

An Ode to Memory

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Every day memories enter and leave my body sporadically, like butterflies landing upon flowers in a grassy field. Seeing, hearing, or smelling, often triggers miniature explosions within the channels of my brain, commanding me to feel a certain way, or remember something from the past that has to do with what I am experiencing in that present moment. I breath in the magic moments like these, but questions wander into my conscious: How do memories influence our present subconscious mind? What allows connections to be made between the present and memories? To what extent is who I am today a reflection of the experiences in my past?

I believe that the “self” is spun out of the experiences that have happened to us-- experiences that may or may not have been in our control. These are the events that are then woven into our memory, and gently unraveled and re-woven with time and new experience. We cannot control which details are uncovered; we can only decide what to do when we discover them, and who they will make us. But how can we know what potential our memory holds until we can understand it?

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I. MEMORY

I like the feeling of being free. I enjoy the moments in which I can let go of my connection to material objects, and sometimes even the earth. There is a reason for this attraction within me-- a reason that lies within the memory that replays in my mind each time I re-experience this sensation of freedom. Essentially, that is all we are doing when we feel-- replaying the emotions which were created by one experience, and then strengthened by others.

I was nine when this feeling was created. The breezy New Mexican air was hot and heavy and my smile was as innocent and genuine as it has ever been. That day she let me twirl around the stage to the melodies of my grandfather's flamenco guitar and her voice. I became lost in the movements and the rhythm filled me up with something completely new. A feeling that comes each time I dance now. True freedom. It comes to me in other moments too-- when the wind hits my face, with the feeling of soft silk against my legs, and when I see that worn wooden stage. All of these sensations are embossed into my brain. A thousand miniature impressions that will never go away.

These small things. The moments in between is where I am transported like dust particles in a tunnel of sunlight. Dancing into the past, drowning in the past. I sometimes find myself at a loss for breath, for speech, for anything really. Memory is a strange realm of “in between.” Between reality and fantasy, dreaming and awake, past and present. My feet are lifted off the ground. But then I wonder why? Why has this moment called my name? Why is this fragment being given to me right at this moment? I suppose there is an actual scientific reason for how the mind constructs and re-calls memory.

The physical structure within our brain cells allows every part of each experience that we have to be recorded, even the tiny details that we are unaware of. Thus, a web of permanently linked connections between the different parts of our various memories is created; an endless overlapping pattern that ultimately is what allows us to access the past. We are constantly building a network of thoughts, thoughts that will then be summoned in the future. Neurons within our brain make synapses with all other neurons; so, any part of a memory can trigger recall of the rest (Seung 73).

We often overlook the permanence of memory. Once something is experienced by us, it cannot be erased from our mind. An experience becomes a physical aspect of our neural structure and is recorded as “memory” (*Memory and Forgetting*, Radiolab). “Neural connections are material structures... Like wax, they are stable enough to remain the same for long periods of time, but they are also plastic enough to change” (Sueng 77). We can seemingly “forget” something because we have a negative connotation associated with that particular experience, but in reality it is never *really* gone from our mind. The memory could show up due to any trigger that holds a similar element of the recorded memory associated with the event. Furthermore, because memories have this ability to change, something that normally had a positive association within one's mind can be overwritten with a negative experience, simply because the new experience involved some part of the old, but is now associated with a new emotion.

I pick a rose petal and grasp its silky body in between my pale fingertips; I inhale its delicate scent and suddenly it is telling me a story from beginning to end, from child to now. The pink color envelopes my mind in the smiling past, playing the movie back to me. I suppose this is why I pick roses, why I smile at their scent. Why I save a few and my smile disappears as I set them on the altar. When I smell roses, and touch their petals, it reminds me of being a small child, mixing rose perfume with the woman I admired all of my life. My grandmother who made rose perfume with me, and let me dance. She is gone now and this memory is associated with sadness and grief. Memories can be overwritten by trauma. But they can also be a combination of ambivalent feelings. They are complex and individually part of a greater picture-- one that contributes to how we feel and what we do every single day.

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II. SUBCONSCIOUS

We walk around each day and are drawn to certain objects, scents, places, people, experiences; we like and dislike these things, all for different reasons. Reasons that are a result of that *whole* chain of memories that reside in our brain. As author Oliver Sacks states in a Radiolab interview about memory and artistic inspiration: “Some engine inside of me, a wonderful associate engine which weaves thoughts together, brings unexpected things into apposition” (*Me, Myself and Muse*, Radiolab). It is this “machine” within us that allows us to make the decisions we do, whether we are or are not aware of this process as it occurs. There are two forms of remembering. “Recognition” is the association of an event or physical object with one previously encountered; and “Recall” is when something that is not currently physically present is remembered (Mastin, *Memory Recall/Retrieval*). The subconscious is something much closer to the cognitive part of our memory, but we are much less aware of its existence. It is built into us naturally, and morphed with time.

Subconscious is very much about perspective, how we see the world. It exists “in the part of the mind that a person is not aware of” (Merriam-Webster). I would like to emphasize that it “exists,” which implies that this part of our mind, has already been created by something and exists independently of our current mental awareness. I believe that our past experiences and memories build up the subconscious, a voice that speaks to us and somewhat dictates who we are and how we think.

She sorts my memories like scraps of paper on a cluttered desk and I can feel it. I can feel

her hands categorizing each one and spitting up my reactions. My expressions. My emotions. My faces. My soul. She is painting with it all. The little girl who I have carried with me through everything. She is now using the everything as color to my bare body. I try to bury her. I try to hold her. To rock her. But she slips through my fingers. She knows it all. There is comfort in that. And also fear.

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III. SELF

There are many parts of my past that define me. Images come to me, blurry, like fog. As I waltz through the meadows where I grew up, the one I was named after, it is as if the land is an extension of my mind, a place where I feel like I am “myself.” The sun is dim and the air is clear. As I inhale, my brain is set free. This is the place I feel the most pure and in touch with every element of myself. The solitude speaks to me and whispers truths in my ear, revealing every emotion within me: There is anxiety that was birthed from trauma. It handles me like sand in a child's sandbox. I am its game. There is passion that was birthed from disappointment. It is strong, pricking me often in order to awaken me. My heart has become a mangled abstract picture. One stained with tears of despair, yes sprinkled with the light of hope and renewal. Chance that fills me up every day and makes me believe that something, anything, might be different somehow. This has become me. A cycle of good and evil, fate and control, truth and lies. It is endless. A repeating pattern that glistens like mosaic under cool water, begging to be recognized. So now I am calling upon all of those truths of my past, the individual mosaic pieces, to create a picture of my “self”-- who ever that may be.

The “self” is an element of the human that cannot be described through one definition, and there is beauty in this. The self holds the individuality of the soul, a unique structure that is not always easily discovered by a person, but rather undone in small pieces and transformed by experience. Who are we? Do we have any control of the outcome of “self”? I believe that the control we do have is left up to interpretation-- the patterns and shapes, the stories that we make for ourselves out of our experiences. The events that have happened to us leave powerful imprints on our mind and forever change us. They influence our present selves and who we *really* are is what we end up doing with those events and memories, the aftermath of recognition. We must learn how to mold two viewpoints together: our self through our own eyes, and our self through the eyes of unchangeable circumstance. I believe that art is a way to accomplish this.

Self-portraiture as an art form has enthralled me because of its quality to visually uncover a greater truth about the self. Experience and memory is what defines our perception of ourself to a certain extent. In an article about contemporary female self-portraiture, theorist Jaques Derrida's ideas are discussed: “The recognition of self as generated by the individual's perception of the difference between her/himself and others within a particular system, and thus never fixed or determined but forever shifting” (Erdrich 44). There is a certain relationship between us as separate beings and those around us. Our view of ourselves is very much made up of the external elements around us and the relationship we have with the external world, and therefore, never stays the same for long. Humans tend to see others from a physical viewpoint, however, there is much more underneath what we see with our eyes. Self-portraiture displays the self as a subject of both perceptions, which is perhaps what makes it so affective. In this genre, an artist is not only represented in the way in which they feel they see his/herself but also from the viewer's

perspective, which may differ greatly from the original intentions of the artist.

Memory is repetitive, and we see these patterns come through in our behavior and selves. Author Elizabeth Bronfen¹ summarized Freud's theory² by saying how “the source of uncanny experience lies in the 'compulsion to repeat, to re-present, double, supplement; in the establishment or re-establishment of similarity; and in a return to the familiar that has been repressed'”(Erdrich 45). In this, she is describing the very experience that occurs when the discovery of the past is obtained and inevitability revealed because that is human nature. The patterns always will exist within us, and we will simply repeat them, especially if repressed. I think that these patterns of repetition are in fact our memories themselves. If only I could accurately represent the way in which my memories have shaped me in a photograph of myself. My figure being the subject, the picture telling a much greater story about who I am as an individual.

Photography is a unique medium, one that I like because of the amount of potential it holds. Combining the human figure and photography only seems logical as they both contain very objective traits. With this said, I think there is something unique about representing *yourself* through a photograph because when you become the subject, there is a lack of control compared to how much one usually has as the photographer. Therefore, the artistic process is very deliberate. One must think about position and the photographic circumstances, as well as the camera's natural tendency to capture reality (Loewenberg 400). In my mind, an artist's ability to somehow change what we are actually seeing, is what defines an emotionally affective self portrait. The viewer should have to wonder what is going on, because it is not simply a superficial picture of something or someone, but it tells a much deeper story. Perhaps I am drawn to this medium because it is another memory in itself. Another impression in my brain. One that travels back to me with the swirling scent of darkroom chemicals as they make their way to my nostrils in the darkness.

The dim light protruding from the safelights hanging above me filled my soul up more than the sun did at one point in my life. It was here, in this stuffy school darkroom in freshman year, that I found magic. The ability to transform physical reality into my reality, and watch it happen in front of my eyes as I dipped exposed photos into chemical baths causing the images to dance to life. I fell in love with the art, with the manipulation and control and the ability to spin my opinions and thoughts into powerful photographs. I found a bit of my voice on that day so long ago; one that I want to speak again. About new things. About the things that make up me and the web of experience I have been uncovering this year. A web that I want to share with others.

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There is a certain relationship that naturally exists between us and the natural forces of the world. I believe that everything happens for a reason, and it is up to us to uncover that reason. It is in this discovery that we can come to peace with this relationship we have with fate and the things that our out of our control. We can honor experiences that we may have defined as either good or bad before, and allow them to simply become elements of our self. Parts that cannot be changed, but rather accepted. We must not let our past define us, but instead use it to define our

1 Author of *Over her dead body; death, femininity and the aesthetic*. (Erdrich, 45)

2 “Sigmund Freud used the term uncanny to describe a particular category of life experience that produced anxiety by 'leading back to what is known of the old and long familiar.’” (Erdrich, 45)

selves.

I believe that intimacy is an important component of art. When an artist is willing to give a piece of his/herself to their audience, this is of much more value to both parties in my mind. What is the use of memories if we keep them hidden within us? As a society, we have become very private, conditioned to believe that our experiences are simply things that have happened to us. I want to change this for people, and for myself. Maybe, if I were to give thanks to my memories, and honor their work of building who I am, then I could inspire another lost person to look within and understand themselves in this way.

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