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Time travel: memories, identity and memoir – a personal essay

Abstract:

Narratives of time travel immediately suggest the genres of science fiction or fantasy. Few people would hold out memoir as a possible genre that also deals with time travel. Yet we all mentally time travel every day, travelling from minutes in time to decades in time as we recollect different periods in our lives, and imagine the future, unencumbered by time or space. It is these remembrances that give us our sense of identity. Without memoir identity fades and becomes ghostlike. Based on the work of theorists such as Eakin and Schacter, this creative work examines time travel, ghosts and the effects of personal history on identity, memory and memoir.

Biographical note:

Irene Waters is currently doing a research higher degree (masters) at Noosa Campus, Central Queensland University, and is examining sequel memoir. Her work is published in an anthology, *Eavesdropping* (2012), and in *Idiom23 literary magazine* (2013, 2014). Irene has completed a memoir, *Nightmare in Paradise* (2013) and is writing a sequel to it.

Keywords:

Creative writing – identity – memoir – memory

The sand drifts into darkness. The sea beyond invisibly crashes. I stand on the boardwalk of the beach staring into the eyes of a dragon. Its body is sculpted from sand and smoking, red embered fire spurts from its nostrils. My eyes hurt from the particles in the smoke as I inhale sulphur fumes, the taste of which dries my tongue.

Without warning, I hear urgent rapping on the front door of our house on the island of Tanna in Vanuatu.

‘Missus! *Touris emi killem long volcano!*’ Our cook, Elizabeth, stands agitated, her eyes matching the hysteria in her voice.

‘*Killem mo killem ded?*’ I ask.

‘*Killem ded,*’ she replies

Bile climbs to my mouth. *No. It can’t be true!* The words echo in my head as I scream for Roger, my husband, to follow us. As we race down the hill to the resort, Elizabeth fills me in on the detail. My need to get to the other side of the island and offer any nursing assistance is overpowering. She may not be dead, I keep thinking. She may not be dead. By this time Elizabeth has told me one of our tourists, a Japanese girl, and one guide have died. Still I hope... Roger arrives and begins the essential phoning to organise planes, alert the hospital to be on standby and notify authorities in Port Vila, on the main island of Efate. Off I go in the truck to the volcano.

The steep hairpin road over the mountain range normally would terrify me but doesn’t today. In my mind are visions of flesh and gore, broken bodies superimposed with the picture of a dark-haired, giggling girl who left me only three hours earlier. My head spins. I wonder if I have enough equipment to deal with what I may find. It just can’t be true.

On our arrival the volcano is shrouded in blackness, but its smell is unmistakable. Sulphur gas. My eyes burn. My tongue dries. We race to the crater’s edge, dodging lava boulders littered on the mountainside. Torchlight guides us to the injured, surrounded by a small group of men. Pushing through them, I look. There is no mistaking that Asako and the guide are dead. A red hot jagged rock, the size of a soccer ball, has hit the local guide on the chest and shoulder and, due to his strong musculature, has deflected to the girl’s head who was standing to the side of him, killing both instantly (Waters 2013).

‘Irene, I asked: How much sulphur do I put in the mix?’

My husband’s voice, tinged with annoyance, jolts me to the present. I am neither on the beach nor up that mountain in Vanuatu. I am in my office, sitting in front of a louvered window, looking out to a narrow pond that separates two sections of my house. Behind me are piles of ironing, books and journal articles, ignored as I time travelled months, then years, as the waft of sulphur my husband mixed for the citrus trees drifted into my sanctuary. My Proustian moment (Schacter 1996). His had been stimulated by warm sweet tea and lemon flavoured petit madeleine biscuits that took him back to happy times with his aunt. None of my trips were happy ones, and I marvelled how a waft of scent could send me travelling to the past with such ease.

Alongside time travelling as a response to an odour, back and forth movement without constraints of time or space are things we all do on a daily basis, as we remember and recount events from our past, whether it is minutes, days, months or years. Questions, such as ‘Do you remember..?’ or gazes at photographs trigger memories that hurtle us off to yet another time travel expedition.

Rich memories can also emerge when we focus on the body (Krauth 2010; Merleau-Ponty 1989). If I think of my toes, I can go back to the time I attacked my brother with an axe. We were fighting. I screamed at him as he taunted me. We moved from the backyard into the garage. My rage built to a point of explosion. I picked up the axe, lying against the garage wall, raised it as far as my seven-year-old strength would allow, and brought it down on my brother’s toe.

Blood gushed from the wound. My brother screamed I had cut off his toe. My mother came running, bundled her beloved son into her arms and carried him into the house.

‘Irene go to the courtyard and stay there,’ she commanded as she left.

The courtyard was a cement slab between the garage and the house. We didn’t use it for anything so it was bare – not a single chair or a toy, and I was a child easily bored.

I don’t know what happened to my brother in the house. After an incredibly long time my mother came out, hairbrush in hand and I knew punishment was coming. Worse, I was not permitted out of the courtyard for the rest of the afternoon. My loneliness and boredom were immense. I stood on my tiptoes at the door and stared, watched for activity, attempted to remind my folk that I existed and worried that, as I was no longer loved, I would soon be forgotten...

Thinking of toes, I could just as easily time travel to when I was fourteen and my brother, in anger, slammed the swinging door against my foot, jarring my toe and injuring my tendons. The doctor bandaged it and I had to use crutches for a week. My brother was not locked out of the house.

Today, my toes are my downfall. Deformed and ugly, they cause me immense pain while I dance – my favourite activity. This is the only time I try wearing shoes.

My toes send me time travelling into the future, to a time I am crippled and have finally agreed to surgery; the rods coming out from my toes are painful and I am unable to walk for six weeks. My husband has no patience with invalids and he is not one to willingly wait on anyone. At first he puts on a cheerful front, now his dark moods, like the pain in my toes, are unbearable.

By this point, you could argue I am not time travelling but, rather, I am reviewing the past or imagining memories yet-to-come. In the time travel of fantasy and science fiction, the protagonist interacts with the world to which he or she has been transported. For example in the television series *Dr Who*, we see the story of a time travelling humanoid who journeys with the aid of the Tardis, his time machine, which allows him to move across time and space, where he protects the world from evil and changes the course of history (BBC 1963).

In remembering, I too am overcoming the dimensions of time and space, but do I interact with the places I travel to or are the memories just visions of the past, unchanged from visit to visit? Is a memory, for instance, in a state of storage inside the brain and retrieved as required, unaltered, from viewing to viewing as believed by Neisser (Schacter 1996)? With modern brain imaging techniques (P.E.T. and MRI scans) the mysteries of memory are becoming clearer. They show that the hippocampus is involved with novel events, and this activates the left inferior frontal lobe of the brain, allowing previous knowledge to be drawn, thus leading to an elaborative encoding, essential for long term remembering. But we don't encode every detail and our memories often resemble Swiss cheese. We only remember what we have encoded, and what we encode is dependent on who and what we are at the time (Schacter 1996). This is one reason why our memories of an event are not exactly the same as those of others who experienced the same event.

Eakin (2005:3) points out that remembering is an essential part of being human and that the ability to relate one's life is the difference between success and failure. For this purpose, my memory is good.

My recalled experiences do not come to me as they occurred in the past. They come in their rich and vivid detail, altered by my reflections on the event and its environment, how it made me feel, the person I now am and what is acceptable in the present day and place where I am doing the remembering. I unconsciously fill the gaps in my remembering and subsequent narrative with constructed detail so the story is complete, as narrative is the only way we can relate our life to others.

Returning to that mountainside in Vanuatu, the trip to the volcano was a blur. I know I wasn't frightened of the speed at which we travelled, but I know that normally I would have been. I also know, from my days of working in intensive care, what someone looks like when half his or her face is shot off, or when severely burnt. The fear of what I would see and find on my arrival to the scene of the volcano was greater than my fear of the road. Once I reach the scene in my mind, there are huge gaps in my memory. All I know is how I felt as I looked upon the corpses, and attempted to help and comfort the other girls. Did we climb to the rim of the volcano that night? My memory says we did, but logic says it does not make sense. Surely, between the time it took for word to reach us and the time it took to travel from the other side of the island to the volcano, the bodies would have been carried down to the cars. Was it that I had climbed in memory to the rim so many times that each vision of it filled in a gap in my narrative, or was it that the rock that killed people was so well described at the scene that I had such a vivid image of it, and the imagery transformed to autobiographical memory? It is now known that episodic memory (the type of memory used for autobiographical recall) shares the area of the brain used for visual memory (Schacter 1996). If an image is strong, it can be remembered as a memory, hence why people have different versions of the same event and, at times, can even 'remember' events erroneously (Sacks 2013; Schacter 1996). For me, however, where I go when I time travel back to that night of the volcano, and whether it is true or false, it is real to me. It is my truth.

If we accept that memories are a construct of the mind (Bruner 2004; Eakin 2005; Schacter 1996) and are created anew on each occasion of remembering, affected by our past experiences, knowledge and what we wish to create for the future, it is to be expected that another who experienced the event will remember it differently, as they bring to their memory their own past, present and future. Take that axe attack on my brother's toe. I have always believed I cut my brother's toe off in my frenzied attack. Recently, on hearing this, he said, 'I stepped or my foot came down so the blade of the axe cut my big toe (a little). I made a really big deal out of it – which may be why you remember being a wannabee axe murderer.' Certainly, my recall shows that my version of events was my construct. What is interesting is that it is still vivid and real to me now, despite knowing the truth.

In order to create the self we wish to be, we remember 'what' and 'how' in order to have our memories fit the identity we wish to create for ourselves. When the ability to remember goes, the identity of the person fades along with their memories and they become ghostlike in life. As the ability to relate our stories diminishes with age, brain injuries and dementia, we lose our identity, and our sense of self (Baldwin 2005), for it is our ability to time travel backwards, into the past, which give us our identity.

What comes first though? Memoir or identity? There is no doubt in my mind that memoir comes first.

Starting at the beginning, I was born. My baby body was filled with organs, blood vessels, heart and brain but I was, otherwise, a shell. My parents gave me my first item of identity when they named me. Had I died as a toddler, my small 'unmemoried' body in the morgue would have had a cardboard label on my toe bearing that name but I would have been relegated to history without an identity of my own.

My early identity did not belong to me either, but I made it mine. I took the parts I wanted from my parents, my brother and their stories of me as a child. I was the daughter of a minister and a well-known radio personality who had been one of the original quiz kids. These facts I knew early in life and they certainly identified me in the community. My father had a wonderful sense of humour and I hung onto his stories of his childhood, for example his tale of the greengrocer who visited his aunt's house weekly. The vendor arrived with his horse and heavily laden cart, selling vegies but, with my dad's Auntie Annie, they would disappear to her garden where they exchanged vegetables. One day, while the adults were in the garden bartering, my dad and his cousin took the cart off the horse and pushed it inside the fence. They then shut the gate, pushed the shaft through it and re-harnessed the horse, leaving the beast and the cart on opposite sides of the fence. This left the adults unable to work out what had happened when they returned while my dad and his cousin watched in glee from their hiding place. These tales my father told made me want to create a self like him. I had no desire to be like my mother whose world was full of rules and correct behaviour.

So the unmemoried child started to fill with the memoirs of others, taking these and making them my own. Over time, experiences filled that once empty body making me the person I am today. I am certainly unable to recall every single experience I have

ever had, as some received scant thought at the time they occurred and were never put into a form that would be remembered. Others need cues to retrieve them: a friend from that past time, a glass of wine, a return to a place long forgotten, even a scent or an odour from the past.

Finally I had my own personal identity. When Asako was killed, I went from being a minister's daughter to being, that afternoon, an hotelier. After the knock on the door I quickly reverted to my former identity of being a nurse. But these historical selves only made up the 'what' of my identity. This became clear after a conversation I had at a party with a woman who was part of the social elite in the country town in which I lived. She was one of our shop customers and our greeting became a conversation. Both ex-nurses, we talked of our respective training hospitals, our views of nursing and the world in general. When I was finally called to leave, she said, 'I'm so glad we had this conversation. I thought you were just a shopkeeper.' For her, my identity was initially forged by 'what' she saw in my role as a store-owner but, in reality, my identity, then and now, is made up of my memoir in its entirety. Time travel to my nursing past and the narrative that formed about that past gave her a glimpse of 'who' I was; a different picture to the one she had previously held.

Time is important in memory, both for giving us the ability to move between past and present and into the future, and for its effect on memory. Study shows that memories further back in the past are less accessible than more recent ones. Schacter (1996) tells of a survey of 590 injured car accident victims who invariably told of the event within three months of the accident on questioning where 9 – 12 months post event most had forgotten it. Was it time that took me initially to the sculpted dragon on the beach, an event that happened recently, rather than to the volcano in Vanuatu? Does my memory of the dragon event show that I have created for myself the identity I wish to be? As I again think of the sulphur smell that started me reflecting on time travel, I again make the journey back ... to my husband's 70th birthday:

Initially, I was going to let the event go by unnoticed as all Roger, my husband, wanted to do was put his head under a pillow and spend the day in bed. I started to feel guilty eight days before the actual day and before I could change my mind I invited the first guest to a surprise party. I soon had sixteen definite guests, but I was not concerned as I could prepare whilst he was at golf on Wednesday, four days before the party.

This did not happen, for on the Monday he chopped the top of his finger off. Now I don't think my husband is a stupid man but at times he does seem to suffer a total lack of brain. We had eaten some superb onion pickle, which he planned on reproducing. Our food processor did not allow the passage of an onion down its throat so he removed the lid, held the onion with one hand and with the other put a knife into the mechanism, fooling it to spin the blade. The scream when it came was loud and the blood flowed freely. Luckily only a small amount of finger was lost but enough that he could not play golf. I decided not to worry with further invitations. I had some finger food and that would be enough. However, two days before the happy day, saw Roger depressed at his impending decade change and I arrived home to find him eating his way through the party food I thought I had hidden.

On the eve of his birthday I took him for a romantic dinner for two. We were lucky as we managed to get a table on the edge of the open balcony giving us a great view of the beach and the sand sculpture of a fire-breathing dragon below us. Sometime during dinner I said, ‘Something’s happened to my vision. I can’t see as well as normal.’ Roger was his usual unsympathetic self. After a delicious meal we wandered downstairs to have a closer look at the dragon, and then drove home.

By the time we arrived we were both complaining of painful gritty eyes. I assumed we had allergic eyes and used some old antihistamine drops but this did nothing to alleviate our pain. By the time we retired to bed our eyes were swelling and the pain was unbelievable. ‘I’m going to the hospital. I won’t be able to sleep,’ I said. Roger refused to accompany me, as he has no patience for sitting in hospital casualty waiting rooms. When I was finally seen the diagnosis was severe burns to the cornea. There was nothing they could do apart from antibiotic eye ointment, which would also help with the graininess. The doctor told me to go home, take some paracetamol and come back the next day for an eye check.

On my arrival home, I found Roger in a worse state than myself, as his entire face was red and swollen. With difficulty I prised his eyes open to apply the ointment and then dosed my own. Now I could not see to find the painkillers. Eventually, I located a box that said *strong pain relief* in huge letters that I could make out, so I gave two to Roger and myself and settled down to sleep.

Within an hour I was in agony. I lay on the bathroom floor running hot water over my stomach from the shower and, with some easing of the pain I returned to bed. It soon returned and I called the ambulance. That was difficult in itself as I could barely move and couldn’t see. There were tasks to be done. The lights had to be put on. I shut the dogs in the bedroom, opened the gates and doors, then lay writhing in agony on the lounge. Time passed. I rang the ambulance again. By now I couldn’t see, had a severe pain in my stomach and, as the pain changed my breathing pattern, I now had an asthma attack coming on. This time, the emergency centre stayed on line calming, encouraging, and telling me every turn the ambulance was making. Her response from me varied between screams of pain and asthmatic wheezes.

Finally the paramedics arrived and instead of taking me to hospital they decided a cannula had to be inserted. Due to my writhing this took a long time. Roger was unable to take it any longer and stormed out of the bedroom, eyes shut in obvious pain himself, saying, ‘For fucks sake give her some pain relief and get her to hospital.’

‘We don’t need any lip from you,’ said the ambulance woman. With that the dogs escaped from the bedroom. Zac, my German shepherd, was in attack mode. Here I was with a strange man holding me down, screaming in pain, and Zac was determined to protect me. The female paramedic screamed. Soon we were all screaming. Roger grabbed the dogs and returned to the bedroom. Finally I eventually arrived at the hospital where the diagnosis of acute pancreatitis was given. I was admitted.

Five thirty am the next morning, his 70th birthday, Roger arrived to the hospital with eyes that could barely open and certainly couldn't see well, a face covered in shaving cuts (he had a beard when I had last seen him) and still in agony. He told me the pain was so bad that if he'd had a gun he would have shot himself overnight but instead he removed his beard from his pain-ridden face. This he did in the dark as the light created more pain and he couldn't see anyway. Finally he agreed to see the doctor and again received a diagnosis of burnt corneas. He agreed we'd have to cancel the arrangements for the day. Neither of us could see, however, to do the necessary calls so in desperation a friend came to the hospital and, armed with a list of people, drove Roger home to fulfil his wish of a day in bed.

To cap things off, as he ate a solitary dinner on his birthday, he bit down on a bit of overcooked calamari and broke his back tooth, which then required a crown. (Waters 2015)

The smell of the sulphur that my husband was mixing brought this more recent memory quickly to mind with it appearing first, before I moved further back in time to Vanuatu.

Whether memories are lost over time completely or whether all memories are present, only requiring the right cue to retrieve them, is unknown and very difficult to prove. However, without time travel it would not be possible to tell our stories of the self. It is the constructed narratives that come from these constructed memories that give us our identity, both the 'who' and the 'what' of our self. There is no doubt that, over time, memories fade and become blurry around the edges and eventually slip from our grasp. When this happens and we are unable to travel through time and space, and consequently lose our narrative, our identity fades and we become ghostlike in life.

Research Statement

Research Background

Time Travel: Memories, Identity and Memoir draws on my Masters practice-led research based on my creative output of a sequel memoir and an exegesis. In this process memory and identity, two elements that cannot be removed from memoir, are examined, specifically the work of Daniel Schacter who examines autobiographical memory and the theories of Paul John Eakin who expounds that memoir is an essential function to maintain the body in time and space and for the creation of the human identity. In order to test these theories I applied my own personal history to them via a narrative of time travel

Research Contribution

There is much written on memory and identity, and some insights by writers on their own memory and identity formation. However, as none specifically test the theories there is a gap in the literature. Although personal illustrations are written to guide the reader to the conclusions derived by the author in the process, it is left open to the reader to determine the identity the author has created for herself at the conclusion of the work.

Research Significance

This creative work was accepted for peer review scrutiny and presentation at the AAWP conference in Melbourne 2015. Parts of this work were taken from the manuscript 'Nightmare in Paradise' which constituted the creative artifact for the Graduate Certificate in Creative Industries completed 2013. Another part was taken from the creative artifact 'After the Nightmare' completed 2016 for the RHD Masters.

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