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Literature Review

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Literature Review

Although humans have constructed and consecrated memorial and burial sites since ancient times, it took the 20th-century work of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs to elevate public memory as a socially-validated field of academic study (Carroll 157). In his 1950 study, “The Collective Memory,” Halbwachs differentiates collective memory from history as a “current of continuous thought” tied to and bounded by the “consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive,” rather than a comprehensive analysis of primary sources (Halbwachs 140 and 143). Historians strive to privilege no singular perspective over others, while students of collective memory purposely seek to isolate the formative narratives of individual communities (Halbwachs 140). These scholars recognize that multiple, and often competing, collective memories exist surrounding the same historical events as a result (Halbwachs 142). To better understand the perpetuation of these metanarratives, recent scholars have begun analyzing public monuments as anchors of “political and cultural meaning” rather than “innocent embellishments of the public sphere” (Johnson 293). Communication scholar Brian Carroll characterizes monumental commemoration as a dynamic and selective process of meaning-making, due to the community negotiations over concept, location, construction, and inscription which they entail (Carroll 157). He argues that monuments and memorials are primarily political endeavors of collective remembering, and forgetting, “controlled by those in power” (Carroll 157).

One of the primary places this political struggle manifests in the United States is the raging debate over the Confederate iconography crowding cemeteries, parks, town squares, and country lanes across the American South (Simko et al. 591). Debates over Confederate displays and their meanings have intensified since 2015, when a white supremacist massacred nine Black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina; a neo-Nazi killed a counter-protestor over a Confederate statue in Charlottesville, Virginia; and extremists sent death threats to contractors over the removal of another statue in New Orleans, Louisiana (Forest and Johnson 127). Most recently, a January 6 rioter carried the Confederate battle flag through the halls of the Capitol Building in a flagrant act of insurrection (Little 169). In the wake of such appalling acts, many communities have begun to debate strategies to silence, contextualize, and counter the original meanings of the Confederate monuments contributing to their collective memories (Simko et al. 592).

To determine the appropriateness of a given monument, sociologist Vered Vinitsky- Seroussi of Hebrew University of Jerusalem proposes a three-part theoretical framework to unravel its embedded narratives. He encourages scholars to examine “the political culture of the commemorating society,” “the timing of the commemoration” and “the power of the agents of memory” to unravel their mythic meanings (Vinitsky-Seroussi 32). When it comes to analyzing Confederate monuments in the United states, Sara Evans applies Vinitsky-Seroussi’s methods to Confederate monuments in public spaces to “explore the cultural significance of ‘who,’ ‘what,’ and ‘how’ is being remembered” in these post-Civil war sites (Evans 1044). Scholarly examination of the original climate surrounding in which many Confederate monuments were built often shows a heavy reliance on an ideology known as the Lost Cause myth of the Confederacy (Little 169).

The Lost Cause myth is an interpretive framework which scholars define as “a sentimental narrative championed by Southern whites, one that proposes the Confederacy fought in defense of states’ rights and antebellum chivalry,” according to journalism scholar Alexia Little (Little 170-71). This narrative was widely promoted among white communities across the country to dignify a demoralized South and promote reunification efforts (Little 173). However, the narrative also suppressed minority collective memories of slavery and oppression (Little 174). Additionally, much of the Confederate iconography in the South was promoted by prominent women’s agencies such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy in support of this agenda (Heyse 31). Southern women often drew on rhetorical categories such as “republican motherhood” and “true womanhood” to increase their persuasive credibility and “construct their agency as public commemorators (Heyse 31). Thus, most of the collective memory surrounding the Civil War derives from white power-brokers looking to reinforce the narrative of the noble Confederacy.

Other scholars study the contemporary clashes over how to handle Confederate monuments. Scholars such as Mark Vail and Stephynie Perkins studied a series of letters to the editor about two different renaming controversies in Memphis and Jacksonville, respectively (Vail 417 and Perkins 61). Like Little’s newspaper analysis, Vail’s study “revealed a rhetorical reliance on tenets of the Lost Cause myth that ennobled Southern states following the Civil War” and showed that the true epicenter of the controversy was “political control of Memphis’s historical narrative” (Vail 417). Perkins discovered that most writers “framed their ideas using words and concepts such as “slavery,” “Confederacy,” “hate,” and “pride,” but the writers used them in very different contexts” (Perkins 71). Readers’ differing usages of these words revealed their fundamentally diverging views of the historical events to which they refer (Perkins 71).

Conflict over such objects of memory highlights “the underlying racialized fissures” in diverging narratives perpetuated about slavery and civil war in the antebellum South (Johnson 295). This debate is incredibly important since a city’s cultural landscape often reflects the breakdown of power among different racial groups (Leib 306).

In light of emerging information about the Lost Cause intent behind many Confederate monuments, an increasing number of communities have opted to remove these objects (Evans 1046). When this happens, J. David Maxson encourages scholars to step in and analyze the “monumental absences” left behind “as Lost Cause statues come down across the country” to prevent a gap in collective memory (Maxson 48). However, this approach invites a degree of critique because “any act of removal can be seen as an act of forgetting” (Forest and Johnson 130). Although they agree with the “normative” position that removing Confederate monuments is good for communities, scholars Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson encourage interrogation of the “reflexive desire to ‘take ‘em down” and consideration of alternative methods to “the stark choice of removal versus retention” (Forest and Johnson 127). This would seem especially true in light of the strongly diverging narratives held in collective memory by minority and majority groups (Evans 1044)

One way to understand how these alterations counter or expand the meanings of Confederate monuments is through the “modes of recontextualization” proposed by Simko et al. in their article “Contesting Commemorative Landscapes: Confederate Monuments and Trajectories of Change” (Simko et al. 591). The categories of recontextualization are “expungement, amplification, and repositioning” and are “rooted in material transformations to commemorative objects” (Simko et al. 592 and 607). Monuments can also have their meanings changed by the introduction of “counter-monuments” expanding the range of dialogue and

interpretations surrounding a work (Krzyżanowska 465). Scholar Natalia Krzyżanowska theorizes that adding counter-monuments enables dialogue in the symbolic landscape and allows “commemoration of complex and difficult past events…that are traditionally surrounded by multiple interpretations and often-conflicting attempts to commemorate them” (Krzyżanowska 465). Similarly, Jody Stokes-Casey analyzes the protest art of Richard Lou performed at the site of Memphis’s statue to Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest and how it “was one of the first artworks to confront the monument and its history through conceptual iconoclasm, or the symbolic destruction of the racist icons and institutions of the Old South” (Stokes-Casy 323-24).

However, in this endeavor to elaborate on monumental memories, it is important to recognize that not all counter-monuments are equally successful in their intended purposes. In 2019, doctoral candidate Carson Kay studied and condemned the proposal of South Carolina Representatives Bill Chumley and Mike Burns for a monument to Black Confederate soldiers as a “reconstruction of public memory” that “would reinforce preexisting structure rather than reimagine meaning” (Kay 1). Kay contends that the mere presence of Black memorials “does not equate with appropriateness of these structures, for if the memory they pitch to the public fails to tell Black truth, these monuments are but agents in the continuation of white-washed history and contorted public memory” (Kay 11). Additionally, as Forest and Johnson note, these strategies run the risk of ineffectiveness in their more “minimalist, unobtrusive” forms (Forest and Johnson 130).

While much scholarship has centered on Confederate iconography as a whole, there remains a great deal of particular work to be done. Since collective memory is so particularly tied to specific places and groups, the narratives surrounding each individual monument will carry distinctive nuances based on their unique locations. Each new battle over collective

memory in each small town and city creates a fresh opportunity for research. In Rome, Georgia, although much attention was given to the city’s most prominent Confederate monument during the controversy in 2020, public attention to the work has largely died out since. However, since the statue itself has gone through a storied history involving several different modes of recontextualization, it makes a particularly interesting case-study for a textual analysis. This paper examines how each successive controversy and modification of Rome’s monument to Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest has altered its original meaning and contributed to a narrative of ambivalence toward the city’s racial past.

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