

Performing the Layers of Community on Main Street: A Reflection¹

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People's memories of particular moments linger on through time, captured and buried within the place in which those memories were created. They become layers of the past, each memory inscribed onto its landscape – natural or built, lively or forgotten. As memories and stories of the past layer themselves onto a landscape, its environment begins to encompass a particular meaning that can be felt and experienced by the people who move through its space.² I would like to suggest here that these physical encounters with such embodied landscapes are performances that uncover histories and pasts buried over time. As people move within a place embodied by the past, they recover the meanings that layer the landscape through acts of memory-making and recalling, and experiencing and re-experiencing.³

These phenomenological ideas inspired “Layers: Performing Community on Main Street,” a short narrative video that I created to capture my own connections to the Main Street of my hometown, Grimsby, Ontario.⁴ Now that I have been living away from my hometown for over five years, I am becoming more acutely aware of my ability to re-perform the meanings,

¹ This submission draws from a project reflection paper submitted for the Carleton University MA course HIST 5702W Narrativity and Performance in Public History, April 2014.

² This is drawn from phenomenological archaeologist Christopher Tilley, who suggests that “places themselves may be said to acquire a history, sedimented layers of meaning by virtue of the actions and events that take place in them.” See: Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Place, Paths and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994): 27.

³ In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau speaks to the “spatial acting out of place” and the stories and narratives that are told as people move through particular spaces using particular paths, see de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 97-98, 115. This idea is also influenced by Tilley’s *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, where, in his discussion of time, memory and movement, he argues that stories and places are mutually supportive of each other; stories are recalled in the places in which they occur, and places are only given meaning by recalling these stories, see pg. 33; this project also draws from This argument draws from David Crouch’s discussion of “embodied encounters” in the practice of tourism and the tourist’s call to “discover and encounter the world... ‘with both feet’ and figure sensual and mental and imaginative evidence together.” See: David Crouch, “Surrounded by Place: Embodied Encounters,” in *Tourism: Between Place and Performance*, Simon Coleman and Mike Crang eds (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002): 213.

⁴ Sara Nixon, “Layers: Performing Community on Main Street,” *Youtube*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJObJRJ4BU0> (2 July 2014).

values and customs of my community when I return home to visit. I seem to have buried my roots deep within the buildings, roads and landscapes of my town. Reflecting on my own experiences in my community, I have become quite interested how in local members of small-towns identify with their community in everyday life. How do the memories and stories of a community's past embody the local landscape and how do members of that community encounter and experience these meaningful places? I explore this phenomenon in "Layers."

This creative project, using elements of film, superimposed photographs and narration, tells a rather personal story of the built environment of Grimsby's Main Street West. Drawing from my roots, I record how I perform my membership to Grimsby and how I encounter this local landscape and experience the town's past by filming myself walking down the town's Main Street. As I do this, I uncover a meaningful and emotional story buried deep within Grimsby's every growing history; I peel back the layers and intimately share a part of me, of my community, with the audience.

This project is inspired by the interactive storytelling features of the web-documentary, *Hollow*. I wanted to create a digital visual platform that would allow my audience to see what I saw in my hometown, to imagine the same memories and stories, and to evoke the same feelings and sensory experience.⁵ So, in early March, I took a train home from Ottawa to Grimsby. I had to re-immense myself within my community's Main Street, dig through the deeply-rooted layers of the built landscape in order to recall its past and to re-experience what it meant to belong to the community.⁶ I spent much of a Sunday morning, after an unseasonable snow fall, immersing

⁵ *Hollow* is an online interactive documentary that invites users to discover and explore the story of McDowell County, West Virginia. Elaine McMillion, *Hollow*, Hollow Documentary website, <http://hollowdocumentary.com/> (accessed January 18, 2014).

⁶ To dig up my roots embedded within Grimsby's Main Street, I used Greg Dening's idea of "encompassing." Here he suggests that historians must immerse themselves in a "space of knowledge" by seeing, listening, writing and reflecting on the past embedded in a space and that the process of history-making and history-telling should engage not just the mind of the historian, but the whole body, senses and emotions.⁶

myself in the built environment of the town's Main Street West, a short block of historic buildings at the very core of the town. I walked up and down its sidewalks, contemplated each building, took photographs at all angles and filmed myself moving through the street, physically walking down the road. Filming my movements was an important element to my digital storytelling. It encourages more of a sensory experience for the audience and also visualizes the uncovering of the story I tell, the actual process of digging up my memories and my roots.

The narrative I form, because of its sources, inherently speaks to a local audience. Rather than focus on detail and description, I play with a familiar local landscape in a way that evokes an emotional reaction from my audience. I hope to invite spectators to reflect on their connections with their own community. The narrative I tell in "Layers" especially encourages local audiences to think about the meanings they have buried within Grimsby's Main Street and the memories and stories they share with this local space. Drawing also from the ideas of Freddie Rokem, I wanted to communicate the energies of my community's past in the hopes of evoking feeling and emotion within my audience through the story shared.⁷ I hope to communicate the excitement, pride and optimism felt at the 1921 Old Boys and Girls Reunion parade and to invite the audience to immerse themselves into this past.

The script for "Layers" and the story of the 1921 Reunion was researched and written after the filming. It was recorded using Audacity and edited into the video using Windows Live Movie Maker. The narrative that I developed is drawn from my thoughts, reflections and remembering as I recorded my walk down Grimsby's Main Street that Sunday morning. The

⁷ Although Freddie Rokem discusses energies in terms of theatrical performances on stage, my choice to tell my story orally and through video was influenced by Rokem's idea that as actors communicate the energies of the past on stage, the spectators make these meaningful in their reactions and responses with their own social and psychological energies. I hoped that my own storytelling of my community would evoke the recalling and sharing of other stories, memories and meanings among the audience. See: Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2000): 192, 194.

narrative is my unburying of my roots. Still though, it was difficult to match what I wanted to say with the speed and shots of the video. While I drew on my reflections of my experience in Main Street, I had to rewrite and edit my narrative to fit within the frame of the video.

When I was finally pleased with my narrative, I still struggled to visually engage the layers of Grimsby's past. I came up with the idea then to superimpose archival photographs of the streetscape and buildings of Grimsby's Main Street to the present images I took when re-encountering the space. I literally layer the past onto the present, speaking to Tilley's argument that landscapes are "embedded in the social and individual times of memory."⁸ The images tell their own story of how the streetscape in downtown Grimsby has changed over time, and how the town's past is buried beneath each layer. The superimposed images show buildings that have persisted through time, witnessing the community grow and evolve. They also depict buildings no longer standing, and people no longer moving through the street. Inserting these into "Layers" plays on feelings of nostalgia, inviting audience members to recall and share their own memories and stories of the old buildings they remember in their community. It also visualizes the more serious argument to preserve these historical buildings because of the meaning and history buried within them. Now that I have reflected on the project, I realize that "Layers" is above all, a plea to the Grimsby community to embrace their memories and meanings of their town. In the end, it became more about my audience than me.

⁸ Tilley, *Phenomenology of Landscape*, 27.

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