

Research Statement

Lucy Britt

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

Current Book Project

My book in progress argues for an expanded concept of fugitivity that draws on the Black intellectual tradition and on the variety of ways that enslaved people in the United States fled from bondage. Drawing on the concrete experiences of fugitives from slavery in the United States and its colonies and territories, this book demonstrates the value of the politics engaged in by Black fugitives and created from Black fugitivity. In particular, it moves beyond the exceptionalism and individualism often perpetuated by mythical retellings of escape on the Underground Railroad to explore how flight *within* geographies of enslavement can enrich contemporary politics of resistance to systems of violence. In particular, many forms of fugitivity leaned on – and strengthened – entanglements, relationships, and communities of care. This ethos can be generative for contemporary fugitive politics and theory.

In recent years, scholars of the Black intellectual tradition have taken up the idea of fugitivity, drawing on theories of refusal; ideas from resistance from anticolonial and Black radical thought; and the history of fugitives from chattel slavery in the Americas. Fugitivity is a form of resistance to a system of oppression that takes the specific form of flight. The concept evokes generative possibilities for how to escape within systems of oppression when it is impossible to fully escape or overcome them. This possibility seems increasingly appealing during our current period of democratic backsliding, climate catastrophe, and the extreme precarity faced by subjugated populations.

Many contemporary engagements with fugitivity in political theory are implicitly or explicitly grounded in Sheldon Wolin's theory of "fugitive democracy," the fleeting nature of democratic revival. In the introduction to the book, I contest fugitive democracy as the basis for an articulation of fugitivity and argue instead for a footing in conceptual frameworks based on the diverse, specific historical experiences of Black fugitives fleeing slavery in the United States. The five substantive chapters are organized by type of fugitivity: flight all the way out of the territory of enslavement, lurking and liminal fugitivity, fugitive truancy, hiding in plain sight, and marronage.

Chapter One begins the book's exploration of diverse modes of fugitivity with the mode that looms largest in the American imaginary: escape on the Underground Railroad. In this chapter, I draw on the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and historical research to show how this hegemonic narrative of complete escape is a powerful American political myth that was rewritten in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to emphasize individual heroism, masculinity, a promised land of freedom, and the sacrifices of white abolitionists. In Chapter Two, I explore "lurking" on the periphery of sites of enslavement. This phenomenon illustrates the importance of kinship and social ties, as "lurkers" often relied on the support of family networks and often "lurked" in order to keep

together or reunite their families. I read Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as an illustration of the relationality of "lurking" and argue that lurking is a powerful tool for escaping and fleeing injustice *within* systems of oppression that are impossible to fully escape.

Chapter Three turns to truancy, or short-term escape, as a form of fugitive resistance and argues that truancy highlights the world-building potential of relational ties. I read Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* alongside historical research on enslaved truants. I argue that truancy can reveal both the strength and the limitations of kinship ties, ultimately broadening discussions of fugitivity in contemporary politics to include an emphasis on the relational, temporary, and tenuous nature of certain types of fugitive resistance. Chapter Four focuses on hiding in plain sight among free Black communities. In this chapter, I examine how histories of fugitivity in plain sight within the territory of enslavement can illuminate the ways that communities of sanctuary can mobilize to subvert racial and state violence. Connecting sanctuary communities to contemporary strategies of evasion employed by migrants, I argue for the political potential of fugitivity as blending in.

In the fifth chapter, I turn to marronage, a form of flight in which fugitives created permanent and semi-permanent communities of refuge within the territory of enslavement. Archaeological evidence has pointed toward a radically communal way of living at one maroon settlement, the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia and North Carolina. Drawing on my field research at the Swamp and recent work on marronage, I offer an alternative imagination of memorialization of the Great Dismal Swamp maroons as a form of what Christina Sharpe calls "wake work." I argue that memorializing marronage may offer new ways of thinking about building communities of care within systems of violence and subjugation.

The conclusion ties these various forms of fugitivity together and links these fugitive politics to contemporary subaltern struggles. From Black Lives Matter organizers to migrant communities building sanctuary to feminist networks organizing reproductive healthcare, fugitive politics are emerging in response to systems of violence and oppression. Finally, I draw on Achille Mbembe's "relation of care" and "ethics of the passerby" to argue that fugitivity, as formulated by its original theorists (those fleeing enslavement) draws its political power from its relational nature. The fugitive strategies of enslaved Black people in the United States show how flight *within* systems of violence and oppression can be effective modes of resistance when total escape from those systems is nearly impossible. My book is relevant for contemporary political thought and political struggle as Americans become increasingly disenchanted with political institutions. My book proposal was recently accepted to the Association for Political Theory's Book Manuscript Workshop.

"Contentious Vulnerability: The Case of Rwandan Genocide Memorials." Under review.

The memorials commemorating Rwanda's 1994 genocide are rare in their use of human remains and depictions of violence. These memorials have been widely criticized by European and North American scholars, who focus on the danger of depicting bodily vulnerability, arguing that it supports the regime's politics of exclusion. However, by conflating what is exclusionary about the *framing* of the aesthetic of bodily vulnerability at Rwandan memorials with the aesthetic itself, these critics write off vulnerability altogether, risking a colonialist stance that reduces the Rwandan context to the non-political by fitting its commemorative politics into a false dichotomy of emotion and reason. In conversation with theories of vulnerability and the human by Judith Butler and Achille Mbembe, I argue that the aesthetic of vulnerability, when framed in an inclusive and critical way, can

provide hope by supplying a way to see others' bodies as non-disposable and oppose debasing forms of power.

“Share Your Trauma: A Critical Feminist Theory of Trauma Culture,” with Wilson Hammett. Under review.

This essay theorizes a dilemma for feminism and the mental health fields posed by a particular form of trauma discourse. Feminists have played an important role in the development of current cultural and clinical conceptions of trauma and its destigmatization, but one result of the destigmatization of trauma has been that the language of trauma has begun to be used as a form of cultural capital. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, distinction, and inequality to understand the circulation of trauma discourse, we critically reflect on the use of trauma as cultural capital by the privileged and powerful to enhance their power, distinguish themselves from those without such cultural capital, and reinforce hierarchies. We put the struggle to understand and treat trauma in the context of feminist interventions in the mental health and medical fields. We then outline, using several examples from contemporary U.S. popular culture, the appropriation of trauma talk to entrench existing inequalities and give cultural capital to those in positions of power and those seeking to evade accountability for abuse. This discussion has important implications not only for those in the mental health professions and trauma survivors, but also for feminist thought and those interested in deconstructing structural injustices and relations of inequality more broadly.

Additional Research: Race and Politics in the United States

In addition to my political theory work, I also study race, whiteness, and memory using survey data. My empirical research and my normative work often speak to each other: my normative research takes an applied approach, and my empirical work is often informed by or tests the assertions of political theorists.

"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 were awarded \$1,850 across two grants for this project and we presented this study in a public-facing invited talk. I am currently serving as an expert witness in a trial over a North Carolina Confederate monument, drawing on research completed for this project and for a follow-up study.

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

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. A follow-up study focusing on white identity formation will examine the qualitative data collected as part of this survey.

Two working papers on white NIMBYism and racial threat, with Andreas Jozwiak. Target for submission fall 2022.

In the wake of the "Great Awakening," white Democrats have professed increasingly racially progressive attitudes. However, the question remains open whether Democrats' racial progressivism predicts important decisions that white Americans make "when the rubber hits the road" – like when deciding where to send their children to school or where to live. White people continue to make decisions on an individual level that have created levels of racial residential segregation at levels similar to the 1970s. Using a survey experiment (paper 1) and text analysis of citizen complaints about housing development at city government meetings (paper 2), we observe the effects of nonwhite families moving into white liberals' neighborhoods on white liberals' willingness to support racially progressive policies.

Additional Research: Teaching and Learning

"Reasons and Power: A Holistic U.S. Political Institutions Simulation," with Ryan Williams. *PS: Political Science and Politics* (2021, <https://www.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521001013>).

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 the strength and type of various normative arguments for and against a policy with the procedures of government as the policy makes its way through federal institutions.

"Medicare-for-All or the Status Quo? Simulating Lobbying, Policy Debate, and the Party Line in Congress." In *Simulations in Political Science: Games Without Frontiers*, Ed. Mark Harvey, James Fielder, and Ryan Gibb (Routledge, 2023).

This book chapter lays out the purposes and procedures for an original simulation of the lobbying and policymaking process in U.S. politics. Aimed at illustrating one of the ways that private groups can influence policy outcomes, this simulation divides students into lobbyists or members of Congress and brings the lawmaking process alive through active learning.