

The Mnemonics summer school: Reflections on a decade of international collaborative doctoral training in memory studies

Memory Studies

2023, Vol. 16(6) 1693–1696

© The Author(s) 2023

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/17506980231202347

journals.sagepub.com/home/mss**Stef Craps** 

Ghent University, Belgium

Mnemonics is an international collaborative initiative to provide doctoral training in memory studies that has been organizing a rotating small-scale summer school since 2012. The network had been launched at a meeting in Brussels 1 year earlier. The first person to float the idea for it was none other than the renowned memory scholar Andreas Huyssen – though when I brought this up in my introduction to a keynote lecture by him a few years ago, he claimed to have forgotten it. I had met Andreas and Marianne Hirsch as a visiting scholar at Columbia University during the 2009–2010 academic year. When the former came to Ghent University to give a talk, participate in a roundtable discussion, and lead a postgraduate workshop in 2011, he suggested setting up a memory studies network including Columbia, Ghent, Aarhus University, and possibly some other institutions. I immediately contacted my Aarhus colleague Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, who – so Andreas told me – had recently written to Marianne to enquire about the possibility of establishing formal ties between the memory studies groups at Aarhus and Columbia. As it happens, Mads and I had first met a decade earlier as doctoral students participating in a summer school organized by the Hermes Consortium for Literary and Cultural Studies, and we had kept in touch since then.

The memory studies network we went on to found, and which I have been coordinating from the beginning, is modelled to some extent on that consortium, from which both of us had benefitted a great deal – it was a way, you might say, of paying it forward. We gathered together memory scholars from different countries with whom we had already collaborated before, and who in some cases brought on board other partners they knew well, until after a few years the network reached its current size and configuration. Mnemonics now has partners in seven Western European and North American countries: these are, in addition to the aforementioned ones, the University of Copenhagen; KU Leuven; Goldsmiths, University of London; the University of Westminster; King's College London; Stockholm University; Södertörn University; Lund University; Goethe University Frankfurt; Utrecht University; UCLA; the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign;

Corresponding author:

Stef Craps, Department of Literary Studies (English Section), Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Ghent University, Blandijnberg 2, 9000 Gent, Belgium.

Email: stef.crap@ugent.be

and UC Irvine. While there have been some personnel changes over the years, as members have retired, moved to different institutions, or moved away from memory studies, Mnemonics continues to be a vibrant and thriving community. We are lucky and proud to count many leading memory scholars among our ranks, a state of affairs that no doubt accounts for much of the network's appeal. Mnemonics was a grassroots initiative built on personal connections, and these also go a long way to explaining its continued existence and what success it has had as a network. A culture of mutual trust, respect, and friendship between the partners and a shared strong commitment to mentoring doctoral students have been key to ensuring its smooth operation and sustainability. Another reason why the network has endured, I believe, is its modest ambitions: it has only ever done one thing (but has sought to do it well), without making unreasonable demands on the partners' time.

Mnemonics organizes an annual summer school around specific themes in memory studies, hosted by each of the partners in turn – or rather, by six clusters of partners, grouped along national lines in most cases – and lasting three intensive days. The theme, which usually resonates with the local organizer's ongoing research, aims to hit the sweet spot between hyperspecificity and free-for-all meaninglessness: ideally, it is specific enough to enable focused discussion but general enough to allow a large number of doctoral students to connect their research to it. Themes addressed so far include aesthetics, dynamics, and media of memory; memory and materiality; the other side of memory (forgetting, denial, and repression); the social life of memory; ecologies of memory; memory and activism; memory and migration; mnemopolitics; and the industry of memory. A call for applications is launched at the start of the year: it is posted on the Mnemonics website (<https://www.mnemonics.ugent.be/>) as well as on our social media platforms and disseminated through numerous other channels. The network's Facebook group, where news about Mnemonics as well as other memory studies-related topics is posted, is particularly active and currently has some 4700 members.

About a dozen students affiliated with the partner institutions and a roughly equal number of students external to the network are given the opportunity to present and receive feedback on their research projects at the summer school. Staff from all of the partner institutions participate in the discussions, as session chairs, respondents, or audience members, and three prominent keynote speakers bring their perspectives to the debates. Some editions also include professionalization sessions about academic publishing, often in conjunction with a book launch, and a guided tour of the campus or the city. The summer school serves as an interactive forum in which junior and senior memory scholars meet in an informal and convivial setting to discuss each other's work and to reflect on new developments in the field. It is intended to be an exciting and stimulating intellectual event that helps students refine their research questions, strengthen the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of their projects, gain further insight into current trends in memory scholarship, and network with their peers and other academics with similar research interests. The venue is either a regular university building, with the participants staying in nearby student accommodation or hotels, or a residential conference centre, where everyone can stay on site.

We are now approaching the end of the second cycle of Mnemonics summer schools, meaning that by the end of 2024, every cluster will have organized two editions. Being the year's organizer involves seeking funding, proposing a theme, drafting the call for applications, inviting keynote speakers, managing the selection process, putting together the programme, and arranging venues and accommodation. While this is a fair amount of work, every cluster has to shoulder this burden only once every 6 years. The reward for these efforts is that each cluster has two guaranteed spots for its own doctoral students at every edition of the summer school. Moreover, every partner is welcome to send one or more senior scholars – in fact, it is expected that each cluster is represented by at least one senior person to ensure continuity. They represent their institution and cluster at the

partners meeting that is scheduled during the summer school, and at which we evaluate the current edition and discuss plans for the future. At the last of these meetings, for example, it was unanimously decided that we will add a third cycle. We have been very fortunate in that a critical mass of partners have indeed kept showing up year after year, often at their own expense, as the funds the organizer manages to raise (from departments, research groups, doctoral schools, research foundations, etc.) are typically used entirely to keep the registration fee for junior participants as low as possible. This consistently high level of staff involvement has been a critical factor in making the summer school as successful as it has been.

To avoid the echo chamber effect, we decided early on to open Mnemonics to scholars and students from outside the network. Not only are around half of the available places open to any current doctoral student regardless of affiliation, but we also make sure to always invite one or two external keynote speakers. This has helped Mnemonics remain resolutely outward-facing and receptive to innovative thinking. Moreover, whenever the funding situation (which varies from year to year) allows for this, we try to give applicants from beyond high-income countries in the Global North the opportunity to participate in the summer school by making a scholarship available to them, awarded on the basis of academic merit and financial need, or waiving the registration fee. Furthermore, when the COVID-19 pandemic drove us to go hybrid in 2021 (after forcing us to cancel the 2020 edition), this allowed several students based in the Global South who were unable to travel to participate remotely in the summer school. Whether and, if so, how Mnemonics will keep offering the online option in the post-COVID-19 era is a much-discussed and unresolved issue, but the possibility to widen access for groups that are otherwise excluded or under-represented – not only the economically disadvantaged but also disabled people and those with caring responsibilities – is and will continue to be an important argument in favour.

It is doubtful, though, that Mnemonics can ever become a truly global enterprise. Over the years, we have received many requests from institutions around the world to formally join the network, but unfortunately we have had to decline most of these. One reason is that at some point we felt the network had reached optimal size and feared that further expansion would undermine what makes Mnemonics work well, as a larger number of partners might result in a weakened sense of co-ownership. Besides, it did not seem to make much sense to ask partners to commit to hosting an edition of the summer school many years in the future, nor did it seem advisable to further reduce the number of guaranteed places per partner or to offer fewer open places. Having parallel sessions, which would allow us to admit more participants, did not seem like a viable option, as this would inevitably jeopardize the sense of being part of a tight-knit community and a continuing conversation that we consider integral to the summer school experience. Finally, we worried that Mnemonics editions in other continents would attract few participants (both junior and senior) from within the network, as most of these are based in Europe, and the cost of inter-continental travel – particularly beyond the North Atlantic world – might be an obstacle for some if not many of them. While especially in the early days the idea of applying for EU funding to take Mnemonics to the next level by turning it into an MSCA doctoral network, a HERA research project, or a COST Action occasionally came up at the partners meeting, on balance we always felt that the current level was actually just fine and that it would be unwise to fix what is not broken in the first place.

I, for one, have come to believe that we should leave it up to the Memory Studies Association to organize a genuinely global doctoral training school as part of its annual conference, as it has in fact been doing since 2017. MSA Forward, as this initiative is called, actually took a page out of the Mnemonics playbook – indeed, one of its founders, Hanna Teichler, is a Mnemonics alum. In fact, one of the great joys of running Mnemonics for more than a decade now has been to see how participants have gone on to engage in various kinds of fruitful collaborations, ranging from joint

conference panels and working groups to co-edited or co-authored publications and – indeed – similar doctoral training initiatives. The existence of MSA Forward has also helped take some of the pressure off Mnemonics, as the number of applications Mnemonics received when it was the only show in town, so to speak, often far exceeded the number of places available, sometimes even by a factor of four or five. Rejecting scores of strong applications is a depressing business, so we very much welcomed new kid on the block MSA Forward and the (somewhat) redistributive effect it has had.

The level of interest in and enthusiasm for Mnemonics that we have witnessed is something we did not and could not anticipate back in 2011. All the founding partners knew (or suspected) at the time was that our own doctoral students would benefit from a training school of the kind we had in mind; we had no idea that it would turn out to answer an apparently much more widely felt need. The student feedback we have received over the years has been overwhelmingly positive, with many describing their participation in the summer school as an exceptional learning and networking experience and a highlight of their time as a doctoral student. Participants especially appreciate the quality and variety of both the keynote lectures and the student papers; the thoroughness of the feedback and the vigour of the discussions; and the friendly, warm, and supportive atmosphere.

Mnemonics has a certain utopian quality to it that I, too, cherish. As I see it, at its best, the initiative embodies the true spirit of academia. The summer school provides a platform for staff and students from diverse backgrounds and disciplines to come together and share ideas, knowledge, and experiences. Established scholars nurture the professional growth of the next generation by generously offering mentorship and guidance. Students get the opportunity to develop their presentation, critical thinking, and debating skills in an environment conducive to robust intellectual discussion. They gain exposure to cutting-edge research, emerging trends, and innovative ideas, instilling a sense of excitement and inspiring them to push the boundaries of knowledge. Moreover, they build networks and forge partnerships that foster collaboration and mutual support, and thus provide a bulwark against the stress, loneliness, and uncertainty that often come with doing a PhD. Overall, Mnemonics creates a nurturing environment where aspiring memory scholars can flourish, expand their intellectual horizons, and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field. Attending the summer school, whether as a doctoral student or as a senior scholar, is a reinvigorating experience that reminds us all of what drew us to academia in the first place: the passion for learning, the pursuit of knowledge, and the joy of engaging in intellectual discourse. Reason enough, it seems to me, to keep the endeavour going for at least a few more years.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Stef Craps  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6720-1689>

Author biography

Stef Craps is a professor of English literature at Ghent University in Belgium, where he directs the Cultural Memory Studies Initiative. He is the founding coordinator of the Mnemonics network, an international collaborative initiative to provide doctoral training in memory studies, and a co-chair of the ‘Transformation of the Environment’ working group of the EU-funded Slow Memory COST Action. Craps has published widely in the fields of memory and trauma studies, postcolonial theory, and ecocriticism and the environmental humanities. His current research explores ecological mourning as a creative and transformative process.