

Generations and Memory: A Meeting of Modern Concepts and Postmodern Questions

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In this issue of *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*, you will find authors as well as book and film reviewers on four continents considering what oral history can reveal today about how the social groupings of generations engage in understanding their place in history, in receiving or passing on such understandings and other forms of knowledge, and in altering, forgetting, or even withholding them. This issue was co-edited by Yumi Ishii and me; as she is one of the issue's authors, it is to me that the honour of introducing our joint endeavour falls.¹ When we first conceived of this project and made a call for author submissions, it seemed possible that we would receive a submission about oral histories of being taught how to quilt by one's grandmother – in other words, a submission focused on continuities of knowledge between familial generations, set in a socio-historical context marked by only gentle, quiet change. Instead, the works in this issue, resound with the paroxysms of regimes and empires, with the clanging machineries of global wars and the clashes of grand ideological schemes.

World War I, and the nexus of events associated with it, especially reverberate through this issue, in both its substantive topics and its central concepts. In Sonja Andrew's article, you will read of oral histories with the family of a man in the United Kingdom who conscientiously objected to this war, while in Derya Firat and her coauthors' work, you will read of Armenians whose lives remain overshadowed by the genocide perpetrated in the crumbling Ottoman Empire as this war drew to a close. Russia's ignominious defeats in World War I helped to spur the rise of socialism and communism. The potential and the discontents associated with these ideologies and their realizations often resonate in this issue too, for example, in Raimundo Frei's observations of youth who participate in socialist movements in Chile and Argentina, in Hiroshi Murai's review of a book about Chinese pro-democracy protestors, and in Iraida López's review of a study of different generations of Cuban migrants to Spain. And, in Germany, the political and economic instabilities of this initial world war would give rise to the next and its fresh horrors. The travails of Chinese villagers at the frontlines of the Sino-Japanese war, of Japanese orphans left behind in China, and

¹ My thanks to Riley Chisholm, Deborah Davidson, Zhipeng Gao, Amber Gazso, and Michael Scott-Collins for their thoughtful remarks on this introduction; and to Robert Rutherford, Mickey Vallee, and Lesley Wood for their sage input early in the editorial process.

of children who survived the Holocaust are represented here, respectively, in the writings of Yumi Ishii, Zhang Lan, and Rebecca Clifford.

The cataclysm of modernity's first global war also informs how today's oral historians understand the relations of memory, self, and narrative. In particular, you will find this issue to be imbued with psychoanalytically-informed perspectives on trauma, the influence of these had grown as the military hospitals of World War I attempted to grapple with waves of soldiers suffering from what we now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. (At the time, one explanation held that these soldiers had a form of concussion induced by the explosions of shells.²) In these perspectives, trauma is understood to ransack the stores of memory, concealing memories at one turn, only to haphazardly fling them forth, unbidden at the next; Zhipeng Gao's review of the film *Red Amnesia* positions uneasy memories as a ghostly haunting. Oral historians' understandings of trauma are linked up with notions of the self as essentially a narrative-in-process. A traumatized self is understood to produce a fractured oral history, one that requires, as Ivana Maček and Zhang Lan each discuss, a finely attuned listener and co-constructor. Narrators' efforts to turn the incomprehensible into the meaningful is often understood as a sign of their resilience, of the capacity to heal their selves.³ But also it signals the ways in which remembering and narrating are not private psychological activities so much as profoundly social and, in these pages, the work of generations.

Finally, the concept of the 'generation' itself was also transformed by the war and, more broadly, by the rapidity of modern social change. As Raimundo Frei explains, this concept had previously been associated with continuities and social reproduction within the sphere of the family. But, in Karl Mannheim's 1927 essay on "The Problem of Generations,"⁴ a generation came to be formulated as the basis of a standpoint that cohorts of young adults, all experiencing the same period of dramatic events in the public sphere, *might* come to share. Research has shown that generations, conceived of in this sense, can be associated with their own identities, forms of belonging, and moral claims.

² Marc-Antoine Crocq and Louis Crocq, "From Shell Shock and War Neurosis to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A History of Psychotraumatology." *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 2, no.1 (2000): 47–55.

³ The cultural particularities of this model and the associated conceptions of the self can be questioned (see Katherine Bischooping and Amber Gazso, *Analyzing Talk in the Social Sciences: Narrative, Conversation and Discourse Strategies* (London, UK: Sage, 2016), pp. 25-26 for a summary). For the authors in this issue, however, the model appears quite serviceable.

⁴ Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," pp. 276-322 in Paul Kecskemeti (ed.), *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1952 [1927]).

Katherine Bischooping, "Generations and Memory: Modern Concepts Meet Postmodern Questions" *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017), Special Issue on Generations and Memory: Continuity and Change.

Further, narrators may use this idea of generations to make sense of otherwise incomprehensible pasts: the idea allows changes in abstract social structures to be spoken of in terms of concretely-visible cohorts, and can permit violent discontinuities to be spoken of in terms of logical successions.⁵

However, a notion of generations borne of modernity must contend today with postmodernism's provocations, with its affinities for the messy, the local, and the emergent, and its keen eye for the ubiquitous workings of power. In this issue, you will find oral historians meditating on such themes. Several of these scholars consider how to bridge the gap between asserting the fixity and primacy of generational identities and acknowledging that, today, identities are understood to be fluid, situationally emergent, multiple, and intersecting. Other scholars complicate the binary between conceiving of generations as sources of change in the public sphere and as sources of continuity within the familial sphere.⁶ Even though memory scholarship is often dominated by contrasts between what is transmitted in the macro context of the state and the micro context of the home,⁷ in this issue, Rebecca Clifford and Yumi Ishii show that generations do consequentially come into play elsewhere. Likewise, although empirical findings have often supported Mannheim's proposition that young adulthood is the life stage in which a generation may come into being,⁸ in these pages you will find

⁵ Although the narrators in this special issue largely experience generational identities and historical logics positively, these are not without hazard. Davis demonstrates how the counterpart of generational belonging can be exclusion of the generational 'other'. Further, per Kansteiner, a logic in which history is produced by generational change can mask some of the more insidious continuities among generations (e.g., of prejudice); per McDaniel, such a logic masks how change is influenced by macro level social factors, and can thus serve hegemonic interests. (See: Mark Davis, *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism* (St Leonard, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1997); Wulf Kansteiner, "Moral Pitfalls in Memory Studies: The Concept of Political Generations," *Memory Studies* 5, no. 2 (2012), 111-113; Susan A. McDaniel, "Generationing Gender: Justice and the Division of Welfare," *Journal of Aging Studies* 18 (2004), 27-44.)

⁶ Susan A. McDaniel, "Generationing Gender"; Camille Peugny & Cécile Van de Velde, "Re-thinking Inter-Generational Inequality," *Revue française de sociologie* 54, no. 4 (2013), 641-664.

⁷ Jan Assmann's contrast of the cultural memory of the state (expressed, for example, in monuments and formal commemorations) to the communicative memory of the family has been particularly influential here. (Jan Assmann. "Communicative and Cultural Memory," pp. 109-118 in A. Erll and A. Nünning (eds in collaboration with S.B. Young), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008).) However, as Mickey Vallee's review, in this issue, shows, memory scholars have increasingly been troubling this divide.

⁸ Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, "Generations and Collective Memories," *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 3 (1989), 359-381; Howard Schuman, Roberto

Katherine Bischooping, "Generations and Memory: Modern Concepts Meet Postmodern Questions" *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017), Special Issue on Generations and Memory: Continuity and Change.

scholars who provide remarkable examples of the significance of childhood in the formation of generations – or of young children as communicators of historical memory.

Finally, you will read scholarship that reflexively considers how the crisis of representation⁹ plays out in work on generations and memory, with regard not only to the power dynamics of interviewer-respondent relations, but also to questions of poetics. Specifically, such contributions – especially a passage in Renee Lulam’s work– renew questions about the capacity of language, which is so inescapably a medium of oral history, to communicate meaning with certainty. Moreover, these contributions underscore the potentials of working in and with multiple media.

Now, to the particulars of the works through which these themes ripple. Research on the legacy of the Armenian genocide for the descendants of its survivors has quite often been conducted in the Armenian diaspora in North America, or – albeit with difficulty – in Turkey, a state that continues to deny the genocide and to persecute those who commemorate it. Derya Fırat and her coauthors, Barış Şannan, Öndercan Muti, Öykü Gürpınar, and Fatma Özkaya champion the use of Marianne Hirsch’s ‘postmemory’¹⁰ concept as an analytic tool for understanding how trauma can echo through the psyches of multiple generations. In contrasting the identities, memorial practices, and visions of justice put forth by the “4th generation” of Armenians living in Armenia to those living in Turkey, this group of researchers advances our understanding of how an umbrella label for a generation may contain a multiplicity of standpoints, transnational and otherwise. Recognizing this, Fırat et al. call boldly for a politics of remembrance, reconciliation, and peace, making the case that it must incorporate this multiplicity.

Like Fırat and her team, Raimundo Frei juxtaposes a setting in which the present is narrated as disconnected from the past, with a context in which past and present are understood to be intimately tied. He asks how and why it is that young Chilean activists constitute their generation as ruptured from those past, while their Argentine counterparts perceive themselves to be carrying the banners of

Belli, and Katherine Bischooping, “The Generational Basis of Historical Knowledge,” pp. 47-77 in James W. Pennebaker, Dario Paez, and B. Rimé (eds), *Collective Memories of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives*, (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1997); Howard Schuman and Amy Corning, *Generations and Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁹ James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

Katherine Bischooping, “Generations and Memory: Modern Concepts Meet Postmodern Questions” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 37 (2017), Special Issue on Generations and Memory: Continuity and Change.

their predecessors. Frei's answers lie not only in the contrast between Chilean and Argentine political developments. He also offers a close and elegant reading of early and recent generational scholarship, one that eschews ready binaries, rejects "a 'frozen' youth-oriented generational frame" (p.6), and avoids the notion of history as progress. Using this reading, Frei succeeds in characterizing youths' historical narratives as inherently emergent and responsive to multiple contexts, including those of the family, social media, and networks of peers and activists.

Two other works in this issue especially advance our understanding of contexts beyond those of state versus family. Yumi Ishii's inquiry, set among Chinese villagers living in the region that had been on the frontlines of the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945, has an unusual and creative focus. Although the villagers' stories of the war were disparate and heterogeneous, Ishii noticed that their nightmares were as patterned as any genre, following common plots and containing common imagery, even when the villagers experiencing them were too young to have known the war at first-hand. Ishii's analysis deftly teases out how the village context figures in this phenomenon, for example, in how open-air showings of movies about the war became a catalyst for elders' storytelling, and in how the shared work of collective farming deepened intergenerational interaction. Her findings overturn an assumption, long-held in memory studies, that it is only in the family that generations participate in daily, in-depth, and emotionally impassioned interaction.¹¹

Rebecca Clifford, meanwhile, turns an analytic lens upon the 1983 American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust survivors, a context in which a new generational identity came into its own. That the generation in question had, in childhood, survived the Holocaust, Clifford points out, handily overthrows Mannheim's conception of generational standpoints as responses to the events of young adulthood. These survivors were instead well into middle age before they began to formulate a shared standpoint, one based on the profound consequences of shared events of their early lives – events that, again *contra* Mannheim, they could often barely remember. Clifford's study is especially revealing because she draws upon oral histories conducted in 1983 and then again, years later. Her methods afford us glimpses of how these survivors' new sense of themselves would unfurl, influencing their personal and family lives as well as inform today's 'commonsensical' understanding that child Holocaust survivors matter.

The next author robustly maintains that in projects contrasting states' historical narratives to those of families, the family has gotten short shrift. Asking how it is that constellations of facts and affects are familiarly transmitted and

¹¹ See, for example, Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall. *'Opa war kein Nazi': Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001).

Katherine Bischooping, "Generations and Memory: Modern Concepts Meet Postmodern Questions" *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017), Special Issue on Generations and Memory: Continuity and Change.

transformed, Ivana Maček gives us a window into the lives of a family in Sweden, as its four members narrate and renarrate the father's experiences of war in the former Yugoslavia. One of Maček's most fascinating contributions is to show that the transmission of historical memory within the family is not uni-directional: having told a story of war to his sons, the father here listens to the son's renarration of the story and finds his own heart lightened. Maček's work is also unusual in interpreting children's drawings of the war in tandem with spoken narratives. Abandoning the certainties of language-based data might seem a risky choice for an oral historian; I call it an exciting one, and a natural extension of understandings of talk itself as situationally emergent, co-constructed, embodied, performative,¹² and altogether less definitive than our transcripts may make it seem.

Renee Lulam's project, the culmination of over a decade of oral history research, asks how Mizos, a community from India's North Eastern borderlands, have negotiated the shattering of memory produced by state-organized violence. The link between this inquiry and Ivana Maček's is an acute attention to the media through which memories and meanings are transmitted. For example, Lulam discerns that the forced relocation of Mizo villagers also meant a brutal dislocation of the memories that had been caught up in their land use practices and landscapes. As the Indian state censored the highly literate Mizos' written expression, Lulam shows that they turned to older, oral traditions, especially song, to communicate their grief and longing. Today, in a far-flung diaspora, she shows Mizos to avail themselves of social media to carry on community-building and remembrance. In these actions by state and Mizos alike, the media of memory are essential to the message being communicated.¹³

In reading Lulam's work with an eye for its postmodern elements, I found one of the most telling passages to concern a tactic of relocated Mizos who had missed the army curfew: "If they happened upon a patrol, they would pretend to make an important announcement, usually shouting out gibberish to ensure the community was not unduly alarmed. The patrolling *jawans*, who had no

¹² See Bischooping and Gazso, *Analyzing Talk*, pp.182-185.

¹³ This Marshall McLuhan-like framing of 'medium and message' can be applied to Lulam's findings; within collective memory research, her findings may also be seen as a response to Jeffrey K. Olick's call to look at the relation between 'mnemonic practices' and 'mnemonic products'. (See: Marshall McLuhan, "The medium is the message," pp. 23-35, 63-67 in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1964); and Jeffrey K. Olick, "From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products," pp. 151-161 in A. Erll and A. Nünning (eds in collaboration with S.B. Young), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008).)

Katherine Bischooping, "Generations and Memory: Modern Concepts Meet Postmodern Questions" *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 37 (2017), Special Issue on Generations and Memory: Continuity and Change.

knowledge of the local language, would let the young men go their way.” (p.11) That deliberately meaningless words can simultaneously convey two meanings pulls the ontological rug out from under us; it is an oral history equivalent to René Magritte’s painting ‘This is not a pipe’¹⁴ and to Erwin Schrödinger’s simultaneously lucky and luckless cat.¹⁵

Such uncertainty underscores the urgency of reflexivity, of reflection on how our methods and our standpoints shape the knowledge that we produce. Although several authors in this special issue take this up in their methods sections or afterwords, it is the central concern of Sonja Andrew and of Zhang Lan. Continuing in what has become a welcome tradition for *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale*,¹⁶ Andrew offers an informative account of the process of translating oral histories into artistic installations. Her textile works are of a luminous and solemn beauty. Moreover, in what we believe to be a first for an oral history journal, Andrew also discusses the rigorous process by which she investigated how viewers interpreted these works when she displayed them without any explanations alongside; if we continue to use a ‘translation’ metaphor, we can understand this as a process of back-translation. Through this inquiry, Andrew reveals how generational cultures as well as broader cultural codes could contribute to viewer interpretations that were, at times, jarringly different from what she intended.

For her part, Zhang Lan has for several years studied ‘Japanese orphans’, the group of Japanese children left behind in China at the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War as the Japanese army retreated. Often facing exclusion in China, many of the orphans moved to Japan much later in their lives, only to find that painful experiences of discrimination would continue to dog them there. Lan delineates how her positionality, as a Chinese scholar who had studied in Japan and who is fluent in both countries’ languages, figured into building rapport for this sensitive inquiry, interpreting participants’ language choices, understanding the interviews’ cultural nuances, and framing analyses for the eyes of readers in both countries.

If I might close on a personal note, it would be to consider how my standpoint as a sociologist, methodologist, and onetime Holocaust researcher,

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, at his most accessible, offers an engaging interpretation of this painting. (See Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe* (J. Harkness intro. and trans.) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press).)

¹⁵ Erwin Schrödinger, “Die gegenwärtige Situation in der Quantenmechanik,” *Naturwissenschaften* 23, no. 48 (November 1935), 807–812.

¹⁶ The special issue of *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* that Michael Kilburn edited in 2014, on “Human Rights and Oral History: Stories of Survival, Healing, Redemption, and Accountability,” was the first to include artistic works.

Katherine Bischooping, “Generations and Memory: Modern Concepts Meet Postmodern Questions” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 37 (2017), Special Issue on Generations and Memory: Continuity and Change.

trained in the United States, writing in Canada, and working primarily in English, similarly influences this introduction and the works that Yumi Ishii and I present here. She and I would sometimes speculate about how different events – such as the Sino-Japanese War, the United States civil rights movements, or the Holocaust – might have proved formative to the intellectual traditions of oral historians at work in different regions. Without wishing to essentialize, we wondered whether our different approaches, hers more aimed at presenting participants' voices untrammelled and mine leaning more toward the theoretical, might reflect differences in such intellectual traditions. (Shinzo Araragi and Hiro Saito's reviews, in this issue, each perceptively offer angles on these matters.) Editorial exchanges with authors brought additional aspects of standpoint to light. There were occasional humorous exchanges about indentation conventions, which turn out to be far from universal, or by the journal's requirement to write in 'Canadian English,' a fitful beast indeed. More seriously, some authors have had to spend many a precious word to explain the fundamentals of their countries' geopolitics to imagined readers. Some have had to expend resources on translation. Some risk censorship in their homeland for the stories they tell here; I do not, and am humbled by their courage. Thus, to Yumi, to the referees and authors whose efforts are manifest in this issue's pages, and to Janis Thiessen, this journal's editor, I wish to express my gratitude for the opportunity to participate in, and reflect upon, a global intellectual endeavour.