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<http://ioha.org>

Online ISSN 2222-4181

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Words and Silences
September 2019
“Memory and Narration”

Presented @ IOHA
KEYNOTE 1
Delivered on June 18, 2018, University of Jyväskylä

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NOT TO BE QUOTED WITHOUT PERMISSION

Oral History and the Landscape of Memory - In Between the Living and the Dead

Introduction

I would first of all like to say a heartfelt thank you to our wonderful Finnish hosts for their invitation and their generosity to me. I think Finland is a very special place for a conference on oral histories. It is a particularly sonorous culture: it has produced an exceptional number of musicians and composers for its size (as we have just seen); and has 30 orchestras, so there is an affiliation with music as sound. There may be many reasons for this – their very expressive language with vowel harmonies; or a population long being attuned to sounds of the natural world.

As a way of introducing my talk today to open the conference, a well-known song from the middle of last century, 1963, that has now become iconic – it has been played before Barack Obama. This is storytelling, or, narrative in song, a song from the American century which facilitated a kind of out-of-place feeling (in an Anglo-speaking colonial country) – where one sang songs about Fall (in Australia we say “Autumn”) and the junior prom (dances).

[PLAY SONG “Then He Kissed Me,” by the Crystals]

Now this song does many things in relation to my presentation today: First of all, it reminds us about the ways that music and song help carry narratives across media. And it also reminds us of the multiple meanings of voice and the exceptional ability of all kinds of aural narrative genres to immerse listeners in storyworlds (you know that so well if you listen to podcasts). The speaking voice is just one of these – music is one which particularly evokes a powerful emotional response. Given that it is a story in song of a particular type, the manner in which the sequence of events is recounted is quite exposed, (to me, this is always told as a confidence between 2 women, mimics the way they talk to each other) so it’s a performance in public of personal feelings and intimate relations. It underlines that remembrance is always embedded – and I mean by this that we cannot communicate individual memories outside of collective frameworks, shared cultural categories (the story of the romance). And the repeated circulation of popular songs, which like images, do not simply invoke the past but actually help construct forms of memory that we can identify with collectively. However, the Palestinian poet Moureed Borghouti speaks about the danger of a single story. So let’s identify at least one story that is lost with the circulation of a Crystals ‘hit song’ ripped from production context, which may change how we view “Then he kissed me.”

The year before, the Crystals released a song titled “He Hit Me, But It Felt Like a Kiss” that did not go nearly as well as the later one – it bombed. It was a song written by Carole King and Gerry Goffin after they learned that their babysitter was regularly beaten up by her boyfriend.

[PLAY SONG 2 EXTRACT]

It was produced by Phil Spector (yes, the man now serving time for murder of Lana Clarkson).

[A] scholar called Dave Thompson says: “It was a brutal song, as any attempt to justify such violence must be, and Spector’s arrangement only amplified its savagery. In more ironic hands (and a more understanding age), ‘He Hit Me’ might have passed at least as satire. But Spector showed no sign of appreciating that, nor did he feel any need to. No less than the song’s writers, he was not preaching, he was merely documenting.” This song was one of many little public forays into expressing or normalising working class women’s experience of violence in the 1950s and 1960s, e.g. Carousal musical. Of course since then, it has been circulating in a more underground way – Amy Winehouse loved it; various other groups adapted it. But to be mass popular – has to satisfy a number of constituencies, in this case across time and this didn’t, but can we call the second instance a ‘forgetting’ or a ‘silence’? or is it really about different modes of circulation transnationally? I will come back to this.

So, these two songs about remembered experience circulating in very different ways through a variety of countries introduce my talk today, which is about oral histories of domestic violence through the lens of shame and humiliation. I am asking the question: what are the limits of oral history or remembering?

My paper today is titled “Between the Living and the Dead,” which refers not only to the transmission of memories across generations or not, but when it is possible for some experiences to become public, and why some and not others? Much of the discussion about oral history as a practice has been about its potential for liberation, social change – but what about the limits on what we can know through this medium?

I want to introduce you to the concept of “narrative wreckage.” It is a term the scholar Arthur Frank uses in his 1990s book *The Wounded Storyteller* to describe the wholesale disruption of the lives of people suddenly afflicted by serious illness. I have adapted it here to describe lives which are suddenly thrown into chaos through a violent event. I prefer this term to the use of words like “forgetting,” partly because Jay Winter stresses the risks of a binary approach to remembering and forgetting (as non-speech or absences), also because they don’t quite have the potency of the idea of wreckage AND it leaves open the idea of speaking in public at some time in a future. Intrinsic to Frank’s scheme is the possibility of rebuilding lives through narrative – but more importantly it leaves the issue of intent as ambiguous (not always state repression).

We may consider Louisa Passerini’s description of her interviews with Gypsies as “defiant silence.” But first, I want to note that in 2008 Linda Shopes and I published a book, *Oral Histories and Public Memories*, in which I spoke about a ‘disconnect’ between oral histories and

memory studies which had developed as separate disciplines with different genealogies and different objects of study. Not everyone agreed but we do know that these are areas of study of very different registers and not necessarily an easy leap from an individual cognitive process about experience to much broader national and transnational phenomena and collective. Ten years later, I would now think that we can see that there has been a considerable rapprochement between these, oral history as a practice and memory studies at least in part because memory studies needed methodologies to develop further, as an area of study. Oral history is a central aspect of the 'work of memory' or part of what some in that field are now calling 'memory practices,' and partly because the two met in various areas of public history, memorialisation and commemoration; but also because, from the oral history side, we began to see a wider significance for interviewing – not just a gathering of evidence or a conversation; and a wider context for storytelling beyond entertainment – need[ing] a context.

So, it's not about using oral history as data that we fit into a pre-given framework but a generalized understanding that what we do is bring experiences into memory, into public memory. And many, judging from this conference program, understand themselves as oral historians doing memory work; it is very pleasing to see the large number of papers here which relate to oral history and memory as a testament to their entangled nature. We all know that the [in the] act of doing oral history, co-creating a record, in the present about the past, we collapse the distance between past and present and the relationship between them. This is the case with the study of memory and remembering generally in all forms. Several scholars and philosophers have weighed in on this and its implications for the writing of history, which developed as a discipline that separates past and present – puts a distance between them.

American historian Gabriel Spiegel, in defence of history as a critical study (not memory): "History re-presents the dead; memory re-members the corpse in order to revivify it," implies lack of critical engagement with remembering which I don't subscribe to – many scholars continue to think this way. However, there is a growing dissatisfaction with traditional histories and great upheavals in the history world that the work of memory and oral histories 'or the soldiers of memoryland', as Dipesh Chakrabarty has called us, has helped to fuel. (I am about to write something about the impact of memory and oral history on the history discipline), and of course it is manifest in the increased interest in lived experience, individual testimonies, and questions relating to how the past lives on in the present, not just about oral history but personal and memory sources in general.

On the other hand, there is an important politics to time and memory: the historian Berber Bevernage has convincingly argued that modern history has been lining up on the side of the perpetrators rather than the victims in its linear idea of time and events, which have finished and are past, that fails to capture the experience of a haunting past or the continuing effects of trauma in the present (even the conception of trauma has been under fire). The concern for how history deals with the haunting memories of victims and their demand for justice means we have had to rethink the assumptions that are at the core of western history and modern historiography about time and its separateness.

So now for me, I want to bring this past into the present – not as discontinuous history, as a study of remembering. My major study deals with servants working in the home who have experienced domestic violence. I have no time but to give you some glimpses of the richness of the memories and where they address the limits of what and how is possible to speak about in oral histories. Australians rarely associate domestic servants (maids, housekeepers, nannies,) with their own country, but usually recall the British television dramas with a bevy of servants in the large mansions of the 1970s series *Upstairs, Downstairs* and the more recent *Downton Abbey*. Or they associate domestic work with indigenous women and the film *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Even with these films and widely publicised government inquiries into the “Stolen Generations” removed from and “Forgotten Children” the focus has been on identity and trauma to underscore state responsibility: the act of wrenching children from their families or sending young children on their own overseas from Britain to Australia. In the Australian public imagination, there is no collective or even collected memory of domestic service as an occupation which many girls and women, under a variety of circumstances, undertook in Australian homes at least until the 1960s, that was then reworked on a more casual basis. It is the main area of employment until 1920s and 1930s for working class women (up and down).

While public remembering and forgetting is a complex phenomenon, there is still a powerful nationalist belief that Australia is a classless, egalitarian society by implicit comparison with Britain. If paid domestic work is remembered at all it is consigned to a past of ‘long ago’ which has no resonances for the post-1980s expansion of au pairs, nannies and the continuous and massive international industry of women from poor countries working in the homes of those in wealthier places who can afford to employ them. Today I am going to focus on the particular – with small local individual stories that some European researchers are calling ‘peripheral memories,’ peripheral in that they were neither the focus of national or transnational (cultural) memory nor a privileged subject of research. But it then begs the question – what types of experience and knowledge are considered valuable? I am making them significant by talking about them to you, by questions asked in the present context of the public revelations about harassment, rape, the “Me Too” movement, et cetera.

The focus of my project is narratives by women (usually young single women) about their experiences of working in service, usually live-in. I have a considerable archive of interviews done in the 1980s to 2000s, letters, correspondence, etc., with hundreds of women (as well as oral history archives around Australia). I take up British historian Carolyn Steedman’s injunction to ‘think with servants’ who provide many windows into working class lives and the domestic sphere, or the heterosexual family home last century. In doing this, I am aiming to many hundreds of women’s women’s experience, as I have said, into memory, into public memory. Many historians think that history ends at the front door of the house, and although we now have a massive range of data digitised – majority of it, as feminists point out, is public; within that house, though domestic service has never been understood exclusively as a category of employment. It was a site of a form of knowledge, a site of self-fashioning, as well as an employment relationship and a site of physical and emotional labour.

I am exploring, on this occasion, emotions of shame and humiliation and their impact, and I link two different kinds of sources for examining the violence that produced these feelings: that is, to

the oral histories relating to sexual harassment and illegitimate pregnancies during the period 1900s to 1950s, with the newspaper reports of infanticide and trials for infanticide involving domestic servants. Of course in these latter documents, the voices of the women are as yet very faint, because I haven't yet been able to access the full court/trial records. The oral histories reveal accounts of abortion, adoption, what we now call sexual harassment as we will see, but they say absolutely nothing about rapes and infanticide or the more extreme violence that women experienced. Some experiences cannot be recalled and spoken about and that's what I mean by narrative wreckage. Moreover I am arguing here that it is all one continuum of sexual violence and its consequences, from harassment, to rape, to leaving babies on church steps, abortion, to adoption and finally infanticide, and in the process of linking these phenomena I am framing the paper as a feminist analysis. Because feminist historians have argued for some time now that infanticide of newborn babies by women is a form of birth control, that infanticide is on the same continuum as adoption, which was legalised in the 1920s but not widely utilised until after 1945, and giving babies away or putting them up for adoption or farming them out.

And earlier in the twentieth century it is borne out of desperation and panic, with few contraceptive measures widely available, and as some argue, the whole knowledge about sex and concept of prevention of birth is very slow to reach the working class. So in the last few years this has also become incorporated into a much broader feminist political campaign about gendered violence against women, and as Lisa Featherstone and Amanda Kaladelfos note, that 'though feminist approaches are disparate, they tend to emphasise the systematic nature of gendered power in structuring legal political and social responses to violence'.¹

These are not about domestic service but they are happening now, so though beyond our scope today there are interesting questions raised about the historical and present reasons women commit infanticide. I am also aware, of course, of two other important factors – first that these experiences and the actions women took to deal with the consequences of illegitimate births is not only an Australian phenomenon but it is also an extensive international practice, particularly infanticide, which has continued to this day in many other countries. It would make a sober comparative study.

I am equally aware that it is cross-cultural and central to the framework of colonialism, and that indigenous women were also involved in infanticide (less access to abortion?). It has been argued that the pregnancy rates of indigenous women in service until the 1960s were much higher than white women, but also much more difficult to research. Just a note of caution in relation to ethics and politics: while many of these women are now dead, they still have descendants. How do we write about women's suffering? Without sensationalising their misery?

I am aware that I am bringing some of these memories into the public (sometimes again) but my principal concern is to attend to the substantive complexities of lived experience.

So to paraphrase Carolyn Steedman, all the stories that follow are not stories in their own right: they exist in tension with other more central ones, in this case, of course, about the purity of

¹ [SLIDES 3 AND 4]

motherhood, and the 'fallen' woman. So I think stories framed by the legal system in the written material have different understandings of the meaning of violence than personal stories told, though I am not yet certain how that plays out. But I do know that stories from oral histories usually emphasise agency, the capacity to take action in the world. People usually tell stories which focus on their survival – how they overcame the trauma or disasters of one kind or another. However this is a somewhat complex issue: how do we define agency here? How do we think about choices? Because these poor working class women are both victims and perpetrators – shamed and then publicly humiliated twice over through both the pregnancy and the action they took to resolve their situation - which reveals the explanatory inadequacy of these categories. Wulf Kansteiner has notably said all victims are created equal to underline this.

And through these sources I am arguing that how single, unmarried women dealt with their pregnancies is one result of a much broader landscape of constant sexual tension in the 'privacy' and intimacy of the home where women who worked in frequently endured what is now called sexual harassment, forms of male predatory behaviour and modes of seduction on the one hand, and were also subject to rape and violence on the other. The letters and oral histories tell us about this but not about killing babies or rape – but we do have stories of women who had abortions and survived, or gave their babies up for adoption.

In 1986, I interviewed Susan M in Western Australia, as one of hundreds who responded to my letters asking for experiences of domestic service. In it she spoke of a day – Friday 19th April 1935, Good Friday 'that was to remain locked away forever'

'locked away through the pressure of church men, solicitors, child welfare, shame and poverty, I had made a mistake never to be forgiven.'

She had a child from her employer, tried various failed ways to get rid of it including suicide and potions, and then gave the baby up for adoption.

'I was only ground into the dirt from shame' (historians note that women were more reluctant to take this route than infanticide) and of course 'I have never told anyone this before' (confessional mode)

She is able to tell me this story in the middle 1980s because the stigma of adoption is gradually loosening and because she is terrified that the change in adoption laws will mean that her son will seek her out and her sin will be now found out 51 years later. However, while we can see her shame is disgrace and a feeling of unworthiness, moral weakness -- humiliation is relational, often depends on knowledge that others disapproval, in this case as a Catholic, weight of the Catholic Church coupled with the State intervening to take the baby away. Adoption practice at that time in Australia reflected the concept of secrecy and the ideal of having a "clean break" from the usually unmarried mother immediately after birth.

Susan was of course not the only one. Our bodies carry the traces of past experiences' impact of feeling humiliated some fifty years earlier, continued to influence this person's sense of themselves as a subject of history. As domestic servants, almost all who had illegitimate children

were young and unmarried, during an era in which unwed motherhood was socially and legally unacceptable. The birth of a child meant loss of a job (always?) and the stigma meant that most of their family also felt humiliated by their daughters's shame and would not necessarily have welcomed them home (where to turn?) sometimes pressured them to kill and helped themselves.

Though some employers were so desperate for help, they took in those with children. In their oral histories women spoke much more extensively about sexual harassment AND ALMOST ALWAYS positioned themselves as voting with their feet. The strong narrative running through all the stories is about ignorance, lack of knowledge, about sexual knowledge not spoken about by their parents or employers, they had no idea what happens or how you have sex. Looking back on their youthful selves because they are often usually very young from 13 or 14 years old to their 20s to 30s. 'Men of any rank', says the historian Mark Smith, 'saw the female body as always open to touch and therefore possession.' (p101) In the case of domestic service this was a matter of young women evading the advances of men in the household but at the time their response was always constrained by the inability to speak about it to relevant authorities, parents, female employers, guardians and to be questioned if they did so.

Joan R's first employer after leaving school at 14 in the 1930s was a German couple in outback Queensland. 'We never had sex explained to us by the step-mother. For some reason in those days it was never mentioned, which was a shame' because²:

After I had been in that job for a while, the woman's husband came downstairs one morning, as I was trying to light the fire, and started rubbing his hands up and down my legs and my senses told me that wasn't right, but before he went any further, he heard his wife coming downstairs and he walked away. I felt so self-conscious that I thought she may have known what was going on. So I left not long after that. (the wife pleaded with her).³

It is clear from this narrative that in the relatively privatised space of the home, men waited for their opportunities, for the moments of being completely free from observation (just as they did later in the privacy of the boss's office for the secretary,) and that the young Joan is made to feel a sense of complicity: 'feeling dirty' is how it was often expressed, and some women did become involved with their employers or other men in the household. But for many others, the male hand came to symbolise the touch they abhorred and it could become the focal point of their fear. This was particularly the case with women who were sent out from orphanages or state institutions who were regarded as 'fair game' (reasonable target for sexual exploitation).

In this case of an Aboriginal women sent out from Cootamundra Girls Home, her anger echoes down the years. Her first job in rural New South Wales on a farming property underlined her isolation and vulnerability:

² Joan Rissman, Toowoomba, Queensland, to Paula Hamilton, 29th May 1986

³ See Mark Paterson (2007) *The Senses of Touch. Haptics, Affects and Technologies*. Berg Publishers, Oxford. Section on 'Touch as Feeling-with' p. 164. Merleau-Ponty notes that to touch is always to be touched as well. Cited in Harvey op cit p. 387.

He [employer] used to try and maul me. At first I thought, lovely old man making me feel welcome...I really thought he was interested in my welfare, but it was more than my welfare he was interested in. He soon showed that after a couple of weeks – wandering hands – I nearly broke his bloody hands...I used to be that scared when I went to bed at night...I'd sneak knives out of the kitchen and I was scared he'd come and attack me...⁴

For this young woman, who we shall call Mary, the matron at Cootamundra whom she rang about the harassment, did not believe her story, but she ran away back to the home anyway. 'Wandering hands' or the unwanted touch of the male hand was the experience of many women and for some it became the signature of their understanding of men in general. 'They were all like this,' said Kit and Alma Hughes, who had come out from England in 1923 to the Western Australian interviewer, Sally Kennedy. In one of her first jobs at fourteen:

'I went sort of away in the country as a ladies companion. The lady was the daughter of the house and there was the old father and the son and the old man used to smack me on the bottom every time I walked past him and make a pass at me and he had palsy!⁵

She was terrified 'to go in the room when he was there on his own or walk past him on the verandah'. Alma Hughes was also 'Too afraid to tell parents. In those days you didn't discuss those things with your parents.' Later at a dairy farm, it happened with another employer who 'got me, shut me, got me shut in the freezer. They get you in ice in the freezers, you get shut in the freezers and make passes at you and you couldn't get out...we were fairly innocent in those days and we didn't know much.' In her memory, of being a young girl they were 'Huge men' pushing her into spaces where they could be unobserved. The Hughes sisters' solution like others was to move on from job to job.

So if we go to the other end of these sexual encounters and confront the consequences of the violent actions women took to deal with unwanted pregnancies, here is the 'voice' of Jesse Thomson: Jessie Thompson in 1919 – police found a baby in a cardboard box behind the grating at Belview street, Sydney, in October of that year – her declaration given in police evidence (court reporting) was in the newspaper at the time:

'This is a dreadful thing. That was my baby. She was born on Friday night. I did not know what to do I was nearly out of my mind. But nobody wants a girl with a baby so I tied a tape around its neck to make sure it would die and put it in a box and put it behind the fireplace and went on with work. I'm tired of life. I wish I was dead. I have not a soul in the world. I am poor and penniless' and she is committed for trial.

This is very much a story where she has agency and yet not – her capacity for action clearly circumscribed; and this has interesting similarities with many others I have read – the strong

⁴ Extract from interview with no name in Peter Kabaila Home Girls. Cootamundra Aboriginal Home girls tell their stories. Canprint publishing Canberra 2012 p 42. See also Victoria Haskins (2013) exploration of a late 19th century case in "Down in the Gully and Just Outside the Garden Walk' white women and sexual abuse of Aboriginal women on a colonial Australian frontier' History Australia, Vol 10, No 1 April pp 11-34.

⁵ Interview with Kit and Alma Hughes by Sally Kennedy, April 1977. Battye Library of Western Australia Oral History Collection OH209 A/r and T/r pp4-6.

admission of the killing, the reporting of speech ‘in a low voice’ at the trial. So I wonder whether I will be able to reconcile this very different kind of mediated narrative with the stories from the oral histories. By and large these deaths were viewed as different from other forms of homicide (though varied between states) gradually through the different legal jurisdiction of the states - category infanticide came to mean the murder of babies under 12 months by mothers. And for every one of these that came trial there were hundreds who left dead babies in the sea, in rivers, concealed in a variety of places who were never prosecuted and never spoke about them.

But of course I am aware that the newspapers favoured more brutal infanticides that had been carried out with an apparent sense of purpose (along with obvious attempt at concealment). These are more likely to make the papers – women who attacked their babies with scissors, or as in Tasmania, cut them up with an axe.

And as lawyer Kathy Laster and others have noted, the ‘justice’ meted out to these girls and women were varied and arbitrary - some were convicted and sentenced to death but had the sentence commuted to life imprisonment – suggests that there was considerable social discomfort around making only the women pay for these crimes, though such liberal treatment did not have universal approval from the public by any means.

Conclusion

So I hope what I have shown you first of all is that not only are the voices of women who experienced domestic service marginal in both the historical and the remembered terrain of the Australian past, but their own accounts of their experience of domestic harassment and violence have by and large never been heard. The written account generated at the time and the oral accounts of experience told many years later, laid side by side, reveal significant silences in both, of course; but for our purposes the focus is the oral histories – and the silences signify what we might term ‘narrative wreckage’.

Some aspects of women’s experience of sexual violence are not absent from the public domain, they are there in the state libraries but there is no remembering of them in a public domain or they circulate in different domains (popular, sensationalist). So they remain as a silence. For the women who were put on trial for infanticide, the obvious legal framework and public humiliation ensured these experiences were not passed on in memories (as well as generational rupture – those on trial didn’t marry or have children but we do not even accounts by relatives or friends).

What is clear to me is that in this landscape forgetting is not merely an absence of sound, of conventional verbal exchanges, but is also an active process, waiting, as the French philosopher Ricoeur has argued, for the timeless metaphorical archive to be reactivated *oubli de reserve* - existing but not yet manifest, or what we might call latent. Or as Dessingue calls it, ‘an archived silence’, which becomes an accepted silence by and for those who experienced the violence. We know through these stories that it was the young working class woman who suffered most.

So the usual explanation of narrative erasure, marginalisation or colonisation is not simply a process where the powerful work in strategic ways to prevent those who are less powerful from

speaking. The cultural context also constrains what is possible and how to speak about experience across time. But for me silence is not a negative or an absence – I argue the case here that as Louisa Passerini claims these are ‘defiant silences,’ involve much more complex motivation/intent than the word ‘forgetting’ as a corollary to remembering, implies. We will be extending this discussion further in papers and panels to come.

Finally, we have to ask questions about what is considered unknowable, inexpressible knowledge that is unable to be articulated for many reasons (some of them fear of legal punishment, or humiliation). Since the focus in oral histories is always on speaking, becoming conscious of ourselves and the articulation of memories in language (even to articulate which is embodied knowledge) to an audience as a performance, which always involves silences and places our narrators at the centre of a telling where they took action in the world, were not victims or not for long - then perhaps this is ultimately the limits of oral histories. Our narrators might be able to speak about other people’s narrative wreckage but for the story of themselves it is by and large a self-selected story of the survivor, the story of disaster overcome.