

## The Unsubmissive Islands: Children's Memories During the Cold War

A Review of *(An)Archive: Childhood, Memory, and Cold War* (Mnemo ZIN, Eds.)

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*This book review aims to provide a broad reflection on (An)Archive: Childhood, Memory, and Cold War, highlighting its theoretical and methodological relevance for the study of past childhoods and childhood studies in general. It emphasizes the innovative approach of creating an alternative public archive, as well as the compelling focus on constructing collective memories through biographical narratives situated in various geographies and time periods influenced by the Cold War.*

an island can be said to be what remains when everything has been lost (...) a remnant of something forgotten that is organized through a trace. Islands are always unsubmissive (...) something virginal, secret, disorienting seems to be unleashed in these lands that, perhaps, are nowhere, but in a time of transition between strangeness and home, the past and the future, what one is and what, perhaps, one would like to be. Islands are also rarely happy places. Sad, but happy, like every childhood, or better to say like every childhood recovered. (Negroni, 2021, p. 129)

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### An archipelago as a map

*(An)Archive: Childhood, Memory, and Cold War* (Open Book Publishers, 2024) proposes an archipelago,

merging diverse texts like islands, like the fragmented feature of memory itself. The book organically threads together each text with its particularities: chapters of conceptual and scholarly analysis, biographical reflections and recollections, poetic accounts, childhood etchings, artistic proposals, as well as pedagogical frameworks and methodological interventions. This diversity offers a kaleidoscopic entry into the childhood experience recalled during the Cold War period.

The structure of the book is a discovery in itself, offering a particular reading experience, integrating texts of diverse nature, skillfully combined by the authors, which help to compose the complexity and particularities involved in the understanding of childhood memory. The editors, under the suggestive common name of Mnemo ZIN, compile 16 chapters of academic development interspersed by texts of remembrance and artistic works, which recover both materials created by the authors themselves during their childhoods and present elaborations on the past. All the sections highlight different corners of memory: sensorial, affective, and dimensions that go beyond the verbal (such as secrets, images, works of art, pedagogical stakes, and objects, among others). In this sense, the various edges of the intricate prism that is childhood memory are addressed from effects and traces that the authors propose as objects and subjects at the same time. With this premise, the texts are interspersed with remembrances and analyses of the Cold War and the socialist experience, nuancing polar categories with which the experiences of the subjects of that time are usually interpreted.

Similarly, the book makes a valuable contribution to the collective dimension of remembered childhood

experiences. It recovers the convergences between experiences that are apparently dissimilar but that find common aspects relevant to understand both the context, the political projects of the time, and the biographical trajectories of those who went through the Cold War during their childhood. This implies a novel perspective in terms of considering different collective points of view about experiences rooted in the Cold War (in different political contexts, geographies, and temporalities).

Thus, it is an audacious challenge that the book takes, at an epistemological level, in the exercise of common remembrance. Not only is the collective dimension of the memorial processes, understood from Maurice Halbwachs as the memory with others, recovered and weighted, but it also emphasizes and puts into practice the production of memories together. This constitutes a significant contribution, both theoretically and methodologically, to approach the intersubjective dimension of children's memories of the past.

### **An insular inventory or an alternative archive**

One of the book's eloquent contributions has to do with the methodological proposal for the construction of a collective memorial narrative. The stories that unfold here are part of the "Reconnect/Recollect" research project that brought together more than 70 scholars and artists from 36 countries (and 6 continents) to share, through various workshops in different parts of the world, their experiences of childhood during the Cold War. In this way, the work focused both on the construction of collective narratives based on the sharing through memory workshops and on the stories that emerge from individual searches in family archives. The proposal brings together texts that reflect and analyze between academic and analytical reflection and personal memory work. Between sections and within sections, the flow of texts goes back and forth between the personal and the collective.

These elaborations stem from a second significant contribution proposed by this project and work: the construction of an "anarchive." In this sense, the public availability of narratives on childhood memories, which has driven different lenses of analysis, questions the very notion of the archive and its potentialities, in the case of childhood memories.

It does so because, on the one hand, it expands the notion of the archive by formulating another conception regarding the nature of what can be a piece of data or a document to be preserved, stored, and consulted as a source or document to be archived. At the same time, it assumes another form of approach for the contributor and of interaction for the researcher: other search routes as a result of a particular organization and order, more rhizomatic than linear. In this sense, the book invites the building of an anarchive that constructs a "thread of data," in the words of the authors: rebellious, in terms of its possibilities of establishing an order, of its affective nature and of the content of its narratives coming from the memory of subaltern subjects such as children of the past. Likewise, the anarchive deploys a bid to give knowledge status both to the recalled experience itself and to the common narrative fabric that emerges in the collective setting of a shared experience during childhood. From here, I raise questions that emerge from the very nature of memories about past childhoods: If it is a repository of memories, works, elaborations on a past childhood experience, how can we account for the changing property of childhood memories, which are modified as they are narrated and recovered? What do these narratives tell us about the biographical contexts and situations in which the narrated memory takes place?

On the other hand, the development of the anarchive raises the possibility of making the repository publicly available. This recalls the premise that summons the work of Sosenski (2016) regarding the potential of a public-access archive to deepen the study and understanding of childhood and childhood experiences of the past.

## **The islands: Their borders and debates**

The book offers a valuable contribution to childhood studies, based on the support it gives to several central debates in the field. In the first place, it consolidates the leading role of children as social actors in historical and political processes. In this sense, it dilutes the views that separate the adult world from that of children, attending to the views and interpretations of the youngest ones regarding the common events they have also been part of. The book, then, underlines the potency of the contribution of childhood memories in understanding both children's experience and broader social, political, and historical processes. At this point, the text adds to the reevaluation of the memories of second generations, particularly those who have been protagonists of social catastrophes. These are first-hand experiences that offer other aspects to help understand the events of the past. They are not only integrated as objects of study at the academic level but are also considered at the judicial level (as is the case of the trials currently taking place in Argentina).

In contrast, a controversial dimension related to the characteristics of childhood memories has to do with their temporality: are they remembrances that allow us to understand the past or the present? Is the emphasis placed on recovering the experience of the childhood past or on the narrative construction of the biography of the adult in the present? This slippery challenge runs through works focused on childhood memories (including my own) and perhaps it is significant to address this tension from the analytical key that understands these memories as narratives recalled, from an adult present, about the experience of children during the Cold War. Occasionally, throughout the chapters and vignettes, a certain slippage appears regarding the work with memories as an attempt to enter, to access, to "restore" in some way that past childhood experience. In other instances, the act of remembering in the present is emphasized, along with how much it reveals about the biographical moment in which the memory is presented, as well as the meanings involved in shedding light on those experiences in the present day: What does this past allow us to know about the present? Why are remembered experiences remembered?

Another of the theoretical debates underlined in the book has to do with the notion of childhood agency. Throughout the chapters, this notion is taken up again from different topics (secrets, menstruation as taboo, athletes who sacrifice themselves for impositions in the name of socialism, intermediate times, etc.). In such a journey, a traditional conception of children as passive, innocent, apolitical subjects, only recipients or victims of political agendas and projects, appears fractured. Thus, the sections illuminate other modalities around the practices, forms of intergenerational negotiation, elaborations, interpretations, and readings of children of that time about the political context in which they were immersed.

## **Biting geographies, or how to overcome frontiers**

Although the authors rightly propose some perspectives of analysis transversal to the whole work (body, affect, memory as pedagogy), the dimension of everyday life can perhaps be seen as an axis that articulates different angles around the children's experience of the Cold War. Throughout the book, several of the authors emphasize the existence of studies focused on more structural issues, such as the characteristics of the educational apparatus in socialist societies, but little attention is given to learning experiences, political socialization, and everyday life. In this sense, the sections present different ways in which people remember their own understanding of the political context during the Cold War: What did they understand and how did they understand what they understood? How do we remember today those forms of understanding?

This focus on the everyday dimension of childhood memories also allows for the dilution of some border categories that assume other readings of historical events. In this way, similarities are traced as findings that break possible dichotomous positions and stereotypes built according to the geographical place of such experience. At this

point I would like to point out the transnational nature of the Cold War experience and the potential to address, rather than just experiences confined to a specific geographical and national reality, the circulations, transits, and interrelations that have also shaped this period. Although the transit is visible in some chapters (as is the case of the Argemex exile), perhaps this emphasis can be key a posteriori, as a relevant aspect in the contact and the socialist experience.

Likewise, the book is positioned from the perspective of postcolonial critique and accounts for the existence of a “colonial matrix of power” that modulates versions and forms of knowledge about the Cold War. Children’s memories have been effectively invisibilized in the dominant narratives on the various historical, political, and social events. These are memories that have been “underground” in Pollak’s (2006) terms and that, through initiatives such as this book, have achieved a position of being heard through their emergence. Although the book’s enterprise focuses on recovering the absent voices of children, as well as the modes of resistance offered by such remembered experience, I wonder about the scope of the postcolonial gaze to understand such memories: Do all subaltern testimonies express a postcolonial perspective? Is it about the recovery of other paradigms decentered by the European one? How can it also be considered that the subaltern subjects themselves, at the same time, reproduce the dominant conceptions about knowledge and their forms of memory?

### **An unwilling closure**

For all of the above, the book constitutes a significant contribution to the consolidation, on the one hand, of a line of childhood studies centered on the experience of the Cold War and, on the other hand, an area within childhood research whose object of study is childhood memories. Throughout its pages, the authors not only recover the productions that took place in the project that initiated the book, but also retake and deepen previous interests (of which their relevant academic and artistic trajectories account for) and new issues that are being developed in the field of childhood studies, as is the case of the gaze on the Anthropocene or nonhuman agency, to think about the link between memories, childhoods, and materialities.

It remains, therefore, to conclude this review by strongly recommending the reading of the book, mainly among all those who are interested in relevant topics such as the history and memory of childhood and, in particular, among those who work on a political process as complex as the Cold War. *(An)Archive: Childhood...* is a major contribution that opens up future lines of research and stimulates new questions to delve deeper into children’s experiences in a conflict that divided the world after World War II.

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