

Memory and place: geographies of a critical relationship

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In recent years, investigations of social or cultural memory have become a major field of inquiry throughout the humanities and social sciences. No longer the sole preserve of psychology, the study of memory now extends to anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literary studies, communication, history and, increasingly, to geography. This article assesses some of the major trends in this burgeoning literature, especially those works spatial in nature, which we find to be of considerable cross-disciplinary importance. Together, memory and place conjoin to produce much of the context for modern identities; providing a modest overview of that critical, dynamic relationship, this article serves as an introduction to this special issue of Social & Cultural Geography.

Key words: memory, place, landscape, performance.

Introduction

Robben Island, located twelve miles from Cape Town at the entrance to Table Bay, is widely acknowledged to be the most symbolically charged site in South Africa. For nearly 400 years, it served as a place of exile for political dissidents and of confinement for lepers and the insane; and, from the 1960s to 1991, as a high-security prison and metaphor for the inhumanity of apartheid. Oliver Tambo observed in 1980 that 'the tragedy of Africa, in racial and political terms [has been] concentrated in the southern tip of the continent—in South Africa, Namibia, and, in a special sense, Robben Island' (Robben Island Museum 2001). For Tambo and other anti-apartheid leaders, most notably Nelson Mandela, Robben Island em-

bodied in concrete form the harshness of apartheid rule.

Scandals about the treatments of prisoners on Robben Island sparked debates in the 1970s about its closure and possible alternative uses. On one side were broadly right-wing proposals to make the island into a leisure resort or nature preserve. Here, resort planners sought to deflect growing criticism of the National Party government by publicly remembering the island's 'natural' environment, a remembering that allowed for public forgetting of its political role. As part of its plan to change the image of Robben Island in the early 1980s, the government's Prison Department began stocking the island with eland, ostriches and springbok, and re-establishing a penguin colony. On the other hand were mostly anti-apartheid sug-

gestions to build an educational museum and peace centre. Here, museum planners sought a site on which to concentrate criticism of apartheid: public remembering of the horrors of the prison was to be part of a project of post-apartheid reconstruction (Deacon 1998).

These debates of the 1970s and 1980s over how to remember Robben Island's past held considerable importance for national identity and, in turn, helped focus the world's attention on the systemic injustices of South Africa's political apparatus. By the early 1990s, the high-security section of the prison had become a place of pilgrimage and homage, visited by dignitaries from all parts of the globe. With the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners, its status as a global symbol of transcendence over oppression had been all but assured.¹ In 1997, it became a National Museum and National Monument, and two years later, UNESCO listed Robben Island as a World Heritage Site. Since then, it has been visited by over one million people, who, however well intentioned, have placed a different set of demands on the site, forcing museum officials to ask how to package the island's past for large-scale tourist consumption without irreversibly changing it (Mandela 1994; UNESCO 2000).

Although few places are as electrified with symbolic power and political contestation as Robben Island, the site brings to the fore many of the central themes of this special issue. These include, among others: the continually unfolding nature of memory; the importance of forgetting in every act of remembering; the pressures of the marketplace and commodification of the past; the unpredictability of group memory and its centrality in the maintenance and contestation of political identity; the fact that memory is often both particular and universal; and the inextricable link between memory and place. This last point is especially

important, for, as the anthropologist Nathan Wachtel (1986: 216) notes, 'the preservation of recollections rests on their anchorage in space'. Places like Robben Island bring such claims into immediate and vivid focus, and serve to provide a point of departure for this issue's examination of a critical, geographical relationship.

The social and spatial nature of memory

The transformation of Robben Island from 'hellhole into a symbol of freedom ... not only for South Africa and the African continent, but also for the entire world' (Deacon 1998) captures two overlapping areas of interest that have influenced disciplines across social sciences and humanities: the shared dimension of remembering, and the equally social nature of how space is produced. Both have triggered extremely vibrant and sweeping work that has challenged basic understandings of space and time. Together, social memory and social space conjoin to produce much of the context for modern identities—and the often-rigorous contestation of those identities.

Once the sole preserve of psychology, the study of memory now extends to anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, literary studies, communication, history and, increasingly, to geography. Taking their cue largely from the work of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992 [1951]), many scholars, including geographers, have come to see memory as a social activity, as an expression and active binding force of group identity (Crang and Travlou 2001; Dwyer 2000; Edensor 1997; Till 2001). Whether one refers to 'collective memory', 'social memory', 'public memory', 'historical memory', 'popular memory' or 'cultural memory', most would agree with Edward Said (2000: 179) that many 'people now look to this

refashioned memory, especially in its collective forms, to give themselves a coherent identity, a national narrative, a place in the world'.

This is a key contention, for it suggests that the surging scholarly interest in memory reflects larger, societal changes. Said continues by arguing that the

study and concern with memory of a specifically desirable and recoverable past is a specially freighted late twentieth-century phenomenon that has arisen at a time of bewildering change, of unimaginably large and diffuse mass societies, competing nationalisms, and, most important perhaps, the decreasing efficacy of religious, familial, and dynastic bonds. (2000: 179)²

Ours is an age of both rapid social transformation and a search for roots, of time-space compression as well as people looking for a past seemingly removed from the unrelenting social-political-economic forces that have come to be called globalization (Harvey 1989; Lowenthal 1996). That social groups today employ various recollections as vehicles for their constitution, or for their dissolution, Said reminds us, points to the usability of this freighted phenomenon.

Eventually those uses intersect with power. The study of social memory inevitably comes around to questions of domination and the uneven access to a society's political and economic resources. Paul Connerton (1989: 1) puts it this way: 'control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power'. Seen in this light, social memory is inherently instrumental: individuals and groups recall the past not for its own sake, but as a tool to bolster different aims and agendas (Fentress and Wickham 1992; Le Goff 1992; Trouillot 1995).

Representatives of dominant social classes have been most adept at using memory as an instrument of rule. This is perhaps the central

point of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), a now-canonical work that has inspired much research in the area of memory studies. Moreover, it is often the case that memories of ordinary people are appropriated by elites and pressed into the service of conquest and domination (Bodnar 1992; Gillis 1994). In most cases, Barbie Zelizer (1995: 220) writes, 'power wins out'. Recent research suggests, however, that less-privileged groups—such as the anti-apartheid leaders before the collapse of white rule in South Africa, or AIDS activists in the USA (Sturken 1997)—are becoming ever more adept at making use of memory to challenge their own subordination.

What subaltern and dominant groups share in their efforts to utilize the past is the near universal activity of anchoring their divergent memories in place, a point increasingly recognized in the scholarly literature. Here, the work of French historian Pierre Nora (1989) has been especially influential. His notion of 'sites of memory'—or *lieux de mémoire*—gives prominent attention to the various ways in which memory is spatially constituted. For Nora, memory is attached to 'sites' that are concrete and physical—the burial places, cathedrals, battlefields, prisons that embody tangible notions of the past—as well as to 'sites' that are non-material—the celebrations, spectacles and rituals that provide an aura of the past. Sites of memory therefore encompass geographical places (the site of New York's World Trade Center, the city of Hiroshima), monuments and buildings (San Antonio's Alamo, the Auschwitz death camp), historical figures (Abraham Lincoln, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin), and public displays and commemorations (Emancipation Day commemorations among newly freed slaves in the American South, Peace Day celebrations in Ireland). Research on these and many more such sites of memory reveal that most validate and authenticate consensual notions of the past

while they simultaneously invite alternative readings (Charlesworth 1994; Clark 2000; Flores 2002; Forest and Johnson 2002; Johnson 1999; Schwartz 2000; Sturken 2002; Yoneyama 1999).

Monuments, memorials and museums have proven to be fertile grounds for investigating places of memory (Till 2003) and here geographers have been especially productive. Wide-ranging works by Mike Heffernan (1995), Nuala Johnson (1995) and Charles Withers (1996) on monuments dedicated to nationalism and war, by Kenneth Foote (2003) on American memorials of 'violence and tragedy', by Jonathan I. Leib (2002) on the politics of race and memorials, and by Karen Till (2001) on German history museums only begin to hint at the extraordinarily rich literature that is emerging. As spaces explicitly designed to impart certain elements of the past—and, by definition, to forget others—such *lieux de mémoire* are the sites where, as Nora (1989: 7) puts it, 'memory crystallizes and secretes itself'.

More generally, monument- and museum-related activities have themselves become a model for remembering. Governing elites, whether in late nineteenth-century Rome (Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998), New Orleans (Boyer 1994) and Milwaukee (Hoelscher, Bawden and Zimmerman 1997) or in twentieth century Taipei (Leitner and Kang 1999), Budapest (Foote, Tóth and Árvay 2000) and New York (Zukin 1995), often make or preserve historically inflected urban landscapes as a way to bolster a particular political order, and as a means to capital accumulation. One of the most intriguing avenues to explore the means by which memory and place are woven into the fabric of everyday life follows the widespread commemorative practice of street naming—and the bitter controversies that can sometimes follow (Azaryahu 1996). If the social memory of Martin Luther King, Jr, is given concrete form

in street names throughout the American South, so too are those spaces redefined by competing memories of the slain Civil Rights leader (Alderman 2000, 2002).

While the constitutive relationship between memory and place is most obvious in the realm of material culture—in landscapes—it is also, and no less, performative. Through bodily repetition and the intensification of everyday acts that otherwise remain submerged in the mundane order of things, performances like rituals, festivals, pageants, public dramas and civic ceremonies serve as a chief way in which societies remember (Connerton 1989). Thus, as Thrift and Dewsbury (2000: 420) argue, performance is 'a means of carrying out a cultural practice—such as memory—thoroughly'. Civic celebrations like St Patrick's Day parades (Marston 1988) and historic pageantry (Glassberg 2001; Hoelscher 2003; Woods 1999) are always embedded in place and inevitably raise important questions about the struggle of various groups to define the centre of urban politics and public life.

If geographies of memory circulate both in material form and through the bodily repetition of performance and cultural display, they are frequently called upon to support the specific kind of conquest and domination associated with colonialism. Here, again, Said (1995 [1978], 2000) is especially relevant as he showed how the confluence of memory, place, invention and power added up to what he termed 'imaginative geographies'—the construction of geographical spaces that paid negligible attention to the actuality of the region's geography or its inhabitants, but more accurately reflected the fantasies and preoccupations of colonizing agents. While Said famously described the geographical-imaginative construction of the Orient, his critical insights have been applied to Egypt (Gregory 1995), Ecuador (Radcliffe 1996), British-occupied

Africa and India (Ryan 1997) and North America (Harris 1997). The memories projected on to these colonial spaces, and their frequent conflict with indigenous understandings of the past, make them part of an ongoing legacy of conquest—in places as seemingly far away as South Africa's Robben Island and Indian reservations throughout the American West (Limerick 1987).

Contributions and themes

The articles in this special issue each address the tangled interaction between memory and place from a variety of theoretical and empirical perspectives. They owe their origin to a series of six paper sessions organized by Derek Alderman, Owen Dwyer and Steven Hoelscher and presented at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers. The tremendous outpouring of interest in the Los Angeles sessions made it clear that a collection of essays that explicitly examined this critical relationship was long overdue.

The contributing authors visit a wide range of geographic locations in their work—Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and three different regions within the USA. They also criss-cross the thematic landscape at different points as well, examining memory and place as they intersect with the politics of national identity, racial conflict, public planning and historic preservation, social mobilization and activism, and the heritage tourism industry. Although certainly varied in their focus, each article advances our understanding of the multiplicity of people, perspectives and processes that structure the spatial representation of history and memory.

Public involvement in the re-making of places of memory is especially important in post-totalitarian societies, according to Ben-

jamin Forest, Juliet Johnson and Karen Till. However, a comparative analysis of Germany and Russia reveals significant variation in the extent to which these governments address the oppressive aspects of their pasts and the degree to which they have involved the public in the memorialization process. As the authors suggest, studies of public memory should move beyond the dichotomy between 'elite' and 'public' to consider the multiple agendas, conflicts and negotiations that characterize the process of remembering the past and refashioning national identity.

Fernando Bosco also makes a strong case for viewing commemorative agents and organizations in diverse, non-monolithic terms. Rather than focusing on the involvement of officials and other elites in representing the past, his work explores the politics of public commemoration as carried out and debated by grassroots women activists. His article documents important internal conflicts within the Argentine social movement *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, which is divided over the legitimacy and manner in which victims of past human rights abuses should be commemorated. Two competing *Madres* organizations carry out public performances at different spatial scales as they disagree over the strategic value of commemoration and how best to keep the human rights movement alive.

Tovi Fenster continues the discussion of how scale intersects with public commemoration when she examines the politics of planning in Israel. Planning, according to her, has the power to legitimize (or de-legitimize) sites of commemoration and the sense of belonging and identity embodied in those places. At the scale of national planning, policy emphasizes the development of a collective Jewish identity while ignoring the preservation and commemoration of Palestinian history. Planning decisions at the local level can present a different

picture, however. Two cases presented by Fenster show Jewish Israelis honouring places of Palestinian memory and belonging. The memorial process at this scale is one of negotiation rather than sheer exclusion.

Although Selma, Alabama (USA) is thousands of miles from Israel, Owen Dwyer has a similar desire to understand the complexities of commemorating antagonistic histories in the same place. In Selma, memorial activists associated with the Civil Rights Movement and the Neo-Confederacy have collided over how and where to commemorate the career of Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Confederate general and a founding member of the Ku Klux Klan. Dwyer's paper uses the concept of symbolic accretion to advance understanding of how different political actors attach new and sometimes conflicting commemorative meanings and agendas to established memorial landscapes. The notion of accretion suggests that although 'commemoration is marked by a spirit of deliberate construction, the outcomes of commemoration cannot be not set in stone'.

Like many commemorative struggles, the conflict over the Forrest monument in Selma cannot be assessed outside the context of the growing heritage industry. The three remaining papers in the special issue offer useful ways of thinking about the relationship between tourism and the representation of the past. Luke Desforges and Joanne Maddern show how heritage institutions, particularly museums, are actively engaged in producing and circulating historical knowledges. An analysis of actors involved in the creation of the Museum of Immigration at Ellis Island, New York, finds that the museum's landscapes and textual spaces reflect a number of different, sometimes contradictory discourses about the past. The research challenges traditional criticisms that the museum presents a single, master-narrative on the immigration experience.

Desforges and Maddern demonstrate that a study of the heritage industry requires analysing the social actors and negotiations that surround the production of memory and place. Stephen Hanna, Vincent Del Casino, Casey Selden and Benjamin Hite contribute to this idea further. According to them, the everyday representational practices of tourism workers are essential to the reproduction of heritage spaces such as Fredricksburg, Virginia (USA). By conceptualizing representation as work, the authors give authority to the ways in which tourism professionals embody and communicate representations of the past through their performances. Seemingly mundane performances, such as driving tourist trolleys and conversing with tourists, construct Frederickburg's historic past, helping weave personal and local memories with established national and regional historical narratives.

While Hanna and his colleagues advocate for a more critical perspective of tourism workers, Dydia DeLyser encourages readers to examine the often under-analysed memorial practices of tourists. Throughout the early twentieth century, the southern California landscape was dotted with tourism sites identified with Helen Hunt Jackson's famous novel, *Ramona*. DeLyser focuses on the agency of tourists in shaping these attractions. Her article is also a methodological statement on the difficulty of recovering social memories of the past and the great contribution that tiny archival traces can make to the process of retrieving memory.

DeLyser's paper demonstrates how analysing the relationship between memory and place requires paying attention to small things such as people's photographs, postcards and stories in addition to their more visible monuments and museums. It and all the papers of this special issue are dedicated to furthering our understanding of how cultural memory works through detailed empirical analysis. Together

they contribute to a growing project in which social and cultural geography plays a significant, perhaps even decisive, role.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Nelson Mandela first arrived on Robben Island in 1962, before it was fully established, and remained there until 1982, when he was transferred with a few other prisoners to Pollsmoor Prison in the white middle-class Cape Town suburb of Tokai, and then, in 1988, to Victor Verster, where he was finally released in 1990 (Mandela 1994).
- 2 Other scholars like Pierre Nora (1989), Anthony Giddens (1990), Andreas Huyssen (1995) and David Lowenthal (1996) have made similar claims, while Eric Hobsbawm (1983) has famously described the turn of the twentieth century as a period of 'mass-producing traditions'. In either case, the key point is that periods of rapid social transformation are often accompanied, in the modern world, by moments of intense collective remembering.

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Abstract translations

Le souvenir et le lieu: les géographies d'une relation critique

Dans les dernières années, les explorations menées sur le souvenir social et culturel sont devenues un champ d'études important dans les humanités et les sciences sociales. L'étude du souvenir ne se résume plus qu'à la psychologie, mais se prolonge maintenant vers les champs de l'anthropologie, la sociologie, les études culturelles, les lettres, la communication, l'histoire, et de plus en plus la géographie. Cet article évalue quelques-unes des grandes tendances qui caractérisent cette littérature en ébullition. Nous nous penchons notamment sur les travaux concernant l'espace qui, à notre sens, sont intéressants du point de vue de la transdisciplinarité. C'est l'union entre le souvenir et le lieu qui produit les éléments qui

structurent le contexte dans lequel les identités modernes existent. Le survol de cette relation critique et dynamique nous permet de présenter les grandes lignes de cet enjeu particulier qui touche la géographie sociale et culturelle.

Mots-clefs: souvenir, lieu, paysage, performance.

Memoria y lugar: geografías de una relación crítica

En recientes años, cuestiones de memoria social o cultural han llegado a ser campos de investigación a través de las ciencias sociales y las humanidades. La memoria ya no es un tema tratado exclusivamente por la psicología y como tema se ha extendido a la antropología, sociología, estudios culturales, estudios de literatura, comunicaciones, historia y, cada vez más, es un tema tratado por la geografía. Este papel evalúa algunas de las tendencias principales de esta literatura creciente y en particular los trabajos de naturaleza espacial. Nosotros consideramos que estos trabajos son de suma importancia para todas las disciplinas. Juntos, memoria y lugar producen mucho del contexto de identidades modernas. Por un breve estudio de esta relación crítica y dinámica, este papel sirve como introducción a este número de *Social & Cultural Geography*.

Palabras claves: memoria, lugar, paisaje, actuación.

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