Memory, Narrative and Histories: Critical Debates, New Trajectories

edited by Graham Dawson

Working Papers on Memory, Narrative and Histories
no. 1, January 2012

ISSN 2045–8290 (print)
ISSN 2045–8304 (online)
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Introduction

Graham Dawson

Memory, Narrative and Histories: Critical Debates and New Trajectories is the first in a new series of occasional Working Papers to be published by the Centre for Research in Memory, Narrative and Histories at the University of Brighton. Drawing on the University’s long-standing research strengths in humanities, arts and social sciences, and emphasising the plural ‘histories’, the Centre engages with multi- and interdisciplinary research on the complex relationships between present and past; dealing, for example, with subordinate and marginalised histories, archive practices, and the complexities of popular memory. Research collaboration draws on scholarship in a range of disciplines including history, cultural studies, literary studies, sociology, cultural and human geography, visual studies, performance studies, critical theory, psycho-social studies, and narrative theory.

The Centre promotes dialogue about the methodological, epistemological and theoretical issues at work in the study of memory, narrative and the making of histories, resulting in an institutional locus which embraces creative and critical practice, and encompasses academic, professional and community development. It explores the relations, and facilitates links, between academic scholarship and the work of other practitioners and stakeholders involved in making histories, in representing the past, and in producing forms of remembrance and commemoration. Reflecting these emphases, the Centre's key areas of interest are identified as: Archives and Histories; Life Writing/Creative Writing; Community History; Cultural Memory; Oral History and Life History; and Public History.

The papers collected in this publication were originally delivered at the Centre's Launch Symposium on Memory, Narrative and Histories which took place on the Falmer site of the University of Brighton on 6th December 2008, attended by over sixty people. The aim of the symposium was to act as a catalyst, stimulating discussion amongst researchers and postgraduate students across the University, and with colleagues from the University of Sussex and wider afield, about developments in and across these linked fields of activity. By encouraging critical reflection on evolving traditions, new directions and future possibilities, the symposium was envisaged as a way of setting an agenda for the Centre's work.
Seven speakers, all experienced researchers and practitioners in one or more of the Centre's key areas of interest, were invited to provide a personal overview of recent trends, current debates, and new trajectories within their field. In the first session, Public History and Community History, Hilda Kean of Ruskin College, Oxford, spoke about 'People and their Pasts. Aspects of Public History Today'; and Glenn Jordan, of the University of Glamorgan and Butetown History and Arts Centre in Cardiff, delivered an illustrated talk on 'History, Memory, Cultural Politics: A People's History Project in Cardiff Docklands'. The second session, Archives and Histories, involved Andrew Flinn of University College London speaking on the theme of 'Archives and their Communities'; and a paper by Dorothy Sheridan of the University of Sussex, 'Archive Fever and Archive Struggles: Tensions in the Creation, Care and Use of Archives with Stories from the Mass Observation Archive'. In the third session, Life History, Life Writing, Creative Writing, Margaretta Jolly from the University of Sussex spoke on the theme of 'Life History and Life Writing'; and Micheline Wandor, writer and Royal Literary Fund Fellow, drew on examples from her own writing to explore 'The Voices of Creative Writing, Past and Present'. In the final session, Carrie Hamilton of Roehampton University gave a paper on 'Cultural Memory and the Emotions: Exploring the Connections'. The symposium concluded with a plenary drawing out key themes of the day led by a respondent, the Centre's director, Graham Dawson.

Five of these papers have been developed for publication and are collected here. In her paper, Hilda Kean considers how to move debate on Public History-making away from an emphasis on 'professional' historians reaching out in accessible ways to 'the public'. Such formulations assume that history is a given rather than a process and maintain the division between the so-called 'professional' and the 'amateur'. Kean suggests that thinking about the ways in which people engage with their pasts – and develop such engagement in various forms – may provide us with a different and more dynamic starting point for historical practice which breaks down rather than reinforces current divides.

Andrew Flinn examines the impact of some recent developments with regard to the production of history and the role of the archivist. In particular, drawing upon an AHRC-funded research project, 'Community archives and identities: documenting and sustaining community heritage', he considers the growth of independent community archives and heritage initiatives. While firmly rooted in older traditions of history from below, History Workshop and identity politics, such initiatives have also emerged in new forms; partly as a response to technological change but also due to greater awareness of, and challenge to, the partiality of orthodox national historical narratives. His paper identifies a related challenge to professional authority, also enabled by technological change;
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namely, the growth of user-generated content whether it be of archival material uploaded to community sites, or descriptions and tags added by users to heritage-institution catalogues. Flinn argues that, although the archive profession once ignored these initiatives and many remain concerned about the challenge of the crowd to the expert, and of replacing ‘I think’ with ‘we think’, others are now exploring ways in which a transformed profession might seek to support and embrace these developments as a way of diversifying and democratising archives and the histories that are, in part, written from them.

Mass Observation set out to document the everyday in all its minute detail and to ensure that so-called ‘ordinary people’ had the opportunity to record their own history. Considering both the original initiative that created the Mass Observation Archive in the 1930s and the contemporary Mass Observation project, Dorothy Sheridan identifies a complex triangular relationship between the archive creators (who include the author-contributors), the archive collectors and curators, and the archive users (within and beyond the academy). Her paper explores some of the resulting tensions and reflects on the ensuing struggles for representation and possession.

How do the fields of oral history, life history and life writing relate? Using Alistair Thomson’s notion that oral history has undergone four ‘paradigm transformations’, Margaretta Jolly traces shifts in the shared histories and passions that link these areas of enquiry. Her paper also investigates persisting disciplinary faultlines between literary-based and historically-based traditions of research, and considers what they can tell us about the difficulties in integrating oral and written life-story work, with reference to Guatemalan activist Rigoberta Menchu’s story. How do interdisciplinary ideals hold up against the realities of institutional and professional pressures? Digital life-story telling, a form of audiovisual literacy and Thomson’s fourth paradigm transformation, logically brings oral and written methodologies together. But, Jolly argues, we have yet to provide an adequate synthesis of life history and life writing.

Turning finally to research on memory, Carrie Hamilton’s paper examines the importance of emotion in analysing forms of ‘collective memory’ and individual life stories. Arguing that the relationship between memory and emotion is not often spelt out or theorised, Hamilton explores the links between them in the context of the recent ‘turn to affect’ in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Her paper draws on memory studies, cultural theories of emotion, the history of emotions and oral history, as well as her own research on memory and emotion in relation to political subjectivities in the Basque country and Cuba.

A number of common themes run across and between these papers. Firstly, they share a preoccupation with the social relations of knowledge production, and an interest in transforming modes of professional and institutional authority – whether that of the academic
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historian, the archivist or the museum curator – through practices that
draw professionals into collaboration and negotiation with historical
practitioners situated in wider cultural locations (variously characterised
as 'the public', 'the community', 'the people').

A second theme is the continuity between transformative practices
of this kind in the early twenty-first century and previous projects –
whether the History Workshop movement centred on Ruskin College
after 1967, Mass Observation in the 1930s, or popular history initiatives
of the early twentieth century – which are constituted as reference
points, inspirations or traditions, creatively adapted to meet changed
circumstances and emerging needs. In this respect, the particular
influence of Raphael Samuel – teacher, writer, pioneer of the Ruskin-
based History Workshop, founding editor of History Workshop Journal –
is evident throughout these papers. This is a sign of the continuing
vitality and motivational power of Samuel’s vision of a democratic,
participatory and liberatory culture of history-making. It is also an
indicator of unfinished business within the cultural politics of 'the past',
involving an ongoing process of challenge to the appropriation of history,
whether by the state, by the academy, or by professional interests. Such
challenges manifest in diverse ways: they may assert the centrality of
history-making to the experience of class and other social oppressions;
they may celebrate the depth and vitality of 'amateur' history-making
(nowhere more evident than in the extraordinary growth of genealogy,
rooted in popular fascination with the family as narrative); or – as
Raymond Williams urged – they may work to build counter-hegemonic
'alternative traditions' that draw new lines of connection between the
present and the past, reconstructing received histories the better to
contest the present and the future.

It follows that, thirdly, these papers embody a common commitment
to enhancing intellectual exchange and dialogue across the faultlines of
affiliation, discipline and practice that may divide us into discrete
enclaves – as public or community historians, as interested in archives or
memories, as practitioners working under the banner of life writing or
oral history, as historians or literary critics or cultural analysts. In
deploying debates, perspectives and approaches that often have rather
different and disconnected starting points, the papers help us to see and
think about the links between these various endeavours, and thus the
possibilities of transformative practice.

The five authors have taken various approaches to translating their
spoken paper into publishable writing; some retaining the more informal
and discursive style of the original, others developing their talk into a
more formally elaborated written paper. Both styles are embraced in the
ethos of this new series, Working Papers on Memory, Narrative and
Histories. Inspired by the mode of publication – the so-called Working
Papers in Cultural Studies – adopted in the 1970s by the now defunct
(and greatly missed) Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the
University of Birmingham, this series will provide an in-house vehicle for publishing papers from our Centre's symposia, conferences and other public events; 'work-in-progress' and occasional papers; and other fruits of the Centre's research activity and collaborative work with academic, professional and community partners. Each number in the Working Papers series, edited and presented to the highest scholarly standards, will be published as a bound paper booklet (available from the Centre for Research in Memory, Narrative and Histories, c/o CRD, Faculty of Arts, University of Brighton, 58-67 Grand Parade, Brighton, BN2 0JY, UK), and simultaneously in pdf format on the Centre's website <http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/mnh>, with a view to facilitating ongoing debate. All contributions to this first number have been read, and revised in the light of editorial comments, by myself and another member of the Centre's Steering Group. I am grateful to Mark Bhatti, Paddy Maguire, Lucy Noakes and Deborah Phillips for their assistance and input.