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Memory and Monument Wars in American Cities New York, Charlottesville and Montgomery

Marouf A. Hasian, Jr.
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A black and white photograph of a modern building facade, characterized by a dense grid of lines forming a series of rectangular panels. The perspective is from a low angle, looking up at the building.

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Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies

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Introduction: US Cities' Agentic Role in Twenty-First-Century Memory and Monument Wars

Abstract This introductory chapter situates our work at the nexus of urban studies, critical rhetoric, political geography, and memory studies, and presents readers with a view on cities as agentic actors that traverse various memoryscapes for strategic uses in the present. Assembling human and non-human actors across dense cityscapes, we set up our analyses of “monument wars” in New York, Charlottesville, and Montgomery with a posthuman view on rhetoric, agency, and memory.

Keywords Memoryscape • Cityscape • Counter-monument • Agency
• New York • Charlottesville • Montgomery

This book is about the challenges posed by key municipal events in what some have called “monument wars”¹ or “statue wars,”² and it extends the work of interdisciplinary theorists who are interested in the study of both urban American cityscapes and public memoryscapes. Our interest in this topic comes in the wake of heated debates that have taken place after several traumatic events: the attack by Dylann Roof on the congregation assembled at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, where nine individuals lost their lives;³ the August 12, 2017 confrontations on the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia; and the 2019 shootings of praying Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand.⁴ All sorts of disagreements about how to remember, or forget, particular

ways of viewing victimage and racialized histories have impacted how city residents have been turned into targets by domestic terrorists and others who seem to be declaring war on precarious urban landscapes.

We are convinced that these attacks by white nationalists and others are harbingers of things to come, as members of communities who once worried about the horrific losses on military battlefields are now having to fight ideological conflicts in cities that are now treated as if they are under siege. We are finding that the older academic disputes over the meaning of the “cultural wars” have spilled over into more than just verbal or textual exchanges as decision-makers, scholars, police, judges, investigative journalists, and lay persons in cityscapes hear about how armed protesters in cities chant “you will not replace us” as they march through downtown streets.⁵ Patricia Davis, writing in the *Southern Communication Journal*, averred that the “politics of memory, race, and place in southern cityscapes have inspired new areas of inquiry as two interrelated phenomenon have conspired to change the urban fabric.”⁶

Is it possible that we are just now beginning to realize that some cities are trying to gain control and have some say as they deal with everything from the building of Trumpian walls at the borders to legal standing of “sanctuary” cities⁷ to ways that Americans should assess what happened with the death of Michael Brown and the protests in Ferguson, Missouri?⁸ Are we only now coming to realize the lingering traumas that are felt by a resilient New York City have something to do with contested memoscapescapes or cityscapes as various cultural topographies are linked to violent pasts, presents, and futures? Is this the time when critics need to follow those who are interested in network-centric theories, *dingpolitik* (the politics of things), or “new materialism” as we endeavor to come up with theories and methods that allow us to understand the complex dynamics of the rhetoricity of cities?⁹

Clearly there are those scholars working in urban studies, political geography, security studies, cultural studies, or critical sociology and related disciplines who have been asking academic communities to rethink notions of social agency. Ash Amin, writing in the journal *City* in 2007, had this to say:

The social has been largely grasped in the area of human experience. The non-human—including the built environment, nature, technology, infrastructure, animal, and viral life—has not been allowed to feature as part of the social. Accounts of urban social life have tended to engage only

marginally with the body of social theory associated with the work of Deleuze and Guattari, de Lande, Ingold, Law, Latour, Haraway, and others who steadfastly refuse to reduce the social to the human.¹⁰

Is it possible that we can see how cities, and portions of cities, may be caught up in salient national public controversies? Have cities, for instances, had to make decisions regarding how to participate, or not participate, in monument wars?

Extending the work of urban studies researchers, critical rhetoricians, political geographers, memory studies scholars, and others who are interested in the study of collective traumas and public memories that are associated with dark tourism, urban violence, and related phenomenon, we invite readers to focus on cities' reactions to various racial divides, societal fissures, and wounds that can be linked to various acts of commemorative remembering and forgetting. As Professor Barbie Zelizer has argued elsewhere, collective memories that are purveyed by state-sponsored memorialists involve "the fabrication, rearrangement, elaboration, and omission of details about the past" as matters of "accuracy and authenticity" are pushed aside so as to "accommodate broader issues of identity formation, power, and political affiliation,"¹¹ and we would extend this to advocate for investigations of why cities choose to remember or forget particular real or imagined urban histories or municipal memories.

That said, we recognize the politicized, contentious, and affective nature of some studies that critique the activities of cities that may be producing memoryscapes that others might find objectionable. Notice, for example, how many of the memorial museums that are going up in Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, or Croatia invite visitors to consider the "double genocide" that may have been perpetrated by Stalin's communists during the famine years before the advent of the Nazi Holocaust.¹² Are these cities' museums and memorials and other commemorative sites authentically recollecting the mass violence that was perpetrated during the Judeocide—producing what Michael Rothberg has called "multidirectional" memories¹³—or are they inviting Eastern Europeans to engage in official and unofficial victimage wars that focus more on post-1989 anxieties?

We are obviously not the first interdisciplinary scholars who have called attention to the growing rhetoricity of various cities' monuments, statues, parks, cemeteries, and other sites of commemoration. In 1993, for example, Bryan Chetty, in his review of some of James Young's work on the "texture of memory" and the "rhetoric of ruins," noted how in the

aftermath of traumatic events like World War II “memorials and monuments built to commemorate those” who “perished in the death camps became more conspicuous.”¹⁴ During the following decades all sorts of studies of collective memories, monuments, museums, and other “sites of memory” flourished to the point where many started writing about the surfeit of memory studies. By 2008 Erika Doss could write about the “memorial mania” that was capturing the attention of so Americans,¹⁵ and there was little question that both public and scholarly interests were driving what many regarded as the “memory boom.”¹⁶

Transcontinental debates about what to do with immigration populations at Calais¹⁷ were soon being linked to geopolitical disputes about everything from the population demographics of cities to the growing power of “alternative right” (alt-right) on several continents. Oftentimes, in contingent, unexpected, and dramatic ways disputes over national heritage, monumentalization, race, population density, identity politics, and even colonialism were linked demands that objectionable statues be taken down and replaced with less objectionable objects. For instance, in 2015 students on college campuses in South Africa began a movement known as “Rhodes Must Fall,” demanding the taking down of statues of the British imperial expansionist Cecil Rhodes, and when these same rhetorical impulses traveled to England they were met by what Amit Chaudhuri called the “nation’s long retreat from multiculturalism and the return of a rose-tinted memory of empire.”¹⁸

The political shockwaves that could be felt in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s presidential victory were soon followed by violence in several cities as various factions prepared for a new type of urban warfare that harkened back to the 1960s civil rights protests in the streets of Selma and Birmingham. As we explain in one of this book’s chapters the rhetoricity of an agentic city was put on display during August 2017 when the city of Charlottesville, Virginia became a memoryscape as local police were caught in the middle of conflicting protests that were organized by members of the “Unite the Right” coalitions and anti-fascist (“antifa”) demonstrators. Three individuals lost their lives during two days of protest, and journalists would later report that all of this began after Charlottesville Council members determined that some Confederate statuary needed to be taken down in the name of “public safety.”

As we argue later on in this book, during the first decade of the twenty-first century local municipalities across America became convinced that Confederate flags, monuments, markers, buildings, street names, and

other Civil War symbols were contributing to waves of domestic violence—including attacks on churches and synagogues—and city officials for many reasons tried to “take ‘em down.” These efforts, in turn, catalyzed the impulses of a wide array of political and cultural communities who, for varied reasons, tried to either apply new state statutes or tried to use those already in place to prevent the removal or recontextualization of what many deemed Confederate heritage that deserved preservation.

Previous interdisciplinary studies have done an excellent job of providing needed insights into the historical and public memory features of many of these Confederate monument debates, but many researchers are just beginning to study the role that cities—as rhetorical agents—play in what Kirk Savage once called the “monument wars.” While Savage was primarily interested in studying some of the contestation over key memorials on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., and recommended a “modest proposal” of having a moratorium for a decade on monumental building on the Mall to help make room for an “open conversation”¹⁹ we would invite readers to extend this analysis so that we can see how entire cities might engage in similar deliberations. This is especially important where all sorts of violence can be linked to past, present, and future memorialization practices.

The rest of this chapter proceeds as follows. We begin with a subsection that theorizes cityscapes and memoryscapes. This general overview is followed by a subsection on cities that engaged in monument wars that have portentous consequences. We then justify our choice of three case studies—critical rhetorical analyses of New York City’s 9/11 Memorial and Museum, Charlottesville’s decisions to try and remove the Robert E. Lee and “Stonewall” Jackson statues, and Montgomery’s “Lynching Memorial”—before we present a brief conclusion.

THE RHETORICAL DIMENSIONS OF MEMORYSCAPES AND CITYSCAPES

Memoryscapes have been defined as “particular clusters of spaces and locales which have a particular significance in the ways in which people related to and narrative the past.”²⁰ Kendall Phillips and Mitchell Reyes, two rhetoricians working in the field of communication studies, have noted how memoryscapes can sometimes drift across nationalist boundaries

because of globalization influences, and they explain some of the functions and the structures of these entities when they note that memoryscapes operate on “a complex and vibrant plane upon which memories emerge, are contested, transform, encounter other memories, mutate, and multiply.”²¹

Memoryscapes are fluid, protean, and mutable. They flow through the affective allegiances of human collectives. As such, they cannot be objectified. Those who treat some memories as inflexible, essentialities entities miss the ways that even the most hegemonic of structures have fissures and cracks that can be dissected, cut, and even buried. As Michel Foucault and others have noted in studies of utopias and heterotopias, the materials that go into the production of sedimented formations like “effective histories,” archives, cemeteries, ships, etc., have everything to do with contingent discourse/power/knowledge formations.²² Holidays, commemorative markers, museums, and memorials are only some of the tangible materials that can be used by municipalities to convey more intangible persuasive ideas.

Cities and cityscapes, we contend, should be understood as a part of the human and non-human relational systems that contribute to the formation of the objects of contention in twenty-first-century monument wars. In many ways cities that find themselves in the middle of ethical, cultural, political, and legal battles can be viewed as examples of what Bruno Latour called “mediators,” agentic figures that “transform, translate, distort, and modify the meanings of the elements that they are supposed to carry.”²³ In Latour’s “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik” essay, he comments on those who “traced” the “complex genealogy” of “cities, landscapes, animals, merchants, dancers, and the ubiquitous rendering of light and space.”²⁴

This, we contend, was Latour’s way of pointing out that cityscapes, landscapes, and other larger formations had everything to do with “dingpolitik” (the politics of things) that was left behind in anthropocentric ways of thinking about deliberative democratic ideals of “realpolitik.” This broadening of the ways that writers like Bruno Latour or Ash Amin conceptualize the “social” invites critics to see how cities—with everything from the strategic placements of cemeteries to the erection of classical war statues—are involved in the co-production of memoryscapes.

Our book will highlight the agentic actions of New York City, Charlottesville, and Montgomery, and we extend the work of James Young, who has shown how German cities have worked at mastering their own fraught pasts that were produced by forming structures around Holocaust memories and putting together assemblages in all sorts of

national monuments and counter-monuments.²⁵ Young argued that both “a monument and its significance are constructed in particular times and places, contingent on the political, historical and aesthetic realities of the moment.”²⁶

Regardless of whether we are discussing the post-apartheid politics of the neighborhoods of Johannesburg, or the division nature of Jerusalem memoryscapes, it is fair to argue that cities play a major role in the production of symbolic formations that influence how communities assess their past heritage, their present needs, and their future plans. In Bruno Latour and Emilie Hermant’s famous analysis of Paris, they suggest that researchers who wish to study the social life and “complex relations” of a city have to avoid the “two perversions of idolatry and iconoclasm,” along with other maladies. Latour and Hermant then provide readers with a performative example of how to try and study the “movement of inscriptions” and other texts and visualities of Parisian spaces and places.²⁷ Building off of previous work on network-centric theories of action the authors opine:

It’s to objects that we must now turn if we want to understand what, day after day, keeps life in the big city together: objects despised under the label “urban setting,” yet whose exquisite urbanity holds the key to our life in common.... It seems that the big city is even more populous than Babylon, with a multitude of agitated little beings whose combined action gives height, width and depth to the entangled networks.... I’m not simply passing through Paris: the “I” also passes through forms of action, regimes of intelligence.²⁸

In their critiques of the social life of Paris, Latour and Hermant commented on the symbolic significance of museums, roads, parking garages, tourism, Charlemagne’s statue, crypts, architecture, and other phenomena that had to do with French urbanism.²⁹

For our purposes here, we want to focus on how several American cities are responding to various social pressures in key monument wars.

THE CITY AS AGENTIC IN SALIENT TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY MONUMENT WARS

When critical scholars take up the question of the social agency of cities in studies of memoryscapes they will inevitably have to take into consideration issues of power, hegemony, counter-monuments, and contestation

in their analysis. Even legal scholars, who are used to studying the “personhood” of corporations, have realized that cities can be thought out of as entities that are caught in webs of governmental struggles. Gerald Frug, in an influential law review that was written in 1998, explained why he felt that legal structures had created situations where U.S. cities were “powerless”:

American cities today do not have the power to solve their own current problems or to control their future development. Under current law, cities have no “natural” or “inherent” power to do anything simply because they decide to do it. Cities have only those powers delegated to them by state law and traditionally those delegated powers have been rigorously limited by judicial interpretation. Moreover, city authority exercised pursuant to unquestionable delegated powers is itself subject to absolute state control.³⁰

In theory, for some legal scholars who were influenced by postmodern or post-structural thinking about the law, far too many had forgotten about the difficulties that cities faced when they were ill equipped to make decisions without the supervision of state or federal authorities.

If we turn our attention to global rhetorical situations, we can find international examples of where cities have had to decide what to do when they lacked the power that Frug was mentioning. In her study of the rebuilding of the city of Sarajevo after the “siege” that took place between 1992 and 1995, Stefanie Kappler uses the notion of *memoriescapes* to explain how this municipality reacted after being attacked for years by Serbian forces. Kappler was interested in reviewing the memory politics and the ideological negotiations that took place in this municipality in the aftermath of violent conflict, during periods where witnesses needed to see post-conflict justice.³¹ Arguing that Sarajevo was a place of “ambivalent memoriescapes,” Kappler shows how complementary and contradictory pressures were coming from international and local actors as Sarajevo used monuments and other memorials to envision what this part of the world would be like in this post-conflict setting. Extending the work of writers like Barbie Zelizer and Bruno Latour, Kappler argues that city memories in this situation need to be read in ways that allow critics to see “conflict, agency, and power as spatial, discursive practices.”³² In Bosnia-Herzegovina, memorials are viewed by Kappler as mediators of the “contested narratives” that can be encountered in the “city of Sarajevo,” and she contends that those who travel to this part of Europe can only

understand some of the ambivalences and traumas of the past that are associated with the strategic usages of “monuments, museums and other spaces of memory...”³³ Her particular approach involved analysis of monuments and memorials in Sarajevo, as well as the discourses that were produced by those who argued about the shape and contours of these memoryscapes.

While some might argue that cityscape or memoryscape investigations need to focus on the more uplifting, neo-liberal features of contemporary landscapes we would suggest that at times cities become agent when they are forced to remember and forget or simply cope with what Ann Stoler has labeled “ruins and ruination.”³⁴ Karen Till has similarly suggested that researchers can profitably study “wounded cities.”³⁵ Till notes:

By considering cities as “wounded,” urban space cannot be understood as property only. If cities and their inhabitants are understood as having been wounded by state and dominant social-political practices, other imaginaries of place, temporality, and the city might focus attention on why places, peoples, groups, environments, and nonhuman natures continue to be injured.³⁶

Can cities be thought of as spaces and places—sometimes powerful, sometimes vulnerable—that have memories or monuments that are built, destroyed, and rebuilt, oftentimes depending on biopolitical or thanatopolitical conditions?

Critical scholars interested in studies of wounded cities might study all types of existential threats—physical violence, burnings, natural disasters, wars, etc.—that are viewed through all sorts of memoryscapes. For instance, there is little doubt that perceived dangers after the events of September 11, 2001—especially Jihadist or Taliban or Al Qaeda or ISIS terrorism—influenced the ways that twenty-first-century researchers, decision-makers, investigative journalists, or lay persons treated cities like New York City or Washington, D.C. Before the 2018 opening of Baghdad’s famous “Green Zone,” huge neighborhood spaces within the city had been cordoned off to protect American and coalition forces from terrorist attacks.³⁷

This urban militarism and securitization has impacted not only Bagdad but the many other global cities. In *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism*, Steven Graham contends that cities are the new battlegrounds for a globalized world that is facing increased urbanization.³⁸ As various factions fight over scarce symbolic and material resources in urban

landscapes, transcontinental audiences witness the spread of political violence that influences how we argue about everything from infrastructures to city spaces to bunkers.

The advent of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) is not the only rhetorical event that has impacted the formation of memoryscapes and cityscapes, and in this book we want to focus on how three American cities are coping with their traumatic wounds: New York, Charlottesville, and Montgomery.

WHY STUDY NEW YORK'S 9/11 MEMORIAL AND MUSEUM, CHARLOTTESVILLE'S ROBERT E. LEE STATUE REMOVAL EFFORTS, OR MONTGOMERY'S NATIONAL MEMORIAL FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE?

All three of the case studies that we have chosen for this book involve rhetorical situations where cities have been asked to deal with complex histories, traumatized moments, and contentious memoryscapes. There are several reasons why we chose to begin our book with a review of the 9/11 Memorial and Museum in New York City. This is hallowed ground, a privileged site of America's civil religion that continues to attract hundreds of thousands of visitors. By 2018, the National September 11 Memorial and Memorial Museum would be ranked as the top museum in the United States by *TripAdvisor*, based on the quality and quantity of user-generated reviews that were published on the *TripAdvisor* website.³⁹ Second, there is no doubt that the passage of years has not hindered the efforts of those who wish to commemorate the acts of those who are remembered through the display of more than 110,000 artifacts in the 9/11 Museum. In May 2019 Madison Horne could still recall:

The attacks of September 11, 2001 killed almost 3,000 people, shocked the world and forever seared 9/11 into memory as a date filled with tragedy, loss and heroism.... By May 2002, workers had moved more than 108,000 truckloads—1.8 million tons—of rubble to a Staten Island landfill. However, fires burned underground for months, leaving downtown Manhattan in smoke and dust with the intense smell of burning rubber, plastic and steel.⁴⁰

Although many today consider the 9/11 Memorial and Museum to be a place that puts on display New York City's resilience and ability to overcome political wrangling, it will be our contention that for more than a