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History and Memory

Public History and the Study of Memory

DAVID GLASSBERG

IN THE PAST DECADE, dozens of new certificate and degree programs in public history have trained historians for work in museums, archives, historic preservation, and public policy positions. Within these new programs a central question—how is public history different from conventional academic fields—has been answered in primarily vocational rather than intellectual terms. We think of public history as a collection of career paths, not a coherent subject of study.

During the same decade there has been an explosion of scholarship examining the images and 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) to special issues of the *Journal of American History* ("Memory and American History"—March 1989) and *Representations* ("Memory and Countermemory"—Spring 1989), 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: the theme of a recent Organization of American Historians meeting (Chicago, March 1996) was "History, Memory, and Identity."

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Despite the simultaneous development of public history and writings on public memory during the past decade, little has connected them. Few new scholarly works on memory have incorporated insights from public historians' experiences working in museums, historic sites, and historic preservation agencies; few public history projects in museums, historic sites, and preservation agencies have made use of theories developed in the scholarly research on memory.¹

The separation is unfortunate, because the new scholarship on memory offers us a new way to think about public history, a common intellectual foundation for the diverse enterprises taught and practiced under its name. Understanding the various ways in which societies think about the past and use it in the present can help public historians to understand the institutional contexts in which they operate as well as the presuppositions about history with which the public approaches their work. Moreover, public historians are well positioned to contribute to this scholarship. The insights public historians gain from working with the public in a variety of settings, the first-hand knowledge of how historical knowledge is created, institutionalized, disseminated, and understood, can help revitalize the entire historical profession as it redefines itself both professionally and intellectually in the years ahead.²

What do historians talk about when they talk about memory? The profusion of terms—collective memory, popular memory, public memory, countermemory—suggests that memory requires further definition as a field of study. Before demonstrating the importance of the scholarship on memory to public historians and the important contributions that public historians can make to this scholarship, we first need to understand its emergence as a historical and intellectual phenomenon.

At first glance the study of memory seems a new field, but in fact historians have long been interested in tracing how ideas about history change over time. For decades, we have taught the history of what historians have thought about history and called it historiography, making its study central to training future generations of professionals. At the same time,

1. Among the best examples of memory scholarship based on personal experience in public history work are Michael Frisch's *Shared Authority: Writing on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990) and the publications of the Center for History-Making in America at Indiana University. See Lois Silverman, ed., *A Bibliography on History-Making* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1993). This bibliography is essential for teachers in public history programs, listing many more examples of the new scholarship on memory than can be mentioned in this essay.

2. The Organization of American Historians recently devoted an entire Council of Chairs newsletter to the question of "Rethinking Public History." Its five essays address many important concerns of curriculum and professional identity, but not the role of memory studies as a component of public history training or an example of how academic and public historical practices can be integrated. See Jannelle Warren-Findley, "Integrating Public and Academic History: Is it Possible? Is It Wise?" *OAH Council of Chairs Newsletter* 45 (June 1995): 4–6.

literary critics and art historians have examined historical imagery in the works of artists and writers, while folklorists have investigated the historical tales of less socially prominent groups. And political historians have explored the changing historical reputations of heroes such as Jefferson or Lincoln, the notions of history embedded in the ideology of political movements such as republicanism or populism, as well as how government officials have employed historical analogies in the making of public policy.³

What distinguishes the new scholarship on memory from the old is not subject matter but approach. Whereas earlier studies primarily sought to characterize a single group or institution's beliefs about its past, the new studies primarily 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. In a sense, the new memory scholarship broadens the types of institutions and ideas included in the traditional historiography course, viewing professional historical scholarship as not the only thought about history but one of several versions of the past competing for influence in public in a particular place and time.⁴

With this change in approach has come a shift in focus from studying the institutions that produce history—colleges and universities, government

3. Among the early scholarship on images and uses of the American past are works associated with the "myth and symbol" school of American Studies such as Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), and William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: George Braziller, 1961); each saw a peculiar historical consciousness as central to holding together the societies they studied. I discuss the relationship of contemporary studies of memory to American Studies scholarship further in "Monuments and Memories," *American Quarterly* 43 (March 1991): 143–56. On academic historiography, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). On artists' and intellectuals' use of the past, see Warren Susman "History and the American Intellectual: The Uses of a Usable Past" [1964], reprinted in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). On the historical consciousness of minorities, see Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). Studies of the changing historical reputations of political figures include Merrill Peterson's *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (1960) and *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). For a pioneering investigation of historical representations in political movements, see Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform, From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955); for a more recent example, see Dorothy Ross, "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth Century America," *American Historical Review* (October 1984): 909–28. On decisionmakers, see Richard Neustadt and Ernest May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

4. Redfield uses "Social Organization of Tradition" as the title for Chapter 3 of *Peasant Society and Culture* (1956), reprinted with *The Little Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 40–59.

agencies, mass media—to studying the minds of the audiences where all these versions of the past converge and are understood. Whereas earlier approaches assumed that audiences for history more or less understood the same historical images the same way—if George Bancroft's histories were popular, it meant that they embodied an American popular historical consciousness—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 the author, but changes as audiences actively reinterpret what they see and hear by placing it in alternative contexts derived from their diverse social backgrounds. To paraphrase Carl Becker, every person is his or her own historian, creating idiosyncratic versions of the past that make sense given personal situations and experiences. But then how can we make meaningful generalizations about a public history?⁵

The Problem of Scale: Individual and Collective Memory

Indeed much of the new scholarship on memory examines communication about the past only at the most intimate of scales: autobiographical memory and reminiscence. Psychologists and oral historians explore how individuals in recalling the past form a coherent personal identity and sense of self, telling stories that place themselves at the center of historical events, or their “uchronic dreams” that combine recollections of the events with how they thought history should have turned out. How individuals remember is of obvious importance to oral history interviewers and should be incorporated into the oral history practice of public historians; however, the focus on personal memory and an individual's idiosyncratic recollection of the past is not particularly useful to historians working with larger groups. More useful is the scholarship investigating 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. Historians 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 discover the relationship of the memories that circulate among family and friends to the historical representations that circulate in public on a wider scale, in towns, regions, nation, mass media. The many oral history projects connected with the fiftieth anniversary of World War II

5. The new scholarship reflects the impact of communications theory, especially as developed in the Birmingham (UK) “school” of cultural studies. Among the most useful works introducing this literature are the essays in Robert C. Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987—or see the second edition of this work published in 1992), and Nicholas Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry Ortner, eds., *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

offer opportunities to consider how family stories told about World War II have been shaped by the larger political culture and mass media and are not merely unmediated personal reminiscence. This leads to a larger question, one that has been at 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 public histories change over time?⁶

Public History as Political Culture

One approach to these questions is to analyze how the prevailing images of the past in a society reflect its 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 public history is a political one, and that public history embodies not only ideas about history—the relation of past, present, and future—but also ideas about the public—the relationship of diverse groups in political society. Contemporary debates over the politics of public history have only increased the importance of public historians reading scholarship on the political uses of history in the past, as reflected in the establishment of war memorials, civic celebrations, and public institutions such as museums, archives, and historic sites.⁷

For some scholars, public historical imagery 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 construction of an “imagined community” through which disparate individuals and groups envision themselves as members of a collective with

6. The insight that oral history interviewees usually place themselves at the center of the historical events they are describing appears in Linda Shopes, “Popular Consciousness of Local History: The Evidence of Oral History Interviews,” International Oral History Association, 1994. The term “uchronic dreams” appears in Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), a fascinating book of essays exploring how individuals and communities remember the past. On personal reminiscence as a spontaneous individual activity, see Robert N. Butler, “The Life Review: Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged,” *Psychiatry* 26 (February 1963): 65–76. On the social construction of individual and collective memories through group communication, see Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), and the essays in David Thelen, ed., *Memory and American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) and David Middleton and Derek Edwards, eds., *Collective Remembering* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1990). See also the important collection on gender and memory, Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

7. The controversies over the Smithsonian exhibit on the end of World War II prompted a torrent of writing on the politics of public history; see, for example, “History and the Public: What Can We Handle? A Round Table about History after the Enola Gay Controversy,” *Journal of American History* 82 (December 1995): 1029–1144.

a common present and future. From W. Lloyd Warner's analysis of commemorative rituals in Yankee City (Newburyport, MA) in the 1950s through Robert Bellah's characterization of a national civil religion in 1967, to recent analyses such as Pierre Nora's multivolume exploration of the "lieux de mémoire" in France and Michael Kammen's description of the "mystic chords of memory" in the U.S., 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.⁸

Other scholars depict the practices and representations of public history as instruments in the political struggle for hegemony among various social groups. From the wide-ranging essays in the Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger anthology *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), through Michel Foucault's linkage of systems of knowledge and power in France, George Mosse's studies of the representation of the past in fascist Germany, or Raphael Samuel's exploration of British national identity, this strand of analysis identifies public history with the master narratives that elite supporters of the nation-state impose from the top down to consolidate control over their citizenry. Historical imagery disseminated by government and mass media advance the imagined community of the nation while suppressing authentic local and group memories and collective identities. The prevailing framework for analyzing the politics of public history versus popular memories, the one underlying John Bodnar's *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (1992) and many of the essays in the recent anthology edited by John Gillis, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (1994), sharply delineates between an official history that government agencies such as the military and the National Park Service employ to maintain the political status quo and a multiplicity of vernacular memories that ordinary citizens employ to sustain ties of family and local community.⁹

As the spirited contemporary debates over the nation's history show, a civil-religion approach that emphasizes public history's role in holding

8. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, rev. ed. 1991); W. Lloyd Warner, *The Living and the Dead: A Study of Symbolic Life of Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959); Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" *Daedalus* 96 (Winter 1967): 1–21; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire" *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–25. For a superb critical assessment of Nora's work, see Nancy Wood, "Memories Remains: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *History and Memory* 6 (Spring/Summer 1994): 123–49.

9. See Michel Foucault, *Language, Countermemory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich* (New York: H. Fertig, 1975) and *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Raphael Samuel, ed., *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (London: Routledge, 1989). See also the essays in Robert Johnston, et al., *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

political society together tends to overlook how dissenting voices view experience, the historical visions of minorities, and conflicts over the construction and dissemination of a public history. Nostalgic for a shared national culture, whether a conservative version that could reinforce the patriotic orthodoxy of the Cold War or a liberal one that could promote understanding between particular racial, ethnic, class, or sexual identities and communities, these works tend to see the practice of public history as actually integrating society rather than as an effort by some to structure reality for others. But the prevailing framework pitting official history versus vernacular memories also oversimplifies the play of forces shaping public history. Concerned that depictions of the nation's "collective" beliefs and values might endanger minority rights, these works tend to overlook the apparent spontaneity and depth of emotion associated with national histories—not only flag-waving on the political right, but also the emergence of progressive nationalist visions such as the CIO in the 1930s or Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1960s. In fact, there are multiple official histories as well as multiple vernacular memories. Analyses of the politics of communication about history must not only explain how the nation-state appropriates and transforms vernacular memories into its official history, but also how national imagery acquires diverse meanings from the local contexts in which it is displayed. They must examine how public history simultaneously reproduces the unequal political relationships of a society, through the relative power of groups in society to have their version of history accepted as the public history, and serves as an instrument through which those relationships are transformed, through the interaction of that public history at the local level with the other versions of the past that circulate among ethnic, fraternal, or labor organizations, as well as among family and friends.¹⁰

The new scholarship analyzing public history as political culture has important implications for how public historians think about their work. Inevitably, public historians operate between competing political forces, as well as between 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 public interpretation of a historical event that anyone still cares about, public historical representations such as an exhibit, war memorial, or commemorative ceremony are often deliberately ambiguous to

10. An insightful criticism of the civil religion approach appears in Steven Lukes, "Political Ritual and Social Integration," *Sociology* 9 (May 1975): 289–308; for a lengthier critique of the historiography of American patriotism, see my review essay "Patriotism from the Ground Up," *Reviews in American History* 21 (March 1993): 1–7. In conceptualizing how public historical imagery both reproduces and transforms political relationships, my thought has been influenced by William H. Sewell, Jr. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (July 1992): 1–29. For an exemplary case study examining the conflation of local and national historical imagery, see Alon Confino, "The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Heimat, National Memory, and the German Empire, 1871–1918," *History and Memory* 5 (Spring/Summer 1993): 42–86.

satisfy competing factions. They are examples not of collective memory, but rather 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. The task of the public historian 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.¹¹

Public History as Popular Culture

The dialogical nature of public history is especially evident when we examine historical imagery in commercial mass media and tourist attractions, representations shaped less by politics and the desire to communicate official ideology or a sense of collective identity than by the marketplace and the desire to appeal to large numbers of people in their leisure hours. 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 are increasing their marketing and promotion to bring more visitors through their doors or to broaden the constituency for their work. As public historians seek larger and 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; can tabloid history be far behind in the 1990s? 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? Will mass culture in the next century prove to be a more powerful force than the nation-state in the twentieth century for the standardization of public historical imagery?¹²

11. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). For more on the historian's role as a creator of public spaces for dialogue about the past, see John Kuo Wei Tchen, “Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment,” in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1992), 285–326.

12. Roy Rosenzweig, “Marketing the Past: *American Heritage* and Popular History in the United States,” in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, ed. S. Benson, S. Brier, and R. Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 21–49. Susan G. Davis demonstrated how the dictates of commercial television broadcast shaped the commemoration of the Constitution bicentennial in “Set Your Mood to Patriotic: History as Televised Special Event,” *Radical History Review* 42 (1988): 122–43. On the convergence of the Disney version of history and what appears elsewhere, see Richard Francaviglia, “Main Street USA: A Comparison/Contrast of Streetscapes in Disneyland and Walt Disney World,”

The new scholarship on how audiences create meanings from popular culture products can help us understand the growing convergence of public and popular history. Works such as George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (1990) argue that audiences neither passively receive nor actively challenge the historical imagery they encounter in popular television docudramas, music, film, novels, and tourist attractions, but rather “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 their particular concerns. Even the most commercial of history products contain the suppressed collective memories of subordinate groups embedded within it; through close analysis, audiences can recover the hidden meanings and memories encoded in these narratives. Popular history does not impose a single view of the past on the masses, but rather communicates a multiplicity of submerged alternative visions accessible to audiences competent to decipher them according to their social background.

Analyses of public history as popular culture, emphasizing the multiplicity of possible readings of historical texts, has the same limitation as scholarship examining public history as political culture: they still do not tell us much about how real audiences communicate and respond to the history they see and hear. Do audiences really interpret history based primarily on their social characteristics such as gender, class, and ethnicity? Or is education and ideological stance a better determinant of how a text is interpreted? How competent are most audience members to recover the hidden meanings in popular culture texts, to construct an alternative interpretation of historical events by reconfiguring the information present and supplying what is left out? And what about the role of intermediaries in guiding audience reception? We not only see the film but read the review, with expert commentators classifying the texts according to larger categories and interpretive conventions. Doesn't being told that the historical account they will see is “true” affect how it is understood as much as the particular social position of the audience member? It would seem that to discover the alternative contexts and narratives in which audiences might piece together the public history they encounter, we need to find out what other stories they might have heard, and the audience members previous relationship to the source of information, i.e., what sources do they consider reliable? I would guess that for most Americans the National Park Service or the Smithsonian's reputation for accuracy would make their representations of history more trusted than those of a commercial television network—

Journal of Popular Culture 15 (Summer 1981): 141–56; Mira Engler, “Drive-Thru History: Theme Towns in Iowa,” *Landscape* 32 (1993): 8–18; and “Symposium: Disney and the Historians—Where Do We Go From Here?” *The Public Historian* 17 (Fall 1995): 43–89.

though the recent controversy over the Smithsonian's Enola Gay exhibit demonstrates how fragile that trust might be.¹³

Public historians can help the scholarship on memory advance beyond merely opening up a text to the range of possible readings encoded within it to discover what meanings actually surfaced in particular historical situations by adding a survey or ethnographic component to their work. More than a decade ago, Janice Radway surveyed a group of women readers in the Midwest about their reaction to different romance novels, and constructed out of their likes and dislikes a portrait of their mentality concerning gender relations. Public historians are in an ideal position to conduct the same kind of field research. Day to day they see history not only as created by the author, but also as reshaped by the institutional bureaucracy and reinterpreted by various audience members. If the meaning of a historical fact is not intrinsic but changes with context, then public historians can investigate the successive contexts created by the author, by institutions of communication, and by audiences, tracing the social organization of knowledge about the past in particular settings. This kind of audience research is designed not merely to make interpretation more popular to attract more visitors, but rather to understand better the preconceptions about history with which audiences approach our work.¹⁴

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 give visitors, and park visitors continue to interpret and reinterpret the history they see and hear in terms of family and other contexts. At the same time, the tendency in an era of declining resources to justify park operations in terms of audience size generates pressure to present history in a way that appeals to the greatest number of visitors. Although NPS has not yet put a ripped bodice on an entrance sign, we might expect Park Service interpretation more and more to resemble popular historical attractions. In tracing history within the NPS, each level of communication offers its own context that shapes the meaning of the history

13. On the role of interpretive conventions in guiding audience reception, see Robert Allen, "Reader Oriented Criticism" in *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 254–89; see also Celeste Michelle Condit, "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (June 1989): 103–22.

14. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). Excellent examples of research on how audience expectations affect historical interpretation appear in two anthologies published by the Smithsonian Institution Press: Jo Blatti, ed., *Past Meets Present: Essays About Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences* (1987), and Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven Lavine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (1992).

being told, meanings that the public historians who work for and with NPS might recover through close observation and analysis.¹⁵

Or consider the 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 characterize not only how Burns constructed the story (where he got his information, and what contexts he placed it in) but also, to some extent, how audiences constructed the meaning of what they saw and heard. Many letter-writers remarked that the series reminded them of other TV shows, or other films about the Civil War. Many more 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.¹⁶

Public History as Place Consciousness

History offers ways not only to communicate political ideology and group identity, or to make a profit, but also to orient oneself in the environment. Public histories provide meaning to places. Whether a film showing a Civil War battlefield or the designation of a local historic site or district, all connect stories of past events to a particular present environment. Historical consciousness and place consciousness are inextricably intertwined; we attach histories to places, and the environmental value we attach to a place comes largely through the memories and historical associations we have with it. What cognitive changes occur when an environment is considered as historical, either by government designation or popular practice, or when a civic organization such as the local chamber of commerce creates maps and historical atlases that recognize some historical places but not others? If the scholarship on the politics of public history has special relevance for historians who curate and present the past in government museums and historic sites, and the scholarship analyzing public history as popular culture has special relevance for historians who work in mass media or who increasingly must rely on popular appeal to keep their institutions afloat, then the scholarship on how memories attach to places has special relevance for historians who work in cultural resources management, helping communities to define and protect their "special places" and "character" through historic preservation strategies.

15. The local impact on NPS interpretation is likely to grow as more and more sites enter into joint management agreements with local historical agencies and volunteer groups, such as at Lowell National Historical Park.

16. See my "Dear Ken Burns: Letters to a Filmmaker," *Mosaic: Newsletter of the Center for History-Making in America* 1 (Fall 1991): 1, 8.

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.”¹⁷ Psychologists have explored how children bond emotionally with places as they develop, and memories of childhood places, particularly environments explored between the ages of 6 and 12, remain a crucial anchor for personal identity in adulthood. A sense of place is further 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. Marc Fried, in studying the relocation of 500 Boston residents to make way for an urban renewal project in the 1950s, noted that nearly half exhibited symptoms of depression even two years after the move. He also noted that 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.¹⁸

17. Interestingly, there is little historical literature on the evolution of sense of place over time, and the processes through which past generations made the environments where they lived part of their individual and community identities. Though historians at the turn of the century such as Frederick Jackson Turner pioneered the study of how Americans interacted with particular environments to produce distinctive, place-based local and regional identities, the historical profession in subsequent years by and large abandoned this study, assuming instead that the nation’s high degree of geographical mobility, the centralization of economic and political power under modern capitalism, and the spread of a standardized, interchangeable, instant architecture had left Americans with a sense of “placelessness”—a feeling of belonging in no particular place. I discuss the problem of “placelessness” in American historical writing in “Place and Placelessness in American History,” Organization of American Historians/National Council on Public History Annual Meeting, April 1995. On Turner’s relationship to place consciousness, see Michael Steiner, “From Frontier to Region: Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Western History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 64 (November 1995): 479–501.

18. Among the most useful works connecting memory and place from the perspective of developmental psychology is the anthology *Place Attachment*, ed. Irwin Altman and Setha Low (New York: Plenum, 1992). The emotional power of remembered places is especially articulated in the work of artists and writers, who create powerful identities for themselves through the act of remembering particular places. See, for example, Louise Erdrich, “A Writer’s Sense of Place,” in *A Place of Sense: Essays in Search of the Midwest*, ed. Michael Martone (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), 34–44, and Wallace Stegner, “The Sense of Place,” in *Where The Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West* (New York: Random House, 1992). On social networks and place, see Kathleen Gerson, C. Ann Steuve, and Claude S. Fischer, “Attachments to Place,” in Fischer, et al., *Networks and Places: Social Relations in the Urban Setting* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 139–61. On urban renewal in Boston, see Marc Fried, “Grieving for a Lost Home,” in *The Urban Condition: People and Policy in the Metropolis*, ed. Leonard J. Duhl (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 151–71.

Whereas 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, or about work, local residents transform ordinary environments into “storied places.” Wallace Stegner notes that “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 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.¹⁹

The scholarship on sense of place in psychology, folklore, and geography reminds historians that managing cultural resources is inevitably also an effort to manage the multiplicity of environmental perceptions, values, and meanings attached to a place; when historians bound and mark certain places as “historical” and distinguish them from ordinary places, or decide to stabilize, to restore, or even to remodel a place “in character,” 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 the sites that historians produce. By and large tourists look

19. The folklorist Henry Glassie proclaims that “history is the essence of the idea of place.” Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 664. The term “storied place” comes from nature writer Robert Finch, who described being initially attracted to Cape Cod not by its natural features but by the many stories that had been written about it over the years. See Edward Lueders, ed., *Writing Natural History: Dialogues with Authors* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), 44. The Wallace Stegner quote appears in his essay “The Sense of Place,” 202. A superb introduction to how contemporary folklorists write about place is Mary Hufford, *One Space Many Places: Folklife and Land Use in New Jersey's Pineland's National Reserve* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1986), and Hufford's anthology, *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1994). On cultural geography's concern with how the social production of space shapes the subjective experience of place, see John Agnew, “Representing Space: Space, Scale, and Culture in Social Science,” in *Place/Culture/Representation*, ed. James Duncan and David Ley (New York: Verso, 1993), 251–71.

for novelty in a landscape, what is not back home, whereas local residents look at the landscape as a web of memory sites and social interactions.²⁰

Research on memory and place should be a regular part of cultural resources management work, devising programs that seek to identify and protect a community's memory sites, places unintentionally preserved or made special by popular practice, as well as historic sites, places that governments designate as important to a collective political identity, such as battlefields and presidents' homes, or that local chambers of commerce designate as appealing to tourists.²¹ 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. Part of this research involved asking residents in a series of public meetings to discuss the special places in their town or neighborhood, and discovering the divergence between officially designated historic landmarks and community memory sites. The public dialogue revealed the different senses of local history that underlay different perceptions of the environment. 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 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.²² Public

20. See Sidney Brower, "Residents and Outsiders Perceptions of the Environment" in *Housing, Culture, and Design* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 189–202. Among case studies of historic preservation directed toward tourism see John Dorst, *The Written Suburb* (Philadelphia: Temple Press, 1989), Martha Norkunas, *The Politics of Public Memory: Tourism, History, and Ethnicity in Monterey California* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), and Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1995).

21. Randy Hester describes these as "subconscious landscapes of the heart," the places that local residents feel are part of the "sacred structure" of the town. Randy Hester, "Subconscious Landscapes of the Heart," *Places* 2 (1985): 10–22. Whereas the residents of a town or neighborhood are more interested in preserving the places of which they have a personal memory than those of the remote past, historic preservation—both in legislation and practice—emphasizes the remote over the immediate past. In the words of Kevin Lynch, "near continuity is emotionally more important than remote time," Lynch, *What Time is This Place?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972), 61. David Lowenthal observes that governments value a remote, malleable past to a recent one painfully recalled. Lowenthal "Revisiting Valued Landscapes," in *Valued Environments*, ed. John R. Gold and Jacqueline Burgess (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1982), 78.

22. The Orange Line project is described in Myrna Breitbart, Will Holton, et al., *Creating a Sense of Place in Urban Communities* (Cambridge: Urban Arts, Inc., 1992). Among other exemplary efforts are The Bostonian Society's *Last Tenement* exhibition of October 1992–March 1994, which explored the history of Boston's West End, including its destruction as part of an urban renewal program in the 1950s. See the exhibit catalogue, *The Last Tenement: Confronting Community and Urban Renewal in Boston's West End*, ed. Sean M. Fisher and Carolyn Hughes (Boston: Bostonian Society, 1992).

historians can participate in the process of placemaking and contribute to local residents' sense of place by adding a sense of location to local residents' sense of emotional attachment, helping 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.²³

Public Historians and the Study of Memory

By and large the study of memory as the interaction of various versions of history and audiences in public is only beginning to be written. Only a few case studies have examined the complex relationships between public history and political culture, popular culture, and the culture of place-making in a particular place and time. And we are a long way from a synthesis of public historical practices over time, in the same way that we can isolate a historiography of the historical profession. At this point, the most common case studies trace the changing public history of a single event, such as the Civil War or Holocaust, in response to political currents.²⁴ Other studies, operating at a grander scale, contemplate changes in the forms and practices of remembering, tying those changes to the rise and decline of the nation-state as a political entity. Pierre Nora's often quoted essay "Between Memory and History" argues that forms of public history such as the museum, archives, and marked historical site replaced oral tradition and places held in memory at about the same time as the emergence of the modern nation-state in the eighteenth century created discontinuity with previous regimes, and geographical mobility imposed by modern capitalism undermined rooted knowledge of particular locales. But John Gillis and Charles Maier speculate that we are now in a post-nationalist era, when disillusion with the nation-state and modernity has produced an explosion of interest in local and family history.²⁵

23. Dolores Hayden's *Power of Place* project in Los Angeles sought not only to identify and mark places that commemorate the achievements of women, non-Anglos, and the working class, but also to situate those sites in a larger social and political history of the city. Hayden argues forcefully that the public representation of place should consist of two activities: (1) making visible previously obscured spaces and the history they represent, and (2) interpreting the built environment in terms of a "dynamic, aesthetic, social, and economic history of the production of space." Dolores Hayden, "The American Sense of Place and the Politics of Space," in *American Architecture: Innovation and Tradition*, eds. David G. DeLong, Helen Searing, Robert A. M. Stern (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), 191. Hayden describes her power of place projects in "The Power of Place: A Proposal for Los Angeles," *The Public Historian* 10 (Summer 1988): 5–18, and in *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

24. Among the best of these studies is Henry Rousso's *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944* (1991), which examines the changing representation of the Vichy period in postwar France, tying it to organized political movements as well as the deep structure of French political culture.

25. John Gillis, "Introduction," in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3–24; Charles Maier, "A Surfeit of Memory?"

As well as exploring the changing relationship of grassroots memories and invented national history, historians might examine other changes in public historical representations over time, such as the relationship between depictions of continuity and discontinuity with the immediate past. In the nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, events from the immediate past were routinely represented in public orations, parades, and historical pageants as part of a continuous succession of past, present, and future; but by the late 1920s, it was far more common to represent a single historical event rather than a sequence of events, and to choose that event from the distant past. In the words of David Lowenthal, the past became isolated as a foreign country, disconnected from present and future concerns. When and under what circumstances did we begin referring to something (or someone) as “history” when we meant it was over and done with, without ongoing significance for the future?²⁶

Besides comparisons over time, historians might compare public historical practices across cultures. David Lowenthal observes an essential similarity in how nations throughout the world have adopted the western use of the term “heritage”—although the content of each national heritage is by definition unique, the way that “heritage” is conceived as residing in objects, unique and exclusive, not shared with those residing outside national boundaries, is the same. In another kind of study, James Young’s *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (1993) compares the memorialization of the Holocaust in Germany, Poland, Austria, the U.S., and Israel, demonstrating how each nation’s version of the Holocaust was shaped by its political culture and incorporated into its national identity. Although examining national differences in historical practices is important, not all public history activity refers to the nation. Studies might compare urban and rural historical practices, or the historical practices of different social classes. Gender differences in public history work offer an especially interesting topic for cross-cultural comparison. Who does history, and how? It seems that in the U.S., men narrate history as a succession of events, whereas women curate history as a web of objects and places. But we have no studies of this phenomenon cross-culturally. These are only a few of the many possible directions for future investigation as memory becomes more established as a field of scholarship.²⁷

Reflections on History, Melancholy, and Denial,” *History and Memory* 5 (Fall/Winter 1993): 136–52.

26. I discuss this phenomenon as “the receding past” in *American Historical Pageantry* (1990); Charles Maier ties it to the waning power of national ideologies of progress in the late twentieth century. Maier, “A Surfeit of Memory? Reflections on History, Melancholy, and Denial,” *History and Memory* 5 (Fall/Winter 1993): 136–52.

27. David Lowenthal, “Identity, Heritage, and History,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 41–57. My observation concerning gender differences in memorialization is based on my reading of recent histories of historic preservation, such as James Lindgren, *Preserving the Old Dominion: Historic Preservation and Virginia Traditionalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

In conclusion, historians have a lot to learn from the new scholarship on memory. The organization of tradition in society has a history; understanding this history, and the history-making practices we have inherited from the past, not only places our contemporary practices in perspective, but also offers a new way for historians to ground their scholarly and professional identities beyond the customary historiography course. In my introductory graduate public history course, I regularly include a five-week unit consisting of (1) the changing culture of history-making over time, (2) history and autobiographical memory, (3) history and political culture, (4) history and popular culture, and (5) history and place as the common core for my students' more specialized studies later. Although future historians will work in a variety of professional settings, from museums and historical sites to colleges and universities, they can share a growing body of scholarship that concerns the relationship of history and audiences as a new foundation for professional training.

Public historians can play a leading role in the development of this scholarship. Unlike their colleagues in colleges and universities who write primarily for other historians, public historians routinely practice in multiple communities of discourse about the past. They confront the problem of historical representation on a daily basis, immersed in a world in which the boundaries between knower and known, between subjectivity and objectivity, have long been collapsed. Trained historians working in museums, historic sites, and community history projects encounter perspectives on the past they never would have encountered solely in the world of professional scholarship. In presenting history to the public, they soon discover that the public is presenting history back to them as well. It is time for some of the insights into the relationship of historians and audiences that come from this interaction to find their way back to the discourse of the larger historical profession. As political and economic currents increasingly compel the historical profession to rethink its relationship with the larger culture, historical practice will be transformed, whether historians like it or not. What Michael Frisch has called the shared authority of the public historical enterprise has profound implications for how all historians will do their work in the future. Public historians have interesting and valuable stories to tell, and the growing interest in the topic of memory by the larger historical profession suggests a new desire and willingness to hear them.