Dempsey on Ladino, 'Memorials Matter: Emotion, Environment, and Public Memory at American Historical Sites'

Review published on Thursday, February 27, 2020


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In 2009, Ken Burns referred to the National Parks as “America’s best idea” in his sweeping, six-part eponymous PBS film. His familiar use of slow panning over still images, and cinematic video segments of majestic landscapes all worked to reinforce this rather grand film subtitle. Music and first-person narration also conditioned the visual and emotional experience, as the viewer learned how National Parks came to be and why they still resonate with significance today. Much like the impact of Burns’s epic Civil War (1990), this film helped to shape the meaning of America’s National Parks for millions of viewers, and its emotional underpinning thus serves as a useful backdrop to the book considered here.

In Memorials Matter: Emotion, Environment, and Public Memory at American Historical Sites, Jennifer Ladino is interested in what it feels like to visit and internalize National Park Service sites across western America. An English professor and specialist in American literature and the environmental humanities, she employs literature and memoir to add historical perspective while also mining psychology and ecocriticism to provide an interdisciplinary framework for her larger themes. Rather than highlight recreational areas like Yosemite, Ladino selected educational sites as her experiential landscapes. Throughout, detailed description and critical analysis of all built and natural features inform Ladino’s primary effort to understand the emotional core of each memorial site.

Ladino divides the book into chapter case studies, using specific National Park Service sites to explore affect, or “the feelings that precede or elude consciousness and discourse ... and [that] can transcend the individual body” (p. 12). From locating the roots and manifestation of fear at Coronado National Memorial (US/Mexico border site) to processing racism and shame via the built infrastructure and natural environments at Manzanar National Historic Site (Japanese internment), Ladino deeply considers bodily and contemplative experiences, describing their affective impact while implying corrective methodologies when she senses barriers to more transcendent feelings and narratives. The suggestion is that memorial sites have the potential “to clearly connect past and present injustices,” if their design, intention, and interpretation work with the natural landscape to generate a direct confrontation more conducive for ambivalent, or untidy histories (p. 254).

Ladino argues that affect theory is useful in this context for its ability to closely assess and describe
how environments (landscapes, buildings, exhibits, people, interpretation, animals, border fences, view sheds) act to condition and prompt feelings, senses, predescribed emotions, and ultimately, ways of knowing people and places. Memorial sites operate at multiple sensory and intellectual levels, but Ladino reminds us that to value one mode over another fails to capture their instructive potential.

Some sites have the capacity to lift tourists out of purely celebratory and patriotic urges to contemplate something more nuanced and global. Ladino finds that anxiety, for example, is a better affective catalyst for deep contemplation and subsequent activism than an overarching atmosphere of fear at a site. Similarly, she writes, “shame is potentially a more useful emotion for engaging American racism than guilt, which implies a quick fix” (p. 202). The processes and outcomes are the product of subtle differences in memorial design, context, location, and intention.

Ladino is close to her subject, having served as an NPS ranger for thirteen summers early in her career. She readily acknowledges that National Park Service sites are “products of settler colonialism” and are not fully detached from patriotic and nationalistic impulses (p. 229). Even so, because their general mission is to narrate “the intense history of the U.S.” and thus “to manage the relationship between public memory and national identity,” their empirical value is clear (p. xii). Through closely analyzing the affective environments at each chosen site, Ladino is attempting to uncover processes and methodologies that generate historical thinking, compassion for diverse groups, and a reconnection to the natural world. She is not dismissing the value of touristic celebration or patriotism per se, but she is arguing for a much more informed and humane definition of those emotional conditions.

At Coronado National Memorial (Arizona), for example, Ladino grounds her experience within today’s highly charged and fragmented political culture. While the site seeks to interpret the famous 1540 Coronado Expedition, in which Spanish explorer Francisco Vazquez de Coronado initiated significant ecological and cultural change in a search for riches, Ladino experiences as much of its border landscape as possible, connecting a lingering sense of fear with warning signs cautioning the dangers of the desert, including “illegal” immigrants. At World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument, (now the Pearl Harbor National Memorial,) Ladino describes the cognitive and “affective dissonance” produced by the surrounding Hawaiian landscape, the touristic impulse to have fun and celebrate, and reminders to observe the sacredness of Pearl Harbor. While the site has commendably shifted its interpretive focus to include a global scope, the affective impression reinforces peace and reconciliation, resulting in what Ladino calls a “techno-patriotism” that “leaves a gap … often filled by nostalgia” (p. 143). She argues that incorporating a more direct and visceral confrontation with indigenous Hawaiian voices might move the interpretive impact toward the larger goal of “[overcoming] the delusion of American innocence” (p. 184).

Ladino is concerned about the volatile and divisive political climate goaded by the current administration, and her wider intent is profound: that land, landscapes, and the “more-than-human” world have agency; that borders are not inevitable; that the affective impact and potential of memory sites should be understood and recognized; and that Americans must internalize resulting ambivalent histories if we are ever to move beyond destructive nationalisms supported by naive patriotism.

Ladino hints at the power of art to generate deeper connections to history. Her early treatment of the
psychology and science behind affect theory, along with her use of literature and memoir to add depth to each site, sets the stage for an equally direct defense of history also informed by the arts in her final analysis. While this argument is somewhat obscured by her use of rhetorical questioning to suggest their direct utility, her encounter with an Archibald MacLeish poem at the San Francisco National Cemetery powerfully demonstrates the visceral potential when the arts act with other features of a memorial landscape to complicate history and prompt deeper contemplation. Ladino writes, “I feel the grief of mortality and the shame of the ruthlessness with which the U.S. conducts its nation-building projects, and, at the same time, the incongruous sense of peacefulness a silent cemetery emits and the compassion many humans have for each other in the face of our inevitable deaths” (p. 246).

Memorials Matter is an impressive and important book. Acknowledging the agency of landscapes and the more-than-human world, while understanding how all facets of an interpretive site interact to produce an affective environment, urges public historians, humanities scholars, and federal employees to think holistically and humanely. Given the fact that most Americans develop their sense of history outside the academy, it is increasingly clear that we should embrace opportunities at historical sites with as much creativity and cross-disciplinary perspective we can muster. This should be the promise of memorial sites; to make possible what Ladino calls “eco-patriotism,” or a redefinition of what it means to love and understand your place in the world beyond mere national borders or singular ethnic affiliations.


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