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Influence of Memory: The Way History is Communicated

How does memory affect the way in which history is viewed? Memory is based on a series of decisions on what is worth remembering and what should be forgotten. It is a process of suppressing history that is unbearable or difficult, yet it is also about reflecting on what is misunderstood. Memory is formed through several influencing factors and elements; Memory can be formed by the study of pop culture and icons, which often propose a reexamination of difficult and repressed memories. Memory is also influenced through exclusions and biases. These can be racially or politically motivated, but they could also derive from personal or cultural trauma. Recorded history, such as textbooks, novels, and letters, may also be influential in understanding the complex and ever changing relationship between memory and history.

Memory Reflected through Icons and Pop Culture Elements

Icons and elements of pop culture have a heavy influence on the way people experience or understand events in history, and also how they go on to write about them. A war memorial is one type of icon that has profoundly influenced how wars are remembered. Memorials fulfill a need to find closure on and define the history of difficult events. For example, Marita Sturken's commentary on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial demonstrates the reflective nature that such icons can have; specifically, she mentions how the names on the memorial bring forward memories and in extension expressions that expand on the history of the war.¹ Since the histories of trying events such as the Vietnam War are always being disputed and reshaped, the process of memorializing or reflecting is necessary for healing, acceptance, and ultimately closure. Through

¹ Marita Sturken, "The Wall and the Screen Memory: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," in *American Studies an Anthology*, ed. Janice A. Radway, Kevin K. Gaines, Barry Shank, Penny Von Eschen (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 542.

this ritual of memory, people are able to actively contribute and communicate new histories: letters and documents may come to the surface, or veterans may feel compelled to speak about their experience or on behalf of those that were killed.² This idea of pop culture elements and icons conjuring repressed memory and history and insisting that they be confronted is what Avery Gordon refers to as haunting.³

Haunting can be an effective way to reach a large majority of people who remain ignorant to particular aspects of history. Besides memorials, haunting can also happen when people read fictional period novels or see historically set films, for example. These pop culture elements and icons become like ghosts; they expose people to themes and subject matter that may open their eyes on a difficult topic or conflict with what they believe to be true. This experience then forces a perspective on people who begin to question the events being told and the accuracy of what is portrayed. Gordon uses the novel *Beloved*, which deals with the effects of slavery, to illustrate how sparking the imagination on a topic and asking difficult questions of the audience can create a haunting effect that may lead to new reflections and further research and analysis.⁴ In this way pop culture elements and icons are important not only as tools for reflection and communication, but also as a lens for researchers and historians to understand why history has been shaped into its current form.

This analytic perspective can be particularly useful in the case of icons and pop culture elements that misrepresent history. For instance, historical figures are often glorified and surrounded by myth, especially war heroes; after the Civil War, many southerners held up Robert E. Lee as the embodiment of “Confederate invincibility” to further their sense of righteousness in

² Ibid., 548.

³ Avery Gordon, “Not Only the Footprints But the Water Too and What is Down There,” in *American Studies an Anthology*, ed. Janice A. Radway, Kevin K. Gaines, Barry Shank, Penny Von Eschen (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 523, 525, 526.

⁴ Ibid., 525-526.

defeat.⁵ Therefore, a study of this Post-Civil War mindset could lend itself to understanding the South's reinvention after the war. Films also tend to modify historical events, figures, and motivations to suit modern tastes; they can be influenced by both known history up to the time they are made and modern issues. As an example, Donald Pease studied how the film *The Patriot* used underpinning themes of civil war nationalism to tell a story set during the revolutionary war era before such sentiment would have been known.⁶ While such films may not accurately represent history, they offer interesting subjects for the study of the time period in which they were made, and may spark interest in the history as well. Furthermore, historical films are often the shaping notion many people have of a certain time period.⁷ In the end, that is the importance that pop culture elements and icons have on memory; they offer an introduction to history, and they allow people to come together as a community to reflect on what has passed, what is true, and what needs to be rediscovered.

Memory Shaped Through Exclusion

Memory and History are made up of a series of silences and exclusions. These exclusionary practices often obscure the truth and shape a biased history. This can happen in a couple different ways. First, there is censorship through bias, which is usually motivated by racism or political affiliation. Racism is one type of bias that is found heavily in the early history of America and still has an influence on how slavery is viewed today. One form of history that tried to combat conceived notions of slaves was the slave narrative; these were autobiographies written by slaves or those who had been slaves to illustrate in the most authentic way possible the experiences they had suffered. They were created to enlighten and expose slavery in the

⁵ David Blight, "The Lost Cause and Causes Not Lost," in *American Studies an Anthology*, ed. Janice A. Radway, Kevin K. Gaines, Barry Shank, Penny Von Eschen (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 528, 531.

⁶ Donald E. Pease, "The Patriot Acts," in *American Studies an Anthology*, ed. Janice A. Radway, Kevin K. Gaines, Barry Shank, Penny Von Eschen (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 554.

⁷ Sturken, "The Wall and the Screen," 546.

hopes of seeing it abolished for good.⁸ However, the authenticity of such works must be brought into question because of the process of publication. Stories and biographies like the slave narratives were often “vouchsafed by a white authority” and had to give up some of their authenticity to become palatable to consumers.⁹ When studying these kinds of narratives, researchers must look at the restrictions placed on the writer, the editing process, and the publication where it was printed to fully understand what kinds of exclusions were imposed on the writer and how truthful the final product actually is.

On the other, hand there are the histories that were imposed upon by powerful white men and women and need to be reviewed for validity as well. During the Post-Civil War era, there was a “lost cause” movement by many white southerners to convince the world through various forms of writing and campaigning that slavery had not really been the driving force of the conflict; they wanted to write a history that favored their view of the events surrounding the civil war and expound their claims that the North had destroyed their idyllic way of life.¹⁰ Of course, these histories paint a skewed exclusionary picture, but powerful and politically motivated people can often come together to strongly affect the way history is remembered.

The second form that censorship can take is a deeper kind of exclusion. It is the need to forget the events that are too painful to remember or too unbelievable to comprehend. History is full of events that would leave the individual and the public consciousness with memories too painful to live with every day. For example, Trouillot reports on the slave uprising and Revolution that took place in Haiti from 1791 to 1804 as an unthinkable act to the civilized

⁸ Gordon, “Not Only the Footprints,” 517.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 518.

¹⁰ Blight, “The Lost Cause,” 534, 536.

world of that period.¹¹ Over time, Haiti's decline and trivialization by Western society created a silence in the written history on this event.¹² In fact, slavery is still a difficult national topic, which many would prefer to forget. But, can people really forget what has happened to them? The best they can really do is find a "state of temporary memory loss that feels permanent" to help them cope.¹³ However, this repression of memory cannot last forever. If society is to move forward, these silences and exclusions must be brought to the forefront and discussed. Therefore, as a form of communication, these historical silences are important because they allow researchers to see what is missing and what needs to be researched and recovered.

Memory as Seen Through Literature and Recorded History

The act of looking back and analyzing what has been recorded can have a huge impact on how history is viewed. It can lead to identifying where there are exclusions and biases, or it can offer new reflections. While novels can help haunt and spark interest in a topic as mentioned earlier, they are not expected to offer detailed and exacting information like a textbook. However, as Trouillot explains, textbooks, dictionaries, and encyclopedias are not immune to exclusions and silences.¹⁴ Even though they are created with bias from the author, textbooks and other reference books can offer a solid starting point of facts and a trail of silence that may be worth researching. For instance, Blight examined the biased confederate history of the South, and through a detailed examination, he reflected on the positive and unifying affect that it ultimately had on America.¹⁵ This kind of thoughtful scholarship and analysis is helpful in illustrating biases and filling in the gaps but also for concluding something new. Finally, letters

¹¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History," in *American Studies an Anthology*, ed. Janice A. Radway, Kevin K. Gaines, Barry Shank, Penny Von Eschen (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 562.

¹² *Ibid.*, 563.

¹³ Gordon, "Not Only the Footprints," 521.

¹⁴ Trouillot, "Silencing the Past," 564, 565.

¹⁵ Blight, "The Lost Cause," 537.

are another form of literature that can add to historical knowledge, and Sturken found that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial had become a place for people to share their thoughts and letters into the “cultural memory.”¹⁶ These kinds of letters can be a form of healing for many people; a way to express emotions that can never be spoken aloud, but they can also expand history and offer a new source for analysis and understanding.

There has been a great deal of research and study on the silence factor or exclusion of elements from history; nearly all the articles used for this review focused on this aspect of memory and history. In extension, they also covered the topic of various biases in literature and written history. This will be helpful to keep in mind during further research as it is a clear reminder that researchers and historians are not infallible and often have their own agendas in mind when they write. The articles also focused heavily on slavery and its effect on history and the concept of forgetting and re-memory. One of the more compelling aspects of the research offered a glimpse at the influence of pop culture and icons have on these rituals of memory. When looking back over the scholarship regarding memory, one thing that was not mentioned at all is the effects of modern technology on individual and collective memory; how do cell phones, email, and social media affect history and memory? Since modern technology offers immediate access to historical knowledge and resources as well as current events, is the importance of memory becoming diminished? Do we really need to commit history into memory at all?

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¹⁶ Sturken, “The Wall and the Screen,” 546, 547.

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