

Reader Response 2

Memory can be considered to be one of the most integral parts of an individual. Memories seem to belong wholly to oneself, and represent everything we believe to be true. However, as introduced through various media this week, memory consists not only of recollections which reside within each individual, but is also that which is retained and influenced by society as a whole. In “How Societies Remember”, Paul Connerton explores the political manipulation of memory, as well as important classifications of specific types. Through “On the Uses of Relativism” and “Public History, Private Memory”, Eric Gable and other writers use Colonial Williamsburg to present dichotomies in how the past is remembered. The film “Digging for Slaves” and the Museum of African American History then provided visual and atmospheric evidence of social memory.

The first text utilizes the French Revolution as an example of how societies seek to create or destroy shared memory. As is similar across many revolutions, the new regime of this period utilized commemorative ceremonies and changes to bodily practices in an effort to overwrite the past (Connerton, 7). However, in doing so the old regime was still recognized, as executions bore similarities to coronations, and new liberal fashion required past context to be relevant (Connerton, 9-12). This text also presented three types of memory: personal memory (that which is individual and contains past states), cognitive memory (conceptual ingrained knowledge, such as language), and habit memory (something known beneath awareness) (Connerton 22-24). This lack of awareness distinguishes habit memory from rules, as rules may be understood and judged, while habits are engrained (Connerton, 30-31).

The next two papers utilize Colonial Williamsburg to more specifically analyze the distinction between personal and historic memory. In Colonial Williamsburg, there is a dichotomy in the recreation and representation of white and black history (Gabe, et al., 792).

White history was recreated from accounts, often made by elite and privileged individuals, while black history relied on physical evidence, which was less individuating (Gabe, et al., 794 - 796). From the Wythe House to the Governor's Palace, Colonial Williamsburg was constructed as a blend of the personal memories of whites, and memories historically preserved and related to slaves (Gabe, et al., 798 - 800). This site continues not only to reconstruct personal and historic memories, but also to create and instill them within its guests. Colonial Williamsburg expresses a responsibility to provide history to its guests, yet they must also create a pleasing experience for visitors to remember and desire to return to (Gabe, Handler, 238). The atmosphere has been continuously changed, from editing the landscape to its buildings, in order to better align with expectations (Gabe, Handler 240). As the environment is molded and time passes, visitor's memories are put up against history, and it appears that personal memories—created by this dynamic recreation of the past—are retained and not the historical past itself (Gabe, Handler 244-247).

These texts contain themes worthy of analysis, which the film "Digging for Slaves" and our museum trip help facilitate. Firstly, there is sufficient evidence that societies collectively invent memories, such as the traditions instilled by new regimes, historical reconstructions and personal experiences at Colonial Williamsburg, and presentations of restored locations in the Museum of African American History. These memories may be considered social constructs as they were created with intent. How the past is made to be presented impacts which memories are instilled within an individual, and to a greater extent, the population. For example, Colonial Williamsburg chooses how to portray its grounds, and the memories visitors walk away with are a direct result of those choices. If the site decided to not portray "the other half" (as it was termed), the stories told by the African American tour guide in "Digging for Slaves" would not have entered into the memories of others. Both he and our own guide at the museum exert further

power in creating memories within us, as what we take to be historical is a direct result of how each of them chose what to include and omit in their stories of the past.

Another key theme across these media is the value of teaching history versus entertainment when it comes to portraying the past. Colonial Williamsburg, “Digging for Slaves”, and the Museum of African American History seek to portray history in a way which is engaging enough to attract the general population. In the Museum of African American History, many exhibits are comprised of notable texts on black heritage accompanied by notecards which summarize and provide context for the work. These summaries are interesting and engaging, but do little to deliver the whole historical memory enclosed within the book. In “Digging for Slaves”, there is entertainment value in learning about the slaves owned by Jefferson, but showing their above-average quarters disregards the historical reality of worse conditions the average slave would have experienced. Perhaps this tradeoff for entertainment is necessary, as without it there may not have been enough care to learn anything at all. However, with or without entertainment it seems that there is still some history which goes forgotten, deemed of too little value to remember.

Through texts, film, and museum presentations, it is clear that societies work to collectively create and share memory. However, due to the inherent politics within any group, these memories do not always resemble their historical truth. As said by George Santayana, "Those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it." Perhaps this comes not just from ignoring lessons or forgetting the past though, but from remembering something entirely different than what once was.

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