Memory-Place, Meaning, and the Alamo

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I no longer recall the month or the week, only the place. Wrapped in our winter coats and gloves, scarves and hats, my third grade class was on its first field trip of the year. The thrill of leaving behind workbooks filled with three place addition and subtraction problems can only be described as a third grade “rush.” It was electrifying. The trip, like many of those in my elementary years, was to the Alamo: that bastion of Texas liberty and memorial to brave men. I had passed by it numerous times before, on my way to see my father at the pharmacy where he worked across the street. I remember wondering if he ever ventured over there during his lunch break, feeling the same invigoration that I would surely experience walking amidst the Alamo’s ancient stone walls where, I had learned, heroes died.

My every expectation was met. The stones cried out to me with their sense of history. I looked closely at the wall, searching for pockmarks, imagining muskets displacing rock with each shot. The silence of the main room, what I learned was the mission church, filled me with awe and heightened my senses. There, beneath the floor that I and my classmates tread upon, was the site where legends fell in martyrdom for my freedom. Bowie. Travis. Crockett. Texan heroes all of them. Once outside the silent chamber of the mission church, the air fresher, and the light brilliant, I lost my equilibrium. I recall it vividly. Robert, my best friend, nudged my elbow and whispered, “You killed them! You and the other ‘mes’kins’!”

Unfortunately, this experience is not mine alone. Over the last few years as I have retold this story at various places throughout the US—some as distant from Texas as Ithaca, New York—invariably someone would approach me with a similar tale.1 The breath of the Alamo—well beyond the confines of its regional appeal—is the result of its transformation from a battle of defeat in 1836 into a place and story that resonates with the experience and values of the US in the modern period.

As a site of public history and culture, the Alamo did not emerge full-blown into American cultural consciousness but is
the cumulative affect of multiple representations that have reproduced its compelling discourse. In many ways, the response of my third grade accuser was mediated through the story he had learned from teachers, books, possibly John Wayne, and most importantly for the purposes of this essay, our visit that day. His views were informed, selective as they were, by what I refer to as memory-place: collective memories fixed to physical places that construct meaning.

My understanding of memory-place builds on Pierre Nora's discussion of les lieux de mémoire or sites of memory (“Between Memory and History”), as well as the recent interest in the relationship between memory, history, and semiotics. For Nora, lieux de mémoire are constructed from the interplay between memory and history with memory attaching itself to “sites” and history to “events” (22). But the relationships between memory, site, history, and event are not so clearly delineated in places of public culture like the Alamo. Walking through the stone-fortified Alamo church, listening to historical renditions of the battle, recalling last week's history lesson or the previous night’s Disney episode of Davy Crockett collapses the distinctions between the events of 1836, their historical emplotment, the aura of the place and one’s collective memory of it. It is this conjunction of the learned and the experiential that emerges with the presence of place. The result is a past made real because one stands—quite literally—in its wake; the collective memory of the Alamo burst into truth by walking through its silent chambers.

Examining the semantic force of memory-place allows me to explore how collective memory is semiotically grounded in geographic sites, providing physical and spatial locations upon which social meanings, and concomitantly, social identities, are fabricated. As such, collective memories, disguised as the workings of historical discourse, are spatially and physically embedded in geographically fixed sites of public history. Memory-place is critically linked to practice, emerging from and within the concrete relations of social power that inform the social construction of meaning. As Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge remind us, the implications of such constructions call for critical scrutiny since public locations like the Alamo are “deeply located in cultural history, on the one hand, and are therefore also critical places for the politics of history, on the other” (37). The cultural history of the Alamo concerns a long and multifarious process through which the memory of 1836 is inscribed, not only in place, but in numerous discursive and nondiscursive forms. As such, unraveling the relationship between memory and place requires that we cast a glance in two directions at once: first, to...
wards the past and the narrative entwinement of memory and history; second, towards the present so as to examine the construction of place in terms of discursive formation and physical representation.

Twenty-seven years later I return to the Alamo, sitting in a small, low-ceilinged room, facing a large monitor, waiting for the film to begin. The renovated stone room, what is known as the convento or long-barrack, grows dark as the "officially authorized" story of this place begins.

"In 1691 an exploratory expedition chanced on the precise spot where the modern city of San Antonio now stands..." claims the narrator of the official Alamo narrative. The film is provided free of charge to all tourists and visitors, by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, official custodians of the Alamo for the State of Texas. After a few more chronological notes about Spanish and French explorers, the early history of the Alamo, initially the mission of San Antonio de Valero, begins. The role of the early Franciscan missionaries in Christianizing and civilizing the native population is recalled, explaining how the mission was abandoned in 1793 when the secularization laws of Mexico took effect.

The year is now 1835, and the Mexican General Martín Perfecto de Cos, charged with protecting the Province of Tejas from Anglo-American unrest, is defeated at the siege of Béxar, now San Antonio. After being captured, he and his soldiers are sent south of the Rio Grande River.

Sam Houston takes charge of the Texas forces, and after Cos's defeat, orders Colonel Jim Bowie to destroy the Alamo lest it become occupied and fortified by Mexican forces. But Bowie, according to the narrative, becomes "fascinated" with the old mission, declares that he "would rather die in these ditches than to give them up to the enemy," and refuses to destroy the fortress.

Soon, Lieutenant Colonel William Barrett Travis and Bowie assume joint command of the Alamo and are joined by David Crockett and his dozen or so volunteers from Tennessee. There are about 150 men in the Alamo, few of whom are trained soldiers. The majority of these men are from outside Texas, with a number from European countries. "They had come to aid the revolution." The only outside help the defenders receive are thirty-two men from Gonzalez, Texas, who believed that "this was the place and this was the hour to stand opposed to tyranny."

On 22 February, "governed by the ruthless will of the dicta-
tor, Santa Anna’s cavalry arrived” in Béxar. Upon arriving, Santa Anna orders the men in the Alamo to surrender. Unwilling to do so, Travis answers with a canon shot aimed at the Mexican forces. “One hundred fifty valiant volunteers against the dictator’s trained brigades. The siege had begun.”

The men at the Alamo begin the battle alone. No help is delivered, although it is requested, as the battle carries on for thirteen days. Bowie, sick and bedridden, passes the full command of the Alamo forces to Travis. The narrator declares:

According to legend, Travis drew a line on the ground with his sword, offering every man a choice to remain or save his life.
According to the legend, only one man fled.
History records that 187 remained to die.

After twelve days of fighting, Santa Anna, on the morning of 6 March, sounds the deguello, the Mexican bugle melody that announces “that no prisoners will be taken, no quarter will be given.”

As the Mexicans begin their attack, Travis gives the order, “The Mexicans are upon us. Give them hell!”

The Texans fight bravely, pushing back two assaults on the Alamo. The third assault breaks the Texans’ forces and the Mexicans soon reach the inner fortress of the old mission. Travis falls holding his sword, Crockett dies fighting in the plaza, and Bowie, still bedridden, fights with his pistol and knife in his hand. All the defenders are killed.

The battle of the Alamo was not in vain, for Santa Anna’s army is tattered and needs weeks to recuperate from this victory. Less than six weeks later, Sam Houston’s army defeats Santa Anna’s forces at San Jacinto, screaming: “Remember the Alamo! The Alamo! The Alamo! The Alamo!”

Through this film—constituted from the semantic force of presence conjoined to the discursive sway of narrative—visitors to the Alamo experience the most extensive portrayal of the 1836 battle. While the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT), the designated custodians of this site, provide a pamphlet entitled, “The Story of the Alamo: Thirteen Fateful Days in 1836,” it is less than two pages long and provides only a summary of the battle. The public presentation of the past at the Alamo merits special attention since “the powerful grip of collective cultural memory,” as Michael Frisch discusses, must be differentiated
from "real people and the processes of history" (1155). Frisch is concerned with the critically imperative need to distinguish memory, and its role in historical imagination, from the movement of history. For my purpose, memory, both singular and collective, serves as a means of authenticating a particular vision of the past; history, quite differently, refers to specific norms and values concerning evidence and interpretation. But how does one distinguish the political and ideological undercolor of collective memory at sites of public history when the crafting of such sites works to erase the past? It is here that memory-place, as a means of scrutinizing the semantic dimensions of sites of public history, serves a critical interpretive purpose.

In the Alamo film just outlined, the cinematic narrative of the battle is based on a binary division between Texans and Mexicans structured in the following way:

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<td>Character:</td>
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<td>brave, valiant men</td>
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Binary structures such as these are useful not because they provide a "map of the real," states Ramón Saldívar (123), but for the kind of foundational principles that give credence to these narratives in the first place. As such, this binary symmetry is not the foundation of historical discourse, where the murky waters of the past are defined by their sheer multiplicity and ambiguity, but the structural features of memory. Following Jacques Le Goff, who defines memory as a particular group's understanding of the past (95), the reading that follows understands memory as mobilized in the service of the group, not as the collection and interpretation of evidence.

In spite of its pretense to historical accuracy, this film is not an historical reconstruction of the "Battle of the Alamo." The film begins by citing the date of 1691 as the year when the first explorers to the area "chanced on the precise spot" where the
city of San Antonio now stands. Like all chronotopic devices, following Bakhtin, this opening sentence collapses time and space, historical distance and geographic location, into a unified frame. It bridges the gap between the presence of those first explorers and our own, uniting the historical fates of the observer and the historical actors through the physical place of the Alamo. A series of other dates and historical characters are presented, recalling the chronology of the founding of the mission, the names of those who established it, and its depopulation before becoming a military outpost in the early 1800s. These devices are part of the strong voice of the narrative, mixing dates and places, and offering anecdotal vignettes as proof of its historical authority. The film organizes everything into a single, unified frame that leaves no confusion as to the social and geographic borders that separate Texans from Mexicans. 

Midway through the film, the narrator recounts Travis’s action prior to the final siege. The narrator states:

According to legend, Travis drew a line on the ground
with his sword, offering every man a choice to remain or save his life.
According to the legend, only one man fled.
History records that 187 remained to die.

This segment is instructive for the way it constructs its own historical authority. By announcing this segment as “legend,” the narrator readily admits that fabrications have filtered into the collective story of the Alamo. But in marking this segment as legend, all other aspects of the narrative, including that which is unmarked, are framed as “fact.” The narrative thus produces its own authority by claiming to distinguish “legend” from “fact,” a statement reinforced through the parallel repetition of the phrase “According to legend . . .”

The binary logic of the Alamo narrative is further implicated in the last line of this segment. “One hundred eighty-seven people remained to die.” But this figure only takes into account those on the Texas side, clearly qualifying them as the only historical actors who count.

This last line provides another example of how the film constructs its own authoritative stance. The narrator, in a slow, methodical cadence, claims, “History records . . .” Through these words, the narrator represents history as a transcendental subject that keeps track of minute events and details, making them available to the investigative eye of the historian. While the phrase certainly derives from a certain poetic and dramatic license indic-
ative of the intended audience, its message is that history, and its representation of the past, is objectively knowable and readable.

Once the credits are complete, I again explore the mission complex, scrutinizing the physical features of the place. Walking through the mission church, what most people recognize as the Alamo, I take careful note of the displayed artifacts and their descriptions. Before exiting from the back side door that leads to the Alamo museum and store, I recall the sign on the front entrance that reads:

Be Silent Friend
Here Heroes Died
To Blaze a Trail
for Other Men

The Alamo is silent.

Because of the interreferentiality between the collective memory of the Alamo and the place itself, the full force of this site can only be experienced ethnographically, which is to say, by one's presence. In keeping with the protocol of public shrines and memorials, patrons are asked to "be silent," and, from the vacuous quiet of the stone walls, this request is readily observed.

Silence is not only an aspect of public protocol—observers moving quietly and reflectively as they slip by artifacts, paintings, and other objects housed in the mission church—but a mediatory code underlying the ambiguous tension between memory and history that anchors meaning in place. As a semantic component of memory, silence is crucial for understanding how places like the Alamo are validated. Andrew Lass argues that the "nation-state's concern for remembrance, or encoding, is paralleled only by its obsession with forgetting, or erasure" (467). Memory is not only forgetful, but, in attempting to preserve the forgotten, it selectively silences those elements that attempt to rupture the quiet. One such example concerns the debate over whether Crockett died in combat during the battle or was executed after being captured at the end. According to José Enrique de la Peña, one of Santa Anna's officers, as well as Dan Kilgore, in his book, How Did Davy Die? (1978), Crockett was executed after the battle. However, according to Susan Prendergast Schoelwer, the DRT, intent on keeping Crockett's memory intact, stated in 1985 that his death in battle, as portrayed in John Wayne's
cinematic version of this event, was more accordant with the official narrative of the Alamo (16).

While I agree with Michel-Rolph Trouillot when he claims that “any historical narrative is a bundle of silences” (27), I want to suggest that the silences of memory and history serve different purposes and move in different directions. Here I return to Nora once again. Crucial to his distinction between memory and history is the relationship between space and time. For Nora, memory is attached to sites which are concrete and physical while history is concerned with the fleeting, the fluid, and the processual. This spatial-temporal distinction transfers, for Nora, into absolute and relative fixtures of meaning. As such, memory-place, through physical and concrete evidence, validates and authenticates without contest a specter of the past, while history—intent on unraveling the temporal movement of the past through sources, archives, and the flow of narrative—is only as solid as the process of narrative production itself.9

Memory needs no validation since it thinks itself complete: ambiguity is dispelled, motives understood, winners and losers clearly marked. History, on the other hand, is noisy: it is open, shifting, changing with the emergence of new evidence, other perspectives and possible interpretations; it is contested, dialogical, open to revision and debate, and as Hans-Georg Gadamer states, “can never be complete” (303).10 History breaks the silence of memory and unlocks its semantic fields. While the silences of history, as Trouillot rightly demonstrates, are linked to the differential exercises of power whose effects reinforce regimes of truth that control the past, the silences of memory anchor the past concretely, naturalizing the social order itself. The silence of history leads to power; the silence of memory creates culture.

The call to silence on the Alamo door resonates with the silences of memory that write the past in a way that leaves no room for ambiguity. The Alamo film functions in the same way. Its binary construction produces winners, losers, tyrants, heroes, Mexicans, and Americans. Any evidence that would gray the picture is silenced by the weight of its structure. While the film makes a slight attempt to portray an unbiased view (“The Mexicans charged with discipline and courage”), its binary configuration—like memory—is closed to such a reading. The silent walls of the Alamo serve to remind us of those who died and shield us from the confusion of history.

The historical account presented to the public at the Alamo—through its binary construction and silent omissions—erases a number of critical aspects concerning the Battle of the Alamo. Clearly, public historical accounts suffer from their need
to condense and simplify, but such efforts bear a certain responsibility to understand and portray the various complex forces that shaped the past. Public history should open the door to curiosity about the past, not render it conclusive and known. The Alamo, and its historical portrayal, is no different, and numerous historical aspects effaced from the official narrative merit re-inscription. To this end I offer other texts and other readings.

In February 1836, General Antonio López de Santa Anna, dictator and president of Mexico, approached the town of San Antonio de Béxar in the province of Coahuila y Tejas for the purpose of enforcing a centralist regime against those who sought to follow the federalist constitution of 1824. The events leading to Santa Anna's northward campaign are critical for understanding the march of 1836. While these events do not change the outcome of the battle, they do underscore the erasures of the public accounts and point in an interpretive direction as to why such silences have occurred.

Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, and, like many postcolonial governments, its search for a political and national identity was forged through factionalized parties. One main source of strife was over political organization and ideology: should Mexico develop as a strong centralist state or as a cohesively structured federalist nation that allowed more autonomy to its member states? Centralists supported special rights for clergy and military personnel long practiced by the Spanish Crown. Furthermore, they argued persuasively for an elite form of control, relegating power to the hacenderos and other select groups over the populous. Federalists were influenced by the recent success of the US, with its separation of power into three branches, as well as the political philosophy of Montesquieu. The balance of power teetered in one direction, then the other, for several years until 1824 when the issue was seemingly settled with the writing of a constitution forming the United States of Mexico as a federalist republic.

During the struggle for independence from Spain, Moses Austin petitioned the Spanish Crown for permission to settle in Coahuila y Tejas. Although he died before achieving his goal, his son, Stephen F. Austin, received colonization rights from the newly established Mexican government in 1821. According to Meyer and Sherman, Austin was allowed to emigrate 300 families from the US provided they were "of good moral character, would profess Roman Catholic religion, and agreed to abide by Mexican law" (335). While many of Austin's early frontiersmen,
as well as others who soon followed, came seeking opportunity in this new land, many found the presence of Tejanos (Texas-Mexicans) an unwanted sight. As Arnoldo De León aptly states:

The immigrants, then, did not arrive in Texas with open minds concerning the native Tejanos: their two-hundred-year experience with “different” peoples had so shaped their psyche that their immediate reaction was negative rather than positive. . . . They had retained impressions acquired before their arrival in the state then reapplied and transposed those racial attitudes upon the native casta. (11)

By 1827, 12,000 Anglo-Americans had entered Mexico and were living in the province of Coahuila-Tejas, outnumbering the Mexicans by 5,000 people. Foreigners continued moving into the province in large numbers, and, by 1835, Mexicans citizens in Tejas numbered 7,800 to 30,000 Anglo-Americans. The growing number of Anglo-Americans moving into Tejas alarmed Mexican officials, and, in an effort to curb the growing immigration from the US, the Mexican government passed an emancipation proclamation in 1829 outlawing slavery. Slavery was not a practice in Mexico, but the law was aimed at curbing the number of US citizens moving into the Mexican provinces.

Another factor causing concern among citizens of Tejas—both Mexican and Anglo-American—was the cumbersome distance between Tejas and Saltillo, where government offices and appellate courts for the province were housed. Austin, in 1833, traveled to Mexico City to try to persuade President Santa Anna to allow Texas to become an independent Mexican state with control over its own affairs. While Santa Anna refused, as Stephen Hardin claims, he did agree to allow citizens of the province more latitude in conducting their legal matters, including a revision of the tariff laws, repeal of the anti-immigration law, and trial by jury.

But tension and fear were not the only sentiments between Anglo-Americans and the local Mexican population. Mexicans in Tejas were pleased to find assistance in warding off the raids of Comanches, Apaches, and Kiowas who often attacked settlements in search of horses and other goods. And Anglo-Americans, unaccustomed to the harsh conditions of the Texas prairies, learned their skills of cattle ranching from the Mexican vaqueros. In terms of marriage alliances, it was not uncommon for Mexican women to find husbands among the incoming settlers, especially among those of the elite classes.

Tensions between the Mexican citizenry in Tejas and the
Mexican government came to a head when Santa Anna discarded the Constitution of 1824, causing great consternation among Mexicans and Anglo-Americans in Tejas. Perhaps the biggest misnomer in the annals of Texas history concerns the immediate affects of Santa Anna’s annulment. Historians agree that his actions led to the military engagements that resulted in the independence of Texas, but it is also quite clear that the move to independence was not the immediate stance taken by all, especially among the older settlers. Many had come to Tejas seeking new ways of life and were slow in responding to the cries for military service, and even fewer fought at the Alamo. As Hardin demonstrates, “Few of the real Texians were there, for few of the old settlers had originally sought independence or war” (156).

There are numerous factors to consider in attributing a motive to those who bore arms against the Mexican state. The most common, at least in the initial stages of the revolt, was the intent of local citizens to return Mexico to a federalist republic. In fact, as settlers in Tejas organized during the early months of conflict, their efforts at forming a provisional independent government led to open feuding about the issue of independence. These initial efforts in November 1835 led to the formation of a provisional government “as a state within the Mexican federation,” according to Hardin (57), not a separate independent Texas republic, although this was only a few months away. The rationale for this position was that local citizens of Tejas believed that many of their troubles with the Mexican government would be sufferable if decisions were left in their own hands. Federalistas and centralistas, then, bear the primary responsibility concerning the open hostility erupting in 1835. Among these two camps, neither ethnic nor national origin served as a primary factor in choosing sides. One found Mexican citizens siding with the federalists, opposing the dictatorial regime of Santa Anna, and Anglo-Americans backing the centralist forces of the dictator.

In an effort to suppress the federalist movement in Texas, Santa Anna led his forces north, making his move on San Antonio de Béxar and the Alamo. Close to 200 men, organized into a small militia, gathered to defend this onetime Franciscan mission against Santa Anna’s forces late in February 1836. But on 6 March the Mexicans, greatly outnumbering those in the Alamo, made their final siege, taking the Alamo and leaving no prisoners. The entire scene was one of blood, carnage, and utter death and destruction. José Enrique de la Peña described Santa Anna’s arrival at the battle scene as follows: “He could see for himself the desolation among his battalions and that devastated area littered with corpses, with scattered limbs and bullets, with weap-
ons and torn uniforms. . . . The bodies, with their blackened and bloody faces disfigured by a desperate death, their hair and uniforms burning at once, presented a dreadful and truly hellish sight” (52). Santa Anna lost an estimated 600 men in his victory, a loss that would cost him in a few short weeks.

Those who died defending the Alamo did so for a “borrowed cause,” claims Hardin: “[T]he majority had only recently come from the United States to fight for Texas independence. Among them were Scots, Welsh, Danes and English, as well as US citizens. Few of the real Texans were there . . .” (156). But there is no doubt that news of the defeat, and the death of all of the Alamo defenders, gave impetus to an already growing but not wholly subscribed to independence movement.

After the Alamo battle, the soldiers under Sam Houston’s command were the only obstacle between the Mexican general and his goal of reincorporating Tejas into the Mexican union. But Houston was indecisive and had no clear plan of where or how to encounter the Mexican army. By either chance or design, Houston’s forces met Santa Anna’s at the Battle of San Jacinto on 21 April. Mostly through the element of surprise, the rebel forces overtook the Mexican army swiftly and captured Santa Anna as he retreated south the next day.

Critical to this historical portrait are several factors. First, as noted above, the initial dispute in Texas stemmed from both Mexicans and Anglo-Americans seeking to restore a federalist government in Mexico. Mexicans in the province also tired of Santa Anna’s exploits and of the tedious political circumstances affiliated with their distance from the provincial and national capitals in Coahuila and Mexico City. Second, in spite of his unilateral control of Mexican affairs and politics, and his egotistical and personal ambitions, Santa Anna’s actions can be viewed as an effort to control an internal uprising in his own country.

Finally, an element that seems quite overlooked is the identity of the men who died. The public version of this event provided by the DRT claims that this was a battle between Texans and Mexicans, a categorization that merits special scrutiny since it collapses ethnic and political categories into an ambiguous binary. Ethnically, those who fought on the “Texan” side were anything but a homogeneous lot. There were thirteen native-born Texans in the group, eleven of whom were of Mexican descent. Of those remaining, forty-one of them were born in Europe, two were Jews, two were black, and the remainder were Americans from other states in the US. Intermarriage between Anglo-Americans and Mexicans was common, with that of Jim Bowie and Ursula Verimendi, the daughter of the Mexican governor,
serving as the closest case at the Alamo. On the Mexican side, Santa Anna’s force as well as the local population in Béxar was an amalgamation of former Spanish citizens now Mexican, Spanish-Mexican criollos and mestizos; and Santa Anna had conscripted numerous indigenous young men from the interior of Mexico to assist in battle. Politically, one has only to recognize that this was Mexican territory and “foreigners” were not citizens of Texas but affiliates of the Mexican state. Coupled with this are the presence of European immigrants and the loosely understood notion of US citizenship as well as the fact that many immigrants to Tejas were seeking relief from social and economic problems they faced in their countries of origin. Finally, one cannot forget that prominent Mexican citizens fought on both sides, dividing their allegiance along political and ideological lines rather than according to the ethnically or nationally circumscribed positions popularized at the Alamo.

Silence, History, Power

The film presentation at the Alamo is silent on many of the causes of the 1836 battle and inherently limits the range of meanings, fixing memory (not history) to place. But what is the history of memory-fixed-to-place? Why must memory—and the specter of these hallowed walls—take precedence over history at the Alamo?

The public presentation of history at the Alamo is quite specific about the 1836 battle, but it is silent about its own making within the sociocultural matrix of South Texas history and society. For example, why is it that the Alamo was not historically recognized until the late 1800s? Why is it that the years soon after 1836 saw the Alamo fall into disrepair and physical neglect? Unlike the site where the “Battle of Gettysburg” was fought, the Alamo was not recognized as a memorial immediately after its occurrence.12 This history, of memory-fixed-to-place, is one of power.

The years between 1836 and 1880 were ambivalent years, not only for Texas but the US as well. Between 1836 and 1846 Texas existed as an independent republic but one never recognized by the Mexican state until the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. This treaty was followed by the Civil War, an event that destroyed the illusion of unity and propagated an economic and social agenda that catapulted the US into an emerging capitalist economy. By 1880, the US was ready to
tangle with other emerging world nations, a process that required a certain level of introspective national identity construction. The ambivalence that hindered the making of the Alamo until the late nineteenth century is the same ambivalence Homi Bhabha claims “emerges from a growing awareness that . . . the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality” (1). This ambivalence, one we have been “obliged to forget,” as Bhabha argues (311), is what remains silent at the Alamo today.

The place of the Alamo is silent about this history for several reasons. First, the “remembering” of the Alamo acts as a local narrative of displacement against the local *mexicano* population. Consider that the Alamo in Texas legendry and oral tradition impelled a discourse of fear and recompense against Mexicans. As A. M. Gibson critically notes in his introduction to Will Hale’s *Twenty-Four Years a Cowboy and Ranchman in Southern Texas and Old Mexico* (1959), “‘Killing a Mexican was like killing an enemy in the war.’ Since this was a conflict ‘with historic scores [the Alamo] to settle the killing carried a sort of immunity with it’” (xxii–xxiii). One does not have to wait long after the Battle of the Alamo to witness the subsequent social incrimination of Mexicans, even of those who supported the federalist and independence movement. Juan Seguin, who played a critical role in the siege of Béxar, the Battle of San Jacinto, and who also was an Alamo defender who escaped death because he was sent by Travis on a courier mission, was driven out of Béxar in 1842 for being Mexican. This experience was not unique to *bexareños*. David Montejano, drawing on the work of A. B. J. Hammett, describes how “Mexican families were driven from their homes, their treasures, their cattle and horses and their lands, by an army of reckless, war-crazy people, who overran the town of Victoria. These new people distrusted and hated Mexicans, simply because they were Mexican, regardless of the fact they were both on the same side of the fighting during the war” (27).

The Alamo backlash against Mexicans not only serves a social purpose but an economic one as well, for the effort to restore the Alamo in the late 1880s is concomitant with the emergence of industrialization and class division in South Texas. To this end, the Alamo fixes a narrative against Mexicans that “naturalizes” the class division that erupts at this time. Reading Mexicans through the story of the Alamo becomes a narrative strategy that normalizes what otherwise could not be stated—that the economic reorganization of South Texas was based on a system of social dominance. Remembering the Alamo kept present
the collective memory of "Texan heroes" and "Mexican tyrants," serving as a public reminder "to keep Mexicans 'in line,'" as Montejano reminds us (229).

**Silence, Memory, Culture**

The emergence of the Alamo as a place of public history and culture is generated from the memory of fixing a social discourse to a public place. The Alamo film is read as a "true" account because it points to the very "spot" that explorers found, the "real" walls where Texans stood, the "real" church where heroes fell, the "ditches" that Travis chose to defend. The historical narrative at the Alamo is conjoined to the place of the Alamo so as to provide a cohesive, coherent, and closed reading of the events of 1836. In this way, the film indexically maps the contours of the physical structure, forming a sign-vehicle relationship that emerges from and is grounded in its presence.

That the Alamo is a shrine openly admits to its two-dimensional construction of the past. But this construction is contradictory: maintained as a shrine and memorial, the Alamo is presented through multiple layers of historical texts that apotheosize, rather than debate, the past. It is a shrine committed to memorializing a past event by authenticating a single version of it. The preservation of stone walls, cannons, and other artifacts, the presence of exhibits, and the film which historically portrays the battle are presented as historical evidence. Such aspects "overcode" the place, so as to enable a reading of it as an historical site. This overcoding is further recognized in the juxtaposition of colonial mission architecture and the modern edifices of San Antonio. The historical markings of the Alamo, however, are not about historical evidence. They are artifacts, displaced from the movement of history, that reinforce a collective memory of Texan superiority. And, like most discourses of this kind, the reproduction of this collective memory, as Le Goff states, informs the present rather than enlightens the past.

The silences found at the Alamo—the way selective discourses of Texans and Mexicans are wedded to the physical place where this historical event occurred—are the makings of culture. This collective representation provides a socializing narrative that discloses the identities of "Texans" and "Mexicans." Such representations mark the contours and bring into relief appropriate moral and ideational values that constitute both the social terrain and one's location in it. Such representations construct, through overlapping systems of signs, the cultural and social
map through which social agents find their way to themselves and their place in the world. These collective representations, as social maps, shape the practices and views of those circumscribed by them. Only by disembedding the multiple layers of aggregate signs can we begin to understand the power they wield. As my young classmate demonstrated, the chord of collective memory and identity reproduced at the Alamo is a highly effective form of meaning construction. This forging of memory to place, constructed through the interaction of recollections of the past and physical places, reveals how knowledge of the past is constituted and spatialized in public structures.

In this instance, the inscription of my “mes’kin” social place was amended years later through a politically invoked Chicano sense of self. But what of my “best friend” and the millions of others who visit this Shrine of Texas Liberty each year? Does the image of “treacherous Mexicans” constructed from the emergent memory-place of the Alamo continue to fashion their perceptions, closing their American minds? I suggest it does, for the ability of the Alamo, through its use of memory-place, to wield social identities is a powerfully evocative form of constructing meaning. I do not intend to point a finger at those duped by ideology but to demonstrate that the prescriptive influences of memory-place are but one aspect of the lived experience of hegemony that not only affects those whose identities are so thickly fixed, but also those whose views are so thinly drawn. That one particular memory of the Alamo was fixed to this public place is not an accident of history. Rather, it is an example of how collective memories construct cultural meaning, and, in this case, shape the future of the dominant.

Notes

Research for this essay was generously supported by the graduate School, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the UW System Institute on Race and Ethnicity.

1. This experience is not mine alone. Edward Tabor Linenthal describes how several Chicano educators he interviewed in San Antonio concerning the Alamo reported how “we learned in third or fourth grade that we killed the Alamo heroes” (526).

2. There are numerous scholars working in this area. Those most useful for this essay are Michael Frisch; Nora; Jacques Le Goff; and Dean MacCannell.

3. This summary of the film produced and projected at the Alamo is based upon multiple viewings of the film. All quotes are taken directly from my notes as I recorded them at each viewing.
Like other factors of the official narrative, the historical evidence of Bowie's fascination with the Alamo is slim, if that. See Glazer 67.

The distinction between memory and history has benefited from a number of recent discussions, including Roger Chartier; Frisch; Nora; Le Goff; and Faith Davis Ruffins.

For further reading on history and the public see Susan Porter Benson et al.; on history and the politics of the past see Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal; Andrew Lass; Michel-Rolph Trouillot; and Nathan Wachtel.

See Bakhtin 343 on authoritative discourse in the novel.

The structure of the oppositional discourse between Texans and Mexicans goes undisputed, while the details of "where Travis really died, or where Bowie's bedroom was located" are poured over in very minute detail. As such, the deep structure of this place does not change, while the multiplicity of historical minutia are viewed as the "real" elements of the Alamo's historical identity.

See Trouillot on this point.

While Gadamer is here speaking of persons, I believe that same can be said of places of public history like the Alamo.

For further reading on this subject see Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman.

For a discussion of Gettysburg on this point see Patterson 128.

Works Cited


