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Monumental Impact: Honoring the Life & Legacy of Dr. Melanie Buffington

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Abstract: This article is intended to honor the impactful work of the late Dr. Melanie Buffington while introducing the work of Monument Lab. As I share my journey in recognizing the overlap with Dr. Buffington’s work and the work of Monument Lab, I hope to provide implications for educators (specifically art educators) to recognize Monument Lab’s field trip guide as a tool for engaging students in critical thinking and meaningful conversations, considering and reimagining public art and public spaces. Approaching topics including power, agency, social justice, racism, radical empathy, artivism, and community, I encourage educators to recognize monuments as starting points for thoughtful and critical engagement with complex issues.

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Introduction

The events of 2020 provoked a reckoning with public art and overt symbolism of hatred, racism, colonialism, and white supremacy visible in communities both domestic and abroad. While scholars, activists, and artists have dedicated careers addressing these exact topics, 2020 sparked visible, transformative change. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) Whose Heritage? report, 94 Confederate monuments were removed in the year 2020, compared to only 58 in the previous four years combined (Black, 2022; SPLC, 2021). Further, of the reported 168 Confederate symbols renamed or removed from public spaces, 167 of those occurred following the death of George Floyd (SPLC, 2021). Confederate monuments were not all that came toppling down, protestors ignited the removal of problematic racist and colonial figures in public spaces throughout the world (Diaz et al., 2020).

In the field of art education, Dr. Melanie Buffington, was among the first to actively publish articles that specifically addressed issues surrounding public monuments as well as suggestions for using them as teaching tools (Buffington, 2017, 2019a; Buffington & Waldner, 2011, 2012). Dr. Buffington’s research tackled topics traditionally sidestepped in classrooms, including the impact of public monuments, collective and counter memory, disrupting the dominant narrative, recognition of complex power structures, confronting Confederate monuments, and more (Buffington, 2014, 2017, 2019a; Buffington & Waldner, 2011, 2012). In 2015, she was awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to provide workshops to teachers across the nation exploring symbols and memory of the Civil War, encouraging and guiding educators on ways to utilize monuments to facilitate lessons to address and critique inequities (Kane, 2015). A professor at Virginia Commonwealth University based in Richmond, Virginia, Dr. Buffington documented and wrote about graffiti intervening with the General Robert E. Lee Monument more than a decade ago. She noted, “I was surprised and excited to see that someone spray-painted ‘no hero’ on the base of the Lee Monument. Knowing that it was not likely to last long, I raced home to grab my camera so I could record the graffiti intervention (See Figure 1)” (Buffington & Waldner, 2012, p. 2). I wonder if she could imagine then the now iconic imagery of the monument that graced the cover of National Geographic’s January 2021 Special Issue (See Figure 2). I wish I could ask her, but in a year that was filled with so much loss, Dr. Buffington lost her battle to cancer on September 16th, 2020, after a nine-year struggle (The Ohio State University, 2020).
Initial Discoveries

On the verge of the official declaration of the global pandemic, on Friday, March 6, 2020, I was teaching high school visual art when I received my letter of acceptance for the doctoral program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). Interestingly, although at the time I was living approximately 3000 miles away in San Diego, California, I had two friends locally who originally hailed from the university’s location. As I weighed my options, I asked my friends a number of questions, largely fearful that I would not fit in in this city that was once the capital of the Confederacy. The idea of living in a place where monuments to Confederate soldiers still lined the city’s streets left me admittedly anxious; even as a white woman, I felt this place that contained outright symbolism of hate, racism, and white supremacy was not a place I belonged. Yet, upon discovering the work of VCU professor, Dr. Melanie Buffington, my thoughts began to shift otherwise.

By the time I made the cross country move to Richmond, (a mere four months later) on July 9th, 2020, empty pedestals covered in graffiti were largely all that remained of the monuments I feared so deeply. As I drove down Monument Avenue for the first time, I witnessed construction crews cleaning up after the removal of the globe atop what was the Mathew Fontaine Maury monument. This statue of a Confederate soldier, prior to its July 2020 removal, had been in place for over 90 years (Richmond Times-Dispatch Staff, 2020). I pulled over at the only remaining monument of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, which was removed in September 2021 following a ruling by the Virginia State Supreme Court. Graffiti and projections had transformed the monument and the space was now informally referred to by community members as Marcus-David Peters Circle after a local Richmond man, a teacher and VCU graduate, who was murdered by police (See Figure 3). Upon my arrival, the circle was lively, with gardens, art, a basketball hoop, and activists (see Figure 4). The landscape of the city was changing in real time before my eyes.

Figure 3 – A sign in front of The Lee Monument showing the reclaimed space informally named, Marcus David Peters Circle after a local Richmond teacher who was murdered by police
Seeking Meaning in Grief

When I met Dr. Buffington over a virtual graduate department Zoom gathering in August, she never mentioned her battle with cancer, and spoke eloquently on future research goals and interests. I was shocked when I received the heartbreaking news that she had passed away just one short month later. I made my first entry in my research journal that day. As I wept, it was my mother who encouraged me to attempt to find a glimmer of light amongst the darkness. Later that day, upon reflection, I wrote, “Maybe I am shedding tears so deeply for an individual I knew so briefly because this is a calling...” Dr. Buffington made an incredible impact on the lives of so many. Perhaps, it is now my responsibility to ensure her legacy lives on and important work in the field of art education continues (C. Black, personal communication, September 16, 2020).

This article is intended to honor the impactful work of Dr. Buffington, in particular, where her research illuminates the complicated and often violent histories of Confederate monuments in the United States. Additionally, I make connections between Dr. Buffington’s work and the work of Monument Lab, a not for profit public art and history studio based in my home town of Philadelphia. I hope to provide implications for educators (specifically art educators) to (re)visit the scholarship of Dr. Buffington and to use Monument Lab’s field trip guide as a tool for engaging students in critical thinking and meaningful conversations, considering and reimagining public art and public spaces. Approaching topics including power, agency, social justice, racism, radical empathy, artivism, and community, I encourage educators to use monuments as starting points for thoughtful and critical engagement with complex issues.

Monumental Connections

Dr. Buffington (2019) underscored Hafeli’s (2009) belief regarding the importance of acknowledging existing ideas and research in the field of art education (Buffington, 2019b). Throughout this article, I aim to weave connective threads between existing research and the work of Monument Lab. For the purposes of this article, I will adopt Monument Lab’s definition of monument as “statements of power and presence in public space” (Farber & Lum, 2020, p. 6). For context, Monument Lab is a public art and history studio founded by two University of Pennsylvania professors, Paul Farber and Ken Lum, initially emerging from coursework and classroom conversations in 2012 (Monument Lab Studio, 2021). Based in the city of Philadelphia, Monument Lab “cultivates and facilitates critical conversations around the past, present, and future of monuments” (Monument Lab Studio, 2021). Working with artists, activists, educators, students, municipal agencies, and cultural institutions, Monument Lab focuses on participatory approaches to public engagement and collective memory while working to shift mindsets, discourse, and pedagogy related to public art, history, and space (Monument Lab Studio, 2021).
Lab Studio, 2021). Further, Monument Lab adopts antiracist, de-colonial, feminist, queer, working-class, ecological, and other social justice perspectives to inform peoples’ understandings of monuments (Monument Lab Studio, 2021). Through a variety of collaborative platforms and programming including workshops, fellowships, and exhibitions. Monument Lab seeks to make generational change in the ways art and history live in public (Monument Lab Studio, 2021).

Field Trip Guide

In July 2020, amid widespread protests, monuments and statues came toppling down as citizens took to the streets to express opposition to the long-standing public symbols reflecting “racist and unjust legacies” (Farber & Lum, 2020, p. 9). Concurrently, Monument Lab launched a free downloadable “Field Trip” activity guide (see Figure 5) to encourage the investigation and exploration of monuments through critical and curious questioning of their locations and histories (Monument Lab Studio, 2021). Through hands-on activities and inquiry, the guide provides opportunities for the reimagining of existing monuments as well as space to propose ideas for monuments of the future. Thoughtfully posed questions seek to prompt the interrogation of public spaces and public art while highlighting contested narratives, dissenting histories, and dominant power structures. The 10-page guide is approachable and could be easily adapted for use with students in nearly any grade level. The guide is seamlessly scaffolded and serves as an excellent resource for educators looking to introduce students to a variety of topics and concepts including observation, design, urban planning, public space, public art, history, social justice, and artivism. Furthermore, since the guide was released during the global Covid-19 pandemic, there are suggestions for using the guide in both outdoor and online settings, providing opportunities for engagement regardless of whether students are in person, virtual, or hybrid participants in the educational environment. The guide could be used by students individually or collaboratively.

I recommend a combination of the two – allowing students to develop their own ideas as well as share and discuss their thoughts with others.

Ultimately, the guide seeks to shift perspectives and raise considerations for creating public spaces and monuments that are more inclusive. While designed with younger audience accessibility in mind, I would argue this guide could serve as a valuable learning tool with virtually any age level within communities. The Monument Lab field trip guide encourages more than surface level historical or artistic exploration of public art and monuments – the when, where and how – by guiding participants through intersections of context, contestation, and community voices, supporting students through research-based dialogues in and through public art.

Figure 5 – The Monument Lab Field Trip guide in front of Marcus David Peters Circle in Richmond, VA
Educational Connections

In many ways the Monument Lab field trip guide is intentionally designed to draw attention to historical vantage points and the power of the imagination when considering alternate histories and issues of absence and erasure, particularly in the realm of public art and monuments. Greene (1995) promoted these concepts in what she referred to as aesthetic experience and aesthetic education, noting educators’ obligation “to find ways of enabling the young to find their voices, to open their spaces, [and] reclaim their histories” (p. 120). Greene (1995) called for creative thinking, imaginative awareness, and consciousness encounters with art to tap future possibilities. These notions were additionally echoed by Bolin (2009) who noted “thoughtful and grounded speculations and wonderings of the imagination are profitable motivators...in initiating and carrying out lively and meaningful investigations of the past” (p. 111). American author, professor, feminist, activist, bell hooks (2009), posits the “imagination is one of the most powerful modes of resistance that oppressed and exploited folks can and do use” (p. 61) hooks (2009) additionally points to the significance of collective imagination in providing the creative energy that will lead “to new thought and more engaging ways of knowing” (p. 62).

Within the context of art education, scholars have drawn attention to the need for the critical examination of dynamics of power and privilege especially when interrogating the normalization of whiteness and other hegemonic structures as dominant (Acuff, 2018; Buffington, 2014; Knight, 2006; Kraehe & Acuff, 2015; Link, 2019). Acuff (2018) states, “arts education cannot continue business as usual, addressing social justice issues and developing initiatives to advance diversity and equity, without recognizing white supremacy as an ideological construct as well as an objective condition that reinforces hegemony” (p. 531). Noting the need for “actively anti-racist” curriculum, Link (2019) notes, “we cannot shield our students from a world built on inequity, but we can provide them the tools to disrupt, challenge, and unravel it in their own hearts and communities” (p. 25).

Dr. Buffington (2017) recognized, “groups, public or private, with significant political and economic power are usually the ones who commission public art to tell stories that reinforce their power in complementary fashion, often ignoring or glossing over views, creating a single hegemonic narrative” (p. 54). She saw works of public art, especially monuments, as starting points for engaging students in meaningful and authentic learning experiences (Buffington, 2017, 2019a; Buffington & Waldner, 2011, 2012). Ozment (2018) emphasized, “Monumental art demands responsive pedagogies that encourage critical reflection and inspire positive change” (p. 298). Dr. Buffington looked to the work of Ladson-Billings (2006) and Crenshaw (1991) specifically pointing to Critical Race Theory “as a tool to help investigate intersections of place, race, community, and other facets in public spaces” (Buffington, 2017, p. 54; Buffington, 2014, p. 11). Paraphrasing Dixson & Rousseau (2005), Kraehe (2015) underscores the importance of counter-narratives in providing students opportunities to rethink institutional norms and policies and provide fertile ground in which justice-oriented change can begin to take root” (p. 202).

Other scholars have also notably pointed to monuments as means through which to guide students in the examination of dissenting histories and power relationships, as well as intellectual analysis and interpretation of designs with aims of enhancing social justice (Binder, 2017; Mooreng & Twala, 2014; Urmacher & Tinkler, 2008; Waters & Russell, 2013). Buta and Esche (2019) argue that the consideration of monuments and the culture of monuments “could prove one of the most productive avenues for introducing decolonial critique into public discourse” (p. 447). Yet, in the field of art education, it was Dr. Buffington that notably introduced monuments as modes to encounter issues of collective memory, counter memory, systemic racism, power, and reimagining explicitly to the field of art education (Buffington, 2014, 2017, 2019a; Buffington & Waldner, 2011, 2012).
Continuous Revelations

While the aforementioned connections between the work of Dr. Buffington and Monument Lab may seem obvious, more subtle parallels gradually revealed themselves. Delving further into the work of Monument Lab, I noticed direct associations with artists featured in Dr. Buffington’s published work as well as connections to her theoretical approaches, especially related to critical feminist pedagogy. For example, in July 2007, Dr. Buffington published an instructional resource in *Art Education* calling upon educators to introduce students to the work of artist, Tyree Guyton, exploring “concepts of art, community, change, and renewal” (p. 26).

Dr. Buffington (2007) highlighted how Guyton’s work encouraged conversations “about difficult issues including politics, racism, religion, poverty, homelessness, and consumption” (p. 26). Additionally, she provided suggestions for discussion questions, artmaking activities, and assessment. Ten years later, in 2017, as part of a citywide exhibition, Monument Lab: Philadelphia featured a collaborative installation by Tyree Guyton titled, *THE TIMES* (Farber & Lum, 2020, p.67-74). *THE TIMES* was created “as a monument to reframing our awareness of this moment in history” (Monument Lab Studio, 2021). According to Farber and Lum (2020), “THE TIMES mediates on the ways in which time and money are intertwined cruelly for the poor” (p. 20).

Featuring “community painted images of giant clocks affixed to the brick façade of an empty warehouse” Guyton provides critical commentary on “the time capitalism imposes on the poor [as] unceasing and compulsory” (Farber & Lum, 2020, p. 21). However, Tyree Guyton was not the only Monument Lab collaborator whose work clearly intertwined with the work of Dr. Buffington.

Sonya Clark, an artist Dr. Buffington referenced in both 2017 and 2019 articles, created a prototype monument as part of *A Call to Peace* - a public art and history exhibition co-curated by Monument Lab and New Arts Justice (Monument Lab Studio, 2021). Dr. Buffington referenced Sonya Clark’s work as an artist for educators to introduce when confronting Confederate monuments and symbolism such as the Confederate flag with students. Dr. Buffington (2017) referred to Clark’s 2010 piece titled, *Black Hair Flag*, in which “she used black fiber and stitched the stars and stripes of the U.S. flag on top of the Confederate flag in a manner to allow both to be visible” (p. 55). Dr. Buffington (2017) described Sonya Clark’s artistic engagement with themes of identity and hope through her art (p. 55).

Additionally, Dr. Buffington referenced Clark’s *Unraveling* piece on multiple occasions, an interactive work in which “Sonya Clark works with gallery visitors to literally unravel a Confederate flag, thread by thread, using only their hands” (Buffington, 2019a, p. 18). For Monument Lab, Sonya Clark “reproduced multiple and monumental replicas” of the Confederate truce flag, a rarely known artifact, which is a white flag of surrender that was flown as a sign of defeat by Robert E. Lee’s troops at the end of the Civil War (Monument Lab Studio, 2021). According to Monument Lab (2021), Clark sought to “re-introduce the flag into contemporary consciousness” as well as “reckon with unsolved legacies of the Civil War memory” (Monument Lab Studio, 2021).

As I viewed the intricate threads of Sonya Clark’s work, I was prompted to reflect further on the connective threads between Monument Lab and the work of Dr. Buffington.

Though not always explicitly stated, Dr. Buffington often approached research grounded in critical feminist pedagogy (Buffington et al., 2017, p. 46). Through this approach Dr. Buffington sought to interrogate “the imbalances of power” as well as “make more transparent the intersections of oppression” (Buffington et al., 2017, p. 46). Similarly, Monument Lab promotes the questioning of historical narratives and records that center the patriarchal experience. As specified by Farber & Lum (2020) Monument Lab is “interested in issues of embodiment and the ambivalence that is part of any construction of symbolic unity as well as negated or unacknowledged histories that have been evacuated from the monument and yet remain palpable as an absence” (p. 16). In the confronting history portion of the field trip guide, Monument Lab proposes a series of questions including whether communities...
contain monuments dedicated to non-white people, monuments dedicated to women, and monuments dedicated to indigenous people or honoring indigenous lands. Through spotlighting absence, the guide seeks to expose “willful structuring that produces and reproduces the conditions of patriarchal society” (Farber & Lum, 2020, p. 18). These notions subtly intertwine and connect with concepts present in many of Dr. Buffington’s contributions to the field.

No words could adequately honor the prolific scholar that was Dr. Melanie Buffington. As educators we seek to inspire, and although Dr. Buffington’s passing was untimely, her impact was profound. While I am deeply saddened that I will not have the opportunity to work with her, I am eternally grateful for her innumerable contributions to the field, and particularly for her research which undoubtedly remains relevant and far-reaching. In her first time as editor of the *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, Dr. Buffington (2016) described how social theories “are well suited to help us study, critique, understand, and possibly change divides” (Buffington, 2016, p. 2). She pointed to collaboration as a space of possibility and hope for the future (Buffington, 2016). Additionally, she spoke about the power of overarching ideas in creating meaningful connections to advance social justice (Buffington & Muth, 2011). Monument Lab’s field trip guide beautifully encapsulates Dr. Buffington’s pedagogical approach to monuments and public art; art education and social theory. I hope educators will embrace both her research and the guide as tools to spark student curiosity and challenge learners to critically engage with the world around them.

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