# Introduction

In the midst of the digital revolution, historical scholarship finds itself at an inflection point. While the tools and methodologies of digital and public history are advancing at an unprecedented pace, the theoretical frameworks that guide their application have struggled to keep up. This book is an effort to address this gap by proposing a new hermeneutics of practice—an epistemic virtue that prioritizes hands-on experimentation, critical reflection, and the reconciliation of traditional and emerging historiographical practices. This approach stems from the core belief that the digital component, far from being a neutral intermediary, fundamentally conditions the way historians engage with sources, interpret narratives, and construct arguments.

The idea of epistemic virtues has long been central to the philosophy of science and knowledge. Thinkers such as Aristotle, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Lorraine Daston have shown how virtues like curiosity, objectivity, and precision underpin intellectual inquiry. Hermeneutics of practice, as introduced in this book, draws inspiration from this lineage but situates itself firmly within the digital and public history realms. It is an approach that invites historians to engage not only with the content of their research but with the very processes and tools through which historical knowledge is produced.

The experimental case study at the heart of this book exemplifies this approach: a digital public history platform designed to collect and analyze migration memories in Luxembourg. This project, named Memorecord, explores the interplay of mediated memories, technologies of memory, and the researcher’s own positionality within the historiographical operation. Through participatory design, community collaboration, and the use of innovative digital tools, the Memorecord platform illuminates the possibilities and limitations of digital history in practice.

The choice to focus on migration memories in Luxembourg is deliberate. Luxembourg's history as a site of immigration offers a microcosm of global migration trends, revealing complex narratives of identity, belonging, and collective memory. The voices of Italian and Portuguese migrants, who arrived in Luxembourg at vastly different historical moments, provide a lens through which to explore these themes. However, this project also underscores the need to move beyond national frameworks and consider transnational and mediated perspectives on migration.

At its core, this book is an argument for embracing experimentation and failure as integral components of historical research. As historians, we are often taught to privilege polished outcomes over the messy realities of the research process. Yet, it is precisely in the ‘mess’—in the detours, dead ends, and serendipitous discoveries—that new styles of reasoning emerge. By documenting these processes and reflecting on their implications, we can expand the boundaries of our discipline and open new pathways for historiographical inquiry.

This book is not merely a methodological manifesto but a call to action. It challenges historians to rethink their relationship with the digital, not as a separate domain but as an intrinsic element of historical practice in the 21st century. In doing so, it invites readers to consider hermeneutics of practice as a bridge—between theory and method, between analogue and digital, and between academic and public history.

This research addresses the **digital interferences** on the historical craft by taking a fully hands-on approach to critically assess how the digital component conditions the different phases of the historiographical operation. Bringing practice and theory hand-in-hand, the present thesis is developed upon an  **experimental study** that conjugates digital history with public history methods, in a particular expression that is becoming increasingly relevant in the first decades of the 21st Century: digital public history. To tackle both methodological and theoretical implications of the digital component in historical research and public history practice the study builds and analyses a concrete case: the process of **shaping a digital memory platform on migration narratives**, dealing most specifically with Italian and Portuguese migration memories in Luxembourg. By means of participatory design, working towards a shared authority between community members and the researcher, the **Memorecord - Memory Harvest** platform ([memorecord.uni.lu](https://memorecord.uni.lu/)) was created from scratch and fed by a digital crowdsourcing activated on social media (i.e. Facebook and Instagram) through the use of the hashtag of the project,  #memorecord.

After collaboratively building the Memorecord platform, the crowdsourced memories are analysed within a broader contextualisation of the history of Italian and Portuguese immigration to Luxembourg, crossing the collection results with oral history interviews conducted in the framework of this project and other sources (i.e. secondary works on historiography of migration in Luxembourg, autobiographical works by other immigrants, government documents, historical demographic data and other socio-economic statistics). This was a deliberate choice because most of the historical initiatives of crowdsourcing so far have concentrated their efforts on the collection phase and I wanted to have the opportunity to complete a 360º experiment on historical research with digital methods. In dealing with born-digital material originated from the Luxembourgish social media landscape, this analysis also engages with the cultural dynamics of mediated memory practices, considering the (new) technologies of memory at play.

Ultimately, the doctoral thesis originated from this experimental study completes its research cycle being published in a digital scholarly platform[[1]](#footnote-1). Making available this sort of enhanced publication is part of a final effort to render the research results more accessible to the community who helped to shape and animate it. Shifting to the online platform allowed me to add inline media from the Memorecord collection within the chapters, favouring a different reading experience as evidence and argument are juxtaposed. Moreover, the platform also enables standalone resource collections that can be explored linearly or through a thematic navigation (i.e. tag menu).

In its full form – hands-on experiment, analysis of digital methods, interpretation of the memories crowdsourced and online publishing – this thesis could be considered a snapshot of how research conducted by means of the digital looks like. The whole thesis, is hence, an exercise of documenting the process of doing research conditioned by the digital component. This process is described and reflected in the limits of the topic and capacity of the case study chosen for the hands-on experiment. However, while many aspects may be specific to the research context, I argue that most of the meta-reflections on digital methods may resonate with interest to historians working elsewhere and on different topics and time cohorts. It is an invitation to reflect productively on the challenges brought by the digital turn and try to learn something valuable about this time of transition from the analogue to the digital: when dealing with the unknown, we have to follow our intuition, based on the canons of the historical discipline, but we also need to adopt an open posture towards the new, accept open questions and take the time to put our hands-on. While it is true that experiments can be time consuming and frustrating if results do not turn out as expected, it is also true that right now we have more to gain in the learning by doing, even if it means an objective failure at the end. Only then we will be able to think otherwise and, perhaps, be more successful next time. The discussion of the case study and the meta-reflections offered in this thesis may help to explain the value of experimentation as creative and critical gesture to pave the way for digital history scholarship. As I will argue, we might be witnessing the **emergence of a new style of reasoning**, based on the **hybridisation** of our old and new (yet to be acquired) skills and capacities to deal with the digital interferences in historical research. A possible way to this new style of reasoning, as I will demonstrate, is through **hermeneutics of practice**, a critical instance toward the whole historiographical operation, deeply rooted in experimental approach, ultimately reconciling the *hack* & *yack* dimensions paradoxically (still) split among most digital humanists and historians.

Through these hermeneutics of practice, I got global view of how the digital component is spread throughout the research development and interfering on it with its advantages and caveats. In this process, I identify and discuss a series of epistemological questions that are of primordial interest for my case study, but might be of relevance to other historians, with different research topics elsewhere. I purposely share the metaquestions that emerges along the experiment in an attempt to bring forward what usually remains silent in most methodological discussions. I do so in the intent to turn the internal gears of this digital public history experiment more accessible to colleagues within and outside the digital realms. Hopefully, it will increase the chances of this research to reach a broader historiographical conversation. So is *raison d'être* of this thesis.

Ideally, vis a vis the community contribution to build the Memorecord platform, I hope the analysis of the migration memories shall find echo in the historiography of migration in Luxembourg. If the interweaved approach of methods and narrative featured in the study case succeeds in raising questions about how migration is approached in Luxembourg or elsewhere, which type of sources are used, what are their provenance and why, I believe this thesis will be contributing to the insertion of digital public history in wider (analogue) academic debates. If the participatory design and the strategies used to generate empathy in the process of shaping Memorecord collaboratively earns attention from other historians involved in community projects, I consider the study case will have accomplished its goals beyond scaffolding my inquiry on the digital public history methods.

## Thesis structure

The thesis was conceived as a journey through the realisation of this experiment and as such it is divided in four chapters, each of them laden with self-reflexivity and insights from the experimentation envisioned, but with different emphasis. To allow a thorough reflection on practices and better explore their dialogic relation with theoretical assumptions and the subjectivity of the researcher positioning, the ensemble of the chapters offer detailed description on decision making processes throughout the experiment and articulate methods and theory. Nevertheless, for readability and clarity of structure, each chapter was organised to convey different chunks of the research: 1. theoretical framework and researcher positioning; 2. detailed presentation of the case study, including a step by step description of all stages from conceptualisation to activation of the crowdsourcing campaign online; 3. analysis of digital methods, interpolated by valuable lessons and insights from the hands-on experiment on the possibility of the establishment of a new style of reasoning for digital history scholarship; 4. Interpretation of the crowdsourced memories, contextualised in perspective with literature about Italian and Portuguese immigration in Luxembourg and other sources gathered throughout the experiment. Beyond the situational [Chapter 1](#_Chapter_1:_Framework:), all the other chapters add up in the discussion of state of the art articulated with the methods and genres of sources at play. Since this thesis braids up theory and methods all the way through, it was instrumental to juxtapose the arguments with an informed literature review. Hereunder, a brief description of each chapter in more detail:

[**Chapter 1, Framework: Theory and Working Concepts**](#_Chapter_1:_Framework:) gives important intel on how I am equipped to the journey pretended in this doctoral research. In this chapter, I introduce the context in which this research emerges – or *from where I stand* – describing by positioning as a PhD researcher at the University of Luxembourg from 2015-2020 and presenting the state of the art that precedes this research. In dialogue with Michel de Certeau, for whom “[a]ll historiographical research is articulated over a socioeconomic, political, and cultural place of production” I give special attention to the research environment of the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) as the *laboratory of historical uncertainty* in which my experiment is embedded. Next, an overview of what means doing digital in the digital age is introduced, in a discussion that will be deepened, as the hands-on experiment develops.

[**Chapter 2, Shaping the Memorecord Digital Memory Platform**](#_Chapter_2:_)is the roadmap of experiment. It discusses the importance of documenting the process of setting up and developing the case study in order to allow other researchers to reproduce, but also to be able to criticise this work. This chapter discusses why migration memories, and more specifically, those from Italian and Portuguese immigrants were selected as base for the case study and discusses the different phases I followed in my fieldwork to set up the platform: *community sensitization, thinkering, going public.* The step by step documentation draws special attention to the technical development of the platform as well and what serves as base to the reflection of the digital methods presented in [Chapter 3](#_Chapter_3:_Analysing). At the end, the chapter sums up the lessons learned from the experiment, emphasising the value of hands-on work and collaboration.

[**Chapter 3, Analysing Digital Methods – A Return to Hermeneutics**](#_Chapter_3:_Analysing)is an *intermezzo* reflection. A moment in which I zoom in and out from the case study to offer a broader analysis of digital methods in historical research. The chapter is deep-seated in the experimental experience described in [Chapter 2](#_Chapter_2:_) and situates it in a broader *experimental ethos*. It bridges the questions emerged from the specificity of my case study with broader debates in digital humanities that have the *digital component as a condition.* It discusses heuristic triggers for digital history and empathetic triggers for public history. It reflects on the importance of these trigger elements for the practice of digital history scholarship and digital public history. Finally, the chapter sheds light on the work done with the Memorecord platform and makes a case for hermeneutics of practice, discussing its role in the possible emergence of a new style of reasoning. Ultimately, this chapter informs the reading of the following and last chapter.

[**Chapter 4, The historian’s kitchen, or how to cook your memories? Interpreting Memorecord’s Memory Harvest**](#_Chapter_4:_The)discusses the actual results of the case study, the memories in the broader context of history of immigration in Luxembourg with particular focus on Italian and Portuguese immigrants. The chapter regards the interpretation of the collected memories as a sort of experiment inside the experiment, playing with the metaphor of cooking. The first section of the chapter offers an overview of the framework engaged for the interpretation phase of the project: mediated memories, technologies of memory, a summary of the crowdsourced memories and a brief consideration on digital ethnography, i.e. *the kitchen*, with its tools and ingredients. Next an overview of what we have *on the menu, i.e.* historical contextualisation of the Italian and Portuguese immigration is presented, articulated with other sources gathered during the research, with highlight for the oral history interviews conducted during the community sensitisation activity, the atelier *Racontez Votre Histoire de Vie.* The last section focuses exclusively on the interpretations of the crowdsourced memories – the cooking – and brings insights on the particularities of working with digital-born material and their evidentiary value in the context of the Memorecord project.

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1. PubMemo, available on <http://pubmemo.uni.lu/>, using the Manifold platform for scholarly publishing <https://manifoldapp.org/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)