

Research Statement

Lucy Britt

My research focuses on the political legacy of historical violence, race and ethnic politics, and the politics of place and space. I mostly work in normative political theory, but I also conduct empirical research on U.S. politics, race and politics, and teaching and learning.

Dissertation: Toward a Political Aesthetic of Commemoration

Citizens and states grapple with how to represent histories of genocide, colonial violence, and slavery in their physical landscapes. How should the physical environment confront us with these violent histories: should they commemorate victims? Should it aim to be politically instructive? I argue that careful examination of the “political aesthetic” can reveal the successes and failures of communities and states to work against future violence.

Scholarly and popular debates about the commemoration of violent events often center on a key dichotomy: harmful forgetting versus painful remembrance. For example, critiques of Confederate statues in U.S. public spaces argue that monuments should be removed as painful reminders of injustice, while the monuments’ defenders claim to be wary of historical erasure or forgetting. This dichotomy is not new; postwar scholars such as Theodor Adorno reject *aufarbeiten* (“working to overcome the past”) in favor of reckoning with the past. In my dissertation, I show how this postwar forgetting-remembrance dichotomy continues to dominate discussions of historical commemoration of atrocities. But it is important to move beyond this impasse. I instead make a pragmatic argument that societies should consider what kinds of messages might aim at preventing a *summum malum* (worst outcome) of future violence. By examining three case studies – memorials to genocide in Rwanda, to slavery in the U.S., and to colonial violence in Australia – I outline the defining characteristics of an alternative aesthetic of commemoration. This aesthetic opens up imaginative possibilities for a world without future mass violence by highlighting bodily vulnerability, fugitivity, and solidarity.

The first case study analyzes three memorials to the Rwandan Genocide, all of which were partially sponsored by the Rwandan government and contribute to its official narrative of the “Genocide against the Tutsis.” These memorials depict the vulnerability and fragility of victims’ bodies in a way that I argue is effective in communicating the horror of genocide despite their failure to create a narrative of the genocide that is inclusive of all groups. This emphasis on the body draws on Judith Butler’s analysis of the precarity of the body and political mourning, asserting the power of attending to our shared bodily vulnerability. This chapter is currently under a revise-and-resubmit.

The second case study turns to memorial depictions of slavery in the United States, focusing on theories of fugitivity and resistance in Black political thought. It suggests that a focus on fugitivity as relational (rather than extraordinary and individual) might allow us to find moments of resistance to – and even flourishing within – systems of violence and oppression, even when these systems cannot be completely overthrown. What can we learn from depictions of fugitives, truants, absentees, runaways, and maroon communities? I suggest that stories of flight as relational community care might be useful for a political imagination that works against future mass violence.

The third case study suggests that recent efforts to memorialize Australia's colonial violence toward Indigenous peoples represent an attempt to cultivate political solidarity in a pluralistic society. I examine two memorials to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people killed by settlers and, drawing on Hannah Arendt's idea of *sensus communis*, I show how these memorials embody solidarity as a set of practices rather than as a set of shared characteristics.

This project takes a comparative political theoretic approach and integrates rich interdisciplinary literatures of Black political thought, architectural and planning theory, critical and postcolonial theory, history and public history, political philosophy and theory, and the interdisciplinary field of "memory studies." It has important implications for political theorists interested in how political values manifest in the visual environment; for scholars and practitioners of history, public history, material culture, and urban planning; and for the public, whose deep interest in the political implications of monuments and memorials has recently become apparent. For dissertation research, I have been awarded \$23,300 across three different grants, including a highly competitive university Dissertation Completion Fellowship for the 2019-20 academic year. All chapters are written, with an intended defense date of February 2021.

"Share Your Trauma: A Critical Feminist Theory of Trauma Culture," with Wilson Hammett. Working paper.

With increasingly open cultural attitudes toward talking about mental illness and therapy, especially among the young and privileged, some stigmas surrounding mental illness have decreased among younger generations in the Global North in the 21st century. Concurrently, the rise of the interdisciplinary field of "memory studies" has seen a proliferation of scholarly and popular discourses around mass violence. Trauma culture, in which trauma is used as a social concept and in everyday parlance outside the frameworks of medicine and memory studies, poses interesting dilemmas and difficulties for feminism. On the one hand, it has been feminist theorists and activists who legitimated affect and emotion. On the other hand, the use of trauma discourse as currency for social capital poses dangers for feminism. In this paper, we outline the contours of a critical feminist theory of trauma, arguing that feminisms should explore how cultural ideas of trauma might bolster their political claims. However, feminisms should remain wary of the possibilities for trauma to become a tool of gender oppression, for trauma to become a kind of social currency in which traumatic stories are exchanged for cultural capital, and for trauma's meaning to become diluted and therefore less useful to medicine, mental health, and memory studies. Target for submission: April 2021.

Additional Research: U.S. Politics, Race and Politics, and Politics and Emotions

In addition to work within my research focus of political theory, I coauthor with empirical political scientists to study the intersections of politics and emotion, race, and commemoration.

"Set in Stone: Confederate Monuments' Meaning and Consequences in the American South," with Emily Wager and Tyler Steelman. *Du Bois Review* (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X2000020X>.

How do citizens interpret contentious symbols that pervade our environment? What downstream effects does state protection of these symbols have on how citizens of different backgrounds feel they belong in that environment? We approach these questions through two original surveys. We find perceptions of Confederate monuments vary by race, where White Southerners are drastically less

likely to perceive them as symbolic of racial injustice than Black Southerners. Further, state protection of Confederate monuments leads to a diminished sense of belonging among Black Southerners, while generally leaving White Southerners unaffected. This research moves beyond the literature that examines simple support or opposition toward contentious symbols, and instead develops a deeper understanding of what meaning symbols have for citizens and symbols' tangible consequences for how citizens engage with politics. We have been awarded \$1,850 across two grants for this project. This paper is published in the *Du Bois Review*.

"The New White Visibility: Racial Solidarity in the Post-2016 Era," with Leah Christiani. Working paper.

Calls to cross-racial solidarity in contemporary politics often claim that whiteness needs to first be made visible before racial healing can begin. But what does this mean in 2016, when whiteness has already been made visible - in two divergent ways? On the right, white identity politics centers around claims of white oppression in the face of threatening minorities, while on the left, white progressives in the Black Lives Matter era focus on making white privilege visible. We run a survey experiment to better understand the impacts of these two divergent frames of whiteness (against a control) on policy positions, racial attitudes, and cross-racial solidarity. Target for submission: February 2021.

"Memory and Constructed Emotions: A New Measure for Emotional Reactions to Political Figures," with Pamela J. Conover and Tyler Steelman. Working paper.

Despite the importance of emotions in understanding political candidates, elections, and elected officials, for forty years political scientists have been using a measure of emotional reactions to politicians that does not align with current theoretical understandings of how emotions work. The American National Election Study (ANES) asks respondents to recall how often they have felt a certain emotion toward an individual political figure, but research on the fallibility of memory and the constructed nature of emotions shows that this approach is misguided. We propose a new measure that uses real-time news alerts to measure emotional reactions as they are formed, not months or years later. Preliminary results show that this measure is able to detect emotions that the ANES measure cannot. A \$725 grant funded surveys for this project. Target for submission: March 2021.

Additional Research: Teaching and Learning

"Reasons and Power: A Holistic U.S. Political Institutions Simulation," with Ryan Williams. Under review.

In U.S. government courses, simulations have been shown to increase students' engagement with course material and knowledge retention. We introduce procedures for and data on the effectiveness of an original simulation on civil liberties and U.S. federal institutions. Students play members of Congress, lobbyists for a pro- or anti-natural gas pipeline group, or Supreme Court justices. The simulation is unique in its combination of reflection on various normative political arguments with analysis of the procedures of the federal government.

Future Research

I plan to publish a revised version of my dissertation, including an additional case study, as a book following completion of the doctoral degree. In my long-term research agenda, I will develop a new project about a related topic – the politics of place and space. This project will examine how our surroundings in the built environment can shed light on democratic institutions and processes.

The first paper, tentatively titled “‘The people have decided’: User-Centered and Adaptive Design as Democratic Experiments,” teases out the democratic implications of “desire paths” and user experience design principles. “Desire paths” are a phenomenon in which foot traffic along shortcuts between buildings, across lawns, and around obstacles wears down grass and indicates pedestrians’ needs. In this project, I explore the phenomenon of desire paths and the implications for justice of a bottom-up approach to the design of physical spaces used by the public. I focus on two aspects of desire paths that are interesting from the perspective of normative political theory. The first is the political significance of the generative, creative, and norm-defying act of creating and walking along a new path. The second is the possibilities for designers and reformers of democratic institutions to harness this bottom-up creative capacity of the public while avoiding the pitfalls of majority-based decision-making, such as the marginalization of minorities. User-centered design has exciting implications for democratic theory, urban and regional policy, and the design of political institutions.

The second paper focuses on the concept of “livability” in the built environment and draw on theories of biopolitics (including Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “bare life” and Judith Butler’s invocation of lives deemed worth mourning) to explore what it means for a community to be livable or unlivable. What do discourses about livability – walkability, accessibility, and availability of services – mean for those communities where people continue to live and even flourish in “unlivable” communities? This project has important implications for the generative possibilities of “unlivable” communities for city and regional planning, as well as interesting normative implications for political theorists and philosophers interested in how physical space adapted to community needs under conditions of stress might provide new theoretical resources for imagining the good life and human flourishing.

The third paper takes a critical approach to two of the issues on which even racially and politically progressive White U.S. residents continue to support racial segregation: “not-in-my-backyard” issues (NIMBYism) and school desegregation. It studies these two policy areas from a critical race theory approach, analyzing the ways that when faced with the prospect of nonwhite people living alongside them (in the form of public housing or residential desegregation) or learning alongside their children (in the form of school desegregation policies), White people ultimately support the continued segregation of the built environment. Why do even those Whites who support other racially progressive policies balk at the racially liberal policies that would reshape their neighborhoods and schools? Through a critical reading of the concept of “home,” this paper interprets White anxiety about the arrival of Black and Brown people “close to home.”