

The new grey of memory: Andrew Hoskins in conversation with Huw Halstead

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Abstract

Andrew Hoskins – interviewed by Huw Halstead – discusses the tensions and paradoxes of memory and place in the connective era. Digital media liberate memory from the spatial archive, but they also create a connective compulsion and dependency, a disconnect from the present moment and a loss of control over memory. The overwhelming abundance and immediacy of digital data breed a placelessness of the digital traces of ourselves, an algorithmic narrowing of information, knowledge and life. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified this compulsion to record to such an extent that it may be considered a new memory boom, an obsessive desire to remember. Locative and mobile technology may seem to locate us in space more than ever before, but they do so in ways that are beyond our comprehension: our smartphones know more about our locatedness than we do, ushering in a ‘new grey’ in digital memory. Yet, it is critical to be aware of the variegated geography of connective memory – and of Memory Studies itself.

Keywords

Connective turn, COVID-19, digital memory, grey memory, hyperconnectivity, place

Halstead: Andrew, thanks for joining me – virtually, fittingly! I want to start by asking about the ‘connective turn’ (Hoskins, 2011a, 2011b). You’ve argued that digital technologies – and Web 2.0 and social media in particular – have fundamentally altered the way we remember and relate to the past. Given the close relationship between memory and place-making, could you say what, from your perspective, the connective turn has done to our relationship to place?

Hoskins: The connective turn is an ontological shift in what memory is and what it does. And in terms of space, it has reengineered memory. There’s a liberation of memory from the spatial archive. I’ve drawn on Ernst’s (2004) idea of a shift from archival space to archival time, the sense

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that memory is liberated from its traditional bounds in terms of place and space, be it the locale, the organisation, the institution. For me, connective memory is more about distribution: this notion of connectivity between minds and bodies, between the personal and the public, which both imprisons and liberates active human remembering and forgetting, creating whole new ways of sorting, sifting, seeing, using and abusing the past.

Let me give an example of how memory is undone in these conditions. On a small scale, instant playback on mobile phones transforms both the perspective on, and the memory of, the event. When children are shown a video of themselves immediately after an event, does this instant and third-person perspective hamper their own mental encoding and consolidation of what happened? As psychologists tell us, repetition and rehearsal are central to remembering, and, whether on the autobiographical level through smartphones or on the scale of millions of clips on YouTube, digital media are intervening all the time in this settling and sedimentation of the past.

Yet, this is also about distracting, overwhelming and blocking memory. Where people typically start with the relationship between media and memory is that media are seen in a very constructive and positive light. This idea that media are memory's principal champions is really dominant. I've always been uncomfortable with that. Increasingly, I see forgetting as much more significant than memory. It's very hard to shift our register from memory to forgetting. Right now, we're having a discussion that will appear in *Memory Studies*. It begs the question, what would a journal of *Forgetting Studies* look like? What would be its parameters, its canon? Between us, though we might disagree on a few things, I'm sure we could list the key concepts, theories and history of memory studies. But what would forgetting studies look like? What new insights would be made possible? And who would be its champions? David Rieff's wonderful work comes to mind.

In terms of place, personal data pours out of our smartphones wherever we are. We scatter digital traces of ourselves just through being social, through working or even by doing nothing: information pours out of our smartphones as we sleep. This is the placelessness of the digital traces of ourselves, our conversations, our memories. And that brings us on to the notion of 'grey memory': the sense that a conscious, active, willed memory is obscured in the digital era. We used to lend our individual, personal memories out to media; now we give them away. Borrowing from Floridi (2013), there's been a shift from a *reliance* on technology for memory to a *dependency*. This raises the question: at what cost? At what cost do we lose this active, willed and individually controlled memory? The past is caught up in the algorithmic narrowing of information, knowledge and life. The haste for the digitisation of everything seems at the expense of a clear understanding of the risks related to the ownership, use, access, costs and finitude of digital data.

Place has always been significant to memory, but it's also central to forgetting. Think of toxic memories, of places that have been defaced, pulled down, removed or erased, because the present finds intolerable the memories that were attached to those places. In one sense, these are simple solutions, even though it seems to me there is an oversimplification in presuming that destruction or erasure of place enables the forgetting of the toxic memory. But the problem in the digital age is, how do you erase digital memories? There's a whole range of political and personal responses to that question that seem to me to be inadequate and after-the-fact: the 'right to be forgotten', for instance, is like trying to close the stable door after the horse has bolted.

Let's take the example of Jimmy Savile, who sexually abused hundreds of victims over several decades of his career as a media personality in the UK. When all of this came to light, it posed a significant problem, because he was so much a part of Britain's popular cultural fabric, and institutionally connected to charities, to government, and to media corporations like the BBC. When you suddenly become associated with something so toxic, something from which you want to distance yourself, the immediate response is erasure. In terms of place, in a number of cases that

was quite easy to do: statues were taken down, his gravestone was removed, a memorial plaque at his former home in Scarborough was defaced with graffiti and then removed. But what happens when that horrific memory is articulated in connective media? How do you get rid of that?

In hyperconnective media you cannot erase the past, even though there seems to be this belief that you can just as easily as you destroy buildings, or plaques, or memorials. The BBC, for instance, edited Savile out of repeats of *Top of the Pops*, the programme he had presented over some years. That works on one level, but on another level it doesn't. In our era with YouTube and other digital media, you can't just erase all digital traces of people you don't like, it's impossible. And yet we still try it. We have this belief in erasure. And in some ways the digital age has given us a greater belief in our power to erase: I delete this photograph, I delete my Twitter feed, I close my Facebook account. There's a real disjuncture between this individual sense of power to control our digital traces, and the reality that we are walking into a new era, the age of the 'inverted archive' (Hoskins, 2021), that is no longer located in place and time, but rather follows us, consumes us, remakes us. It seems to me that the digital archive of me is paradoxically both scattered in time and space and yet ever-present, in that we are faced with a continuous confrontation with all of the self at once. This is the ultimate problem with the convergence between communication and archive. All our communicational acts are archival. We are archival in ourselves, and that fundamentally transforms the nature of memory and our capacity to control it.

Halstead: You mentioned 'grey memory', which you've described as a kind of shapeless and dif-fused memory in which the world around us slips out of focus as compulsive digital recording and sharing of the present becomes more important than experiencing it. In his contribution to this issue, Edward Relph expresses some similar reservations, describing a 'digital disorientation' as the overwhelming abundance of daily data renders our experience of place more fleeting, more distracted and less distinctive. And in my editorial, I note certain common concerns underpinning your discussion of grey memory and Relph's (1976) earlier critique of 'placelessness' – the erosion of meaningful place identities created by pre-digital mass media, mass transportation and commercialisation. Would you be tempted to characterise your 'grey memory' as 'placeless'?

Hoskins: Digital media have 'greyed' memory in the new memory ecology (Brown and Hoskins, 2010). This idea of a 'memory ecology' is to see our current inhabiting of a melting pot of intersecting and colliding mediated remembrances that (re)order the past by and through multiple connectivities of times, actors, events and so on. In this ecology, there is a digital blurring of what were once clearer and more contained representations through which society would catch a collective glimpse of itself, take stock, draw a line and also forget. In forthcoming work, Matthew Ford and I write of a 'new war ecology' (Ford and Hoskins, 2022) as a way of emphasising how new pervasive modes of participation in a hyperconnected environment implode the once more easily separable ideas of actors, representations and forms of war. In terms of both memory and war, the idea of an ecology emphasises the effects of an environment that is increasingly saturated by data and experienced within an 'information infrastructure' that mixes the human and the non-human. This work in turn draws upon an established tradition in media studies of 'media ecologies' (Fuller, 2007; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010; McLuhan, 1964). Are ecologies placeless? I guess this is the question pertinent to our current conversation. These new ecologies are defined by a persistence and pervasiveness to war and to memory that in some ways supersede place. It is useful to think of these questions in terms of archives, because the ultimate spatial metaphor of memory is the archive. How would you define an archive today? It isn't the dusty, fusty one with an index of cards with record keepers who knew exactly *where* a particular file or box could be found (even and

especially if it wasn't listed in the index). Rather, the archive today is the inverted archive, as we have discussed, which challenges the significance of place and location. Clearly, place and location are still important, but in many ways they are transcended, if not displaced, by connectivity, time and algorithmic search.

Put another way, the importance of place becomes entangled in digital cultures of sharing and remembrance. One of the real contradictions that I've tried to think through is that when we go to places that we see as significant to memory there is an obsession to record the place, and us in the place, digitally. This isn't new, but today it's on steroids. This sense that you've got to 'be there', *you* took the photograph and not someone else, even though the photograph is *exactly* the same as those that others have taken before you and already shared on social media. This brings us back to the shift from reliance to dependency. The 'compulsion of proximity' (Boden and Molotch, 1994) has been replaced with a 'compulsion of connectivity', but also a compulsion of recording and archiving. We capture and record so much today that we will never ever be able to revisit and review and make sense of it all, or even a fraction of it.

If we are not recording to review and to remember, then what are we doing? It is something about fulfilling a need in the present, rather than of the past or for the future. Maybe there is a security that comes with the moment of capturing. But for me, the act of recording has become more urgent than experiencing that which is recorded. Through search engines or our own personal archives, memory today seems really *available* to us, but I think the key term is what is actually *accessible*, what is actually *findable*. What is our capacity to actually mobilise the archive of our experiences so that we come to comprehend our past, or our lives, or our identities, or our relationships in a meaningful and functional way? We assume that everything is accessible because it's available, but that's not the case at all, even though we like to think it is.

Halstead: I find this question of what meanings might be derived from the very act of recording itself to be interesting. In his contribution to this volume, Christoph Bareither describes groups of visitors to the Berlin Holocaust memorial taking it in turns to grab staged photos of themselves gazing thoughtfully off into the middle distance, but only momentarily for the instant of capture before they walk off and the next person does the same. One interpretation of this would be that it constitutes a quite superficial and ephemeral act, a compulsion to take photos even though they are almost identical to those uploaded by others, and a mortgaging of the present moment to the notion of its future availability in digital media. But what Bareither argues is that, however staged, the *act* of capturing these images of thoughtful contemplation *in itself* functions to express meanings and emotions that the visitors derived from their experiences in the present moment; meanings and emotions that perhaps they struggled to articulate by other means. This may still constitute a compulsion to record, but perhaps in this way some colour seeps back into the grey of digital memory.

Hoskins: Recording transforms the memory. Coming back to the example of the parent and the child: the child is on a stage, doing a performance or a dance, the parent records it on an iPhone. Let's say I record my son doing a dance, he says to me, 'Daddy, can I have a look?' I show him the video. Does that change his memory of that event? He's no longer thinking about what he was thinking about when he was doing it, he now remembers it as something his father recorded from his father's point of view. The more we bring the digital into the moment, the less capacity the human mind has to imagine and wonder, to change and transform. There's some fixity there, which creates a memory issue going forwards.

Halstead: Picking up on this idea that through the compulsion to record we end up with a third person perspective on the memory of an event, might we likewise end up with a third person perspective on place?

Hoskins: It comes down to what we consider to be first person. Coming back to the Holocaust memorial, these photos are all placing the individual at a site, at a place, but they're all the same. There's a strange paradox: this sense of wanting to be seen and attached to the place in which the photograph was taken, and yet in a manner no different from how everyone has been seen there before. Maybe these photos are not about recording or about memory, perhaps they are more about ritual. There's a certain set of rituals or expectations of capturing certain moments in particular ways. You take the picture in a moment and then you move out of it, it's like you've done it, you've achieved what you set out to achieve. What is the value, the function, of that act? Is it just a ritual that everyone does? I certainly don't think it's about showing other people that photograph. You take so many photographs of yourself and others, what are the chances of you showing that photograph to someone in a very meaningful way? Maybe it's partly ritualistic.

Halstead: This brings us back to availability and accessibility, and I wonder if part of the compulsion to record is about the notion that you need to have something captured that, even if you never do, you could in theory refer to; to say, 'look, I was there!'

Hoskins: You're right, if aspects of our lives are not recorded, there's a sense that it was missed. Again, that is a dependency. We are no longer willing to depend on our own memories, and our own stories, and our own orality, and our own sense of shared memories. Without our introducing a digital lens on events it is as though they didn't exist. But there is also the function of the sociality of connectivity that comes through the uploading and the sharing of the most mundane to the most exceptional of experiences, and also the need for validation through likes, comments and more shares.

Halstead: In her article, Larissa Hjorth describes how, during the 3/11 disaster in Japan, people held tightly onto disconnected or powered down phones as a means of feeling connected with distant loved ones. It's the sociality of connectivity that drives this association between mobile devices and co-presence, such that the device retains affective significance even when it is no longer digitally connected or functional.

Hoskins: In the absence of other mementos and meaningful objects or memories of loved ones, of relationships, of times and events, yes, the communicational device – which is the archival device also – takes on a whole new meaning and significance, certainly. And today the smart phone is central to how we remember. It's such a prism on our everyday experience and lives that, for many people, it becomes difficult to imagine life or relationships without it.

Halstead: In my editorial, I refer to the novelist Gibson's (2014) fictional 'neoprimitives' in a near future who forego digital connectivity and seek technology-free lives, even opting to catch 'heritage diseases' for which immunity is widely available. From your perspective, to what extent in today's world is this kind of opting out actually possible? I'm thinking of your example of the 7/7 bombings (Hoskins, 2011a) and survivor John Tulloch's frustration when, sometime after the event, his own perspective on how he survived shifted, yet the media narrative of his survival that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the attacks continued to circulate unchanged. In a sense, he can't opt out, because his story proliferates digitally whether or not he engages with digital technology, and he would be liable to encounter this remediated story through interactions with others who remain digitally connected. Can we escape the 'hybrid space' (de Souza e Silva, 2006: 262) of the digital era and disconnect from the connective society?

Hoskins: A dependency becomes most visible when you are deprived of that which you are dependent on. For instance, those who attempt digital detox, or turn their smartphone off for a week or a month, as part of an experiment, invariably go back to it. Like any dependency. The very fact that people write about these moments or months or weeks without digital technology, just makes the

point that it is a dependency, that these times without connectivity are completely exceptional and difficult to deal with. It's why they make a good story. If you want to work in this world, and form relationships in this world, opting out isn't possible. It's kind of a grudging, reluctant acceptance that people who are critical about this have to live with. Once the story is out there, then everyone is able to tell the story, and even though John Tulloch's memory of the story, his meaning attached to the story, had changed completely, it was too late. Once something is out there, in the digital world, it is hard to rein it in.

The whole notion of being participatory in the digital era is a paradox to me. Because, yes, you're a participant, but can you stop being a participant? It feels very lively: you can delete stuff, you can upload stuff, you can tweet stuff. And these are the fundamental ways we are connected. But, I would say, they are also the fundamental ways of being archival. You're storing up an archive, potentially, of self and others that might come back to haunt you. And people still continue to offer up their personal data, suppressing their knowledge of the risks to the far corner of their consciousness.

Halstead: You and Tulloch (Hoskins and Tulloch 2016) call this 'hyperconnectivity' – how digital connectivities enfold past and present, leaving us constantly 'haunted' by the digital traces of our pasts. You characterise this as 'a feeling of connectivity of self to everything' (Hoskins, 2018). Does this hyperconnectivity multiply our place attachments and generate more dynamic place attachments, or rather overwhelm or swamp our capacity to develop distinctive place memories?

Hoskins: It's a good question. I guess in one sense you can be anywhere with hyperconnectivity. Certain times and places come together in how we remember things: what we were doing is often associated with where we were doing them. And I still think that holds to some extent, or perhaps especially, in this digital era. One of the ironies of the COVID-19 lockdown and global pandemic is the reversal of that notion. Many are stuck at home. Connectivity has made the place of home very different, not exceptional or distinctive but rather almost permanent, in the sense that there's no escaping it.

Hyperconnectivity for me is always a matter of dependency. The 'hyper' is about the inescapable, so it's not just about acceleration and intensification, it is about an overwhelming. And the multiplicity of connections is also another feature of that. If you think about Zoom meetings, you constantly have an array of dozens or even hundreds of people connected in ways that were traditionally only associated with co-present gatherings like seminars, conferences or meetings. And overnight that seems to have been replaced, or displaced, by Zoom. Okay, it was a forced shift, but it suggests that there's a certain placelessness to the modern existence, doesn't it? Before, there was significance and importance attached to a conference in terms of its locale. My memory of the 'Placeless Memories?' conference in York that led to this special issue is very much attached to place: my journey on the train down looking out along the rugged English coastline, the soulless campus room I stayed in the night before and which also prompted me to remember the very similar rooms in which I spent so much time as a student, the characterful pub where I met other participants, the layout of the room where the conference took place, and so on.

If we had that conference yesterday on Zoom, my memory of course would be fundamentally different. But would it be less in some ways? It certainly wouldn't include the rich detail and experience that made it more personal to me, so I would certainly characterise that as a loss. The events I have attended online since the pandemic began seem to quickly lose their distinctiveness, they blur into grey; I find it harder to remember my students' names and their contributions on a Zoom screen full of 40 windows, some of them displaying just a name, than if I had been co-present in the space and place of the seminar room, aware of their eye contact and body language in shaping

our unfolding interactions. Surely, the richness of the learning experience for all participants and their memories are diminished in such circumstances.

Halstead: One of the features of ‘grey memory’ is what you call ‘sharing without sharing’ – when social media becomes more of a compulsion than a genuine connective experience, such that we inhabit compulsive captivations of the world more than the world itself. It strikes me that this takes on a particularly interesting complexion in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing, when for many digital connectivity may be the only kind of connectivity available. Could you say a bit more about grey memory, and digital memory more broadly, in times of pandemic?

Hoskins: There was an op-ed posted in the French, Swiss and Belgian newspapers entitled ‘COVID-19: For an Ordinary Memory of the Extraordinary’ (Piguet and Montebello, 2020). The authors, Myriam Piguet and Caroline Montebello, called for the creation of an inclusive and intersectional memory of the pandemic, which would recount the ordinary, the everyday, the ‘vies minuscules’ of the pandemic. Indeed, over the past few months, we’ve seen a new mass memory of the crisis being vigorously accumulated, directed by hundreds, if not thousands, of individual, institutional, amateur and official calls to collect, record and archive stories, images and artefacts.

These calls are at least in part driven by the connective turn: the immediacy, connectivity and volume of digital data and information, which in turn enables a participative culture of remembrance. Connective or participative memory is where anyone – including interested parties from around the globe – can share their experiences and images, comment, and promote their preferred versions of the past. There is a new velocity to the forging of and contestation over what the memory of an event will be or look like, before the event has ended. This is precisely the memory and media culture in which the COVID-19 global crisis emerged.

This brings us again to my point at the very beginning of our conversation: this absolute assumption that memory is for the best, that we *should* remember, that we should take every means to document every single part of the pandemic and our experiences of it. And Reiff (2016) would probably say, ‘really?’

The question to ask then is, firstly, what if we didn’t? And, secondly, what is this going to lead to? What kind of memory will result out of this obsession, especially this kind of moral imperative to remember? Where does this come from? It’s so pervasive in some cultures. You can say that it develops or accelerates from 20th century mass warfare, and the need to honour the dead, honour the victims and to prevent, through learning lessons, a particular catastrophic event from happening again. I understand aspects of that may be applicable to the global pandemic, but not all of them. The contemporary obsession and desire to document and remember is shaped through our relationship to digital technologies and to a false sense of security afforded through the ease and routinisation of our capturing of present experience. That seems to me to offer a suspect basis for any future capacity to review, revisit and, relatedly, remember that experience. Even though I see some of these attempts to secure memory as perfectly laudable and reasonable in themselves, we must ask: What does this whole picture add up to? How will it be used? How will it be accessible? And by whom? Partly, all of this is a product of our capacity to document. We can, so we feel we must.

But we can also ask, how will the pandemic be forgotten, rather than how will it be remembered. If you turn the question on its head, then what aspects are being and will be forgotten? There’s this emphasis on a sort of Blitz mentality and a kind of ‘carry on regardless’ approach. What does this hide of people who aren’t coping, or who are suffering from mental illness or other aspects of it? In some ways, a huge, amazing, tsunami of digital memory is obliterating and obscuring and blocking out other vital aspects of the pandemic.

Certain people might come back to me and say, ‘well, isn’t this an amazing, mass memory? Isn’t this a democratic, diffused and varied memory?’ Again, the memory of the multitude is this

paradox, who ultimately will come to shape what memory counts and what doesn't? And more importantly, what is forgotten? Ben O'Loughlin and I talk about a 'third memory boom', the obsession – caused by digital technology – to record everything as it is unfolding (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010). This is in contrast to crises and catastrophes often seen as synonymous with memory of the 20th century (and particularly world wars) initially marked by periods of limited and mostly private recollection, denial, unspoken trauma and non-memory only to be publicly and officially commemorated or memorialised, and it seems, without much reservation, many years later.

But responses to the global pandemic seem to take memory as we understand it to a new place. This is unfolding in and shaping a fourth memory boom that ironically becomes detached from any kind of reality of the past. This is memory of the present for the present, rather than in any practical sense a memory of the present for an ever-realizable human future. What is also extraordinary about this event is that the memory of the pandemic was a memory waiting to happen. It was a memory that was pre-ordained or pre-mediated in the datafied infrastructures of our time. And the ultimate irony of the fourth memory boom is that whilst so many are pursuing the strategy of the preservation of the human everyday ('we must remember *this*'), the very same technologies are pursuing a strategy of preserving us – our data, so that we are known more than we know our own selves and our own pasts.

Halstead: You talk about the connective turn as a fundamental shift in how people remember, but to what extent is this new digital media ecology felt differently – or to different degrees – by different groups of people in different places? How, in other words, would you characterise the geography of connective memory?

Hoskins: I see these things as connected. I use the term 'ecologies' of remembering and forgetting. These are shaped culturally, socially, politically, economically and geographically. To use the term ecology means that you implicate all of these different aspects that impose themselves or shape remembering and forgetting. Winter (2015) refers to two memory regimes in the world: Europe, North America, maybe Australasia; and then a separate memory regime in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and parts of Asia. And whilst that's important, in terms of these different geographies of memory, the Western geography of memory has been absolutely defining for the concept of memory studies. So, geography is absolutely important in defining the very basis, the very roots and foundations of highly influential conceptualisations of memory. In terms of how countries come to conceive of the importance of memory, geography is really important. If you put that now in the digital age, there's an interesting corollary: the introduction of social media like Facebook into ecologies without such a developed history of the Internet and social media as we have, for instance, in the UK. If you consider that technological developments are also regionally and geographically specific, that shapes what is possible in terms of memory. So, take the example of Myanmar with the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims, and how Facebook was used by the military and the government in a country that had little history of understanding how social media works. When technology is introduced there's always a sense that there's a rupture, if you like. The time at which particular technologies are introduced into a particular region or area with a particular technological or media history, I think, absolutely shapes the extent to which they are potentially exploited. In some countries without a developed understanding of the mechanics and the culture of social media, a kind of digital literacy, there is greater vulnerability to more terrible forms of the exploitation of technologies, including in the spreading of hate and the perpetration of violence.

Halstead: Several of the contributions to the special issue pinpoint cases in which digital technology, for all its novelty, has in fact failed to penetrate pre-existing power structures, social geographies and structural inequalities. We talked before about ‘opt outs’ from the connective society, and the extent to which that’s even possible, but I suppose the flipside of that is the kind of ‘shut outs’ or ‘forced outs’, the people who are not opting out of the connective society but are perhaps disconnected from it (or aspects of it) because of these pre-existing power structures or structural inequalities that digital technology has not – or at least, not yet – erased.

Hoskins: Absolutely, I quite agree. And that is why this notion of participation is kind of interesting: participation by whom for whom? I talk about, particularly in the West, this notion of a digital ideology of openness, of unbridled commentary, ‘freedom of information’ and so on, this sense that open access is a good thing in itself. And I don’t quite buy it, because it deludes us, I think, into being more open, sharing more data, giving away more, all because of this notion that there is an intrinsic good to openness. Meanwhile, the past, for all its apparent digital abundance, is diminished through the algorithmic narrowing of information, knowledge and life (Hoskins, 2021).

Halstead: In his article, Daniel Willis uses this phrase ‘politics of placelessness’ in a similar way that you are using the digital ideology of openness. This idea that once data have been made open access, and therefore theoretically available to anyone from anywhere, inequalities will take care of themselves. And he critiques this by showing how an initiative in Peru intended to democratise access to archives by placing them online is limited by the fact that the people most excluded from public mnemonic and historical meaning-making processes tend to occupy remote regions with poor digital connectivity.

Hoskins: Quite. Again, accessibility: that memory, that knowledge seems available, but it’s not accessible. That’s a really important distinction, and we tend to conflate availability with accessibility. Digitisation has always been seen as a panacea. In the early days, there was a tremendous move to try to digitise everything. And this absolutely applies as well to the pandemic, that if we can capture everything about it, or what we think should be captured about it, that this memory will work in a particular and somehow functional way, but there’s no real sense of what the future memory of the pandemic will look like. I’m uncomfortable with how this obsession to remember is seen as a good in itself and also a dominant mode through which we are experiencing things.

Halstead: Silvana Mandolessi, in her contribution to this issue, talks about the research group Forensic Architecture’s digital reconstruction of places that are either very fleeting, like the scene of a bomb explosion pieced together through scattered social media photos and images, or that are inaccessible or intangible, as in the case of prisons remembered in a highly fragmentary manner by people who were held in conditions of sensory deprivation. Anna Reading and colleagues similarly discuss in their paper how Extended Reality in migration museums allows for the ‘remixing’ of multiple places of migration experience and representation. This seems to me rather different from the loss of place distinctiveness that we might associate with Zoom and videoconferencing: you’ve got digital technology being used to create or recreate places that otherwise couldn’t exist or would be imperceptible. And I think also of the destruction of Palmyra and its virtual reconstruction as #NEWPALMYRA (see <https://newpalmyra.org/>). Or, conversely, of online communities whose forums and platforms constitute distinctive places where they encounter familiar people, idioms, memes and images, and the potential for a very real kind of place loss if these virtual places abruptly disappear, for instance because of technological changes or domain ownership issues. So, there’s this capacity as well for digital technology to be place-creating and place-enhancing.

Hoskins: Forensic Architecture is really interesting, in terms of both new imaginaries and old imaginaries. There's a point made by Pomerantsev (2019). He argues that we've got these huge archives of human rights abuses, sitting in organisations, terabytes of data, sitting there awaiting to acquire meaning. So, you might say, what meaning does it have now? We've got incredible archives of abuse by all kinds of people that are available, but they're not accessible. It's pointless having the most incredible human rights archive of abuses in history if no one can do anything with it, because of a lack of resources, technology or political will. Having an archive doesn't mean it is a useful archive. Illingworth and I see this as a part of a trend towards 'inaccessible war' (Hoskins and Illingworth, 2020). This brings us back to the global pandemic and to the fourth memory boom. We need to ask what the accumulation from the thousands of calls to collect, record and archive stories, images and artefacts of experiences of the pandemic will ultimately add up to? What of this glut will ever be rendered accessible and useful? What meaning will ever be afforded to it beyond the moment of its capture?

Halstead: I want to ask you as well about locative technology and what this specifically does to the grey of memory. Does it make memory and place-making more dynamic and productive, pushing back against the grey of digital cloud memory? Or does it do the opposite, making engagements with places all the more ephemeral, fleeting and superficial?

Hoskins: It's a new grey, isn't it? It's a new obscuration, a new form of knowing you. It does locate you, but it locates you in a way that is beyond your understanding. The overarching point about grey memory is that you lose a sense of knowing who has your digital traces and to what ends they can be put. Knowledge of your journeys, your relationships, your identity, the things you like, your sexual preferences: there is an astonishing body of data about ourselves that we routinely give away. The technology knows us much better than we do ourselves. This is what I call '**the unremembered self**'. That, for me, is the grey: it is the obscuring of our own sense of our personal memories. Because often we can't remember: I can't remember where I was last week (okay, I was probably at home!); *but my smartphone knows*. So, the technology, the data, those who can aggregate and cross-reference them, they have a better understanding of our identities and ourselves than we do, bizarrely. We've lost control, or at least conceded it, obviously in exchange for access to digital services; and that's why we don't withdraw from it. There's the example of the Strava fitness app, which was tracing people's running routes and uploading them to digital maps; and when those users were, for instance, soldiers those maps could in turn reveal where military bases are situated (Hern, 2018). So, the technology can visualise more about our locatedness than we can. That's the paradox. We are located, but we are located in ways that are impossible to locate ourselves.

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