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Historicizing Memory & Sacred Geography

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I'm here representing the discipline of history. I'm a historian of American landscapes. Most of my work concerns the relationship between natural landforms and cultural values. Today I'll talk a bit about how sacred places function as memory sites. To do this I'll use some Native American and Mormon examples. But first I need to go through some definitions. I need to tell you what historians mean when they use terms like "memory site," "collective memory," "history," and "the past."

The past is everything that has happened: the totality of time until exactly right now. No one save an omniscient god could know the past in its entirety. It's inconceivably vast.



As humans, we cannot *know* the past; instead, we *relate* to it. We gain a sense of the past using means of relation. Two of the oldest means are storytelling and ceremony. These are group activities. When groups create a sense of the past, that shared sense can be called collective memory. Nowadays, each of us belongs to multiple groups; hence we have multiple, overlapping collective memories. The primary group remains the family. Other formal groups include nations and churches, as well as alumni associations, professional societies, and fraternal organizations. Some large-scale groups lack membership rolls; they are loosely defined by demography, politics, or consumerism. Examples include the Baby Boom generation, the Vietnam generation, the Nintendo generation. In our present moment, media corporations exert a deep influence on collective memory. For instance, our shared sense of the Sixties can no longer be disentangled from TV and Hollywood images about the Sixties.

In the United States, collective memory is big business. And for good reason. Americans love their past. They pour a staggering amount of time and money into memory-building activities like genealogy, re-enactment, and heritage tourism. But this love does not, I'm sad to say, extend to history. Most Americans have no use for my discipline.

History is not the past. History is simply one more means for relating to the past. But unlike the other means, this one has been professionalized. History is a set of professional rules for thinking about the past. It requires academic training.

Perhaps the best defense of this pedagogy comes from educational psychologist Sam Wineburg:

In its deepest forms, historical thinking is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development. Its achievement actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think, one of the reasons why it is much easier to learn names, dates and stories than it is to change the fundamental mental structures we use to grasp the meaning of the past Of the subjects in the secular curriculum it does the best in teaching those virtues once reserved for theology—the virtue of humility, in the face of our limits to know; and the virtue of awe, in the face of the expanse of human [experience].

Before historians make judgments or interpretations, they spend months or years gathering evidence. It's a craft. Whenever possible, historians track down primary sources—preferably first-hand evidence created at the time in question. But even primary sources must be read skeptically. Documents may contain errors, lies, or biases. Sources must be triangulated; they must be weighed against each other. Many sources are baffling. Their meaning isn't evident to us for the simple reason that we weren't the intended audience. Only with context does some of the meaning become apparent. Historians obsessively search for context, yet they often find a void. In their interpretations, then, historians must account for the silences and absences in the record. But they cannot fill in the blanks or re-order the data. They must

use the existing evidence in the proper sequence according to the linear flow of time.

In short, history is different than collective memory. Indeed, they're somewhat at odds. One is professional, the other is popular. One is descriptive and analytical; the other is evocative and emotional. History calls attention to the strangeness of the past; memory makes the past seem familiar. Collective memory can be built on faith; history cannot. It would be easy for historians to dismiss or debunk all group memories, but that would miss the point. Our job is to *historicize* them. Historians treat group memories like any other cultural phenomena: they begin at some point; they change over time; and they end—or will end—at some point. Explaining why is the historian's job.

To do this historians tend to focus on emblems—those special stories, songs, images, and so on, that have come to symbolize a moment in the past. Emblematic places are another rich source. We call them memory sites. These are places where the past and the present collapse into each other. Examples include mausoleums, museums, and monuments. But rural landscapes and natural landforms can be memory sites too. Consider the orchards at Gettysburg or the beaches at Normandy.

Many—though not all—memory sites are also sacred places. Unlike the other terms I've used, "sacred place" does not have an academic definition. In my mind, if a group of people believes a place is sacred, it's sacred. Historians try to accept

such claims at face value. But they also can't help but historicize the people making the claims. From the historian's point of view, particular places are revered by particular people for particular reasons at particular times.

So sacred places may not be timeless, but they do often relate to the origins of time. Many indigenous creation stories name specific landforms. *The world began right here*, the stories say. In Native America, indigenous groups lived or continue to live about their mythic geographies—their holy lands.

Jerusalem of course offers the most famous examples of the connections between mythology, memory, and place. Places and place-names like the Temple Mount and Gethsemane evoke powerful group memories. The aura of belief around sites like the Garden Tomb reinforces a shared sense of the past that is frankly more powerful than any work of history. The Holy Land is particularly instructive because it shows that geographies—just like memories—can be contested. The Dome of the Rock has multiple competing meanings based on irreconcilable collective memories.

The Judeo-Christian tradition of sacred geography encompasses built landscapes (like temples and cemeteries) as well as natural landforms (like springs and mountains). Yahweh met Abraham on Mt. Moriah, Moses on Mt. Sinai, and Elijah on Mt. Carmel. But holy mountains are hardly restricted to Palestine. In North America, the most important medicine wheel sits atop a peak in the Bighorn Range. In the Black Hills region, both Bear Lodge Butte (in Wyoming) and

Bear Butte (in South Dakota) possess cosmic significance to many Indian groups. One of these groups, the Kiowa, also venerates Rainy Mountain in Oklahoma. Four peaks for the four cardinal directions mark the limits of Dinéyah (Navajoland); the southern mountain, Mt. Taylor, is also sacred within Acoma, Laguna, and Zuni cultures. Their Puebloan cousins, the Tewas, have their own four cardinal peaks. Hopis look with reverence at the San Francisco Peaks north of Flagstaff. The creation story of the Tohono O'odham involves the stunning Baboquivari Peak west of Tucson. In the Pacific Northwest, the great volcanoes of the Cascade Range figure into many Native mythologies. Though there's no historical evidence that any peak in the Wasatch held spiritual significance to Numic peoples, Sleeping Ute Mountain in Colorado has an age-old place in Ute cosmology.

It's important here to point out that not all sacred places are equally sacred. Some are tabooed, unapproachable. Some are suited for ceremonial purposes only. Others are multi-use. Ute Mountain Utes use their sacred mountain for family picnics as well as tribal ceremonies.

According to anthropologist Linea Sundstrom, sacred places break down into three categories of perception. A small number of places—all of them natural landforms—are *intrinsically* sacred. That is, people revere them for being one of a kind and beyond compare. Bear Lodge Butte—a Native name for Devils Tower—is a good example. So is Rainbow Bridge or Mount Shasta. A larger number of places are *generically* sacred. This category includes LDS temples, all of

which are sacralized with identical dedication ceremonies. In some Native American cultures, *all* rock art sites or *all* springs or *all* caves possess some spiritual power. But the most common category is the *specifically* sacred: Something took place here to make this once-ordinary site extraordinary and hallowed. These sites derive their power from the past. They are by nature memory sites. You could call them sacred historical markers. They remind people that a vision happened here. An important ceremony took place here. Someone important died here.

Death sites—especially scenes of mass murder—often become sacred memory sites. Violence can be creative as well as destructive: it tears groups apart and brings them together. Sand Creek, Colorado—site in 1864 of the second worst massacre committed by U.S. troops against Indians—is now a sacred place for many tribes. The site of the worst massacre—located here in this very valley—is sacred to Northern Shoshones. But the Bear River Massacre site is unknown to the majority of people who live in Cache Valley. Sacred memory sites that are universally honored are rare, maybe non-existent. Here in the United States, the closest sites are scenes of nationalized tragedy, notably Gettysburg, Oklahoma City, and now lower Manhattan.

These place-names, as much as the places themselves, serve as repositories of memory. “Names are magic,” said Whitman. “One word can pour such a flood through the soul.” Our shared sense of WWII can be summoned with words like Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Pearl Harbor. The temporal name,

“9/11,” has become a de facto geographic given that New York has already eclipsed Virginia and Pennsylvania in our collective memory. A simple utterance like “9/11” relates a mountain of cultural information. Anthropologist Keith Basso has recorded conversations among Western Apaches that consist almost entirely of uncontextualized exchanges of place-names. By “speaking with names,” Apaches invoke stories tied to memory sites on their reservation. The closest non-Native analogue to the Apache story-name probably comes from the Mormons, who have their own sacred American geography. Latter-day Saints can invoke their entire early church history through a canonized set of place-names: the Sacred Grove, the Hill Cumorah, Kirtland, Independence, Hahn’s Mill, Nauvoo, Carthage Jail, Winter Quarters, Emigration Canyon.

The archetypal Mormon memory site is the Church-owned “Sacred Grove,” a wooded lot near Palmyra, New York, where the farm boy Joseph Smith saw “two Personages,” the Father and the Son. Today, the story of the “First Vision” is a cornerstone of Mormonism; it’s the first thing that missionaries share with potential converts.

But this emphasis on the vision and its location does not go back to the Joseph Smith era. In fact, it was a twentieth-century development. New York was enshrined in Mormon memory only after the disappointments of the Utah territorial period, when two older LDS cornerstones—the imminence of the millennium and the sanctity of polygamy—wore away. In the first half of the twentieth century, following the trauma of

Americanization, the Church placed more emphasis on its glorious past than its glorious future. The First Vision and the pioneer trek emerged as the safest episodes for commemoration. Under the leadership of Joseph F. Smith, the Church began to instruct its followers to revere the sacred events that took place in New York.

For the other subject of commemoration, the pioneer trek, Mormons did not have to be instructed to remember. It was merely a matter of recontextualization: yoking the trek to the mythic American story of overland migration. Mormons had been celebrating Pioneer Day since 1849—just two years after arriving. The trek to the West turned Brigham Young’s splinter group into a unified people. The relationship between coerced migration and ethnogenesis runs deep; consider the examples of the Jews and the Exodus, the Puritans and the Great Migration, the Boer’s Great Trek, the Middle Passage, the Cherokee Trail of Tears, and the Long Walk of the Navajos. In the second half of the twentieth century, Utah Mormons managed to preserve this interior meaning of pioneering even as they packaged their commemorations for exterior consumption. The 1997 sesquicentennial was a brilliant display of this balancing act. The LDS Church attracted national and global media coverage of the wagon train of re-enactors who traveled from Council Bluffs to This Is the Place State Heritage Park.

Every Mormon youth in Utah and Idaho is required, it seems, to participate in at least one activity involving wagons or handcarts. The new favorite destination is Martin’s Cove,

Wyoming, the approximate site of the great handcart disaster of 1856. Trapped by snow and freezing weather, the Willie and Martin companies huddled against some granite walls beside the frozen Sweetwater River, waiting for a rescue party. About 200 people, one-sixth of the combined group, perished. In the chronicle of Mormon emigration before the railroad, this event was a double aberration. The LDS Church experimented with handcarts for a few seasons only. And the huge majority of Mormon pioneers—handcart companies included—benefited from good planning and good fortune.

Yet in recent collective memory, the Willie and Martin companies have joined the even more exceptional Brigham Young advance party as the archetypal pioneers. Though the location is questioned by trail historians, the place officially called “Martin’s Cove” has become a shrine. Since the Sesquicentennial, the place has hosted thousands of re-enactors. A year ago, amid controversy, the LDS Church secured what amounts to a permanent lease of this federal property along a National Historic Trail. The Church had previously bought up the surrounding land. In 1997 it opened a visitor center staffed by missionaries; the displays inside talked about angels aiding the pioneers.

Martin’s Cove offers further proof that place-based memories about collective death go a long way to maintain collective identities. But it matters who in the past did the dying. The recent concerted effort to turn the cove into a sacred memory site stands in utter contrast to the 150 years of evasion the about *other* tragic site in Utah’s history of overland migration:

Mountain Meadows. Here, on September 11, 1857, Mormons and some Paiute accessories murdered more than 100 innocent men, women, and children. To this day, Mountain Meadows lacks a fully honest and truly appropriate memorial. This is not a sacred place; it’s a haunted place.

For a very long time, the LDS Church tried to erase the massacre from its collective memory. The matter stayed alive in large part due to historians, notably Juanita Brooks, a Mormon. She was brave. She was also professional. It’s history’s job to be memory’s conscience. Good history makes up for the intentional omissions as well as the unintentional lapses and unavoidable defects of collective memory.

Again, I don’t mean to suggest that history is “better” than collective memory. Most people get by just fine without history. But they can’t live without a sense of connection to the past. That’s one of our basic human needs. For most people, that sense of connection is felt most powerfully by standing on ground where the past as they believe it happened. Even for secular-minded historians who prefer the archives, there’s something special about visiting a memory site, taking a moment of silence, and imagining a world that used to be.