

The Transitional Space of History: Reflections on the Play of Roger Simon's Remembrance Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper reads Roger Simon's concept of "transactional memory" in relationship to D.W. Winnicott's theory of "transitional space" to examine the emotional dimensions of making historical significance. Drawing on a personal memory of archival study with Simon, I suggest that his attention to the ethical qualities of remembrance at the same time offers a theory of remembrance as a work of creative play that sets into motion the painful and hopeful process of working through the anguish of loss.

A genuine tomorrow, and not a repeat of yesterday or today requires we reassess what we have learned and repressed (Simon, 2000, p. 22)

An old adage tells us that this, too, shall pass. Today will soon be yesterday and tomorrow will one day arrive. But time is also uneven and uncanny, for what feels immediately present can at the same time usher in the return of what is familiar and old. Yesterday is never finally over and done with, even if seemingly forgotten. Together with colleagues Sharon Rosenberg and Claudia Eppert, Roger Simon (2000) reminds us that time is not solely a linear concept. History is both a "difficult return" and a difficult education: "a psychic and social responsibility to bring the dead into presence, a responsibility that concurrently involves learning to live with, in relation to loss" (p. 3). Simon devoted the latter part of his scholarship to the study of the ethical complexity of summoning a relation with history's haunting returns. Across a range of sites such as the classroom, the museum, and the art gallery, Simon was concerned with developing remembrance practices that could create "points of connection" among past, present, and future (2005, p. 89). At the same time, Simon was wary of symbolic collapse. To his mind, there could be no "genuine tomorrow" if it had been already determined by either today or yesterday. Equally, there can be no yesterday if it is overshadowed by the concerns of tomorrow and today. Indeed, the opposite of history is, from Simon's view, not the future but "a repeat of yesterday or today" that cannot hold open the distance afforded by thought and by time.

The "points of connection" to which Simon refers are, then, points also of separation. This separation, Simon argues, is needed to symbolize history for its inherent dissension, "an expression of struggle" over the representation of past events in curriculum and pedagogy (Giroux & Simon, 1984, p. 231). Rather than a fantasy of historical objectivity, Simon's use of the term separation refers to a space in which students and teachers alike can engage history as a conflicting record of incomplete interpretations with the potential to affect, challenge, and think anew.

His was a pedagogy of looking before leaping to certain conclusions and in that gap, taking a closer look at how historical knowledge is fraught with resistances, doubt, and senses of debt and obligation. Simon found generative and *ethical* potential in the construction of and engagement with counter narratives, symbolic dissidents, psychic remainders and forgotten others, which he believed opened the heroic study of history to its discarded remains. At every turn, his scholarly and pedagogical work slowed down the rush to triumphant conclusions, attending instead to the stories, conditions, and processes that could welcome the disruptive force of histories “undergone and spoken of by others” (Simon, 2005, p. 90).

Simon’s idea of there being “points of connection” between yesterday and today therefore implies an obligation to represent a relationship to history in the awareness that knowledge cannot conclusively close the gap through mastery of facts or information. Simon describes such “points of connection” as “boundaries [that] estrange me from various pasts to which I always arrive too late, reminding me that the time of other people’s memories is not my time” (ibid, p. 90). It is in this temporal and conceptual distance that Simon locates the possibility for ethics insofar as it involves “being claimed in relation to the experiences of others,” without at the same time collapsing those experiences into a version of one’s own (ibid, p. 89). History’s capacity to “break in on the present,” Simon (2000) argues, holds ethical potential insofar as it works against the grain of present assumptions and opens onto unknown corridors of significance, enabling “any given moment to bear a new meaning” (p. 17). To paraphrase Simon’s vision above, tomorrow depends upon the reassessment of yesterday in the symbolic realm of representation, where it can be thought about, contemplated, and debated with others. While Simon’s hope for tomorrow is not “a repeat” of yesterday, it is also not without history. The future instead depends upon a witness to make something new, something narrative, from the wreckage that piles up at their feet.

Amid the difficult and traumatic histories that concerned Simon’s scholarship, he only rarely used the term creativity and never, to my knowledge, did he use the word “play”. To have done so, I imagine, might have felt too glib in the face of historical suffering. And yet, it is my suggestion that Simon’s theory of remembrance as a point of connection across distance sets history education into a transitional space of creative play, with the caveat that creative play is not synonymous with selfishness, even though it involves the self. Rather, I draw from the work of D.W. Winnicott (1971) to suggest that creative play is also an emotional labour of renewal in the face of loss, needed for the construction of both culture and history. If we can mine from Simon’s work a theory of history as “transitional space,” as I am proposing to do, then we are well positioned, with and after Simon, to think about the emotional significance of his theories of remembrance. We can ask, moreover, about the psychical labour of making meaning from the hard blows of history’s ethical force. Finally, we might even begin to ask how Simon’s own efforts to grapple with these questions bequeath to the generations of teachers, scholars, and students he leaves behind, the resources we need to live with and after his devastating loss.

Transactional Memory and Transitional Space

Among the many terms that Simon (2005) used to describe the ethical force of memory, he used “the transactional sphere of memory” to denote the disruptive effect of its address (p. 87). The ethical dimension of memory is not at all masterful, but rather proceeds, quoting Simon (1992), “in a way that does not insist on a fixed set of altered meanings” (p. 47). Citing the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Simon (2005) argued that history “humbles any design to master the past” when we can bear to take as our starting point the ruins of trauma that disillusion heroic myths (Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert, 2000, p. 7). Disruptive and expansive, history “enacts[s] a claim on us, providing accounts of the past that may wound, or haunt” in ways that “interrupt one’s self-sufficiency” (Simon, 2005, p. 89). Here, history’s force is derived from “an otherness that cannot be reduced to a version of our own stories” (ibid, p. 89). History’s transactional claim does not, then, begin or end within the closed borders of the ego’s own orbit of existence. It enlarges a space of community and culture, as “a transactive memory has the potential to expand that ensemble of people who count for us, who we encounter not merely as strangers, but as ‘teachers,’ people who in telling their stories change our own” (ibid, p. 89).

While ethical and social, I am suggesting that the force of memory also implies an emotional labour insofar as history demands something of the ego. Early on, Simon (1992) identified this labour as the task of education, which he defined as, “a basic resource for the task of self-constitution” (p. 22). To the extent that Simon would later on insist upon the continual labour of becoming (or, perhaps *re*-constitution) in relationship to history’s difficult returns, creative play seems to me an apt metaphor for thinking about his theories of remembrance as well. I take for my interlocutor, analyst D.W. Winnicott, who was also deeply concerned with how the ego might make something from the disillusioning blows left behind by the past. Winnicott offers a frame through which we might think about the emotional developments at work in Simon’s vision of remembrance. While I intuit that Simon might have been wary of imposing a frame on the messy, excessive labour of historical thought, it is important to note that Winnicott’s frame of development is neither linear, nor complete. What draws these two thinkers together in my mind is a complementarity of thought on the continual labour of drawing linkages among “past, present, and future” (Winnicott, 1971, p. 109). What Simon called “points of connection” across distance, Winnicott called the transitional space of play.

Winnicott used playing as a metaphor for the psychical activity of creation, an activity not limited to children but also accessible to adults in the form of cultural experiences, such as in art, philosophy, and history. The transitional space of creative play straddles both subjective experience and objective knowledge. In this third space, external reality becomes meaningful through the affective sediments of the ego, whether desire, or aggression, or longing, or grief. But as much as playing mobilizes inner life, for Winnicott (1971), playing is also a social activity that involves creating and contributing with others to a “pool” of symbols and representations from which we all may draw, differently, in the continual work of shaping and reshaping ties to culture and history (p. 101). Playing, then, implies a

shared set of signs and symbols that we use to represent meaning through creative and aesthetic work.

Playing, not unlike Simon's understanding of witnessing, calls the ego into relation even while it is not characterized by the "deliberateness of trying", at which point, it would feel more like coercion (Winnicott, 1971, p. 109). And, if Winnicott distinguished playing from coercion, playing did not at the same time refer to total self-satisfaction or whimsy. Rather, Winnicott describes play as the serious labour of making meaning from the losses that constitute being alive and in relation to others. In this way, Winnicott's view interrupts the adult fantasy that playing is simply childish. Playing is more like a work of mourning. Through play, the ego uses signs and objects to make a symbolic relation to loss, needed to give meaning to its lasting and lingering effects. Winnicott believed that through playing, for instance, one could represent the emotional significance of the acute and sharp edges of loss without literally repeating the agony or its opposite, claiming utter indifference or apathy. Play is a balance between the anguish of loss and its renewal in the life of signification.

For Simon, too, ethical forms of remembrance depend on the ego's capacity to balance or play with hope and despair. William Pinar (2014) elaborates this paradox as central to Simon's memorial scholarship. While "history's not going to get any better," he suggests that Simon also found some "resolve" in the idea that we *can* at the same time represent and revise repressed and repressive narratives (p. 8). By this, I take Pinar to mean that Simon's vision of history was not progressive, even if it did involve renewal, the direction of which could not be determined or marshaled in unilateral direction. If Simon locates the possibility of renewal in the distance afforded by language and representation, Winnicott gives us good reason to think that playing is "a basic resource" to re-assemble a sense of self in the face of such distance (Simon, 1992, p. 22).

Despite the relation I construct between remembering and playing, it deserves mention that Simon was wary of turning to psychical processes as the grounds of thinking about memory. In contrast with Simon's aim to "humbl[e] any design to master the past" (2000, p. 3), playing initially promises "some experience of magical control" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 47).¹ Even so, such magical beginnings are needed to accept the fading glamour of entering into the world that fails. Provided the ego can exchange ideals for symbolic substitutes, the magic of beginning eventually gives way to disillusionment. In Winnicott's (1971) words, playing bridges the gap between inner illusion and outer worlds of disillusion through "the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to cultural life" (p. 109). From the vantage of Winnicott, Simon's theory of ethical remembrance may now look like this: history must first survive the omnipotent wish on the part of the witness that defends against its very loss. For history to be remembered, it will depend on the ego's capacity to play with symbolic substitutes that fail to repeat the spellbinding agony of historical loss. Ethically and playfully, the practice of remembrance brings the past into symbolization through renewed arrangements and ties to history's remnants, beyond the fantasy of their magical recuperation.

A Story From the Archive

With colleagues Mario DiPaolantonio and Mark Clamen (2005), Simon offers a glimpse of ethical remembrance in practice. Significant to Winnicott's notion of play, these theorists propose a practice that is in their words, "as much a creative act as a responsive one" to lives once lived (p. 148). Quite differently from the tightened spine of an already completed history text, this method juxtaposes citations from archival documents that, together, are intended to represent the significance of one's learning in the belated encounter with testimony. Simon's method radically revises the typical hierarchy of the teacher-student relationship. The act of witnessing is here not only cognitive, but a commitment made with others to remember together in ways that attend to the epistemological frames and affective commitments that both open and obscure the attention of the witness. The witness in this juxtaposition has an active responsibility to "give expression to what astonishes, what exceeds my horizon of expectations, what is contradictory and heterogeneous" (Simon, DiPaolantonio & Clamen, 2005, p. 149).

I was fortunate enough to be a part of one of Roger's study groups working with the practice of citation described briefly above. The history under investigation was that of the ghetto in Vilna, established and operated by Nazi Germany between September 6, 1941 and September 24, 1943. Our group constructed a multi-modal and multi-vocal archive of materials designed to support our engagements with the history of lives lived and lost in this community under siege. From our work, Simon hoped to generate varied, counter, and conflicting historical accounts from diaries, chronicles, letters, notebooks, newspapers, recorded songs, as well as official ghetto decrees and documents. Each member took turns to compile and present to the study group a juxtaposition of citations from archival documents, with the view to give expression to the direction and detours of learning in the archive.

For the occasion of this article, I looked back into my computer's digital archive. My search term was "juxtaposition," which yielded a range of documents related to the study group, named "The Testimony and Historical Memory Project." Among these documents, one in particular caught me by the throat: my own juxtaposition, dated January 31, 2001. I offer a brief discussion of this document as one instance of the kind of remembrance practice that Simon's theories generated. In light of his recent passing, this document marks also my belated effort to represent a relationship to the memory of Roger's work, and to him.

Similar to my colleagues' juxtapositions, my own compilation consisted of citations from surviving documents from the Vilna Ghetto. Although each of my citations meticulously records the date, author's name, and source, my representation of this learning is not chronological, nor limited to facts and information. From my juxtaposition of citations, I can see that my concern was with the experience of death not directly organized around Nazi roundups or deportation, and instead focused on other painful effects of the genocide such as miscarriage, illness, and assisted suicide. Amid a backdrop of spraying bullets, nighttime roundups, and the horror of public hangings, what concerned me was the meaning and status of cultural practices through which ghetto inhabitants mourned the dead. What stands out among them today is diary entry of a young student,

Rudashevski. In this entry, he describes the experience of reading aloud a eulogy for the occasion of his teacher Gershteyn's memorial:

Arriving half an hour early, I practised reading a little. I was edgy as usual. At first I do not feel at ease. However the fine, well-rounded speeches, and listening to the magnificent history of this beautiful person, Gershteyn, calmed me. The speakers spoke a long time. Epochs, periods of Gershteyn's beautiful life emerge. Finally teacher Lubotski delivers the concluding speech. He concludes by saying that we do not know what post-war life will look like. We know one thing, however: that Gershteyn's place has remained blank. There is no one to replace him. (p. 75)

There is nothing particularly unusual about this nervous scene of a student reading aloud. At the same time, the context of genocide in which Gershteyn's funeral took place struck me as a poignant representation of human dignity against a historical backdrop bent on its violent destruction.

Rudashevski also laments the interruption of memorialization by the ghetto's unyielding clockwork, writing "...we cannot even accompany him to the cemetery. We return and breathe his anger" (Vol. I, p. 65). A diary entry from another young boy, Kruk, follows from this opening citation, describing the madness of living in a world that marches on as if nothing changed, even while hearts "stop with grief" (1942, Vol 1. p. 87). As he puts it, "everything around here runs like a magic wheel, a kaleidoscope where you can't catch everything at once" (p. 87). Reading it now, almost 15 years later, my juxtaposition brings to the foreground also my struggle with a question. If ethics implies the distance needed to engage the otherness of history, what can this labour entail in an emotionally charged context "stopped with grief"? What can it mean to let go of loss when it feels like there is nothing to adequately represent it? Today, these questions register anew in the context of Roger's death. All of us who survive him are faced with the challenge of letting go without knowing what life, post-Simon, will look like. We are left with the question of how to represent Simon's legacy, to ask and risk a relationship to what matters, all the while knowing that we can't "catch everything" and that "there is no one to replace him."

Nonetheless, I've feverishly searched the archive of my computer for Roger's written response to my juxtaposition, looking to fill a void where there was once his response, his prose, and his voice. The document is nowhere to be found in the belly of my computer's memory. In my feverish search, Jacques Derrida's insight leapt to mind, for as much as archive is a metaphor of our culture's refusal to give up the past, it is also a metaphor of the impossibility of memory. We can never "catch everything", but are rather left to piece together the details for their lasting significance. Without the written document, only fragments of Roger's response return for memory, of course, shot through the screens of my worries and wishes. The fact of Roger's death calls to mind the context in which I presented my juxtaposition to the group. My own father was gravely ill, and would die months later on Father's Day, 2001. Just fifty-seven, he was born in 1943: one year after

Kruk and Rudashevski penned their diary entries. At the time, I was twenty-seven. Clearly anticipating my paternal loss, Roger seemed to recognize that the archive, so full of pain and suffering of distant others, was also a transitional space in which I had attempted to “catch” the loss that I anticipated and would soon have to endure.

With the benefit of hindsight, I can recognize the inwardly focused melancholia of my archival reading. My juxtaposition of children’s texts in mourning for figures of paternal authority gave “substance to my own attachments”, in this case, to my anticipatory melancholia for my dad (2005, p. 91). Roger recognized this too. But ever the pedagogue, and not the police, Roger (1992) also recognized my archival inquiry as a “basic resource” needed to constitute myself in the face of my first unthinkable loss (p. 22). But even more, he helped me think simultaneously about my denial of the very rituals of grief I had represented in others. Despite his wariness of affective ties, Simon did not demand I let go of my attachments too soon. He rather brought into symbolization the grief that was stopped in my heart. What emerged was no less difficult, but perhaps more hopeful, in that there was now a narrative to represent the emotional pain framing my archival reading. Roger helped me to think about how the grieving children I had “found” in the archive represented a wish that I might somehow prepare myself for the loss I anticipated in my own future history. Thinking about this experience today, I speculate that this tension might be the difficult quality of historical knowledge itself, caught between excess (the knowledge of death is too much) and lack (the knowledge of death can never help or prepare). The difficult labour of history is to represent loss that cannot at the same time be replaced in that very effort. Yet, in spite of such difficulty, and perhaps because of it, Simon also found hope.

The Hope of Pedagogy

Simon’s theory of remembrance mirrors a larger “archival turn” within the field of history education (Seixas, 2004). This turn to the archive, much like Simon’s, actively invites students of history to read, encounter and make meaning from a series of fragments and clues, as opposed to an already-finished set of events. But while Simon took as axiomatic “the remnants themselves,” the remembrance practices for which he advocated were not solely organized by to historical yardsticks of truth, coherence and rationality (Simon, DiPaolantonio & Clamen, 2005, p. 150). The “otherwise” of remembrance, for Simon (2005), meant finding meaning in the displacement of plausible knowledge, in the incredible affective ties that bind us to past others and in the breakdown of the categories with which we typically make sense of the world (p. 1). “The obligation,” writes Simon and his colleagues, “is to a constant rewriting” that is less about telling a better story than those currently on the books, and more about representing how historical knowledge unsettles and disrupts the inner lives of those left behind to carry on its traces (Simon, DiPaolantonio & Clamen, 2005, p. 150).

If Simon’s pedagogy of remembrance highlights the ethical quality of renewal, and if I have linked this labour with creativity and play, it is not at the same time merely a wishful release from the difficult knowledge of the past. It is rather a labour of hope: a concept already at the forefront of Simon’s early work. There,

Simon (1992) distinguishes hope from wishing. Where wishing refers to “a diversion” that provides “temporary release from routine,” hope is “the acknowledgement of more openness in a situation than the situation easily reveals” (p. 3). Thus while wishing yearns for the ideal of “ultimate peace and resolution” (p. 4), hope offers no such consolation, characterized instead by “loosening and refusing the hold that taken for granted realities and routines have over imagination” (p. 3). Simon’s theory of historical citation is also a practice of hope insofar as it seeks to loosen hardened truths and open new interpretive possibilities. For Simon, hope is defined by the mind’s openness to the futurity of history, without the wish to pin down once and for all what that will mean.

Jonathan Lear (2006) might well have read Simon on the topic of hope, for he, too, describes its capacity to renew stalled, or “thick” concepts in the aftermath of loss (p. 65). For Lear, hope is characterized by the labile quality of the mind that can risk being open to and changed by ideas that break fixed patterns. Simon, before Lear, described this quality of mind as an “openness” to meanings in excess of what “the situation easily reveals” (p. 3). Transposed to the scene of historical learning, Simon’s theories of remembrance challenge us to engage in practices that renew the meaning of events that have already occurred. He did so also by encouraging us to make a distinction between the hopeful renewal of meaning and the wishful fantasy of un-doing past wrongs. Indeed, he encouraged us all to represent the significance of historical trauma that at the same time could not be undone or “get better” (Pinar, 2014, p. 8). Simon’s emphasis on the disillusioning qualities of remembrance is also the grounds of hope.

Simon’s vision of hope therefore poses a challenge to engage history’s forgotten content in ways that push back against linear procedures of time and “frames of certitude” that typically organize how we imagine the past (Simon, Rosenberg & Eppert, 2000, p. 7). Hope cannot satisfy the wish for certitude that protects us from conflict and loss. On the contrary, Simon’s vision positions history education as a tension: on the one side, a felt obligation to respond to history’s ethical claim and on the other side, an excess of meaning beyond what it “easily reveals” about the past (Simon, 1992, p. 3). We “can’t catch everything at once”. But if this claim is to retain a shred of hope, and not repeat the “magic wheel” of a turning kaleidoscope, then we might follow Simon’s example, and enter history into a symbolic space of creative play. For Simon, this involved a lifetime of scholarship marked by the rigorous study of history’s forgotten content, a tireless effort to represent difficult knowledge that eludes understanding, and a vigilant attentiveness to evidentiary traces that pierce the boundaries we typically use to keep safe from pain. Within each turn is the lasting glimmer of a scholar who knew how to play, seriously. If all goes well, we might ourselves receive Simon’s example in life and in scholarship as an invitation to play seriously, too, so that history’s unfinished legacies, including his own, can have hope for a “genuine tomorrow.”

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Endnote

¹ Together with Mario DiPaolantonio and Mark Clamen (2005), Simon articulates a concern about fantasied promise of history to un-do the losses it also represents. They offer the example of “phantasmagoria,” which refers to both a notion and performance that first emerged in connection with a form of theatre popular in the early 19th Century in France, England and the United States. The performance involved shining a light through a paper lantern with the view to project onto smokescreens images of ghosts, demons, and skeletons. In the example of phantasmagoria, Simon, DiPaolantonio and Clamen (2005) find an over-valuation of “the recuperative power of the present” rooted in the belief that “everything can be brought back – resurrected and re-animated” (pp. 140-141). Simon, DiPaolantonio and Clamen suggest that the logic of phantasmagoria is itself alive and well in remembrance practices that promise a unifying and continuous tie between the past and the present, that is, without disruption. It is this fantasy of magical return that Simon sought to expand through a study history’s representational limits and conflicting traces.