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Collective memory and the politics of urban space: an introduction

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The proliferation of recent works on the place of memory in social life and political culture has called attention to the various struggles over remembering and forgetting the past and, hence, the imagining of alternative futures. Moreover, numerous geographers have highlighted the important role that spaces of commemoration play in reshaping the geographies of memory and oblivion (Dwyer and Alderman 2008; Foote 2003; Foote and Azaryahu 2007; Forest et al. 2004; Hebbert 2005; Hoelscher and Alderman 2004; Johnson 2004; Legg 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2007; Pred 2004; Rose-Redwood, 2008; Till, 2003, 2005, 2006). Scholars from both the social sciences and humanities have contributed to the interdisciplinary field of “memory studies” (Till 2006), which now has its own set of professional publication outlets, such as

the journal *Memory Studies* (launched in January 2008). Additionally, the new scholarly forum, H-Memory, first went online in March 2007 and serves as an informal network to promote the exchange of ideas among those grappling with questions of memory.

Fueling much of the analysis of memory is a recognition that the past—as we commemorate and identify with it—is a selective social and geographic construction. What memories are ultimately made visible (or invisible) on the landscape do not simply emerge out of thin air. Rather, they result directly from people’s commemorative decisions and actions as embedded within and constrained by particular socio-spatial conditions. All indications suggest that we are currently witnessing the revalorization of individual and collective memory at a time when historical amnesia appears to be at an all-time high. Many are searching for and building places of memory that can provide a sense of “temporal anchoring” in a world of up-to-the-minute media saturation and “information overload” (Huyssen 1995, p. 7). A growing heritage industry, often centered on tourism and preservation, has driven some of this search. Memory can be profitable even as it is important to one’s sense of time and place, although Lowenthal (1996) warns us about the pitfalls of being “possessed by the past.” Establishing places of memory has also taken on great meaning and value for social actors and groups—and, indeed, entire nations—as they seek to establish the legitimacy of their public identities and histories,

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particularly in times of political change and conflict (Forest et al. 2004; Light 2004).

The classic sociological studies of Halbwachs (1980 [1950], 1992 [1925]), along with the more recent work of scholars such as Nora (1989, 1996–1998), have heavily influenced how we theorize memory studies as well as analyze the social frameworks and sites of memory. Yet, subsequent scholars have by no means adopted such theories wholesale (Connerton 1989; Misztal 2003), and the nostalgia underpinning Nora's conception of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, has particularly come under critical scrutiny (e.g., Legg 2005a). The geographical breadth of the literature on collective memory is expanding each year, and the theoretical and empirical scope of this work can, at times, seem overwhelming. Nevertheless, there are a number of general themes that are emerging from the bewildering array of case studies and theoretical reflections (for a concise overview of such themes, see Foote and Azaryahu 2007; Till 2006).

One of these thematic concerns involves the relation between memory and urban space, and a variety of recent projects have explored the dynamics of what Crinson (2005) calls "urban memory" (also, see Boyer 1994; Crang and Travlou 2001; Huyssen 2003; Jordan 2006; Legg 2005b; Srinivas 2001; Till 2005). Cities serve as powerful symbols and repositories of memory (Ladd 1997). As Srinivas (2001, p. xxv) suggests, urban memory provides a "means of accessing how various strata of society and different communities construct the metropolitan world." Furthermore, Nas (1998, p. 547) emphasizes the "polyvocal" nature of urban commemorative symbols, pointing out that "they often possess an official meaning bearing the intentions of the creator or creators in mind, but informal references may be attached to them, enforcing, neutralizing and even counteracting the original intention." As a place of memory, the city is a site for both symbolic control and symbolic resistance.

This special issue of *GeoJournal* contributes to the burgeoning field of memory studies by reconsidering questions of collective memory and the politics of urban space. The idea behind this issue emerged from a series of sessions on memory and urban space that one of the guest editors organized at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in San Francisco (April 2007). Over half of the

contributors to this issue participated in those conference sessions, which sparked a constructive dialogue and debate among scholars from a range of disciplines. The articles included here draw upon a variety of theoretical perspectives and offer a rich set of empirical case studies that explore the politics of memory and urban space.

In their article, "Memorial landscapes: analytic questions and metaphors," Owen Dwyer and Derek Alderman provide an overview of several important approaches to critically examining the spaces of public commemoration. They highlight three key metaphors that have been employed to analyze memorial landscapes as texts, arenas, and performances, while offering a series of probing questions with the aim of encouraging future scholarship to "multiply the number of analytic moments that can be brought to bear on a memorial scene." One innovative way of tackling these questions is proposed in Maoz Azaryahu and Kenneth Foote's article, which focuses specifically on the use of commemorative space as a "narrative medium." Azaryahu and Foote draw upon numerous well-illustrated examples from around the world and call attention to the strategies that have been utilized to reconfigure commemorative landscapes as "spatial narratives." In particular, their discussion focuses on the way in which "historical stories are arranged to be told in space" through the geographical configuration of historical sites at various spatial scales. These two opening articles are both agenda-setting pieces that seek to extend current theories of memory and place in new directions, and many of the themes covered are further developed by the authors of the remaining articles in this issue.

Steven Hoelscher's article on the "angels of memory" in Guatemala City illustrates the power of photography to evoke historical memories of atrocity as a means of resisting "institutionalized forgetfulness." Hoelscher takes as his principal case study the photographic artwork of human rights activist Daniel Hernández-Salazar, especially his use of Guatemala City's streetscape as a site of political intervention in the struggle over remembering the human rights abuses that still haunt the city's streets. In doing so, he convincingly argues that the "remembrances of those atrocities depend on urban space for their grounding, articulation, and maintenance." In his analysis of Hernández-Salazar's *Street Angel*—which

consists of a series of angel-like images that were first clandestinely placed at different locations around Guatemala City in 1999 to invoke the human rights injustices from the country's recent past—Hoelscher offers a stunning comparison of Hernández-Salazar's "angel of memory" with Walter Benjamin's famous depiction of the "angel of history."

The spatial politics of public remembrance and forgetting are also considered in Emilia Palonen's account of the dramatic changes in commemorative practices that have swept through Hungary since the early 1990s, leading to a wave of street renamings as well as the rededication and removal of memorials in post-communist Budapest. Palonen uses the notion of the "city-text" to explore the contested terrain of political decision-making with respect to the memorial landscape of Hungary's capital city. She demonstrates how the reshaping of Budapest's city-text involved conflicts among competing political authorities at different jurisdictional levels, which played a significant role in the debate over national identity in the post-communist era. Similarly, Hillary Jenks' article on Little Tokyo in Los Angeles addresses the issues of ethnic identity, urban space, and the politics of collective memory. She views Little Tokyo as a *lieu de mémoire* where different generations of Japanese Americans have attempted to project their conceptions of the past onto urban space. Through interviews with community members, textual analysis of local newspapers, and experiences during three years of "on-site" participant observation, Jenks emphasizes the complex juxtaposition of competing visions of history and cultural identity in Little Tokyo.

Many studies of collective memory and urban space focus primarily on the monumental landscape, yet Paul Stangl's article challenges scholars to consider the relationship between vernacular architecture and cultural memory. He argues that while the borderline between the monumental and the vernacular is fluid, the distinction is still useful since it allows for an analysis of how "[s]ome vernacular places become memorialized and some monumental places become vernacularized." Stangl explores these issues within the context of post-war Berlin and critically engages with recent debates over the role of memory in Berlin's urban reconstruction (e.g., Jordan 2006; Ladd 1997; Till 2005).

Each of the articles in this special issue approaches the theme of collective memory from a somewhat

different vantage point, but they all underscore the importance of considering the spatial configuration of commemorative practices in the urban context. The articles also examine a variety of spatial modes of memory within different countries around the world. As guest editors of this issue, we have not sought to impose a uniform theoretical agenda upon the articles included here. In the course of working on the special issue, we—the guest editors—have not always shared the same views concerning issues related to the politics of collective memory and urban space. Accordingly, we welcome the plurality of perspectives and approaches that highlight the complexities of memory, politics, and urban space presented in this special issue.

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