
Copyright:

The definitive version is available at [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/) at:

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00593.x](http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00593.x)

Always use the definitive version when citing.

**Further information on publisher website:** [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/)

**Date deposited:** 5th December 2013

**Version of article:** Author final

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/)

*ePrints – Newcastle University ePrints*

[http://eprint.ncl.ac.uk](http://eprint.ncl.ac.uk)
Relationality, place, and absence: a three-dimensional perspective on social memory

Dr Cathrine Degnen, Newcastle University, UK

Abstract: This paper builds on recent work on memory and place in the social sciences. One emphasis in the literature on ‘Western’ forms of social memory has been on official, intentional sites of commemoration, such as war memorials and monuments. Based on fieldwork in the north of England with older residents of a former coal mining village, I approach social memory from a different perspective, emphasising the work of memory and its complex interactions with place, absence, social relations and social rupture. Like Village on the Border, this research has taken place in a setting that has undergone significant socio-economic change: the closure of the South Yorkshire coalfields. The embeddedness of local knowledge in social relations emerge in both Ronnie Frankenberg’s work and my own and I explore these topics here in connection with what I term a “three-dimensionality of memory”.

Introduction

Influenced by post-structural intellectual shifts in the social sciences, researchers working on social memory and place have redefined the parameters of both domains in a remarkably paralleled fashion. Western notions of both concepts are described as tending to create a static, reified vision of both social memory and of place as vessels of knowledge. To remedy this, both sets of literature argue convincingly that Western models of social memory and of place need to be historicised, understood as processual, and understood as constituting social meaning. It is also argued that both social memory and place have important temporal aspects which must be taken into account in order to expand and enrich understandings of what is at stake for sociality with memory and place (Basso 1984, Cohen 1987, Fentress and Wickham 1992). Whilst this rearticulation was occurring in the literature, some social scientists also began to see how memory and senses of place were not just parallel, but at times importantly interconnected (Blokland 2001, Jarman 2001, Nuttall 1992, Stewart 1996). This shift is partly due to theoretical interest in identity formation but also to the inherently temporal aspects of both remembering and the experience of place.

I propose that much, although by no means all, of the literature on social memory in the West has tended to focus on active, intentional forms of commemorative practice. A passage from an article by Schudson offers a representative example of this tendency:
Once commemoration gets underway, it picks up steam; it operates by a logic and force of its own. Not only are records kept, diaries saved, and news accounts written, but statues are built, museums are endowed, brass plaques are engraved and placed in sidewalks and on the walls of buildings. (Schudson 1989, p.108)

This model of social memory understands Western forms of social memory as being predominately monumental and official, such as war memorials and monuments (Olick and Robbins 1998), ‘heritage’ museums, and nation-building projects (Gable and Handler 2000; Nora 1989). In a subtle, unspoken way, such understandings of social memory tend to homogenise both the categories ‘Western’ and ‘Western sites of social memory’. This is because social processes of remembering (and of forgetting) are glossed as happening in the same way throughout ‘the West’.

It is at this complex intersection, that of social memory practices, place as a site of social meaning, and ideas about ‘Western’ forms of social memory that I locate my own work. I wish to broaden notions of what social memory is in Western settings and where and how it can be forged. In so doing, I join a growing body of literature that seeks to demonstrate how factors such as place, relations, and recounting experience are highly significant for understanding social memory (Blokland 2001; King 2001; Misztal 2003). Towards these ends, I draw on twelve months of fieldwork in a former coal-mining village in the north of England called Dodworth. My time in Dodworth confronted me with a nexus of memory practices that shuttled between present and past, individual and collective. The connections between the past and the present in everyday talk about the village play out on a number of different levels with memories embedded in multiple sites. While conventional memorial sites and monuments do exist in Dodworth, these sites are not my focus here. Instead, I wish to call attention to the everyday, nearly mundane ways of remembering the past that transpire in Dodworth. I also explore how such talk is part and parcel of what I term ‘the webs of relations’ within the village.

Indeed, it is this interest in talk and the everyday that connect my work with Ronnie Frankenberg’s seminal text. His concern in Village on the Border is with social processes and the ways in which community is forged and maintained in the face of a lack of local male employment (1957). Recreation and leisure activities become the sites Frankenberg explores for the ways in which village relationships are performed. Dodworth, like Glynceiriog fifty years earlier, is a place where people are having to consider what ‘village’ and ‘community’ mean
because of significant socio-economic change. Writing about Glynceiriog villagers, Frankenberg describes the role of gossip in the reproduction of community and local identity (1957, p. 20-1). This article takes up the theme of the configuring power of talk in village life, and expands it by considering the ways in which memory talk reveals a profoundly meaningful way of relating to the surrounding world, both physical and social.

**Remembering in Dodworth**

Dodworth is in the county of South Yorkshire which was home for over a century to both large-scale coal mining and steel working, industries that in Britain established particular forms of sociality and particular community structures. This area has altered greatly over the past fifteen years due to the closure of the coal and steel industries. Such a rupturing shift has had significant implications for the people living in the area and this social change forms a centrally backgrounding context to my work. I first moved to Dodworth to conduct research on the cultural parameters around ‘old age’ and the subjective experiences of ageing. One of the most forceful themes to emerge from the accounts of the people I worked with were the transformations in the social and physical environments around them. This included changes in the fabric of social life and community, and a perception that the coherence of the past is morphing into troubling fragmentation in the present.

Other authors writing on old age have remarked upon an intense ‘disassociation with the past’ amongst the older people they worked with and a disinclination to talk about the past (Hazan 1980). This was fundamentally not the case amongst the older people in Dodworth who took part in my research. Instead, they talked spontaneously amongst themselves and with other people with great relish about the past. They talked about themselves in the past, of each other in the past, and of what their surroundings had been like in the past. The present was not ignored in this memory talk, but was rather infused with the past, and vice versa.

The work of memory was not something that I arrived in Dodworth looking for. The necessity of paying critical attention to this topic was made clear by the sheer magnitude of the role talking about memories of the village, its inhabitants, and its locales played in the everyday lives of my research participants. While some individuals were particularly adept raconteurs, it was a practice and a skill that nearly everyone I came into contact with exercised. As the material presented here comes out of a larger piece of work with older people (Degnen 2003), readers may conclude that such an emphasis on the past is due to the
characteristics of my research population. I wish to indicate clearly here that I do not believe this to be the case. Through my work, I came into contact with Dodworth residents of all ages. While different generations refer to different temporal frameworks and varying historical events, members of all generations in my research experience participate in and reproduce similar patterns of memory work. Furthermore, other anthropologists working in England but not specifically working with older people have written about their research experiences which mirror my own (Edwards 1998). I turn now to an example of memory talk compiled from my fieldnotes and interview transcripts.

The death of an ‘old Doduther’

Percy Ingham, an ‘old Doduther’ by virtue of having been born and raised in Dodworth, died in October 2000 towards the end of my fieldwork. Like with most deaths that affected the village, I came to know about Percy’s death through the grapevine. The first person to tell me about it was Anne when I was visiting her at home. She was eager to share the news, unhindered by the fact that I did not know Percy and had not heard his name before, since he was now living outside the village. Despite this, I recognised his surname as a local one. Anne and Percy were not related, but as she explained to me, she knew him and his sisters from when they were young, all growing up together on Church Hill. She’d gotten to know about his death during her trip to Barnsley when she ran into one of his family members on the bus. Without hesitation, Anne then rattled off the names of Percy’s brothers and sisters: there was Percy, Norris, Sarah, Ada, Stanley, Annie, and Florence. Then, trying to help me place him, Anne told me that one of the women I know in the village is Stanley’s (Percy’s brother) daughter. Swept up in remembering about Church Hill (a cluster of houses near Dodworth Church that has now largely but not completely been demolished) where she had known him and his family, Anne started to tell me about a shop, owned by the Breezes that used to be nearby on Bower Row, near to Lambert Fold which used to be behind Traveller’s Inn, which itself used to be called ‘Johnny Hep’s’ cause it was Johnny who had it, and where Alfie Breeze, still alive today, lives in Dodworth. Continuing, she said that on the same row, on the end nearest to the pub, lived a family called Harrison, adding that Doris Harrison used to work for the council. I asked Anne which other families used to live on that row. More details came quickly: The Pashleys (that’s the same family as Norman Pashley, and his sister Hilda, who lives in Gilroyd); the Woodcocks (most of them died in a carcrash, but his son is a CID man); and Kenworthy had the shop to start off with, although the Breezes took it over; Arthur Lodge
who we used to call ‘Doctor’ because he used to try and concoct things. Then there was Frank Hill, another row of houses nearby, named after Frank Ownsworth who was the landlord. On that row there was Amy Hollins, in the first house; her brother Donald now lives on Station Road and her other brother lives on Mitchelson Avenue. Then there was Muriel Tordiff who lived in the second house but later moved; the Robinsons who used to have a farm at Hood Green; Then the Greens, but their Marjorie has just died. Next to them was the Newtons, and Sally Newton lived there; her husband was related to Laurie Newton. Then, in that big house that stands on its own, that was the Herrings’ house; then the Hodgsons, the Inghams, the Nichols, and the Houghs...Our conversation then moved on, but this flood of information about people and places, some still present and many others now absent, washed over me in a familiar fashion since it had happened to me so many times during my fieldwork with so many different people. As I scribbled notes down while Anne talked, I thought of how this way of remembering and reciting details about the villagescape made the physical geography of the village come alive with both the social relations of the people who lived there and the local histories of events that had transpired there.

Later that week, at a local whist drive, the subject of Percy’s death came up again. This time information about his death was discussed amongst a group of about ten whist players. Many of them remembered him and shared a certain set of knowledge and memories about both Percy and his extended family. Although they did not go into as much detail as Anne had when I asked her about Church Hill, similar themes were discussed to those that Anne had initially brought up in our conversation – where Percy was living when he died, who he was related to in the village (both living and dead), if he had been at the same school as the speaker, and elaborate discussions about specifically where in Dodworth he used to live in his youth. This in particular was used as a way of identifying exactly who he was, and which Ingham family he was a member of, for those whist players who needed help placing him.

Although this example of memory talk happens in the context of Mr. Ingham’s death, memory talk is by no means restricted to this sort of event and occurs in multiple contexts. What is constant in memory talk however is a calling back and forth between past and present. The use of memories about the past in terms of the present operates between speakers as mnemonic tools to help them situate and place people, such as when the whist players were describing which Ingham family Percy was a member of. People in Dodworth endlessly place each other by shared memories of where what had been and by what events they had experienced together. Part of figuring out who is who in the village necessitates a referencing
back in time to activities, relationships, and places of habitation occupied by the person in question previously. What is particularly striking in memory talk is how place operates within this shuttling back and forth between past and present. Both places and people are named explicitly in this discourse, and are explicitly linked. Often describing an absent third party or explaining who someone was hinged critically on where they had lived in the village; similarly, describing places and buildings in the village is always a backgrounding characteristic of memory talk.

A second salient aspect of memory talk is the web of relations contained in them and how these in turn relate to village places. By the web of relations, I mean who is and was related to whom in Dodworth and neighbouring villages. Just as in Village on the Border where Ronnie Frankenberg describes the multiple and intersecting informal ties of experience (including work, recreation, shared schooling) and of kinship that constitute relations, many people in Dodworth are embedded in complex sets of relationships that have built up over a lifetime of local residence. These relationships are often in turn reflected in local places, particularly by where people used to (and sometimes still do) live.

By listening to and partaking in everyday conversation which is laden with these shared memories, I learned an enormous amount about different family and historical connections in Dodworth. The webs of relations in Dodworth are part of the public domain and part of the local social memory. That is to say that not only would people recite their own webs of relations in the village and in the history of the village, but they would also talk about other people’s webs of relations, as part of everyday conversation. However, while place and people are recurrent themes, the extent to which the memories are personal and individual or collectively shared varies quite a lot. For example, as evidenced at the whist drive, not everyone has equal access to all aspects of shared village memories since not everyone could remember Percy. What is remembered and discussed is not a fixed, rigid thing but rather is a process that is often fragmentary and sometimes contentious. As such, remembering is not a homogenous process, but operates instead on different levels and in different forums. Despite these different levels, memory talk is inherently framed by shared memories, shared experiences, and place.

In addition to the way memories of places and people are used as landmarks, talking about memories of places erased and people deceased is equally important in this form of discourse. Bower Row and Lambert Fold, for example, no longer exist and while Church Hill and Frank Hill are still there, all but a few of the houses that stood there for the thirty years
Anne lived there between the 1920s and 1950s are gone. Despite their absence, both still operate as landmarks in the webs of relations and in memory talk in the village. This intersecting use of place, people and absence are characteristics of memory talk in Dodworth.

Theorising social memory and senses of place

Social memory as concept and practice has attracted a great deal of anthropological interest. Mainstream ideas about memory in Western cultures are premised on a largely reified vision whereby memory is widely perceived as an object, not an act. In contrast, social scientists have been busy demonstrating how remembering is a much more active and fluid process. Many researchers trace the roots of inquiry into socializing memory to Halbwachs (1925), Bartlett (1932) and Mead (1959 [1932]). More recent influential writers in the field include Connerton who examines how social memory is manifest in commemorative celebrations and bodily practices which he argues embed meaning and memory in bodies (1989). Similarly, Fentress and Wickham point out that memory ‘is not a passive receptacle, but instead a process of active restructuring, in which elements may be retained, reordered, or suppressed’ (Fentress and Wickham 1992, p.40). Such approaches to memory based on practice are attractive as they permit an examination of how the dialectical relationships between the individual and the social as well as the past and the present play out through memory on multiple levels. Indeed, it is these flows back and forth between public and private, individual and collective made manifest in memory practices which so intrigue social scientists: people are individual subjects, but social memory helps explain how people become linked to groups.

In a parallel body of literature, social scientists have been investigating ideas about landscape, space, and place as loci of social meaning. Ingold identifies two ways of understanding landscape which have dominated Western explanations of it: naturalistic which perceives the landscape ‘as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities’ and culturalistic, the ‘view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space’ (1993, p.152). Ingold argues that a more useful model for understanding landscape is that of a ‘dwelling perspective’, whereby the generations of previous occupants have left their mark and fragments of their lives on the landscape (1993). In this way, he hopes to escape the dichotomy between ‘nature’ as physical reality and ‘landscape’ as the cultural or symbolical representation of the physical surroundings. This is an approach to landscape that sees it as an ongoing process (Hirsch 1995).
Similarly, the concepts of ‘space’ and ‘place’ have been debated, particularly by cultural geographers. As Ryden explains it: ‘Space is geography viewed from a distance, coolly pondered and figured out, calmly waiting to have meaning assigned to it’ (1993, p.37). Place, on the other hand, comes to resemble much more closely Ingold’s description of landscape as dwelling perspective: ‘A sense of place results gradually and unconsciously from inhabiting a landscape over time, becoming familiar with its physical properties, accruing a history within its confines...When space takes on three dimensions, when it acquires depth, it becomes place’ (Ryden 1993, p.38). In this respect, there is a temporal aspect to place, a depth of knowledge and feeling which accumulates over time. Although Ryden does not specify this, it is also an experience which is both individual and collective.

A number of authors have noted how, until recently, place in anthropological accounts was something which served only as the backdrop to ethnography (Rodman 1992; Hirsch 1995; Feld and Basso 1996; Okley 2001). Since the early 1990s however, increasing attention has been paid to this situation. For example, Gupta and Ferguson demonstrate the tendency of traditional ethnographies of assuming inherent links between culture and place. They in turn suggest that anthropologists examine ‘the processes of production of difference in a world of culturally, socially, and economically interconnected and interdependent spaces’ (1992, p.14, emphasis original). Rodman (1992) shows how place is both multilocal and multivocal, helping anthropologists rethink ‘place’. She highlights how places are not passive vessels, but rather are ‘politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions’ (1992, p.641) and how places simultaneously hold multiple meanings for different groups and individuals. Some of the first anthropologists to recognise the link between place, identity and temporality include Basso (1984) in the Southwest United States amongst Western Apache and Cohen’s work (1987) in Whalsay, in the Shetland Islands.

But social memory and place are not just paralleled realms. They can also intersect (Misztal 2003:16), as demonstrated by the work of Nuttall, Stewart and Jarman, amongst others. Based on his fieldwork in Kangersuatsiaq, an Inuit community in Greenland, Nuttall draws on rich ethnographic material to demonstrate connections between local knowledge of landscape with social memory. Drawing on experiences with seal hunters, he argues that ‘memory is a way of articulating the relationship between community and landscape, or between the landscape and an individual’ (1992, p.57). Manifest in Nuttall’s work is a model of social memory and place as united through practice, belonging, identity and hunting as a form of embodied knowledge.
In an entirely different cultural context, Stewart writes ‘a poetics of place’ based on her work in former coal mining villages in the Appalachian hills of West Virginia (1996). Stewart’s ethnography is finely attuned to how people speak of and experience the transformations around them, and to the links between place, memory and absence. Her work seeks to sensitise her readers to the ways in which places evoke memories, and the power of places to embody local knowledge of local history.

In a third ethnographic setting, Jarman connects social memory and place in Belfast. Writing about sectarian parading and commemoration, Jarman shows how both Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists groups combine parading, music, banners, and painted wall murals to perpetuate ‘an extensive social, as opposed to an official or historical, memory’ (2001, p.174). His approach to social memory combines spatial aspects and material objects in ritualistic and commemorative practices of remembering.

These three ethnographies help contextualise my material on memory talk in Dodworth. Given other authors’ work on the links between memory and place, it is not surprising to find similar connections in Dodworth. However, my fieldwork data from Dodworth raise two characteristics of remembering which deserve careful attention and consideration. The first of these is the three-dimensionality of social memory in Dodworth whilst the second centres around issues of absence.

Remembering in ‘3-D’

The ways in which Anne and the whist members relate memories about Dodworth are highly representative of a form of discourse that circulates throughout the village. Memory talk is a discourse in which social memories become lodged in places (both present and erased) and people (both alive and deceased) outside of intentionally commemorative and ritual contexts. So, for example, while there are parallels between Jarman’s work and my own in that he evades a model of Western memory as based on monuments and memorials, the emphasis on ritual and commemorative events in his research in Belfast is much more structured, intentional and organised than the informal processes of remembering that I have been describing in Dodworth. Memory talk in Dodworth does trace familiar sites and mental images but this occurs outside of ritual and commemorative contexts. Rather than the nationalistic social memories created and sustained by parading in Belfast, the sort of social memories described here in Dodworth occur at the level of everyday practices of chatting and village gossip. It is for these reasons that although narratives are a crucial aspect of this
memory work, I have been referring here to the stories and the ways they are told as ‘memory talk’ rather than as ‘memory narratives’. This is intentional in two respects: firstly, I do so in order to emphasise the extent to which recounting, sharing and contesting memories of the village and its inhabitants is active, processual and performative. Secondly, it serves as a reminder of how embedded in everyday social practice such narrative accounts in Dodworth are. This is not social memory in a ritual, sacred sense, but rather woven into the fabric of daily talk and gossip in all its variety, contradiction and everydayness.

Crucially, this is also a form of remembering which is remarkably spatialised within deeply localised parameters, concerned with local forms of knowledge and with the domestic world. As my fieldwork progressed, I became increasingly aware of the spatial aspect of the repertoires of memories I was hearing and being taught. For example, walking down different streets in Dodworth, I could visualise the homes that had been there and recite the people who had lived there although I had never seen or met them: George Henry Hart, the local bookie; the cottages linked to the pub where the Smiths used to live before they were torn down; where Gladys’ dad used to keep pigs and where her mother used to stand calling to them until they would come running for scraps; the path home that Evelyn used to walk down in the dark after dancing all night with her girlfriends during the war; the impossibly steep hill that they used to take bets on Mr. Hamby being able to cycle to the top of without stopping; Dr. Leichsman’s house, before he committed suicide; the driveway where Alec used to haul cartload after cartload of coal uphill to his coal store after working a seven hour shift at the pit.

Within only a few months of starting fieldwork, I had already been well-schooled in various landmarks of my research participants’ lives, landmarks that had been repeated to me many times already and which were to continue to figure powerfully in my fieldwork experiences. Aware that I was learning these memories and their spatial referents and aware that knowing them made me able to participate in a discourse that has significant local identity implications, I was at a loss of how to explain or conceptualise memory in this way. I began to think of it and shorthand it in my fieldnotes as a ‘three-dimensionality of memory’. By this, I meant Dodworth and the way it is ‘seen’ and described by village residents as well as trying to capture the richness and perspective of place and social relationships that are embedded in social memory practices in Dodworth. The forms of collective memory I was already conversant in seemed two-dimensional in comparison with what I was being taught in Dodworth in that they did not hold associations with local places or webs of relations. In this sense, space constitutes a first dimension, time a second, and relationality (both to people and
to places) a third. Rather than being a flat viewing of the village as it was in 2000, I could read onto the physical villagescape not only shops and homes that have since been destroyed, but also multiple layers of meaning including social relations that had played out in these places and how they mapped onto contemporary webs of relations in Dodworth. As Anne reminded me when describing who Percy Ingham was, explaining who Percy the individual was meant not only explaining and locating his family, but also a social fabric which included people who were not his family members, villages places and village stories.

However, it is entirely possible that I was so powerfully struck by the three-dimensionality of remembering in Dodworth because of my own relative shortness of association with any one locale over my lifetime. That is to say, in contrast with the majority of my research participants, I have not and probably never will be as long-term a resident of any one place as they have been. Perhaps this is why learning how to see is a common experience of both anthropologists and all travellers. In a similar example, Rodman describes her experiences in Vanuatu and how:

‘as I mapped the village, a grandmother told me about the birth sites of her children. One birth house had been over here, another time she had given birth in a menstruation hut over there, realizing she would not make it to the hospital eight miles away in time. Although I put an X on my map in the locations she pointed out, they were marked by nothing I could see in the landscape. Yet for the old woman these memories were etched as clearly in the landscape as if they bore commemorative plaques’ (1992, p.650).

Ryden has called this kind of knowledge the ‘invisible landscape’, a form of knowledge and set of meanings that comes with a sense of place, ‘an unseen layer of usage [that]... to passing observers...will remain invisible unless it is somehow called to their attention’ (Ryden 1993, p.40). While I was also seeing the invisible landscape, having finally accrued enough local insight, the difference between what Rodman and Ryden describe and the three-dimensionality of memory in Dodworth is the strongly relational dimension of memory talk which works the relations between people into village places (both present and erased), and vice versa.

Another point this material raises is the concept of layering, as in Ryden’s description of ‘an unseen layer’. Ingold signals a subtle distinction of this word with important
implications when it is used to describe how meaning becomes read onto the physical environment. Ingold’s dwelling perspective highlights how the stories people tell about the world around them ‘is not like weaving a tapestry to cover up the world, it is rather a way of guiding the attention of listeners or readers into it’ (1993, p.153, emphasis original). In other words, people do not ‘layer’ meaning onto the otherwise unchanging physical forms of the environment. Rather, they construct relationships with place. Likewise, the three-dimensionality of memory in Dodworth cannot simply be described as a form of layering meaning onto places, but rather needs to be understood as a simultaneously individual and collective way of placing oneself and webs of relations within contours of meaning in the villagescape.

Indeed, as evidenced in the beginning of this article, people in Dodworth talk about village residents and places that are long gone yet which are made still tangible through the ways in which memory talk hinges on local knowledge such as who owned which shop where, who lived next door, the locations of farms, shops, pits, bus stops, paths and people’s homes. Importantly, this talk and these memories have a critical social role in present day discourse. They are used both to place other people and to place oneself in the history of the village. Adeptness in this way of talking and remembering is a way of staking a claim to belonging through demonstrating a temporally rich knowledge of Dodworth. Skill in using this local knowledge also garners social capital and maintains identity. As in Glynceiriog, “knowledge of one another’s background and lives, and the past and present sharing of mutual experiences” (Frankenberg 1957:22) forge connections between Doduthers and creates identity as Doduthers. Furthermore, the power of these memories is not just in having them, but comes through recounting them, exchanging them, and using them to help navigate current social relations. It is in this way that I argue that memory is put to work in Dodworth, constituting local identity as a ‘Doduther’: as belonging to, and constitutive of, the village.

Having and using a three-dimensional form of memory also operates as a form of social and cultural distinction within the village. Not everyone in Dodworth can (or wants to) participate in memory talk. The most obvious example of this are non-Doduthers who have moved into the village later in life and who described to me the feeling that one ‘needs a passport to live in Dodworth’. People who have not lived in Dodworth for an extended period of time do not have the same level of access to, nor perhaps the same interest in, the memory talk as I describe it here. They are also cut off from some local channels of social engagement for the same reason.
Absences and ruins

Throughout the previous sections of this article, the theme of absence reoccurs. One author to recently engage with questions about memory and absence, in a non-Western setting, is Küchler (2001). She is interested in shifting anthropological attention away from objects as sites of memory to ‘the space created by rendering absent the products of memorywork’ (2001, p.54). Based on fieldwork in New Ireland, New Guinea, Küchler’s work has explored the way social memory, extraordinarily intricate carved sculptures called malanggan and mortuary practices intersect with the transmission of power and land (1987, 1993). Contrary to Western expectations, malanggan are abandoned to decay once made rather than kept. Küchler draws on malanggan as an ethnographic example in contrast with objectified models of Western memory: the concept of malanggan is in ‘conflict with our [Western] assumption that commemorative works should provide a lasting visual referent for acts of remembrance’ and that ‘the place of memory in modern culture [is] best exemplified by the war memorial’ (2001, p.55). Küchler argues that Westerners valorise presence over absence in commemoration, saying that ‘we still customarily conceptualize the memorial’s value as residing in the object or parts of the object, rather than in a mental resource created through the object’s disappearance’ (2001, p.62). Drawing on Harrison (1995), Küchler raises the point that researchers should ‘consider the possibility that, rather than being the norm, the modern industrial economy with its attachment to material, rather than mental resources, may be the odd one out’ (2001, p.62). Küchler crafts a rich and interesting argument about how malanggan are ‘a mode of forgetting’ (2001, p.68), channels of the transmission of knowledge and land rights which are also owned by individuals as mental images, cyclically remembered at appropriate moments, only to become invisible again. She asks at the very end of her chapter ‘where are the spaces for memory, free of physical artefacts, to be found in modern Western experience?’ (2001, p.68).

The situation in Dodworth is both clarified and made more complex in light of Küchler’s work. On the one hand, in Dodworth there is a lively form of discourse which remembers relationships and individuals by linking them with residual mental images and feelings of places that no longer exist. In contrast with the physical, tangible Western monuments and war memorials Küchler evokes, in Dodworth there are spaces for memory which connect images of what used to be there (paths, steps, abattoirs, pits, houses, shops, neighbours, family, fruit trees, pigs, friends, employers, farms) and memories of what used to
happen there (running errands, cleaning, eating chips, mining, farming, egg and spoon races, shopping) with the contemporary negotiation of lives, identities, and relationships by village residents. This could arguably be a form of social memory ‘free of physical artefacts’ in a Western context.

On the other hand, unlike *malanggan* ‘in which proprietary rights pertain not to objects, but to their mental ‘remains’ ‘ (Küchler 2001:68), the social memory practices I describe in Dodworth seem unable to escape the embodied, embedded, experience of the places and objects they refer back to. Remembering by evoking absences is still to engage with object, even if it is engaging with the mental footprint left by the object upon its removal as well as the subjective experiences of what transpired there. Resolving this contradiction could prove fruitful for considering what counts as commemoration in a Western setting, but is a thread to be investigated in further work as it is beyond the scope of this particular article.

Despite decaying, being erased, or having passed on, places and people serve as trig points on the contemporary social landscape in Dodworth and feature heavily in local discourse. The irony here is how absences and erasures, which are inversions of physical and present, become loci of memory, or, rather, remain as loci of memory, despite their connection to the physical reality being interrupted. This is a way of remembering that, in terms of the villagescape, glosses over rupture and emphasises continuity in the face of absences. However, in terms of the web of social relations, a three-dimensionality of memory is also a way of remembering that helps to perpetuate and maintain connections rather than allowing them to slide into oblivion.

**Intersecting levels of history**

Kathleen Stewart’s work parallels my own in respect to her interest in absences, experience, and interstices. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that both she and I experienced ‘a process of being hit by events, an aggravation that stirs a relentless scanning and chronicling’ (1996, p.90) during our fieldwork in former coal mining areas. Despite great geographical and cultural distance, she could have been describing South Yorkshire when she wrote this of West Virginia:

‘The West Virginia coal-mining camps and hollers become a place that is at once diffused and intensely localized, incorporated into a national imaginary and left out, intensely tactile and as ephemeral as the ghostly traces of forgotten things. These hills, at once occupied, encompassed, exploited, betrayed, and deserted –
become a place where the effects of capitalism and modernization pile up on the landscape as the detritus of history, and where the story of ‘America’ grows dense and unforgettable in re-membered ruins and pieced-together fragments’ (1996, p.4).

Dodworth, once a pit village and now an ex-pit village, is part of the centre of what was one of the most industrialised parts of the world but which is no longer. Dodworth and villages like it throughout Britain play a role in the national imagination about Britain’s own history, figuring in the stories that piece together some sense of what it ‘means’ to be British or English, the socio-cultural changes experienced in Britain since the Second World War, and uncertainty about the future.

At a local level in Dodworth, Stewart’s observations of ‘being hit by events’ are paralleled by the erased pitheads and mine workings, once industrial hives of activity sprawling over acres of land but now razed to the ground and either concreted over or made into North American style shopping-malls; the fields that men walked across on their way to work but which are now full of new, expensive, ‘executive’ homes for wealthy commuters; polluted groundwater oozing from mine workings which have been covered over but still exist deep underground; terrace houses which have to be demolished because of mining subsidence and the old workings beneath them. These are all traces of an industry that used to be and which is no more, but whose presence is still felt. As Stewart argues, attending to (and privileging) how people talk about memory, place and absence does not permit the anthropologist access to some true, preserved, past. Instead, places and absences that are remembered become sites in which meaning is symbolically represented, a representation that encompasses loss and change. This also stands for a significant transformation in the order of things, and the rupturing effect of macro-level events on local levels of history and experience. Dodworth is a textured social milieu where the living and the dead, individuals, families, relatives, and neighbours are closely related by a myriad of present and remembered links. Village residents, many of whom have lived their entire live in the immediate vicinity, have had to integrate immense changes in the social, physical and economic realms over the past fifteen years. Within this context, memory talk that reproduces such closely interwoven interpersonal bonds may serve as a sort of fire-break in the face of such overwhelming rupture.
Conclusions

Memory is put to work in powerful ways in Dodworth. While social memory plays out on many levels, I have focused here on practices of remembering which are embedded in everyday life and daily practice. This is not the large-scale, nationalistic remembering of monuments and memorials, but rather is a form of remembering made manifest by how talk of the past plays out at a local level. There are no official monuments to domestic places or to the webs of relations in Dodworth. And yet, memories of them persist and are used to navigate contemporary social relations. The flux between the past and present in social memory and the ways in which the past is used for contemporary purposes is a topic that has been thoroughly demonstrated by many authors. What I have focused on here, however, is how both knowledge about the past and the processes of recounting it are intimately connected with places, places now erased, and webs of social relations. This creates a three-dimensional form of memory, evoking temporal and spatial richness in the social memories of Dodworth that are linked to relationality. Memory talk in Dodworth however, like gossip and the politics of recreation recounted by Ronnie Frankenberg in the 1950s, is not a neutral practice. It is a way of discerning who is of the village, and who the village belongs to and as such is something that can be used as a form of differentiation and exclusion as much as to create a sense of belonging.

As ‘forgetting’ had to be added to ‘social memory’ and ‘remembering’, I argue that ‘absence’ needs to be added to ‘presence’ in terms of place and experience. Memory in the absence of something is often called commemoration in Western settings, but this connotes an intentionality or a planning which is absent in the three-dimensionality of memory talk in Dodworth. This material also opens up new considerations in relation to memory practices in the West and problematises a homogenised notion of ‘Western’ social memory as lodged in monuments and memorials. As with considering how social memory is connected to place, exploring social memory in terms of absences and relationality may also help social scientists to move towards more nuanced accounts of differences within the so-called ‘West’ and even within Britain itself.

Acknowledgements

Funding from the Radcliffe-Brown Trust Fund for Social Anthropological Research, STANDD/AGREE in the Department of Anthropology at McGill University, a McGill FGSR Social Sciences Research Funding Grant and a Department of Anthropology and FGSR Award at McGill are all gratefully acknowledged. An earlier version of this article was presented at ‘Thinking with Memory’ in July 2003 at the University of Manchester. My thanks to the
participants at that seminar, and to Ellen Corin, Andrew Dawson, Jeanette Edwards, Sharon Macdonald, Hugh Potter, Mike Savage and Colin Scott for thoughtful readings and discussions of earlier incarnations of this article, although responsibility for any faults that may remain is mine alone.

Bibliography


Mead, George Herbert (1959 [1932]) The Philosophy of the Present. Open Court:La Salle, IL.


Although I use the term ‘Western’ throughout this article, I wish to signal here my discomfort with the unproblematic way it is usually employed and the homogeneity it implies. While there are cultural similarities throughout the ‘Western’ world, blanket use of the term masks significant nuances among the component cultural groups, local levels of experience, and class, gender and generational issues. On the other hand, it serves act as a useful shorthand to express certain shared tendencies which background the questions in this article.

Pseudonyms have been used for research participants in this article. Local places and local names have not been changed in order to respect and retain the local oral history.

‘Criminal Investigation Division’.

This occurred before I read Ryden (1993) who describes place as a three dimensional form of space since it acquires depth over long-term association. Memory, on the other hand, already has a temporal aspect to it, and I am arguing that it is not the perspective of time which gives social memory depth, but rather how it is associated with place and with social relations.

For an engaging discussion about differences between ‘seeing’ and ‘viewing’, see Okley 2001.

In her published work pre-2001, Küchler uses the spelling “malangan”.