

Public Memory Relics: The Rhetorics of Personal and Public Collections of Mundane Items Imbued with Public Memory

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Collecting relics from notable public events has long been practiced. We name numerous public museums and private collections that store, curate, and engage these relics. This article provides a theory for how mundane items are imbued with public memory, and how to understand that value once imbued.

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The Civil War is an inescapable part of American history that has generated millions of objects both mundane (buttons, cutlery, etc.) and tumultuous (bullet fragments, used weapons, etc.). Upon entering any museum that contains relics of this war, the observer is presented with an experience of completely unique items, as well as mundane objects that need a context to have any significance. Collections of relics, both public and private, tend to contain items whose connection is obvious, and items who need context to understand their place within a collection. Objects like these fill museums and private collections.

In the last few years, over 140 statues, mostly of confederate soldiers and leaders, were taken down and remnants of these statues are being collected. These aren't battlefield bullets that were shot during the war. These aren't weapons that were wielded by generals. These aren't dishes from the first White House of the Confederacy. All of those are desirable items for any private or public collection. These specific artifacts are stone, metal, and concrete chunks that held up a statue, but still people want them. In addition to items expected to reside in private and public collections, parts of public memory sites that are being removed are now a part of these collections.

I must make a distinction, and an argument, here. There is an incalculable number of relics that hold historical significance. Some of these items have a blatant purpose and context. But so many others, if their context were to be removed, would not appear to be remarkable in the slightest. I argue that while extraordinary public memory relics are more readily recognized for their mnemonic functions because what they are is what they do, ordinary and mundane public memory items are forced to rely on contextual clues because their use as public memory is not naturally tied to the item's function as public memory.¹

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¹ Some of my discussion here could help explain why personal items of family members passed down through generations have family significance. However, my primary focus is on items with a public context for their meaning.

I was led to this inquiry because of a conversation about the lectern Lincoln spoke from. I knew it was a public memory relic, but when Pope Francis used it, I wasn't sure what had happened. I didn't know how that changed the public memory of the item. I looked for some terminology to understand what would imbue a normal, mundane item with public memory, and not finding terms that fit my needs, I created this theory to help understand how value is imbued on these items to make them more than what they are at first glance.

In 1990, my father was deployed with the Air National Guard to Berlin Germany. He and his group were there shortly after the Berlin Wall fell. He, and many others, were able to break or chisel off small chunks of the Berlin Wall to keep as a memento of this historic wall shortly after it fell both physically and politically. He still has this item. To many, this piece of concrete looks unremarkable as it looks just like millions of other pieces of concrete that have been broken down. And to look at one chunk of concrete from the Berlin wall next to a different chunk of the wall, there is nothing beyond their context that provides these chunks with any significance. My father built a small wooden base with a small metal plaque explaining the context because without him to tell the story, this object would most likely be thrown away.

In December of 2017, the Nathan Bedford Forrest Statue that was erected in Memphis, TN in the early 1900's was removed from its pedestal after protests asking for such over the prior twenty years. Forrest's statue here was unique in that it was is a confederate statue but was also a grave marker for the bodies of Forrest and his wife buried below it. In July 2018, the pedestal that the Forrest statue once sat upon began to be demolished. Regardless of the future of the Forrest statue, the removal of the statue and pedestal has been a substantial event for the public memory of Forrest and Memphis. On August 3, 2018, the local Memphis Daily News featured a front-page article of a young man who tried to abscond with a chunk of the demolished pedestal. The article told the story of how he grabbed a chunk of the pedestal, but then was forced to return it by the park security.² The young man identified in the picture was doing no more than what my dad had done in Germany. But why such a different reaction? In addition to one chunk representing freedom and the other racism, the answer could be in the quantity of chunks available. The answer could be in the vast area the Berlin Wall occupied and the vast number of people seeking parts of it, as opposed to the one individual in Memphis. Or the answer could be with the public breaking down the wall versus the Memphis government removing the Forrest statue and pedestal, providing a vernacular versus an official removal. These relics of long-standing monuments possess some form of value that individuals desire because of the unique historical context that comes with the story of how they came to have that relic.

On November 12, 2018, a Jewish prayer book that might be worth \$50 normally was sold at auction for \$21,000 for the pure reason that it was once owned by Marilyn Monroe.³ Monroe did not add any prayers to the book. She did not use it to journal her conversion to Judaism. There are some annotations in the book that she might have written but cannot be confirmed.⁴ The only thing Monroe did to this book, that can be proven, is that she owned it. The book is not any different from thousands of other copies (except than Marilyn Monroe owned it, giving it provenance). We have here another relic, but not in the same way that my dad owns a piece of the Berlin wall. Monroe's book is one of one, and my dad's chunk of the Berlin wall is one of many. However,

² Bill Dries, "Bluff Park Disarmed: Cannons' Exit Signals Six Years of Change in Controversy," *The Daily News*, August 3, 2018.

³ Shiryn Ghermezian, "Marilyn Monroe's Jewish Prayer Book Sells at Auction for \$21,000 to 'Obsessed Fan,'" *The Algemeiner*, November 14, 2018.

⁴ Ghermezian, "Marilyn Monroe's Jewish Prayer Book."

both relics possess some kind of drawing power about them. To the untrained eye, this is a piece of concrete and a mass printed book, and when placed side-by-side another piece of concrete and another copy of this book, any individual would be hard pressed to tell the difference, or to ascribe any significant value. But for those who know, these are impressive objects and represent something of significance.

How does an individual take something of no particular significance, and then imbue it with some form of additional value? I argue that we do this all the time, but to imbue an object with public memory is to attach it to a context where that context gives the object rhetorical value and purpose. And what kind of value becomes imbued? Rhetorical? Monetary? Sentimental? Public memory? For the remainder of this article I will sketch out a theory to explain how objects, or relics, become imbued with an additional power beyond their inherent power. First, I will discuss the context for items of public memory. Second, I will discuss the potential power of public memory relics. Finally, I will make an argument about assessing value/s of relics.

Relics as Items of Public Memory

While much of the scholarship on public memory is focused on places⁵ and spaces,⁶ and most of the research on items specifically is tied to individual memory,⁷ I argue that there are relics from public memory that carry a rhetorical presence from their connection to a specific public memory and place but do their work as public memory outside of their original context. For example, owning a chunk of the Berlin Wall is individual ownership of a part of a contested public space and memory and is a connection to what happened in Berlin in 1989. But this chunk is not being displayed in Germany, it is in Memphis, Tennessee. The original context must be presented for this item to be understood to have public memory connection as a relic. The chunk of concrete on its own does not possess any way of telling its significance to any observer unless its context is presented in conjunction with the relic.

For clarification, I am not talking about monuments or memorials. There exists vast scholarship over the form and function of those artifacts.⁸ Also, in contexts where objects are officially destroyed or taken out of circulation through burial or some other form of intentional symbolism, those objects become a memory in their absence; and, therefore, rely on an individual's memory in the absence of a mnemonic device.⁹ But I am not talking about that either. I am focusing on relics that have no inherent value as public memory outside of their context. They may have functional value, but the connection to a specific context and the narratives we construct of those contexts is my focus.¹⁰

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; 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..

⁶ 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.

⁷ See Teresa Barnett, *Sacred Relics: Pieces of the Past in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 2; 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.

⁸ Refer to footnotes 5 and 6, whose references all focus on monuments and memorials.

⁹ Michael Rowlands, "The Role of Memory in the Transmission of Culture," *World Archeology* 25, no. 2 (1993): 146.

¹⁰ Value as it is tied to context is something that changes and evolves over time, so I use the term value here as a variable, not a constant.

Teresa Barnett, in her book *Sacred Relics*, talks about relics as “association items” and defines them as “objects, fragments of objects, and bits of nature valued solely because they had been associated, however tangentially, with a prominent person or event.”¹¹ For this definition to work, three truths about the relic must exist. First, the relic must not possess any extraordinary value outside of its relationship to a person or event beyond the value it would have as a functioning item. For example, Marilyn’s prayer book has no value as a prayer book beyond its price as a common book from seventy years ago. Second, it implies that the relic must be tied to its context to be seen as a relic. For example, the lectern that Abraham Lincoln used for the “Gettysburg Address” is no ordinary lectern. Of course, it was built and purposed to be an ordinary lectern, but once Lincoln orated from it, the lectern was forever changed because it now had a story to give it greater importance than an ordinary lectern. Finally, for those two truths to work, it must also be true that the relic, seen completely out of context, would be seen purely as an ordinary item. The final truth functions differently than the first in that the first functions specifically within one context, and the final truth is that the relic would supply the same function completely outside of that context.

Barnett also added that relics are established as cultural forms.¹² For this to be true, the rhetorical elements of public memory come into play. To be a relic, objects, fragments, and bits of nature must be enacted upon with rhetorical force. In other words, the relic, which begins as ordinary, must be imbued in a significant way to forge a connection between that specific relic and that specific individual or event. A human force provides action of some significance that includes the relic. For example, Abraham delivered “The Gettysburg Address” and used a podium to speak from. The podium was in no way extraordinary before Lincoln’s speech but became extraordinary afterwards. Lincoln involved that podium in a significant action, but he in no way changed the make-up of the podium. The owner or curator of the relic must then present the relic’s context which allows an observer to see the relic as something extraordinary because on its own, it would only come across as mundane and ordinary. To be imbued is to possess extraordinary rhetorical power to influence the observer, but the context has to be present as the lens through which to view that extraordinary power. Once a relic has been imbued with a rhetorical power, it only loses that power via destruction, by a public forgetting the connection between relic and context, or by a public no longer valuing the context. The Nathan Bedford Forrest statue in Memphis is a good example here. The pro-confederate white supremacists who erected the statue were the ones with power, money, and influence in 1910. But their values are no longer the values of the Memphis citizenry, hence the removal of the statue and graves.

Allow me to make two other points about relics. Most relics seem to exist in one of two places. The first would be in an official capacity tied to the original person or event that imbued the relic. The most common place for this would be in a museum or some form of exhibit. For example, if you go to Shiloh, TN, there are numerous museums both on and off the civil war battlefield that display relics tied to the battle at Shiloh, those who fought in the battle, or to the civil war in general. If you go to Elvis’ home Graceland, you will see a vast collection of items the King used, played, or built with his personal style. These would be the most obvious and expected places to find relics. The second such place would be in private collections. The relics in these collections may have the same public memory connection as those items in an official display, meaning that they possess the same imbued power. I am not saying that they possess the same story, or would fetch the same price at auction, but rather am arguing that a privately owned guitar with proof of

¹¹ Barnett, *Sacred Relics*, 2.

¹² Barnett, *Sacred Relics*, 2.

Elvis playing it would have the same imbued rhetorical power as public memory as an identical guitar on display at Graceland. The context is different for each, and the stories about them will be different, but their value as public memory would be the same.

My father's piece of the Berlin Wall would be an example of a private collection of a relic. The relic here still has the same rhetorical power, but the audience is much smaller than items on public display in a museum. For these private collections, there is an added individual, personal connection or narrative, in addition to the public memory of the item, that works when the owner tells the story. The person controlling the contextual narrative invites the audience to see the relic as extraordinary. In a museum, every observer is going to be presented with the exact same context to keep the story consistent. My father, however, may include details of his trip to Berlin making his version of the context last an hour and a half. And the next person might only receive the thirty-minute version. In a loose sense, this illustrates the distinction Bodnar describes between official (coming from the top down) and the vernacular (coming from the bottom up) ways of presenting public memory.¹³ Graceland is a corporation and an image, a brand to protect. My dad will tell his stories the way he wants them to be told in that particular moment.

The Potential Power of Relics

The main question here is, what do relics do? If relics have been imbued with a rhetorical power, what does that power do? Once again, I reference Barnett to get to the functionality of relics. When discussing what remains on a battlefield after the battle, Barnett stated, "relics encoded the bodies of the dead and the wounded and how, in doing so, they provided the symbolic means of reworking the war's violence."¹⁴ She finished that specific chapter by stating, "relics were instigators of processes, objects that could be wielded in ways that transformed the conditions of reality, whether that reality was the user's emotional state, their relationship with the body of the nation, the nation's collective relationship with God, or even the outcome of the war itself."¹⁵ While Barnett was talking specifically about relics left on the battlefields of the civil war, I argue that her positioning of relics can be applied much more generally.

Relics do work by remaining after the person is gone and the event is over. Relics do work that cannot be completed by ordinary objects. I argue that relics do two things. First, they represent a person, action, or event that possesses some extraordinary resonance with a future audience. Relics do not connect audiences with the mundane, only that which must lie beyond the ordinary. Second, a relic must, in coherence with its imbued power, attempt to conjure a reaction. The reaction will be unique to the observer and may be no more than an interesting glance, or it may be a gaze of amazement to be so close to an object that was involved with someone who was extraordinary. Alone, these relics probably would not garner a second glance, but adjoined with its context, it goes beyond any reaction to the mundane. Items located in the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama all confront the observer with horrific items from America's past, but the museum is curated to guide those reactions to important conversations about our present and future. These items do not just reside in a singular moment but set up the observer with the opportunity to question their own lived experience. I consider this second attribute to be the rhetorical potency of the item. The Legacy Museum, as well as other museums that display collections of relics instead of

¹³ John Bodnar, "The Memory Debate: An Introduction," in *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13-20.

¹⁴ Barnett, *Sacred Relics*, 105.

¹⁵ Barnett, *Sacred Relics*, 105.

isolated relics in a personal collection, presents their relics in concert for their desired reaction by amplifying and connecting the powers of one with the powers of many. The Legacy Museum will always have a greater reaction due to its collection versus any similar item in isolation in a private collection. The imbued value of the personally owned relic is not lessened here, but it cannot work in concert with other like relics.

I must make a further distinction as to types of relics here. Because the context is an inescapably necessary element for the relic to function, the text and context must be presented together. There are two types of connections between a text and its context. The first type is an overt connection, where the connection to context is interwoven within the construction of the text. For example, an “I Like Ike in 52” pin for the 1952 US presidential campaign has an overt connection. The pin literally tells you when, what, and who it is referencing. The second type would be a covert connection, where the connection is not obvious through the construction of the relic. For example, the lectern from which Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address does not possess any markings that would connect the lectern to Lincoln. There is no “Abe was here” carved on the face of the lectern. The overt relics may be able to stand alone or may have an accompanying narrative to provide the viewer with additional details. The covert relic, however, requires an accompanying narrative to be able to perform its rhetorical function to conjure contemplation. Both of these rely on the curation of the items to help them do their work. The rhetorical power of a relic must come from its ability to connect the past and the present in a meaningful way. A relic’s form must be a physical manifestation of this connection between past and present.

Assessing Value

The criteria necessary to judge a relic’s value is rather subjective and would seem to be predicated on the desires or needs of the curator or collector. What might make it into the hallowed halls of Graceland in Memphis might not even be considered by the British Museum in London, and vice versa. So, if value is subjective, how should one assess value? I argue that there are two types of value that a relic can possess that do much to influence its rhetorical function, and, to some extent, its ownership. I argue that a relic can possess either extrinsic or intrinsic value as public memory, and in some instances a relic can possess both.

By extrinsic value, I mean that a relic has value external of its ability to function. For practical purposes, the extrinsic value of an object is its worth that can be assessed in quantitative or monetary terms. Marilyn Monroe’s prayer book is a good example of this. When it was recently purchased, it was not bought for its ability to assist an individual with their prayers. Rather, it has monetary value as a collectable, and mnemonic power with its context. If the book were appraised in any other way than once being owned by Monroe, the value would plummet. The relic relies on its context to have any value in either realm.

By intrinsic value, I mean the relic has value in its ability to still perform its function. The object may still have a monetary value, but to be placed in this category, I argue that the intrinsic value is where the relic would be appraised for its qualitative worth. For example, the Lincoln podium was used by Pope Francis in 2015 when he gave a speech at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He did not use it as Lincoln’s lectern from which one of the greatest orations of modern history was delivered; he used it as a lectern. He added to its value as public memory because of his speech delivered from it, not because it did its job as a lectern well. The twice imbued podium still has the potential to serve as a podium for another speech, so it still has intrinsic value, but the extrinsic value here may keep it from being used in any mundane way.

In 2018, the Rolling Stones created a traveling exhibit to show off everything from stage-worn costumes to old set lists to recording equipment and instruments. About halfway through, the observer comes to many guitars owned and used by Keith Richards and Ronnie Wood. One black Fender Stratocaster is infamous because in a show during 1981, a fan ran on stage. Keith was playing this guitar, took it off to hit the fan running at him, and then back on to finish the song. Keith's guitar has both extrinsic and intrinsic value because he infamously used it to defend himself and Mick Jagger during a live concert, but he also still plays this guitar on tour. His guitar is unique because he has played it on many occasions, but it is also tied to a singular moment that an observer can both see and hear in the video of this concert.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented a framework for evaluating relics for their power as a relic and for categorically assessing their value. Ultimately, public memory contains the extraordinary and the mundane. The extraordinary takes care of itself and what it is must be directly connected to what it does. But for the mundane, ordinary items, a context must be provided because these relics alone have little to no monetary or mnemonic value. Their significance is only apparent by providing that context of how the relic was imbued with rhetorical power as public memory. Without this imbuelement, my dad has a worthless chunk of concrete, the buyer has a very expensive prayer book, and museums are full of worthless artifacts. The relics need the context for significance, and observers need the context for the story to make sense. Our world is full of museums with vast collections of mundane items that require their individual contexts to have any value, or to do any memory work. Hopefully I have provided a way of understanding how these items do what they do, as well as how these items become what they become.