2
‘Auto’ Is Not Automatic

What greater thing is there for two human souls
than to feel that they are joined...
to be at one with each other
in silent unspeakable memories

George Eliot

The stories in the last chapter are Opal’s reflections. In this book these stories will be interpreted through a lens of autobiographical memory. To do this it is important that we begin with an understanding of how autobiographical memory is envisaged within the dominant paradigms from memory studies because, as mentioned in the Introduction, a common language is essential to an interdisciplinary analysis if we are to be able to create meaningful engagement. Therefore, before proceeding with the analysis I will outline the framework for memory that is most generally accepted. A rigid, uncritical application of any scientific scheme such as this in cross-cultural research would be questionable and indeed through the course of this book many aspects of this paradigm will be problematized.

Paradigms of memory

Precise definitions of memory are hard to come by in part because, as Wittgenstein says, ‘many very different things happen when we remember’.² Our memories are bound up in our emotions, our sense of self and through this our current state of mind entangles our past. It is therefore necessary to look at different aspects of the memory framework in order to develop a shared notion of what is meant by autobiographical memory.
In a broad sense memory can be broken down into three main forms. Firstly, there is ‘episodic memory’, which is the form of memory most people think of when they think of memory, as it is in relation to this type of memory that we most naturally use the phrase ‘I remember’. Episodic memories are our memories of experiences; for example, I remember typing the last sentence, I remember having breakfast, I remember my first kiss. This kind of memory is often called ‘mental time travel’ because it is in this kind of remembering we are most tied to previous experience as our own experience. While the term ‘episodic’ brings to mind ‘episode’, this form of remembering can be general or specific and can encompass varying durations. Another common subset of memory is ‘semantic memory’, a term coined by Edward Tulving to distinguish this form of declarative memory from episodic memory. Semantic memory is a term used to describe our ‘general knowledge’ or memories of facts. For example I was born in the United States. I don’t ‘remember’ being born but I know that I was born and I know that this happened in the United States. Semantic memory also refers to the memory of meanings, understandings and other concept-based knowledge which is unrelated to specific experiences. This includes the conscious recollection of factual information and general knowledge about the world. For example, I can know that $2 + 2 = 4$ without specifically recalling any episode in my life where I learned such information. Importantly, semantic memory is also implicated in forming ‘associations’ – relationships between two pieces of information. Relational association formation is fundamental to the structures underpinning much cultural variation in remembering. Such association is also of fundamental importance for the ways in which we culturally attend to the world.

The first two forms of memory listed here, episodic memory and semantic memory, are often referred to collectively as ‘declarative memory’ and stand in contrast to ‘non-declarative memory’, particularly ‘procedural’ memory. Procedural memory is a label that refers to memories people have in relation to performing specific activities like playing the guitar, typing or playing a sport. Interesting literature is emerging in relation to this form of memory, particularly with regard to somatic storage, looking at how these kinds of memories are held in bodies as well as brains. There are many ways that culture and the body interact within this form of memory. For example, anthropologist Paul Connerton looks at how bodies remember the traditions and practices of a group. In his treatment of ceremonies and the body he says: