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Research Honors Paper

Memory, Deconstructed and Reconstructed
An Outward Expression of an Inward Reality

Jessica Rochford

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2013

“[France], now became personalized, and it was no longer possible to understand her ‘soul’ except in terms of individual attitudes toward the object upon which that soul had left its mark.”

-Pierre Nora, Realms of Memory, p.636

Lieux de Mémoire, or “places of memory,” are symbolic sites of national identity. Defined in *Le Grand Robert de la langue française*, the term is attributed to French historian Pierre Nora. Nora has compiled two large project anthologies and several individual books of essays by various authors that identify and reflect upon symbolic sites of great national importance throughout France. Nora’s various collections of work, span over “seven volumes, six thousand pages”) and “more than one hundred and thirty authors” (Le Goff 118). The particular project of Nora’s that I will focus on, titled *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, includes: *Volume 1: Conflicts and Divisions*, *Volume 2: Traditions*, and *Volume 3: Symbols*. Here, I will examine and apply theories from Nora’s third and final volume of this project, *Symbols*.

In these volumes, Nora establishes three criteria for admission into the category of *lieux de mémoire*. First, there must be evidence of the significance of these places over a substantial period of time (Nora IX). Second, there must be a consensus among various sources that attest to the significance of these places as cultural artifacts (Nora IX). Finally, these symbols must be universally acknowledged by the majority French opinion and the rest of the world as a site of importance (Nora IX). Thus, in Nora’s opinion, for a symbol to be universally recognized, it must be acknowledged both internally and

externally, within the country itself as well as by top experts both domestic and foreign, over a significant period of time.

Having used these criteria to identify *lieux de mémoire*, Nora distinguishes between two different kinds of *lieux de mémoire*. These two categories are imposed symbols and constructed symbols (Nora X). Imposed symbols are usually official state symbols, such as the French tricolor flag, the Pantheon, and the palace of Versailles. Imposed symbols are created by the state to represent an element of what the state stands for. Nora describes imposed symbols as having “a symbolic and memorial intention [that] is inscribed in the object itself (Nora X).” On the other hand, constructed symbols are unintentional symbols, formed by “unforeseen mechanisms, combinations of circumstances, the passage of time, [and] human effort” (Nora X). Examples of constructed symbols would include the Latin Quarter, so named due to the presence of Sorbonne students, or the Marais, a historic district that has evolved and created its own identity, known today for its Jewish community, art galleries and falafel. Nora states that the difference between these two groups “is in fact of fundamental importance” (Nora X).

Overall, imposed symbols are constructed from the top down, starting with the state, designed to exert its will upon the people. Constructed symbols, on the other hand, are formed from the bottom up, by unforeseen circumstances until the state is forced to acknowledge the significance the people have inscribed upon these objects.

These symbols, constructed in the past, and still present today, are important lenses into France’s history. The imperative nature behind Nora’s project is the exploration of how French symbols serve as unifying factors to help create the conception of France as a whole. These symbols are unique in that they serve as unifying

devices for the entire country. France is unarguably a diverse nation. The concept of “France” as a single unit of study has become increasingly problematic. Nora identifies this problem directly, stating that, while France’s diversity gives it a uniqueness, “the natural wealth of climates, the variety of its terrain, the landscapes of a very particular density on which is layered the historic succession of divisions of every order” (“Introduction” VIII) can convolute the idea of France as a unified nation. Additionally, cultural practices, *la vie quotidienne*, and economic factors differ drastically within one single country.

Despite these differences, among the French there exists a seemingly innate concept of what it is to be French. The word *patrimoine* carries substantial weight and is a word whose meaning has evolved over time. Its most recent connotation refers to “anything that made people feel that they had roots in a particular place and links to society as a whole” (Nora 625). The *patrimoine* can further be described as

a sacred treasure, a precious heirloom to be handed down from generation to generation. It descended from the roofs of cathedrals and castles and took up residence among forgotten customs and ancient techniques, good local wines, songs, and dialects. (Nora 625)

This word originally had a more formal, legal meaning, referring to tangible inherited property (Nora 635). Now, however, the word has evolved to mean “the possessions that make us who we are” (Nora 635).

Le patrimoine can be thought of as an inner Frenchness, or an inner French cultural “DNA” embodied in each citizen. The idea of *le patrimoine* is a unifying factor that provides common ground for the vastly different citizens of France to stand upon

together. Furthermore, *lieux de mémoire* can be considered outward representations of the internal concept of *le patrimoine*. These *lieux de mémoire* have spanned over numerous generations. Thus, they possess a distinctness that endures throughout a significant period time, earning a place in the hearts of citizens and linking one generation of the French to the next, and serving to unify. According to Nora, “only in the eyes of memory do the concepts of cohesiveness, unity, and continuity retain their pertinence and legitimacy” (XII).

Notably, while Nora stated that *lieux de mémoire* must be significant over a substantial period of time he also places certain time constraints on his *lieux de mémoire*. He states,

To ask what the national lieux de mémoire might have been a hundred and fifty years ago or what they will be in the next century, beyond the turn of the millennium, would be nonsensical, nothing more than a classroom exercise or intellectual game. The present selection makes sense only for the present moment. (Nora 637)

I understand this to mean that Nora assigns an “expiration date” to these *lieux de mémoire*. While I think it wise that Nora acknowledges that his list is not exhaustive or capable of lasting eternally, I believe that a true *lieux de mémoire* has the capability to evolve with a nation, and also that all *lieux de mémoire* possess elements of construction.

While I acknowledge the merit and logic behind Pierre Nora’s classifications of *lieux de mémoire* as imposed and constructed symbols, I disagree with the separation of *lieux de mémoire* into two distinct categories. I believe that all *lieux de mémoire* contain elements of construction. I will take one of Nora’s imposed symbols, the Eiffel tower,

and another symbol that he would consider imposed, the gardens of Versailles, and explore how they are both truly constructed symbols. Furthermore, I propose two additional places of memory, the rue Dénoyez and the common French garden that manifests the characteristics of constructed *lieux de mémoire*. I believe these two locations are true constructed *lieux de mémoire* that embody a French paradox. Throughout this project, I do not wish to deconstruct Nora's work, but rather, through his work, to sharpen this idea of a French paradox. This paradox can best be identified as a seemingly ingrained reverence for the past with a need to reinterpret symbols of the past. It is an esteem for history but also a desire not to be bound by history. This paradox does not exist within Nora's time constraints, but is timeless, thus adding to the definition of *le patrimoine français*.

-PART I: ANALYSIS-

LA TOUR EIFFEL: AN IMPOSED SYMBOL CONSTRUCTED BY THE PEOPLE

"Guy de Maupassant ate lunch at the base of the Eiffel tower almost every day because he hated it and that was the only place in Paris from which he could not see it."

-Anonymous

From before it was even constructed, the Eiffel Tower made a powerful impression on the French people. Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, French architect and

urbanist pioneering the idea of modern architecture, describes the Eiffel Tower as “a sign of beloved Paris [and a] beloved sign of Paris” (Loyrette 349). Today, most would agree that the tower is emblematic, and synonymous with both Paris and France itself. Yet this now renowned symbol started out on an unstable foundation of doubt and contempt. Dismissed by some as a “hollow chandelier” (Loyrette 350), the tower was initially constructed “by the newly established Republican government as a gigantic gateway to the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris commemorating the French Revolution” (Levin 56). However, the tower met great resistance throughout its entire design process and construction. Particularly when Gustave Eiffel announced the tower was not a temporary structure, but a monument he intended to stand for at least the next twenty years, those opposed to the tower were outraged (Loyrette 351). A protest published in *Le Temps* on February 14, 1887, stated that citizens could not bear to witness “the odious shadow of the odious column of sheet metal and bolts...stretching over an entire city still alive with the genius of so many centuries” (Loyrette 356-7).

Despite this debate, the tower was created to be remembered. Regardless whether the people of France were in love with the tower or if they utterly despised the tower, it was undoubtedly making an impression. The opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference, and among the many emotions the building of the tower stirred, indifference was not one of them. From its stages of infancy, the tower was set up to be remembered by those who saw it. The tower stirred people to intense and passionate emotions. Regardless if these feelings were positive or negative, the tower had the power to evoke passion from the people.

The people's feelings towards the tower began to change when the tower became less of a structure and more a protective figure watching over France. While the tower did not always have the support of the French civilians, it has a longstanding history of support by the military and engineers. Between 1898 and 1908, countless experiments on the tower proved vital in creating and "establishing the first transatlantic radiotelephone link in 1915" (Loyrette 370). The tower earned its stripes in two world wars. During the First World War, the tower's wireless facilities "guided the airplanes that protected Paris and intercepted enemy communications" (Loyrette 370). As a result, the tower became seen as less obtrusive and as much more than a merely architecturally significant structure. The Tower became a protective figure, guiding and protecting France, keeping the country safe under her steady watch. The Eiffel tower is a symbol that not only served its people during two world wars, but also a symbol that survived two world wars. Tragically, the same cannot be said for all cities subjected to the wars. Take, for example, London, which suffered a series of brutal Nazi bombings that destroyed large chunks of the city during World War II. Like Big Ben, the Tower seemed to say to its people, we have endured, and we will continue to do so.

As time progressed, citizens began to accept this gross intruder on their historically sacred Parisian landscape. Protesters first complained that the hideous tower could be seen from everywhere, but this gripe evolved into an attribute. Standing at 1,063 feet (324 meters) tall, the tower could be seen from most locations in the city. The city embraced the unification that it found beneath one structure. In a sprawling city divided by twenty *arrondissements*, the tower "unified the twenty *arrondissements* of the city as effectively as the new avenues and uniform building codes, turning a patchwork of

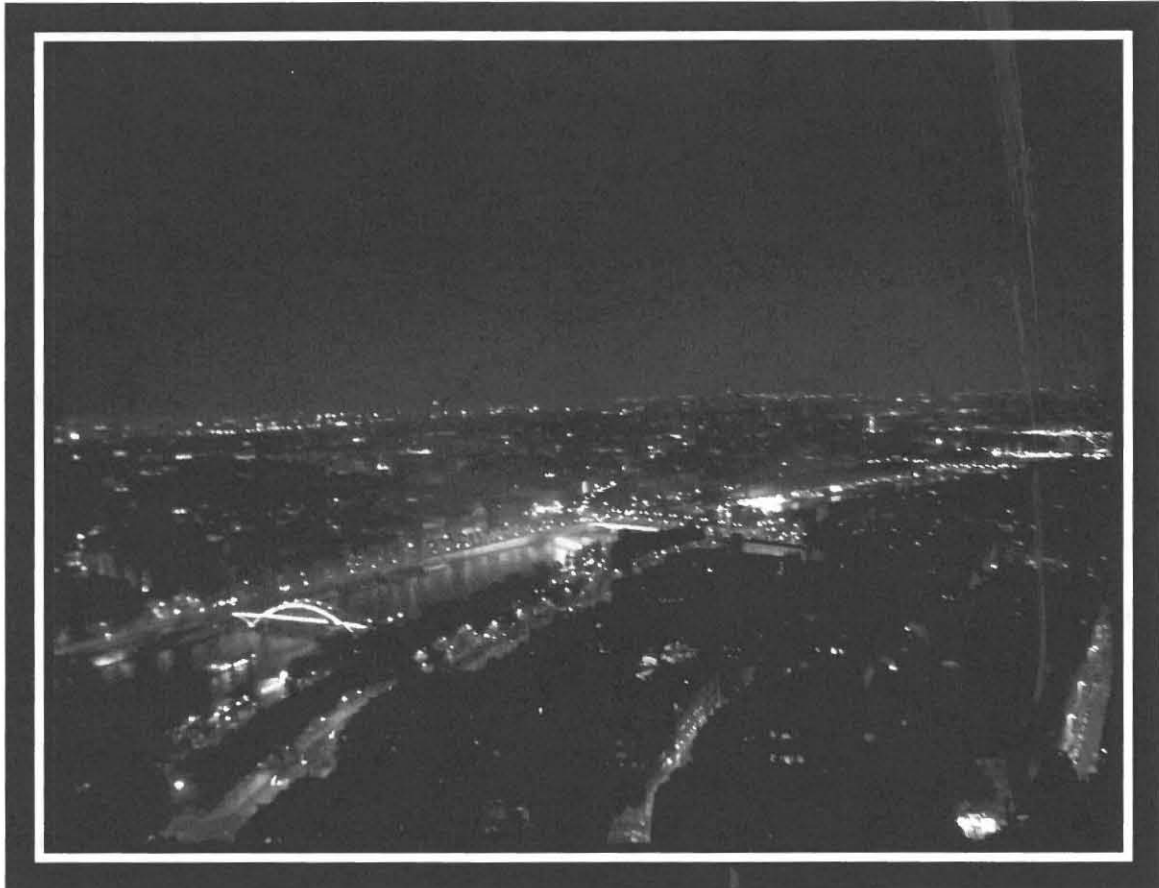
neighborhoods into a single capital” (Loyrette 363). Additionally, by statute, there is no structure taller than the Eiffel tower in the entire core of Paris. Furthermore, in 2008 a height restriction law was passed in Paris that stated no structure could be built over 37 meters (121 feet) tall, thus ensuring the tower’s reign over the Parisian skyline. From any sort of elevated area throughout the city, the tower undoubtedly draws the eye as it pierces the sky, commanding the attention of lookers-on.

Therefore, not only could the tower be seen throughout the city, but also *from* the tower, one can see the entire city. From various hilltops, to Montmartre, to the top of Notre Dame, “In the nineteenth century, writers, painters, and photographers had climbed ‘as high as they could’” (Loyrette 364). Now, the tower allowed them to climb even higher. The view the tower presented to the people inspired them. In 1923, Jean Giraudoux wrote *Prière sur la tour Eiffel*, that praised,

Before my eyes lie the ten thousand acres of the world where more has been thought, talked about, and written than anywhere else –the freest, most elegant, least hypocritical crossroads on the planet. The light air and empty space below are the accumulation of Heaven knows how much wit, intelligence, and taste. (Loyrette 364)

If one ascends the elevator to the third floor of the tower, the entire city is laid at the feet of the beholder. One striking element from the top of the tower is the unique look and texture of the city as a whole. One can see the ancient gothic architecture of Notre Dame. Classic stone and modern iron bridges are juxtaposed alongside one another as they form their arcs over the steady flow of the Seine. The Arc de Triomphe rises into the sky, bringing minds back to a time of war and chaos. A chaos now reflected in the traffic

below. Gasoline, the rev of engines and car horns are the smells and sounds of modernism that waft up and mingle with the monument.



View from the top of the Eiffel Tower, taken May 2011

From the peak of the tower, the multiple sub-cultures of neighborhoods, both old and new, which make up the city, appear. The curved basilica dome of Sacré Coeur now shares a skyline with the sleek peak of the Tour Montparnasse. From atop the tower, all of these sights unfold. The Eiffel tower serves as a gateway into Parisian history, where one can see the different footprints left by numerous people and historical events. These various symbols, originating in the past and present in today's society, are kept on the forefront of the people's minds by the Eiffel tower. This view of past meeting present,

offers the onlooker a temporal unity, where multiple time periods all come together in one vision.

Therefore, what is most unique about the tower is not what the people see when they look at the tower, but what the tower *allows* the people to see. The mélange of history and contemporary culture is a gift of sight. This visionary gift is representative of an intimate relationship between the people of France and the tower. This intimacy, provided by the people and for the people, illustrates elements of a constructed symbol in the tower.

Thus, over time, the attitude toward the tower was utterly transformed, or constructed. Citizens came to see that the tower did not make a mockery of the city but instead “made it possible to contemplate the centuries in tranquility” (Loyrette 364). The tower brings together memories of the country’s past with contemporary viewers. When past and present come together, a unity is created. Citizens with different everyday lives shared these common experiences in their past. Therefore, unity is a construct that developed by looking backwards, and the tower is a mechanism that enables people to look backwards. A society or culture of people is ever growing, and as a result of this, in a state of constant tension. People yearn for progress and cry out for change while all the while longing for the comfort and familiarity of tradition. The Eiffel tower, as a link to the past upon which French citizens could find unity and appreciate Paris’s beauty in the present, plays a substantial role in mitigating these tensions.

Although this symbol was originally imposed upon the people, it is significant that the tower did not become universally loved until the Parisian public accepted it and then assigned to it new meanings. Note in the picture angle below, how the tower and the

home's of the people seem to merge into one, and how the tower is portrayed in a protective stance.



Image courtesy of: National Geographic

While Nora considers the Eiffel tower an imposed symbol, I believe that its service to the people, and the citizen's evolving relationship with it, make the tower a constructed symbol. The attitudes surrounding the tower have relied heavily on the citizen's feelings towards the Eiffel Tower.

This is a slight deviation from Nora's original classification of places of memory. Nora stated that the degree of significance of a place of memory is not dependent on its

popularity, but on expert and international acknowledgement. Arguably, although expert support is significant, the support of the people is what initially draws the expert's eye, and thus without the support of the people, a symbol will cease to be a symbol.

NATURE IMPOSED, NATURE CONSTRUCTED

THE FRENCH GARDEN FROM THE 17TH CENTURY ONWARD

“The way in which a garden is continually preserved and kept is a representation of the past, and symbols and messages about local, regional, national and transnational identity.”

-Jennifer Jordan, Landscapes of European Memory, p.6

There are few symbols that more accurately embody the idea of an imposed symbol than the Palace of Versailles. Versailles was ultimately a creation of the King's will, a place where his glory and splendor could be displayed and admired. Conjuring up images of an enchanted palace, Versailles was an emblem of riches and power. Not only was the palace designed to impress, but the grounds surrounding it were also meant to convey the king's mastery of nature to the entire country, and even the entire world. A “triumph of rationalized landscape,” the palace of Versailles is a place where “a divine order and picturesque symbolic mythology organize a nature that is controlled, civilized, and strictly regulated” (Cachin 84). The epitome of this rationalization of nature lies specifically in the gardens of Versailles. In “Naissance de Versailles,” the artwork in the

garden is a central topic of discussion. In the garden of Versailles, the author notes how “the modifications of art have ably abetted nature to make it perfect” (Pommier 294).

Particularly in the garden, Louis aspired to showcase his dominance. He attempted to illustrate this by exhibiting dominance over nature in every way possible. He challenged the natural progressions of nature itself. For example, Louis had “orange trees blossoming in midwinter” (Pommier 300). Orange trees normally blossomed in the spring, and thrived throughout the summer, but in the garden of the Sun King, he commissioned the care and keeping of orange trees so that they thrived throughout the cruelest months of winter. Louis also had an extensive menagerie. Different, often exotic animals, caged there for his enjoyment, were representative of “Louis’s domination of the animal kingdom” (Pommier 300). Through these various illustrations of dominance, Louis strove to create an image of power. “The palace garden was essentially a device for creating perspective. And perspective was a technique for subordinating nature to order and reason” (Pommier 299).

It wasn’t enough for Louis to have massive and mighty trees in his garden, but the mastery he showed over them was vital to the image he sought to project to his subjects. Not only was Louis imposing this symbol upon the people, but he was also imposing upon nature, in order to create the message of dominance he so desired.

As we can see in the image below, Louis’s mastery over nature is representative of how he had hoped to run his country, and the ideas he aimed to portray. The trees are wild and rampant and allowed to grow, but only up until a certain point, where they are trimmed and cut evenly, stopped from growing, exactly where the king’s experts decided they should reach.



The garden of Versailles, taken April 2011

While Louis built the palace for himself, he meant to showcase it to the rest of the world and to all of his subjects. The mastery of nature and design in his garden was on display for all to see. Even in later years, particularly during the reign of Louis XIV, a substantial volume and variety of publications concerning the palace and its gardens were made available. “These can be grouped in four categories: guidebooks, descriptions in the *Mercure galant*, literary or poetical writings, and accounts of festival events” (Berger 29). The order and structure portrayed in the garden was meant to send a larger, poignant message to observers.



The garden of Versailles, taken April 2011

At this time in France, “nature would long be tolerated only in an idealized form, refined by distance or time” (Cachin 297). Yet even before Louis, the French had long been known for their rigidity and structure in manipulating the Earth.

The “aesthetic of the classic French garden was in place long before Versailles” (Walton 274). The gardens of Versailles were largely constructed around 1678. In 1664, the Tuileries were also constructed in the French “formal style.” The park is structured around a circular center, with long straight pathways branching off from the center. Also, the Luxembourg gardens in 1612 were fashioned in a similar manner. Notably the *Grand Bassin*, a large octagonal pond in the center of the park, particularly epitomizes this formal, highly structured style. In the garden of Bagatelle, located in the Bois de Boulogne, there were established strict rules and regulations pertaining to what types of plants could be planted where, and how certain trees could be cut. These rules still exist today. Thus, this rigidity did not originate with the Versailles gardens. Rather, Versailles was a focal point that brought existing ideas to the forefront of people’s minds. This idea of dominance over nature was something embodied at Versailles, and was viewed by the French as the ideal model for a proper garden.

Yet this rigid style slowly transformed over time. This transition was one that did not erase the French’s original inclination toward order and structure in nature. However, around the late 18th century, England gradually passed on to France a taste for the more “natural look.” In *The Parks and Gardens of Paris*, William Robinson, English gardener, presented his view on this transformation of French gardening: “And so Paris broke away from the old and dismal style of French gardening, with its clipped trees and unendurable monotony” (Chadwick 154). While this is the opinion of an Englishman, it is nonetheless accurate. This change came about gradually, and was influenced by the decreasing rigidity of class distinction and other socio-economic factors. As times progressed, the “fields” and gardens were no longer just a place where peasants were forced to work.

Nature became a place for reflection, a place for art, and a common ground that everyone could enjoy. Places such as the Luxembourg gardens and Bois de Boulogne opened to the public. In particular, during the 18th century in the Tuileries, cafés, lounge chairs and public toilets emerged in the gardens. These are all instillations catering to the public, and new additions to the garden *for* the people. Thus, as the people and society evolved, the garden evolved. While the idea of the rigid French garden was initially imposed upon the people, the people had the power to shape their relationship with the garden.

While these gardens were largely commissioned by kings and officials of the state, it was the people who viewed and enjoyed the garden that circulated ideas and thoughts about this particular style of gardening. Like the Eiffel tower, the most important aspect of the garden resulted from what citizens saw when they looked at it, or in this case, how they treated the garden. What was once a place for kings and nobles to repose became a place for all people to meet, converse, stroll and picnic. Today, the Tuileries and the Luxembourg gardens are filled with people doing just that. Additionally, the garden Buttes-Chaumont is today a famous “running park” in Paris. The park is filled with joggers training for long distance runs to people jogging for pleasure or additional exercise.

Also, the endurance of the garden left a long lasting impact. While a garden ebbs and flows with the seasons, the strict French style of the carefully formatted and geometrical garden was advantageous, in that portions of it always endured.

The study of form is not only of importance in the garden, because it is less changeable than colour, but because even in winter the beauty of geometrical patterns remains when the colours of the flowers are entirely

gone, and nothing is left beyond the sad recollection of their faded beauties. (Chadwick 160)

Although Versailles is undoubtedly an imposed symbol, it also contains elements of construction in that today the idea of gardening is a dual construct. While public gardens maintained a strict imposition on nature, the process of formal gardening has become undermined by the way in which the people of France interacted with the gardens, and also by the common garden of the citizen.

Like the Eiffel tower, the gardens of Versailles are also a monument that has endured. Throughout the French revolution and change in Republics, the palace was stormed, monarchs were executed, and furniture was removed from rooms and burned. Yet the gardens remained untouched. Why would a group of people in revolt against a tyrant and irresponsible monarch leave the gardens that manifested the order and control they so despised? It speaks volumes to the French respect for the order of nature that the gardens were permitted to remain.

However, unlike the Eiffel tower, the people's growing relationship with nature and a garden cannot be seen as openly. Part of this reason is because a garden evolved to be an intimate part of a home, and thus I rely on my creative application to showcase the true transformation of the French garden. In my next section, I describe my own personal experiences with a contemporary French garden. These experiences revealed strains of the form and order previously described, but also elements of a new, natural look. That the French have taken their formal garden and transformed it into something entirely their own illustrates that even the loftiest of imposed symbols can possess strains of construction by the French people over time.

-PART II-



Image courtesy of: http://www.polismaster.eu/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Paris_3-e1297351717160.jpg

Nora claims that today we exist in a state of “high commemorative frequency” (Nora 609). Currently, we are desensitized to commemoration. Nora states, “at one time cultural commemorations were rare, celebrated only by educational institutions” and “motivated directly by some moment in national history or other national consideration” (Nora 618). In today’s society, Nora claims commemorators “are too numerous to count” and “no scholar, writer, or artist has the slightest chance of escaping the commemorative radar” (Nora 617-8).

While I agree with Nora’s point on the current overemphasis on commemoration, I believe that the loss these *lieux de mémoire* have suffered is the loss of belonging to the French alone. These locations, the Eiffel Tower and the gardens of Versailles, are

indubitably French, but are today expressions of a French aesthetic destined for the entire world. Charging reduced admission for students, and special rates for large groups, these locations no longer cater to the French, but to those who are foreign to France.

From my own memories and experiences in France, I propose two new locations into the category of *lieux de mémoire*: the Rue Dénoyez in Belleville and the common French garden. The rue Dénoyez and the common French garden are *lieux de mémoire* still belonging entirely to the French.

While Nora's work on *lieux de mémoire* is thorough and extensive, in his distinction between imposed and constructed symbols, he underestimates the power of the French people's ability to construct a symbol. The people, those whose memories are stirred by these places and monuments, are responsible for creating and cultivating their own places of memory. These two *lieux de mémoire* are entirely constructed by the people, surrounded largely by those who are native to France, and thus two strong candidates for entry into the category of *lieux de mémoire*.

THE EVERYDAY FRENCH GARDEN

“(Geography) Is history as a surface. Child, you must love France because nature has made it beautiful and history has made it grand.”

-Ernest Lavisse, French Historian

The smell of fish so early in the morning invaded my nostrils and worked its way straight to my stomach, making it churn. I watched a man fill a large bowl with tiny

perfectly rounded pink shrimp. Cigarette smoke wafted through the air mixed with ladies perfume. Women clipped by in their heels and oversized scarves tied in intricate knots around their necks. A biker swerved around the corner, bread under his arm, weaving through the stream of people. Children ran. People called out in words that tasted different to my ears.

Some of the people frankly did not look French at all. People of Asian, Indian and African descent milled about the streets in multi-colored shawls and saris. Clusters of Indian and Moroccan restaurants lined the streets. Yet little did I know, I was about to have one of the most ethnically French experiences the city had to offer.

Belleville, my home for the next four months, is a historically working class neighborhood, today characterized by multi-ethnic neighborhoods and home to two Chinatowns. The name Belleville literally means “beautiful town.” In my opinion, this was a misleadingly naive description of this town.

My host mother was a short, loud woman. She welcomed me with a warm smile and firm hug. Her short black hair was tousled in every direction and pushed back with a large orange bandana that hung down her back. She had the kind of eyes that always crinkled at the corners when she smiled. She was a gardener in the Bois de Boulogne, and was aptly named Rosa. Rosa was an immigrant herself, having emigrated from Portugal to Paris when she was only 16.

Rosa’s apartment was decorated with colors I would have never expected one to pair together. The walls were painted a warm citrus yellow and the couch was a deep red. There were canvas paintings on the walls, all abstract art depicting swirls of deep greens, blues and purples. None of the colors seemed to take a break or be the lesser color. They

were each deep and rich and poignant. Windows were always propped open and the lights remained off until it was completely dark outside. The apartment seemed more like an exotic beach house than a city apartment.

On my first night in Belleville, Rosa took me on a walk. We walked up and down the uneven cobblestone streets to the *Parc de Belleville*, a local park where she took her two sons to ride bikes on Sundays. She said one of the best things about the park is that it offers the second best view of the city (second to only the view from the top of the Eiffel tower itself). It was a gem, she said, because most people who aren't from Paris have no clue it exists. *Il n'y a jamais de touristes ici* [there are no tourists here] she told me.

The park sprawled alongside a steep hill. When we reached the top, I was presented with quite a stunning, second-best view of Paris. The entire city lay before me, spiraling rooftops, and buildings formed a galaxy of swirling lights. I could see the familiar peaks of Notre Dame; the sleek rise of the Tour Montparnasse, and most prominently the Eiffel Tower, which was currently sparkling. After dark, the tower's lights sparkle every hour on the hour, until one o'clock in the morning, serving as a reminder to the city just how prominent it really is. All aglow, the tower seems to mimic the other monuments, taunting, *go ahead Sacré-Coeur, try and light up*.



View from le Parc de Belleville; taken February 2011

~

5:45 a.m., jardin de Bagatelle dans le Bois de Boulogne

It was sure to be a mild March day, but this morning before the sun was up tiny splinters of icy glass frosted the grass as she crunched her way to her sector.

“*Salut*” she nodded to Georges, her boss, who was already bent over a flowerbed. Seeing it was her, he grunted in reply and turned back to his work, annoyed that he had even taken the time to look up. Georges didn’t take kindly to her or anyone else that he knew was an immigrant. Even though she had been here twenty-five years, to George, Rosa was still the *Portuguese* woman the park had hired.

Arriving at her sector of the park, she sunk her fingers into the bare earth, kneading it with her hands, letting the feeling of the damp ground course through her body. Another day of work had begun.

Normally she tended to get along better with men; they were easier, less complicated, but not this group. She normally ate lunch in her sector of the garden where she worked. She much preferred the fresh air to the dark break room and the flowers served as better company too. Today, thanks to the warm sunshine, her co-workers lunched outside too, careful though, to place themselves a fair five meters from where she sat.

Georges was off on a rampage again, this time the victim of his rant was the overseer of the sector before hers. There were times she didn't think Georges was old enough to be as cranky and set in his ways as he was, but then again, people can always surprise you.

She watched as the men circled him and nodded in agreement to his rant. The park certainly had a way of hiring the same type of person: stubborn, uncooperative, set in their ways, and male. Almost always male. Except for her. In a way it made sense. She was a history major in her days at the Université and the park was a nostalgic place. Almost four hundred years old, the park was an historical landmark. Originally commissioned by Louis XIII, there were strict ordinances stating what could be changed and what could not be changed, more often than not, things couldn't be changed. So they hired a set of crotchety old men, set in their ways, who didn't like to change things. She hadn't the slightest idea why they hired her.

One day I came home to find Rosa sitting at the kitchen table, still in her work clothes. Her head rested in one hand, and in the other she held a large glass of *L'eau de Vie*. I was still getting to know Rosa as a person, but I imagined that a glass of *L'eau de Vie* at 4 o'clock in the afternoon wasn't the mark of a particularly good day.

I awkwardly sat beside her and asked what was wrong. Utterly discouraged with her job, she said she was tired of feeling *bête*. Rosa was a gardener at Bagatelle, a famously idyllic park in the Bois de Boulogne in Paris. Her normally stern and unimpenetrable brown eyes looked despondent as she recounted the story of her day. It all started when she took the initiative upon herself to trim a certain area of bushes. When she was halfway through, she said that her *chef* had come barreling over, and started yelling at her like a small child in front of everyone. She had cut a group of trees in a certain way that was not in accordance with their rules of the park. He screamed that those trees have been preserved in that certain way for over one hundred years, and who did she think she was deciding herself that they should now change? I patted her hand and consoled her, offering words of encouragement that it simply wasn't her fault.

What I still cannot forget is the look of complete defeat and shame in her eyes. Not only had she "broken the rules of the park" but it also seemed as though she felt as though she had violated a more sacred code. A code of preservation and dedication to history and her country that she strove to preserve, and had failed.

~

New Religion

Time
has not always existed.
Space and cosmos
once

swirled together
in a pool
of infinite chaos.

Time
is never intensified
nor
obliterated.

You stand
on a precipice.
The steady turn
of the axis
about to cast you off
while you cling.

The past pulls
while
your future
calls.

Hold steadfast
to them both.

Hold them like a new religion.

~

Rosa's work crisis seemed to mark a pivotal point in our relationship. It became habit for us to sit at that same table at end of the day and talk about our days over a glass of wine. As our friendship grew, Rosa and I began to spend some of our free time on the weekends together as well. However, it was not until I had lived with them for three months that she finally invited me to help her garden one Sunday afternoon. Her garden was a small area, enclosed by a row of tall trees in the back. The trees had skinny trunks interwoven into a long stretch of bark. The trees bloomed out at the top, and branches sprung out in all directions, rampant with leaves. The trees were planted side-by-side, all

equidistant from one another. To my amusement, these trees were all trimmed in a square fashion, perfectly even with one another.

Rosa started out by trimming the trees, a task I was not permitted to help with, as it involved sharp trimming scissors. She claimed that she did not trust her *maladroit* American with the large scissors, but I believed that this was a task that required perfection that she preferred to do herself. I watched from the patio chair as she would methodically trim an area of leaves, step back, make sure she was in accordance with the rest, and slowly continue. She did this to each tree, going back down the line twice to perfect her work.

As I sat I looked around the garden. Rosa had flowers of green, yellow and red all scattered in various pots. She had small pots, large pots, terracotta pots, two large mosaic pots, and even a few kitchen cups that held tiny sprouts. The pots were on the patio table, around the corners of the garden, and inside light hangings in place of the light bulbs. It was chaotic and beautiful at the same time. There was absolutely no rhyme or reason to her presentation, but it flowed beautifully. It was perfect poetry.

Next, it was time to trim the grass. Rosa's tiny *jardin* required only a kitchen scissors to trim all the grass. I watched as she snipped at odd angles at the ground until the grass was cut, letting the trimmings fall wherever they chose to land. She then raked her newly cut grass into the dirt, creating a base of dirt intermingled with intermingled grass trimmings. *C'est plus naturel*, she kept saying. I helped her rake and after Rosa deemed that we had sufficiently mixed up the newly cut grass, we stepped back and admired our work. She smiled.

I laughed and smiled at the irony of a gardener, who admired her *plus naturel* garden, but who had just spent a half hour trimming her square trees to perfection.



Rosa's Garden; taken March 2011

Rosa's garden is a window into how the French have taken the formal and rigid structure of gardening and constructed it to fit their liking. Rosa's garden still contained elements of gardening that one would have seen at Versailles, but it is this formal gardening intermingled with a natural and pure idea of nature that creates something new in itself. When one looks at Rosa's garden, one sees the French paradox: taking ideas and concepts that have been imposed upon them and constructing them into something entirely their own. However, the interesting thing about this paradox is that even when

these symbols are constructed and made their own, one can always find certain remnants of history, giving these symbols a unified cultural common ground.

THE RUE DENOYEZ

“Les gens viennent et peignent ce qu’ils veulent. Tous les jours, il y a quelque chose de nouveau. Parfois, ils peignent sur des murales vieux, mais ils respectent l’art qui est là”

[People come and paint what they want. Everyday there is something new. They sometimes paint over old murals, but they respect the art that is there.]

-Rosa Mateus, Belleville resident



Image courtesy of: parisbyphoto.com

On one of our afternoon walks, Rosa started talking about her neighborhood. Before Belleville was considered a part of Paris, part of its large appeal was, charmingly, the cheap drinks. The Belleville bars and nightlife offered a relief from the burden of heavy taxes that came from living directly in Paris. In 1860, Paris expanded and staked

claim over this area, and Belleville rapidly declined. Belleville no longer provided something the city could not offer, so she was abandoned (Roberts). Many businesses closed and the area disintegrated into an eyesore, with vacant streets and unkempt abandoned buildings. According to Rosa, Belleville became a place where men of “questionable morals” gathered, and where down-on-their-luck families relocated as a last resort. Desolate, “Belleville” was now an oxymoron to its name.

Yet, Rosa said, an artist’s eye sees differently than others. A true artist can grasp and capture beauty in something where others can find none. Belleville captured the eye of the artists. And thus begun its transformation.

The abandoned shops and vacant streets became the artists’ canvas. Colorful murals emerged on the stone walls and seemingly seeped out of the stone a new life that revitalized the area. Capturing the eye of curious locals, the streets slowly began to fill again with clusters of people gazing at the artwork before them.

Turning onto the rue Dénoyez, Rosa’s story unfolded before me. The walls looked like nothing I had ever seen before. The entire street, as far as I could see, was covered top to bottom in spray graffiti, large murals, and individual pieces of art shoved into the nooks and crannies of the crumbling stonewalls. Growing up around Chicago, I was not unfamiliar with the bubble letters and phrases that graced train cars, underpasses, and the sides of buildings, but this was utterly different.

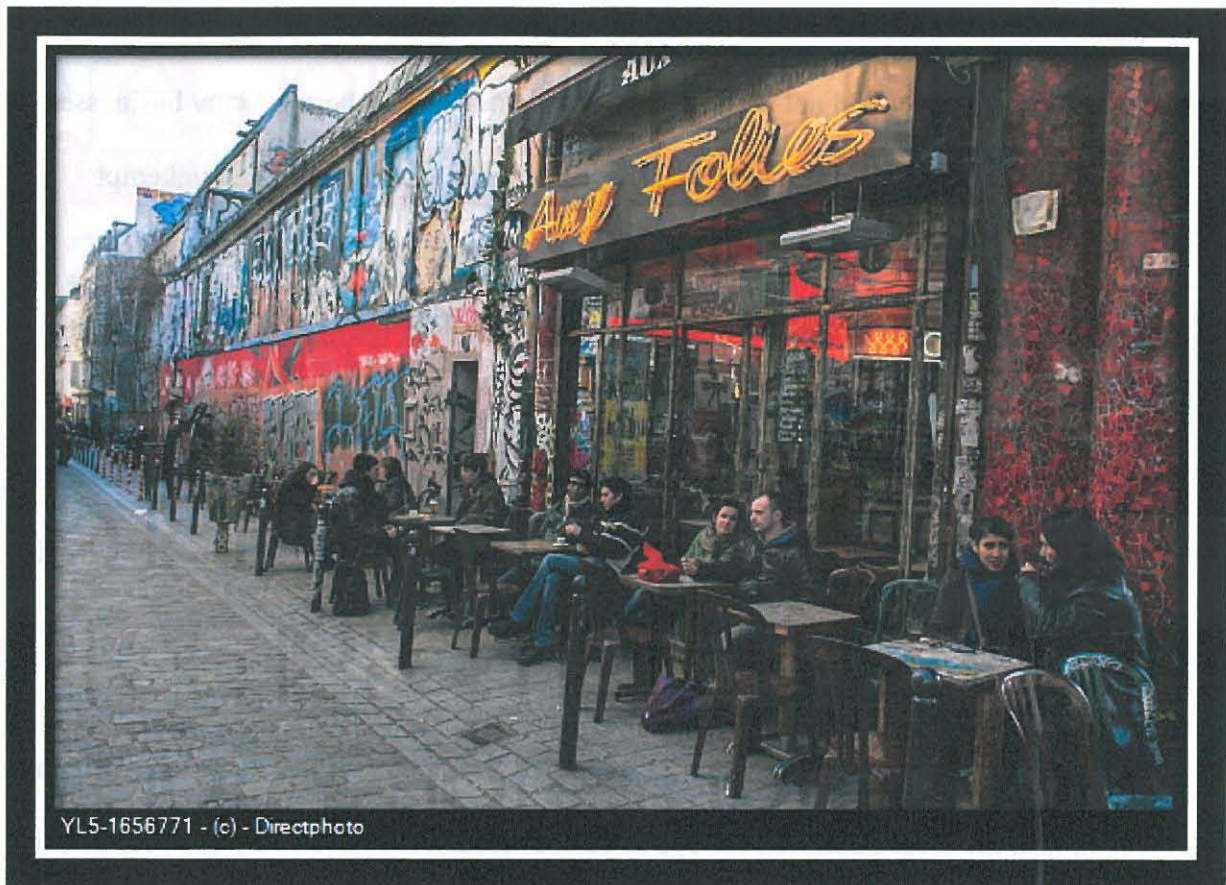


Image courtesy of:
<http://previews.agefotostock.com/previewimage/bajaage/1eafbd655ced07e835ab32a9a19c73a9/YL5-1656771.jpg>

There were layers of words upon words. People had spray painted their names, sometimes with dates commemorating the time of their presence at the wall. There were names and pictures depicting couples and families, conjoined in unique, circuitous designs. There were countless shapes and images and, notably, many face-like shapes. Figures that were mere shapes of head, with no distinct face, to black, brown and white faces depicted in smiles, tears and laughter. Even the flower pots lining the road were mosaic, depicting their own geometric flowers that zigzagged up the side of the pot, their orange and red jagged petals striking against the blue patterned background.

Aside from the occasional métro car, Paris was fairly free of graffiti. In fact, Rosa said, this was only one of three places in Paris where graffiti was legalized. *How French*, I thought, to *color outside of the lines, but only where coloring outside of the lines is allowed*.

~

Dénoyez

Exquisite construction.
Your exceptional beauty
or
singular ugliness
is a long-lasting
impression.

You are poor.
You are dirty.
But oh!-
the colors of your dirt.

The sheen
of your graffiti
reflects the sun.
Your art
has breathed
into the people
new life.

Ever changing
yet
unmoving.

I demand questions
from your body
of unmoving stone.
Your measured silence
rushes into my ideas.

Surprise me.
Shock my soul.

You are
Proteus

and your people
are the un-drowned.

~

The next day I was compelled to again seek out the colorful wall in the daylight. I suffered an agonizingly long “touristy” walk with a map held upright and a befuddled expression, searching for street signs. I was hesitant to ask for directions. Belleville was located on the outskirts of Paris, and Rosa wasn’t kidding when she said you didn’t find tourists here. People immediately picked up on the fact that I was a foreigner. While Paris was not unfamiliar with foreigners, Belleville was unfamiliar in dealing with them. When I looked at my map or checked out at the grocery store, people seemed to regard me with a bemused expression that seemed to say, “Are you lost? You know where you are, right? The Louvre is over there.” It was an area of Paris that was unaccustomed to intruders on their everyday lives.

A mural of what seemed to be an ocean caught my eye from around the corner, and I knew I had found it again. Eclectic blue ocean waves a violent shade of violet boarded this section of the wall. A sailboat arose out of the water and beneath it was a small boy. The boy seemed to regard the ship with polite indifference, while simultaneously running away. He was terrified and unconcerned, frantic yet at ease. It was then I realized the *Dénouez* literally means “un-drowned.”



Image courtesy of: www.untappedcities.com/paris

Wanting to mark on my map the wall's specific location, I hesitantly asked a nearby lady at a café table, "Excusez-moi, Madame, avez-vous un stylo?"

To my surprise, she smiled warmly at me and struck up a conversation. Not that Parisians are unfriendly, but they do not smile or nod at one another on the street and most kept generally to themselves. We began to talk, and she mentioned that she really appreciated how I asked her for a pen in a correctly formed French sentence. She said most Americans she has encountered would have looked at her with wide eyes and said "PEN" in a loud slow voice whilst mimicking a writing action with their hands. The lady was refreshingly social and kind. She could tell that I wasn't a native French speaker, but she still chatted amiably with me in French, pretending not to notice when I fumbled with a verb tense. I told the lady that I loved Paris and was debating spending another semester

here if I could. Her smile deepened and she gestured to the wall and said, *How could you not?*

I was immediately struck by the profound and genuine sense of appreciation in her voice. Some may mistake this pride for arrogance, but I believe it runs far deeper than that. The French have a deep, profound sense of national pride that most of us do not possess. Not only do they have it, but they are proud and willing to proclaim it to people. By looking at the wall, the lady was reminded of something that made her proud to be French.



Drawing of the rue Dénoyez. Picture by Reuben Torset (Rosa's son), age 5 & Jessica Rochford

Like the Eiffel tower, the wall was representative of the French overcoming an obstacle. Hard times had almost run down the entire town, but the French had embraced the area for what it was, and made it beautiful. The wall, like Rosa's garden, also embodies a certain French paradox. When the city imposed Paris on the town of Belleville and it became run down, the local people embraced the wall and took it into their own hands. Since then, the wall has made an impression on the French people and, in my opinion, has become an outward representation of the French people's inner reality of what it is to be French.

-FIN-

Nora himself admits that his own classifications of *lieux de mémoire* are not comprehensive. While he clearly outlines his distinction between imposed and constructed symbols, he allows for a certain amount of ambiguity among the symbols as a larger group. Nora admits that what he constitutes as a *lieu de mémoire* today might not necessarily be considered a *lieu de mémoire* in the future. Moreover, these essays are not meant to encompass all French symbols, but to serve as examples, aimed, "at shedding light on the idea of a *lieu de mémoire*" ("Introduction" XI).

These *lieux de mémoire*, imposed or constructed, are the cohesive glue that reminds citizens of what they most value in their history and contemporary culture. This connection among the people of what it is to be a French citizen is the spiritual and cultural side of citizenship, and the power of this should not be undermined or underestimated. Nora's imposed symbols have endured throughout numerous

generations. The Eiffel tower and Versailles have been integral parts of the French culture and landscape for many years. While the rue Dénoyez and the common French garden do not have the longstanding temporal history, these other symbols possess, there is a common distinctness about them that has endured throughout time, thus making their age an irrelevant factor. The rue Dénoyez and the common French garden are the epitome of constructed symbols. Constructed by the people, who have inscribed their significance upon them, these two entities serve in uniting the French under a common idea of what it is to be French.

While I do acknowledge Nora's distinctions of imposed and constructed symbols, I believe the true heart of *lieux de mémoire* lies in the symbols that are constructed by the people. As we have seen with the Eiffel tower and the garden of Versailles, even imposed symbols are embraced and re-constructed by the people; it is during this renovation that these symbols gain much of their significance.

The two symbols that I have proposed for entry into the category of places of memory, the rue Dénoyez and the common French garden, are symbols that have had their importance inscribed upon them by the people of France. While these two symbols contain strains reminiscent of more rigid and imposed symbols, they nonetheless have been taken into the hands of the citizen and molded into entities significant to the people. These symbols embody a French paradox of acknowledgement of history, with regard to the present. This paradox is the French way of embracing their rigidly structured culture while simultaneously taking it into their own hands to transform it. Yet in this liberty, the French still adhere to certain constraints. The French garden was traditionally the embodiment of structure and order. Today, the gardens of citizens still pay certain tribute

to this aspect of their heritage, yet they also embrace a more natural look, creating a mélange of structure and order, but with appreciation of nature in a pure form.

The rue Dénoyez is a unique and ever-changing expression of the people of Belleville. While the wall remains firmly rooted in the ground, the artwork upon the wall is ever-changing and evolving, and dictated by the people. In terms of constraints, while the artists of France have taken their liberties with the rue Dénoyez, it is important to remember that the rue Dénoyez is also one of the few legalized laneways for graffiti in the city. Thus the French have not only embraced and nurtured the art on this Belleville street, but they have also taken freedom and applied it within the constraints denoted by France itself. This, in a way, mirrors the people's relationship with the Eiffel tower. Although the tower is firmly in place and has changed minutely over the years, the people's relationship with the tower has changed drastically, and it is the people that determine what the tower represents to them as a whole. Through these *lieux de mémoire*, we can observe this paradox that seems to be inherited in French "DNA" and commonly possessed from citizen to citizen.

In the introduction, we explored the idea of *le patrimoine*. Nora claims that these *lieux de mémoire* come to represent the French people. Furthermore, Nora defines *le patrimoine* as a word with the capability to name ever-evolving places or objects. While I acknowledge that *lieux de mémoire* indeed possess Protean qualities, I firmly believe that there are always strains of a certain cultural relativism present. Nora claims that it is impossible for us to know what will be considered a *lieu de mémoire* in 150 years. I believe he envisions 150 years as the length of time a significant place will retain its original meaning. I suggest however that a *lieu de mémoire* will grow and evolve with the

people from the time of its creation. Or how the rue Dénoyez is always being painted over and reconfigured. The connections between these images and the memories they hold, I believe, are meant to be a “shared process of understanding that make it possible for us to inhabit a common world” (Johnson 76). These places have the power to express an ever-evolving yet singular message to a large group of diverse people: *We are French. This is France.*

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