalised social life which are intimately informed and structured by the legacies of colonialism, and on the other hand to consider how those same legacies shape practices and processes of remembering.

Even where memory studies research seeks to engage with memory and remembering in the global south, or more specifically in communities profoundly shaped by histories of colonialism and processes of decolonisation, the technological trajectories of the global north are routinely taken as the primary medial context through which mnemonic activity is articulated and shaped by. The geopolitical histories which provide a critical perspective on these contemporary media contexts and make visible their relational character, which is contingent on (post)colonial relations with the global south and east remain largely occluded. In this short article, I argue that we have reached an opportune moment to reassess our approach to those analogue and digital technologies which operate as vehicles for memory (from photography to sound recording to the world wide web), in memory studies in ways which decentre, or at the very least de-naturalise the technological narratives and ecologies of Europe and the US, in the interests of developing what we might call postcolonial memory studies. This requires three interconnected analytical moves. Firstly, it requires bringing media memory studies into a much closer dialogue with postcolonial studies. Drawing more effectively on postcolonial studies has the potential to form the basis of an ethico-political critique of mediated memory as inextricably connected to the legacies of colonialism and empire. As Michael Rothberg (2013) has noted (with due consideration to some prominent exceptions), the seeming complementarity of the aims of memory studies and postcolonial studies mask a persistent lack of theoretical and conceptual interaction between the two fields of enquiry. While research at the intersection of memory, media, and communications research has been somewhat more active in taking up the concerns and perspectives of postcolonial studies, most substantially via literary and film studies, it has largely (although not exclusively) emerged from a confluence of concerns around cultural communication and content, most strongly exemplified in research on transcultural memory. This leads to a second requirement. Decentring western technological trajectories as determining the character of late-modern memory means drawing on a much broader account of media infrastructures emerging from what is increasingly characterised as 'global media studies' and heeding recent calls for political economic approaches to memory technologies which develop grounded, materialist perspectives, not only on ecologies but also economies of memory through which structures of power and perhaps more specifically what we might think of as mnemonic power, can be revealed and understood. Research which attends to the 'reception' of mediated memory in local, embedded social contexts, and attention to 'global' (Reading 2014) economies of memory only recently challenging what has been a resolutely western-centric analytical perspective in memory studies. Finally, an empirical and analytical shift in our approach to memory technologies is required that moves away from the primacy afforded to digital communications technologies in media memory studies and to consider the value of exploring the technologies, not just as artefacts but as knowledge generating skills, crafts, or arts (Mackenzie and Wajcman 1999). This has the potential to radically diversify what is considered a technology of memory and to move away from presumptions of the empirical and analytical primacy of digital technologies, rather positioning them as part of a more complex assemblage of technologies through which remembering occurs.

The combined value of these three shifts in approaches to media and communications technologies in memory studies research holds considerable possibilities for the development of what we might call postcolonial media memory studies research, which is not simply textualist in its perspectives but offers a thorough and empirically grounded analysis of the complex ways in which the legacies of colonialism shape and structure the ways in which practices and performances of remembering are mediated in contemporary social life. By offering the possibility of decentring and denaturalising western-centric practices and processes of remembering, it will enhance possibilities to explore and reconfigure accounts of the communicative nature of mnemonic relations in ways that address postcolonial mnemonic experience and that excavate the impact of colonialism on our understanding of memory itself. It is also possible to consider a shift towards postcolonial memory studies as part of the wider project of what Anna (Amza) Reading has in this volume called 'rewilding memory'. Reading's argument is that, with reference to neurodivergent experiences of remembering, there is a need to rethink 'the underlying ecologies of knowledge within studies of memory' (2022: 13). Integrating a postcolonial lens is part of this troubling of established ecologies of knowledge, not simply by challenging the western-centrism which remains so ingrained in memory studies, but by rethinking all remembering processes as shot through with the residue of empire. The implication of this does not stop at media and cultural studies scholarship, but requires colleagues from across the humanities, social, and human sciences to consider the postcolonial condition as producing particular ways of knowing which may unsettle our very ontological and epistemological assumptions about memory itself.

Postcolonial memory studies

To begin with, it is necessary to trace the relations between memory studies and postcolonial studies in order to understand why, as Michael Rothberg notes, 'memory studies has largely avoided issues of colonialism and its legacies' despite considerable areas of overlap in the concerns of the two fields (2013, 359–60), and to identify grounds for a rapprochement. For Rothberg what they share is a concern with the accounting for the mediation of the past in the present, and the value of 'considering these two overarching forms of mediation together lies in a new understanding of how violence fundamentally shapes the temporality of modern memory and how regimes of memory help propagate and potentially resist violence through the creation of unexpected solidarities' (2013, 361). However, from the perspective of integrating a postcolonial analytical perspective into memory studies, the task of realising this new understanding is a complex one. In particular, it requires rethinking approaches to media and mediation which intersect the two fields.

In his exploration of the missed opportunities for memory studies to develop a critical approach informed by the legacies of colonialism and empire, Rothberg locates this failure largely in the founding texts of the field – the work of Nora, Habwachs, and Assmann – and their emphasis 'on the construction of continuity over time and the coherence of cultural groups, whether defined as small-scale, national, or civilisational' and that this 'appears in the postcolonial mirror as a kind of fetishism that disavows the structural dislocations produced by the imperial world system' (2013, 364). However, as Rothberg goes on to discuss, memory studies has in recent years, become increasingly sensitive to the 'transcultural' features of contemporary remembering, with a concern for the liminal 'between spaces' in which memory is articulated and produced permeating the work of those we might think of as the next generation of memory studies scholars who are schooled in various forms of cultural perspectives, including literary studies (Astrid Erll, Marianne Hirsch, and Michael Rothberg), visual culture (Alison Landsberg), film

studies (Susannah Radstone), and digital media studies (Andrew Hoskins). For Astrid Erll, one of the foremost proponents of a transcultural approach to memory, transculturality in memory studies is a 'research perspective, a focus of attention, which is directed to towards mnemonic processes unfolding across and beyond culture' and is 'grounded in what intercultural communication studies calls our "multiple memberships"' (2011, 9, 10). The transcultural approach has actively sought to nuance 'containerised' approaches to memory and remembering (such those limited by the lens of national context or specific social formations) by attending more to the mobility and movement of memory in its cultural forms at a range of scales (Keightley et al 2019), and to conceive of memory primarily in relational terms. This shift aligns closely with a somewhat earlier shift in media and communications research which has become increasingly alive to the connective, globalised nature of processes of mediation, and the nature of communicative networks and infrastructures, and as Levy and Sznajder's (2005) account of cosmopolitan memory illustrates, the transcultural mobility of memory is predicated on these communicative transformations. The shift towards a transcultural approach to remembering has facilitated a recognition of the diversity and hybridity of memory in contemporary social life. Indeed, Rothberg cites 'Erll's attention to the circulation of memory in media forms' as suggestive of 'new ways of thinking about the activist potential of memory against empire' (2013, 372).

What is notable in Erll's account of transcultural memory is that postcoloniality is positioned as one in a number of characteristics of 'travelling' forms of memory, with transcultural memory positioned 'as an umbrella term for what in other academic contexts might be described with concepts of the transnational, diasporic, hybrid, syncretistic, postcolonial, translocal, creolized, global, or cosmopolitan' (2011, 9). Indeed, it is this umbrella term of transcultural memory which has been afforded an analytical primacy of its own across the field of memory studies, with the particularities of colonial legacies and decolonial processes and the way they have shaped the character of cultural memory often left unexplored. The transcultural turn in memory studies has been highly effective in analysing the contemporary dynamics of remembering processes, it has been less effective in construing these dynamics in concrete ethico-political terms. There have, of course, been a range of attempts to develop and apply normative frameworks in transcultural memory studies. Cosmopolitan memory (Levy and Sznajder 2005), postmemory (Hirsch 2012), and prosthetic memory (Landsberg 2004) have all developed accounts of the potential of remembering which crosses spatio-temporal boundaries to foster recognition of the pasts of others and to bring them into relation with rememberers in ethically productive ways. However, these approaches have focused on the cultural movement of memory in its cultural and communicative forms, equating the ethical potential of memory with its ability to move. In relation to memory, mobility itself has been assigned a positive valence, with stasis and immobility its pejoratively valued other. What tends to be occluded in these accounts are the actual ways in which memories are articulated, embedded, and understood in new locations, contexts, and times. As Törnquist-Plewa et al have recognised, transcultural approaches still 'struggle with the questions of how to understand and study the reception of memories' (2017, 3) and as such marginalises both the social and cognitive processes by which mnemonic knowledge is developed at individual and group levels. The transcultural movement of memory is then at once positioned as potentially productive of new solidarities and as having the potential to mobilise responses to marginality and inequality, but these are not positioned as embedded in and articulated through specific colonial, decolonial, and postcolonial socio-political structures and experiences. Large sections of our understanding of memory are then positioned as outside the legacies of colonialism, not least the processes of making meaning and acquiring knowledge at an individual level. Transculturality as an approach which

emphasises the nature of the mobility of memory and the mnemonic ‘encounters’ it may entail, is therefore *not sufficient on its own*, as a basis for the integration of the political concerns of postcolonial studies into memory studies.

Transcultural analyses of memory have provided detailed assessments of ways in which memory travels, but have yet to situate the complex multiple positionings of individual remembering subjects in complex structures of power and account for the role of memory in reproducing, negotiating, and potentially challenging contemporary geopolitical power structures. In this sense, there has been increasing critical purchase on the cultural complexities of remembering in a postcolonial context, but all too often structures of power and inequality endemic to postcolonial conditions slip from view. It is not only the limited attention to the socially situated contexts in which the mobile forms of cultural memory are mobilised as resources in negotiating the lived realities of postcolonial social life. Memory studies, like postcolonial studies has, in its focus on symbolic and representational processes involved in the reproduction of (post)colonial ideologies and regimes, and a focus on recognising the hybrid nature of marginalised cultures and cultural experiences, drifted away from more economically and materially focused critiques. Indeed, as Pawling notes in relation to postcolonial studies, Marxist and neo-Marxist political economic analysis has routinely been refused as part of colonial tradition of Eurocentric thought. Pawling, in his critique of ‘hyper-culturalist aesthetics of the emotions’ which can be found in some of the most cited accounts of postcolonial culture and experience¹ ‘accept[s] that the establishment and reproduction of western colonialism was bound up with the politics of subjectivity and “epistemic violence”, but questions the extent to which a “postcolonial global order which is still based on inequality and exploitation” can be directly challenged without an accompanying political economic analysis’ (Pawling 2011, 155). Likewise, the movements of memories of the (post)colonial past in cultural forms can only ever be partially understood if the cultural forms are not contextualised as travelling in and through communicative memory ecologies which are themselves structured by and produced through the very unequal economic, social, and political legacies of colonialism, to which they refer.

It seems then, that media memory studies has run up against the same problem of media and communications studies more generally in its attempts to decentre or at least critique dominant approaches to media in the global north, and to account for the legacies of the colonial past. As Colin Sparks noted, social science approaches to communications media, and I would add media memory studies, sees its central task as ‘to try to discover invariant laws that operate independently of social and geographical location’ while cultural approaches have tended to consider ‘social meanings [to be] inherently local and contextual, and any attempts at universal grand narratives are bound to be imperialistic in one dimension or another’ (2013, 129). For media memory studies, the former approach has resulted in totalising claims about the socio-cultural consequences of changing memory technologies predicated on the experience and technological histories of the global north, continuing what Sparks calls a trajectory of ‘unreflective universalism, which at least in the past was frequently the servant and agent of genuinely imperialist agendas’ (Sparks 2013). Conversely, cultural approaches to media and communications and, I would add, to mediated memory, which focus on the particularities of local representational and symbolic mnemonic practices and content, provide ‘little purchase on the commonalities of human experience and its stress on particularism provides a weak ground for any critique of the ways in which local despotisms sustain themselves’ (Sparks 2013). It is therefore crucial that memory studies’ draws more widely and more effectively on rapidly developing area of what has come to be known as ‘global media

¹ His main focus is on the work of Paul Gilroy and Iain Chambers.

studies' (Kraidy 2002; Miller and Kraidy 2016; Sparks 2013) in which a rapprochement between political economic approaches to media and communications have been brought into productive dialogue with cultural approaches.

Political economies of mediated memory: from environment to infrastructures

It is then, a rather different area of media and communication studies that memory studies needs to draw on alongside transcultural approaches, if it is going to make good on its potential to account for the ways in which memory itself is shaped by legacies of colonialism by radically decentring the historical narratives of mediation and communication of memory emerging from the global north/west. Globalisation and its cultural, economic, and political ramifications have been significant concerns in media and communications studies for several decades, but the emergence of the specific subfield of global media studies as a more specific enterprise emerged in response to high profile calls in the late 90s and early noughties to de-westernize media studies (Curran and Park 1999). This body of research has developed materialist, political economic approaches to media institutions, infrastructures, and cultures, and in doing so has allowed for (at least some) exploration of the specific ways in which contemporary global communications and media are shaped by legacies of empire and (de)colonial processes. While attention to geopolitics and the legacies of empire have been strikingly absent in digital media studies more generally (Aouragh and Chakravartty 2016, 3), as Plantin and Punathambekar note, the recent infrastructural turn in media and communications research is premised on the insights of a longer trajectory of research in political economy, which explicitly engaged with 'the control that the north Atlantic empires exerted on international communications in the postwar and postcolonial era' (2019, x). This media-historical perspective that is so strongly embedded in global media studies lends itself well to the kind of analysis which seeks to account for the ways in which the economic and cultural consequences of empire are embedded in and reproduced through communicative processes. As Werkmeister notes 'the (post) colonial perspective [provides] a necessary extension of media historiography, which until now has been all too Eurocentric. The media-historical dimension of colonialism and its cultural forms of manifestation too, are a field of investigation which has so far found little attention in Postcolonial Studies oriented towards discourse analysis' (Werkmeister 2016, 239).

The project of global media studies has, in this regard, progressed apace, developing what Chakravartty and Zhao have termed a 'transcultural political economy' of global communications (2007). A recent collection of articles edited by Miriam Aouragh and Paula Chakravartty have, for example, been instrumental in challenging some of the assumptions that underpin widespread claims in recent media and communications research 'that digital media technologies fuel or transform political change through new networked publics, new forms of connective action cultivating or renewing liberal democratic values and ideals' (Aouragh and Chakravartty 2016, 2) by redressing an absence of an historical engagement with relationships between media and empire. Aouragh and Chakravartty follow John Durham Peters' approach to communications infrastructures, treating it both as 'the material stuff of cables and wires that have long been seen as modern public goods as well as the "soft" and more amorphous networks of cultural exchange shaped by European (and American) colonial power' (2016, 6; Durham Peters 2015, 37). Global media studies has provided both general frameworks for thinking through the legacies of empire in the communication systems of the global south (Alhassan and Chakravartty 2011) and has also attended to the specific ways in which colonial systems and postcolonial geopolitics have shaped communicative infrastructures

and the cultures it supports have been explored in the contexts of East Asia (Iwabuchi 2007), India (Chakravartty 2004), and Africa (Parks 2015, 2020).

While media infrastructures research which draws down heavily on colonial and post-colonial historical perspectives, one of the limitations of what Couldry and Mejias (2021) have called the ‘decolonial turn’ in digital media and communications studies more generally, has been a tendency to adopt and apply the term ‘colonialism’ to contemporary data networks in rather loose and metaphorical ways. As Casilli notes, ‘using notions such as colonialism, imperialism, and slavery by drawing broad parallels between present and past times risks trivializing and dehistoricizing the experience of colonization, neglecting the specificities of colonial past and geographies’ (2017, 3946). It is then, both the explicitly *historical* and *political economic* sensitivity developed in global media studies which is necessary to what Miller and Kraidy call a ‘clear headed analysis of unequal exchange of cultural textuality, technology, environment and labour’ rather than engaging in either fantasies about ‘technological transformations’ (2016, 36), or in loose metaphorical attributions of colonial dynamics to media technologies and infrastructures. But what of media *memory* studies? In the context of memory studies, a similar approach to the mnemonic dimensions of media texts, technologies, communicative infrastructures, labour, and the supply chains which underpin mnemonic transmission certainly has the potential to forge an analytical path between totalising western-centric accounts of technologically determined shifts in memory ecologies and culturalist approaches which account for hybridity and complexity in mnemonic content, but struggle to gain a critical purchase on the historical socio-political conditions which both produce and are reflective of inequalities in contemporary remembering processes which are specific to (post)colonial legacies and contemporary contexts.

While this potential largely remains latent in the field, there have been several recent analytical developments which could be considered as laying the conceptual and theoretical groundwork for such an empirical project. Media memory studies has, in recent years, demonstrated an increasing openness to political economic modes of analysis. Matthew Allen has been one of the recent proponents of a political economic perspective on contemporary remembering practices and processes, as ‘the flow and reproduction of capital rely upon mnemonic infrastructures [and] regimes of digital connectivities’ (2016, 373–4). He argues that these economies of memory now need to be politicised in order to address the inequalities and struggles ‘for and against memory’ (372–3) in different social, economic, and political contexts. Indeed, there have been a range of studies in media memory studies which have sought to account for the ways in which memory features in cultural economies and assess these in normative terms. For example, in the North American context, Niemeyer and Keightley (2020) have explored the ways in which nostalgia is commercially exploited online by what they call ‘nostalgia businesses’. While on the one hand they concede that ‘commercially produced and stimulated nostalgia has the potential to support the building of engaged, affective communities around nostalgic media consumption [...] this is part of a continual process of limitation and co-option by the processes of commodification intrinsic to the logic of the platform and motivations of key commercial players’ (2020, 1659). The concept of ‘mnemonic labour’ is also becoming more widely adopted in memory studies (Chidgey 2020; Reading 2021) indicating a broader concern with the mechanisms by which memory ‘capital’ is transacted and accumulated and to draw attention to inequities in these dynamics. What is less widespread is a broader geopolitical perspective on these dynamics.

The few moves in this analytic direction are perhaps best exemplified by the recent work of Anna (Amza) Reading on political economies of memory, where an attempt to get ‘under the skin’ of digital memory, has drawn attention to the ‘socioeconomic and technical infrastructures that enable the capture, circulation and storage of data that

then become the raw material of global memory' (2014, 748). Reading's materialist analysis of the 'digital memory supply chain' (Reading and Notley 2015, 2018), while primarily conceived as providing a global environmental perspective on the technical infrastructures which underpin cultural memory ecologies, opens the door for an analysis of mediated remembering which is premised on an understanding of the interdependency of communicative mnemonic infrastructures and their rootedness in an uneven distribution of global wealth and resource as part of a post or in some cases neo-colonial political economic relations, and the circulation of symbolic and representational content in cultural forms. While the specific histories of colonial and postcolonial relations are not the primary focus of the work of Reading and Notley, it is not difficult to see how the global dynamics of technical-material-environmental relations pertinent to the communication and transmission of memory can be read through the specific geopolitical legacies of colonialism in order to account for the 'consequences of personal and collective memory including the impact on less powerful actors and on the natural environment' (2018, 247).

The work of Reading and Notley, particularly with reference to their examples of indigenous Australian art and its digitisation as a dynamic process of exploiting 'ecological capital to create objectified memory capital' (2018, 246), return us back to the question of how the technologies of memory can and should be conceived in an approach which reveals the political economic and historical dynamics which underpin the communication of memory in (post)colonial contexts. For Reading and Notley, digital technologies and earlier analogue forms such as the case paintings they discuss in their 2018 chapter are, in terms of their mnemonic and ecological capital in opposition to one another. Digital memory is cast largely in neo-colonial terms, as the exploitative western-global contemporary counterpart to the authentic, ecologically sound local form of indigenous mnemonic transmission. While undoubtedly there are cases, such as this one, where such a characterisation is wholly appropriate, a more generalised binary treatment of digital technologies as neo-colonial set against either pre-colonial modes of cultural transmission has the potential to reproduce the limitations of some of the totalising treatments of digital memory technologies common in media memory studies.² It also has the potential to reproduce some of the long-recognised problems endemic in memory studies, most commonly identified in the work of Pierre Nora, of setting off authentic memory against the inauthentic modern 'mediated' forms. A sensitivity to the entanglements of digital and non-digital memory technologies is essential if the nuances, interdependencies, as well as inequities of postcolonial memory ecologies are to be properly accounted for. This requires reframing the ways in which memory technologies are themselves understood.

Reframing memory technologies

It has been recognised for some time in media and communications research, particularly in global media studies, that the analytical focus on the potentialities of digital media, particularly in relation to the global south, for diasporic or marginalised communities, is problematic. As Madhavi Mallapragada notes in her research on digital diaspora 'such generalising narratives, often underwritten by Anglophone, American-centric biases, imagine new media as a *global web*' (2014, 41). The plethora of research publications exploring 'digital memory' in one form or another testify to the analytical primacy of digital technologies in conceptualising the communicative character of contemporary remembering processes (Garde-Hansen et al 2009; Hoskins 2018a, 2018b; Merrill et al

² See Casilli (2017, 3945–6) for a more extended discussion of the pitfalls of characterising digital labour in the global south as colonial.

2020; Reading 2016; Van Dijck 2007; Worcman and Garde-Hansen 2016). While in some areas of media and communications research, it is the ‘shimmering possibilities’ (Mallapragada 2014, 41) of digital media to develop new, progressive forms of sociality (see particularly research in communication for development and research on digital media and social movements), in media memory studies, it has largely been a more pejorative assessment of digital technologies that has gained ascendancy. In this view, the consequences of digital technologies of memory as the primary mode of mnemonic engagement are that while we are increasingly connected to one another, and to one another’s pasts, relating to the pasts of others ‘is nothing like an act underpinned by the values of equity and unselfishness, but rather is more a matter of an obligation to participate and to reciprocate, underpinned by a set of digitally fostered values’ (Hoskins 2018a, 2).

These analytical conditions bring with them two problems. Regardless of the normative assessment of the consequences of digital memory, the positioning of memory technologies as synonymous with digital technologies means that other communicative modalities are assigned an historicised form of otherness, rather than being considered as coeval with and actively interpolating digital modes of mnemonic transmission and engagement. Very much akin to Johannes Fabian’s discussion of time in anthropological research (2004), this is particularly the case when other mnemonic technologies are associated with contexts outside of the global north, where non-digital mnemonic technologies are cast as both historically and anthropologically other. This means that when non-digital modes of transmission are engaged with in memory studies research, there is a tendency to nostalgize these processes, as belonging to an exoticised there-then, and consider them as somehow of the past rather than a contemporaneous feature of late-modern remembering practices. At the same time, there are well-justified critiques of what has been badged ‘food, fun, and festivals’ (Haynes Writer 2008) research in memory studies and beyond, which overemphasises tradition at the expense of attending to the complex lived practices and contemporary politics of remembering which exist in post-colonial societies within and without the global South.

Allied to these problems is that in the process of digital technologies becoming synonymous with memory technologies, non-digital modes of transmission are always conceived in terms of mnemonic content, in symbolic terms, rather than as technologies. However, in their work on the social shaping of technology, MacKenzie and Wajcman (1999) recount the etymological roots of technology, as ‘derived from the Greek *technē*, meaning art, craft, or skill, and *logos*, meaning word or knowledge’ but also noting that ‘the modern usage of “technology” to include artifacts as well as knowledge of those artifacts is thus etymologically incorrect, but [is] so entrenched that we have chosen not to resist it’. Following their characterisation, we might think of mnemonic technologies as systems of knowledge and the cultural artefacts associated with the systems of knowledge that communicate and transmit memory over time and space. This potentially covers an incredibly wide range of cultural forms and processes, and while a broad and varied range of cultural content is attended to in the field of memory studies, especially with reference to diasporic and migrant communities, references to memory technologies and the associated modalities of communication are remarkably narrow in scope. The concept of remediation is, for example, widely used in memory studies (see e.g. Erll and Rigney 2009), and is routinely used to explore the reconfiguration and mobilisation of pre-digital forms of memory through digital communication networks (Cherasia 2020; Jones and Gibson 2012). In other words, the focus is routinely on what digital technologies ‘do’ to other modalities of memory. This ranges from perspectives on individual memory in which memory technologies are seen as impacting on cognitive processes of remembering (see, for example, research which explores the role of digital photography and social

media in recall, e.g. Soares and Storm 2018) to social and cultural perspectives which consider the impact of digital media on collective memory (see e.g. Hoskins 2018a, 2018b on the memory of the multitude), rather than proceeding from a position which seeks to account for the interpenetration of multiple memory technologies (or what we might call memory crafts and their cultural products). Non-digital modes of transmission are routinely denied the epistemic status of technology. This is particularly problematic when we consider that memory technologies or crafts that have and continue to be essential in communicating colonial, decolonial, and postcolonial experiences, both within and beyond the global south, routinely get subsumed as cultural memory ‘content’ within western-centric digital communications systems of memory transmission, rather than being recognised as systems for organising ways of knowing and communicating the past, which have the power to act on and shape digital processes of transmission.

It would of course be disingenuous to suggest that there has been no attention to a broader spectrum of memory ‘crafts’ in the field, many of which have sought to explore the role of these technologies or crafts in the transmission of memory by and for marginalised communities. On the margins of memory studies, there have been moves to consider other ‘crafts’ of memory. There is, for example, a thriving subfield of memory studies which explores the systemisation and communication of mnemonic knowledge, especially postcolonial knowledge through literature. Beyond literary studies, the work of Diana Taylor (2003) in performance studies has for example explored the ways in which dance operates as a mode of communicating memory, not simply as symbolic content but as a bodily system of knowing and transmitting memory. Halstead has noted, there is also a strand of memory studies scholarship which has challenged the idea that digital media have ‘fundamentally transformed remembrance’ (2021, 565) by attending closely to the continuities between digital and analogue technologies and the forms of memory they support (Erlil 2011; Hjorth 2005; Miller and Horst 2013).³ However, it is not sufficient to expand the definition of memory technologies to incorporate non-digital forms and systems of transmission, nor is it sufficient to recognise the continuities between analogue and digital media. Media memory studies needs to understand memory ecologies as involving ongoing interactions between multiple technologies of memory.

The significance of both expanding what is considered as a mnemonic technology and considering the interactions between these technologies in the production of mnemonic meaning is particularly important for the development of a distinctively postcolonial analysis of memory in two ways. Firstly, it prevents memories of the colonial past and of decolonial processes being considered as static until mobilised by digital media technologies, or the rendering of non-digital technologies as historically or culturally ‘other’ in relation to dominant, contemporary digital technologies. Secondly, it allows for a more complex view of the limits and impositions on engagement with the (colonial) past that interactions between different technical systems of memory transmission enforce or permit. This question is not only theoretical, but also empirical, as it requires distinguishing between ‘what is *technologically possible* and *actually practiced use*’ (Hafez 2016, 47). It is precisely these layered interpenetrations of multiple technologies of memory that have been observed in the Migrant Memory and Postcolonial Imagination project⁴ which explores the remembering of Empire in South Asian communities in the UK.

³ See Halstead (2021) for a more extended discussion of this body of work.

⁴ 2017–2024 funded by the Leverhulme Trust. This research was a multi-sited ethnography exploring memories of decolonisation processes in the South Asian community in East London and the East Midlands and has generated data including over 200 qualitative interviews, over 25 community arts projects and associated creative outputs.

In just one example, we worked with a group of older East African Gujarati women living in the British Midlands to explore the role of clothing as a technology of memory, and the opportunities and limits it afforded for communicating memories of colonialism and decolonial processes of migration. These women had a complex relationship to the British Empire, with familial roots in India but having grown up as part of the colonial administrative infrastructure in East Africa, and then migrating to the UK following the wave of expulsions in the 1970s. It became clear that clothing that had travelled with them across continents in migratory patterns linked to colonial expansion and decolonisation, was essential for articulating sensorial regimes associated with Indian cultural inheritances and pre-migratory experiences of middle class comfort in Africa, and also with their post-migratory marginalisation as 'cheap' labour in the textiles factories of the UK. The materiality of clothing allowed for specific modes of intergenerational transmission in accordance with particular social, cultural, and religious conventions. Questions of access to and affordability of fabrics and garments were traced alongside moves across and between India, Africa, and the UK, in remembered narratives of changing location, status, and experiences of belonging. However, clothing (and fabric more generally) as a mnemonic technology was inseparable from a range of other technologies in the modes of transmission of (post)colonial memory it permitted. Photography as a mnemonic technology which at once fixes and mobilises specific moments of wearing, opens up the possibility of mnemonic comparison between 'then' and 'now', 'here' and 'there', 'us' in the UK, and 'them' in both India and Africa, allowing for the interrogation, not only of cultural continuities afforded by material inheritances but the recognition and manifestation of historical and cultural difference over time. In so doing this provided opportunities for critical reflection on the losses and absences embedded in colonial processes. At the same time, technologies of bodily performance interpolate clothing and textiles as technologies of memory, producing complex moments of embodied knowledge through acts of wearing in which participants narrated both remembered connections with close and distant others, but also memories otherness and difference both in terms of culture and age in the diaspora. Finally, digital smartphone technology via private WhatsApp networks was deployed as a mechanism for intergenerational, local, and transnational sharing of the pasts invoked by clothing, contributing to a geographically and generationally augmented sense of mnemonic community. What is evident is a complex set of technological affordances and dynamics, which are not reducible to any one technical system. It is in their interpenetration that provide opportunities for the management of social and cultural continuities and change across time and space through remembering practices under postcolonial conditions, and affords also possibilities for articulating experiences of difference and marginalisation in decolonial migrations from East Africa and the experiences of racism and marginalisation in postcolonial diasporic communities in the UK. Mobility of remembering is not simply an affordance of digital technology, nor is clothing as a mnemonic technology antecedent or subordinate to digital, or indeed any other media involved in the remembering process.

Coda

In conclusion, it is perhaps appropriate to return to the initial call for a rapprochement between memory and postcolonial studies by Rothberg, to which this article responds. In making this call he helpfully centralised the role of media and mediation in achieving this aim. What perhaps was underestimated was the need to rethink the terms on which memory studies approached mediated communication and technologies in order to develop a field of postcolonial mnemonic inquiry that extends beyond the limits of the symbolic and the recognition of the cultural mobility of memory. Transculturality is not sufficient on its

own to account for the geopolitical contexts and material legacies of empire and their mobilisation in contemporary social and cultural life in remembering processes. The political economic and materialist perspectives of global media studies which are slowly being taken up in memory studies research, provide an essential counterpart to the accounts of symbolic and textual dimensions of mobility. At the same time, this cannot simply involve a political economy of digital memory. Expanding what is currently a relatively narrow focus on digital technologies in the transmission of memory to incorporate multiple technologies of memory which can be understood as arts of crafts of remembering which support particular ways of knowing the past, each with their attendant political economic and material dimensions, is essential to challenging both the tendency in media memory studies to elide or subsume memory technologies in totalising ways, into the logic of the digital. In this sense, postcolonial memory studies is an expansive project which accounts for the ways in which legacies of empire impact across the scales of remembering from the cognitive to the cultural. In doing so, the possibility to develop more nuanced accounts of the ways in which colonial pasts are communicated and mobilised in contemporary social life and culture, and the ways in which the legacies of empire structure and shape those underpinning communicative infrastructures which support and enable remembering processes, becomes realisable. In setting out the shifts needed in our approaches to memory, media and technology that this move requires, I hope to have charted at least a tentative way forward for a postcolonial media memory studies which aligns with calls for the transformation of postcolonial studies itself, to be 'pragmatic, ethical and pedagogical', a 'materialist enterprise' and support 'a politics of solidarity that provides a bottom up perspective on exploitation and as an oppositional political agenda of resistance' (Merton and Kramer 2016, 10). What a reframed approach to memory technologies adds to this project is the possibility of opening up to scrutiny the ways in which the colonial past is mobilised in postcolonial contexts in ways that serve or undermine this agenda, and to do so in ways that fully account for the full range of memory technologies and infrastructures involved in enabling, limiting, or otherwise shaping these mnemonic processes.

References

- Alhassan A and Chakravarty P** (2011) Postcolonial media policy under the long shadow of empire. In Mansell R and Raboy M (eds), *The Handbook of Global Media and Communication Policy*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 366–382.
- Allen MJ** (2016) The poverty of memory: For political economy in memory studies. *Memory Studies* 9(4), 371–375.
- Aouragh M and Chakravarty P** (2016) Infrastructures of empire: Towards a critical geopolitics of media and information studies. *Media, Culture & Society* 38(4), 559–575.
- Casilli AA** (2017) Digital labor studies go global: Toward a digital decolonial turn. *International Journal of Communication* 11(2017), 3934–3954.
- Chakravarty P** (2004) Telecom, national development and the Indian state: a postcolonial critique. *Media, Culture and Society* 26(2), 227–249.
- Chakravarty P and Zhao Y** (2007) *Global Communications: Towards a Transcultural Political Economy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cherasia SP** (2020) Affordances, remediation, and digital mourning: A comparative case study of two AIDS memorials. *Memory Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698019894686>
- Chidzey R** (2020) How to curate a 'living archive': The restlessness of activist time and labour. In Merrill S, Keightley E and Daphi P (eds), *Social Movements, Cultural Memory and Digital Media*. Palgrave Macmillan *Memory Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 225–248.
- Couldry N and Mejias UA** (2021) The decolonial turn in data and technology research: What is at stake and where is it heading? *Information, Communication & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1986102>
- Curran J and Park MJ** (1999) *De-westernizing Media Studies*. London: Routledge.

- Durham Peters J** (2015) *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Erlil A** (2011) Travelling memory. *Parallax* 17(4), 4–18.
- Erlil A and Rigney A** (2009) Introduction: Cultural Memory and its Dynamics. In A. Erlil & A. Rigney (eds), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, pp. 1–14.
- Fabian J** (2004) *Time and the Other*. New York, Columbia University Press.
- Flew T and Liu B** (2016) Media convergence. In Merton K and Kramer L (eds), *Postcolonial Studies Meets Media Studies: A Critical Encounter*. Germany: Transcript Verlag, pp. 25–42.
- Garde-Hansen J, Hoskins A and Reading A** (2009) *Save As... Digital Memories*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hafez K** (2016) The 'Global Public Sphere' – A critical appraisal. In Merton K and Kramer L (eds), *Postcolonial Studies Meets Media Studies: A Critical Encounter*. Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, pp. 43–66.
- Halstead H** (2021) Cyberplace: From fantasies of placelessness to connective emplacement. *Memory Studies* 14(3), 561–571.
- Haynes Writer J** (2008) Unmasking, exposing, and confronting: Critical race theory, tribal critical race theory and multicultural education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 10(2), 1–15.
- Hirsch M** (2012) *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press.
- Hjorth L** (2005) Locating mobility: Practices of co-presence and the persistence of the postal metaphor in SMS/MMS mobile phone customization in Melbourne. *The Fibreculture Journal* 6.
- Hoskins A** (2018a) The restless past: An introduction to digital memory and media. In Hoskins A (ed.), *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Hoskins A** (2018b) Memory of the multitude. In Hoskins A (ed.), *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 85–109.
- Iwabuchi K** (2007) Cultures of empire: Transnational media flows and cultural (dis)connections in East Asia. In Chakravartty P and Zhao Y (eds), *Global Communications: Towards a Transcultural Political Economy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 143–161.
- Jones S and Gibson P** (2012) Remediation and remembrance: 'Dancing Auschwitz' collective memory and new media. *ESSACHESS – Journal for Communication Studies* 2012(2), 107–131.
- Keightley E, Pickering M and Bisht** (2019) Interscalarity and the memory spectrum. In DW Parks and N Maurantonio (eds), *Communicating Memory & History*. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 17–38.
- Kraidy M** (2002) Ferment in global media studies. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 46(4), 630–40.
- Landsberg A** (2004) *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press.
- Levy D and Sznajder N** (2005) *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- MacKenzie D and Wajcman J** (1999) *The Social Shaping of Technology*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Mallapragada M** (2014) *Virtual Homelands: Indian Immigrants and Online Cultures in the United States*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press.
- Merrill S, Keightley E and Daphi P** (2020) *Social Movements, Cultural Memory and Digital Media*. Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Merton K and Kramer L** (2016) Introduction. In Merton K and Kramer L (eds), *Postcolonial Studies Meets Media Studies: A Critical Encounter*. Bielefeld: Verlag, pp 7–24.
- Miller D and Horst HA** (2013) The digital and the human: A prospectus for digital anthropology. In Horst HA and Miller D (eds), *Digital Anthropology*. London: A&C Black, 3–35.
- Miller T and Kraidy M** (2016) *Global Media Studies*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity.
- Niemeyer K and Keightley E** (2020) The commodification of time and memory: Online communities and the dynamics of commercially produced nostalgia. *New Media & Society* 22(9), 1639–1662.
- Parks L** (2015) Water, energy, access: Materializing the internet in Rural Zambia. In Parks L and Starosielski N (eds), *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, pp. 115–136.
- Parks L** (2020) Global networking and the contrapuntal node the project mercury earth station in Zanzibar, 1959–64. *ZMK (Journal for Media and Cultural Research, Germany)* 11, 40–57.
- Pawling C** (2011) Debating contemporary postcolonial theory: The limitations of a culturalist approach. In Brunt R and Cere R (eds), *Postcolonial Media Culture in Britain*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 142–56.
- Plantin J and Punathambekar A** (2019) Digital media infrastructures: Pipes, platforms and politics. *Media, Culture & Society* 41(2), 163–174.
- Reading A** (2014) Seeing red: a political economy of digital memory. *Media, Culture & Society* 36(6), 748–760.
- Reading A** (2016) *Gender and Memory in the Global Age*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reading A** (2021) Moving hearts: How mnemonic labour (trans)forms mnemonic capital. *Memory Studies* 14(1), 95–111.

- Reading A and Notley T** (2015) The materiality of global memory: bringing the cloud to earth. *Continuum* 29(4), 511–521.
- Reading A and Notley T** (2018) Global memory capital: Theorizing digital memory economies. In *Hoskins, A (ed) Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 234–250.
- Rothberg M** (2013) Remembering back: Cultural memory, colonial legacies, and postcolonial studies. In Huggan G (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 359–379.
- Soares JS and Storm BC** (2018) Forget in a flash: A further investigation of the photo-taking-impairment effect. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 7(1), 154–160. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2017.10.004>
- Sparks C** (2013) Global media studies: Its development and dilemmas. *Media, Culture & Society* 35(1), 121–131.
- Taylor D** (2003) *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Törnquist-Plewa B, Andersen TS and Erll A** (2017) Introduction: On transcultural memory and reception. In Törnquist-Plewa B and Andersen TS (eds), *The Twentieth Century in European Memory*. Leiden, Brill.
- Van Dijck J** (2007) *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Werkmeister S** (2016) Postcolonial Media History. In Merton K and Kramer L (eds), *Postcolonial Studies Meets Media Studies: A Critical Encounter*. Transcript Verlag, pp. 235–256.
- Worrcman K and Garde-Hansen J** (2016) *Social Memory Technology*. New York: Routledge.

Cite this article: Keightley E (2022). Rethinking technologies of remembering for a postcolonial world. *Memory, Mind & Media* 1, e17, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2022.9>