Contested control of commemorative spaces between black and white southerners, from Reconstruction to the rise of Jim Crow (1865-1915)

Rhetorical Situation Memo

Audience

The Gettysburg College Journal of the Civil War Era would be a good prospect for possible submission of my article. *Gettysburg* is an undergraduate humanities journal with a focus on the Civil War era and its historical memory. The editorial board of the journal is comprised primarily of undergraduate and graduate students, with a faculty advisor who is a professor of War and Memory Studies at Gettysburg. I imagine most of the students are history majors; however, only Isherwood seems to have a specialization in the topic. The journal accepts submissions from a broad range of topics related to the Civil War and its memory. My article would be included in the Academic Essay category as original research. In this category, submission lengths should be 6,000 words or less. The journal has published other research on the construction and reconstruction of Civil War memory. My paper would be an apt fit for this journal, as I will be writing about the racial history of Civil War commemoration.

Context

I will need to address southern racial dynamics during Reconstruction and Jim Crow, and the transition between them which changed the terms on which of blacks could claim public commemorative space. I will be able to weave this historical context into discussion of black commemorative adaptations to white resistance without losing focus. I will also need to establish the theoretical relationship between commemoration and the construction of official culture, and its implications for the perpetuation of white supremacy in the South. I will need to maintain my focus on black commemorative resistance to white narratives by limiting theoretical discussion to the role of establishing exigence for my research.

Situating the Argument

I will be situating my argument in relation to John J. Winberry's seminal work on Confederate monuments in the southern landscape. Winberry's analysis of the function of monuments and the sociopolitical forces motivating white memorialization will serve as a strong theoretical basis for my interpretation of white forms of commemoration. However, I will also challenge Winberry's privileging of monuments as a commemorative form and build off of his work by comparing white monuments with black commemorative forms and motives that have been neglected in the scholarship.

Outline

Thesis: During Reconstruction and throughout the rise of Jim Crow, black southerners resisted white attempts to exclude them from the cultural narrative of the South and its Civil War by claiming public commemorative space for the simultaneous celebration and construction of black

freedom.

I. Commemoration is a part of collective memory with important implications for the social structure of southern communities around white supremacy. The versions of history which are commemorated become part of the public memory and influence ideology. In the South, this has meant the continued codification of white supremacy since the Civil War.

A. The collective memory of a society is a collection of the individual memory of its members. However, collective memory remains distinct and in turn shapes the recollections and cultural interpretations of the individual.

1. The sociologist Halbwachs constructed a framework for collective memory in which individual memory relies on collective memory as a reference point and borrows from it when constructing ideas about the past. In this way, expressions of collective memory such as commemoration continually shape the ideologies of individuals.
2. Brundage moves away from Halbwachs towards a theory of "collected memory" in which individual experience is the root of shared memories and collective experience.
3. I will pull from both of these theoretical frameworks to discuss the motives for commemoration as individual and the ramifications of commemoration as collective.

B. Commemorations are careful curations of symbol and ceremony which contribute to "official" culture. Official culture maintains social organization around shared values and limits social change. Thus, they are self-perpetuating structures which endure across time.

1. Winberry describes the organizational function of monuments in shaping collective and individual memory of the past around shared values. "The meaning of the monument is defined by the act of interpretation." This would suggest that the meaning of commemoration is malleable.
2. The monument is "a medium of continuity and interaction between generations, not only in space but across time, for to be monumental is to be permanent." Gulley. This suggests that a commemorative act is not circumscribed by its moment and is not malleable, but rather is passed down from one generation to the next unchanged.
3. I will argue that the meaning of a monument, which stands unchanged for centuries, often with a written explanation of its ideology, cannot be

significantly reinterpreted by subsequent viewers. However, other forms of commemoration, such as ceremony and celebration, are easily adaptable generation to generation, or even year to year, though still able

to hold the core of their original character.

C. Commemorative space is a valuable form of social capital. Whites, especially in the South, have attempted to monopolize this capital and have persecuted blacks for claiming an equal share of public space. Any measure of success they've had has shaped collective memory and social organization into the image of white supremacy which persists today.

1. "[Monuments] encourage maintenance of social order and existing institutions, discourage disorder and radical change, and stress the duties of citizens rather than their rights." Gulley. Commemoration of white supremacist narratives of slavery and the Civil War contributes to the perpetuation of white supremacy by discouraging progressive change and downplaying the rights of blacks as equal citizens in favor of the "proper place" of blacks as second-class citizens.
2. This problem persists into the modern day, as when a white citizen calls the police on black citizens having a barbecue. I will need to include examples of contemporary instances in which blacks have had to struggle to claim commemorative space.

II. Black and white southerners constructed competing narratives of the Civil War and attempted to control the definition of southern identity around the War's perceived results. While whites celebrated the Lost Cause, blacks celebrated Emancipation and the defeat of the Confederacy.

A. White southerners -- with women as the spearhead -- sought to redeem the South from the shame of defeat and northern accusations of treason by elevating Confederate soldiers on the basis of their perceived southern virtues of honor, sacrifice, and chivalry.

1. Winberry and Gulley both discuss the Lost Cause ideology and its implications. I will be using the Lost Cause to understand white perceptions of their place and of the place of blacks in history.
2. According to the Lost Cause ideology, southern whites believed in the just cause of the Confederacy as a defender of states' rights and argued that the South only lost due to overwhelming numbers of northern troops. This narrative justified slavery as a benevolent paternalistic institution for intellectually deficient and habitually criminal Africans.
3. I will use monument inscriptions from the era to examine the language white southerners used to talk about the outcome of the War. Monuments to the Confederate dead proliferated, often with inscriptions which glorified the Confederate cause and the sacrifices of those who fought and

died for it. This construction of the Confederate past erases slavery as a principal cause for the war and ignores Emancipation as its outcome. 4. Other

monuments to "loyal slaves" reveal white perceptions of slavery as a benevolent institution and slaves as faithful and contented to serve their masters indefinitely.

B. White southerners also erected monuments as part of the fight to preserve a unified white southern society against the disruptions of the Civil War and the resulting social and economic upheavals.
    1. Winberry addresses the disruptions and devastation caused by the Civil War and the process of rebuilding as an impetus for the commemorative impulse among whites. Southern whites sought to repair the damage wrought by the War by returning to the antebellum order.
    2. Winberry also discusses the perceived need for racial unity between poor and wealthy white farmers during the difficult economic times.
    3. Monuments remembering the Civil War as a noble struggle to maintain white supremacy helped form a united front against social change by placing whites in opposition to a hoard of blacks threatening integration.

C. After Emancipation, black southerners gathered to assert their new status as freed Americans, to look back at their history in the nation, and to plan for the future of their people.
    1. Especially immediately post-war, blacks gathered in great numbers to celebrate their Emancipation. This enormous public presence declared the freedom and political empowerment of blacks to themselves and their white neighbors.
    2. Blacks also gathered to celebrate their history in the nation. They denounced the evils of slavery and celebrated the defeat of the Confederacy. They touted the integral role of blacks in building the wealth of the nation during slavery, discussed the degraded economic condition of blacks in the present, and made plans for improving those conditions.
    3. Black newspapers such as *The Colored American* and the manuscripts of black leaders such as Frederick Douglass will evidence the scale and pattern of black commemorative celebrations. The orations given at these events are especially crucial to understanding black conceptions of southern history. They broke down black southern history through all of the themes discussed above, and they also looked to the future, advocating for expanded rights for black Americans.
    4. Black commemorations maintained the valor of the black soldier in their historical narrative, and recognized slavery as the thing against which those soldiers were fighting. While blacks kept this memory alive in their commemorations, however, whites continued to erase it from theirs. The

dominance of white cultural narratives has led to what Holyfield and

Beacham discuss as the persistent erasure of the role of black soldiers in the War and the struggle to recognize slavery as a principal cause for the War.

III. Black and white southerners commemorated their competing histories by different methods. Whites erected monuments, while blacks held public celebrations. A. Whites primarily expressed an "official" culture of Lost Cause rhetoric by erecting expensive, durable, and highly visible monuments to the Confederate cause and its soldiers

1. Winberry offers a breakdown of the types of monuments and their prominent locations which I will use to interpret the cultural logic of Confederate memorialization. Immediately after the War's end, commemoration focused on honoring the dead and most monuments were erected in cemeteries. After Reconstruction and into the Jim Crow era, monuments appeared more often in public places, such as courthouses.
2. I will want to say something here about the particular role of white women in fundraising and organizing to erect monuments, especially to the Confederate dead. (Gulley)
3. There was a late-century shift from commemoration of the war dead to commemoration of a cultural narrative which whites felt increasing need to defend against black encroachments in the social and political arena. The racial imperative of Confederate monuments became more pronounced, and whites began displaying the Lost Cause narrative in centrally public places where all citizens, black and white, would see it and heed it.

B. Blacks, cut off from the economic and political capital to have monuments erected, turned to the social capital within their communities to launch annual public celebrations of dates with perceived importance.

1. Winberry only discusses the *physical* commemorative landscape of the South, an approach which ignores or willfully erases the less corporal commemorative forms practiced by blacks. Other scholars in this field have followed suit.
2. Black southerners organized in the thousands for very public displays of their newfound freedom, especially during Reconstruction when white southerners were checked by northern forces. They filled major throughways, town centers, and affluent white neighborhoods, all places where they were either forbidden to exist or were subjugated as slaves before the results of the Civil War.
3. Prominent blacks gave speeches about the history of the nation and its future, often demanding expanded rights. They portrayed the Civil War as

a great struggle against slavery and Emancipation as the great triumph of

the War. They also commented on the state of blacks in America and proposed action that could be taken to acclimate formerly enslaved blacks to freedom and, in later years, to expand black economic and political opportunities. Record of these speeches can be found in black newspapers and in the manuscripts of prominent black leaders, such as Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois.

4. Churches, schools, and civic organizations were important centers of community life around which blacks organized commemoration in a participatory and democratic public cultural tradition. While men were often the headliners of these celebrations, black women did important organizational and fundraising work behind the scenes to make commemorations possible.
5. Important dates were Emancipation Day, July 4, New Years, etc. Clark argues that blacks laid a claim to July 4 to legitimize emancipation and redefine American freedom.

IV. Black southerners resisted against and adapted to white infringements on their rights to commemorative space. While whites were able to limit blacks' public cultural expressions after Reconstruction and during the rise of Jim Crow, black southerners never ceded their claims to commemoration.

A. Despite the aforementioned stratification of commemorative methods, whites also competed with blacks for public ceremonial space, presenting a conflict between incompatible versions of southern history.

1. Clark describes the increased tensions of the late-Reconstruction and early-Jim Crow eras. White infringements on black commemoration increased at the end of the Reconstruction era as whites gained more power to violently combat black claims to public space.
2. Both white and black southerners held decoration and memorial days dedicated to the Civil War dead, and July 4 was also a site for ceremonial conflicts. Following North-South reconciliation and the removal of federal troops from the South, southern whites increasingly reasserted their dominant claim to commemoration by resuming July 4 celebrations where blacks once had, barring blacks from entering cemeteries on Decoration Day, and threating black celebrations with violence.
3. White newspapers of the era used racist language and tropes to disempower black commemoration and cast black organization as a dangerous force that needed to be snuffed out. Clark cites important examples of this rhetoric which I will use.

B. Blacks turned inward to the safety of black institutions, such as the church and the school, to protect their commemorative efforts from white violence.

1. The descriptions of commemorative celebrations found in black newspapers show that black celebrations became "tamer" as Reconstruction came to an end. Fewer blacks traveled in from surrounding regions and celebrations were more likely to be held indoors.
2. Centers of black community life, such as the school, the church, and various aid societies, became common sites of commemoration. These places allowed blacks to continue to gather as a community and celebrate their cultural narratives where whites would have less opportunity to violently intervene.
3. I will need to say more here about where blacks turned to when public spaces became less hospitable for them.

C. Black oration became more conservative in response to white criticism of "incendiary" racial politics.
1. This was a larger trend outside of commemoration, borne from the Victorian era's rigid and elitist codes of conduct.
2. Black leaders became more likely to criticize the black community itself, directed especially at lower-class blacks in a turn towards "respectability politics." They argued that blacks would never rise to the level of whites if they continued to drink, gamble, and behave promiscuously. The accommodationist rhetoric of Booker T. Washington is a good example.
3. The speeches given by black leaders at commemorative events will allow me to track shifts in black rhetoric at the turn of the century.

V. Despite the proliferation of white monuments to the Lost Cause Confederacy and the apparent absence of significant black memorializations across the American South, southern blacks maintained a rich tradition of public commemoration throughout the post-Civil War period and the rise of Jim Crow. Black commemoration manifested as public celebration of events with symbolic meaning, such as Emancipation Day and July 4, during which southern blacks told and retold their own histories and displayed the newfound freedom of their people. Black forms of commemoration, though long standing, have remained largely invisible to the public and scholarly eye due to the unwarranted privilege ascribed to monuments as symbols of collective memory.

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