

The Weight of the Past: A Comparative Study of Race and Memorialization in St. Louis
PI: David Cunningham, Department of Sociology

Introduction: How do symbolic representations of the past influence present understandings of, and debates about, inequality? Understanding the evolution of any urban core requires attention to the relationship between contemporary social arrangements and past political, economic, social, and policy practices. Social scientists have long documented such relationships – how, for instance, school desegregation campaigns spur white flight; how gentrification associated with economic revitalization concentrates poverty in other areas. Crucial as well is interrogating how communities represent their histories in the built environment, through public memorials that provide spaces for commemorating the past – and, in doing so, convey its present significance. Such symbolic representations influence public understandings of current disparities, and can become sites for contesting how inequalities are interpreted. Consider the Confederate Memorial in St. Louis’ Forest Park, which was defaced with spray paint after the Charleston church shootings. Understanding this act requires examining the memorial in context – its physical form and textual content, its location in the city, and the political environment that shapes its meaning.

Purpose and goals: This project’s interdisciplinary approach builds on collective memory scholars’ tripartite observation that: (1) past events structure present-day arrangements, (2) representations of the past shape and reflect contemporary tensions and motivations, and (3) the dynamics of memory interact with other social processes to provide a basis for the sorts of contention we have seen in and around Ferguson and many other urban communities. Investigating past memorialization efforts – how racial disparities have been encoded in the built environment – is thus especially critical in St. Louis, and a core aspect of sustainable urbanism broadly conceived. To clarify local dynamics, this study considers St. Louis in comparative relief, alongside two additional urban cases – Boston, MA, and Jackson, MS – that exhibit differing orientations to key events in U.S. racial history. The core goal for this pilot study is to construct an inventory cataloguing each memorial’s date of establishment, compositional and textual features, location, and degree of public accessibility. Archival newspaper research on subsequent events associated with each memorial will further illuminate the role that representations of the past play in current narratives about inequality.

Intellectual underpinnings: Public intellectuals such as Ta-Nehisi Coates and grassroots movements such as Black Lives Matter have sparked a national conversation concerning the weight of the past: America’s long history of racial oppression and its enduring ramifications for the present. This project engages that conversation by drawing from interdisciplinary scholarship on “collective memory” – i.e., shared representations of the past – to ask: What images of the past do urban memorial landscapes make available, and what is forgotten, denied, or silenced? How do the stories they tell shape and constrain public understandings of contemporary inequalities? When, how, and why are these official representations critiqued or contested? Systematic social research will offer empirical breadth and theoretical depth to pressing regional and national debates, revealing how public representations address difficult histories.

Methodology and content of the proposed work: The approach here draws from comparative-historical and visual methodological traditions. While the project will catalogue public memorials, the analytic emphasis is on how those cases intersect with racial and ethnic

boundaries and disparities, and particularly with communities’ orientations to the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. As a guiding model, we draw on an existing digital project, “[Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina](#),” which adopts a productive interdisciplinary approach to collect and present materials associated with monuments (many of which address the Civil War) in that state. Our proposed project also gains analytic leverage from its comparative focus, which assesses St. Louis alongside Jackson (with its strong roots in a slave economy, unambiguous elite support for the Confederacy, and white opposition to civil rights efforts) and Boston (a quintessential northern case, with strong abolitionist and Union roots and support for the southern Civil Rights Movement, though with a more tangled local civil rights history). At this pilot stage, we plan to complete the complement of coding tasks outlined below for St. Louis, while also constructing a baseline monument catalogue for the other two cities.

Following protocols from the North Carolina project, and drawing upon established social scientific, historical, and urban design approaches, we focus on six analytic dimensions:

<i>Areas of inquiry</i>	<i>Associated data</i>
<i>Temporal</i>	Dates when proposed, approved, and erected
<i>Organizational</i>	Active stakeholders (supporters, opponents, and invested audiences)
<i>Financial</i>	Funds required, sources from which they were secured, alternative funding paths not pursued
<i>Bureaucratic</i>	Required permitting and other steps to secure public space
<i>Spatial/ecological</i>	Location, degree of public accessibility, composition of surrounding area
<i>Textual</i>	Documentary and visual evidence of creators’ intentions and subsequent public reception, focused on size, architectural style (e.g., realist vs. abstract, monumental vs. anti-monumental), relationships between written inscriptions and sculptural depictions, and representations of race, gender, power, and status

Research activities, milestones, and deliverables: This study will be carried out over a 12-month period, between June 1, 2016 – May 31, 2017, and involve three phases:
 (1) constructing a complete inventory of public memorials in St. Louis, Jackson, and Boston, including the sponsor, funder, and date of establishment for each. *(June-August 2016)*
 (2) gathering site data for each St. Louis memorial, including images of the memorial, its surroundings, and its accessibility within the broader ecology of the city. *(Sept.-Dec. 2016)*
 (3) searching newspaper archives (from the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* and a core set of alternative newspapers in the city, selected in conversation with WU Libraries contact Makiba Foster) to identify events – dedications, subsequent commemorations or celebrations, and acts of contention – associated with each memorial site. *(January-March 2017)*
 The final months *(April-May 2017)* would be dedicated to integrating data to compile a file on each memorial suitable for constructing a web-based interactive overlay map of St. Louis, to be supported through subsequent funding identified via ongoing conversations with Olin Library, the Weidenbaum Center, the American Sociological Association, and the American Council for Learned Societies. Additionally, the project team will build on these research activities to deliver one or more professional conference presentations (with undergraduate interns) and prepare two articles, oriented respectively to academic and public audiences.

Challenges and limitations: Bounding what constitutes an official memorial poses analytic challenges. This pilot project will focus on *physical* memorials in *public* spaces, intended as *permanent* establishments. This excludes, e.g., school curricula and temporary museum exhibits, though we may revise these boundaries as we inductively interrogate our data.

Project partners and their contributions: This project centers on partnerships between the PI and two faculty members at other institutions: Prof. Nicole Fox (Department of Sociology, University of New Hampshire) and Prof. Christina Simko (Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Williams College). Its collaborative nature is intended to orient synergistically to each component of this comparative study, with the composition of the project team benefiting from the complementary expertise that its members bring to the study of memorialization and collective memory as well as to the specific urban cases included here. In particular, the proposed faculty partnership builds on substantive experience and active research profiles associated with core dimensions of the project: collective memory (Simko), memorialization (Fox), and race and contestation (Cunningham). The collaboration draws as well on the team members' diverse methodological expertise, including ethnographic observation and qualitative software analysis (Fox), discourse analysis and archival research (Simko) and spatial and relational approaches to comparative-historical inquiry (Cunningham). Team members also have conducted prior work in and around Boston (Simko and Fox) and Jackson (Cunningham and Fox), and the PI's presence at Washington University provides a basis for project research in those cities to inform our comparative examination of the project's central case (St. Louis).

The organization of the collaborative project will additionally integrate undergraduate research assistants in significant ways, with 1-2 students on each campus working closely with lead faculty on archival, historical, photographic, and analytic components. Such a model builds on the PI's past projects centered on faculty-student teams in multiple field settings, several of which have resulted in student participation in conference presentations and publications (both popular and in refereed academic journals), along with invited presentations on pedagogical best-practices around such collaborative models.

The mechanics of the partnership are predicated to include both virtual and in-person collaboration across the project's three sites. In particular, the project work plan incorporates:

- remote coding of municipal and newspaper records by student research assistants, with the Williams contingent taking the lead on Boston, UNH on Jackson, and Washington University on St. Louis.
- in-person field visits to collect images and observational data around each memorial site by two or more project faculty (Fox and Simko in Boston; Cunningham and Fox in Jackson; Cunningham, Fox, and Simko in St. Louis), augmented by student research assistants.
- collaboration between the PI and Washington University students, along with campus resources, to construct the data files that will provide a baseline for the subsequent construction of the interactive St. Louis memorial map.

Ferguson Academic Seed Fund
Grant Application Project Member & Invited Scholar Bio Sketch Form

Please complete an electronic copy of this for each member of your project team and for each invited scholar. You will be required to upload completed bio sketch forms on the grant application page. You may collate forms into a single document for ease of submission.

Invited Scholar: Team Member: Both:

Team Member count: 1 of 3

TITLE: Dr.

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AFFILIATE INSTITUTION (s):

Washington University in St. Louis

SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH (200 WORDS OR LESS):

David Cunningham is Professor of Sociology at Washington University in St. Louis. His current research focuses on the causes, sequencing, and legacy of racial and ethnic contention, and has been supported by the National Science Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. His latest book, "Klansville, U.S.A.: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era's Largest KKK," was published by Oxford University Press in 2013 and served as the basis for a PBS American Experience documentary of the same name earlier this year. A recipient of Brandeis University's Jeanette Lerman-Neubauer '69 and Joseph Neubauer Prize for Excellence in Teaching and Mentoring, he has directed a number of community-based student programs that have provided research support for restorative justice efforts focused on the legacy of racial violence.

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Invited Scholar: Team Member: Both:

Team Member count: 2 of 3

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University of New Hampshire

SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH (200 WORDS OR LESS):

Nicole Fox, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Sociology department at the University of New Hampshire. Her research focuses on the impact of contention on identities and communities and, specifically, on how remembrances of adversity shape dynamics of social change. To that end, her work examines how families, communities, and nations decide how to remember, reconcile, and rebuild their identities after trauma or conflict. Her scholarship has been published in *Journal for Scientific Study of Religion*, *Societies without borders*, *Sociology of Health and Illness* and the *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*. Her most recent research focuses on the ways genocide memorials in present-day Rwanda shape reconciliation practices and processes as well as the everyday lives of genocide survivors. This research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, Prevention Innovations Research Center, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, among others. She teaches courses on sociological methods and analysis, gender, and violence.

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Invited Scholar: Team Member: Both:

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SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH (200 WORDS OR LESS):

Christina Simko is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Williams College. Anchored in cultural sociology as well as the interdisciplinary field of memory studies, her research examines how traumatic events have been interpreted and memorialized in U.S. society. How have interpretations of collective suffering influenced American national identity as well as larger social and political processes? Her book, *The Politics of Consolation: Memory and the Meaning of September 11* (Oxford UP, 2015) places the events of September 11, 2001, in historical context, tracing how they were mediated through memories of past suffering and examining the ongoing struggle to define the meaning of September 11 in foreign policy discourse, commemorative ceremonies, and the contentious redevelopment of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan. Research from this project has also appeared in the *American Sociological Review* and received the Suzanne Langer Prize from the American Sociological Association's culture section. Currently, she is working on a project that examines U.S. media and political representations of the 1945 atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She teaches courses on theory, culture, media, politics, and memory.