

The Pulse of Public Memory

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In addition to previewing the articles published in this specific issue of the Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric, this article makes an argument over a convergence of audience and public memory text where the text becomes alive with a pulse.

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Since the inception of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, I have described its emphasis as “rhetoric with a pulse.”¹ While many rhetoric journals focus on historical events and rhetoric by figures such as Lincoln, Churchill, and others, JCR has steadfastly kept its focus on more recent events, on issues and texts created or relevant within the previous eighteen months before publication. In the years since JCR’s inception, my research and teaching has evolved to pick up more elements of public memory, and I started thinking about putting together a special issue of this journal on public memory. Connecting my view of JCR and my research led me to ask the question, “Does public memory have a pulse?” Public memory regularly grounds its appeals to a shared sense of the past in material supports, in tangible and concrete objects, which further prompted me to wonder in what ways might public memory be said to be “alive” or “animated”?

In this introductory piece, I discuss the essays that comprise this special issue, as well as their connections and contributions to this notion of public memory’s pulse. But first I wish to clarify what I mean by the “pulse” of public memory. How do we make sense of the remnants of the past? How do they reflect the issues and concerns of the present? How do they shape and constrain future actions and possibilities? To begin to address these questions, it is useful to reflect on what is meant by public memory in its broadest sense. Public memory is the rhetorical construction and circulation of a collectively shared sense of the past through symbolic and material supports, situated and uniformed to serve the needs and interests of the present.

With this basic understanding in place, we might ask how rhetorical scholars go about the work of studying appeals to public memory. While there is no single agreed upon approach, research in the field has to date overwhelmingly focus on “sites” of public memory, on the official and unofficial places it is staged, which has led to considerable work on memorials,² museums,³ heritage

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¹ See Brett Lunceford, “Swan Song,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 6, no. 3/4 (2016): 129.

² See Ekaterina Haskins & Justin P. DeRose, “Memory, Visibility, and Public Space: Reflections on Commemoration(s) of 9/11,” *Space & Culture* 6, no 4 (2003): 377-393; Renee C. Romano, “Narratives of Redemption: The Birmingham Church Bombing Trials and the Construction of Civil Rights Memory,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, eds Renee C. Romano & Leigh Raiford (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006): 96-134.

³ See Glen Eskew, “The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the New Ideology of Tolerance,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, eds Renee C. Romano & Leigh Raiford (Athens: The University of Georgia Press,

sites,⁴ and other places that engage directly with the past.⁵ Often, these sites of memory focus on the collection, preservation, and display of material remnants.⁶ The form of these remnants varies widely, ranging from stone and brick to plaster and plastic, but in many instances their physical form is undeniably “present,” serving as a concrete testament to the past. The presentation of material objects as guarantees of authenticity raises interesting questions about how they function rhetorically. Recent scholarship on rhetoric’s materiality (informed by new materialism) suggests that objects are themselves lively, that their very material form works in both sensory and suatory ways.⁷ In this sense, we might say that public memory does have a pulse. Indeed, we might go even further and say that it is kairotic and pulsating, that it moves and motivates people in a live moment.

But how does it do so? First, it is useful to think of texts, spaces and places, and audiences within Borromean rings. They each possess qualities that make them distinctive, but there is also space where all three intersect. The pulse of public memory lies in that intersection. There is a time, maybe just a fleeting moment, during the interaction of observer and the observed where the unique circumstances of the observer are being met by the unique attributes of the observed. And this interaction is completely unique for this specific observer, with their specific background, encountering this specific memory text.

Monuments have a unique power to represent specific elements of history, and unique elements of their creator. But they also possess the power to provide meaning in a way that 100 observers can walk away with 100 different feelings and observations based on the specific materiality of each monument. These public memory sites are doing rhetorical work; they are not passive blocks of stone that have meaning laid upon them. Rather, they sit dormant with a rhetorical potential to influence observers. Once their audience is present, these public memory sites become alive in the sense that they become ready to interact with the observers however necessary for the observer to gain something from the experience. My encounter with the Babi Yar statue in Kiev, Ukraine was unique to me, but not just because of the unique elements I brought to the encounter. My unique

2006): 28-66; Reiko Hillyer, “Relics of Reconciliation: The Confederate Museum and Civil War Memory in the New South,” *The Public Historian* 33, no 4 (2011): 35-62; Stephen A. King, “Memory, Mythmaking, and Museums: Constructive Authenticity and the Primitive Blues Subject,” *Southern Communication Journal* 71, no 3 (2006): 235-250.

⁴ See Edward S. Casey, *Public Memory in Place in Time*, in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004) 17-44; Owen J. Dwyer, “Interpreting the Civil Rights Movement: Contradiction, Confirmation, and the Cultural Landscape,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, eds Renee C. Romano & Leigh Raiford (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006): 5-27.

⁵ See Derek H. Alderman, “Street Names as Memorial Arenas: The Reputational Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. in Georgia County,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, eds Renee C. Romano & Leigh Raiford (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006): 67-95; Guillermo G. Caliendo, “MLK Boulevard: Material Forms of Memory and the Social Contestation of Racial Signification,” *Journal of Black Studies* 42, no. 7 (2011): 1148-1170; Ekaterina Haskins, “Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37, no 4 (2007): 401-422.

⁶ See Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, & Brian L. Ott, “Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place,” in *Places of Public Memory* ed. Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, & Brian L. Ott, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010): 1-54.

⁷ See Anthony C. Cavaiani, “Rhetoric, Materiality, and the Disruption of Meaning: The Stadium as a Place of Protest,” *Communication & Sport* 8, no. 4-5 (2020): 473-488; Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson, “Redefining Rhetoric: Why Matter Matters,” *Berlin Journal of Critical Theory* 3, no. 1 (2019): 45-81; Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder, “Rhetoric’s New Materialism: From Micro-Rhetoric to Microbrew,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45, no. 5 (2015): 441-461; Kenneth S. Zagacki and Victoria J. Gallagher, “Rhetoric and Materiality in the Museum Park at the North Carolina Museum of Art,” in *Readings in Rhetorical Fieldwork* ed. Samantha Senda-Cook, Aaron Hess, Michael Middleton, & Danielle Endres (New York: Routledge, 2018), 81-98.

experience locked eye to eye with the metal figure of a dying woman, observing a narrative I was unable to read, and surrounded by a Ukrainian winterscape was not just me in the context. I wanted to understand, and that statue wanted me to understand.

To make this theory work, we must think of public memory texts and spaces as golems. The text or space on its own has no life, it is just a physical being that bears the materiality of its maker's choosing with meaning inscribed, but dormant. These objects exist within a specific context, even if that place is virtual. On their own, these texts, spaces, and places are traces of public memory in that they were created or manipulated with purpose. But the pulse comes into play with the audience's interactions. These are not benign encounters like a five-year-old looking at a Monet painting with little to no interest because they do not recognize the cultural importance of what is before them. These encounters must be active encounters of engagement where the audience is not looking just at history, but rather traces of history that have been manicured and manipulated to curate the audience's experience. To get that experience to create meaning, the engagement must require something from that audience. The audience's contemplation about the convergence of past, present, and future is what feeds the golem. The moment the texts, spaces and places, and audiences converge to a point of significance of past, present, and future is where public memory is its most alive, and where its pulse resides.

Public memory supplies its own kindling but cannot light its own fire because it cannot have a life on its own. Thinking of public memory as a golem takes care of this problem and gives all public memory a pulse, moments of being alive enough to engage the observer on this limited ground. Once the observer moves on, the pulse goes quiet again and the golem becomes dormant again to wait on another observer.

So, what does this analogy do for us? Thinking of public memory as continually dormant until an audience engages with it gives us a kairotic moment that is unique when the text is engaged. Within this moment, the past, the interpretation of the past, the living observer, and all the contextual elements of past and present meet with a mixture that cannot be replicated. Within this moment, the text becomes alive, and the observer becomes malleable. The past and present now have influence on the future through the present observer. The future is where the real work of public memory occurs. Did the text do its job to influence observers to engage in a curated version of the past within a present moment for future contemplation and action? Ideally, yes. These would be the public memory interactions where the pulse is at its strongest between observer and golem, but with so many factors that can come into play an interaction can possess a weak pulse as easily as it can a strong one.

The golem analogy works here to highlight the kairotic moment where text and observer are connected in unique ways, and it provides us with a framework to think of public memory doing work. We have a framework of public memory coming to life with a pulse to actively engage the observer on their contextual terms to influence their minds and hearts.

Our Issue

I invited all the authors included in this issue with the idea of public memory having a pulse, and with the call for them to focus on a text, space, place, or occurrence tied to public memory within the last eighteen months. The abstracts I received from them were interestingly diverse, from museum exhibits to moonshine to Nazis. I shared my idea of the pulse of public memory with them

to think about what is happening right now. What I received created a wonderful tapestry of scholarship on public memory during 2020-2022. The following essays are organized to flow from the more concrete, textual sites to the more figural use of language as public memory.

Ott and Whittenburg explore the tensions between text and context within a site of public memory that both plays into and contests the narratives of the city surrounding it. The Mob Museum provides a fascinating text to examine, and the authors describe their experiences moving from section to section, from lawless to lawful, to ask what makes this museum alluring and dangerous, while also promoting a respectful view of law enforcement. They end their essay asking questions about what a museum like this means in 2022, and what this museum provides to make it a top tourist destination.

Medhurst, Winfield, and Harris examine the recent reboot of *The Wonder Years* to examine Black public memory and the ways this new television show is using 1960's Montgomery, Alabama to recognize and explore real, lived experiences through public memory that have not been a part of popular culture before due to the dominant (white) narratives being the focus.

Mandziuk explores the way the far-right took the death of Ashli Babbitt during the U.S. Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021 and made her narrative malleable as public memory to match their political goals. Mandziuk follows the process of transmogrification that the far-right took as they continually shaped and reshaped Babbitt's death as a martyr's story to aggressively reframe the illegality of the insurrection into a hero's journey.

Saunders explores public memory relics not only as sites of public memory, but as objects that have been imbued with a rhetorical power as public memory. He theorizes on how mundane objects can be imbued with this power and how to understand their value as a result.

Atkins-Sayre and Stokes explore a Southern Appalachian crossroads. On one hand, the locals have wildly inaccurate, stereotypical representations that help sell their products to a national market. On the other, they have their authentic stories, selves, and products that have nothing to do with the misrepresentations. They are at a moment of needing to question their public memory, what exactly it is doing for them, and what their public identity is. Atkins-Sayre and Stokes map out this journey from past into present and make arguments over what might take them into the future.

The use of the word "Nazi" is unfortunately common in popular culture as we have linked that word to a wide variety of contexts. French and Webster examine high profile usage of this term and other comparisons to Hitler to argue that they are doing harm to public memory of World War II and the Holocaust. They argue that the more direct references to WWII are used in casual contexts, the less power these terms possess, which in turn is eroding public memory.

We present this issue as an inquiry into the kairoitic, living moments and spaces of public memory. We offer these essays as critical questions and arguments that invite response and further questioning. Our collective hope is not to have resolved any issues of public memory, but to add to the ongoing conversation.