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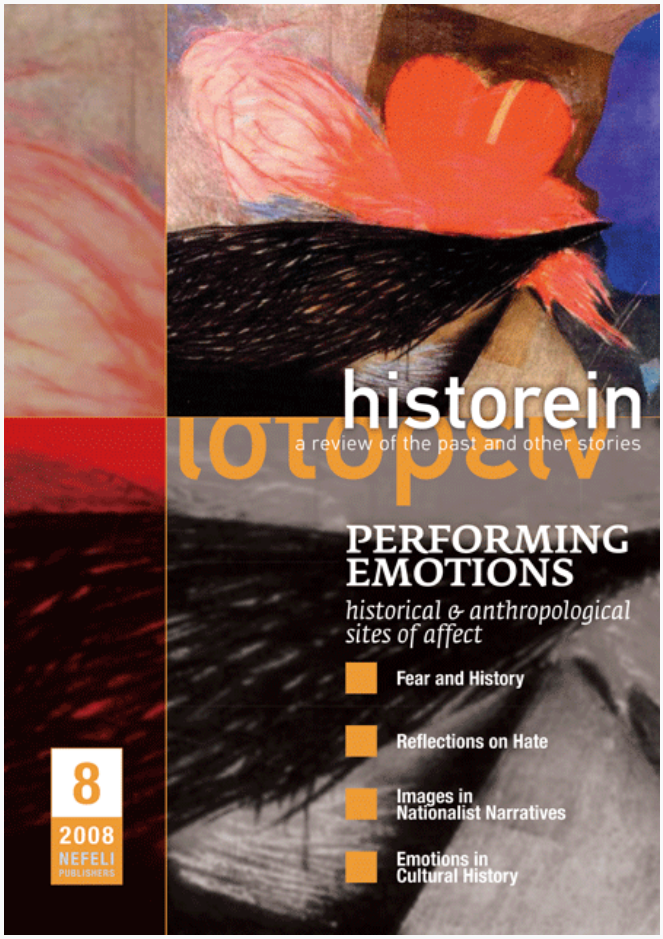

History, our own Stories and Emotions Online

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History, our own Stories and Emotions Online

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In the contemporary mediated society, there is an undeniable proliferation of testimonies to violent, exceptionally harsh and generally traumatic events. The desire to testify, whether about an event that directly affects one's own life or about an event that touches the collective life of a community on a large scale, has become a basic component of contemporary culture. It could be argued that we are 'witnessing' the formation of an extended and propagated culture of testimony with novel characteristics and multiple forms.

The need and the desire to produce and consume personalised forms of historical knowledge – *what has already happened* – is evident nowadays in various forms of media and communication. The mass media offers a massive space for the expression of the desire or often the *imperative* to tell one's *own* story or *a* story. The internet, especially, works as an open space that transcends the traditional and establishes new boundaries of public and private spheres, as well as of personal and collective subjectivities. Personal homepages, blogs, chat rooms, online communities of all sorts (i.e., political, activist, artistic, cultural and so on), official commemorative sites, online archival collections, etc., are all markers of the blending between the personal and the collective, of the internet functioning as a common and public space for personal reflection and emotional release.

How is this emerging testimonial culture interconnected with a more general process of sentimentalisation of public memory and historical culture on online memory

sites? This question could be answered through the presentation and discussion of the September 11 Digital Archive, established by the Center for History and New Media (CHNM) of George Mason University. The September 11 Digital Archive offers a valuable example for the study of the ways in which collective memory can be personalised and familiarised online on the basis of an emotional, sentimental engagement with the past.

Case study: The September 11 Digital Archive

Since it was established in 1994, the CHNM has undertaken activities and projects that promote the discussion over issues relating to the possibilities of digital media technologies and applications in the discipline of history. In its own words, the "CHNM combines cutting edge digital media with the latest and best historical scholarship to promote an inclusive and democratic understanding of the past as well as a broad historical literacy".[1] The September 11 Digital Archive is one of these projects, organised by the CHNM in collaboration with the American Social History Project (ASHP) of the City University of New York Graduate Center. In 2003, the Library of Congress incorporated the September 11 Digital Archive into its permanent collection, making it the library's first major digital acquisition. The September 11 Digital Archive is now a closed archive since the project formally ended in 2004.

What is this archive about? The September 11 Digital Archive is a digital repository of histories – arguably in the main a repository of *personal* stories – and documents relating to the 9/11 attacks in New York, Virginia and Pennsylvania and their aftermath, encompassing almost 150,000 digital items. It is structured in seven subsections, which contain many thousands of accounts of different genres. Most of these accounts are personal contributions but one can also find whole collections of material evidence from official institutions, organisations and other networks. The seven distinctive subsections are made up of the following:

Stories: first-hand accounts of people directly affected by the events, that is people who were actually on site, lost dear ones or have suffered the consequences since, etc.; individual stories of people who do not actually have any connection to the events – some are not even US citizens – except for the fact that they were emotionally moved by the 9/11 events.

Emails: individual emails sent and/or received on or shortly after the 9/11 events; large collections of emails from institutions, organisations, and other groups such as a collection of 11,000 emails from the Department of Justice, or from the Madison Area Peace Coalition, etc.

Documents: posters, letters, cards, brochures, event programs, press releases, announcements, etc., collected from the streets of New York (the Michael Ragsdale Flyer Collection); action plans, reports, studies, white papers, etc. (the New York City Fire Department incident action plans, the National Guard archives); newspaper articles (the Independent Press Association collection); various other documents produced by a variety of organisations and journals on a more wide range of topics; links to other relevant document collections.

Images: digital photographs and art, artworks submitted by individuals (people with first-hand experience, site visitors after the events and others); additional collections of images from diverse groups and organisations (the "Thank You Rescuers" website, for example), etc.

Digital Animations: video and digital animations, most of which present a movie or game from individuals, organisations, networks and other groups; a collection of animations created by political cartoonist Mark Fiore.

Interviews: oral history interviews with people who either experienced the events or were subsequently affected by them (including, for example, material from the "Acting Patriotic" interviews project on the victims of the anti-terrorist legislation); interviews with Arab and/or Muslim Americans about the impact of the 9/11 events on the Middle Eastern diaspora communities (from the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center interviews project).

Audio/Video: audio and video material from the public, such as personal stories recorded as voicemails; voice messages from visitors to the "September 11: Bearing Witness to History" exhibition of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

The September 11 Digital Archive also gives access to several special collections, namely 1) the Ground One: Voices from Post-911 Chinatown collection which preserves interviews with Chinese-Americans living and working in the area of Chinatown, the largest residential area affected by the 9/11 events; 2) the collection of stories from the National Museum of American History's September 11: Bearing Witness to History exhibition and website; 3) the Here is New York collection that hosts photographs of the 9/11 events by professionals as well as by amateurs; 4) the Sonic Memorial Project collection that holds audio traces of the World Trade Center and its neighbourhood collected and submitted by radio and new media producers, artists, historians and people from all over the world; 5) the Library of Congress Witness and Response exhibition, a collection of stories, images and emails from the public about the 9/11 events. Finally, the September 11 Digital Archive offers an indexed and annotated guide, organised by type and content, to 9/11 websites and web resources.

Navigating through the September 11 Digital Archive raises certain questions concerning, on the one hand, the nature of the historical archive in the digital era, and, on the other, the connection between history and personal narratives, contemporary historical culture and emotional experiences, and sentimental expressions and individual meaning-making. Some of the main issues that emerge through the study of this type of archival collection are outlined herewith.

Online archives

Recent years have seen the emergence of strong debates over history, in particular over issues of reality versus truth, fact versus fiction, 'hard' evidence versus interpretation, empiricism versus theory, and so on. An interrogation of the status of the traditional archive is inscribed in these debates.[2] In an attempt to describe the traditional analogical archive in the modern West, Peter Fritzsche has written:

> *The archive is the production of the heirs, who must work to find connections from one generation to the next and thereby acknowledge the ongoing disintegration of the past. The heirs also distinguish themselves as such: a cultural group that knows itself by cultivating a particular historical trajectory. In the West, the nation has been the dominant form of this particularity, reinforcing a common past within its borders and emphasising the difference of cultural origins across its borders.*[3]

In the modern West and with the rise of the nation state, the division of life into public and private spheres played a crucial role in determining what counted as history, what was memory, and what sort of historical memory should be preserved. Everything that happened in public was what the nation should remember, where as what happened in private had no historical significance. Thus, the aim of the traditional archive was to preserve the historical knowledge and memory necessary to foreground the modern national "imagined communities".[4]

Of course – and for good reasons – the traditional archive is still very much respected and valorised as a valid institutional form of memory preservation, especially within the context of professional history making. Nevertheless, the emergence of the new information technologies and especially of digital technologies has brought with it a new kind of archive, the online archive. That is, in short, an archive on the internet that is usually initiated by an institution but expands in more complex ways as it also welcomes individual contributions by non-professional historians and other amateurs. This new, online archive seems not so completely dependent on the nation. Rather, it is an archive that transcends traditional national boundaries and reaches out to preserve and bring forth memories on a transnational and global level. The discussion about the nature of the archive in the digital era problematises an apparent turn from a single, national territory and its archive as a repository of materials of historical significance for one nation, to overlapping globalised territories and networks and thus multiple and interconnected histories that blend together online. This novel cultural moment could eloquently be described as the crossroad of transnational and transcultural memories and identities. Nadia Butt talks about transcultural memory as a social practice "defied as a kind of remembering that locates memory not in a single world or culture but in 'multiple time and contact zones'" and as "a new approach to remember, commemorate and preserve the individual and collective past in our multidimensional present".[5]

The fact that the online archive gives voice to non-professional historians makes it different from the traditional analogical archive in diverse ways and raises questions about history both as a way of learning about, understanding and making sense of the past, and as a discipline. In short, the online archive creates the circumstances for history to become all the more public and political,[6] communicative and accessible. According to Cohen and Rosenzweig, the September 11 Digital Archive example shows how the internet can function as a novel space to communicate, comment and remember, and reveals another kind of interactivity: "This interactivity represented an entirely new role for the Internet as a place for community-making and spontaneous documentation."[7] In addition, the internet, again as an open and public space, plays an important role in supporting a movement to democratise history. The democratisation of history is one of the main goals of the CHNM concerning its online history projects.[8] One should, of course, be aware and cautious when it comes to discussing democracy and the internet or, better, democratising

processes, since it is not always necessary that multiplicity and plurality per se promote diversity and differentiation.

The online archive is a new historical locus on the internet that hosts traditional historical records and facts but also welcomes personal accounts as well as 'memories' that were never lived and stories of the past (his/her-stories) that never materialised. There seems to be a questioning of the concept of 'proper academic history' and of 'proper, verifiable and thus reliable archival sources'. Instead, it has become increasingly important to pay attention to personal, individual stories as a legitimate historical source. Perhaps this is an opportunity to rethink memory as "the raw material of history",[9] not in the ambiguous context that Le Goff has contemplated as regards the things that can either bring memory and history together or drive them apart, but as a way to reapproach the notion of memory – collective and/or individual, lived and/or imagined, direct/first-hand and/or mediated – as a complex, multileveled and dynamic process of making sense of the past. This new online locus, the online archive, is created at the point where massive, usually traumatic and global, events of the present (soon to become turning points in world history) meet the small, personal and localised experiences and stories. A new theoretical analysis of the concept of the archive seems necessary, an analysis that might explain this intersection between *proper history* (standing for discourse) and *memory* (signifying emotion). These thoughts also lead to questions such as the following: What counts as an archive in the new digital era? And, therefore. what counts as history in the new digital era? These kinds of questions have become all the more legitimate.

Testimonial and sentimental culture online

The massive collection of diverse digital items in the September 11 Digital Archive shows that testimonial culture[10] is not unified or homogeneous. New spaces of expressing one's own story, such as the on the internet, create novel, multiple and complex testimonial forms, presented either in their totality or as fragmented. These forms are marked by digital technologies and can be written, spoken, visual, artefactual, technological, virtual, and so on. Moreover, the fact that the internet creates and functions as an open, public and perpetual space of expression, magnifies the sense of importance attributed to personal testimony in the sense that once uploaded, it always remains there; it is always present both as a personal and as a collective piece of historical documentation.

In addition, there are other alterations of testimonial forms that result from their interconnection to one's emotions. The need to tell one's own story, especially when it relates to a hard and traumatic past event, is also felt and experienced as an obligation. This duty to remember,[11] this felt obligation of the individual subject to speak out about the traumatic past, is intrinsically connected with complex emotions and, as such, reshapes as well as reinforces the sentimental burden of the testimony, thus altering its characteristics. Narrating one's personal story as a documentation of the collective and traumatic past is eventually experienced as a very important and serious task and, as such, it has to be emotionally engaging. In particular, in the September 11 Digital Archive we can trace a new form of sentimental testimony: the one related by a physically detached but sentimentally attached subject. The contributions to the online archive do not just

come from actual witnesses of the 9/11 events or from people directly affected by these events but also, and in a large part, from people who were emotionally moved but have actually no other connection to the events. These people feel the need to share their inner thoughts, their life recollections, their reflections about love, human relationships, politics, about almost anything that people usually think and contemplate about after a massive disaster.

Although these new forms of testimony share many common characteristics with more traditional oral or written testimonies, they are also marked by differences:

a) their production and dissemination is based on the use of digital and mobile technologies that promote a massive public dissemination and circulation;
b) they are meant from the start to be presented online, a condition that presupposes another kind of intentionality on the part of the contributor of the testimony, of the person who shares his/her story online;
c) despite the fact that the original nature of the story-testimony is personal and private, it undergoes a constant transformation through its exposure and its presentation on the internet, and it turns out to be collective and public at the same time;
d) the individual subjects that narrate their stories are simultaneously producers and consumers of history and the past. This characteristic is not novel in itself. In a sense, one could argue the same for the autobiography or the memoirs genre. However, these online personal stories could be thought of as snapshots of the individual's autobiographical impulse and urge, mere digital fragments of his/her life.[12] They satisfy a need to remember as well as to make public an instance of the individual's life, an individual that will probably never find himself/herself in a position to put down his/her whole life story in a more organised and structural form, such as an autobiography. It could therefore be argued that these new forms of online testimony promote the construction not of a "story of the self" as a whole – in its totality, with a narrative form that has a beginning, middle and ending – but the construction of a single-fragmented story of 'part of the self'. In addition, given this short autobiographical narration online – that is within a collective space and through a collective process – the individual shares a feeling of relationality to all the other individuals online, by living a relational digital life. It seems evident that the 'self' ought not to be thought of as a solitary entity, but instead as a relational one, relational to the other solitary entities online.

This contemporary testimonial culture, as described here, is interconnected with a growing sentimental culture. One is a basic, fundamental, constitutive element of the other. They grow and expand through their interdependence. Testimonies and personal stories about the past, especially the traumatic past, contribute to the sentimentalising of public and historical culture.

The term sentimentalisation as used here does not necessarily have a negative connotation, nor does it refer exclusively to a description of facile and distorted emotions. Rather it is used in such a way so as to refer to an act of excessively indulging in sentiments without attributing, however, either a negative or a positive set of values to that act. In that sense, this process of sentimentalisation of the past seems to be based on the usage of emotions such as fear, grief,

shock (deriving from the spectacularity of the images and the unanticipated events), vulnerability, nostalgia, etc., in order to retouch and transform the known and traumatic past into an ideal and heroic past worth remembering and building a future upon. Within that context, discussions of memorialisation quickly followed the 9/11 events,[13] as did the need to vividly remember and narrate our own stories. Into the void and emptiness, of absence and loss, has emerged a massive and intense need to create presence. And what a better and more alive presence than that of the past, of history.

Towards an expanded notion of historicity

It seems that the personalisation[14] and familiarisation of collective memory, as well as the publication of personal stories, raise questions about the relations between people's stories and history. It is only recently that scholars have begun to systematically study emotional perception and expression as not merely a "private" inward feeling but as a way of interpreting and understanding the external world and acting in it.

The September 11 Digital Archive seems to have created a sort of *history-in-e-motion*: a history created, disseminated and moving at a different pace and rate from the traditional history written by the authorial figure of the professional historian; a history fragmented yet constantly and perpetually present online; and, finally, a history experienced and performed on the basis of emotional memories of the past that undermines quite a few dilemmas and binary notions in our understanding of history, such as the individual vs. the collective, fact vs. imagination, reality vs. desire, stories vs. history, etc. As Lauren Berlant puts it, "it is about change in the normative structure of mass subjectivity, a shift in the public sphere standard of ordinary personhood from an Enlightenment model of the reasonable man who is organised by a hierarchy of mind over body in favour of an image of the subject who becomes historical by proximity to trauma"[15] and – if we may add – to sentimental emotions in general.

Online personal testimonies shed light on areas of personal, social and political activity that would otherwise be lost through official records and institutional archival sources. The personalised expression of a lived, sensed, collectively felt past creates a shared, common and public space of remembering and communicating, thus undermining the sharp distinction between the emotional and the rational/intellectual, and moulding the boundaries between private and public spheres. The September 11 Digital Archive offers the opportunity to observe that what had previously seemed emotional – that is, personal, individual, idiosyncratic – has been rendered historical, structural and an object of historical study. Empathy is represented as equal to physical experience, and thus it needs to be accounted for as part of the historical event itself. Online memory sites function as a new locus that empowers the idea – and not necessarily or exclusively the condition – of freedom of speech and, at the same time, the need for emotional release and unburdening of the traumatic past. Online personal testimonies enhance the predisposition to relieve one's feelings and emotions about the past, about history and its significance in forming one's conceptions about the present and the future. Then again this might mean that a new history will enter the public domain, a new history that will probably bring forth new kinds

of emotional structures and intimacies produced by our exchanges with the past through constantly emerging, novel online sites of memory.

As oral history has previously done, online/digital history expands our notion of historicity to include practices, activities and interactions that have increasingly gained recognition as historical. In any case, a new theoretical framework needs to be developed in contemporary social and cultural theory and more research needs to be done in order to get a clearer view on the implications of the new, emerging form of online archive and the constantly evolving testimonial and sentimental culture online.

APPENDIX

- Center for History and New Media (CHNM)
  http://chnm.gmu.edu/index.php
- September 11 Digital Archive
  http://911digitalarchive.org/index.php
- *Ground One: Voices from Post-911 Chinatown* collection
  http://911digitalarchive.org/chinatown/
- *September 11: Bearing Witness to History* exhibition and website
  http://americanhistory.si.edu/september11/tellyourstory/index.asp
- *Here is New York* collection
  http://hereisnewyork.org/
- *Sonic Memorial Project* collection
  http://www.sonicmemorial.org/sonic/public/index.html
- *Witness and Response* exhibition of the Library of Congress
  http://old.911digitalarchive.org/lc/
- American Social History Project (ASHP)
  http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/

NOTES

1 See the CHNM's webpage: http://chnm.gmu.edu/about.php (accessed 19 April 2008).

2 For a study of the notion of the archive, see Jacques Derrida, *Η έννοια του αρχείου [Mal d' archive]*, transl. Kostis Papagiorgis, Athens: Ekkremes, 1996. For a study on memory and the archive, see Penelope Papailias, *Genres of Recollection*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

3 Peter Fritzsche, "The Archive", *History and Memory* 17:1–2 (2005), pp. 15–44, here p. 16.

4 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.

5 Nadia Butt, "Cultural Encounter in Process: Transcultural Memory as a Social Practice in the Age of Globalised Modernity". Paper presented to the interdisciplinary conference on "Encounter and Experience: Cultures in Process", available at http://wwwhomes.uni-bielefeld.de/dfinke/cip/Abstract-Butt.htm (accessed 3 February 2008).

6 On memory and history (in relation particularly to gender), see Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive. Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.

7 Daniel J. Cohen & Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History. A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. Available at http://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory (accessed 21 April 2008).

8 See the CHNM webpage: http://chnm.gmu.edu/about.php (accessed 19 April 2008).

9 Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, transl. Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman, New York: Columbia UP, 1992.

10 On testimonial culture, see Sara Ahmed & Jackie Stacey, "Testimonial Cultures: An Introduction", *Cultural Values* 5:1 (2001), pp. 1–6. Also, Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.

11 Antoon De Baets, "Dwarfs on the Shoulders of Giants. Is Remembering the Past a Right or a Duty?" Lecture presented on 2 April 2007 at the Historical Archive of the University of Athens as part of a series of lectures on the topic "Contemporary Historical Thought in the Netherlands" organised by the Historical Archive of the University of Athens and the Dutch Institute of Athens.

12 Mitsos Bilalis, «Από την παρουσία στη φετιχοποίηση. Διαδρομές της ιστορικής πληροφορίας στο διαδίκτυο», *Archeiotaksio* 9 (2007), pp. 202–208.

13 See Marita Sturken, "The Aesthetics of Absence: Rebuilding Ground Zero", *American Ethnologist* 31:3 (2004), pp. 311–325.

14 See Amy Fried, "The Personalization of Collective Memory: The Smithsonian's September 11 Exhibit", *Political Communication* 23 (2006), pp. 387–405.

15 Lauren Berlant, "Trauma and Ineloquence", *Cultural Values* 5:1 (2001), pp. 41–58, here p. 42.