Sociologist John Walton, whose excursions into history include the memorable *Western Times and Water Wars: State Culture and Rebellion*, has returned to the study of California with another fine volume, *Storied Land: Community and Memory in Monterey*. As his title and subtitle indicate, Walton is not so interested in the events that comprise the history of Monterey, but rather in the making of that history in each of that city’s distinctive eras. Walton seeks “to explain how and why [certain] stories were silenced in the more powerful and selective narratives of major institutional actors during successive historical periods, what went into the dominant narratives, what was left out, and how the principles and politics of narrative construction changed over time” (p. xv). Why, for example, asks Walton has Robert Louis Stevenson, who spent a few months in Monterey and left nary a mark on its development, become a celebrated figure, while David Jacks, a robber baron par excellence, who dominated the town in the late nineteenth century, remains mired in obscurity?

Walton distinguishes between the two meanings of history: the first as a series of events and the second as the story of those events. Walton’s primary emphasis is on the latter definition, most particularly public history and memory. “Social groups with different agendas and unequal power compete to influence or control the public memory,” argues Walton (p. xvi). This struggle often takes the form of narratives that “that selectively construct stories with a rhetorical purpose in mind” (p. 288). These “socially constructed” narratives create a public history that “signifies the past of a community, as it is generally understood by its citizenry” (p. 287). The Monterey experience, suggests Walton, reveals that in the realm of public history, we must move beyond the two standard meanings of history—and the standard alternative interpretations of cultural tradition that those with wealth and power write history—and social memory (that different social groups write their own history)—to a third model of “social memory based on collective action” and “collective memory” (pp. 293-94, 301).

Collective memory, writes Walton, is a “process of interaction between narrative and history, the interplay of stories and events” (p. 301). In this construct, public history becomes a disputed terrain, “a contested, chancy, changing process” in which groups with an agenda create narratives that depend on a combinations of “history itself, on the interplay of actors, social circumstances and situational contingency” (p. 294). These narratives themselves become history as stories transmute into fact and myth becomes heritage. In each generation, the dominant narratives are challenged by oppositional narratives and countermemories, “beliefs that challenge and subvert narrative interpretations without necessarily producing a fully formed narrative of their own,” and silences, in which the narratives of certain players are suppressed and forgotten. Thus in the Spanish colonial period, two competing, but equally Eurocentric narratives emerged: that of the heroic missionaries presented by Father Francisco Palou and an oppositional version offered by military and civil authorities. The more critical voices of non-Spanish European observers offered countermemories, while the Native Californians were silenced. In the contemporary era, on the other hand, one finds a “democratization of historical claimants” (p. 293). In a dominant environmental narrative, “no story is truly silenced” (p. 298). Indeed, stories like that of Native Americans, Chinese fisherman, or immigrant cannery workers, previously silenced have become important narratives.
Most of this theoretical framework is laid out in the introductory and concluding sections. In between Walton illustrates the dynamics of collective memory in chapters about the Spanish frontier, the Mexican interregnum, the American ascendency in the late nineteenth century, the twentieth century cannery era, and the postindustrial modern period. In each chapter, Walton includes a long historical section on "what happened, as well as can be determined from a wide variety of sources," and a shorter inquisition into "how the story was told in early narratives" (p. 47). These expositions range from familiar to fascinating. The chapter on the colonial decades, for example, holds few surprises. But the reinterpretation of Mexican California as a revolutionary era offers an intriguing analysis of legal records to demonstrate that a "new conception of citizenship rights was conveyed, even advocated, to the Indian population" (p. 93) and Mestizos, women and the poor. In his depiction of the era of United States hegemony, Walton explores the mystery of the fire that destroyed the luxurious landmark Hotel Del Monte, to probe ethnic conflict in an era in which the dominant narrative purveyed an image of entrepreneurial consensus. The transition of Monterey from an industrial town to a center of historical preservation, tourism, and environmental correctness, requires that John Steinbeck’s fictional conception of Cannery Row, an important countermemory of the earlier era, ironically becomes the subject of meticulous "historical" recreation.

The Monterey experience, argues Walton, "provides a microcosm for developing a new explanation of how public history is constructed in concrete situations" (p. xvii). Whether his model, however, can be expanded beyond local history, with its provincial promotional interests, to a broader analysis of state and national history remains to be seen. Walton tends to underestimate the power of dominant narratives, which he argues failed to "engender conformity, co-opt dissent, or fool anyone" (p.293). This description seems to apply the lessons of the modern democratized era of public history backwards with little to substantiate it. Even today these narratives, though widely challenged in the academic realm and contested in the public arena, hold powerful sway at both the national and local level. In the past, before people acquired the powerful tools to create public history we have at our disposal today, historical mythology co-opted and fooled many more.

Nonetheless, Walton, has created a valuable sociology of history itself, that invigorates our debates about the historical process. Its geographical focus might limit its readership to those interested in Monterey or California history, but this would be unfortunate. Storied Land is worth a visit by all interested in the creation of history and its public uses.

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