Liminal Memorials in the Anthropocene:

How We Remember in a World That's Disappearing

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Abstract

This paper explores ephemeral memorials- roadside shrines, environmental plaques, and decaying cemeteries- as sites of resistance against impermanence in the Anthropocene. Conventional memorials aim to anchor memory in place, yet in an era of accelerating environmental and societal change, even so-called "permanent" memorials succumb to erosion, neglect, and disappearance. Through three case studies, 1) a fading roadside shrine in Wappingers Falls, NY; 2) the 2019 Okjokull glacier memorial in Iceland; and 3) the deteriorating Old Tongore Cemetery, this essay examines how temporary memorials reflect deeper anxieties about loss, erosion, and cultural forgetting. Drawing on the work of Foote (2013), DeSilvey (2017), Ingold (2000), Tsing (2017), and Morton (2013), I argue that these transient spaces of mourning disrupt traditional expectations of permanence. In doing so, these spaces offer an alternative framework for memorialization- one that embraces decay, acknowledges instability, and reimagines memory as an ongoing, dynamic process rather than a fixed monument. This shift challenges dominant narratives of remembrance in a world that is itself disappearing.

Introduction: Mourning in an Age of Impermanence

There's something unsettling about watching a memorial disappear. Maybe it's a roadside shrine you've passed for years, gradually overtaken by weeds and rot. Maybe it's an old gravestone, its inscription worn down to near illegibility. Or maybe it's an entire landscape, like a melting glacier, vanishing within a single human lifetime. The things we build to hold onto memory aren't supposed to fade like this, but in the Anthropocene, it's happening more and more.

We live in a time of rapid change. Climates are shifting, coastlines are eroding, forests are burning, and places that once seemed fixed in time are proving to be far less permanent than we assumed. And yet, we still make memorials. We mark spaces of grief, we carve names into stone, we stack rocks, and we leave flowers. We keep making memories physical, even in places where things don't last. Why? What does that say about us?

This essay looks at how different kinds of ephemeral memorials- roadside shrines, lost-place markers, and even old cemeteries- challenge traditional ideas of permanence in mourning. I'll explore three cases: 1) a roadside shrine in Wappingers Falls, New York, that I saw slowly disappear over time; 2) the Icelandic glacier Okjokull, which was officially declared dead and given a plaque as a memorial; and 3) the Old Tongore Cemetery, where weathered gravestones reveal how even "permanent" markers eventually fail. Through these examples, I argue that temporary memorials aren't just placeholders for something more lasting. Each is uniquely important in its own way, and together, they reflect a deep anxiety about remembering in an age when environments and histories are constantly being undone. The reflection of anxiety is a feature of their importance, but not the sole source of it. Their importance is both contextual (what, whom, or where they memorialize) and thematic (what they reveal about how we process grief and change today).

Roadside Shrines: Marking Memory in Places That Aren't Meant to Hold It

If you've ever driven past a roadside memorial, you've probably seen how personal they are. A wooden cross, a framed photograph, a stuffed animal, a scattering of artificial flowers- there's something deeply human about them, about the way they turn an ordinary, often unmemorable place into something sacred. To be "deeply human" in this context is also to confront loss with a gesture that insists, "Someone once lived here. Someone once died here.

Someone was loved. Someone *is* loved." Even briefly, the human need to mark presence in spaces of absence pushes back against forgetting. It signifies an impulse that is as emotional and spiritual as it is cultural: our longing to honor the invisible, preserve memory, project meaning onto space, and recognize loss, even when we know the gesture may not endure. It's not just about mourning a person, but about revealing something essential about the human condition in the face of impermanence.

They break into the everyday and yet are often ignored. They make you pause. But they also fall apart. Over time, the flowers fade, their colors bleaching under the sun. The stuffed animals grow tattered, worn down by wind and rain. The photographs curl at the edges, their images blurred by weather and the passage of time. What was once fresh slowly decays, yet even in its fading state, the memorial remains. Sometimes they're maintained by loved ones for years, and sometimes they disappear within weeks, either erased by weather or removed by others. Their ephemerality is built in.

Roadside memorials persist- not necessarily as fixed objects- but as cycles of remembrance. In some cases, families or friends return to restore what has been lost, replacing broken crosses, refreshing flowers, and adding new mementos. In other cases, the decay is accepted, the site is allowed to return to the landscape, leaving only an echo of the once sacred memorial. This transience does not diminish a memorial's significance; rather, it speaks to a different mode of memorialization- one that acknowledges impermanence and embraces the ephemeral nature of both memory and material.

(Figure 1: Left) A roadside memorial in Wappingers Falls, New York.

I saw this firsthand with a memorial in Wappingers Falls, New York (Figure 1). I didn't know who it was for, but for several years, I passed it occasionally. The memorial started strong- first, a sturdy wooden cross adorned with trinkets at the base was erected, then a slow decline set in as the elements took their toll, until the memorial seemed on the verge of disappearing altogether. Just when I thought it was gone, a new memorial emerged in its place: a metal cross fashioned from a bicycle handle, the number 72 spelled out in blue stones, a small American flag, artificial flowers, and various trinkets. The transformation reflects a pattern seen in many roadside shrines- decay followed by renewal- an ongoing process rather than a static monument.

This cycle of loss and recreation challenges the assumption that memorials must be permanent to be meaningful. Instead, it highlights how mourning and memory are dynamic, continuously being reshaped by those who engage with the site. The impermanence of roadside shrines aligns with what anthropologist Kenneth Foote (2013) describes as "sanctification," the marking of sites associated with trauma or death, while also resisting the typical trajectory of official memorialization, which seeks to fix memory in place. Here, memory is mobile, shifting in response to time, weather, and human interaction. Places like these can be seen as shadowed ground- spaces where tragic events happened, but where official memorialization often doesn't take place. Instead, memory is left to individuals, taking shape in informal, impermanent ways.

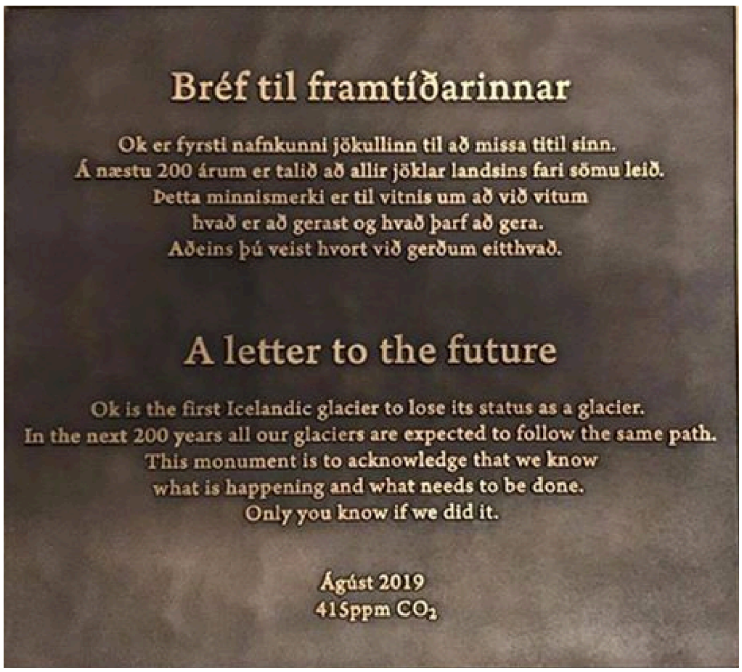
(Figure 2: Left) The view of a roadside memorial in Wappingers Falls, New York, with the road itself in frame.

Folklorist, Holly Everett (2002) studies roadside memorials and argues how liminality- existing between personal and public, sacred and mundane- challenges the expectation that mourning belongs only in designated places. Roadside shrines break that rule. They insist that memory can happen anywhere, even in places meant for pure movement (Figure 2). Roads are built for movement; they prioritize speed, efficiency, and progress. A roadside memorial disrupts this flow. It forces a break, a moment of reflection in an otherwise utilitarian space. This disruption is not just geographical- it is temporal. Roadside shrines introduce the past into the present, making losses visible that might otherwise go unnoticed. But unlike conventional memorials, which seek to inscribe permanence in stone or metal, these makeshift markers acknowledge their own vulnerability.

In the Anthropocene, the meaning of this ephemerality shifts. In this way, roadside shrines embody what anthropologist Anna Tsing and her co-editors (2017) call "the arts of living on a damaged planet." They argue that we must rethink how we engage with loss, decay, and change in a world shaped by ecological destruction. Roadside shrines, with their inherent impermanence, reflect this ethos. They are not built to last forever, nor do they attempt to resist decay entirely. Instead, they adapt, change, and even disappear, mirroring a world where so many other things are disappearing, too. They reflect a broader cultural anxiety about loss itself. As landscapes become less stable, memory doesn't just contest spaces of grief; it fights against the invisibility that comes with erosion. When a roadside shrine fades, it does so in a world that's also losing ice caps, forests, coastlines, and species. It becomes a small, human-scaled echo of a much larger instability.

Okjokull: Commemorating a Glacier in an Era of Vanishing Landmarks

On August 18, 2019, scientists, activists, and citizens gathered to the northeast of Reykjavik in Iceland to unveil a plaque. The plaque (Figure 3) was installed on what was once Okjokull, a glacier that had lost so much ice that it no longer technically counted as a glacier at all. It had been declared "dead." This was, in a way, a funeral (Kyzer 2019).

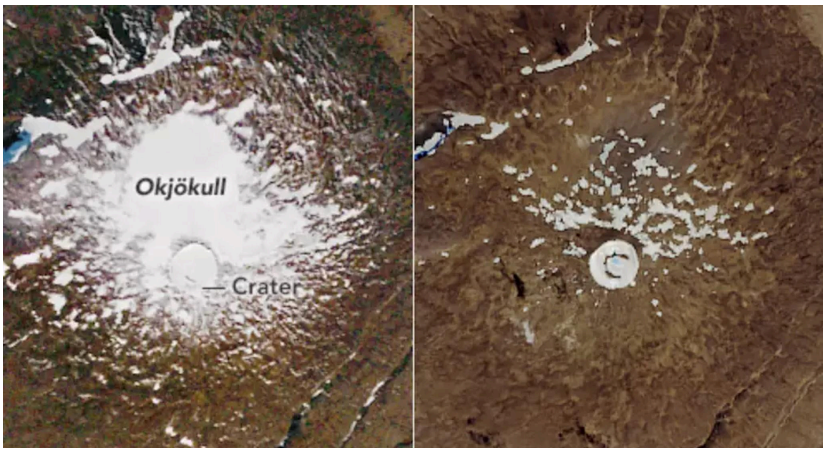


(Figure 3: Left) Photo of Okjokull memorial: "Ok is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as a glacier. In the next 200 years, all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it." (Kyzer 2019)

This inscription does something unusual for a memorial: it speaks directly to the future. It acknowledges that Okjokull is the first but may not be the last. That mourning has to become something ongoing.

Environmental historians, such as Caitlin DeSilvey (2017), discuss curated decay: the concept that, rather than attempting to halt environmental loss, sometimes it is necessary to let things go while still acknowledging their presence. This is what the Okjokull plaque does. It doesn't try to restore the glacier or pretend it will make a comeback. Instead, it simply marks the loss, while also drawing attention to what is still to come. This type of memorialization alters our perception of permanence. It forces us to acknowledge that, while landscapes have always

changed, in the Anthropocene, their instability has become more rapid, visible, and unsettling. It forces us to acknowledge that even the places we assume will last forever- mountains, glaciers, coastlines- are slipping away (Figure 4). Just as roadside shrines deal with personal grief, the Okjokull memorial confronts planetary grief- not necessarily the grief that the planet feels, but the grief humanity feels as it witnesses the loss of glaciers and ecosystems across the world. It marks a collective mourning for a changing Earth. It's not just about one glacier. It's about all the ones the Earth is losing.



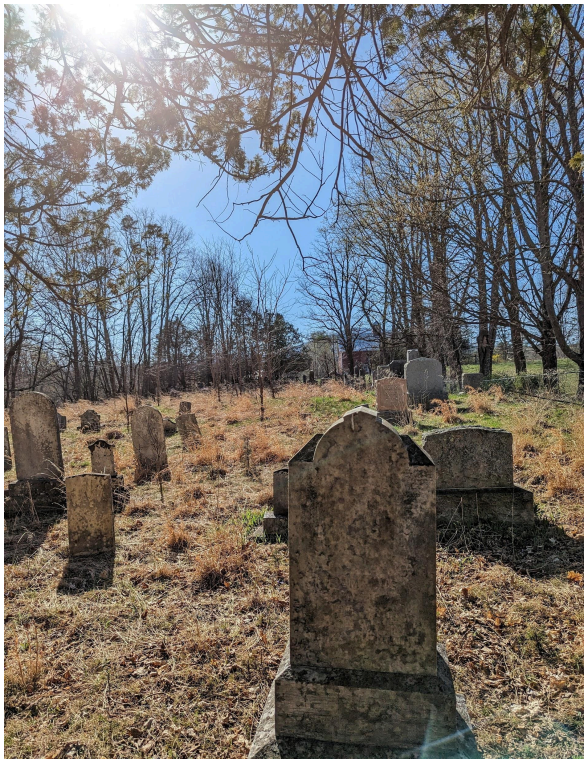
(Figure 4: Left) Okjokull in 1986 (left) vs. 2019 (right). (Hermosillo 2019)

Old Cemeteries and the Myth of Memorial Permanence

At first glance, cemeteries appear to be the antithesis of ephemeral memorials. They are designed for longevity- granite and marble markers, deeply engraved names, and burial records- intended to last perpetually. Unlike roadside shrines or environmental memorials, cemeteries are seen as stable, sanctioned spaces of remembrance, meant to defy the passage of time. Yet, in reality, even these so-called "permanent" memorials succumb to erosion, neglect, and decay.

(Figure 5: Left) Entrance view of the Old Tongore Cemetery.

The Old Tongore Cemetery in upstate New York (Figure 5) is a powerful example of this slow disappearance. Unlike many older burial sites that evolved within a community, Old Tongore was itself an artifact of displacement. When the Ashokan Reservoir was constructed in the early 20th century, entire hamlets were destroyed, and families were forced to relocate. As part of this upheaval, hundreds of graves were exhumed from cemeteries that lay in the reservoir's flood zone and reinterred at Old Tongore (Beisaw 2022). The Old Tongore Cemetery was meant to serve as a lasting home for the dead whose original burial places had been stolen by the reshaping of the land. This "stealing" was not just done by the water, but by people, through development decisions that prioritized resource needs over the emotional, cultural, and historical context of the communities affected. Yet, even this attempt at permanence is failing. Today, the cemetery bears the scars of time (Figure 6)- many of its gravestones are barely legible, their inscriptions softened by decades of rain, wind, and freeze-thaw cycles. Some markers have cracked or crumbled, broken apart by tree roots or shifting soil. Others have been swallowed by the earth entirely, tilting at odd angles or vanishing beneath layers of moss and fallen leaves. Though the cemetery remains a recognized historic site, its continued erosion raises essential questions about how- and for how long- we hold onto memory through material forms.



(Figure 6: Left) Rear view, facing toward the entrance at the back section of the Old Tongore Cemetery.

This process of disappearance mirrors what happens with roadside memorials or lost-place markers, only at a slower pace. The worn-away names on old gravestones are, in some ways, no different from the faded photographs and weathered crosses of informal memorials. When a name disappears from stone, what happens to the person it belongs to? Who remembers them once the marker itself is gone? As archaeologist Tim Ingold (2000) suggests, landscapes are not static containers of history but active participants in it, continuously reshaping memory over time. The Old Tongore Cemetery is a reminder that permanence is an illusion, even in spaces explicitly designed to resist time.

In past centuries, grave markers were created under the assumption that stone and metal would preserve individual legacies indefinitely. However, what sites like Old Tongore reveal is the slow but inevitable fragility of memory, even in the most carefully constructed spaces. The forces that erase roadside shrines and glaciers- weather, neglect, environmental shifts- are at work here too. Gravestones crumble, names fade, and plots are abandoned or overgrown with weeds. In a way, Old Tongore is a memorial twice over: first, to the people buried there, and second, to the original cemeteries and communities that were sacrificed for the reservoir. Ironically, the cemetery meant to preserve the displaced dead is itself fading, much like the lost homes and hamlets now submerged beneath the waters of the Ashokan. The entropy that erases informal memorials is just as present in cemeteries; it only operates on a longer timeline.

Decay as a Way of Remembering

So far, we've looked at memorials that stretch and strain under the weight of time, weather, and social forgetting. Each of them- whether a shrine, a plaque, or a cemetery- shows us something about how memory isn't just preserved but also lost, shifted, or imperfectly passed down. However, there's another layer here worth exploring. What if decay itself isn't a flaw in

the system but a meaningful language of memory? That's where archaeology comes in, not just as a science of the past, but as a way of thinking. Archaeology is built on the simple fact that things fall apart and that there's something to learn from the pieces.

Traditionally, archaeologists have focused on what survives: temples, ceramics, inscriptions- the enduring bits. However, contemporary archaeologists, such as Alfredo González-Ruibal (2008) and Laurie Wilkie (2003), argue that focusing solely on what is durable misses the fuller story. What about the things that deteriorate quickly? The photos, the graffiti, the roadside flowers, and the decaying teddy bears? What about the spaces defined less by what remains and more by what's disappearing?

From this view, the shrines and cemeteries we've explored can be seen as archaeological sites in progress. Not ruins, exactly- but things becoming ruins. Every fallen gravestone, every melted candle, every rusted cross tells a story of care, time, and erosion. And every object that vanishes- not just what stays behind- is part of the story memory leaves.

Think again of the Wappingers Falls shrine. It's not just a place of death and remembrance- it's an ongoing record of maintenance, neglect, change, and human presence. The way things fade and reappear marks a rhythm between the living and the dead. The weathering is data.

The Okjokull plaque anticipates this future clearly. It's built to be read not just in 2019 but maybe in 2219 or 2719. It includes the CO_2 concentration- 415 parts per million- as if to say: this is what we were doing when the ice died. Looming behind the plaque is the idea of future archaeology: someone someday reading that bronze plate the way we now read Roman milestones, trying to stitch together what happened.

In this sense, curated decay (DeSilvey, 2017) isn't just about aesthetics or ethics- it becomes an archive. A way of letting materials tell the story, even as they're changing. It's

memory as a lived process, not an object. Even the Old Tongore Cemetery, with its tilting stones and overgrown paths, becomes a kind of open-air site study. It doesn't preserve perfectly, but it reveals deeply. Archaeologists interpret traces: the slope of a neglected plot, the font style of a half-erased surname, the intrusion of tree roots through a burial site. That isn't just data about the past- it's an unfolding conversation among time, weather, and those trying to remember. In the Anthropocene, an era where we're losing landscapes, species, and shorelines as rapidly as we study them, we need memories that can survive change or, at the very least, know how to witness it. Decay is no longer incidental. It's central. What fades tells as rich a story as what persists.

Hyperobjects and the Viscosity of Memory

To fully grasp the experience and function of liminal memorials in the Anthropocene- roadside shrines, glacier plaques, and fading cemeteries- it is helpful to draw on Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects. In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (2013), Morton defines hyperobjects as entities so massively distributed in space and time that they defy sensory comprehension: things like climate change, global plastic pollution, and radioactive waste. We can't ever fully "see" a hyperobject; we only perceive it in fragments- its effects always partially hidden and indirectly encountered.

Morton introduces the property of viscosity to describe how hyperobjects stick to beings that interact with them. When we recognize an object or event as part of a hyperobject- say, a receding glacier as part of the broader phenomenon of climate change- that recognition alters our perception of everyday life. Suddenly, the weather feels differently charged; a summer day might carry an unsettling undertone. Hyperobjects cling in ways that transform our sense of place, time, and responsibility.

This idea of viscosity is incredibly relevant to the ephemeral memorials explored in each of the cases we've looked at: a melting glacier memorialized with a plaque, a crumbling cemetery born of ecological displacement, and a roadside shrine reborn through cycles of decay and renewal. These cases can be read as touchpoints where larger hyperobjects momentarily become visible. These memorials act like "viscous nodes" that reveal the otherwise intangible presence of global-scale forces, like climate change, geological reformation, or cultural amnesia. They're small, localized responses to vast, distributed forms of loss.

Take the Okjokull memorial. The plaque doesn't just commemorate the death of a glacier; it becomes a site where the hyperobject of global warming surfaces. It is sticky. Visitors cannot encounter it without being caught within the broader narrative of ecological (or even planetary) collapse. The specific becomes metaphoric, and memory adheres not only to the physical environment but also to the readers themselves. "Only you know if we did it," the plaque concludes, reflecting the moral viscosity of climate grief. You cannot be near it and remain unaffected.

Similarly, roadside shrines like the one in Wappingers Falls are caught in the viscosity of social trauma- death, rupture, remembrance, but also in fragmented visibility. Their temporality, their decay, and their eventual disappearance do not erase their meaning; they deepen it. These shrines are porous participants in environments shaped by culture, urban neglect, and environmental exposure. They challenge the notion that a memorial should be stable, tidy, and permanent, because the grief they express is ongoing.

Morton's concept also allows us to contextualize the Old Tongore Cemetery as marked not by stasis but by entanglement with the very forces that remade the land itself- the flooding of old towns, shifting climate patterns, and ecological succession. The cemetery does not simply age; it dissolves in dialogue with multiple overlapping hyperobjects, becoming a kind of

distributed ruin. Its viscosity lingers in memory- particularly among those who trace family lines through burial records- but it also physically adheres to the landscape in cracked stones, eroded epitaphs, and moss-covered names.

In this way, liminal memorials are not just ephemeral or marginal- they are hyperobject encounters. They provide tangible, emotional, and sensory access points to phenomena we otherwise struggle to contain or comprehend. They remind us, in often subtle or depressing ways, that the Anthropocene is not simply happening "out there," in statistical models or news articles. It lives among us, in the materials we try to preserve and the stories we try to tell. It clings, and its viscosity unsettles the boundary between past, present, and future. As the Okjokull plaque's "letter to the future" suggests, these memorials do not operate in a closed temporal frame. They resist linearity. They haunt while we grieve, and in doing so, they pressure remembrance to become not a backward-looking fixation but a forward-looking, ethically charged act of engagement with a messy, disappearing world.

Conclusion: Memory as a Process, Not a Monument

So, where does this leave us? If even cemeteries- our most "permanent" memory markers- aren't really permanent, what does that mean for how we think about memorialization? The cases explored in this paper collectively challenge the assumption that memory can be fixed in place. Roadside shrines disappear, glaciers melt, and gravestones erode- the supposed durability of memorials is continuously undone by environmental and social forces. In the Anthropocene, where landscapes are rapidly shifting and traditional forms of memory preservation are proving fragile, we are forced to ask: How do we mourn in a world that refuses to hold memory in place?

One answer, as these liminal memorials illustrate, is that memory must be understood as an ongoing process rather than a static monument. Instead of relying on permanence, these sites

reveal the necessity of embracing impermanence, adaptation, and renewal in how we remember. Whether through the cyclical recreation of roadside shrines, the acknowledgment of irreversible environmental loss in the Okjokull plaque, or the weathering of historic gravestones in Old Tongore Cemetery, these examples suggest that memory is not something we can ever truly "fix". Instead, memory is fluid, shaped by time, the environment, and human engagement.

This shift has profound implications for how we approach memorialization in an era of planetary crisis. Traditional monuments aim to preserve the past against the ravages of time and decay, but in a world where even the landscapes on which those monuments stand is disappearing, such an approach may no longer be adequate. Instead, we may need to recognize that mourning and remembrance must be dynamic, acknowledging that loss is not a single moment but an ongoing condition. Anthropologist Caitlin DeSilvey (2017) suggests that instead of resisting decay, we might engage in curated decay- a form of remembering that honors loss without clinging to false permanence.

Liminal memorials, by their ephemeral nature, reflect this ethos. Rather than resisting the forces of time and erosion, they work with them, accepting their own impermanence as part of their meaning. The fading of a roadside shrine does not erase the grief it represents; rather, it’s slow disappearance reflects the process of mourning itself- an experience that is never truly finished but continues to shape those who remember. Similarly, the Okjokull plaque does not seek to rebuild a lost glacier but instead acknowledges its absence while confronting future losses.

As the Anthropocene reshapes our environments and forces us to rethink what can and should be preserved, memorialization, too, must adapt. This is not to say we should stop making memorials, but rather that we should reconsider their purpose. Instead of striving for permanence, we must create spaces for memory that acknowledge change, instability, and the

transience of all things. Whether through temporary shrines, climate memorials, or accepting the slow erasure of historic burial grounds, we must recognize that to remember is not to fix a moment in stone but to engage in an ever-evolving conversation with the past.

In the end, memory is not a monument- it is an act, a practice, a process. It exists not just in stone or plaques but in the stories we pass on, the rituals we perform, and the fleeting markers we create in the face of loss. In an era where both human and environmental histories are being rapidly undone, perhaps this understanding of memory- a fluid, living remembrance- is the most fitting way to honor a world in flux.

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