



Monument Culture: International Perspectives on the Future of Monuments in a Changing World

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Some monuments are about war. And some wars are about monuments. A recent memorial melee was the 'Unite the Right' rally that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017. You remember: the one where Donald Trump saw 'very fine people on both sides'.

Laura A. Macaluso was less sanguine. The 'hideous' spectacle of white supremacists marching around Confederate-era statues led her to issue a call for essays about 'monument culture' (p. xiii). This interesting book is the result of that initiative. The subtitle indicates its international scope and future-focus at a time of momentous change. The book's closing section underlines why monuments matter: the Charlottesville rally was not really an argument about history: it was a fight to shape the future (p. 258).

The diverse case studies spread across twenty-two chapters piece together to tell a 'global story' (p. xiv). Each essay is an uncomfortable reminder of my ignorance. There is so much history that I don't know! Knowledge gaps serve as reminders that we are products of educational systems that all too often contribute to 'an "us and them" divide' (p. 251) and that this, in turn, gives rise to the sorts of disagreements explored in this book.

Many monuments deal with the 'regrettable past' (p. 250). However, it is interesting to chart how certain aspects of this history get treated with 'apathy and neglect' by one generation, only to become a source of intense controversy for another (p. 219). It must therefore be the case that future generations will forget present-day disputes whilst being scandalised by things that we find uncontroversial. Furthermore, in her introduction, Macaluso argues that 'social inequities' are 'reinforced in public culture, which include... historic sites and museums' (p. xiii). If that was true in the past, to what extent does it remain the case today?

A number of the contributors cite James E. Young's work on Holocaust memorials. In *The Texture of Memory* (1993) Young famously remarked that, 'by themselves, monuments are of little value, mere stones in the landscape'. It's what goes on around them that brings them to life. This includes lavish occasions such as 'ceremonies and memorial days' (p. 126) as well as unofficial protests. Even the simple act of dressing a bronze statue in a coat and scarf can thrust a mute historical marker into the politics of the present (pp. 137 & 179).

Any lingering doubts that monuments – like museums – are fixed and backward-looking are dispelled by this book. Memory is a process and we're the active ingredients: 'I'm a monument' declares one graffiti artist in the Kyrgyzstan capital, Bishkek (p. 168). Indeed, every one of us is a 'walking memorial', encountering history in individual ways courtesy of our own pasts and frames of reference (p. 210). Differences of opinion would therefore seem to be inevitable. Problems arise whenever contentious issues are mediated and magnified as part of wider quarrels. Throw nationalism into the mix and it's easy to see why monuments can become so divisive. One of the few places without sovereignty is Antarctica (p. 28). But the fact that it too features monuments erected by nations keen to stake their territorial claims shows that this is likely to be a future flashpoint. Countering this are signs of a growing sense of transnational solidarity directed at promoting human rights in the present and correcting commemorative injustices (p. 194). But these same forces can be used to advance very different causes. The so-called '*good Fascism*' (p. 237) on offer in heritage-rich Italy resonates with Trump's equivocal response to Charlottesville.

And that's precisely why we need books like *Monument Culture*. Its many clever contributors help us prepare for that fateful day when the late, great Donald Trump mutates from bile into bronze. For every person cheering his erection, someone else will be trying to tear it down. By, hey, that'll be OK. After all, there are sure to be 'very fine people on both sides'.

Reviewed by Stuart Burch

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