

# Storying the Self: The Pluritemporal Memories of Rural Youth Identity and Place

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## Abstract

Memories are crucial to our sense of identity and emotional response to place, providing an anchor point from which we can tell different stories of our temporal encounters in the world. Through memory, we embed different spaces, pasts, and futures of ourselves in particular locales. These identities are not fixed, timeless, or geo-specific; they are the spontaneous assemblages of meaning, drawn from a multiplicity of memories, emotions, and thoughts that represent an 'outpouring' of being in place. The mechanisms and processes by which meaning is articulated in these encounters are fundamental to our understandings of ourselves and places. This chapter brings together research on young people and identity to examine critically how rural youth tell stories to define themselves in the world through three themes. First, the role of memory in creating a sense of identity. Second, how individuals create memory images that are woven through with understandings of place. Finally, the chapter reconciles the inherent inconsistencies and flux of the selfhood project through the concept of pluritemporal memories of place.

## Introduction

Place is a tangible site in which meaning is made through a nexus of beliefs, values and feelings, which are at the very core of our reflexive accounts of belonging and identity. Through focusing on the role of emotions and memory in the construction of place we can contribute to ongoing debates on the extent to which "an appreciation of emotional geographies – the ways in which our affective experiences of self and others contextualised temporally and spatially – change and enhance our understanding of how the world works?" (Wood and Smith, 2004, p. 533). Examining the ways in which emotionality and memory is patchworked into space and time, this chapter investigates how various identity positions are produced and transferred into lived spatialities for young people in the countryside. In so doing, the chapter examines how place, emotion, memory, and representation get appropriated into the articulation of the self.

This chapter begins by reviewing young people as an object of study and notions of being in the world. It then explores the methodological challenges of accessing such accounts before addressing the theoretical underpinnings of how memories help shape place, through the production of memory images. The chapter focuses primarily on a case study drawn from

wider research examining young people's sense of belonging (Leyshon 2016) and concludes by reconciling the inherent inconsistencies and flux of the selfhood project through the concept of pluritemporal memories of place.

## Positioning Young People: Being in the World

Geographical studies on memory have significantly increased in the recent years and have provided a concentration of research into a variety of subject areas such as landscapes, heritage studies and environmentalism. Although all these investigations have been useful in enhancing geographical understandings of memory formation, there remains a lacuna in the extant literature concerning the lives of rural youth. Recently, however, some researchers have begun to explore a range of themes associated with young people and memory through connections to place(s) (Leyshon 2016; Gaini and Seire 2022) to moments of transition and coping strategies (Leyshon and Tverin 2015; Vathi and King 2021), and key methods for researching memory (Moraitopoulou 2022). My focus here is on the complexity of self and memory as a non-linear practice in which stories of the self have an emergent quality and materialize when required (Leyshon 2011; Leyshon and Bull 2011). The aim is to illustrate how memory is mobilized into stories and is founded on the recall of the self in relation to others, materiality and places. A consideration of memory-making in this way has the potential to open out conceptualizations of what it means to be a young person by drawing on the entanglements of the self and how it is intertwined into narratives of the past, present, and future. As Harraway (2019) recently reflected, 'it matters what stories tell stories' and how they are interwoven and connected to multiple objects, places and species. Her reflexive manifesto offers a profound and persuasive analytical tool for encouraging and interrogating storytelling of the self. This is in part achieved through decentering the individual as the key figure of concern and searching for more collective understandings of life through how our human stories talk not only of and about ourselves but of others. As McKagen (2018: 88) suggests, entanglements establish stories that create something "new emerging *from* the present system" by recalling the past, present and future conditions of ourselves.

Contemporary literature on rural youth, memory and storytelling is limited in extent and tends to concentrate on their identity positions or interventions into their lives. These studies problematically focus on defining rural young people not as human 'beings' but as 'human becomings' (Uprichard 2008) on a journey through increasing cognitive, emotional, and social capacity to the ultimate goal of adulthood, with its implied completeness. A number of geographers (Farrugia 2016; Leyshon 2016) have tried to destabilize this understanding through exploring the interesting, complex lives of young people as human 'beings', experiencing place and otherness through multidimensional factors, such as age, race, gender, and sexuality. Little is known, however, about young people as social agents in the here and now, with feelings and memories that actively help them to make sense of the world moment-by-moment. To achieve this, an epistemological shift is required to refocus on more-than-being in place, positioning young people through their memories and emotions and thereby achieving a fuller understanding of their lives. We need to recognize young people in their own right, separate but not detached from adults, and not in a state

of *becoming* but rather an embodied emotional *being-in-the-now*. Doing so, I argue, will capture some of the unique individual differences and socio-spatial complexities of young people's lives.

Davidson and Bondi (2004) argue that the emotion is crucial to the processes that make place(s) matter but Anderson (2006, p. 735) points out that these processes "cannot be reduced to a range of discreet internally coherent emotions which are self-identical with the mind of an individual". Emotional responses shape and are shaped by encounters with people and the more-than-human world. Young people are always encountering their own lives, in places and in moments. These encounterings, or *becomings*, are produced in a flux of spatial-temporal sensory experiences interwoven with memories of past events. The construction and retrieval of memory is, however, a vastly complex set of electrochemical, embodied processes, few of which are understood. It is perhaps because of the methodological challenges of capturing this complex mingling of emotional and sensory responses that memory appears to be largely absent from contemporary personal accounts of landscape. Indeed, personal narratives of historically situated memories of places are often elided in favor of instantaneous sensory or affective accounts. In fact, memory and affect are conjoined. The affective qualities of bodies become interwoven with memories in a messy process of affective assemblage in which self, time, place, objects and emotion become appropriated into the articulation of events (Willett 2021). The challenge is to capture the creative processes of everyday life whereby young people become embedded in the social structure of places and how they learn to be themselves, challenge and/or accept their lives. Through new contacts and experiences, both visceral and tactile, individuals produce their own identities and stories of life that are sensed, represented and – importantly – retold to themselves and others.

The case study in this chapter illustrates the way that emotional and affective encounters with the more-than-human world can become both crystallized and mobilized through storytelling, photographs, verbal descriptions, and utterances and how images and words are part of the raft of representations that document the emotional resonance of affective encounters. The next section briefly highlights how emotional geographies of subjectivities were captured using auto-photography.

## Method, Memory, and Place

This work stems from a decade of research by the author with young people which broadly examines how the more-than-human world is encountered, remembered, and authored. The research used close ethnographies, including participant-directed photography, both stills and video, to examine the tensions, complexities, and inconsistencies of everyday life. Such methodologies reach into spaces that are not (physically) occupied by the researcher as the participants create images which are neither exclusively public (part of art, media, or other forms of visual culture) nor private. This chapter particularly pays attention to short videos created by rural youth, which on first examination appeared chaotic but were very much laden with memory-making using a visual lexicon completely comprehensible to young people themselves. These personal video images, in the vein of holiday snaps or aide-

memoires, are subject to different aesthetic conventions and expectations. The images depict routines and repeating moments in the young people's life histories, giving insight into their lived realities of rural space(s). The artifacts in the images were loaded with sentiments, visualizing the intangible. The images and their associated memories can be considered as moments in a self-narrative that become departure points from which a young person's story can be (re)built.

The intention here is to draw out the significance of individual experience to focus on the everyday rather than the extraordinary and to recognize the way that representations, encounters and emotions are drawn together into personal narratives. The concept of a narrative memory is an important component in making meaning about place; Crang and Travlou (2001, p. 173) identified how collective memory creates "pluritemporal landscape[s]" where the multiple histories of places are overlaid to generate the contemporary landscape thereby highlighting the multiple spatialities and temporalities of the here and now. Personal memory of the repetitive encounters with place(s) illustrates how *memories* of mundane spaces are not limited to the echoes of grand events but are equally reliant on the largely inconsequential actions and connections of individuals – the biographical moments of ordinary lives that Harraway (2016) alludes to. It is the role of memory in defining and evolving these 'small stories' that requires further attention in the lives of young people.

A way of addressing this concern with memory, affect and storying is to explore Bergson's research on *Duration, the Image, and Memory*. In *Time and Free Will: an Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (2012 [1889]), Bergson develops a concept of duration (Guerlac 2006) in which he underlines the temporality of existence. Bergson's duration is underwritten by a notion of 'qualitative multiplicity.' This multiplicity suggests that each moment (however constructed) is different in terms of its relational constitution. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson (2005 [1908], p. 66) raises the significance of memory for the individual's understandings of space and place, suggesting that without memory we have nothing but "simple signs of the real." For Bergson, the multiple stimuli of the now are meaningless without the interpretive framework of past experience. This referential role of memory ties neatly with the qualitative multiplicity of duration, that the perceived signs of the real are made significant through the connection to a past and an anticipatory future. This is not to conflate perception and memory or to suggest that they operate on a temporal continuum. According to Bergson, memory and perception can only be understood as an interaction, an intuitive interplay between past, present, and future. Memory, therefore, is crucial to how we respond to stimuli which constitute the here and now.

Bergson suggests that there are two forms of memory, one based in the corporeal (central nervous system) and one based in representation (process of learning). The corporeal memory or reflex memory goes beyond simple responses to particular stimuli. They include the performances and bodily processes, which were imprinted through evolution long before our birth, such as habitual responses to certain stimuli. Bergson's second form of memory – based in representation – is temporally anchored (it is the remembering of specific events). However, it is not spatially anchored. It is dispersed, fluid, and unfixed, present, but only apparent when drawn upon either by conscious or unconscious thought.

This re-emergence of the spatially unfixed memory is what Bergson calls the ‘memory image’. In Bergsonian terms, the memory image is neither an actual thing nor merely an appearance – it bridges the gap between the real and the ideal (Guerlac 2006).

These memory images are accumulations of meaning and glimpses of being. They are hypothetical, momentary, and unintelligible (except in conceptual terms). The memory image is the re-emergence, the re-spatializing of memories at particular moments. It is constantly changing and constantly reaching out along the temporal lines of existence connecting different pasts to the now and onto imagined futures through a process that I term as ‘storytelling memory’. Returning to Bergson’s concept of representational memory (i.e., the memory of phenomena or episodes in their temporal context), he refers to this temporally (but not spatially) fixed memory of events as the memory of imagination or regressive memory. They are regressive as they are dislocated from the present. This framing of dislocated memory as regressive has led Bergson to be (possibly unfairly) criticized (notably Lefebvre 2002 [1961]) for implying a linear understanding of time (Fraser 2008, p. 340). Regardless of whether Bergson intended a linear conceptualization of time, this “regressive memory” implies a programmatic process of remembering. Consequently, the concept of a “memory image” to highlight both the temporality of memory and the processes of remembering through the self-narration of memories, can be deployed as an explanatory tool. Narrative memory focuses on the process by which the memories are drawn upon to constitute memory images thereby giving insight into the understandings of the self *in situ*. My argument therefore centers on the tensions between the memory images and the processes by which young people use them to make sense of the self, space and place. In essence, while these memory images are – to a certain extent – spontaneous. They are also used to make accounts of the self as coherent and meaningful through self-narrative.

## Stories of Being Rural Youth

These Bergsonian memory images are not necessarily time-specific or indeed without time, but rather are constantly reworked in the now in an ongoing encounter of self with others (including multispecies and inanimate objects) that has a depth that cannot be determined. They interact with narrative to become stories that are by nature temporal; they do not have to be consistent or preclude the holding of contradictory perspectives. They merely provide a glimpse of how rural youth define their sense of self and place. However, memory images in and of themselves produce the illusion of everyday life as stable and resilient, when conversely young people’s lives maybe replete with narratives of otherness, vulnerability, and ultimately a vision of escape. Therefore, a storied self, it can be argued, can only be understood through an interpretation of contexts, connections and narratives that produce intimate and personal landscapes.

The remainder of this chapter focuses predominantly upon one young person and how they produce pluritemporal memories of place. Ellen (14 years old) lived in a village in England and acutely felt a sense of otherness based on her social position – living in social housing. The village is a linear settlement on an escarpment with a population of just over 400

people. Other young people in the village like Julie (17 years old) described it as “uninteresting, boring and there’s not a lot of night life . . . there’s one streetlight . . . it’s surrounded by empty fields and forests and whatnot.” Alex (15 years old) conversely reflected “it’s alright . . . not bad, cos like I’m into fishing an’ shooting and going up top with my uncle an’ getting us some rabbits.” However, for both Julie and Alex, the village was divided between a wealthy upper area and the poorer lower village. As Julie commented, “I dislike the whole sort of separating the community. But we can’t do a lot about it; it’s always been like that.” The majority of young people lived in the lower village (17 in total) and meet once a week at the village hall for a youth club.

Interpretations of how rural youth gain a glimpse of their selves have tended to draw on the role of families and social networks (Lee 2001) to the detriment of thinking through personal conceptualizations of place. Ellen’s sense of self can usefully be explained by applying Bergson’s theories of memory, narrative, and emotion to her experiences. Starting the analysis from the position that the space of her village is topologically complex, contingent, and temporal, within these fluid spaces, young people produce themselves through interpreting their sensual and/or representational accounts. Through this process young people build memories of places that can simultaneously position them across an array of senses and emotions from being included and excluded, vulnerable and confident, happy and sad, and bored and interested. Their memories are part of a creative process in which they learn to be themselves and challenge or accept their lives. This is a constant and iterative process of being embedded and disembedded within the social and physical structures of place. Although village spaces are not formally regulated, they are clearly coded by adults as spaces in which young people are out of place and in which their activities are unwelcome or inappropriate. For young people to find a place in which to belong therefore becomes a constant struggle of being regulated out of place. Ellen captured her sense of displacement through producing a short video diary.

Ellen’s short film demonstrates how her story of marginality, memory images, and identity are intrinsically woven together. The film captures the heterogeneous nature of her life and how the divisions within the village are felt emotionally. Ellen used the video camera almost as a stills camera, the result being a series of images which move very quickly across the screen. The video is in the style of a documentary with a brief narrative introducing each section. It can be condensed into four main images – all are of the lower village where Ellen lives. The first image (Plate 1) shows Ellen sitting in front of the family television watching MTV. This is quickly overlain with a series of images of the children’s playground, including the swings, climbing frame, football goals, and slide (Plate 2). The third set of images focuses on Ellen climbing a tree (Plate 3) and finally, the remainder of the video is a panoramic view of the upper village shot over the cricket field from the road outside Ellen’s parental home (Plate 4).

On initial viewing, the brevity of the film suggests that Ellen’s life is very dull and unfulfilling – it seems that there is so little to do here that Ellen requires only a short video. Indeed, how could she video a absence: a non-event or show how nothing means something? But this is far too simplistic an explanation of the images; the video diary calls up Ellen’s memories and sense of self beyond the assembly framed in the image. It illustrates how a young person’s way of seeing and storying their life makes the past a part of TV culture’s

curiosity shop of fragments with one image overlapped by another in quick succession. Images are problematic but by focusing on the awkward, already commodified, already positioned, already meaning-saturated, already violent practices of envisioning in making video diaries, it may be possible to escape a romanticism of popular representations of the countryside. Indeed, Ellen's documentary highlights the more fertile idea of the production of new imagined spaces that enable her to talk of otherness rather than using video to enframe the other as exhibit.

These clips act as a metaphor for Bergson's memory image; although they are fragments, instantaneous moments that appear dislocated, they are pluritemporal memories inherently connected to a variety of locales, moments and stories of self. As these images illustrate, Ellen lives a lot of her life beyond the village: she did not include many scenes of the countryside. She spends "as much time as possible" in her local town either with friends, her older sister, her parents, or at her grandmother's house, "going to shops and doing stuff you can't do around here" (personal interview with Ellen). However, the video shows that Ellen does also hang around the village. Indeed, she reports liking the village and the peace and quiet it affords her. Her family is from the village and she has many close relatives still living there. There are people there who make her feel safe, and it offers the spaces required for private communications between friends.

Yet there are also elements of the village she doesn't like: the clear structure between "the wealthy people on the hill and us down below" and the new houses which "only rich people can afford" (personal interview with Ellen). Here we begin to witness Ellen's sense of marginality. She does not feel marginalized by incomers *per se* or their conspicuous wealth (although she did comment that she was embarrassed that her parents did not own a car). It is their attitude she finds repressive, in particular, their dismissal of the rural poor as "bumpkins" and without the right to be in place.

The cumulative effects of the restrictions placed on Ellen and her friends by "those who run the village hall" leave her with little space in which to play – the children's playground (Plate 2), a few trees near her home (Plate 3), and a corner of the cricket field (Plate 4). These memory images in the film reflect instantaneous sections in the general stream of being, highlight how different memories she tells and retells to herself are overlaid and re-spatialized in different spaces. The bodily performance of climbing trees is an illustration of the reflex memories which enable the movement through the tree – a learnt awareness of which trees can be climbed and what branches can be trusted. Equally, the cricket pitch illustrates how her pluritemporal memory images help her narrate an awareness of the power structures in the village and how they butt up against the bodily reflexes of play to create competing spatialities of cognitive and reflex memory. These competing and varied memory images play out across the landscape of the village. All the sites are in the lower half of the village in public view, and Ellen feels she is under surveillance within them. While she recognizes that private space is hard to find in the countryside (especially as a number of adults know her in the lower village and because she shares a bedroom with her older sister), she also feels unable to occupy the more secluded spaces, such as the woods, in the upper half of the village. When she expressed that she felt unable to move into such spaces, she said that "it would be hard for her mum and dad, it'd make trouble for them." This demonstrates how she became bound into a moral topography of place.

Ellen felt a border existed in her village between the council estate and the upper village and that the border was patrolled by incomers and defended against young people from the council estate. She also felt the border was insidiously encroaching on her household. For instance, the neighboring home, formerly an estate house, had been sold to people working in Bristol. Thus, while the village at one level provides a safe environment for her to play and climb trees, surrounded by people she knows and trusts, at another level she felt an ever-growing sense of being ostracized from her home. Her tactic for coping with this sense of marginality is to spend “as much time as possible” in the nearby town (personal interview with Ellen). The town provides her with a sustainable memory of her identity located between home and elsewhere through creating a hybrid story of self. Each with a multiplicity of temporal meanings, and different meanings which can re-emerge, become re-spatialized in the variety of the contexts which constitute the now. Ellen is living with inconsistency, the overlaying of space with the multiple meanings that memory affords. Her pluritemporal memories are made up of a multiplicity of memory images in part drawn from TV, the town, and the multiple places of Willow Hill.

Ellen’s video is about structuring absence – her absence of self-esteem within the village and the absence of her life elsewhere. For her, the countryside does not afford the opportunity to perform her identity; therefore, the sites she chose to video were all tropes of survival – indexical signs showing a passage of time before she moves on, a movement she expects to achieve. Ellen believes the countryside is a good place to be if you can find space – as with other rural youth studies (Leyshon 2008). Although Ellen’s personal video diary is a unique journey, it only exists through the interaction of innumerable elements, which are constitutive of the time/space being explored. These elements of memory, practice, storying and performance are what define and produce places for young people. They are “an instantaneous configuration of positions” (de Certeau 1988, p. 116) that appear as a stable order of coexistent elements. These video/snapshots become “space” upon the addition of variables of velocity and direction, and it is through this participation in the creation of space, or of the countryside/city, that Ellen experiences place. However, the embodied performances of Ellen’s life are not holistically transferrable to images. This is not to suggest that these embodied performances do not have cognitive memories attached – they were learnt – but rather that her senses and synapses have become attuned so that the memory is no longer anchored as an event *per se*.

Identifying memory as a component of a wider system of understanding place through both perception and recollection permits investigation of how these sentient geographies interplay with the representational geographies of cognitive memory. This enables an engagement with the liveliness of representational experience. However, such memories do not occur outside of representation. The images do not capture the wider experience but serve as a point of departure for memory. In this way, the self is produced within the lexicographic processes of memory combining affectation, emotion, and knowledge (images and language) to produce a sense of place. The self is produced fluidly within an internal narrative dialogue made between relations of signs and symbols and the emplacement of those signs and symbols within memoried relational systems of knowing. This occurs in a continuous and iterative process of sensing, identifying, interpreting, (re)presenting, and making meaning. Place is fundamental to this process as it provides a position from which the self can speak to itself as well as others, not only by situating self-knowledge within the



self but also situating the self in a corporeal and physical geographical space. Hence, we talk from within ourselves, to outside ourselves and others, within a relational understanding of space. The story Ellen narrates to herself, and others is always being made and represents an identity project that is paradoxically the avoidance of being fixed – to either an identity or to a place – but rather a sense of striving for a sense of belonging and resilience to change.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

This chapter concludes by returning to the writings of Bergson and Harraway. The aim here has been to determine the extent to which an understanding of images and memory can provide a useful framework for capturing everyday spatial encounters. In attempting to address the question, the chapter has done two things: first, it has unpacked Bergson's theory of memory to examine the role that memory plays in the construction of the self *in situ*, and second, it has demonstrated the 'work' that place does for young people in their construction, articulation, and maintenance of identity, and how the interplay between the remembered as the 'here and now' is overlaid with the storytelling of 'there and then. This understanding hinges on the idea that the relationship between identity and place is dependent upon the accumulation and co-constitution of memories and visceral experiences, in the production of memory images that include complex social and tactile interactions and emotional stimuli, both with and within places.

The memory image is a spontaneous re-emergence of reflex and cognitive memories and is an active process continuously reaching out along various lines of experience. In this way, "memory is 'on' and working all the time, in our bodies, our subconscious, through our emotions" (Jones 2003, p. 27). Memories enable individuals to configure their place in the world moment-by-moment. Yet memories are not simply drawn from the past into a present, they are creatively brought into new conscious realms of being through the telling of stories about ourselves to ourselves and others. What Ellen's case study demonstrates is that memory can be considered as an actor in the defining of identity, not the passive residue of experience. What different memory images provide are assemblages of memory objects which can be used, shaped, and interacted with to create a logical and coherent sense of self through an evolving and fluid encounter with the world. These memory images are to a certain extent spontaneous, in essence 'found'; however, the way that they are put together is an articulation of their meaning. In this sense, that of the assembly of found memories to give emergent meaning can be best described as pluritemporal memories of place – a life of being in the world rather than one of becoming.

Young people choose how memories are used, altered, and rejected in a process of construction that is not an ordered replication of "how things happened." As DeSilvey (2007, p. 408) writes: "the act of connection and assembly works by a logic not of sequential reconstruction, but of association" in the production of a story of the self. This process echoes Harraway's (2016) *Staying with the Trouble*, in which she proposes a method of storytelling that is constantly open to the emergence self-stories from the "compost" of memories and connections to multiple time-spaces, other species and stuff. It recognizes

how stories can become radically decentered as individuals revisit and re-narrate complex past stories of the self through finding new associations or new collaborations. These can challenge taken for granted ways of thinking and being but equally they retain an awareness of how an individual arrived at this point in time/space. Understanding the self therefore requires a multibeing awareness to place in which other voices, other memories and other things cooperate in the production of place. Through her storied self, the fragments of rurality which constitute Ellen's life are apparent: she locates part of her identity in urban space, which is positively affirmed, and partly in rural space, which is negatively configured as a space in which she is prevented from performing aspects of her identity and is subject to the repressive social regimes at play in the village. Yet she identifies positively with many aspects of rural life, further evidence for how messy individual's connections to pluritemporal memories of place can become. However, her accounts, and the ways in which she connects the images of her documentary, exemplify her ability to utilize a poetics of narrative to attempt to reconcile the tensions present in her life. In her account, Ellen creates a storied self which erodes the lumpy inconsistencies of her emotional response to the world while simultaneously connecting her to rural and urban spaces. Identity therefore is not pure phenomenology but rather a form of reflexive hermeneutical phenomenology in which young people tenaciously attempt to contain the dynamics of temporal life by producing a framework for themselves from which to navigate through the complexities of their existence. This fluid interpretation of memory offers the potential to interpret and bring meaning to periods of radical transformation, from childhood to adulthood, in the lives of young people.

## Cross-References

"Black Neighbourhoods" and "Race", Placed Identities in Youth Transition to Adulthood

Rhythms and Flow: Timing and Spacing the Everyday

Space and Place in Studies of Childhood and Youth

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## Plates



**Plate 1 Watching MTV**

"It's a school holiday and we're sitting in" [Ellen and her friend Alice]



**Plate 2 Children's Playground**

"This is where we play games on a good day with the youth group"



**Plate 3 Up a Tree**

“It’s easy to climb trees”



**Plate 4 The Border**

“This is our local cricket pitch, we’re not allowed on the square but we’ve got the top left hand corner to play in. That’s not really enough space for us to play but we put up with it anyway”