

“What Good Does All This Remembering Do, Anyway?” On Historical Consciousness and the Responsibility of Memory

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In the ethical anteriority of responsibility... I am thrown back toward what has never been my fault or my deed, toward what has never been in my power or in my freedom, toward what has never been my presence, and has never come into memory. There is an ethical significance in this responsibility, this an-archic responsibility.... It is the significance of a past that concerns me, that “regards me,” and is “my business” outside of all reminiscence, re-tention, re-presentation, or reference to a remembered present.... Such is my *nonintentional* participation in the history of humanity, in the past of others, who “regard me.”

— Emmanuel Levinas¹

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, with the publication of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s seminal work, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*,² attention to the moral significance of memory has steadily increased in the fields of cultural studies, history, psychology, philosophy, and education.³ Consistent with Felman and Laub, much of the more recent literature focuses on the horrors of the Holocaust as a watershed moment in human history and as a particularly salient referent for both goodness and evil in the human condition. While there are differences in scholarly aims and methods among the various disciplines, a common thread running through the literature is an insistence that the Holocaust is something we cannot and must not forget. But as a friend of philosopher Jeffrey Blustein asked him one afternoon as they walked through the Jewish quarter in Prague, “What good does all this remembering do, anyway? Shouldn’t we stop dwelling on the past? What is done is done, what’s past is past. Why keep exposing oneself... to what can only be intensely painful memories? To what end?”⁴ In what follows, I want to take up that question and attempt to show that remembering does constitute a good insofar as it facilitates the development of a particular kind of subjectivity and moral responsibility — more specifically, a Levinasian conception of responsibility for that which lies outside my own actions and intentions, an unconditional, an-archic responsibility that comes from outside the subject and from outside knowledge.⁵

TEACHING ABOUT THE PAST

Within education, the call not to forget the Holocaust has taken on an important role especially in moral education, history, and social studies. In moral education, the focus has largely been on the “rescuers” as moral exemplars, and on trying to cultivate the moral attitudes of compassion and empathy that led to their acts of selflessness and heroism. In history and social studies, the focus has been on a reconsideration of how we teach about the past. While traditional textbooks sought to represent history as an objective, universal story of progress, current curricula reflect history as inescapably mediated by individual and collective understandings of the past, and there has been an increasing use of first-person narratives and testimony as legitimate sources of knowledge. This focus on *memory*, rather than on the attempt to reconstruct what “actually” happened in the past, marks a significant

shift in history education from an emphasis on historiography to “historical consciousness.”⁶

The term “historical consciousness” itself, however, is contested and has created some tensions in the field among scholars writing within different and somewhat incompatible traditions.⁷ Both strands of the historical consciousness literature that inform education emphasize the moral significance of our relationship to the past. However, while some scholars focus on the cognitive aspects, working from a belief that a fully moral response rests on knowledge and understanding of the past, others focus on the ethical debt the present owes to the past regardless of what can be known and understood. Perhaps the best known example of the cognitive approach in the United States is *Facing History and Ourselves*, a comprehensive online educational resource that connects academics, curriculum developers, teachers, and students in an effort to deepen students’ understanding of historic and current situations of trauma, violence, and injustice, and to promote moral dialogue, social action, and civic responsibility.⁸ In Canada, Peter Seixas’s Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness at the University of British Columbia takes a similar approach, bringing together academics, curriculum designers, and practitioners from a wide range of fields, but with a more explicit emphasis on theorizing historical consciousness in addition to developing materials for classroom use.⁹ Consistent with its cognitive focus, Seixas’s “benchmarks of historical thinking” include the ability to read and analyze primary source documents, to take different historical perspectives, and to understand the moral obligations this new knowledge brings to bear on our present lives.¹⁰ Significantly, the term “historical thinking” is used here interchangeably with “historical consciousness.”

The second approach to historical consciousness draws on continental philosophy and psychoanalysis, emphasizing the ethical demands the past makes on us here and now, regardless of our ability — or perhaps more accurately, because of our *inability* — to understand what went on in other times and places. This approach figures most prominently in Roger Simon’s Testimony and Historical Memory Project at the University of Toronto. Simon draws primarily on Emmanuel Levinas’s conception of unconditional responsibility, Jacques Derrida’s work on the “gift of the ghost,” and Deborah Britzman’s and Felman and Laub’s psychoanalytic perspectives.¹¹ By the “ghost” Derrida means the trace of the past that is always with us regardless of our attempts to deny or disavow it. While we may sometimes want to believe that the past is dead and buried, according to Derrida, we are indelibly marked not only by those who have lived and died before us, but also by the ideas, ideologies, and histories that have shaped the world as we know it, and that indeed shape our very selves as knowing subjects. Simon’s conception of historical consciousness thus constitutes a destabilization of the subject, an experience of being called into question, and of being called to unconditional responsibility to and for the other. This approach treats history as a debt the present owes to the past and as a “difficult inheritance” we cannot refuse.¹² I locate my own work within this strand, and in the remainder of this essay I will follow Simon’s use of the term “critical historical consciousness” to distinguish it from the cognitive approach.

Perhaps not surprisingly, while both conceptions of historical consciousness have been well theorized, the cognitive approach has had the most traction in schools. One of the reasons, I suspect, is that, like Levinas's and Derrida's thought on which it stands, critical historical consciousness cannot simply be applied to education.¹³ But this does not mean it has no relevance for schools or for teacher preparation. While students clearly need to learn about the past in the ways that *Facing History* and similar curricula advocate, I believe that critical historical consciousness offers different, and perhaps richer, possibilities for reconceiving history education and our relationship to the past.

ON TESTIMONY AND LEARNING FROM THE PAST

In *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics*, Simon writes,

One consequence of the recent "turn to ethics" in social and political thought has been a return to the question of what it could mean to live historically, to live within an upright attentiveness to traces of those who have inhabited times and places other than one's own... [and] to live as though the lives of other people mattered.¹⁴

Drawing on Felman and Laub's research, and consistent with many approaches to Holocaust education, both the critical and cognitive strands of historical consciousness rest on a premise that testimony and witness are the most powerful ways to make history come alive. Testimonial accounts, Simon explains, include "diaries or eyewitness statements, documentary photographs or film, novels, poetry, stories, song, fictionalized film, or theatre," either by people who have lived through those particular events or by people who have read or heard the testimonies and are "moved to convey to others what has been impressed upon them." Testimony is effective precisely because it is seen as a "vital personal supplement to impersonal documentary evidence," thereby "overturning the anonymity that is often the fate of victims of historical trauma."¹⁵ In a discussion on the pedagogical potential of testimony Simon cites two testimonial accounts of the removal of the Sayisi Dene people in northern Canada, whose communities were picked up with only a few hours' notice and moved from their traditional homelands and hunting grounds to the barren shores of the Hudson Bay in the summer of 1956.¹⁶ If received attentively, Simon claims, such testimonies have "the potential to make a transactive claim on Canadian public memory, one with the possibility of shifting the stories that non-Aboriginals tell of themselves and hence of possibly renewing the terms on which to build a redefined relationship between native peoples and Canadians."¹⁷

I too have been drawn to the pedagogical potential of testimony and narrative, and have used diaries, novels, documentary films, and eyewitness accounts in my work with pre- and in-service teachers. But a recent experience with an undergraduate class has led me to question whether testimony and witness have in fact withstood the test of time as the most effective ways to bring history to life and to plant the seeds of critical historical consciousness and ethical responsibility in twenty-first-century students.

In an introductory education course I was teaching a couple of years ago, the students were reading Eden Robinson's novel *Monkey Beach*.¹⁸ The first-person narrative is set in an Aboriginal community a few hundred miles north of Vancouver,

our own city. As the story unfolds, we see how the experiences of Aboriginal children who were taken from their families at six or seven years of age and sent to government-mandated residential schools continue to have a devastating impact not only on those who actually attended the schools, but on their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and on Aboriginal communities in general. In addition to reading *Monkey Beach*, several of the students had previously heard testimonial accounts from elders and other survivors of the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse that too often characterized the day-to-day life of students in these residential schools. But the testimonies had apparently done little to shake up their negative (and often socially sanctioned) stereotypes. Most of the students in the class assumed that Aboriginal people on the whole are lazy, do not care about education (their own or their children's), and that they typically spend their days drinking or gambling away their government support payments.

On the morning we were to discuss *Monkey Beach* in class, the common feeling around the room was one of indifference and a thinly veiled moral superiority with regard to the characters in Robinson's novel and toward Aboriginal people in general, and the discussion did little to disrupt their understandings and self-conception as future teachers of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth. So after class I decided that if personal accounts and testimonies were not successful at cutting through the stereotypes, perhaps a bit of old-fashioned history would be in order. The next day, in a moment of remarkably *uninspired* pedagogy, I stood at the front of the room and read aloud passages from the historical policy documents that had underpinned Aboriginal residential schooling in Canada, including the Indian Act of 1876 (which defined who was and who was not an Indian); the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857 (the policy of assimilation that sought in part to “take the Indian out of the child”); and sections from a bill put forward in 1920 by Duncan Campbell Scott, head of the Department of Indian Affairs, and under whose direction residential schooling became compulsory for all Aboriginal children between the ages of seven and fifteen. In the bill, Scott pledged to “get rid of the Indian problem.... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department.”¹⁹ I simply stood there for about twenty minutes reading from these documents verbatim, and then we moved on to the rest of the day's activities.

Later that week, I ran into one of the students on campus and she said, “I can't stop thinking about that stuff you read to us the other day. Why didn't I know about that before?” But what was it that she didn't know? She had heard testimonies, had read the novel, and the Canadian media was full of stories about the upcoming apology by the federal government to residential school survivors. Obviously these accounts had not really sunk in — at least not in the way that Simon suggests might help to shift the way non-Aboriginals see ourselves in relation to Aboriginal people. The following week in class it became apparent that several other students had had a similar response to the impersonal, seemingly affectless policy documents, and they were filled with a kind of moral outrage and distress.²⁰

As I reflected on the difference between the students' responses to the novel and testimonies, and their response to the policy documents, I began to wonder whether testimony might have lost a bit of the performative and pedagogical force it once held. Have our Generation Y students — that is, those who were born between the mid-1970s and the late 1990s, and who have grown up watching *Oprah* and *Dr. Phil* — become somewhat immune to the power of testimony? The students' impassioned response to the text of the historical policy documents clearly showed that they were *not* impervious to the "touch of the past," but what touched them and shattered their previous understandings and self-conceptions was not testimony or witness. Rather, to borrow Simon's words, what had "the potential to make a transactive claim"²¹ on the memory of my students was not the spoken testimonies of residential school survivors, or the first-person novel, or narrative accounts in documentary films; it was the cold text of government policy.

In contrast to a generation or two ago, today's students have been raised in a culture where the boundary between public and private has been virtually erased. We now have access to the intimate details of strangers' lives around the clock on television and on the Internet, and we have become accustomed to witnessing others' suffering and trauma in situations of injustice. The problem, however, is that by the time the credits roll on *Oprah*, the narratives of suffering and struggle have typically been transformed into tales of triumph. While viewers might empathize with the person who suffers, they know that by the end of the hour she will have overcome her adversity either through self-determination or faith, or through individual acts of kindness on the part of a stranger. For my students and other viewers of their generation, there seems to be no obvious connection between hearing and seeing testimonial accounts of another's suffering and their own ethical responsibility.

Now Simon might argue that the students' responses were symptomatic of the testimony having been received merely as a "spectacle of suffering,"²² and this might be partially true. But I also think there was something else at play. My sense is that it was not a case of the students simply refusing to call into question their previous understandings or self-conceptions, but rather that what prompted their willingness to be "touched by the past" — to attend to the past as something that makes ethical demands on us here and now — was a different form of address. I am still compelled by Simon's overall project on public memory and practices of remembrance, and especially his emphasis on Levinasian and Derridean thought in that work; therefore, let me return briefly to *The Touch of the Past* in order to suggest that the ethical power of critical historical consciousness need not rest on the pedagogical potential of testimony.

RECEIVING THE PAST AS TEACHER

As I mentioned previously, critical historical consciousness is not primarily about historical knowledge, but about acknowledging our responsibility to and for the past, regardless of what part we may or may not have played in that history and regardless of our ability to know or understand it. Unlike other conceptions of responsibility, which rely either on a calculus of rights and responsibilities or on a finely tuned moral perception that enables us to see the other as basically just like

us in order to see their suffering as our own moral concern, critical historical consciousness rests on a Levinasian and Derridean conception of receptivity and susceptibility to the call of the Other. For Simon, the call to responsibility comes especially powerfully in the address of testimony, which is "always directed toward another... and places the one who receives it under the obligation of response to an embodied singular experience"²³ that cannot be reduced to some version of one's own experience:

The saying of testimony initiates a communicative encounter in which one may be seized in the performative moment of testimony by the transitive "facing" of the other and as a consequence, compelled to submit to a responsibility for that other. It requires an attentiveness that can be accomplished only by greeting the embodied call to witness with a binding allegiance: "Here I am." Here I am to learn and *attempt* to exceed the limits of my knowledge. In my approach as apprentice, I submit myself to learn the limits of myself and, in doing so, bare myself to a wounding — a trauma inflicted by the other's story.²⁴

Simon's point here is that being "touched by the past" requires a suspension of ego and an openness to receiving the past as teacher. This receptivity in turn requires us to revisit not only our culturally inscribed habits of reading, listening, and attending to the voices and stories of the other, but also our prevailing assumptions about time, historical memory, and pedagogy.²⁵ To receive the past as teacher — or, in Derrida's words, as "the gift of the ghost"²⁶ — means being open to questions we did not even know we had, and to learning not only what we seek to learn, but also that which might shatter our knowledge, our identities, and our self-understanding. To receive the past as teacher thus means that we risk being changed — perhaps profoundly — by our engagement with that which we might otherwise seek to avoid.²⁷

Recalling the difference between my students' response to the testimonial accounts and narratives and their response to the historical policy documents, I am not convinced that the capacity to receive the past as teacher and to hear the call to an unconditional, an-archic responsibility necessarily rests on the performative moment of testimony or witnessing. Simon and many other educators and scholars of historical consciousness believe that it is the address of testimony that uniquely (or at least most powerfully) carries such ethical force. However, I want to suggest that, especially for our students who have come of age in the twenty-first century, a similar experience can be evoked by pedagogical encounters with the very kind of "impersonal documentary evidence" that is thought to risk relegating victims of historical trauma to oblivion.²⁸

This is not to say that we need to adopt a cognitive, knowledge-based approach to historical consciousness, for I agree with Simon that the acquisition of more information in and of itself has no ethical force. That is, there is no necessary connection between learning particular facts and the call to put our current understandings and the stories that shape our relations to others and to the world into question. But as educators who are attuned to our students' changing realities, I think we might need to revisit the assumption that the kind of pedagogical encounters that have historically been most effective for making a transactive claim on public memory continue to hold the same power. And while both Levinas's and Derrida's ethical thought resists being flattened into prescriptions for practice, I believe that

there are some experiences that can move us closer to recognizing our unconditional, an-archic responsibility for the other and some that move us further away.

Consistent with Simon, the key pedagogical point, on my view, is that we must pay equal (if not more) attention to our practices of remembrance as to the content. Critical historical consciousness is about reframing how we live in relation to the past; it is about “forms of learning that unsettle the present, opening one to new ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting.”²⁹ Contrary to the cognitive approach to historical consciousness, which emphasizes coming to understand the past through primary research, exercises in perspective taking, and the cultivation of empathy for those who suffered in other times and places, critical historical consciousness calls us to come to terms with the impossibility of understanding, and with receiving the “gift of the ghost” as a necessary condition for a hopeful future.³⁰

But if, as I have suggested, testimony and witnessing may have lost some of their pedagogical force, what other practices might we adopt in order to foster the development of a critical historical consciousness? One possibility, in preparing teachers for work in culturally diverse classrooms, for example, might be to spend considerable hands-on time with the historical policy documents that have shaped education in the communities they serve. Ideally these sessions would take place in small groups where the teachers could work together reading and re-reading the documents and attending to the multiple ways in which not only the words of the documents themselves, but, more importantly, their own practices of reading and interpreting shape their relationship to the past, the present, and the future. As was the case with the students in my class, such encounters may result in difficult new knowledge that one cannot simply add to the store of what one already knows. Instead of learning *about* the past, critical historical consciousness requires us to be open to learning *from* the past in a way that “unsettles the very terms on which our understandings of ourselves and our world [are] based.”³¹ This work thus requires attentiveness and sensitivity on the part of the teacher educator, not in order to alleviate the difficulty such new knowledge poses, but to create the conditions where students can learn to live in and with the tensions of that new knowledge. The hope of critical historical consciousness is that in coming to terms with the “gift of the ghost,” in being “thrown back toward what has never been my fault or my deed, toward what has never been in my power or in my freedom, toward what has never been my presence, and has never come into memory,”³² we might recognize the ethical significance of our relationship to the past, for as Derrida puts it:

The question of the archive is not...a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past which *already* might be at our disposal or not at our disposal, ...[but rather] a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow.³³

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 111–112.

2. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

3. See, for example, Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); William J. Booth, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006); Deborah Britzman, *Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Martha Minow, *Breaking the Cycles of Hatred: Memory, Law, and Repair* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002); Peter Seixas, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Roger I. Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); and Roger I. Simon, Claudia Eppert, and Sharon Rosenberg, eds., *Between Hope and Despair: Pedagogy and the Remembrance of Historical Trauma* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
4. Blustein, *Moral Demands*, xii.
5. Levinas, *Time and the Other*.
6. See Seixas, *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, 3–20, for a fuller treatment of the development of historical consciousness in Europe and North America.
7. *Ibid.*, 105–106; and Seixas, *CSHC Annual Report 2008–2009*, p. 1, http://www.cshc.ubc.ca/Annual_Report_2008-9.pdf.
8. <http://www.facinghistory.org>.
9. <http://www.cshc.ubc.ca>. See also Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004); Kent den Heyer, “A Dialogue on Narrative and Historical Consciousness,” in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Seixas, 202–211; Stephane Levesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students in the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Jurgen Straub, ed., *Narration, Identity, and Historical Consciousness* (New York: Berghahn, 2005); and Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg, *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).
10. <http://www.histori.ca/benchmarks/concepts/>.
11. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: Or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981); Levinas, *Time and the Other*; Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994); Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Britzman, *Lost Subjects*; and Felman and Laub, *Testimony*.
12. Simon, *Touch of the Past*.
13. See Denise Egéa-Kuehne, ed., *Levinas and Education: At the Intersection of Faith and Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Sharon Todd, ed., “Levinas and Education: The Question of Implication,” special issue of *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22, no. 1 (2003).
14. Simon, *Touch of the Past*, 133.
15. *Ibid.*, 50 and 51.
16. Roger Simon, “The Pedagogical Insistence of Public Memory,” in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Seixas, 183–201. For original testimonies, see Ila Bussidor, *Night Spirits: The Story of the Relocation of the Sayisi Dene* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1997).
17. Simon, “The Pedagogical Insistence of Public Memory,” 192.
18. Eden Robinson, *Monkey Beach* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).
19. Duncan Campbell Scott, National Archives of Canada, Record Group 10, vol. 6810, file 470-2-3, vol. 7, pp. 55 (L-3) and 63 (N-3).
20. David E. Purpel, *Moral Outrage in Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999). On moral distress, see Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).
21. Simon, “The Pedagogical Insistence of Public Memory,” 192.
22. *Ibid.*, 190. See also Megan Boler’s discussion of “inscribed habits of (in)attention” in *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
23. Simon, *Touch of the Past*, 51.

24. *Ibid.*, 54 (emphasis in original). However, in order for testimony to be effective as a call to responsibility, it must be taken up in a particular way. In the same chapter as the extended quote I have cited, Simon offers a detailed description of responsible listening, or “listening otherwise,” but constraints of space preclude a fuller treatment of that discussion here.
25. Simon, “The Pedagogical Insistence of Public Memory,” 195; and Simon, *Touch of the Past*, 105.
26. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*; see also Claudia Ruitenberg, “Education as Séance: Specters, Spirits, and the Expansion of Memory,” *Interchange* 40, no. 3 (2009): 295–308.
27. Simon, *Touch of the Past*, 146.
28. *Ibid.*, 51.
29. *Ibid.*, 106.
30. *Ibid.*, 112.
31. *Ibid.*, 106.
32. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 111.
33. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 36.