The Future of Forgetting: Rhetoric, Memory, Affect
Jeff Pruchnic & Kim Lacey

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Q1: Au: do you mean Rhetorica Ad Herennium?
Q2: Au: Add Touching to the refs.
Q3: Au: Cite or delete.

TABLE OF CONTENTS LISTING
The table of contents for the journal will list your paper exactly as it appears below:

The Future of Forgetting: Rhetoric, Memory, Affect
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The Future of Forgetting: Rhetoric, Memory, Affect

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This article argues for a rethinking of the rhetorical canon of memory as a productive tool for understanding and effectively responding to recent changes in culture, economics, and politics. After reviewing historical conceptions of rhetorical memory both before and after its “canonization,” we identify two processes at the heart of the contemporary relationships between persuasion and memory: an “externalization” of memory and commonplace rhetorical structures through information networks and technologies, and an “internalization” of memory and dispositions that takes place in human affective systems. We conclude by arguing for the value of such an expanded notion of rhetorical memory for addressing two of the more pervasive and significant registers of contemporary persuasion: advertising and populist politics.

The difficulty of the current conjuncture is to think memory and amnesia together rather than simply to oppose them.

—Andreas Huyssen, Twilight Memories (7)

Of the five traditional canons of rhetoric— invention, style, arrangement, delivery, and memory— memory has by far suffered the largest scholarly decline over the intervening centuries. Indeed, in almost all revivals of rhetoric that have invoked the canons, memory has traditionally been, as is often claimed in another context, “the first thing to go.” Perhaps most famously, in the return of rhetorical theory and pedagogy in the Renaissance, Ramus reduced rhetoric’s share of the canons to only two— style and delivery—and, in assigning the remaining canons to the field of dialectic, alternately configured memory as mere memorization or “good memory” as an adjunct to “good judgment.” Ramus’s reduction of memory from its vaunted status in the Ad Herennium as “the treasure-house of the ideas . . . the
guardian of all the parts of rhetoric” to a supporting role in rhetoric and logic would largely set the tone for its subsequent treatment (205); sixteenth- and seventeenth-century works by such writers as Bacon, Vico, and Thomas Wilson similarly conceived rhetorical memory as little more than the practicing of effective mnemonic techniques, a conception that survives with little emendation today. Indeed, in the most recent resurgence of rhetoric in the twentieth century within the academic domains of English and Speech Communication departments, rhetorical memory is approached largely as an historical interest, implicitly foregrounding how foreign the importance of memory in early rhetorical now seems in our own time.

It is all the more surprising that early rhetorical theories of memory have fallen on such difficult times within the disciplinary boundaries of rhetoric given the renewed interest in the topic in the humanities as a whole over the last two decades. During this time Derrida “returned” to his interest in memory (Specters of Marx, Archive Fever), Halbwachs’s landmark work on memory was collected and translated (as On Collective Memory), and Ricoeur’s final text was released (Memory, History, Forgetting), as were numerous well-received studies of cultural memory (Boym, Huyns, Olick) and the effect of mass media on contemporary memory (Hoskins, Landsberg, Van Dijck). Indeed, “memory studies” has emerged as a recognized field with its own degree granting and interdisciplinary programs, book series (Studies in Memory and Narrative, Cultural Memory in the Present) and journal (Memory Studies).

Scholars in rhetoric have, of course, made many important contributions to this field, particularly in analyzing how material monuments function as manifestations of collective memory (Blair and Michel, Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti, Marback) and the rhetorical function of “memory texts,” discursive and visual representations of historical events (Biesecker, Hasian, Haskins). Such analyses have identified the complex role of memory in contemporary culture and the ways in which these phenomena operate as instances of communication and persuasion. Our interest here, however, is in recuperating the connections between rhetoric and memory not only through direct representations of historical events or collective experiences, but primarily as forces that are co-implicated generally in everyday subjective experience and rhetorical performance, a conception of rhetorical memory perhaps best represented by memory as rhetorical canon, or, as we suggest later, by looking even further back into the early rhetorical tradition.2

1See Rossi (97–129) for a detailed history of the influence of Ramus’s approach to rhetorical memory.

2Of course, analyses of the intersection of rhetoric and memory through specific objects or texts often entail or imply analysis of how rhetoric and memory come together in general. For instance, Haskins’s reading of the U.S. Post Office’s Celebrate the Century, discussed below, uses that particular campaign to make broader judgments about the potential use and misuse of collective memory (particularly the reduction of memory texts to the status of commodities or propaganda). Our approach here might be read as performing something of a similar process in reverse: identifying the overall structures of rhetorical memory as vectors of subjective experience and rhetorical performance, to claim that something of these structures circulates in all instances of rhetorical memory.
One of the reasons rhetorical memory has been so hard to recuperate is likely that it was already an impoverished concept at the time of its “canonization.” Indeed, although scholars typically benchmark the contemporary decline in attention to memory in rhetoric against its treatment in the Ad Herrenniun the prominence of rhetorical memory in the Roman rhetorical already paled in comparison to its previous status in the early Greek cultural scene that midwifed Western metaphysics and rhetoric. As numerous scholars of Western antiquity have emphasized, in its manifestation in the Greek concept of mnemosyne (both the name of a goddess in Greek mythology and the abstract term for “remembrance”), memory was consistently invoked to both assay the divides and bridges between human interiority and cultural exteriority as well as to delineate the spiritual or intellectual capacities of humans from their affective and biological faculties (Loraux, Notopoulos).³ As Vernant (115–153) and Detienne (39–52) have outlined, mnemosyne went through at least four important and often overlapping functions in Greek culture and philosophy: memory as a divine source of creative inspiration and access to “eternal truth” (the “Hesiodic” conception of memory); mnemosyne partnered with lethe (forgetfulness, oblivion) in esoteric rituals focused on death and immortality; practices of memory and recollection developed by the Pythagoreans and in the writings of Empedocles aimed toward discovering the entirety of one’s soul; and, finally, the Platonic conception of revelation and learning as practices of recollection. In all of these stages, mnemosyne and memory practices are positioned as interfaces between the “inside” and “outside” of human subjectivity, the barrier or entry used to determine how motivation, persuasion, and knowledge emerge from within or without; thus, theorizing memory was a crucial tool for determining the “objective” or “subjective” status of personal and cultural knowledge as well how human desires and beliefs emerge or are installed within humans.

In this article we argue for the value of recuperating such an expanded notion of rhetorical memory for understanding the interactions of subjectivity, sociality, and persuasion today. In particular, we argue that the rhetorical force of “memory” in the present moment—the aspects of memory that make it a vector of motivation and persuasion—has shifted in response to the increasing ubiquity of information technology and new media forms as well as the increasing reliance on affective “memories” and precognitive associations in the rhetorical strategies that dominate the use of persuasion in contemporary politics and economy. In both of these cases, we mark a shift in emphasis from what we propose to call the “content” of memory—the particular image or experience that is formed or recollected—to

³As Vernant emphasizes, although there were many gods associated with human capacities or skills, “Mnemosyne seems to be a special case. Memory is a very complicated function related to important psychological categories, such as time and identity. It brings into play a whole collection of complex mental operations that can be mastered only with effort, training, and exercise” (Myth 116).
what we propose to call the “program” of current ecologies of memory—the broad systems in which past experiences and associations are captured and/or strategically leveraged for persuasive effects. This shift, we suggest, shows the most influential forms of current rhetorical memory to have more in common with the early Greek interest in the non-cognitive and asignifying vectors of persuasion associated with mnemosyne than subsequent considerations of rhetorical memory as processes for the individual or collective “storage” and “retrieval” of particular texts or ideas. Indeed, echoing the pairing of mnemosyne with lethe in Greek antiquity, we will argue that the future of rhetorical memory will be inextricably bound to our ability to “forget” the content of experiential memory as it becomes stored in information networks and our bodies’ affective responses.

More specifically, in what follows we thematize this shift in contemporary rhetorical memory from two directions: an “externalization” of memory information networks and technologies, and an “internalization” of memory that takes place in human affective systems. Our overall argument is that such an expanded view of rhetorical memory as it functions in the present may be one of our best ways to understand and respond to the intersection of (individual) subjectivity and (collective) sociality today.

Much like the pre-modern import of mnemosyne, we will also suggest that contemporary rhetorical memory is similarly bound up with broader questions of persuasion (how we are persuaded or motivated to adopt particular beliefs or perform certain actions), ethics (who we “are” and the communities we are a part of), and politics (how we are implicated in or integrated into large processes of social power). We return to this question in our conclusion by arguing for the roles that rhetoric as a domain and rhetorical memory as a resource might play in tracing relatively recent changes in the function of persuasion in contemporary culture.

Remembrance of Things Present: External Symbolic Storage and Rhetorical Networks

Although scholars such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and José Van Dijck are correct in emphasizing the impact that contemporary information technology has had on rhetorical performance, a longer view of this relationship would equally foreground the earlier function of rhetoric itself on the storage of information: the techne that played the role of organization and arrangement that is now most associated with material technologies. The work of Merlin Donald, a cognitive psychologist who has studied the intersection of biological life systems and information systems from early hominid development to the present, is particularly helpful in thinking through such a relationship. The central focus of Donald’s work is the co-implication of biological and cultural evolutionary mechanisms, particularly the ways in which major cultural developments such as the emergence of language and literacy have impacted biological evolution, rewiring not only the human mind but also the physiological brain. For Donald the most prominent
aspect of such bio-cultural evolution is its impact on human memory, the way that
shared, exterior, communicative media—what Donald codes as systems of
“external symbolic storage” (ESS)—have altered human capacities for memory.
On the one hand, as in the Platonic critique of writing, Donald has ears for the
ways that our increasing abilities to store information outside of personal, biologi-
cal memory may have diminished some aspects of human memory capacities,
particularly our skills in mental arithmetic and rote memorization (“Human”
166). On the other, however, he underscores how the external storage of memory
“far exceeds the capacity of biological memory” and thus ESS has “radically chan-
ged the total memory storage capacity of humans, as individuals and as species”
(Mind 312–313).

The most dominant form of externalizing memory in the present time and thus
the most ubiquitous interface of personal and collective memory, is, of course, the
variety of contemporary information technologies that allow memory storage that
is personal but not biological (computer memory, smart phones, Universal Serial
Bus [USB] drives) and/or shared in cultural ecologies (Web presences, databases,
Global Positioning System [GPS] navigational systems). Donald attends, however,
to the crucial role rhetoric played centuries earlier in this process, one that in
many ways created a pattern for externalized memory still present in current infor-
mation systems. Although he acknowledges that early Egyptian culture displayed
signs of collective memory (apparent through the use of hieroglyphs, or phonetic
writing), Donald claims that the first to actually “store” memory were the Greeks.
Greek culture was the first in which “complex ideas were placed in the public
arena, in an external medium, where they could undergo refinement over the long
term” and the emergence of rhetoric as a pedagogical discipline was a vital step in
the development of this process of externalization (Origins 344). Particularly in its
attention to the strengthening of memory and its pragmatic value in social, legal,
and political exchanges, rhetoric became the first active attempt at “the large-scale,
on-line structuring of linguistic thought products,” the formation of a metaling-
guistic skill set that broke considerably with the “simple, linear narratives and
unconstrained imaginative myth” that had previously structured the Greek psyche
and culture (348). In this sense, rhetoric was the first discipline to fully acknowl-
dge and take advantage of the unique cognitive advantage of humans to have
“active” access to memory rather than the “passive” collection and recollection
of sense experiences.

Although Donald’s work documents the importance of Ancient Greek rhetoric
in the transition from oral to literate culture, the precise nature of the relationship
between common techniques of persuasion and the externalization of memory
today is a somewhat thornier question, and a necessary one for us insofar as
our primary interest is in thinking through the role of rhetorical memory in the
present. Such an inquiry is perhaps best approached by making a finer analysis
of structures of memory training that were present in Ancient Greek rhetoric
and, we will argue, continue to guide the manipulation of externalized memory
in the in the age of networked computing. Early Greek memory practices might be distinguished through the ways in which each balances the “program,” or systematic nature of memory devices, with its “content,” or the variable information contained within this structure. The zero point of this dichotomy is likely one of the simplest of rhetorical devices, the trope. On the one hand, as codified techniques for “wordplay,” the trope is a pattern that a rhetor memorizes and hones; these patterns then serve as systems that can be leveraged in the future for improvisational turns of phrase. On the other hand, however, when a particular iteration of a trope becomes widespread, it moves from being a type to a stereotype or cliché. For instance, there are innumerable ways that synecdoche may be deployed, but particular iterations, such as the use of the phrase “hired hand” to refer to an employee, can become common communicative currency. All other more complex forms of rhetorical memory training may be taken to emphasize one or the other of these functions. Consider, for instance, one of the most popular memory techniques, the method of loci, in which parts of speeches or arguments were mentally associated with elements in an imagined physical location such as a house. As a technique, the method of loci is almost wholly a program; though there are many variations on this program, and an unlimited number of items or associations that might be worked within the program, the “content” of the technique is composed only of the act of association (between mental ideas and physical locations) itself. At the opposite end of the spectrum would be techniques such as Aristotle’s “special topics,” sequences of fairly detailed strategies for effectively responding to particular types of situations in discourse (*Rhetoric* II.23); such techniques are higher in content rather than system, although they too could be adapted to various circumstances.

Emphasizing this dual nature of rhetorical memory techniques puts a finer point on memory’s function as a mediator or interface between human interiority and exteriority as well as the impact of rhetorical memory on suasion in general. Although such techniques have come to be known as instances of “artificial memory” (Yates), these practices were designed to mimic or amplify what were taken to be the natural (and therefore) familiar processes of thought and communication (whether they be the most established arrangement of elements of an argument, the most seductive turns of phrase, or the most accessible strategies of refutation). Of course, once these techniques became pedagogically codified and disseminated, this process further reinforced the prevalence and presumed universality or innateness of these strategies. Furthermore, immersion in these techniques also had the effect of restructuring interior thought as a whole, as habituated practices of memory training and association became second if not “first” nature for practitioners. In his magisterial study of the transitional moment in Greek media, *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong referred to this process as an “involution,” the tendency for media technologies (such as writing) that externalize the workings of human intelligence to become in turn “internalized” as components of human reflective thought itself (81). Havelock, one of Ong’s major influences, would suggest a
particularly important example of the “involutionary” relationship between thought and media, presenting Plato’s theory of Forms as an effect of the externalization of language and memory through formal notational systems, despite the latter’s well-known critique of writing (Preface 254–271).

This co-implication of interior, personal memory and externalized systems of symbolic storage has been maintained, if not intensified, in the time during which changes in the techne–cultural matrix have been increasingly driven by visual and digital information technology. Indeed, one can not only read the emergence of new media forms as a whole as reflecting this co-implication, but can also, in their chronological progression (from cinema, to television, to home-videography, to networked computing technologies) as marking a shift in the priority of what we have called the “content” and “program” vectors of externalized memory. Much as this sequence is often read as a progression toward the greater “interactivity” of media (the ability of a user to interact with and/or contribute to a media)—such as in McLuhan’s famous distinction between “hot” and “cold” forms of media—increased interactivity and the increased “networking” of information technology has also led to the priority of the “program” vector of externalized memory over its “content.” The externalization of memory in early forms of “new” media (cinema, television, videography)—the contemporary analogy in many ways to the “content” centered forms of early rhetorical memory practices—has attempted to emulate our common human memory practices while simultaneously altering the ways we “remember” with and without external adjuncts, the way we experience events intended to be stored in external memory, and how we conceive what “counts” as valid memory. Perhaps most obviously, the presentation of subjective experience in media such as cinema, television, and early (“read only”) Web formats, much like literary works, gained its representational power through mimicking common processes of human experience and recollection. The popularity of such attempts, however, much as the early feedback loop of rhetorical memory techniques, has the effect of additionally altering the “natural” memory processes of their audiences. Digital publisher Florian Brody provides a concise demonstration of such a feedback loop in doubly tracing his personal memory practices and the history of cultural media forms: “Three generations ago, I would likely have categorized every evocative scent as inextricably linked to Proust’s Madeleines. In my youth, I saw the road to work on an average morning as one long tracking shot in a Nouvelle Vague film. Today I find it difficult to think of my life as anything but an interactive net” (143). The formats and styles of “exterior memory” presented in the public sphere also influence our own fashioning of mediated memories. Media theorist José Van Dijck emphasizes, for instance, how the internationally franchised “home video” program America’s Funniest Home Videos has led home video enthusiasts to adopt the show’s narrative structures and themes in filming their own families and friends (19). The anticipation of exteriorizing memory within media can also, of course, significantly impact the staging of the event being captured, molding it to the benefit of its status as a future source of recollection and...
to the potential detriment of its present status as real-time experience (an experience familiar to anyone who has decided to have their wedding videographed for posterity).

Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, the mere potential of exteriorizing memory in media can suggest that only those memories captured in such ways are real or reliable. Documentary filmmaker and writer Errol Morris suggests, for instance, that such an intimate and naturalized conception of “external storage” as memory led Military Police Specialist Sabrina Harman—now best known as the smiling, “thumbs-up” posturing, figure in the digital photos of Abu Ghraib prison abuse—to make the counterintuitive decision of documenting such abuse in photographs and letters home; Harman has stated: “I put everything down on paper that I was thinking. And if it weren’t for those letters, I don’t think I could even tell you anything that went on. That’s the only way I can remember things, is letters and photos” (qtd. in Gourevitch and Morris).

However, the most intense locus of the contemporary feedback between internal and external memory, and the strongest analogue to “program”-centered early rhetorical techniques, is undoubtedly current computing technology and online mechanisms for the storing and sharing of individual or “private” memory content in public realms. The increasing popularity of personalized information management and social networking technologies such as Gmail, Flickr, YouTube, and Facebook, are perhaps our best demonstrations of the recursion of “program” changes in individual and collective memory. All of the above examples externalize individual memory into extra-human realms, whether this content takes the form of written communication (Gmail), static images (Flickr), video (YouTube), or some combination of all of these (Facebook). However, the technological interface through which this content is externalized and arranged produces novel changes in larger interfaces of the private and public, and of internal and external vectors of persuasion and ideation.

Consider, for instance, Foucault’s paradigmatic notion of “disciplinary” power—the crafting and modulation of human subjectivity organized around particular identity formations and their related practices (student, worker) and particular sites of training (schools, factories) that “sort” and maintain identities concomitant to their inclusion or exclusion from such sites and practices. However, as a mode of both economic value and of social power, networks such as Facebook and Flickr operate largely through mechanisms of broad inclusion rather than the threat of exclusion, and the “content” of this externalized information is far less important than its simple insertion in the “program” of these storage practices. The content of messages sent on your Gmail account, for example, are entirely unimportant to the service except insofar as keywords or trends in that content trigger a number of highly targeted or “individualized” advertisements that will be inserted into your interface for sending and receiving messages. Such technologies illustrate what is perhaps the most striking consequence of both the contemporary “externalization” of rhetorical memory and of emergent modes of social
power: how the former enables the latter to relax its reliance on extracting cultural or economic value from the stable maintenance of particular subjectivities or ideational frames, and instead efficiently respond to, and extract value from, virtually any kind of subjectivity that can contribute content to shared networks of communication and commerce. As a vector of the long history of rhetorical memory, such networks comprise what we might take to be the most intense moment of the “program” of a memory system taking precedence over its “content.”

Rhetorical scholars in memory studies have, of course, long emphasized both the ways that memory is externalized and the ways an individual’s personal contributions (material or discursive externalizations of interior memory) to sites or networks of collective memory alter not only their individual relationship to the same but also the site or assemblage itself. For instance, Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci have analyzed how the “symbolic field” of the Vietnam Memorial is affected by items that visitors leave at the site as well as the addition of new names to the Memorial’s wall; thus the Memorial as a whole “admits within its text the multiple decorations, stories, interpretations, elaborations, and arguments that visitors leave at the site” even as it may appear to be a stable material site of collective memory (and mourning) (272–273). In this sense, then, the Memorial possesses less a “static” content or representational value than a continually demonstrated “program” for absorbing and refiguring memories and experiences. The externalization of memory taking place on the immaterial networks named above, those that traffic in much more quotidian and individualized experiences and sentiments, represent what might be taken as a more intense version of the same process; their appropriation of contributions from diverse individuals is made much easier by focusing solely on the “program” through which memories are aggregated and categorized while jettisoning any significant concern with the content of these materials.

Similarly, the relatively recent changes in the externalization of memory that find their most intense forms in contemporary social media might force us to revise or update the ways in which memory has been defined “against” such externalization by such memory studies scholars as Pierre Nora and Andreas Huyssen. Nora, writing in what we might call the “early days” of new media in late 1980s, suggests that the “tremendous dilation of our very mode of historical perception” wrought by the ubiquity of media signaled a “conquest and eradication of memory by history” (7; 8). For Nora, memory as a force that “remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting...vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” is increasingly crowded out through its externalization in media and “material sites” of recollection (such as monuments) that discipline and reduce memory to the universalizing framework of history that “belongs to everyone and no one” (8; 9). Analyzing contemporary practices of rhetorical memory in reference to their “program” rather than “content” aspects, however, suggests that the externalization of memory has become its own “framework” very different
than the one we might attribute to history; here the “universality” comes not from a static representation that all are meant to share, but a dynamic process of exchange in which all shared aspects of personal memory become variables for the flexible sequences of identification, targeting, and marketing that mark contemporary media environments. Similarly, although he prizes as instances of “memory” many of the externalized or materialized texts and sites that Nora suggests hail the eclipse of memory by “history,” Huyssen similarly opposes the externalization of memory in memorials and monuments to its externalization in new media. For Huyssen, the “memory boom” illustrated in these sites and in the general “turn to memory” in the contemporary humanities and social sciences represents “the attempt to slow down information processing, to resist the dissolution of time in the synchronicity of the archive, to recover a mode of contemplation outside of the universe of simulation and fast-speed information and cable networks” (7). Although Huyssen’s counterposing of more contemplative practices against the speed of media networks may be as true now as when he made this distinction in the mid-1990s, today we would also have to say that externalized memory “itself” has become the engine, content provider, or “value” of such networks.

In the conclusion of this essay, we turn to the broader impact of the “program” vectors of contemporary memory management, its implications for contemporary rhetoric, and its value for thinking social power and cultural life. First, however, we return to a different conception of contemporary rhetorical memory, one that is both a complement and counterpoint to its exteriorization in mechanical and mediated realms: the internal, affective forces that equally construct the materiality of memory today. Far from being separate processes, instead we suggest below that the two not only reinforce the operations of their counterparts but might also be taken to share a surprisingly similar logic.

Once More with Memory: Affect, Repetition, and the Mechanisms of Motivation

Memory is, therefore, neither perception nor conception, but a state or affection of one of these, conditioned by lapse of time.


Much as the “externalization” of rhetorical memory has become increasingly noticeable in conjunction with the growth of networked information systems, the relation to which we now turn—the “internalization” of rhetorical memory through affective structures—has also grown in prominence proportionate to the spread of a particular class of technologies: the positron emission tomography (PET) scans and autonomic response instruments leveraged by the behavioral and neurological sciences. As mentioned earlier, one of the important aspects of
rhetorical memory that disappeared in the movement from Greek mnemosyne to Roman rhetoric’s conception of memory was its focus on the affective capacities of humans as a way of negotiating between, as Vernant writes, the “intellectual” part of the soul or subjectivity and its sensory or sensuous faculties (138). In the ecstasy of the poet inspired by the Muses, affective and non-rational feeling was itself thought to be access to a “divine” or asubjective memory. According to Havelock, practices of recollection during Greek orality that emphasized their connection to the mythological figures of Mnemosyne and the Muses were those that focused on shaping the “shared ethos” and emotional dispositions of the polis (Muse 73–75). During the transition to literate culture, Greek poetry increasingly positioned memory as a recording of past emotional experiences and individual affective tenors, its function in maintaining collective identity outsourced to written prose and civic records (Snell 65–69). However, memory of lived experience and of learning was also used to affirm decision making as based on wisdom or willed determination rather than vulgar feeling; knowledge, accessed through memory, was synonymous with an individual’s character and thus provided a defense against the base impulses tied to emotional response. The early encounter between sophistic rhetoric and Platonic philosophy similarly emphasized the role of affect on human susceptibility to persuasion and its relation to memory. For instance, in his defense of memory and knowledge in both the Phaedrus and Meno (85–86d), Plato’s Socrates insists on their value as defenses against the sophists’ exploitation of affective capacities as part of their rhetorical performances.

In what follows, we are interested in rethinking the relation of rhetorical memory and affect in the present, a moment during which affect has once again become a crucial concept in critical theory. More specifically, we argue for the value of positioning affective response as a second way in which the vectors of memory and persuasion have become more flexibly mobilized in contemporary rhetoric. Much as we suggested that the “externalization” of memory in contemporary new media and information technologies has prioritized the “program” or structural ways in which various inscriptions of memory are made available for consideration and manipulation, affective response—particularly as it has been taken up by contemporary public relations and advertising—might be considered something like the reversal of the same process: the ways that diverse experiences that have been “internalized” and become the targets of rhetorical discourses.

Focusing on the ways that social and experiential factors, in addition to biological vectors, shape the connections between affect and memory might also be useful for mediating some of the more problematic aspects of contemporary thinking about affect in the critically attuned humanities, particularly given that interest in what is sometimes called “the affective turn” has largely been premised on its value as a response, if not a remedy, to postmodern theory’s ostensible lack of attention to biological materiality. For example, in his influential work on affect, Brian Massumi argues that increased attention to the physiology of human bodies within the humanities can help us pass through the “gridlock” of contemporary
cultural studies created by the dominance of theories of social construction and cultural identity (3); for Massumi, focusing on the precognitive capacities associated with emotion can allow us to avoid both the “Scylla of naïve realism” and the “Charybdis of subjectivism” and think more concretely about the co-relation of human bodies and human cultures (4). Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s equally prominent work pitches the turn to affect as a salutary way to challenge the “anti-biologism” of contemporary critical theory (101) and to think outside of our tendency, pace Foucault, to concentrate our critical energies on identifying social forces as either “repressive” or “liberatory” (10). For both these theorists, as for the majority of participants in the so-called “Affective Turn” within critical theory as a whole, affective potentials are largely “hard-wired” into human biology—the potentials for such affects as shame, joy, and so on are fairly universal to human experience—so attention to their role in human behavior and identity is taken as promising way to rethink these categories outside critical theory’s narrow focus on sociality as the prime shaper of human subjectivity and experience.

Certainly this renewed focus on affect has indeed proved salutary for contemporary critical theory, particularly in goading scholars to complicate and rethink traditional tools of the enterprise such as ideology critique and social construction. As Michael Taussig argues, the deductions reached through such earlier analytical frameworks—‘‘sex is social construction,’ ‘race is a social construction,’ ‘the nation is an invention’’—have too often suggested that belief in or obedience to such institutions is privative, and thus easily dismissed once the cultural and discursive forces underlying them have been identified (xvi). Focusing on the role of biology in human subjectivity and the ways affective experiences influence subjectivity has helped complicate the notion that an “intellectual” understanding of the contingency of contemporary forms of social power automatically provides some purchase on resisting them.

However, it is worth asking after whether the turn to affect as a critical category, as much as it is meant to be a step “beyond” postmodern thought, has amounted to more of a return to the primacy of “pure feeling” traditionally associated with phenomenology, modernist aesthetics, or even what we used to call “the sublime.” As Clare Hemmings emphasizes in explaining her skepticism of what she calls the “theoretical celebration” (550) of affect in the humanities, the primary focus of such work on affect has been insisting on its ubiquity in human relations and interaction while maintaining its “singularity” as a force that cannot be exhaustively described or generally applied in a strategic fashion. As Hemmings details, it is this singularity and asociality, “affect’s difference from social structures,” that is leveraged to link it with “the hope of freedom from social constraint” (550); its “autonomy” from social or discursive structures is what is taken to give affect its potential for overcoming or exceeding forces of social or cultural interpolation.

Hemmings may go a bit too far in emphasizing theorists’ depictions of affect’s asociality. Although it is true that much of the language used by Massumi and Sedgwick suggests such a conclusion, the sites they analyze in reference to affect, such as the presumed influence of the Clinton–Lewinsky scandal on the U.S. stock
market (Massumi) or the experiences of queer identity (Sedgwick), not to mention their general leveraging of affect as an intervention into contemporary \textit{cultural} studies, implies that at the very least they have ears for the abstract intersection of affect with the cultural or social. In other words, and to soften her critique somewhat, what Hemmings underscores in her essay might be better taken as an indictment not of Massumi and Sedgwick’s neglect of culture \textit{en toto}, but their inability to account for the intersection of affect and culture that is implicitly presumed in their work; to be more precise, their failing might be in finding a way to negotiate how affective \textit{systems} in general are wholly material (and asocial) but affective \textit{responses} are profoundly conditioned by cultural forces or commonplaces. What is missing in their analyses is a category that could mediate the two vectors, or account for how affect and culture are co-implicated or function in a recursive relationship. Our argument below and in the remainder of this essay is that rhetorical memory has the potential to account for this mediation; we are particularly concerned with the challenges that such an “internalized” concept of rhetorical memory—both individually and when coupled with the “externalization” of memory through technological processes described earlier—poses for the current treatment of affect in the critical humanities and contemporary cultural and political persuasion as a whole.

In fact, the logic of these two systems—memory as “outsourced” to machine realms and the co-implication of affect and memory in human motivation and behavior—may have more in common than we initially think, despite the tendency within the humanities and social sciences to leverage affect as the fundamental aspect of human “nature” and thought that is fundamentally distinct from, and impossible to reproduce within, mechanical systems. Indeed, this forwarding of affect as a constitutively human process is one of the few interests generally shared across the variety of treatments of affect with these disciplines.\footnote{For instance, in “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold,” Sedgwick and Frank emphasize the context of mid-twentieth century cybernetics—and the interest in thinking of the brain and/or body as structured like a machine—on the affective theories of Silvan Tomkins \textit{(Touching} 93–122). In N. Katherine Hayles’s \textit{How We Became Posthuman}, affect is leveraged as her primary example for human singularity during a time when machines and information technology have made claims on other human capacities (245–246). Finally, as George E. Marcus, W. Russell Neuman, and Michael MacKuen write in their \textit{Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment}, their influential work on the role of affect in political decision making was inspired by Herbert Simon’s early work on how affect divides “human” and “machine” thinking (6–7).} However, some of the most prominent studies into affective responses in the natural and social sciences have underscored how the “autonomic” nature of affect—its connection to physiological processing—leads not so much to an “autonomy” from social factors as it does a certain culturally and experientially fomented “automaticity”: robust systems of affective dispositions and responses that are conditioned by personal experiences, physiological memories, and cultural commonplaces.

Unsurprisingly, one of the more prominent attempts to conceive of affect in this way was made by Sylvan S. Tomkins, the mid-twentieth-century psychologist
whose work encompassed information systems, memory, and affect. For Tomkins, one of the most important, although historically underemphasized, operations of memory was its function in creating perceptual and motivational dispositions on the unconscious and affective levels of experience. He writes in “A Theory of Memory” that memory not only stores information that allows us to interpret our perceptions, but also “provides prefabricated analogs that, when transmuted, are the perceptual experience” (60; emphasis in original). Memory, for Tomkins, had to be taken not only as discrete recollections and learned skills and behaviors, but also as the location of an accumulation of affective responses to categories of stimuli, responses that build up over time but that allow humans to respond much more efficiently, even automatically, to phenomena to which they have already formed some positive or negative association. More recently, research psychologists John A. Bargh and Tanya L. Chartrand have similarly emphasized the ways that affective response—and corollary categories of emotion and “mood”—are largely predicated on unconscious memories of previous affective experience as well as generalized affective perceptions reinforced by cultural stereotypes. A series of experiments performed by Bargh illustrate how “the frequent and consistent pairing of internal responses and external events” create and maintain individuals’ affective potentials and thresholds and the behaviors that emerge in response to them (468). For instance, subjects “primed” with terms relating to stereotypes of the elderly (“Florida,” “Sentimental,” etc.) subsequently behaved in line with the stereotype (walking slowly down hallways, having difficulty with their short-term memory). In another series of experiments, participants were subliminally presented with the faces of young African-Americans; their subsequent affective behavior was markedly more hostile (as opposed to control groups), presumably based on their stereotypical association of hostility with that group. Such “automaticity” of affect, and in particular, such connections between affective potential and cultural stereotypes should give us pause over what Hemmings codes as the “optimism of affective freedom” dominant in humanistic affect theory, wherein affective attachments with less than desirable implications—“the delights of consumerism, the feelings of belonging attending fundamentalism or fascism”—have been crowded out by focus on affect’s “autonomy” (551).

These connections between unconscious memory, culturally reinforced conceptions, and affective response were known in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century psychology as “affective memory”: an “involuntary memory linked to sensory or emotional triggers” as opposed to that of conscious memory organized by intelligence (Terdiman 201). In more contemporary work in psychology and neuroscience, the associations of concepts and objects with particular affects in long-term memory, and the influence of these associations with the generalized disposition and motivation of individuals, are attributed to the functioning of “affective tags” or “somatic markers.” Both terms refer to the process through which individuals’ affective responses become tied to particular concepts, identities, or individuals over time; the suturing of affect to particular stimuli in this
way significantly impacts individuals’ dispositions—their inclinations toward responding positively or negatively to specific phenomena—and thus their judgment and decision-making processes. When we have an affective response to an object or concept, it becomes “tagged” or “marked” in our memory with that feeling, increasing our chances of responding in similar fashion when confronted with or recalling the original stimulus as well as others that we perceive. As neuroscientist Antonio Damasio writes, affective responses are stored in dormant and implicit “dispositional memories” that record these responses within our nervous systems (260). This bodily memory helps explain, for instance, the rapidity of individuals’ affective responses to objects as well as our tendencies, when such dispositions are challenged, to seek out information that supports our initial feelings.

Such an affective or bodily memory has significant implications for our conceptions of contemporary subjectivity and social power; much as it was in the concept of memmosyne, the affective dimension of memory in the present is perhaps best taken as a pivotal component of subjectivity as well as a resource for persuasion. As a basis for thematizing human subjectivity, affective memory suggests a co-implication of cultural and biological factors that may be lacking both in more traditional critical considerations of the ideological or “socially constructed” nature of such categories as well as the tendency within contemporary cultural studies to foreground the autonomy of affect from social forces. In other words, if attention to affect is to function as something more than a foregrounding of “pure feeling” we will have to do some hard thinking about its ties to sociality and its role in individuals’ use of, and vulnerability to, forms of influence and persuasion. Our argument here has been that the best way to think of such a relation between affect and sociality is—as it was in ancient Greece and early twentieth-century cognitive theory—through memory, and, more specifically, rhetorical memory, or the various intersections of individual and collective memory and the forces of persuasion affecting and affected by them. Beyond its impact on our conceptions of identity or ontology, we take it that this is the primary question of affect today: the ways that affective experience and its persistence in our bodies and memories prime or prepare our responses to the various phenomena that would make claims on our attention, support, or response.

**Conclusion: The Future of Forgetting**

In *The Art of Memory*, her canonical study of memory training from Ancient Greek rhetoric to Renaissance scientific culture, Frances A. Yates reproduces a number of diagrams used by teachers in various historical periods to visualize types of items being memorized, or, more commonly, the operations of memory itself. Many of these diagrams share a structure wherein individual markers are connected by lines representing the different relations between items and possible sequential strategies for organizing them. Likely, given the various historical moments during which these diagrams were actively used, they alternately reminded their viewers of blueprints for physical structures, cartographic representations, or astronomical
constellations. Those viewing them today are likely reminded not so much of such particular images as much as the genre of these images themselves: networks. As we have argued in this essay, such a conception is far from coincidental; the network is perhaps the master-trope of any attempt to theorize the operations of social power in the post-Empire, post-disciplinary, or post-postmodern present. More specifically, two particular types of networks—the material and electronic networks of information technology and the affective and biological economy of the nervous system—are perhaps the most vital sites for the conception of rhetorical memory that we have been arguing plays large in contemporary culture and politics.

A conception of memory networks diagramming the connections of memory internal and external to an individual thus becomes an alternative to a conception that uses analogies to physical processes (walking through the room of a house or visually tracing the stars in a constellation) to mimic the parts of a speech or the action of remembrance. Such an alternative might also emphasize a key difference between the pedagogical value of rhetorical memory in oral and early literate culture as compared to the “post-literate,” multimedia culture of the present. Whereas in early training in rhetorical memory and mnemotechnics, theories of how memory function were secondary to the training of internal memory, in the contemporary moment—in which the externalization of memory in media systems and its co-implication in the manipulation of our affective dispositions have become central to culture and politics—its is perhaps the analysis and diagramming of this system of memory itself that should take priority, rather than any formal training in the personal capacity “to remember.” In the following, we are interested in drawing a clearer picture of such a diagram, and thus begin winding down this essay, by focusing on areas where both the “externalization” and “internalization” of rhetorical memory are particularly prominent: contemporary mass marketing and political campaigning. We choose these two phenomena not only because of their prevalence in contemporary social life, but also because they both demonstrate a particularly strong mixture of the two types of rhetorical memory systems that have been under review here—information technology and affective response.

Indeed, although affect may have only recently returned to the scene of humanities research, it has long been the coin of the realm for research into contemporary marketing, one made all the more prominent as both corporate and academic research into advertising have made increased use of advanced diagnostic technologies for measuring both affective response generally and the more specific cataloguing of what components of cognition are operative in response to marketing appeals. Take for instance, a relatively recent experiment by the Human Neuroimaging Lab and the Center for Theoretical Neuroscience at the Baylor College of Medicine (McClure). Their protocol for this experiment was in many ways itself a

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5 See Wells for a journalistic account of this trend and Lindstrom for an overview by a practitioner.
reiteration of a famous marketing technique: “The Pepsi® Challenge.” Administrers of this experiment tested individuals’ verbal and affective responses (via brain scans recorded by functional magnetic resonance imaging) to drinking both Coke® and Pepsi® in their normal packaging, drinking them independent of their packaging (a “blind taste test”), and drinking them from receptacles that are marked to suggest the alternative drink was being offered (e.g., a cup labeled “Coke®” that might in fact contain Pepsi®). Their results showed that around half of the participants who did not know which drink they were imbibing preferred Pepsi® and that drink tended to produce activity in the brain’s prefrontal cortex, a region thought to process feelings of reward. The most striking result of the experiment, however, was that when participants knew they were drinking Coke®, three-fourths of participants claimed it tasted better and their brain activity changed correspondingly. Perhaps most surprisingly, the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus, both associated with the impact of affect on behavior and the latter associated with memory, were activated, suggesting that consumers were relating their experience to existing pre-conscious memories, particularly their recollection of images and marketing messages and the somatic markers created by those commercial appeals.

Although participants in the contemporary turn to affect in the humanities are fond, as Hemmings emphasizes, of noting scientific research that identifies the sometimes “quirky” or peculiar manifestations of affect and those that suggest an “escape” from our usual notions of the cultural influence of mass media and public culture on individual subjectivity, it is likely that operations of the kind described above drive the majority of our affective experiences: quotidian operations and dispositions that underscore the persuasive effect of cultural messages and images and that, though they may be more expansive than our traditional ideological notions of such influence, are equally tied to our memory and experiences. Indeed, it is precisely the intersection of affect, memory, and persuasion, detectable in such a quotidian interaction, that makes this process so pervasive and it is the ubiquity and complexity of this intersection that distinguishes the conception of rhetorical memory we have been tracing here from both our more traditional tools of critical theory (ideology critique, analysis of the “social construction” of phenomena) and the more recent turn to affect that was designed to remedy the limitations of the former.

Although it would be, of course, ridiculous to suggest that institutional structures no longer largely dictate acceptable “roles” or subject positions for the huge majority of individuals, our argument about the primacy of rhetorical memory is meant to suggest that the constellation of these forces, and, in particular, the processes through which social and cultural ecologies shape subjectivity, have in fact shifted significantly from what these above theoretical perspectives would suggest. More specifically, we are arguing that the priority between the ideational contents (capitalism, heteronormativity) of whatever system is under review and its mechanisms of maintenance (ideology, social construction) have in many ways
reversed. To use the vocabulary we have worked with throughout this essay, "program" has become much more important than "content."

Or, to phrase it another way, rhetoric or persuasion “itself” increasingly drives cultural and economic production, rather than the discrete content it might be used to carry. In this sense the importance of affect for thinking through contemporary forces of persuasion is not that it might reveal some more “authentic” or “resistant” self, but rather because it has increasingly become a crucial component of the process we have been coding as rhetorical memory here, particularly its manifestation in the most common or quotidian operations of daily life. This focused creation and manipulation of personal memory and affective response goes hand in glove with the technologically mediated niche marketing techniques mentioned earlier in this essay; the two come together to form a relatively novel system of persuasive techniques leveraging the overlaps between cognizant, personal memory and both its externalization in mass mediated informatic networks and its internalization, often equally mass mediated, into affective responses and preferences encoded in our nervous systems.

We can see the same intersection in the dominant strategies of contemporary American political campaigning. In addition to the increased attention to affect’s role in “political decision-making” in the disciplines of political science and psychology, work on affect in the critical and cultural studies wing of the humanities have also underscored the importance of affect in public politics (and, in particular, the historical superiority of the right over the left in leveraging affective persuasion). However, as republican political campaign consultant Dan Schnur has recently emphasized, academic approaches to the leveraging of affect in political appeals often neglect the very specific circumstances and strategies surrounding their use in public political persuasion. Most significantly, Schnur argues, researchers get it wrong when they configure political appeals as geared toward a broad swathe of the electorate or claim that the shared affective capacities of potential voters make them a homogenous group. Although empirical researchers into affective politics test hypotheses by crafting emotional appeals and then applying them to test groups, a reverse process is followed by the average “political

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6We might read this shift as an intensification of the trend Richard Lanham identified in as the “fundamental figure/ground reversal” between “fluff” and “stuff” in the early days of the information economy (6). For Lanham, the commoditization of immaterial phenomena (information, the ethereal “aura” of consumer products) seemed to be giving it many of the qualities that we would traditionally only associate with material goods. Whereas for Lanham, increased focus on branding mechanisms and the importance of aesthetics in marketing emphasized rhetoric’s historical positioning as the creation of manipulation of “style,” the ubiquity of niche-marketing strategies in both commerce and political electioneering seems to take us back even further in the rhetorical tradition and its emphasis on generic persuasion “itself” as the flexible manipulation of the existing interests and investments of an audience.

7For a recent survey of work on affect in political science and psychology, see the anthology The Affect Effect: Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking and Behavior (the source of the Schnur piece cited above and below).
practitioner,” who first identifies various voter groups and then crafts emotional appeals tailored to these various groups (360). In addition to dividing voters into categories based on whether they are likely to be opponents, supporters, or possible supporters of a particular candidate, the latter two categories are then further divided based on their existing dispositional memories and affective investments, and various “emotion based messaging” is designed to target these deeper niches (363).

It is in this final division, the ever more specific targeting of emotional appeals to voters, that the leveraging of affective memory intersects that of externalized memory and information technology. Although the modern work of dividing voters into targeted categories may have traditionally taken place through the recognition of explicitly organized “interest groups” (for tax decreases, for the preservation of the natural environment, etc.) that could be addressed via public rallies or direct mail campaigns, in the last decade or so data-aggregating corporations such as Strategic Telemetry, TargetPoint, and Catalist have combined massive server power and the increasing availability of demographic and consumer preference information to provide their clients with a seemingly infinite number of cross-indexed voter niches (Strategic Telemetry worked for the ‘08 Obama campaign, TargetPoint for Romney, and Catalist for the Democratic National Committee [DNC]). As journalist Steven Levy reports, the “fuzzy cohorts” such as “soccer moms” and “Nascar dads” that attempted to grasp broad cultural trends have given way to more specific categories based on the documented material, political, and affective investments of individuals: a cache of “education-obsessed Hispanic moms” microtargeted by Republicans in 2004, a niche of “Christian Conservative Environmentalists” microtargeted by the DNC the same year. On the one hand, the increased individualization of these appeals might be read as nothing more than a more intense version of what preceded them: today’s microtargeted niche demographics being little more than smaller or more plural manifestations of the “interest groups” that were in the sights of earlier political campaigns. On the other hand, however, the increasing precision with which such demographic information has been collected, analyzed, and exploited suggests a change not just in degree, but in kind (or, perhaps more accurately, that the intensity of the former trends toward the latter). One would have to revise Horkheimer and Adorno’s famous description of twentieth-century capitalist political economy as one in which “something is provided for all so that none may escape” (123). Today, it might be more accurate to state that, “everyone must provide something so that none may escape.” If the former designates the strategy of creating multiple versions of whatever phenomena are under review (products, persuasive discourses) in order to persuade multiple audiences, the latter codes the priority of identifying and analyzing the various niches of whatever audiences are under review and producing effective persuasive techniques in response. And, for good or ill, one must declare some kind of identity or desire in order to participate in either economic or political exchanges, even if that identity and/or desire...
becomes immediately vulnerable to contemporary demographic targeting technique. The current, and likely future, contours of contemporary political persuasion are mapped in this calculus of party and product affiliation, spending habits, geographic location, and income level.

These currents in marketing and political campaigning are also perhaps two of the most dramatic examples of changes in the ways that subjective and collective memory are leveraged in the contemporary moment. Of course, marketers and political operatives have long capitalized on subjective and collective memories. In her analysis of the U.S. Postal Service’s *Celebrate the Century* campaign, for instance, Ekaterina V. Haskins presents a compelling case study of the way that initiative capitalized on Americans’ collective nostalgia (for the “old-fashioned” hobby of stamp-collecting) and commodified participants’ attachments to icons of American history (by voting on what images should be used to commemorate the century and made available for sale via stamps and the associated products offered by the campaign). Similarly, Shawn J. and Trevor Parry-Giles have leveraged Bill Clinton’s rhetorical strategies as a demonstration of how “collective memory works as an interpretive strategy” for political actors, who often “seek to link their character to familiar and secure markers of collective identity drawn from the community’s shared past” (419). Such processes, of course, are still prominent in the present; one need look no further, for instance, than the variety of products recently made available to commemorate the 1969 moon landing, or Obama’s frequent references to the Great Depression and the founding days of American democracy early in his term. However, today these processes run parallel with the more niche- and data-driven practices of today’s political strategists and marketers’ exploitation of affective memory. The pivotal difference between the two is found both in their differing emphasis on the “content” versus “program” vectors of rhetorical memory as well as their treatment of collective versus subjective memory. Whereas the former examples draw our attention to how broad memories and attachments are targeted by agents for the relatively stable responses they can be expected to elicit, the robustness of the latter varieties of marketing and political persuasion is keyed to their ability to, in the case of data-driven campaigning, collect and correlate shifting categories of attachments and preferences, and, in the case of affective marketing, install emotional attachments in individuals’ memories through the careful shaping of brands and advertising appeals.

The latter varieties—the “program-centric” uses of memory in persuasion—are also those that are most likely to become increasingly prevalent in contemporary politics and economy, not so much because, as some have suggested, we find collective experiences on the wane, but because it is has been the manipulation of externalized memory and affective responses keyed to individual experiences that have been shown to be much more supple and efficient vectors for broad strategies of persuasive manipulation, whether they be the selling of products or the “selling” of candidates. In other words, it is likely that the future of memory as a rhetorical force, will be tied to the “future of forgetting”: the ways in which
our experiences are externalized in various media and forgotten by us or become embedded in our very affective dispositions and responses—their obscurity to our present consciousness in many ways proportional to their effect on our future actions. As today's persuasive landscape is currently, and one presumes, will continue to be, marked by the recursive connections between subjective interiority and environmental exteriority best thematized as memory, we would do poorly to forget the age-old connections between these forces and rhetoric.

References


