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Geographies of Commemoration in a Digital World

Anzac @ 100

Danielle Drozdowski
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------|---------------------------------------|
| AAG | American Association of Geographers |
| AFL | Australian Football League |
| ABC | Australian Broadcasting Corporation |
| ABS | Australian Bureau of Statistics |
| Anzac | Australian and New Zealand Army Corps |
| AWM | Australian War Memorial |
| WWI | First World War |
| WWII | Second World War |

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Geographies of Commemoration in a Digital World

Abstract In this introductory chapter, we outline three key points of distinction in our examination of geographies of commemoration in a digital world. First, we discuss our characterization of geographies of commemoration and its importance. Second, we outline our approach to tropes of Anzac, and explain how these tropes link to memories, places and experiences of Anzac and how they play out and transform, or not, in and through a digital world. Third, we detail our position on geographies of commemoration in a digital world, proposing that the digital constitutes opportunities to influence how we remember. Our discussion threads along the productive value of the digital, and how it reveals in the dialogues between concepts of commemoration and ethnographic methodologies *and* how these operationalize through commemorative geographies.

Keywords Commemoration • Digital • Politics • Identity • Anzac • Australia/n • Memory

INTRODUCTION

Commemoration, it seems, is always in the headlines. Whether it takes the form of solemn and official state ceremonies, rowdy marches through city streets or tense standoffs over urban statuary, who, what and why we remember the past is never far from public attention. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, which formed the backdrop to writing this book, the public gatherings that are central to many forms of commemoration became particularly controversial, as the desire to commemorate together took on new physical risks and political meanings. One response to this challenge was to find new ways to commemorate at a distance, gatherings that inevitably travelled online. While this digitality is not new, the complexities of representation, ways of being present and the strong feelings that inhere in commemoration have been particularly highlighted because of the new risks associated with physical proximity. Commemoration, as an expression of collective memory, had to grapple with new risks and implications borne of that collectivity. This book addresses these complexities by considering some of the ways that the digital world has figured in forms of commemoration since the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is aimed at scholars of memory studies, as well as geographers, historians, political scientists, designers, media, heritage and cultural studies scholars and others interested in how the persistent and enduring practices of commemoration play out in a digital world.

As geographers, our shared entry point into this area of research is the argument that ‘the digital’ constitutes opportunities to influence geographies of commemoration, necessitating that we better understand and investigate commemoration in a digital world. We show that the productive value of the digital reveals itself in dialogues about how we come to know memory, especially as related to geographies of commemoration. To get there, we employ ‘thinking-with’ methodologies that attend to the experiential worlds of commemoration (after de la Bellacasa, 2012). We position our distinctive geographical intervention on commemoration around digital worlds within the larger corpus of scholarship that interrogates memories of nation as stories of the past. *Geographies of Commemoration in a Digital World* contributes to this rich debate through its distinctly geographical focus, which enables a theoretical and methodological (re)framing of commemoration towards how people experience it through encounters with different places—material and otherwise.

The volume locates these encounters with commemoration within the core geographical concepts of ‘place’ and ‘identity’, and it facilitates further interrogation of the role of power in representations of memory. As developed in Chap. 2, we advance a *new epistemology of memory* that theorizes an energetic understanding of memory-work as experienced through its connective fibres to place and identity, and as felt and encountered through its materialities, affects *and* the body. In attending to multiple forums, media, and practices of commemoration, afforded by, in and through the digital world, we stand to gain access to a range of new insights into how memory and identity fold together, providing a lively perspective on the resulting political implications of state-led commemoration. Furthermore, adopting a geographical perspective with strong feminist leanings enables us to loosen the orthodox ties to/of the historicity of commemorative tropes, to create the space necessary to reconsider official narratives as they are experienced, felt, and (re)represented in people’s everyday lives.

This book develops around three critical pillars: (1) geographies of commemoration; (2) the commemoration of Anzac in contemporary Australia; and (3) the digital world. This opening chapter establishes our conceptual underlay across these three concepts. It also charts a chapter-by-chapter outline, thereby signposting how we have inter-knitted these larger threads together through our empirical material. Before progressing further, however, it is prudent to clarify what this book does not do: *it does not attempt to provide a history or politics of Anzac*. If such an exercise is even possible (and we are not sure that it is), there is already a considerable literature that collectively, and amply, covers a lot of this ground, and we touch on numerous key texts from this collection below. While Anzac, as a well-established Australian cultural trope, provides a vibrant case study, the book presents findings that relate to Anzac by ‘thinking-with’ its geographies, and through it as a commemorative event, in the digital world. In other words, it exemplifies our arguments without being our argument, which is to say that we do not provide descriptive or definitive ‘findings’ as such about Anzac. Instead, as scholars working within and across human geography, and influenced by an affective and emotional turn in that discipline, we argue that understandings of Anzac memory, as we explicate in this book, will always be a partial and in process knowledge.

In the book we also avoid providing a specifically ‘digital’ analysis of the commemoration of Anzac that somehow sits independently of other ways of commemorating. While we refine our usage of the term ‘digital’ in a

further section of this chapter, we are keen to declare from the outset that we do not consider digital forms of commemoration as something separate to other forms of commemoration—material, hybrid, or otherwise. Rather, we see the ubiquity of the digital world as something that means that commemorative symbols, activities, and gatherings travel across and between online and offline realms, to the degree that it no longer makes sense to differentiate them. Using the phrase ‘more or less digital’, Merrill et al. (2020a: 5) have explained that commemoration is

not only more or less digital because the ubiquity of digital technology continues to grow globally. ... but also [because it is] constituted by elements that can themselves be individually conceived of as primarily digitally or non-digitally constituted.

We concur with Merrill et al.’s (2020a) assertion and approach the digital in this book through their terms of reference. With these caveats laid bare, we turn next to positioning our focus on geographies of commemoration.

WHAT ARE GEOGRAPHIES OF COMMEMORATION AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

This book sits within an established (Ashplant et al., 2000; Dwyer, 2004; Foote & Azaryahu, 2007; Johnson, 1995; Osborne, 2001; Till, 2005), as well as vibrant and flourishing, geographical scholarship focused on commemoration (De Nardi et al., 2019; Drozdzewski et al., 2016; Jones & Garde-Hansen, 2012; Saul & Waterton, 2018; Wallis & Harvey, 2018; Waterton, forthcoming). Across this scholarship, geographies of commemoration are broadly understood as being,

concerned with the dynamic and productive relationship between place, memory, the state and its histories and people, and usually focus on particular sites or regular events that are organized, maintained or sponsored by official bodies. (Sumartojo, 2020: 1)

In determining what we mean by ‘particular sites’ and ‘regular events’, these most commonly relate to material markers—such as war memorials and/or museums—and calendar events of the state’s remembrance of war and/or conflict. Commemoration is thus often directed towards remembering territorial subjugation *and* the service, suffering and contribution of those implicated in that war and conflict. Walter (2001: 495) has

reasoned that ‘when death fractures the body social, one human response is to gather together, to re-embody the society whose strength has been weakened by death’. Elsewhere we have written extensively on how nation-based memories of war link to national identity (Drozdowski et al., 2016; Drozdowski et al., 2019). Put simply here, ‘war and conflict so often punctuate the continuity of a nation’s memory timeline and leave memories of wounding, trauma and suffering, regardless of victory or defeat’ (Drozdowski et al., 2019: 252).

Remembrance of war and conflict in a nation’s past is a means to venerate lives lost for the nation (Anderson, 1991). However, because commemoration involves the regular and ongoing (re)telling of an event at a particular site, it also means that the nation must choose and reinforce its ‘official’ version of shared collective and/or national identity of that event. This ‘politics of memory’ refers to how a memory event is chosen, referenced and represented in national rituals and public discourse (Connerton, 1989; Mitchell, 2003; Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003; Huyssen, 2003). The state uses culturally familiar tropes and prompts to create, and then invoke, memory narratives of/at nation-based events. Narratives of commemoration thus remain culturally influential to characterizations of the nation, with collective memories of war shaping national identity and conceptions of belonging to the nation (Finney, 2002; Gillis, 1994). Belonging to the nation has become critically important in an age of highly mobile, digitally fluent, globally focused and increasingly diverse nation-based communities. Nations rely on memory to assert collective identity and strengthen national resolve because they draw together the focus of diverse and spatially separated members towards common and shared ideals.

The importance of our geographical focus on commemoration is its spatial and connective focus. In 2012, Jones & Garde-Hansen (2012: 10). Claimed that memory is ‘always bound up with place, space, the body, practice and materiality. It is of geography and geography of it’. We very much agree with this assertion and, as geographers, direct our concern towards the operationalization of commemoration as part of a relationship between the nation’s memory and identity, attending to how this relationship takes up space, and with what geopolitical outcome for politics, people and place of the nation. Here, we attempt to tap into what Hoskins (2018: 9) has identified as commemoration’s capacity to be ‘dynamic, imaginative, and directed in and from the present. And how this dynamic holds across the spectrum of strata of memories, of the individual or the multitude’. By thinking through how memory, identity and place intersect, we therefore attend to the diversity of participating individuals and