

Kai H.

Pacifica, California

Memory

Mixed Media Animation & Video

My final project explores memory, the intersection between media relating to memory and the memories that we keep, and how memories can change over time. I began my project by filming interviews with a mix of staff and students. I asked the participants several questions relating to my topic.

My art consists of two pieces. I created a documentary-style short from the nearly two hours of footage that I filmed. Second, I created stop motion and digital animations to introduce and accompany the short. To create the animation I cut out, hand-altered, and photographed over 500 elements.

When I began work, I asked my parents and extended family to send me photos and videos from when I was little. I worked with these photos for both the intro and outro sequences. Going through all of this media of my younger self was significantly more emotional than I would have expected. I was able to see the progression of my life in a way that I hadn't before.

My choices of sounds were very intentional. The video begins with an excerpt from Pink Floyd's *Time* along with an audio clip of young me singing the song *Movin' Right Along* from *The Muppet Movie*. Part of the introduction and the credits are also set to a piano cover of *Movin' Right Along* Performed by Noa Gutkin.

This project has helped me explore both my memories and how others think about their own. Conducting the interviews, reviewing, editing, and writing about the footage was a very fulfilling experience that gave me lots to think about. Working with others' memories as well as my own gave me new perspectives on how I spend the time that I have and what I will value in the future.

What We Forget to Remember



Kai H.

The Oxbow School

OS50

Writers Note: In my final weeks at Oxbow I set out to explore memory. I explored what memory is, how people's concepts of memory differ, what factors change the ways in which we remember, and how we can preserve memories in a non-superficial way.

I. Introduction

I started by thinking about some memories that have shaped me into the person I am today. By thinking about these memories, I wanted to compare my experiences with the scientific consensus that I found through my research. Next, I conducted interviews with 8 people about memory. Hearing perspectives from people of different backgrounds and age ranges was very interesting.

I asked the participants:

1. What is a memory?
2. What is a memory that you can't actually remember?
3. Do objects hold memory? Can you think of an example from your life?
4. Another way memories can be preserved is through photos. What changes do you notice in your memories that you have photos of versus the ones you don't?
5. Do you think that taking photos specifically to preserve memories takes away from the moment? Why or why not?
6. What does losing memory mean to you?
7. Do you think that thinking about your memories changes the way you remember them?

In asking these questions I hoped to learn more about different people's perspectives on memory, hear a set of interesting stories, and analyze the way that different participants interpreted the questions presented to them.

Throughout working on this project, I have realized how big of an impact memory has on life. We are constantly remembering, continuously reminiscing, contextualizing, and reinventing our memories. Each moment consists of thousands of individual factors, yet, when we look back at them they all appear as one cohesive image.

Last, I thought about scientific explanations for why we reshape memories and how false memories can be used to create falsehoods. With all three of these methods, I hoped to form a complete picture of both the way memories work and the way that memories change over time.

II. Birthdays and Blended Memories

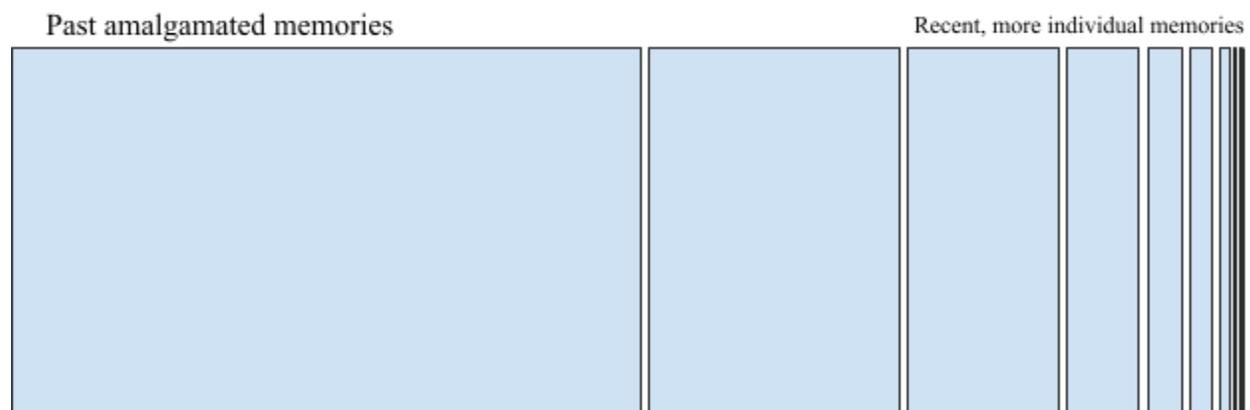
I am the product of a failed homebirth. My first moments touching the air were being rushed up the 100ish stairs out of my house and around the crumbling trail that has now mostly fallen into the ocean. My fully Jewish mom gave birth to me in a room in the nearest hospital, which happened to be Catholic; in those moments, when nothing else worked, she prayed to the statue of Jesus that sat on the wall of that room.

Every year, on February 21st at 2:52 a.m., my mom tells me that story. She, of course, precedes it by talking about the pain and effort in a half-joking attempt to make me feel both loved and possibly understand the lengths she went to just a bit.

I clearly remember waking up each year to my alarm. I would always say I was going to eat a bowl of ice cream in the middle of the night just because I could, and yet, I never would; I never actually felt like getting out of bed. Those are clearly memories in my mind, yet, if you

asked me which birthday I finally did it: pushed myself to get out of bed, walked into the kitchen, and got myself a big bowl of pistachio ice cream, I could not tell you.

In the introduction to a study done at Oberlin College in 1998, the authors brought up an interesting point from a book on autobiographical memory: “Conway (1990) proposed that most memories remain vivid for some period of time but lose this quality when similar, later events occur” (Friedman & deWinstanley 368). I find this sentiment to be very true for me. While every memory I have had here at The Oxbow School feels vivid and separate right now, I am sure that I will have significant trouble remembering specific parts of time periods in the near future.



The chart above shows my belief of how my repeated memories feel over time. I can remember my birthday here at Oxbow clearly as well as last year, when I finally valued my sleep and decided not to be awake at 2:52 am. In the years before that, especially during Covid, all of my birthdays feel like one memory. I know that I was aging but that one specific moment on February 21st feels frozen in years of time.

If I had more time to do this assignment I would conduct a small study of students at Oxbow. First, I would ask them to recount a recent memory. Then, I would have weekly check-ins with them asking about the same memory and recording how their story changes. I would especially focus on what got more detailed, what got less detailed, and what changed

entirely. Instead, the data I have is one five to fifteen minute interview of each participant to ask about many different parts of their lives.

III. Interviews

I interviewed 8 people:

- ❖ Carly, 46, Chef (She/Her)
- ❖ Emily, 15, Student (She/Her)
- ❖ Frank, 18, Student (He/Him)
- ❖ LK, 59, Printmaking Teacher (She/Her)
- ❖ Lou, 17, Student, (He/They)
- ❖ Victor, 17, Student (He/Him)
- ❖ Wayan, 26, Humanities Teacher (She/Her)
- ❖ Will, 17, Student (He/Him)

I started by asking the participants the question “what is a memory?” I wanted to see how their answers differed when given a very basic, but open-ended question. Many answers used the word “remember” in them, which is a bit redundant. I believe that this is because memory is such an intrinsic part of us that it is a hard topic to form a definition of. I found that answers to this question tended to be more basic: bare bones attempts to define the word rather than the feeling of remembering. That being said, there were still answers that were not what I would expect for a definition of memory. Wayan said that memory is “A compilation of sensory feelings, associations in your mind that you can retrieve and link to certain moments in your life.” Carly said that “I always associate memory with positives, but, I guess it’s not necessarily that.” I liked the imagery Frank used when he said “It’s effectively like a movie playing in your mind or

pictures in a gallery” I find it fascinating how such a basic concept to human existence can have such different interpretations.

I then asked them, “What is a memory that you can’t actually remember?” I left this very subjective on purpose. I wanted to make it as easy as possible for the interviewees to have differing responses while still staying on the same topic. Wayan had an interesting anecdote about what she remembers from 9/11, when she was three years old. She said “I don’t know how much of this is my own memory versus how much of this people told me after.” Emily made an interesting point that, “If I can remember the idea of a memory, that is a memory in it of itself.” Both Lou and LK talked about being born, while Frank talked about his childhood: “I’ve been told a lot about my young life in different countries. I used to live in Korea, but there is only one memory of that time that I can remember, and it is no longer something that has motion to it, it is just a picture of a room.” The way that Frank responded to this question was especially intriguing. The idea of the motion of a memory fading away into just a still image of a room is something that I have never heard anyone talk about. I would love to know if this is something that happens to others as well as just Frank.

Third, I asked them, “Do objects hold memory? Can you think of an example from your life?” I wanted to give the interviewees the ability to think about either objects that held their memories or talk about family heirlooms. Everyone was very enthusiastic about the fact that objects hold memories. Will said, “Fuck yeah objects hold memory. Like I said, like music and stuff—it’s not exactly an object but it’s still sound— paintings, artwork, people, they all hold a lot of memories. I can go somewhere, a place in my life, a location, and I’ll remember things... whether I like it or not, it’s not really something I can control.” This idea of recalling memories based on objects or places is something that I thought about a lot while writing this paper. Being

at home this year over spring break after being away from home for the longest time in my life made me think a lot about the memories that each piece of it held. On this topic, Wayan said, “I fully stand behind the fact that objects have memory. In particular, I’m thinking about... I’m thinking about spaces, I think about houses having a lot of memory.”

Lou had a slightly different take on the topic. “I think of clothes,” he said. “I think, like, if you have a stain on your clothes you remember what meal you were eating that gave you that stain. And if there was a tear in the couch you remember like ‘oh yeah I was playing with my dog and she bit the couch and that’s how it got that tear’ and that’s the memory.” I love this interpretation of damaged things as memories. This feels important in the way that scars tell stories. Each place where my skin is permanently marked is linked to a different story, a different time in my life, and a different emotion or feeling, although usually pain.

Fourth, I asked, “Another way memories can be preserved is through photos. What changes do you notice in your memories that you have photos of versus the ones you don't?” Will, again, talked about recalling memories through feeling emotions in photos. He said, “When I look at a photo of a memory, I feel how I felt in that moment, and whatever is in that photo I’m gonna, like, develop a connection to whatever is in that photo whether it’s solemn or happy.” Lou thought of the photos in a different way. He stated, “Photos are very good at capturing details that you wouldn’t have otherwise remembered. They’re like if you could take out a memory from a third person perspective so they’re kinda like better recording devices in that way.” This idea of seeing memories from a third person perspective is fascinating. It was not something that I had ever thought about before, yet, it makes so much sense. When I see other people’s photos of events and experiences I have been through, it gives such a different perspective. Wayan also talked a lot about smartphones and how much easier it is to document through photos now. She

said, “Smartphones came out when I was about 10 years old... I think because I have a camera roll that I look back at quite frequently being a somewhat sentimental, nostalgic person. I mean, looking through when I was 17–18 years old like I have pictures documenting this like a beginning to end narrative thing.” By having access to a camera at all times we have the ability to document our lives in a narrative format. I love going back through my photos on my phone, however, a lot of times I find myself being self-deprecating to my past self. I don’t have this same tendency to be self deprecating when I am simply recollecting without photographs.

Fifth, I asked, “Do you think that taking photos specifically to preserve memories takes away from the moment? Why or why not?” LK was of the opinion that it could, sometimes, take away from the moment. “Taking pictures to preserve memories is a very deliberate act,” she said. “I know what I’m experiencing when I’m standing in front of the ocean as it’s crashing onto the rocks is not going to feel or look the same in a photograph.” The disconnect between what is shown in photos and what was actually going on in the moment is huge. Whether that is not being able to show the whole picture through just a photo or deliberately hiding pieces of the scene through alteration or framing photography can show a very small portion of what is actually going on. Lou and Frank were of the opposite opinion, stating, “I don’t think that taking photos in a moment takes away from being in that moment because it just becomes a part of that moment,” and, “I think photos are a good way to preserve memories because while they may not be particularly true to the moment, they are still memories in themselves. I don’t believe they detract in any way at all.” Wayan was more centered on the idea. “Not intrinsically,” she said. “I think especially if it’s intentional, it can add to the moment and it can mark this moment as something that you want to remember.” She continued with, “The only example I can think of that like really takes away from the moment for me, and maybe this is just like being a young

woman in this culture. growing up I spent so much time—and still do—thinking about how I look in photos, and that's just what takes away from the moment for me. It could be a beautiful day and I'm not thinking about the body that I inhabit or the appearance I have, and then, all the sudden, someone takes a photo and I look like trash or something like that and it just ruins that mood.”

Then, I asked, “What does losing memory mean to you?” Most responses, as expected, were melancholy. Victor, however, had a different take. “Losing memory, I believe that it's like a sign of moving on, forward, because memories can be also very very bad.” He continued with, “I believe that if people forget memories, it's for the better.” While I don't fully agree with this, I do think that there is a lot of value in thinking about forgetting as moving on. “I think losing memory is sad. I think that's one of my biggest fears,” Will said. “Whenever I see other people lose memory, I get very sad by it, because memories are integral to our behavior and experiences and I think if I were to lose memory, I'm losing a part of myself.” Losing my memory is also a huge fear. When we went to visit my great grandmother right before she died, she couldn't remember anything, including who her own children and grandchildren were. Losing the memory of the people I care about the most is possibly the most terrifying thing to me, maybe even over dying.

Last, I asked, “Do you think that thinking about your memories changes the way you remember them?” Emily made an interesting analogy: “It changes them in the sense that you're basically playing a giant game of telephone with yourself. So, if you relate one memory to another memory of the same place or person maybe they'll get jumbled up.” LK had a more optimistic take, stating, “I think that it almost enhances that memory and it kind of brings it further in, 'cause sometimes memories feel very far away, like thinking about something in

particular.” Will talked about the way it will change how you think of a situation and dilute it. He said, “I think that depending on the memory, it will hold a bias to a certain situation, so it will change the reality of that situation in my mind, my perception will change. It’s kinda like how if you smell a flower a lot, the smell will go away, in the same way if I think about something a lot the meaning will go away, the impact will go away.” I love the analogy of smelling a flower enough that the smell goes away; however, I don’t relate super strongly to the idea of memories getting diluted if you remember them too much. For me, I feel that I only think of a memory when I need to remember it. I don’t tend to force myself to remember anything.

IV. The Cove: Death, Alters, and Childhood Camaraderie

When I was born, I was the second kid in the small, sequestered, beach community where I live: “The Cove.” By the time I turned two, the first, Nyla, had moved away due to her dad being allergic to the mold that grows in every crevice of the fog-weathered wood of our houses. If I think hard enough I can remember waving to each other from windows positioned directly across from each other in our second floor duplexes. I know logically that this memory can’t be real, that every part of that clear picture is a cobbled together amalgamation of stories and different times. Yet, if I think hard enough I still see her hand waving, her mom next to her, mine next to me. In this memory, I can see her face as a baby, however, I do have a picture of the two of us at six-months old that looks very similar to what I picture.

The next kid to follow after Nyla’s departure was Nina. Nina was born three years after me, Barry was born one year after her, and Ryka two years after him. When I was six, Nina three, and Ryka just born, Nina and I started a band. We called it Play All Day, played mini guitars whose strings buzzed a bit when strummed, and sang hit songs like Twinkle Twinkle

Little Star (Screaming Version) and Puff the Magic Dragon. Our big break was the birthday party of Kari Revolva, world renowned hula hoop artist (also my downstairs neighbor). Although I don't remember it, I'm sure we rehearsed long and hard for our big performance. I can remember the day of the show; the party took place in her living room. Nina and I sat on the floor while the rest of the party-goers watched from the couch. We sang Twinkle, Puff, and our breakout original hit; a self titled single called Play All Day. I have a clear memory of the way that we played: not well, as neither of us actually knew how to play guitar. I can see the living room clearly in my mind, people populating every nook and cranny. However, I have also been there many times since then, including this year over spring break, and, honestly, her house has stayed pretty much the same for the last 11 years.

To me, The Cove is a conduit of memory. Each grain of sand, segment of crumbling cliff, and falling apart house hold different moments. Even though it still exists in a very real, very present place in my life, it exists in my mind in a more ethereal space. I have been homesick a lot at Oxbow in a way that I have never been before. I find myself missing the ocean the most, the ever crashing mass that exists in front of my house, continuously shifting yet ever present. Getting used to not falling asleep to the sound of crashing waves was always an adjustment, however, when I went home for spring break, I noticed them in a way I never had before.

I have found myself visualizing The Cove as I fall asleep in my dorm at Oxbow. Taking myself on walks up the stairs and around the trail or sitting down on the northern point and throwing rocks over the tidepools and into the frothing ocean of dreams that lie ahead. Until I started trying to visualize it, I never knew how much of a map I had on the place I have spent so much of my time.

The Cove is a conduit of memory in the way that a quilt made by many hands makes a blanket large enough to warm a mother and her new baby. Each section is solidified by a different memory—a different time of joy, sorrow, or any of the unquantified number of feelings I've experienced in my life. The Cove is a place of memories for so many people. On the ledge in between the two sets of stairs sit two altars. One of them is for April, my neighbor who died at 49. The second is for Mary, my almost 101 year old neighbor who, up until a few months before her death, was still walking up and down the stairs to my house.

The moment I found out April died is seared into my mind in a more complete image than anything else from that time period is. Where every other memory feels empty in one specific way, that day feels full. Maybe it's because the emptiness rests in the space that she once inhabited, maybe because I've re-lived those moments so many times in my mind, or maybe because that new and profound of an experience roots itself into your mind in a way that not many things do. Before April died, I had never really had a comparative experience with death. The idea that one day, someone can be having water fights and playing tag with you, telling you about memories and wisdom, and teaching survival skills, and the next be gone forever, was a foreign concept to me. The fact that her memories would be only retellable through the writing that she did, the people that she shared them with, and the communities that she built felt so foreign and, frankly, wrong.

V. Documentation of Memories

In 2000, Erik Kandel won a Nobel prize for his study of memory. He believes that mapping the brain is the first step towards solving many diseases and issues. In an interview with CNN in 2013, Kandel stated, "The brain is the most complex object in the universe. And it is so

important that we understand it, not only to understand ourselves and who we are, but also to be able to overcome many of the miseries that affect the brain” (A Nobel). In his research, Kandel used *Aplysia*, a type of sea slug about a foot in length. Kandel, using the reduced amount of neurons in the slugs’ brains compared to human brains, studied short term and long term memory at a biological level. “With *Aplysia*, Kandel revealed that we learn not by altering neurons but by strengthening or building new synapses, or connections, between them—a breakthrough of a lifetime” (Dobbs).

Kandel paved the way for neuroscientists today to study more specific neurological changes. While in the past, scientists have only been able to map out specific fast activity patterns, newer technology allows scientists to map the brain over hours. “By incorporating data from previous literature, Sejnowski and first author Cian O’Donnell, a Salk postdoctoral researcher, developed a model that bridges findings from both molecular and systems observations of memory to explain how this 1-2 hour memory window works.” This was a huge breakthrough in the study of memories; it could contribute to huge leaps in understanding memory-based diseases like dementia.

When doing interviews, even before I asked the question about losing memory, one thing that came up frequently was the fear of forgetting. This fear of memory loss and losing ourselves to age is something that is present in so many people's lives. If there is a scientific possibility to make breakthroughs on solutions to memory loss it is so important that we do everything in our power to work on it.

VI. Conclusion

Memory is one of the most complicated processes that we go through on a daily basis, yet we rarely think about the actual process of remembering. I believe that this is partially due to the fact that memory is so intrinsic to being human. Every second, we are processing unquantifiable pieces of information, transferring to our brains, and letting them inform the way we interact with the world around us. Even if we don't remember the exact blades of grass we stood on this morning or the shape the clouds made in the sky weeks ago, we still know that they were there, that they were a part of the conglomerated whole of our life, and that, even though we don't remember them specifically, they contributed to the way we remember.

Works Cited

“A Nobel Prize with Help from Sea Slugs.” *CNN*, May 2013,

<https://www.cnn.com/2013/05/14/health/lifeswork-eric-kandel-memory/>.

Booth, W. James. “The Work of Memory: Time, Identity, and Justice.” *Social Research*,

vol. 75, no. 1, 2008, pp. 237–262, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40972059>.

An article going over statutes of limitations for our memory and actions based on historical events. The most interesting piece for me was questioning how much we are responsible for our actions as a child. It likens memory to a photo book which, in itself is interesting, but, if its pages are turned by the right person who can tell a story from each image becomes invaluable.

Dobbs, David. “Eric Kandel: From Mind to Brain and Back Again.” *Scientific American*,

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/eric-kandel-from-mind-to-brain-and-back/>. Accessed 26 Apr. 2024.

Garry, Maryanne, and Matthew P. Gerrie. “When Photographs Create False Memories.”

Current Directions in Psychological Science, vol. 14, no. 6, 2005, pp. 321–25.

JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20183056>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2024.

A paper outlining studies on photos and false memories. Garry and Gerrie go over the ways that Photoshop and access to photo doctoring technology could affect people. They cover multiple similar studies to Stephan et al. as well as a time that doctored images made it into a newspaper about the war in Iraq. They end the paper by wondering about therapeutic uses of changing traumatic memories with doctored photos.

J. Friedman, William, and Patricia A. de Winstanley. "Changes in the Subjective Properties of Autobiographical Memories with the Passage of Time." *Memory (Hove, England)*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1998, pp. 367–381, <https://doi.org/10.1080/741942606>.

A study of how memories change over time conducted on a sample size of 528 at Oberlin University. The most interesting part of this article for me was the introduction where they outlined similar studies. I would like to go into more detail about the way we get desensitized to experiences by experiencing them multiple times. For this article I got the most out of the introduction where they explained different people's beliefs on memory.

Jakki Spicer. *Cultural Critique*, no. 57, 2004, pp. 187–190, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4140766>.

Lindsay, D. Stephen, et al. "True Photographs and False Memories." *Psychological Science*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2004, pp. 149–154, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40063945>.
This paper covers a study of 45 participants given three memories, one false, two true from their childhoods. The true memories were given by the family members of the participants. 23 random participants were also given photos from that time period to go with the stories. This study showed that viewing childhood photographs could contribute to the formation of false memories. This will be a valuable resource to explaining how false memories can be formed and manipulated.

Loftus, Elizabeth F. “The Malleability of Human Memory: Information Introduced after We View an Incident Can Transform Memory.” *American Scientist*, vol. 67, no. 3, 1979, pp. 312–320, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27849223>.

NOVA | Your Memories Are Not as True as You Think | Season 50 | Episode 9 | PBS. 2023.

Paul, Marla. “Your Memory Is like the Telephone Game.” *Northwestern.edu*, <https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2012/09/your-memory-is-like-the-telephone-game/>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

“Scientists Explain How Memories Stick Together.” *Salk Institute for Biological Studies*, 16 Apr. 2014, <https://www.salk.edu/news-release/scientists-explain-how-memories-stick-together/>.

“The Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine 2000.” *Nobelprize.org*, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/medicine/2000/kandel/facts/>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2024.

Van Bergen, Saskia, et al. “Are Subjective Memory Problems Related to Suggestibility, Compliance, False Memories, and Objective Memory Performance?” *The American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 122, no. 2, 2009, pp. 249–257, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27784395>.

A study on the relationship between subjective memory and suggestibility using a sample of 142 young and middle aged participants. This article shows

how people answered questions about their clarity of recollection on a scale of 1 to 9. Unfortunately, I don't agree that this article has much significance seeing as they only rated the way that people believed that they remembered and not the actual memories and how the story changed. If I had longer to do this assignment I think that I would do a small study of students at oxbow. I would first ask them to recount a memory from close to or on the start date. Then, I would have weekly check-ins with them asking about the same memory and recording how their story changes. I would especially focus on what got more detailed, what got less detailed, and what changed entirely.