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Contested Histories in Public Space: Memory, Race, and Nation

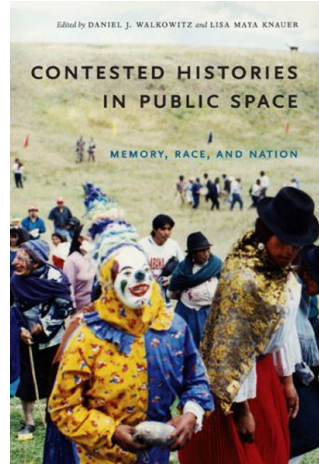
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Reviewed by: BROOKE NEELY

How are racial and national narratives imagined in a postcolonial, global context? A growing body of work across the disciplines locates these processes in public sites of commemoration. Memorials, monuments, and other historical spaces operate as contested terrains for constructing, opposing, and negotiating racial and national discourses. In Daniel J. Walkowitz and Lisa Maya Knauer's edited volume *Contested Histories in Public Space: Memory, Race, and Nation*, contributors illustrate these representational struggles at a variety of historical sites around the world, from New Zealand's national museum to South Africa's Voortrekker Monument, highlighting in particular how postcolonial theory has informed the character and politics of public debates over how to convey history. Walkowitz and Knauer argue that this is a particularly important time to study debates over history in the public sphere because deindustrialization and outsourcing have made cultural and historical sites important spaces for economic development. To address the range of ways public histories get contested, they divide the book into four main thematic sections that take the reader on a tour of four theoretical problems the editors see as central to the study of memory, race, and nation.

The first section focuses on how indigenous groups engage with national historical sites in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada and attempt to expand and complicate the national narratives that circulate in these memorial spaces. For example, Ruth B. Phillips and Mark Salber Phillips offer a compelling piece on the First Peoples' Hall at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. They detail the conflicts and collaborations that emerged in the process of expanding the museum's narratives in ways that legitimate indigenous epistemologies and foreground First Peoples' traditional *and* contemporary experiences. In this case, we see how museum spaces can avoid singular narratives and artifact-oriented displays by offering unfinished, multiple, and fragmented stories of current and former Native inhabitants as well as by conveying the ongoing political struggles surrounding identity, land rights, and sovereignty. Similarly, Paul Ashton and



Paula Hamilton argue in their essay on Australia's public history debates that museums often act as important spaces for renegotiating public histories. They make a convincing case that these historical sites offer explicit opportunities for making sense of current struggles over national identity in postcolonial contexts because "practitioners are often in the front lines, struggling to come to terms with new and conflicting interpretations of national history" (p. 71-72).

In the second group of essays, the authors turn our attention to the ways nation-states with colonial pasts negotiate their postcolonial situation and find ways to accommodate multiple historical narratives. Durba Ghosh illustrates how, in the case of Great Britain, the British Library faces challenges in representing British colonial history in the wake of an ever-diversifying postcolonial British citizenry. In order to remain a nationalist tool of the British state, the library moved away from a traditional narrative that distances white British citizens from brown colonial "others" to what they perceive as a more contemporary multicultural story that minimizes political and economic struggles and highlights the assimilation of colonized "others." Nation states with ugly colonial pasts also utilize commemorative spaces to justify their history of colonization. For example, Richard Flores highlights how the Alamo site in the United States acts as a forum for perpetuating a myth of "good" Texans fighting "bad" Mexicans and for rationalizing the settlement of the North American southwest. In response to efforts to expand this discourse, Flores argues that even an inclusionary or multicultural narrative does not fundamentally undermine the memorial's function of justifying western expansion. These essays underscore the ways postcolonial nation-states adapt their hegemonic historical narratives in the wake of great social and political changes.

The third collection of essays goes on to address more directly how states construct and control the circulation of historical knowledge, in the arenas of public monuments, education, and space. In his piece, O. Hugo Benavides highlights the state-mandated narratives in Ecuador that present fictionalized accounts as official history to secure the approval of the Ecuadorian citizens. Through a content analysis of history books controlled by the state's Ministry of Education, Benavides illustrates how the mythic national narrative of a "Kingdom of Quito" has been used to inspire patriotism among Ecuadorians even though the existence of the kingdom remains unproven. Benavides provides a useful example of a state's successful implementation of nationalist discourse. In her article on racialization and public space in Oaxaca, Mexico, Deborah Poole provides another example of state-based commemoration and identity-formation. In this case, the state government of Oaxaca launched a campaign to create a seemingly progressive "Space of Diversity" in central Oaxaca, which overshadowed the local culture and politics and promoted a nationalist Mexican agenda and a growing tourist economy in the region. Poole maps the historical context with great detail and clarity, and she does an excellent job of highlighting the ongoing and strong opposition of many local Oaxacans to these state-based efforts.

The fourth section of essays builds upon Poole's article to shed light specifically on the ways hegemonic state authority over memory and history is continually challenged and opposed. For example, Paul Amar traces the collection of social actors, from local residents to state officials to police and drug traffickers, struggling to redefine and redevelop the Rio de Janeiro *favela* (shantytown). Similarly, in her piece on performative public history in Cuba, Lisa Maya Knauer shows both the contestations over race and nation that emerge around the World Heritage site in Old Havana and the multiple interpretations of these displays by residents and visitors. In keeping with the theme of the book, these essays stress the contested and changing nature of public histories.

Indeed, *Contested Histories* is a part of a larger book series on radical perspectives in historical research, which seeks to interrogate "the way power is constituted, contested, used, and abused" (p. viii). This installment examines contestation over official historical narratives. The book and the larger series work to highlight comparative and transnational approaches, multiple social perspectives, the ways the past becomes commodified, and the intersections and politics (around race, class, gender, and so on) that are embedded in historical discourses. The contributors all emphasize how histories—and the stories we tell about history—are central sites of political struggle; reclaiming the past can be a crucial part of claiming contemporary rights to inclusion and self-determination.

Walkowitz and Knauer offer an important collection of essays for people interested in memory studies more broadly. This book will also appeal to readers concerned with the intersections of collective remembering and social understandings of race and nation in postcolonial contexts. *Contested Histories* would be a particularly useful collection of readings for courses across the humanities and social sciences on race, ethnicity, and nationality, history and memory, as well as postcolonial studies. It would also be very valuable for anyone interested in public history work. The essays shed light on the complicated networks of scholars (traditional "historians"), museum employees, and government officials as well as the dilemmas public historians face when trying to engage audiences in more complex (often ugly and uncomfortable) historical stories, while still maintaining people's interest and securing potential funding resources.