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U.S.-American Sites of Memory between Consensus and Contestation

outline

1 Introduction: American Studies and / as Memory Studies

U.S.-American sites and cultures of memory reverberate the particular – and larger -- contexts and developments of North American histories since the colonial period. Various factors and circumstances seem to have supported – rather than limited (as one might suspect) -- the emergence, purposeful construction, and ongoing revision of a multivocal network of sites of memory, e.g.:

- the proverbial newness of the so-called 'new world';
- the definition of the U.S.-American republic as an unprecedented, exceptional promise of universal redemption;
- the manifold conflicts throughout the multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual history of the North American continent and the United States.

The fields of memory studies in general -- and of U.S.-American memory studies in particular -- have profited strongly throughout the past two decades from theoretical concepts such as the "imagined community" (Benedict Anderson) and "invented traditions" (Eric Hobsbwan). Ongoing discussions of the processes of nation-building and of the implications of identity politics offer further conceptual frameworks to assess the significance of cultural memories

and collective commemorations --- also for the formation and stabilization of the U.S.-American nation (that was created rhetorically against all the odds and requirements of 'regular' nationhood and in historical acts of political and cultural opposition).

At the same time, archaeological remains of the pre-contact achievements of the indigenous peoples of North America and traces of pre-Columbian European travelers in the Western Hemisphere have been increasingly recognized as lasting reminders that "American" cultural memories do not begin in 1776 and not even in 1492 -- and may not be reduced to Anglocentric sites alone.

Just two well-known examples (slides):

- Mesa Verde
- Pueblo Bonito

Furthermore, the multidisciplinarity of American Studies and the discipline's prominent involvement in recent theoretical turns – visual, performative, spatial, virtual, transnational – provide Americanists with a wide-ranging, comprehensive scholarly vision. Such a vision is suitable and necessary to account for the full diversity of the manifestations and platforms of U.S..American cultures of memory. The specific theoretical orientations and reorientations of American cultural studies in recent years – and especially e.g. the so-called New American Studies -- offer manifold possibilities and perspectives to explore the political, cultural, and economic competition for commemorative participation and authority in a pluralistic society. Counter-memories have especially moved to the center of attention in the wake of, e.g., ethnic studies, women's studies, and the canon revisions – all of them academic repositionings and scholarly interests that have shifted the focus from the once-dominant to the oppositional, contradictory forces in U.S.-American history and culture.

At the same time, time-honored concepts of American cultural history and American Studies scholarship such as, e.g., Henry S. Commager's stress on the specific U.S.-American search for a usable past or Robert Bellah's notion of American civil religion connect well with new, mainly constructivist approaches in memory studies.

In this larger context, I would like to take you on a tour through the diversity and (old / new) plurality of U.S.-American sites of memory – with a special focus on their particularly ambivalent positions and roles between consensus and contestation. I would like to show how sites of memory of a most divers kind have been instrumental – functional -- in the political

and cultural construction, contestation, and revision of the United States throughout the past centuries.

2 The Cultural Work of Literary Sites of U.S.-American Memories

The beginnings of the literary construction – in the European sense of the term -- of specifically "American" sites of memory run parallel to the European colonization of the North American continent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A wealth of multilingual texts preserves the wonderous moments of the first intercultural encounters as well as -- the less wondrous -- conflicts between European colonists and the indigenous peoples in the northwestern, southern, and southwestern areas of the future United States. The commemorative impulse in colonial English-language literature reaches a first climax of lasting ideological impact – until today – in the historiographical writings of seventeenth-century Puritan New England. The histories of William Bradford, John Winthrop, and Cotton Mather prefabricate later notions of U.S.-American exceptionalism out of the collective past and political impetus of 17the-century Puritan New England. Puritan historians prescribe a formula for U.S.-American commemorations of an Anglocentric myth of origin that revolves around the narrative of the Pilgrim Fathers' arrival on Plymouth Rock in 1620 – an event which is still observed as the national American family holiday of Thanksgiving on the last Thursday in November. The intention of seventeenth-century historiographers to perpetuate the Puritan "city upon the hill" – to borrow John Winthrop's phrase -- against the changing course of worldly history is best verbalized in the "General Introduction" to Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702): "But whether *New England* may *Live* any where else or no [sic], it must *Live* in our *History*!"

Puritan remembancers already enact the determination to use history writing as a means to exercise commemorative authority – and especially so in times of political crises and intercultural conflicts. This can be recognized in particular in the repeated commissioning of prominent seventeenth-century ministers and politicians to write officially sanctioned versions of New England history:

- Nathaniel Morton's *New Englands Memoriall* (1669)
- William Hubbard's *General History of New England* (1680s).

In the centuries to follow, and especially after the foundation of the U.S.-American republic, the impulse to construct historiographical sites of memory for the sake of ideological control and cultural containment continued to remain productive. George Bancroft's *History of the United States of America*, first published in 1837 and continually revised until the 1880s, still stands as maybe the best examples of a long-dominant, orthodox site of U.S.-American memory.

A second case in point: historical novels. The nineteenth-century, and especially the time period between the British-American War of 1812-15 and the Civil War of 1861-65, saw the publication of innumerous historical novels which acted as platforms of memory in the seminal processes of establishing a national U.S.-American culture and identity. Prominent literary critics [[--- e.g., George Tucker, Walter Channing, Rufus Choate, John Neal, William Gilmore Simms --]] repeatedly called for the intentional and consensual creation of a national U.S.-American literature. The historical novels of James Fenimore Cooper and others [[James Kirke Paulding, John Neal, Lydia Maria Child, William Gilmore Simms, John W. DeForest, and Nathaniel Hawthorne]] responded to this collective desire for fictional commemorations of earlier stages of colonial and national U.S.-American history. They also provided historical precedents and frames of references for contemporaneous cultural and political issues and conflicts such as, e.g., the Indian removal policy or slavery – and thus functionalized memory. The nostalgic recollection of the pre-Civil War South in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reconciliation literature is another example in this context. [[The resurgence of history in contemporary American literature – see novels by, e.g., Thomas Pynchon, E.L. Doctorow, Charles Frazier – testifies to the unbroken cultural power of fictional sites of memory.]]

As a third example and probably most closely connnected with memory studies: autobiographical writings, i.e. purposeful acts of individual remembrance and collective identity construction in specific cultural contexts. It is almost a commonplace in American literary and cultural history that the self-scrutinizing urge and introspection of New England Puritanism fuel the production of a large body of religious and secular life writing in British North America and also help to give a voice to otherwise marginalized or repressed groups:

- the spiritual autobiographies of Thomas Shepard and Jonathan Edwards
- the Indian captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson
- the travel narratives of women such as Sarah Kemble Knight and Elizabeth Ashbridge (the latter also a Quaker)
- John Woolman's Quaker journal

- Native American Samson Occom's narrative
- slave narratives > Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Harriot Jacobs

- and, above all, the master text and ideologically consensual blueprint for future generations of American dreamers >> Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*

The autobiographies of women, ethnic writers, and representatives of religiously and politically dissenting groups illustrate the usefulness of acts of individual remembering for oppositional, if not subversive, expressions of group concerns.

In the twentieth century, American autobiographical writing encompasses life writings by a wide range of differently representative Americans and provides an archive of 'American experiences' of different, often competing kinds:

- Gilded Age business tycoon Andrew Carnegie
- ground-breaking feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman
- Jewish American immigrant writer Mary Antin,
- Sioux chief Black Elk.

The pluralization of a once-Anglocentric, English-only U.S.-American literature becomes even more prominent in the wake of the ethnic empowerment movements since the 1960s and the canon revisions since the 1980s --- as is recognizable in the autobiographical fiction and commemorative identity politics of ethnic writers such asN. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, Sandra Cisneros, Toni Morrison.

To sum up:
Literary texts have functioned as platforms for the construction, circulation, contestation, revision of U.S.-American past(s) and identity/ies.
Especially autobiographical writings have functioned as act and platforms of group empowerment.

3 Visual Sites of U.S.-American Memory

Petroglyphs and other forms of visual rock art of precontact indigenous Pueblo cultures in the American Southwest are the earliest forms of visual memory in what would become U.S.-American territory. Dating back several centuries before the arrival of European colonists and continuing into the times of European-Indian contact and conflict after 1492, the pictorial art of the prehistoric Southwestern cultures (Anasazi, Moggollon, Hohokam, and Fremont) are abstract, ceremonial, or representational in composition. They preserve sacred rites, mythic figures, and ancient symbols as well as specific secular and historic events such as, e.g., a Spanish massacre of Southwestern tribes in the Canyon de Chelly area in Arizona.
Two examples

- religious / ceremonious petroglyph
- petroglyph with historic scene / Canyon de Chelly

Today, such visual sites of memory remain part of the ceremonial cultures of Native American tribes -- but theyalso serve as an important attraction in the tourist business and commemorative industry of the national parks of the Southwest, among them prominently and probably best-known Mesa Verde.

Among visual representations of the European colonization of North America, renditions of so-called 'landing scenes' hold a specific ideological position as commemorative constructions of pivotal moments of origin, foundation, and identity formation. Some examples:

- The 1493 Basel woodcuts of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the 'new world' express European desires, projections, and cultural schemata rather than actual American realities.
- Theodore de Bry's widely-circulated late sixteenth-century engravings of Columbus's imperialist act of taking possession of the Western Hemisphere became the foil for later visualizations of landing scenes with seminal impact on U.S. history.
- Henry Sargent's "The Landing of the Pilgrims" (1815), today displayed in Pilgrim Hall, Plymouth, Mass., and John Vanderlyn's "The Landing of Christopher Columbus" (1847), still part of the permanent exhibition in the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C., are particularly visible examples from a much larger archive of pictorial recollections of foundational moments in North American history.
- The crucial moment of U.S.-American national creation is enshrined in John Trumbull's painting "The Signing of the Declaration of Independence, 4 July

1776" (1820), which remains a remarkable example of the young nation's construction of a usable past by means of commissioned icons of memory.

That many of the works mentioned here served as points of reference for popular prints distributed by the thousands by Currier & Ives and Kellog & Kellog, the most successful producers of lithographs in the 19th century, illustrates the connection between U.S.-American cultures of memory, on the one hand, and commercial interests, on the other, already in the nineteenth century.

Example: Plymouth arrival scene by Currier and Ives > more like a family outing

The large archive of iconic sites of U.S.-American memory includes three pre-twentieth-century pictures that deserve special attention here:

- Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre of 1770 was immediately distributed after the event in various print and broadside versions and is still used today for history and children's book illustrations. It has framed interpretations of the American Revolution as the archetypal struggle of liberty-loving, American colonist-citizens and common people against British military and political tyranny – one could also say: David vs. Goliath.
- Emanuel Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" (1851) has become the quintessential representation of George Washington's historical role as the larger-than-life epic hero leading the emerging U.S.-American nation into a bright future of glory and progress. The visual representation is anything but historically accurate – but it is visually effective (e.g.: light / direction westwards / Washington standing in the boat)
- Emanuel Leutze's "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way (Westward Ho!)" (1861) was commissioned as a mural for the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., and is still prominently on display there. The monumental painting gathers for official recollection and public admiration the full repertoire of prototypes and scenic elements available to depict the national ideology of Manifest Destiny on the eve of the Civil War.

Among more recent, 20th-century pictorial sites of memory, Norman Rockwell's "Freedom from Want" (1943) stands out as a painting whose rendition of an (Anglo-)American Thanksgiving family celebration for World War II propaganda purposes testifies to the unbroken cultural and political power of paintings even in the twentieth century. The possibly

positive, soothing effect of the painting did not remain hidden to the public relations experts in the Bush White House >> 2003 Baghdad photograph.

The rise of photography as a new documentary medium in the second half of the nineteenth century changed the configuration of U.S.-American visual memory --- and initiated the conceptualization of sites of memory as part of modern U.S.-American media culture.

- The Civil War photography of Matthew Brady became the first major set of photographic representations of a major event in U.S.-American history. The pictures of Brady and his teams replaced to a large extent classic formats and modes of memory of war, i.e. literature and painting. They continue to dominate the collective U.S.-American recollection of the Civil War until today.

- In a similar vein, Edward Curtis's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs of Native Americans in the West and Southwest have inscribed into U.S.-American and non-American memories alike the iconic figure of the 'vanishing Indian.' Especially in Germany, Curtis photographs have been widely used in a wide variety of contexts – mainly, however, as 'true-to-life' documents and not as what they actually are: carefully choreographed and arranged constructions with specific intentions and implications (e.g. sublime / covering the destruction by peaceful representations).

- The social photography of Jacob Riis has preserved the promise and plight of late nineteenth-century immigrant life in the U.S.

The list could be extended. Throughout the twentieth century, photographs have increasingly served as commemorative registers of changes and crises in U.S.-American history and culture, from Walker Evans's and Dorothea Lange's pictures of distressed farmers during the Great Depression and Ansel Adams's photographs of the endangered landscapes of the Southwest to the photographs of war atrocities in Vietnam and the Magnum photographers' immediate capturing of the national trauma of 9/11.

In a similar way, newsreels and live TV news coverage -- the latter increasingly live and rivaled by the Internet -- have inscribed into twentieth-century U.S.-American memory lasting, at times haunting, images of historical events and national traumas, including e.g.

- the funeral of President Kennedy
- the landing on the moon
- 9/11
- Hurricane Katrina.

How movies – at times affirmative and at times reviionist – have shaped U.S-American cultural memory and popular imagination since the beginning of the twentieth century can be measured by the continued appeal and commercial success of seminal filmic sites of memory such as *Birth of a Nation (*1915*), Gone with the Wind (*1939*), Dances with Wolves* (1990), *JFK* (1991), *Amistad* (1997), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), or *Pearl Harbor* (2001).

4 Commemorative Performances and Displays of U.S.-American Memories

The establishment of the new nation of the United States of America stirred a collective urge for the celebration of common historical achievements and for the affirmation of the newly created collective identity. The early republic – i.e., the period between the Revolution and the War of 1812 – saw a variety of local, regional, and national festivities in the service of nation-building, e.g.

- commemorations of specific occurrences of the American Revolution
- celebrations of the birthdays or inaugurations of revolutionary leaders turned presidents
- ceremonies in honor of the ratification of the Constitution.

The commemorative culture of the early republic and also of ante-bellum America laid the foundation for the emergence and development of a specific U.S.-American civil religion whose politically and culturally cohesive function relies until today on the lasting appeal of largely uncontested, consensually worshipped sites of memory and collective veneration. Thus, throughout the nineteenth century, the Fourth of July developed into the national holiday proper -- rivaled for some time only by the observance of Forefathers' Day, i.e., the commemoration of the arrival of the so-called Pilgrim Fathers in Plymouth on December 22, 1620. How important Forefathers' day once was, can be traced in a quote by Pequot writer William Apess who wrote in his “Eulogy on King Philip” of 1836: “We say, therefore, let every man of color wrap himself in mourning, for the 22nd of December and the 4th of July are days of mourning and not of joy”

Post-Civil War America saw the further pluralization and commercialization of the U.S.-American landscape of performative memory. A host of Civil War monuments and memorials

erected with different – diverging, competing, conflicting -- political and cultural agendas in the North and the South, reduced the national significance of New England history and heritage. The battlefield of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania became the overtowering icon of national rededication and soon developed into a commercially marketed shrine of pilgrimage and collective worship whose commercial exlpoitation anticipated twentieth-century memory tourism and heritage business. African American emancipation celebrations and ethnic sites of memory, especially in the Midwest and West in the wake of mass immigration, furthermore pluralized U.S.-American festive cultures. In another illustration of the fast-changing parameters of U.S.-American cultural memories, the Wild West shows of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody staged the conflicted memory of the American West with white and Indian actors for both American and European audiences from the 1880s through the 1900s, i.e. while the history of westward expansion was still under way. Throughout the 20th century, this pluralization continued

- monuments such as the Boston Irish Famine Memorial, unveiled and dedicated near Boston's famous Freedom Trail in 1998
- Japanese-American WW II memorials
- monuments honoring the Spanish explorere and conquerer Onate in the Hispanic Southwest

All of these sites document the continued and explicit urge of ethnic groups to also claim their spaces on the map of U.S.-American historical memories.

The gathering and display of U.S.-American memories in collections, archives, and museums also goes back to the early years of the U.S.- American republic. The establishment of the Library of Congress by an act of Congress in 1800 laid the foundation for the largest U.S.-American archive, whose special online section "American Memory" (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>) is the most comprehensive – and ever-growing – collection of U.S.-American cultural memories electronically available to date. The early foundation of local and state historical societies as well as of private archives of national significance such as the Massachusetts Historical Society (1791), the New York Historical Society (1804), and the American Antiquaran Society (1812) became the model for an intricate network of historical societies and heritage institutions in all states and major cities. During the ideological crisis of the 1930s, when the cultural politics of the New Deal supported acts and endeavors of collective identity stabilization, local and state archives often

became important platforms for the retrieval of commemorative materials such as African American slave narratives, the records of the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692, and Southern blues and Western cowboy music.

The centerpiece of U.S.-American museum culture is the Smithsonian Institution (<www.si.edu>). which was established in 1846 and today consists of some 20 museums, most of them located on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Recurring controversies over particular commemorative exhibits such as the display of World War II B-29 atomic bomber "Enola Gay" in 1994/95, illustrate the far-reaching political implications of museums as particularly visible and influential sites of memory in contemporary U.S.-American culture.

The National Mall in Washington, D.C., is the heart of U.S.-American civil religion and the central site of national U.S.-American memory culture. Designed in its basic outline by Washington architect Pierre L'Enfant in the 1790s, the National Mall today serves as the prime destination for national(ist) pilgrimages of American citizens -- and as a tourist attraction for both American and international visitors. In a larger symbolic context, the Mall connects the major buildings of the three branches of government, i.e., the White House, the Capitol, and the Supreme Court. Besides the museums of the Smithsonian Institution, important national organizations such as the National Archives, the famous monuments erected in honor of, e.g., George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as well as major national war memorials such as the World War II Memorial, the Korean War Memorial, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial are all located on or close to the Mall.

Two sacred spaces of national U.S.-American collective memory deserve special mention here:

* the Great Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol, with its commemorative arrangement of paintings of crucial scenes of North American history and sculptures of important U.S.-American presidents and statesmen

* the Rotunda of the National Archives, with its ceremonial display of the sacred documents of the U.S.-American nation

Since 1965, the "National Mall and Memorial Parks" have been part of the U.S. National Park Service and are thus linked institutionally and ideologically to an extended system of some 400 sites across the nation. Since the establishment of the first national park, Yellowstone National Park, in 1872, U.S.-American national parks have been dedicated to the preservation

of the natural and historical heritage of the United States. Parks range from battlefields of the American Revolution and Civil War to landmarks of immigration history such as Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, as well as to New Orleans jazz clubs, birthplaces of historical figures, churches of the Civil Rights Movement in the South, and presidential libraries.

In addition, privately sponsored and more openly commercial sites of memory have become part of the flourishing U.S.-American memory culture and heritage business. Plimoth Plantation and Colonial Williamsburg deserve special mention, as their living history performances of everyday-life in Puritan Plymouth in the 1620s and in eighteenth-century Virginia are particularly noteworthy examples of the intricate fusion of historical didacticism and tourism governing many sites of U.S.- American memory today. Whether the active involvement of visitors in historical performances and – in a different way – the increasing accessibility of sites of memory both in person and via the Internet do indeed enhance the democratization of U.S.-American national memories (as some scholars surmise / Michael Kammen) remains open to debate.

[[The seqeunce of example of visual and material sites of memory could be extended – and include, e.g. stamps and coins – but I will stop here and move into my last section.]]

5 Concluding Focus: Counter-Memories – Contradictory Memories -- Commemorative Dialogs

Allow me to move into the last section of my paper which will focus on a special aspect that has been also already present throughout my paper – counter-memories, contradictory memorials, commemorative dialogs. The last decades have seen a significant and intentional pluralization of the U.S. American landscape of memory – a development which has complicated and challenged once-monolithically Anglocentric constructions of American history and identity. The long-time repression, exclusion, and erasure – by dominant ideologies and Anglocentric histories and memories -- of oppositional narratives and group-specific memories has come to an end. Counter-memories and commemorative contradictions have emerged in a number of ways. Therefore I also began my tour of U.S.-American sites of memory by pointing to late 20th-century ethnic autobiographies as a platform to intervene into traditional memory discourses. Let me conclude my paper and tour by giving some particularly striking examples from different areas:

- Focus on the national capital: The once-solidly granite architecture of the buildings on the National Mall – the heart of U.S. American national memory -- has been deprived of its monolithic aura by the newly-erected National Museum of the American Indian (opened fall 2004). With its adobe-like Southwestern architecture and the park-like surroundings, the museum – by its very presence, location, and architecture -- enacts a response to previously given readings and versions of North American history. The extended controversy over the location and concept of the National Museum of African American Culture and History – decided in January 2006 in favor of a site close to the Washington Monument – is another case in point and also illustrates the pluralization of the central platform of U.S. American civil religion.

- Moving out west and into the center of the national narrative of westward expansion: The renaming of Custer Battlefield National Monument to Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument in 1991 and the addition of an Indian Memorial in 2003 to the National Park Service's previous site of commemoration of the 1876 battle between General Custer's 7th U.S. Cavalry and an alliance of Plains Indians under the leadership of chiefs Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse document in exemplary fashion how oppo-sitional narratives and countermemories are surfacing more visibly from beneath the long-monolithic landscape of U.S. American memory.

- Also in the West: The monumental dialog in the hills of South Dakota between the four presidents enshrined in stone at Mount Rushmore National Memorial and the eventually even more colossal figure of Crazy Horse on horseback slowly emerging from the wooded mountain at the construction site of the Crazy Horse Memorial makes for an equally striking example of the increasingly multivocal and controversial landscape of American memories. The monmental Crazy Horse statue is an all-too obvious challenge to the "America's shrine of democracy" only some 30 miles away.

- On a smaller scale but no less indicative: Robert Colescott's "George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware" (1975) makes for a satirical

counter-statement to one of the most reproduced icons of national memory, Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" (1851).

- Some further examples: Pivotal sites of national(ist) U.S-American history – such as the Alamo in San Antonio, TX, or the two major immigration stations on Ellis Island, NY, and Angel Island, CA – are now giving more multivocal narratives of their transnational histories and implications. Monuments, memorials, historical markers, and national parks related to the intercultural histories of specific ethnic groups such as, e.g., Manzanar War Relocation Center National Historic Site in the desert of California now display more conflicted memories of U.S.-American history and immigration. [[The success and popularity of movies such as *The Amistad* or *Dances with Wolves* also be mentioned in this context.]]

- How virulent the issue and the debate is, borne out by the fact that, e.g., the 58.2/2006 issue of *American Quarterly* alone contains three articles on contested memories:
    - the killing of three anti-Vietnam student protesters on the campus of Kent State University in 1970;
    - alternative readings of the end of the Vietnam War and the plight of refugees;
    - the struggle over a 9/11 memorial in Ground Zero;

*

To conclude – with reference to the last example given.
The ongoing controversies over adequate memorials and rites of commemoration at and beyond Ground Zero in New York City dramatize more than anything else the political and cultural implications of the contest for commemorative authority in the U.S. The U.S.-American landscape of memory has changed from consensus – enforced or voluntary, is another question – to one of contestation and competition. The examples given in my tour through the archives and platforms U.S.-American memories and commemorations were to illustrate how memories fuel and support both consensus and contestation – and how multifunctional memories can be in different contexts (and not only U.S.-American ones).