

Memory, Memorials, and Painful Pasts: A *More Perfect Union* Theme

Historical sites and the memorials we place on them can bring communities together or tear them apart. Often those with the greatest ability to do both are sites where tragic or painful events have taken place. Through works of both non-fiction and fiction, this theme explores cases in which the public memory of painful pasts has had profound impacts on communities in the present.

In recent decades, when American communities have experienced moments of great tragedy, they tend to quickly begin the process of building a memorial. This has not always been the case. Though memorialization has always one way of responding to tragic events, in the more distant past, the impulse to memorialize was weaker. In 1911, New York City experienced what is still its worst industrial accident – and one of the worst industrial accidents in US history – when the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory caught fire, killing 146 workers. Yet, while the event attracted enormous public attention and led to major changes in labor law, beyond a modest plaque, no memorial was erected to remember it. Indeed, it was not until 2002, nearly a century later, that a Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Memorial Foundation was incorporated. Though a Triangle Fire Memorial has since been planned, it has yet to be built.

But while memorialization has grown in popularity, its results are mixed. In recent decades, memorials have both brought American communities together and torn them apart. The creation of the Oklahoma City National Memorial was an important part of the city's healing process in the wake of the bombing of the Murrah Building. On the other hand, monuments around the country to Confederate leaders have been the focus of enormous political debate and, in some cases, even violence.

Memorials can be an extraordinarily powerful way to record and remember the past. As in Oklahoma City, the process of their creation can afford a unique opportunity for those affected by an event to process their experience. And, once recorded in a memorial, turning that experience into a public memory can last generations. Even those who never read a history book or step into a history museum experience the memorials and monuments that have been erected in their communities. A well-designed memorial can broaden awareness of the past and shape a community's self-understanding in positive ways.

But memorials tend to put forth a single point of view. While many of the best memorials represent a carefully crafted consensus among the members of a broad community, others simply represent the views of whoever happens to have the power to erect a statue. And compared to other ways of narrating the past, such as history

books, museums, and documentary films, monuments generally do a poor job of representing disagreements about whatever it is they memorialize. While some memorials display often hard-won consensuses about events in the past, others attempt to overwhelm deep social disagreements about the past by embodying one side of such disagreements in stone and bronze, whether or not that side represents historical truth.

Through works of non-fiction and fiction, this series of books explores both how memorials get made (and unmade) and the positive and negative impacts they can have once they appear. Who decides what gets memorialized? Once a decision has been made to erect a memorial, who gets to design it? What should be the relationship of individuals and communities affected by a tragic event to the design process of a memorial? How should memorialization take place when it touches on issues about which communities are truly divided? What impact should a memorial have on those who were not directly impacted by the event it memorializes? What makes a memorial successful...or unsuccessful?

This series consists of three works of nonfiction and two works of fiction that grapple with these questions. Edward Linenthal's *The Unfinished Bombing* is a nonfiction account of a successful memorialization process: the creation of the Oklahoma City National Memorial. Amy Waldman's novel *The Submission* concerns an unsuccessful memorialization effort in the wake of a 9/11-like terrorist attack in New York City, a memorialization process that leads to acrimony rather than healing. Clint Smith's *How the Word is Passed* focuses on ongoing efforts to memorialize slavery in America. Connor Towne O'Neill's *Down Along with That Devil's Bones* explores battles over memorials to the Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, who is most famous for having helped found the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War. Finally, the series concludes with Yishai Sarid's novel *The Memory Monster*, which explores the dangers of dwelling too much in the past. Taken together, these books are designed to show the positive and the negative sides of memorialization and to raise questions that might help us better think about the memorials around us as well as future memorials to come.

***The Unfinished Bombing* by Edward Linenthal**

One of the foremost American academics studying memorials, Linenthal began work on this book in 1996, well before the OKC memorial design was chosen and built. This allowed him to observe the memorialization process as it happened. *The Unfinished Bombing* is focused not simply on the memorial itself, but also more broadly on the impact that the bombing had on the survivors, families of victims, and the broader Oklahoma City community. His breadth of focus and concern for the individual stories of

those affected by the bombing enrich Linenthal's account of the memorial and its creation.

For good reason, the Oklahoma City National Memorial is seen as one of the most successful memorials erected in recent decades. *The Unfinished Bombing* suggests that its success reflects not just the design itself, but also the ways in which individuals and communities affected by the bombing processed their experience and worked together to make it possible. The memorialization process that Linenthal describes was not entirely smooth. But to a very great extent the memorialization process successfully navigated divisions among various community stakeholders. That process and the memorial that emerged from it played a key role in the community's recovery and healing.

(Especially given the subject of the next book in the series, it's worth noting that Linenthal completed this book in early 2001, just months before 9/11.)

What made the memorialization process in Oklahoma City so successful? And what makes the monument itself so powerful? Are there general lessons to be learned from the way survivors, victims' families, and Oklahoma City as a whole, responded to a horrific terrorist attack and from the way they incorporated its memory into the city's landscape?

***The Submission* by Amy Waldman**

Amy Waldman's novel begins at the end of a memorialization process. In the aftermath of a 9/11-like attack on New York City, a jury has been selected to choose from anonymously submitted memorial designs. Though divided between two of the proposals, the jury eventually votes for a memorial garden. Among the most enthusiastic supporters of this design is Claire Burwell, the one relative of a victim of the attack on the jury. But after selecting the design, the jury discovers that it was submitted by an architect named Mohammed Khan, who is an American Muslim. The novel concerns the enormous public controversy that follows this choice and the way that both Burwell and Khan attempt to navigate it. The fictional memorialization process described in *The Submission* is, in a sense, the opposite of the actual memorialization process that took place in Oklahoma City. It tears communities apart and leaves many unsatisfied by the results.

The Submission, which was published in 2011, was Waldman's first novel following a successful career as a reporter for the *New York Times*, in which she worked both in New York City, reporting on the aftermath of 9/11, and later in South Asia. The novel

reflects Waldman's professional background in several ways, including the care with which she presents competing and often bitterly opposed perspectives on the memorial at its center.

What does *The Submission's* calamitous memorialization process suggest about memorials? When an event being memorialized not only brings a city together but threatens, in other ways, to tear it apart, can a memorial do the kind of work that we expect of it? Is there something about an event like 9/11 that makes it more difficult to memorialize than the bombing of the Murrah Building? When memorialization processes do tear communities apart, is there a workable political solution? Or do you share the political pessimism of Waldman's novel?

***How the Word is Passed* by Clint Smith**

Between 2017 and 2020, the poet and writer Clint Smith visited sites that, in one way or another, are attempting to convey the history of slavery and its aftermath. Unlike the Oklahoma City bombing or the fictional terrorist attack in *The Submission*, slavery took place not in a moment in time, but over many centuries. This alone would make it difficult to memorialize. While each of the first two books in this series takes the reader through to the end of a memorialization process, *How the Word is Passed* is about a broader memorialization process that is still far from finished. Most of Smith's travels takes him to sites in the South: Thomas Jefferson's Monticello plantation, the Whitney Plantation outside New Orleans, Angola Prison in Louisiana, a Confederate cemetery in Virginia, and Galveston, Texas. But he concludes his book by visiting New York City and Gorée Island in Senegal, reminding us that the sites of slavery are not all in the South.

What challenges face those trying to memorialize slavery? How does one go about memorializing something so vast? In what ways does memorializing the more distant past differ from attempts to memorialize events that many living people experienced personally? Which of the attempts at memorializing slavery that Smith discusses seem most successful to him...and to you? Why does Smith choose to include a chapter on Confederate memorialization at Blandford Cemetery in the middle of his book? How does he relate the efforts he sees there to celebrate the Confederacy to the other memorialization efforts he describes? What might future attempts to tell the story of slavery look like?

***Down Along with That Devil's Bones* by Connor Towne O'Neill**

Like Smith, O'Neill describes his book as a "reckoning," in this case with "monuments, memory, and the legacy of white supremacy." And like Smith's book, O'Neill's consists of

a series of visits to memorial sites, in this case involving the Confederate General and early Klansman Nathan Bedford Forrest. O'Neill starts in Selma, famous not only for its role in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, but also among neo-Confederates for Forrest's defense of the city during the Civil War. O'Neill then goes to Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where Middle Tennessee State's ROTC building is named after Forrest. Just outside of Nashville, he visits the largest memorial to Forrest. And he ends his journey in Memphis, where Forrest lived the final years of his life. Though some of the people O'Neill talks with resemble the Confederate memorialists Smith meets in Virginia, O'Neill's book, unlike Smith's, is fundamentally about conflict.

The sites he visits are places not simply of memory but of fights over memory. O'Neill describes not only these conflicts, but also the real life of Nathan Bedford Forrest, as well as the mythical version of it that memorials attempt to represent. While the first three books in this series concern how to memorialize something that the communities (in the first two books) and the author (in the second) believe ought to be memorialized, this book is about attempts to memorialize someone whom the author feels should *not* be memorialized.

How should and can communities respond to bad memorials, ones that misrepresent the past or celebrate people who do not deserve to be celebrated? How should communities and governments manage conflicts over such memorials? The fights over memorials to Nathan Bedford Forrest discussed in O'Neill's book are one small part of a broader battle over Confederate monuments. What does O'Neill have to tell us about this broader fight?

***The Memory Monster* by Yishai Sarid**

This short, recent work of fiction takes us outside the context of the United States and American history. But the questions it raises are worth pondering when thinking about memorials and memorialization. Sarid's novel takes the form of a long letter of apology, written to the director of Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial and museum, from an Israeli scholar who has been hired as a guide for fellow Israelis visiting the former sites of the Nazi deathcamps in Sobibor, Majdanek, Treblinka, and Auschwitz, all of which are in what is today Poland. The narrator / letter writer describes how he comes to study the Holocaust, how he becomes a guide, why his experiences with the individuals and groups that he leads turn sour, and, finally, the way in which his engagement with the past eventually leads to a kind of mental breakdown.

The first four books in this series, in different ways, grapple with questions about how good memorials are made, what does and does not deserve to be memorialized, and

how to deal with conflicts that arise when, for good or bad reasons, memorials become sites of controversy. *The Memory Monster* raises a different sort of question. The problem at its center seems to be caused by the very place of memory in the lives of its characters. Can history and public memory – even when they are historically accurate and concern very important events – come to play an unhealthy role in the lives of individuals and communities? Can memory itself be a kind of monster? And, if it can, what might that suggest about contemporary America's growing attachment to memorials?

For Further Reading

Cox, Karen L. *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. The historian Karen Cox surveys the history of Confederate memorials and the current battles over their place in the American landscape.

Doss, Erika. *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012. With a skeptical eye, Doss analyzes the growing importance of memorialization in U.S. culture in recent decades to understand why it has happened and what it might mean. Unusually for books like this, Doss doesn't present as series of case studies on individual memorials, but instead casts an extraordinarily wide net, allowing readers to get a sense of the breadth of memorialization in 21st-century America.

Foote, Kenneth E. *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*. Austin: University of Texas, 2003. Foote surveys the ways in which Americans have marked (or tried to eradicate) places where violence and tragedy have taken place. A good book to get a sense of how much more common memorialization is today, as a response to such events, than it was in the past.

Linenthal, Edward Tabor. *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields*. Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1993. Before writing *The Unfinished Bombing*, which you're reading as part of this LTAI series, Ed Linenthal wrote this volume about memorialization at battlefields of across the United States. Features chapters on Lexington and Concord, the Alamo, Gettysburg, Little Bighorn, and Pearl Harbor.

Rieff, David. *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2017. Surveying uses of public memory around the world, Rieff makes the contrarian case that forgetting past tragedies can be more socially beneficial than remembering them.

Senie, Harriet. *Memorials to Shattered Myths Vietnam to 9/11*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016. Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in DC, which was erected in 1982, has been enormously influential in the over the last four decades, a period in which memorialization has grown ever more important in the United States. Starting with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial itself, art historian Harriet Senie surveys a series of important memorialization efforts that took place during the ensuing decades, including those following the Oklahoma City bombing, the Columbine school shooting, and the 9/11 attacks.

Young, James Edward. *The Stages of Memory Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018. A recent series of essays on memorialization by James Young, whose book on Holocaust memorials around the world, *The Texture of Memory* (1994), remains the most important book on that topic.

Credits

This program is part of the National Endowment for the Humanities' A More Perfect Union initiative. This initiative encourages projects that explore, reflect on, and tell the stories of our quest for a more just, inclusive, and sustainable society throughout our history.



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