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Reexamining Collective Memory: The Role of Landscape in Shaping Memories

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to review the development and the theoretical framework of collective memory and to explore how it fits within the current anthropological discourse that challenges the human-nature divide. Namely, it examines how landscapes as agents of memory are contributing to shaping collective memories of a community.

The concept of collective memory is best known from the works of Maurice Halbwachs. His theory that individuals acquire and share memories as members of a social group has been widely used in various disciplines, including anthropology. However, due to its prominent sociological background, until recently collective memory has only been applied to discussing human societies.

The current anthropological research has introduced ontologies that challenge the Western dichotomy of nature-culture, offering the opportunity to rethink the way humans interact with the world and to include non-human agents into the debate. Therefore, it has also become necessary to reconsider collective memory within a broader context. However, while landscape memories have been an important topic in memory studies, landscape has mostly been viewed as being static and shaped by humans. Due to that, collective memory hasn't been able to venture outside of its initial social realm. This paper explores the agency of landscape and how it manifests itself within memory thus becoming a part of communities that share and shape collective memories.

This study aims to contribute new perspectives in applying the concept of collective memory to current anthropological debates and to offer new insights on human and nature relations by focusing on how humans and landscapes interact and are connected through memories.

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1. Introduction: Early Influences and Key Principles of Collective Memory

The current fascination with memory is a result of what Climo and Cattell (2002) refer to as a *memory crisis*. It is the yearning for a link with an unchanging past in the fast-paced present. However, memory has been a topic of debate throughout times, and the idea of memory transcending the individual appears in texts as early as Ancient Greece (Russell 2006: 792).

The term *collective memory* (la mémoire collective) was coined by the French sociologist Maurice

Halbwachs in the first half of the 20th century. Halbwachs (1992) describes collective memory as a social construct and its key feature as being shared between members of a group. While individuals are the ones who remember, it is only by being part of a group and a social context that they are able to do so. Belonging to a group enables the individuals to acquire and share memories even of events they haven't directly experienced. Although the concept of collective memory is attributed to Halbwachs, the idea itself was greatly influenced by his teachers Émile Durkheim and, to a lesser extent, Henri Bergson.

In the *Division of Labour* (1984), Durkheim discusses the idea of two consciences: *individual* and *collective conscience*. According to Durkheim, collective conscience is the means of how small-scale societies achieve mechanical solidarity. Since small-scale societies share the same environment, Durkheim concludes that their relation to the environment must also be the same. This contributes to the development of collective conscience. Although collective conscience bears similarities with collective memory, such as being shared by a group and uniting its members, Halbwachs does not consider the environment in his theory instead stressing the importance of *social* context which is limited to the human realm. Later, in order to distance himself from environmental determinism, Durkheim abandons the idea of collective conscience in favor of *collective representations*. Collective representations, such as myths and rituals, work as a link between the present and the past through which a society continuously reaffirms its unity (Durkheim 1915: 375-387). Durkheim sees the past as an unchanging entity that can be accessed from the present at any time. However, while in collective memory the connection between the present and the past is vital, the past is being constantly reconstructed through memories in order to fit the present needs of the group (Halbwachs 1992: 40). Namely, collective memory is not a replica of the past, but an interpretation of it (Climo and Cattell 2002: 12). The individual is also not limited to identifying with one group but can simultaneously belong to several groups. Therefore, while collective memory works as social glue within a group, the members still maintain their individual memories thus retaining a variety of memories based on the backgrounds of each individual.

Before becoming Durkheim's student, Halbwachs studied philosophy with Henri Bergson. Although Bergson did not support presentism and Halbwachs later distanced himself from his ideas, there are traces of Bergson's thought in Halbwachs's theory of collective memory. Bergson (1911) states that one of the functions of memory is not to represent or preserve the past but to enable its use within the present context. Utilizing collective memory in order to support the present of the group is one of the key aspects of Halbwachs's collective memory. However, unlike Bergson, Halbwachs never truly defines *memory* nor how one *acquires* it (Bloch 1998: 117). The abstract nature of the term is criticized by Crane (1997) who argues that the group itself does not physically have the facilities (a brain) to *remember*, whereas Green (2004) and Kansteiner (2002) point out that since memories are acquired and transmitted through language, which is a social construct, all memory including individual memory should be considered *social*.

While some debatable issues remain, Halbwachs has laid a solid sociological foundation for his concept of collective memory. However, due to its versatility and relevance in everyday life, collective memory is now widely applied interdisciplinarily. This paper introduces current anthropological theories along with the possibilities of going beyond the sociological context of collective memory in order to explore interactions of human and non-human agents of memory.

2. Collective Memory after Halbwachs

Collective memory attracted a new wave of attention with the rise of constructionism in the 1980s. The principle of viewing nations as *constructed* was similarly applied to nation state memories treating them as a social construct (Kim 2010: 25). This highlighted the connection between collective memory and politics, and memory was reexamined within the new framework making war and trauma memories one of the most prominent fields in memory studies (Olick and Levy 1997, Kansteiner 2002). However, the concept of collective memory was also developed into entirely new directions expanding on Halbwachs's theory. One such example is historian's Pierre Nora's concept of *the sites of memory* (les lieux de mémoire). According to Nora (1989), sites of memory are not limited to places but can include items of symbolic value, as well as man-made sites. Therefore, a battlefield, a monument, and a museum are all sites of memory. This new approach recognized the importance of *place* in shaping collective memory and interactions that are not limited to human society. However, sites of memory do not directly act as agents of memory. Crane (1997) points out that unless they are *read* by people who carry certain memories, sites of memory do not bear any connection to the group or the memories they represent.

The broad application of collective memory has led to criticisms that it is simply being used to replace the concept of *culture* (Klein 2000, Berliner 2005). However, while collective memory is used to describe unity within a group and the sharing of identities in a somewhat idealistic way, the concept has been continuously modified focusing on the unanswered dilemmas in Halbwachs's theory. Assmann (1995) introduces a new approach to collective memory by viewing it as a combination of *cultural memory* (kulturelles Gedächtnis) and *communicative memory* (kommunikatives Gedächtnis). Cultural memory refers to events in the past that are crucial to reaffirming the group's identity (e.g., creation myths), whereas communicative memory arises from group members communicating over a span of no more than 80-100 years. Therefore, cultural memory is shared by a large group with a common past, such as a nation, while communicative memory is common in small groups, such as families. Olick (1999) also expands on Halbwachs's ideas and offers the concepts of *collected memory* and *collective memory*. Collective memory, in this case, refers to commemoration and rituals shared within a group. On the other hand, collected memory is accumulated exclusively by individuals. These analyses, however, don't go beyond the original framework of collective memory postulated by Halbwachs mainly because they address the same issues regarding the relationship between the individual and the group. While Assmann focuses on the scale of the group, Olick tries to differentiate between individual memories and those shared collectively. Therefore, similarly to Halbwachs, collective memory is still viewed as an anthropocentric concept bound to human society. However, recent anthropological research has challenged the Western views on the nature-culture divide, making it possible to consider non-humans as having their own agency. Therefore, it has become essential to reexamine collective memory in a wider spectrum of interactions. Introducing landscape into collective memory does not contradict Halbwachs's ideas as much as it allows to explore the underlying layers within them.

3. Collective Memory in Anthropology

Until recently, the term collective memory was scarcely used in anthropology, but memory and the past have always been major topics within the discipline.

Influenced by Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss (1984) stresses the importance of *collective conscience* in obtaining knowledge and faith, as well as creating social order. He also discusses memory and suggests that memory is not something one can *have*. Memory is *life* itself, meaning that by remembering the past we can *relive* it again. Memories as a means of creating social order also appear in Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* (1940). Evans-Pritchard points out that the Nuer *remember* their past only up to three generations. The past before that is completely *forgotten* and they cannot trace their lineage further back. Peck and Perri (2006) suggest that this collective forgetting of the past is a way for the Nuer to avoid breaking the rules on intermarriage between relatives. Appadurai (1981) also draws attention to Geertz's and Malinowski's descriptions of the past as an example of past being more than just a linear flow of time. Malinowski (1971) describes myth as means to control reality and explain present action, whereas Geertz (1973) looks at different calendar use in Balinese society and describes attitudes towards the past as a cultural element. However, Appadurai states that there is another type of *past* not mentioned by Geertz, nor Malinowski. Namely, *the debated past*, whose function is to encourage debate of our memories and versions of the past. The debated past is closely linked to the political context of the time and depicts the power relationships within the community when choosing the most desirable version of the past. This approach tackles one of the issues left unanswered in Halbwachs's theory of collective memory by looking at the power dynamics between the group members and focusing on the link between group identity and the political landscape. Construction of identity is one of the major debates where anthropology incorporates memory (High 2009, Hoang 2008). Another important topic being the discourse of colonialism and the memories of indigenous people (Tonkin 1995, Rappaport 1998). According to Pool (2016), the memories of indigenous people can be categorized into two types: memories regarding cultural practices, and political memories, which have been suppressed or erased by colonial forces. This creates a situation where certain societies are *trapped* in their pre-colonial time memories, creating what Climo and Cattell (2002) refer to as *mnemonic cultures*. The displacement of *others* as living in a different time than our own is greatly criticized by Fabian (1983) who has played an immense role in shaping the anthropological thought. Some recent debates in anthropology also discuss the concept of collective memory directly. Crumley (2002) uses collective memory to explain how people acquire *culture*. She suggests that the core group for sharing collective memory is the family. The memories shared within a family become the first *culture* that we acquire. Cappelletto (2003) expands this idea and explains how individual memory transforms into collective memory by broadening its scope to communication between different social groups.

Although not as frequently used as in sociology due to its parallels with the concept of culture, collective memory is as relevant in anthropology when exploring issues on how we regard our past and how memories are shaping our present identities. The anthropological perspective on collective memory draws attention to the fact that collective memory is not essentialistic but is greatly influenced by the power relations between different communities. It also stresses how the power imbalance marginalizes the memories of minorities and leads to an orientalist view of them as the *others*. Applying anthropological discourse to collective memory has unearthed a deeper layer of memory-making than simply identifying with a group. The current anthropological debate on nature-culture goes a step further in extending the communication beyond the realm of human society and, potentially, changing the ways we think of memory.

4. Conceptualizing the Landscape

The understanding of *landscape* has greatly changed throughout the years. Until the middle of the 1980s, landscape was almost exclusively used in regard to the natural environment external to humans (O’Keeffe 2007: 3). Kawai (2016) suggests that this approach to landscape is also mirrored in the anthropological research of the time. Binary oppositions in symbolic anthropology and linguistic categorization of the environment in cognitive anthropology indicate people’s attitudes towards the surrounding environment. This naturalistic view of the landscape has been maintained since the incorporation of the term into English. The word *landscape* became widely used in the English language at the end of the 16th century. It originates from the Dutch word *landschap* and was used by painters referring to paintings of idyllic countryside sceneries. (Schama 1995: 10). The romanticized nature depicted in the paintings was how *landscape* gradually became attributed to the picturesque countryside (Hirsch 1996: 2).

Limiting the landscape to the natural environment and separating people as external to it was challenged with the introduction of theories by Eric Hirsch and Michael O’Hanlon in *The Anthropology of Landscape* (1996). Hirsch (1996) notes that there are two types of landscape. The first kind is created by local practices and the people living in the landscape. It is only made known to its *outsiders* through interpretations, such as ethnographies. The second kind of landscape is the one we as *outsiders* can perceive directly¹. However, Hirsch’s main objective is to overcome the division between these two perspectives of the *inner landscape* and the *outer landscape*. He argues that it is impossible to divide the two because they are not mutually exclusive. Landscape, therefore, is a process connecting these two perspectives (Hirsch 1996: 23). The idea of landscape as a process is inspired by what Ingold (1993) describes as the *dwelling perspective*. The dwelling perspective does not treat landscape as a natural background for human activity, nor as something created exclusively by the human mind. A landscape is rather like a record of people’s lives and their activities, and at the same time it is a part of the people inhabiting it. In this sense, a landscape exists both on the material plane as well as on the sensory plane. And while partially being created by people, the landscape itself contributes to shaping them (O’Keeffe 2007: 4, Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017: 5). These new approaches go beyond the Western naturalism and recognize that humans are inseparable from the landscape they inhabit. They have also paved the way for understanding the landscape not only as a romanticized background but as an existence in its own right and an important contributor in making people become who they are.

Another important approach to landscape challenging the hegemony of the Western thought is the Australian Aboriginal concept of *Dreamtime* or *Dreaming*² (Rose 1996; 2008, Stockton 2000).

In Dreaming there is no distinction between humans and nature. Humans are a part of nature and nature is a part of humans. Therefore, in Dreaming all things on Earth are *part human*. These part human beings are our ancestors and the ones that created human society. They are not bound by time because they are still alive today and live among the current people (Rose 1996: 26). Since the ancestors have never left the Earth and live among us, they are a part of the landscape and therefore the landscape

1 Various terms are used to describe the two types of landscapes, for example, *primary* and *secondary* (Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1996), *inner* and *outer* (Stewart and Strathern 2003).

2 Some communities prefer calling it *The Law* (Stockton 2000: 149).

itself becomes a medium of communication with the ancestors (Faulstich 1998: 201, Stockton 2000: 150).

To sum up, there is more than one way to view a landscape. Though Aboriginal Dreaming has long since considered humans and nature as a whole, the Western view on landscape has also recently recognized the necessity to view past the opposition between nature and human. Consequently, realizing ourselves as being part of a landscape has also made it essential to reconsider the process of how we create collective memories because the limitations of our *belonging* and *interactions* have extended beyond human society.

5. Landscape in Memory Studies

In memory studies, the main approach towards landscape has been analyzing *memories of the landscape*. Within this framework there are several fields of inquiry. One of them is the role of landscape memories in creating a sense of belonging and constructing one's identity (O'Hanlon and Frankland 2003, Fox 2006). Another important topic is the dynamics between the varying understandings of landscape (Bender Shetler 2007, Stewart and Strathern 2003, Kray and Church and Yaeger 2017), which is the extension of the debate postulated by the anthropology of landscape, discussing the differences between the inner landscape and the outer landscape. In this approach, the paradigmatic view on landscape of the Western societies is contrasted to that of the indigenous people's (Bender Shetler 2007, Guo 2003). Bender Shetler (2007) introduces a case of one landscape simultaneously being perceived as three different landscapes by different parties. The landscape of the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania is an economic asset for the investors, a *wilderness* in need of protection for the nature conservationists, and a place of livelihood and everyday activity for the Maasai people. Bender Shetler points out that even though the landscape is being physically altered by the investors, in Maasai people's memories it maintains the same shape and qualities as those that have been transmitted in Maasai oral tradition through time. The landscape is an unchanging entity within Maasai memories. Said (2000) states that landscape memories differing from the actual landscape are constructed in order to strengthen people's sense of community and identity. Therefore, it is not enough to solely consider a landscape visually (outer landscape), as it might have many invisible layers retained in people's memories essential to their sense of belonging and identity. The process of reconstructing the landscape within memories bears parallels with Halbwachs's concept of collective memory that also serves as a tool for reconstructing the past in order to support the present of a group. Similarly, the landscape becomes a key aspect in constructing identities and a sense of belonging. Therefore, identifying with a group inevitably includes a landscape engraved in people's memories.

6. The Ontological Turn and New Agents of Memory

One of the most debated topics in current anthropology is the ontological turn (Kohn 2013, Viveiros De Castro 1998; 2004; 2014, Descola 2014). Ontology's main objective is to challenge the Western division of human (culture) and nature and to introduce alternative ways of understanding and being in the world.

The first field to reexamine the division of nature and culture was the anthropology of science. Latour (1993) argues that one of the key aspects of modernity is *purification*: categorizing different

disciplines into clear-cut categories. However, he stresses that even a scientific experiment in a laboratory is not entirely free from the connotations of politics, economics, and social contexts. Therefore, as it is impossible to draw a distinct line between the various fields, it is also unreasonable to separate the humanities and science, culture and nature. A similar point was made by Descola (2014) who draws attention to the fact that the nature-culture divide is a Western paradigm. He argues that the Western concept of *nature* is a social construct, therefore Western ontology cannot be universally attributed to non-western societies.

Following the debate of the nature-culture divide, Viveiros de Castro introduced the ideas of multinaturalism and perspectivism, that were greatly influenced by Latour's Actor-network theory (ANT). ANT discusses the networks of relationships that are not limited to social interactions between humans, but instead also include non-human actors (Latour 1992: 2). ANT made considering the perspective of non-human actors possible. Viveiros de Castro (2004; 2014) states that in Amerindian perspectivism both, humans and non-humans, see themselves as *human* in their world. Perspective lies within the body; therefore, a human would see a jaguar as an animal in the same way a jaguar would see humans as animals while viewing itself as human. This means that there is one *world-view* that doesn't change with the body, but there are many worlds inhabited by these different bodies. This is expressed in the concept of multinaturalism. However, Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism refers exclusively to carnivorous animals and their prey (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 471) and doesn't specify how to treat the *mind* and the perspectives of other living and non-living beings. A step further in this direction is taken by Eduardo Kohn (2013) who interprets the world through semiotics. According to Kohn, all interactions in the world are a certain code that bears meaning to somebody. He describes the relations between animals and the forest and uses the word *self* when referring to anything that has *living thoughts* (Kohn 2013: 16). For example, in order not to be eaten by a bat, an ant has to interpret its surroundings and must also know how a bat views its world. Therefore, Kohn suggests that aside from humans, there are many *selves* inhabiting the world, and the way they organize their worlds is a sign that *living thought* exists outside of human cognition as well. Since many *selves* inhabit the forest, while bearing *living thoughts*, it could be said that the forest itself *thinks*. The semiotic approach in Kohn's theories was influenced by Charles Sanders Peirce, who also played a role in shaping Alfred Gell's theories. Gell (1998) explores the connection between art and the agency of things. He suggests that the artist is able to paint a particular thing not only due to the artist's agency but because the said thing has engraved itself into the artist's mind through its own agency.

However, it is impossible for humans to entirely comprehend the perspective and agency of another animal or a thing, nor to suggest with complete confidence that worlds outside of the human realm exist, as these observations are limited to our own cognition and perspectives (Keane 2013: 187-188). This issue remains unresolved in ontology, but taking other ontologies seriously means not writing them off as mere metaphors, while still making sense of your own reality (De la Cadena 2010: 339). There is no doubt that landscapes are home to many non-human inhabitants that interact with the world around them whether it includes humans or not. The same goes for people and interactions reaching beyond human society. These interactions, no matter how small, carry meanings and are *recorded* into the landscape. Therefore, landscapes are not only sources of recorded memories: they also inevitably participate in their creation.

7. Conclusion

This paper examined the key aspects of collective memory and its development based on the theoretical contributions made within various academic disciplines, specifically focusing on the current anthropological thought and how new ontological theories have brought on the necessity to consider the relationship between collective memory and landscape.

Since the introduction of the concept by Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory has been continuously reexamined according to the present discourse. However, its sociological framework limited the application of the concept within anthropology. Anthropological research that focused on identity building and power relations within a group highlighted the link between collective memory and political context, as well as differences in collective memories of the majority and the minority. Similarly, there is anthropological research that focuses on varying views of landscape often having political connotations but that are also possible due to ontologies differing from the Western paradigm of dividing humans and nature. This paved the way for considering the possibility of an alternate collective memory building process that goes beyond human society and includes landscape as an active agent of memory. By examining current ontological research, it may be argued that landscape should no longer be viewed as a background for human activity, but as an entity that interacts with humans in their everyday life and, therefore, contributes to and is a part of collective memory. Considering landscape as having agency is still a scarcely explored topic within the Western thought, however, examining collective memory of belonging and identity building is one way to understand how we interact with the surrounding world and how landscapes are constantly shaping us, as well as to come closer to overcoming the nature-culture divide.

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