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The Strategies and Tactics of Mnemonic Battle: Patterns in the Dynamics of Conflict over the Past

This paper has two central objectives. On the one hand, I analyze and compare contemporary mnemonic disputes concerning three distinct issues: child sexual abuse, the Vietnam War, and American slavery. Analyzing the rhetorical dynamics between contentious mnemonic agents in each case, I present an ideal typology of mnemonic battles in order to detail the various ways communities and individuals contest memories of morally salient past events. Mnemonic battles take three principal forms: disputes over the *existence* of the past, the *nature* of the past, and the *relevance* of the past. Each case I present is most aptly characterized as one of these three forms. On the other hand, I provide a framework with which to advance our sociological understanding of the relationship between autobiographical and collective memory. The three main cases I present demonstrate how individuals and communities use autobiographical memories in public struggles over collective visions of the past, a phenomenon that became more prevalent in the latter half of the twentieth century with the rise of a new *ethic of autobiographical storytelling*. While there is a good deal of work detailing how social forces shape self-stories and memories, there is a dearth of work focused on what individuals do with their retrospective autobiographical claims. With attention to these two objectives, I highlight the different strategies and tactics that rival mnemonic agents employ in each case when using the definition of a past situation to make moral and political claims in the present. Such an approach highlights the typically contentious character of historical or mnemonic “truth” and provides a useful analytic guide to understanding public struggles for *mnemonic authority*. Beyond elucidating the ways that dynamics of contention shape social memories, this analysis also contributes to our sociological understanding of collective identity, trauma, social movements, narrative, and time.

Thomas DeGloma is an Assistant Professor of sociology at Hunter College, CUNY. He specializes in the areas of culture, cognition, memory, symbolic interaction, and sociological theory. His research interests also include the sociology of time, knowledge, autobiography, identity, and trauma. In his forthcoming book, titled *Seeing the Light: The Social Logic of Personal Discovery* (University of Chicago Press), he explores the stories people tell about life-changing discoveries of “truth” and illuminates the ways that individuals and communities use autobiographical stories and memories to weigh in on salient moral and political controversies. DeGloma has also published articles in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *Symbolic Interaction*, and *Sociological Forum* and is an Associate Editor of *Symbolic Interaction*.