

**Expanding Livable Space: Memorialization and Sacralization of Providence's
Mashapaug Pond**

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Mashapaug pond is sick. Community concerns for Providence's largest fresh water pond as well as attempts at diagnosis and remediation have been richly documented online by organizers, activists, concerned citizens, and Brown University students and faculty. This growing archive, undertaken in tandem with outreach, education, and environmental remediation projects, is part of a larger cultural and historical movement to recover, memorialize, and deploy the stories of otherwise forgotten, underprivileged communities. In the case of Mashapaug pond, the memorialization project is linked to an on-the-ground activist campaign to clean up the pond area and engender community stewardship. Recovering the pond as a community-owned, environmentally safe space for urban activity requires using individual memories to create a larger social history. The pond memorialization project is helping to create a social history and re-claim the pond as a sacred space, using or drawing out notions of power, property, exclusion, nostalgia and specific American tropes and myths of the sacred.

Once a site of Native American life and community activity, the Mashapaug pond area is now surrounded by office buildings, parking lots, chain-link fences, and permeated by a general sense of community apathy. The process of pond memorialization calls attention to the urban renewal visited upon this community and the alienation felt by its members, as well as their nostalgia for an earlier period in the pond's history. In the 1990's, grassroots environmental activism in urban areas across America increased awareness about industrial pollution, spurred increased state and federal regulatory activity and ignited public debates and controversies that continue today (Bullard and Johnson). Ongoing debates concern responsibility for the environmental impact of intense industrial activity in the late 19th through the mid 20th centuries and ensuing industrial decline. In the case of Mashapaug pond, city and neighborhood awareness of pollution began in the early years of the 20th century, some time after Gorham, a nearby silver manufacturing company—founded in 1890 and later bought by Textron—began polluting the area (Fulton). Gorham used the pond as a dumping site for their waste, however the pond's current pollution levels are most likely a result of other forms of pollution, including rampant storm runoff (Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island).

In recent years, the residents around Mashapaug pond are increasingly low-income people of color (although one neighborhood near the pond is medium to high income). According to 2000 census

data, 70% of the residents living in the reservoir area (encompassing the pond's densest neighborhoods) are people of color (mostly Black, Latino and Asian), and 10% of families are living below the poverty line (The Providence Plan). Starting in the 1990's, Textron, the city, and state health and environmental agencies experimented with different kinds of signage to warn residents away from the pond. However, locals continued to use the pond, mostly for fishing, with apparent disregard for the posted warnings. In 2007, the surrounding community became more attentive to the pond's issues, in large part due to the work of one artist-activist, Holly Ewald, and the organization that she founded, the Urban Pond Processional (UPP). Ewald was asked by the Rhode Island Council for the Arts and the state's Health Department to create more colorful, engaging and universally understood warning signs for the pond site. Ewald worked to ensure that the community had a voice in helping to develop the narratives eventually embodied in the new signs. In many ways, this initial project was simply an outreach and exposure project: the pond was dangerous and the community needed to know the risks.

After Ewald's initial experience talking to parents, school children and other community members, and engaging them through the arts, she decided to broaden her educational and outreach work. Eventually, she also became active in working with the city, the health department and the Environmental Justice League of Providence to help organize and advocate for a speedy cleanup. This work is still ongoing and includes a number of actors and a complex network of social, political and economic configurations and negotiations, the details of which are outside of the purview my paper. Yet the inclusion of community knowledge and support persists and appears necessary to ensure the creation of sustainable changes to the pond.

In 2011, Ewald and the UPP connected with Brown University's Anne Valk in the Public Humanities Program, and Valk decided to focus her oral history course on the Mashapaug pond site for the next three years. Since then, students in the course have done historical research and collected oral histories, resulting in a body of research and scholarship on the area. Various public events have been held (including a yearly UPP neighborhood event and walk) and multiple online collections of material now exist. Students in Valk's 2011 course organized a museum exhibit and those in her 2012 course designed a cell phone audio tour around the pond area. The human labor involved in deciding who to

interview, what questions to ask, how to curate the material and events and what the purposes of the various projects are, is visible through examination of the material. Above all, there is a focus on the pond as a site that holds memories, with the aim of drawing on these memories to recover and honor the past and promote a new sense of stewardship for the future. Intentionality about story gathering and storytelling is apparent both in Ewald's work and in the oral history projects. Among the tools that Valk and her students have brought to the pond, is a desire to collect a rich, diverse and complex network of stories—representing different social, cultural and ethnic groups as well as historical epochs.

Postmodern theory complicates ideas about the individual and the collective, problematizing collective or social memory narratives. But in their book on social memory, Fentress and Wickham ask “How does one make individual memory ‘social,’ then?” Their answer: “Essentially by talking about it (x)”. This is what the collection of the pond material—and the shift in perspective about the pond—illuminates: through the process of collection, exhibition, education, outreach and engagement, a social history on the pond has been created. This history is non-linear, often of necessity fragmentary and riven by controversies (who is responsible? what are the solutions?), yet it is still (indeed, because) social, and, as connected to one geographical space, collective.

In his book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Andreas Huyssen is critical of the contemporary obsession with memory, arguing that it is tied to a deep sense of anxiety provoked by amnesia and technological change and our fleeting attention spans. He writes: “Obsession with memory clashes with intense public panic of oblivion (17).” He is critical of attempts to “musealize” the past, directly connecting them to narcissism, nationalism and the mainstream media. Yet he does allow for memory to have some purpose in

...processes of democratization and struggles for human rights, expanding and strengthening the public spheres of civil society. Slowing down rather than speeding up, expanding the nature of public debate, trying to heal the wounds inflicted in the past, nurturing and expanding livable space rather than destroying it. (27)

Ultimately, however, he urges that we “remember the future, rather than simply worry about the future of memory (29).” While it is important to understand that “approaches that posit relatively stable formations

of social and group memories . . . are not adequate to grasp the current dynamic of media and temporality, memory, lived time, and forgetting” (Huyssen 17), the Mashapaug pond memorialization project as a whole is an attempt to “creatively remember” for the purpose of the future—an attempt to “expand livable space.” It is clear that as a result of the project, the space the pond occupies—in memory, in online repositories, in organizations and physical, metaphorical and mental spaces around the city—has expanded.

In my own professional life, I have seen evidence of a collective sense of populist social history emerging in Providence. I work part-time teaching Providence K-12 students at the Rhode Island School of Design’s museum. One of the schools we work with is Alvarez High School, which was built on contaminated ground near the pond. Consequently, Alvarez students have no access to outdoor space (and no sports teams), a fact that has, justifiably, caused contention, resentment and a palpable sense of anger. While teaching a pre-visit course in an 11th grade history class at Alvarez high school, my colleague and I introduced a piece of decorative art made by Gorham that the students would see during their upcoming visit to the museum. The students all had some awareness of Gorham’s history, and their teacher pointed outside and said: “Gorham is the reason you don’t have a football field and the reason that fence is up.” When the students came in to the museum to see the Gorham piece—a silver, gold encrusted, “Neptune Epergne”—one tiny portion of a 740 piece silver dining service set—the sense of discomfort surrounding the human toll of production was evident. A group of Providence public school students discussing the environmentally destructive history behind an isolated museum piece changed the traditional discussion space at RISD, usually dominated by the students and faculty of one of the nation’s top design schools. It also produced a radically different interpretation of that piece, which visitors and critics usually fawn over for its incredible details and the craftsmanship that went into its construction. For that lesson, the piece became a touchstone for a new social history. And the reason that Alvarez teachers and students had this historical knowledge, and shared sense of history, was because of the active organizing efforts of UPP.

The relationship of activism to memory is unique. In her book on the labor of memory, Elizabeth Jelin writes:

The past is gone, it is already de-termin(at)ed; it cannot be changed. The future, by contrast, is open, uncertain, and indeterminate. What can change about the past is its meaning, which is subject to re-interpretations, anchored in intentions and expectations toward the future. That meaning of the past is dynamic and is conveyed by social agents engaged in confrontations with opposite interpretations, other meanings, or against oblivion and silence. Actors and activists “use” the past, bringing their understandings and interpretations about it into the public sphere of debate. Their intention is to establish/convince/transmit their narrative, so that others will accept it” (Jelin 26).

Without activism, educational outreach and storytelling about the pond’s sickness and Gorham’s role, these students would not have had the confidence to discuss a fine art object in the space of the museum. Instead, the dominant interpretation of Gorham silver as representing the finest craftsmanship and design would have been maintained. Instead, the specter of the polluted pond found its way into the gallery. And this radical act would not have occurred simply with a collection of individual memories and education around a pluralist notion of the past. Instead, certain aspects of the pond’s past and present were highlighted in order to build a sense of the sacredness of this space.

In the introduction to *American Sacred Space*, a collection of essays on sacred spaces in America, David Chidester and Edward Linenthal analyze the concept of the sacred, outlining the schism between substantive and structural theories. For the former, the sacred is deep, poetic, full of spiritual or religious meaning and power. Durkheim calls this concept “an empty signifier” (qtd. In Chidester and Linenthal 6). Levi Strauss expands the structuralist perspective: it is “a value of indeterminate signification, in itself empty of meaning and therefore susceptible to the reception of any meaning whatsoever” (qtd. In Chidester and Linenthal 6). “As a situational term,” Chidester and Linenthal argue, “the sacred is nothing more nor less than a notional supplement to the ongoing cultural work of sacralizing space, terms, persons, and social relations. Situational, relational and frequently, if not inherently, contested, the sacred is a by-product of this work of sacralization. The authors then outline some of the aspects of the sacred, which emerge through a process of sacralization.

The sacred always has power at its heart; the actual physical space occupied by anything sacred is inherently political, since positioning requires “selection, orientation, limitation or conquest” (Chidester and Linenthal 8). There is often an act of exclusion involved in making something sacred, even if the exclusionary process is invisible. Often there is an inherent politics of property involved as well: “a sacred place was not merely a meaningful place; it was a powerful place because it was appropriated, possessed and owned (Chidester and Linenthal).” It can also be expressed through a modern sense of nostalgia or alienation at a sense of lost sacredness.

Along with—and tied to—notions of power, politics, property and loss, the changes to the land, conceptions of nature and the Native American presence make Mashapaug pond a rich site for sacralization. The work done by activists, organizers, artists, historians and oral history collectors has created a deep sense of loss, longing and anger within the community. Many of those who live near Mashapaug pond, especially the low-income residents, are upset about living close to a site of pollution. And perhaps most important to the re-sacralization project, a once spiritually important Native American space has been tainted by corporate greed and public neglect. Especially in American history, change and loss are linked to conceptions of the natural or wild, and these concepts and tropes play an important role in the sacralization of Mashapaug pond.

As William Cronon outlines in *Changes in the Land*, the colonial transformations of life in the area eventually named New England were not just social, cultural, and economic, but also ecological. The white settlers had radically different ideas of how to interact with the land than the Native American inhabitants. Encouraged by the allure of trade and profit, and influenced by Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke, who claimed it was man’s God-given responsibility to own and improve the land through productive use, early settlers saw the land as a space ripe for cultivation. Their ability to productively use the land was an argument they relied on when seizing the land—claiming that the Native Americans had no right to land that they were not improving. As Cronon notes, “Environment may initially shape the range of choices available to a people at a given moment, but then culture reshapes environment in responding to those choices” (13). This was not just true for the changes to the New England land in the

1700's, but for periods of industrial change and urbanization that shape the physical landscape, and now the city, shifting conceptions of humans' relationship with the land.

As evidenced most dramatically in the Transcendentalist movement, wilderness in America has often been endowed with a highly romanticized, religious, mythical sacredness. Yet contemporary critiques demonstrate that treating nature as sacred elides the political, economic and social relationships that go into creating, maintaining and organizing it (Chidester and Linenthal 10). Cronon also argues that romanticized conceptions of nature as separate from human activity are damaging, contributing to an "othering" of the wilderness that among other things obscures the fact that "wilderness" itself is a human construct, inextricable from the human. (Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness" 87). Mashapaug pond represents an interesting counter-example to these themes since the oral history collections—and UPP's work—focus on the displacement of the Native Americans, as well as their reclamation of the site through the collection, the presence of Gorham manufacturing and its social, political and economic ties to the space and the constant human interactions occurring at the pond. To trace some of the themes and ideas that go into re-claiming the pond as a sacred space, I will turn to three oral histories of men who grew up in the area in 1945-1965. I chose these three histories since, in many ways, they are distinct. For one thing, the three men are respectively Native American, Black and White. Yet they all experienced the pond in the mid twentieth century, when it was still a well-used site. Their comments share certain conceptions of the pond—many of which I have introduced. But because of the diverse perspectives of each man, these interviews provide an appropriately postmodern perspective on historical collections, memory and activism. Collected for a purpose, the memories of these three men contribute to the making of a social history and the sacralization of the pond for the purpose of creating empathy and stewardship.

Everett G. Weeden Jr. is a member of the Narragansett tribe and a leader in the Rhode Island Native American community. During the oral history interview he was speaking as Tall Oak, the name he uses when he represents his people (Tall Oak 1). As a person accustomed to speak for a group, Tall Oak's interview offers the broadest perspective on the pond's history, as it is connected to individual and group memories but also embedded within the larger economic, social, cultural and political structures that shaped them. Tall Oak is a historian of his people. During the interview he outlines the local

Narragansett tribe's collective relationship with the land around the pond through history. About the Native American presence around the area up through the mid-twentieth century he says:

So, Mashapaug Pond, having the water there and having the land where you could raise your own crops, as our people did, you know, because we were agricultural people initially, and all of those things were able to be maintained there. So, that's why the pond provided all of that back then and that's what makes it such a tragedy to see the way none of those things are possible now (Tall Oak 7).

Not long before the interview Tall Oak visited the pond with a family member. It was the first time he saw all of the warning signs about the contamination. He commented on how "altered" the area was; noting that the damage done to the pond was "such a blow (Tall Oak 8). Yet he is hopeful that the through the project's attempt "to monitor all of this and document all of this" that "enough good will come out of it (8). He adds:

. . . it depends on how we utilize the information we have and how we can deal with the system and the laws that are in effect that don't always work in our favor as far as saving the Earth because in this society, it seems anytime there's a conflict between the economy and the so-called environment, the economy wins because there's money involved," (9)

Tall Oak refers to the "so called environment" here to point out, as Cronon does, that the environment is not separate from the people that live there.

He attributes the problems with the pond to human alienation from nature: "That's part of the problem. That's why you have the development and all that's contaminated the pond to the extent that it has...paved all the grass and cut down all the trees" (Tall Oak 8). Ultimately, Tall Oak's individual memories—and the memories of his family members and tribe—connect to a spiritual sense of the inherent sacredness of the earth. In his interview he expresses anger that this sacredness has not been protected but he also expresses hope that through documentation, storytelling and education people will see the errors of their ways and re-sacralize these spaces through a system of shared respect:

If we want to work along with it instead of trying to control nature as this society's done for too

long; damming the rivers and paving the grass and everything else. . . . That's probably the most important lesson that has to come out of this look at the pond and the community and the people around there that made it. It's that respect and it's a position that no one can argue against (Tall Oak 16).

Through Tall Oak's interview we see that certain memories are still considered collective. Even if there may be some problems with this conception, the sense of a universal, collective message a disenfranchised group can use to agitate for change helps create a more compelling and strategically valuable narrative about the importance of the pond.

In fact, in a project completed just last year, Holly Ewald collaborated with members of the Narragansett tribe to create a book of collages, stories and poems that comment on and interpret the Narragansett's relationship with the pond. Throughout UPP's projects and workshops runs an emphasis on creating stewardship for the land; the Native Americans' treatment of the land stands as an educational tool for pointing out the space's history, but also to gesture to possibilities for the future. However, as Tall Oak said in his interview: "we can all get as enthusiastic as possible...but if we can't get access to the people who actually are in power, at the controls, it's going to be much more difficult to make those changes that are mandatory for our common survival" (Tall Oak 13). This reflects a shared sentiment seen in the interviews: that the systems of power control the space of the pond.

Ed Hook's interview is a treasure trove of memory captured in physical space; he traces his 1950's paper route through the neighborhoods, telling stories of family and friends, noting the changes to the land, emphasizing that what once was clay, marsh and hills is now flattened and cemented. Listeners to this oral history feel transported to the late 1950's, riding along with Ed as he delivers papers, listing old names of streets, tracing movements of people, pointing out the train and bus lines that also demarcate racial divisions; he even outlines the beat cops' turf (Hooks 6). Many of these markers, including the street names, no longer exist. The area is largely developed urban, industrial space and his excited nostalgia for the past is palpable throughout the interview. Yet the sense of nostalgia—for the blueberries, blackberries, frogs, swimming holes, clay hills and vibrant community life—is felt intensely by the contemporary listener, now deprived of these experiences.

Much of the loss is expressed through Hooks' storytelling—his energy, enthusiasm and playfulness (he tells of making frogs smoke cigarettes and “raiding” fruit trees on private property) and the sense that the pond was a special space, now enshrined in memory. Across racial lines, a number of interviews with men who grew up in the neighborhood express this playful, boyhood troublemaking reminiscent of the movie set in that era, *Stand By Me*. Hooks expresses a sense that the pond area was a sacred, natural space separate from the city: ...this is [was] marsh. Over here, hill's coming up. I used to think the area was great ... It wasn't like the rest of the city. The rest of the city was all built up. You know you can find [that] anywhere. Here you were open (19). At the end of the interview he remembers another detail about the space: “Oooh! And this area is pretty much you know [I] almost want to say wilderness (27).” Hooks' memory of the “open,” “wilderness” stocked with fruit, animals and topographical diversity stands in stark contrast to the Mashapaug pond area of today. His role in helping to shape a new collective nostalgia for the past is important, both to him and to the memorialization project: “Well I hadn't done much of any research except walking around...until I saw you guys there at the ball field, you know I hadn't done any research on the area, just basic experience that's it (29).” Hooks' “basic experience” made him an excellent memory historian of the natural space. A trait that he shares with Dick Chatowsky.

Chatowsky was only three years older than Hooks but traveled in a vastly different circle in the white Mashapaug community. Yet his interview is similar to Hooks' in a number of ways. First of, all, like Hooks, he uses the map of Mashapaug to direct his interview, telling the interviewer immediately: “I'm going to start in the north corner of Mashapaug Pond and ... work my way counter clockwise all the way around the pond in back of Gorham's and then all the way back to my house. So let's start now (2).” Chatowsky's interview reflects the access he had to more spaces around the pond, but it also replaces an innocent playfulness with a focus on the darker side—the auto body shop that dumped old cars into the pond rather than take them to the dump, a death in the ice, and multiple stories of near-death accidents. He also tells of experiences ice-skating, swimming, building and trouble making—again connected, and perhaps constructed partly in subconscious response, to the American trope of the innocent but mischievous boy coming of age in nature. Like Hooks, he talks about the clay, and connecting to Tall Oak, he mentions the Native American presence:

. . . right up from the, the pond, there was a vein of clay that had to be thirty – forty – maybe fifty feet wide. And we as kids dig a cave in that clay...But I can remember that clay cave and I'm sure the Indians [that] were in that area used that clay, maybe with some other stuff to make potteries, what not, whatever they did. But that's the only vein of clay and it was a natural vein of clay. It wasn't something that was dumped there because like I say, it went in twenty five, thirty feet, maybe forty feet ... (Chatowsky 7)

Unlike Hooks and Tall Oak, Chatowsky's interview is self-directed; he takes the interviewer on a memory journey around the pond. He barely touches on the question of the pollution and avoids any questions related to the contemporary situation. His interview is a narrated map of pond memories. He and his roving group of friends felt ownership of the pond—they built on it, nearly died in it, carved their names in the trees surrounding it and played tricks on each other in its presence. Yet they also left other groups out of their ownership—people like Hooks, whose experiences of the actual space of the pond seemed peripheral to residents like Chatowsky.

All together, these three men and their responses to questions about their relationship to this space provide a diverse, interconnected social history of one area of Providence during the mid-20th century. The fact that these three diverse men are connected in their relationship to the pond and that their stories are informing one memorialization project reflects the shared unity—almost mythical unity—that the project aims to create. While there are countless differences in their stories, and divisions marking the physical spaces in which they traveled, there are also important similarities. All interviewees romanticize and interact directly with nature, imbue the urban wild with a sense of power (danger in some cases), understand lines of ownership, boundary and exclusion, comment on the changing land and communicate a sense of nostalgia for the space. Through their memories, their acts of narrating them and the permission they gave for them to be preserved, shared and curated, all of these men help to mythologize and sacralize the pond.

In an introduction to a collection on the historical study of memory, Randolph Starn and Natalie Zemon Davis write: "If memory is shaped by mythologies, ideologies and narrative strategies why should we even try to remember what actually happened in the past? And yet if we give up trying, where does

this leave history except as a special category of fiction? (4)” I would argue that fictions about Mashapaug pond have much to tell us about local ways of interpreting environmental change that can be leveraged in the construction of broader narratives about the significance of human impacts on the planet. In a project that aims to “expand livable space” (Huyssen) for a largely and increasingly underprivileged community (and a sick pond), memorialization and sacralization play key and strategic roles. At its heart, the project aims to improve our planning for the future by recovering the richness of our collective past.

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