THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF MEMORY ACTIVISM

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DECOMISSIONING MONUMENTS, MOBILIZING MATERIALITIES

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For a memory to catch hold in society two things are needed.[1] Firstly, a new narrative has to find expression and, secondly, the power of old narratives to command assent needs to be undermined. Most discussions of memory activism have understandably concentrated on the first of these processes: on the ways that "forgotten," or actively suppressed memories are brought into public visibility. Many articles in this *Handbook* accordingly show the creativity of activists in exploring alternative archives, and in inventing ever new ways to gain recognition for what has been overlooked. Less attention has been paid to the dismantling of the old. Theoretical reflections on the emergence of hitherto occluded experiences have by and large assumed that dominant memories simply disappear as a byproduct of the new ones. Since the old narratives have held center-stage long enough, the argument goes, why continue to pay attention to them?

However, the intense attention paid to existing monuments in recent years suggests that the dynamics of old and new are more complicated. The materialized presence of old narratives in the form of public statues offers a particularly potent site for negotiating the emergence of the new. With this in mind, the present article calls for reflection, not just on strategies for giving voice to hitherto occluded actors, but also on best practices for undermining hegemonic narratives and decommissioning their normative power. The term "decommissioning" is used here by analogy with weaponry to indicate that collective adhesion to new narratives depends on the old ones being rendered ineffective, powerless to command attention and respect. While memory activism primarily takes a positive form (acting "for" a particular memory), it is also implicitly "against" prevailing narratives which are considered unfit for purpose in a society with aspirations to greater justice and inclusivity. Although it may not be the ultimate aim, the decommissioning of the old deserves consideration in its own right.[2]

This interdependence of the old and the emergent reflects the fact that memories – or more precisely, acts of remembrance in the present – are in constant dialogue. They are in structural competition for social uptake and public visibility. Public monuments have proved to be key flashpoints in this process because their erection and maintenance make hierarchies of values concrete and tangible. Accordingly, struggles about when to erect and when to demolish them reflect their importance to public memory, but also, and more fundamentally, their importance in determining who has the power to define collective identity and control urban space. In public debates, they are usually discussed in terms of their symbolism, the fact that they evoke the memory of certain events or actors rather than others. But their power to mobilize

emotions is less a matter of symbolism as such, but of material presence. In statues, meaning ceases to be merely abstract, having become materialized in aesthetically formed objects – many of which are also very large.

Recent conceptualizations of the "agentic capacity" of material presences allow for a new understanding of why people can get so worked up about monuments. As Jane Bennett has argued in her work *Vibrant Matter*, material presences are "never entirely exhausted by their semiotics" (2010: 5). As material-symbolic presences monuments are an active part of the "memory habitat" (Rigney, 2015) in which people live their lives and negotiate collective meanings and allegiances. They are actants in the assemblage of human and nonhuman agents that work together to produce public memory at any given moment. Moreover, by identifying what is memorable in the past and rooting this in particular locations, they are also crucial to creating the "space of appearance" in which groups acquire visibility in the present or are denied it (Mirzoeff, 2017). It is for this reason that monuments matter so much, although their role is as yet poorly understood by scholars and too easily dismissed in the media as a fuss about a load of old stones.

The material, and linked to this aesthetic, presence of monuments interpellates city-dwellers to acknowledge the importance of a particular historical figure or event. They have been designed to impose themselves on the spectator, to generate awe and respect by their sheer size, forcing the viewer to look up, casting shadows over city squares. Often located in central positions in the cityscape, they even force people to organize their movements around them (the Arc de Triomphe in Paris offers a case in point as does the monument to Daniel O'Connell in the center of Dublin).

The examples offered so far belong to the monumentalism that since the early nineteenth century has produced multiple tributes to national heroes in cities across the world. To be sure, the aesthetic style of monuments and the practices surrounding them have evolved since the nineteenth century (see Young, 1993, 2016). Most notable is the gradual shift in the post–World War II period to more openly interactive and less physically coercive forms and to smaller-scale and more intimate modes of address – exemplified by Gunter Demnig's stumbling stones project that, in conjunction with civil society groups, has led to the placing of thousands of cobblestones in European cities before the houses of victims of Nazi persecution, all identical in form while bearing in every case a different name. But here too, as the title "stumbling stones" suggests, it is the material presence of the memorial stones that triggers memory. These stones too exercise mnemonic power albeit at a different scale and by triggering a reflexive form of "empathic un-settlement" (LaCapra, 2001) rather than awestruck subordination to something transcendent.

Reflecting these major changes in commemorative forms, there has also been a gradual shift in terminology. The term "monument" (usually associated with the celebration of achievements) has gradually been replaced by "memorial" (usually associated with the mourning of the dead and the victims of history), a shift of emphasis that is also reflected in changing material practices and aesthetic forms. This reframing has been accompanied by stringent critiques of monumentalism as a structurally flawed attempt to fix for eternity a certain view of the past and turn public memory into a monologic narrative with no room for dissent (Huyssen, 2003; Hirsch in Altinay et al., 2019: 8). As several chapters here illustrate, ephemeral and performative interventions in public space are currently being developed as creative alternatives to the monumental without, however, as the placing of new public memorials suggests, entirely replacing people's desire to give public expression to memory in a more permanent material form.

Even as these new material and performative practices are developing, however, many cities are still marked by the legacy of monumentalism in the form of monuments to those once considered heroes. These continue to bear witness to narratives that are now challenged but that at the time of their erection were often supported, indeed commissioned, by large numbers of citizens (it should not be forgotten that many major "national" monuments were originally

made financially possible by crowdsourcing and that, in some cases, they were even expressions of emancipation – a case in point is offered by the huge tribute to "the Liberator" Daniel O'Connell erected by acclamation in 1880 as a challenge to English rule in Ireland). If the "vibrancy" of monuments has been displayed in people's enthusiasm when they were erected (though in some regimes this enthusiasm was undeniably imposed by authorities), their mobilizing and affective power is arguably even more strongly reflected in the resentment they have later provoked. Unwanted monuments – some of which were unwanted from the outset, others becoming unwanted as frames of remembrance change – exercise a negative power. They provoke rather than inspire, offend rather than impress, at first in silence and then in increasingly public forms of dissent. Reflecting the depth of such offense, the Paris Commune of 1871 took time out of its life-threatening struggle against government forces to express its anger against the Vendôme Column, which had been erected in 1806 as a tribute to Napoleonic militarism. Its looming presence in the city caused deep offense since the values it expressed were contrary to the internationalist spirit of the new revolutionary order. Illustrating the agentic capacity of the column, the Commune declared it to be "an *affirmation* of militarism, a *negation* of international law, a *permanent insult* to the vanquished on the part of conquerors, a *perpetual attack* on one of the three great principles of the French Republic – fraternity"[3] before they decreed its destruction. Its spectacular demolition in May 1871 was celebrated by the assembled Communards, who performed their newly-won visibility on its ruins, posing for posterity and future remembrance in the still relatively new medium of photography.

Figure 1.1 Communards posing on the ruins of the Vendôme column, 16 May 1871. Photo: Bruno Braquehais, *Commune de Paris, la colonne Vendôme à terre.* Courtesy Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

Many other examples can be adduced of monuments that ended up provoking anger and object-oriented aggression on the part of new regimes or oppositional movements. Suffice it to mention the swathe of demolitions and relocations of statues to Lenin and Marx that followed on the fall of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s; the "Rhodes must Fall"

movement of 2015, targeting the statue of Cecil Rhodes dominating over the University of Cape Town (Jethro, 2019); the spectacular dumping into Bristol harbor of the statue to slave trader Edward Colston in June 2020 during a Black Lives Matter protest; the toppling of a statue of Spanish conquistador Sebastián de Belalcázar by Indigenous protestors in the Columbian city of Popayán in September 2020; and the ongoing debates in the United States about the future of the statues to the Confederacy. Current debates may be unusually intense, but the mechanisms are not new.

Memory activism and monument destruction have long gone together, from the *damnatio memoriae* custom of the ancient Romans, to the iconoclasm of the Reformation, to the practice of "slighting" the cultural heritage of the losers of the English civil war, to the systematic destruction of statues of royalty during the French Revolution. Destroying, re-inscribing, or removing monuments helps clear the decks for something new. More importantly, it helps put the new on the agenda in a high-profile act of dissensus which is all the more visible because it uses existing monuments as a launching pad for the emergence of alternatives. Even if some monuments have become such a familiar part of the landscape as to be almost invisible, they gain new vibrancy in times of contestation and become a focal point both for advocates of change and for those who would resist it. Once this happens, the monuments start to command new forms of attention and to inspire new actions. Ironically, the centralized location of many monuments has meant that they easily become urban landmarks and assembly points for dis-senters – including those protesting the monument itself as a toxic legacy and rejecting the values it expresses. In becoming magnets for demonstrators, monuments help to make tangible and highly visible the power asymmetries that have shaped the past and continue into the present. It is for this reason that they can become powerful vehicles for un-forgetting occluded histories and for inaugurating a new "space of appearance" in contemporary society that is visibly played out in their destruction, defacement, removal, or replacement.

Is there then a repertoire of strategies for decommissioning monuments and redirecting the energies they mobilize? Have centuries of iconoclasm and recent events yielded a list of best practices? Demolition is clearly the most radical rejection of the past. But while it certainly succeeds in removing an intolerable or "insulting" presence, it also has a downside. Destruction risks whitewashing history by removing its traces, and permanently erases a key material witness to an earlier mnemonic regime and its exclusionary logic. This not only produces a new form of amnesia about the prehistory of the present; it also destroys a cultural object which, in the future, might have provided a tangible starting point for facilitating debate about the interplay between remembering and forgetting in the production of collective identity.

Disrupting the meaning of monuments as they were originally intended offers a more pro-ductive way forward. Two main strategies can be identified: *re-framing* and *re-signifying*. When a toxic monument is relocated to a museum or to another type of exhibition space and hence cordoned off from the everyday life of the city, it becomes "reframed" and hence transformed into a heritage object. As such, it recalls the past instead of affecting the present. It loses the aura it once had by virtue of its location in the center of city life and becomes instead a "display object" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998) with historical and aesthetic value, but no longer the power to dictate memory and command respect. The Memento Park outside of Budapest, created in 1993, offers a case in point: it displays side by side dozens of communist-era statues as aesthetic presences that have become relics of an outdated memory culture. The very fact that so many statues are lined up together also underscores their loss of power by making each statue a specimen of a particular type rather than a singularly vibrant object capable of commanding loyalty. The downside of relocation to a museum, of course, is that the lessons to be learned from the historical fact of the monument's existence will only be visible to museum-goers.

Re-signifying in situ offers an alternative. This involves modifying the appearance of a monument so that its original meaning is changed and even over-written by a new perspective. The least intrusive (and hence arguably least effective) strategy of resignification entails adding an extra inscription. The statue to Jan Pieterszoon Coen in the Dutch city of Hoorn, for example, was originally put up at the end of the nineteenth century as a tribute to this seventeenth-century "hero" of the Dutch colonial enterprise; in 2012 a new plaque was added, under pressure from civil society groups, that also recognized Coen's responsibility for the massacre of civilians on the Banda islands. In bearing witness to colonial violence, the new plaque has some symbolic value; yet its physical presence is arguably not strong enough to offset the material presence of the celebratory statue itself. The same could be said of the creative vandalizing of the huge monument erected in 1931 to Leopold II in the Belgian city of Ostend which depicted the king towering over his subjects, including a group of naked people from the Congo. The amputation of the hand of one of these figures by unknown activists in 2004 was widely interpreted as a way of recalling Leopold's horrifically violent policies in Africa; but the power of this mutilation to re-signify the monument nevertheless remains limited given the sheer size of the latter.

Other "jamming" strategies make a stronger material mark and, for this reason, are more effective in re-signifying the original and disrupting its power to speak for the public. Examples include the spray-painting of "Black Lives Matter" across the monument to the Confederacy in Charleston in 2015 in an explicit and highly visible contestation of the statue's claim to speak for society. They also include the colorful repainting of the heroic monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia in 2011 which transformed the soldiers into figures from popular culture in a spectacular act of guerilla art that decommissioned Soviet memory while also offering a playful critique of the ongoing Americanization of Bulgarian society (the same monument was again repainted in 2014 in the Ukrainian colors in condemnation of the Russian occupation of the Crimea).

Figure 1.2 Monument to the Soviet Army, Sofia, 18 June 2011. Repainted by anonymous collective. Photo: Ignat Ignev, CC BY 3.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

In such cases, a monument offers a durable canvas for the projection of changing per-spectives and counter-narratives (at least until such time as the authorities move in and wipe the monuments clean again). Yet another strategy is to bring alternative monuments into play in the vicinity of the toxic monument in such a way as to challenge its primacy in the city space. In the early morning of 15 July 2020, for example, a team led by artist Marc Quinn erected a resin-and-steel statue of Black protester Jen Reid on the pedestal in Bristol where until a few weeks earlier the statue of Colston had stood. This piece of guerilla art known as "A Surge of Power (Jen Reid)" was removed within a day by the city authorities, but as long as it stood, it dra-matically brought into play both the memory of Colston's presence and the desire to inaugurate a new mnemonic regime. As these examples illustrate, combining guerrilla art and pop-up performance with high-profile monumentality yields highly visible contestation in a form that can be more responsive to a changing environment and the dynamics of public debate than a bronze monument erected "for the long haul".
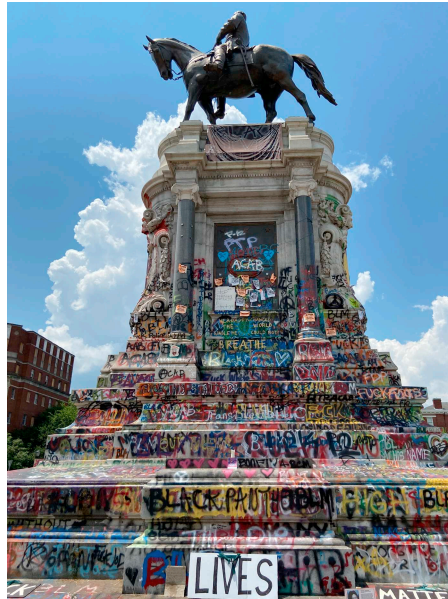

Figure 1.3   Robert E. Lee Monument, Richmond, VA. 1 July 2020. Photograph: Mk17b, CC BY-SA 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

All of this begs the question of what sort of monuments or memorials, if any, should replace the ones that have been recently challenged, and how the celebration of achievements can be squared with mourning of victims. What languages do we have for publicly recollecting the past?

Reflecting the ongoing search for new expressive forms , Kara Walker's recent *Fons Americanus* (Tate Modern, 2019) offered a critical pastiche of monumentalism in the form of an enormous plaster-cast fountain. This echoed the size and style of the Victoria Memorial outside Buckingham palace, while depicting various figures and scenes from the "Black Atlantic" slave trade. Its de-familiarizing appropriation of the very language of the monumental offers a platform for making visible histories that so many imperial monuments occluded. Although it operates through a temporary exhibition in an art museum, Walker's installation is clearly in critical conversation

with more permanent monuments elsewhere. At the same time, it raises the crucial question of the need to invent alternatives to the monumental (often depicting single "heroes") in future mnemonic regimes.

In the meantime, we can conclude that, although there is no single recipe for decommissioning monuments, new and highly creative strategies are continuously being invented. One thing is clear: memory activism is inevitably entangled with the old memory it seeks both to displace and to disqualify. Gaining recognition for hitherto silenced voices and perspectives can take the form of entirely new initiatives. But paradoxically, it can actually be facilitated by the intolerable presence of the old because the latter affords a public platform – and offers a tangible focus for marking out differences and demanding change in the politics of visibility. Important as it is, however, there is also a danger attached to expending too much energy on the decommissioning of existing monuments. If pushed too far, iconoclasm may end up becoming an end in itself, distracting attention from the contemporary inequalities that drove the demand for mnemonic change in the first place, and creating the illusion that to change a statue is in itself a solution to the problem rather than a part, albeit a key part, of a larger dynamic of contestation.

Notes

1 Research for this article was financially supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under grant agreement 788572: *Remembering Activism: The Cultural Memory of Protest in Europe.*
2 A more extended version of this argument can be found in Rigney (2022).
3 La Commune de Paris, 12 April 1871; *Bulletin* 22; emphasis and translation AR.

Additional Resources

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