

## Research Statement

Lucy Britt

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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 and Current Book Project: 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? My dissertation and current book project explores the political aesthetic of commemoration in representations of contentious historical violence. It argues 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 *anfarbeiten* (“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 review.

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. To support this project, I have been awarded \$23,300 across three different grants, including a highly competitive university Dissertation Completion Fellowship.

**"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: November 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. Under review.

**"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: October 2021.

**Additional Research: Teaching and Learning**

**"Reasons and Power: A Holistic U.S. Political Institutions Simulation," with Ryan Williams. *PS: Political Science and Politics* (forthcoming).**

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

In my long-term research agenda, I plan to prepare a book manuscript based on my dissertation and to develop a new project focusing on how different modes of fugitivity that enslaved people engaged in in the United States Southeast can generate new ways of thinking about resistance, flight, and oppression in contemporary systems of oppression such as modern-day structural racism. While enslaved people escaping all the way north, including through the Underground Railroad, is a widely understood form of fugitivity, I suggest that looking to historical examples of fugitivity *within* the South can both illustrate the political creativity and survival-seeking practices both of enslaved people in the United States and generate ideas about alternate ways of resisting structural oppression and creating political communities. Through engagement with historical research, primary texts, and Black political thought, the project studies several different forms of fugitivity that did not bring enslaved people all the way to “free” territories, from marronage (escaping to form political communities of resistance within territories of enslavement) to lurking on the periphery of plantation labor camps in order to stay close to family members. It ultimately suggests that those interested in modern-day resistance to seemingly insurmountable barriers such as structural racism might take inspiration from enslaved people who created connection and community through their resistance to the violence of slavery.