How History Takes Place

ALEIDA ASSMANN

We exist at a moment when the world is experiencing . . . something less like a great life that would develop through time than like a network that connects points and weaves its skein.

(Michel Foucault)

‘What a history you have.’ ‘You are welcome to it if you like.’

(Jamaica Kincaid)

The shared leitmotiv of this volume is Pierre Nora’s concept of the lieux de mémoire, which has offered new common ground for scholars from rather different disciplines such as history, sociology, or literature. What we all have in common is an interest in symbols and the way in which they shape historical experience, memory, arguments, and collective identities. Nora’s concept of lieux harks back to the ancient Roman art of memory, which created durable props for the notoriously unstable memorizing capacities by combining specific loci (places) with imaginæ (images). While most approaches that investigate the role of myth and memory in the process of nation-building and the forging of collective identity are built on the concept of narrative, Nora’s innovation was to reactivate this ancient concept of ‘topoi’ and thereby approach the texture of memory in a non-linear and topological way. The lieux, of course, are not necessarily ‘places’ in the strict sense, but crystallizations of experience or memory-entries in a much more general sense, be they events, heroes, buildings, artefacts, customs, ideas, or images. In moving from ‘stories’ to ‘topoi’, Nora focused on a much looser texture of memory that is anything from an open inventory to a rhizomatic matrix of more or less connected nodes and ties. Instead of emphasizing continuity and unity, Nora has provided us with a conceptual framework with which to approach the fragmentary, inconclusive, and highly elusive texture of national memory.
Roughly half of the articles collected in this volume are dedicated to the concrete localization of events and memories. This contribution will also return to the more literal sense of ‘place’ and ask the more specific question: how does history take place? How does it take possession of place; how does it inscribe itself in space? I shall first briefly discuss methodological issues related to the ‘spatial turn’ in historiography and another shift that has remained concealed beneath it: the shift from space to place. I will then introduce the distinction between lieux de souvenir and lieux de mémoire and discuss the question of how memory interacts with places from the point of view of individuals and collectives. Finally, I will briefly touch on colonial and postcolonial lieux de mémoire, emphasizing the role of symbols and media in the shaping of memory. At the same time as history takes place, it also takes hold in memory to the extent that it is shaped by symbols. These symbols, however, are by no means fixed entities but liable to change with political constellations and perspectives. As we move from Nora’s national (and patriotic) to a more transnational perspective of histoires croisées, the emphasis clearly shifts from consensus to conflict. In this perspective it turns out that what is sacred for one group may be offensive to another. The symbolic places that maintain the past and transfer it to the present often become sites of a post-history in which the meaning and memory of the past event is continuously contested.

Space and Place

At the same time as Pierre Nora was working with more than a hundred colleagues on his 130 lieux de mémoire, published from 1986 to 1992 in his seven-volume project, the spatial turn was proclaimed as a new intellectual and discursive orientation in historiography and cultural studies. As far as I can see, those who were involved in the two historiographical trends did not take much notice of each other, but it is the privilege of the historian to reflect on their relationship in retrospect. A strong and decisive voice in the proclamation of a spatial turn was that of Edward Soja, political geographer and urban planner, who argued that the new paradigm of space should replace that of time, historians’ great theme since the nineteenth century. The claim was that space as the dimension of the simultaneous had been
1 The historian Karl Schlögel has made a similar point: ‘The historical narrative has enforced a silencing of space which could not be integrated into the structure of temporal sequence but persists in the presentation of the simultaneous.’ Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik* (Munich, 2003), 64. I owe the phrase ‘history takes place’ to this book. Schlögel emphasizes: ‘All our historical knowledge attaches to places. . . . Historical dates coincide with sites of action, we cannot do without images of the locations where events have happened.’ Ibid. 70.


How History Takes Place

silenced by an over-emphasis on linear temporal change. Soja pointed out that something had been forgotten, overlooked, elided in the nineteenth-century obsession with history and time, namely, ‘the life-world as being creatively located not only in the making of history but also in the construction of human geographies, the social production of space and the restless formation and reformation of geographical landscapes’. Soja did not invent this new paradigm out of the blue. He was able to draw on French historians who had already prepared the ground. One of them was Henri Lefebvre who, fifteen years before Soja, had written on *La production de l’espace* and defined space as ‘a reservoir of resources, and the medium in which strategies are applied’. By stressing a constructivist view, Lefebvre emphasized that space is ‘more than a theatre, the disinterested stage or setting, of action. . . . Its role is less and less neutral, more and more active, both as instrument and as goal, as means and end.’

In a similar way, Edward Said made the point that ‘geography can be manipulated, invented, characterized quite apart from a site’s merely physical reality’. A ‘merely physical reality’ of space is somewhat difficult to conceive of; historical, political, and economic human action always interacts with space, which is quite obvious to historians of colonial and postcolonial history. According to David Harvey, the conquest of space ‘first required that it be conceived of as something usable, malleable, and therefore capable of domination by history.’
through human action’. In the political context, space means territory and calls for very specific forms of action; it is to be conquered or defended, discovered, traversed, colonized, measured, mapped, occupied. Space, indeed, is the central motive and motor of colonialism and modern geopolitics. In this context, it is space that is to be transformed and exploited, becoming the central locus, manifestation, and symbol of power. Imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced a new form of territorialism based on an aggressive form of modern space-consciousness.

There was an even earlier shift of orientation towards space by Michel Foucault, who gave a lecture to architects in 1967 on ‘different spaces’ (Des espaces autres) which was not published until 1984, shortly before his death. At the end of the twentieth century, he argued, ‘we are in the age of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the scattered. We exist at a moment when the world is experiencing, I believe, something less like a great life that would develop through time than like a network that connects points and weaves its skein.

I want to draw attention to the fact that below the shift from time to space as propagated in the rhetoric of the ‘spatial turn’, there is another shift that has received less attention. I am referring to the shift from space to place. While space is often conceived of in discourses as something to be shaped (whether by politicians who have the power to make history, or by architects who transform geographies according to their vision by inscribing their intentionality into space), place appears as something that already has a name and a history. It has acquired a specific physiognomy by previous acts, experiences, lives, and deaths. While the notion of space is rather abstract,

5 David Harvey, The Urban Experience (Baltimore, 1989), 176.
6 Michel Foucault, ‘Des espaces autres’, pub. in English as ‘Different Spaces’, in James D. Faubion (ed.), Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology (London, 2000), 175–85, at 175. Five years later, Soja recycled these ideas and gave them the shape of a ‘spatial turn’. An interesting assessment of the rhetoric of paradigm changes is to be found in Schlögel, Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit, 60–4.
7 Foucault, ‘Different Spaces’, 175. Foucault does not distinguish between space and place; his description covers both aspects. In introducing the concept of ‘emplacement’, he is not interested in leaving history or time, but in conceptualizing both space and time along different lines.
How History Takes Place

often directed towards the future and related (to use Lefebvre’s words) to instruments and goals, to means and ends, place is related to the past, to events that have happened, and have left their mark. Soja writes about Los Angeles, which, according to him, is paradigmatically characterized by ‘the restless formation and reformation of geographical landscapes’. These ever-changing landscapes are obviously the very opposite of ‘place’ in terms of a crystallization of history or memory.8

Place refers us to the specificity of concrete places which have become the focus of a new form of topographical enquiry. Places can be defined as a condensation of historical events, as a thickening and materialization of history, as a tangible carrier of signs and traces which are eventually destroyed or preserved, discarded or deciphered, marked or unmarked, forgotten or remembered.9 It is the stage after some violent action has taken place, and then ceased, yet still remains present, either as material traces, or in memory. The concept of place becomes especially relevant when the focus is shifted from the ways of making history to the ways of experiencing and remembering historical events. Place has now become an object of historical research that has become as important as written and verbal sources. It applies the notion of legibility to landscapes, cities, and places wherever, as Foucault says, ‘this inevitable interlocking of time with space’ has taken place.10 Places that are replete with history are the opposite of the so-called non-lieux such as parking lots, international airports, and hotel-chains that have a purely functional design and generally lack a historically specific physiognomy.11

The ‘spatial turn’ has sparked new interest both in space and place. The concept of place is directly related to ‘history’ and ‘memory’, and to history as memory in particular. While historiography focuses on change and development, the interest in place emphasizes aspects of continuity in change, of permanence, of subsistence, and

8 Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis, 1977).
9 Gaston Bachelard, Poetik des Raumes (Frankfurt am Main, 1975); Jay Hillis Miller, Topographies (Stanford, Calif., 1995); Schlögel, Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit.
10 Foucault, ‘Different Spaces’, 176.
11 Marc Augé, Orte und Nicht-Orte: Vorüberlegungen zu einer Ethnologie der Einsamkeit (Frankfurt am Main, 1994).
retention. It is the shift in perspective from history in the making to the aftermath of history, from the aspirations of power to the trauma of violence. It allows for new forms of writing colonial history in a non-linear and fragmented way by reading the struggle with the empire and the complexities of the postcolonial period within the framework of concrete historical sites. As history takes place, it leaves its marks, scars, and traces, which later become the focus of memory through acts of symbolization and the construction of narratives. The shift towards place does not banish narrative altogether; it only discards homogenizing master narratives such as imperial narratives to make room for multiple and contesting narratives. As place tends to be contested and layered, it is often the focus of divided memories and competing narratives.

Lieux de souvenir

How do places become repositories and media of memory? In trying to answer this question, let me start with individual experience. There is an illuminating autobiographical essay by the German writer Günter Grass that can serve as a starting point. The text begins with the words ‘I remember’ and continues as follows: ‘. . . or am reminded by something that crosses my path, that has left its scent or that has lurked in long outdated letters or insidious words, waiting to be remembered.’ In turning abruptly from the active to the passive voice, Grass alerts us to two basic modes of memory, which we may refer to as ‘I-memory’ and ‘me-memory’. While the first is conscious, verbal, and declarative, the second is embodied, elusive, and diffuse, which is not to say that it is not equally potent; it clearly appeals more to the senses and emotions than to will and reason. In the following paragraph, Grass describes in detail the workings of his me-memory while describing what happened to him when he revisited places of his youth after a long interval:

How History Takes Place

But it is also when travelling to places that we left behind, that were destroyed and now bear strange-sounding names that memory suddenly catches up with us. It happened to me in the spring of 1958, when, for the first time since the end of the war, I visited the city of Gdansk, which was slowly growing out of the cleared-away rubble. I was hoping to stumble upon some remaining traces of the old Danzig. Indeed, the buildings of my school were still in place and so was the well-preserved fug in the corridors. The road to school seemed shorter than I had remembered. But suddenly, when I came to the old fishing village of Brösen, recognizing the unchanged lazy wash of the Baltic Sea, I found myself again in front of the bathing place and the sealed-up kiosk next to the entrance. And before I knew it, I saw the cheapest delight of my childhood foaming up before me: effervescent powder with the taste of raspberry, lemon, or woodruff that used to be sold in tiny bags for a few pennies at that very kiosk. Hardly had the remembered drink started to fizz, than it brought up stories, truthfully deceitful stories that had only waited for their password to surface. The harmless powder that so easily dissolves in water triggered a chain reaction in my head: effervescent early love, this repeated sensation that wanes and vanishes in later years.\(^\text{13}\)

reminisces, and he describes the process of recall. His memory is triggered by visiting places which he had not seen for decades, his school in Gdansk and the beach at Brösen. We may call such places lieux de souvenirs to distinguish their private and subjective quality from Pierre Nora’s collective and cultural lieux de mémoire. Places and objects are the most important triggers for our me-memory. Grass writes: ‘Speechless objects touch us.’ These may be buildings, mute relics, or photographs, but also the effervescent powder that stimulates a sudden almost physical sensation.

What kind of magic is it that rests in such inconspicuous places; how can it suddenly move us with a sudden and unexpected touch? Before such places can exert this power over us, clearly we must first have invested something in them. Whatever we have consciously or unconsciously invested in them will later produce the specific effect of a ‘resonance’. We may perhaps compare this magic power of memory residing in places as well as objects to the operation of symbola in classical antiquity. The word refers originally to objects that were broken in half and given to the two parties engaged in a legal contract. When they met again after a long interval, the two parties identified themselves by their respective halves. Fitting the halves together again was a way of authenticating their identities and of vouching for the contract. Something similar occurs when we invest autobiographical experience in outside objects and places while carrying the other half with us as a kind of ‘divining rod’ or ‘memory rod’. The non-conscious memory is reactivated when, after a relatively long interval of forgetting, the external half is suddenly reconnected with the somatic half. Such memories cannot be recalled at will. They remain latent and have to wait until they are reconnected with the right external trigger. The lieux de souvenirs relate to an embodied memory that is radically different from other externalized forms of storing memories in symbolic carriers such as texts or images. In the case of lieux de souvenirs, a concrete place provides a ‘contact zone’ in which
the barrier between the past and present unexpectedly collapses, and sudden and unpremeditated transitions can unwittingly occur.

Lieux de mémoire

When we move from me-memory to we-memory, that is, from individual lieux de souvenir to collective and cultural lieux de mémoire, we move from embodied forms of remembering to disembodied and re-embodied cultural practices of commemoration. What happens spontaneously and unconsciously in personal memory has to be symbolically constructed in trans-generational collective memory. There is an important link, however, between both forms of memory because the lieux de mémoire in collective memory are very often also constructed and experienced as contact zones in which time collapses in a symbolic reclaiming and re-enactment and an unmediated, embodied access to the past seems possible.

Since ancient times ‘place’ has been credited with an inherent mnemonic power. Cicero wrote: ‘Magna vis admonitionis inest in locis’ (Great is the power of memory that resides in places). Cicero was not only the great master of the Roman art of memory, he also cherished special lieux de mémoire to celebrate the Greek past, such as the ruins of Plato’s Academy. At the time of the Roman Empire, such sites were already the destination of a tourism of the past in which a later civilization venerated an earlier one that had become a repository for cultural norms and models of styles and values. The humanists of the Renaissance revived this affective attachment to the memory of places when they travelled to Italy to visit paradigmatic sites of the Roman or Christian past. Long after the events, they returned to ruined places that retained traces of the past and used them to re-establish a direct contact to a lost foundational past. By themselves, of course, these places yielded no memory. They had to be framed by a powerful narrative and their traces had to be marked symbolically to confirm the truth of this narrative and be credited with an experiential quality. Such places do not refer to one specific event only but become models for the ongoing and layered process of history as palimpsest (Geschichte als geschichtet). Narrative and place reinforce each other in this process of mutual authentication, a relationship that is further consolidated by continued performances and experiences.
If the magic of the lieu de souvenir works in terms of emotional investment and resonance, what is their equivalent in the case of collective lieux de mémoire? In this case personal experience and emotion are replaced by collective experience and emotion, which are transformed and condensed in a symbolic form, be it that of a heroic person, a mobilizing narrative, or a stimulating icon. The memorability of a lieu de mémoire is built on various past incidents, which more often than not refer to the dying of a heroic death than to the living of an exemplary life. Wars, battles, rebellions, daring adventures, and tragic suffering stand out in the list of possible investments in places. In one of his plays, T. S. Eliot reminds us that blood is the most precious investment in place that calls for a long-term memory commitment. I quote a passage from his play Murder in the Cathedral (1935), which is taken from a prayer by the Women of Canterbury:14

For the blood of Thy martyrs and saints  
Shall enrich the earth, shall create the holy places.  
For wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr has given his blood for the blood of Christ,  
There is holy ground, and the sanctity shall not depart from it  
Though armies trample over it, though sightseers come with guidebooks looking over it.

The sanctification of places through the shedding of the blood of martyrs is not only a Christian tradition but also one that was adopted by political nations which, within a secular framework, made the same claim for their soldiers. In this context, the cultural norm of ‘dying for Christ’ was replaced by ‘dying for the nation’. It is Eliot’s claim that the holiness of such places cannot be desecrated or profaned; it has fused with the site and remains an inherent quality of the place: ‘From such ground springs that which forever renews the earth.’15

From such ground, we may add, also springs that which can forever renew the memory. The lieux de mémoire of the Romans in Greece and of the humanists in Italy were sites of exemplary models; they reconnected to a normative past enshrined in places that were

15 Ibid. 86.
How History Takes Place

revered and invoked to guarantee the values of the present. But not only sites of triumph, also sites of suffering serve a similar foundational function. Suffering, interpreted in a heroic martyrological narrative, is the paradigmatic ‘investment’ in a place that will later define its sacrificial aura and provide a highly affective and long-term link to past events.

Colonial and Postcolonial lieux de mémoire

Since the 1980s, two new developments have changed the transnational culture of remembrance: the belated emergence of the discourse on the Holocaust and the rise of postcolonial studies. In the light of this change, suffering has once again become a central feature of memorial sites. This suffering, however, can no longer be framed in a heroic narrative. The new mnemotechnics of places that has evolved in a post-traumatic world is very different from both the older European notion of sacred places as represented by T. S. Eliot, and Nora’s emphasis on positive national lieux de mémoire. It has introduced new concepts such as ‘trauma’, ‘victim’, ‘witness’, and ‘survivor’, which frame our constructions of memory within a new political and ethical discourse.

In postcolonial discourse, we are dealing not with perpetrators and victims but with colonizers and colonized, the latter also qualifying as victims. When speaking about colonial and postcolonial lieux de mémoire, we are moving into an exemplary domain of entangled histories. In this context, the problem is not only how history takes place but also how it has marginalized and effaced other histories. The question, then, of how it takes hold in different memories becomes much more complex. It is often the very same site that yields contrasting and irreconcilable narratives, depending on the point of view of the historical agents and non-agents. These lieux de mémoire are paradigmatically contested sites; on former Palestinian ground, for instance, ‘the trees and landscape themselves yield two very different and contesting narratives converging on the same site’.16 This contestation can take different shapes. There is the polarity between the hegemonic and imperial narrative versus a subversive or liberat-

16 Carol Bardenstein, cited by Said, ‘Invention, Memory and Place’, 191.
ing counter-narrative; there are usable and unusable, self-reinforcing and awkward narratives; and there is even the asymmetry of ardent remembrance practised on one side and total amnesia on the other. We will have to distinguish not only between the colonial power and the colonized, but also between political, that is, imperial or national memory on the one hand, and social and individual memories on the other. While political memories define, support, and enforce a collective identity, social memories generally do not; social memories are embodied—they exist as a network between individuals, they are much more varied, and lack an effectively homogenized symbolic shape and profile. Social memory affords room for internal variations whereas political memory gains its clear profile in a context of struggle and contestation.

To distinguish between different shapes of memory, then, we have to pay attention to symbolic strategies. The creation of effective and affective symbols is of paramount importance for binding individuals together and compelling them to commit themselves to common goals. Without such symbols and commitments, there is little chance of constructing long-term memories and collective identities. In the creation of symbols, memory often draws more heavily on imagination than on historiography. From the point of view of memory, the question is not so much what exactly happened in the past, but how the event can become representative of an enduring experience. In a similar way, the lieux de mémoire project the past into the present. They are constructions of past events which are made accessible in the present. The lieux de mémoire, then, are not so much about how history actually took place, but how history is rooted in the hearts, minds, and imaginations of subsequent generations.

Historians, of course, enjoy the professional privilege of looking backwards. Today we live in a world in which looking backwards has become a general habit. Defining our era as post-traumatic or postcolonial already shows that we are defining who we are and what we do with respect to events located in the past rather than by visions of the future. Or rather, the gaze that looks into the future must take a detour across the past.
I will end this article with a (post)colonial lieu de mémoire, which is at the same time a colonial lieu de souvenir. It is a description of the library on the Caribbean island of Antigua that I found in the writings of Jamaica Kincaid. Kincaid was born in 1948 in St John’s, Antigua, in the West Indies. The island gained its independence from Britain in 1981, long after Kincaid had left it for voluntary exile in the United States. In her description of the island, she looks back at the English and their colonial system with great bitterness:

no natural disaster imaginable could equal the harm they did. Actual death might have been better. . . . They should never have left their home, their precious England, a place they loved so much, a place they had to leave but could never forget. And so everywhere they went they turned it into England; and everybody they met they turned English. But no place could ever really be England, and nobody who did not look exactly like them would ever be English, so you can imagine the destruction of people and land that came from that.17

Kincaid attended a colonial school. In an earlier novel she describes how she had to learn the colonial history of Britain and to memorize long passages from Milton’s Paradise Lost as well as poems by the English Romantics. One of these poems, ‘The Daffodils’ by William Wordsworth, which can in itself be considered as a colonial lieu de mémoire, she had to recite at a school celebration, without having the faintest idea what a daffodil might look like. When she finally got a chance to see real daffodils, for her they had turned into a symbol of colonial oppression and humiliation. Where others saw daffodils, she saw ‘a scene of conquered and conquests’. While her friend ‘saw beautiful flowers, I saw sorrow and bitterness’.18

In her autobiographical description of Antigua, Kincaid describes how, at an early age, she obtained a library card and used to spend hours poring over the books. She recalls with considerable affection the big old wooden building with its permanently open windows

18 Ibid. 30.
and ‘rows and rows of shelves filled with books’, with ‘beautiful wooden tables and chairs for sitting and reading’, and ‘a sound of quietness (for the quietness in this library was a sound in itself)’. She relishes the beauty of these invaluable hours of her life, but not without sarcasm, which is the specific flavour of Kincaid’s style: ‘the beauty of us sitting there like communicants at an altar, taking in, again and again, the fairy tale of how we met you, your right to do things you did, how beautiful you were, are and always will be.’

Her portrait of the library, however, turns into a retrospective and nostalgic lieu de souveni the moment she revisits the place. On her return to Antigua many years after she had left it, she discovers that the library had been moved from its former place to a dingy space above a dry-goods store in an old, run-down concrete building. Most of the books have been packed away into cardboard boxes, ‘gathering mildew, or dust, or ruin’. This is her portrait of the Antigua library:

Antigua used to have a splendid library, but in The Earthquake the library building was damaged. This was in 1974, and soon after that a sign was placed on the front of the building saying, THIS BUILDING WAS DAMAGED IN THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1974. REPAIRS ARE PENDING. The sign hangs there, and hangs there more than a decade later, with its unfulfilled promise of repair. . . . REPAIRS ARE PENDING, and here it is many years later but perhaps in a world that is twelve miles long and nine miles wide (the size of Antigua) twelve years and twelve minutes and twelve days are all the same. The library is one of those splendid buildings from colonial times, and the sign telling of the repairs is a splendid sign from colonial times.

Kincaid presents an autobiographical lieu de souveni that is at the same time a lieu de mémoire. This cultural lieu de mémoire is itself a layered one, combining the colonial with a postcolonial site, recording two separate yet entangled histories and cultures. This lieu consists in

19 Ibid. 42.
20 Ibid. 43.
21 Ibid. 8–9; see also 41–3.
an abstract institution with specific practices and material objects: the library’s silence, books, rooms, and furniture, which are mobile and have, in the meantime, been moved from their former location. In telling us the specific history of this lieu de mémoire/lieu de souvenir, Kincaid makes us aware of how a specific site can tell different and conflicting stories, colonial as well as postcolonial, individual as well as collective, historical as well as contemporary.