Cross-Generational Storytelling

A Conversation with Sasha Su-Ling Welland and Sabrina Craig

ABSTRACT Sarah Choi interviews Sasha Su-Ling Welland, chair and professor of Gender, Women, and Sexuality studies at University of Washington, Seattle, and Sabrina Craig, director of Community Engagement for South Side Home Movie Project in Chicago, to discuss their engagement in cross-generational storytelling. Acknowledging the vital role women's shared memories have played in preserving historical knowledge, Welland and Craig make a connection between their pedagogical, ethnographic, and counterarchival practices, which situate cross-generational conversations at the heart of feminist historiography. KEYWORDS cross-generational dialogues, storytelling, memories, counterarchival practices, Sasha Su-Ling Welland, Sabrina Craig, South Side Home Movie Project

In the summer of 2019, I traveled to Inner Mongolia to make a short documentary about the famed, local papercut artist Meiling Zhao. Shot and edited in less than two weeks, *Big Scissors, Small Scissors* (2019), is a twelveminute film that celebrates the special connection Ms. Zhao shares with her granddaughter Jinghan through their practice of Chinese papercut art. Ms. Zhao, whose nickname is "Scissor Hands," represents the "Big Scissors" of the title while "Small Scissors" refers to Jinghan in a play on a Chinese proverb that has since slipped my mind. What began as a fascination with the transmission of cultural heritage has become a growing interest in intergenerational or cross-generational dialogues as feminist practice. Such a practice emerges from relational, care-filled, and intersectional historiographical pursuits that take place outside of hegemonic, formal institutions. The lesserknown, local, and personal histories that are shared via intimate dialogues and art, such as Ms. Zhao's intricate papercuts, also need to be celebrated and preserved as they reflect the lived experiences of pioneering women.

Recognizing paper as more than a delicate medium of artistic expression and tradition, but as a vehicle of cross-generational knowledge flow, I began

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FIGURE 1. Sasha Su-Ling Welland.

FIGURE 2. Sabrina Craig (Credit: Diana Solis).

to think more critically about the kinds of feminist histories that are shared between generations and how they are preserved. As Australian Indigenous historians Sue Anderson, Jaimee Hamilton, and Lorina L. Barker share, "storytelling has been central to the feminist movement," and this is particularly evident in their study of Aboriginal oral traditions.¹ In their close analysis of "yarning," which is described as "a form of storytelling, ... a significant feature of knowledge transmission within Australian Indigenous cultures, particularly between women and children," Anderson, Hamilton, and Barker explain how this practice allows for knowledge to be "passed on by absorption, experience, and deep listening rather than through a Western notion of pedagogy."² They also make a connection between yarning and Toni Morrison's concept of "ancient properties," which acknowledges Black women as keepers of Black cultures and histories. It is unsurprising that Trinh T. Minh-Ha would observe how "the world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women."³ To ruminate on these still precarious histories and Minh-Ha's reflection that "to listen carefully is to preserve," there is resiliency found in retracing feminist histories, and still much careful listening to be done.⁴

From Inner Mongolia to the American Midwest, from Southern Queensland to South Side Chicago, women's shared memories play a vital role in preserving historical knowledge. Yet, there is still a lack of understanding or

appreciation of such affective, feminist labor. Instances of cross-generational dialogues and relationships like that of Ms. Zhao and Jinghan make visible the importance of women's experiences, and together, these intimate threads of cross-generational stories will forge new paths in feminist historiography. As cinema and media scholars May Chew, Susan Lord, and Janine Marchessault consider the role of counterarchives in preserving the "cultural heritage [that] has been unevenly cared for," and in safeguarding the "creative practices of women and Indigenous, racialized, and LGBT2Q+ communities," I speculate that cross-generational dialogues will become an increasingly significant part of such counterarchival practices.⁵ As African American film theorist and founder of South Side Home Movie Project (SSHMP) Jacqueline Stewart contends, archives need to become more accessible so that by "showing it, [you can put] the archival materials in people's minds and consciousness, and wherever those mental images are they are keeping that history alive and moving forward."6 And, what better way to instill and sustain these images and insights than through meaningful crossgenerational conversations?

Inspired by SSHMP's counterarchival practices that are deeply relational and collaborative, I reached out to Sabrina Craig, director of Community Engagement for SSHMP, to learn more about their work. I was especially intrigued by South Side Sisterhood, an initiative that brought together girls and women of various age groups to engage in cross-generational conversations about their experiences growing up in South Side Chicago. I also reached out to anthropologist Sasha Su-Ling Welland, author of Thousand Miles of Dreams: The Journeys of Two Chinese Sisters, which recounts the memories and stories of her grandmother, Amy Ling, and great-aunt Shuhua Ling. As Welland writes, she is "the first in generations of women in [her] family to have access to a line of women, talking and writing about themselves," and through this book, we, as readers, also gain an intimate access into their fascinating stories. While Craig's and Welland's methodologies and practices may seem miles apart, they are both engaged in fostering cross-generational dialogues in imaginative and meaningful ways. I met with them on Zoom on June 2, 2023, to learn more about their practices, to deeply listen. What follows is a transcription of our conversation that has been edited slightly for this format.

Sarah Choi: It's so wonderful to have you both in this space; thank you for being here. As I mentioned in my email, I'm interested in learning more about your involvement in cross-generational storytelling. Perhaps we could begin with you, Sabrina. Could you please give us a brief overview of your work?

Sabrina Craig: Of course. I work at the South Side Home Movie Project [SSHMP], which is a community-engaged initiative to collect, preserve, digitize, exhibit, and research home movies made by residents of Chicago's South Side neighborhoods, based at Arts + Public Life at the University of Chicago. The project brings materials that are typically kept in private collections into public light and discussion, seeking to build an alternative, accessible visual record, filling gaps in existing written and visual histories, and ensuring that the diverse experiences and perspectives of South Siders will be available to larger audiences and future generations.

Activations of these archival materials take place whenever we represent the home movies in new settings, from watch parties and pop-up exhibitions around the city to murals, community cataloging workshops, and a wide range of imaginative reuse projects created in collaboration with local artists. During the pandemic, we launched Spinning Home Movies, a virtual program where Chicago-based musicians and DJs curated original soundtracks for specially selected sets of silent home movies. What began as a creative response to the call for virtual programming during an isolating time emerged as a new paradigm for meaningful artist-archive partnerships and community engagement. The online series has been viewed over 20,000 times. We've also opened our archive to high school students, teaching artists, and teachers, so that they can conduct research and do creative projects using our home movies.

Sasha Welland: Sabrina, thank you for sharing all of that! It's amazing to learn about all the different aspects of the Project—just so many fabulous ideas alongside the work of preservation. I love the idea of the watch party for home movies that you've developed, how you honor family and community knowledge and invite artists in, to creatively interpret and interact with the movies. There's something really intimate to that, while you are also creating the foundation for public histories different from what has often been systematically archived and understood as history. My mind was blown by the creative interactions you've organized—what you're calling activations—but also how you are supporting students' and future researchers' inquiries into Black history, neighborhood history, community history, and histories of immigration, whether it's the Great Migration from the South to the North, or from other parts of the world to Chicago. So many new ways of Sabrina Craig: Thank you so much, Sasha. I'm delighted to represent the South Side Home Movie Project (SSHMP), which was born of Dr. Jacqueline Stewart's vision back in 2005. She established the parameters of the project so that it would always be based in a kind of intimacy between the home movie donors and their family films, the publics that engage with them, and the archive itself. That has been the core practice of the archive since the very beginning—it's never been the kind of place where someone just drops off their films and walks away. There's always been an ongoing dialogue, an actual relationship, between the archive team and our friends and neighbors who share their home movies. They get to know us as part of the project, as we get to know their families through their films. Whenever their home movies are activated in a public program, donors get a special invitation not only to attend, but to be part of the program, to narrate their films if they're comfortable, so that the connection between the films and the living families they depict is always visible (figure 3).



FIGURE 3. Three generations of the Taylor family assemble to watch their family home movies, dating back eighty years and spanning four decades, which were recently digitized by the South Side Home Movie Project (Credit: Sabrina Craig).

We're very careful about how the films are included in any kind of project or documentary—we have turned down inquiries where we don't think that the materials are being honored or foregrounded in a way that seems respectful to the understanding that the donors had when they shared their materials with SSHMP. Again, that's based on Dr. Stewart's original intentions around running a community-engaged archive. Now that the project has scaled up to about 900 films—and continues to grow exponentially—we are still dedicated to that model of an ongoing donor/archive relationship. We're very slow and intentional about bringing in new collections, knowing that each new collection means a relationship with this family for years to come.

- Sasha Welland: That's really beautiful. There are so many levels of care, from the preservation of reels that wouldn't survive through digitization to the idea of watch parties and how the families are honored all of the way through. From the potential for opening lost and broken connections to providing a moving image history for younger students coming into understanding of who they are and where they come from. I'm thinking about Sarah's initial question to us about cross-generational conversation. I can imagine this process, and all of the steps you go through with the materials, as cross-generational conversations within families, school groups, or any community with a tangible or felt connection with the movies. Through these material and creative processes, like Spinning Home Movies where you invite DJs to produce a soundtrack for film clips, there can be pathways to cross-generational conversations. This is so important because there are so many ways in which those get cut off: busyness with work and family, moving away from a community, and family misunderstandings and tensions in which people break relations that can maybe only be mended a generation later.
- Sabrina Craig: Exactly. The viewing of home movies opens portals for conversations, gives us a shared reference point, both for family members who see themselves in their ancestors and their elders "coming back to life," as people describe it. It's different than seeing an old photo; seeing somebody moving around in their environment, interacting with family members gives you a richer sense of who that person might have been, even if you've never met. And it opens possibilities to see what their lives were like, and how they were different yet the same in so many ways.

I wanted to talk a little bit more about our Spinning Home Movies model because as I mentioned, it began during COVID, when opportunities to have these conversations suddenly disappeared (figure 4). At the beginning of the lockdowns, we were scrambling for



FIGURE 4. Rapper and poet Mykele Deville premieres Spinning Home Movies #18 live at the Green Line Performing Arts Center, accompanied by multidisciplinary artist Jeffrey Michael Austin, on April 7, 2023 (Credit: Sabrina Craig)

ways to stay engaged and connected with our communities-it's so fundamental to the way the project operates. I should back up and say that when we host public programs, we try to replicate or recreate or just respect the original presentation intention around the films. Home movies were created to share back to family and friends in a social setting, so when we organize a public program, that's the environment we attempt to create. We host events in lively spaces with the lights up, with food and drink, people talking, people jumping up to narrate if they recognize somebody or remember a story. When the pandemic shut down the possibility of being together in a public space, we turned to Zoom and created the Spinning Home Movies programs in order to reconnect with our communities in that casual, interactive style. Spinning Home Movies was an opportunity for DJs and musicians and filmmakers to explore the archive with us as their tour guide, and then curate a set of clips, adding their own unique soundtrack. When these creations were presented live via Zoom or Facebook or Twitch, everybody was popping up in the comments: the donors whose films were included, their family members, our constituents from all over the city, friends of the artists, even people who were just looking for something cool to watch at home. You were hearing, "That's my Aunt Susie from 1952," "Oh, I used to have a dress just like that," or "My cousin used to live in Greater Grand Crossing." So, that lively, warm conversation still happened naturally in the chat. At the end of each episode, we invited the donor families, the artists, and the archivists to have a live conversation with the viewers who were active in the chat. This opened the space for everyone to talk about how they were connecting with the home movies, the ideas and themes that were brought up, as well as the wealth of anecdotes, memories, and stories. It was a multigenerational space with the home movie donors, their nieces, nephews, and grandchildren, the artists—it became a space people referred to as lifesaving—a balm—when everyone felt so isolated and distanced.

- Sarah Choi: That's so interesting. I used to conceptualize crossgenerational conversations as physically present, face-to-face interactions, but you just illuminated how they don't necessarily need to be in person. Virtual dialogues, like your examples of Twitch and Facebook Live chats, can also belong in the sphere of cross-generational conversations of care. This kind of care and intentionality makes me think of your first book, *A Thousand Miles of Dreams*, Sasha. Could you please share a bit about this project?
- Sasha Welland: The impetus for that book goes way back. I'm also from the Midwest. I come from a family of Chinese Americans from Indiana and Missouri, where there was very little Asian community. Both of those sites, especially when my mom or I were growing up, were very black and white in terms of racial dynamics. But I ended up in California as an undergraduate where I felt fake or awkward fitting in to any kind of Asian American community. That moment in my life coincided with my grandparents' decision to move in their retirement to the Bay Area, near where I was a student lost in my own process. When my grandfather died, I took a term off from school and spent time with my grandmother, who started telling me all these stories that I had never heard before. She revealed all these details of the family. I didn't know what to do with them, so I started recording them (figure 5). A lot of our cross-generational dialogue just happened by accident.

Stemming from these conversations, *A Thousand Miles of Dreams* is a dual biography of my grandmother and her sister—my great-aunt who went through a period in the early 1900s in China known as the New Culture Movement. It overlapped with the early women's movement. They were the first generation of their family who, as girls, received a school-based education. My grandmother ended up training as a doctor and coming on a scholarship to Cleveland, and that's how she



FIGURE 5. Sasha Welland with her late grandmother Amy Ling. (Courtesy of Sasha Welland)

ended up in the US. Her sister—and this was all accidental that I found out about this—was a fiction writer, who later emigrated to Britain and found a second career as a writer there, switching from writing in Chinese to English instead. The trickier and accidental crossgenerational conversation emerged from the fact that my grandmother never told anyone in the United States that her sister was a relatively well-known writer because she didn't like what she wrote. Her sister's writing disclosed gender and family dynamics in China that my grandmother had actively tried to erase to fit into the American nuclearfamily ideal. I found this all out because I met some family in England who gave me a copy of my great-aunt's book written in English after she left China. It contained a very different family tree in it than the one my grandmother had narrated to us. My desire to read my great-aunt's writing in Chinese led me to China where my graduate work and

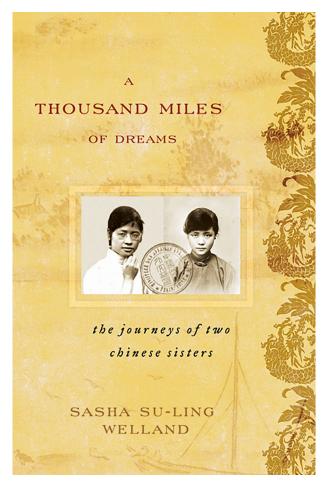


FIGURE 6. Sasha Welland's A Thousand Miles of Dreams

subsequent research also took place. That was a very long description to say that *A Thousand Miles of Dreams* is a triangulated, cross-generational conversation that skipped the generation of my mother, which allowed me to trace histories of immigration and feminist yearnings through my grandmother and great-aunt's stories (figure 6).

- Sarah Choi: It's such a fascinating, beautifully written book, Sasha. Have you been able to integrate *A Thousand Miles of Dreams* into your teaching? I am sure there will be more students who will benefit from your ethnographic research and storytelling.
- **Sasha Welland**: I sometimes include a chapter on girls involved in early twentieth-century student protests in my Gender and Sexuality in China

course or one on my grandmother's arrival in Cleveland-told in her own voice and through archival documents—in Feminist Research Methodologies. One of my favorite classes to teach is Ethnographic Studio; it's similar to the Spinning Home Movies concept in that I try to get students who were working in some mode of ethnographic participant observation-even autoethnography-to think beyond telling their story or family story in a memoirist mode, to also consider what we can learn from the story, and how it is told, about history and social structure, power and culture, and ways of knowing and created modes of conveying knowledge. I ask students in this class to think of themselves as researcher-creators. The projects they've created-they are enormously talented-have included video work, photography, creative nonfiction, poetry, performance art, spoken word, digital mapping projects, audio walks, even encaustic painting (figure 7)! I was so excited to hear from Sabrina about the SSHMP community-based work because it really resonates with what some of them were exploring in this class.

Sabrina Craig: Thank you for that amazing introduction to your work, Sasha. I love all your examples of the different forms of storytelling, using archival or oral history resources as a platform or as raw material or structural element. It reminds me that in addition to Spinning Home Movies, we've also recently worked with an artist who generated



FIGURE 7. Anqi Peng's video installation created in Sasha Welland's Ethnographic Studio.

charcoal drawings based on images from the archive to reinterpret and contemporize them in a completely new way. We've also recently created a new curricular guide to South Side Home Movie Project, which invites high school students to create projects based on the archive—we include free access to an entire, downloadable set of home movies as part of our curriculum around the Great Migration. We introduce them to the family members that they'll see in the films and then invite them to get to know their individual stories. In one film, you meet a new baby, and later get to see her grow up and interact with her family.

We want the students to think about archiving and storytelling not just as looking to the past, but as something important that we do today. So, we ask them to make a time capsule of their lives now. What will you archive from your own story? How can we share our culture with the future? Through this sort of trajectory of conversations—past, present, and future—we're hoping to engage a new generation in talking about the value of archives. It's what we do when we're using our smartphones to take photos, or post on Instagram or TikTok. It's a form of self-representation, personal archiving, and storytelling that people of various generations are really responding to right now. So we ask, what will a TikTok be fifty years from now? How will people interpret it, if they can even access it? How are we going to preserve today's culture so that when we are grandparents, our grandkids will be able to see where they came from?

- Sasha Welland: I think the aesthetics part is so interesting, right? Because if you think about watching a home movie from the 1950s or '60s—the color of the film stock, what was technically possible, what homes looked like—what's being communicated across generations is not just histories, but also cross-generational aesthetic modes of representation and technology. There used to be no sound, so what happened when it was introduced? What gets lost or gained in these transitions? For the TikTok generation, where content length is short and data is collected on them, what does it mean for them to go back and look at how families preserved their memories-and the limits of the media they had at hand? I'm thinking about some of our own 16mm home movies; film was relatively expensive, and each reel was only so long. Conversations about what's possible in different aesthetic modes could be super interesting, which we're already seeing in the next generation's practice of remixing archival materials. Could this also be seen as a crossgenerational endeavor?
- **Sabrina Craig:** Absolutely. There are always questions of technology embedded into any conversation about self-representation: what tools

are available to you? People talk about human sketching on cave walls as an early example—there was an impulse to document lived experience in some way using the available technology. And today, everybody seems to have a camera in their hands. But what we're creating and what we're documenting doesn't necessarily have the longevity of a cave drawing because it's not rooted in a technology designed to last. So, there's concern about how we're generating all these records of our lives, but not in a way that is sustainable or preservable.

- Sarah Choi: Thinking about availability and sustainability also applies to the kinds of stories—voices—that we have access to today, so I think that's why I'm so inspired by both of your work. Whether it is through ethnohistorical research or community archiving, you are preserving and sharing stories that are perhaps less familiar.
- **Sasha Welland**: Finding and archiving stories that have not been the majority or the norm that gets taught in schools is the feminist, critical race, or class piece of all of this work that helps people understand where they come from. The stories of resilience, agency, and complexity of those lives that came before us get flattened in so many ways by national histories, mainstream media, and what we've conventionally thought of as the archive, which are the official records, the winners' history and what they've preserved. I don't think any complete change can happen within a generation or two; it's always the work of the next generation to continue activating ways for people to interact with and build counterarchives.
- Sarah Choi: Yes, perhaps activation is the key word here in considering how we can foster more cross-generational conversations. Sabrina, I know that SSHMP hosted an event called South Side Sisterhood a few years ago where you invited women who were in some of the home movies and a group of girls from the neighborhood. I would love to hear more about this initiative.
- Sabrina Craig: Sure. Back in 2018, SSHMP hosted an exhibition where we re-created a living room space, circa 1950, with monitors playing home movies from the period, film cameras and family portraits on display, copies of *Ebony* and *JET* magazine. People were invited to hang out, sit on a lounge chair and read *Ebony* and watch the home movies. There's a lot of footage of children, little girls, young women doing amazing things in the world, seen through the eyes of their loving parents with cameras. For one of the exhibition programs, we curated a set of home movies around the theme of sisterhood, growing up, and



FIGURE 8. South Side women and girls gather for a unique public program exploring the resilience and complexity of familial bonds through screening and discussing home movies, hosted by SSHMP in 2019 (Credit: Daris Jasper).

family ties. What happened spontaneously during that program was a powerful and rich conversation between some of the older women in attendance, who had donated the films, and young women who had come to the program. We were so energized and emotional about it that in 2019, we developed a program called "South Side Sisterhood," where we invited women who were little girls in the home movies to engage in a conversation with Global Girls, a South-Side-based performance organization for young women (figure 8). We moderated the conversation around the concept of sisterhood: How do we define sisterhood, in our families of origin and beyond? How do we build those ties? What can we learn from each other as women of all different ages navigating relationships with each other, our sisters, mothers, brothers, and fathers? It was a beautiful program, with home movies depicting sisters alongside very contemporary conversations among women of all ages.

The young women from Global Girls performed a dance they choreographed around the theme of sisterhood. DJ Selah Say curated a special playlist for the event, and this program actually led to the Spinning Home Movies series that we talked about earlier. We wanted to continue foregrounding these kinds of multigenerational conversations between women and girls, and people asked if we could do one for young men and their fathers as well. We were on the cusp of thinking through that possibility, even started writing some grants, but then COVID-19 came along and quieted that possibility for a little while. But we're still very excited about the possibilities for activating home movies as a portal for these conversations that people clearly seemed energized to have together.

- Sarah Choi: That's really wonderful. Considering all the logistical and financial planning that go into these projects leads me back to the issue of sustainability. How do you think we can not only generate, but sustain these kinds of cross-generational dialogues and relationships?
- Sasha Welland: I'm thinking about this from multiple levels, but at the most basic, simply giving people support and validating their ideas is essential. When I was in college I left for a while, but wanted to find a way back, to a major where I could pursue what would later become my first book project. So, I ended up designing my own interdisciplinary major somewhere between art, literature, ethnic, and gender studies, with the support of two anthropology professors. When I graduated, one of them told me, "When you first explained your ideas, I wasn't quite sure where you were going with all that, but you really did something." So, just trusting people's instincts and supporting them is foundational.

Then, there is a larger scale to consider. A Thousand Miles of Dreams began as a very personal project—even if it didn't necessarily heal gaps in my own family-but has had another kind of afterlife. One of those is among a younger generation of feminists in China, for whom that early history of my grandmother's generation has been cut off again and again by state directives. It's a political strategy that deprives women of the resources of previous histories of women revolutionaries, such as early communist women, so it's important to show them another generation and their substrata of stories. These kinds of work and change don't happen overnight, though. It took me fifteen years to write that book because I first had to learn Chinese and spend time in China. And, it took another maybe fifteen to twenty years to see what people might do with it. I think this is somewhat akin to what Sabrina was saying, that even though the SSHMP has scaled up, they've tried to maintain that initial intimacy of the home movie. Seeing what others do with the collection can't be rushed.

Sabrina Craig: I actually went looking for a certain quote as you were speaking, Sasha, because I just love this line. One of our resident artists, Jamila Woods, an amazing Chicago-based musician and poet, said the following, which we ended up putting on a t-shirt because we love it so much: "To press record is to say, I want to remember you. I wish you to be remembered." This is the guiding principle. When we focus a camera, when we press record, this is how we show what we value. Whatever is happening in front of our lens, we want to capture and document—this is how we also approach archiving. To archive something is to value it, to give it love, to say that it's meaningful. Home movies from the South Side are worth recording, worth preserving, worth sharing. We're not saying that this archive represents a totality of South Side experience, but what we are saying is that somebody felt driven to capture a moment and we, in turn, are moved to honor that impulse, and then to preserve and care for what they valued enough to capture on film.

Sasha Welland: I want one of those t-shirts. I love that quote.

Sabrina Craig: It's beautiful, right? I always go back to it. So simple, but yes, that's what it's all about.

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NOTES

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