Fault lines
Four short observations on places of peace, trauma and contested remembrance

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Abstract

Preservation of historical remains is ridden with complexity. In particular, battle landscapes are multi-layered, with many different and intersecting ideas and meanings about identity, place and landscape production. This article explores the site of battle as a place of the imagination, as a site of continued dispute, a 'debatable land'. Focusing on contested terrain in northern Europe, the article also briefly examines the creation of new monuments in 'imperial' London and New York, suggesting that the lack of a dialogical rationale for such memorabilia fails to extend the language of remembrance, settling instead for monolithic forms that perpetuate the status quo, prioritizing the 'plinth' over more fluid forms of remembering.

Keywords

battlefields
commemoration
representation
remembrance
memorials

1. Water

In a lecture commissioned for the New York Public Library, and later published as 'The Site of Memory', Toni Morrison suggested that 'fictional' writing is rarely a product of total invention. It is, she argued, always an act of imagination bound up with memory. To affirm this point she drew an analogy between site and memory:

> You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally, the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and it is forever trying to get back to where it was.
>
> (Morrison 1990: 305)

Morrison's poetic image of a 'stream of memory' compelled to revisit an original site can be seen as integral to the relationship between geographical spaces and the construction of individual and collective remembering. Such 'syncretic interwining' of place, identity and memory is subject to a continuous evolution of meaning. Social memory forms emotional ties with specific geographies that are 'anchored in places past' and inevitably, during periods of national remembering those emotions are rendered in enduring forms of stone, bronze or brick (Johnson 2002: 294).

Figure 1: Wreath left at the Cenotaph, Bristol, March 2003.

Focusing on the monumental forms of the urban landscape, Boyer has described such manifestations as 'rhetorical topoi … civic compositions that teach us about our national heritage and our public responsibilities and assume that the urban landscape itself is the emblematic embodiment of power and memory' (Boyer 1996: 321). However, such didacticism rarely remains unopposed and, as Matsuda has shown, competition for the mnemonic spaces of cities has often been fierce and dramatic (Matsuda 1996: 6). If, as he contends, commemoration is always an act of evaluation, judgement and of 'speaking' which 'lends dignity to the identity of a group', then it is easy to see why, as Lefebvre argues, the commemorative process raises issues of territorial domination and the control of memory (Lefebvre 1991: 220). Not only are the meanings of monuments problematic but, as Lewis Mumford asserts, both monuments and revered sites soon become invisible because 'something has impregnated them against attention' (Mumford 1938: 435). They simply blend back into the undifferentiated landscape. They become invisible. The meaning of monuments, like memory itself, is profoundly unstable. It is hardly surprising that, after each of the world wars of the last century, the dialectic between remembering and forgetting has been a dominant theme in the discourses around commemoration and remembrance (Gillis 1994).

In Europe, such arguments have focused on the value of memory as invested in a knowable object (Mitchell 1990). The failure of nineteenth-century forms of monumentalism resulted from the fact that representational modes of commemoration, either plinth-based or architectural, could no longer convey the immensity of loss experienced in both world wars.

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Figure 2: 'Coffin', left at the Cenotaph, Bristol, April 2003.

Fixed statues, the 'heroes on horseback', the idols and the exalted induce not awe but a reified memory that quickly results in national amnesia (Young 1992). Memory is fluid and contingent and, as many contemporary European artists have pointed out, it is neither possible nor desirable to insist on a single, objective and authoritative reading of any one place or historic moment. The counter-monuments created in post-unification Germany are designed 'to register protest or disagreement with an unten-able prime object' - the plinth-bound, exalted statue - and to set up a process of reflection and debate, however uncomfortable or radical (Michalski 1998: 207). Analysing what he refers to as the western 'anxiety of erasure' engendered by bourgeois culture, Lacquer has asserted, in a similar vein, that figurative simulation has long been inadequate to the task entrusted to it. Instead, 'the thing itself must do because representation can no longer be relied on' (Lacquer 1996).

In many instances, however, 'the thing' is little more than a cleared and uncluttered tract of land to which historic significance is attached. Indeed, it is possible to trace a developing commemorative strategy vested in locales of embodied potentiality that can be traced from the preservation of the battlefield of Gettysburg in 1863 via the barren ash hills around Verdun (Horne 1962), to such Second World War sites as the beaches of Normandy, the 'martyred village' of Oradour, and eventually to Hiroshima (Gough 2000: 216). In each place the moral resonance of the site itself is paramount. Ditches, mounds, ruins and apparently barren tracts have been maintained because they are seen as 'historical traces' whose authority eclipses the untenable artifice of the commemorative object. Nonetheless,

Figure 3: Bouquet, left at the Cenotaph, Bristol, April 2003.

the semiotics of commemorative spatiality are complex because, as Bender points out, spaces are 'political, dynamic, and contested' and so 'constantly open to renegotiation' (Bender 1983: 276).

This difficulty notwithstanding, a semiotics of place has been clearly articulated by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who was compelled by the qualities of particular sites and examined their role in the formation of collective memory. 'Space', wrote Halbwachs, 'is a reality that endures', it can unite groups of individuals and believers concentrating and 'moulding its character to theirs' (Halbwachs 1980). When compared with 'monumentalia' and transient objects, certain geographical locations appear to offer a sense of legitimate permanence that draws pilgrims to sites that 'place' or 'contain' the memory of overwhelming events. The terrain around the Brandenburg Gate, Les Invalides, the 'raised knoll' in downtown Dallas, perhaps even Tiananmen Square, might be regarded as secular shrines that are capable of rekindling memories of awesome, globally significant events.

Perhaps nowhere are the issues indicated above more urgent than in the controversies that surround how we remember and represent the Holocaust. In the absence of convincing memorials the sites chosen to remember the Holocaust are crucial to the national and popular imagination as it comes to address this event. This is especially true of those places where 'unmanaged ecological succession threatens to erase history' (Charlesworth and Addis 2002). Koonz, in an analysis of the commemorative hinterland around Nazi concentration camps, suggests that whereas we know that written texts are 'infinitely malleable' and readily abridged,
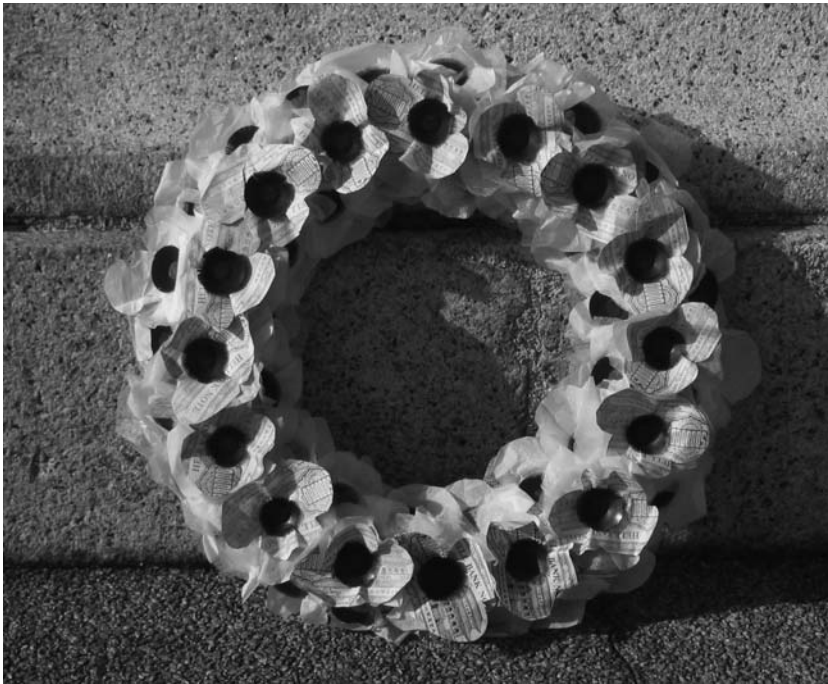
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Figure 4: Wreath of white paper poppies, left at Penang memorial to the First World War, May 2004.

films edited and photographs airbrushed, the landscape feels immutable. Only geography, she argues, is capable of conveying the narrative of extermination: 'At these places of remembering, memory feels monolithic, unambiguous, and terrible' (Koonz 1994: 258).

2. Stone
I was sitting in a cubicle. I remember there were no windows, just a grubby desk, a big expensive-looking microphone and some coloured lights. On the headphones I could hear several disembodied voices, almost whispering. Then a neutral voice counting me into a conversation, a three-way discussion with louder voices. At one end, the anchor - a well-known 'radio voice', difficult to visualize, but expertly practised; on the other end another well-known voice; indomitable, certain, unflinching: 'There is a clear need for this in the heart of the capital; it's about time their memory was realized in physical form. Why have we, the women of this country and empire, had to wait so long?'

I was asked - as an 'academic' - about the history of monumentalism, the passion for stone and bronze in the sad aftermath of the First World War. It was difficult not to appear glib; I spoke about the permeability of memory, the invisibility of most stone monuments, the fugitive nature of remembering. I even asked why 'the women' of the country should want another stone and bronze edifice. Were there not enough of them [monuments, not women] already? My political adversary made short work of that

Figure 5: Flowers, left at the Cenotaph, Whitehall, April 2004.

idea. She had certainly seen off tougher debaters than me, and was one of those people who answer each question with a negative. 'No. We have raised the money, thousands of women in this country have contributed. No. It is an essential project.' In parallel monologue we debated a little further, but she would brook no opposition, no sympathy with my counter-monument proposals: a garden, an annual festival, a national scholarship scheme, a big idea that would engage with the 'process' of remembering, something inclusive and participative. It smacked of being 'alternative' - not in the sense of a different choice, just too tricksy, too subtle, lacking substance. 'No. We will realize this vision in bronze and stone.' Or was it 'stone and bronze'? I left the studio convinced it would never happen. Not after Lady Di and the empty plinth, not after the national memorial garden, and the tons of bouquets in St. James's Palace.

3. Scissors
Wandering over the sites of the Battle of Gettysburg in the United States of America, and musing on the manner in which we help to create 'significant' landscapes, Robert Harbison has suggested that 'serious tourists' actually help monumentalize the landscapes they pass through, 'classicising them by concentrating on certain nodes of significance which acquire ceremonial eminence' whatever their outward condition (Harbison 1991: 138). The role of the 'serious' tourist, he argues, is essentially reconstructive. At no point is this more evident than in the constructions of 'spectacles of memory' often staged on former battlefields. These invariably take the form of choreographed events - re-enactments, last stands, famous victories - and tend

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to be focused on a particular motif or historic locale. Mass battlefield pilgrimage - such as those that took place across northern France and Belgium in the wake of the Great War - brought about a consensual collapsing of time into place (Rainey 1983: 76). As the pilgrims passed through the devastated landscape, they left behind vast numbers of stone markers, obelisks, monuments and memorial detritus. Such public monuments can no longer be considered as innocent aesthetic embellishments of the public sphere. Instead, attention has to be refocused on their contextual 'spatiality', where (as Johnson argues) the sites are not merely the material backdrop from which a story is told, but places where the spaces themselves constitute the meaning by becoming both a physical location and a sight line of interpretation (Johnson 2002). Preservation and 'reconstruction' of such sites has accelerated recently, alongside a compulsive consumption of personal and public history, and the democratization (some might say privatization) of the past. The former lines of the Western Front, for example, are now liberally furnished with private, regional, local and 'ethnic' memorial markers, where once the 'imperial' ideal stood for all. Winter has drawn important parallels between sites of battle, sites of memory and sites of mourning, identifying three phases in the evolution of commemorative spaces (Winter 1995). First, there is an initial, creative phase involving the construction of a 'commemorative form'; it is marked by monument-building and the creation of ceremony; second, the 'grounding of ritual action in the calendar' through a process of institutionalization and routinization that takes place within the defined commemorative space; and finally, there is the crucial stage during which the sites of memory are either transformed or disappear, a process that is largely contingent on whether a second generation of mourners inherits the earlier meanings attached to the place or event and is able to add new meanings. Without frequent reinscription, the date and place of commemoration simply fades away as memory atrophies. In this scenario, the commemorative space loses its potency to reinvigorate memory and vanishes from view (Winter 2000: 24).

As hallowed sites of national memory, the identification and preservation of a battlefield as a physical site can help maintain a consciousness of the past which, as Lowenthal argues, is 'essential to maintenance of purpose in life, since without memory we would lack all sense of continuity, all apprehension of causality, all knowledge of our identity' (Lowenthal 1985: 103).

Few former battlefields contain such historic tensions as the barren slopes of Gallipoli in south-western Turkey (Aspinall-Oglander 1929). National Australian myth has insisted that it was on these bloody ravines that 'modern Australia' was forged. This assumption ignores the fact that great numbers of British, French and New Zealand troops were engaged in the eleven-month campaign. During the 1920s - despite the fact that Turkey controlled the terrain, having 'won' the campaign, though lost the war - the Imperial War Graves Commission carried out its work collecting, naming and reburying the dead and marking their graves with the sober, classical architecture that is a hallmark of the period (Longworth 1967).

In the past decade the tension about who controls the historic perspective is being revived, as a wave of statues have been installed by the Turkish authorities. This new generation of memorials takes the form of giant striding figures, each cast in bronze and mounted on solid, imposing pedestals (Gough 1996). They make a strange and uncomfortable contrast to the restrained neo-classical architecture of the Allied war cemeteries. Perhaps the most dramatic contrast is to be seen on the summit of Chunuk Bair, a gullied and sandy hill above Anzac Beach, where a gigantic 20-metre stone obelisk commemorates the New Zealand divisions that fought and died there. A few yards away (and a few inches taller than the granite obelisk) is the Conkbayiri Ataturk Memorial: a vast statue of the commander, Mustafa Kemal, later known as Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey (von Sanders 1927: 63).They stand yards apart, both seeming to share the dry contested crown of the hill, but also ignoring each other's right to be there, speaking in 'parallel monologues, acting as if the other were not present' (Ayliffe et al. 1991).

4. Paper

It is July 2005, not yet two years since that other parallel monologue in conterminous sound-proofed booths. There, in the middle of London's political quarter, a robust stone and bronze cube sits squat in Whitehall. Intended to be expressive of the 'courage and resilience of British women who served their country during the Second World War' it was unveiled amidst the litany of events celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Several hundred yards away is the restrained white slab of the Cenotaph, several miles away is the more recent memorial to the animals that have suffered in war. Commenting ruefully on the commemorative clutter that is filling our overfurnished cities, A.A. Gill wondered in *The Times* at the peculiar order of things. Very British, he thinks, first, the men; then the animals; lastly, the women.

As if to compensate, every aspect of the unveiling ceremony was gendered. Five military helicopters - Apache, Sea King, Lynx, Chinook and Merlin - thundered overhead, each flown by female pilots from the three services. Soon after, these are pursued by two Tornado F3 jets, also with women at the controls. As the thousands of women veterans leave the unveiling, the memorial that took months of lobbying, tens - probably hundreds - of thousands of pounds to erect, lapses back into the habitual invisibility that is the hallmark of much street furniture. To repeat Lewis Mumford's lines: there is nothing more invisible than a monument, it is both fugitive and permanent, but essentially unstable because memory itself is contingent and constantly in a state of negotiation.

How different it might have been had the argument held for something fluid, something temporal: a garden, a scholarship, an event, a moment of annual homage to the 'invisible' combatants of the world wars, those women who maintained the Home Front and whose contribution was often invisible, overlooked and taken for granted.

It was the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles, working in New York, who suggested the most brilliant, potent, idea to commemorate those who had died in the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in 2001. Recognizing that it had been these very people - the quiet, the low-paid, the humble and the overlooked; the office workers, cleaners and porters - who had been the victims that morning, she proposed that for one day every year, on the anniversary of the tragedy, it would be expected that the executives, the bosses, the managers would - for one day only - be *nice* to those menial labourers who are the invisible cadre of urban commerce. Better than any angular memorial, or garden of remembrance, it would be those thousand acts of small kindness and humble recognition that would act as a living and appropriate memorial.

As of yesterday the idea has yet to take root. Instead, it is the metal cube in Whitehall, the fountain in Hyde Park, the jagged monument over Ground Zero that seems to grip the public imagination. Ukeles's call for small tokens of appreciation was stillborn, as infertile as the dust that coated the Manhattan avenues, overlooked and undervalued.

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Suggested citation:

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