

Jens Brockmeier

Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 401 + xiii pp. £44.99.

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The provocative thesis of Brockmeier's book is that the archival model of memory—which goes back as far as Plato's likening of memory to a wax tablet—is in the process of disintegrating and is destined to be replaced by a number of alternative models, one of which, the narrative model on which the book focuses, sees autobiographical remembering, in particular, as being more about interpretation and the construction of meaning than it is about storage and retrieval. While there is certainly room for reservations with respect both to this thesis and to the argument by means of which Brockmeier defends it, both merit serious consideration. Brockmeier's case for understanding autobiographical remembering—or the “autobiographical process”—in terms of narrative is based on both an impressively wide-ranging reading of research in psychology and neuroscience, the social sciences, and the humanities and on a close reading of a number of key works of literature, and researchers interested in the concept of memory stand to profit by engaging with it, regardless of their disciplinary homes.

What is memory? While it has never been easy to describe the details of the workings of memory, Brockmeier contends that we were until recently confident about the basic outlines of the answer to this question: memory was seen as a kind of storehouse or archive—in contemporary terms, as a process of encoding, storing, and retrieving representations of past experiences. His claim in the book is not so much that the archival model provides an incorrect answer to the question as it is that the model is in the process of breaking down and being replaced by something else. His focus is as much on the development of our concept of memory as it is on memory itself. Since remembering is something that we do, however, changes in our concept of memory may reshape our practice of remembering. Ultimately, then, the disintegration of the archival model implies a transformation of memory itself.

The book falls loosely into two parts. The first part, consisting of chapters 1–3, argues that the archival model is in the process of losing its grip. Chapter 1 contrasts the traditional concept of memory as an individual capacity, clearly distinguishable from other mental capacities, for encoding, storing, and retrieving information, with emerging concepts of memory as a constructive and social process. Although the latter concepts originate primarily in the broad field of memory studies, Brockmeier will eventually argue that the traditional concept is challenged by developments within psychology itself. He emphasizes, however, that the traditional concept is compatible with the multiple systems approach to memory, since the latter understands each of the distinct memory systems that it posits in terms of encoding, storage, and retrieval, as well as with much work on autobiographical memory. The alternative concept favored by Brockmeier foregrounds narrative, which he sees as key to understanding the autobiographical process—the process in which “remembering and interpreting are intertwined in such a way that they can only be separated artificially” (p. 129).

Chapter 2 reviews the concepts of memory at work in a number of different fields, including history, media and technology, and literature and art, arguing that the archival model is breaking down in these fields as memory is increasingly understood as fluid, malleable, and interpersonal. Turning to psychology and neuroscience, Brockmeier argues that the archival model is breaking down even here, as old ideas of discrete, localized memory traces are abandoned and remembering is increasingly understood as a form of mental time travel, blurring the boundary between remembering and imagining. Chapter 3 links the emergence and persistence of the archival model to the

role of language in our understanding of memory, arguing that the development of writing, which provided a stable store for information, had a profound impact on our concept of memory, coinciding with a shift from remembering as a public practice to remembering as an individual activity—a matter of looking something up within oneself, as in Plato's wax tablet metaphor. Tracing the historical evolution of the archival model, Brockmeier sees it culminating in Ebbinghaus' studies of memory for nonsense syllables at the birth of experimental psychology. The chapter then reviews a number of alternatives to the archival model, including discursive and social approaches and Internet-related digital technologies. With the former, narrative makes its first appearance. With the latter, which are often in effect concerned with personal archives, the focus shifts to autobiographical remembering.

Focusing on autobiographical memory, the second part of the book, consisting of chapters 4–9, develops the narrative model. Chapter 4 defends the “strong narrative thesis,” according to which “there are autobiographical memories that only come into being because of narrative” (p. 99). The strong narrative thesis seeks to eliminate any sharp boundary between memory and its interpretation, in contrast to the standard view that there are acts of retrieval which are prior to acts of interpretation. Chapter 5 explores the autobiographical process by means of a case study of a novel (Ian McEwan's *Saturday*). Here, we shift from an emphasis on memory systems to an emphasis on the remembering subject, his identity construction, and the context of his life. Meaning and interpretation now come to the fore, and these cannot be reduced to the operation of neurocognitive memory systems but require us to situate remembering in the subject's broader cultural and historical context.

Chapter 6 is concerned with the role of the autobiographical process in the formation of the subject's identity. Brockmeier argues for a “postautobiographical perspective” on identity, maintaining that even memory-impaired subjects are often able to successfully construct identities. This perspective challenges the “Lockean” view that autobiographical memory is crucial for personal identity, and the Lockean view is further challenged by the intersubjective dimension of remembering, as when memory-impaired individuals collaborate with their spouses to construct personal narratives. The intersubjective dimension takes center stage in chapter 7, which considers the autobiographical process as a cultural process, using a second novel (Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*) as a case study of the way in which individuals may reconcile different cultures of remembering. Brockmeier argues that rather than being situated in either the individual realm or the social realm and rather than functioning as a kind of bridge between the two, the autobiographical process functions to enable the individual to localize himself in the social realm.

Chapter 8 turns to the temporal dimension of the autobiographical process. Remembering is normally understood as taking place against a fixed background of “continuous, chronological, and homogeneous” or “Newtonian” time (p. 261). This understanding is implicit, for example, in much work on mental time travel, but Brockmeier argues that there are aspects of the autobiographical process that challenge it, maintaining that our autobiographical “meaning constructions” are not based on our ideas of time—instead, the latter are based on the former, and Newtonian time is often of little significance in autobiographical remembering. This argument is supplemented, in chapter 9, with another case study of a novel (William Sebald's *Austerlitz*). Overall, the message of these two chapters is that what is fundamental to autobiographical remembering is not an attempt to locate ourselves in time but rather an effort to make sense of our existence in the world.

The final chapter of the book, chapter 10, makes use of another case study (of a sculpture of an archive by Anselm Kiefer) to sum up the overall argument of the book, suggesting that the crisis of the archival model makes room for a “de-substantialized and de-ontologized” notion of memory which turns our attention from the individual brain to the lives of subjects who remember in an intersubjective and material world. This conclusion is not implausible, but it arguably fails to

appreciate the extent to which our attention has already turned to the intersubjective and material aspects of remembering. These aspects are, of course, at the forefront of research in interdisciplinary memory studies. But they also play a larger role in research in other fields than Brockmeier seems to recognize. In psychology, for example, research on collaborative memory explores the ways in which groups of individuals remember together. And in cognitive science, research on distributed cognition views remembering as a process carried out by the interacting human and material components of socio-technical systems. Greater attention to these bodies of research, which make only brief appearances in the book, would have suggested a more nuanced formulation of its thesis.

With respect to Brockmeier's argument for that thesis, readers in psychology are likely to object that psychologists are already well aware of the limits of a purely archival view of memory and that constructive views have for some time already attempted to go "beyond the archive." The tradition of research on constructive memory goes back at least to Bartlett, and constructive approaches are today perfectly mainstream, as evidenced, for example, by the prominence of research on remembering as mental time travel. Indeed, alternatives to the archival model go back even further, with Plato, for example, providing not only the metaphor of a wax tablet but also a rather different metaphor of an aviary. While Brockmeier recognizes the existence of these alternatives, he deemphasizes them, perhaps on the ground that we have not yet succeeded in going entirely beyond the archive. It is true, of course, that much research in psychology continues to presuppose an archival view of remembering as a matter of encoding, storing, and retrieving, and in that sense the archival model is alive and well. But the very success of the research in question suggests that perhaps we should not want to go entirely beyond the archive. Memory may not reduce to encoding, storage, and retrieval, but it is surely in part a matter of encoding, storage, and retrieval. Brockmeier himself seems to admit this when he discusses digital memory technologies: many of these amount to what he terms "personal archives," and it is only the archival model which licenses us to view them as memory technologies at all.

Despite these reservations, the book constitutes a major contribution to the interdisciplinary literature on memory. Whether or not we should want to go entirely beyond the archive, Brockmeier is clearly right that there is a tension between the archival model and alternative constructive and social models of memory. It is not clear how or even whether this tension might be resolved, and perhaps the book's most valuable contribution is to remind us forcefully of its existence and importance.

Klaus Newmann and Janna Thompson (eds)

Historical Justice and Memory. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2015, 264 pp. \$39.95

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Historical Justice and Memory edited by Klaus Newmann and Janna Thompson, seeks to cross disciplinary boundaries, in particular bridging transitional justice and memory studies, to critically address what the editors describe as "the seemingly unstoppable movement for historical justice" (p. 17). The volume at once situates the demand for historical justice historically, drawing attention to its emergence as a new, human rights-oriented principle that increasingly guides international politics, while also raising important questions about the future of historical justice. In a range of essays, many by prominent scholars from the fields of transitional justice and memory studies, the volume takes the reader deep into discussions about the nature of justice, memory, and their overlap; at the core are questions of recognition, reparation, and redress for past violence. For any