Mythscape Shapes National Identity

When I hear the word mythscape, I automatically think of mythical tales and legends that are passed down from generation to generation. Over these past few weeks of class, I have now learned that mythscape assists us in understanding how national identity is developed. Bell summarizes mythscape as, “Myths do not simply evolve unguided […] a nationalist myth [is] a story that simplifies, dramatizes, and selectively narrates the story of a nation’s past and its place in the world” (Bell 2003, 75). Bell also expresses that, to understand mythscape we must also understand memory, collective remembrance, and collective memory. These three terms aid us in defining mythscape and its impact on developing a national identity.

Memory is when individuals draw on past experiences. These are called memories, which can only be shared by those who were present at the event being remembered. For example, when Jesus was on Earth he created individual memories with people he encountered. Each time he interacted with someone whoever he experienced that moment with was the only one that could describe it, because they had experienced it with Jesus. Many of these stories and events are written in the Bible, but none of us today have experienced them. Bell explains that “The Australian mythscape can be understood and defined as the constructed temporal and spatial discourse in which the myths of the nation are continuously acted, transmitted, negotiated and reconstructed” (Duncan and Bell 2003). The scriptures written in the Bible are constantly being broken down and looked at in different ways. Just like the memory of Jesus and events that took place in the Bible, many memories of major events in Australian history are constantly being modified and reconstructed. These memories of Jesus result in how Christians know who they are today, just like how Australians know who they are and how they see themselves today based on their history.

The second term is collective remembrance, which is, groups of individuals coming together and sharing memories of events or past experiences. This term demonstrates how memory can be multiple acts of remembrance through social interaction (Bell 2003). Collective remembrance is organic memory, which means it has to do with the bottom-up development of remembrance. The bottom-up approach deals with processing information when it is fed to you through representations of history in school, art, media, and music. For example, in elementary schools in the United States students are not taught the gruesome details and events that have taken place in the past. A great example of one of these events would be the celebration of Thanksgiving. Students across the nation think Pilgrims and Indians gathered around a table for a feast, but they do not know the real story of Thanksgiving. In the United States, we brush over the fact that the colonists killed hundreds of Native Americans. We can also see this similar event take place in the documentary we watched in class when the aboriginal Australians were wiped out by disease given to them by. We still celebrate holidays like Thanksgiving today, because groups of people came together and shared bits and pieces of information about the past, which is known as collective remembrance.

The final term that helps us define mythscape is collective memory. Collective memory is when people share understandings, conceptualizations, and representations of past events that are considered vital for constructing a national identity (Bell 2003). Bell suggests that collective memory is mythical information rather than authentic information. Collective memory has to do

with different types of people who remember different things. “It explains that national identity is linked to other forms of collective identities, such as class, ethnic and religious identity, so that it is ‘multi-dimensional and ‘can never be reduced to a single element” (Smith 1991).

As Smith stated national identity is linked to other forms of collective identity; therefore, there can be no singular national narrative or national identity due to collective memory.

According to our lecture notes collective memory can be shared between many members of a national community. It can also define a nation and bind the nation together. According to Ignacio Rojas, the most important Australian myths are, “The explorers/settlers, convicts, bushmen, and the ANZAC/Diggers” (Rojas 2013, 24). Not one, but all these different groups of people have created a national identity for Australia and have influenced the way Australians see themselves. Mythescape assists us in understanding how national identity is developed through memory, collective remembrance, and collective memory. It shows us how these many identities emerged over time and how they are constantly being reconstructed today. Mythscape ultimately helps us understand how collective memory and other memories frame a national identity.

References

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