

***A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community*, by Robert R. Archibald, AltaMira Press, 1999, 224pp.**

Minami Orihara

The University of British Columbia

Historians must maintain an objective distance from their subject matter. In *A Place to Remember*, Robert R. Archibald urges historians to be shaken out of this an established view of history and to engage in the political and ethical task of building a sense of social justice. He rejects relativistic view of historical truth as morally and intellectually irresponsible while also arguing against equating the work of historians to scientific pursuits. Instead, as a practitioner with many years of experience in the field of public history, Archibald stresses emotion as a powerful tool to construct narratives that inculcate empathy, facilitate conversations among people of diverse viewpoints, and present opportunities for all to search for “common ground” (Ch.5). By providing context for people to participate in a dialogue about the meaning of their past, he believes public history can elucidate shared concerns of the

present and inform “core values” that must be embraced for the future (Ch. 6). Early in his book he writes, “[I]f history does not encourage us to care, what is the point? In the absence of empathy, emotion, concern, and caring, history becomes an exercise in nostalgia or an academic sidebar of limited use in a real world. If we do not care, we will not be motivated to take action” (22).

According to Archibald, what connects individuals with history (and past with future) is an attachment to community and personal memory that accompanies one’s feelings about a shared place. The book therefore sets out to present Archibald’s journey to his hometown of Ishpeming in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, where he picks up the fragments of his childhood memory from the “raw materials of community” (35): symbolic objects, landscapes, and other undocumented sources in Ishpeming, all of which academic historians are conventionally reluctant to work with. Through his personal reflection Archibald realizes that every memory of his past, no matter how insignificant it may seem, is open to historical interpretation, for everything is connected to one another within the framework of a larger historical reality. He comes to understand that his hometown shaped subjective motives for his career choice as an historian, his historical interests in identity and memory, and his professional convictions on the importance of history for forging strong bonds of civic life. Just as how Archibald’s

journey allows him to cross the boundary between memory and history, he identifies that a primary obligation of public historians is “to facilitate the public process of remembrance and the creation of an inclusive narrative, and always to ‘connect the dots’” (48).

As president of the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, Archibald projects this philosophy in the employment of African-American staff so as to incorporate diverse perspectives into the planning of exhibitions. Their discussion about community symbols led to the discovery of the Homer G. Phillips Hospital in an historic African-American neighborhood, which he proposes to be a new civic icon that deserves wide communal recognition comparable to the Gateway Arch. Moved by its symbolic significance for African-American identity, Archibald feels compelled to salvage the hospital from the state of obscurity since he sees within this deserted building a power to cure not only the African-American population but the community of St. Louis at large of the social ills of racial segregation and deterioration of civic life. But these goals, he believes, can be achieved only if the hospital is celebrated as a representation of African-American legacy and continues to serve as a stimulus of “shared civic memory” (34). What entities public historians choose to commemorate for public memorials thus depend on the historians’ moral discretion and judgment, so the author expounds on four “core values,” –

namely, mutual obligation, sustainability, transcendence, and memory— as guideposts for all practitioners of history. Archibald's professional experiences are certainly the most captivating part of this book, and by weaving them into the stories of his childhood, he makes history accessible for a general audience, engaging the readers to trace the roots of his philosophical convictions.

In favor of an emphasis on public remembrance, however, Archibald tends to make an unequivocal connection between memory and history. There is a general discomfort among social and cultural historians with extending history to the collective memory of humankind. While he is aware of historical problems underlying such a view, his book does not profoundly engage in the question that concerns the distinction between the two. In Chapter 5, Archibald discusses his experience in New Mexico, where he conducted an interview with one Isleta Indian for his doctoral research on tribal narratives. When told how the ancestors of this informant got on horses to escape from the Spaniards at the time of their first encounter four hundred years ago, Archibald immediately thought his interview was to end in futility because concrete historical and scientific evidence verifies that horses arrived with the Spaniards. To further turn the situation into an enigma, the informant handed an anthropology textbook that stood as a record of those objective proofs. This experience now comes back to Archibald as a revelation; he was

not confronting “a clash of cultures” (91) but methodological tensions between traditional representations of reality in historical discipline and different authenticities of sources. This fuels Archibald’s belief that “the validity of narratives must be evaluated…on the basis of their success in sustaining a culture that provides a system of coherent beliefs, nurtures a cohesive community, acknowledges the humanity of all members, and ensures the survival of a people” (93).

Although “collective memory” is never espoused in his writings, there are many moments like this in this book when the author takes the notion of collective memory to make a univocal linking with history, and this is often done so at the great expense of historical accuracy. When a painting called *The Last Slave Sale* was prepared for one exhibition entitled *Seeking St. Louis*, Archibald struggled to make a meaningful connection between the burdens of the past, remembrance, and the future. The painting depicted the slaves standing in front of an auctioneer and a white audience who gathered at the city’s Old Court House. Based on the life of the painter and a civic tradition in St. Louis, according to which on that day a number of white people stood in public protest against the sale of slaves, Archibald concurs that this painting represents “a symbol of resistance to injustice”(100). In privileging memory, he disregards the lack of historically-verified evidence, stating: “But perhaps it does not matter. Perhaps the most important fact is

that St. Louisans want to believe the story,” and further adds, “The persistence of the story, in itself evidence of resistance to slavery and injustice, reveals the better side of our natures” (100-101).

At these moments, Archibald is set to illuminate his argument that the most important goal of history is to establish identity for those sharing memory and history attached to a place. He is therefore inevitably convinced that a community exists within geographically defined spaces, as opposed to “cyberspace” (120, 209). It is not until the last chapter of his book in which he defines that a community is a place “unified by issues and interests” (210). Although he holds that its boundary can be a subjective one unconstrained by political constructs, he adamantly questions the capacity of cyberspace for nurturing emotions necessary to search “common ground” and enact changes for the future. One defining event that solidified such understanding for Archibald is when he witnessed a pair of American and Japanese strangers who overcame their differences to initiate conversations about the bombing of Hiroshima at the *Enola Gay* exhibition in Washington, D.C. The public historians are certainly well-positioned in their expertise to provide contexts for such conversations, but one wonders what Archibald would say now, after nearly fifteen years since this book was written, about the relationships among social media, public sphere, and history.

Rich in personal and professional accounts, Archibald's book intrigues us to reconsider the boundaries and standards we have set as historians. The challenges he faces as a public historian invite us to be more aware of the ways our works, be they exhibitions or texts, are adapted by individuals and community for their own purposes. As Archibald stresses that history is a "process" and "collaboration" with our audience, we can certainly learn from it by making our research process felt in our historical writing and allowing readers to be part of the journey toward our conclusions.

