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A new model for memory work: nostalgic discourse at a historic home

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To make domestic heritage sites useful to their communities, we must acknowledge discourses, define structures and critically examine the interplay of our own and others' practices of commemoration. How do agendas of remembering and forgetting intersect at historic dwellings? These issues are explored through the Elihu Akin House, a late eighteenth-century house museum in a New England coastal village. Existing site narratives are dissected through the social theories of Peirce and Bourdieu, revealing nostalgia as a structuring element of cultural logics. The author argues that mechanisms of nostalgia, approached critically, offer interpretive common ground for memory work at historic homes (and beyond). As a material and emotional discourse, nostalgia binds memory, place and experience. This study proposes a new model for heritage-makers seeking to alter site narratives without undermining a site's established worth. They might identify then disrupt pre-existing nostalgic narratives, finally bridging those disruptions through additional, critical nostalgic discourses. New and established narratives can coexist, in harmony and in tension, and visitors should be invited into the interpretive process.

Keywords: memory; nostalgia; heritage; narrative; semiotics; practice theory

Discourses of heritage

Memory work: heritage as practical experience

This is but a small sheaf among many others; for, as the floor of the woods is covered with fallen leaves and pieces of detached bark, so the little woodland of my thoughts is strewn over with these rough fragments and memories. Yet the old homestead still stands as I have written it. There is no latchstring. It is always open to receive us. (Houston 1906, preface)

Archaeology specifically, and heritage in general, is increasingly framed as 'memory work': an interdependent process of remembering and forgetting. *Memory*, whether individual or collective, is not stable. *Memory work* is not about retrieving a past truth; it is about reconstructing the past's present, shifting legacies 'in anticipation of the future' (Hallam and Hockey 2001, p. 3). It often comprises the creation of public memories from private ones. Our professional responsibility is to be mindful about this work, actively articulating what is being remembered or forgotten, how and why. To make heritage sites useful, we must acknowledge discourses, define structures and

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critically examine the interplay of our own and others' practices of commemoration (see also Edgeworth 2006, Little and Shackel 2007). Material and affective mechanisms entangle individual memory with collective memory at history sites, a contested process that reproduces structured social value and meaning. The domestic setting of house museums affords certain possibilities, but core issues of memory and place are universal. This case study considers the Elihu Akin House, a historic house in the north-east United States that is in the process of becoming a heritage site (Figures 1 and 2). Through it I propose a new model of heritage practice: one based in nostalgia.

The cornerstones of heritage practice are experience and narrative. These practices reproduce meaning, identity, history and community at individual and collective scales. This conception of heritage is rooted in ontologies of materiality, phenomenology, practice and discourse. Materiality: people and things indivisibly and simultaneously constitute each other. Phenomenology: physical, embodied experiences make spaces meaningful. Practice: everyday engagements show and shape who we are, and new experiences transform old assumptions about the world. Discourse: social reality is broached as if it is brought into being through worldly practices. That is, practices do not simply reflect social reality; they comprise it.

Material-based discourse analysis is a powerful tool for practical critique in contexts, like heritage sites, where colonialism, capitalism and similar structures are continuously experienced and created (Bender 2002, Paynter 2002, Smith 2006, Hall and Bombardella 2007). As Smith (2006) has expertly argued, the very concept of 'heritage' is self-evident only because of the efficacy of discourses in which it plays. In this article, I first review the theoretical underpinnings of my analytical approach



Figure 1. The Elihu Akin House in Dartmouth, Massachusetts, 2007. Photograph by the author.



Figure 2. Elihu Akin House, 1905. Photograph by Henry B. Worth. Courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum.

(from Peirce *et al.* 1998 and Bourdieu 1977). Then I explore a key structuring logic of memory work at heritage sites: nostalgia. The case study dissects current discourses of memory and power at a historic farmstead in Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Analysis of these discourses reveals assumptions, elisions, insertions and other mechanisms of political and social legitimisation. After defining new goals for memory work at the case study site, I propose a discursive manipulation of memory work there. I conclude that, if correction is an agenda, we should first evaluate then disrupt pre-existing nostalgic narratives, finally bridging the disjunctions through new, critical nostalgic discourse. For this technique to be effective, we must invite the visitor into the interpretive process.

Theoretical groundwork: a summary of Peirce and Bourdieu

One should always be thoughtful and reflexive, and engagement with social theory is one path to mindful heritage practice. I find elements of both Bourdieuan structuralism and Peircian semiotics helpful in critically thinking through memory-making at heritage sites (Bourdieu 1977, Peirce *et al.* 1998). As are all useful theoretical frameworks, they are tools for systematically thinking through and beyond familiarised, naturalised or otherwise obscured cultural processes.

Charles Sanders Peirce forwarded a less-logocentric semiotics: a relational understanding of human subjectivities created through worldly engagements, which is represented through an irreducibly triadic scheme of sign–object–interpretant. His work now enjoys an established place within archaeological studies (Preucel 2006, Joyce 2008, Knappett and Malafouris 2008, Mills and Walker 2008). His ideas are not,

however, commonly applied to reflexive studies of heritage practice. This application is profitable and offers to unite international discussions of history- and memory-making through archaeology, history, heritage, museology etc., in new ways. In Peircian terms, competing discourses signify as one of three hierarchical types of sign/object relationships: icon, index and symbol (Peirce *et al.* 1998, pp. 13–17, Preucel 2006, pp. 56–57).¹ Peirce originally proposed that everything can be categorised as icon, index *or* symbol. But the comprehension of indexes depends on established icons, and ‘all symbols are indexical because they act through tokens or replicas’ (Preucel 2006, p. 56). I would make the further point that things can function simultaneously – even contradictorily – in more than one of these categories.²

Pierre Bourdieu proposed that established modes of practical/perceived understanding – called ‘habitus’ – define the mechanisms through which meaning (including memory) is created. Elements of habitus that are ‘doxic’ are assumed, unquestioned, unarticulated. Through the role of interpretants, these doxas are reproduced in Peircian symbols and underlie indexes and icons. Bourdieu called challenging new daily practices ‘heterodoxic’. Heterodoxies might create new icons and indexes. Consciously conservative responses are ‘orthodoxic’. Orthodoxies reiterate old icons or indexes and can create new icons.

The Elihu Akin House, built ca. 1762 as a farmstead, is a ‘dwelling’: both a home and a place of thoughtful and repetitive engagement, in this case with the past. The once-‘forgotten’ property was purchased by the town of Dartmouth in 2008, and the house has since been subjected to preservation and archaeological study. Like other aspects of heritage, archaeology is a memory practice of assemblage, the creation of a new and partial whole from collected – and recollected – fragments. As the Akin House is reinvested with significance, it has been exposed and destabilised, selectively recalled via narratives of history, identity and place. Critical reading of these narratives, facilitated by the social theories of Peirce and Bourdieu just described, finds nostalgia is a key structuring element of the newly orthodoxic and heterodoxic discourses (practical and semiotic) at play. Nostalgia is typically under-regarded, under-theorised or simply dismissed by scholars because of its assumed regressive agenda. I argue, however, that nostalgia offers compelling common ground among disparate memorial narratives, potentially including revision and critique.

Nostalgia as prospective memory

Some scholars, embracing a traditional understanding of chronology, posit time and social process as separate subjects of inquiry (Paynter 2002, p. 86). Others envision temporality as a human process that both informs and is created by anthropological and historical study (Munn 1992). In this sense, archaeological time is an emerging antidote to the linear time of historicism, alternatively proposing human time as non-linear, multi-temporal, conflated, flattened, cyclical and/or embedded (Lucas 2005, Witmore 2006, 2007, Olivier 2008, Ruibal 2009; for time in anthropology see Munn 1992, James and Mills 2005). A phenomenological understanding posits that places are also always ‘plural’, and heritage experiences are ‘both “of the moment” and something that extends forward and backward in time and place’ (Bender 2002, p. S107; see also for example Shanks 1995, Paynter 2002, Smith 2006, Olivier 2008). Senses of attachment and belonging are clearly also at play in historical, archaeological and popular discourses surrounding the Akin House and other historic sites (Shanks 1995, Paynter 2002, Smith 2006, Hodge 2009). These qualities present fertile ground for

nostalgia and, in Peircian terms, shape the interpretant's role in the construction of meaning.

Nostalgia is an emotional engagement in a present-past and longing for a future defined through the past. Over the early modern and modern periods, nostalgia has absorbed idealised notions of home, homecoming and childhood, as well as longing for a stable place of origin (Tannock 1995, Austin 2007). Nostalgia produces linear time by distinguishing past, present and future. Yet it is also convoluted or entangled time, a kind of prospective memory uniting visions of the *future* based on *present* perceptions of *past* conditions (experienced or imagined). It is a structuring element of cultural logics, therefore, a component of habitus and the icons, indexes and symbols it informs. As a material/emotional discourse, nostalgia is directly involved in memory-making and the values of heritage (Shanks 1995, Tarlow 2000, Smith 2006, Hall and Bombardella 2007, Shackel 2008, Hodge 2009). Any heritage site is an institutionalised space that facilitates nostalgic experience. Gregory and Witcomb (2007, p. 265) suggest nostalgia is especially potent at house museums, where visitors 'experience a collapse of the present with the past' in an atmosphere of presence and absence, attentive to fugitive and acute senses of life inside a dwelling that has somehow lost itself.

The Akin House has fostered nostalgic reflection since at least the Revolutionary War, long before it became a heritage site (Hodge 2009). Recent heritage work there has, in fact, reactivated these engagements by re-introducing the site to public consciousness. When the Akin House was an anonymous old home, it was quiet and in the background. As an identifiable heritage site, it is destabilised and exposed. The Akin House is now embroiled in tugs-of-war between heterodoxies and orthodoxies, competing meanings as icon, index and symbol. Nostalgia is integral to this social reproduction via competing visions of past/present/future, which are at stake and in flux. To undertake best heritage practices in any context, we should critically evaluate the stories we are and are not telling and the slippage between archaeological (or other disciplinary) goals and already in-process interpretive practices.

Many scholars hesitate to engage with nostalgia, preferring to dismiss it as (at best) distortion, misrepresentation and (at worst) regression, delusion and outright amnesia (Tannock 1995, pp. 454–455). Better, we should, like Stuart Tannock (1995), confront the social functions of nostalgia. In his excellent critique, he pursues nostalgia as affective habitus, a 'structure of feeling in Western modernity' (Tannock 1995, p. 453). Nostalgia reifies a subjective separation from an idealized past and home(land) and, simultaneously, is a bridge across that separation. Those embroiled in nostalgia do far more than wallow in sentimental denial. By invoking a 'lost and longed for earlier period', they are 'involved in escaping or evading, in critiquing or in mobilizing to overcome the present experience of loss of identity, lack of agency, or absence of community' (Tannock 1995, p. 454).

How do nostalgic discourses – ways of thinking, assumptions, practices and materialities – create the structures of power and value within which heritage sites like the Akin House work? How do agendas of remembering and forgetting intersect with the uses of heritage? Who controls the production of this knowledge? When practising heritage, how do you honour multiple stakeholders and the 'public trust' when priorities are misaligned with or run counter to each other? To address these questions, I explore some effective uses of nostalgia at a recent house museum exhibition. I then explore the nostalgic discourses with which site stewards, the town of Dartmouth and the public do – and might – remember the Akin House.

Defining the model: narrative and nostalgia at the Artemas Ward House

Whether nostalgia underlies all heritage projects is debatable. That it is insidiously, unquestioningly ensconced in house museums and domestic heritage sites across Europe and its former colonies is undeniable (see for example West 1999, Smith 2006, Gable and Handler 2007, Levin 2007, pp. 93–142, Murray *et al.* 2007, Hodge 2009). But should we eradicate it universally? Or might we, the heritage-makers, employ it? Heritage professionals work to define the memory of others, to provide a framework of convincing, collective understanding into which individual perceptions might fit. Emotion and affect are as integral as practice and embodied experience (Gregory and Witcomb 2007).

The work of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich and Ivan Gaskell at the Artemas Ward House in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, has convinced me that nostalgia can be a powerful interpretive tool. Gaskell and Ulrich foregrounded aesthetic qualities in their exhibition of house collections, which was held at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University (Harvard University Art Museums 2006, Gaskell and Ulrich 2007). For me, however, the 2006–2007 Ward House exhibition neatly critiqued – and simultaneously exploited – nostalgic discourses. I read the exhibition as a model for integrating founding and progressive narratives by *exposing*, *historicising* and *manipulating* the mechanisms of nostalgia.

Artemas Ward was a successful farmer and well-connected Revolutionary War hero. The Ward House represents a particular, familiar genre of curiosity cabinet: a historic house museum filled with material components of outmoded daily life. The collection of objects, photographs, manuscripts and other memorabilia was amassed during the nineteenth century, when the house was occupied by Ward descendants, and after 1925, when it became a public historic museum. Ward women were the primary agents of this memorial project, which transfigured objects into ‘icons’ of the Ward House, ‘indexes’ of historic events and ‘symbols’ of American Republican ideals, gentility and feminine and masculine domestic values (Figure 3). Many items are associated with particular Ward family members and anecdotes, the founding figures and narratives that underpin preservation of the site as a house museum.

Objects associated with Ward were removed from the home and exhibited at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University in ‘counterpoint’ to those owned or made by his female descendants, women who perpetuated an edited family history as national history (Harvard University Art Museums 2006, 2009). Visitors to the Fogg Museum found General Ward’s late eighteenth-century cloak next to a day gown from the 1880s, his ca. 1768 snowshoes near his nieces’ mid-nineteenth-century childhood sled (Gaskell and Ulrich 2007). Gaskell and Ulrich’s exhibition critiqued an existing house narrative by rupturing it: editing and re-contextualising objects from a heavily manipulated domestic context. The curators then used a specifically nostalgic critique to bridge that rupture, making the site meaningful in the present.

In the exhibition room, Ulrich and Gaskell disrupted time and crafted parallel narratives: the nineteenth-century nostalgic narrative assembled by Ward descendants and a simultaneous narrative of the nineteenth century in the current curatorial voice. Thus, they expertly exploited a nostalgic fascination with the past and its dated ideals, yet – crucially – embroiled the viewer in a critique of that same nostalgic impulse. This approach compounded the iconicity of materials on display, layering eighteenth-, nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century references. How was this effect achieved? Through interpretive texts and material arrangements in



Figure 3. Front hall of the Artemas Ward House in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. This image was taken in the 1890s, when the house was privately owned and occupied by women descended from General Ward. They opened their home to visitors as a museum. The hall includes what were, at the time, salient indexes and symbols of the Revolutionary War period and its virtues: the flag, colonial-style furniture and a spinning wheel (inconveniently located on the stairwell). Courtesy of the President and Fellows of Harvard College (HU4091.6).

which, 1) original and additive narratives were produced simultaneously and 2) the visitor was explicitly invited into the interpretive process. Objects stayed the same, but orthodoxies were exposed and heterodoxies introduced, altering the symbolic relations of signs to newly-afforded interpretants.

Discourses at the Akin House

Introduction

An uncritical nostalgia 'approaches the past as a stable source of value and meaning' (Tannock 1995, p. 455). As the Artemas Ward House project proves, however, nostalgic critique can successfully expose the past as an *unstable* source of value and meaning. Mindful of nostalgia as a structuring logic of social relations, I here explore specific, existing discourses of memory at the Akin House historic site.

Site stewards

The five-room, two-storey, centre chimney Akin House was built in 1762, making it one of the oldest extant structures in the town of Dartmouth, Massachusetts (Worth 1907, p. 12). Because Dartmouth has lost several of its oldest structures to

development or demolition in recent years, the Akin House has become a rallying point for community preservation. Ownership of the property was recently transferred from a New Bedford, Massachusetts, preservation group to the town of Dartmouth (King 2008). A second preservation group, the Dartmouth Heritage Preservation Trust (DHPT), immediately leased the property from the town.

The Akin House was first subjected to historical study in the early 2000s and soon listed on the State Register of Historic Places. It is also eligible for listing on the National Register under local-level criteria A (patterns of national history) and C (distinctive construction and architecture) (Medeiros 2003). Founding narratives were at the core of these nominations, and they re-positioned the Akin House as 'significant' (for an extended discussion of founding narratives and the weight they carry, see Beranek, this issue). This process justified acquisition and preservation of the property, *creating* a historic site by *remembering* what happened there. The founding narratives are still deployed to explain investments of time, money and other resources.

The highlights of this founding narrative are as follows:

- The Akin House property represents the unique agricultural and seafaring history of Dartmouth because the property once extended to the waterfront and included fields and an orchard and because Elihu Akin was a prominent ship-builder and a farmer.
- The Akin House represents the spirit of American independence because the Akin family moved there after the British destroyed their main house in 1778; son Jonathan Akin was impressed by the British and freed through the influence of Benjamin Franklin (Akin 1778).
- The Akin House represents perseverance because the Akin family re-made their lives after the British attack and because the house then remained in the family for over 230 years, during which it changed little.
- The Akin House represents modern individualism, via self-determination and romance, through Elihu Akin's great-great-grandson, Richard Canfield (born 1855), a flamboyant self-made Gilded Age figure. The Akin House was also a location for the silent film *Down to the Sea in Ships* (filmed 1921) (2002 [1922]), which manifested Colonial Revival values in a romantic adventure story.

Ideals of stability are one nostalgic discourse at work in this narrative, in both story and materiality. Like other historic places, the Akin House is a Peircian icon, a mimetic likeness of its own earlier selves. The physical structure is not currently considered a reproduction or amalgamation, however, but something authentic. The seeming persistence of this icon is read as stability. This narrative mechanism further couples doxic, desirable moral qualities with this material one. Calling out the physical persistence of the Akin House demonstrates and, thereby, legitimises particular conservative values, and it is one aspect of site narratives that I would edit.

More themes emerge around the nostalgic tropes of Homecoming and Pastoralism (Tannock 1995): the house as refuge and the house as the place for self-made men. The former emphasises the gendered domesticity associated with Victorian and later ideals of home and family life. The latter couples these with modern endorsement of the modest, determined and entrepreneurial American middle class. The 1922 silent movie *Down to the Sea in Ships*, in which the Akin House appears, most clearly trades



Figure 4. Frame from the 1922 film *Down to the Sea in Ships* showing the main character returning 'home' to the Akin House.

in these nostalgic ideas. The film is set not in the 1920s but in the early nineteenth century. Its young hero is introduced through his homecoming to the 'Old Homestead', aka, the Akin House (Figure 4). He soon meets his childhood sweetheart in the backyard, and they imagine themselves in this place as happy children.

The Akin House obviously struck the movie's director as essentially of the past, as it does visitors today. The material qualities of the place support the film's fabricated nostalgia, within which normative ideals of childhood and the rural are much in evidence (Austin 2007, pp. 106, 126–127). The man and the house simultaneously become icons. *Down to the Sea in Ships* is steeped in the colloquial nostalgia of the Colonial Revival, which celebrated the (supposed) virtue and simplicity of America's early days. *Down to the Sea in Ships* reveals the material, performative and phenomenological qualities of nostalgia (Austin 2007, pp. 21–22). These qualities are repeated in current heritage processes, as the Akin House once again is set as a stage for historical contemplation.

Reiterative stories of Elihu Akin, his son Jonathan, Richard Canfield and the idealised Colonial Revival hero of *Down to the Sea in Ships* represent men suffering and overcoming ruptures with home. These anecdotes have quickly become a priori truths upon which the value of the Akin site depends, with demonstrable success. The house is on the State Register of Historic Places; has received multiple preservation grants; and has inspired the interest of many members of the public and a few heritage amateurs and professionals. These nostalgic discourses are limited by (among other things) race, age and gender, and they are dangerous if they continue to be repeated without being questioned.

From a corrective, heterodox point of view – one not yet written into site narratives – the house is an ironic icon of the slippage and instability inherent in memory practice. The superstructure is literally slipping off its foundation. The interior exists in a reconstructed shell. Floors and ceilings are gone, beams and lathes are exposed and mosaics of layered wallpaper and paint peel from any and all vertical surfaces. Decay is everywhere (Figure 5). The Akin House is successfully resisting any effort to be fixed (or affixed) to a particular period or story. Nostalgia can still work to broach this present-past, but as an *entrée* to the complex interstices of change and persistence rather than a comforting invocation of doxic stability.



Figure 5. A built-in corner cupboard and layers of peeling paint and wallpaper in the Akin House parlour, 2007. Photograph by the author.

The town

The town of Dartmouth committed itself to the Akin House property by purchasing it from a preservation organisation. The Akin House is specifically mentioned in the town of Dartmouth's most recent Master Plan, in the 'Cultural and Historical' subheading of 'Section 5: Open Spaces and Recreation':

The Dartmouth Historical Commission ... [is] working on the *preservation* of the historic Akin House. Dartmouth's rich history is *preserved* in its many cultural and historic resources ... Those areas need to be *protected* by various means to *maintain* the history and character of the town [emphasis added]. (Bull and Recchia 2007, pp. 5.32–5.33)

The plan describes a process by which communal identity is produced by historic properties. In this discourse, specific historic resources like the Akin House are symbols for 'town character' and 'town history'; that is, these values are materialised and conveyed by places within the town. Preservation of these places somehow equals preservation of the town as a cohesive, distinct, stable place. These properties, in turn, become significant because they materialise doxic themes. The significance of these themes to town history/identity is assumed but not articulated in the document, and they are thereby naturalised. The nostalgic practice of preservation offers to overcome perceived threats to the community, recapturing the past in order to create a future. Town leadership asserts authority and control by referencing continuity with the past, in essence, defining their – and the town's – authenticity.

Stability is important to the logics of nostalgia. In this regard, the town of Dartmouth seems anxious about itself. It is threatened by discontinuity while simultaneously asserting continuity, a paradoxical tension often at play in nostalgia (Tannock 1995, pp. 456–459). Emphasising stability, according to the town, the Akin House is not being restored, renovated or interpreted. It is being 'preserved'. Material preservation, protection and maintenance index passivity and stasis. Mere existence is assumed to be enough. The town does not expect its historic places to participate in active public service missions, education or entertainment, for example. Nor are these places (real or imagined) acknowledged as populated, lively, contested spaces. We cannot assume, however, that the Akin House's significance and usefulness are self-evident or self-sustaining. As at any public heritage site, its relevance must be created, nurtured and shared. The Town Plan does nothing to further an active vision of historic resources as civic tools. On-going work at the Akin site will, hopefully, challenge this orthodoxy.

Memory processes are driven not only by the recollection of past histories, but also by present contexts of politics, economics and social relations. As a planning document, the Town Plan's vision has real repercussions. Specifically, the Akin site, its history and its future are re-visioned. DHPT, site archaeologists and other interpreters of history must be mindful and strategic as we are also reinvesting the house with significance. In an atmosphere of politicking and budget stress, the site has unsurprisingly become a fraught space. I have heard personally from individuals both adamantly for and against expenditure of public funds on the Akin House renovation (certain funds are earmarked for local preservation per the Massachusetts Community Preservation Act, Chapter 267 of the Acts of 2000). This tension is one way agendas of remembering and forgetting intersect with uses of heritage.

The public

It is now a truism that archaeology is accountable to a variety of stakeholders. At existing heritage sites, archaeology often overtly embraces a public service mission (Jameson and Baugher 2007, Little and Shackel 2007). This mission invites archaeologists not only to be accountable to the public(s) it serves, but also to be responsive to voiced needs and concerns. Criticism is a constructive heterodox challenge to doxic heritage practice. Yet casual comments, visitor log notes and feedback form responses from visitors, volunteers and students validate archaeological contributions to heritage practice at the Akin House. They do not reveal where the project is irrelevant, useless and disconnected. To date, the most sustained commentary on the Akin House heritage project by a non-project member is found in blog posts from 2007 and 2008. I cannot confirm that the author represents the general public perspective, but he is certainly a vocal member of the site's stakeholder community.

In a July 2007 blog entry, ThirdMate (2007) ruminated on the Akin House and its archaeology:

I retreat ... into giggling at the elaborate fantasy life of the 'university' 'professionals' in my neighborhood... Years ago, when I first experienced the magic of Dartmouth Street ... I noticed a ramshackle hovel ... Little did I know that years later, I would be donating to a fund that would restore the place to some semblance of community usefulness and historical integrity. Known as 'The Akin House', the little hovel I so derided is a cause célèbre here on my corner of The Beach. One of the oldest extant homesteads in Dartmouth (because the British forgot to burn it when they torched the rest of town during the War for American Independence), hopes are to turn the Akin House into a cultural resource center ... Speaking of tools, it only took a few years for the local University of Massachusetts [Dartmouth] ... to find a kooky way to capitalize on the Little Grant Shack. My wacky neighbors ... have taken it upon themselves to invite me ... to go digging through the Akin House's kitchen midden to find a sense of history or place or something amid the discarded pottery shards and Tupperware™ lids behind the historically-preserved and quaintly-shingled Akin House. The last time I participated in a 'dig', I was operating the Bobcat™ behind the New Bedford Whaling Museum where performance artist Mark Dion³ pawed through the junk contemporary cultural artifacts buried at site of the former O'Malley's Tavern ... We found broken bottles. Lots of them. Thus, I am qualified to present the following hypothetical list of artifacts we'll be sure to find in the shadow of Elihu Akin's hogged-roof shanty ...

- (1) A Dunkin' Donuts cup, styrofoam.
- (2) 312 filter cigarette butts, *Newport Ultra-Light*.
- (3) Cassette tape wrapper, Aerosmith *Get Your Wings*.
- (4) Aerosmith *Get Your Wings* 8-track.
- (5) 7982 filter cigarette butts, *Virginia Slim*.
- (6) *Tab* can.
- (7) Section of orange-red-yellow-white shag carpet.

So what are the mechanisms of the post's materially-engaged discourse? The author establishes his authority through an emplaced and embodied narrative. While 'experiencing' Dartmouth Street, he 'noticed' the Akin House. 'Years ago' is a past place and past time, for the author, the town and the house. Could anything be less significant than a 'ramshackle hovel'? A swayback 'shanty'? It is material qualities that make this 'little grant shack' vulnerable. The author donated money for its 'restoration', not passive preservation but active 'usefulness'. In his idealised, imagined future the Akin House will be a place integral to and with integrity for his community.

Archaeological processes of 'keeping time' are a powerful 'medium of hierarchic power and governance' (Munn 1992, p. 109). ThirdMate is wary of ceding this power

to what he perceives as community outsiders. In the blog posting, both the prestige of the local university and the authority of outside professionals (i.e., me) are openly mocked (I wonder if ThirdMate would have felt the same if he knew I grew up in Dartmouth myself). The heritage group is ‘wacky’; archaeology is ‘kooky’. The author fears the local university is ‘capitalizing’ on the house, taking advantage of it, him and his community. I am left wondering if the physical dwelling as the site of history is so ingrained that the author finds heritage work beyond its walls transgressive. Perhaps, ironically, archaeology loses credibility when it is local and visible.

The author obviously devalues the recent past, yet he simultaneously suggests a way forward. ThirdMate’s essay integrates time and community through place and material culture in recursive signification. He muses about the ‘sense of history’ ‘we’ll’ find in the midden, inserting himself into an imagined future on site. Whose history is indexed through these imagined artefacts? These are symbolic items of the 1980s and 1970s: domestic, everyday, personal, familiar (and rather feminised, perhaps to make them appear even less consequential). The list was meant as satire. But these are things archaeologists might collect – I have collected similar things there (Figure 6). They are also things many adult visitors would recognise from their own pasts. Archaeologists can and must communicate the value of the everyday and recent. The lesson? A constructive discourse might take advantage of the materiality of nostalgia, investing people in the past through imaginative, situated experiences of these familiar places and things.



Figure 6. Near-contemporary artefacts recovered during surface collection and excavation at the Akin House site in 2008 and 2009, including (left to right): iron scissors, bisque porcelain elephant figurine, white and green glass marble, two ‘Atomic Red’ Fiestaware saucer sherds, brown and turquoise stoneware plate sherd, two cigarette filters, plastic figure of a sweeping man, broken incandescent light bulb and three iron clothespin springs. Photograph by the author.

Public opinions, like scholarly interpretations, are not static. In September 2008, ThirdMate (2008) again reflected on the Akin House and its relevance for current Dartmouth residents:

This 'bail-out' thing seems that it should apply to one of my favorite causes: The Elihu Akin House, here in Dartmouth ... Historic preservation, like history itself, is an on-going process. When I first saw the Akin House, I thought it was an abandoned shack with very little to say for itself. It seemed odd that someone hadn't knocked it down and planted a Cumberland Farms [convenience store] on that sweet corner lot. But later, I found out that this Akin Homestead was one place that wasn't burned down by the British when they attacked. Even though the British troops were apparently very angry at tavern owner Elihu Akin because he wouldn't serve the lobsterbacks. And he built boats, although I can't tell whether he built them on his property because it's far from the water. But was it, back then? Did Clarks Cove reach all the way up to that rickety shed? No, that's not possible. But how did his son Jonathan start sailing from there? And find himself in lockup writing letters to Ben Franklin and John Adams? Oh, there's a letter that he wrote? And did they write back? And did he get back from wherever? Am I getting any of this right?

He is. He is also engaged enough to move from known facts to anxious questions about gaps in his narrative understanding (the ruptures across which nostalgia operates).

The 2008 post does not state if ThirdMate's feeling about archaeology underwent a similar shift. In general, however, attitudes shifted from the earlier post, from sceptically ambivalent/insulting to supportive/engaged. The change seems to result from on-going project visibility and increased awareness of Akin founding narratives. There is also an increased appreciation for the uses of heritage when he writes,

Without the 1762 Akin House, there may be nobody to answer these questions for me now. Or in the future when I ask them again, because I will probably have forgotten the answers. And maybe even the questions ... So that's why the Dartmouth Heritage Preservation Trust needs \$250,000 to stabilize the old place and everybody should go to the public hearing at 6:00 this evening in the Town Hall, basement room 103. To show solidarity with the past. *For the future!* Plus, we can use the skills common to the old place while we all dig our own gardens and raise our own fowl and cattle since the economy we've grown fat on and accustomed to is now over and done with [emphasis original]. (ThirdMate 2008)

Dartmouth has lost a rural way of life (a discontinuity with the pastoral ideal). The author suggests that the Akin House might help recapture it and use it in the future (prospective memory). The site could remind Dartmouth residents of the past, marking earlier times as past, but clarifying and reordering that past for the future. In this example, nostalgic engagement is actively creating a community by arguing for its investment in a historic home, showing 'solidarity with the past. *For the future!*'

Recollecting the old homestead

Narrative and memory work

Narrative is a powerful way to make sense of human temporalities (Paynter 2002). Narratives surrounding the Akin House assemble fascinating fragments of Dartmouth's past and make it familiar, knowable, domestic. The tangible presence of the house indexes themes of American historical meta-narratives such as entrepreneurial spirit,

principled sacrifice, independence, persistence and self-determination. These histories are created social memory and social values. They are not yet multivocal, critical, progressive or theoretically robust. As processes of commemoration, they normalise deeply rooted hierarchical, racialised, gendered and temporalised power structures – just the things historical archaeologists love to decolonise, engender, embody, democratise, de-sanitise etc. Undermine these narratives, however, and you undermine preservation efforts to date and future hopes for the site. It is no wonder archaeological ‘research has been slow to become integrated into historic house museum interpretations’ (Stahlgren and Stottman 2007, p. 134).

Developing heritage narratives should be both critical and mindful of pre-existing, successful discourses of power and knowledge. The Ward House exhibition integrated founding and progressive narratives by exposing, historicising and manipulating a nostalgia that has always been based in material culture (Gaskell and Ulrich 2007). Its curators played with rupture and continuity, exposing the unstable meanings the past carries in the ever-shifting present. I have elsewhere historicised nostalgic narratives at the Akin House (Hodge 2009). In this article, through critical consideration of current heritage discourses at the site, I demystify their mechanisms, exposing discourses of power and knowledge. Based on this work, I conclude that future interpretations – memory work – at the Akin House site should attend to nostalgia and: 1) embrace the physicality of the house; 2) validate community; 3) explore the strangely familiar; 4) assuage anxieties of exploitation; 5) be useful.

Making memory at the Akin House: nostalgic rupture and bridge

I have elsewhere advocated ‘for discussions with the house stewards to find points of common ground and to introduce ways in which previously unexpected archaeological results might be relevant to the house’s mission’ (Hodge and Beranek 2008). A shared recognition of the appeal of old things, places and stories is one such area. People long to connect with ‘their’ past. The Akin House, so strangely familiar as a home, dwelling place and site of comforting stories, is already a place of nostalgia (Hodge 2009). Existing discourses suggest people critically may be brought to imagine themselves in one place – the Akin House – but in a variety of times. We can do more than ‘allow for the possibility of subjective inflection through the processes of recall and reconstitution’ (Meskell 2008, p. 234). *We can exploit it.* It worked for Gaskell and Ulrich’s (2007) critical re-interpretation of the Artemas Ward House; I believe it would work for the Akin House as well.

There is a postmodern impulse to undermine doxic narratives, exposing the naturalised power relationships and social structures that create the world in which we live. When scholars lay bare the ‘structures of perception and experience ... the apparatuses of power’, we open the way to awareness and to change, remaking structures and relationships (Grossberg 1997, p. 260). This agenda – which could be described as a heterodox shift in habitus – is important and is the strongest argument for why heritage matters. But it also risks undermining the legitimacy of house museums like the Akin House, alienating site stewards, town representatives and the public. There is hope: the Ward project models two steps to creating relevant reinterpretations of historic house museums which are to 1) rupture pre-existing nostalgic narratives (doxas), 2) bridge those ruptures through critical nostalgic discourse (heterodoxies). How? By 1) presenting original and additive narratives simultaneously and 2) inviting the visitor into the interpretive process. To date, archaeological narratives push only

lightly against the founding narratives of the Akin House property.⁴ But new archaeological finds offer heterodox possibilities.

At the Ward House, scholars used old objects to remake a largely static exhibition and dwelling. They reworked an existing narrative, both reproducing and critiquing it. At the Akin House, ceramics and toys from many centuries – miniature teacups and toy cars, Mr Potato Head pieces and clothespin clips – reveal a unique, but familiar, domestic landscape of work, socialising and play (see Figure 6). We understand the past and its present legacies differently when we take more than men into account (Voss 2006); adding these artefacts – and the disenfranchised women and children they index – to site narratives would expose gaps in those narratives, rupturing them. But using things to consider experiences of women and children could also *bridge* those ruptures. These artefacts strongly index nostalgic tropes of lost childhood, familiar domesticity and the pastoral. In this way, the Akin House might expose and critique without too deeply undermining its own legitimacy. I believe an interpretive focus on women and children would critique, but respect, existing symbolic engagements with independence, persistence, seafaring and agriculture, romance and masculinity. It would simultaneously integrate new evidence and corrective interpretive agendas (heterodoxy) into shared social memory.

Reflections

Historic places are inherently nostalgic: they are icons, indexes and symbols of the past in the present, for the future. Playing on these existing discourses can mediate between stakeholder and professional values. Archaeological narratives, also inherently nostalgic (Hodge 2009, p. 17), can foster experiential learning through specific stories, tangible links and formal narrated plots (Paynter 2002). Nostalgic tropes of childhood, home, homecoming, continuity, discontinuity and the pastoral offer entrée to alternative public memories narrated through Akin House archaeological finds.

Through such heterodox memory work, we might remake the site's icons, indexes and symbols. This strategy exploits rupture and tensions between individual and collective memory. It would integrate visitors with aspects of the Akin property's past by way of their own recollections and imagined emplacement. Such mindful nostalgic discourse could validate a sense of ownership and familiarity, creating a 'sense of place and belonging' while supporting vital archaeological critique (Bender 2002, p. S107; see for example Hodge 2009).

For all nostalgia's dangers, it is incredibly useful. Nostalgia intrinsically includes a 'search for authentic origins and stable meanings' (Tannock 1995, p. 453). This fact does not mean it must *find* them. Nostalgia is, in fact, inherently unauthentic (experience not of the thing itself, always memory of the thing) and unstable (multivocal, individualised, experiential, elusive). It is because of these very qualities that 'nostalgic retreat comprises both critique and alternative' (Tannock 1995, p. 459). It facilitates 'recuperation of previously overlooked historical material and practices' (Tannock 1995, p. 457). When heritage professionals engage critically with nostalgic discourses – as interpreters of the Ward House do and the Akin House might – they have a powerful tool for revealing doxic assumptions within their own, and others', histories. That is, we develop new perspectives on what has been remembered and forgotten within processes of memory. Further, nostalgia is predicated on rupture with the past. Foregrounding discontinuity might clarify that we re-create, but do not recover, the past.⁵

Existing heritage narratives, rife with nostalgic discourses, deploy the Akin House variously as icon, index and symbol. In this way, the house inculcates social values, power structures and collective and individual identities. To justify on-going commitment to an 'Akin House as heritage site', new discourses must make the place desirable, relevant and useful. While pursuing this goal, new memory practices must acknowledge that enabling one mode of remembering denies and displaces others (Weiss 2007). The Akin House, its history and its future are, simultaneously, being remade. Heritage is a discourse of re-collection, literally finding and assembling, making a past that lives in and for the present and, ideally, the future.

Nostalgia has implications for the way the Akin House is developed as a heritage centre serving local and regional interests. As a material/emotional discourse, nostalgia already binds memory, place and experience. And – importantly for those in heritage and allied professions – nostalgia is susceptible to manipulation. At the Akin House, nostalgia offers pre-existing common ground among disparate agendas, in this case, of site stewards, town and public. Processes of nostalgia are part of the ways individuals perceive time and make collective memory at sites like the Akin House, a fragmented place recollected through the things we find and stories we tell.

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Notes

1. An 'icon' is a sign that refers via a mimetic likeness. A photograph of a house is an icon of that house (see Figures 1 and 2). An 'index' symbolises an object by referring to that object through proximity, causality or effect. The Akin House indexes a 'family' even though no one lives there because of its original purpose of housing a family unit, expressed through a conventional architectural form. A 'symbol' refers to a thing only through established use and meaning. The Akin House now symbolises a unique town identity.
2. While Peirce's ontology is generally anti-anthropocentric, it accounts for perception via the notion of 'interpretants', the understanding or context-specific translation of the original sign as icon, index and/or symbol. Interpretants are not subjects, but they are practical subjective understandings. Accounting for interpretants opens an accounting of context, experience, bias and emotive response. Even so, Peircian semiotics, with its roots in scientific realism, might be criticised as too static and descriptive for interrogating culture as process (as in Preucel 2006). In realms of material practice, however, I believe that Peirce's semiotics – especially the concept of interpretants – couples naturally with Pierre Bourdieu's structural framing of cultural logics and social reproduction.
3. Mark Dion was born in New Bedford and stages assemblage/museum/collection-inspired interventions in spaces around the world. Coincidentally, I also participated in Dion's 2001

New England Digs project. I was as conflicted about that project as ThirdMate seems about mine (for a discussion of Dion, see Vilches 2007).

4. A standard site report for work in 2007 has been written (Hodge 2008); 2008 and 2009 reports are in process.
5. Historical archaeology in particular has been critiqued, I think unfairly, for what some read as its overreaching claims to be a 'direct bridge' to the past (Mayne 2008). Few, if any, practising historical archaeologists claim direct access to the past or that such a thing even exists.

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