

Presenting History to the Public

The Study of Memory and the Uses of the Past

In the past decade, there has been an explosion of new scholarship examining the uses of history in Western culture. Ranging from broad overviews such as David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985) and Michael Kammen's *Mystic Chords of Memory* (1991) to monographs such as Karal Ann Marling's *George Washington Slept Here* (1988) and my *American Historical Pageantry* (1990), the new scholarship explores the various ways that the "memory" of a society is created, institutionalized, disseminated, and understood. The current fascination with memory among a wide variety of disciplines, including history, shows no sign of abating.

This new scholarship on memory offers a common intellectual framework for those working in museums, historic sites, and historic preservation agencies, as well as those in academe. Comprehending the various ways in which societies think about the past and use it in the present can illuminate the institutional contexts in which cultural resource managers operate as well as the ideas about history with which the public approaches their work. Moreover, the insights preservation and interpretation professionals gain from working with the public in a variety of settings, the first-hand understanding of how historical knowledge is created, institutionalized, disseminated, and understood, can help revitalize the entire profession and practice of history.

What is meant by memory? By and large these studies seek to understand the interrelationships between different versions of history in public. They investigate what anthropologist Robert Redfield termed "the social organization of tradition"; how various versions of the past are communicated in society through a multiplicity of institutions and media, including school, government ceremonies, popular amusements, art and literature, stories told by families and friends, and landscape features designated as historical either by government or popular practice.

Following this approach, scholars have moved from studying the institutions that produce history—colleges and universities, government agencies, mass media—to studying the minds of the audiences where all these versions of the past converge and are understood. Rather than assum-

ing that audiences more or less understand the same historical images the same way, new approaches emphasize the many different meanings audiences derive from the same historical representation. The meaning of a historical book, film, or display is not intrinsic, determined solely by the intention of its author. Meanings change as audiences actively reinterpret what they see and hear by placing it in contexts derived from their diverse and personal backgrounds. But if each person creates his or her own past, how and when does a shared understanding occur?

Much of the new scholarship investigates how individual memories of the past are established and confirmed through dialogue with others. An individual memory is the product of group communication, intimately linked to a "collective" memory of the community. Those working with community groups are in a good position to investigate how stories about the past are handed down within families, or circulate among friends. They are also in a good position to compare the memories that circulate among family and friends to the historical representations that circulate in public on a wider scale, in towns, regions, nations, and mass media. A second look at the many oral history projects connected with the 50th anniversary of World War II, for example, reveals how family stories told about the War were more than solely personal reminiscence, but also reflections of the larger political culture and mass media.

This leads to a larger question, at the core of much recent scholarship on memory: with all the possible versions of the past that circulate in society, how do particular accounts of the past get established and disseminated as the public one? How do these shared histories change over time?

Politics

One approach to these questions is to analyze how the prevailing images of the past reflect political culture. In the wake of controversies over the Smithsonian exhibit on the end of World War II or the content of national history standards and textbooks for schoolchildren, few can deny that the question of whose version of history gets institutionalized and disseminated as *the* history is a political one. Contemporary debates over the politics of history have only increased the importance of being familiar with new work on the political

uses of history in the past, as reflected in the establishment of war memorials, civic celebrations, museums, archives, and historic sites.

For some, history supplies the myths and symbols that hold diverse groups in political society together. In the words of Benedict Anderson, a shared history—elements of a past remembered in common as well as elements forgotten in common—is the crucial element in the creation of an “imagined community” through which disparate individuals and groups can envision themselves as members of a collective with a common present—and future. One strand of analysis has portrayed the politics of public historical representation as essentially consensual, embodying an underlying civic or national faith beneath ethnic and class divisions.

Others argue that history is a tool in the political struggle for hegemony among various social groups. This strand of analysis sharply delineates between an official history used to maintain the status quo, and the many “vernacular” memories used by ordinary citizens to sustain family and community ties. These authors believe that when government and mass media use historical imagery to advance an imagined national community, then authentic local and group memories are suppressed.

Pitting official history against vernacular memories oversimplifies the play of forces shaping a shared history. Concern that depictions of the nation’s “collective” beliefs and values might endanger minority rights leads these works to overlook the apparent spontaneity and depth of emotion associated with a shared history. In fact, there are multiple official histories as well as multiple vernacular memories. Analyses of the politics of history must not only explain how elites appropriate and transform vernacular memories into official history, but also how national imagery acquires diverse meanings in the local contexts in which it appears, such as rituals of ethnic, fraternal, and labor organizations, and the conversation of family and friends.

Cultural resource managers not only strive to balance competing political forces but also local and larger-scale interpretive frameworks as they place a local story in larger context. Since it is nearly impossible to reach a consensus on the meaning of a historical event that anyone still cares about, cultural resource managers often make exhibits, war memorials, and commemorative ceremonies deliberately ambiguous to satisfy competing factions. The products of this ambiguity are examples of what James Young has termed “collected memory”—discrete and often conflicting memories brought to converge in a common space, much like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in

Washington. In this role, the task of cultural resource managers may be more to create spaces for dialogue about history and for the collection of memories, and to insure that various voices are heard in those spaces, than to provide a finished interpretation of events translating the latest professional scholarship for a popular audience.

Popular Culture

When history appears in the commercial mass media and in tourist attractions, it is primarily the marketplace and the desire to appeal to large numbers of people in their leisure hours that are the driving forces. Popular appeal is the lifeblood of commercial historical ventures; with the decline of government and foundation funding for history, all but the most exclusively scholarly of historical institutions have been increasing their marketing and promotion to bring more visitors through their doors or to broaden the constituency for their work. As museums and historic sites seek larger audiences and cater to popular expectations, will the conventions that shape other popular media play a greater role in shaping the form and content of their work? Roy Rosenzweig documented how the popular journalistic convention of the human interest story permeated the presentation of history in *American Heritage* magazine in the 1950s and '60s. In the future, will every historical documentary or exhibit need a happy ending to compete for mass audience? Will historic sites and districts more and more resemble theme parks such as the one Disney proposed in Virginia?

The new scholarship on memory argues that individuals neither passively accept nor actively challenge the historical information encountered in television docudramas, music, film, novels, and tourist attractions. Rather, as George Lipsitz has shown in his *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (1990) they “negotiate” between mass culture and their own particular subculture. To appeal to the widest possible audience, popular historical representations, like other pop culture forms, incorporate a variety of possible characters and themes with which diverse audiences can identify. Even the most commercial of history products contain the submerged collective memories of subordinate groups. Through close analysis, historians can recover the hidden meanings and memories present in these stories. But do individuals really interpret history based primarily on social characteristics such as gender, class, and ethnicity? Or is education and ideological stance a better determinant of how popular presentations of history are understood? How competent are most people to recover the hidden meanings in popular representations of history by reconfiguring the information present and supplying what is left out? And what about the role of intermediaries in guid-

ing reception? We not only see the film but read the review. Doesn't being told that the historical account they will see is "true" affect a visitor's understanding of the past as much as race, class, or gender?

If individuals actively analyze and interpret the historical interpretations they receive, we need to find out what other stories they might have heard, and what sources they consider reliable. I would guess that most Americans trust the presentations of history at historic sites and museums more generally than those of a commercial television network—though recent controversy over the Smithsonian's Enola Gay exhibit demonstrates how fragile that trust can be.



Hiroshima survivor Yasui Kouichi posed in front of a photo mural of the Enola Gay crew on the opening day of the Smithsonian exhibit, 1995. Photo by Ed Hedemann of the War Resisters League. Originally published in *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, April-June 1995.

Managers and interpreters understand that historical meanings are not only created by the authors of history books, but are also shaped by the institutional bureaucracy in which they work and reinterpreted by various audience members. Audience research aimed at understanding the preconceptions about history with which audiences approach historic sites would assist everyone who works with historic preservation and interpretation and the general public.

Consider, for example, a family visiting a National Park Service historic site. What at first glance seems a historical interpretation handed down from a central office in Washington, Denver, or Harpers Ferry turns out to be a product of the interaction of national and regional offices, between park personnel and local interest groups, as well as between NPS and the visitor in the field. Park Service personnel have a lot of autonomy in the selection of what information to tell visitors, and park visitors continue to interpret and reinterpret the history they see and hear in terms of family and other contexts. Even in an era of declining resources and government performance and results

mandates, visitor education and satisfaction remains one of four major operational goals. While each layer of NPS bureaucracy offers a context that shapes the meaning of the past, all remain committed to the overarching goal of visitor education. Cultural resource managers and interpreters who work in multilevel cultural agencies are in a position to recover these various contexts and meanings, as well as those brought by visitors.

Or consider viewer response to popular historical documentaries such as Ken Burns's *The Civil War*. During March 1991, I read the letters Burns received at his home in New Hampshire as a way to begin to understand how audiences constructed the meaning of what they saw and heard. Many writers were prompted to discuss how they learned about the war from their families. Nearly one-third of the letters Burns received mentioned family members, suggesting that these viewers saw the national history presented in the film through the lens of their family history.

Place

History can not only be used to communicate political ideology and group identity, or to make a profit, but also to orient oneself in the environment. Historical consciousness and place consciousness are inextricably intertwined. We attach histories to places, and the environmental value attached to a place comes largely from the memories and historical associations we have with it. Connecting stories of past events to a particular present environment occurs whether showing a film of a Civil War battlefield; designating, preserving, and interpreting a local historic site or district; or placing a statue or marker. What cognitive changes occur when an environment is considered as "historical," either by government designation or popular practice? When civic organizations, such as a local chamber of commerce, create maps and historical atlases that recognize some historical places but not others? The scholarship on how memories attach to places has special relevance for cultural resource managers helping communities to define and protect their "special places" and "character" through historic preservation strategies.

Over the past decade, just as historians have studied the making of historical consciousness—how ideas about history are created, institutionalized, disseminated, understood, and change over time—other disciplines have investigated place consciousness, what scholars in environmental psychology, folklore, and cultural geography call "sense of place." Psychologists have explored how children, as they develop, bond emotionally with places and memories of childhood places, particularly environments explored between ages of 6 and 12, which remain a crucial anchor for personal identity in adulthood. One's sense of place is fur-

ther developed and reinforced by the social networks participated in as an adult; the longer one lives in a place, the more likely that the environment becomes saturated with memories of significant life experiences with family and friends. Psychologists have also explored the emotional consequences when the bonds between people and places are broken, the grieving for a lost home that occurs among the elderly or exiles forcibly deprived of their familiar environment and memory sites. In studying the relocation of 500 Boston residents to make way for an urban renewal project in the 1950s, Marc Fried noted that nearly half exhibited symptoms of depression even two years after the move. Boston's "West End" gained an intelligibility in memory that it might never have had in experience—a destroyed collection of streets became a single "neighborhood" or place primarily through the memory of its destruction.

While psychologists connect sense of place to personal identity and recollection, cultural geographers and folklorists connect it to group communication and collective memory. Through conversations among family and friends about past local characters, about the weather, about work, local residents transform ordinary environments into "storied places." Wallace Stegner notes, "No place is a place until the things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments." Unlike early folklore studies that sought to capture and preserve the romanticized "spirit of place" of the natives in rural areas, recent research has focused on the often conflicting meanings for the same environment communicated among social groups, and how the invention of a "collective" sense of place, like the invention of a public history, is part of the struggle for cultural hegemony, the product of power relations between various groups and interests. Geographers concerned with the ideological aspects of place-making seek to supplement psychological and folklore studies of the subjective experience of place with critical analysis of the social production of space—how sense of place is affected by larger social, economic, and political forces that determine, for example, the distribution of slums and suburbs in a locale and who gets to experience which place. The established meaning for a place, and the land-use decisions that stem from that meaning, are negotiated not only between various residents of a town or neighborhood, but also between local residents and the outside world.

The scholarship on sense of place in psychology, folklore, and geography reminds us that managing cultural resources is inevitably also an effort to manage the multiplicity of environmental perceptions, values, and meanings attached to a place; when certain places are bound and marked as

"historical" and distinguished from ordinary places, or stabilized, restored, or even reconstructed, which (and whose) version of community, place, and character will prevail? This is an especially important question when it comes to considering the tourist relationship to historic sites and cultural resources. By and large tourists look for novelty in a landscape, what is not back home, while local residents look at the landscape as a web of memory sites and social interactions.

Research on memory and place should be a regular part of CRM work. Resource managers can initiate programs to identify and protect a community's memory sites, places unintentionally preserved or made special by popular practice, in addition to sites designated by governments as important to a collective political identity, such as battlefields and presidential homes, and those local chambers of commerce designate as appealing to tourists. In 1991, I investigated how the concept of "town character" was used in three New England communities: Northfield, a post-card New England village; Wilbraham, a sprawled out post World War II suburb; and the McKnight historic district of Springfield, a racially diverse urban neighborhood. In a series of public meetings, residents discussed the "special places" in their town or neighborhood. Historic landmarks and community memory sites were different. For example, the restored Victorian facades of the McKnight Historical District in Springfield held different meanings for middle-class African-American residents moving up from the ghetto and middle class whites moving in from the suburbs.

Among the other kinds of public programs that evoke a community's sense of place and history are photographic projects, neighborhood walking tours led by local residents, or public art projects such as "Arts in Transit" in Boston, in which neighborhood oral historians collaborated with artists in developing the public art that was installed at each station along the Orange Line. Cultural resource managers are in a position to contribute to local residents' sense of place by adding national context to local residents' sense of emotional attachment. They can help residents and visitors alike to see what ordinarily cannot be seen: both the memories attached to places and the larger social and economic processes that shaped how the places were made.

CRM and the New Scholarship on Memory

The new scholarship on memory has the potential to provide a new collective framework for cultural resource managers and academic scholars. The new approach to memory, with a focus on how individuals and groups create an understanding of their pasts, can be used as a basis for operating in three historical endeavors. Political or official his-

tory, popular history, and history of place all engage the public as participants in the history being made at these sites. Cultural resource managers and interpreters play essential roles in these three endeavors. This discussion of how historical meaning is created will hopefully serve CRM professionals and academic-based scholars in the accurate, effective, and inclusive presentation of the past.

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David Glassberg directs the Public History Program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is the author of *American Historical Pageantry (1990)* and *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life (forthcoming)*.

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