Making Places, Molding Memories: Political and Race-based Origins of Monuments, Memories, and Identities

Ezra Zeitler

This volume of Historical Geography showcases scholarship orbiting three general but interrelated topics—monuments, memory, and identity—as they relate to the place-making process from multiple perspectives. Collectively, four contributors highlight how various guises of political ambition and policy took shape on the cultural landscape and how those manifestations have been integrated into society as public memory.

The colonization of foreign lands by Europeans left an indelible imprint on the land and in the memories of those experiencing its far-reaching impact. As an inherent part of colonization, the place-making process was conducted by its agents through varying methods of control, ranging from a dominating military presence and strict legal system to the introduction of informal cultural institutions and subtle forms of anti-conquest. The racialized ideologies embedded in these practices resulted in colonial spaces which either disassociated Indigenous societies or integrated the Indigenous through assimilation. Alan Baker notes that such ideologies “exert their authority and find expression not only in language but also in landscape. Non-verbal ‘documents’ in the landscape can be powerful visual signs.” Interpreting these landscape documents from various perspectives, including nationalism, identity, memory, and hegemony, is something geographers do very well. Tim Edensor, Stephen Daniels, David Harvey, Nuala Johnson, Stephen Legg, Brian Osborne, and others have noted how places and scenes have been used to symbolize national sentiment and identities.

The erection of monuments is a common method of canonizing the memory and ideology of a nation on the landscape. Ranging from the

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sublime to the mundane, memorials often commemorate persons and/or historical events that have collectively admired significance.5 Similarly, many scholars have documented the contested memories and meanings that many monuments harbor between classes, genders, ethnic, and racial groups.6 Indeed, racism can be so ingrained in society and the landscape that it is unnoticed by those of the dominant culture,7 and a number of geographers have noted the various roles that monuments, domestic architecture, flags, and other forms of iconography have played in preserving white hegemony in the American South.8 In the eyes of many, protests against the display of such Confederate iconography are viewed as direct challenges to white memory and to a racialized social hierarchy under white control. As Derek Alderman, Owen Dwyer, Joshua Inwood, and others document, the topic of public memory and the politics of commemorating the Civil Rights Movement also reveals racial cleavages in Southern society, as the erection of memorials dedicated to preserving African American history provide counter-narratives which contest memorials to the Lost Cause.9 The insightful research mentioned here has taught us much about how we honor what we value as a society, but there are many untold stories and perspectives we can share. The essays comprising this special issue contribute in many ways to existing research and enhance our understanding of how various types of political ambition influenced individual and collective identities, the shifting meanings of commemorative sculpture, and place-based memories.

In the first essay, “Ornithology on ‘The Rock’: Territory, Fieldwork, and the Body in the Straits of Gibraltar in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” Kirsten Greer examines the interconnectedness of nineteenth-century British military culture and the practice of ornithology as agents of colonial place-making at Gibraltar, the symbolic gateway to Britain’s once vast empire. In documenting ways in which imperialist and masculine identities were maintained among soldiers, Greer provides a noteworthy example of how the British developed a racialized environment on “The Rock.” C Drew Bednasek’s essay, “Remembering the File Hills Farm Colony,” heeds the call of Indigenous scholars by providing an insightful counter-narrative to imperial memory by telling the stories of Indigenous participants in an early twentieth-century governmental assimilation program on Saskatchewan’s Peepeekisis Reserve.11 These contributions exhibit the many forms which ideologies associated with colonialism take and add to an expanding array of scholarship in this field of historical geography.

Seth Dixon’s essay, “Mobile Monumental Landscapes: Shifting Cultural Identities in Mexico City’s ‘El Caballito,’” contextualizes the relocation of a statue of King Carlos IV throughout Mexico’s capital between 1796 and the 1970s as a reflection of intense debates involving the colonial, national, and Indigenous identities of Mexicans. Dixon’s empirical method stresses the importance, and the rewards, of deciphering complex historical layers of public meaning in constructing narratives of public monuments and their social spaces.

In the final essay of this special issue, Chris Post examines the
memorialization of John Brown, the stout abolitionist most known for his involvement the infamous “Bleeding Kansas” era of that state’s territorial history. By viewing this movement through a dual lens of reputational politics and the concept of symbolic accretion, Post presents a fascinating account of how the politics of John Brown’s legacy has shaped public memory and influenced the erection of monuments in the communities Osawatomie, Kansas and the Quindaro neighborhood of Kansas City, Kansas. Collectively, these geographically eclectic essays reinforce the often undervalued role that memorials and place-based memories play in the development of individual and group identities.

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Notes

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