

PRELIMINARY
REFLECTIONS ON
DEMOCRACY AND
MEMORY

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Seen from one angle, democracy might be thought to be allergic to monuments, for monuments heroize individuals and distinguish them from the crowd. Theorists of democracy often point to ancient Athens as a model. In a society in which all individuals who count (and in Athens this was limited to free men who were born in Athens) have an equal say in how they are to be governed, heroes were frowned upon, and hero-worship thought to be in poor taste.

Nevertheless, both democratic societies and those with democratic aspirations, like the United States, need their heroes. Despite the many limitations on who was granted citizenship in the polis, citizens in democratic Athens had political power and the ancient Athenians certainly had their heroes. Both historical heroes such as Pericles and mythical heroes such as Herakles captured their imagination and gave them a sense of identity. Heroes and monuments help constitute us and give us a story to tell about who we are. Monuments help make us “us,” and this is why they matter - regardless of the sort of society we inhabit or the type of government we have. But this identity constitution comes at a cost: for every ‘us’ constituted through memorialization also entails a ‘them’—memorialization is simultaneously inclusionary and exclusionary.

This is one of the main reasons why the many “monuments controversies” occurring today in U.S. communities across the country likely won’t be going away anytime soon. While the claims of some that losing these monuments means losing our history may seem nonsensical, these objections do contain some truth, though perhaps not in the way that proponents intend. Monuments can make a normative claim upon us. Certainly not all of them do this, but they all have the potential to tell us who we ought to be by determining how we ought to remember and understand our history. Monuments can potentially say, in effect: this is how history ought to be remembered; this is how we ought to relate to the past.

The Six Grandfathers and Mount Rushmore

Consider this photo of the site where Mount Rushmore, which the Sioux called Six Grandfathers, now stands and compare it with the familiar faces carved from the rockface:

Mount Rushmore Before Carving



Figure 1¹

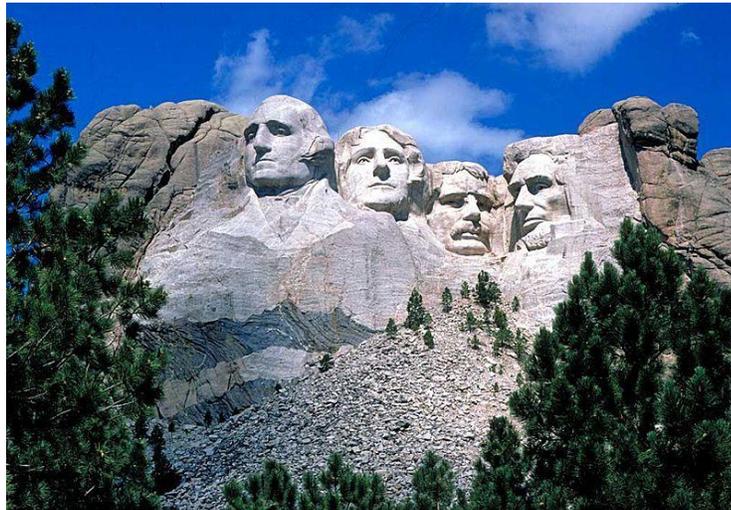


Figure 2²

¹<https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/mount-rushmore-before-it-was-desecrated-and-other-captivating-images-8XrYvku9kkeKz4zJ5Jp7aw>.

² Wikimedia Commons:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Mount_Rushmore_National_Memorial#/

The four presidents monumentalized there efface the memories of what the site was before these faces were carved into the rock. Even before it was the site of struggle and massacre in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was a sacred site to the Sioux people.³ So, yes, monuments are simultaneously a way of remembering at the same time as they are a way of forgetting. The four presidents carved into the stone in 1927 are meant to remind white Americans of their nation's power and might at the same time as they efface what this place had once meant to the indigenous peoples who lived there for generations and continue to live in the region today. This reinforces an official account of history focused on the great men who supposedly made it at the same time as it obscures the histories of the people whose land was stolen to make this national monument. The fact that this mountain was once a sacred site for the Lakota Sioux and had been for generations until white settlers stole the land, massacred its people, and desecrated the site is not part of "our" national story and it is typically not told as part of the history of this place.

Memory and Identity

Official histories like those that Mount Rushmore and other monuments enshrine, condition how we understand memory and therefore how we understand ourselves. James Baldwin understood this all too well. Indeed, one of the threads running throughout his writing is the way that history, and the dynamics of memory and forgetting that it entails, makes it impossible for us to know ourselves. Among many examples, we can consider this passage from "The American Dream and the American Negro" (1965):

media/File:Mount_Rushmore.jpg

³ A good overview of the history of The Black Hills and Mount Rushmore can be found here: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/rushmore-sioux/>. Accessed July 30, 2020.

In the case of the American Negro, from the moment you are born every stick and stone, every face is white. Since you have not yet seen a mirror, you suppose you are, too. It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6 or 7 to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to see Gary Cooper killing off the Indians and, although you are rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you.

It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and identity, has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you. The disaffection and the gap between people, only on the basis of their skins, begins there and accelerates throughout your whole lifetime.⁴

Baldwin's recollections of his youthful misunderstandings of who he was and the malign indifference with which his government and his fellow citizens treated him and black people like him provide a vivid example of how these official histories work on us. Although his recollections focus on the films of Gary Cooper rather than public monuments, the effect is similar: these cultural representations make it impossible to understand ourselves and our role within American society.

Overcoming this fundamental misunderstanding while we continue to expand the conception of who exactly "we" are will be

⁴ James Baldwin, "The American Dream and the American Negro," *Collected Essays* Ed. Toni Morrison (NY: Library of America, 1998, 714-715. This essay, originally published in *The New York Times* in March of 1965, was based upon the address that Baldwin had given the previous month at The Cambridge Union as part of his famous debate with William F. Buckley. For a reconsideration of the debate and its continued relevance, see Nicholas Buccola, *The Fire is Upon Us: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley and The Debate Over Race in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

necessary if we are to have any hope of one day fulfilling the promise of a truly American democracy. One of the sites for this reimagining of public memory is Mount Rushmore, along with all the monuments to Confederate generals that are being taken down throughout the country. Some ask, “Where does this critical reconsideration of public memory end?” to which we respond, “Hopefully with a freer, more equitable, and more democratic society.”