

Review: *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media, and Performance.*

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Steven High, Edward Little, and Thi Ry Duong, eds. *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media, and Performance.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. 376 pages. ISBN 978-1442614659

Canada's traditionally progressive policy toward refugees has made Montreal a haven for survivors of mass atrocities ranging from the Holocaust to the Rwandan genocide. Among other things, *Remembering Mass Violence* seeks to tell their stories. The volume grows out of a 2009 conference at Concordia University on the same theme, which brought together both scholars and artists who work with Concordia's wide-ranging "Life Stories of Montrealers" archive (<http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca/>), and other contributors from multiple disciplines who have used oral history to explore human survival through genocide, war, and displacement. *Remembering Mass Violence* assembles a rich variety of perspectives on its topic, illustrates the tremendous potential of oral history as both a research method and a mode of engagement, and raises some fundamental questions about the limitations of this approach to narrating collective trauma.

Diverse as they are in their approach and subject matter, the chapters in this volume share some important ethical and methodological commitments. The first is their emphasis on what Michael Frisch has called "shared authority," which the editors gloss as an "ethic of learning with, rather than learning about or from" (8); thus, the effort to involve narrators in the shaping and dissemination of their own stories takes center stage throughout the volume. The editors also point out that the contributors share a desire to do politically meaningful research. This sense that research should be "somehow linked to a forward-looking social or political engagement" (6) is perhaps exemplified by the final chapter in the volume, in which Valerie Love excavates the history of Rwanda's suppressed LGBT population in order to "advocate for those whose rights have been denied." (310) Finally, against historians' tendency to subordinate individual narratives to widespread trends or verifiable facts, the essays collected here attend to the specific affective qualities of survivors' individual stories. In the spirit of Alessandro Portelli, they "attempt to understand the inner logic of not only *what* we are hearing, but what we are *not* hearing." (4)

The last words here point to a problem that preoccupies the contributors to *Remembering Mass Violence*: the limits of language and narrative as means of

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remembering collective trauma. In a powerful piece that sets the tone for the entire collection, the Holocaust scholar Henry Greenspan points out the failure of stories, which work by verbalizing noteworthy actions, to capture traumatic experiences that are often characterized by what Primo Levi called an “all-pervasive lack of events.” (43) This sense that narrative somehow falsifies or misinterprets survivors’ experiences returns at a number of points in *Remembering Mass Violence*. In an essay on the process of making a documentary film about the Cambodian genocide, a Montreal high school student comes to the pivotal realization that “I couldn’t tell [survivors’] story exactly the way they had told it.” (164) The same recognition leads Reisa Levine and her team at the CitizenShift/ParoleCitoyenne website to avoid documentary film altogether in favor of a “curated playlist” approach to digitizing large portions of the Life Stories project (141). In an essay on the difficulties of staging her experience of the Armenian genocide, Hourig Attarian recalls surprising the actors by asking them for “less emotion, more mutedness” in their performances (121). As in Greenspan’s essay, silence here seems to capture what language cannot.

Silence carries its own risks, however, and some of the most memorable essays in *Remembering Mass Violence* take up the challenge to find new ways narrating mass violence and collective trauma. These efforts are the focus of Part 2 of the collection, entitled “Performing Human Rights.” The section opens with Michael Kilburn’s lucid account of Shaw Pong Liu’s *Soldiers’ Tales Untold* (2008). In this restaging of Stravinsky’s *The Soldier’s Tale*, Liu embeds veterans in the audience and has them interrupt the performance of Stravinsky’s piece with statements about their lived experience of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Kilburn points out, this interruption of a classic narrative “makes explicit the narrative breakdown that accompanies the trauma of war.” (69) At the same time, by insisting on the contemporary relevance of Stravinsky’s story, Liu’s piece reconnects trauma to its political origins as what Cathy Caruth calls “a symptom of history.” (74)

The constitutive tension in Liu’s piece between narrative and fragmentation, classic text and contemporary interruption, resonates with other efforts to narrate trauma in *Remembering Mass Violence*. Kilburn mentions Jonathan Shay’s use of Homeric archetypes to contextualize soldiers’ combat experience in works like *Odysseus in America* (74). Similarly, the poet Lorne Shirnian uses an epic parallel to understand the experiences of his father, a refugee from the Armenian genocide. “Father, I imagined you like Ulysses gone those twenty years,” begins one of the poems by Shirnian that is reproduced in this volume: “But he returned to claim his home and family. You never returned.” (54) And Sandeep Bhagwati, whose *Lamentations* ingeniously compensates for

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the unreliability of language by staging only survivors' physical gestures as captured in video interviews, sets those gestures to words from the biblical Lamentations of Jeremiah in order to "transform personal woes into stark and intransigent laments." (87) These efforts recall the works of modernist writers like Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, who also used epic and religious parallels to connect private experience to collective history. Indeed, the prevalence of this approach in *Remembering Mass Violence*—along with the Brechtian aesthetics of the book's theater chapters—is a reminder of how relevant modernist strategies remain for narrating collective trauma. As we approach the centenary of the Great War, it is worth remembering that modernism itself developed largely as an effort to process unprecedented mass violence.¹

Remembering Mass Violence presents an astonishing variety of perspectives on oral history and on mass violence itself. The closing section on the Rwandan genocide, for example, juxtaposes Athanasie Mukarwego's horrifying first-person account of her serial rape at the hands of Hutu soldiers with a revealing interpretation of this "crime d'envie" by a team of social scientists. The unreliability of language takes on visceral reality in this pairing, as the authors explain that the suffering of women like Mukarwego was enabled by a kind of "double language" that used words like "work" and "liberation" to mean "killing" and "rape," thus naturalizing violence by "integrating it progressively into ordinary life." (289)² Like the chapters discussed above, this one makes clear the difficulties of using language to narrate mass violence, even as it makes deft use of oral history as a way of engaging the reader. Both in the frankness with which it addresses the shortcomings of narrative and in the creativity of its solutions, *Remembering Mass Violence* gives valuable insights on the uses of oral history as a research method, a mode of engagement, and a means of survival.

¹ See Samuel Lynn Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990) and Pericles Lewis, "Inventing Literary Modernism at the Outbreak of the Great War," in *London, Modernism, and 1914*, ed. Michael J. K. Walsh (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 148–63.

² "L'astuce du double langage est de prendre un terme et de l'investir d'un sens contraire ... Tout comme travailler voulait dire dans les faits tuer, 'libérer' voulait dire violer [...] Ce détournement du sens des mots, cette perversion du discours, ces anti-phrases permettent de ... camoufler la dimension tragique et par conséquent de l'intégrer progressivement dans la vie ordinaire, autant des persécuteurs que des persécutés." (289)