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Forgetting and Remembering: Cultural Memory Work Toward Racial Justice¹

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In this paper I consider processes that develop cultural memory and examples of how such processes can be put to work to serve racial reckoning and justice. Contemporary battles about the meaning of symbols such as the Confederate flag and statues of Confederate leaders reflect broader ideological contestations over the nation's cultural memory—the weighty matter of “who and what should be remembered” (Doss, 2010, p. 2), and who and what should be forgotten. Forgetting such monuments is a matter of justice as their common presence in public spaces valorizes centuries of racial tyranny. Cultural memory scholars suggest that monuments are ideological and political because they reflect a group's shared affirmation of the events and figures worthy of representing in material form to help keep their memory alive in the narrative landscape. To enact such processes of affirmation, the practice of memorializing involves financial resources, decisions about location and access, and reflection on the contours of representation. Memorials also require collective labor to actualize their mission of remembrance. Peace museums can close without visitors and funding, cemeteries can decay without daily care, and monuments can sit silent without witnesses to hear their stories.

Here I consider the possibilities of cultural memory as a narrative practice in public, academic, and family spaces oriented toward racial justice. I draw from cultural memory scholarship in order to consider both recognized sites of racial justice memory work (removal of Confederate monuments) and other examples of local, academic, and family memory as sites of consideration. I see memory work as a form of labor and responsibility. This work can occur through collective public practices oriented to forgetting some dominant memories and remembering subjugated ones, oral and written practices that repeat and concretize counter-narratives, and the narrative semiotic teaching of monuments and memorials (Brockmeier, 2002). In a field saturated with competing versions of history and popular memory and what Doss calls “memorial

mania” (2010, p. 2), the physical markers of cultural memory compete for public attention and sustenance. Interrupting dominant cultural narratives to enable layered and subjugated memories to surface demand attention and labor. I briefly situate my work in memory studies, then describe Brockmeier’s (2002) conception of three narrative orders which can aid in forming cultural memories. I describe examples of contested cultural memories in the U.S., the state of Oklahoma, and in academia. I conclude with an example from family inquiry used as a vehicle for dominant groups to explore their family’s complicity historically in racial injustices that can reframe family and cultural memory (Bailey, 2022).²

Memory studies encompass diverse foci, academic disciplines, and theoretical orientations. Such inquiry can include positivist studies in the fields of psychology and neuroscience which examine the slipperiness of human memory or the best processes for shoring up our memory storehouses as they leak (e.g. Loftus, 2005). In feminist studies, memory work can refer to a research methodology through which women collaboratively explore patriarchal influences on their lives (e.g. Kaufman et al., 2002). Within cultural geography, memory studies include how space and land can highlight or occlude aspects of human experience (Alderman & Inwood, 2013, p. 187). In Cultural Studies, memory studies can include the study of popular conceptions of the past as they manifest in the present in varied sociocultural contexts and community practices, rituals, and materiality enabling cultures to preserve a sense of identity over time.

Cultural memory studies embrace a range of investigations into how we as cultural beings collectively preserve, remember, and forget some historical events and interpretations and how relationships between cultural memory and identities form, reform, and gain shape and substance through rites, sacred objects, rituals, archives, and gatherings. Such memories are consequential, as Alderman and Inwood (2013) describe, as “how we imagine ourselves in the present is intimately linked to how we remember ourselves in the past” (p. 186). In this sense, memory practices can facilitate imaginaries that contribute to creating “socially just futures” (Alderman & Inwood, 2013). This is the cultural orientation that grounds my work here. I am interested in how to form cultural memory in ways that can contribute to historical awareness, reconciliation, and healing through labor, attention, and diverse forms of narration.

We cannot recall, nor perhaps would we want to, all the many events of our lives, and we cannot track or preserve the varied events of our familial or social histories. Indeed, there are many memories we as individuals or communities might wish to forget. Cultural memory scholars recognize that processes of memorialization through which we foster and construct a shared sense of cultural identity or history are always selective, dynamic, and partial. Memory ebbs and flows as some events crystallize momentarily in cultural discourse through intense narration only soon to pass away,

becoming faint or forgotten, as others replace them. In popular memory, forgetting and remembering involve networks of relation which expose us to some narratives instead of others or nudge us to consider one cultural memory as more- or less-persuasive and truthful than another.

A recent example of the stakes involved in which cultural memories persuade and achieve narrative dominance in the politics of truth is the explosive reaction to Hannah-Jones' *1619 Project*, which narrates a "new origin story" of the United States. In this rich and controversial project supported by *The New York Times*, Hannah-Jones (2021) strives to "reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center" of the national narrative (Serwer, 2019, n. p.). Her work unsettles an often-beloved national story of the country's formation in enlightenment ideals of reason and freedom belied by the utter centrality of the slave trade in America's founding. The furor erupting in the wake of her work and the blistering critiques it evokes (Serwer, 2019) reflect the deep investments in dominant cultural memories and origin stories. The response also offers a glimpse of how groups can de-center dominant cultural memories and create others which can become vehicles for dialogue, justice, and reconciliation.

Woven through these processes of resistance in creating new cultural memories are the power of affect and the politics of time—how the politics of emotion shape us (Ahmed, 2014), how we choose to attend (Ingold, 2018), and which work we choose to do in the fleeting time we are given (Burkeman, 2021). In Burkeman's (2021) *Four Thousand Weeks*, he explores what he calls "time management for mortals." With compelling writing and good humor, Burkeman dismisses dominant messages time management and organization books convey to discipline our bodies to become more efficient and productive. He believes timers and software that spur Pavlovian responses and endless instrumentalist checklists keep us focused on minutia rather than on a holistic view of our lives. Steadily insisting we reorient ourselves to the realities of our fleeting embodiment, he underscores the most motivational management framework of all—our mortality. He reminds us that in a life span of 80 or so years, which we know is never guaranteed, individuals have about 4,000 weeks to live. We forget these sobering numbers amidst our daily demands. Burkeman's examination of time management from this philosophical perspective relentlessly returns him to the question of how he and the rest of us "want to spend those weeks—in all their mundane glory, as they pass" (Bailey, 2021, p. 143). His reminder of the politics of time relates to the labor of cultural memory work and narratives we choose to nourish with our time.

It is labor to forget, and it is labor to remember. Choose your labor.

Cultural Memory Work

Scholars trace various ways we create and sustain cultural memory. For Brockmeier (2002), cultural processes of remembering and forgetting depend on an “interplay between individual and social organization of memory” (p. 16). He conceptualizes the process as “culturally mediated within a symbolic space laid out by a variety of semiotic vehicles and devices” (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 25). In my reading, an implicit assumption underlying these arguments is that advancing some events and interpretations over others requires labor. Brockmeier’s (2002) concept of “*narrative as cultural memory*” nourishes my analysis of current examples of memory work that help me speak to the collective labor involved in such narrative processes. To Brockmeier (2002), the intricacies of effective memorials which support cultural memory engage three systems of meaning making—three “orders” in his framing—which allow us to craft, preserve, and amplify narratives that can become remembered. He describes these as linguistic, material, and discursive orders. I use these orders to consider several contemporary sites of memorializing, many of which focus on the still unactualized potential of memory work for racial justice.



Figure 1. *The field of chairs at the Oklahoma City National Museum and Memorial. Photograph by Lucy E. Bailey.*

Cultural memory is supported through a *linguistic order*, such as oral and written stories, in which people mobilize plot devices (actors, events, predicaments, and resolutions) in writing about events and places, describe to others the meaning of those events and places, and bend and collapse registers of time to link aspects of past and present in dynamic narrative configurations. Cultural memory work requires framing events in a cohesive story that fosters a sense of belonging to a cultural group, however defined (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 18). When, for example, pilgrims journey to the Oklahoma City National Museum and Memorial as I have dozens of times without realizing its narrative memory work (see Bailey & Kingston, 2020)

and *read* plaques detailing the Murrah Building bombing in 1995 which killed 168 people, *listen to* the audio recordings preserving survivors' stories, and *describe to others* those events, they engage the linguistic order of cultural memory work. This narrative order might include sharing through social media, family conversations, or group museum tours about the man who enacted the violence, the resulting losses and survivors, the meaning of those events, and the journey to create the peace memorial, museum, and annual marathon memorializing these events. In this sense, cultural remembering of the Murrah bombing is fueled by what we visitors—and it must be a “we”—describe, speak about, and write about.

Brockmeier's (2002) second order, a semiotic order, can extend a linguistic order to support narrative integration which fuels cultural memory and belonging through the materiality of a given site or space—whether an art exhibit, a museum, a monument, a book, or another marker of some kind. An example familiar to many in Oklahoma is the physical space and gardens of the Oklahoma City National Museum and Memorial (Figure 1). Community members and architects envisioned, designed, and dedicated this site of remembrance within a city block of space in memory of the Murrah bombing. Its material elements reflect spatial and relational configurations which narrate a cohesive story of events before, during, and after the bombing. A grand survivor tree flourishes near remains of the building, two massive arches etched with the times the bombing began and ended frame two entry points to the grounds, a shimmering rectangle of water stretches between the arches, and a field of 168 empty chairs face the water representing those lives lost.

Visitors recognize and contribute to the site's semiotic order through interactions such as touching walls, leaving objects, and writing messages of tribute. A fence edges the ground on which visitors affix an ever-evolving array of tokens of remembrance including messages and stuffed toy animals and chalk pads in front of the museum welcome visitors to scrawl drawings and messages. These dynamic forms of materiality engage visitors in a narrative of remembrance and tribute which nourishes the cultural memory of the bombing and their connection to these events. To Brockmeier (2002), such markers function within a semiotic system to coalesce as a narrative text that works alongside linguistic and performative orders to form cultural memory. Material symbols can also convey absence to inform a symbolic order, such as empty chairs on the grounds signaling the loss of lives.

The third component of the process of narrative integration central to cultural memory work is discursive and performative (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 35). Brockmeier's three orders are not always discrete, as the semiotic order noted previously also has discursive components. The discursive order of narrative requires enacting a process in which the site design engages the viewer, pilgrim, or visitor in its narrative goal. Brockmeier (2002) describes

this process as involving discursive practices that present historical facts “symbolically [to] activate [the material] installation and turn it into an agent in a cultural system” (p. 35). The discursive practice encourages actions aligned with the installation’s goal. The memorial marks the unspeakable violence that led to such widespread suffering and destruction and pays tribute to lost lives. Designers intend it to “achieve something” (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 35)—a call to peace, *a demand to remember*, a calling out of “you,”—the witness, the visitor—as a necessary actor in accomplishing those goals. To Brockmeier (2002), the discursive work of a material site “draws visitors and viewers” into a particular “position” in relation to the linguistic and semiotic orders to enable actualizing the memorial’s cultural memory work beyond the site (p. 35).

The enactment of this discursive work relies on meanings embedded in the marker’s social-geographical context. The precise placement and size of memorials can matter here (see Alderman & Inwood, 2021). In the example of the Oklahoma City Peace Memorial and Museum, the dedication of a full city block to the memorial at the very site where the federal building bombing took place is consequential. Deemed the largest act of domestic terrorism in the country’s history, the bombing was massive in its loss of life, material destruction—and in targeting a federal building—its symbolic and actual threat to the nation. Among the messages of the memorial’s placement and scope is the weighty reminder of the threat of violence, the power of the State’s organized response, the need to stand vigilant to threats, the responsibility to remember innocent lives lost, and the power of remembering to offer peace and comfort. The discursive order invites varied actions aligned with these orientations.

The coalescing work of these orders enables the forming of cultural memories we deem worthy, salient, or sacred to nourish and inherit. They can shape what we notice, narrate, remember, and pass on (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 23) as inheritances. Because our social moorings and communities, such as our family, our racial, ethnic, and religious communities, and our activist or academic allies, frame and shape our memory work, the process is riddled with power relations. As feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2017) notes in relation to her critique of institutional norms, “The more people travel along a path...the more our lives might be directed in some ways, rather than others because of this easing of progression” (p. 46). In fact, “once a flow is directed, it acquires a momentum. Once a momentum is acquired, it is directive...what is in front of us depends on the direction we have already taken” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 45).

Cultural memory can work in similar ways. Visible and invisible power relations fueling multiple orders that enable remembering and forgetting are all around us reconfiguring great swaths of history in new temporal relations through these narrative orders. They invite us to follow the flow and direction of the cultural memory and imagine ourselves as part of

the community of belonging it symbolizes. They can also reflect forms of collective labor inviting and even demanding us to create more bearable memories for others to inherit as our 4,000 weeks pass by.

Cultural Memory as Inheritance

One can turn attention to cultural battles surrounding the removal of Confederate monuments across the U.S. in recent years for a glimpse into the value and fragility of cultural memory and the labor involved in sustaining it. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, more than 2,000 U.S. memorials honor the Confederacy (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). Such markers include statues of Confederate generals and buildings, as well as schools bearing leaders' names. Since the late 1990s, intensifying in the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020, robust activism has targeted their removal (Cox, 2021). To many, such memorials sustain a cultural memory of the Confederate South steeped in white supremacy and the enslavement of millions of innocent African-ascendant (Dillard, 2006) people. The common presence of such monuments in public spaces where a diversity of people live, learn, and move normalizes and valorizes a government which has fought to uphold racial tyranny for centuries.

The sites in which these memorials, or semiotic orders of narrative, reside—such as state capitol grounds, public lands, schools, parks, or any spaces supported by public funding—further imbue these sites with the message that they speak the state's desires. Such public markers require ongoing embodied labor, care, and resources on the part of the state for their upkeep. In spurring the removal of a total of 168 symbols between 2015–2020, protestors ask, “Whose Heritage?” do such memorials represent? (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). What are the daily psychological and spiritual consequences of such memorials? Where are their counternarratives visible? Indeed, whose cultural memories do we privilege and sustain?



Figure 2. A 2021 map of Confederate monuments and removals. Southern Poverty Law Center (splcenter.org).

Many such U.S. memorials have been in place for decades. Yet a lesser-known story of how some entered public spaces in the first place—an active cultural forgetting, perhaps—is that many were erected in the decades well after the Civil War, during Jim Crow, or in some cases, even a century after the Civil War, during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (see Cox, 2021). Confederate General Robert E. Lee, for example, did not want memorials constructed in his honor or dedicated to the Confederacy. Recognizing their symbolic power, he believed they would fuel rather than soften divisions after the Civil War (Cox, 2021, p. 39; Romeros, 2017). After his death, groups invested in his status erected monuments to him and other leaders during the ongoing post-war struggle for civil rights. Thus, baked into the semiotic narrative origins of some Confederate statues, through their temporal and spatial placement in primarily Southern states after the Civil War during Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement, as well as the funding and labor invested in erecting them, is an intentional, virulent, narrative reminder of white power. Lee and others became symbols for “the lost cause” mythic of cultural memory in which the South fought heroically to sustain state’s rights. The monuments’ establishment post-Civil War exemplifies power relations used to collapse time in memory work to nurture connections between the present and past and the semiotic and discursive orders of cultural memory work that serve to glorify the Confederacy. Discursively, these monuments enact symbolic violence through warning Black activists to “remember their place.”

These assemblages of concrete and bronze, just like configurations of red, white, and blue in various versions of U.S. flags, hold no inherent meaning. We breathe complex meanings into them which solidify and shift over time in various geographies and in dialogue with other symbols. Yet their symbolic fields of operation limit their interpretation. As Carlson and Schramm-Pate (2003) note in their research on the Confederate flag, despite some groups’ efforts to dislodge the flag’s racist hauntings with messages of a rebellious spirit or a regional identity salient to all who live there, semiotic machinations with the flag could not shake loose the racist history to which the flag remains tethered today. Similarly, some decry the removal of these figures allegedly because of their beauty, their historic meaning, or their representation of a “shared heritage.” Yet, the origins of their production, the meanings they carry across a century, their creation to intimidate and wreak symbolic violence, and their contemporary mobilization by white supremacist groups carry entrenched cultural meanings of hate that defy new interpretation. Some suggest these memorials belong in history museums, as has occurred with Nazi symbols, better to contain their virulence.

Semiotic and discursive orders of the statues are not only consequential for creating cultural memory and narratives of belonging among Americans. Subjugated cultural memories gain visibility through painting or projecting images of Black visionaries onto these monuments in public celebrations,

in renaming schools (Brown, in process), and in erecting statues of Black freedom and triumph (Schneider, 2021). This also occurs through public dialogue about the removal of statues or the absence of particular markers that cultivate new imaginaries of who we want to be. In *No Common Ground*, a study of Confederate monuments, Cox (2021) describes justice-oriented organizing that finally led to some Confederate memorials' removal. The 2021 removal of the 12-ton, 21-foot-high, bronze statue of General Lee in Richmond, VA that sat atop a 40-foot pedestal of granite after its 130-year reign in this public space leaves light and sky behind, and air to breathe. Other removals have led to the creation of murals, gardens, and new statues honoring freedom.

Both the materiality of Richmond's Lee statue and its active removal signals how cultural remembering and forgetting are always in motion and in tension. The two are always shifting in their material expressions, always scripting different temporal relations between then and now, always in danger of—or in need of—erasure, and always reflecting competing visions about which cultural memories we should solidify with materiality and which we should choose to let crumble. That Lee's statue cost \$10,000 (a quarter of a million dollars today), was unveiled to a crowd of 150,000 people (Brumfield, 2017; Cox, 2021), and sat in glory for more than a century speaks to the powerful interests its cultural memory served and reflected. That it came down in 2021—at a cost of \$2 million—demonstrates both the collective labor and the power exercised and invested in its forgetting.

Academic Memory Work



Figure 3. Book cover of Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*.

There exist entire social histories of forgetting, to use Klein's (2007) term. He analyzes popular memory in Los Angeles and the bulldozing of districts which are now forgotten and replaced by glamorous narratives of

the creation of Hollywood. Higher education, too, is riddled with cultural memories and inheritances, dominant cultural frames and subaltern frames that operate simultaneously or shift over time. Concerned community members have advocated to change the names of campus buildings with racist histories, for example, as well as removing statues and markers (Alderman & Reuben, 2020) in order to help cultivate orders necessary to form new cultural memories. Academic memory can sustain and forget varied memories. For example, feminist historian Clare Hemmings, in *Why Stories Matter* (Figure 3), analyzes dominant feminist accounts of women's history noting how politics of the many stories feminists tell about history obscure alternative narratives which non-feminists might easily coopt.

The practice of academic citation is another vehicle for nourishing memory involving all three narrative orders. The linguistic order is evident in discussing, writing, and disseminating dominant memories; the semiotic order is visible in which physical materials, books, artifacts, podcasts, and other vehicles of value are dedicated to one set of memories or another; and the discursive order is visible in the implicit call to others to value, use, and circulate academic sources. Citation practices might reflect affection for certain narratives which create well-worn grooves and orientations (Ahmed, 2017). Scholars can perpetuate forgetting and remembering through concretizing in their writing whose work is visible and valuable and thus dominant in this semiotic system. One well-worn narrative groove in Women's Studies, for instance, is the familiar "wave" metaphor of the women's movement (first, second, third, fourth waves, etc.). However teachable, this metaphor obscures the frothing waters and deep hues between waves and forms of resistance manifested in women's history that can reframe popular memory of the movement. Movements ebb and flow, with both trickles and gushes.

In recent years historian Maggie Nash (2019) has directed her analytic gaze to the history of land-grant universities in order to contribute to countering widespread amnesia of U.S. settler colonialism related to higher education. She traces U.S. governmental machinations and legislation leading to the forced removal of American Indians from the very land on which public universities came to be built and flourish—supporting "the wide public" of the state while the vision of "the public" remains narrow. The original mission of land grants was to "teach agriculture, military tactics, and mechanic arts (and classical studies) so members of the working classes could obtain a liberal, practical education" (Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, n.d., para 1). Some imagined land-grant institutions as places of service oriented to increasing educational access.

Nash traces the practices of "claiming" "unclaimed" Indigenous land to establish land-grant institutions. Much celebrated for their visionary public promise, land-grants actually emerge from coercive policies, warfare, and dispossession of Native peoples, but this history relentlessly falls out

of cultural memory. Some universities now render visible their Indigenous roots through land acknowledgments on plaques, email signatures, and mission statements. These are all steps in the linguistic and semiotic orders of establishing cultural memory. They can aid in reframing origin stories and amplifying counternarratives about the terrain on which land grants reside. Yet there is more work to do in addressing such dispossessions beyond acknowledgements; reparations and returns can accompany cultural memory work.

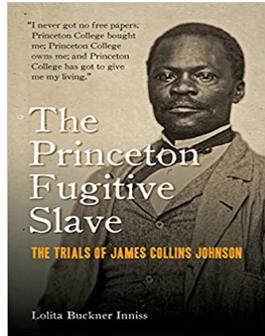


Figure 4: *Innis' book, The Princeton Fugitive Slave.*

Other memory work in higher education focuses on rendering visible the intersections between the institution of slavery and institutions of learning. Legal scholar Lolita Buckner Innis' work surfaces these intersections in her innovative biography of James Collins Johnson, a fugitive who lived in Princeton, New Jersey for 60 years (Figure 4). Innis works to remember a forgotten institutional memory of the constitutive historical intersections between slavery and higher education. For example, finances to support Princeton in the 18th and 19th centuries and white Southern students who attended often came from plantation households. The institution, in turn, relied on Black workers to fuel its educational mission, workers who supported white male students' education through laundering their clothes, emptying their chamber pots, chopping their wood, and cooking and cleaning.

Johnson's livelihood, Innis reveals, depended on this service. She examines other intersections as well.³ Such institutional forgetting can weave the erasure of financial origins and the human beings that made them possible into their glowing origin stories and replace them with narratives of enlightenment, access, and possibility. Historical studies can surface information that can be woven into new cultural memories to capture more complex narratives in the interests of racial justice. Brasher, Alderman, and Inwood's (forthcoming) language of campuses as "wounded places" also seems fitting for the processes Innis' and Nash's work make visible. The

linguistic order evident here also discursively calls for healing directions of acknowledgement and reparations in cultural and geographical memory work.

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Place-Based Memory Work

Cultural memories are often situated within geographic landscapes with place-based meanings which underscore the importance of local, place-based memory work. Alderman and Inwood (2013) use the term “landscapes of memory” to convey how landscapes have a “normative power” in which they give “voice to certain versions of the past,” grant them “legitimacy,” thereby “ordering and controlling the public meaning of the past” (p. 188). Such ordering and controlling manifests in narratives about the Oklahoma territory’s Land Run and the Centennial Land Run Monument in Oklahoma City which memorializes it. These massive bronze statues of galloping horses, wagons, and determined riders straining in their saddles and charging into Oklahoma territory celebrate the early settlers who fought harsh conditions to claim ostensibly “uninhabited” land in 1889. This powerful set of sculptures was created by a Norman, Oklahoma artist, Paul Moore, situated in a semiotics of Western survival and triumph, created over many years with much family labor and commitment. The city land on which it sits is a fitting aesthetic home framed by water and the vast Oklahoma sky.

However, a writer representing Indigenous perspectives describes the marker as a “monumental monstrosity,” because the powerful statues and other markers set in a public park deny the existence of Indigenous peoples on the land far preceding settlers (Fowler, 2020). The cultural memory of the Land Run that helped establish the state now known as Oklahoma crafts an origin story that preserves and champions one set of memories and perpetuates the erasure, the forgetting, of another set of memories. Too often the dialogue and arguments about statues such as the Confederate examples exemplified earlier can dissolve into armed contestations and fierce identity battles about mine and yours, us and them, worthy memories and dismissible ones. Whose memories get to “win” and thereby be remembered? What might a counter-memorial look like alongside, complicating, or speaking back to these massive statues? What would it look like to establish multiple, layered cultural memories in such spaces?

The Tulsa Race Massacre that occurred in 1921 has a long history of active cultural forgetting and a more recent history of active and widespread remembering. Although some Tulsans have never forgotten the turn of the century’s vibrant, nourishing, and active Black Wall Street community (see Johnson, 2021), knowledge of the mass of angry, white

Tulsans who burned the community to the ground, killing hundreds of its Black citizens in 1921, has intensified in popular memory as more Oklahomans have learned and listened in recent years. In broader cultural memory, the community, and the violence, became forgotten. Descendants, staff writers of *The Black Wall Street Times*, and local historians have worked for decades to cultivate a linguistic order toward remembering both the massacre and the resilience of the community through writing, storying, classes, memory tours, scholarship, teacher education, popular histories, and the establishment of a center for tribute.



Figure 5. The Healing Walkway, Tulsa, Oklahoma, Photograph by Amanda Kingston.

Beginning in 2020, a year of events led up to the 100th commemoration of the massacre. These events provided opportunities for people to gather in peace and pay tribute to those who lost their lives, acknowledge the few remaining survivors, and to foreground the history and resilience of Black Oklahomans. Reflecting the discursive third order of narrative that can help sustain this cultural memory's prominence in Oklahoma and the nation's history of racial violence, leaders also *called for others* to act beyond honoring and commemorating. As the organizing committee expressed, "We believe strongly in reparations. Our focus is on the larger scope of reparations, which means repairing past damages and making amends through acknowledgment, apology, and atonement. This process is central to racial reconciliation in Tulsa" (Greenwood Rising).

Family Memory Work

The final example I consider is cultural memory work and its potential for racial justice through family inquiry. Families invested in a particular identity narrative can actively forget aspects of their family past through

excising troubling aspects from family storytelling or downplaying them at a reunion. They can toss pictures, change the subject, and repeat favorite stories they want to instantiate in the family narrative. Some seem to have taken up a call to racial justice through reframing family memory in ways I read as using linguistic, semiotic, and discursive orders. I have been interested in how white scholars conduct historical family inquiries to engage in racial justice work, to acknowledge, apologize for, and atone for their family's historical complicity in racial violence as an example of what cultural memory work toward racial justice might look like. I turn to one example here (e.g. Bailey, 2022).⁴

There has been a robust turn to family inquiry in the last two decades which includes varied forms of identity work and creative engagement with one's own family as a site of research. Scrutinizing how people engage in family inquiry, remembering and forgetting, is an ongoing interest to me because our narrations of family can reflect our identity investments through remembering some narratives and forgetting others. Family constructions can become part of a racial project because all of us have variable awareness of our ancestors, extended kin, or even-closer relatives. As Brockmeier (2002) says of cultural memory more broadly, people narrate various versions of their families which reflect and create their sense of belonging. Work on family can become hagiographic when we encounter family members worth praising or angst-ridden when we encounter those whom we prefer to prune from our family trees.

Since 1998, with his publication, *Slaves in the Family*, Edward Ball's award-winning research into his family's history manifests his efforts to reframe and create new family memories oriented toward racial justice. This journalist has conducted extensive research on his Southern-plantation-owning family to remember events some members of his family wished to "forget"—to ignore, cover up, or actively push away. Ball (1998) describes the colorful stories he heard as a child about his family's heritage as owners of numerous Southern plantations. Family storytelling was a common cultural practice for the Balls aligned with the linguistic order of narrative necessary for cultivating a coherent picture of family identity and memory.

As the years passed, and Ball began to wonder about the silences in his family storytelling—the part of his family history his father sometimes says they do not talk about—he used his considerable research skills to begin an inquiry into his family's complicity in slavery. Ball (1998) notes how his family memory was inherently racialized in *inscribing silences* about his family's racial crimes, writing, "the Balls lived side by side with Black families for six generations" but "no one talked about how slavery had helped us" (p. 13). Six years, dozens of conversations, numerous trips across the nation and globe, much questioning and searching, and hundreds of pages later, Ball produced his National Book Award-winning text. In what I frame as his racial-justice oriented family memory work, Ball lays bare his family's past and narrates the history of the families his own family enslaved.

He works to “face the plantation” as he calls it—to be accountable to his family history—through tracing, uncovering, and reflecting on his family’s involvement in the atrocity of slavery (Ball, 1998, p. 14). Through an oppressive inheritance borne of records necessary to run Southern plantations, he relies on over 10,000 pages of Ball family documents preserved in archives throughout the South to help him conduct his research. To even possess such an archive from which to script a family narrative inheritance reflects the kind of archival inequities and injustices that expose which lives are chosen to be recognized, gain substance, and shape and become cultural memory, and which lives remain unremarked upon or hidden. Who could write, with which materials, whose lives were worth recording, in what ways, and which remnants endure centuries later are all questions tied to archival privilege and silences central to justice-focused historical work.

For scholars investigating subjugated histories, engaging with records in some historical periods requires extensive strategizing. For example, in her book, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (2005), Williams describes the necessary critical reading practices she brought to the archive to explore how African-American people historically pursued education. In the introduction to her book she writes, “I returned...to the same missionary archives that other historians have used, and I learned to read between the lines, to pull out people who are mentioned only in passing...they were present...in the interstices, in the negative spaces that comprise such a substantial part of the picture” (Williams, 2005, pp. 1–2). Ball’s family records were thus vital for Ball history as well as the histories of the men, women, and children his family enslaved.

Ball mines his haunted archival wealth to contribute to the linguistic and semiotic orders of family memory, producing three massive books (1998; 2001; 2020). His 1998 text also engages in the discursive order of memory work by including a call to action for other Southern families who may hold similar records in their family archives. In Ball’s (1998) acknowledgments section, he pleads:

...to the families of former slave owners and others with records from the plantation period...to release their records to the archives...because the lives of slaves were chronicled by their owners...not by government scribes...such private letters and papers [thus] contain the family history of millions. (p. 455)

The ethical urgency of his call for archival equity urges the reader to act, recognize, reframe, and make accessible any crucial resources they possess to enable Black family descendants to access ancestral records to enrich their own family memory. In the Ball family alone, he notes, “close to 4,000 [B]lack people were born into slavery in his family, or bought by them, during a 167-year period” (1698–1865) when the Civil War ended, leaving as many as 75,000 descendants. His is a call to redistribute precious archival

resources that should never have been his or others to own, possess, or control in the first place.

This white racial project of family historical accountability necessitates grappling with many truths and, in my reading, methodologically destabilizes a Ball grand-family-racial narrative of white innocence or benevolence. His dual story eventually connects through discovering shared bloodlines among Black and white Ball family descendants, thereby expanding his and others' constructed sense of "family." Ball fuels those temporal reconfigurations necessary to cultural memory work that removal of Confederate statues also accomplishes. He conveys that the racism underlying the plantation system is not in "the past," but continues to the present. He refuses a colorblind racial narrative of past harm that is now "over," and "irrelevant," in favor of foregrounding a dynamic legacy that blends past and present and persists in varied forms. Ball continues this line of family inquiry in subsequent books, *The Sweet Hell Inside* (2002) and, most recently, in *Life of a Klansman* (2020). This is family memory work that moves determinedly toward racial justice.

Conclusion: The Work of Cultural Memory

Today's cultural memory evidenced in Confederate removals, academic memory practices, and family memory work all speak to the labor and narrative orders involved in fostering more-bearable cultural memories toward racial justice. Recognizing cultural memory as a project of power and formation through particular narrative orders (Brockmeier, 2002) allows us better to mark, trace, and excavate counter memories, forgotten memories, and partial memories that merit amplifying through sustained attention to these discursive, semiotic, and linguistic orders. With Burkeman's (2021) reminders of the centrality of mortality to our choices and attention, to remember otherwise demands dedication to accountable memory work. And these potential transformational projects *can* happen in family, public, and academic spaces when we collectively consider the cultural memories we want to honor and to work purposefully toward those visions.

It is labor to forget, and it is labor to remember. Choose your labor.

Endnotes

- ¹ I am grateful to have been a member of SOPHE for the last 15 years and honored to be invited to give The Drake Lecture. I was scheduled to give the Lecture a few years ago but was unable to travel. The amazing Karen McKellips stepped in to present about the value of biographies in her life which continued a theme we presented for

a panel together a previous year. I remain grateful for this kind act still, years later. Karen died suddenly and far too soon in September, 2020. I thought about Karen throughout the process of writing and preparing for this presentation. I wished she could have been present with us in St. Louis this year, offering a fierce, incisive commentary on contemporary politics, wearing something bold and colorful aligned with her spirit, and gracing us all with another good story. And another. Thank you, Karen. We won't forget you.

- ² After presenting The Drake Lecture in October, 2021, I developed it further, which is the version I present here. I also developed a separate paper from remarks in the family section to explore in detail Ball's text, *Slaves in the Family* (1998), as a form of family memory work (Bailey, 2022).
- ³ See Bailey (2021) for a full review of Innis' book in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education (JISE)*.
- ⁴ After presenting The Drake Lecture in October, 2021, I drew from my remarks to develop a separate paper exploring Ball's work in *Slaves in the Family* (1998), published in 2022.

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