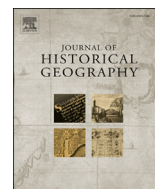




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Geographies of commemoration: Angel Island, San Francisco and North Head, Sydney

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ABSTRACT

Memorialising lives, deaths and events in landscapes can be authorised, official and highly regulated, or spontaneous, unsanctioned and anti-authoritarian. Interpreting and connecting two sites spanning the Pacific Ocean, this paper explores the inscribed and affective landscapes of Angel Island, San Francisco, and North Head, Sydney. Both sites encompass multivalent histories of defence, quarantine, immigration and leisure. Both also host a continuum of mark-making practices, from informal graffiti to monuments aspiring to direct national narratives. Elaborating the rich and complex layering of histories at each site, we trace the semiotic and emotive circuits marked by their endorsed and vernacular inscriptions. In particular, we question the work done when individual or even surreptitious texts are appropriated – or marketed – within formal narratives of inclusiveness, reverence and homogeneous nationalism. Drawing upon scholarship from archaeology, history, geography and heritage studies, this analysis argues that formalised commemoration never escapes the potential for counter-readings – that authority and authorship never entirely coincide.

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The historical geography of memorialising and commemoration operates across a continuum, from highly orchestrated state endeavours to intensely private individual mark-making practices. At one end lie military and Holocaust memorials, at the other end quotidian graffiti.¹ Somewhere in between reside monuments to the dead: cemeteries, headstones and plaques that have their own complex histories and practices of formal design and semiotic arrangement.² The memorialising of lives, deaths and events in landscapes can be authorised, official and highly regulated, or spontaneous, unauthorised

and even anti-authoritarian. Much memorialising, nevertheless, combines public display with an ambition toward interior reflection, aiming for – and often achieving – an affective response.³

In recent years, geographers have joined tourism and heritage scholars in turning away from interrogating formal, sanctioned monuments in favour of vernacular practices and the memory work they perform. Such studies encompass nominally ‘incidental’ graffiti, ephemeral shrines, the deviation of docents from history-tour scripts and the individuated expectations that consumers place upon – and perform at – heritage sites.⁴ Operating against or beyond authorised arenas of memory, such interventions may contribute to an anti-theoretical accretion of symbols within memorial landscapes. Conversely, they may project territorial claims of cultural or racial

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'heritage' onto otherwise unremarkable streets, neighbourhoods or villages.⁵ Geographer Hamzah Muzaini has powerfully demonstrated how individuals and cultural groups may seek to maintain their ontological security precisely via non-engagement with formal memorials, through productive acts of forgetting or by dispersing their past into personal memories, family stories and domestic artefacts.⁶

Whether pursued for counter-hegemonic or consumerist ends, this democratisation represents a historical re-scaling of the politics of memorialising practices.⁷ As Reuben Rose-Redwood and Laurajane Smith remind us, attending to these intimate and highly localised interventions can be revealing of the emotional micro-economics of investing memory in public places and traces.⁸ Such encounters can be heightened, as Karen Till's work has shown, at historically 'wounded' sites, 'haunted locales through which unfolding and intersecting social and personal histories resonate across space and time'.⁹ Indeed, this paper is animated by the dialectic between the creation and consumption of 'heritage' at two sites where official commemoration and individualised mark-making come together in highly dense assemblages.

Angel Island in San Francisco and North Head in Sydney are two coastal sites – respectively insular and peninsular – on either side of the Pacific Ocean. As entry points to continental territories and (therefore) to national histories, they have comparable pasts as quarantine stations, places of immigration detention and of military defence. Angel Island and North Head also share comparable presents as sites of heritage tourism, whose public draw and affective impact rests in part on their stunning landscapes proximate to major cities. A further appeal, however, lies in their dark pasts, which are actively commemorated by the authorities responsible for their twenty-first century management. While there have been numerous studies that address the rich and connected quarantine-military-immigration-leisure use of these particular coastal sites, none compare and link these two Pacific landscapes.¹⁰

⁵ O.J. Dwyer, Symbolic accretion and commemoration, *Social & Cultural Geography* 5 (2004) 419–435; A. Nayak, Race, affect, and emotion: young people, racism, and graffiti in the postcolonial English suburbs, *Environment and Planning A* 42 (2010) 2370–2392.

⁶ H. Muzaini and B. Yeoh, Memory-making 'from below': rescaling remembrance at the Kranji War Memorial and Cemetery, Singapore, *Environment and Planning A* 39 (2007) 1288–1305; H. Muzaini, Making memories our own (way): non-state remembrances of the Second World War in Perak, Malaysia, in: O. Jones, J. Garde-Hansen (Eds), *Geography and Memory: Explorations in Identity, Place and Becoming*, Houndmills, 2012, 216–233; H. Muzaini, On the matter of forgetting and 'memory returns', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 40 (2015) 102–112.

⁷ D.H. Alderman and J.F.J. Inwood, Landscapes of memory and socially just futures, in: N.C. Johnson, R.H. Schein, J. Winders (Eds), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography*, Chichester, 2013, 273; K. Giles and M. Giles, The writing on the wall: the concealed communities of the East Yorkshire horselads, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 11 (2007) 336–357.

⁸ R. Rose-Redwood, D. Alderman and M. Azaryahu, Collective memory and the politics of urban space: an introduction, *GeoJournal* 73 (2008) 161; L. Smith, Theorizing museum and heritage visiting, in: A. Witcomb, K. Message (Eds), *Museum Theory*, Chichester, 2015, 459–461.

⁹ K.E. Till, Artistic and activist memory-work: approaching place-based practice, *Memory Studies* 1 (2008) 101. See also K.E. Till, Wounded cities: memory-work and a place-based ethics of care, *Political Geography* 31 (2012) 3–14.

¹⁰ For Angel Island see E. Lee and J. Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America*, Oxford, 2010; N. Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*, Berkeley, 2001; G. Hoskins and J.F. Madder, Immigration stations: the regulation and commemoration of mobility at Angel Island, San Francisco and Ellis Island, New York, in: T. Creswell, P. Merriman (Eds), *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects*, Farnham, 2011, 151–167; A. Mayne, Guardians at the gate: quarantine and racialism in two Pacific Rim port cities, 1870–1914, *Urban History* 35 (2008) 255–274. For North Head see J. Foley, *In Quarantine: A History of Sydney's Quarantine Station 1828–1984*, Kenthurst, 1996; S. Darcy and S. Wearing, Public-private partnerships and contested cultural heritage tourism in national parks: a case study of the stakeholder views of the North Head Quarantine Station (Sydney, Australia), *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 4 (2009) 181–199.

Historically, it has been commonplace to observe geographic overlays of military defence, protection against infectious diseases configured as invasive, and immigration configured as a threatening contamination. The structures, processes and purposes of health, immigration and defence have coincided at sites along almost any border one cares to examine, whether terrestrial (for example, the Mexico-US border) or maritime (for example, Victoria, British Columbia or Robben Island, South Africa).¹¹ Owing to their multivalent pasts, Angel Island and North Head likewise occupy complex and competing locations in the spectrum of 'dark tourism' sites. Functioning simultaneously as places of civil imprisonment, military defence and 'benevolent internment', both their product offering and visitor expectations slide across a range of dark heritage typologies, amongst more quotidian leisure activities.¹²

Here we are less concerned with the intertwined past uses of these places of complex isolation and segregation, and more with the interwoven practices of mark-making and commemoration that they have elicited. Angel Island and North Head are both populated with extensive assemblages of informal and personal inscriptions, paintings, carvings and graffiti that have themselves come to form part of the heritage and historical pedagogy of national remembering. From graffiti to sanctioned inscriptions, headstones to war memorials, they prove concentrated spaces of formal and informal, authorised and unauthorised mark-making; landscapes of affective commemoration.

Conceptualising these markers as 'materialized discourses emplaced in the landscape' is critical to interpreting their historical dynamics of meaning.¹³ As Laura McAtackney has argued of political murals in Northern Ireland, 'the walls on which murals are placed often dictate the nature of their subject matter and the timescales on which they will be allowed to survive'.¹⁴ If those walls themselves both restrict and define the communities they enclose, they also provide a forum for the endless dialogue between shifting patterns of murals and graffiti.

In this sense, we interpret the memorial landscapes of North Head and Angel Island not simply as assemblages of texts or layered narratives, but as strategically sited arenas which 'seek to influence collective decisions or policies, justify their claims to the past, and entice others to participate in the debate'.¹⁵ In effect, they comprise a community of inscriptions – emerging, conversing, shaping each other's position and meaning, fading from visibility or importance, and occasionally resurrected from obscurity. The inscriptions likewise participate in a politics of scale: if each carved line or whorl reminds us of the intimate efforts of its creator, their messages evoke the names of individuals, ships and nations, gesturing all at once to intensely local affiliations and global mobilities.¹⁶ Thus to

¹¹ See A.M. Stern, Buildings, boundaries, and blood: medicalization and nation-building on the US-Mexico border, 1910–1930, *Hispanic American Historical Review* 79 (1999) 41–81; P. Johnson, *Quarantined: Life and Death at William Head Station, 1872–1959*, Surrey, BC, 2013; H. Deacon (Ed.), *The Island: A History of Robben Island*, Claremont, 1996.

¹² P.R. Stone, A dark tourism spectrum: towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions, *Tourism* 54 (2006) 145–60; W. Logan and K. Reeves (Eds), *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'*, New York, 2008; J. Lennon and M. Foley, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, London, 2000. For punitive, protective and therapeutic rationales for isolation, see C. Strange and A. Bashford (Eds), *Isolation: Places and Practices of Exclusion*, London, 2003.

¹³ O.J. Dwyer and D.H. Alderman, Memorial landscapes: analytic questions and metaphors, *GeoJournal* 73 (2008) 166.

¹⁴ L. McAtackney, Peace maintenance and political messages: the significance of walls during and after the Northern Irish 'Troubles', *Journal of Social Archaeology* 11 (2011) 88.

¹⁵ Alderman and Inwood, landscapes of memory and socially just futures, 281.

¹⁶ See also Muzaini and Yeoh, Memory-making 'from below', 1301–1302; H. Muzaini, Scale politics, vernacular memory and the preservation of the Green Ridge battlefield in Kampar, Malaysia, *Social & Cultural Geography* 14 (2013) 393.

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