

Special issue: *Socio-cultural theory*

Editorial

Reflecting on the significance of location, personal experiences and the human condition in the era of advancement

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In this unique collection, we bring together perspectives that delve into the complex dynamics between space, history, culture and the human experience in the modern era. The four articles presented here, while rooted in different cities, communities and historical contexts, converge on a critical inquiry: how have we transformed our environments and ourselves in the pursuit of progress, often forgetting the foundational essence of place, memory and humanity?

As the editor, it is both a privilege and a duty to compile these explorations. They do not provide simple solutions, nor do they suggest that nostalgia can solve every problem. Instead, they insist on difficult questions and demand engaged reflection questions about what we preserve and what we erase, what stories we elevate and which ones we bury and how we define 'advancement' when it comes at the cost of lived experience and social memory. In today's world, we are surrounded by discussions about technology, sustainability and the concept of smart cities. These stories offer potential remedies for climate change, overcrowding and economic stagnation. But in our eagerness to digitise and optimise

we risk marginalising the very textures that give our cities and communities meaning: rituals of mourning, collective memory, counter-histories, racial and cultural identity and marginalised voices that refuse to be forgotten. The four articles in this issue each highlight the divisions in contemporary society and offer fresh perspectives on how to perceive and engage with the world.

The first article, 'Journeys through deathscapes in the contemporary city',¹ delves into the exploration of deathscapes within the modern city, shedding light on the often overlooked and silenced spaces of urban cemeteries. In New York City and Istanbul, cemeteries serve not only as final resting places for the deceased but also as sites of transformation for the living. The article highlights the significance of the inner spaces within these areas characterised by thresholds, liminality and sensory abundance and advocates for their re-evaluation as essential components of urban existence. The authors suggest a fresh perspective on cemeteries, viewing them as dynamic spaces that encompass, rather than shy away from, contradictions and complexities. These spaces provide an opportunity for introspection, a brief respite from the bustling city sounds and a chance to reflect on one's emotions. The way cemeteries are viewed as urban ecological spaces, repositories of cultural memory and sources of emotional healing is both groundbreaking and essential. The authors emphasise that recognising death is a way to affirm life and that spaces of silence can often convey the most powerful messages.

The second article, 'Dark travel',² reveals the hidden layers of racial discrimination that were deeply ingrained in the transportation systems of the United States during the twentieth century. The author employs the *Green Book* as a reference and a symbol, tracing the paths of safety, resilience and survival that African Americans have taken while navigating a nation plagued by violent segregation. What starts as a mapping project transforms into a profound and introspective exploration of fairness, opposition and the power of space. From this perspective, the roads and highways of America become layered with emotions such as fear, defiance and hope. The call to urbanists and planners is urgent: design with historical context in mind, with an ethics of care and with an understanding of the psychological landscapes influenced by generational trauma. The paths we tread upon should never overlook the individuals who were compelled to steer clear of them.

The third article, 'Erasure of urban detritus',³ delves into the ongoing debate surrounding the transformation of Toronto's Yonge Street. Once a thriving hub of underground culture, LGBTQ+ community and artistic innovation, the area underwent a process of sanitisation under the guise of urban 'clean-up' and economic progress. This article eloquently illustrates how the eradication of 'vice' paralleled the eradication of identity, resistance and community. The so-called 'Sin Strip' was not just a place of moral judgement, it was a refuge for individuals who were often overlooked by society. The destruction of the structure in the name of maintaining order exposes the underlying mechanisms through which cities eliminate what they consider undesirable. Despite the efforts to erase its memory, the spirit of Yonge Street remains alive through art, memory and testimony, refusing to be completely forgotten.

The concluding article, 'Transforming heritage discourse on the landscape at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania',⁴ shifts the discourse on heritage at Gettysburg and focuses on the significant and often overlooked narrative of Hester a fugitive, enslaved woman whose actions reverberate throughout the national consciousness. Her narrative, similar to that of countless other Black Americans, was overshadowed by the dominant narrative of Gettysburg as a white site of national heroism. In honouring Hester's memory, this article questions the dominant narrative of the memory industry that shapes national historic sites. It examines how historical landscapes are constructed to reinforce dominant ideologies and how narratives led by Black women are often disregarded. As the author illustrates, acts of defiance, such as Hester's, played a crucial role in shaping the very foundations of these landscapes. Her bravery necessitates not only remembering but also continuously acknowledging and taking action.

These articles collectively argue that our urban and cultural futures should be grounded in profound listening to the environment, to our past and to each other. They urge us to reflect on our relationship with the world, not only in terms of our physical presence but also in terms of our emotional and ethical connections. The themes of discrimination, isolation and cultural erasure are not relics of the past; they are ongoing realities in cities that are marketed as 'smart', 'sustainable' or 'inclusive'. We need to ponder: in our pursuit of innovation, have we neglected to acknowledge the importance of remembering? As we move forward, can we also take a moment to reflect on the past not out of sentimentality but out of a sense of duty? These questions require more than scholarly investigation. They advocate for change in policy, design, education and personal experiences.

As the editor of this issue that focuses on socio-cultural theory, I am deeply grateful for the valuable insights and thought-provoking ideas presented by these authors. Their work serves as a reminder that socio-cultural theory is not solely focused on criticism but also encompasses hope, imagination and empowerment. Through their narratives, we are encouraged to revisit, reconsider, act, respond and contemplate not just within the pages of books, exhibitions or presentations but in our everyday lives. This issue is progress in that direction.

Notes

- ¹ Uysal and Snyder, 'Journeys through deathscapes'.
- ² Michell, 'Dark travel'.
- ³ King, 'Erasure of urban detritus'.
- ⁴ Hancock, 'Transforming heritage discourse'.

References

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