

## Identity, Memory, and Monuments: problematics of referentiality

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### Abstract

Honoring a person or an event, public monuments interrupt geographical landscapes and point to a temporal past asking us to stop, to look, and to engage memory. They invite reveries as the word, monument, derives from the Latin word *monēre*, meaning 'to remind.' In effect, they occupy public spaces asking for private thoughts that problematize a referentiality dependent on identity. An analysis of Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "Facing It," based on viewing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., illustrates the way monuments offer a phenomenological space for an individual's transformation. Yet in addition to an interiority the poem captures, the monument itself reifies politically official and unofficial messaging, an ambivalence that further muddies the referentiality it reifies because it privileges one cultural identity over others. The theories from the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and the literary critic Cathy Caruth provide the framework for investigating the loss and the gain from the construction and the removal of monuments.

**Keywords:** Public Monuments, Trauma, Identity, Reverie, Bachelard, Caruth, Komunyakaa, Lacan

### Introduction

In his article on the riots in Charlottesville, Virginia (USA) in 1917 and in 2017, Louis Nelson records the initial unveiling of four monuments: Lewis and Clark (1919); "Stonewall" Jackson (1921); George Rogers Clark (1921); and Robert E. Lee (1924) (19).<sup>i</sup> He notes that they, along with accompanying municipal buildings, effectively displaced the African American community who had lived in McKee's Row. The community's pleas to remove the statues had less to do with the individuals represented than with objections to the political aims of white hegemony. In effect, the statues asserted a political power that disenfranchised many of Charlottesville's citizens. The word, monument, derives from the Latin, *monēre*, meaning 'to remind,' but what the statues conjure in the minds of viewers depends on perspectives stemming from different histories and individual experiences. The same local and national events induce diverse reflections. From the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries, 'monument' also denoted a 'tomb.' While no bodies are buried under the statues in Charlottesville, they figuratively stand for buried identities.

As others have noted “public remembrance of the past – through such tools as the construction of monuments – is really as much – maybe more – about the people who had the power to erect them than they were about the individuals being honoured” ([Rudin](#) 111-12). Yet even among those with power, competing viewpoints jockey for control of public spaces. In his introduction to *Written in Stone*, Sanford Levinson finds public monuments to reveal “polities roiled in controversies attached to deciding who within a particular society should be counted as a hero worth honoring” (2). Although focusing on the United States, his examples stretch throughout Europe and include African nations to highlight the political movements wherein new or revised public monuments signal an ideology that dislodges a previous one. While such monuments may literally displace neighborhoods, they figuratively displace historical identities in their aim to instill a “national consciousness.”<sup>ii</sup> As in 1917 Charlottesville, the landscape transforms from a ‘before’ to an ‘after.’ Yet as artifacts symbolizing a dominant narrative, monuments also instantiate a site of trauma. The statue of a war hero, for example, reminds viewers of the suffering endured in any military conflict. For the defeated, the substitution of one cultural identity over others unearths a memory that further complicates the experience of the viewer. In other words, public monuments allude to the traumatic experiences embedded in their visual structures. Staring at the statue of “Stonewall” Jackson in Charlottesville, for example, invites thoughts of martial heroism, but it also elicits the burden of oppression and of a lost cause.

The trauma, either signified or intimated by public monuments, creates its own kind of impermeable distance. A commemoration usually sanctions either events or persons in the temporal past, separated from the viewer’s present, and contributing to the muddiness of referentiality. The same problem exists for individuals who experience a traumatic event: memories change it. As the literary theorist Cathy Caruth has suggested, it is “in the equally widespread and bewildering encounter with trauma – both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it – that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is, no longer based on simple models of experience and reference” (2). For Caruth, the problem of referentiality contributes to the ‘un-speak-ability’ of trauma. It is in a sense irretrievable because the narrative issues in a “double telling” “oscillat[ing] between a crisis of *death* and a correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” ([Caruth](#) 7). In other words, trauma ruptures one’s sense of self. The ability to articulate a traumatized identity undergoes a kind of aphasia.

Monuments do not always garner the immediacy of experience, but they frequently remind us of a traumatic event. Inviting experiential reverie they contribute to the problem of referentiality because reverie entails a sense of psychological and emotional displacement, a temporal oscillation between a then and a now. Whereas Caruth’s theories target the difficulties in articulating trauma, the phenomenalist Gaston Bachelard offers insights into spaces open to the intimacy that remembering necessitates. He posits a pathway to approximate referents in his privileging of the daydream because the daydream provides a space for revisiting the past (p. 6). Whether in the celebration of cultural winners or in the displacement of losers, monuments problematize referentiality vis-à-vis either the events or persons they ostensibly commemorate concomitant with whatever they attempt to erase. Coupled with their histories, they point to the actuality of a particular traumatic event that affected individual citizens and altered their identities. Given the impermeable distance of trauma between a then and a now, however, the significance of monuments involves a kind of sideways approach. Due

to temporal displacement, pieces of the trauma remain missing. But the experience of confrontation with monuments effectively offers insight into their psychological engagement and releases narratives other than the one instantiating a unified “national consciousness.”

### **Vietnam Veterans Memorial**

A visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. illustrates this process. Although in no danger of displacement, the Memorial Wall provides a salient example of public monuments because of its controversial inception and because it has generated much commentary since its construction.<sup>iii</sup> Its placement in Constitutional Gardens displaced a landscape dredged up from the Potomac River by the Army corps of Engineers at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tributes abound in the Garden. Some of them disrupt the pastoral landscape, such as the sculpture to the Vietnam nurses, and others exist to commemorate events, such as the dedication of the island to the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Whereas many sculptures taking human form referring to people who are not there, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, like the island figuratively stands in for bodies. The black granite, in contrast to the green lawns and trees, stretches nearly five hundred feet. It leans up against a grassy knoll to be somewhat engrossed by the landscape. A slight hollow cushions its shape in a stretched-out V. It seems to undulate. From the air, it resembles the wings of a bird without a body, perhaps a flock in symmetrical formation. The granite angles upwards to its apex of slightly over ten feet so that it gradually dwarfs sightseers strolling along the path. They are overshadowed and, due to its reflectiveness, absorbed into the names of the dead. The timeline in plaques below the wall invites recollection of those times while the granite mirrors the here and now.

The Memorial Wall essentially reifies loss in the “national consciousness.” In so doing, it invites reconstruction of that loss, however distorted by time and memory. While all public memorials intimate stories other than an official one, this space inscribes names and dates the dead. In standing for what is not there, the memorial fosters memories, not just of those killed in Vietnam but of political unrest and social discord in the United States. Following Bachelard’s contention that space rather than time catapults memory<sup>iv</sup>, going to the wall elicits experiences wherein young people made life altering decisions in an atmosphere of ‘us against them.’ Releasing narratives other than the one it ostensibly tells, the granite walls emit tendrils, a web reaching into the past, some of which is documented in other media and some of which float in the semi-shared consciousness of those who survived that era. The public space and the wall’s design lend themselves to the collapse of public/private, inner/outer dichotomies. Time folds in on itself. The Memorial, then, frames a home for the survivors of trauma to revisit not only the dead but their younger selves, identities separated from that time by careers, responsibilities, the mundane. For some, the space opens a phenomenological doorway, a daydream that challenges diegetic conflicts, the presence and the absence embedded in a particular historical moment.

Depending on the sun’s angle, visitors to the Memorial view an image of themselves among the names of the dead carved into its surface. The black granite literally ruptures referentiality and figuratively encourages cognitive reflections. Visitors’ record their thoughts in editorials, letters, notes, criticisms.<sup>v</sup> Some people write about the wall, some to those whose names are engraved on it. Caruth

has suggested, however, that the language of trauma, "is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (5). Among literary genres, it is poetry that opens the space for eliciting a sideways glance into capturing referents to traumatic experience in part because the genre of poetry itself elicits the experience of a daydream: "to read poetry is essentially to daydream" (Bachelard 38). In effect, poetry invites entry into an altered phenomenological state. Assumed here is that the daydream provides a non-threatening intimate space for reflection, for eliciting other narratives, for a sideways glance to a traumatic referent that can neither be named nor entirely captured in memory.

Among literary examples, Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "Facing It" portrays a phenomenological experience arising from confrontation with the trauma of loss. The process described in "Facing It" parallels those descriptions of immersion Bachelard associates with the moments of daydreaming, outlined in the *Poetics of Space*, and it conveys Lacan's collapse of inner and outer actualities suggested by his term "extimacy," expressed in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Komunyakaa describes visual images to illustrate dislocation in an exchange between object and viewer. The poem begins with the lines: "My black face fades, / hiding inside the black granite" (ll. 1-2). The image is ostensibly empirical. Yet it articulates the problem of referentiality due to its multi-valences. The face, for example, presumably blends with the name of the dead soldier carved into the granite. At the same time, however, the reflection enables an 'othering' of the viewer's physical presence. He is displaced. As the first line merges viewer and viewed, the granite objectifies the face without revealing what the face hides from. Yet to other visitors in the same space, the speaker demonstrates only the observable. As Bachelard describes such moments: "All we communicate to others is an orientation towards what is secret without being able to tell the secret objectively" (35). The image intimates the psycho-emotional moment of a "double telling," caught in the simultaneous crisis of survival and of loss, "oscillat[ing] between a crisis of death and a correlative crisis of life."

With these opening lines of the poem, we are already in the realm of "extimacy" ("extimité"). The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan coined the neologism in 1960 to indicate "'this central place, this intimate exteriority, this extimacy which is the Thing'" (qtd. [Pavón-Cuéllar](#) 662). The "Thing" seemingly refers to the "presence at the core of human activity" (Lacan Seminar 7.8, p. 105), "the source of this world as it is to us" ([Pavón-Cuéllar](#) 662). The process allows our intimate selves to become our first outside, our first notion of exteriority ([Pavón-Cuéllar](#) 662). As the term designates, interiority merges with exteriority: we are in the world and the world is in us. Whatever Lacan exactly meant by this abstract paradoxical concept, the first lines of Komunyakaa's poem unite his visage with object and suggest intimacy since his face hides in the wall. The reflective qualities of the wall and the name on it fosters confrontation with the "excluded interior," that is, an "interior" trauma "excluded" due to its traumatic pain ([Lacan](#) 7.8, p.101). The extimacy moment provides a way to glimpse what cannot be recovered and simultaneously recovering it. In one interpretation of extimacy, "feelings can be radically externalized on to objects without losing their sincerity and intensity" ([Kingsbury](#) abstract). The poem designates this aspect as the poet holds back tears: "I said I wouldn't dammit: No tears" (ll. 3-4). The granite further syncretizes the speaker in a polarized actuality: "I'm stone. I'm flesh" (l. 5). In her analysis of the poem, Robin Ekiss understands the line as an "acknowledgement of his dual identity" to "reveal the extremes of his consciousness." The thoughts, however, also encode the experience of what Bachelard describes as "phenomenological reverberations," an apprehension that

evades articulation (52). Komunyakaa's literal description connotes the crisis of referentiality in his own comprehension.

After the poet imprints himself on the object, he sees the wall imprint itself on the viewers, if just for a moment.

Names shimmer on a woman's blouse  
but when she walks away  
the names stay on the wall. (19-21)

An exchange takes place even as the wall retains its solidity. For the poet, the merging of interior with exterior results in his transformation into transparency: "...I'm a window," he declares (l. 27). He has oscillated from flesh to stone to a loss of physicality that suggests the completion of an extimac exchange due to the conversion of dichotomies into the lucidity of a window. The transformation points to experience beyond the ability to articulate it precisely because it is only available through metaphor. In effect, Komunyakaa's poem captures the exchange of inner and outer realities in a distillation that fuses interiority and exteriority, the subject and the object, so as to elicit an experiential memory suggestive of a catharsis.

Finally, the poem restores the objective situation of visitors to the space. The concluding image denotes "anamorphosis,"<sup>vi</sup> the pictorial technique by which a distorted image comes into focus by changing perspective:

He's lost his right arm  
inside the stone. In the black mirror  
a woman's trying to erase names:  
No, she's brushing a boy's hair. (28-31)

The identification of being one thing and then another signals an awareness of liminality, of being caught between actualities, able to see each but not both simultaneously. The poem began with anamorphosis when the poet was sometimes stone and sometimes flesh. At the conclusion, then, the images return the poet from an extimac immersion to the understanding of two ways of seeing. In other words, the poem moves from portraying a phenomenological experience at its center to one based on perspective. The referent keeps moving between what is empirically there and not there.

In summary, this poem suggests how the very architecture of the Vietnam Memorial Wall stimulates a confrontation with trauma. The literal reflections on the wall create a double vision: one of the names, and the other, of the person viewing the names. The resulting anamorphoses elicits the liminality of being aware of both objects, however distorted. But this cognitive knowledge also elicits paradoxical idea of extimacy which suggests the phenomenological experience of absorption into this monument and space.

Absent from the parallelism and crucial to Bachelard's philosophy, however, is the disclosure of experiential memory. Komunyakaa's poem sets itself in the present progressive verb of 'Facing.' It implies the immediacy of confrontation. Of course, intimate moments, like experiencing poetry, are

“polysymbolic” (Bachelard 470), open to multiple interpretations, but here the space itself supplies a context for whatever the poem and the poet revisit. Whereas the dominant narrative memorializes those who gave their lives for the nation, other narratives compete for recognition of other traumas. The design encourages what Bachelard describes as the “intensity of being evolving in a vast perspective of intimate immensity,” a product of the daydream that takes into account the fallibility of memory (210). For survivors of that era, the recollection of that time evokes not only the difference between public and private, but also the intimate difference between publics and other publics, the other stories centered in disagreements between United States and Vietcong soldiers, between Democracy and Communism, between those for and those against *the* conflict, for and against the design and the building of this very Wall. A hot, humid day in DC summons the prickling of a nearly equatorial humidity, of other swamps and claustrophobic vegetation, of terror and of cynicism in Vietnam. Or of that muggy August night in 1968 on the streets of Daley’s Chicago unable to cool down from its rage outside the Democratic convention. As in Komunyakaa’s poem, the images keep moving.

The footsteps of the visitors at the memorial echo those other footsteps “Marching to Washington” in protest of the Vietnam conflict: “Looking down, I see feet moving calmly, gaily, / almost as if separated from bodies” (Bly, ll. 1-2). And regarding those soldiers disembarking across the world, “It was natural to welcome them / with triumphal marches. / Many would return in halves” (Bell, ll. 15-17). The trees growing on the lawn above the Memorial wall recall the students spread out on the Kent State hillside. Their sullen faces gaze at a professor urging them to leave the area. Why did they need to leave when the armed national guard seem to be the incongruity? Exactly what threat were those young people?

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler asks, “when is life grievable”? For some visitors, this Memorial Wall marks heroism, the greatest sacrifice an individual and a family could make for their beloved nation. For others, it releases another narrative. It is a reminder of families that fell apart over differing ideologies. As a memorial for those who have lost their lives, it also commemorates those who lost their youths, their youthfulness, their innocence. Many young men slept with packed suitcases under the bed, refused to open the mail in a draft lottery, destroyed their brains with drugs to fail the Army’s physical, left everything they knew to find Canada. Even now ragged men stare blank eyed from urban sidewalks. Some of them bear the marks of war and are missing limbs. Nightmares from the war wake retirees in their suburban homes. Thus, the Memorial resurrects the forgotten selves, the leftovers from political turbulence that cut Americans to pieces. It stands for a past left vacant, differences unbridgeable except in the daydream, a collapse that can be straddled but not changed. Staring at the wall, the body seems to be in two places at once, not disappeared but someplace in between what is and is not. It recalls relinquished possibilities and the elemental vibrancy that brought us to this place.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial actualizes memory of the dead and of past selves, of identities in living and lived experiences. Depending on the viewer, it collapses the differences between official and unofficial stories wherein the former in its solidity muffles the latter but cannot erase competing cultural experiences. Komunyakaa’s poem “Facing It” exemplifies the phenomenological potency garnered from a public monument. But it also signifies the excluded histories of individuals from that time and in response to that conflict. The Memorial Wall reminds them of the political hegemony that altered identities for those opposing that conflict. But occurring in the daydream, in the reverie, in the

imagination, these experiences have been erased from monumental view. Upon the passing of the witnessing generation, visual media and literature from that time provide evidence of lives interrupted, but only if such documents are tracked down. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial allows us to see that even the “heroic statues” in Charlottesville, paradoxically stand for an absence. They are graveyards without graves.

### **Alternatives?**

In their introduction to a journal dedicated to museums and monuments, Capdepón, Sierp and Strauss note that “When places hold multiple and often opposing memories, the question of whose histories are remembered and publicly shared, or marginalized and excluded, becomes crucial for understanding social dynamics and political change” (5). Their insight suggests that excluded identities retain a shared and cultural stability despite individual experiences. In effect, whatever the story the monument signifies, those with displaced ideologies may band together to assert themselves and alter the privileged narrative. From these perspectives, public monuments summon social unrest since they entail a psychological engagement able to fester into uprising. At another remove, autocracies have the advantage of unifying a “national consciousness” based on a myth. The powerful have a personal stake in organizing political will based on a fabricated national identity that unites disparate cultures. If unrecognized as such, the official story issues in actions based on a belief misunderstood as a historical fact. The “social dynamics” of conflict remain buried. Yet given the stability of cultural identity based on social experience, which Capdepón, Sierp, and Strauss imply, these citizens may eventually assert their differences despite the ostensible purpose of public monuments that are dedicated to unity.

In the United States, public monuments are being hauled off to warehouses or re-shuffled to indicate significance. The changes result from “social dynamics” and cultural conflicts. Theoretically at least, alterations in public viewings make room for other narratives, nonetheless linked to trauma however much they celebrate. Whereas the African American community of McKee’s Row in Charlottesville have been dispersed and cannot be restored, the present generation renews its protests based on their heritage and individual experiences of a lasting oppression. Yet if the statues are removed, what fills the empty spaces of the pedestals left behind? Does this space invite a different phenomenological experience than intimated in “Facing It?” In Franklin, Tennessee, the citizens offer an alternative to removal. Instead of hauling off “Chip,” who symbolized the White Confederate soldier in the center of town, they installed a statue representing the United States Colored Troop Soldiers recruited by the United States Army to serve in the Civil War (McGee). “Five recently added markers tell the story of the market house where enslaved people were auctioned and the role that local Black men played in fighting for their freedom” (McGee). By contextualizing the public monuments, these citizens make visible the sites of trauma in a kind of outdoor museum. But their points of reference differ to display two competing narratives based on the same event of Civil War. Each fosters a snapshot into an unbearable trauma they have inherited. Referentiality remains dispersed and dependent on individual identities. Perhaps such visible reminders permit a sideways glance into generational scars, separate and different, honoring and preserving the conflict among and within them.

The Millennium Monument in Budapest, Hungary illustrates changing ideologies resulting in the alterations in its façade. According to Levinson, radicals destroyed statues of the Hapsburg dynasty after the loss of the war in 1919; the Hapsburgs were replaced when counterrevolutionaries established a Dual Monarchy (2-6). Wars and governments assert their influence. Silence curtains those in disagreement with the current policies. Perhaps those who see the monument, as some see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and statues of the Confederacy, take it to symbolize a lost cause. If so, they perhaps allow for a phenomenological transformation such as Komunyakaa's poem illustrates despite the absence of an immediate referent.

In another effort to change the landscape, Thomas Stubblefield reports on those in Germany undermining the concept of the monument by designing structures that invite the citizen's participation; they are movable, destroyable, invisible (1). This art movement assists in elucidating the purpose of monuments. However interesting such constructions, any narrative they elicit remains localized in the artifacts with reference only to its conceptual purpose and relatively short life. They relegate the possibility of an extimac experience located in trauma to further abstraction from an intimate encounter. These "counter-monuments" fail in their "banalization" precisely because they are disassociated from national history and from significant memory.<sup>vii</sup> They corral and insulate referentiality. They do not "remind" us. In so doing, they disallow us from knowing ourselves. If public monuments instantiate a site of trauma with problematic referentiality, what does their removal indicate? Perhaps these actions set the story straight in forming a first step in amelioration, or perhaps the trauma deepens cultural and political divides because this alteration to the landscape remains superficial.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> The statues signified Lewis and Clark who in 1804 began to explore the lands west of the Mississippi River in the United States; "Stonewall" Jackson (1824-1863), a Confederate General during the United States Civil War; George Rogers Clark (1752-1818) a militia leader in the American Revolutionary War for independence from England; Robert E. Lee (1807-1870) the Confederate General during the United State Civil War. Three of the four represented war; the Confederacy fought for the South and was defeated.

<sup>ii</sup> This term stems from András Gero, *Modern Hungarian Society in the Making* (pp 203-22) qtd in Levinson, p. 3.

<sup>iii</sup> For examples of overviews of the controversies, see Edward J Gallegher online site "The Vietnam Controversy," <http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/vietnam/>; Thelma Raker Coffone, "History of the Wall,"

<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Vietnam-War-Memorial>; "Vietnam War Memorial" *Encyclopedia Britannica Academic*

<sup>iv</sup> See for example, "In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for" (p. 8); "Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are" (9).

<sup>v</sup> See, for example, editorials in the *New York Times* that span intermittently from 11/20/1984 – 9/11/2017; letters among other items left at the wall can be found at "Items Left at the Wall:" <https://www.vvmf.org/items/6746/VIVE09007/>; for criticisms, see note 2.

<sup>vi</sup> See also Lacan, *Ethics Seminar* 7.11.

<sup>vii</sup> Stubblefield (pp. 1-2) takes the term "counter monuments" from James Young.

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