

**COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND HOW THE PRESENT SHAPES THE PAST:  
A PHILADELPHIA STORY ABOUT GEORGE WASHINGTON AND SLAVERY**

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## Introduction

Collective memory is increasingly discussed as an important feature of large group behavior. My goal in this presentation is to outline five theoretical and empirical questions that underlie the linkage between collective memory particularly and the dynamics of mobilization and mitigation in contemporary ethnic conflict. Next I outline three conceptual tools for the analysis of collective memory and how present needs shape what is told and retained about the past: narratives, symbols and rituals, and symbolic landscapes. To illustrate the approach, I consider race in the United States and especially the phenomenon of slavery in both the north and the south. To do this, I emphasize the role of selective forgetting in the north and how only in recent years has the story of slavery and segregation there been publicly considered.

The analysis will examine the following five questions or problems. (1) What is collective [sometimes called cultural] memory and how is it conceptualized? The *what* problem examines alternative formulations of collective memory and the potential relevance of each for understanding ethnic conflict. (2) Who makes up the collectivity that shares, nourishes, and modifies these memories? The *who* problem focuses on the identification of relevant units of analysis given the absence of formal group boundaries and membership criteria. (3) What are the mechanisms by which collective memory is maintained, communicated and transformed? The *mechanism* problem asks how individuals and groups come to hold, invoke and transmit collective memories. (4) How should we understand the nature and source of variations in the intensity of collective memory across individuals, cultural groups, and over time? The *intensity* problem asks how and why not all collective memories are not equally salient for all members of the ethnic group. (5) To what extent and in what ways are collective memories an important foundation for collective action? The *action* problem asks how and when are memory and identity mobilized to produce action in the name of the group.

The goal of this presentation is to outline an empirically useful way to understand collective memory and its role in ethnic conflict and conflict mitigation. To help illustrate my approach, I will describe a conflict that has gone on for the past eight years in Philadelphia concerning George Washington and the nine enslaved Africans he had while in lived in the city as President of the United States from 1790-1797 (Mires 2009). The house that was torn down in the 1830's was a block away from Independence Hall—where the national narrative of freedom and liberty is celebrated and the slave quarters were just under the present entrance to the Liberty Bell Pavilion where the bell is housed. How can this complex braided history of freedom and slavery that not only is found on this site but throughout the country in its first 77 years be told together? In Philadelphia, there have been contentious debates, strong disagreements and complicated and painful discussions about Washington, slavery in the north, and the nine individuals—two of whom escaped to freedom. These debates reveal a good deal about what is, and is not, included in collective narratives, how selective narratives are remembered or forgotten, and reinforced or discouraged. While this conflict is not yet settled and my research not yet completed, I expect that the relevance of collective memory to this conflict will be clear

## FIVE QUESTIONS ABOUT COLLECTIVE MEMORY

### ***What is collective memory?***

Collective memory offers accounts of emotionally salient events and persons in the past that have particular relevance to how a group understands itself and the challenges it faces in the present and future. These accounts are not simply the details about the past but a central feature is the moral, political and social lessons they communicate. A starting point for some authors is the difference between what is often referred to as history which is about facts, specific events and truth (as positivists use the term) and popular memory as experienced through the eyes and mind of participants in the events and their descendents. While there are real limits to this

distinction, it can serve as a useful starting point. The limits are important too for both historical accounts and collective memory are built around the plausible explanations and accounts about the past found in the narratives offered in school texts, commemorative events, and the sacred places that are emotionally powerful for group members.

In addition, because large-scale events can be remembered by many people, there will often be diversity in what is remembered that is linked to the social diversity in who is remembering what as is seen in the example of American civil war mentioned below

### **Who shares collective memories?**

People who share collective memories often, but not always, share cultural identities. However, it is important to consider that identity groups are not neatly defined or bounded in the way that citizens of a state or members of a voluntary organization are. There are generally no membership cards or hierarchical leadership structures in most of the collectivities of interest here. In addition, there is often high internal diversity among people in large collectivities such as religious or national communities that produce significant variation in the content of shared collective memories. Although this might sound like a contradiction at first, perhaps an example would help here. In the US people in the north and the south as well as whites and blacks have memories of the American civil war and lessons they have drawn from them. An initial reaction might be that if the memories are not the same, they are not shared while a more nuanced reflection might be that with all collective memories there are some parts about which there is widespread consensus and high agreement while there are more specific parts about which there can be differences in content, emphasis and even outright disagreement.

Resolution of this complexity with a simple decision rule probably does not make much sense. Elsewhere I have discussed the methodological challenges the absence of fixed cultural boundaries raise and propose that they are best settled contextually depending on what one is trying to understand. Given my understanding of culture as shared systems of meaning, meaning making and identity and the multiple identities that people hold the unique assignment of individuals to cultures or the assumption that people within a culture agree on all points large and small makes little sense. As Robert LeVine has wisely pointed out, people who share the same culture don't necessarily agree on all details. Rather, the point LeVine argues that emphasizing culture as common understandings of the symbols and representations they communicate does not mean there is necessarily a problem with within-cultural variation in thought, feeling, and behavior (LeVine 1984: 68).

### **What are the *mechanisms* by which collective memories are held, invoked and transformed?**

Narratives, ritual enactments, and symbolic landscapes are three central mechanisms in the development, reinforcement and transmission of collective memories. Psychocultural narratives that are verbal accounts that articulate stories about the past and attributes motives and meanings to key actors; psychocultural enactments and dramas through which the narratives are played out through specific rituals and conflict events evoking powerful emotions; and symbolic landscape that use specific physical objects and sites to convey powerful messages of inclusivity/exclusivity. All of these serve multiple functions in ethnic conflict as *reflectors* of a group's core assumptions about a conflict and what it needs to make a good enough agreement with an adversary; as *exacerbators* or *inhibitors* of conflict when they heighten or diminish tensions, and as *causes* of conflict when they make certain action possibilities more plausible, and hence more probable, than others. In these ways, the dynamics of culture and memory direct us towards performance and passionate expressions as strategic political acts of mutual denial or acknowledgment that shape the course of conflict.

### **Why and how does the *intensity* of collective memories vary?**

There are two very different answers to the question of why there is always within group variation in the intensity and meaning of collective memories. One is that collective memories serve the interests and goals of different people and subgroups. This answer emphasizes how interests motivate action and define meanings; the second is that identities are at the core of engagement in collective memories and that particularly when identities are threatened, people protect them through rituals and symbolic expressions that the lessons from collective memories reinforce.

### **How and when are collective memories mobilized to produce collective *action*?**

Collective memories, even when they are deeply felt don't explain group mobilization in any simple way. Rather, the emotions and beliefs contained in the memories need to be translated into actions—a process involving mechanisms that concretize the connections between the memories about the past and what should be done in the present. Making sense of how this is accomplished in different contexts is both challenging in part because it is unlikely that there is only one simple pattern of linkage. We can however begin to outline some of the dynamics involved in specific situations and identify both some general patterns as well as unique features that are highly context specific.

One commonly cited mechanism is “leader manipulation,” referring to a situation where a political figure effectively organizes group mobilization linking past experiences to present-day injustices. Sometimes this apparently is successful but it is also important to recognize that it often is not and it has a curious one-dimensional view of followers granting them little agency and their willingness to resist mobilization appeals that they find less than compelling. Yet we readily cite situations where appeals to collective memories seem to work and tend to ignore those in which they fall upon deaf ears. The point is a simple one—to understand the underlying dynamic we have to examine both successful and unsuccessful attempts at manipulation. We can think of leaders as sellers seeking buyers if we consider the incentives they have to offer appeals to potential followers. Perhaps more interesting because it is less obvious is what is in it for the buyers—the people who decide to follow these leaders.

The remainder of this presentation provides the beginnings of my framework for thinking about these questions but no clear answers to them. My goal here is to outline the roadmap meaning identifying the approach I offer to cast light on these questions. I begin with a consideration of cultural frames and consider some of the ways that shared narratives are important in understanding how groups understand the challenges and opportunities they face in terms of their understood past experiences. Next I suggest the importance of cultural expressions and enactments that reinforce the narratives and make certain courses of action more plausible—and even necessary—than others. In the final section, I describe the conflict in Philadelphia over the President's house and the briefly return to the five questions and offer some brief suggestions how the approach offered here will be useful to answer them.

## **CULTURAL FRAMES**

This project will focus on the importance of cultural frames in shaping when and how collective memories are relevant to understanding mobilization and collective action in contemporary ethnic conflicts. A cultural analysis emphasizes the power of each party's narratives to make sense of conflict and in shaping interpretations of the others motives and intentions in ways that have significant impact on actions (Ross 2007). The underlying premise here is that conflict is inherently ambiguous to the parties involved and that their interpretations shaped by past experiences and long-standing cultural assumptions play a significant although

often unappreciated role in shaping the course of events. To do this we need to take seriously the cultural frames and narratives that the parties to a conflict recount. They are significant reflections of reality for them and any effort to manage conflict constructively must take them into consideration—not because of their absolute truth or falsity but because they tell us a great deal about how each side sees the world, their hopes and fears, and what they need to avoid escalation and violence.

**Shared narratives.** Narratives are explanations for events—large and small—in the form of short, common sense accounts (stories) that often seem simple<sup>1</sup>. However, the powerful images they contain, and the judgments they make about the motivations and actions of one's own group and opponents, are emotionally powerful. Narratives are not always internally consistent. For example, group narratives often alternate between portraying one's own group as especially strong and as especially vulnerable—and the same holds for the portrayal of the opponent (Kaufman 2001).<sup>2</sup>

Narratives meet a number of needs and people are especially likely to rely upon them when they are disoriented and struggling to make sense of events in situations of high uncertainty and high stress. In such contexts, group narratives with their familiar shared images provide reassurance and relieve anxiety while reinforcing within group worldviews. Yet it would be foolish to suggest that within group narratives are fully consistent or that there is no variation in how members of an in-group understand a narrative or the parts of it they emphasize. All cultural traditions have access to multiple pre-existing narratives and collective memories that provide support for diverse actions in anxious times. Narratives, therefore, are not made from whole cloth, but are grounded in selectively remembered, interpreted experiences and projections from them that resonate widely in a group.

Narratives have a number of features relevant for the analysis of group conflict that I have recently examined (Ross, 2007: Chapter 2). I note four of these here which are especially likely to be relevant to understanding the linkage between collective memories and contemporary actions: past events and collective memories as metaphors and lessons; selectivity; fears and threats to identity; and in-group conformity and externalization of responsibility.

(1) *Past events and collective memories as metaphors and lessons.* Emotionally meaningful narratives are rooted in shared culture frames and collective memories that are filled with deeply emotive images and meanings that provide the psychocultural narrative's building blocks. Narratives invoke the past in response to contemporary needs. "By placing the present in the context of the past and of the community, the myth of descent interprets present social changes and collective endeavors in a manner that satisfies the drive for meaning" (Smith 1999: 62). Narratives are normative accounts with heroes and villains and lessons about how life should be lived. They provide in-group accounts of the past, including the origin and development of the group, they invoke past threats and conflicts and enemies, and they laud group survival. In some cases, there is a conscious effort to develop a narrative with an eye towards long-term political goals while in others they give rise are much more like patchwork quilts sewn and re-sewn over a long time period.

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<sup>1</sup> Schudson (1995) argues that all memory is social "because it is located institutions rather than individual minds in the form of rules, laws, standardized procedures, and records, a whole set of cultural practices through which people recognize a debt to the past...these cultural forms store and transmit information that individuals make use of without themselves 'memorizing it'" (346-7). In addition he adds that "memory is sometimes located in collectively created monuments and markers: books holidays, statues souvenirs" (347) which is very similar to my own views.

<sup>2</sup> The general argument is found in LeVine and Campbell (1972).

Harkening back to historical events, such as battles, that make up collective memories is one common way in which a shared community of experiences is communicated. Serbs emphasize the defeat of Prince Lazar in Kosovo in 1389; Quebecers continue to mark the swift English victory over the French on the Plains of Abraham in 1759; and some French still remark that it was the English who burned Joan of Arc. These references offer a direct link between a shared identity in the present and one in the past that is constructed more to meet contemporary needs than to reflect historical reality. Weber's (1976) masterful analysis of the transformation of identity in 19<sup>th</sup> century France is very relevant to the argument that the past is often understood through the needs of the present as the French today regard themselves as having a long national history and identity. However, Weber argues that in the French countryside there was only a weak identification with the state and French culture as late as the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and that elites in Paris saw their mission as one of bringing civilization to the primitive peasants between 1870 and 1914 producing a strong French identity sacrifice in World War I after which the sense of a much longer standing national identity was further strengthened, in part, to explain the high cost and sacrifice the war entailed.

Ethnic groups and nations commonly recount their narratives in a chronological fashion that blends key events, heroes, metaphors and moral lessons (Kaufman 2001). These recountings can be usefully thought of as collective memories and products of social interaction and individual memory processes (Devine-Wright 2003: 11). Collective memories, as Halbwachs (1980) and others have pointed out, are selective and what is emphasized is facilitated through socially produced mnemonic devices such physical objects that become repositories of group memories. Social memory for Nora is at odds with history and "takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects" (1989: 9).<sup>3</sup> For Connerton too collective social memory is clearly different from the more specific activity of historical reconstruction, which is more dependent upon evidence than is social memory (1989: 13-14).

Groups, from this perspective, remember many of the same events, battles, and heroes that a historian might consider important. However, the explanations for them, and how the two modes of understanding interpret their significance are often highly divergent. In addition, while groups see collective memories as unchanging, objective accounts of a group's history, it is clear not only that there are often major changes in emphasis and the specific events or people included in group narratives over several generations, but in addition, at any one time there is also variation in which memories are most salient across generations (Devine-Wright 2003: 13). Memories associated with historical events may often be far more recent and develop as political claim making a good deal after the event took place. For example, the French did not celebrate Bastille Day until a century after 1789; the 1690 Battle of the Boyne in Northern Ireland that only became significant in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Roe and Cairns 2003: 174); the 1838 Battle of Blood River in South Africa was unmarked for several decades after it took place (Thompson 1985:164); and the close emotional between Jewish and Muslim identity and the holy sites in the old city of Jerusalem have dramatically increased the past century. The particular events whose lessons and metaphors are emphasized can vary as collective memories evolve.

The objective manner in which collective memories are often recounted should not blind us to their emotional significance as links between the individual and the group as well as the past and present. Otherwise how could we explain the strong reactions people have to totally non-utilitarian physical objects such as buildings, potsherds, and statues on the one hand to household objects on the other?

Connerton (1989) asks how collective memories are conveyed and sustained. While he

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<sup>3</sup> What Nora terms *lieux de mémoire* does not seem to be best understood as only physical sites of memory for they are not simply locations that hold memories but can be located in images and expressions as well.

sees a role for unconscious dynamics, his emphasis is on social processes that make connections to the past that are useful in the present. For Connerton, the past matters because it shapes our present needs. My argument emphasizes the opposite relationship, namely that how we understand the past grows out of our present needs. However, like Connerton, I emphasize the role that social participation and especially ritual commemoration play in conveying and sustaining knowledge about the past. For him, commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices are important because they are performative and participation builds commitment to the group and to its core narrative.

(2) *Selectivity*. Events in the present and the past and memories of it are used in complex ways as groups selectively focus on events, individuals, and how they are linked. For this reason, while group narratives refer to the past, they are different from a history of the group (Nora 1989). The selectivity arises for at least three reasons; first, the narrative's focus on emotionally significant events is central in prioritizing what is included and how central its role is; second, narratives are a form of naïve realism, offering an account of the unfolding events that, while presented as objective, makes no effort to understand an adversary's perspective; and third, an opponent generally receives little attention in the in-group narrative. Because present needs and challenges shape the narrative's relevance, specific events in it shift in importance, elaboration, and emotional significance over time.

As a result, it is sometimes the case that when faced with competing narratives of groups involved in a conflict, outsiders may believe that they refer to different places or the same place at different points in time. Even when it is clear that this is not the case, the shared images and explanations for events opponents provide often seem to have little in common. Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, for example, while agreeing that there was significant violence since 1969, generally offer highly divergent explanations of the events, just as whites and blacks in the US provide differing narratives on race relations. What this says is that actions rarely speak for themselves and must be interpreted within a wider cultural narrative (Bates, et al. 1998).

(3) *Fears and threats to identity*. Narratives are central to understanding "who is a people," to spelling out what in their "imagined past" is shared, and what dangers they face, and to spelling out a dream for their future. These narratives articulate an ethnic conception of the nation and its past that emphasizes the group's community of birth and shared culture (Smith 1991). Even in minimal conflicts with no physical danger, individual and group self-esteem seems to be quickly invoked and defended, affecting judgments about worthiness and resource allocation (Brown 1986; Tajfel 1981). In bitter conflicts, among the strongest feelings people express are fears about physical attacks on their group, and about symbolic attacks on its identity. While the distinction between physical and symbolic attacks is not hard to make conceptually, it is much harder to separate the two in the heat of a real conflict. Both fears involve feelings of vulnerability, denigration, and humiliation that link past losses to present dangers. Fears can be about physical security and/or the extinction of the self, family, and the group and its culture, including its sacred icons and sites. For example, even where directly related deaths did not occur, Smith (1991) uses the term *ethnocide* to describe deliberate efforts to destroy a community's cultural icons. Recent examples of such attacks include the Hindu dismantling of the mosque at Ayodhya in Northern India in 1992, destruction of cultural treasures and mosques in Bosnia (Sells 1996), the Taliban's toppling the ancient huge Buddhist statues in Afghanistan in 2001, and government schools for native American and Australian aboriginal children in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that removed children from their families, prohibited them from speaking their language or wearing their traditional clothing, and even insisted on cutting their hair to resemble mainstream notions of civilization.

(4) *In-group conformity and externalization of responsibility*. All groups exert conformity pressures on their members, and these are greatest in high-stress conflict situations when there is

assumed high within-group agreement about the meaning of events, heightened in-group solidarity, an intensified sense of linked fate that inhibits social and political dissent, and blame for the conflict directed outside the group (LeVine and Campbell 1972: 21). As part of this dynamic, disagreement quickly becomes disloyalty, and often those holding dissenting views are careful not to express them publicly, and sometimes even in private. Within communities, high conformity pressures increase acceptance of the dominant elements in a narrative. This does not mean, however, that once a narrative emerges, it is unchangeable. Quite the opposite; as new events unfold, there can be questioning and conflict around, and change in, a narrative following the emergence of alternative versions of events. For example, in South Africa there was high consensus among Afrikaners about the justice of, and religious basis for, apartheid when the Nationalist Party first came to power in 1948, but by the 1980's there was widespread rejection of many of its core elements that meant the Afrikaner narrative no longer had same broad emotional appeal. In this context, majority rule and the idea of Afrikaners as white Africans in a rainbow nation became more acceptable.

Political leaders often know intuitively that building consensus around the key elements in a narrative can be crucial to mustering support for their actions, which are presented as “naturally” following from shared understandings (Kamman 1995; Schudson 1995). In short, building active public consensus around a narrative is a form of public opinion formation that both provides a strategy on the part of leaders to mobilize public support and helps individuals reduce their own anxiety. A good indicator of this dynamic is the greater homogeneity of publicly expressed opinions, greater public agreement on key parts of the dominant narrative, and externalization of responsibility for the conflict onto an out-group as a conflict heat up. For example, prior to the outbreak of the Gulf War in January 1991, American public opinion as expressed in surveys, newspaper editorials, and in Congress was quite divided on the question of the war with Iraq. Once the fighting began, however, public support for military action increased dramatically. This is seen at the level of political elites as well. Just a few days before the outbreak of fighting, the Senate narrowly voted in favor of action. Within a few days, however, few Senators publicly offered significant criticism of the war effort. Few surveys, however, clearly identify the extent to which people actually change their attitudes towards what they perceive as the dominant view in their society versus the extent to which they engage in what Kuran (1995) calls preference falsification to avoid ostracism or even persecution.

**Cultural expressions and enactments.** Powerful narratives are far more than simple verbal accounts. Music, drama, and art, often filled with richly powerful images, enact and reinforce psychocultural narratives. “We Shall Overcome,” the anthem of the American Civil Rights Movement, still brings tears to the eyes of many participants and supporters, evoking not only memories of the struggle, but also its goals. Collective memories are often symbolized through physical objects and sites that represent group identity and through rituals that enhance a narrative's persistence and emotional significance. Examples of this connection abound in group holidays and rituals that assert relationships between the present and past through sacred objects, holy sites, special foods, and prayers. Zerubavel (1995: Chapters 5 and 8) describes the development of Masada in the Zionist period as a pilgrimage site for Israeli youth, and the powerful emotional role it came to play for them. The creation of, and visits to, the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington helped Americans to move past their pro- and anti-war positions of the 1960s and 1970s and to develop a new, more inclusive account of the period. It is not so much that past disagreements over the war changed, but that the events became less salient in comparison with the shared recognition of the large scale loss and suffering for families and communities that resulted from bringing people together at the site where they shared common emotions. Flags, memorial sites, inaugural ceremonies, sacred holidays, and state funerals are ritual objects and events that reinforce in-group identity and the emotional power of the group's



narratives.<sup>4</sup> Of course the same symbols that unify a group can also be sources of intense conflict between groups.

*Ritual.* Rituals are behaviors whose central elements and the contexts in which they take place are emotionally meaningful because of what they represent. In many rituals, people's actions are particularly mundane and the moods and motivations they elicit have to be seen through their connections to the social and political identities. Cultural performances are ritual expressions that communicate core parts of a group's self-understood identity and history. The cultural performances of particular interest here are those used to build or bolster political narratives and claims based on them. Normally we think of people as performers, but Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) argues that objects in museums presentations or public exhibitions, festivals, fairs, memorial and tourist sites perform as well. Performances, as she analyzes them, simultaneously reflect and produce plausible accounts of a group's past and present (also see Kamman 1995).

Repetitive cultural rituals are a crucial way of creating and solidifying narratives and collective memories that are transmitted over time and while they are often communicated as timeless rituals are regularly invented and reinvented to meet present fears (Connerton 1989; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Jarman 1997). Participation in a wide range of activities such as festivals and commemorative ceremonies are important in Connerton's analysis in which he emphasizes that rites are not merely expressive; rites are not merely formal; and rites are not limited in their effect to ritual occasions (1989: 44). Rituals commemorate continuity and in so doing shape communal memory (Connerton 1989: 48). Invented rituals often begin long after the events they mark as we noted earlier. In addition, "Ritual is not only an alternative way of expressing certain beliefs, but that certain things can be expressed only in ritual" (Connerton 1989: 54). He adds that

I approached ritual not as a type of symbolic representation but as a species of performative, and to this end contrasted myths, as reservoirs of possibility on which variations can be played, and rituals, on which no such variation is permissible... In doing so I underlined the cultural pervasiveness of performances which explicitly re-enact other actions that are represented as prototypical; and to this end I itemized the rhetoric of that re-enactment, calendrical, verbal and gestural. What, then, is being remembered in commemorative ceremonies? Part of the answer is that a community is reminded of its identity as represented by and told in a master narrative... Its master narrative is more than a story told and reflected on; it is a cult enacted. An image of the past, even in the form of a master narrative, is conveyed and sustained by ritual performances... [To be effective for participants, they must not just be cognitively competent] "they must be habituated to those performances" (Connerton 1989: 70-71).

Political leaders are keenly aware of the value of ritual performances that enhance their

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<sup>4</sup> Smith is clearly talking about enactment when he writes, "These concepts—autonomy, identity, national genius, authenticity, unity and fraternity—form an interrelated language or discourse that has its expressive ceremonials and symbols. These symbols and ceremonies are so much part of the world we live in that we take them, for the most part, for granted. They include the obvious attributes of nations—flags, anthems, parades, coinage, capital cities, oaths, folk costumes, museums of folklore, war memorials, ceremonies of remembrance for the national dead, passports, frontiers—as well as more hidden aspects, such as national recreations, the countryside, popular heroes and heroines, fairy tales, forms of etiquette, styles of architecture, arts and crafts, modes of town planning, legal procedures, educational practices and military codes—all those distinctive customs, mores styles and ways of acting and feeling that are shared by members of a community of historical culture" (Smith 1991: 77).

legitimacy and the political loyalty of their citizens, and all states have ceremonial occasions, which are moments of high ritual that assert the state's power and legitimacy. State rituals mark occasions such as political transitions, national holidays, military victories, the deaths of leaders, and the achievements of past and present heroes. State rituals take many forms and vary along a number of dimensions such as their size, degree of organization, key participants, and the emotions they evoke. Some of these celebrations are planned in advance and follow a calendric cycle, while others are a response to unfolding events. In both, the state invariably takes the lead in their organization and in determining the inclusion of national symbols and personalities intended to evoke strong affective response to the ceremonies. These large-scale rituals involve elaborate pomp and ceremony, and often large numbers of people.

Rituals and symbols can generate powerful messages about a group or a regime and its leaders and are routinely part of political mobilization and opposition. States are well aware of opponents' potential uses of ritual and at times go to great length to limit, and even prohibit them.<sup>5</sup> When opposition is particularly aligned with a society's social and cultural cleavages, cultural institutions and practices, such as those of religious groups, are often a prominent part of an opposition's political actions. Examples of this phenomenon include the American Civil Rights Movement's reliance on southern black church congregations for organizational support and the expression of equality demands in broad religious terms, the use of religious appeals and the mosques to mobilize support for the Iranian revolution, and Gandhi's emphasis on Hindu symbols in his hunger strikes and other non-violent political actions.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside state sponsored, or inspired, ceremonies are more low-key daily activities that involve ritualistic political actions that are rarely thought about self-consciously. Some of these include displaying symbols such as national flags and photos of present and past leaders, and playing national anthems at sporting events and in movie theaters. One is sometimes aware of these only in periods of stress and conflict when group identities are contested. In visits to divided societies, the paucity of such unifying activities is often clear as there are few symbols and rituals which people in competing groups share.

*Symbolic landscapes.* A society's symbolic landscape communicates and frames social and political messages through specific public images, physical objects, and other expressive representations. It includes public spaces and especially sacred sites that are not necessarily religious ones as well as group representations found in the mass media, theater, school textbooks, music, literature, and public art. Symbolic landscapes reflect how people understand their world and others in it but they can also be significant shapers of these worlds when they establish and legitimate particular normative standards and power relations within and between groups. As a framing mechanism:

The landscape idea represents a way of seeing—a way in which some {...] have represented themselves and to others the world about them and their social relationships with it, and through which they have commented on social relations. Landscape is a way of seeing that has its own history, but a history that can only be understood as part of a wider history of economy and society...whose origins and implications extend well beyond the use and perception of land; that has its own techniques of expression, but techniques which it shares with other areas of cultural practice (Cosgrove 1998: 1).

Symbolic landscapes communicate inclusion and exclusion, hierarchy, and portray

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<sup>5</sup> States ban many sorts of events including religious ceremonies, political meetings, parades, anniversary celebrations, pilgrimages and memorialization.

<sup>6</sup> It is not an accident that all three of these examples link religious symbols and political action. Religion is an especially rich source of cultural images, rituals as well as organizational resources.

dominant and subordinate groups in particular ways. The meanings a symbolic landscape conveys invites us to ask: Who is present and who is absent in public representations? What are the qualities of those people and objects portrayed in it? Who controls the representations and to what extent are they contested? How is hierarchy portrayed and what qualities are associated with particular positions within a society's hierarchy?

Inclusion and exclusion is often powerfully expressed through the restriction or expansion of a society's symbolic landscape. Exclusion of groups from the symbolic landscape is an explicit form of denial and assertion of power. In contrast, a more inclusive symbolic landscape is a powerful expression of societal inclusion that communicates a mutuality and shared stake in society. It renders the previously unseen visible, gives voice to those once voiceless, and can offer powerful messages to young people and help to reshape relations between groups as in post-apartheid South Africa, or to talk about what was previously kept invisible as in the conflict over marking the fact that George Washington kept slaves in his home in the nation's capitol when it in Philadelphia from 1790-1797 on what is now Independence Hall National Park (Mires, 2009).

Inclusion offers acceptance and legitimation that can reflect and promote changes in intergroup relationships. Through inclusion, groups can more easily identify and help mourn past losses and express hopes and aspirations for a common future. As symbolic statements of acknowledgment, it is no wonder that particular sites and the representations they contain can become the source of intense controversy between groups but also within the previously socially invisible group. What stories do they choose to tell about themselves? How is this related to who can speak for the group? Who controls its narrative and the images associated with a site? All of these issues provoke discussion that can be both thoughtful and heated as in the cases of the Holocaust Museum in Washington (Linenthal 2001a) and the District 6 Museum in Cape Town (Rassool and Prosalendis 2001); Soudien, 2009).<sup>7</sup>

All groups have sacred sites (Hassner, 2003) and these often are the most emotionally charged, treasured, and defended places in their symbolic landscape especially when they are threatened in ways that are experienced as threats to the group itself. These sites can be religious or secular and mark key events in a group's past and are associated with emotionally significant victories or defeats, miracles, and the exploits of heroes (Levinson 1998). Sacred places containing relics linking a group's past to its present and future are particularly powerful emotionally (Benvenisti 2000), and often there are restrictions on admitting outsiders to them. Sharing these sites with others is frequently hard to even imagine, let alone achieve, as we see in conflicts in Jerusalem (Abu El-Haj 2001; Hassner 2003; 2009), and Ayodhya (Davis, 2009). The emotional power of sacred sites is precisely what makes demands for exclusive physical control over them so strident and why loss of control over a site easily heightens a group's vulnerability.

### **CULTURAL FRAMES, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, AND MOBILIZATION**

Let's return to the Philadelphia story to illustrate key some features the power of collective memory in this conflict. First, while the National Park Service which controls the site had been aware that Washington held slaves in the city since the 1970's, only when free-lance historian Edward Lawler wrote about it in 2002 did the public controversy began (Lawler 2002; 2005). Initially, the Park Service was slow to recognize the political and emotional significance of the "discovery" and suggested only the most modest symbolic gestures such as a plaque on the site that acknowledged that Washington kept slaves in the house while he was president and lived there. Soon at least three citizens groups were formed including Avenging the Ancestors

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<sup>7</sup> There has been a particularly rich recent writing on the issue of landscape and memory in South Africa. For example see Coombes (2003) and Rassool and Prosalendis (2001).

(ATAC) led by the articulate attorney Richard Coard, Generations Unlimited, and an Ad Hoc Historians group from the region that was especially interested in pushing the National Park Service to tell the complex history of the site in and around the new Liberty Bell Pavilion<sup>8</sup>.

The conflict expanded as the city became involved soon in effort to obtain funds for a yet to be defined exhibit on the site of the President's House. Congressman Chakka Fattah got a funding bill for a memorial through Congress and the city offered another piece of funding. Before proceeding, the Mayor supported an archaeological dig on the site hoping that some remnants of the house still remained. This was conducted in the summer of 2007 and attracted so much interest that the NPS constructed a platform from which people could look down into the hole where the archaeologists were working, installed panels giving the historical background to the site and providing the names of, and telling something about each of the nine enslaved Africans, and having some of the archaeologists working on the site taking turns to explain to the public what was learned about the site and how this related to Washington and slavery. It was reported that over 400,000 people visited the site in just the few short months that the dig was conducted.

The next step involved deciding what to put on the site that would incorporate part of the house's foundation uncovered during the archaeological work. Designs were solicited and the winning one was announced at the end of 2007 but there was still widespread concern about what exactly what would and would not be shown and told on the site. Would it emphasize Washington (and Adams who lived there too during his term as President) or would it stress the story or slavery and Washington as a slave-holder as a tainted a Founding Father of the country?<sup>9</sup> In between there were more issues on the table such as how to link the two narratives, whether the site should also say something about free Africans in the city and the problems that community experienced, to what degree should the pain of the institution of slavery be emphasized, and how the nine enslaved Africans should be portrayed.

By mid 2009, the construction of the memorial was underway, but there was controversy about whether it communicated the historical accuracy of the original house plan or not and even more important in the latter half of the year there was widespread criticism of the interpretive materials that a consulting group had prepared and enough tension so that the Ad Hoc historians agreed that they would not speak about the contents of the project to anyone not involved in it for the time being. A new consulting group was hired and in April the city's oversight group headed by the Mayor's chief of staff put the proposed panels on display in the Independence Hall National Park Visitor's Center and hosted a public meeting to get feedback on the panels. The meeting in mid-May was raucous as community activists vocally stated that Washington was still portrayed too positively, that the pain and suffering of slavery was not portrayed sufficiently and that the enslaved Africans were seen as contented and happy in the proposed panels, and finally that minority contractors were not getting enough of the work from the construction project.

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<sup>8</sup> For a great deal of background in the history of President's house and the controversy over what the memorial site should present see <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/#>.

<sup>9</sup> The fact that Washington and his wife owned slaves—as did a good number of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and delegates to the Constitutional Convention, was always well known as was the fact that Washington freed his slaves up his death. However, to understand the power of this controversy requires ask how slavery is linked to the Independence Hall site and to Philadelphia a city that was home to many Quakers who were strong opponents of slavery. Another important part of the story is that Washington signed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1793 in Independence Hall—again emphasizing the checkered history of the site. <sup>10</sup> In 2005, the New York Historical Society presented a widely publicized exhibit on slavery in New York providing detailed descriptions, maps, and teaching materials ([http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/gallery\\_2.htm](http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/gallery_2.htm)).

The public has been engaged in the archaeological dig described above and in public meetings to discuss proposals for the site. There have also been at least two created “ritual events” held at the site that ATAC organized and conducted. The first, “Hercules Freedom Day,” was held on February 22, 2010 to mark his escape from Washington’s plantation at Mt. Vernon Virginia on Washington’s 65<sup>th</sup> birthday on February 22, 1797. It was previously known that Hercules had escaped but further research by Lawler and a long two part article about Hercules and Washington in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (<http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/news/inq022110.htm> and <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/news/inq022210.htm>) showed that it was not from Philadelphia and after, not during Washington’s presidency. Michael Coard, head of ATAC delivered a simple message that “Everybody knows George Washington’s birthday is today, but we celebrate it as Freedom Day for one of the 316 Black people he enslaved” and added that “Washington may have been a great general, a great leader and a great President but what kind of man was he who would enslave others?” A few months later, on May 21, 2010 Coard and ATAC held another gathering to mark the anniversary of the day Oney Judge’s escaped in 1796 when she slipped out of Washington’s residence while the president and his wife, Martha, were eating their supper. Judge was a young woman at the time, about 23, and a skilled seamstress and attendant for Martha Washington. With the assistance of the city’s substantial community of free blacks, Judge made her way to a ship and sailed off down the Delaware River and away from Philadelphia, eventually ending her journey in New Hampshire despite Washington’s great efforts to capture her.

The President’s House memorial site was originally set to open on July 4, 2010 and it was hoped that President Obama would be present at the dedication. However the delays have been sufficiently long so that it is tentatively set to open in November 2010. However after the last round of feedback, the consultants are again making changes so at this point the date is more a hope than a certainty.

The location of the President’s House is part of the sacred landscape of historic Philadelphia where it is said that extraordinary people did extraordinary things in the period from 1776-1787. One visits the site, much of which has been restored to look like colonial Philadelphia, and is told about the events that took place there at that time. Until recently, there was little mention by tour guides or in the literature available to visitors on the contradictions in the narrative that placed freedom and slavery side-by-side in this very place (as well as the country more generally), in its Constitution, and in the lives of many of the founding fathers. Symbolic landscapes are emotionally powerful so there is great attention paid to whose stories and which stories are recounted on them—at least through official voices. As a result, I expect that a memorial site in IHNP entitled “Freedom and Slavery in making a New Nation” will be both jarring and illuminating to many visitors who expected to encounter a simpler narrative without complex contradictions. Control over the narrative and its presentation on a site like Independence Hall invites more questions not just about slavery in general but slavery in the north where in recent years there has been a new realization that it was never just a southern institution in the early US. Despite the presence of the Quakers in Pennsylvania, slavery was not illegal in the state in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century although owners were not allowed to keep slaves in the state for more than six months at a time after which period they could be declared free. To get around this law, Washington regularly moved his enslaved Africans in and out of Pennsylvania.

New York is another Northern state where virtually all people view slavery as a Southern practice. There has been little knowledge that during the 18<sup>th</sup> century New York city was a center of the slave trade and that the number of slaves in New York was second only to Charleston

South Carolina in the colonies (Berlin and Harris 2005).<sup>10</sup> Slaves were critical in building the early city and during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as many as 43% of New York families owned slaves who comprised as much as 20% of the city's population and slavery was not abolished in New York until 1828, far later than most neighboring states. In 1991 there was the discovery of an African burial ground in lower Manhattan when the foundations were dug for a large federal office building in lower Manhattan, workers uncovered a forgotten colonial-era cemetery in which 20,000 Africans were buried outside the city walls. Research revealed a great deal about the individuals and their lives in the city (Blakey 2001). In 2003 the excavated remains were reburied in a commemorative ceremony that included caskets made in West Africa expressly for this purpose, processions through cities on the east coast and a widely attended memorial service. The site is now a National Monument (<http://www.nps.gov/afbg/index.htm>). A crucial question in terms of my focus on collective memory is why so little is known about the extent of slavery in New York and its role in the city's economy over two centuries. How did such a large part of the population and their experiences become so invisible in the city's historical memory and symbolic landscape? Why and how does it matter that some stories about the past are told and retold and others are ignored? What is the dynamics by which this is forgotten while other memories of the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century are vividly passed on to generation after generation in the US?

### CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The newly emerging narratives and exhibits such as the President's House and New York's African burial grounds are highly relevant to making a buried narrative audible and help us to understand some lessons about how collective memory works and suggests some tentative answers to the questions about collective memory raised at the outset. In this concluding section, let me outline a direction for future elaboration in terms of my five questions. The *what* question examines alternative formulations of collective memory as at least partially distinct from history and asks how some become culturally dominant, and leads us to the issue of what the consequences and meanings are for Americans if they learn that their sacred site of freedom and liberty for all is really a story of freedom and liberty for some. The *who* question focuses on the identification of relevant units of analysis given the absence of formal group boundaries and membership criteria. Whose narrative is this? Are there going to be two distinct stories—the Washington as Founding Father story and the Washington as slave holder story—or is there a way that they can be integrated to tell citizens the complex nature of the early American nation and not the just the patriotic Cold War version that dominated the site for so long? The *mechanism* question asks how collective memory is maintained, communicated and transformed and in this case we see a combination of forces operating. Initially it was research driven and Lawler's early articles that encouraged the Ad Hoc Historians interested in public history and African-Americans groups in the city to demand that the National Park Service respond to the new discoveries and give them a prominence on the site. It suggests a further interaction between local political officials, federal officials, and the power of voice to sometimes transform even the most sacred of sites and narratives—in this case the one about the founding fathers and their participation in the institution of slavery. It also suggests the importance of finding powerful ways to recount the story. In this case the development of biographies about the nine enslaved Africans and the detailed accounts of the two who managed to escape to freedom—Hercules, Washington's chef, and Ona Judge, Martha Washington's personal slave—helped to recount the narrative in emotionally compelling ways to the public. The *intensity* problem asks how and why not all collective memories are not equally salient for all people and why the same one can strike different people in different ways. The conflict in the past three years has not primarily been one between white and black narratives about Washington or slavery but disagreements among

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<sup>10</sup> In 2005, the New York Historical Society presented a widely publicized exhibit on slavery in New York providing detailed descriptions, maps, and teaching materials ([http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/gallery\\_2.htm](http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/gallery_2.htm)).

African-Americans about the best way to tell the story of Washington's slaves. There is great rage on the part of some people who still feel the legacy of slavery today and want strong and clear acknowledgment of its evils. At the public meeting a few weeks ago, there were about a dozen people who chanted, "House of Horrors" and "Tell the Truth" over and over emphasizing the need to stress the degrading, demeaning aspects of slavery and the evil of Washington and other slave owners. Any image of the nine enslaved Africans as content or even dignified is, in their eyes, a perpetuation of lies. Finally, the *action* question asks how and when memory and identity are mobilized to collective action. While this single case does not quickly suggest any simple generalization, it does emphasize the power of deep emotions in connections across time and space that are mobilized here whether it is in the case of a group such as ATAC, or the example of photographer John Dowell who recounted how during his work photographing the archaeological dig, he found himself reflecting on what it must have been like for his ancestors living there over 200 years ago and how he found himself deeply moved as the site even with its very modest artifacts allowed him to make an emotionally significant, powerful connection across time and space and to work on a project celebrating the enslaved Africans who had lived and worked in the President's House.

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