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To be and not to be: Memory, Care, and the Contradictory Imagination

Are we what we remember? Everything we remember is an act of imagination. We are actively reconstructing the way it was then in the here and now. Memory is sensory, iconic, and haptic. It consists of images, sounds, tastes, and smells to which we add a story to create meaning. These stories are neurophysiologically, socially, and technologically encoded, performed through daily habits and rituals, transmitted through artistic representation, and traced throughout cultural objects and architecture. Memories offer us continuity, a sense of place and identity. Therefore, the loss of memory presents an ontological dilemma for those whose memories are no longer accessible and for those who care with and for them.

Are we what we forget? Memory is the process of storing and then remembering this information. However, memory practices, such as what to memorialize, are often sites of psychological, social, and political struggle, as they underpin the construction of the past as well the present. Thus, the preservation of particular memories is also linked to negation, suppression, and culturally authorized forms of silencing. Recent science would also suggest that forgetting is a form of learning, a way of altering access to memory in response to a dynamic and changing environment.

Drawing on examples of research and artistic practice, I will take up these two questions as they arise in the pedagogy and practice of the arts therapies. In particular, I will draw on recent studies that illuminate the unique contributions of the creative arts therapies to memory care, contributions that rely on our capacities to invite and inhabit contradiction.

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