

## Sites of Memory in U.S.-American Histories and Cultures, UDO J. HEBEL/Clyde Forsberg

**Main Idea:** Hebel is an American Studies scholar and it shows. His adaptation of Memory Studies to American Studies requires no great stretch of his considerable imaginative powers. His thesis can be found at the very end of this finely crafted historiographical essay: “To what extent transnational accessibility and virtual interactivity will further enhance the pluralization, democratization, and commercialization of U.S.-American cultures of memory remains to be seen” (p. 58). Hebel discusses a wide array of “sites of memory.” These include but are not limited to the following: autobiography, fiction (novels), petroglyphs, woodcuts and engravings, pictorial histories, photographs, newsreels, and the Internet. “Performative memory” in American culture is highlighted, by which is meant anniversary commemorations at pilgrimage sites like Gettysburg where the idea is a type of collective worship. Add to this America’s museums, which are legion, its public libraries, the Library of Congress, local and state historical societies, the country’s national parks (Yellowstone a case in point), and commemorative coins and stamps. All of this attempts to create, and often invent, a national culture. **HOWEVER**, the point is really America’s changing national self-understanding, which has moved slowly but surely away from the original, Anglo-Saxon monolithic understanding to something decidedly more multicultural and/or transnational, one that celebrates on a national level the various ethnic minorities who also make up the country.

**Terms:** American Studies, New Historicism, civil religion, commemorative authority, ideological control and cultural containment, literary sites of memory, ethnic empowerment movements, commemorative identity politics, landing scenes, commissioned icons of memory, U.S.-American media culture, commemorative registers of change, civil religion, national memory and collective veneration, performative memory, anniversary commemorations and reenactments, memory tourism, ethnic sites of memory, multiculturalism, political correctness, the National Mall, commercial sites of memory, official acts of repression, exclusion, erasure, and forgetting, renaming, more multivocal narratives, international memory.

### Select Quotations (from the text):

- Since 1965, the “National Mall and Memorial Parks” have been part of the U.S. National Park Service and are thus linked institutionally and ideologically to an extended system of some 400 sites across the nation (p. 56).
- However, a seemingly monolithic U.S.-American festive culture was to remain politically and culturally powerful, if not dominant, well into the second half of the twentieth century.  
In the context of more recent debates over multiculturalism, ethnic empowerment, political correctness, and identity politics, time-honored celebrations of Columbus Day or the arrival of the Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock became the very epitome of repressive Eurocentric conceptualizations of the U.S. to advocates of a more pluralistic understanding of .... (p. 54).

### Questions:

- Is Donald Trump and the Republican Party intent upon making America great again by remembering the past or forgetting?
- Does the argument apply in any ways to Central Asia’s new and evolving self-understanding following the collapse of the USSR and Independence, to your own country’s employment of various sites of memory to build a national consciousness and what might be termed a single ethnic national belief? Can you come up with any examples? Is this good or bad?
- Are the Americans in trouble, culturally?
- Are there other countries who have attempted to follow their example, their lead?
- Should collective sites of memory be torn down if their history is problematic?