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# Memory | Materiality | Sensuality

**Lindsey A Freeman**

State University of New York—Buffalo State, USA

**Benjamin Nienass**

California State University San Marcos, USA

**Rachel Daniell**

The Graduate Center, CUNY, USA

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In a 1993 essay, literary theorist Peter Stallybrass movingly described how his recently deceased friend Allon White had finally returned to his memory after countless futile attempts to bring him back. While in the process of mourning, Stallybrass' tireless efforts to actively invoke memories of Allon paradoxically created more distance rather than less. If anything was made present through the stories that Stallybrass told to remember his friend, it was his absence. The moment in which Allon finally “returned” to him was a much less deliberate affair: while wearing a hand-sewn jacket the two had both worn throughout their friendship, Stallybrass finally felt he had reunited with his friend through the physicality of the object they shared. Much more than a mere representation of Allon, the jacket, for a brief moment, *became* Allon,

He was there in the wrinkles of the elbows, wrinkles which in the technical jargon of sewing are called “memory”; he was there in the stains at the very bottom of the jacket; he was there in the smell of the armpits. (Stallybrass 1993: 36)

Stallybrass' story is emotionally powerful and conceptually productive because it allows us to break down the artificial binaries between mind and matter when dealing with the complex processes and practices of memory. It refutes the idea that “memory [is] about minds rather than things” (Stallybrass, 1993: 47), and proposes instead that we rarely remember through ideas only, but rather through our encounters with things, and through embodiments and

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**Corresponding authors:**

Lindsey A. Freeman, Sociology Department, State University of New York—Buffalo State, 1300 Elmwood Ave, Buffalo, NY 14222, USA.

Email: [freemala@buffalostate.edu](mailto:freemala@buffalostate.edu)

Benjamin Nienass, Dept of Political Science, California State University San Marcos, 333 S. Twin Oaks Valley Rd, San Marcos, CA 92096, USA.

Email: [bnienass@csusm.edu](mailto:bnienass@csusm.edu)

Rachel Daniell, Anthropology Department, The Graduate Center, CUNY, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016, USA.

Email: [rdaniell@gradcenter.cuny.edu](mailto:rdaniell@gradcenter.cuny.edu)

disembodiments collected in material traces and objects. This special issue of *Memory Studies* takes as its starting point a deep skepticism of the overly neat oppositions drawn between mind and materiality in matters of memory. The authors collected here are interested in physical practices, sensual experiences, built environments, objects of affective investment, and the human bodies that shape, store, and facilitate our memories, as well as memory's forms.

In order to think through our pasts, as they are entangled with our presents, we must examine the intersections of sensation, experience, and meaning that arise through our interactions with material forms. To do so, we sift through the capharnaum of the everyday and the extraordinary, the run-of-the-mill and the ruinous, through all kinds of *things*: a panoramic postcard, an irradiated souvenir dime, chunks of concrete with graffiti tattoos, war-time helicopter landing mats, the etched letters on a memorial marker, a bloody yellow shoe left after disaster, and the smooth touch of leather. In this issue of *Memory Studies*, we seek to get at the power of things at the points where matter meets memory by attending to the representation, transmission, and circulation of memories—to examine how memories are sparked and narrated through things, both in their presence and in their absences. With the authors collected here, we share an interest in how sensuality plays a key role in the relationship between matter and memory through the glances, seductions, and revulsions that arise through encounters with the visual, tactile, textual, and synesthetic expressions of the past. Moreover, this issue brings new attention to these concerns at a moment when many recent studies of social memory have taken up considerations of the virtual and the digital.<sup>1</sup>

## Mnemonic assemblages

In his essay “Thing Theory,” Bill Brown (2001) argues that the “thingness of objects” becomes apparent “when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily” (p. 4). We contend that we also confront the thingness of objects when they start working *for* us, or for others: when the Vietnam landing mat is turned on its side to become part of a border wall (Hattam), when the leather boots from a lover two sizes too big grant entrance to a party (Van Doorn), or when Wite-Out blots out inconvenient or uncomfortable pasts (Freeman). Thinking with and about things is tricky because as Brown (2001) writes, “we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things” (p. 4). Any “entity can be viewed as a thing *or* an object”; it depends on how one is looking (Harman, 2010: 24; Heidegger, 1994). Things, in contrast to objects, have more aura and more distance; they are constituted by human relationships with objects and are therefore imbued with memory. Objects become mnemonic *things* when they become part of a meaningful assemblage, when they have rubbed up against the human in a memorable way (or when the human has rubbed up against them), and when traces of past experiences have been created with and held within them. Bruno Latour (2000) insists, “things do not exist without being full of people” (p. 10). We add that things do not exist without being full of memory.

Memory alters fundamental categories that are often taken as stable and destabilizes them: time and space and the animate and the inanimate are the prime examples. In memory, the past, present, and future take turns in the lead, like those charming but somewhat awkward dances that sometimes take place at weddings between different generations of relatives, where each moves to the music in their own way, sometimes leading, sometimes following, all the while holding on to each other through various grips, some more tightly than others. Memory resists strict choreography, it is not “an automatic or ‘mechanical reproduction’ of the past, but sense”—that is, something with aura (Ansell-Pearson, 2010: 74). As Benjamin (2007) writes of the phenomenon,

To experience the aura of an appearance or a being means becoming aware of its ability [to pitch] to respond to a glance. This ability is full of poetry. When a person, an animal, or something inanimate returns our glance with its own, we are drawn initially into the distance ... Aura is the appearance of a distance however close it might be. (p. 45)

The experience of aura requires a relationship with a thing—a hand-sewn jacket, a painting, a postcard, a jagged tooth—where a knowing glance is perceived or exchanged. The type of glance we are concerned with here is a glance of the past, that is, a glance of memory.

These glances are not just observed; they are also felt. In sensory encounters with the past through things, subject/object distinctions tend to break down quickly. As Susan Stewart (1999) writes, “[T]he body as agent of sense impression also becomes the body as object of sense impression” (p. x). We remember things and remember with things when they have touched us in a particular way, when they have gotten in our way, when they failed or we failed them, when the thing “thinged” (to put a past tense on Heidegger’s famous phrase), or when doing things with objects we felt pain or the hot flush of shame or pleasure, similar to Nietzsche’s conception of memory as being “burned in” (Heidegger, 1994: 17; Nietzsche, 1989: 61). To remember without things would be to recall a fuzzy netherworld without friction, boundaries, or entanglements with the material world.

Humans do not simply operate objects in a unidirectional manner. As Latour’s (2005) “actor-network theory,” Jane Bennett’s (2010) “assemblages”<sup>2</sup> and “thing-power,” as well as Donna Haraway’s (1985) “cyborg,” and N. Katherine Hayles’ (1993) “materiality of informatics” show, objects simultaneously act upon the human sphere, by aiding, influencing, provoking, and wearing away. They are not merely repositories for memory, separate from the human and activated by human desire to pour memory into their material form for retrieval, reminiscence, or forgetting—objects are not just storage systems, nor external hard drives. Rather humans, objects, and memories are bound up with each other in their material presences, creating assemblages made of persons, things, and traces of the past—what we think of as ‘mnemonic assemblages’.

In *The Politics of Nature*, Latour (2004) suggests that things can be *actants*: “source[s] of action” (p. 237) that can “make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events.” Building on this idea, Bennett (2010) argues that objects possess a “vital materiality” (p. viii), where things have the ability “not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.” Memories are not still, matter is not stable: each has a pulse, a vitality. Roland Barthes (1990) reflected on this as he wrote about Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, evoking “the sphere of the infinite vibrations of meaning, at the center of which is placed the literal object. We can say there is not one plate of the *Encyclopédie* that does not vibrate well beyond its demonstrative intent” (p. 35). Thinking with these theories in the context of memory studies, we can utilize the idea of “mnemonic assemblages” to re-vitalize and re-examine long-held notions about the relationship between objects and the past.

## Materiality and conceptualizations of memory

At least since antiquity, metaphors for how memory works have been heavily dependent on linkages to the material world and its spatial configurations. Memory has been compared to a storehouse, a palace, a theater, a mystical writing pad, and a computer, among other things (see Augustine, 1860; Cicero, 1998 [55 BCE]; Curruthers, 1990; Connerton, 2009: 5; Critchley, 2014; Freud, 1963; Yates, 1966). When not viewed as a container, memory has often been thought of as something that must be contained and stored neatly for easy retrieval. The practice of controlling memory was elevated to the extent that it was referred to as an art. This dream of mastery is full of a particular kind of human hubris that ignores the agency of things and denies the complex dynamics of remembering.

Historical and theoretical attention to mnemonic mastering has been outlined particularly elegantly in Frances Yates' (1966) *The Art of Memory*, and the practice continues to fascinate contemporary thinkers and writers, as in, for example, Joshua Foer's (2012) best-selling account of his participation in the United States Memory Championship, *Moonwalking with Einstein*, and Simon Critchley's (2014) recent novella *The Memory Theatre*.<sup>3</sup> The protagonist in Critchley's text suggests, "Everyone could have their own memory theatre. Everyone *was* their own memory theatre" (p. 38). Critchley moves us nearer to the idea of mnemonic assemblage when we are no longer using the memory theatre simply as a mental tool, but we have become the theatre as well. To fully explore mnemonic assemblages, we just need to get a bit closer to *things*.

As the story of Stallybrass' early efforts to recall his friend at the beginning of this introduction reminds us, remembering is more than recounting. In order to get to the mnemonic abilities of things to bring up the past, scholars have turned closer attention to the relationships between people and objects, sometimes based on Proustian or Benjaminian accounts of involuntary memories triggered by chance encounters with the material world (see Freeman in this issue). On the basis of Proust's observation that we are "islands in time," Christopher Frayling (1999: xiv) points out that our island beaches are covered with the flotsam and jetsam of our eras; they are "littered with material culture." As we interact with the things that float up on our shores, these interactions create mnemonic assemblages and the future fossils that tell the stories of our lives. This approach moves away from an over-reliance on mnemotechnic systems in order to consider objects as vibrating with history and memory, objects resonating in shared vibrations with persons.

Previous interventions made in *Memory Studies* have argued for a renewed focus on the "material-semiotic orderings" in the study of memory (Kontopodis, 2009) and on the interaction of memory and materiality in the production of "memory effects" (Schlunke, 2013). Schlunke, in particular, has invited those interested in studying how the past lives on in the present to view "memory as an order given to us by ... things themselves" (p. 261). And, in earlier work, memory scholars such as Andreas Huyssen (1995) have paved the way for an account of memory that takes the "anamnesic dimensions" of auratic objects more seriously (p. 33).

At the same time, a focus on materiality in the field of memory studies has not been without its challengers. Forty (2004 [1999]: 186), for instance, claimed that the interaction between objects and memory is more complicated than "Western thinking has been in the habit of assuming." Starting from the assertion that "[i]t has been generally taken for granted that memories, formed in the mind, can be transferred to solid material objects, and by virtue of their durability, either prolong or preserve them indefinitely, beyond their pure mental existence" (Forty, 2004 [1999]: 182), Forty suggests instead that this material externalization may very well be the opposite of durable memory. Evoking De Certeau's (1984) premise that memory depends on alteration and movement (on memory's dependence on movement, see also Creet and Kitzmann, 2011), Forty views the materialization efforts as a sign of memory's decay rather than its longevity.

Derrida (1995) worried about this too. In *Archive Fever*, he showed that there is no archive dedicated to memory which is not at the same time an archive of forgetting. The contemporary archive and new archival machines take the place of knowing things by heart. For Derrida (1995), concerns about archiving are concerns about everyday life too; he writes, "what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way" (p. 18).

In similar terms, Nora (1989), lamenting the disappearance of authentic spaces of memory, famously described the "breathtaking ... material stock" (p. 13) of what he called "archive memory," the external support structures for memory that increasingly act as our main depository for the past while our internal experience of memory declines. The desire to hold the past, to prevent anything from slipping away, is an old desire. As Critchley (2014) writes,

Artificial memory machines litter history. Human beings seem to be persistently seduced by the idea that a theatre, a palace, or a machine might be constructed that would hold the sum of knowledge in a way that would permit total recall. (p. 17)

What is wished for here is an externalized memory, outside of the individual, where controlled recollection can be achieved at the touch of a button—not the flood of sensations filling the body and mind like the agony of the totalizing memory beset on the Borges' character Funes, who, after a freak accident, remembers everything, every lived detail of every moment of every day (Borges, 1962).

Finally, Klein's biting critique of what he considers a recent convergence between archaic and modern notions of memory has little patience for the new focus on objects in recent accounts of memory. For Klein, it is the renewed localization of memory in material objects that has justified a questionable leap from individual memory to collective memory. This dual move toward a sacralization of memory objects and a reified version of "Memory with a capital M" (Klein, 2000: 135) has dire consequences for the study of memory; according to Klein (2000),

[t]he prosaic emancipation is tremendous, for an author can move freely from memories as individual psychic events to memories as a shared group consciousness to memories as a collection of material artifacts and employ the same psychoanalytic vocabularies throughout. (p. 136)

Klein's warning against reification in the field of memory studies can be taken seriously without giving up the notion that humans imbue the material world with meaning in almost any act of communication (Nienass and Poole, 2012: 91–92), but here, we want to address another specific limitation to the memory–materiality relationship assumed by some of the critiques above. A starting point for this issue is the premise that the externalization thesis implied in the accounts by Forty, Nora, and others is not the only productive way to think of the relationship between memory and objects. In their view (or rather in the views and practices they criticize), the material world looks like an intentional extension of the mind, a preservation device designed to bring the past to life for future generations or future versions of ourselves. What is lost in these accounts is the "surplus of meaning" (Huysen, 1995: 15) and the "imagination value" (Leslie, 1999: 119) that our encounters with objects hold, including those objects that were not necessarily imbued with a memory value from their very beginning. In short, what is potentially lost is an account of the involuntary and poetic effects of the material world on our experiences with the past and consequently a sense of agency imbued in materiality itself.

## Contributions

As Appadurai (1988) remarks in his influential text *The Social Life of Things*, even if one's starting point is that "things have no meanings apart from human transactions, attributions, and motivations" (p. 8), methodologically we need to go back to the things themselves, "their forms [and] their trajectories" in order to understand how they operate in human life. The mnemonic objects of study in this special issue of *Memory Studies* are wide reaching—they range from the border walls of neoliberal states to the pitted leather of worn jackets, panoramic postcards, soldier-shaped cookies, dry-roasted peanuts, built memorials, museum displays, and much more. The things studied here are part of an "eccentric archive" that has emerged indiscriminately, based on the individual proclivities and research interests of the authors involved (Cvetkovich, 159–160) because, as Julian Yates (2006) points out, "every 'thing' offers a route through the world" (p. 1006). What cuts across these papers is the attention paid to the mnemonic assemblages that emerge from a material reading of the things of history, memory, and culture. The authors also pay particular attention to

the often neglected realm of the senses, while exposing and negotiating the implications of modes of affect and display, systems of exhibition, circulation, and distribution; tracing the logics of exchange, value, and investment; and examining the role of objects and bodies to incorporate or mobilize certain memories. In the collected essays, what is recalled is intimately linked with a politics of the things of memory, such as the appropriation of objects by museums to produce an understanding of historical events, or calling upon mythic landscapes through panoramas to folklorize what could otherwise be remembered as exercises of state power.

Marita Sturken explores the things and sensory encounters of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum in New York. On display in the museum are objects whose changed formations or ruined surfaces and structures “embody the material transformations of that day.” She focuses on two of the most dramatic interpenetrations of human matter with nonhuman matter in the memorial of this event: a “composite” object of compressed debris that may or may not contain human remains, and the all-enveloping dust of that day, which certainly did. The composite and the dust are material outcomes of that day and are among the most potent mnemonic objects of September 11. Sturken also points out how, in a further interpenetration of human matter/nonhuman matter and past/present, the dust—which is composed in large part of the toxins of pulverized materials (computers, furniture, buildings)—has also interacted with the material bodies of some of the early responders, in many cases damaging their health and shortening their lives. The dust and the composite each speak to a “think[ing] beyond the binary of matter and life.” As Sturken argues, “the transformation of material objects and landscapes resulted in new forms of materiality that demanded meaning making. Things remained, but they were not the same things.”

By contrast, Victoria Hattam looks at forms of materiality that have remained arguably the same, but have been utilized in different ways in the service of state power. She traces the surplus portable helicopter landing mats previously deployed by the US military during the Vietnam War, as they are transformed through “imperial recycling” (Hattam) into sections of the contemporary, militarized southern US border wall—the material infrastructure of one kind of state project repurposed for another. She writes provocatively about the aesthetic rhymes of the landing mat/ border pieces to mid-twentieth century modern art, attending to the “aesthetic affinities running through these geographically dispersed sites; affinities that undergird the many faces of American nationalism.” Through historical analysis, material culture analysis, and visual observation, Hattam highlights the interconnectivity of politics and aesthetics—closing the distance between the United States–Mexico border and the Museum of Modern Art and “provok[ing] a rethinking of subjectivity, political authority, and change.”

Jonathan Bach also takes up a socio-historical and spatial analysis of a state-built wall in his description of the transformations of the Berlin Wall over time. The wall’s material form is worked and re-worked through the political shifts of this history, in the transformation from exclusionary wall to a site for a new city imaginary to a memorial marker of the past. Over the years, rust accrues to its metalwork, tracing evidence of the wall’s interaction with oxygen, and, in the human understanding of the nature of rust, becoming symbolic of time’s passing and the inevitable weakening of its inner infrastructure. Human interaction transforms the materiality of the wall—chipping away, commodifying, and selling pieces of the wall, painting and pasting on the wall—through changing political regimes, urban space issues, commemorative impulses, and material decompositions. Bach relates this to the Wall’s paired properties of visibility/invisibility: the wall is there, but the ways in which we see it depend on the framing of the city and the politics around it. Even in this intentional account of the material framing of the past, however, the nonhuman intervenes: Bach alludes to the rabbits that remained unaffected by the initial purpose of the wall and who later became a symbol of freedom in early anti-Wall graffiti.

In another analysis of the built environment's relationship to human presents, pasts, and futures, Josep-Maria Garcia-Fuentes looks at nineteenth century guidebooks, panoramas, and postcards as early modern mass mediums with a particular power to shape visions of the past. Through his case study, the Montserrat site in Catalonia, he traces idealized images of Montserrat from their circulation as public media through their influence on actual architectural changes at the site itself. The representations of a physical environment through other, highly circulatable material forms led to a mutual interaction of these two materialities, eventually influencing the processes of architectural planning and state-building. In this case, the past lives on as an idealized model for urban architecture and carries with it not only aesthetic but also political and religious understandings, which shape and reshape ideas about a fictional-historical Montserrat stamped with the longing gaze of the traveler.

Lindsey Freeman takes us into a childhood spent visiting her grandparents in the Manhattan Project city of Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Like Hattam's and Sturken's interventions, Freeman also sees an aesthetic connection with modern art and mid-twentieth century aesthetics that one cannot help but feel in the city. She shows how a modern, gridded design was placed on top of the rolling hills of the city designed to produce an atomic bomb, and how, over time, the place became infused with atomic imaginings as well as nuclear realities. Freeman's attention to the things and spaces she encounters in the atomic sensorium shows how the glimpses and half-knowings of secret things amass over time to produce memories.

Addressing the relationship of objects to the self and objects linking the self to community, Niels van Doorn interrogates the practices of gifting and inheriting leather items in a queer community. He points out that the practice of passing down objects through generations is an invention of tradition that has an identity-building and history-generating function that stems both from the symbolic investment of the actors and from the phenomenological qualities of the material itself. He asks us to consider "how the material qualities of leather, as treated animal skin, evoke, store and shape memories and, vice versa, how such memories imbue leather items with emotional, cultural and political value"—how leather becomes "a thing that *wants things*." His ethnographic examination of the circulation practices of worn items among the Baltimore leather community shows that to think about clothes means to "think about memory, but also power and possession" (Stallybrass, 1993: 37). Worn-in leather pressed up against the skin of members of the community thus becomes a textural "mnemonic technology" around which "the practices of maintenance, care, and commemoration that are of vital importance to the survival of Baltimore's gay leather community" can be organized (van Doorn).

Finally, in a photo essay accompanied by personal reflections on his own work, Kingsley Baird, the designer behind New Zealand's *Tomb of the Unknown Warrior*, describes the sensual stimuli embedded in specific memorial forms that have been used to expand the ethical involvement of the visitor beyond a strictly cognitive engagement with the past. He discusses shaping the trajectory of the viewer at the Nagasaki Peace Park in such a way that patterns of light are sensed to evoke the patterns of heat wave injuries that resulted from the atomic bomb blast; he describes varying the carving of the words etched into the *Tomb of the Unknown Warrior* with deepening and lessening grooves so the text of the Maori ritual call (or *karanga*) can be felt, not merely read; and he discusses his project for Dresden's Militärhistorisches Museum: the *Stela* memorial sculpture, comprised of 18,000 soldier-shaped biscuits which visitors were invited to eat—a participatory act suggesting the responsibility and complicity of individual citizens in the human costs of war. In each of these cases, Baird's design choices utilize a strong material-sensual element in creating linkages between the past, present, and imagined or desired future while augmenting the gaze and touch of memory.

## Possibilities

Current movements in the study of memory call for an engagement with the material-nonhuman and the material-human as they are interpenetrated via the senses. Seremetakis (1994) reminds us that sensory experiences and the “ability to codify past, present, and anticipatory experiences [...] are never purely mentalist but embedded in and borne by a material world” (p. 8). To take the vitality of things seriously in the study of memory is to illuminate the relationship between past and present by focusing on the “memory-soaked patterns” (Connolly, 2010: 183) of intersensory involvements with built environments, objects, fabrics, and monuments, and to explore the interplay between visuality, tactility, and emotion, by looking at how the past is transmitted and received not merely on a cognitive basis, but on a multi-sensual level.

Moving beyond the individual senses, this issue examines both human and nonhuman material forms and their entanglements with the political histories they emerge from and also those they effect (see also Bennett, 2010 and Winner, 1980). Politics and history lead to the emergence of particular human and nonhuman materialities and these same materialities reciprocally impact politics and history. In light of this, we are interested not simply in objects themselves, but in what kinds of memories emerge when subjects and objects are caught up and twisted together in the snarls of particular spaces. In the context of material and forensic turns in the broader academic community, we turn attention to an examination of the affects, agency, and capabilities of matter as they relate to long-term interests of memory studies. These investigations point toward the possibilities of an engagement with new materialism for the study of memory.

Most often the work of the social scientist is carried out under the banner of “making the everyday strange” or of challenging common sense, but with the study of memory it is always already the study of the strange or the often unexpected, the study of a genre of experience that often defies common sense. The challenge, then, for the scholar of memory is an opposite challenge, or perhaps, more accurately, a double challenge: to make the strange everyday, to dispel its aura, and then to re-enchant it, in order to see how the aura, the sense of distance between objects, persons, and moments adds to our perceptions of the past and pastness. The anthropologist Sherry Turkle (2007: 4), channeling Claude Levi-Strauss (1966), writes in *Evocative Objects* that “material things are goods to think with and good to think with”; here, we argue that they are also good to remember with.

## Notes

1. See Hoskins (2013), Van Dijk (2007), Ernst (2012), Garde-Hansen et al. (2009), Neiger et al. (2011), Rabinovitz and Geil (2004), Taylor (2012); also our own collection: Freeman et al. (2014).
2. Bennett’s thinking about assemblages is influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of “machinic assemblages.”
3. Our thinking here has also been influenced by Kirkbride (2008).

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## Author biographies

**Lindsey A Freeman** is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York—Buffalo State. She teaches, writes, and thinks about catastrophe, utopia, memory, and atomic bombs. Lindsey studied at the New School for Social Research (formerly the University in Exile), where she received the Albert Salomon Award for distinguished dissertations. She is the author of *Longing for the Bomb: Oak Ridge and Atomic Nostalgia* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), and editor, along with Benjamin Nienass and Rachel Daniell, of *Silence, Screen, & Spectacle: Rethinking Social Memory in the Age of Information* (Berghahn Books, 2014). Lindsey is originally from atomic Appalachia and is working on a new project on her irradiated childhood.

**Benjamin Nienass** is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at California State University San Marcos. He received his doctorate from the New School for Social Research in New York. His research is concerned with the politics of memory in post-national contexts and has appeared in *The Review of Politics*, *Politics and Society*, the *International Social Science Journal*, and the *International Journal for Politics, Culture, and Society*. He is also the co-editor of *Silence, Screen, and Spectacle: Rethinking Social Memory in the Age of Information* (Berghahn Books, 2014) with Lindsey Freeman and Rachel Daniell.

**Rachel Daniell** is a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center conducting research on everyday social practices around data and documents that can contribute to the visibility of human rights violations. She is interested in the intersection of evidence, documentation, archives, technology, and data visualization with historical memory and state accountability. She has published in *Anthropology News* and *e-misférica*, and is the co-editor of *Silence, Screen, and Spectacle: Rethinking Social Memory in the Age of Information* along with Lindsey Freeman and Benjamin Nienass (Berghahn Books, 2014). She was formerly the Associate Director of the Center for Human Rights and Peace Studies at Lehman College, CUNY, and currently works with the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, EAAF).