Generational Theory and Collective Autobiography

John D Hazlett, University of New Orleans
Each of us moves with the men of our generation, submerged in the great anonymous multitude, and save for the final individual nucleus of our life, to ask ourselves to which generation we belong is, in large measure, to ask who we are.

Julian Marias

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was common to hear young, middle-class, white Americans referring to themselves with a self-conscious sense of shared identity and common oppression that today one associates with race, class, ethnicity, or gender. The primary collective with which those young people in the 1960s identified—the generation—is now granted attention only in popular magazines and in marketing and demographic reports on the continuing economic and social impact of the baby boomers. In the field of American autobiography, studies of works by writers who identify themselves on the basis of gender, class, race, or ethnicity have been numerous, while autobiographies in which the primary collective identity has been derived from the concept of the generation—works such as Raymond Mungo’s Total Loss Farm: A Year in the Life (1970), Michael Rossman’s The Wedding Within the War (1971), Joyce Maynard’s Looking Back: Growing Up Old in the 1960s (1972), or David Harris’s Dreams Die Hard: Three Men’s Journey Through the Sixties (1982)—have been largely ignored.

The reasons for the neglect of what I call “generational autobiographies” are not difficult to imagine. Whereas autobiographers often experience gender, race, ethnicity, and class affiliations radically and over the whole of their lives, one is most aware of one’s membership in a generation during the coming-of-age years or the period that Erik Erikson refers to as the “psychosocial moratorium,” when one is first entering the arena of history, rebelling against parental institutions, and experimenting with adult identities. After that period, one’s sense of kinship with other members of one’s age group inev-
Generational Theory and Collective Autobiography

Itably declines, and since conventional autobiographies tend to be written later in life, they rarely focus exclusively upon generational experience. Then, too, oppressed groups now enjoy a privileged position within the academy; it is not often argued that members of specific generations are actually oppressed, whatever they themselves might say to the contrary, and when it has been argued, that oppression is generally acknowledged to be limited to the coming-of-age period itself. Once through that phase of their lives, the members of new generations within the dominant social group inherit the world and the power of their fathers. Not surprisingly, critics tend to ignore the role of the generational concept in the construction of autobiographical identity.2

One of the best reasons for studying generational autobiographies is that they so powerfully undercut the central assumption of traditional autobiographical theory—the assumption that the genre depends upon the notion of the individualized self. That assumption permeates the work of critics who write about the canon of established autobiographical classics. Karl Weintraub, for example, argues that the development of historical consciousness after the Renaissance provided a cultural context within which autobiography "became the literary form in which an individuality could best account for itself" (847). Elizabeth Bruss remarks that individual identity is one of the “defining features” of the genre (15). And Paul John Eakin, in his recent Fictions in Autobiography, comments that “the value of the individual . . . is the premise, ipso facto, of autobiography as we know it today” (198), an assumption now attacked by writers approaching the genre from the perspective of marginalized groups. Central to the argument between traditional critics and their opponents is the model of identity formation that each group employs. The model used by traditional critics, Susan Friedman claims, is inaccurate on two counts: “First, the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed identity for women and minorities. Second, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity. From both an ideological and psychological perspective . . . individualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities” (34–35).

American autobiographies written by people who came of age between 1960 and 1975 help to demonstrate that the cultural pervasiveness of the myth of individualism does not prevent the self from being conceived collectively. But more im-
important than the mere existence of generational autobiographies is the way in which they enable us to see features of the genre less visible (but nonetheless present) in more individualized works, particularly the dialogical nature, constructedness, and negotiability of the autobiographical self. The self of generational autobiography is always more or less overtly offered in the service of identity politics, but these conspicuous characteristics of collective autobiography also have, I believe, important implications for our understanding of the way in which the selves of more conventional, individualized texts are dialectically related to collectives.

1. Generational Consciousness

In the twentieth century, the idea of the generation has at various times enjoyed a vogue among historians who thought it could provide a scientific basis for predicting and measuring social change. It has also enjoyed intermittent popularity among people who have used it to articulate personal identity, announce their primary collective affiliation, and position themselves in relation to historical trends. In recent decades, historians have accounted for some of the causes that contribute to age-group consciousness within particular generations. According to Robert Wohl, the essential element in "the formation of a generational consciousness is some common frame of reference that provides a sense of rupture with the past and that will later distinguish the members of a generation from those who follow them in time. This frame of reference is always derived from great historical events like wars, plagues, famines, and economic crises . . ." (210). One result of such ruptures is the younger generation’s sense that the model of identity offered to them by their elders is unsuitable or oppressive. Generational self-consciousness is accompanied, therefore, by the development of a new collective identity. Annie Kriegel attributes the rise of generational consciousness to peculiarly modern causes. It is the result, she says, of the "shrinkage of time," which has been caused by the lengthening of the average life expectancy, the rise of the bourgeoisie, the regulation of modern life according to certain well-defined stages of socialization, and the proliferation of ideologies. Other theorists point to factors such as increased social mobility, accelerated social change, the development of mass communication, the greater numbers attending universities, and the breakdown of regional identities.3

In twentieth-century America, generational self-conscious-
ness has been strongest among the two middle-class groups that came of age during the periods of the First World War and the Vietnam War. Both groups experienced disillusionment as America engaged in the fighting of an apparently meaningless war; both groups felt a tremendous gap between their own cultural, social, and sexual values and those of their parents; and both groups enjoyed an economic security that allowed them to devote time to questions of value and meaning. The earlier group came of age during the period of America’s transition from a rural to an urban society, when enormous changes were occurring in basic institutions such as the family, the church, and the school. For the most part, it was middle-class youths who were first affected by these changes and who were forced, as a group, to adopt a political stance in order to defend themselves and their values against charges of immorality (Fass 1–51, 361, 487). The later generation came of age during a time when professed political, economic, and social ideals were radically undermined by lived experience. Middle-class young people, raised on the assumption that American prosperity was permanent, prepared for the future amid the upheavals of the civil rights movement, the growth of the “multiversity,” anxiety about nuclear war, the assassination of three greatly admired political leaders, and an increasing scarcity of economic opportunities.

Perhaps the most important distinction between the two generations is that the earlier group expressed its generational consciousness in sociological and historiographical discourse that obscured the extent to which the writers saw their own generation as the vanguard of history and themselves as members of a self-conscious generational elite. The later group expressed its generational consciousness specifically in autobiographical forms that simultaneously make explicit the personal dimension of generational thought and the collective element in autobiographical discourse. This difference can be attributed in part to the literary fashions of each period. During the first decades of the twentieth century, scientism, together with the modes of discourse that it fostered, enjoyed a prestige that it lacked in the late 1960s and ’70s. During the later period, fashion favored the mode of individual witness to protest the depersonalization of mass society and established historiographical postures of objectivity. One can use the earlier theoretical expression of the phenomenon to illuminate the assumptions about the self, about society, and about history in the later, more personal expression of the autobiographies.

As a social and historical category, the idea of the gener-
Ation had existed in the nineteenth century, but as a theory of social change, as a form of romantic historicism, and as a means of self-conception, the idea found particularly fertile ground among the young people who came of age between 1910 and 1930. During this period, the conviction that a new generation had arrived upon the world scene was shared by writers and intellectuals all over America and Europe. In Europe, it was accompanied by a remarkable flowering of theories which sought to explain historical change, zeitgeists, and social disorder as the result of the rhythmic pattern of generation succeeding generation. In this early period of popularity, generational theorists imagined that the idea would displace other historiographical concepts such as the mass and the individual. In this belief, they were largely disappointed. As a form of romantic historicism, however, and as a means of self-conception for young people (and potential autobiographers), the idea was very powerful. It helped them answer vital questions about their identity: Who am I in relation to history, to the present world, to others? And it provided some of them with an ethical and political program that apparently transcended personal ambition and quotidian life.

In America, the idea found a powerful spokesman in Randolph Bourne, who believed that the consciousness of each generation is determined by the particular portion of history that it possesses in its youth. "A man’s spiritual fabric,” he wrote, “is woven by that time.” Bourne conceived of history itself as a series of generations, each one of which could be characterized by a collective spirit and the issues and “radicalisms” that it calls forth. The sharing of a given historical moment by distinct age-groups, therefore, meant that different generational spirits inevitably clashed over the issues of “their times.” This, said Bourne, is the reason there is social conflict, generational strife, and historical change (15).

Anticipating many of the central tenets of European generational theory, Bourne was writing as early as 1911 about the differences that exist between the older generation, who “sit in the saddle,” and the young, who are the only people that are “actually contemporaneous.” According to Bourne, “very few people get any really new experience after they are twenty-five, unless there is a real change of environment” (12–13). Implicit in the idea is the belief that each generational era possesses a spirit independent of the lives of individuals, but organically tied to a collective sensibility, one that gives rise to tasks whose accomplishment is the burden of the generation. Youth is the one period in life when a person can live fully in consonance
with his or her time; to avoid doing so, as a tradition-minded youth might choose to do, would be to live in unreality, like old men who "live only in the experience of their youthful years" (13).^5

Views like Bourne's are frequently encountered in generational autobiographies, in statements to the effect that one did not really experience the '60s unless one was present, in some fashion, at the major symbolic rites of the generational moment. In this form, generationalism is like all forms of historicism; it contains an animism by which collective history is perceived to embody a will independent of individuals. Only when one is consonant with this "direction of history" can one take part in "real time"; otherwise one forfeits one's times.

For generationalists like Bourne, this participation is made possible by a political and cultural avant-garde which identifies the various progressive issues that constitute the generational moment. The belief that such participation enables the transcendence of individual existence and thrusts the participant into the vanguard of history emerged again in autobiographies written by the generation that came of age in the 1960s. There it creates an authorial stance that apparently suppresses the individual self at the same time that it exalts (to the author's great individual credit) the collective self to which the author belongs. Such a posture is particularly evident in those works that were written in the midst of the coming-of-age experience. In The Wedding Within the War (1971), Michael Rossman articulates this feeling when he comments on his presence at the 1960 demonstrations protesting the persecutive activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee: "It is one thing to say that we are living in the middle of history; everyone is aware of this. It is quite another thing to know this is so, to participate in actions that one knows are in the growing-bud of the historical tree" (69). In generational autobiographies that view the coming-of-age experience retrospectively, this sense of the preeminence of the generational moment is frequently heightened by nostalgia.

As a form of historicism, generationalism not only infuses history with a suprapersonal meaning, but it also seeks to predict the direction of history on the basis of the continual replacement of older generations by rising generations. Since the time period over which a generation can exert its influence ranges from 10 to 30 years, generationalists must predict historical trends on the basis of a limited temporal unit. Moreover, the predictions of generationalism have had to compete with those of Marxism, which are based on much longer temporal units (the duration
of the rise and fall of economic classes) and a firmer conception of the relations between its constituent groups. In this competition, generationalism has not fared well. When autobiographers enthusiastic about the generational idea have expressed the relationship of the generation to a larger pattern of history, they have often produced a mixture of generational and Marxist historicism.

In the 1920s, writers in France, Spain, and Germany constructed the first fully developed generational theories: In France, François Mentre's *Les générations sociales* (1920); in Spain, José Ortega y Gasset's *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (1923) and, later, *En torno a Galileo* (1933); and in Germany, Wilhelm Pinder's *Kunstgeschichte nach Generationen* (1926), Edward Wechssler's *Die Generationen als Jugendgemeinschaft* (1927) and *Das Problem der Generationen in der Geistesgeschichte* (1929), Karl Mannheim's essay "Das Problem der Generationen" (1928), and Julius Peterson's *Die Literarischen Generationen* (1930).

Ortega, one of the more influential of these writers in America, developed his theory as a solution to the problem of historical evolution. Traditional historical studies, he said, generally fell into one of two categories: those that explained historical change as the consequence of individual action and personality, and those that attributed it to the actions of collectives. The generation, he proposed, could serve as the "dynamic compromise between the mass and individual ... the pivot responsible for the movement of historical evolution" (Modern Theme 14–15). Ortega's distinction between the generation's elite "minority" and its "gross multitude" later emerged in the work of generational autobiographers whose political commitments were leftist and collective, but who still desired to play a role in generational history as individuals. The task of the elite, Ortega thought, was to give voice to the generation's sensibility and destiny and, "by reason of their eminent intellectual qualities," to assume "responsibility for the conduct of the age" (21).

Once Ortega had established the generation's role in historical change, he set about noting the ways in which its collective identity is produced. The members of each generation, he said, "come into this world endowed with certain typical characteristics which lend them a common physiognomy, distinguishing them from the previous generation" (15). This physiognomy is determined, in part, by the generation's response to its two historical "tasks," one of which is simply "the reception, through the agency of the previous generation, of what has had
life already, e.g., ideas, values, institutions,” and “the other is the liberation of the creative genius inherent in the generation concerned” (16). These responses allow for two different types of generational identities. Generations “which felt that there was a perfect similarity between their inheritance and their own private possessions” create “ages of accumulation” and possess no particularly strong generational identity. On the other hand, generations which “have felt a profound dissimilarity between the two factors” lead to “ages of elimination and dispute, generations in conflict.” These generations, in general, tend to be highly self-conscious and creative (17).

One of the most important aspects of generational thought for understanding generational autobiography is the notion that within given generations, there coexist generational “units” or parties that vie with each other over the issues of the times. Ortega, meeting the objection that generations cannot constitute a coherent collective because subgroups within a given age-group are often at odds with one another, claims that these generational opponents nonetheless share a “general sign of identity” and that beneath the “most violent opposition of ‘pros’ and ‘antis’ it is easy to perceive a real union of interests. Both parties consist of men of their own time; and great as their differences may be their mutual resemblances are still greater” (Modern Theme 15). Mannheim likewise argues that “within any generation there can exist a number of differentiated, antagonistic generation-units. Together they constitute an ‘actual’ generation precisely because they are oriented toward each other, even though only in the sense of fighting one another” (307). Such antagonisms constitute one of the most salient characteristics binding the group of generational autobiographies written by those who came of age in the 1960s.

The ideas of Bourne, Ortega, and other generationalists who came of age in the first decades of the twentieth century serve two purposes here. They foreshadow several of the underlying assumptions of generational autobiographies written by those who came of age between 1960 and 1975. Most of these earlier writers, for example, see in generationalism a “scientific” explanation of social conflict and change, and most share a quasireligious belief in zeitgeists that give rise to generational tasks and historical trends. Generational autobiographers tend to hold both of these assumptions, though often in a diluted form that downplays the scientific claims. But the early generational theorists should also be given credit for accurately isolating generational phenomena that manifest themselves in the later autobiographical works. Most of these the-
orists, for example, accurately see the concept of the generation as a crucial aspect of collective identity. And as a part of that identity, they distinguish within each generational group between the mass and an elite, the latter of which articulates generational identity, interprets generational tasks, and provides leadership in carrying them out. Finally, they all attribute internal differences within generations to arguments over the “reality” they share with each other and which separates them from other age-groups.

2. Generational Autobiography

The generational concept of the self in these theorists recurs in autobiographies written by people who came of age between 1960 and 1975. Its emergence there is significant enough to constitute a virtually new autobiographical subgenre—a narrative of the generation as told by one who defines the self in terms of generational identity. Some of these works, in fact, are written almost entirely in the first person plural, reconstructing a generational, rather than an individual, past. More often, the texts slip back and forth between the “I” and “we” so fluidly that the distinction between the autobiographer’s personal story and the collective history of the generation to which he or she belongs is completely blurred. Because the generational autobiographer’s own story is meant to serve as the narrative that will ultimately define the public identity of the author’s peers, contemporary readers inevitably perceive them, whether sympathetically or unsympathetically, as bids for power. The response that this often evokes is another autobiography, offered by a peer as a countertext or alternative reading of generational identity.

In discussing these works as a group, therefore, it is useful to examine them for the presence of difference within the overarching collectivity. All of the generational autobiographies that I discuss participate in this generational dialogue. Indeed, they need to be read in conjunction with one another, as so many voices in an argument about generational experience and identity. Sometimes that dialogue is explicit, as when Rossman includes an open letter to Jerry Rubin (himself a generational autobiographer) in The Wedding Within the War or when David Horowitz includes an open letter to his friend M— (another representative peer) in his and Peter Collier’s The Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts about the Sixties (1989). Often, however, the presence in a single autobiography of these other
voices (as well as those of a former self, parents, political foes, the other gender, the media, etc.) is apparent only in what Mikhail Bakhtin has called “hidden polemic” (187); they are voices whose presence one must infer in order for the texts to make sense. Because of the dialogical nature of these works, I divide them into three overlapping groups, representing three phases of an ongoing generational dialogue, each with its characteristic autobiographical forms.

Autobiographies that appeared between 1960 and 1971 were highly politicized, “annunciatory” works. In texts like *The Port Huron Statement* (1962), Abbie Hoffman’s *Revolution for the Hell of It* (1968), Rubin’s *Do It! Scenarios for the Revolution* (1970) and *We Are Everywhere* (1971), Tom Hayden’s *Trial* (1970), or Rossman’s *The Wedding Within the War* (1971), the collective self is as often announced as it is narrated. Consequently, many of these early works are manifestos written for two intended audiences. Many aspects of the new identity—particularly its leftist politics and countercultural lifestyle—are directed at the previous generation and reject the model of identity that that generation has proffered. At the same time, the new identity is offered to other members of their own age-group still in search of an identity. In some ways, *The Port Huron Statement* is paradigmatic of such works. Collectively produced by the Students for a Democratic Society, it announces its collective identity in its opening sentence: “[W]e are the people of this generation... .” Its members are clearly middle class: “[We were] bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.” And the work attributes the identity of the collective to a shared history and a common disillusionment with American social life brought about by “racial bigotry,” “the Cold War,” and the “presence of the Bomb” (329). Like *The Statement*, Rubin’s and Hoffman’s books construct pasts for their narrators that are meant to be interchangeable with the past of every other member of the generation. Perhaps most typically, *The Statement* is an overtly political manifesto that directs its “agenda for a generation” toward both its own age-group and those parental figures whose policies have resulted in an America from which the young feel alienated. Significantly, this group sees that they will inherit the world, but just as significantly they wish to distinguish themselves from their elders and to constitute themselves as a marginalized, oppositional group. Jonah Raskin’s *Out of the Whale: Growing Up in the American Left* (1974) is a rather late variation of the annunciatory autobiography, for its narrator is self-consciously out of sync with his
peers throughout much of his story. Consequently, his announ-
cement of generational identity in the book's final chapter
is actually a bathos-laden, rearguard effort to fend off those
voices claiming the demise of The Port Huron Statement's de-
clared collective unity: "We, not the presidents, senators, ad-
vertising executives and news broadcasters, created and are still
creating history. The sixties is our past, not theirs, and we're
proud of it. We're not a lost, damned, corrupt generation. We're
the future, we've got hope, discipline, dedication. . . . They want
to rob us of our sixties, make us adolescents again and substitute
old, old lies—individualism, consumerism, alienation, author-
ity" (211–12).

After 1969, the year that almost all writers of this age-group
designate as the obituary date of the first "announced" notions
of generational identity, a second phase of the dialogue began.
The intended audience of the works written during this phase
is less often the previous generation, since the authors turn their
attention to the first of several intragenerational arguments over
identity. This phase is characterized by narratives of renunci-
ation or conversion that provide a literary vehicle for the de-
struction of the author's earlier generational identity. Like the
much older Christian conversion narrative of which they can
be seen as secular variants, both of these narrative forms involve
a violent casting off of the narrator's old self. The narrators in
Raymond Mungo's Total Loss Farm: A Year in the Life (1970)
and Rubin's Growing (Up) at 37 (1976) have embraced a new
ideology that provides a vantage point from which the errors
of the old generational self may be judged, as have the later
narrators of the Collier and Horowitz book. Mungo's narrator,
newly converted to primitivist communalism, denounces the
generation's earlier leftist radicalism and, in doing so, projects
his own life trajectory as the generation's. Rubin denounces the
former generational identity from the vantage of New Age ther-
apy, and Collier and Horowitz do it from the standpoint of
neoconservatism. The narrator of the renunciation narrative,
on the other hand, repudiates the old self without the benefit
of a rejuvenating new ideology: the Old Adam is indeed dead,
but the New Adam has either not yet risen from the grave or,
having done so, is a feeble replacement of the former self. Dot-
son Rader's narrators in i ain't marchin' any more (1969) and
Blood Dues (1973), Jane Alpert's in Growing Up Underground
(1981), and Mungo's in his earlier Famous Long Ago: My Life
and Hard Times with Liberation News Service (1970) are of
this sort.

The latest phase of the generational dialogue is character-
ized by autobiographical works that are elegiacally retrospec-
tive, such as Joyce Maynard's *Looking Back: A Chronicle of
Growing Up Old in the Sixties* (1972), Rossman's *New Age
Blues: On the Politics of Consciousness* (1979), Patricia Hampl's
*A Romantic Education* (1981), David Harris's *Dreams Die Hard:
Three Men's Journey Through the Sixties* (1982), and Tom
Hayden's *Reunion* (1988). The narrators of these works tend
to be more individualized than those of the earlier works and
often see themselves as survivors of a generational diaspora.

A number of observations can be made about this intra-
and intergenerational dialogue, with its characteristic an-
nouncements, alliances, repudiations, and feuds. First, it takes
place primarily among persons who consider themselves to be
representative of the generation, either as typical members of
the generational mass or as members of a generational elite.
Second, each of these autobiographers, by offering him- or her-
self as the generational representative, engages with other au-
tobiographers and potential representatives in a struggle for
power and is thus more or less consciously engaged in identity
politics. Finally, the self in these works is, by dint of its collective
nature, its self-conscious engagement in a political struggle, and
its frequent revisionings, overtly negotiable and artificial.

The generational autobiographer's implicit conviction that
his or her own story is the story of the generation is a political
belief already visible in Bourne's and Ortega's notion that the
generational elite interprets the spirit of the times, characterizes
the generational identity, and leads the generational mass. Oc-
casionally, such autobiographers qualify their efforts by vacil-
lating between the construction of a collective identity and nag-
ging doubts about their right to represent that identity. For
example, Maynard disclaims the very task she has set out to
accomplish: "I should perhaps temper my statements with apol-
gogies, for saying 'we' all through this book, when there are so
many people I've no right to speak for (where are the blacks?
the teen-age dropouts? the people of my generation who read—
really read—books? I cannot speak for them). . . . Ten years
cannot be summed up; a generation can't be generalized about"
(151). But such disclaimers are at least partially disingenuous,
for all generational autobiographies finally represent audacious
bids for the representative status of their authors and their friends.

One can, however, detect a distinct falling off in these claims
of representativeness over the course of the dialogue. In the first
phase of the dialogue, such assertions are as pervasive (though
often implicit) as the political agenda that dominates the surface
of the texts. The authors of *The Port Huron Statement* can begin
with the claim “we are the people of this generation” without having to devote textual space to those who may not consider themselves to be adequately represented by the writers of that document. In the second and third phases, on the other hand, disclaimers such as Maynard’s become more common as the authors demonstrate an increasing uncertainty about the possibility of a coherent “we.” A comparison between the first and second autobiographical works of Rossman provides a telling example of such a shift. In the first, *The Wedding Within the War*, Rossman aggressively speaks of the Movement (to which he belonged) as the vanguard of the generation, claiming that it “had become a presence, forcing all the young to begin in some way to define themselves with respect to it” (75). But at the end of the ‘70s, he prefaces the essays that make up *New Age Blues* (1979) by saying that unlike the first book, whose ideas he took to be “in fair part the product of many minds and people,” this one “has been lonely—for this decade has left me, like many others, more alone than I would like to be to shape my understanding from its conflicting evidences” (xiii). In large part, of course, this falling off of claims to representative status merely reflects the development of internal difference as external political goals are met.

The other collective affiliations of these autobiographers also invite examination. All of the generational autobiographers in the three phases outlined above were either members of the New Left and the counterculture or were heavily influenced by these movements. The majority of them were white, male, and middle-class. Consequently, the generational self they defined was often characterized both by a consciousness of its exclusion from the center of power and by its own kind of exclusiveness. For example, when Rubin titled one of his early generational works *We Are Everywhere*, it was understood that the generational “we” to which the title referred comprised alienated youths who were besieging an “establishment” controlled by their elders; at the same time, however, that ubiquitous “we” clearly was not intended to include the American soldier in Vietnam, even if he did belong to Rubin’s age-group.

By firing off the first autobiographical characterizations of the generation, early Movement writers like Rubin sought to determine who would carry the moral banner of youth. It was not until the mid-’70s that the excluded groups began to construct their own autobiographical narrative. After 1975, for example, there appeared a profusion of memoirs written by Vietnam War veterans that reflect their authors’ awareness of an audience familiar with the moral outlines of an already
existing narrative in which the veteran was assigned a role as the generational Other, the excluded sibling of the generational self. Frederick Downs’s memoir *The Killing Zone* (1978) is typical when it begins with an account of the narrator’s return to the US after his tour of duty in Vietnam. Walking across a university campus on his way to class, he is stopped by someone who asks him how he lost his arm. When Downs replies that he lost it fighting “up near Tam Ky in I Corps,” his questioner tells him that it serves him right. Downs’s book, written 10 years after that encounter, is the result of his feeling that “it is necessary now to give another view of Vietnam, that of the day-to-day life of an infantryman on the ground” (preface). What he means by this, as his narrative reveals, is not that he really wants us to see Vietnam in another light, but that he wants us to see the generational subgroup comprising American soldiers who fought there in another light. And in this, he typifies other Vietnam War memoirists. The one motive that unifies them, even when they differ widely on the political meaning of the war, is the desire to take back their identity both from other writers of their own generation and from anyone who presumes to speak of or for them.

Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976) offers a more complicated instance of this motive. For Downs, the reclaiming of the veterans’ identity stops at showing that the soldiers were heroes in the specific context of combat, whatever the political and moral value of the war itself. Kovic’s book, on the other hand, reveals how the veterans were caught in a rhetorical cross fire over the soldiers’ identity. The Movement had demonized them; the older generation had cast them as heroes. On the surface, Kovic’s book appears to be directed mainly at the older generation, rather than at other members of Kovic’s own age-group. In one revealing scene, when Kovic and another veteran attend a Memorial Day parade at the request of officials in their hometown, Kovic grasps how his identity as an American hero is being constructed for him by his elders, who have a stake in seeing veterans in that role. And he becomes aware at the same time that the identity is being constructed at the cost of suppressing his “real” self, with its overwhelming sense of anger and loss. The awareness leads him to reject his hero status and to reassert his own voice: “These people had never been to his war, and they had been talking like they knew everything, like they were experts on the whole goddamn thing, like he and Eddie didn’t know how to speak for themselves because there was something wrong now with both of them. They couldn’t speak because of the war and had
to have others define for them with their lovely words what they didn’t know anything about” (107–08).

But although Kovic avoids the pitfall of one “imposed” self, he seems to have fallen victim to another. For much of the book’s pathos results from Kovic’s having come to accept implicitly the Movement’s explanation of his experience; his narrative is pervaded by self-loathing, and its confessional sections actually confirm the Movement stereotype of the Vietnam soldier as a baby killer. As a rehabilitative strategy, Kovic must cast himself first as a victim—someone to whom history has “happened”—in order to become an active member of what he takes to be his generation’s political vanguard, the antiwar movement. But even after becoming an activist, Kovic continues to see himself as victim, as one can see in the way he characterizes his presence at the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami: “This was the moment I had come three thousand miles for, this was it, all the pain and the rage, all the trials and the death of the war and what had been done to me and a generation of Americans by all the men who had lied to us and tricked us, by the man [Nixon] who stood before us in the convention hall that night, while men who had fought for their country were being gassed and beaten in the street outside the hall” (182–83). Kovic’s final acceptance of the antiwar movement’s assessment of the war’s morality does not, however, lead him to articulate a clear political agenda, for the narrative focuses exclusively on the destruction of the cultural myths that had provided its author with meaning in the past. In this, Kovic (and most other veteran memoirists) has much in common with the authors of autobiographies of renunciation. Like them, he recounts the destruction of his own younger self and its validating myths, and he is left without a clearly articulated set of alternative values or any blueprint for constructing a future self. More significantly, Kovic’s and other veterans’ memoirs only occasionally move beyond the soldiers’ particular case to argue for the author’s more inclusive representative status. Because of this, veterans’ memoirs are only marginally, though powerfully, involved in the generational dialogue.

Besides excluding Vietnam soldiers, early attempts to construct the generational self also largely excluded women. The struggle over generational identity in the 1960s and early 1970s was carried out primarily by men who, on both the right and the left of the political spectrum, ignored the gender bias of their collective autobiographical self (assuming, for example, that theirs was the generation that faced the military draft). The growth of the women’s movement in the early 1970s was partly
the result of an awareness of a gap between the egalitarian rhetoric of male New Leftists and their treatment of the women within their own ranks. The subsequent development of group consciousness among women produced the need and the desire to define themselves in their own terms. An outpouring of autobiographical writing by women ensued. Their primary group identification, however, was not the generation (though there were some female generationalists in the later phases of this group’s output), but all women, past, present, and future.

An exception to the tendency of women writers to ignore this subgenre is Maynard, whose earnestly generational Looking Back (1972) is a good example of a text self-consciously engaged in the dialogue over generational identity. Particularly illuminating is Maynard’s notion of how the autobiographer represents the generation. In some ways, it is similar to that of the war memoirists. Like them, she constructs a largely passive collective identity. History is something that “happened to” her age-group while they were still children; they are its product. What determines this posture, she claims, is the temporal position her birth-year subgroup (1953) holds within the generation. Born later than many of the other writers, she addresses her narrative in part to the older, more politically active, members of her own generation and explains to them that the Movement had ceased to be the defining agency of her collective identity because her group “inherited the Vietnam war just after the crest of the wave—too late to burn draft cards and too early not to be drafted” (14-15). Viewed from the perspective of generational theory, writers like Maynard assert representativeness by confessing themselves typical members of the generational mass. The Movement writers, on the other hand, seek to establish their representativeness by placing themselves implicitly within the generational elite, seeing themselves as active members of an avant-garde that represents the generation as leaders can be said to represent followers. This is not to say that the Movement writers make no claims to typicality. Most of them do make such claims when they reconstruct their childhoods, as a part of a rhetorical strategy that seeks to convince readers inclined to judge them as “other” that they are, in fact, very much like the reader. But Movement writers are generally uninterested in childhood because significant identity for them evolves from the ways in which the generation is shaping history, not the ways in which history has shaped the generation. Their narratives tend, therefore, to focus on the years during which their authors enter the historical arena, between the ages of 17 and 25; Maynard’s, in contrast, ends soon after the author graduates from high school.
But beneath Maynard's temporal explanation of her difference from Movement generationalists lies a political one. The passive collective self Maynard constructs is one that, having been buffeted about by historical forces, now wishes to be let alone with its middle-class possessions: "Now my goal is simpler. . . . I want comfort—nice clothes, a nice house, good music and good food, and the feeling that I'm doing some little thing that matters. . . . I feel a sudden desire to buy land" (155). If the collective self is the product of history, it has no reason to engage in activist politics, whether proffered by the Movement, the counterculture, or by feminists, whose movement she dismisses as "a sisterhood of bitterness" (151). Maynard, then, attacks the Movement writers' claims to represent the generation not on moral or political grounds, where she concedes their superiority, but on grounds that arise from generational theory: their generational moment (the "crest of the wave") and the events that gave rise to it have passed. Since historical direction is determined by reified time-spirits, generational identity has little to do with the rightness of one's political stance. Representativeness, according to her, has simply been passed back by history into the hands of the politically resigned and the economically secure.

What such differences among generational writers reveal is an ambivalent relation to power that derives both from their sense that the powerless (with whom they identify) are morally superior to the powerful and from their often unarticulated desire to attain power at the expense of their rivals. All of their texts are ostensibly about selves excluded from power; all of them are at the same time efforts to attain power by advancing each author's individual narrative as the narrative of the generational self; and all of them attempt to exclude from power other, often weaker, selves within the generation by omitting them from the generational narrative or by rejecting them as unrepresentative.

The rejection of unrepresentative selves is so pervasive among these writers that they often, in fact, practice it on their own former selves. Autobiographical sequels, such as Rubin's Growing (Up) at 37, Rader's Blood Dues, and Mungo's Total Loss Farm, all represent not merely an update of the collective narrative, but a renunciation of the author's first formulation of generational identity in an earlier work. For autobiographical theory, these revisions are of interest because they highlight both the collective self's textuality and its negotiability. Freud long ago compared the ego's repressions of unpleasant truths to the revision of a text that contains offensive passages (236–
37); revising one's generational identity in order to align it with one's political changes and to make it more acceptable to other members of the collective exemplifies this analogy operating for a collective self.

This malleability of the collective self in generational autobiographies both undermines the assumption that autobiography depends on the concept of the individualized self and practically ensures that generational authors acknowledge the self's artifactual nature. Anyone who constructs an autobiographical "we" will find others who take issue with that version. If those who take issue possess power or, perhaps more important, access to publishers, a dialogue follows in which each party constructs a version of the generational narrative that will be most advantageous to its own position. Such a dialogue highlights the self's political and social construction in a way rarely found in individualist autobiographies. Insofar as generational autobiography becomes an instrument in the struggle to control collective memory of the past and present, these works also aim to direct the social and political future of their culture.

Notes

1. The phrases "coming-of-age experience" and "generational experience" will be used interchangeably in this essay. They refer to that stage of psychosocial development immediately following adolescence. Kenniston refers to the same group as "youth" (3–21).

2. Sayre's suggestion that American autobiographers in the twentieth century could most usefully be approached from the perspective of their generational affiliation has been largely ignored (254).

3. See also the work of Mannheim, Marías, Berger, Spitzer, and Jaeger.

4. The most conspicuous exception to this generalization is Cowley's Exile's Return: A Narrative of Ideas (1934). See Knoll for a list of autobiographies in which the impact of the generational idea can be found.

5. For a more psychosociological explanation of this phenomenon, see also Mannheim (300) and Erikson (Identity 256–58).

6. The works I examine here can usefully be compared to the Latin American testimonios examined in Sommer's essay. Sommer, however, detracts from the theoretical implications of her texts by insisting that they are not true autobiography.
7. For an analysis of the role of *The Statement* in the history of this generation, see Miller (13–18, 106–25), Harrington (132–65), and Hayden (73–102), who was the document's principal author.


**Works Cited**


Bourne, Randolph. *Youth and Life*. Cambridge, MA: Riverside, 1913.


