

On Living and Learning in Between the Past and the Future

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In view of the continuum of human existence, it is apparent that we are always living in between the past and the future. Yet we intuitively and perpetually make arbitrary demarcations among the past, the present, and the future. Parallel to one's memory of one's lived early childhood experience, our collective memory of the past — especially the remote past — can be hazy, indefinite, and surrealistic. Just as one's present state of mind shapes one's understanding of one's early childhood experiences, contemporaneous ideologies can circumscribe historical inquiries into the collective past. Thus, teaching about the past is always a value-laden inquiry. As Ann Chinnery is keenly aware of the interconnections between the aims and the methods of teaching about the past, she argues that teaching about the past must foster critical historical consciousness so learners may apprehend and appreciate difficult knowledge from the past. To Chinnery, cultivating critical historical consciousness differs from “a cognitive, knowledge-based approach” to recollecting the past. More specifically, Chinnery, in line with Emmanuel Levinas and Roger Simon, acknowledges and affirms that one's “here and now subjectivity” has always been interwoven with the past at both individual and collective levels. Drawing from her teaching experience, Chinnery further concludes that cultivating critical historical consciousness need not rely upon personal testimony. Instead, teaching and learning about the past should focus on facilitating learners' undertaking critical contextual inquiries into the formation of subjectivity and public policies. Such critical inquiries, while disquieting, can lead to recognizing our ethical responsibilities of “receiving the past” and “shaping the future.”

I commend Chinnery's efforts to advocate for intergenerational reciprocity when the pursuit of progress and instant gratification often propel the bygone to disappear beyond the horizon. I also appreciate her calling our attention to the pedagogical value of impersonal documentation of the past. While I concur with Chinnery that teaching about the past constitutes a good, I believe that concerned educators must also attend to the politics of teaching and learning about the past in formal educational settings. According to Kate Millett, “the term ‘politics’ shall refer to power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another.”¹ In the case of history education, it has been noted that curriculum development as an inherently political undertaking continues to circumvent teachers' professional autonomy. In the United States, for example, the recent proposed changes to the Texas social studies curriculum clearly indicate that teachers lack professional autonomy in determining the scope and content of collective remembering in institutional settings. In the same vein, despite concerned teachers' efforts to establish more egalitarian teacher-student relationships, the imbalance in the power relations between students and teachers persists. Because “receiving the past” is not a passive act, socially responsive and responsible

teachers, to a large extent, are responsible for determining what and how their students should learn about the past. Undoubtedly, students can exercise their agentive subjectivity in determining what and how they may want to learn about the past. Nevertheless, student engagement in the act of remembering is compulsory in nature. As a result, present-day politics have overshadowed history education as an ethical endeavor.

Also, Chinnery points out that personal testimony may have very limited impact on helping Generation Y students connect with their fellow human beings in the past. However, it is unclear whether it is the genre of personal testimony that fails to raise the students' critical historical consciousness or whether it is this particular student population that rejects specific personal testimonial accounts such as Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach* in a specific educational or cultural context. To assess the pedagogical effectiveness of personal testimony versus impersonal public documentation of historical facts and events, it is critical to attend to the fact that Generation Y students do not necessarily share a common cultural heritage and worldview. To a large extent, the construction of "Generation Y students" reflects the existing dominant social norm, which may result from and continue to sustain historical injustice. Hence, simply designing differentiated curricula and instruction in accordance with students' aptitudes may not facilitate their commitment to redressing historical injustice. Instead, it might be critical to recognize and underscore the complementary relationship between personal testimony and impersonal documentation of historical facts.

To a large extent, Chinnery seems to suggest that learning about the past could shed light on the present generation's ethical responsibilities toward future generations. Chinnery's affirming the value of remembering reminds me of Kant's claim that "human nature is such that it cannot be indifferent even to the most remote epoch which may eventually affect our species, so long as this epoch can be expected with certainty."² However, human nature remains indeterminate and unsettling. Also, it is virtually impossible to foretell the future with certainty, notwithstanding scientific and technological advancement. Clearly, a recognition of temporal continuity does not provide us with a moral compass. It follows that the act of "remembering" the past by itself does not automatically guide the present generation to undertake prudent actions to attend to the well-being of future generations — the ultimate good of "remembering." Following Chinnery's line of thought, I wish to explore how critical historical consciousness might be facilitative for the pursuit of intergenerational reciprocity.

Based on his twenty years of experience working with international aid workers, Tony Vaux found that aid workers' lack of self-knowledge impeded their own humanitarian missions. To Vaux, humanity is a learned capacity to gain a holistic contextual understanding of the person in dire need. Without self-knowledge, international aid workers are unable to listen to the people in dire need in order to then render needed support appropriately. Hence, he claims that "self-knowledge is the prerequisite of humanity." At the same time, Vaux believes that aid workers must be willing to obliterate their selves in order fulfill their humanitarian

responsibilities.³ Vaux's calling for obliteration of our own selves echoes Chinnery's recognition of the paradoxical relationship between enhanced self-knowledge and destabilized human subjectivity. More specifically, enhanced self-knowledge can lead to the destabilization of subjectivity. Destabilized subjectivity, while vulnerable, can facilitate a recognition of common humanity across cultural boundaries. Similarly, in the case of intergenerational reciprocity, fostering critical historical consciousness can facilitate the present generation's recognition of the power exercised by the past generation in shaping their subjectivity. The present generation's recognition of their destabilized and vulnerable subjectivity, thereafter, can play a critical role in guiding the present generation to employ their power with prudent caution. After all, it is especially essential to recognize that the present generation has power to shape future generations' prospects rather than vice versa.

In her study of the generation gap, Margaret Mead distinguishes three types of cultures: post-figurative culture, co-figurative culture, and pre-figurative culture.⁴ In post-figurative culture, children primarily learn from their forebears. In co-figurative culture, both children and adults learn from their peers. In pre-figurative culture, adults also learn from their children because of the accelerating rate of social changes that have taken place within the lifetime of one generation. To bridge generational gaps, Mead suggests that "we must, in fact, teach ourselves how to alter adult behavior so that we can give up post-figurative upbringing, with its tolerated co-figurative components, and discover pre-figurative ways of teaching and learning that will keep the future open."⁵ In the new millennium, the boundaries among post-figurative culture, co-figurative culture, and pre-figurative culture have become fluid and unsettling. While formal education continues to facilitate transmission of the past generation's cultural values, ongoing globalization inadvertently leads us to question our post-figurative upbringing and accept co-figurative culture formation. Above all, the unprecedented changes in the economy, technology, and science compel us to reexamine modern schooling's seemingly indifferent attitude toward future generations. Fostering critical historical consciousness, therefore, is especially helpful for facilitating reflective inquiries into the historical construction of the present generation, whose awareness of historical injustice can in turn lead to moral efforts to redirect cultural formation.

In short, Chinnery's call for raising and fostering critical historical consciousness does not exclusively dwell on remembering the past. Rather, Chinnery reminds us that the past is always intertwined with the present and the future. Hence, remembering the past not only sheds light on the formation of the present generation, but it also raises the present generation's moral responsibility to future generations in order to advocate for egalitarian intergenerational relationships.

1. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 23.

2. Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," Proposition 8, in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 5.

3. Tony Vaux, *The Selfish Altruist* (London: Earthscan, 2001), 7.

4. Margaret Mead, *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap* (Garden City, N.J.: Natural History Press, 1970).
5. *Ibid.*, 92.