

**Part VI**  
**Twenty-First Century Subjectivities**

# Introduction to Part VI

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This part engages with memory by considering the idea that, as Paul Sheehan puts it, narrative is '*human-shaped*':

It is a uniquely human way of making order and meaning out of the raw material of existence. It is also, more importantly, a way of carving necessity from the uncertainty and potential chaos of personal experience. Put simply, we tell stories about ourselves to give our lives meaning and purpose, and about our kind to maintain the crucial human/inhuman distinction. This is a twofold process: the mere existence of narrative suggests *difference*, a separation from nature (which does not, needless to say, manifest narrative order); and the kind of narrative that are produced have supported that separation.<sup>1</sup>

Narrative aligns with memory and forgetting in creating and shaping our understanding of ourselves, and our relation to what is not ourself. As such distinctions grow untenable, or even undesirable, how can we continue to maintain this alignment, as memory itself shades into forgetting, into the inhuman spaces of technology and material processes? The digital age, with its various forms of cognitive offloading and virtual communication, demands of us that we question the nature of our own and others' control over information and memory. Assigning to forgetting its proper role in the understanding of memory and identity provokes difficult, even painful questions about how we perceive, or want to perceive, ourselves, and the means through which we construct these perceptions. On top of this, the new temporalities of memory explored in Part IV disrupt the possibility of a linear, causal model of the development of identity. In the twenty-first century, we think of memory not so much as the retrieval of fixed facts and past events but as the brain's ability constantly to reorganize information: memory is the activation of the memory traces as last laid down when remembering an event or fact, which will often have been modified by the present context in which the remembering takes place. This part posits a new form of subjectivity, aware of the ways in which memory is often a highly selective, fictional story that we tell ourselves.

We live in a digital age that seems to have revitalized ‘a certain Benjaminian spirit of the collector as cultural analyst, but the practices of what one does with those collections differs’.<sup>2</sup> We constantly collect ourselves via social media, yet this archive is mutable and dynamic. N. Katherine Hayles has written of the transformations of the digital age as creating ‘a highly heterogenous and fissured space in which discursive formations based on pattern and randomness jostle and compete with formations based on presence and absence’.<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze claims that, subject to the ‘the digital language of control’, ‘individuals become “dividuals”’.<sup>4</sup> Rather than persisting in outdated conceptions of the individual, our best response to these changes may be to assert that such new formations of the subject can be understood and negotiated through a recognition of their presence in the past. The term ‘dividual’ originates in James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* (1938) as an expression of the breakdown of the individual inherent to modernity:

The first till last alchemist wrote over every square inch of the only foolscap available, his own body, till by its corrosive sublimation one continuous present tense integument slowly unfolded all marryvoising moodmoulded cyclewheeling history (thereby, he said, reflecting from his own individual personal life unlivable transaccidented through the slow fires of consciousness into a dividual chaos, perilous, potent, common to allflesh, human only, mortal).<sup>5</sup>

‘Cyclewheeling history’ asserts itself here through the imagery and concepts we have seen recurring throughout this book: the body as text, the continuous present tense. It can also be understood as an appropriate metaphor for the emerging conception of human memory as an ongoing process of revision and renewal. Understanding the ‘dividual’ in the Deleuzian and Joycean senses provides a continuity between digital and embodied memory, and between early twenty-first and early twentieth century challenges to the traditional idea of the self as a coherent, organic whole. This convention was also put into question by Sigmund Freud, whose work was developed by post-Freudian thinkers from Jacques Lacan to R. D. Laing. Selfhood as an enclosed entity or subject of scrutiny was further challenged, post-war, by thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, whose work explored the postmodern notion that human identity is a social, historical construct, at the heart of which lies a disturbing contingency. Deleuze developed his own ideas by responding to Freud’s ‘Wolf-Man’ case study, which criticized Freud’s betrayal of his own project in shaping the functions of the multiplicities of the unconscious within linear narrative. Deleuze and Guattari link this movement in Freud to both the formation of recognizable subjectivity through narrative, and to the operation of literary narratives in terms of reconstructive memory: ‘It is not very difficult to determine the essence of the “novella” as a literary genre: Everything is organized around the question, “What happened? Whatever could have happened?”’

Contemporary novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard, whose obsessively detailed, six-volume, autobiographical *My Struggle* has been put forward as a twenty-first

century *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, emphatically rejects the possibility of writing *what happened*: 'for me', he tells us,

there has been no difference in remembering something and creating something. When I wrote my fictional novels they always had a starting point of something real. Those images that are not real are exactly the same strength and power of the real ones and the line between them is completely blurred. When I write something, I can't remember in the end if this is a memory or if it's not – I'm talking about fiction. So for me it's the same thing. It was like I was writing a straight novel when I was writing this but the rule was it had to be true. Not true in an objective sense but the way I remember it. There's a lot of false memory in the book but it's there because it's the way it is, it's real.<sup>6</sup>

Memory's tendency towards fictionalization is often not identified by us; even less so does the self mark its constitutive memories as false. Memories are true lies, yet not often perceived as such; it is only when we encounter contradictory evidence or hear counter-narratives from people with whom we shared an experience that we may be led to notice the highly subjective nature of memory. Cinematographers, literary authors and artists have explored a whole range of psychopathologies in order to dramatize this fascinating yet unsettling feature of memory, and to show the fragility of human life and identity. *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) shows how confabulation (the self's production of fabricated, distorted or misinterpreted memories about oneself, others and/or the world, without the deliberate intention to deceive) has deep repercussions for our self-conception and our relationship to others and the world, in this case with dramatic global political repercussions. Literary examples include the exploration of De Clérambault's Syndrome, also known as erotomania (whereby a patient falsely believes a social superior is in love with them), in Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* (1997), and of Capgras Syndrome (in which people think their loved ones are merely impersonating Doppelgängers, and may even go so far as to kill their partner, parents or siblings) in Richard Power's *The Echo Maker* (2006). These novels share a willingness to engage with such conditions in terms of their lived and biological reality, drawing on research, and refusing to treat their characters' conditions as metaphors. At the same time, there is a refusal to draw fixed boundaries between illness and health; in acknowledging the biological aspects of all human behaviour, the line between pathology and normal life blurs, and science can no longer be relied on to re-establish it. This is the role of narrative and memory. McEwan's protagonist Joe Rose struggles throughout the novel with the question of what happened, revising his memories to distinguish himself from the deluded Jed. Joe returns throughout to the question of his role in the tragedy that brings the two together at the start of the novel, and of how his own behaviour may have contributed to Jed's increasing obsessiveness and the breakdown of his relationship with Clarissa. Jed's condition is real, not some delusion of Joe's, but the two share an obsessiveness with reading meaning into small details from the past that bleeds through diagnostic categories into everyday life.

In his essay 'Touching Brains', Jason Tougaw has written on the recurring fantasy in contemporary fiction that through direct contact with this supposed seat of identity, we might relate to the self it supports more deeply than previously possible. In David B's *Epileptic* (1996–2004), another nuanced contemporary meditation on mental illness, the narrator fantasizes at one point that 'he might exchange brains – and therefore identities – with his epileptic brother Jean-Christophe, who lives with severe generalized epilepsy'.<sup>7</sup> Tougaw notes that the fantasy is 'ironic in a devastating way, because it stands in for the connections they can't maintain in life. David's fantasy is a surrogate for empathy he can't muster for his brother in life'.<sup>8</sup> Raymond Tallis notes that another response to epilepsy, by Aristotle in *On the Sacred Diseases*, provides one of the earliest known statements of the idea that the brain is, in a sense, the self; Aristotle's 'deeply humane' claim that men 'ought to know that from the brain, and from the brain only, arises our pleasures, joys, laughers and jests, as well as our sorrows, pains, griefs and tears' countered a moralistic reading of disease in terms of divine intervention, advocating a rational, naturalistic approach, but in so doing formed the root of the contemporary notion 'that the brain is not only a necessary but also a sufficient condition of conscious experiences: that it is the whole story'.<sup>9</sup> Writers such as David B., in their attention to the lived experience of psychopathology, and their disruption of established cultural narratives around mental illness, have taken on the humane purpose of this naturalistic approach; in this same spirit, they recognize the false promise of neuroscientific interpretations, of deciphering within the brain's functioning *what happened*, emphasizing the role of conscious and unconscious selection in the creation of their narratives. As Tougaw and Tallis remind us, to resist fixed interpretation, and to understand what happened as the incomplete and semi-fictional product of memory, is at the heart of ethical subjectivity. The writers in this part build on the knowledge that the narratives we create out of our experience can never be true to reality, and that our efforts to distinguish ourselves from what is not us can never be entirely successful; they propose ways in which to use this knowledge to create new and better narratives.

As we saw in Part III, narrating the very real prospect of self-extinction forces us to unpick and redefine the stable conceptual register through which we have previously constructed linear narratives of human development and progress, or of technological encroachment onto unspoiled nature – fixed trajectories leading to utopia or apocalypse. Here, Claire Colebrook argues that the pre-determined concepts through which such narratives operate – 'nature' and the 'human' – are themselves constructs that blur together the biological, technological, historical and cultural. To recognize ourselves as individuals entails exploring and incorporating the inhuman: 'Rather than think of the future from the inscribed archive, one might imagine other archives that would, in turn, re-inscribe the present from within. We might call this counter-memory: what other presents might have been, and are present virtually, harboured in all the inscriptions outside human recognition?' We might begin to do so with the claim that such re-inscription of the present from within is emerging as characteristically human.

The form of the question of ‘what happened’ presumes that the answer will be singular. Patricia Waugh draws our attention to an alternative in her focus on literature which takes as its subject the experience of hearing voices, an experience literalizing the perception of oneself as the synthesis of multiple selves. Waugh’s work as co-investigator on the interdisciplinary Hearing the Voice network similarly draws our attention to how literary form acts as a participant (or set of participants) in a cultural dialogue often disremembered in the selective attention through which academic disciplines define themselves. To understand the individual novel as an engagement with multiple voices has consequences for how we understand the individual’s experience of auditory verbal hallucinations (AVH); shifts in our shared constructions of subjectivity, in what we choose to remember, reverberate across multiple pathways.

Alison Waller’s piece on her work on adults rereading books from their childhood carries on Waugh’s line of thought by exploring ‘the implications for multiple selfhoods emerging from recollections of the reading self and the capacity for self-deception to play a part in this process’. In developing her own metaphor of the ‘time-capsule’, she recovers a moment from Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* often disremembered as part of a focus on the significance of the madeleine: the moment when Marcel, ‘tempted to reread his childhood favourite when he comes across a copy of George Sand’s *François le Champi* while browsing his host’s library shelves’, resists due to ‘fears that his own sense of his younger self would also be damaged through this kind of readerly digging, getting “buried in oblivion”’. The promise of a meaningful connection with the past allowing for a renewed sense of agency in the present held out by the madeleine is mirrored here by the threat of such a connection revealing the distance between two selves, and the frailty of their connection.

Robert Pepperell’s chapter begins by emphasizing the acts of remembrance and forgetting that contribute to our neurocentric culture. Pepperell’s own formulation of the posthuman can be seen as an act of remembrance, of the ‘widely distributed array of forces and substances (gravity, light, air, moisture, energy and so on)’ beyond the brain that make up human life; to ‘believe that the essence of a human being is contained in the brain, or part of the brain, or even within the skin of the body, is simply to ignore an enormous range of highly complex and integrated processes going on around the body that contribute in fundamentally important ways to the existence of that being’. Moving his focus to contemporary discussions on the changing understanding of memory in the digital age, Pepperell argues that technology is simply another one of these processes, as much a foundation of our sense of self as a threat to it. Pepperell’s post-digital, analogue model of the relation between mind and world posits an alternative to the vogueish notion that ‘you are your brain’ that allows for a genuine continuity between self as we understand it now, the ever-expanding scope of scientific knowledge, and our shifting relationship to technology.

Joanna Bryson discusses confabulation: ‘a narrative that sounds like a memory, but that we know to be false’. To distinguish between confabulation and what we might suppose to be the normal functioning of memory in creating a narrative of

the self becomes more complex the more attention we pay to such cases. Despite what we have learnt about the workings of the brain, the way in which we distinguish truth from falsehood lies within the same social consensus that distinguishes between disease and health. When we assume a naturalistic perspective, turning away from this consensus, the conclusion is, as Bryson puts it, 'simple': 'all narrative memory is essentially confabulation'. We skew our memories to conform to the norms of our society to the extent that we can be said to have achieved a coherent, frictionless sense of self through an act of confabulation not recognized as such; we are, then, *dividuals*.

Neander Abreu and Martijn Meeter close this collection by considering the most significant challenge to what has been its own implicit assumption, that of the positive role of memory in our lives. For those who have experienced trauma, memory ties them to a moment that they must move beyond, and undermines their sense of self through the ongoing effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Abreu gives voice to the question these people put to us: 'Why should I remember that?' He also gives voice to a challenge facing those treating these people: how to distinguish between those whose symptoms are real, and have a genuine connection to traumatic events, and 'malingerers', those who seek invent or exaggerate symptoms of PTSD for whatever purpose. For those suffering from PTSD, memory resists any purpose we may have assigned to it in fulfilling a function with no redemptive aspects at all, which interrupts the patient's ongoing narrative of self. For the psychologist, the way in which memory works makes it very difficult, if not impossible in some cases, to demarcate between PTSD and malingering; the way in which the narrative of their experience the individual tells themselves and others shift and produces their memories anew. Abreu responds to this contradiction through narratives of his own – case studies from his practice that carry their own truth without resolution.

Martijn Meeter takes up what was implicit in Abreu's piece, answering the question of 'why should I remember that?' by proposing that 'maybe you shouldn't'. Drawing on further research into the workings of trauma, as well as a wide-ranging consideration of how we understand knowing and telling the truth through culture, he proposes an alternative to the use of narrative in helping those who have experience trauma: these narratives do not have to be truthful. When we allow a patient to develop a narrative that relieves their suffering but is, in a way, false, 'truth yields to life, and that is how it should be'. This is a significant challenge to a widespread notion rooted in various conceptions of the self. Meeter identifies the notion, already present in Freud's earliest writings, that 'explaining a patient's past to him or her will give the rumbles of the unconsciousness their place, leading to a better life for the patient'; what we now know of memory gives the lie to this idea that a sense of self must be developed through an uncovering of the truth, an engagement with the past *as it was then*. In Part IV, Squire and Wixted provide a foundation for understanding even the act of narrative remembrance as a form of forgetting, referring to the 'long-standing idea, which has received renewed attention in recent years [. . .] that retrieval of memory provides an opportunity for updating or modulating what was originally learned and even

the possibility of severely disrupting it'. In order to move on with our lives and progress, for instance after experiencing trauma, it is often beneficial to let go of past episodes in our lives which either lock us into a stifling nostalgia, a backward-looking mode that can sometimes be conservative if not downright regressive. Memory and forgetting form complementary parts of this process of moving on.

This challenge to the role of truth in our understanding of ourselves takes us back to Knausgaard's use of 'false memory' in his autobiography. In the same interview, Knausgaard claims that 'To do something good you have to step out of society, almost out of humanity, if that's possible'. New and emerging perspectives on memory emerging confront us as a challenge to how we have previously understood our humanity, as a society and as individuals. This should not be a source of crisis, of anxiety. The writers in this part remind us to take this as an opportunity. Just as memory, in its selectiveness and creative aspects, can alter and renew the individual's sense of self, even in response to trauma, how we understand memory can allow us to find new ways to express what it means to be human in the twenty-first century.