
**Selling the ‘Authentic Past’:
The New York Times and the Branding of History**

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Abstract

News media increasingly revisit the past with an eye toward present-day commerce. The 156-year-old *New York Times* is one active repackager of history, selling many ‘commemorative sections’ that blend *Times* front-page coverage with modern, interpretive essays. Advertising them in the newspaper under titles such as ‘Image Conscious’ and ‘Get the Picture’, the *Times* also sells, at very high prices, ‘exhibition quality’ prints from its vast Photo Archives. Urging its readers to ‘own a moment in history’, this commercial enterprise bolsters the role of journalism in public memory while blurring historical realities of authorship and production. The past the company sells is a mix of facsimile and authentic material culture, and of previous reporting and present reassessment. This essay considers how the *Times*’ commodification of history illuminates other intersections as well, including those of materiality and imagination, visual and verbal imagery, news and nostalgia, and history and memory.

Introduction

News media increasingly revisit the past—including their own—with an eye toward present-day commerce, repackaging history as ‘heritage’ and selling it to status-conscious consumers. One such company is *The New York Times*, which for a decade has been marketing ‘commemorative’ coverage and historic photographs, a commercial sideline that has accelerated since the newspaper’s own 150th anniversary in 2001. The *Times* is among the most prestigious of many news organizations that have recast themselves as public historians and memory-makers, producing representations of the past whose authenticity is literally certified.

Through its online ‘New York Times Store’, the company reprints its own coverage of major events in 29 ‘commemorative sections’, some with sweeping themes such as ‘American Milestones: 55 events that shook the nation’ (e.g., 28 December 2003, Sec. 6, 7)¹. The main product, though, is photography². Some 1,500 images held in the company’s photo archives are available for purchase,

printed at varying degrees of quality according to the customer's order. Themed sets of these photographs are regularly advertised in the newspaper under titles including 'Image Conscious', 'Photo Op', and 'Get the Picture', with text assuring buyers that each reprint is 'produced according to strict archival guidelines' and is of 'exhibition-quality print that can be displayed for decades' (e.g., 'A Season for Gift-Giving', 2006). Such care may explain their prices, ranging from \$195 to \$2,665, the latter for a framed, 'estate stamp' Robert Capa photograph of the Normandy invasion (e.g., 3 June 2004, E6).

As it offers its readers the chance to 'own a moment in history' (promotional mailing received by author, n.d.), this ancillary business bolsters the role of journalism in public memory while blurring historical realities of authorship and production. The past it sells is a mix of facsimile and authentic material culture, and of previous reporting and present reassessment. The following essay considers how the *Times*' commodification of history illuminates other intersections as well, including those of materiality and imagination, visual and verbal imagery, news and nostalgia, and history and memory.

This study builds on the growing body of scholarship about the role of journalism in the construction and articulation of collective memory, and in the blurring of memory and history (e.g., Carey 1988; Lang & Lang 1989; Schudson 1992; Zelizer 1992, 1998; Kitch 2005; Edy 2006). It views print journalism not only as a process of information transfer (a conveyance of words and images), but also as a tangible product that may be saved, collected, and reprinted for memory purposes. Thus this study is further informed by sociological and anthropological literature on the communicative and identity-construction functions of material culture (Douglas & Isherwood 1978; Appadurai 1986; McCracken 1988; Miller 1998; Hoskins 1998; Edwards & Hart 2004), with particular attention on photography.

Photographs are 'the most compelling of memory objects', claims Marita Sturken, because they seem to provide eyewitness testimony to historical fact. 'No object is more equated with memory than the camera image. . . . Memory appears to reside within the photographic image, to tell its story in response to our gaze', she writes (1997, 19). Yet precisely because of their materiality and referentiality, photographs exclude information as well as document it. 'In their relationship with their referent, their reality effect and their irreducible pastness, photographs impose themselves on memory', explains Elizabeth Edwards. 'They become surrogate memory and their silences structure forgetting' (1999, 222). Photography is a cultural act, a process of selection and interpretation that is evaluative (Williams 1961). Susan Sontag noted that 'photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe'; moreover, '[p]hotographs, which package the world, seem to invite packaging' (1973, 3, 4). It is especially important, then, to consider issues of

preservation and circulation of photographs (and texts) over time and across media, issues of 'how certain uses of images are set in place, challenged, and legitimated' (Zelizer, 9).

In the words of John Tagg, 'It is to the reality not of the past, but of present meanings and of changing discursive systems that we must therefore turn our attention' (1988, 4). What follows is a textual analysis not just of the memory products themselves, but also of the cultural discourse of their creation and the rhetoric of their marketing. Most of the examples cited here are images and promotional text of advertisements appearing in the pages of the print version of the newspaper. Although these advertisements have different themes, most have appeared repeatedly over the years. Other evidence comes from the ecommerce site itself (<http://www.nytstore.com>) and from a newsletter that periodically is sent by email to *Times* subscribers, containing updates on new 'historical' products as they became available.

'To Appreciate What They Went Through': Historical Imagination and the Reinvention of Authenticity

One of the company's first 'historical' products was 'Civil War Extra', a blue box containing four broadsheet-sized newspaper sections. Each one reprints 1860s *Times* front-page reports of battles but begins with an interpretive essay written by a modern historian. While its editorial content mixes old coverage with new interpretation, the visual and material properties of 'Civil War Extra' mix authenticity with artifice. Buyers can 'experience the Civil War just as readers did at the time' (e.g., 23 May 2003, W8) by reading the reprinted coverage on paper cut at the very wide broadsheet size no longer used in American newspapers. In an opening essay, historian James McPherson promises: 'These reprinted stories from *The Times* will give modern readers a 'You Are There' feeling that will make it possible to empathize with people of the 1860's (sic) and to appreciate what they went through' (n.d., p. 2). Such an appeal draws on what Robert Archibald and others have called 'historical imagination', through which modern people empathize with historical actors in an imagined drama. He explains that 'thinking our way into the past is not simply a pattern for knowing the past; it is also how we confirm our own understanding of ourselves. . . . History then is a means of self-confirmation through connecting oneself to a particular past' (2002, 72).

That kind of connection can be made only through modern means, the hybrid of the 'real' facts of battle seen through the lens of hindsight and interpretation, and literally through the lens of a camera. Visual images alleviate the denseness of the great blocks of grey type on the actual (reprinted) *Times* front pages of the era. The historical essays beginning every section of the 'Extra' are illustrated by the now-well-known Civil War photography of Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner,

and Timothy O'Sullivan, images that, thanks to the filmmaking of Ken Burns, constitute the mental picture-album through which most Americans 'remember' the Civil War. Of course, for technological reasons these photographs could not have appeared in any newspaper during the 1860s.

Should the boxed set of reprints not create the desired sense of 'you-are-there' presence, the Times Store now sells 'Original Civil War Newspapers' for \$60 each. These first were advertised in late 2006 with promotional text that exclaimed:

Yes, you read that correctly, these are complete original New York Times newspapers from the Civil War, all dating 1861 to 1865. Imagine the thrill of reading detailed first-hand accounts of the battles and generals. This is the closest you can get to the Civil War without getting powder burns! These antique Civil War newspapers . . . are true collectors (sic) items; just imagine the thrill of holding a piece of history in your hands ('Original Civil War Newspapers' 2006)³.

Certainly this offering comes closer than the boxed set to fulfilling the newspaper's promise that modern-day Americans could 'experience the Civil War just as readers did at the time' (indeed, the copy the author purchased was authentically grimy). Yet a large part of the authority of such artefacts lies in the Times's current reputation as the nation's 'newspaper of record', a status it did not have during the Civil War, when it was only a decade old. Although the 'Civil War Extra' historical introduction claims that 'The Times employed some of the best war correspondents' (McPherson, n.d., Part One, 2), it did not employ the most; three times as many were on the payroll of the *New York Herald*, which along with the *New York Tribune* dominated the New York newspaper market at the time (Stephens 2007, 234).

A century later, the *Times* could claim more convincingly to lead public opinion on the American Civil Rights movement, and its coverage of the culmination of that movement is republished in its 'Special Commemorative Section' on this subject. The contextual essay in this package was written by Anthony Lewis, a *Times* legal and political reporter who covered the movement and thus could provide a historically authentic perspective. Yet his essay reshapes the meaning of that struggle, recasting it in late-20th-century terms:

The three decades since the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have seen remarkable achievements: the end of state-imposed racial segregation in the South, a growing number of black elected officials . . . the rise of a black middle and professional class. But those years also have seen the stubborn reality of a black underclass living in degraded urban ghettos. They have seen law and politics begin to turn away from policies that had helped to raise the status of blacks so dramatically in American society (Lewis 1998, 1).

The essay goes on to mention the 1992 police beating of Rodney King (an African-American man stopped for a traffic violation in California) and the growing power of right-wing, Southern politicians in the U.S. Senate.

In this package, the reprinted *Times* front pages are a matter of history, a document of reporting done in the time and place of 1950s and 1960s America. Yet the style in which they are presented recasts them as memory, as newsprint and photographs testifying to the drama of the past: the March on Washington, a police dog lunging at an African American man, a white crowd swelling around African American students trying to enter Little Rock High School—all images now so iconic that we recognize in them ‘truth’ beyond any one particular news story. Moreover, we regard pictures of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy with dread, knowing what will happen next. In memory, news coverage of the Civil Rights movement is both an origins story and a cautionary tale, needing to be told anew to provide inspiration for ‘solving the great national problems that remain’ (Lewis 1998, 2). This is just one example of how the *Times* ‘commemorates’ a past event by placing it within an imagined historical trajectory that extends not only to the present, but also to the future. At the same time, such remembering alters our understandings of the past itself, a process explained by Maurice Halbwachs in his pioneering work on memory: ‘As this new picture is projected over the facts as we already know them, we see features revealed that then take their place among these facts and receive a clearer meaning’ (1980, 76).

The Civil War and Civil Rights packages are representative of the retrospective nature of the company’s other historical reprints, which are priced beginning at \$25.95 and range in length from 80 to 112 pages. Their topics include U.S. Presidents Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan; World War II; the events of the year 1968; Elvis Presley; ‘The Making of a Metropolis’ (the history of New York City); ‘A Century of Flight’; ‘Forever Fab’ (The Beatles); and ‘Legends of Hollywood’. One product is a joint offering with Time Inc. that allows buyers to ‘Relive the Moon Landing’ through a reprint of the *Times*’s coverage—supplemented by ‘reflections by science reporter John Noble Wilford, who covered the lunar mission for the paper’ (e.g., 12 September 2001, F7)—and the *Life* magazine ‘special edition’ titled ‘To the Moon and Back’ (together these cost \$34.95). Customers also may order a photograph of the moon landing that is ‘signed by Buzz Aldrin’ (its subject) and ‘was taken by fellow astronaut Neil Armstrong’ (e.g., 3 January 2005, A14).

‘A Scrapbook of Facts’: Evaluative Summary versus Anachronistic Rearrangement

One especially ‘special’ package offered by the *Times*, no longer available, was its ‘Millennium Box’, which included, among other items, a reprint of the 1 January

2000 issue of the newspaper and 'a scrapbook of century facts created by The Times' ('Millennium Box' 2001). In fairness to the *Times*, it was only one of hundreds of news media, including nearly all of the major companies, to produce century-end 'specials'. But this kind of sweeping evaluative summary characterizes its other memory products as well. Perhaps the most striking example is one titled 'American Milestones', a 96-page section with an introduction by former CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite. The ad describes it as:

A commemorative edition in newspaper format featuring original *New York Times* coverage of 55 events that shook the nation, from Custer's Last Stand to the Fab Four's first U.S. appearance. Other stories include: Lincoln's assassination; the Chicago fire of 1871; San Francisco's 1906 earthquake; the Titanic; Lindbergh's flight; the Hindenburg explosion; Pearl Harbor; John F. Kennedy's assassination; and the landing on the moon. American Milestone also includes Page One stories on the invention of the light bulb, telephone, wireless, talking movies and television. Comes in a keepsake box ('American Milestones' 2003).

In this kind of presentation, the past is a series of exceptional 'moments' that 'unfold' before our reading eyes, with history moving swiftly toward us in the present.

The *Times* also summarizes and prioritizes episodes of the past in the marketing of its photographic prints, which in some cases are offered together with the newspaper reprints. Arranged into 'collections', their themes include: U.S. Presidents (Abraham Lincoln at Antietam, Ronald Reagan speaking in front of the Statue of Liberty, Harry Truman holding the famous newspaper headline declaring his defeat); transportation (trains, helicopters, ships, cars); aviation (Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, John Glenn); baseball (historic stadiums, Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson stealing home, Lou Gehrig with Babe Ruth); science (Albert Einstein, Margaret Mead, a child getting a polio vaccination, climbers on Mount Everest); Mother's Day (singer Marian Anderson, women's rights marchers, female window shoppers); Father's Day (baseball, golf, war); and the 'Stars and Stripes Photo Collection' (photos of the American flag in war, on the moon, being flown in front of the capital, in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade) (e.g., 20 May 2004, E7; 28 December 2003, Sec. 1, 25; 24 July 2005, Sec. 1, 8; 12 September 2001, F4; 7 May 2003, W8; 11 June 2003, W8; and 7 July 2003, B4). During Black History Month (February) of 2007, a 'Struggle for Civil Rights' commemorative newspaper was offered free to customers who bought one of the four advertised photographs: 'Harriet Tubman with Slaves', 'African-American Troops in World War I, 1918', 'Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 1968', and [President Lyndon Johnson] 'Signing the Civil Rights Bill, 1964' ('Celebrate Black History Month' email newsletter received by author 21 February 2007).

The frequently advertised New York City collection includes a broad array of images, which appear in various combinations: a steamship arriving; Times Square; Broadway theaters; the Flatiron Building; Grand Central Station; the Brooklyn Bridge; the Metropolitan Opera; ice skaters in Central Park; a traffic jam; fireworks over the Statue of Liberty; immigrants arriving in a ship under the Statue of Liberty; horse-drawn streetcars; the World Trade Center buildings; and the night-time skyline (e.g., 17 July 2003, E8; 25 May 2004, ZP4-5; and 5 May 2006, A3). The nationalistic parallel is a photo collection titled ‘American Icons’ including: the Statue of Liberty under Fourth-of-July fireworks; a huge balloon of Uncle Sam in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade; Arlington National Cemetery; the two beams of light at the World Trade Centre site; a picture of a man and three boys looking out a window titled ‘First glimpse from Ellis Island, 1950’, and a large crowd of African Americans on the National Mall in Washington, DC (with the Washington Monument in background, so presumably they’re looking toward the Lincoln Memorial) with the title ‘Prayer pilgrimage for freedom in Washington, 1957’ (e.g., 26 July 2004, ZU8).⁴

As these groupings reveal, the *Times* markets historic photographs through overlapping themes, so that ‘moments’ of the past are connected in varying combinations. Implications about the meaning—either ‘historic’ or ‘American’—are fluid, dependent on the anchorage of their collection titles and the language of their advertisement. This is even truer of the company’s more general historic-photo collections. The advertisement for one such offering, titled ‘Americana’ and described as ‘Moving portraits of our American legacy’, combines a photograph of ‘Harriet Tubman with slaves she helped during the Civil War, circa 1864’ with an image of a white man and his family at the open door of a barn, titled ‘Blacksmith, 1890’ (e.g., 2 January 2006, A12). The Harriet Tubman picture is used as well in other themed collections, including those about the Civil War and Civil Rights/Black History. The blacksmith picture is one of many examples of images that feature anonymous people living ordinary lives, with photograph titles such as ‘Newsies and bootblacks shooting craps, 1910’, ‘Polio vaccination, 1955’, ‘Arm wrestling in Harlem, 1940’, and ‘Children balance, 1959’ (children walking on railroad tracks) (e.g., 19 May 2003, Z6; 9 June 2004, C15; 17 July 2003, E8; and 12 April 2006, D5).

While photographs travel across collections, their groupings nevertheless do convey certain familiar narratives of American identity. In many of the themes, African Americans are represented as one component of the whole (whether or not they would have been included in pictorial summaries of American life published during the previous eras represented); ordinary people mingle with the great; immigrants and other working-class people of the past are shown as noble (as ‘ancestors’); and symbolic images, especially children and the American flag, appear without any local or regional specificity (as if they have the same meaning

everywhere). The collection themes also merge people, places, and events of different eras into one idea of 'the past', erasing their individual historical specificity. Similarly, images of major historical events merge together within a story of American progress.

In its photo marketing, the *Times* can create cohesive visual narratives because it owns so many images, most of which never actually appeared in the *Times*. The company has licensing agreements with 'partnership collections' including art galleries, historical institutions such as the New York Historical Society, and photo agencies such as Bettman/Corbis, Getty, and Black Star. Thus the Times Store may sell Robert Capa's photographs of the D-Day invasion, Dorothea Lange's Dust Bowl photography, and the famous 'Afghan Girl' cover of National Geographic. Such well-known images are featured prominently on the Web site and in the print advertisements. So well-circulated that much of the 21st-century general public is unaware of their origins and initial use, these kinds of images float through the marketing in a matter-of-fact way; they are merely 'ours'. This transformation de-historicizes the photographs, 'scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at time past', as Susan Sontag contended about such photographic collections, adding: 'A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs)' (1973, 71).

'Rarely Available to the General Public': Selling Status

Whatever their subject, these photographs are not for everyone: their basic prices range, according to size and framing, from \$195 (11 inches by 14 inches unframed) to \$745 (20 inches by 24 inches framed). Why? Not because they are scarce (they are, after all, prints), but rather because of the process by which they are made, described in great detail on the Times Store Web site:

our black and white photographs are archival, silver-gelatin prints. They are printed on fiber-based photographic paper after being hand processed, toned, washed and air-dried by archival guidelines. Each photograph is produced by master printers in a dark room (sic)—the gold standard of photography ('Frequently Asked Questions' 2007).

This kind of language is present in many of the advertisements, assuring potential buyers that all of the company's products are of 'exhibition quality'. Within their offerings, though, there are levels of exclusivity, and the more expensive products are described in words that flatter the buyers' appreciation of history and art. The highest-priced single print, promoted especially in June (around Father's Day as well as the anniversary of D-Day), is Robert Capa's authentically blurry photograph of soldiers in the water during the Omaha Beach landing, framed and

marked 'with Estate Stamp', and sold for \$2,665. Photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn's misty images of early-20th-century New York City retail for \$1,650 framed, 'authorized by George Eastman House and produced by master printers in England from Coburn's original negatives' (e.g., 2 October 2006, A20). The company also markets the famous photographic work of Dorothea Lange, Lewis Hine, Walker Evans ('Now you can acquire a Walker Evans print through The New York Times' e.g., 15 May 2005, Sec. 3, 11), and Edward S. Curtis ('American Indians: Experience the Old West through the lens of Edward S. Curtis'). With regard to the Curtis photographs, the Times notes, 'These sepia-toned matte prints, produced by Christopher Cardozo Fine Arts, are individually hand-printed on archival watercolor paper' (e.g., 23 August 2004, B8).

The company also offers 'limited-edition prints from the original, hand-colored engravings of wildlife artist John James Audubon', which are printed on 'acid-free, museum-quality stock' and 'are toned to match the average color of the 165-year-old originals . . . reproduced directly from the original engravings. They stand alone as the world's only direct-camera, first-generation facsimile edition of John James Audubon's work' (e.g., 11 July 2005, C10). Advertised with the titles 'Feather your nest' and 'Indulge in a flight of fancy', these pictures of birds cost \$495 each and 'come with a certificate of authentication'. Even more 'limited-edition' images—which 'will not be reissued for at least 75 years' and are 'stamped with the signature of the president of the New-York Historical Society and embossed with the Historical Society logo'—cost \$2,500 each (e.g., 11 July 2005, C10, and 24 September 2006, Sec. 8, 3). Buyers who prefer flowers to birds may choose botanical prints 'uniquely produced from . . . original hand-colored engravings' from the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, with prices starting (unframed) at \$600 each; the title of this ad is 'Every room should have a garden view' (e.g., 8 September 2006, D10).

Then there are 'Heirloom Photos', old colour photographs with subjects including Fifth Avenue mansions and nature scenes, priced between \$145 and \$525:

Since the early 1900's (sic), vintage photochromes, one of the earliest forms of color photography, have rarely been made available to the general public. Now many original photochromes from the American Photochrome Archive, the last intact collection of these classic prints, are being offered exclusively through The New York Times and Cardozo Fine Art. . . . These fine heirloom pieces, the majority created between 1898 to (sic) 1900 by noted photographer William Henry Jackson . . . Quantities are highly limited' ('Vintage Photochromes' 2006).

A final example is an offering of reprints of covers and cartoons from *The New Yorker* magazine at prices ranging from \$125 to \$395. They are promoted in language that is almost comically snooty:

Kitch, Selling the 'Authentic Past'...

By special arrangement, *The Times* is pleased to offer a choice selection of favorite cartoon prints from the image archives of *The New Yorker*. Whatever the occasion, a matted or framed reproduction of a *New Yorker* magazine cartoon is a unique expression of your discerning taste and excellent sense of humor. Cartoon prints are produced with the latest giclée technology, a process unmatched in its precise coloring and razor-sharp detailing ('Classic Cartoons Covers' 2007).

The value of all of these photographs and prints, then, lies less in their content than in the details of their production and cost—information surely meant to be conversationally shared when the prints are displayed in homes and offices. At the same time, they hang on the wall as mirrors reflecting their owner's wealth and taste, as suggested by this advertising language: 'See how an exhibition-quality photograph can shape your world' (e.g., 5 January 2005, B10). Their use is not only a declaration of personal status but also a statement about how the past should be made meaningful in the present. 'What things are made of—how they are materially presented—relates directly to their social, economic and political discourses', writes Elizabeth Edwards, who asks of photographs:

What choices, affecting visual meaning, have been made concerning processes, printing papers or finishes? Then one has to consider how photographs are actually used as objects in social space. What is displayed? Where? . . . Choices matter: they are decisions with consequences for the objects or humans associated with them (1999, 223-224).

Sold under the banner 'The Glory of Sailing', the *Times*' partnership collection with Mystic Seaport (a maritime museum in Mystic, Connecticut) is overtly described as fine art. 'In celebration of Mystic Seaport's 75th anniversary, these images from the Rosenfeld Collection are being offered as special platinum palladium prints to fine art collectors for the first time', one ad announced, listing the price of these special prints as \$1,500 each (16 April 2007, A17).

What may be especially interesting about this upper end of the *Times* Store's product line is that none of these images appeared (or would have appeared) in the newspaper; indeed, they have nothing to do with newspaper journalism. They merely lend their status to the *Times* brand, while the marketing banner of the *Times* logo lends its aura of seriousness and history to the artwork. A related development is that the *Times* Store has begun selling what it labels 'Rare Newspapers', obtained through an antiques dealer ('archive'), and the majority are newspapers other than the *Times* itself. The most expensive, selling for \$4,000, is an 1823 issue of the Charleston, SC *Southern Patriot* reprinting the text of the Monroe Doctrine; hand-marked 'Department of State', it reputedly was 'delivered to John Quincy Adams, President James Monroe's Secretary of State and the principal author of the Monroe Doctrine' ('Rare Newspapers' 2007). This sort of

product is not the Civil War in a box. Its value lies in the thrill of acquisition and in the right to tell the story about the object.

‘Commemorate Your Heritage’: Personalizing the Past and Confirming Identity

Some products marketed by the *Times* blend status with lifestyle and mix inexpensive items with expensive ones, making ‘upscale’ themes accessible to a mass audience. For instance, a 76-page ‘commemorative publication’ titled ‘Great Moments in Golf’s History’ costs only \$10, but it is advertised along with vintage golf photos priced at \$950 for a set of three (e.g., 29 August 2003, D3).

The company’s historic photographs are arranged into themes meant to appeal to various social identities, including generational identity. Some ads emphasize Baby Boom nostalgia, combining photographs of Mickey Mantle at bat, The Beatles arriving in America, and teenagers ‘joy riding’ in a car (e.g., 5 January 2005, B10). Photographs sold as part of the ‘1950s’ collection, which is sorted under the phrase ‘American Experience’ on the Times Store Web site, include titles such as ‘Hula-Hoop Craze, 1958’, ‘Slicking Up, 1953’ (a young man combing back his greased hair), ‘Atomic Dining Room, 1952’ (the name on a billboard advertising a restaurant), and ‘Drive-In Movie on Long Island, 1955’ (‘American Experience,’ 2007). Appealing both to Boomers and to New York Yankees baseball fans, the *Times* offered a collection of photographs of Joe DiMaggio just after his 1999 death (five images for \$900) (17 May 1999, B7).

Such images function as ‘memory objects’, which allow their owners to recall and regain ‘the context of which they were once a part’, according to Alan Radley (1990, 54; also see Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1989; Hoskins, 1998; and Edwards & Hart, 2004). At the same time, they reference not just the past itself, but old pictures of the past; even viewers who personally never saw the subject itself (whether that is Coney Island or Elvis Presley) react nostalgically out of some sense of shared social identity formed around having seen so many images of the subject. Boomers are drawn to a picture of The Beatles arriving in America because millions of them ‘experienced’ that event together through media, especially television. The appeal of such a picture is greater if it is black and white, not because The Beatles were black and white but because television was. This is one of many examples of a phenomenon identified nearly three decades ago by sociologist Fred Davis: ‘The very objects of collective nostalgia are in themselves media creations from the recent past . . . the popular media have come increasingly to serve as their own repository for the nostalgic use of the past’ (1979, 122, 131).

Such nostalgia personalizes the past, blending individual memory into the presumably shared memory of generation, region, or nation. The *Times* also marks

personal milestones with individually tailored 'Keepsake Editions' (advertised under the title 'Newsworthy Gifts'). In an overwrought sentence, the newspaper encourages reader to 'Commemorate birthdays, anniversaries and other important personal and life events with original news coverage of some of the world's most noteworthy people, places and events, just as it (sic) appeared in *The New York Times*' (e.g., 25 March 2007, Sec. 8, p. 7). Purchasers may choose to have a particular front page reprinted and framed (\$44.95), reprinted on a T-shirt (\$29.99), or included as part of a 'Keepsake Edition' that is 'elegantly bound . . . with the recipient's name beautifully embossed in gold on the front cover' (e.g., 26 July 2004, ZU3).

The 'Keepsake Edition' costs \$119.95. For about four times that amount (\$495) certain buyers may 'commemorate' their own identity and authenticity in a different way. Promoted in email, on the Web site, and in the newspaper, the offering titled 'Your Link to the Past' offers readers free access (available via the Times Store Web site) to a database containing 'the records of 25 million people who arrived at Ellis Island and the Port of New York from 1892-1924'. One ad urges readers to 'Go where your past is waiting to be discovered'. This is not merely a free family-research service, of course. Lower in the ad copy is this suggestion:

And once you've discovered your family's history ... The *Times*/Ellis Island Legacy Keepsake. An extraordinary way to commemorate your heritage. Celebrate the day someone special arrived in America. This lovely framed heirloom features: a copy of the ship's manifest with your relatives' names, vessel and arrival date; *The New York Times* front page from the day they landed; a photo of the ship on which they sailed; personalized text that prominently displays your ancestors' names; a Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation brass plaque and *New York Times* embossing. Framed in gold or mahogany with 4-ply matting and plexiglass (e.g., 26 March 2006, 21).

The joint venture with Ellis Island is featured on the Times Store Website in a frequent banner ad that contains this scrolling text: 'Knowing where you're going means knowing where you're from' (accessed 23 April 2007). The syntax of this sentence is fascinating, since it reverses causality: 'we', the successful people of today, don't emerge out of the past; instead, our ambition and drive lead us to seek and claim our own, distinctive, rightful 'heritage'. In this understanding of history, the past is pedigree, an imagined space in which symbols of poverty and struggle and ethnicity are all status objects, to be hung on the wall.

Discussion

The Ellis Island offering is only one of many *Times* memory products that promise to transform history into something personal (your past) and something material, a

'keepsake' to be displayed and saved, as the photographs also are described. Even the newspaper reprints are personalized, described in marketing text as opportunities to 'experience' the past. Through historical imagination, the readers are encouraged to make a personal connection—one that 'confirm[s] our own understanding of ourselves' (Archibald 2002, 72)—to the people and settings of the stories that are told in these memory products.

And they are indeed stories, narratives that arch backward as well as forward. While one ad, promoting four boxed reprint-newspaper sets, invites readers to '(t)ake a journey back in history and relive the biggest news events' (28 December 2003, Sec. 6, 7), that journey is mapped, and it is narrated by a present-day companion. These memory objects literally as well as figuratively package the past, performing the selection and interpretation process through which culture, and memory and 'history', are constituted. The result is an evaluative summary that seems authoritative (ironically) precisely because it is packaged, because it comes to modern audiences as complete story.

So, too, do the company's historic photograph collections provide evaluative and thematic guidance while also offering factual evidence of past events and people. Underlying their presentation is an ongoing tension between referentiality (history) and narrative summary (memory). The frequent circulation of certain images simultaneously guarantees their survival in memory while uprooting their specific historical 'moorings', as Sontag put it (1973, 71). When the photographs' historical specificity is erased (or reduced), their meanings become more mutable, and they are better able to fit into a variety of memory narratives—which, in turn, become more flexible themselves. The narratives that emerge from the *Times*' historical-product marketing are, however, uniform in their affirmative nature: they are upward trajectories of progress, stories told in terms of technology, inspirational pioneers, great cities, military pride, and victory over social problems.

While this presentation affirms American greatness, it also affirms the *Times*' pre-eminence within journalism. Its cross-marketing arrangements with historical institutions and photo agencies serve to strengthen rather than dilute its status as the keeper of American imagery, as do its packages that link its brand with the products of other high-profile, high-status media institutions (*The New Yorker*, *National Geographic*, *Life*, CBS News). The advertising language invites the reader/purchaser inside this web of status as well.

This essay began with the proposition that such commercial texts—the rhetoric of selling memory objects as well as the memory objects themselves—deserve attention because of what they reveal about the discourse of their creation and communication. What *do* these advertisements and products tell us about social and political circumstances today? It is tempting to think that that they are just

another way of capitalizing on the nostalgia, the longing for a 'simpler' time, of post-September 11th America. This explanation would confirm sociologist Fred Davis's contention that:

nostalgia reactions are most likely to occur in the wake of periods of severe cultural discontinuity, as happened following the profound identity upheavals of the nineteen-sixties. Nostalgia is also . . . a conserving influence; it juxtaposes the uncertainties and anxieties of the present with presumed verities and comforts of the lived past...' (1979, 141).

Inarguably, many of the photographic collections and reprint sections celebrate the American past, and by implication the American future, at a time of internal vulnerability and external criticism. But the *Times* began its historical marketing before 2001, and national nostalgia was evident throughout the 1990s in the many media products recalling 'the good war' fought by 'the greatest generation'. This is a more complex phenomenon, and it has been developing for at least several decades. Davis blamed not only the proliferation of mass-media imagery, but also Americans' geographic mobility and 'the decline of localism' (1979, 128) for the upsurge of collective nostalgia in second half of the 20th century. Other scholars ascribe the nostalgia trend to post-Vietnam disillusionment, to de-industrialization, and to the generational self-absorption of 'heritage boomers' who want 'a new kind of memory' (Weeks 2003, 197).

Regarding the latter theory, certainly there is not only a nostalgic, but also an aspirational dimension to the language in which the *Times* speaks to its 'Image Conscious' customers. The company addresses potential buyers in terms of *who they wish to be*, constructing their taste while approving it. Just as customers are invited to imagine themselves into the past, they are urged to imagine themselves as well-bred people who have artefactual proof of their intelligence and financial comfort. This identity-affirmation function may explain why the great majority of the photographic images are from the middle decades of the 20th century (long enough ago to be a 'simpler' time but possible for many people to remember) and why the more distant past is imagined in terms of lessons-learned (primarily during the Civil War) and ancestors. When history is recast as the source of 'legacy', the past is understood as a path leading to, and therefore naturalizing, 'us' and present-day America. This past is an 'unfolding' story whose ending we know. Gone from that story are characters and plots without a modern-day referent.

The products sold through the historical marketing enterprise of *The New York Times* substitute memory for history and blend journalism and advertising into one process meant to enhance the newspaper's own authority as public historians. As their topics suggest, the reprint sections and photograph collections also blend news and entertainment into an ongoing narrative about shared American

memory—a story in which the past, dotted with great events and legendary people, leads us to today and tomorrow. Such a narrative is what Michael Kammen disparagingly calls ‘popular historicity’, a form of nostalgia that delivers ‘history without guilt’ (1993, 672, 688). In this view, held by many historians, ‘media producers [are] manufacturers of popular myths that overly simplify and distort “true” history’ (Herman 2003, 93).

Yet Kammen also acknowledges that ‘the media convey a fair amount of what passes for history and memory’ and have acquired ‘an ever larger responsibility for explaining America, as well as the meaning of America, to Americans and others’ (1993, 668). He is referring to the informational function of media—what they tell us about the past—and that has been the focus of most other scholarship on this subject. Less consideration has been given to the materiality of newspapers (and magazines), particularly the many ‘special’ issues and products that are marketed as ‘keepsakes’ and ‘heirlooms’ today. Their physicality and packaging considerably expand and extend their role as creators of public memory, especially when they are marketed under the most prestigious brand name in American journalism. The stories most people know about history are indeed told primarily by popular media, including journalism. *The New York Times*’ historical marketing enterprise provides an illuminating case study in how that sort of memory—that ‘journey back in history’—is made.

Notes

¹ The advertisements discussed in this study are cited only parenthetically within text, with date and page number, rather than included again in the reference list, since all of them obviously appeared in *The New York Times*. Because most of them have been published repeatedly over the years, ‘e.g.’ has been used to indicate that the cited date is merely one appearance of that advertisement.

² Other items for sale in the ‘New York Times nytstore.com’ include books, branded clothing, and sports memorabilia.

³ This offering is one of 14 categories of ‘original newspapers’ sold on the Website, most of which are not *The New York Times*. Priced between \$30 and \$80 per newspaper, they are categorized with themes such as ‘Golden Age of Baseball Sports’, ‘Gold Rush Era Newspapers’, and ‘Wild West Newspapers’. Most of their descriptions contain the same language (‘Imagine the thrill of holding a piece of history in your hands and reading the news as it unfolded’), tailored to each particular theme (‘Original Newspapers’ 2007).

⁴ Interestingly, the patriotic symbolism of these ‘American Icons’ obscures the fact that they represent only two American places, New York City and the Washington, DC area.

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