

MOURNING AGAIN IN AMERICA:
MEMORIAL DAY, MONUMENTS, AND THE POLITICS OF REMEMBRANCE

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ABSTRACT

Lucy Britt: Mourning Again in America:
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(Under the Direction of Susan Bickford)

The subjects and modes of mourning undertaken in public are consequential for past and continuing injustices because they indicate what a society cares about remembering and how. Holidays and monuments, as expressions of civil religion, affect how citizens read their history by rejecting or legitimating state violence and war in the future. Counter-narratives such as those from oppressed groups often emerge to challenge dominant narratives of civil religion. Close readers of civil religious ceremonies and markers such as Memorial Day and Confederate memorials should undertake a critical examination of the symbols' historical meanings. I propose a politics of mourning that leverages the legal doctrine of government speech to reject impartiality and construct a public sphere in which different narratives of history are acknowledged but not all are endorsed.

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INTRODUCTION

There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another.

--- Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*¹

On May 28, 2016, when a three-year old child climbed into a gorilla's pen in the Cincinnati Zoo, zoo workers shot and killed the gorilla, named Harambe.² Harambe posthumously became one of the most prevalent internet memes of 2016, used to convey everything from racism toward Michelle Obama to 9/11 conspiracy theories to pure sexual goofiness. The week before, at least four unarmed Americans were shot by police across the country. While attention was heaped on Harambe's death, social movements such as Black Lives Matter that fight to draw attention to deaths at the hands of the state often point out the lack of widespread public mourning of people of color shot by police.

These are two very different examples of public responses to tragedy, and while perhaps extreme, they illustrate the phenomenon of public mourning. I conceptualize public mourning as a collective experience of grief with political consequences for citizenship, state power, and civil society. I find helpful Freud's conception of mourning (as distinguished from the more self-reproaching and pathological melancholia) as the painful but necessary "reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on."³ Rather than seeing the past as something separate from

¹ Benjamin 1968, 256.

² "Fatal Force" 2016.

³ Freud 1957, 243.

social life, mourning is a practice that explodes dichotomies of interior and exterior and present and past.⁴ As Judith Butler reminds us, grief is not privatizing but rather has the potential to enable political community by reminding us of our bodies' vulnerabilities and interdependence.⁵ Public mourning is not only politically important but also theoretically interesting because it undermines the ostensible neutrality of liberal democracy and forces the state to adjudicate between competing narratives. I present a close reading of examples of public mourning in order to show that neutrality is impossible in these case. I then argue for a non-neutral civil religion that is guided by a notion of justice.

Americans' judgments of some subjects as worthy of public mourning and others as not are wrapped up in histories of state violence, especially against Black Americans and other marginalized groups, and can send messages about who belongs and who does not in the public sphere. In this thesis, I will suggest a critical rethinking of the subjects and modes of public mourning because who gets mourned, and how, shapes what kinds of violence we deem acceptable or unacceptable in the future. I argue that the status quo is not currently neutral. The state already adjudicates between different narratives of mourning; it has the power to choose only narratives that reject oppression.⁶ Since some narratives obscure the persistence of enduring injustices, a critical rethinking is necessary not only to portray the past conscientiously but also to prevent complicity in continued injustices.

In this thesis, I focus specifically on Memorial Day and war memorials, and argue that they play a central role in constructing narratives of American civil religion. In order to outline

⁴ Bevernage 2012, 166.

⁵ Butler 2004.

⁶ I rely here on Patricia Hill Collins' definition of oppression as "any unjust system where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society" (Collins 2000, 4).

different dominant and counter-narratives of public mourning, I will first delineate some of the state and civil society responses to violence and war through the civil religious expressions of Memorial Day and war memorials. The American state and civil society have collectively shaped which events of wars and state violence will be recognized in the public sphere and how, often choosing dominant narratives of victory and triumph. Holidays and monuments, as expressions of civil religion, give me a chance to present the fallacy of neutral public mourning. Because these dominant historical narratives of public mourning affect how citizens read their history and legitimate state violence and war in the future, I argue that it is important to critically examine them. Second, I demonstrate that counter-narratives provide an opportunity for us to practice such a critical examination. Alternative movements within American politics, especially from oppressed groups, have attempted to reshape which instances of war and state violence are publicly mourned and how, rejecting dominant narratives of nationalism and triumph. The fight over Maya Lin's controversial design for the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial is one such example of alternative narratives of mourning. Finally, I propose a politics of mourning that leverages the legal doctrine of government speech to reject impartiality and construct a public sphere in which different narratives of history are acknowledged but not all are endorsed.

COMPETING NARRATIVES, DOMINANT NARRATIVES

Within my vision of public mourning, I conceive of two different major types of narrative: dominant narratives and counter-narratives. Sometimes theorized as “collective memory,” dominant narratives combine popular understandings of history with group identities, especially the narratives of the dominant social group, regardless of historical accuracy.⁷ They often circulate among the populace without being seriously challenged; those who do not fit into the collective memory are often obscured and forgotten. Dominant narratives are akin to top-down, singular civil religion, whereas counter-narratives, which I will discuss in the next section, are akin to contested forms of bottom-up civil religion. As elements of civil religion, dominant and counter-narratives tell a story by Americans to themselves about themselves, thus informing citizens’ views of historical and present injustices. In this section I will trace the transition in the narratives of Memorial Day and monuments from a set of competing narratives and bottom-up civil religion to a more homogenized, singular narrative.

There are perhaps two main conceptions of American civil religion: top-down (theorized by Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and others) and bottom-up civil religion (theorized most prominently by Robert Bellah).⁸ I will argue that both are useful concepts; together, the state from the top down and civil society from the bottom up shape narratives about

⁷ Urmacher and Tinkler 2008 and Zelizer 1995.

⁸ These two conceptions find a parallel in Robert Wuthnow’s conceptions of the two traditions of the conservative preservationist and liberal reform civil religions, which can coexist and compete (Wuthnow 1988). I owe the identification of this division to Michael Lienesch’s “Contesting Civil Religion,” a paper prepared for presentation to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, September 1-4, 2016.

historical events. The contested histories of Memorial Day and war monuments show that, while competing civil religion narratives can emerge from the bottom up, they are often co-opted by the state for its own civil religion purposes.

Rousseau's best-known account of civil religion (the version from *On the Social Contract*), is "a purely civil profession of faith," the worship of the state, not a state-endorsed religion in a traditional sense (though we may need religious worship of God, too) but a top-down creed of obedience to the state and the common good.⁹ However, in his later essay, *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, Rousseau cites the Roman king Numa to give an account of a more nationalistic (rather than universal) civil religion than the version in the *Social Contract*.¹⁰ Mark Silk's intellectual history of Numa, the subject of the "prehistory" of the idea of civil religion, reminds us that Rousseau was dependent upon on a rich civil religion intellectual tradition.¹¹ A contemporary application of the Rousseauian conception of civil religion is Marcela Cristi's argument about state power over cultural meanings, which shows that civil religion is often used as a political resource for the state to validate policies.¹²

While the Rousseauian top-down view of civil religion is often the status quo, I want to propose Robert Bellah's bottom-up civil religion as a resource for democracies to reformulate and reclaim public mourning. In Bellah's view of civil religion, American civil religion is a "public religious dimension [that] is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals," not the worship of the nation but a universalistic understanding of the American experience in the context of higher truths, made possible by the segregation of the religious and political spheres.

⁹ Rousseau 2011, 250.

¹⁰ Rousseau 1986.

¹¹ Silk 2004.

¹² Cristi 2001, 5.

Examples include presidential inaugurations; presidents' use of the word "God" in speeches; the public-school system; the inclusion of God on our bills and in the Pledge of Allegiance; and the "annual ritual calendar for the civil religion" of Memorial Day, Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, and Washington and Lincoln's birthdays. Though it is not Christianity, much of Bellah's American civil religion is derived from Christianity.¹³ This is because, he argues, the civic virtue of American republicanism and the individualism of American liberalism are "profoundly antithetical." This tension is often resolved in American politics by reference to a suprapolitical sovereignty, God. For example, Tocqueville identifies American churches' teachings of self-interest and capitalist ethos, which can reconcile these ideological differences. As a result of this tension in the American political ethos, the church has been "the real school of republican virtue in America."¹⁴

Bellah is optimistic about civil religion's transformative potential. While he is concerned about "an American-Legion type of ideology that fuses God, country, and flag... to attack non-conformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds," he is reassured by the fact that "it has been difficult to use the words of Jefferson and Lincoln to support special interests and undermine personal freedom." However, he recognizes the danger of American civil religion supporting a rhetoric of manifest destiny and imperialism. Bellah is right to be concerned about such an imperialistic or war-validating civil religion.¹⁵ (He might also be disappointed to find civil religious ideals of freedom used to promote an amorphous War on Terror abroad, just as he was

¹³ Bellah 1967, 4, 18, 3, 11, 4, 7.

¹⁴ Bellah 1978, 21.

¹⁵ Bellah 1967, 14-15.

disappointed to find their similar misuse of America as “the New Jerusalem” in the Vietnam War).

Bellah was dismayed by the controversy surrounding his 1967 paper (many misconstrued his use of civil religion to mean “idolatrous worship of the state” in a Rousseauian sense), leading him to stop using the phrase “civil religion.”¹⁶ However, it remains an important topic in political theory and, I argue, his bottom-up transformative view can help us understand American subjects and modes of mourning. I find useful Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan’s Bellahian idea of “collective remembrance,” a product of individuals and groups exercising their agency to speak out and organize through collective action outside of the state. This can be done through collective memory of memorials, museums, and public holidays.¹⁷

Bellah is right to argue that civil religion has a potential to hold Americans to their highest universalistic ideals. The early narratives of Memorial Day I describe below are an example of bottom-up narratives of mourning because of the early multiplicity of “founders” and participants. However, I find Rousseau’s emphasis on state control to be more useful when understanding Memorial Day from the mid-20th century to the present, when the state has largely controlled the message of the holiday. Counter-narratives of war and violence such as Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial exemplify Bellah’s conception of civil religion as coming from civil society. The potential that these counter-narratives exhibit for guiding national narratives about loss leads me to, in the final section, propose a civil religion that honors a multiplicity of bottom-up narratives but ultimately rejects what I will argue is a false neutrality of public mourning.

¹⁶ Bellah 1989.

¹⁷ Winter and Sivan 1999.

Because of the tensions within the American political landscape that Bellah identifies, civil religion is inevitable and even potentially valuable in American political culture. However, I want to change its contours. In acknowledging that the United States has a civil religion that emerged organically from the bottom up and shifted to control by forces like the state from the top down, I want to free us up to acknowledge that the state currently has significant power to adjudicate between and choose the best from competing narratives. I hope to propose a way that a civil religion of public mourning could be used to orient citizens toward a view of history and the future that is informed by justice as non-oppression.

I also think that memorials and mourning holidays are puzzles for liberal democracy. Liberal democracies are ostensibly neutral on matters of pluralist disagreement like narratives about war. However, violence explodes such neutrality, making public and collective emotional experiences inevitable. While Memorial Day is a federal holiday, it is construed by different citizens to mean totally different things with different emotional valences – pride, resentment, patriotism, heritage, oppression, valor. Similarly, in public spaces and town squares in countless American towns and cities, war memorials stand as a puzzle for liberal democracy: on the one hand, many were built on public land, in coordination with local authorities, as part of a story communities told themselves and future generations about those who fought or were slain in war; on the other hand, they represent a specific, often emotional narrative and interpretation of the event they memorialize. This aporia of the supposedly rational, impartial state and emotional mourning process tends to be resolved by emphasizing patriotism and courage in both Memorial Day and around monuments, thus generating support for past and future foreign policy decisions. The state ultimately chose a dominant narrative of Memorial Day that emphasized the valor of all American soldiers, whitewashing contentious histories like that of slavery. Many civil

religious monuments resolve the emotion-impartiality dilemma through narratives that validate the American military enterprise and minimize political conflict. However, the presence of monuments like Confederate memorials are reminders for Black Southerners of historical and present racial violence. It is an important political and theoretical project to do a close reading of the dominant narratives of monuments and holidays because they have the potential to affect citizens' political engagement and sense of belonging.

Narratives of Memorial Day

Here I will trace the history of Memorial Day in antebellum America, including the holiday's little-known origin story about freed slaves in Charleston, SC; delineate its varied meanings for different groups in society, including Black Americans and Whites in both the North and South through the 20th century; and outline the homogenization and centralization in the state over time. I will argue that the state should both acknowledge multiple narratives and make judgments about ones that should not be honored (in this case, the Lost Cause and pro-slavery narratives). Memorial Day is one of the many cultural symbols and practices that, because of its plural political meanings and multiplicity of origins – including Black and abolitionist origins – has been whitewashed by state interests, market consumerism, and time to mean very little at all. The holiday has effectively moved from a form of spontaneous, decentralized Bellahian civil religion in its origins to Rousseauian (“top-down”) civil religion.

Memorial Day as it is celebrated today is a fusion of many disparate springtime rituals known interchangeably as either Decoration Day or Memorial Day, created throughout the United States to commemorate the Civil War dead. Many towns across the United States claim the origin story of the holiday, from a Columbus, GA woman in 1886¹⁸ to a schoolteacher in

¹⁸ "Started in Dixie: The South Said to Have Originated Memorial Day. A Georgia Lady First" 1905.

Petersburg, VA in 1865.¹⁹ The U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs website cites the first national celebration of Decoration Day at Arlington Cemetery in 1868 and President Johnson declared the Waterloo, NY celebration in 1866 to be the first Decoration Day celebration.²⁰ In reality, the holiday likely had dozens or hundreds of points of origin around the end of the Civil War and diffused across the country, perhaps more quickly in the South because spring flowers bloom earlier there.

However, Yale historian David Blight has revealed that the first Memorial Day was actually orchestrated in 1865 by recently freed Black people in Charleston, South Carolina. The freedmen of Charleston organized a May Day ceremony to give the approximately 257 Union soldiers who had died of exposure and disease on the city's racetrack a proper burial. The Confederacy had used the racetrack (formerly a plantation) as a war prison for Union soldiers. In the days leading up to May Day, Black Charlestonians built an enclosure for the burial ground, a ten-foot high whitewashed fence, rows of graves, and an archway over the gate to the entrance with an inscription "Martyrs of the Race Course." On May 1, the 10,000 people in attendance, mostly former slaves, sang hymns, read Bible verses, and decorated graves with flowers. This was followed by the national anthem and other patriotic songs; speeches by Union officers, Black ministers, and abolitionists; picnics; and Union troop marches, including Black units.²¹ Blight's archival evidence refutes earlier accounts that the white Scottish journalist James Redpath led the ceremony with the freedmen acting as mere labor to strew flowers. Rather, it was Black freedpeople who built the "little head-boards" marking graves and sign reading

¹⁹ "Memorial Day Began in Churchyard" 1978.

²⁰ "Memorial Day History" 2016.

²¹ Blight, David W. 2001. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. 184-187.

“Martyrs of the Race Course.”²² Today, the bodies have been re-interred in a national cemetery; a group led by Blight and the mayor of Charleston installed an informational plaque at the site, now a public park.²³



Figure 1 – The Charleston racecourse burial site.²⁴

Blight also points to what he considers a historical cover-up: “in a grand evasion” of collective memory, a Charleston historian responded to a 1916 inquiry about the 1865 burial ceremony by saying that she could not gather any official information.²⁵ This rewriting of history is harmful because it continues to marginalize Black Americans by leaving them out of the American story. Blight’s retelling of history is empowering because it reclaims an important piece of American history for Black Americans. However, this was only one of many “first”

²² "Martyrs of the Race-Course" 1867.

²³ Blight 2011.

²⁴ Waud 1867.

²⁵ Blight 2002, 187.

Memorial Days in towns across the country, celebrated without knowledge of this one, starting in 1866. Because there are likely dozens if not hundreds of independent origin points for the holiday, it is not all that useful to theorize a conspiracy of historical erasure of the freed slaves' event in Charleston. Rather, an acknowledgement that Black Southerners' gesture of goodwill toward white Union soldiers is an important part of the origin story of the holiday allows us to write a more inclusive and less selectively forgetful history of war remembrance.

Springtime flower-laying ceremonies spread to both Southern and Northern towns by 1866 (the month of May was appealing because flowers for were in bloom). There appears to be no coherent pattern in regional differences of name; a Kansas newspaper calls the holiday both "Memorial Day" and "Decoration Day" in the same 1899 article, with "Memorial Day" describing events in Pennsylvania and Boston and "Decoration Day" describing events in Arlington, D.C., and "Throughout the Country."²⁶ A notice from "Miss Alice" in a Fayetteville, NC newspaper urges locals to "devote all flowers to the decoration of the soldiers' graves" for "Memorial Day."²⁷ A 1911 article in a Black-owned Kansas newspaper about the floral industry notes that the holiday goes by both names.²⁸

Although regional differences in the name of the holiday were inconsistent, regional resentments surrounding the outcome of the Civil War persisted for decades. An 1868 Ohio newspaper item announcing the call by Southern newspapers to consolidate this holiday into a Southern Memorial Day notes that "At present each State has its own day, and there is no concert of action between these lovers of treason," and mockingly suggests the holiday fall on the May

²⁶ "Our Dead Soldiers. Decoration Day Observed Throughout the Country. President M'kinley at Arlington Impressive Ceremonies" 1899.

²⁷ "Memorial Day---Attention!" 1896.

²⁸ "Flowers for Memorial Day" 1911.

anniversary of the capture of Jefferson Davis and be named “Petticoat Day” after Davis’ attempted flight from Union soldiers in his wife’s overcoat.²⁹ A white-owned Savannah newspaper declared in 1907 that the “Federal Memorial Day... will not be observed to any extent in this city,”³⁰ exhibiting white Southern resistance to the national holiday. The holiday emerged as a form of Bellahian bottom-up civil religion, with spontaneous celebrations diffusing across regions and, eventually became a coherent holiday across the country. Three major populations celebrated the holiday, all with different understandings of its meaning that gradually homogenized over time.

In order to highlight the distinctions between the holiday’s different meanings, I borrow here Simon Stow’s distinction between tragic public mourning and romantic public mourning. Romantic public mourning’s politics of consensus and unity can silence minority or dissenting voices (exemplified by the Lost Cause narrative or Lincoln’s conciliatory Gettysburg Address, “predicated on national forgetting”)³¹. Tragic public mourning, on the other hand, is “pluralistic, critical, and self-consciously political.”³² Forms of romantic public mourning emphasize valor, meaningful death, unity, and closure. Conversely, forms of tragic public mourning accept agonistic politics, valuing irreconcilable disagreement.

In the early days of the holiday, Black Americans, (primarily in the South) mourned the brutality of slavery and celebrated the Union victory through tragic mourning; white Northerners celebrated victory through romantic mourning; and white Southerners mourned their defeat and,

²⁹ "The Southern Papers Are Urging the Establishment of One Day Throughout the South as "Memorial Day" on Which the Women of the South Are to Decorate with Flowere the Graves of Those Who Fell in Defence of Rebellion" 1868.

³⁰ "Decoration Day." 1907.

³¹ Stow 2010, 686.

³² Stow 2010, 682.

in the creation of the Lost Cause narrative, consecrated the Confederacy through romantic mourning.

The celebration of Memorial Day in the postwar period by Black Americans (who lived primarily in the South after the war) can be considered tragic public mourning. Black Americans have a history of exclusion from the public or political sphere, through a history of legal enslavement, disenfranchisement, and cultural exclusion. Death and mourning, however, rupture the boundary between private and public. For Black Americans, death has been political since the burial at sea of slaves in transit to the New World, and Black funerals continue to reflect an alternative form of mourning to white or mainstream mourning.³³

For Black Americans, the holiday was partly a celebration of emancipation from slavery. Blight remarks that in the first Memorial Day celebration, the Black Charlestonians “drew a line of demarcation between past and present” and “converted Confederate ruin into their own festival of freedom.”³⁴ Alongside Memorial Day, some towns celebrated (and still celebrate today) Juneteenth, the anniversary of the end of slavery in Texas. Thus, some of the meaning of Memorial Day as a celebration of the end of slavery may have been subsumed by Juneteenth.

Stow argues that Black American mourning traditions are tragic in that they are dual, “death-accepting” (Ronald K. Barrett’s term), and imbued with W.E.B. DuBois’ “double-consciousness.” Stow reads several of Frederick Douglass’ Decoration Day speeches as examples of agonistic or tragic Black mourning. He finds duality within Black spiritual “Sorrow Songs” and funereal rites, both mourning and expressing political resistance.³⁵ One rallying cry

³³ Stow 2010.

³⁴ Blight 2002, 184.

³⁵ Stow 2010, 684.

to convince slaves to fight for the Union, recognizing how slavery and death were already intertwined, argued that it would be better to die free than to live in slavery.³⁶ Like the Athenian women whom Nicole Loraux describes as the guardians of mourning who are restricted to the private sphere,³⁷ slaves and freedpeople were often forced to keep their mourning secret or separate from the white mainstream and many had intimate experiences with death. These examples of mourning that denies neat resolutions and embraces of the idea of death show how Memorial Day, like other mourning practices, was likely construed as tragic mourning for early Black Americans.

White Americans experienced the holiday through different political and social narratives. White Northern newspapers wrote of national reconciliation until the late 19th century while also often emphasizing Northern moral victory over slavery and Southern backwardness.³⁸ One white Ohio newspaper writes that Decoration Day should be second only to Independence Day, for “What the latter was meant to secure, the former stands for.”³⁹ A poem in the *Winnipeg Lutheran* (perhaps by an American expatriate) tells of veterans decorating only Union graves with roses, but the roses spread to the Confederate graves by the next year, and “Since then they deck alike the graves/Of blue and gray with flowers.”⁴⁰ For white Northerners particularly, the watershed moment of the Civil War was a new chapter in the myth Americans told themselves, a “Lincolnian ‘New Testament’” of sacrifice and rebirth of the nation.⁴¹ This narrative of moral

³⁶ Schantz 2013, 72, 129.

³⁷ Loraux, Nicole. *Mothers in Mourning*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.

³⁸ Blight 2002, 161.

³⁹ “Decoration Day” 1888.

⁴⁰ Irving 1912.

⁴¹ Bellah 1967, 9-10.

victory and national reconciliation represents romantic public mourning because of its emphasis on closure and resolution to the war.

Early white Southern interpretation of Memorial Day either recognized defeat or bitterly remembered the destruction of Sherman's march and insisted the Confederacy was right to have fought for slavery – the “Lost Cause” or “Southern pride” narrative. This narrative framed the war as a valiant effort for a noble but lost cause, the liberty of the South to avoid interference by the pesky federal government. The Lost Cause narrative's romantic public mourning conceived the Confederacy as having lost heroically, bringing a sense of certainty and closure to the story of the Civil War for Southerners while allowing them to celebrate Memorial Day and other forms of remembrance as a melancholy engagement with the past. It combined Christian faith and symbols with a sense of Southern culture and history, creating a civil religion as the basis for a Southern identity that was to replace the lost cause of a Southern nation.⁴² By the 1890s, Southern whites had begun to transform this narrative of public mourning into a political rhetoric of conservatism in resistance to widespread economic and political changes.⁴³

Over time, these different regional and racial narratives of Memorial Day and the Civil War began to converge. The inclusion of slain soldiers from other wars, the Great Migration, the move from civil society to state control of celebrations (from bottom-up to top-down civil religion), and market consumerism all contributed to the homogenization of this particular expression of civil religion. It was not until after World War I that the holiday was widely considered to memorialize soldiers of all American wars, although some towns and cities added more recent dead to their commemorations before then. An 1899 Kansas newspaper reports that

⁴² Wilson 2009.

⁴³ Blight 2009, 266.

the recent Spanish-American War casualties were included in the annual flower-laying ceremony at Arlington Cemetery alongside the Civil War dead.⁴⁴ In the 1920s, many Memorial Day speeches and services turned to pacifism in frustration with World War I's massive casualties. Local "doughboy statue" monuments to the fallen soldiers of the Great War lionized war heroes, but more solemn plaques added to town squares also reflected the mournful sentiment of war's futility and waste. World War I's high casualties in foreign lands turned many Americans toward pacifism. By the mid 20th century, the holiday had been nationally recognized and was celebrated in every state, by Black and white Americans alike. A 1939 *New York Amsterdam News* article argued that the country should remember Black soldiers of not only the Great War but also the American Revolution and Civil War.⁴⁵ The narrative of the holiday as an expression of general patriotism rather than specific meanings about the Civil War thus contributed to the holiday's condensing of meaning.

Many Black Americans celebrated Memorial Day similarly to white Americans. Black churches held services; communities watched parades of Black regiments march down boulevards. Civic associations such as the Boy and Girl Scouts and community groups held Memorial Day events after the Civil War, World War I, and throughout the 20th century to the present. 1939 saw a parade of Black veterans and home-front civil society groups through Harlem.⁴⁶ The Great Migration of Blacks northward, away from the source of the Lost Cause narrative, likely helped bring Northern Black narratives closer to Northern white narratives, further homogenizing the meaning of the holiday.

⁴⁴ "Our Dead Soldiers. Decoration Day Observed Throughout the Country. President M'kinley at Arlington Impressive Ceremonies" 1899.

⁴⁵ Malliet 1939.

⁴⁶ "369th Regiment Legion Posts Honor War Dead" 1939.

The transfer of power over meaning-making about the Civil War and Memorial Day from civil society to the state also homogenized the holiday. The mainstream, state-supported meaning of Memorial Day as a celebration of patriotism created a more Rousseauian expression of civil religion. The state has effectively subsumed, homogenized, and whitewashed opposing racial and regional narratives about the Civil War and Memorial Day, erasing its historical origins in order to foster support for its military projects and sovereign legitimacy. This has been made possible by the declining control of the holiday by civil society.

As the holiday's meaning expanded to include the fallen soldiers and veterans of other wars, its meaning began to centralize and unify across the country, especially in the wake of the two World Wars. With a common foreign enemy in these conflicts, regional differences of celebration became less important. The homogenization of the holiday has overshadowed not only the Black tragic mourning tradition but also the Northern moral victory and Southern Lost Cause narratives. What has replaced these multiple meanings of Memorial Day is a homogenized version of Stow's romantic public mourning, which melts multiple meanings and individual anxieties into a cult of the dead, perpetuating both the state's military project and American market consumerism.⁴⁷

This homogenization of meaning was a project of civil religion performed by both civil society and the state, but it coincided with the decline of pluralistic civil society groups throughout the 20th century, bemoaned by scholars from John Dewey to Robert Putnam.⁴⁸ Memorial Day was made a federal holiday in 1971, in effect further supporting the state's project to make the holiday be about valorizing the dead, providing a form of romantic public mourning,

⁴⁷ Warner 1959.

⁴⁸ Dewey 1954, Putnam 1995, Putnam 2001.

and legitimizing the state and any current or future military projects. Consider the first national celebration of the day in Arlington Cemetery, which was declared in 1868 by the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.), a veterans' civil society group. Today, the annual event is organized by the Army, which controls Arlington Cemetery. Lloyd Warner documents the many disparate groups and individuals involved in Memorial Day in "Yankee City" (Newburyport, MA) in the 1950s. For Warner, Memorial Day, as a "cult of the dead," defeats the feeling of death brought on by war losses by re-emphasizing strength through group power and the sacrifices of soldiers. Sacred symbols reverberate throughout disparate social organizations, uniting a plural society of groups and individuals around a recognized set of meanings. The involvement of civic groups both celebrates plurality and unites subcultures around a common enemy. Warner lists the groups involved, which included at least seventeen civil society organizations (the Post of the Veterans of Foreign Fields, local newspapers, the Sons of Union Veterans, the Rotary Club, local churches and schools, American Legion, Daughters of Isabella, several different immigrant populations, Boy Scouts, corps of Women Aids, Elks, the Ladies of the G.A.R., Women's Relief Corps, Moose, Veterans of Foreign Fields, and the G.A.R) and two contingencies from the state or local government (the Massachusetts State Guard and the fire department).⁴⁹ In contrast, reports in the *Newburyport News* about 2016's Memorial Day celebration at City Hall (in lieu of a rained-out parade) lists those who participated or were slated to have participated in the parade as fewer civil society groups (eight: the Newburyport High School Marching Band; boy scouts, girl scouts, and cub scouts troops; the Salvation Army; a group of middle school students reciting the Gettysburg Address; Patriots for American Veterans Organization; and Homes for Our Troops) and more contingencies from state

⁴⁹ Warner 1959, 248, 275, 251-256.

or local government (eight: the Newburyport Police, Coast Guard, City Council, a state legislator, Navy and Merchant Marines, and the Newburyport Police and Fire Departments).⁵⁰ As a result of this movement away from local and civil society control and toward government control over the meaning-making around Memorial Day, the holiday “has acted to integrate the local community into the national cult.”⁵¹

Today, a small town might celebrate Memorial Day through sermons at churches, a few civic association events, or moments of silence at town halls. However, such a high number of organizations as Warner documents in Yankee City would be unlikely to participate in any but the biggest cities’ events today. Because Memorial Day, as a federal holiday, falls on a Monday in order to create a holiday weekend, the way that most Americans think about Memorial Day now is likely not the Lost Cause narrative, Black postbellum tragic mourning, or victory over Southern rebels. Rather, Americans are most likely to encounter Memorial Day through advertisements for sales at department stores, car dealerships, and other retailers.

Commemorative events at churches; announcements in newspapers, on television, and in social media still exist, but they fit most closely with the homogenized meaning of Memorial Day formed in the 20th century out of the World Wars. Thus, Memorial Day’s patriotic symbolism has not been completely erased – it still exists in its patriotism-inspiring, romantic public mourning form – but it has been overtaken by consumerist culture. Regional or racial differences may persist, but there are many more wars to mourn and many more outlets for groups to celebrate their fallen, from Civil War reenactments to Juneteenth to Lee-Jackson Day (a Virginia holiday celebrating two Confederate “heroes”). Dominant (especially state and market)

⁵⁰ Sullivan 2016, Chiaramida 2016.

⁵¹ Bellah 1967, 11.

narratives of Memorial Day indicate something about what story the state is trying to tell us about war and which groups and tragedies are deserving of mourning. They dictate the modes and subjects of public mourning as understood by the more powerful elements of society.

Narratives of Monuments and Memorials

Another important way in which Americans interact with the civil religion of public mourning is through war memorials and monuments. Before examining counter-narratives of war and memory, I will describe three important aspects of the dominant romantic narratives that these monuments were originally meant to tell and what they tell now. First, we find a similar historical pattern in the case of monuments as in the case of Memorial Day, though they do not represent as clear of a trend from diverse narratives of Bellahian civil religion to a centralized and homogenized Rousseauian civil religion. Second, monuments represent a similar puzzle for liberal democracy that is often solved through romantic, patriotic narratives of honor or triumph. These narratives ask Americans to re-inscribe their civil religious faith in the American military project. Finally, because monuments' dominant narratives (such as implicit endorsement of Confederate generals) often legitimate state violence in the future and transmit messages about who belongs in the public sphere, it is important to reveal what these objects are saying to citizens.

The first important point to note about memorials' dominant narratives is that their progression as civil religion is similar to that of Memorial Day (from Bellahian to Rousseauian), though monuments do not fit this trajectory as neatly as Memorial Day does. As projects of civil society groups (though often in collaboration with local governments), monuments represent Bellahian bottom-up civil religion. Whether a government agency or authority designs, commissions, or merely approves the use of public space for a memorial, its participation in the

displaying of monuments in public spaces is an expression of Rousseauian civil religion and a political act. As such, American war memorials and monuments should be considered representations of the regime that mounted them and the political narrative it attempted to shape in doing so, as well as an implicit endorsement by the current authority that continues to display them without context or qualification. In both cases, they express the public mourning and dominant narrative of the time.

The person or body erecting the monument matters for what the monument “says” to these audiences; Simon Stow’s romantic-tragic schema is useful here too. The historian John Bodnar reveals how different present interests struggle to shape the message that society sends about the past. In particular, the “official culture” of political officials favors a romantic “ideal language of patriotism rather than the real [tragic] language of grief and sorrow,” whereas “vernacular culture” favors a diverse array of values and realities.⁵² However, the narrative of patriotism is especially effective because it often appeals to both these official and the vernacular cultures, both the ideals of civic loyalty and the realities of the government’s need for legitimacy.

Though interests still conflict, as I will later show with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, who builds and cares for monuments has shifted over American history from bottom-up civil society projects to top-down state-controlled projects. Historically, American small town war memorials were built by private patrons or organized by small civil society groups or town committees, although with the movement toward codifying land use laws around the 1930s, public projects were increasingly coordinated more closely with local governments. Today, local memorials are often created by or in cooperation with municipal governments if they are built on public land. However, even those monuments that were created by private individuals were

⁵² Bodnar 1992, 14.

connected to the state's meaning-making because patrons imitated the memorials found in other towns and in the capital (witness the spread of the ubiquitous Doughboy from one statue to imitators across the country). Moreover, there is important symbolism and implicit endorsement by the state if a memorial mounted by a past regime remains in a public space.

The second important point to note about monuments' dominant narratives is that American liberal democracy has often chosen to enlist citizens in the state's military project through romantic, patriotic political strategies. The word "monument" is derived from the Latin *monere*, to warn or advise. Many monuments, however, celebrate or valorize war rather than warn against it. War memorials and monuments can connect visitors to intense personal emotional experiences as well as evoke politically charged memories, loyalties, and citizenship identities. The United States Constitution reflects liberal democracy's purported impartiality toward religion, political ideology, and group allegiance. However, the purported rationality and impartiality of state is subverted by the process of designing and building war memorials, often influenced by the state's motivation to depict war in a way that will reinforce its legitimacy and the legitimacy of its military projects. These monuments are not neutral but rather are emotional narratives of romantic mourning.

Through war memorials that celebrate the romantic public narrative of victory, the state can be seen to be legitimizing war by subtly encouraging citizens to fight and win again; through memorials that memorialize defeat, they justify future wars by romanticizing and validating the deaths of soldiers as necessary sacrifices or even portray the defeated country as the victim requiring vengeance.⁵³ The state has needed such projects of civil religion in formative moments

⁵³ Bufton 2005.

to reinforce a sense of nationalism.⁵⁴ Thus, the dominant narrative of patriotic or regional pride allows the official culture and interests of the government to dominate the narrative while encouraging the vernacular culture as well as smaller units (such as local governments and communities) to buy into the narrative.

In using Rousseauian civil religion to endorse certain narratives and not others, the state often utilizes one or both of two political-architectural approaches: one emphasizing victory and triumph, the other emphasizing the honor of the fallen soldiers being memorialized. Both strategies draw on the civil religion language of patriotism, seek closure and unity, and enlist memorials' citizen visitors in upholding state and military legitimacy.

When monuments mark American victories, they have historically been part of a state narrative of domination and military validation, and their vertically oriented architectural style reflects this narrative – from the Liberty Memorial (an obelisk evoking Ancient Egyptian statues) to the Washington Monument and countless variations on the American Doughboy statues of a young soldier marching heroically into battle, found in hundreds of town squares throughout the country. The “Silent Sam” statue of a Confederate soldier facing north, erected by the Daughters of the Confederacy on the campus of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, exemplifies this romantic design and intent. In an 1863 letter to Jefferson Davis (later published in a UNC Alumni Review article about the statue's 1913 dedication), UNC President David Swain likened UNC's Confederate soldiers to Roman warriors, calling the statue “a memorial to their chivalry and devotion. It is an epic poem in bronze. Its beauty and its grandeur are not limited by the genius of the sculptor. The soul of its beholder will determine the revelation of its meaning... Nothing more heroic was ever done in war. They were equal to the Spartans at Thermopylae; to

⁵⁴ Grant 2005.

the Thebans at Chaeronia; to the English at Balaklava; to the Old Guard at Waterloo. They are in the band of the immortals. They are all sublime.”⁵⁵ A narrative of victory is clear from the evocation of glorious historical warriors and the vertical architectural style of this statue.

Thus, romantic narratives of victory and honor have the effect of reaffirming the strength and righteousness of the cause they memorialize and drawing citizen-spectators into a civil religion that reinforces the power and legitimacy of the state. Monuments like this use size, materials, and landscaping to create a visual language of power. Therefore, obelisks and “hero-on-a-horse” monuments in the grand style send a message of power and domination to viewers, a message that is intentionally chosen and transmitted by the original builders.⁵⁶

Another romantic mourning strategy resolves the emotion-politics aporia through a narrative of honor. A Middletown, CT veterans’ memorial plaque to Vietnam and Korean War soldiers reads: “Beyond the far Pacific to the rim of Asia they went – twice in a generation – to risk all for honor and freedom.”⁵⁷ Here the visitor is meant to mourn the fallen by reading their names, but also to honor the soldiers’ sacrifice for the country. Again, the memorial conjures a patriotic feeling to mediate the liberal democratic puzzle not by using tragic mourning to focus on the loss of life (and in the case of these particular wars, American defeat), but rather to use romantic mourning to focus on the courage and honor of individuals.

If a memorial focuses on triumph and victory, like the Boston Commons statue does, the connection to patriotic emotions is clear, and the state narrative of American military might and right is straightforward. However, if a memorial also incorporates elements of loss and sacrifice,

⁵⁵ “The Soldiers’ Monument Unveiled” 1913.

⁵⁶ Loewen 2007.

⁵⁷ Pelland 2009.

like the lists of the fallen in the Middletown memorial do, the state narrative needs to evoke emotions connected to soldiers' honor and bravery in order to reinforce the legitimacy of the American military project. If it did not, and the emotional experience of the memorial was a more funereal form of tragic mourning, the fear may be that citizens would view military enlistment in future wars as a death sentence. The public honor soldiers receive after death is part of the state's message to the population that participation in the civilian military will give citizens a higher purpose and generate public reverence for them, even after death. The American military's voluntary enlistment relies on this romantic narrative of unity for its supply of soldiers.

The dominance of the patriotism and pride narratives does not preclude memorials from evoking private grief and healing. Memorials usually support the national myth and imagined community, yet survivor testimony and reflection on trauma can also indicate the impossibility of closure and the ambiguity of traumatic events such as combat.⁵⁸ Thus, the interests of the state, survivors, veterans, and the general public, each of whom may expect monuments to satisfy different emotional and political needs, may struggle for power over what dominant narratives are really about.⁵⁹

Nowhere is the importance of physical space in shaping political-historical experiences clearer than in Washington, D.C., where over 25 million people visit each year.⁶⁰ National war memorials on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., which are commissioned and built by federal agencies and are part of a visibly official state narrative, more clearly represent top-down civil religion than do local small town monuments. Each monument to a figure of American

⁵⁸ Edkins 2003.

⁵⁹ Ashplant, et al. 2000.

⁶⁰ Line and Braxton n.d.

history, each museum, and each plaque directing tourists' attention is an expression of the state's version of American history. The newest addition to the major Washington monuments, one to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the newest Smithsonian museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, represent deliberate choices by the state about how to depict its narrative of history to the public. People of color and women and other marginalized groups are included in the soldiers killed in wars that are remembered in monuments, but the heroes mourned in the public space of the nation's capital, until the mounting of the African American Civil War Memorial in the 1990s, were primarily white men. Thus, the Mall is a site of contested histories of oppression and valorization, and conflicts abound over which stories get told and how, "who deserves the therapy of a public monument."⁶¹

My third claim about dominant narratives of monuments is that it is a worthwhile project to decipher them because of their possible political consequences of exclusion. It is widely recognized that memorials transmit something to the viewer about what *is* to be honored, but I think we need an account of who is left out by the narratives they convey. War memorials influence political memory through symbols of the sacred or profane, depicting humanitarianism, honor, service, or national identity.⁶² As Erika Doss identifies, different types of memorials can express different emotions and narratives and thus different parts of American public mourning: small memorials at terrorism or school shooting sites embody fear; war memorials express gratitude toward veterans and other sentiments; and progressive memorials about the legacy of slavery reflect shame.⁶³ Equally important, though, are the lives not mourned in a memorial. For

⁶¹ Savage 2009, 279–280.

⁶² Mayo 1988.

⁶³ Doss 2010, 13; see also Doss 2008.

example, Doss says the World War II Memorial mainly evokes gratitude for the “greatest generation.” However, this account forgets that it might also evoke anger or resentment among descendants of interned Japanese-American citizens.

Monuments also remind us of tensions between the past (war events) and the present (simultaneously mourning and moving on from war). The legal scholar Sanford Levinson argues that monuments, street names, and public art all reflect a dynamic view of the past, and that it is impossible to read them without taking into consideration present contexts.⁶⁴ Thus, unlike in Eastern Europe, American monuments to the ousted regime (the Confederacy) remain standing because of the current state of public discourse and social context around the Civil War. When past and present interests clash, controversies – such as whether to fly the Confederate flag – arise, as they did after the 2015 shooting of Black churchgoers in Charleston by a Confederate flag aficionado.

Memorials are reflections of what a society cares about remembering. Judith Butler points out that in the hegemonic state narrative in the post-9/11 United States, certain lives are deemed grievable and others are not. There are no obituaries in the major newspapers, she notes, for Afghan or Iraqi civilian casualties like there are for American war casualties.⁶⁵ Butler’s point about obituaries applies also to memorials: notably, the victims of the genocide of Native Americans and slavery go largely unmemorialized. This (lack of) narrative is important to politics because the extent to which officials and public opinion view victims as humans who are worthy of mourning both reflects and can shape policy priorities for war or peace and oppression

⁶⁴ Levinson 1998.

⁶⁵ Butler 2004, 34.

or resistance to oppression. It may also shape members of marginalized groups' sense of political efficacy and sense of belonging in the body politic.

Especially in the American South, where Confederate memorials are constant reminders of racial violence, they often result in exclusion by signaling about who belongs in the public square. As racial messages, Confederate monuments read differently to people of different racial groups. We know from empirical social science research that both implicit and racial cues from elites, such as Confederate flags, are effective ways to influence citizens.⁶⁶ Racial messages can be conveyed either through ostensibly nonracial codes like subtle visual cues in campaign ads and other political messages.⁶⁷ Racially tinged memorials, as social texts, are read and interpreted differently by people with different racial and regional backgrounds and political allegiances. These romantic narratives of patriotism and honor for supporters of slavery emphasize closure. As such, they have the potential to close out members of historically oppressed groups from the public sphere. This is the dilemma a liberal democracy faces when violence intrudes into politics and explodes the fallacy of state neutrality. Confederate monuments provide a helpful snapshot of this phenomenon.

The Southern Poverty Law Center identifies over 1,500 symbols of the Confederacy (monuments; statues; flags; holidays; and named schools, highways, or other public works), 27 of which are schools with majority African-American populations and 700 of which are statues or monuments on public property.⁶⁸ It is important to both understand monument builders' original intent and acknowledge that interpretations of monuments change dramatically across

⁶⁶ Hutchings, et al. 2010.

⁶⁷ Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, et al. 2002.

⁶⁸ SPLC 2016.

generational time as memories are promoted or ignored in the present.⁶⁹ The majority of the United States' Confederate memorials and statues were built in two surges, during the Jim Crow Era from around 1900-1920 and during the Civil Rights Movement from around 1950-1960. Both these periods represented backlash to increasing racial equality and progress in the South: the first to Blacks' emancipation and advancement through Reconstruction policies and the second to federal intervention in the Jim Crow apartheid system. The building of Confederate monuments during Reconstruction and Jim Crow indicates continued Southern resistance to Reconstruction and continued identification with the Lost Cause among white southerners. For example, Richmond's Monument Avenue is lined with Civil War memorials commemorating Confederate generals or leaders. Their ceremonial installment in the early Reconstruction period indicates a rejection of both the Northern victory narrative and the Black tragic mourning narrative and an endorsement of Lost Cause narrative by the planners (Confederate veteran civil society groups and city officials).

The architecture historian Kirk Savage identifies the first wave of monument building, in the late nineteenth through early twentieth century, at least in the South, as an expression of the Lost Cause narrative, with Richmond at its epicenter. Savage argues that the themes of race, war, and public monuments shaped the American sense of nationhood after the Civil War and as it emerged from slavery.⁷⁰ The process of memorializing in this period was neither completely state-controlled nor organically generated by public demand, but a reciprocal process of conflict and debate about proper commemoration between elites and the wider public arena. In the case of Monument Avenue, local veterans group and a local ladies' group, eventually with the

⁶⁹ Shackel 2003.

⁷⁰ Savage 1999.

endorsement and help of the governor, fundraised and advocated for the first statue, the Robert E. Lee Statue. The Lee statue, the first of five, was unveiled in 1890 as part of a reunion of tens of thousands of Confederate veterans in an eruption of Lost Cause sentiment.⁷¹ Richmond was what Charles Regan Wilson calls “the Mecca of the Lost Cause, and Monument [Avenue...] was the sacred road to it.”⁷²



Figure 2 – a 1908 memorial to local Confederate troops in Thomaston, GA.

For the nation at large, the mission of the war monument to represent a common public memory met an especially thorny challenge in the Confederacy, which represented fracture rather than unity. The proud Confederate war memorials in the South, such as those built on Richmond’s Monument Avenue during and after Reconstruction by Confederate veterans

⁷¹ Edwards, et al. 1992, 16.

⁷² Wilson 2009, 29.

groups, showed that the project of unifying North and South was still in progress. However, their Lost Cause narrative, which reasserted pride in the Confederacy and the South while acknowledging defeat, removed the political threat of further Southern rebellion while retaining both the bittersweet pride in “heroes” like Lee and the melancholy of defeat. Thus, in its recognition of defeat, the Lost Cause narrative made Southern mourning more palatable to Northerners.

Civil War monuments show that public monuments that honor communal events and heroes are used by regimes to ensure their survival and legitimacy through material validation.⁷³ This shaping of the historical narrative by the public body that designed, commissioned, or approved memorials represents an attempt to mediate the space between affect and liberal impartiality through romantic public mourning. The result of liberal democratic thought is that the emphasis on individual rights and liberties contains emotions to the individual person, effectively taking affect out of the supposedly rational political realm. However, as memorials show, the state actually plays an active role in deciding which emotions are aired in the public sphere, in highly visible public spaces such as town squares and the National Mall.

This can result in feelings of exclusion among oppressed groups (in this case, especially Black Southerners). The salience of race and history on Monument Avenue has continued for over a century, with renewed controversy and additional accumulated meanings during the Civil Rights Movement and the Civil War bicentennial.⁷⁴ Richmond residents witnessed a watershed moment when both a majority of both Blacks and white residents, though for different reasons, opposed the 1996 placement of a statue of the Black tennis player Arthur Ashe alongside the

⁷³ Levinson 1998, 87.

⁷⁴ Barbee 2014.

Confederates. Many Blacks opposed the placement of the Ashe statue next to the Confederates because Ashe was too morally good to be associated spatially with them, while others believed the Ashe statue should be placed in Black neighborhoods, where it could inspire Black children. Many white Richmond residents opposed the Ashe statue, saying it was not historically important enough or aesthetically consistent with the Confederate statues, or just straightforwardly arguing against the presence of a Black figure on Monument Avenue.⁷⁵ This illustrates the importance of understanding that what monuments originally meant when they were built may shift dramatically over time and can exclude some members of the polity from dominant narratives.



Figure 3 – Unveiling of the Robert E. Lee Monument on Richmond’s Monument Avenue, 1890.⁷⁶

There has been a shift not only from bottom-up to top-down narrative-shaping around memorials but also in how the state expresses and shapes public mourning. As the nature of

⁷⁵ Leib 2002.

⁷⁶ Andrews 1912.

conflicts has shifted from large-scale World Wars and Cold War conflicts with large numbers of casualties and compulsory enlistment to more ambiguous “involvements” with significant but fewer casualties and voluntary enlistment, the goals of the state in narrating wars and reinforcing its legitimacy through patriotism have shifted. The constant American military involvement after 9/11 and the precariousness of every civilian as a potential target of terrorism will surely change Americans’ parameters for what constitutes a war and what should be memorialized. It is unclear whether the War on Terror, the longest-running war in American history, is seen or will come to be seen as a war at all or simply the status quo, a suspended state of conflict and vague ideas of engagement in the Middle East. My instinct is that many Americans experience the War on Terror as the latter, not a war but simply a foggy state of distant conflict with the constant threat of spilling over to American shores with terrorist attacks, so the task of memorializing that conflict would be a challenge for democracy. There may be potential in such a project; Simon Stow acknowledges the potential for a progressive democratic message to move people beyond loss in memorials. There must be a receptive audience, however; whereas the 9/11 Memorial in Lower Manhattan, he argues, is an opportunity for hundreds of spectators a day to linger in the moment of loss and mourning, the Katrina Memorial in New Orleans represents a lost opportunity for deliberative memory-building because that memorial does not draw many locals or tourists.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Stow 2012.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Alternative civil society movements, especially those representing oppressed groups, have advocated to include traditionally marginalized groups in public mourning. These attempts to rethink our subjects and modes of mourning victims of war and state violence, as Bellahian civil religion, ask us to reshape political culture and the public's view of future state violence and wars. A bottom-up approach of counter-narrative is useful because it combats the dominant narrative, giving us new possibilities in the present by changing its the relationship with the past.⁷⁸ In this section I will take up the political debate over Maya Lin's controversial design for the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial as a counter-narrative that shows the importance of listening and responding to alternative movements and exemplifies tragic public mourning as an alternative to romantic public mourning. What was innovative about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was that it had a less victorious emotional charge and narrative than many previous monuments. Rather, its narrative was one of tragic mourning, the experience of loss as Freud articulates it, enabling a public experience of mourning through architecture, one that has the potential to facilitate political community through shared vulnerability as Butler envisions. Lin's claim to be politically neutral falls short of a political aesthetic that builds new understandings of violence and history. However, her design's rejection of the common white stone, vertically oriented monument style is inevitably saying something different about war and violence despite Lin's claims. Discussing mainstream and counter-narratives such as Lin's gives me a chance to

⁷⁸ Giroux 1997, 160.

uncover the fallacy of neutral public mourning and explore one narrative that conceptualizes war and violence as something to be mourned, not valorized. That the state eventually endorsed Lin's non-neutral memorial, which rejected the traditional evocation of either patriotism or honor discussed in the previous section, shows that there is hope for a non-neutral civil religion of anti-oppression.

Maya Lin, a Yale undergraduate architecture student, was the surprise winner of the over 1,400 anonymous entries in the Congressionally authorized, U.S. Commission of Fine Arts-run Vietnam Veterans Memorial contest in 1981. Her design had an aesthetic that could be understood as feminist, ecological, and/or postmodernist (though she does not claim those labels):

I imagined taking a knife and cutting into the earth, opening it up, an initial violence and pain that in time would heal. The grass would grow back, but the initial cut would remain a pure flat surface in the earth with a polished, mirrored surface, much like the surface on a geode when you cut it and polish the edge... It would be an interface, between our world and the quieter, darker, more peaceful world beyond. I chose black granite in order to make the surface reflective and peaceful. I never looked at the memorial as a wall, an object, but as an edge to the earth, an opened side... I wanted my design to work with the land, to make something with the site, not to fight it or dominate it.... The architects could not understand my choice of a reflective, highly polished black granite. One of them felt I was making a mistake and the polished surface would be “too *feminine*.”⁷⁹

Lin's design consciously rejects traditional Western memorials' tendency to valorize and glorify or celebrate victory (like a white marble obelisk). Rather, she embraces and works with the landscape to create a physical reflective space for visitors to find names of fallen soldiers and touch their names, which are carved into the dark marble. This experience of mourning is very different from romantic, celebratory memorials such as the Boston Commons memorial, and though its listing of the dead continues a tradition started in World War I memorials (and was a requirement of all entries in the contest), the physical interface with all the names of the fallen is

⁷⁹ Lin 2000.

one of her innovations. She aimed not to uplift the veterans or make them feel happy but to help them overcome trauma and loss.⁸⁰ The wall's reflectiveness, showing the visitor her own body on the screen of the dead soldiers' names, resonates for individual and collective political narratives. As tragic public mourning, it allows for conflictual, agonistic mourning without asking her to neatly tie up the emotional experience into one of victory or honor.

Lin's design's controversial simplicity, her age, and her Chinese-American heritage led to an intense fight over the design among veterans' and Missing-In-Action groups, the memorial committee, the architectural firm, and Lin.⁸¹ The controversies surrounding the Vietnam memorial reflect a tension between narratives and a re-examination of the traditional narrative celebrating victory in light of the first modern American military defeat.

Lin's design affected other memorials of the Vietnam War. The very physicality of the memorial affects the emotional experiences of viewers (for example, the scope and permanence of the massive stone Massachusetts Vietnam Veterans Memorial listing the names of the dead overwhelms the senses and emotions, potentially leading to emotional catharsis). This design shift is important; it is likely that the material composition and physical organization of war memorials affect the ways individuals react to the memorials.⁸²

Lin claims that her design was politically neutral:

Perhaps it was an empathetic response to the idea about war that had led me to cut open the earth—an initial violence that heals in time but leaves a memory, like a scar. But this imagery, which some detractors would later describe as “a black gash of shame and sorrow” in which the color black was called the “universal color of shame and dishonor,” would prove incredibly difficult to defend. The misreading of the design as a negative political statement that in some way was meant to reflect upon the service of the veterans was in part fueled by a cultural prejudice against the color black as well as by the

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹ Mock 1994.

⁸² Beckstead, et al. 2011.

misreading or misinformation that led some veterans to imagine the design as a ditch or a hole... it was extremely naive of me to think that I could produce a neutral statement that would not become politically controversial simply because it chose not to take sides.⁸³

However, I argue that such a repudiation of more traditionally masculine, romantic, and glorifying designs is inevitably a political statement. An apolitical memorial of such a politically controversial war, the first significant military loss in American history, would have been impossible. Moreover, Lin's intersectionality as an Asian woman embroiled in the commemoration of a war where the North Vietnamese were the enemy would have made any involvement with the federal government's approval process inherently political. Lin's design, reflecting loss and reflection rather than glory and victory, represents one of many different productive possibilities for alternate narrative-shaping. Its tragic architectural style, which encourages visitors to embrace feelings of loss rather than triumph or pride, can more readily facilitate the experience of grief as Butler imagines, as something that is not privatizing but collectivizing, through reminders of our shared vulnerability to death.⁸⁴ The state should listen to such alternate narratives because they offer valuable new ways of thinking about public mourning and because they often include traditionally marginalized groups in the category of who deserves mourning. The building of war memorials is not merely an aesthetic project; it reflects who shapes the debate about the United States' involvement in conflict. As the nature of American "war" involvement continues to change, the question of which narratives dominate is a crucial question for politics.

Lin's architectural counter-narrative portrays war as something to be mourned rather than valorized. Its embrace of reflection and mourning without turning to a narrative of pride reveals

⁸³ Lin 2000.

⁸⁴ Butler 2004.

the fallacy of neutral public mourning and shows that there is hope for a non-neutral, anti-oppression civil religion. One of the arguments for a homogenized state narrative of war and state violence is that the state is neutral, whereas these counter-narratives from civil society are not. I would argue, however, that the state has never been neutral; on the contrary, it has always had an interest in promoting public mourning narratives of glorification and military validation. This is the impetus for my proposal of non-neutral civil religion: the state is not and cannot be neutral, so instead we should promote a form of public mourning that recognizes past injustices and tries to end current ones.

A NON-NEUTRAL POLITICS OF MOURNING

Maya Lin's design represents one possible alternative narrative of how we should think about mourning and what we should mourn. One lesson of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is the value of listening to such alternate narratives because they can draw attention to the needs of oppressed groups and contest potentially problematic dominant narratives. Considering these alternative projects of mourning, I draw upon Frederick Douglass' post-bellum Decoration Day speeches to propose a state politics of mourning that supports a plurality of meanings but also rejects impartiality. The aim would be to help construct a public sphere that acknowledges both dominant and alternative narratives of history but adopts a specific politics of non-neutral mourning that chooses to endorse only those narratives that reflect a sense of justice as anti-oppression.

This will require us to reconsider our civil religion of mourning. For Bellah's bottom-up civil religion, religious-nationalistic symbolism can moderate the effects of tumultuous times of political or social unrest by helping Americans aspire to their highest ideals. Bellah wrote his 1967 essay to argue that civil religion's imperative was to fight against the Vietnam War, not to accept it or any other action by the state.⁸⁵ The dangers of the state misuse of power is a perennial concern, but I would argue that the state is misusing its power of public mourning *now* in its war-validating narrative and this is why we need a critical rethinking about what the subjects and modes of mourning should be. Bellah's understanding of civil religion as holding us

⁸⁵ Bellah 1989.

to our highest ideals can counteract these dangers and enable this critical transformation of civil religion as used by the state to endorse its war-validating narrative into a civil religion of political participation, equality, and justice as anti-oppression.

A Non-Neutral Memorial Day

Using Frederick Douglass' rejection of neutrality in his Decoration Day speeches, I argue that the state should promote a new formulation of the holiday that acknowledges plurality of meaning and practices partiality by rejecting all narratives that support oppression. This formulation, a combination of Bellah's faith in the people to shape civil religion and Rousseau's call to the state to create civil religion from the top down, asks us to recognize Memorial Day's roots within a history of black suffering, Southern coming-to-terms with defeat, and Northern moral victory. It should aim to educate Americans about the multiplicity of groups and meanings that created the holiday, including Southern losses of human life, but it should reject the Southern "Lost Cause" narrative that glorifies the Confederacy. It should promote a meaning of the holiday that recognizes that its origins meant different things to different people, and that multiple religions, races, and civil society groups were involved in its ceremonies. However, the state does not have an obligation to be rhetorically neutral between these plural meanings. David Blight's rediscovery of the first Memorial Day is significant because it reclaims an important piece of American history for Black Americans. Such a retelling of history can and should be included in a process of civic education that aims to empower previously disempowered groups. This new Memorial Day should celebrate the first (Black) Memorial Day in Charleston and endorse the rhetoric of Northern moral victory, while acknowledging the humanity of the Confederates, despite their misguided reasons. It should reject the rhetoric of the American soldier's martyrdom in all subsequent wars and emphasize the wounds war inflicts on society.

This is a project of civic education. It can take place in state-sponsored celebrations, such as political speeches, ceremonies held at military cemeteries, or local government-sponsored events on Memorial Day. It could also be part of a larger project to educate public school children about the Civil War – federal funding should be restricted from states that teach that the South fought for states’ rights, not slavery – and the causes and consequences of war more broadly. There is a wide range of exciting possibilities, from poetry to archaeology to documentary filmmaking, that would allow children to critically engage with the history of the Civil War and other instances of war and state-sponsored violence. The narratives of anti-oppression the state endorses may need to evoke tragic rather than romantic public mourning, especially a war becomes a less well-developed category in the 21st century.

The biggest challenge to this project may be the conversion of a holiday that today means something quite generic and divorced from politics – a baseball game with extra bunting in the stands, a sale on Volvos, or a secular day off work – to a meaning that is deeply entrenched in political history and contemporary-meaning making. (It might even include reminding the public that even Volvo sales themselves have political implications!). It is similar to what Jeff Spinner-Halev calls “enduring injustice,” which focuses on repairing injustices that persist today through shared space, rather than on merely finding the historical cause for the injustice.⁸⁶ We should acknowledge the complexity of our history and its competing narratives before proceeding to create a new meaning for Memorial Day in order to repair injustices that continue into the present. I offer Frederick Douglass' interpretation of a moral, non-neutral war memory as a challenge to the idea that mourning should remain impartial to political meanings and argue for a new way of thinking about the holiday inspired by Douglass that recognizes its historical roots in

⁸⁶ Spinner-Halev 2007.

the South coming to terms with its defeat, Northern moral victory, and Black mourning but that is free to endorse only the latter two.⁸⁷

Douglass' postwar speeches emphasize the moral victory of the North over slavery. Douglass recognized the sacred ceremony's linking of the individual and group. I agree with David Blight, who says Douglass (and Lincoln) wanted us to carefully remember the war in a way that helps our moral growth as a nation.⁸⁸ In an 1882 speech, Douglass emphasized the Decoration Day ceremony as "a sign of something real, valuable and important... [toward the] common interest and common memory which makes this day sacred to us all."⁸⁹ It is this understanding of the importance of the holiday to public mourning that informed his political philosophy in these speeches.

A critical view of race is the basis for Douglass' rejection of neutrality. Racial power balances are not currently neutral or equal, he says, so he acknowledges that no view of history should take on false neutrality, either. Douglass' 1852 speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" recognizes that the history of the American revolutionary heroes and constitutional framers belongs to whites, not to Blacks. Mainstream American political rights and values have been withheld to varying degrees from Black Americans since their arrival in America as slaves in the 17th century.⁹⁰ This rejection of neutrality is an example of Stow's tragic public mourning because it forces his anti-abolition opponents to engage with his argument on agonistic, democratic-deliberative grounds.⁹¹

⁸⁷ My thoughts on rejecting neutrality are also informed by Ian Shapiro 2016.

⁸⁸ Blight 2002, 188.

⁸⁹ Douglass 1882, 1-2.

⁹⁰ Douglass 2014.

⁹¹ Stow 2010, 687.

His 1871 Decoration Day speech in Arlington National Cemetery gives us a way to think about the reconstruction of the past beyond the bounds of a neutral state. As Blight points out, Douglass “abhorred the non-ideological interpretation of the war that was gaining popularity by the 1880s.”⁹² In response to this neutrality rhetoric, Douglass argues that we cannot forget the difference between the causes of both sides.⁹³

In Douglass’ 1878 Decoration Day speech in Union Square, New York City, “There Was a Right Side in the Late War,”⁹⁴ he also emphasizes the virtues and just cause of the Union, its “clearness of vision to discern the right.” He says that the work of the Union toward freedom is not completed because inequality and injustice still oppress Blacks. He resents that white Southerners have not sufficiently repented or renounced slavery, while the North has been too genteel and conciliatory toward the South. Douglass pushes Northerners not to be too lenient toward Southerners: “I admit that the South believed it was right, but the nature of things is not changed by this belief. The Inquisition was not less a crime against humanity because it was believed right by the Holy Fathers.”⁹⁵

On Memorial Day in 1882, Douglass continues this theme of the just cause: he refuses to accept the “forgive and forget” rhetoric, instead reiterating that “rebellion was wrong and loyalty was right... slavery was wrong and emancipation right.” Decoration Day is thus a celebration of the Northern moral victory over slavery, and the critique that we should not dishonor the dead Confederate soldiers does not apply because “Death has no power to change moral qualities”

⁹² Blight 2002, 98.

⁹³ Douglass 1871.

⁹⁴ Douglass 1878.

⁹⁵ Douglass 1878, 629, 631.

(death should not valorize the morally wrong things the Confederates died defending).⁹⁶ A pattern emerges here: as time progresses, Douglass' Decoration Day speeches emphasize more and more his argument about non-neutrality. Perhaps Douglass grew frustrated over time at Northern whites' conciliatory attitudes toward Southerners or many Southerners' adherence to the racial amnesia of the Lost Cause. Whatever the cause for this pattern, it is interesting that Douglass seems to have grown more committed to a message of non-neutrality with each Decoration Day.

Douglass' narrative acknowledges that Confederate soldiers believed they were right but refuses to shy away from endorsing the Northern victory or criticizing the oppression of Blacks. Similarly, I argue that the government should both acknowledge multiple histories and political meanings of Memorial Day and endorse some but not others. The state should endorse Douglass' idea that Northern moral victory over slavery was necessary, and that fallen soldiers should be honored and thanked, but also that war is a regrettable and tragic event.

A legal scholar would point out that this argument about non-neutrality has to take into account the legal concept of "government speech." As I have discussed, one result of liberalism is a washing away of the emotional from the political, attempting to remove emotions from the supposedly rational political realm. However, memorials and mourning holidays (both of which, with their memories of violence, explode the political-emotional dichotomy) show that the state actually plays an active role in deciding which emotions are aired in the public sphere. Government speech is the constitutional law concept that speech is protected if it is made by the government in promoting its own viewpoint by selecting some speakers and denying the speech of others in certain state-controlled spaces. Mary Jean Dolan argues that this kind of government

⁹⁶ Douglass 1882, 6-7.

speech must be protected – that the accusation of non-neutrality should not stand in cases where the government has to choose between different speakers and not remain totally neutral. This may seem unjust to those who emphasize the establishment clause of the First Amendment. However, it means not only that the state can choose to display the Ten Commandments but not a monument by the fringe Summum religion, but also that the state can allow a monument to gay rights and tolerance in public squares without having to also allow a homophobic and hateful monument by the Westboro Baptist Church.⁹⁷

I present Douglass’ speeches as an example of the theory behind the idea of government speech, the idea that we do not have to be neutral, but can and should endorse one idea over another. Although Douglass of course was not representing the state in his speeches, his rejection of neutrality does the same kind of theoretical work the government speech doctrine does. Both Douglass and the government speech standard might agree that the state can decide to bracket Confederate memorials or monuments to racist leaders with informational plaques. Because the government has the power to decide how to celebrate Memorial Day, it should purposefully emphasize only narratives that reject oppression, historical and present.

Non-Neutral Memorials and Monuments

For monuments and memorials, I propose a normative civil religion project for bracketing existing Confederate statues with plaques denouncing the subjects’ acts and adding new statues of Black leaders and other heroes of oppressed groups. Memorials to Confederate leaders across the South are a point of conflict and protest, exemplifying the puzzle for liberal democracy that public mourning poses. The memorials’ proponents cite the need to maintain “Southern pride” and “heritage,” while their opponents argue that public spaces that are

⁹⁷ Dolan 2009.

dedicated to the defenders of slavery create unsafe spaces for Black Americans living in the shadow of historical oppression. The question for the democratic state is whether to let the memorials stand and risk continuing to honor genocidal “heroes” such as Columbus and Southern “heroes” of the defeated rebellion or remove the statues and risk erasing reminders of our unpleasant history of slavery and war. I will propose a third option, arguing that only narratives of non-oppression should be endorsed by the state, and that this should be done by bracketing Confederate memorials with plaques and contextualizing them with a broader program of civil religion.

The #TakeEmDownNOLA movement is a coalition that successfully, in March 2017, convinced the New Orleans city council and Mayor Mitch Landrieu to remove the Robert E. Lee Monument at Lee Circle and three other monuments related to the Confederacy.⁹⁸ The reasons the movement gives for the statues’ removal include that public spaces should be inclusive for all citizens rather than “constant reminders of the past and present domination of black people by the rich white ruling class”; that tax dollars should not be used to maintain them; and that their removal is a symbol of giving the city “a chance at real racial reconciliation” and “collective will to address systemic oppression, which is reeking [sic] havoc in the minds, homes, and neighborhoods of our families city-wide.”⁹⁹

The city agreed to remove the Confederate statues after a 60-day public discussion period, citing ‘the city’s ability to control its property,’ and to put the statues in storage until their fates are decided. The Monumental Task Committee, the pro-monument group in New Orleans, fought the 5th District Court’s agreement siding with the city’s decision to remove the

⁹⁸ Litten 2017.

⁹⁹ "Open Letter to the Residents of New Orleans" 2017.

monuments. The Committee argued that instead of removing the statues, the city should add informational plaques “to present those individuals [the Confederate figures] in the context of their time.”¹⁰⁰ Similar political battles for the removal of Confederate statues have been won in Charlottesville, VA¹⁰¹ and lost or stagnated in Stone Mountain, GA¹⁰², Memphis, TN,¹⁰³ Chapel Hill, NC,¹⁰⁴ and Louisville, KY¹⁰⁵, among other places. Baton Rouge relocated one Confederate statue from a public square to a museum in 2012.¹⁰⁶

Taking Douglass’ case for a non-neutral historical narrative seriously, I think that #TakeEmDownNOLA’s reasons for objecting to the monuments – that they appear, in public spaces, to be an endorsement of Lee, Jackson, and others by the government – are correct. I rely here on an Arendtian ideal of the public sphere as a space for citizenship that should be cultivated and celebrated as part of the process of living with and for others.¹⁰⁷ A similar view of the public square as a space for citizenship was affirmed by the US Supreme Court’s description of streets and parks for public life, assembly, and citizenship in the 1939 case *Hague vs. CIO*.¹⁰⁸ I think an Arendtian goal of the public sphere is a worthwhile goal because it enables the activities of citizenship and collectivity that are not possible where there are no spaces for acting

¹⁰⁰ Litten 2017.

¹⁰¹ Harmon 2017.

¹⁰² Massey 2015.

¹⁰³ Miller 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Bonner 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Ali and AP 2016.

¹⁰⁶ Pierce 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Arendt 1958.

¹⁰⁸ *Hague V. Committee for Industrial Organization* 1939.

and judging together to pursue common aims. Witness the Athenian Agora and Roman forum; the dearth of and craving for a public space to congregate in refugee camps;¹⁰⁹ and the gathering together on Manhattan stoops that Jane Jacobs famously documented.¹¹⁰



Figure 4 – The Robert E. Lee monument in New Orleans, facing defiantly north.

Despite the validity of the #TakeEmDownNOLA’s concerns about the public square as a reason to object to the status quo, I disagree with the movement’s proposed solution. Monuments to figures who fought for slavery, racism, and oppression should not be torn down but clearly demarcated with explanatory plaques about their history.

Such plaques should not only give historical context but also make a non-neutral renunciation of the figure’s ideology and history. Rather than destroy the memory of the histories of oppression in the United States, I argue we should reframe them. Both our physical environment and social expectations for behavior in that environment shape our perceptions and

¹⁰⁹ Kimmelman 2016.

¹¹⁰ Jacobs 1992.

behavior in a given place. The sense of social time that the people of the present have influences how they interact with parts of their environment that are from the past. We may want to hold on to parts of the past that remind us of future aspirations, or to turn to ruins for melancholy reflection, or to destroy emblems of histories we wish to reject.¹¹¹ Moreover, physically removing monuments poses all the dangers of revisionist histories.¹¹² Destroying reminders of ugly histories may pose a greater danger than keeping them as reminders that can repeat itself.

Judith Butler reminds us that frames of recognition give normative value to some lives but not others. Thus, the solution is not to attempt to erase the frames or narratives altogether (that is an impossible goal as much as it is an undesirable one). Rather, we should circulate and re-circulate the dominant narratives that are currently used to apprehend lives as ungrievable in order to understand them.¹¹³ Only then can we these dominant frames in order to subvert them, to garner a political opposition to war and violence. Though Butler does not explicitly claim that the use of dominant frames can be a strategy for subverting them, I think her theory lends itself to the idea that the withdrawal from frames of memory such as Confederate memorials would whitewash and sanitize the past. Butler's commitment to Foucauldian discursive power means (and I agree) there is no going "outside" power structures; it is only that we can reorganize discursive power. Similarly, we cannot avoid civil religion narratives of public mourning; the question now is whether the state will adjudicate between contested narratives and endorse only those that are anti-oppression. The ultimately fruitless purification of public and private spaces from fear, discomfort, and uncertainty, not by citizens' neuroses but by political institutions, has

¹¹¹ Lynch 1972.

¹¹² Merewether 1999.

¹¹³ Butler 2010.

segregated political life to make contemporary American citizenship less democratic.¹¹⁴ The proposal of tearing down monuments entirely risks precisely this harmful purification. Moreover, there is a danger of erasing the history not only of the Confederacy but also of the Jim Crow and mid-20th century racial backlashes that were the context for the erection of most Confederate statues.¹¹⁵ In the literature on transitional justice, remembrance of past violence aids the process of building a common narrative and increases the success of transitional justice processes.¹¹⁶

However, plaques should only be one part of engaging people; additional statues to heroes of causes of justice and anti-oppression should be juxtaposed with the existing memorials. Thoreau's critique of physical monuments in *Walden* (we should cultivate virtue, for "[o]ne piece of good sense would be more memorable than a monument as high as the moon")¹¹⁷ reminds us that material markers can actually relieve citizens of their intellectual responsibilities. The danger of having physical markers of history is that they can replace "real environments of memory."¹¹⁸ We should avoid the deification of the material landscape; we cannot let citizens off the hook for the political engagement that the process of remembering must entail. Historical education programs in schools, museums, and public spaces should actively engage visitors who might not otherwise stop to read and learn about the history of the Confederacy, the erection of the statue by pro-Confederacy groups later, and the racial justice dialogue leading up to the current denouncement of the figure by the state. Public education as imagined by Helen

¹¹⁴ Bickford 2000.

¹¹⁵ Kytte and Roberts 2015.

¹¹⁶ Hazan 2006.

¹¹⁷ Thoreau 2012.

¹¹⁸ Nora 1989.

Vendler's "humanities toolboxes,"¹¹⁹ Melanie Buffington and Erin Waldner's pedagogical suggestion for art and history teachers to train students to think critically about racism, history, and art in their own communities;¹²⁰ or the engaging Holocaust and Civil Rights Movement curricula of the nonprofit Facing History and Ourselves¹²¹ are all wonderful ways we could implement this theory of non-neutral civil religion. There is also promise in the internet – memes, art, playful use of language – for constructing new ways of thinking about the past in subversive and creative ways. The process of public deliberation about how to contextualize memorials may be as or more important as the plaque.

One of the possible reasons that an advocate of tearing the monuments down might give is that the memorials' mere presence, even with plaques, serves as a daily reminder of past and continued injustices to members of oppressed groups. I would respond, however, that one solution – replacing Confederate memorials with memorials to civil rights heroes, for instance – would also serve as reminders of past injustices (albeit from the angle of those who fought against, rather than for, those injustices). The same concerns the monument removal advocates raise (the state implicitly endorsing the narrative of the Confederate figure or his 19th and 20th century supporters who erected the statue) can also be addressed by plaques that denounce the figures memorialized and erecting new statues (perhaps with more tragic than romantic messages). This civil religion would clearly endorse the narrative of anti-oppression without the danger of erasing painful but important parts of the historical landscape. This approach would both critically engage with and refuse to continue to endorse past oppressions.

¹¹⁹ Vendler 2014.

¹²⁰ Buffington and Waldner 2011.

¹²¹ "Facing History and Ourselves" 2017.

Ultimately, the argument for non-neutrality is not that we should turn back the clock and de-centralize the narrative-making of Memorial Day or tear down monuments. It is that we should recognize the state's centralized power of narrative-making through civil religion and urge it to use it to acknowledge the multiplicity of available historical narratives, reject false impartiality, and use its power to shape a form of tragic public mourning that refuses to continue to implicitly endorse oppression. The state has the power both to uncover painful histories and to direct the national conversation in a non-impartial way to both reverse some of the homogenization and whitewashing of history and change how Americans see current and future injustices. It is precisely because racism is still a useful tool of oppression, especially by Southern states, that this political and ethical problem is so urgent.

CONCLUSION

On a recent trip to Charleston, SC, I paused in front one of the many statues dedicated to Confederate generals in the city. This statue was built in the grand 19th century style – the metal figure stood regally and mustachioed atop a tall podium surrounded by plaques celebrating his heroism. While I was reading the inscription, a middle-aged Black man joined me. After glancing over the dedication, he shook his head, said, “This isn’t for me! There’s nothing for us. They haven’t built anything for us here” and walked away. He was right.¹²² I asked the docent at the Charleston Old Slave Mart museum why there were so few markers and monuments around the city, one of the most important for the slave trade. He told me that there should be more, but if the city were to truly commemorate the lives of slaves wherever slaves were sold, there would have to be a marker on every street corner because slaves were sold everywhere in the city. Perhaps that kind of physical reminder of state-sanctioned violence is necessary,¹²³ though not particularly feasible; several Southern states have passed “Heritage Acts” that limit the ability of municipalities or state bodies to remove Confederate monuments or rename buildings. These statutes make a solution involving plaques, rather than removal or relocation, more pragmatic.¹²⁴ But we, and the state, should listen to the concerns of the frustrated man at the Confederate statue and other voices from historically oppressed members of society. Those are the voices that

¹²² Roberts and Kytle 2012.

¹²³ One model might be Berlin’s *stolperstein* (“stumbling blocks”), tiles laid into the pavement in front of the last homes of Jews and others taken by the Nazis, an art project by Gunter Demnig.

¹²⁴ Collins 2017, Stockard 2016, Wahlers 2016.

have been quieted by history, and we need a non-neutral politics and civil religion that can highlight their struggles, listen to their counter-narratives of state violence and war, and condemn their oppression.

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