Public Memory, Race, and Ethnicity
To my wife Amy, who keeps me connected.

To my parents, who introduced me to love and learning.

To Stephen Browne, who taught me how to read.
One of the most powerful ways of challenging and ultimately destroying the ideology of white supremacy, the myth of white superiority, and the narrative of white domination is to unearth sites of resistive memory, history, and practice.

—MICHAEL ERIC DY SON, Open Mike
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INTRODUCTION

PUBLIC MEMORY, RACE, AND ETHNICITY

G. MITCHELL REYES

Given the increasing inter-disciplinary interest in public memory, one might assume the concept to be old. Prior to the twentieth century, however, memory was primarily considered an individual phenomenon. Not until the 1920s did Maurice Halbwachs—a student of Durkheim and his notion of conscious collective—develop the concept of collective memory, challenging the predominantly mentalist model for understanding memory found in the work of Bergson and others.1 In essence, Halbwachs argued that memory could not exist beyond the social realm. “No memory,” wrote Halbwachs, “is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections.”2 Halbwachs wanted to understand how the past recurred and how certain features of the past were repeatedly memorialized. He maintained that social institutions such as the family or religion provided the frameworks for individual remembrance. The past, for Halbwachs, was not an objective or disinterested tapestry of facts. Rather, the recollection of the past was always filtered through the frameworks of the present, transforming yesterday into an intelligible and meaningful story for today. Classical theories of memory study the “preservation [of memories] before giving an account of their recall,” and Halbwachs held that this latter process was patently social and political.3 On Collective Memory was a groundbreaking book because it located memory in collectivity rather than the individual; moreover, it argued that the invocation of the past always happened through the present and was therefore influenced by contemporary political structures.

Countless studies of public memory have proliferated in the wake of Halbwachs’s insights, taking into consideration everything from oral history to autobiography, museums to commemorative practice. Among these studies issues of race and ethnicity often play a prominent role, for differences in mnemonic practice frequently emerge along racial and
ethnic borders. The present volume contributes to the broad and rapidly expanding interdisciplinary study of public memory, race, and ethnicity. By bringing together scholars from various disciplines, *Public Memory, Race, and Ethnicity* seeks to promote increased understanding of the relationship between practices of remembrance and perceptions of race and ethnicity.

While a thorough analysis of the rise of race and ethnicity in memory studies is beyond the scope of this introduction, a brief review of the central issues such attention raises may be useful. A shared interest in questions of identity is prevalent in public memory studies. Halbwachs himself made the initial link between collective memory and identity when he wrote, "We preserve memories of each epoch in our lives and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by a continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated." Here public memory—or, more precisely, the practices of remembrance—function as pieces of a larger puzzle of identity formation. Academics analyze mnemonic practices to comprehend the influence of remembrance on identity. In this sense, the scholar acts as *bricoleur*, building from the fragments of public memory a basis for understanding the role of remembrance in identity formation.

The analysis of race and ethnicity in memory studies has been crucial to understanding the relationship between memory and identity; it has been, for example, vital to undermining the nineteenth-century dream of a unitary collective identity. That dream, scholars such as Pierre Nora have shown, envisioned the merger of memory and the nation in the nation state, which was meant to articulate a single and unified national identity. To study the mnemonic practices of racial and ethnic groups, however, is to acknowledge the existence of multiple publics and multiple identities. Studies of race and ethnicity have thus revealed perhaps more starkly than any other line of research that there is no such thing as a monolithic national identity to which a unitary public memory might correspond, only practices of remembrance situated in time and enacted by discrete groups.

An emphasis on race and ethnicity has thus revealed the multiplicity of memory; but it has also exposed whiteness as the invisible hand of official public memory. Indeed, part of the promise of scholarship in this vein has been to illuminate the taken-for-granted, normative force of whiteness in conventional public memories and to challenge the official record with counter-memories—alternative versions of the past that illuminate the present in new ways. As Michael Dyson eloquently states, "one of the most powerful ways of challenging and ultimately destroying the ideology of white supremacy, the myth of white superiority, and the narrative of white domination is to unearth sites of resistive memory, history, and
practice.” Houston Baker, Jr. works along these lines when he develops the notion of “black critical memory,” which calls to account narratives of the past that conveniently omit details of racial history. James Loewen’s research on high school social studies textbooks likewise seeks to challenge the official historical narrative, showing how these textbooks whitewash American history, robbing young citizens of historical understanding in the process.

At the very least, then, these studies have effected major changes in how scholars think of the relationship between public memory and identity. Not only have they opened space for plurality, they have also increased skepticism of “official History.” Kendall Phillips summarizes the point concisely: “As claims to a singular authoritative ‘History’ became increasingly (and rightly) untenable in the face of compelling critiques leveled by poststructural and multicultural critics, scholars turned to the notion of memory, or perhaps more accurately ‘memories,’ as a way of understanding the complex interrelationships among past, present, and future.”

Studies of memory, race, and ethnicity were a major force in this shift, helping scholars illuminate both old and contemporary racial tensions through the practices of remembrance that form and maintain collective identities.

Public Memory, Race, and Ethnicity contributes to this rapidly expanding scholarly conversation. Taken together, the essays in this volume make three specific contributions: First, the volume offers a rare opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue. Scholars in all fields are terrible worriers, especially about the health of their resumes, departments, and disciplines. While that attribute has some positive effects, it often results in a certain amount of disciplinary gatekeeping, making it more difficult for interdisciplinary conversations to take place. Being a naturally transdisciplinary field, memory studies suffers especially from this tendency. The present volume is an intervention against the protectionist policies of academia. Readers interested in memory, race, and ethnicity will, therefore, find in this volume a variety of scholarly approaches and a wealth of resources for thinking about the intersections between memory, race, and ethnicity.

While the volume celebrates this interdisciplinary diversity as an inherent strength, the essays also offer two additional contributions that allow them to form a coherent whole. One might think of the first as methodological. For taken together, the essays recommend not only a general attention to memory, race, and ethnicity, but also the need to attend to the rhetorical dynamics of specific practices of remembrance. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the broader theoretical issues related to
remembrance and racial identity appear to be best illuminated in critical case studies of particular acts of remembrance. But what holds the essays together, beyond a common interest in case studies of memory, race, and ethnicity, is a consistent focus on the rhetorical dimensions of memory. Although many of the contributors are not trained in rhetorical studies, they nevertheless attend to the ways in which mnemonic practices become meaningful through symbolic action—a concern that has long been central to rhetorical studies. Rhetoric here might be conceived broadly as a critical vocabulary interested in the power of symbolic and discursive inducement, the practical effects of the visible and the sayable. Thought this way, rhetoric is not “empty talk,” nor is it sophisticated political discourse. Rhetoric is not synonymous with persuasion, or language, or the effective use of argument. Rather, rhetoric names a set of critical tools developed over thousands of years out of the careful study of symbolic action. In saying this I do not intend to dismiss the various disciplinary approaches represented in the volume. Rather, in reading these essays I have simply become convinced that there is a larger methodological force at work, namely, the emergence of a rhetorical hermeneutic for reading public memory, race, and ethnicity.

This rhetorical hermeneutic might be said to have three foci: the first underscores a commitment to the particular, that is, to the idea that the meaningfulness of remembrance only emerges within a situated, temporal moment. Such a commitment rejects the notion that one can understand public memory in a purely theoretical manner, abstracted from the publics that enact it. The second attends to the contested nature of public memory. This is especially important for understanding memory, race, and ethnicity as so much of mnemonic practice around these issues seeks to challenge the status quo. The third highlights the symbolic nature of memory’s expression. Public memory is not an object, it is a practice; expression is its lifeblood. And the form of public memory’s expression is always mediated symbolically. Here is where a rhetorical hermeneutic for public memory becomes most useful. For rhetoric as an analytic approach is primarily occupied with tracing the influence of symbolic action. Indeed, a rhetorical approach to remembrance is uniquely qualified to illuminate the textual and symbolic dimensions of remembrance that shape racial and ethnic identities.

Taken as a whole, then, a rhetorical hermeneutic operates by tacking back and forth between text and context, symbol and situation, seeking always to understand both the production and reception of public memory. Such work is committed to understanding not just the political and social influence of historical knowledge, but also its symbolic and discursive
construction. One can see this hermeneutic at work in the opening essay, where Stephen Browne explores the racial and ethnic borders of memory that emerge in the writings of both immigrant and ex-slave; or in Thomas Sabatini’s analysis of the intertwining of mnemonic, racial, and labor politics in the Youngstown steel district; or in Mark McPhail’s study of racial politics in the visual and material logics of two monuments. In each case, rhetorical concepts are used to unpack the layers of symbolic meaning in mnemonic practice, all with the attendant hope of illuminating memory’s role in constituting racial and ethnic identities.

The third major contribution of this volume regards the specific content of the essays gathered here. In the hope of providing coherence, I have limited the scope of the volume to problems of memory, race, and ethnicity as they have emerged in the United States since the Civil War. Doing so has at least two benefits: first, it avoids the pitfall of making global claims about the nature of race and remembrance that so often flatten out significant differences across national boundaries and cultural contexts; second, what the volume sacrifices in breadth it makes up for in depth. In fact, limiting the volume in this way has given rise to perhaps its most significant contribution to the literature; namely, a historical treatment of the role of memory in the formation and transformation of racial and ethnic identity in the United States. The essays in this volume often speak to each other in remarkable ways, and one can begin to see in their progression the transformation of race relations in America since the nineteenth century. I have elected to organize the essays in a chronological manner to allow readers to see this historical progression for themselves.

**Memory, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States**

Stephen Browne’s essay serves as an excellent point of departure for the volume. He begins by making a case for a rhetorical approach to studying public memory; thereafter, he elaborates on the concept of border memory, and then examines the mnemonic practices found in three sets of nineteenth-century memory texts: Chinese poetry, Scandinavian letters home, and “public expressions of a runaway slave.” Browne gives voice to the tensions of memory and forgetting concomitant with the desires for assimilation and resistance in each of his case studies. There is, Browne’s study suggests, no easy analogy between forgetting/remembering::assimilation/resistance. Rather, across these diverse texts and radically different circumstances he finds only the rhetorical process of negotiating one’s relationship to past and present. Assimilation, in other words, does
not simply call sojourners to forget their past—as if that were possible—but rather to dissociate one’s self from one’s past, to emancipate one’s self, to insist, in Browne’s words, “on the pastness of the past.” Likewise, resistance does not simply mean an unforgiving memory—static and merciless. Browne shows how Frederick Douglass used remembrance in his famous oration, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July,” to reframe the dominant American narrative into an argument for emancipation. As such, Browne’s essay offers a nuanced treatment of the myriad tensions inherent to memory, race, and ethnicity in the nineteenth century.

Maureen Reed extends Browne’s opening provocations by considering the converging tensions of ethnicity and gender in monumental representations of Sacagawea; Reed begins with the first monument of Sacagawea built in 1905 and then traces the representational influence of Sacagawea throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. Although scholars have long taken an interest in monumental representations of women, few have considered the convergence of gender and ethnicity. Reed finds that Sacagawea was a useful symbol not only for the women’s suffrage movement, but also of ethnic assimilation. Thus, in Sacagawea’s monumental form Reed sees a compelling example of the “conservative” forces of remembrance that work to “uphold, rather than re-think, existing ideas about gender and ethnicity.” Interestingly, Reed observes that although one can find both traditional and progressive representations of white women in the early twentieth century, one can only find traditional representations of ethnic women. Whereas Frederick Douglass is seen in Browne’s rendering to make use of public memory for progressive ends and, in this way, to become an agent of public memory’s expression, in Sacagawea one sees the forces of racial fear and patriarchy prevail.

Like Reed, Thomas Sabatini’s essay also offers a glimpse of memory, race and ethnicity in the early twentieth century. Sabatini’s study traces the racial politics of the Youngstown steel district, where he uncovers an intriguing set of racial politics: initially defined as “foreigners,” eastern and southern Europeans evolved in time into “white ethnics.” Sabatini shows that through the “white ethnic” subject position these immigrants were able to forget their own historical marginalization and oppression, rewrite their historical relationship with Black America, and foreclose any opportunity for productive bi-racial politics. As is so often the case, this process of dissociation among minorities was initiated and promoted by economic desperation. Sowing the seeds of racism, wealthy business owners imported Blacks to break the earliest strikes of European “foreigners.” Blacks were seen as taking a certain perverse pleasure in strikebreaking, and European immigrants found an easy scapegoat for their
problems. In this way a double division along racial and ethnic lines emerged in Youngstown: one racially charged between blacks and whites and one ethnically charged between Americans and foreigners.

Yet by the late twentieth century little of Youngstown’s racial strife is remembered. Instead, stories of working class struggle and inter-racial friendship take center stage as racial discrimination fades into memory’s background. In these stories, Sabatini observes, one can find the seeds of the myth of meritocracy that often renders racial histories invisible. “Thus the price of whiteness,” Sabatini concludes, “demanded of ‘white ethnics’ not only complicity in the exploitation of racial subordinates, but the erasure of racial supremacy wherever it existed. Their denial of their own past—as racially exploited, as set in conflict with Blacks—creates a chasm between ‘white ethnic’ memories, their actual history, and their political present.” Sabatini’s essay thus illuminates the fodder memory provides white collective identity as “based on the expectation of privilege but also guilt and the denial of past violence.” Indeed, the benefits of the subtle shift in identification was double, simultaneously allowing European immigrants to separate themselves from the “Negroes” of the time and take a major step toward American assimilation.

Thus, one can read Browne, Reed, and Sabatini together as establishing a broad sense of the importance of mnemonic practice to racial and ethnic politics. Browne observes the tensions of remembering and forgetting for both immigrant and ex-slave, Reed attends to the logics of representation and their connection to issues of gender and ethnicity in monumental form, and Sabatini offers a cautionary tale on the forces of amnesia and erasure when it comes to American racial history. Each essay underscores the complex problems of sameness and difference, assimilation and cultural recalcitrance, authority and resistance that marked remembrance at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

Memory, Race, and Ethnicity after World War II

The next three essays show that the struggles over remembering and forgetting in the nineteenth century continued into the twentieth. Janis Edwards’s piece is especially insightful in this regard, examining the practices of remembrance surrounding Japanese-American internment during the Second World War. Edwards’s essay illuminates the forces of assimilation that allowed internment to fade into silence in the decades after World War II. In this sense, Edwards’s work connects explicitly with Sabatini’s in its focus on memory’s absence. Edwards notes that overt practices of remembrance of Japanese-American internment, including
memoirs, autobiographies, and monuments, only began in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Edwards traces the evolution of these practices, with special attention to the generational differences in remembrance among Japanese-Americans. Edwards ultimately argues that the theme of the “untold story” helps explain the eventual explosion of remembrance of Japanese internment.

Mark Lawrence McPhail’s essay continues the emphasis on memory and erasure seen in Sabatini and Edwards. McPhail’s study begins with an overview of scholarship on visual and material rhetorics, clearly articulating the benefits of a rhetorical approach to public memory and ethnicity. In previous research, however, McPhail sees a disturbing theme of optimism about the potentially transformative force of post-modern monumentalization and rhetorical critique. He argues that such academic optimism conceals the distance between word and deed as well as the predominant amnesia-inducing qualities of monuments dedicated to racialized events. In demonstration of these qualities, McPhail creates an unlikely union between two events and their memorialization: Freedom Summer and Kent State. Both events were tragic and both marked the death of white people, yet the memorial to Freedom Summer is radically different from that of the Kent State shootings. Where the Freedom Summer memorial celebrates the event in a specific and concrete manner, the Kent State memorial offers only highly abstract references. McPhail suggests that the differences in logics of remembering and forgetting between these two memorials can be understood through the lens of racial recovery. In Freedom Summer those who died become martyrs in the fight against racism, whereas the shooting at Kent State offers no possibility of being weaved into the narrative of white racial innocence. Freedom Summer is remembered in a concrete, diachronic manner because it is easily integrated into the heroic narrative of white America. Kent State is remembered in an abstract, synchronic manner because it interrupts the racialized narrative that positions white Americans as free from state sanctioned violence. McPhail’s study thus offers a sobering analysis of the potential of mnemonic practice to “transform racial history and identity.”

The theme of memory and identity takes on a new dimension in the final essay in this group. Amy Heuman and Catherine Langford explore the institutional production of identity through ritual and tradition. Specifically, Heuman and Langford analyze rituals of remembrance at Texas A&M University, arguing that these rituals can best be understood through White Southern Confederate ideals of whiteness. The authors find these rituals perform three rhetorical functions: they constitute and/or reify traditional notions of white southern identity; they produce a way of
knowing through the lens of traditional notions of whiteness; and they regulate practices and performances of identity in the college community. Heuman and Langford’s analysis reveals the powerful hegemonic forces of ritual commemoration, its facility for interrupting critical reflection, and its capacity to ultimately cloak traditional ideologies of whiteness, often rendering them invisible to the very participants who perpetuate them.

Taken together, the essays by Edwards, McPhail, and Heuman and Langford illuminate the practices of remembrance throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. In them one sees the recalcitrance of memory, the struggle of racialized groups to assert their own memories, and the institutionalized production of memory and identity.

**Memory, Race, and Ethnicity in the Twenty-First Century**

The final three essays in the volume illuminate the politics of public memory, race, and ethnicity at the end of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Kendall Phillips and Catherine Thomas trace the negotiation of race and place in the literary work of Walter Mosley. Mosley, one of the most prominent African-American novelists of the twenty-first century to write about issues of racial remembrance, offers a poignant narrative on the intersections of race, space, and memory in his 2004 novel *The Man in My Basement*. In their essay, Phillips and Thomas seek to illuminate the rhetorical form of Mosley’s memory work, with special attention to the ways in which the novel works to render memories visible. In this sense, the essay makes an important contribution not only to discussions of memory, race, and ethnicity, but also to our understanding of how one can study public memory. For in their emphasis on the processes by which memories are made public (rendered visible), Phillips and Thomas offer an unconventional scholarly approach that can serve as an alternative to traditional studies of the circulation and contestation of public memory. In their study of fiction as a medium of mnemonic invention, Phillips and Thomas also underscore the problem of authority and memory, that is, the problem of who has the power to produce, authorize, and authenticate public memory. Phillips and Thomas ultimately argue that *The Man in My Basement* authorizes readers to consider not only how whites and blacks relate to one another in the United States, but also how each group relates to the past.

The theme of authority and memory continues in Nathaniel Cordova’s and G. Mitchell Reyes’s essay, which explores the strategies of remembrance in President George H. W. Bush’s 2006 address to the NAACP. In 2006 Bush’s address was marked by tension: in the previous
six years of his administration, he had refused to speak to the NAACP and had only hosted the Congressional Black Caucus once. Several exigencies thus marked the occasion: first, Bush needed to diffuse the tension generated by six years of seemingly slighting the African-American community. Second, he needed to identify with his audience. And, finally, he needed to try to reconcile his Conservative agenda with the traditionally liberal political perspective of his audience. In short, Bush needed a transcendent narrative that could overcome the vast differences between himself and a potentially hostile audience. Apparently, Bush thought he found such a narrative in the conventional, whitewashed version of American racial history he delivered. In this narrative the past is caricatured through simple binaries such as master and slave, perpetrator and victim. As it progresses, however, white Americans largely escape the role of perpetrators—even being described as the agents of black liberation—while black Americans remain—with few exceptions—victims. Extending McPhail’s concept of racial recovery to Bush’s speech, Cordova and Reyes find it curious that while the history Bush narrates liberates whites from their racist past—recovering their racial innocence—there is no equivalent rhetorical movement for black Americans. In this way, Bush re-authorizes a public memory that shackles African-Americans to the role of victim, ever the subject of historical forces beyond their control.

Questions of power, authority, and memory in the twenty-first century find final expression in Rae Lynn Schwartz-DuPre’s analysis of visual representations of Katrina. Schwartz-DuPre’s essay examines the myriad interpretations of perhaps the most iconic photograph of the Katrina disaster, the Flag Woman image. In these diverse discourses, which often worked toward opposing goals, Schwartz-DuPre observes a shift in the way Katrina victims were framed in the media: Katrina victims, Schwartz-DuPre shows, were initially referred to as “refugees.” Only later was that term rejected and replaced by “citizen.” Schwartz-DuPre argues that when the label of refugee was rejected several rhetorical opportunities were lost, foremost of which was the opportunity to highlight the class based and race based degradation of urban populations that Katrina exposed. Moving from refugee to citizen concealed that degradation, cloaking it in the traditional American language of rugged individualism. Thus, Schwartz-DuPre concludes, many of the hardest hit communities were ill served by the label “citizen” and would have been better served by the notion of the refugee-citizen.

Together, the final three essays focus the reader’s attention on the power-politics of memory, race, and ethnicity in the twenty-first century.
Phillips and Thomas attend to the ways fiction can create space for mnemonic invention, calling forth and making public alternative memories of America’s racial past; Cordova and Reyes examine the authoritative use of conventional public memory in presidential discourse; and Schwartz-DuPre reveals how a shift in terminology can significantly influence what aspects of memory are emphasized and what elements are ignored.

The Horizon of Memory, Race, and Ethnicity

Each essay in this volume analyzes the dynamics of memory, race, and ethnicity in a particular case study and should be read as such. To link them too intimately, to seek too many overarching themes, would run the risk of concealing what is sui generis in each. Indeed, part of the promise of these critical case studies is their capacity to reveal the excess one finds in mnemonic practice to any theoretical concept that might try to account for it. While recognizing the autonomy of each case study, however, I am simultaneously struck by a certain horizon of intelligibility of memory, race, and ethnicity that begins to emerge from the volume as a whole.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that horizon was marked by the inscription and reinscription of racialized borders. In the aftermath of the Civil War it is not hard to understand why. For that war not only devastated the country and freed the slaves, it also challenged much of previously entrenched public memory. What role would the South have in the union? How would the freedmen be integrated into the American narrative? How would immigrants flocking to the United States assimilate? These were just some of the questions that preoccupied the body politic, and too often the response was to use memory to create borders along racial and ethnic differences, many of which—the opening essays show—persist today.

Fortunately, the horizon of memory is ever-shifting, shaped as much by the present and the future as by the past. In the latter half of twentieth century the practices of remembrance are characterized not so much by the inscription of new racial borders as the challenging of old ones. The empowerment of women and minorities during and after World War II gave way to challenges to conventional public memory and the traditional roles for women and minorities that traveled with it. Counter-memory and resistance thus become prominent themes in struggles over the meaning of race and ethnicity during this period. The essays gathered here, however, serve as a corrective to the overly optimistic, showing that even as resistance to traditional racial categories emerged, powerful conservative
forces still largely controlled the production of public memory—especially in monumental form.

In the twenty-first century, one sees the horizon of memory, race, and ethnicity shift again. While contestation is still prominent, there is an equal emphasis on authority and authenticity. This is no doubt a sign of the times. When one can so easily manipulate mnemonic representations, splicing and cutting and cobbled together with new media technologies, questions of authority and authenticity necessarily emerge. At the same time, digital technology has made it possible to record and archive on a scale never before possible. While this is a net positive, one potentially negative effect is that communities must no longer decide what is worthy of remembrance. In the absence of such decisions communities may begin to lose a sense of the importance of memory and tradition, fragmenting in the process. Amidst such fragmentation traditional positions of authority begin to lose their cultural capital as racial and ethnic identities open to potentially radical transformation.

For better or worse, this is where the present volume leaves the reader: in a complex and often conflicted sea of memory. The forces of globalization only promise more complexity in the future. This volume marks an attempt to trace the shifting tides of memory, race, and ethnicity in the hopes of offering some insight into the influence of memory in the emergence and evolution of racial and ethnic identities in the United States. My hope is that such work may open productive lines of inquiry and critique, rendering the study of memory, race, and ethnicity both more pressing and more complex.

* * *

The interdisciplinary dialogue that gave rise to this volume began at an international, interdisciplinary conference on public memory, race, and ethnicity at Lewis & Clark College in 2007, but it was made possible by a number of individuals and institutions. First and foremost, the conference and subsequent volume would not have been possible without the generous support of President Thomas Hochstettler, Dean Julio de Paula, and the College of Arts and Sciences. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Department of Communication, who gave generously of their time and energy.

A number of individuals were crucial to the success of this endeavor. My colleagues Reiko Hillyer and Maureen Reed offered invaluable support. Trevor Steele, my student research assistant, has skills of organization that I envy and sorely lack. Kendall Phillips, both a colleague
and a friend, has been enormously kind in offering guidance throughout the process. Terry Moore has been an excellent administrative and editorial assistant. Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank my wife Amy Wing for her support, patience, and love.

Notes


7. See Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-25. This dream of a singular public identity also can be seen, as Michael Olick observes, in the efforts during the nineteenth century to build “one grand story of descent and progress” (Olick, *The Politics of Regret* 188).

13. Kirk Savage makes this painfully obvious in his excellent work *Standing Soldier, Kneeling Slave*.
14. Nora expresses this concern eloquently in his essay “Between Memory and History.”
PART I:

THE BORDERS OF MEMORY, RACE, AND ETHNICITY
CHAPTER ONE

ON THE BORDERS OF MEMORY

STEPHEN HOWARD BROWNE

Of the many insights generated from recent work in memory studies, three are especially pertinent to the aims of this essay. First, we now understand that the past is scarcely a distant and objective reality, but proximal and deeply embedded into the fabric of lived experience. This much implies at least that such pasts as we summon for present purposes are not given, but constructed; we are all memory makers, seeking to invent and deploy versions of ourselves to maximum advantage. Second, we know that while the past can be and often is oppressive, we nonetheless confront it by making choices; that is, we are agents of as well as subject to that which has been. Our range of choices may be broad or severely circumscribed; certain effects of the past may be beyond our control; but as human beings we have at least some say in how we shall attune ourselves to our own history. And third, we appreciate the fact that the act of remembrance—the willful or affective placement of the past in the present—is decisively shaped by the borders we inhabit. In this sense, remembrance is literally grounded by the material and symbolic locations in which that act takes place. To the extent that we often (always?) occupy several such locations at any given time, it follows that remembrance occurs at the liminal junctures of human experience.1

Nowhere are these considerations more at play than in the case of immigrant memories. To be an immigrant is to confront the past in distinctive ways, to glimpse if not to wholly comprehend both its commands and the need to craft a livable version of it. The stakes involved in this process are per force very high indeed, because how one is attuned to the far-away and long-ago will go far toward defining one’s very sense of self. The immigrant is accordingly faced with choices, for no matter how far away or long ago has been this act of personal migration, the past can never remain merely the past. Among these choices, the immigrant may feel bound to ask: have I made a terrible mistake? Is the present in which I now find myself so intolerable as to require a return to that which
has been left? And if I cannot go back, can I repudiate the here and now and live, as it were, within memory more hospitable than what I now encounter? Conversely, the immigrant may ask whether the past is indeed worth remembering at all. Is this new land and new present in which I find my self so compelling that I no longer feel obliged to acknowledge or pay obeisance to my former self? That is, shall I so assimilate my self to the present that I will, if possible, forget my former self? Finally, the immigrant may ask whether one can, in effect, have it both ways. Can I so negotiate my relationship to the past that it remains ingredient to the here and now, but not allow it to bully the present. And if so, how?

These are difficult, often agonizing questions, but they lead us to exceptionally rich areas for inquiry into the ways of public memory. In the account that follows, I set into play three case studies; although brief, they are intended to initiate new ways of thinking about memory, especially as it is exercised on what I shall refer to as the borders of memory. By this I mean to stress the often dramatic and self-conscious moments when one is made acutely aware of occupying at least two zones of lived experience—the now and the then—and feels the need to negotiate an optimal relationship to both. Underlying this approach is a strong suspicion that immigrant’s struggle on these borders is generalizable to the human condition as such. Before invoking these case studies, however, I wish to set our coordinates with a set of brief theoretical statements.

The Parameters of Memory

For several decades now the role of public memory in shaping the present has occupied the attention of scholars across the humanities. From Holocaust studies to architecture, literature and visual culture, colonialism and queer theory, students of the subject are seeking to explain how and to what ends we avail ourselves of the past. Some of the most recent and instructive contributions to this enterprise issue from the study of rhetoric, which attends in particular to the discursive and strategic dimensions of public memory. The following offers a brief definition of the subject and three suggestions for framing it as a rhetorical phenomenon.2

Public memory may be defined as a cultural process in which a shared sense of the past is created from the symbolic resources of human community. This understanding is provisional and shaped by the vested interests and aspirations of its members. From a rhetorical perspective, such a view presupposes that public memory is never neutral, natural, or without consequence. It is rather constructed, both a process and product of human ambition. Because we can only know the past as it is
symbolically mediated, any given representation of it must be partial; and because memory is the form of knowledge through which we access the past, it too is necessarily selective and purposive. Public memory, therefore, may be taken as intrinsically rhetorical.

As a symbolic construction, public memory embeds itself in culturally available forms of mediation, or texts. These texts may range from monuments to orations, rituals of remembrance, photographs, quilts, tattoos, music and so on. But whatever the various modes of expression through which memory speaks itself, they collectively serve to align the present to the past and the past to the present. And because public memory is created through such symbolic resources, any given message it is designed to communicate remains open to interpretation, debate, and revision, evidence for which may be found in the interminable contests over Holocaust revisionism, history textbooks, public monuments, and Armenian genocide.

As situated in contexts of power and politics, public memory raises serious questions as to its authority, ownership, and influence. Who or what is invested with the power to determine a given version of the past? To what political ends does a particular memorial practice operate? What are the differences between official and vernacular forms of public memory? Such questions lead invariably to contests over sanctioned memorial practices and those which seek to challenge them. Any comprehensive understanding of public memory thus requires a principle of counter-memory, or those practices which aim to disrupt or extend in ways unintended by the powerful. Examples of such counter-memorial practices include African American “5th of July” celebrations, Gay Pride parades, and European counter-monument movements.

As a form of production, public memory entails a key paradox. Stated axiomatically, this paradox holds that every act of remembering is also an act of forgetting. That is to say, the construction of one memory may well displace, elide, or otherwise erase a competing sense of the past. Here indeed is the political rationale for much memory work: to install and sanction a version of history thought to be advantageous to a given interest. The emergence of the “Lost Cause” tradition in the post bellum south, for example, is thought by many historians to have obfuscated the legacy of slavery and the emancipatory ends for which the Civil War was undertaken.

This interplay between remembering and forgetting would seem to apply with special poignancy to conditions under which humans remove themselves to distant shores, to willingly become strangers in a strange land. When they do, these people confront and give expression to what I
would like to call “border memory.” By this phrase I mean to describe the curious and often profound experience of discovering oneself as between two worlds, situated, so to speak, in a poised simultaneity, in which one is made incessantly aware of the past even as it threatens to slip away, and of the future even as it threatens to overwhelm a precarious present. The immigrant, the ethnically-marked, the sojourner: from their writings we hear something akin to DuBois’ “double consciousness,” where “one always feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

In the following comments, I’d like to propose that border memory might serve as a useful concept for understanding the language of those possessed of such “unreconciled strivings.” Specifically, I offer for our examination three sets of writing from very different contexts in late nineteenth-century America: Chinese poetry from San Francisco’s Chinatown; private letters sent back home from Scandinavian immigrants in the northern plain states; and the public expressions of a runaway slave. The risks in doing so are self-evident: generalization across such diverse textualities must be severely qualified; I am neither Chinese, Scandinavian, nor African American; my command of Cantonese and Norwegian is just not what it should be, and I must therefore rely on translations. Then why try it? Because further silence is no real option, and, more positively, because these texts are expressions of something real about the United States, and however distant, however obscured by difference and uncertainty, they beckon as voices from a shared humanity.

**Songs of Golden Mountain**

The tie between precious metal and migration has been close since time out of mind, and the discovery of gold in northern California was no exception. By early in the new decade of the 1850s significant numbers of Chinese, largely from the southeastern Cantonese regions, began immigrating to what quickly became known as the Golden Mountain. These early “sojourners,” as they were called, labored on the land, in the mines, and for the railroads. It was, by all accounts, an exceedingly difficult life, and became more so when the roads were finished, the mines exhausted, and land ownership forbidden. Under these trying circumstances, first generation immigrants sought the company of their own and settled in the central districts of San Francisco. By the time of the Chinese exclusion Act of 1882, the state was host to about 130,000
Chinese, who then represented about ten percent of the population of San Francisco.4

The Act of 1882 was by every measure draconian. Chinese were blocked from becoming naturalized citizens, not allowed to own land, and forbidden to inter-marry. Not surprisingly, immigration numbers began to drop precipitously, and continued to do so well into the next century. But for all the hardships endured, Chinatown itself could boast of a rich literary and intellectual culture. Language schools of one kind or another dotted the area, Cantonese newspapers were readily available, and at least ten bookstores provided further publication and readership opportunities. Importantly, community leaders encouraged a lively habit of writing poetry through reading clubs and local competitions. From this yeasty culture of letters there emerged an impressive body of, among other genres, vernacular folk songs, written in Cantonese, shaped as brief poems, and collectively referred to as Songs of Golden Mountain. They are composed according to classical Chinese standards at 46 syllables each and, when translated, run to about ten to twelve lines. Topics varied widely, ranging from lamentations to conjugal intimacies, women’s rights to the virtues and vices of western apparel. By 1915 some 1,700 of these poems were collected and published in two volumes under the title, translated, Songs of Golden Mountain. It is from this collection that we draw.5

The place between remembering and forgetting is the place of identity itself. And never is that identity more at stake than in the liminal experience of the ethnic immigrant. Here the question is relentlessly imposed: how much of myself can I give to this new land before I forget who I am? This is of course the perennial dilemma posed by the demands of assimilation, that melting pot logic that can operate with merciless force on the ties that bind us to the fleeting past. And so an answer must be summoned: do we concede ourselves to the future and thus forget our past selves; do we continue the exhausting work of negotiating past and future; or do we repudiate that assimilationist logic altogether; that is, to concede ourselves back to the past?

A substantial number of the Songs of Golden Mountain suggest that the final option was very much on the table. Many, indeed, express a kind of existential bafflement at how it all turned out. Here are no romantic dreams of wealth and success, of becoming American as America would have it. Here is rather a language of lamentation, through which we glimpse a sense that one is disappearing before one’s very eyes:

Look at that face in the mirror:
My appearance so completely changed.
Hair white as frost, long beard hanging;
Disheartening are the bald spots sparkling
    Like stars.
Old age has arrived.
No longer is my face young and handsome.
Without my noticing, I am already over forty.
Shame is toiling in hardship, across the vast
    And distant oceans.  

Needless to say, we are not talking about homesickness here, unless by that term we mean a particularly acute malady that admits of no known cure. The writers of these songs, some of them, will never make it back, and they know it. They are instead fated to retain a sense of themselves by living in memory only, where the present is a foreign country they can neither accept nor flee. From another writer:

    Pitiful is the twenty-year sojourner,
    Unable to make it home.
    Having been everywhere—north, south, east, west—
    Always obstacles along the way, pain knitting my brows.
    Worried, in silence.
    Ashamed, wishes unfulfilled.
    A reflection on the mirror, a sudden fright:
    hair, half frost-white.
    Frequent letters from home, all filled with much complaint.

This kind of general dis-ease with the sojourner’s plight ripened into pointed criticism as the Exclusion Act effected its toll. Not surprisingly, perhaps, such criticism targeted especially those fellow travelers who seemed to have willingly embraced America on its own terms—that is, willed themselves into forgetting who they really were. Chinese women, in particular, came under severe scrutiny. We might well imagine a disaffected Cantonese male, in all likelihood unmarried or unaccompanied by his native wife, strolling along Sacramento Street, observing sights unthinkable back home. His response:

    What a batch of lousy broads,
    All without proper upbringing.
    They hustle in the doorways, their gold teeth on parade.
    Day and night, always going to the picture show.
    They are fearless.
    They laugh with lust and speak the barbarian tongue.
    With men, they are experts at fooling around.
    Alas, their dissipation is shameful to our China.