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# Monuments, Movements, & Memory: The Visual and Spatial Implications of the Shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church

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*Dallas Museum of Art*

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On June 17, 2015, a tragedy struck the city of Charleston that would resonate with the whole nation. Dylann Storm Roof entered a bible study group at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and sat with the group for approximately an hour before opening fire and killing nine innocent black Americans. Recently, Roof was formally sentenced to death on federal charges, and he awaits trial for state murder charges. However, this case has implications that extend far beyond Roof's trial. I argue that this shooting marked a turning point in the Black Lives Matter movement in which activists began to call into question the way that the Confederacy is memorialized throughout urban landscapes in the South. I cite images from Roof's social media profiles that proved a direct correlation between Roof's racist motivations and the symbolism found throughout Southern visual culture.

Theorist Dr. Elizabethada Wright argues in her work, "Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places: The Cemetery as a Rhetorical Memory Space/Place" that physical places are able to become rhetorical, symbolic spaces when memory is inscribed on the location.<sup>1</sup> When a specific event occurs in a certain location, or when a monument is constructed to honor an event or group of people, the memory of this event or population becomes an inherent part of the space and its associations. I contend that the construction of monuments and the further development of all visuospatial elements inscribe memory upon a physical place. Such inscriptions subsequently influence the discourse that is attributed significance in these spaces; thus, monuments are able to ascribe a certain behavior and promote a certain attitude within their spaces.

In order to successfully inscribe memory on a physical place, one must have the desire and the power to do so. Wright notes that certain physical places have been

transformed into symbolic spaces with the intention to exclude particular groups of people. In the case of Confederate monuments, those who had the power to influence the urban landscape in post-Civil War South were white Southerners. As such, these monuments were constructed with the intention to systematically exclude black Americans from certain city spaces and conversations about Southern history. Hence, the urban landscapes that were constructed after the Civil War were spaces that implicitly silenced black voices within their discourses.

In Charleston, South Carolina, Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, colloquially known as “Mother Emanuel,” stands in sharp contrast to the typical Southern urban landscape. Mother Emanuel has a storied history, leading to the church becoming a symbol of, and testament to, the strength of black religion in Charleston, South Carolina. Founded in 1791, Mother Emanuel served as a place in which black Americans could freely practice and express their religious beliefs. Members of this church called from an early time for freedom for slaves. These members included abolitionist Denmark Vesey, an early member of the church known for planning what would have been the largest slave revolt in the United States. Though the insurrection never came to be, as the plans were revealed to slave-owners, 117 black Americans were charged for their intention to participate and 34 were eventually hanged, including Vesey himself.<sup>2</sup> After the Vesey insurrection and the resulting hangings, the church began to face a period of challenges from white Southerners. The Citadel, the Military College of South Carolina, was founded in part to protect white Charlestonians against future insurrections like Vesey had planned. The physical church was itself burned and the church community outlawed, forcing worshippers to meet in secret until after the end of the Civil War.

Today, the church stands less than four blocks away from the original location of the Citadel in Marion Square, a popular city park. Additionally, Marion Square is home to a monument to John C. Calhoun, a prominent pro-slavery South Carolinian. Mother Emanuel itself is located on Calhoun Street, named for this same man who once referred to slavery as a “positive good.” The resistance to oppression by the Mother Emanuel community has inscribed these qualities on the physical site today, creating what Pierre Nora has termed a *lieu de mémoire* within the physical place of the church.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the statue of John C. Calhoun in conjunction with the street named for this same man create a *lieu de mémoire* that honors a proponent of the continued oppression of blacks. The emblematic meaning associated with Mother Emanuel makes the shooting a massacre with two implications: it was a crime against the black community itself, but also an attack that targeted the history of blacks in South Carolina. It struck the roots of the black community in Charleston and thus rattled the nation. Further, as the attack was a crime against a monument to black history, monuments became engaged in the response to this crime. Such implications only became more pertinent with the images of Roof with Confederate symbols.<sup>4</sup> Once these images surfaced, the motivation for this crime became indisputable: his racist sentiments had been fostered by the very flag that flew at the South Carolina statehouse.

One image in particular posted by Roof had a momentous effect on the visual landscape and visual culture of South Carolina. Roof posed in a photo with the Confederate flag, providing a direct visual link between the shooting and the Confederate flag. This image forced the public to concede that the Confederate flag symbolized, at least to some individuals, a division between the races that could justify unspeakable

actions such as the shooting at Mother Emanuel. For this reason, Governor Nikki Haley called for the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina Statehouse on July 10, 2015, with other government officials around the country following suit.

The flying of the Confederate flag throughout the South has been debated since the 1960s, but it took a massacre of these proportions – and visual evidence of the killer with the flag – to prove to legislators that the flag needed to be removed from government grounds. It was the explicit statement by Roof that he wanted to start a “race war” along with his photographs with the Confederate flag that proved the connection between racial tension and this flag; the images that Roof posted on the Internet served as a tangible representation of his sentiments.<sup>5</sup> In this manner, images shared via modern-day social media platforms forced an historic symbol to be removed from the grounds of a government building. Therefore, social media was able to directly impact the way that history is commemorated in urban landscapes of Southern cities. The Confederate flag, however, was simply one manifestation of a larger problem at hand: the predominance of Confederate visual symbolism throughout the South.

After the images of Roof in front of Confederate monuments, like the Museum and Library of Confederate History, were distributed across social media platforms, Black Lives Matter activists began tagging these monuments with the rally call for which the movement was named: “Black Lives Matter”. Such defacement occurred in Charleston, on a monument to Confederate soldiers in White Point Garden, a popular city park, and on similar monuments in Baltimore, Maryland; Austin, Texas; Asheville, North Carolina; and Richmond, Virginia, the former capital of the Confederacy.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, the Calhoun monument in Marion Square was tagged so that the monument read,

“CALHOUN, RACIST” and “TRUTH JUSTICE AND THE CONSTITUTION AND SLAVERY”.

This defacement positioned these monuments at the forefront of the nation’s conversation regarding race and historical memory; the public became increasingly aware of the biased commemoration that prevailed in public spaces throughout the South. In this way, the acts of defacement brought the monuments into public discourse. Suddenly, the nation was obligated to discuss the way history is commemorated and inscribed in public spaces.

Confederate monuments overwhelm the urban landscapes of Southern cities; defacement using the phrase “Black Lives Matter” forced citizens to confront and address this reality. These monuments have inscribed meanings on their locations for decades, determining the dominant discourse of that area. The tagging of these monuments with the phrase “Black Lives Matter” revised this message immediately upon inscription. The defacement of these monuments was successful in its efforts to engage the country in a discussion about historical commemoration and the one-sided nature of Confederate memorialization. I have established that this engagement of monuments was due in part to the fact that the shooting was also an attack on a monument to black religious history in the southern United States. However, the response to this shooting via defacement of monuments was also, in part, due to the inability of blacks to engage in rhetoric in other spaces in the South.

Elizabethada Wright argues that some physical places were designed so as to exclude or subjugate certain groups of people. This is most certainly the case with most Southern urban spaces; as these cities were built on the backs of enslaved blacks, they

were constructed so as to exclude the voices of black Americans. The stories of black Americans were not recounted in the visuo-spatial landscape of Southern cities; there was no space created to sustain conversation of black experience and history. The constructed monuments of these cities thus continue to exclude the opinions and beliefs of blacks in the South. As a result, in order to express their responses regarding the shooting, blacks had to re-engage monuments that *are* acknowledged and accorded prominence in the cityscape as well as in the memory of city residents. Such monuments are given legitimacy due to their scale or their location within city spaces. Black Lives Matter activists made their voices a part of this discourse by utilizing the monuments that already played a role in the dominant discourse of these cities, monuments that were accorded significance in conversation. Although activists chose to deface these monuments in order to make their opinions heard, this defacement was constructive, as it enabled the Black Lives Matter movement to gain a voice and express their reactions to the shooting. Such defacement also allowed activists to have a tangible impact on the biased narratives told by the monuments that comprise Southern city landscapes; this tangible impact created a palimpsest of inscribed meanings on the physical locations of these monuments.<sup>8</sup>

This form of “vandalism” layered – literally and figuratively – the slogan of the modern-day civil rights movement on top of the veneration of the Confederacy of several decades past. Though impermanent and easily washed off, these tagged phrases became a permanent part of the monument in the form of memory. Images of the tagged monuments were quickly shared via social media, in a similar manner to the ones that Roof posted of himself in front of Confederate monuments. Anyone who saw this

vandalism in person or via photographs – whether in print or online – now lives with this memory; it is concretized in the form of photographs and collective memory. Now, when people interact with these monuments, they are forced to reconcile the biased commemoration of the Civil War in Southern cityscapes with contemporary race relations in the United States.

Through their defacement, these monuments' meanings have evolved – the racist sentiments that they imply, or even encourage, have been brought to the forefront and the vandalism makes such implications impossible to ignore. People are now more aware of the histories that fill their surroundings and the bias present in the construction of the urban landscape. Although none of the monuments have been taken down because of this vandalism, their meaning, and thus their power to influence the mindset of citizens, has evolved. Moreover, the defacement of these statues represents the struggle between visibility and visual culture: visibility, as defined by Nicholas Mirzoeff, is the dominant narrative as defined by those in power; which is being challenged by visual culture, a different, more inclusive, view of reality and history.<sup>9</sup> Thus, as the experience of blacks in Southern cities is much different than the whites who designed Southern cityscapes, blacks and Black Lives Matter activists must seek to challenge the constructed dominant viewpoint.

Statues and monuments to the Confederacy are not the only visuospatial objects that have changed in meaning after this shooting. The physical structure of the church, which had, since the time of its construction, been representative of the strength and resilience of the black community and of black religion in Charleston, has a stronger meaning as well. The church community, a symbolic entity inscribed on the physical

church, has now withstood the fire and discrimination of the Civil War-era United States, as well as a shooting which reflected the same racist sentiments, sentiments in fact inspired by those leaders who targeted the church throughout the nineteenth century. These facts have consequently furthered the symbolic status of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church as representative of black resilience. The church has also become a symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement, embodying the endurance of the movement and the black community in the face of unspeakable acts of hatred. The church's role as a *lieu de mémoire* has strengthened and it has gained a role as a type of memorial site; flowers and notes are frequently left in front of the church and a part of Calhoun Street, on which the church is situated, has been designated as the "Mother Emanuel Memorial Way District." Thus, as a result of the shooting, the signification of the city of Charleston has evolved. An act that took place at this location permanently inscribed itself on the memory of Charlestonians, as well as on the physical landscape of the city. In the aftermath of the shooting, the historical significance of the church has changed. It has become a symbol of the civil rights movement of the twenty-first century and affected the surrounding urban landscape, thus demonstrating the way that activist movements can inform the cityscapes in which they take place.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabethada A. Wright, “Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places: The Cemetery as a Rhetorical Memory Place/Space,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (October 1, 2005): 51–81.

<sup>2</sup> Shah, Khushbu and Elliott C. McLaughlin, “Dylann Roof Formally Sentenced to Death,” *CNN.com*, January 11, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7–24.

<sup>4</sup> Neely Tucker and Peter Holley, “Dylann Roof’s eerie tour of American slavery at its beginning, middle and end,” *Washington Post*, July 1, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Leonard, “Charleston Church Shootings: What Is the Confederate Flag and What Does It Stand For?; The Flying of the Flag Has Sparked Controversy after the Killing of Nine People at a Church in Charleston, South Carolina, on Wednesday,” *Irishmirror.ie*, June 21, 2015, sec. NEWS, WORLD NEWS.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Holley, “‘Black Lives Matter’ Graffiti Appears on Confederate Memorials across the U.S.” *The Washington Post*, June 23, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Graham Moomaw and Brandon Shulleeta, “Jefferson Davis Statue on Monument Avenue Vandalized,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, June 25, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> David Harvey, “Contested Cities, Social Process and Spatial Form,” in Jewson and McGregor, eds. *Transforming Cities*, 1997 in *The City Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Richard T. Legates and Frederic Stout (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 227-231.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, introduction to *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; or, *Global Visual Cultures: Paradox and Comparison*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, (London and New York: Routledge), 2009.