

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Marita Sturken. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. x + 358 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-20620-5; \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08653-1.

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## Mangled Memories

Within the mangled discursive web of *Tangled Memories* the reader is confronted with the ongoing intellectual wrangles, euphemistically called “contested memories,” that revolve around the concept of personal recollections, collective memories and/or perceptions of the multiple “realities” of recent political-cultural phenomenon. After the author invokes the venerable Freud and a beatified Foucault one is jangled with convoluted babble that simultaneously ignores, yet paradoxically mimics, Plato’s allegory of the cave. The critical difference, however, is that instead of an isolated man in a smokey cave, we are dealing with a diverse and prolix group who are the beneficiaries of the enlightening rays filtering down from the high noon of a blazing postmodern sun.

One cannot fault Professor Sturken’s dedication to pursuing and perusing the vast literature, both popular and scholarly, that has been, and continues to be, generated concerning the cultural implications of the Vietnam War Memorial and the AIDS Quilt project. Imagining the number of hours spent upon the research for this book, temporarily stepping “out of body” and metaphorically entering the set of the *X-Files*, this reviewer can almost hear the laser printer groaning as “deconstructed” digits pound out countless keyword search combinations on a WEB-sited PC.

Sturken essentially seizes the well-known concept of multiple interpretations of artistic works and places an inflated cultural value upon it, by implying that individual actions, such as sewing an AIDS Quilt panel are not

only a moving personal gesture but also a profound act of political resistance to that Procrustean bogeyman of the (old, new, arch-new, post-whatever?) Left—the perpetually malevolent and omnipresent “dominant ideology” and its now (let us ratchet the jargoned rhetoric up another notch) so-called imperialistic “master narratives.”

A key point that pervades Sturken’s work is that the non-traditional idioms of these memorials, and the emotive personal objects, crass commodities and visual images generated by these secular altars, have become focal points for “conflicted agendas” upon which the public has more or less created a set of cultural memories. And with this point, I agree. However, I disagree with the underlying assertion that this is some form of collectivized intuitive act of resistance to that dominant ideology.

Ultimately, the observation that these culturally stimulated multiple “realities” or memories shape one’s historical perceptions is not new nor a particularly profound discovery—to be shared with fellow scholars at \$18.00 a copy. Except if one is imbued with the hubris afflicting certain boomer generation members of America’s academically ensconced elite who seem to think that only benighted darkness existed before 1945 and that sometime between the mid-60’s and the mid-70’s the wisdom of the ages was magically bestowed upon them—perhaps by the ghost of Marx hitching a ride on The Beatles’ last tour flight to the States.

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