Ghosts of Memory

Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness

Edited by Janet Carsten
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The essays in this volume were originally presented at a conference on “Kinship and Memory in Anthropology and Beyond,” held at the University of Edinburgh in December 2004. I am grateful to the British Academy for a Conference Grant, and to the Research Support Fund of the School of Social and Political Studies at the University of Edinburgh, which together enabled this event to take place. Two contributions at the conference are not included in this collection. One was a memorable paper on the Freud family by Leonore Davidoff, which made a deep impression on those who heard it: “The Legacy of the Nineteenth-Century Bourgeois Family and the Wool Merchant’s Son,” published in *Transactions of the RHS* 14 (2004):25–46. The other was some characteristically perceptive and acute concluding comments made by Olivia Harris, which I have drawn on in my Introduction, and for which I record my debt of gratitude here.

All of the contributors have collectively and singly helped to shape this volume. I am particularly indebted to Sophie Day, Rebecca Empson, Stephan Feuchtwang, Michael Lambek, and Frances Pine for their advice at various points, and for detailed and helpful comments on earlier drafts of the Introduction. Laura Bear’s and Sharika Thiranagama’s writings provided part of the original impetus for this project. The work of Veena Das and Michael Lambek has been an inspiration over many years, and I have gained much from discussions with them on the themes of this volume in Edinburgh, London, and the United States. Sophie Day and Frances Pine helped me to plan the original
conference, and they have been involved in a long conversation on kinship and memory that goes back many years, and encompasses our own familial memories. Jane Huber, former anthropology editor at Blackwell, adopted this project with warmth and excitement, and helped to find it a title. Finally, Jonathan Spencer, as always, nurtured the original interest and plans, helped me to order an intimidating wealth of literature, read and reread several drafts of the Introduction, and encouraged me to write it differently.
Residents of a marginal and decayed railway colony in Bengal are persistently troubled by domestic ghosts and by uncanny events featuring their recent ancestors. Pre-empted from asserting communal solidarity or continuity with the Indian polity in the idioms of caste, village, or national ties, these families express their links to the past in tales of haunting and in commemorative practices that bind them to the places where they live. Sex workers in London apparently have difficulty in telling their personal biographies as a coherent sequence of events linking the past to the present. Instead, their pasts are fragmented, refracted through different lives and sets of relationships that are associated with the different names and personae that they have adopted. In Mongolia, nomadic herding, migration, and political persecution disrupt people’s connections with absent or deceased kin. In these circumstances, women’s embroideries that capture significant events and emotions in their lives, photographic montages of ancestors, and accounts of reincarnation, provide alternative media for displaying connections to the past.

These three examples indicate just some of the subtle and complex interconnections among everyday forms of relatedness in the present, memories of the past, and the wider political contexts in which they occur that are considered in this volume. They point to the myriad articulations – of temporality, memory, personal biography, family connection, and political processes – that are manifested in subjective dispositions to the past, and in the imagination of possible futures.