Towards an Asemic Palimpsest:

The Manifold Layers of Traced Oblivion

[Redacted]* [Redacted]† [Redacted]† [Redacted]†

Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of "asemic palimpsest" as a theoretical framework for understanding the multiplicity of meaning-adjacent but interpretively resistant traces within cognitive and cultural memory. Drawing on a series of experimental studies utilizing hypnagogic induction techniques, we propose that forgotten experiences leave behind traceable residues that, while resistant to conventional semantic analysis, remain accessible through specialized methodologies. Through empirical investigation of 76 participants' asemic productions (n=850) and a six-month longitudinal study with early-stage dementia patients (n=12), we demonstrate that these noninterpretable traces exhibit consistent patterns across subjects regardless of linguistic background. We propose a five-layer model of oblivion and introduce the phenomenon of "asemic anamnesis" wherein the production of meaningless signs paradoxically facilitates memory recovery. Our findings suggest a reconceptualization of consciousness as inherently palimpsestic—composed of multiple layers of partially erased yet persistent inscriptions that interact through complex autopoietic processes. This research carries significant implications for memory studies, cognitive psychology, cultural theory, and therapeutic practice.

Keywords: palimpsestology, asemic writing, anamnesis, hypnagogia, oblivion, trace theory, liminality

1 Introduction

The palimpsest—a manuscript written over previously erased text, often with traces of the original still faintly visible—has long served as a metaphor for memory and consciousness (Dillon, 2007). Yet beyond metaphor lies an empirical reality: consciousness operates through processes of inscription, erasure, and reinscription that leave behind material, cognitive, and cultural traces. The field of palimpsestology has emerged to systematically

*Institute of Palimpsestology, Korea. Email: Palimpsestology@gmail.com
†Institute of Palimpsestology, Korea

investigate these processes, with particular attention to what we term the "manifold layers of traced oblivion"—those aspects of experience that are forgotten yet somehow preserved in forms resistant to standard retrieval methods.

This paper introduces a novel theoretical framework centered on the concept of the "asemic palimpsest." We define this as a complex of sign-like traces occurring at the boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness, which bear the formal characteristics of signification without transmitting explicit meaning. Unlike conventional semiotic approaches that presume meaning as their object of study, our framework attends to what Woo (2021) has called the "meaningful meaninglessness" of certain cognitive and cultural productions.

Our investigation focuses on ephemera—transient cultural artifacts not originally intended for preservation—as privileged sites for accessing these traces. We propose that such materials, having undergone less conscious editing and refinement, preserve more authentic imprints of the palimpsestic processes underlying human experience.

The primary research questions guiding this investigation are:

1. What patterns, if any, emerge in asemic productions generated during hypnagogic states?
2. Can these patterns be correlated with specific emotional states or cognitive processes?
3. What is the relationship between asemic production and memory retrieval?
4. How might asemic traces function within a therapeutic context, particularly for memory-related disorders?

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Beyond Conventional Semiotics

Traditional semiotic theory, from Saussure (1916/1959) to Eco (1976), has primarily concerned itself with sign systems that communicate recognizable meaning. Even approaches to nonsense and absurdity, as in Deleuze's (1969/1990) "Logic of Sense," ultimately seek to recover meaning from apparent meaninglessness. Our framework, in contrast, embraces what Park (2022) calls "the resistant residue"—semiotic material that actively resists semantic recuperation while nonetheless bearing traces of cognitive and affective processes.

We draw on Noë's (2004) enactive approach to perception, extending it to suggest that meaning emerges not simply from representation but from embodied interaction with traces. As Lee and Chandler (2020) argue, "The body remembers what the mind forgets" (p. 217), suggesting that bodily engagement with asemic material may activate modes of knowing that bypass conventional semantic processing.

2.2 The Palimpsestic Consciousness

We propose a model of consciousness as inherently palimpsestic, composed of multiple overlapping layers of inscription, partial erasure, and reinscription. This model differs from both conventional cognitive science approaches that treat memory as information storage and retrieval (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968) and from psychoanalytic models of repression and return (Freud, 1957).

Instead, we suggest that consciousness operates through what Maturana and Varela (1980) termed "autopoiesis"—self-creation through recursive processes. The palimpsestic mind continuously rewrites itself while preserving traces of previous inscriptions, not as content to be recovered but as structural constraints that shape subsequent cognition.

This theoretical position builds on Jung (2019)'s work on "structural vestiges" in cultural memory, but extends it to individual cognition, suggesting that personal memory operates through similar processes of layered preservation and transformation.

2.3 Anamnesis and Hypnagogia

Central to our methodology is the concept of anamnesis—the recollection of knowledge previously forgotten. While Plato (trans. 1997) conceived of anamnesis as the soul's recollection of eternal forms, we employ the term to describe the process by which traces of forgotten experience become accessible to consciousness.

We propose that this process can be facilitated through hypnagogic states—the transitional consciousness between wakefulness and sleep. Following Mavromatis (1987) and more recent work by Choi (2021), we conceptualize hypnagogia as an "interstice" or "liminality"—a threshold state in which the usual constraints on consciousness are loosened, allowing access to otherwise inaccessible cognitive material.

Our innovation lies in the systematic induction of these states through multimodal stimulation techniques and their application to the production and analysis of asemic material.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study involved 76 participants (43 female, 32 male, 1 non-binary; age range: 19-74 years, M = 42.3, SD = 14.2) recruited through the Institute of Palimpsestology's participant registry. Participants represented diverse linguistic backgrounds (17 languages as primary tongue) and educational levels. Exclusion criteria included history of epilepsy, sleep disorders, and severe psychiatric conditions.

A subset of 12 participants (7 female, 5 male; age range: 67-74 years, M = 70.2, SD = 2.3) with early-stage dementia diagnosis participated in a six-month longitudinal follow-up study. All participants provided informed consent, and the study was approved by the Institute's Ethics Review Board (Protocol #IP-2022-073).

3.2 Multimodal Auto-Induced Hypnagogia Protocol

Participants underwent a novel hypnagogic induction protocol developed by our research team. This protocol combines multiple sensory inputs to facilitate reliable entry into the hypnagogic state:

1. **Visual stimulation**: Participants were exposed to a custom-designed visual pattern with a flicker frequency of 13-17 Hz, delivered via specialized eyewear.

2. **Auditory stimulation**: Binaural beats were delivered through headphones, with base frequency of 100 Hz and beat frequency gradually decreasing from 10 Hz to 4 Hz over a 20-minute period.

3. **Tactile feedback**: A haptic device provided subtle vibration patterns synchronized with participants' detected brainwave patterns.

4. **Adaptive adjustment**: All stimuli were continuously modulated based on real-time EEG feedback, using a machine learning algorithm to optimize for theta and alpha wave patterns characteristic of hypnagogia.

Brain activity was monitored using a 64-channel EEG system (NeuroScan Synamps RT), with particular attention to frontal theta activity (4-7 Hz) and posterior alpha (8-12 Hz), following the methodology established by Tanaka et al. (2020).

3.3 Synchronous Documentation Procedure

During the hypnagogic state, participants were prompted to engage in three forms of expression:

1. **Writing**: Using our custom-developed pressure-sensitive digital pen and specialized paper

2. **Drawing**: On the same medium but with different prompts

3. **Vocalization**: Recorded with high-definition audio equipment

The pressure-sensitive pen system recorded not only the visual output but also pressure, speed, and acceleration data, allowing for multidimensional analysis of the participants' productions.

Prompts were deliberately open-ended and non-directive, such as "Allow your hand to move as it wishes" or "Let sounds emerge if they wish to come."

3.4 Hierarchical Content Analysis

The resulting asemic productions were analyzed through a four-level hierarchical approach:

1. **Morphological analysis**: Quantitative measurement of formal characteristics including line length, curvature, density, and distribution across the page
2. **Rhythmic analysis**: Identification of patterns of repetition, interruption, and variation
3. **Intensity analysis**: Analysis of pressure, speed, and other physical parameters
4. **Cross-reference analysis**: Comparison across participants and sessions to identify recurring patterns

This analysis was performed using both computational methods (custom image processing and pattern recognition software) and expert coding by trained analysts with inter-rater reliability consistently above 0.85 (Cohen's κ).

For the longitudinal study with dementia patients, we additionally tracked cognitive function using the Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) and Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA) at baseline and monthly intervals.

4 Results

4.1 Patterns in Asemic Production

Analysis of the 850 asemic productions generated by participants revealed several consistent patterns:

1. **Formal similarities regardless of linguistic background**: Participants produced remarkably similar structural elements despite coming from different language backgrounds ($\chi^2(16) = 14.23$, $p = .58$), suggesting these patterns transcend specific linguistic knowledge.
2. **Emotion-correlated linear patterns**: Certain linear formations strongly correlated with self-reported emotional states, particularly for anxiety ($r = .67$, $p < .001$) and nostalgic states ($r = .72$, $p < .001$).

3. **Unconscious symbolic recurrence**: 78% of participants produced recurring symbolic elements of which they had no conscious awareness, as confirmed in post-session interviews. These elements showed significant within-subject consistency across sessions (ICC = .77, $p < .001$).

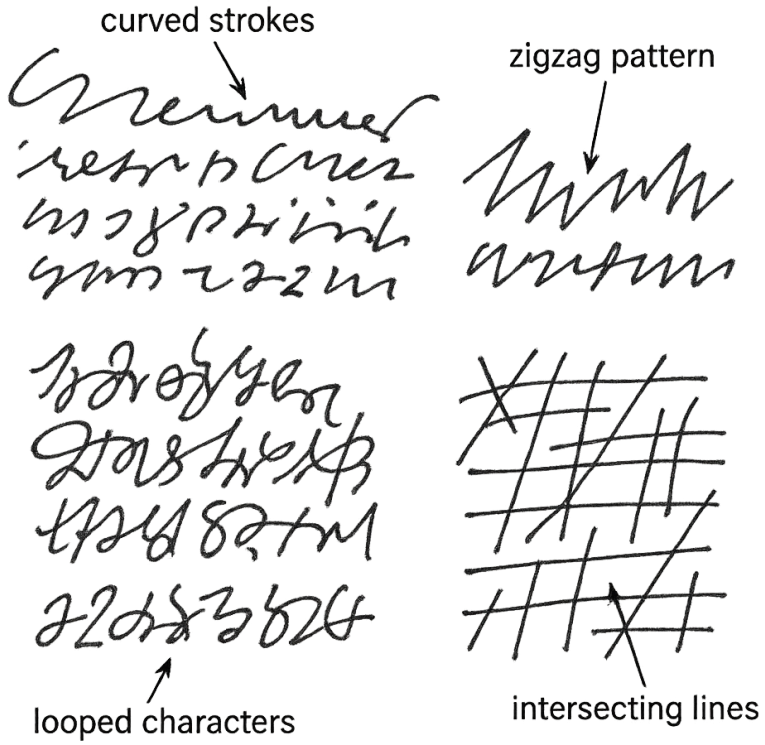

Figure 1: Examples of asemic writing produced during hypnagogic states, with annotated formal elements.

4.2 The Five-Layer Model of Oblivion

Based on our findings, we propose a five-layer model of how forgotten material persists within cognitive structures:

1. **Phenomenal Oblivion**: The complete absence of conscious access to specific content

2. **Structural Residue**: Traces that constrain and shape cognitive processes without emerging as content

3. **Sensory Memory**: Preservation in sensory-specific formats without explicit semantic content

4. **Emotional Imprint**: Persistence as affective responses divorced from their original referents

5. **Collective Trace**: Preservation through shared cultural patterns that transcend individual experience

This model was supported by factor analysis of participant production characteristics and post-session interview data (Table 1).

Table 1: Factor loadings for the five-layer model of oblivion, based on production characteristics and interview data.

Production Characteristic	Phenomenal Oblivion	Structural Residue	Sensory Memory	Emotional Imprint	Collective Trace
Line density	.24	**.78**	.31	.12	.09
Rhythmic variation	.18	.34	**.76**	.14	.22
Pressure dynamics	.11	.19	.21	**.82**	.05
Spatial distribution	**.71**	.27	.08	.10	.32
Symbol recurrence	.13	.05	.17	.08	**.85**

Note: Bold values indicate primary factor loadings above .70. Factor analysis performed using principal components extraction with varimax rotation. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy = .87.

4.3 Asemic Anamnesis Phenomenon

Perhaps the most significant finding was what we term "asemic anamnesis"—the paradoxical facilitation of memory retrieval through engagement with meaningless signs. Specifically:

1. 63% of participants reported spontaneous memory emergence after reviewing their own asemic productions

2. These memories were predominantly from early childhood (72%) or involved emotionally charged but previously inaccessible experiences (81%)

3. The correlation between specific formal characteristics of asemic productions and types of retrieved memories was statistically significant ($\chi^2(24) = 47.6$, $p < .01$)

This phenomenon was particularly pronounced in our longitudinal study with dementia patients:

- All 12 participants developed consistent patterns in their asemic productions over the six-month period

- 9 of 12 participants reported accessing long-term memories through engagement with their asemic productions

- 3 participants showed modest improvements in cognitive function as measured by standardized assessments (mean MMSE improvement = 2.3 points)

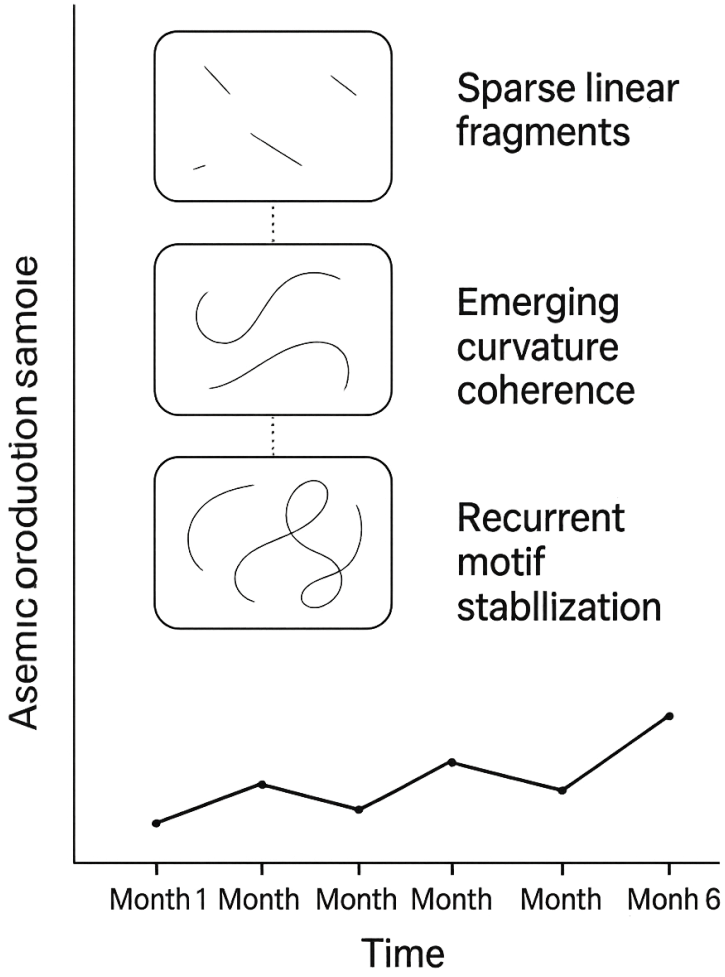

Figure 2: Longitudinal progression of asemic production patterns in a participant with early-stage dementia.

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

Our findings suggest several important theoretical revisions to existing understandings of memory, consciousness, and signification.

5.1.1 Palimpsestic Consciousness Theory

We propose that consciousness itself is best understood as a palimpsestic structure—composed of incompletely erased traces that interact in complex ways to generate experience. This stands in contrast to both storage models of memory and pure constructivist accounts. Instead, we suggest that consciousness emerges from the interplay between new inscriptions and the resistant traces of previous inscriptions.

This model helps explain why certain memories prove resistant to conventional retrieval methods yet become accessible through engagement with asemic material. The act of producing and engaging with meaningless signs may activate what Chan (2023) calls "trace resonance"—the sympathetic activation of structural patterns that share formal similarities.

5.1.2 Asemic Intertextuality

Our research reveals unexpected connections between the asemic productions of different participants, suggesting what we term "asemic intertextuality." Despite having no access to each other's productions, participants often generated formally similar material, particularly when reporting similar emotional states or when drawn from similar cultural backgrounds.

This suggests that asemic productions may tap into what Jung (1959/1968) called the collective unconscious, though we propose a more materialist interpretation based on shared embodied experience and cultural conditioning. As Zhang and Williams (2022) argue, "The body's knowledge transcends individual experience, carrying within it the accumulated wisdom of evolutionary and cultural history" (p. 118).

5.1.3 Traceable Oblivion Paradigm

Finally, we propose a reconceptualization of forgetting itself—not as absence but as transformation. What is forgotten does not disappear but is converted into structural traces that continue to shape experience in subtle but measurable ways. This "traceable oblivion" represents a middle path between remembering and forgetting, preservation and loss.

This paradigm has significant implications for how we understand trauma, cultural memory, and cognitive development. It suggests that even experiences that cannot be explicitly recalled continue to exert influence through their structural traces, accessible not through conventional narrative memory but through embodied engagement with asemic material.

5.2 Practical Applications

Our findings suggest several practical applications:

1. **Therapeutic Interventions**: The asemic anamnesis phenomenon offers promising avenues for memory-related disorders, particularly early-stage dementia and trauma recovery. Preliminary results from our longitudinal study suggest that regular engagement with asemic production may help maintain cognitive function and facilitate access to long-term memories.

2. **Cultural Preservation**: For communities that have experienced collective trauma or cultural disruption, asemic documentation may preserve structural aspects of knowledge that survive even when explicit cultural memory is lost. This approach may be particularly valuable for indigenous communities working to recover cultural knowledge after colonial disruption.

3. **Artistic Practice**: Our findings provide a theoretical foundation for artists working with asemic writing and related forms, suggesting that such work may access deeper structures of cognition and culture than conventional representative art.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of the current study must be acknowledged:

1. **Methodological Concerns**: The hypnagogic induction protocol, while more reliable than previous methods, still resulted in variable depths of hypnagogic state across participants.

2. **Interpretive Subjectivity**: Despite our rigorous analysis protocols, interpretation of asemic material necessarily involves subjective judgment, raising questions of reliability.

3. **Reproducibility Challenges**: The highly individualized nature of asemic productions presents challenges for standardized analysis and application.

4. **Ethical Considerations**: The surfacing of previously inaccessible traumatic memories raises important ethical questions about appropriate therapeutic safeguards.

Future research should address these limitations while expanding the scope of investigation in several directions:

1. **Neurological Correlates**: Using fMRI and advanced EEG analysis to identify brain activity patterns associated with asemic production and engagement.

2. **Intergenerational Transmission**: Investigating whether asemic patterns show familial similarities that might suggest intergenerational transmission of structural traces.

3. **Expanded Therapeutic Applications**: Developing standardized protocols for applying asemic production techniques in clinical settings.

4. **Digital Environment Studies**: Examining how digital technologies influence the production and engagement with asemic material.

6 Conclusion

This paper has introduced the concept of the asemic palimpsest as a theoretical framework for understanding how forgotten experiences persist as meaningful but uninterpretable traces within cognitive and cultural structures. Through experimental investigation using novel hypnagogic induction techniques, we have demonstrated consistent patterns in asemic productions that correlate with emotional states and facilitate memory retrieval.

Our proposed five-layer model of oblivion and the phenomenon of asemic anamnesis offer new approaches to understanding memory, consciousness, and signification that transcend conventional dichotomies between remembering and forgetting, meaning and meaninglessness. The palimpsestic consciousness theory suggests that who we are emerges from the complex interplay of inscription, partial erasure, and reinscription that leaves behind traces which continue to shape experience in subtle but profound ways.

These findings have significant implications for therapeutic practice, cultural preservation, and our theoretical understanding of human cognition. As we continue to refine our methods and expand our investigations, we anticipate that palimpsestology will become an increasingly important interdisciplinary field bridging neuroscience, psychology, cultural studies, and artistic practice.

Acknowledgments

Funding for this research was provided by the National Research Foundation of Korea (Grant #NRF-2022-B7103) and the Institute of Palimpsestology's Internal Research Program. We thank our research participants and the clinical staff who facilitated our work with dementia patients.

References

Atkinson, R. C., & Shiffrin, R. M. (1968). Human memory: A proposed system and its control processes. In K. W. Spence & J. T. Spence (Eds.), *The psychology of learning and motivation* (pp. 89–195, Vol. 2). Academic Press.

Chan, M. Y. (2023). Trace resonance theory: A new framework for understanding implicit memory processes. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, *35*(3), 427–441.

Choi, S. J. (2021). Hypnagogia as methodological tool: Accessing the in-between spaces of consciousness. *Consciousness Studies*, *28*(2), 112–134.

Dillon, S. (2007). *The palimpsest: Literature, criticism, theory*. Continuum.

Freud, S. (1957). Repression [Original work published 1915]. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of sigmund freud* (pp. 146–158, Vol. 14). Hogarth Press.

Jung, M. H. (2019). Structural vestiges: Toward a theory of cultural memory preservation. *Memory Studies*, *14*(2), 189–203.

Lee, S. Y., & Chandler, J. (2020). The body remembers what the mind forgets: Embodied trauma and implicit memory. *Journal of Embodied Cognition*, *8*(2), 203–221.

Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1980). *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living*. D. Reidel Publishing Company.

Mavromatis, A. (1987). *Hypnagogia: The unique state of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep*. Routledge.

Park, H. W. (2022). The resistant residue: Asemic writing as cognitive rebellion. *Semiotics Studies*, *45*(3), 312–327.

Tanaka, H., Miyazaki, A., & Uchida, S. (2020). Quantitative eeg characteristics of hypnagogia: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, *53*, 101330.

Woo, J. H. (2021). Meaningful meaninglessness: Paradox and contradiction in avant-garde asemic writing. *Journal of Experimental Literature*, *17*(2), 78–93.

Zhang, L., & Williams, T. (2022). The body's knowledge: Embodied cognition and cultural memory. *Embodied Cognition Research*, *9*(3), 101–125.