The concept of social memory has generated a large literature, much of which focuses on the trauma of collective violence. Yet we need to know more about how narratives of violent and traumatic events influence social loyalties and how such narratives are managed or manipulated. Here we focus on the 1857 Mountain Meadows massacre, in which some 120 Arkansas emigrants were murdered in southwestern Utah. Our aim is not to establish "what really happened" at Mountain Meadows, but to examine the memory politics of the case—the many stories of the massacre, the ways they have been told, and their use as reference points in drawing or redrawing social boundaries. Our analysis highlights the activities of schoolteachers and other rural intellectuals in shaping the trauma process. This process, we argue, is based on an expanding sense of victimization as communicated in narratives of social violence and suffering.

KEY WORDS: Collective memory; Cultural trauma; Historical narrative; Mormons; Mountain Meadows massacre; Ozarks; Victimization; Violence
2003; Schwartz 2000; Smith 1999; Uehling 2004). The memory literature is both prodigious and sprawling, perhaps because “memory” means such different things to different theorists. Like the notion of hegemony (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:19), that of memory can serve diverse analytical purposes because it is a relatively empty sign—suggestive but indistinct (cf. Sperber 1996:72–73; Verdiery 1999:29). Too often in the literature, the way memory operates is taken for granted rather than recognized as an empirical problem (Confino and Fritzsche 2002:4–5). What we would like to know in particular is how social memory, as it flows through specific social and political networks, shapes the way people act in groups, including the treatment they afford to ethnic or religious others.

One way to approach this issue is through the study of massacres and other acts of collective violence (Cairns and Roe 2003; Cappelletto 2003; Linenthal 2001; Robben 2004; Robben and Suárez-Orozco 2000; Tilly 2003). The best-known cases, from Ireland to Iraq, are those in which violence “flares up” after a long history of ethnic or religious strife. Can such violence be explained by enduring social memories of the distant past? Or are these “memories” really social and political constructions—new historical narratives designed to mask or justify the strategic interests of the narrators?

Following Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), many scholars have argued that cultural traditions have been manipulated or even fabricated to serve the interests of elites (e.g., Brass 1991; Eller 1999; Fox 1985; Hanson 1989; Reyna and Downs 1997). Yet the problem with this approach is that cultural traditions tend to drop out of the picture altogether, having been explained away as instruments of power (Ortner 1989, 1990). Even if culture is always “in the making,” it is seldom wholly invented but results from the modification or transformation of existing cultural materials (see also Rappaport 1990; Smith 1991, 1992). The recent turn to historical memory may be seen as an attempt to slip between the horns of the dilemma and to integrate the study of culture as a set of relatively enduring traditions with the study of agency, creativity, and strategic social action (cf. Fox 2002; Whiteley 2004).

Yet there is still a shortage of empirical evidence about (1) how narratives of violent and traumatic events influence social loyalties and (2) how such narratives are managed or manipulated, even as they are recited in classrooms, rituals, and everyday life. To explore these issues, we focus here on the 1857 Mountain Meadows massacre, in which some 120 men, women, and children were murdered in southwestern Utah. Our aim is not to establish “what really happened” at Mountain Meadows, but to examine the memory politics of the case—the many stories of the massacre, the ways they have been told, and their use as reference points in drawing or redrawing social boundaries (Alexander 2004; Barth 2002). Of course, a case study of this kind is itself a story—a “reconstruction,” in Aberle’s (1987) sense—told and interpreted in rather fine detail. We see such detail as being necessary to the case study method, which has been persuasively defended by Flyvbjerg (2001:82): “The advantage of the case study is that it can ‘close in’ on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice.” By closing in on a few key actors in a specific context, we have tried to expose the often subtle interplay between historical narration and political creation.
REMEMBERING MOUNTAIN MEADOWS

Historical memory can be remarkably volatile. Even mass murder, we have found, can be easily forgotten after a generation or two, only to rebound into historical consciousness as a result of new political circumstances. Public reactions seem to be ever shifting between closure and contestation—between the silencing and the reopening of debate about what has happened, to whom, and why. To understand this process, our study builds on the work of anthropologists such as Connerton (1989), Ortner (1989), Trouillot (1995), and Verdery (1999), who emphasize the political uses of narrative traditions. At the same time, we seek to integrate such an anthropological approach with recent research on “cultural trauma” as a basis for collective identity (Alexander et al. 2004; Giesen 2004; Neal 2005; Oliver 2004).

THE MNEMONIC SIGNIFICANCE OF VIOLENCE AND VICTIMIZATION

From the American Civil War to the breakup of Yugoslavia, the trauma of ethnic, nationalist, or religious violence has been a basic concern, if not the central focus, of memory studies (e.g., Ballinger 2003; Blight 2001; Halpern and Kideckel 2000; Neff 2005; Schwartz 2000; Verdery 1999). The reasons for this are clear. Of all the objects of memory politics, none are so intensely debated as stories of collective victimization. The telling of such stories, as Shryock (1997) has vividly demonstrated, is always politically charged because social identities are at stake: who “we” are depends on who “they” are, and on the conduct of both sides at a moment of violent conflict (see also Connerton 1989; Tilly 2002; Whiteley 1988).

In an anthropological perspective, violence is seldom if ever an isolated act; it is usually the outgrowth of an antagonistic relationship that may extend far back in time (Schröder and Schmidt 2001:3). Across generations, such a relationship has a peculiar quality: although the individuals presently engaged in conflict may feel themselves to have previously suffered at the hands of the enemy, they are often not the ones who were victimized. In the extreme case, the living have “inherited” the suffering of people long dead—their distant ancestors, real or imagined—and seek retribution for acts committed by their enemies’ own, long-dead forebears. Concomitantly, in their understanding of history, people come to abandon narratives that emphasize specific times, places, and individual identities in favor of ones in which time is compressed, distant events are “remembered” as if they occurred here and now, and acts are attributed not to specific persons but to collectivities (Verdery 1999:115–20; Zerubavel 2003).

Who can “stand in” for past perpetrators and victims of violence tends to shape the legal and moral framework for future relations between enemies (Shweder et al. 1997). In war and feud, as Kelly (2000:5) argues, “The principle that one group member is substitutable for another . . . underwrites the interrelated concepts of injury to the group, group responsibility for the infliction of injury, and group liability with respect to retribution. War is thus cognitively and conceptually (as well as behaviorally) between groups.” When the logic of social substitution is pervasive, enmity between groups can be extended indefinitely in both space and
time—if memories of collective violence and victimization are widely shared within a population: “Wars are fought from memory, and they are often fought over memory, over the power to establish one group’s view of the past as a legitimate one” (Schröder and Schmidt 2001:9).

While the distribution of memories varies within any population (Barth 1987; Rodseth 1998), it tends to be sharply uneven between populations: “Some communities can boast a rich or well-documented, and eventful, ethnic past; others can only summon up the barest memories and sketchiest traditions” (Smith 1999:17). What is remembered, furthermore, is not always obvious, especially when discussion of key events is restricted within the realm of public discourse (Burke 1989:108–10; Watson 1994). Yet memories of violence and victimization often survive in unofficial or covert traditions, especially within local communities and families. Such traditions tend to be publicly invisible because they represent a form of historical knowledge produced and disseminated outside the historical guild. In many cases, as Trouillot (1995:21) points out, “those to whom history mattered most have looked for historical interpretations on the fringes of academia when not altogether outside it.” This is the terrain that must be entered if we are to understand the symbolic resources of ethnic and religious leaders and the often powerful reactions of their followers.

ENTREPRENEURS AND CLOSERS

Much of the research on ethnic violence underscores the role of entrepreneurial politicians who inspire their followers with reminders of their victimization at the hands of a collective enemy (e.g., Amin 1995; Ballinger 2003; Feldman 1991; Hinton 1998; Kapferer 1988; Mamdani 2001). We need to know more about these political entrepreneurs, and specifically about their manipulations of historical knowledge. A less familiar but equally important figure is what we call the political “closer”—a leader who attempts to reconcile contending groups, often on the basis of historical forgetting rather than remembering. Closers, in other words, set out to bury the past, even if justice has not been served.

Both styles of leadership are familiar from the history of Yugoslavia. Here, in the 1990s, political entrepreneurs such as Milosovic and Tudjman were able to tap a vast reservoir of local memory, which was then redeployed to serve their own ends. Tito, by contrast, had been the quintessential closer: to forge a multiethnic state, he had insisted on the systematic forgetting of events that had traumatized, glorified, and helped to define each of Yugoslavia’s peoples (Ballinger 2003; Briga 2004; Denich 1994; Hayden 1994; Ignatieff 1993).

In this sense, Tito put into practice the philosophy of Ernst Renan, who wrote in 1882 that “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (1990:11). Renan’s examples of what must be forgotten are themselves telling: “No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale, or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew”—the systematic murder, in 1572, of thousands of French Huguenots by their Catholic enemies.
To establish harmony in a pluralistic society, the forgetting of key events may be enforced by official decree, as in the case of Tito’s Yugoslavia. When this approach falls short, however, it tends to impose a state of “antagonistic tolerance” between former enemies (Hayden 2002), often accompanied by a false sense of justice (Borneman 1997; Torpey 2003). Official ceremonies, memorials, and public education may not be enough to close the gap between the authorized view of history and the unauthorized traditions that may survive and flourish in local communities and families. With the record of fascist atrocities officially suppressed under Tito, ceremonies and memorials named the dead only in the abstract, employing euphemistic, collective categories such as “victims of fascism” who had perished at the hands of “domestic traitors” (Denich 1994:370):

Yet, scattered through the towns and villages of the republics of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, through the Titoist decades, were the pigeon-caves and other unmarked burial sites where the local villagers who survived the massacres quietly remembered the dead and the horror of that time, but were discouraged by the Communist authorities from opening the sites and removing the remains for proper rebury according to Orthodox rituals.

To “remember the dead” was to act on a certain body of knowledge, to cast it in a particular communicative medium (Alexander 2004; Barth 2002). For state officials, the preferred medium was the permanent memorial intended to close off discussion of the past by imposing a collective amnesia about the specific identities of those who had committed the massacres as well as those who had been killed. For the villagers, on the other hand, establishment of their own memorials was not an option. To eulogize their loved ones, they could communicate only with their trusted neighbors or immediate family members, using the informal and inconspicuous media of everyday life. Only after Tito’s death in 1980 would it become possible to rebury the dead, as Serbian nationalists allied with the Orthodox Church to sponsor mass funerals in Belgrade, some of them televised throughout Yugoslavia (Bringa 2004; Hayden 1994).

As this example suggests, “entrepreneurs” and “closers” often coexist in an uneasy balance that may tip in one direction or another with the shifting political winds. In fact, these are not so much stable types of political actors as they are modes of political action. Over the course of a career or even a political season, the same person may operate first as an entrepreneur, then as a closer, and then perhaps as an entrepreneur once again. Each mode, furthermore, is likely to involve both commemoration—the recognition and celebration of certain events that are taken to embody fundamental values (Schwartz 1982:377)—and interrogation—efforts to test the credibility of received historical narratives because, in a period of controversy or crisis, it matters whether these stories are fact or fiction (Trouillot 1995:11). These two processes may be in tension with each other, as some factions seek to recollect while others seek to question the same historical events. To investigate this kind of tension, we turn to an extraordinarily violent event that once seemed forgotten but has now resurfaced in American memory.
On September 11, 1857, all the adults and most of the children on a wagon train bound for California were murdered in the remote valley of Mountain Meadows, Utah (Figure 1). The perpetrators were local Mormon militiamen, who may have been assisted by Southern Paiutes or other Native Americans from the surrounding area (Bagley 2002; Brooks 1962 [1950]). The victims were members of ten or more extended families, including the Bakers and the Fanchers, who had departed five months earlier from their homes in northwestern Arkansas. The men of the company were shot, while the women and children were bludgeoned to death (Novak and Kopp 2003). The 17 survivors were all toddlers or infants, whose lives had been spared because they were deemed not “old enough to talk” (Brooks 1962 [1950]:81). In any case, militiaman John D. Lee (1818–1877) was the only person brought to trial, and it would be twenty years after the massacre before he was convicted and executed by firing squad (Table 1).

**TABLE 1**

Mountain Meadows Participants Referred to in the Text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Birth–Death</th>
<th>Fate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arkansas Emigrants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker, John Twitty</td>
<td>1805–1857</td>
<td>Killed at Mountain Meadows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker, Sarah Frances</td>
<td>1854–1947</td>
<td>Massacre survivor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fancher, Alexander</td>
<td>1812–1857</td>
<td>Killed at Mountain Meadows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Utah Militiamen</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leavitt, Dudley</td>
<td>1830–1908</td>
<td>Never charged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee, John D.</td>
<td>1818–1877</td>
<td>Tried and executed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Locations of key sites discussed in the text.
Many historical accounts emphasize the special circumstances leading up to the massacre, especially the growing tension between Latter-day Saints, popularly known as Mormons, and the United States government. In July of 1857, word reached Salt Lake City that President James Buchanan had dispatched the U.S. Army to replace Brigham Young with a non-Mormon governor and to quell any further resistance to federal authority (Bigler 1998; MacKinnon 1984). According to the classic study by Brooks (1962 [1950]:219), the Baker-Fancher wagon train happened to enter Utah while the territory was in the grip of “war frenzy,” and the reckless behavior of some riders on the train only tended “to fan that frenzy and provoke added violence.” Utah Mormons, according to this interpretation, were convinced that federal authorities intended to punish or exterminate their kind and that the Baker-Fancher company was somehow associated with their persecutors in the East. Variations on this argument are now common in the Mormon history literature (e.g., Arrington and Bitton 1992:167).

The Mormon struggle against the hegemony of the U.S. government would seem to have left only faded memories of regional rather than national significance (Bigler 1998; Rodseth and Olsen 2000). Yet the memories have hardly faded within the “Mormon culture area,” consisting of Utah and large portions of Nevada, Idaho, Wyoming, and Arizona (Bennion and Louder 1978; Meinig 1965). In fact, “Stories of persecution, migration, and deeds of the pioneers are told and retold in a form which has become almost a Mormon litany” (May 1980:724). Such stories remain powerful precisely because they are regional rather than national in scope. They help to maintain the identity of the Intermountain West as a “near-nation” (O’Dea 1954, 1957), culturally distinct and potentially separable from the United States, in much the way that Civil War memories continue to define the South (Brundage 2000; Cobb 2005; Horwitz 1998).

Public memory is not a unified field but a congeries of ethnic and regional traditions, each of which may mask still more radical or parochial subtraditions. Here we seek to uncover some of the layers of memory that surround the Mountain Meadows massacre. Understandings of the massacre in Utah and in Arkansas appear to be vastly discrepant. Even within Utah, there are significant differences in the ways the event is narrated by whites as opposed to Paiutes, “Saints” (Mormons) as opposed to “Gentiles” (non-Mormons), and southern Utahns as opposed to residents of the Wasatch Front, the cultural and political core of the state.

Within this wide array of historical narratives, some are more visible than others. Many are “hidden” in the sense that they are carried by socially marginal groups that have lost or never had the power to recount their narrative traditions within the public realm (Schneider and Rapp 1995; Trouillot 1995). Descendants of John D. Lee, Southern Paiutes living near the massacre site, and descendants of the massacre victims all have their versions of what happened at Mountain Meadows, versions that differ significantly from each other and from official accounts in textbooks, documentaries, and memorials. Those whose ancestors are blamed for the massacre have often borne a stigma, especially in the local communities of southern Utah, and have tended to keep their alternative histories within their own extended families. Descendants of the victims, by contrast, have
tried to introduce their oral traditions, diaries, and memoirs into the record of public history. With a few exceptions (e.g., Fancher 1999), such efforts have met with little success.

Any one of these narratives, if it becomes widely accepted, has the potential to unify a collective body. Yet each population under consideration—Indian, Mormon, or Arkansan—carries powerful memories of many violent events. Thus the Paiutes cannot forget their long history of enslavement by neighboring tribes and their often brutal treatment at the hands of white settlers (Holt 1992; Knack 2001; Tom and Holt 2000). Descendants of John D. Lee are united by the memory of his exile and execution, which made him a sacrificial lamb, in their view, for the Mormon Church (Brooks 1992 [1961]). Most remarkably, those who suffered at Mountain Meadows had still wider claims to victimization (Wm. H. Fancher 1947; B. Fancher 1999). One of the leaders of the train, Captain Alexander Fancher, was purportedly descended from French Huguenots—victims of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in 1572.

**WARS WITHIN WARS**

Devout Mormons have a powerful identification with their ancestors (whether biological or spiritual) in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. This is apparent in various contexts, from the everyday discourse of the rank-and-file to the official statements of Church historians. What emerges is a grand narrative of trial and triumph, with the Saints depicted as a chosen people who escaped their oppressors to establish an independent kingdom in the desert. Always the victims and never the victimizers, Mormons of the nineteenth century are routinely portrayed as morally heroic and tragically misunderstood. No other event challenges the credibility of this image as does the Mountain Meadows massacre. Yet the massacre is still treated, in many standard accounts, as an enigmatic footnote to the epic of Mormon suffering (e.g., Alexander 2003:129–34).

In this respect, the case of Mountain Meadows resembles what Trouillot (1995) calls “the war within the war” during the Haitian Revolution. In 1791, the slaves of Saint Domingue rose against the French colonial regime and fought for 13 years to gain their independence. In the course of the struggle, some of these “Black Jacobins” fell to fighting among themselves (James 1963). Rebels were murdered by rebels until one faction was able to reunite the movement and create an independent Haiti. As told by Haitian nationalists, however, the story of the revolution tends to neglect or “tone down” the war within the war (Trouillot 1995:66):

This fratricide sequence is the only blemish in the glorious epic of their ancestors’ victory against France, the only shameful page in the history of the sole successful slave revolution in the annals of humankind. Thus, understandably, it is the one page they would have written otherwise if history depended only on the wishes of the narrator. And indeed, they tried to rewrite it as much as they could.
The obvious parallel with the case of Mountain Meadows is the sustained effort by Mormon apologists to rewrite this page of history—to spin it (if not expunge it) within the local and national memory. This process began with the conspiracy of the murderers themselves to frame the local Indians for the massacre. It continued with various attempts to blame John D. Lee exclusively, or perhaps Lee plus a few other zealots in southern Utah. Along the way, the victims were often found to be culpable, in varying degrees, for their own murders. They were claimed to be rowdy, syphilitic, and openly scornful of the Mormon leadership. They were thought to be linked, in one way or another, to the persecutors of Mormons in the Midwest. The most persistent claim, which first appeared in print in 1873 (Bagley 2002:280), was that the train contained a party of ruffians, the so-called Missouri wildcats, whose insulting demeanor had incited the massacre (Arrington and Bitton 1992:167; Brooks 1962 [1950]:219).

None of these charges has been substantiated. The victims at Mountain Meadows were innocent of any crime against the Mormons. They had no known connection to the militia that killed 18 Mormon men and boys at Haun’s Mill, Missouri, in October 1838. They had no known link to the mob that murdered the Mormon Prophet, Joseph Smith, and his brother, Hyrum Smith, at Carthage, Illinois, in June 1844. The Arkansans on the train came to stand in for these perpetrators, and were killed for it—not in a pitched battle or any kind of “fair fight,” but at point-blank range, execution-style, after being tricked into surrender. By the twentieth century, with Utah statehood and the gradual incorporation of Mormons into American society, what happened at Mountain Meadows would become all the more baffling and disturbing. Many who first learn of the event are left to wonder how (white) Americans could have slaughtered other (white) Americans in this way. Because the religious and political antagonisms that set the stage for the massacre have faded, if not disappeared, the motivations of the murderers are especially enigmatic to contemporary observers.

Like the Haitian war within the war, the case of Mountain Meadows might be said to involve a “fratricide sequence”—but the meaning of “fratricide” depends on one’s concept of “fraternity” (Clawson 1989; Rodseth and Wrangham 2004). Some such concept has been a consistent element of modern nationalism, but its meaning has also shifted from one historical setting to another. In any given setting, what seems to be pivotal is the image of some third party as the “real enemy”—the “other” against whom a fraternal identity can be formed. As the image of the enemy changes, so does the sense of fraternity—and even the sense of whose story is being told (Clifford 1997:338–41).

The case of Mountain Meadows is fascinating and vexing because the social boundaries within which the story has been told, and thus the assumptions that have guided both narrators and their audiences, have shifted several times since 1857. Until recent years, the vast majority of the Mountain Meadows literature was written from a Utah Mormon point of view. Even within this hegemonic perspective, what could be assumed about “us” and “them” was extremely unstable. Once it seemed plausible to construe the event as an Indian massacre.¹ If this tactic had succeeded, the two white factions might have reconciled at the
expense of a subaltern group, much as they did in the aftermath of the Civil War (Blight 2001). Later, with the arrest and conviction of John D. Lee, tensions developed between the Mormon metropolis and its still tiny satellites in southern Utah. Meanwhile, there were ongoing attempts to find fault with the Arkansans themselves.

More than a century passed before an Arkansas version of the story began to get a wide hearing. The simplest explanation for this is demographic: most of the potential narrators from Arkansas had been killed. It should also be pointed out that the Mormon Church controlled a newspaper (The Deseret News, founded in 1850), a university (BYU, founded in 1875), and an increasingly centralized bureaucracy that thrived on historical and genealogical information. Well into the twentieth century, the Church was able to overwhelm the few alternative accounts generated by the massacre victims or their relatives (Greenhaw 1938; Mitchell 1940). This began to change only around 1950. Let us turn, then, to the victims’ descendants and the process by which they came to share and act upon a memory of collective violence.

THE CARRIER GROUP

In an illuminating discussion of cultural trauma, Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004) argues that the key analytical question is how a sense of suffering comes to be shared by a group much larger than the immediate circle of victims and their kin. To be cultural, in other words, a trauma must be vividly represented and communicated to a wide audience, including many who were not directly affected by the traumatic event. The original set of sufferers is described by Alexander (2004:11) as a “carrier group,” based on Weber’s notion of ethnic or religious activists with “particular discursive talents for articulating their claims.” Such a group is not necessarily powerful, privileged, or highly educated, but tends to capitalize on whatever narrative resources are at hand.

In the case of Mountain Meadows, the victims’ relatives were an especially unlikely carrier group. The wagon train itself was just a loose collection of families, neighbors, and friends. Their next of kin were concentrated in the Ozarks region of northwestern Arkansas, but not necessarily in close association. Within a few years of the massacre, these same communities were overrun by guerillas and bushwhackers from both sides of the Civil War. Many households that had remained intact were now uprooted or decimated (Blevins 2002:31):

Sharply divided between northern and southern sympathies, the Ozarks became a dangerous, lawless land abandoned not only by the men going to war but also by scores of their families looking for safer homes free from the unofficial bands of Union and Confederate sympathizers who sought out their enemies and their enemies’ families in the isolated backcountry.

The cataclysms of the 1860s tended to overshadow any memory of Mountain Meadows. Only those whose close friends or loved ones had perished on the wagon
train were likely to dwell on this particular atrocity, however shocking it had seemed in 1857.

Emigration was another factor that fragmented the carrier group and disrupted the transmission of oral histories within and between families. Around 1910, the Ozarks began to lose population (Gregory 1989, 2005). This process accelerated after World War I and reached a crescendo in the 1930s and 1940s. The bulk of the emigrants were farmers, and by the mid-twentieth century Arkansas had lost 52% of its agricultural labor force. More than a million “Arkies” and “Okies” ended up in California, while another two million were scattered across Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington (Gregory 1989:6–7). Many relatives of the massacre victims joined this wave of migration and fell out of regular contact or lost touch altogether with their Arkansas kin. The “carrier group” was collapsing.

At the same time, first-hand knowledge of the massacre was disappearing. Of the 17 survivors, only one of them, Sarah Frances Baker (1854–1947), was still alive in 1940. At her home in Oklahoma, the 85-year-old—under her married name of Sallie Baker Mitchell—told her story to the American Weekly magazine (Mitchell 1940). This would prove to be the last public statement by an eyewitness to the event. “When Sallie Baker Mitchell died, all living memory of the Mountain Meadows massacre died with her” (Bagley 2002:347). Tales of the tragedy had been incorporated into some family histories and oral traditions. Before 1950, however, published accounts from an Arkansas perspective were remarkably rare.

There was one official memorial in Arkansas. In 1936, a roadside marker had been erected in Boone County, just south of the town of Harrison (Figure 2). Designed by the Arkansas Centennial Commission, this cast iron plaque identified “Caravan Spring,” the departure point for a large contingent of travelers who would die at Mountain Meadows. The composition of the wagon train had been investigated by James W. Nicholson (1888–1979), a member of the Boone County Centennial Committee (Logan 1998:68–69). Though not known to be a descendant of the massacre victims, Nicholson seems to have possessed certain discursive talents for articulating the claims of the carrier group (Davis 1998:313). He grew up within a few miles of Caravan Spring and the grassy stand where part of the wagon train had assembled. His father had served the area as a circuit rider and Presbyterian minister for 62 years. Nicholson himself taught for 42 years in the public schools of Boone and Washington counties. His specialty was American history—the only course he offered when he became principal of Harrison High School. In this community before 1950, James W. Nicholson was an expert in local knowledge and historical memory.

Figures such as Nicholson were deeply involved in the trauma process that unfolded over the next few decades (Table 2). These were American variants of what Gramsci called “rural intellectuals” (2000:308–9)—clerics, lawyers, notaries, doctors, and teachers—who have “a different living standard from that of the average peasant” and offer alternatives to the local models of existence and worldview. In the 1940s, Robert Merton (1968) studied similar figures in the United States—“influentials” who lived in small towns but could introduce these communities to a wider network of worldly knowledge (cf. Barth 1990; Hannerz 1990).
As descendants of the victims began to organize around the memory of the massacre, two of the leaders in the process were schoolteachers. When the roadside marker was erected in 1936, John Kenner Fancher (1899–1968) was teaching in a one-room schoolhouse near Berryville, Arkansas. Though not a direct descendant of the massacre victims, John Kenner’s great-great-grandfather (FFFF) had lost 12 collateral kin at Mountain Meadows. How much John Kenner knew about the massacre in 1936 is unclear. Soon after this date, however, he was talking and corresponding with family members in an effort to collect historical information (R. Fancher 1998:224).

John Kenner’s cousin, Harley Fancher (1914–1991), was a schoolteacher in the nearby hamlet of Osage (Figure 2). Not quite 30 years old, Harley was active in local politics and well-connected with the Democratic Party. In 1945, with the election of Dixiecrat Benjamin Laney as governor, Harley was appointed as a revenue officer for Carroll County. Thus he gave up teaching and moved his family to the county seat of Berryville. From early on, Harley’s political base seems to have been his own extended family.4 Through various kith and kin, the young tax collector was linked to such Arkansas heavyweights as Laney and U.S. Senator J. William Fulbright. In 1948, Harley helped to organize a Fancher family reunion, with the express purpose of welcoming home the veterans of World War II. This reunion, which was held at Osage in 1949, also served as a kind of political rally. Fulbright was there, as well as Senator John McClellan and Congressman James Trimble.

Among the assembled family members was John Kenner Fancher. By now, his interest in family history had begun to focus on the Mountain Meadows massacre.
In the first place, of course, the speaker’s audience must be members of the carrier group itself. If there is illocutionary success, the members of this originating collectivity become convinced that they have been traumatized by a singular event. Only with this success can the audience for the traumatic claim be broadened to include other publics within the “society at large.”

To reach an ever-widening audience, the speaker must be something of a “guru,” in Barth’s (1990) sense—a tireless teacher, willing to travel, spread the message, recruit followers, and hammer out consensus. John Kenner Fancher, in this light, was an American guru. Drawing liberally on his cousin’s political capital, John Kenner set out to convince the Fancher family and anyone else who would listen that a “singular event” had indeed traumatized the people of northwestern Arkansas.
Meanwhile, in the desert town of St. George, Utah, a schoolteacher named Juanita Leavitt Brooks (1898–1989) had been collecting local diaries and other historical artifacts for more than a decade (Brooks 1982:332–33). As a granddaughter of Mormon pioneer Dudley Leavitt (1830–1908), Brooks had grown up with stories of Mountain Meadows. She knew that her grandfather had been involved in the massacre, and had come to doubt traditional accounts that blamed the murders exclusively on Indians or on John D. Lee (Peterson 1988:41). Having attended Brigham Young University, Brooks went on to take a Master’s degree at Columbia, then came home to teach at Dixie Junior College.

By 1946, Brooks was deeply involved in archival research on the massacre. She rode night buses to visit the Huntington Library in Los Angeles, where she examined documents on microfilm, including the transcripts of Lee’s two trials. The first trial, in 1875, had been a chaotic affair that ended in a hung jury. The second one, in 1876, is widely considered to have been fixed by the Church hierarchy to make a scapegoat of Lee (Bagely 2002:306). In her correspondence, Brooks described Mountain Meadows as “a mixed up affair. Everyone who tells it tries to shield himself and blame the other fellow” (Juanita Brooks to Dale Morgan, March 1946 [Peterson 1988:175]).

What would later be called the “Rashomon effect,” named after the film by Akira Kurosawa (1950), extended even to basic facts about the massacre: the numbers of Indians on the scene ranged in eyewitness accounts from 0 to 600, while the victims themselves were variously portrayed as respectable farmers or as rogues and prostitutes. “In light of these counterclaims, Juanita pondered attaching to her narrative a massive appendix of original accounts from which readers could form their own opinions” (Peterson 1988:175). As her work proceeded, however, Brooks gave up this idea and eventually produced a classic authoritative narrative that downplayed or ignored most of the variation in the primary sources.

In November 1946, a letter arrived from Los Angeles. It was written by Ettie Lee (1885–1974), a granddaughter of John D. Lee and now a wealthy real estate investor (Stewart 1965). Having learned of Brooks’s research, Ettie offered to contribute “some documentary material that should be used if the true John D. Lee is to be introduced to the reading public” (Ettie Lee to Juanita Brooks, November 1946 [Peterson 1988:181]). Brooks immediately responded in kind and the two women began a long and fruitful correspondence. They had several unusual traits in common. They shared the experience of being granddaughters of participants in the massacre, and had followed rather similar careers. Both had grown up on the southern Mormon frontier—Lee in Arizona, Brooks in Nevada and Utah—and both had studied to become schoolteachers. For her part, Lee taught English at a junior high school, but presented herself to Brooks as part of an urban professional class specializing in the acquisition and control of factual knowledge (Ettie Lee to Juanita Brooks, December 1946 [Peterson 1988:181–82]).
Being a teacher, it is natural for me perhaps to observe that your letter was particularly well expressed and that pleased me since English teaching in the high schools and both colleges of this city has been my work since 1914. If it is not presumptuous [sic] may I ask about your background so that I may pass it on to my family, who are jurists, teachers, and bank officials as well as one journalist; and I will, therefore, be questioned.

Brooks happily provided her curriculum vitae, and on her next trip to the Huntington was able to call on Ettie Lee. “The wealthy spinster claimed that the descendants of her grandfather, John D. Lee, 4,000 strong by her count, would all want to buy a copy” of Brooks’s book (Peterson 1988:187). By 1949, Brooks was in negotiation with Stanford University Press. She was told that “if the Lee family could guarantee the purchase of a thousand copies, the press was ready to offer a formal contract” (Bagley 2002:356). With this agreement in place, The Mountain Meadows Massacre was published in November 1950. It would be the definitive study for half a century (Topping 2003:198).

Across the United States in the early 1950s, descendants of the victims read The Mountain Meadows Massacre, and many came to base their own historical understanding on Brooks’s account. Among these readers was John Kenner Fancher, who was soon corresponding with the author. Bolstered by her historical authority, Fancher became convinced that northwestern Arkansas should have a memorial to the victims and survivors of the massacre. The Richard Fancher Society sponsored the construction of a granite slab, about three meters tall, on the courthouse square in Harrison. The monument was engraved with the names of those known to have traveled on the wagon train. The riders were listed according to their counties of origin. Most importantly, the monument identified Alexander Fancher (1812–1857) as the captain of the train. No such recognition was afforded to John Twitty Baker (1805–1857), who seems to have been the leader and organizer of the large contingent that departed from Caravan Spring, just a few miles south of the new monument.

On September 4, 1955, Juanita Brooks appeared before an audience of some 500 persons who had gathered for the dedication ([Brooks] 1956; Peterson 1988:237). The Fancher family alone was represented by kin from 40 states (Bagley 2002:360). Brooks was the first Utah Mormon to speak directly, in Arkansas, to descendants of the victims. This was a pivotal moment in the history of the carrier group. The most prominent authority on the subject had entered the trauma process—facilitating communication, validating the formal organization, marking out a center for the sacred landscape, and identifying herself, in effect, as a member of their group, thus drawing the Mormons of southern Utah into the circle of those who had suffered. Juanita Brooks, known in her youth as “the little schoolteacher,” had found common cause with another little schoolteacher, John Kenner Fancher. Setting out to advance the trauma process in two relatively isolated regions of the country, Brooks and Fancher were the quintessential politicians of memory. Though they both advocated commemoration of the massacre, they also sought to put the tragedy to rest and to close the gap between
two groups of people who had all, in their own way, been victims of Mountain Meadows ([Brooks] 1956:76).

A few days after the ceremony, Fancher wrote to Brooks: “Your coming has done much to establish a spirit of love and forgiveness. The Mormon Church owes you much because now the people in this section feel much better toward the Mormon people” ([Brooks] 1956:80). Both participants seem to have thought of the memorial service as “an epilogue” that had effectively closed off an episode of history ([Brooks] 1956:72). One obvious precedent for this scenario was the reconciliation of Northerners and Southerners after the Civil War (Blight 2001; Neff 2005). With the approaching centennial celebrations of both the Mountain Meadows massacre and the War between the States, a vision of completion and reconciliation seemed, for a time, to triumph over alternative visions of continuing alienation or struggle. Yet reconciliation, as Blight (2001) points out, often comes at the expense of a third party—a group that does not share in the process and is effectively punished or demoted by the ensuing “peace.” Perhaps the greatest irony surrounding the 1955 dedication was the way it appeared to heal an old wound yet simultaneously opened at least two divides within the carrier group itself.

First, the monument clearly endorsed the claim of the Fancher family to be the core of the wagon train with its heroic leader, Captain Alexander Fancher. Alternative claims by the Baker family were never acknowledged in this context. Baker descendants would later describe the Harrison monument as “a push from Berryville”—in other words, a power grab by the Fancher family, which was based some 30 miles to the west in the Carroll County seat. Harrison was the seat of Boone County, which had been carved out of Carroll in 1869 (Logan 1998). What was especially rankling to the Bakers was the fact that the Fanchers “had their own courthouse” and might have put the monument in Berryville. Instead, without consulting the Bakers, they used the connection with Juanita Brooks to push through the memorial that stands less than a mile from the farmstead that had been owned in 1857 by John Twitty Baker. At the same time, there is no conclusive evidence that Alexander Fancher ever resided in the area of Harrison. His portion of the wagon train may well have departed from his farm in Benton County, some 60 miles to the west.

Yet the push from Berryville also reflected and reinforced a divide within the Fancher clan itself. For decades, the family had been split into two major branches: the “Black Fanchers” and the “Red Fanchers,” descended from two brothers in the generation before the massacre. The original sources of the split are debated, but in the 1940s—just before the establishment of the Richard Fancher Society—a violent confrontation between Black and Red Fancher men had led to criminal proceedings and a murder conviction. Relations between the two lines were strained to the breaking point. When John Kenner, himself a Black Fancher, began to organize family reunions, only one Red Fancher—Kit Carson Wilson, son of a massacre survivor—was directly involved. When other Red Fanchers showed up, they were made to feel déclassé. As a result, beginning in 1962, the Red Fanchers organized their own family reunions, separate from those of their cousins.
Thus the public image of a unified carrier group masked the political maneuvering that had allowed one faction to stand in for the group as a whole. As a result, the 1955 “reconciliation” between Arkansans and Mormons had the effect of disenfranchising certain factions within each of these communities. Moreover, the premature closure of historical debate allowed for a new cycle of interrogation by the politicians of memory. Throughout the twentieth century, such figures continued to emerge from what Gramsci called the rural intelligentsia—the local teachers and other professionals who seize on events that have the power both to unite and to divide people in the present.

CONCLUSION

Here we have tried to shed light on two issues in particular. The first is how historical narratives influence social loyalties. Our argument is that people identify or fail to identify with the suffering of others as represented in stories of the past. This in turn has the potential to draw or redraw boundaries between social groups. Our approach follows from the key insight offered by Alexander (2004:1):

Is the suffering of others also our own? In thinking that it might in fact be, societies expand the circle of the we. By the same token, social groups can, and often do, refuse to recognize the existence of others’ trauma… In other words, by refusing to participate in what I call the process of trauma creation, social groups restrict solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone.

The process described here is but the dynamic dimension of what Kelly (2000) calls “social substitution.” The principle that one group member is substitutable for another is the basis, Kelly argues, for war and feud. This implies that an injury to any of one’s own group is an injury to oneself. When the logic of substitution bursts the bounds of an existing group, it increases what Alexander calls “the circle of the we.” At the same time, a failure of social substitution can create a new boundary within an existing group, thus contracting the social circle. Crucially, this process takes place through narratives of what has happened and why. When narrators and audience members come to identify with the suffering of those in the distant past, the result is what Verdery (1999:115) calls “time compression”—an expansion of the “we” to include some who are long dead.

This raises the difficult question of why people are so ready to identify with victims they have never known before the trauma process began—why social substitution, in other words, is so pervasive in human groups. Though this is not the place to investigate the psychological intersection of trauma, empathy, and indoctrination, an interesting start has been made in this area by evolutionary biologists and anthropologists (Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Salter 1998; Richerson and Boyd 2005; Rodseth and Wrangham 2004). For present purposes, we will simply say that victimization seems to be “good to think,” in Lévi-Strauss’s famous phrase, and may be what Sperber (1996:67) calls a “susceptibility” at the heart of our social psychology.
The second issue we have considered in this paper is the political management of historical memories. All such memories (if they are “memories”) have been recovered and renovated, and may well have been manipulated to serve the purposes of a narrative performance. Yet the past is not an infinitely plastic resource to be molded to an agenda in the present (Appadurai 1981; Ortner 1990). “What happened leaves traces,” as Trouillot (1995:29) puts it, “some of which are quite concrete—buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries—that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative.” A successful narrative must take account of “all the right traces,” while subtly weighting them according to both their credibility and the support they offer to a strategic agenda. This sets in motion an extremely selective process of remembrance, a process that continues with each act of cultural transmission (Barth 1987; Bloch 2005; Sperber 1996).

The credibility of a given trace is largely a matter of how it was made. Censuses and monuments are left in the record quite deliberately, while diaries and dead bodies may be just as deliberately concealed or destroyed (Novak and Kopp 2003). Some traces leave no “ready-made statements” (Connerton 1989:14). Yet they are still there to be interpreted—“to be read as tracks are read, as results that are left behind by something that has passed and may be identified from the particular features of its tracks” (Barth 1987:83). Here we have distinguished two major modes of “reading the tracks”: a mode of entrepreneurship that tends to revitalize social memories, and a mode of closure that tends to attenuate, simplify, or even erase such memories. It is worth repeating, however, that these are not distinct types but modes of activity that may characterize the same figure in different contexts, ecologies, or phases of life.

Juanita Brooks and John Kenner Fancher both tried to revitalize historical memories, but they also collaborated to close off the process of remembrance. Having emerged from strikingly different backgrounds, they went on to confront quite different political landscapes. As a Mormon historian, Brooks could hardly avoid the suspicion of heresy. She had set out to remind a highly organized network of historically minded people that their ancestors (whether biological or spiritual) had committed an atrocity. Fancher, by comparison, was working in a vacuum. In the 1940s, there was little or no infrastructure for the carrier group, and its members were remote from the national media and the Mormon Church. The Richard Fancher Society provided the platform that would eventually link the carrier group to a wider audience. In this sense, John Kenner Fancher was a truly entrepreneurial figure. Yet the situation was even more complex than this would suggest. Just to begin the trauma process, Fancher had to break through the many layers of suffering that had been laid down by the Civil War and its aftermath. In a sense, Brooks faced the opposite problem, having to overcome the sense of triumph and comfortable modernity that had accompanied Utah statehood and the mainstreaming of Mormon culture. Yet she was also defending the interests of a disenfranchised group—the rural population of the southern Mormon frontier—that had long served as the last line of defense against an indictment of mass murder.
In this regard, Brooks made common cause with yet another schoolteacher, Ettie Lee. Of all the families of southern Utah, the Lees had carried more blame for the massacre than any other. As Brooks herself observed in her biography of Lee, “Small wonder that his grandchildren suffered slights and slurs, that courtships were quickly terminated and engagements broken off when young men learned the girls they had thought so desirable had the blood of John D. Lee in their veins” (1992 [1961]:369). By presenting a sympathetic portrait of Lee, Brooks was also defending the southern Mormon frontier from which she had emerged. Ettie Lee became a crucial ally, providing not only financial support but the Lee family’s unique historical memories.

The relationship between Lee and Brooks was just one variation on a wider pattern observed in the cultural history of Mountain Meadows, a tendency for rural intellectuals to unite in projects of commemoration. Such intellectuals come from what Trouillot (1995) calls the “fringe of academia,” though they do not necessarily remain there. Commemoration becomes a path to wider social alliances, with schoolteachers, for example, exchanging their local memories and traditions for academic or cosmopolitan knowledge, all in the process of establishing new, quasi-religious institutions (cf. Ortner 1989, 1990). An especially successful teacher of this kind, such as Juanita Brooks, is able to tack smoothly between relatively local and relatively cosmopolitan contexts. The winning strategy in general is to follow an entrepreneurial pattern locally, but to shift to peacemaking and closure on the wider stage. As the audience expands to include various publics with potentially conflicting interests and interpretations, historical narratives tend to lose detail, to be thinned of their troubling specifics. If this process continues (and it seldom goes entirely unchallenged), what emerges is true commemoration (Trouillot 1995:116–18)—an act of “remembering together” that depends, paradoxically, on forgetting most of the subtleties of moral and cultural context.

NOTES

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1. According to The Book of Mormon, Native Americans are descended from the ancient Hebrews. In the Americas, the so-called Lamanites fell from the true faith and were cursed with dark skin (2 Nephi 5:21). Mormon scripture claimed, however, that they would be redeemed in the apocalyptic last days when they would ally with the Saints against the sinful Gentiles (Arrington and Bitton 1992:14; Bigler 1998:64). The Mormon treatment of Southern Paiutes as both tools and scapegoats is examined by Holt (1992), Tom and Holt (2000), Knack (2001), and Bagley (2002:23–37).

2. This distinguishes cultural from personal trauma. In a psychiatric sense, trauma involves repressed memories that tend to surface in disguised or surrogate forms. The “memories” of a cultural trauma, by contrast, are always socially mediated and often actively constructed (Alexander 2004:8–10).

3. She was first married to Joseph Allen Gladden of Boone County, Arkansas. Her married name was Sarah Frances Baker Gladden until she remarried in her sixties.


5. Kit Carson Wilson was the son of massacre survivor Triphenia Fancher Wilson (1855–1897) and the FFFBDS of John Kenner Fancher.

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