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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rewilding memory

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Abstract

Rewilding memory provides the basis for a new theoretical and practical agenda to bring greater neurological human diversity and ecological diversity into research and teaching on memory, mind and media. The article develops the concept of 'more-than-human-memory' to refer to the co-construction of memories between diverse humans and the environment. The article draws on research that examined a transmedia corpus of 40 neurodivergent memory works (life writing, memoirs, autobiographical art, blogs and videos). It found that memory works by autistic people consistently remember the self in terms of the co-composition of human memories through and with the media and matter of environmental memories. The article explores the ways in which some autistic people's memory works decentre human memories through deep ecological memory, conversations with vibrant objects and memories of animating energies. The research suggests that such memories 'rewild' or eco-neuroqueer the human-centred and normatively biased assumptions of memory, mind and media that underpin psychology, philosophy of mind, media and memory studies. It contributes a new angle to research that addresses the dialogical relationship between what Barnier and Hoskins (2018) have termed 'memory in the mind' and 'memory in the wild'. It also goes beyond extended mind theory that understands human memory as enhanced and extended through non-biological tools and suggests the significance to memory of the more-than-human living world. Importantly, it highlights connections between autistic more-than-human-memories and the conceptualisation and practices associated with the more-than-human in research shaped by eco-psychology, Indigenous Studies and Environmental Humanities.

Keywords: Rewilding memory; Autism; Animism; Cultural memory; Neurodiversity; Neuroqueering; More-than-human-memory; Eco-psychology; Environmental Humanities; Indigenous Knowledge

Preamble

My son remains standing. He refuses to sit on the chair. He is running his hand gently across the back of the chair as if stroking a pet. He is whispering but I can't understand him. Then he talks more loudly until he reaches a crescendo of shouting. I want him to sit down and eat dinner. I am tired.

My son is resolute. He has been standing like this at every meal. Perhaps, he is anxious because I moved the chair? Perhaps, he is fascinated by the chair's texture? I reach out

and touch the chair. It is a chair made of oak-wood. I remember the tree, then particular trees, then memories of a whole forest fill my mind. My son and I are there together. What I remember with the chair is so much more.

Extract from Journal. Anna Reading

Introduction

The above note to self is used as a starting point to explore how you and I remember more with the chair, seeking to give shape and direction to an agenda in theory and practice for 'rewilding memory'. While 'rewilding' coined by environmental activists Earth First! (Foote 1990) with refinements from ecologists (Soule and Noss 1998) refers to environmental work to restore complex ecologies, it is also critically inspired by the growth in eco-literature urging us to 'rewild' ourselves: 'we're not just losing the wild world' writes Simon Barnes we're forgetting it' (2018). My agenda to rewild memory seeks to diversify academic knowledge by bringing both human neurological diversity and ecological diversity into teaching and research within Memory Studies. In this article, I introduce the concept of more-than-human-memory to explain and enable the recentring of diverse humans co-constructing memories with and through the environment.

The article highlights three dimensions to more-than-human-memory found in neurodivergent memoirs: deep eco-memory, conversations with vibrant objects and memories of animating energies. In so doing, it also contributes to the growing research agenda to understand 'memory in the wild' meaning outside of the laboratory (Wagoner and Bresco De Luna 2020) and contributes to wider research debates led by Amanda Barnier and Andrew Hoskins who address the dialogical relationship between what they have termed 'memory in the mind' and 'memory in the wild' (2018).

The article builds on some modest contributions of my own to eco-memory that addressed the links between the environment and digital memory (Reading 2014) and more-than-human-memory rights (Reading, in press) that are part of a wider longstanding concern within cultural memories of nature and the environment. Simon Schama's opus, *Landscape and Memory* (1995) drew attention to the multiple ways in which Western culture – including architecture, folk-lore, literature, art and agriculture reminds us of human entanglements with nature, from land to wood, from water to rock. More recent work is increasingly concerned with how climate change is being remembered within literature and other art forms (Crownshaw 2017; Craps and Crownshaw 2018); the overlaps between racism and environmental memory (Bond and Rapson 2020) and the ways in which climate change and human activities are expressed through 'non-human life forms' and 'non-biological matter' (De Massol de Rebetz 2019, 2020). What my agenda addresses are the entanglements of neurodiversity with eco-diversity: rewilding Memory Studies, I argue, crucially requires that we remember both.

This article specifically addresses and explores questions that arise from memory works by autistic people. Firstly, I was drawn to these as the mother of an autistic son, since what has enabled my understanding and led me to question long-held assumptions as a media and Memory Studies scholar are autobiographies, art works, blogs and films by autistic authors, artists and film makers. Secondly, as someone who is concerned about the fate of the planet and the more-than-human, particularly in the light of the Climate Emergency I was intrigued by memoirs by autistic environmental activists that include Chris Packham's *Finger's in the Sparkle Jar*; Greta Thunberg's *No One is Too Small to Make a Difference* and Dara McAnulty's *Diary of a Young Naturalist*. I was curious then to explore the extent to which other memoirs and memory works by autistic people would remember and recentre the more-than-human.

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Thus, while longer term, I hope to develop and connect with wider research that addresses how other neurodivergences extend concepts and methods within Memory Studies, this article, specifically seeks to bring into the mainstream of Memory Studies autistic people's experiences of memory that have previously been pathologically marginalised. In addition, since the scope of an academic article requires a narrowing of focus, in this essay I address the ways in which the autistic memory works in my study recentre more-than-human-memory. Having said this, it is important not to essentialise this finding: I am not arguing that *all* autistic people think, feel and remember the more-than-human in the ways suggested in this article, but rather that the memory works that are in this study recentre more-than-human-memories which, in turn, productively trouble foundational concepts in the field.

Drawing empirically on autistic memory works, selected from 40 written memoirs, blogs, You Tube videos and art works by autistic people, I analyse how these rewild memory through 'more-than-human-memory'. The article asks how these both ecologically challenge and 'neuroqueer' (Walker 2014) some of the foundational assumptions that underpin the conventionally normative-biased, neurotypical and anthropocentric paradigm that tends to frame research and teaching in Memory Studies.

To some extent, the idea of 'more-than-human-memory' connects with ideas within the philosophy of mind that have developed the extended mind thesis (EMT) that the mind is not bounded by the body but is extended into the world around us (Clark 1997, 2008; Clark and Chalmers 1998). However, although EMT includes the idea of distributed and embodied memory which is understood to be extended beyond the human through objects and artefacts such as journals, computers and phones (Sutton 2005, 2010; Sutton et al 2010) autistic memory works point much further. The mind for some autistic people is clearly extended through the planetary environment: remembering is coupled with the living landscape, with trees, rocks, light and water. As part of this, then, the article makes new connections between autistic more-than-human-memories, emergent thinking in radical animism, longstanding psychoanalytical work that has sought a shift from ego-centrism to eco-centrism and the knowledge and recognition of more-than-human-memories within Indigenous Knowledge and Environmental Humanities.

Autistic memoirs such as those by Naoki Higashida (2014, 2017) are increasingly reaching the mainstream through television and film documentaries (Regan, Dir 2007; Rothwell, Dir 2020): these mediate the multitudinous, hyperconnected and synaesthetic ways in which human beings perceive, make sense of the world and remember the self in the world. If hermeneutically (i.e. how we interpret the world) we embrace within Memory Studies the lived experience or phenomenology of 'neurodiversity' (Singer 2017) recognising that humanity is naturally neurologically diverse, in what ways does this challenge the connected epistemologies and ontologies that underpin studies of the mind, media and memory? How does recognising that each human being perceives, processes, remembers and communicates about her world in variegated and diverse ways rewild the conceptual, creative and technological paradigms that we use for storytelling, narrative, memory, imagination and communication itself?

The article is based on the thematic analysis of autistic memory works which revealed that a consistent feature is the way in which autistic memoirs narrate ecological and environmental memories. Focussing on this particular finding repositions autistic memory which has been pathologised in terms of deficit or difference as diametrically 'other' to neurotypical memory.

The term 'more-than-human' is borrowed from the philosopher and ecologist David Abrams (1997) and extended to include memory. Abrams argues for the entanglement and entwinement of human subjectivity with other animals, plants and the varied

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bioregions that we inhabit. Abrams discusses how Indigenous knowledge conceives of human memories in the mind as connected with, mediated by and animated through land, rock, water, wind and air (1997). I extend his use of 'more-than-human' to explain the entanglements of individual human memories within our wider ecology of biota (living things such as bacteria, animals and plants) or abiota (the non-living parts around us such as the atmosphere, sunlight, water and soil) made evident through autistic works. I also use more-than-human as a discursive counter strategy to the ways in which autistic people, particularly those who use forms other than speech communication are othered as *less* than human (Mueller 2020, 95–96).

I begin by setting the scene with a brief discussion of related research that has examined autism and memory more broadly and autistic memoirs before outlining the research project in terms of its design and methods. I then discuss the different ways in which autistic works both eco and neuroqueer memory in the head and memory in the wild through the emphasis they give to remembering the more-than-human.

Autism, Memory and Memoirs

Neurobiological and psychological studies approach the topic of autistic people's memories predominantly from a medicalised model that pathologises autistic memory in terms of deficits (Delong 2008), social impairments (Webb 2008) or hyper-capacity with an emphasis on autistic peoples' eidetic visual memory which is often compared to that of a computer (Vermeulen 2001; Rimland 2015). Some neurobiological studies have sought to correct the deficit view arguing that there is evidence of 'intact working memory in autism' (Ozonoff and Strayer 2001; Boucher and Bowler 2008) or that 'autism-related' 'behavioural atypicalities' are in fact functional (Doan and Fenton 2013). Some studies, however, increasingly question whether the study of non-autistic memory should be used as the basis for understanding autistic memory, suggesting instead a model of difference rather than disorder (Mottron et al 2008) asking for example 'what is it like to be autistic?' (Frith and Happé 1999, 82–89).

In contrast, analyses within Media and Cultural Studies have illuminated not so much how autistic people remember but how media and culture (mis) remember autistic people in the news media (Sarrett 2011) and popular culture, identifying a cultural dominance of autistic people being represented as having strengths in visual memory (Loftis 2015). This is echoed by Steve Silberman who argues that the extraordinary visual memory of his debuggers in the computer industry is down to the fact that many have Autism Spectrum Conditions. This hyperabundance of visual memory is also one expressed by multiple autistic people in their memoirs. Temple Grandin (2009) explains how she has acute visual recall which is 'literally movies in your head' or like 'google for pictures' (Grandin 2000), a sentiment echoed by Gregory TC Tino who asserts that 'I can remember things like they just happened … ' (2020, 44–45). Tino explains that what may be pathologised as a deficit of memory may in fact arise from the difficulties of retrieval due to an abundance of detailed memories (2020, 45). His memories are hyperconnected – if he sees a sunset, it is a reminder 'of all the sunsets I have ever seen' (Tino 2020, 45).

Stuart Murray's *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (2008), however, argues for a more nuanced understanding of autistic people's 'presence' in the media, and goes beyond highlighting how popular culture has stressed the autistic savant as well as the eidetic functions of the autistic person's memory depicted films such as *Rainman*. As Pinchevski and Peters (2016) stress, it is important to go beyond the assumption that all autistic people have eidetic memory since this essentialises and positions autistic people in relation to another kind of norm.

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Autistic people's memoirs and autobiographies have grown in number since the 1990s onwards. New technologies have accorded autistic people new ways to communicate and express themselves, including using apps described as providing 'hacking agency' (Demo 2017). Academic work on this has examined the ways in which on-line expression by autistic people constitutes the emergence of an autistic culture (Davidson 2008) as well as the complexities of the ways in which technology and autism interact discursively (Pinchevski and Peters 2016).

The emergence of Judy Singer's 'neurodiversity paradigm' (2017) enabled an understanding of autism – and autistic memory within this – in terms of naturally occurring neurological differences within humanity that are 'disabled' by neurotypical bias and expectations of normalcy. As part of this, Critical Autism Studies seek to gain insights from autistic people through their own works. Studies have, for example, examined emotions and interaction in life-writing (Bergenmar et al 2015) or the ways in which women with autism re-present alienation in their writings (Davidson 2007).

However, it is important to be mindful of simply 'using' autistic memoirs unproblematically as an index of autistic selfhood (Milton 2012, 2014). As Yergeau (2018) argues, this falls into the trap of earlier autistic memoir analysis which sought to extract patterns to prove autistic difference. Autistic recollections of the self are often agonistic, expectant of refutation by those who are neurotypical, since the ability to say 'I have autism' and to remember and narrate one's own life is viewed as evidence that one does not have autism – or, at least, not 'real' or 'severe autism' (Yergeau 2018, 33). Thus, memoirs involve autistic rhetoric and are 'inventional sites'. These, like sign languages 'promise to (make us) question long-held notions about language itself' (Yergeau 2018, 34) complicating our relationship with time/ing as Crip theorist Alison Kafer has shown (2013).

My own contribution approaches autistic memoirs not from the perspective of what they demonstratively lack, or, what they do differently 'from the norm'. Rather, as Irene Rose (2008) reminds us, I seek to explore how autistic works might challenge or neuroqueer ableist and normative ideas: in this case, I address how these might complicate or queer ideas of memory within Memory Studies.

The study builds on an analysis by geographers Davidson and Henderson who in their study of autistic autobiographies examine the intense emotional and sensory relationships of autistic people with things, objects, environments and the natural world. They show how autistic people's 'personal geographies' are characterised by rich, rewarding and meaningful relationships with natural entities offering 'a form of agreeable sociality' (Davidson and Henderson 2010). By extension, I argue that autistic memoirs – arts work, memoirs, on-line blogs and films – highlight the importance to personal and collective memory of the co-construction of more-than-human-memories thereby challenging the human-centred or anthropocentric bias of Memory Studies. At the same time, the analysis also repositions autistic memory through putting it in dialogue with ideas on memory by some Indigenous scholars, and a move towards radical animism in the environmental humanities that seeks to get inside the more-than-human whether it's the soil (Burnett 2019) trees and forests (Kohn 2013; Canton 2020) or the octopus (Godfrey-Smith 2018).

Research Terms, Approach and Methods

Although the 'neurodiversity paradigm' is now an approach that incorporates multiple views (Milton 2019), the term 'neurodiversity' recognises that cognition, sensory perception, sensory processing (including memory and our sense of temporality) and communication vary (Singer 2017). 'Neurodivergent' thus refers to someone who perceives and processes the world in ways that diverge from established norms (Walker 2014). The neurodiversity paradigm recognises these differences not in terms of them constituting a

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diagnostic disorder based on a set of deficits but as part of the natural variations of human neurology (Armstrong 2010). The paradigm challenges a normatively biased view that there is only one correct way for human beings neurological functioning: a monolithic view of communication and memory may then be understood as a cultural fiction that supports inequalities. The 'neurodiversity movement' has emerged to advocate for the equal rights and inclusion of the neurodivergent including those with autism with recognition that there are different ways in which human people's process, understand, remember and communicate about the world (Tisoncik 2019).

As part of the neurodiversity movement, a cultural advocacy response by autistic people to the othering arising from the medical pathologising of autism is what has been termed 'neuroqueering'. Nick Walker (2014) explains neuroqueering as creating stories and artefacts that bring to the foreground neurodiversity while also highlighting the constraints and assumptions of neurotypical communication and memory. The writing and production of autistic memoirs, blogs and art works has played a key part in this, as Robinson (2009) notes, enabling autistic insights to reach the mainstream expressed through autistic people's own words and images.

Furthermore, analysing autistic memory works requires shifting to a paradigm that recognises neurodiversity as a fact of humanity (and our wider earth ecology) while also acknowledging our own positionality as researchers in relation to this. Thus, I write from the position of a white-other cis-female writer and academic who has researched and taught for many decades in the fields of normatively biased Media Studies and Memory Studies. With this particular research project, I also navigate through my internalised assumptions of normalcy and neurotypicality using the compass of autoethnographic insights as a mother with children with both neurotypical and neurodivergent ways of being and remembering in the world, as well as using my particular insights as someone who identifies as neurodivergent.

Researching memory in autistic works through a neurodivergent paradigm means resisting and queering extractive approaches that seek textual evidence of pathological differences in memory, assuming such works will display memory disorders deemed of less value than 'normal' minds. It means that as the researcher I have sought to surface how autistic people's life stories and mediated presences challenge mainstream cultural memories and imaginaries of autism – both the obvious and hidden. More importantly, I look at how this adds a new dimension to growing sociocultural psychological research on memory outside of the laboratory or 'in the wild' (Wagoner and Bresco de Luna 2020), particularly in terms of the individual's dialogical relationship with settings and life spaces (Brown and Reavey 2020).

The research evidence for this article, while coming out of the broader insights from the larger corpus in the study as a whole involves focussed qualitative thematic analyses of primarily six autistic works selected for diversity in terms of gender, nationality, ethnicity and sexuality: *Carly's Voice: Breaking Through Autism* (2009) by the north American authors Arthur Fleischmann with Carly Fleischmann; *How Can I Talk If My Lips Don't Move? Inside my Autistic Mind* (2008) by the Indian author Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhay; *The Reason I Jump* (2014) by the Japanese author Naoki Higashida; *Painted Words: Aspects of Autism Translated* (2013) by the American author Judy Endow and *Beyond Language* (2009) and a biographical film by Amanda Baggs. It also draws to a lesser extent from the work of the Filipino-American writer R Vincente Rubio (2014), the Australian author, Donna Williams (1999) and two autistic anthologies, *All the Weight of Our Dreams: on Living with Racialised Autism* (Brown 2017) and *Stim* (Huxley-Jones 2020).

Working with the support of two neurodivergent research assistants we selected the overall corpus and developed a thematic analysis that clustered findings around queering sense and sense making, time and temporality, sociality and anti-social media, voice and

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voicelessness, language, and memory and forgetting. Findings, so far, address how autistic works neuroqueer notions of visual culture and visuality (Reading 2018) and how autistic works queer the politics of the voice. In this article, I focus on how autistic memoirs amplify more-than-human-memory.

Deep Eco-Memory

A consistent theme of autistic memory works is the emphasis given to deep ecological memory and memories of the natural and more-than-human environment. In some cases, this is front and centre as with memoirs by well-known autistic naturalists such as Chris Packham's *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar* (2017) or 16-year-old Dara McAnulty's *Diary of a Young Naturalist* who writes, '*the only thing I am really bound to is nature – as we all are*' (2020, 125). Across our corpus and within the six selected memory works, none of whom are naturalists or environmental campaigners, the mnemonic entanglements of 'memory in the head' with 'memory in the wild' (Barnier and Hoskins 2018) recentre human memory as constructed with and through deep ecological memory with its associated material and energetic dimensions. Thus, in *The Reason I Jump*, Naoki Higashida writes:

> *I think that people with autism are born outside the regime of civilisation. Sure, this is just my own made-up theory, but I think that, as a result of all the killings in the world and selfish planet-wrecking that humanity has committed, a deep sense of crisis exists. Autism has somehow arisen out of this. Although people with autism look like other people physically, we are in fact very different in many ways. We are more like travellers from a distant, distant past. And if, by our being here, we could help the people of the world remember what truly matters for the Earth, that would give us a quiet pleasure.* (Higashida 2014, 151)

As well as this future memory of neurodivergent people taking the role of earth advocates because of a deep knowledge of the past, Higashida consistently points to the connection he feels with more-than-human consciousness:

> *human beings are part of the animal kingdom too, and perhaps us people with autism still have some left-over awareness of this, buried somewhere deep down. I'll always cherish the part of me that thinks of nature as a friend.* (Higashida 2014, 124)

Higashida's insights resonate with a description in Carly Fleishman's memoir *Carly's Voice* (2009) in which she explains how most neurotypical humans are unable to perceive or process the nuances of the more-than-human such as the different tones within a lion's roar. For Higashida, it is also the world beyond the human that provides both memories and imaginaries of safety and comfort:

> *our uneasy, unsettled feeling doesn't go away. I don't think we'll ever be able to reach our Shangri-La, however. I know it exists only in the depths of the forest or at the bottom of the deep blue sea.* (Higashida 2014, 130)

Donna Williams' *Nobody Nowhere* has more-than-human recollections that change the course of her thinking and narrative, such as a leaf that tumbles across her grandfather's grave that precedes her taking home a goat she finds in a service station (1999, 120). Temple Grandin in *Thinking in Pictures* (2006) recalls that it was her detailed observations over time of animals and cows that enabled her to redesign the ways in which cattle were slaughtered. Taking what she calls 'a cows eye view' she saw that it was little things that

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spooked cattle – such a hanging piece of chain. She noticed that cows needed light in order to enter a new place. She understood that cattle and sheep have acute auditory, visual and olfactory senses and are highly sensitive to movement. She gives the example of how a still coat will not frighten a cow, but a moving coat will (2006, 171).

R Vince Rubio (2014), a Filipino-American, diagnosed to have an autistic spectrum condition later in life structures the memoir *The Odyssey of Woolly Mammoth Boy* through a series of ancient primordial memories of a boy and a woolly mammoth framed as ancient ancestor spirit guides. After being raised in the city, nature restores his sense of belonging in a solo journey in the countryside as a 12-year-old:

> *I intuitively felt the presence of the healing Earthpower... It was as if the trees absorbed all vibrations and sent them back out through the ground. As I stood there, alone, without family, I had a sincere sense of belonging – a belonging to nature and a reconnection to the life energy here on earth that was all around me.* (2014, 98)

He describes walking away from other humans and going deep into the forest and entering a kind of trance:

> *I told stories to myself, drew in the wet banks or in the clouds in the sky, and sand of ancient people and kingdoms made up from my library of fantasy motifs in the storage files my head.* (2014, 98)

The memory is not a description of the forest or the earth but of connection, becoming and belonging in contrast to a human world in which he is alienated and alone. In the last part of the memoir, Rubio describes his experience of grief from the death of his wife and how the natural world restores and heals him. 'The water envelops the whole of me/I am consumed/I am the ocean' (I am the Ocean, 398), while 'Irene soars on the thermal currents of the morning Sun' (Morning Pas de Deux, Rubio 2014, 400).

A consistent feature within autistic lifeworks is the assertation of a special and authentic connection with nature, often described a trace memory of a more primal relationship between human and the natural environment.

Rather than seeing this as distinctly different from neurotypical memory, perhaps it is, rather, that it is perceived to be different as a result of the ways in which memory has been constructed within Western cultures of normalcy. In fact, there are resonances with ideas of memory within the writing by some Indigenous knowledge makers. For example, the Indigenous Australian writer Tyson Yunkaporta in *Sand Talk* articulates similar temporal-spatial relationships between humans and the natural environment, emphasising a multi-sensorial awareness of past-present-future as integral to his way of conceiving of and being in the world (Yunkaporta 2020). Yunkaporta as an Apalech clan academic and artist working from out of the specific environmental context of the far north of Queensland, Australia, writes,

> *All humans evolved within complex, land-based cultures over deep time to develop a brain with the capacity for over one hundred trillion neural connections, of which we now use only a tiny fraction. Most of us have been displaced from those cultures of origin, a global diaspora of refugees severed not only from land but from the sheet genius that comes from belonging in a symbiotic relation to it.* (2020, 2)

Yunkaporta suggests that we need to revisit the 'brilliant thought-paths' of our ancestors in order to 'recover enough cognitive function to correct the impossible messages civilisation has created' (2020, 3).

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Autistic memories of the more-than-human also connect with developments within psychology and psychotherapeutic work that advocate the importance of the natural environment to enable the transpersonal 'loss of the individual self and to live in the ecological self' (McGeeney 2016, 49) with longstanding evidence of the physical and mental benefits to humans of being connected with the natural world (Kaplan 1973; Hartig et al 1991; Lewis 1996) including those with memory differences: Oliver Sacks often took his patients with Alzheimer's for walks in the New York Botanical Gardens (Sacks 2019, 224–245). As Sue Stuart Smith author of 'The Well Gardened Mind' writes, 'we need to remind ourselves that first and foremost we are creatures of the earth' (2020, 286). While such insights theoretically might be supported by the ego-centric analyses of Freud or Lacan that have underpinned much research in memory and communication the more-than-human-memories within autistic memoirs more readily connect with the eco-centric work of CJ Jung in which our ability to remember our connections with animals, plants and the wider earth environment as an essential part of a healthy collective consciousness. Like Higashida, Jung believed that we had become lost within modern societies in which humans have become cut off from nature (McGeeney 2016). As Meredith Sabini shows, Jung's own experience was one of deep interconnectedness with nature in which he often expressed deep ecological connections with the more-than-human.

> *At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go and in the procession of the seasons. There is nothing…with which I am not linked.* (Jung 1961, 225 cited in Sabini 2016, 14)

More-than-human-memory: Animate Objects

The more-than-human-memory present in autistic memoirs, however, is not limited to what Western thought constructs as 'the living' natural environment: it queers our sense of what is living and what is not through the deeply affecting experiences remembered through and in relation with objects and artefacts. In *The Reason I Jump* (2014), Naoki Higashida recalls his experience of seeing a huge statue of Buddha in the town of Kamakura.

> *when I saw it, I was so deeply moved that I started welling up. It wasn't just Buddha's majesty and dignity, it was the sheer weight of history and generations of people's hopes, prayers and thoughts that broke over me, and I couldn't stop myself crying. It was as if Buddha himself was saying to me, 'All human beings have their hardships to bear, so never swerve away from the path you're on.'* (Higashida 2014, 126)

Higashida's sense of the object here might on one level be characterised as really not so different from the assertion by Cuartas (2013) that objects provoke memories of the everyday or Maria Zirra's (2017) assertation of the intersections between Memory Studies and the new materialism which she illustrates through an analysis of memory objects as non-human actors in the work of Seamus Heaney. Yet, this and in other various memoirs, objects and the material world are experienced in terms of complex and sometimes overwhelming remembered connections with the journeys and pasts of materials and objects which are perceived and recalled as animated with memories, stories and histories. Tito Mukhopadhay relates how he could grow around the nail in a wall 'my probable stories around it' (2008, 35). Furthermore, he recalls dialogue between objects, taking for example, two handheld mirrors of his mother's:

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> *I saw the two mirrors interact with each other, not in any language of blue, white, yellow or brown but in a completely new language. They interacted in the language of reflections, something that they would not share with me. I could not understand their language but I could appreciate... I wondered about all the secret stories they shared between them.* (Mukhopadhyay 2008, 16)

Further on he adds:

> *I promised the mirror that I would remember not to distract it with all my talking, especially when it showed me stories of wind... or when it showed me the story of the curtains and the window in the colours of sunlight and green.* (Mukhopadhyay 2008, 19)

From the mirror, he sees that 'stories follow/Into the world of my shadow' and from this he develops an obsession with shadows which he says 'did not have any stories to tell, while the chalk marks that he made around the shadows did:

> *I wondered about the whole chalk-mark area of confused scribbles. 'What would they think about themselves if they happened to look at themselves in the mirror? Would they recognise their own shapes and know whose shadows they were?'* (Mukhopadhyay 2008, 33)

Mukhopadhay explains that in the end it is not the reflections or the shadows that interest him but 'the essence of the related objects and the possible stories about them' (2008, 14). Again, this generates a dialogue with Indigenous knowledge cosmologies that recognise everything through its own essence animating all that is around us, including rocks and sand (Yunkaporta 2020).

The autistic film maker Mel Baggs in her autobiographical film 'In My Language' (2009) shows herself interacting with the environment around her that includes objects and the elemental as well as gestures and movements towards the trees outside her window. Her voice, produced through technology, explains that she is,

> *reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings. In this part of the video the water doesn't symbolise anything, I am just interacting with the water, as the water interacts with me.* (Baggs 2009)

This queering of life and non-life chimes with emergent work within radical animism that claims that apparently 'non-living forces' read and write (Deer 2020). It also connects with observations by the anthropologist Elizabeth A Povinelli (2016) who shows how Western power/knowledge structures, including how we see what is memorable and what not – is regulated and upheld through the distinction between life and non-life. Through long-standing field work with Indigenous Australian's, Povinelli argues for the co-composition of life and non-life, rather than their opposition.

Energetic Memory

The more-than-human-memory within autistic works also consistently emphasises the co-composition of human memories with the more-than-human elements of energy and particularly light. For example, the artist Judy Endow (2013) amplifies her recollection of connections to the natural world, de-centring other humans and herself within it. A key part of her art works concerns autobiographical memories that include her 'world tails' – sweeps of rainbow colours that she perceives coming from people and things – part of her acute perceptions of light and energy, as in her poem 'Got the World by the Tail':

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Outside, time dawns bright for me
While misty Earth is making
A bright New Tail that rises up
Then back to me for taking. (Endow 2013, 38)

Endow's paintings depict her amidst the landscape connected to the world through these world tails with different seasons and weathers that show her by a lake and then standing on the earth (p. 41–43) as part of a series of paintings and poems such as 'Night-Song Sun Girl' to 'Cloud-Breath' 'Sun Girl' (2013, 46–47).

As with deep eco-memories and conversations with vibrant objects, such memories of light and energy resonate with Indigenous cosmologies described by Australian Indigenous scholar, Tyson Yunkaporta in which he describes the importance within memory cultures of the rainbow serpent which '*loves the water because that is what allows us to see him…and he communicates with each of us this way, but he is not just an entity of water. He is an entity of light*' (Yunkaporta 2020, 47).

Autistic memoirs and artworks include vivid memories of amplified and enhanced perceptions of the natural world. Judy Endow's (2013) autobiographical art works 'Magnified leaves', 'Olive-Green Leaves' and 'Goldenrod 3' includes bold depictions of leaves seen as if under a magnifying glass or microscope. In her work, humans are frequently accorded marginal or equal status to other biota: a human and human drama is as important as a leaf, the light from the sun or the flight of a bird, thereby queering the assumption that by memory we mean human memory and memories of human histories and human events. The human figure at times is often entirely absent in Endow's (2013) natural memories, or is a small element connected through world tails or other forms of light. Some paintings entirely merge together the human and natural world such as 'Eye Fish', 'Eye-land' or 'Eye Trees' depicting the shape of a human eye with what look like reflected trees, sky and water within it, instead of the eye. The paintings of merging human-nature further decentre the human: they shift our perspective to that of a bird or insect:

Employing ceiling hovering
Watching down below –
That other girl
With smiling lips
And correctly gazing eyes –
While I myself get busy
From my ceiling perch
Up high – (Endow 2013, 90)

Donna Williams (1999) remembers more-than human-memory through energetic presences which she calls 'the wisps':

The wisps were tiny creatures. They hung in the air directly above me and looked something like wisps of hair…Other than the wisps, my bed was surrounded and totally encased by tiny spots which I called stars… I have since learned that they are actually air particles, yet my vision was so hypersensitive that they often became a hypnotic foreground with the rest of 'the world' fading away. (Williams 1999, 17)

In multiple autistic memory works, nature is amplified through synaesthesia. As well as Judy Endow's listening to nature sounds as colours, Helen Carmichael describes

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> *Bluebells with a hyperreal luminescence, each stalk a crisp spike, each lead a cluster of green blades, poke the cool air. This is sensory overload – I can see every bluebell and every stalk and every leaf. They are legion. My visual field vibrates and pulses – the flowers themselves are almost an ultraviolet him... they are shards of intense energy pulsating together to form a chorus with a definitive clean tone.* (Carmichael 2020, 137)

Wild garlic sprouts in a 'shrill white chord – a suspended seventh about to be resolved'. When she is alone in the woods far from her desk and computer she says 'This is where I belong: this is where I am myself. It is also where I detach from my 'self' and become only my senses... mainly I am the rising ground, the tangled root, the sticky, clinging parasol of cleavers and the rushing wings of a startled wood pigeon' (Carmichael 2020, 138).

Carmichael's life-writing recalls the ways in which her memory is co-composed through the shifting perspectives she experiences in her connections with the more-than-human around her 'The landscape unfolds fractally from a single reed to a field, to a watershed. And I unfold with it' (2020, 139). To Carmichael the interconnectedness of the oak sharing its stories with her through fungi and moss is something she experiences everyday through her heightened senses. Yet, rather than positioning this as different or other, I suggest it chimes with the growing insights of environmentalists who advocate non-extractive methods of presence and being with nature, such as James Canton's (2020) memoir of sitting beneath an oak every week for 2 years; or Merlin Sheldrakes (2020) descriptions of how fungi provides an 'entangled life' beneath our feet. Such connections suggest that it is not that autistic people must change their minds to be more like the norm but that neurotypical people may need to connect and learn from those autistic minds that recentre the more-than-human in order to remember what many have forgotten.

Conclusion: Rewilding Memory

Mel Baggs records a series of repetitive movements in her film, *In My Language* (2009) in which she interacts with her environment. We watch her tapping, humming, smelling, stroking and rocking with gestures towards trees outside her window and interacting with water. The film is confounding if viewed through the neurotypical and anthropocentric lens of memory research. Yet, what I suggest in this article is that we not only pay attention to but that we ontologically embrace the fact that autistic memory works decentre human memories through amplifying ecological memory. This extension of the mind and memory goes beyond 'non-biological scaffoldings' to 'augment memory' as extended mind theorist Andy Clark has argued (2008, 29). Extended mind theory does not consider the more-than-human in terms of biota, living organisms, as well as the abiota of air, rock, water, wind, shadows and light. As Kim Sterelny points out, it does not conceive of the mind being extended into all environmental resources (2010, 466); it is only concerned with accounting for the ways in which the mind and memory are coupled with non-biological resources that are 'importantly, robustly, reliably or persistently supportive of decision-making' (Sterelny 2010, 466).

What we have seen in this analysis and indeed what Mel Baggs work reminds us of, is the extension of the mind and memory as part of 'constant conversation' between the environment and herself through light, vibration, sounds and smells (2009, 3 m 45 s). In this article, I have argued that this 'constant conversation' or co-construction of memories with the more-than-human is present within multiple works by autistic writers and artists in terms of three dimensions that include deep ecological memory, the vitality of objects and the animism of energy and light.

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Furthermore, the autistic memory works analysed in this article point to how human memory making is naturally neurodiverse yet fields such as Memory Studies and Media Studies have been tamed through an obfuscated bias towards normalcy and are framed through cultural and medical discourses that have valorised neurotypical sense-making, cognition, communication and reception. Stories, art works and memories by and from autistic people's culture and communication trouble the ontology and epistemological foundations of memory in the mind and in the wild. Autistic life works 'rewild' or eco-neuroqueer the normative paradigm of studies of memory through highlighting that there are diverse kinds of human thinking and communication and thus memory. They also rewild memory through eco-neuroqueering ideas of what and who remembers and forgets, as well as the interdependencies and co-constructions of human memory with more-than-human-memory. Having said this, I am not arguing that all autistic people – by virtue of being autistic – experience memory in this way. While the concept and praxis of 'rewilding' memory seeks to tip the scales back from a deficit model equated with neurodivergent memory, it is important to note that the evidence in this article comes from a subset of autistic people and, while it absolutely offers a new lens, it does not seek to define each and every autistic person in this essentialist way.

It is also important to note that while this article focusses on life writing and memory works by those with an autistic spectrum condition it suggests the need for analysis of other kinds of neurodivergent memory works in which people communicate and remember differently from the 'norm' such as stories by those with ADD, Dyslexia, Alzheimer's as well as other mental health conditions. How might other 'disabilities' that involve divergent ways of sensing and processing as with hearing, sight or speech differences also rewild or eco-neuroqueer Memory Studies? As I have explored elsewhere, Western culture valorises the specular and sight but what if we do not 'see' the world or visually remember it? (Reading 2018) Similarly, much work within Memory Studies concerns those on the margins and ensuring they 'have a voice'. But how does work by those who are apraxic, those who are nonspeaking or selectively mute rewild the mnemonic power and meaning of voice?

This article on 'rewilding memory' more broadly has sought to provide the basis for a new theoretical and practical agenda to bring greater neurological human diversity and ecological diversity into research and teaching on memory. The research prompts further questions and directions for an agenda for rewilding memory: What is it, for example, that neurotypical memory must forget in order to support extractive economies? Why is it that we assume that is it only particular kinds of human sociality that underpin social or collective memory – what about the sociality of trees, moss, fungi, rocks and sunlight? And what role does (normatively and negatively defined) 'antisociality' or forms of sociality currently unrecognised, denigrated and devalued play in reproducing memories both human and more-than-human over time? What about the role of the averted gaze or the quiet human connection both individually and collectively? How do neurodiverse memory works productively disrupt key neurotypical assumptions including how we think about the language of memory, the forms of memory, voice and writing, veracity and reciprocity as well as more-than-human-memory rights? While these are questions which are too great to answer in this initial essay on rewilding memory, they point to the productive re-framing of Memory Studies to include neurodivergent perspectives and in so doing to the possibility for more diverse, inclusive and vibrant agendas.

Exploring the articulation of more-than-human-memories within autistic life-writing and art works highlights the importance of rethinking the underlying ecologies of knowledge within studies of memory and the ways in which normalcy lays waste to ways of knowing that Boaventura De Sousa Santos terms as a 'broader diversity of world

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experience' (2014, 191). What if we humans were to decentre ourselves and include the full range of human neurodiversity, remembering the world beyond our human traumas, human wars and human triumphs, how much wilder and more diverse the field of Memory Studies would be? While environmental humanities and Indigenous knowledge seeds our way to rethinking memory, the neurodiversity paradigm is also then part of this emergent pattern of thought. It is not simply, though, that intellectually we need a more diverse ecology of knowledge to understand memory in minds and media. More importantly, rewilding memory may enable you and I in some small way to enrich rather than extract from the living planet we share.

Afterword

My son is still standing, refusing to sit on the oak-wooden chair, whispering, 'heart. It has a heart'. Now, when I listen, I see, hear, taste, feel, smell more-than human-memories, including the oak tree that continues its life as the chair. The more-than-human is in the language we live and breathe. My son remembers, recounting, connecting, 'Tree. Heart. Wood. Heart. You said.' Yes, the tree has a heart: in English we call it heartwood. I taught my son that trees have hearts. I am sorry. It was I, who forgot.

Anna Reading, Extract from Journal.

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