

# TEMPORAL ORIENTATIONS IN LIFE STORIES: A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF HISTORICITY

## ABSTRACT

This article draws on ethnographic material from life stories and nonfiction literature and is complemented by fieldwork vignettes. The material is used to discuss how experiences of connections and disconnections between past and present, self and intergenerational relationships, relate to temporal orientations (Bryant and Knight 2019). In the narratives, traces of two salient paradigms framing the temporality of the present, which represent antithetical ways of dealing with connections between the past, present and future, are identified. These traces are found in expressions such as ‘timelessness’, ‘beauty’, ‘now’, and ‘silences’, but also more negatively, as ‘depression’, ‘hauntings’, ‘pain’, and ‘time collapse’. I argue that the two paradigms (‘presentism’ and ‘presence’) coexist, and that they are partly in conflict with each other.

Traces of temporality in life stories provide us with keys to understand how temporal orientations, and their related horizons of expectation (Koselleck 1985) may also contribute to shape life trajectories. By explicating how narrators grapple with experiences of temporal disruption and how they try to come to terms with their experiences by seeing them as parts of larger societal events, aspects of the mechanisms whereby dominant modes of thinking become established are made visible to us (Scarry 2022). The merit in this kind of exploration for the ethnography of historicity (Palmié and Stewart 2019), lies in its potential for showing us how future life scenarios are impacted by the ways in which people deal with past events and affect their potential futures.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article highlights the friction between two salient paradigms framing the temporality of the present. ‘Presentism’ is the modernist belief in a radical break with the past (Hartog 2015).

‘Presence’ is the counternarrative, pointing to the continued existence of past events in the present (Runia 2006). Using material from nonfiction authors who narrate experiences that show traces of temporal orientations that can be related to both paradigms, I show

the coexistence and overlap between two historicities, but also point out how they differ.

By referencing silences, absences, and secrets, and concomitant feelings of anxiety and depression felt by three authors—Jan Ketil Arnulf, Daniel Mendelsohn, and Kapka Kassabova—I show how they are drawn to forge new connections between their pasts and their present through the force of the lacunae and hauntings in their present lives.

The texts that emerge from their respective explorations of their families' stories and current strategies of coping with loss and disruption are precisely the parts of pasts deemed inaccessible to the presentism frame of historicity. Yet, as these authors show, these unacknowledged pasts continue as haunting presences.

These works illustrate the coexistence and overlap between the two historicities, but, also, point to their qualitative differences as modes of being in the world.

## SELF-PRESENTATION AS ATTEMPTS TO STOP THE FLOW OF TIME

To introduce the experiential dimension of the two historicities, I will take as my starting point an experience I had of 'reverse culture shock' having just arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand's capital, Wellington. I arrived in this city after a long stay in the small atoll community of Tokelau in the Pacific. The meeting between two different temporal orientations, between a present-oriented individualism and a genealogical, kinship-based way of life, created a strong cognitive dissonance, and an unexpected discomfort in me. I was standing on the main street downtown, on Lambton Quay, waiting for a bus. This was in the days before smartphones, so I just stood there and did nothing. I looked around, and because I had been in completely

different surroundings for so long, what I saw struck me with an additional great force.

I looked at the people around me, and unlike the life world of the Tokelau atolls, the place I had just left behind, it struck me that none of the faces around me seemed to have grown up, matured or become old. There were, of course, signs of aging in some, but they looked more like signs of decay—like something that appeared as mistakes, like blemishes that one tries to hide behind a well-polished facade. What I saw made me think of a particular type of fruit, the hard-glossy green Granny Smith apples that never seem to ripen, but which, if left for very long, can develop ominous black spots, a sign that they have rotted from within. I thought that the people I saw around me all seemed like they were working hard to keep looking as though they were somewhere between 20 and 30 years old; I found this sight a little creepy, unfamiliar, and almost obscene given the look I had obviously become habituated to from Tokelau—but which I had not entirely realised until that moment.

The memories with which I was filled and carried with me were of faces clearly marked by lives lived, with wrinkles, injuries, poor eyesight, and greying or white hair, but also with great vitality and an extraordinary light in the eyes of some of the elderly. In Tokelau, different age stages are clearly marked. If anything, they are over- and not under-communicated, as age groups have different status and positions and are met with quite different behavioural expectations in public contexts. Simply put, the older one is, the greater freedom and importance one has in terms of decision-making rights and political power. A person simply has greater leeway and more registers to draw on in general. Disease, decay, danger, and death are obvious and present aspects of everyday life. For example, people still practice the custom of

wakes, meaning that the sight of dead bodies is a regular occurrence.

Until recently, the islands have had such irregular boat routes and are situated so far from the nearest neighbouring islands, Samoa, that family members who leave the islands have customarily been treated as dead people. Upon death, a new family member will be given the deceased's name and take their place in the family group. Such a way of creating continuity between past and present is called genealogical, because it also sees all living beings as well as landscapes, ocean, and sky phenomena as present-day manifestations of previous forms of existence (Hoëm 2000; Salmond 2023). Apparently, for me, being a daily witness to death and decay and births as part of the everyday life I had lived during the previous months had seemed reality-enhancing in a way, while the 'photoshopped' image I saw there at the bus stop seemed unnatural and—yes, a little scary and unfamiliar.

## TEMPORAL PARADIGMS WITHIN THE DISCIPLINE OF HISTORY AND THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF HISTORICITY

The first paradigm, 'the dominance of the present', or what is called 'presentism' (Hartog 2015), is commonly identified with the Euro-American tradition of historiography. According to this way of approaching the past, a direct experience of past events is only possible through the meaning horizon of the present. The second paradigm, that of 'presence', is more commonly identified with approaches that entertain the possibility of gaining experiential knowledge of the ethos of past epochs, such as, for example, advocated by Michel Foucault (Sandmo 2012,

2015). This paradigm is referred to as the 'past as presence' or the 'presence' paradigm (Runia 2006; see also Bangstad 2017). The developments that led to the contestation and partial replacement of the linear, evolutionary way of looking at history are well-known and are related to a loss of faith in the modernist project. Here, I present a brief outline of this revision of the overarching narrative of history as it relates to the emergence of an ethnography of historicity and linked to a discussion of how 'presentism' can be seen as part of a larger, late-modernist cultural complex.

The two paradigms from the discipline of history bring us two overarching concepts and interpretative frames of temporality. The two concepts and approaches 'presentism' and 'presence' come with baggage that makes dealing with them difficult. On the one hand, they are emblematically linked through two competing historiographical traditions or paradigms, two strands of thinking with partly incompatible perspectives on temporality. As such, they are examples of what Clifford Geertz has called 'experience-distant concepts' (Geertz 1974). On the other hand, they are also entwined with everyday life experiences, as 'experience-near concepts', such as those reflected in expressions including 'time stopped' or 'urgency' as we shall see. In other words, as temporal orientations that bring a focus to the present—or the past or the future—they can be identified ethnographically and may also be seen as expressions of forces beyond the linguistic, extending into a semiotics that is also economic and ideological. The linguistic expressions of temporal orientations, both of experience-near and more experience-distant concepts and qualities, occur in abundance in life stories.

To identify traces of these two temporal orientations ethnographically, I use the anthropological approach to studies of historicity,

understood as investigations into how people's relationships to the past, present, and future are constituted. I hold, with Palmié and Stewart (2019), that the dominant historians' linear, and ultimately modernist perspective on time, should not be exempt from the comparative approach. If the discursive dominance of this scientific paradigm, and its related 'secular' temporal orientation, is increasingly dominant globally, we should as anthropologists take extra care to document this development.

In their introduction to the new book series *The Anthropology of History*, Palmié and Stewart (2019) describe how various forms of historical experience have come under the shadow of a dominant Euro-American understanding of history. They see the ethnohistory of the '50s as an early attempt to bring other pasts, experiences, and forms of historical understanding to light. From the '80s, and building upon these seminal understandings, they include anthropological texts that can be said to challenge 'the epistemic infrastructure on which Western academic historicism rests' (ibid: xii). Among early challengers to this still-widespread way of thinking, they count the works of Sidney Mintz (1985), Ann Stoler (1985), Nicholas Thomas (1991), and Michael Herzfeld (1991) to name but a few. Palmié and Stewart emphasise Marshall Sahlins' (1985) perspective on 'history as socially relative' as expressed in his aphorism 'other cultures – other historicities'. Perhaps the biggest challenge to the dominant view of history, however, did not come from these early attempts to relativise history, but from what has been called the Subaltern Studies group of Indian history. This group of researchers, including R. Guha, G. C. Spivak, and D. Chakrabarty amongst others, claim that colonial history and Western understanding of history contribute to the silencing of local experiences, arguing that

researchers should turn their attention to local ways of relating to past, present, and potential futures.

To this advocacy for anthropology turning its attention to the study of other historicities, I make a plea for including paradigms of history and temporal orientations of a perhaps more modest sort than that of a subaltern alternative historiography. Stories of past experiences that intrude upon present lives exist in the shadow of the more dominant discourse, and, for that purpose, I also include the 'presence' paradigm in my exploration.

## LIFE STORIES AS ETHNOGRAPHY: SOME METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The use of life stories, drawn from oral and written sources as ethnographic material, demands attention to genre conventions and reception history—that is, to meta-cultural knowledge and social context. The understanding that there is no one-to-one rendering of factual reality in text should not keep us from these rich resources given the insights they offer into key concepts and orientations (Hemer 2016; Bönisch-Brednich 2018). Elsewhere, I have analysed life stories looking for how discursive links are made between spatial orientations and intergenerational relationships (Hoëm 2004). Here, I identify discursive connections between temporal orientations and intergenerational relationships.

In addition to ethnographic vignettes based on my own fieldwork in the Pacific, I also draw on documentary literature. In the use of these nonfiction texts, I follow principles for interpretation developed in narrative analysis (Hoëm 2004, Ochs and Capps 1996). This approach implies taking the genre and reception

context into account and looking for textual markers (semantic fields and so-called ‘deixis’)—that is, references that anchor discourse in time and space, in places and relationships. In this way, I identify patterns of orientation, spatial and temporal, that help orient the author relationally in time and space in these nonfiction texts.

The nonfiction texts I have selected all begin with a stillness, a silence, and this silence is expressed as an experience that personal time has stopped. The narrator is trapped in an eternal now. How the narrator goes about redeeming the past haunting the present and shaping the social relations of which they are a part varies. But, in all the cases presented below, we see explicit attempts to forge new connections between past and present. Furthermore, and importantly, this forging has consequences for the future, since it involves creating new understandings of past events and reviving intergenerational relationships in the process of doing so.

To summarise, I treat the authors’ craft as a case of narration or storytelling (orators, performers, and writers). I analyse their output, oral as well as written, in reference to the larger sociocultural context of which the storytelling practice is a part (Melhuus 1994; Hemer 2016).

## PRESENTISM AND IDEALS OF BEAUTY

Because my impressions of what I called reverse culture shock in the introduction centred around the difference between a society focused on maintaining beauty as youth and one where age is revered, it becomes important to emphasise that both attitudes come with costs. In short, much personal work stands behind different types of practices when it comes to physical appearances, both those that highlight age and

those that attempt to downplay the passage of time. In every society, people are concerned with how they appear and how others perceive them. Every one of us will also experience a variety of possible life courses by meeting with others, and over time, be exposed to peaceful or brutal deaths. It is possible for humans to imagine the end of their own lives based on what we learn from observing the end of others. The experience of the cultural importance of maintaining a youthful appearance that I just described is only a momentary impression of a random assemblage of people waiting for a bus. But it can equally be viewed as an expression of a deeper preoccupation with youthful beauty, of a cultural obsession with a perfect appearance. It can be argued that this preoccupation with youth and beauty has been with us since the dawn of time (Hughes 2020), but has taken on a special form symptomatic of modernity, as Christopher Lash (1979), Richard Sennett (1977), and Anthony Giddens (1992) have argued.

Author Daniel Mendelsohn describes the far-reaching impact of this obsession with a certain type of beauty as follows:

In the stories of my mother’s family, beauty is necessary, cleansing, justificatory: it generates the best and most vivid narratives, and redeems the worst imaginable suffering. [...] It seemed appropriate that I now belonged to a world that existed in an eternal present, because it had no generations. (Mendelsohn 1999: 150)

He ends this reflection by saying:

In a picture, it is always Now. In a picture, if you’re lucky, you are always beautiful. (Ibid: 151)

These efforts to stop time and create a life without ageing, and without generational differences, were brought to the fore in Scandinavian public debate a few years ago, when author and journalist Åsa Linderborg (2021) stated that she refuses to participate on TV because she is ashamed to see, as she put it, ‘that her face sags’. That Linderborg puts into words feelings about the loss of a youthful appearance, but not least that she also expressed so positively her attachment to the power that lies in the possession of such an exterior that fits the model of an eternal now, caused much debate. Wasn’t she a good feminist after all?

I take her statement and the debate that followed as an illustration that what I saw at the bus station in Wellington are symptoms of something that is important to many people in specific sociocultural contexts globally. Much work—both emotional and practical—is put into preserving an eternal now, also in terms of appearance. Other temporal orientations, such as those that highlight different age stages and generations, are linked to other life conditions and other challenges. However, the historicity of the modernist paradigm cancels time in a qualitatively new way.

My concern here is to show how, in a micro perspective, in the life course of individuals and families, this temporal orientation which brings a focus on an ongoing present also works in different ways. All overarching ways of thinking (or what we may call discourses) are dual in nature—they are realised in linguistic concepts, but they also reflect types of production forms, work, and life rhythms. As such, they have an affective dimension. The temporal framework of ‘presentism’, that of the eternal, unchanging now, is expressed, among other things, in the cultivation of youth and health, in the ideal of beauty that portrays the ideal human as free from disease, decay, and ageing.

## ‘PRESENTISM’ AS PART OF A LARGER, LATE-MODERNIST CULTURAL COMPLEX

Personal experiences and attempts to stop individual aging can thus be seen as instances of the temporal orientation of ‘presentism’. These practices are, however, only a small manifestation of a much larger and complex trend. The late-modernist variant of the former assuredly future-oriented capitalism is described by Thomas Hylland-Eriksen as a state of simultaneous stagnation and frenetic activity—that is, a condition of ‘overheating’ (Hylland-Eriksen 2016). Historian François Hartog (2015) also analyses the weakening of faith in the future and sees it linked to an experience of the present taking over. Hartmut Rosa (2015) has even described this orientation as tending towards a further narrowing of perspective, bringing about ‘a shrinking of the present’. As a sociocultural condition, its paradoxical impulses are characteristically summarised by him (2022) as ‘modernity’s furious stasis’.

A recent special issue section on temporality in *Social Anthropology* discussed the phenomenon of ‘presentism’ or the dominance of the never-ending moment. The authors argue that this temporal orientation can be examined through one of its manifestations, namely, the declaration and experience that something is extremely important, creating an atmosphere of ‘urgency’ (Bandak and Anderson 2022). In other words, they focus on the ‘furious’ side of Rosa’s temporal diagnostic, and on the complex that causes ‘overheating’ in Hylland-Eriksen’s terms. Bandak and Anderson encourage anthropologists to carry out ethnographic investigations into how such a perception of time and the experience of time is constructed. The articles in this special issue devoted to the study of ‘urgency’ showed how such an

experience of time—that something is urgent, that something is at stake—can come to be established as a general zeitgeist (Scarry 2022).

Importantly, Elaine Scarry argues that such a zeitgeist represents an affective resource available for manipulation. A reservoir of emotions (hysteria, anxiousness, restlessness, and dissatisfaction) once it exists can be used to enable political interventions, and make their implementation easier, especially in situations of crisis (Hoëm 2017). Bandak and Anderson (2022) strongly urge us, as Palmié and Stewart also do, to examine how such discourses about relationships between past, present, and future are shaped and how they are used.

In short, they offer good reasons justifying why anthropology should pay attention to how specific concepts of temporality are established and circulated in discourses that are partly about other things, such as, for example, beauty, youthfulness or economic crises (Knight 2015).

## NONFICTION NARRATIVES AS ATTEMPTS TO CONNECT PAST WITH PRESENT EXPERIENCES

‘Presence’, the alternative temporal orientation, where the past manifests as an actively felt force in the present, is expressed in the many literary publications where the narrator tries to come to terms with a silenced, repressed or suppressed trauma or theme that has afflicted the narrator’s family, often over several generations. This productive genre is sceptical of modernity’s narrative of a discontinuity, an irrevocable break with the past. The books discussed below bear witness to experiences of being haunted by ghosts of the past and can be read as testimonies of the power of past events in the present. However, the texts frequently begin with what we have seen is a defining criterion of the

modernist paradigm of history, namely, a break with the past. The experiences they describe take the form of a perceived standstill or a persistent collapse of time.

## ARNULF: A CULTURE OF SILENCE

Narrators often, but not always, refer to events related to the Second World War. One recent example is Jan Kjetil Arnulf’s book *Den norske atomlandsbyen*, with the subtitle *Om tungvannet’s tause forsvarsnettverk*<sup>1</sup> (Arnulf 2021). The narrator starts by stating: ‘[One of the main themes of this book is] the significance of silence in the stories about heavy water.’ (2021: 13). The trope of silence, in the sense of deliberate secrecy or avoidances, is presented as a dawning realisation that there are things about which the members of his family do not talk. Furthermore, this silence signals to him that whatever it is that is not talked about has been kept hidden on purpose. As Arnulf reasons, the fact that secrecy makes sense in military intelligence is obvious—however, he reflects that in a family in peacetime, perhaps this silence should be read as an expression of something else.

There is a rich anthropological literature on how violence and trauma are linked to memories and memory. Connerton (1989) is a pioneering reference study, but see also, for example, Tarlo (2003) and Navaro et al. (2021). The extensive historical memory research on the Second World War and the Holocaust further thematises the relationship between trauma and silence and memory work over generations (see, for example, Storeide 2007 and Kverndokk 2011, 2013). In this article, however, my concern is not with trauma or memory work as phenomena per se. Rather, the focus here is on how different temporal orientations are expressed in life stories and how they contribute to shaping life trajectories. In other words, I explore what

consequences temporal orientations may have for the experience and realisation of agency and affect.

As mentioned, the starting point in Arnulf's book is a family in peacetime whose inner life is characterised by the experience of time standing still. His paternal grandfather is the primary figure at the calm centre of this stasis. The family knows that he worked as a military officer at Rjukan, and that he was subsequently hunted by the German SS. This is about all that is told about him. Arnulf's digging in family histories and in archives uncovers past events which allow him to see that the silence that makes every family gathering an onerous task has its roots in military intelligence activities. Added to these are security issues related to the scientific work on the development of nuclear power.

Arnulf's book covers a period from 1905 to the present day, showing how defence needs linked to the development of nuclear power and war matériel were founded on the practice of strict secrecy. Key events in the Norwegian public, such as the opening of the first nuclear reactor at Kjeller and important actors in research, defence, and politics, are described with an eye towards the networks themselves, which together came to constitute what Arnulf calls 'the Norwegian nuclear power village' (2021: 18).

Protected by a culture of secrecy, created by people who knew each other but did not know about or could not openly acknowledge the connections for security reasons, the war was won, and the work carried out by the nuclear village continued after the war. Intelligence activities were organised among networks of people who did not know each other beyond the few with whom one interacted (akin to what Gullestad [2006] has described for the organisation of terrorist networks in dyads in her book *Plausible Prejudice*).

Arnulf describes how, according to the pioneer sociologist in the exploration of the realm of the unexpressed, the late Vilhelm Aubert, this form of organisation produced a generation of people who were unable to talk about what they had been involved in during the war when it was over. This form of muteness was first and foremost enforced for security reasons. Importantly, it also came about because each individual person lacked access to or an overview of the extensive network of which they had been a part. Aubert describes how many were, thus, left to their own devices and were left to improvise, to in a sense 'play their real, normal self', at least to the extent that they could recall what it had been like before the war. In this way, while acting the role of themselves as ordinary citizens, they were 'really' carrying something else, a kind of self that came into being during the war with a burden of experiences that should not be communicated (Arnulf 2021: 19). This experience produced a type of reticent, two-dimensional people. The presence of such a two-dimensional figure in his own family was what eventually prompted Arnulf to search for reasons explaining the silences that he experienced as dominant during family gatherings.

To aid him in this exploration, he uses the gaps in the narratives he finds about the war and post-war events to unravel the roots of the various forms of silence. He traces the lacunae in family stories from those linked to intelligence to those caused by people simply not being aware of national projects and the larger historical events of which that they and their social networks were part.

In Arnulf's story, such past events include scientific entrepreneurship significant for the young Norwegian nation to be the first to develop atomic energy in a setting of international competition. They also involve



business interests heavily invested in keeping this scientific expertise and the knowledge about it on Norwegian hands, represented by the state industrial company Norsk Hydro. These political interests led to the then prime minister, Trygve Lie, being elected to the position of the first General Secretary of the United Nations in 1946. The Norwegian political leaders made public claims of ignorance regarding the military uses of the heavy water and stuck to this official story throughout. Painstakingly, Arnulf opens up this story step by step, thereby releasing its power. His narrative makes it possible for readers to follow how his family's experiences of a temporal collapse, into silence and depression, has its roots in a much larger and previously unacknowledged participation in a large-scale political process.

## MENDELSON: LOSS AND TEMPORAL DEPRESSION

Internationally, it is perhaps Daniel Mendelsohn's writing that has shed the most light on experiences of loss and silences in representations of the past in later years' documentary publications. He (2020) reflects on the work that he carried out for the book *Lost*, in which he documents his close relatives' war experiences. He describes how time and the experience of what he calls the historical depth of places somehow stopped for him. He came to enter what he describes as a depressive state after a period of intense travel on several continents to interview family members in order to establish what happened to the six missing family members who were the focus of his endeavour. His commentary also provides an explanation of what can be a positive value or at least a strong driving force and motivation for oblivion and silence:

Closeness can lead to emotions other than love. It's the ones who have been too intimate with you, lived in too close quarters, seen too much of your pain or envy or, perhaps more than anything, your shame, who at the crucial moment can be too easy to cut out, to exile, to expel, to kill off. (Mendelsohn 2007: 134)

From these narratives, including my own of 'reverse culture shock' and that of Åsa Linderborg on 'face' and media appearances, it is obvious that the discontinuity between past and present so pronounced in the 'presentism' modernist paradigm can be experienced quite differently.

This particular temporal orientation, a reduction of temporality to the present, is at once a suspension of time, a reduction of flow, and an ongoing, never-ending present (Rudningen 2022). The experience of the present as ongoing can, in other words, be associated with both positive and negative qualities. In the narratives, it is described variously as a sense of timelessness, as time stopping, as stasis, and as a rupture. Furthermore, it is ascribed different kinds of affects. In the first extract from the life story from Mendelsohn, the ability to stop time is related to beauty and its powerful capacity to make pain go away. In Arnulf's intergenerational narrative, the characterisation is of a slowing down of time, of stasis, and the experiences are described as painful silences that cause discomfort and unease.

In terms of affect, the range is, as we have seen, from aesthetic appreciation to depression, according to the specifics of the circumstances of the person(s) experiencing such a state. It is, of course, also important to note that there is a difference in valuation according to whether the experience of a temporal orientation towards the present represents what can be

called a pause or interruption, a break, a crisis or a temporal collapse.

Through this it becomes apparent that competing temporal orientations and interpretative frames for understanding the past can coexist, although often linked to different contexts. In Helge Jordheim's (2014: 502) words, 'the modern regime of historicity [i.e., 'presentism'] was always challenged by other rhythms, other times, and other narratives' (insert in brackets mine). In the stories presented here, we can see how the narrators try to deal with discontinuity, ruptures, and the presence of the past, often in the same text. The two temporal orientations of 'presentism' and 'presence' are apparently active simultaneously. Mendelsohn, for his part, highlights reasons people may have for repressing, for trying to avoid the power of the past. He shows how the desire and need to leave trauma behind has its reasons, and we can, thus, say that gaps and silences in families' stories get their respectful explanation from him.

## KASSABOVA: EMIGRATION AND THE COLLAPSE OF TIME

The author Kapka Kassabova is also a nonfiction writer. She is perhaps best known for the book *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe* (Kassabova 2017) (for a review, see G. Brochmann 2022). In the book *To the Lake: A Balkan Journey of War and Peace* (Kassabova 2020), she takes as the starting point the fractures in her own family history. She sets herself the task of picking up the threads that have been dropped through repeated exoduses over four generations, which she calls a pattern of serial escape. Migration and diaspora are consistently discussed in relation to a specific place—namely, the two lakes, Prespa and Ohrid, located in the mountainous area in the borderland between North Macedonia,

Albania, and Greece, and which, although separated by political borders, are connected by underground rivers.

She writes:

It just so happens that I am fourth generation in a female line to emigrate. A hundred years ago, my great-grandmother emigrated from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to the Kingdom of Bulgaria. Her only daughter, my grandmother, emigrated from the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia to the People's Republic of Bulgaria. My mother, an only child, emigrated with her family from Bulgaria to New Zealand, and I emigrated from New Zealand to Scotland. My sister moved back to Europe, too. For each of us, emigration has meant separation from our parents. (Kassabova 2020: 17)

She points out that these displacements occurred in response to what she describes as cataclysmic historical forces: the fall of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, nation-building in the Balkans, the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 followed by two World Wars, the Cold War and its end, and contemporary globalisation. She says the pattern she calls serial flight has been with her since childhood. Thus far, this is a story that she can be said to share with many others.

But, then, she ventures into the more locally specific, into the landscape and the concrete losses and traumas that only people who at some point in time have been native to that area share. And, finally, she delves into her individual, personal narrative of being haunted by past traumas. She describes how, every time they met, in various family gatherings, their coming together is painful and they all use a lot of energy to smooth over differences and work to bridge the long absences and distances.

They make efforts to make things work and put much emphasis on making the gatherings function normally on the surface. However, they all repeatedly fall ill, with various strange symptoms, such as neuralgia and painful shingles, conditions which her mother simply calls ‘the pain’.

Kassabova explains this syndrome in the following way:

Repetitive overwhelming states don’t always need a current object, it transpires: in transgenerational psychology, this is seen as a result of unprocessed trauma and is known as ‘time collapse’ which is how it feels. (Kassabova 2020: 27)

## COMMONALITIES: ON TEMPORAL DISRUPTION AND FORGING NEW CONNECTIONS

This time collapse resembles the condition that Daniel Mendelsohn experienced, which he, in turn, calls a depressive reaction. It can also be interpreted as a negative manifestation of the never-ending present, which tells us that a moment without a connection to the past does not lead to a possible future either. Rosa points to how the human need for what he calls resonance—that is, attachment to relations and places over time—as being at cross purposes with the drive for continuous change, fueling what we have already identified as a concept akin to Hylland-Eriksens’ ‘overheating’, the ‘furious stasis’ of modernity (Rosa 2022).

Kassabova decides not to explain this condition with the help of a kind of psychological archaeology. Instead, she chooses to travel to the landscape where she eventually discovers it all began, to the place where the pain originated: to the two lakes separated although connected by underground rivers, divided into different

political zones, and where few people have free and easy access to all sides of the lakes. She comments that ‘geography creates history, and that it is something that we like to just accept as a fact’ (Kassabova 2020: 6). But, she adds, that ‘we don’t often explore how families digest big *historiogeographies*. How these sculpt our inner landscapes, and how we as individuals continue to influence the course of history in invisible but significant ways’ (ibid: 6).

She travels the landscapes around the lakes searching for an understanding of these forces. She investigates and describes how human destiny plays out across different forms of time, memories, and geography. She sees that their trajectories or life courses are not necessarily linear, but cross back over themselves. Her journey crosses several national and political borders, but the focus is always on the lakes, which are thus separated from each other by national borders despite being physically connected underground. Each of them is also divided across several different nation-states. What people can and will tell, and what challenges they face and have faced over generations in their livelihoods, are carefully documented and significant contrasts in their stories exists which she shows us. These range from nature mythology about the healing powers of water to initiatives from conservationists and ornithologists, as well as to large-scale hotel and tourist infrastructure development projects. Along the way, she also pulls together several threads of her own family’s history, incorporating parts of the stories previously unknown to her—she separates the threads and then puts them together in new ways. In the end, we are left with a multifaceted, rich picture of a region that is connected, despite what has often been called ‘Balkanisation’. This connection is crucially important for the water supply to the region, but which is also of great importance for

nature and wildlife in Central Europe. Even her strange physical symptoms, which have crippled her mother's body in rheumatic disorders, and which have haunted her daughter throughout her life, find a place and sink to the bottom in the life-giving healing waters of Lake Prespa.

This is a short rendering of a complex and complicated story. My point here is to show how a starting point in an individual's life story opens up an intergenerational time perspective, through her family's descriptions produced over four generations. Furthermore, we are led into a geography and across a landscape that, on the one hand, shows traces that evoke memories of the political history of the Balkans, but which also has an irreplaceable value as one of the few relatively untouched wetland areas of critical importance for bird migration over long distances.

## CONCLUSIONS: SOME LESSONS FOR THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF HISTORICITY

In my presentation of these texts, I have drawn attention to how temporal orientations affect life trajectories and intergenerational relationships. To generalise, one may say that late modernity's temporal orientation towards a present as qualitatively different and separate from the past also serves as a barrier against the exchange of information about past events. The ideal self it produces is singular, unique, and disconnected from intergenerational relationships.

The perpetuation of the trope of the socially independent self, as a driver of biographical narrative, has been criticised (Bourdieu 1987) and more recently discussed as part of a larger context of cultural and ideological (re)production (L. H. Chumley 2019). The narrators of life stories I have presented above captured my interest as they all have in common struggles

with this kind of self and with their experiences of disconnection. Accordingly, I have analysed their narratives as attempts to remedy the disconnect, triggered by an experience of being haunted by unaddressed, unspoken but powerful past events in the present. The practices of narration that they adhere to are interpreted as ethnographic examples of 'presence'. In the struggles faced by these narrators, we can see how the two paradigms for temporality (presentism and presence) coexist, but also that they are partly in conflict with each other. They are also difficult to reconcile in everyday lives, even for authors who have made it their project to create new forms of integration between ways of being with the past in the current moment.

Arnulf, Mendelssohn, and Kassabova's stories all show that the presence of the past can make itself strongly felt, on a personal level and in ways that one is often not aware of, let alone understands. In this way, their stories are both a documentation of the impact of temporal orientations and dominant discourses on past events and a discussion of how they should be perceived.

The stories have in common a representation of the present not only as an expression of rupture and modernity, but as characterised by strong, often unknown or unacknowledged forces influencing the people they describe. These forces, the presence of the past, are not only visible in material traces, in landscapes, and in bodies, but also make themselves felt in family stories, and not least, in the lacunae in these stories (Johansen 2001; Arnulf 2021). Through the emphasis the authors place on the experience of unexpected and difficult-to-explain phenomena, the narrative approach goes beyond the representational (Roitman 2022). The traces of the phenomena, and by implication their roots, can be identified beyond the narrative.

More importantly for the ethnography of historicities, the textual examples I have presented typically foreground the work of mediating between events from unacknowledged pasts. Through this practice, the narrators come up against and must confront the limits of what is possible and imaginable to put into words within the prevailing storytelling paradigm. We can look to their experiences, and as ethnographers ask the fundamental, comparative question of what these taboos are, and what the rationale may be for their existence.

For Hartog, the impetus for what he calls the 'duty' of excavating memories takes its current form a quality of repentance and is fuelled by the modernist denial of experiential knowledge of past events (Hartog 2015: 10). Leaving aside the question of shifting emotional attitudes to memory work, I wish to point to a less acknowledged phenomenon: namely, the belief that the past is only accessible as tradition also creates a grey zone, where all events that are not yet seen as tradition crowd and vie for attention.

For the comparative perspective, we should also bear in mind that taboo is originally a Polynesian term, *tapu*, indicating a cultivation of communicative norms, of how to speak and not to speak of past events, a long-standing tradition in Pacific oral literature. As an alternative form of historicity, past events and their relations to present and future are relational. As Sahlins demonstrated in his 1985 work, ancestral relationships and narratives of past events can, in certain contexts, serve as templates for actions at present.

The impulse to transcend the discontinuity between past and present, as instigated by the experience of a willed, enforced silence, is largely absent in that form in the Pacific. Let us return yet again for a moment to the atolls of Tokelau, from which I had arrived only to find

myself alienated from the people going about their business on Lambton Quay in Wellington. Within narrative practices in Tokelau, the impulse to share with a public versions of past events inspired by haunting memories is not encouraged. To do so is generally seen as an activity that portends bad luck, as something that is likely to bring conflict, disease, and death into the world.

While the nonfiction writers presented in this article are forced to break through personal barriers and taboos, their authorial mandate provides them with a licence that allows them to break silences and bring alternative or hitherto unexpressed stories of past events to public scrutiny. The resurgence of a literature of life stories, as documentaries, biographies or memoirs, are, in its recent popular form, intent on drawing lines between personal stories and larger societal events. This can be taken as signalling a need for such connections, and, importantly, it also shows us that such attempts are not entirely discouraged or repressed. In other words, the presentism paradigm is not wholly dominant, neither within nor outside the history profession.

In comparison, in Tokelau, for anyone to break such taboos in earnest is likely to be met with negative sanctions. Knowledge of past events are power, and, as such, its representation in public is a matter for narrative experts and requires careful handling.

The lesson we can learn from this brief comparison is that long-term structural conditions for narrative practices about past events must be considered when analysing narrative, regardless of what form these narratives take. This point is perhaps most clearly brought out in Stewart's (2012) work on historicity in Greece from the island of Naxos, where information about past events of intense local significance for the future of Naxiot

society takes the form of dreams and visions and is communicated to the wider public by children. The visionary practices that reveal past secrets carry an authority in the wider society that perhaps nonfiction writers lack, however. In the documentary literature, we also see how the past can be a powerful presence.

It can be effective in the form of what we have seen described as silences, and, in the presence of strange symptoms. These include, for example, Kassabova's family being haunted by mysterious, strange spirits, or what she calls 'uncanny incomprehensible ghosts'. It is reasonable to think that, this form of haunting, of persistent memories, gains its power precisely from the fact that they are displaced by the dominance of the present. In other words, I draw the conclusion that we see the two historiographic paradigms and ways of conceptualising time as reflections of one and the same reality, that of late modernity. This observation is underscored by the relative absence of this configuration of past–present–future historicity in Pacific narratives.

I have argued that it is possible to create discursive links connecting temporal orientations with experiences of self and intergenerational relationships. Following from this, I have asked questions about what it is like to live with modernity's particular kind of links between self and perspectives on temporality compared with other forms of historicity.

All storytellers, mediators of past and future horizons, work within different contexts of interpretation. All have in common that the concepts and dominant interpretative frames they draw on in their works can simultaneously be the subject of investigation and reflection, but also represent unconscious thought patterns. In the examples I have provided in this article, there is hidden knowledge about the personal self, in the body, in the self-presentation,

and in relationships that are mediated and conveyed.

Sometimes, the relationship between the persistent now and the self is presented as the foreground (as in Mendelsohn's text on beauty and timelessness in photographs). At other times, this relationship is presented as a background (such as in Kassabova's text on the body in a landscape). And, sometimes, the relationship between time perspective and personal relationships is expressed more indirectly without it being the focus itself (as when time itself stands still with Arnulf, Mendelsohn, and Kassabova). We also see the narrator responding to a felt pressure stemming from the power of the past, and they describe an activity (a journey, enquiries, and interviews) that they plan to carry out. In the case of Arnulf, this imperative to action is described explicitly. He wants to discover why there is silence among those close to him.

But, we can also see in the texts of these narrators that the two paradigms for temporality (presentism and presence) coexist, and that they are partly in conflict with each other. There are signs that living with a weak or nonexistent future horizon, the negative aspects of an endless now, can manifest on a personal level as experiences of depression. The effects of a temporal suspension or time collapse, in phenomena such as pandemics, but also associated with climate anxiety and other forms of crises for which mental illness has been thoroughly documented. In the face of this, we can see the efforts of the nonfiction writers to connect the past with the present, through work related to expanding the universe of what it is possible to express in a context that brings out its full significance.

By adding the self and intergenerational relationships to the study of understandings of time and forms of historicity as defined

by Palmié and Stewart (2019), we gain tools to examine how temporal orientations work discursively together with the affective dimension. It is possible to nuance the argument about the growing importance of the 'present' by arguing that the experience of having a future at all can have different qualities. In line with this reasoning, early on Bourdieu (1963) argued that what he called 'the Kabyle's time perspective', dominated as it was by the yearly agricultural cycle of production, did not place emphasis on the future at all. The difference between a growth-oriented mode of production versus a subsistence or agriculturally oriented social formation serves as an obvious example of different horizons of anticipation, to use Bryant and Knights' (2019) terminology.

It is, however, reasonable to hold that there is an existential qualitative difference in living with an infinite or unspecified time horizon versus finding oneself situated in an overheated present. A lifeworld which provides an experience of oneself and one's close relations as part of a continuous unfolding or becoming, imagined as a long genealogy which includes everything in the universe, as I have argued, provides the case for many narrators with connections to the Pacific. This is qualitatively different from a society that works on the premise of some kind of temporal suspension or rupture. This difference between historicities can be described as one where the current moment is experienced as a part of a continuous unfolding, and another where a disconnection from the flow of life is increasingly naturalised as an ongoing present.

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## NOTES

- 1 In English (my translation), *The Norwegian Nuclear Power Village: On the heavy water's silent defence network*.

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