

National Identity and the Ethics of Space

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National symbols are so much a naturalized part of our own everyday experience that it always seems to come as a shock when we are suddenly forced to step back and remind ourselves that our national identity is a construction, not a natural law...¹

National identity carries a strong influence on the actions and logic of a nation's government and its people. This collection of traits, values, and dispositions gives an account of how those constructing these symbols would like citizens of a nation to act, think, and conceive of themselves. Such an identity is often so ingrained in an individual through exposure in school, the family, and through national media, that it can begin to seem natural and inevitable.



Oftentimes, in our daily lives, we forget that national identity is subtly constructed and reconstructed in our everyday interactions with these values and, at times, overtly challenged.

One of the strongest, and longest lasting, media for transmitting a national identity from generation to generation is through national symbols such as the flag, national anthem, or famous figures in national history. These symbols create community through shared experience and/or interpretation of these symbols, as well as act as a textbook on how to be a true

American, German, Russian, and so on. In the United States, the National Mall is one of the most influential location for national symbols—and therefore, national identity—in the country. At the

¹ Michael E. Geisler, “What Are National Symbols—and What Do They Do to Us?” in *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, ed. Michael E. Geisler (Lebanon, NH: Middlebury College Press, 2005), X.

very least, nowhere else in the nation are so many lessons of national identity collected in a single commemorative space. As such, the National Mall becomes a predominant expression of the traits and values of an “ideal American” by displaying and memorializing people and events emblematic of the “American Spirit.” In this paper, I will address the processes of signification at work in national symbols—particularly those on the National Mall in Washington, DC—as a mechanism of what Michel Foucault refers to as disciplinary power, in order to transform a sprawling lawn decorated with marble into a space where national identity is constructed and reinforced. I will also explore the National Mall as a space for the negotiation of national identity, and as such, a locus for significant resistance to, and reconstruction of, the existing American national identity through a reconceptualization of how individuals relate to themselves as nationalized subjects.

The success of this paper will largely be determined by the accomplishment of three goals: to expose national identity as a construction reinforced by national symbols, which are not randomly assembled; to “peel back the mask of innocence”² that surrounds commemorative events (including the monuments) and reveal the mechanisms of power reinforcing their projection of national identity; and to show these narratives of identity as contested “space” which can be challenged and shaped by the “common person” to bring about a more dialectical construction of national subjects.

In order to examine the use of national symbols, we must first take a look at Foucault’s theories of power and the way that power has evolved in society in order to better understand how national symbols have been used to shape conceptions of American identity. To best

² John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 20.

understand how these symbols work, we must look at traits of what Foucault refers to as disciplinary power.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Foucault notes a shift in the way that power is utilized. Before this shift, sovereign power—such as the reign of a king—was the main form of power used by governments. However, over these two hundred years or so, mechanisms of power evolved into what Foucault refers to as a disciplinary power focused on the body itself. He notes three major changes in the techniques of discipline. The first is the “scale of control” is focused on the individual, or the body with mechanisms of discipline “exercising upon it [the body] a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself—movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity....”³ Second, “the object of control...was not or was no longer the signifying elements of behavior or the language of the body, but the economy, efficiency of movements, their internal organization; constraint bears upon the forces rather than upon the signs”⁴ meaning that power was now aimed at controlling the very motion of the body, rather than simply the signification of the body. And finally, “the modality...implies the uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result.”⁵ In sum, disciplinary power has moved to a focus on the actions and abilities of the body with a goal of producing docile bodies—bodies more easily manipulated and controlled in both deed and subsequent ideas about what the body can and should do. These docile bodies are the key component in creating docile subjects, and in this case docile national subjects.

One of the most important elements of this discipline, particularly for our purposes, is the use of space in creating docile bodies and the processes of normalization. Discipline, first,

³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 137.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

“proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space.”⁶ Individuals are spatialized in order to best accomplish the desired function. These “functional sites... code a space that architecture generally left at the disposal of several different uses. Particular places were defined to correspond not only to the need to supervise, to break dangerous communications, but also to create a useful space.”⁷ In the case of the National Mall, monuments are spaced away from one another, giving a sense of pilgrimage when moving from one to the other, but also close enough to be considered a unit with a cohesive message. The space is divided enough to be supervised in manageable pieces and to intervene in any unwanted activity, while at the same time each space produces certain interactions with the monument through the architecture, and simultaneously acts as part of a whole to produce a conception of American identity conducive to a docile citizenry. As a result of this reliance on space

a whole problematic then develops: that of an architecture that is no longer built simply to be seen..., or to observe the external space..., but to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control—to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them.⁸

The National Mall in Washington serves as one of the primary spaces where control of American conceptions of identity is articulated. When in the space of the monuments, individuals are pressured to act in a certain way, not only by the written rules and regulations, but in the very spaces of the monuments themselves.

Take, for example, the Lincoln Memorial. Having been constructed as a temple, individuals are encouraged approach with a sense of reverence up the stairs to worship an

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 141.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 141-2.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 172.

American deity. Once inside the Memorial, the space is open except for the massive figure of Abraham Lincoln sitting as Zeus sits in his temple in Greece. The statue itself is so large one cannot help but look upwards in order to see his face, and the velvet ropes prevent anyone from approaching too closely, and therefore making a personal contact with the Memorial. One is largely limited to standing in awe, head raised, contemplating Lincoln's greatness, or perhaps posing for a family portrait with Lincoln in the background, the patriarch of every American family. While one could say that this is merely an interpretive reading of the Memorial's architecture, and that, in theory, the structure could be read for any number of purposes, we must



take into consideration the fact that most individuals who visit the Memorial do react in this way, do enter the space with reverence and quiet, and largely limit their behavior to looking up and posing in front of Lincoln as in a family portrait. This is not to say that other actions are not possible in this space; they are simply rare and often viewed with disdain by the other visitors to the Memorial. This is a phenomenon I will examine next.

As has been argued, the architecture of a space can have a profound influence on the postures and bodily movements of individuals. But a single interaction in the desired manner is not enough to create a distinct sense of American identity in an individual. Foucault himself states that the “chief function of the disciplinary power is to ‘train’”⁹ the body, so that the appropriate actions are not only performed, but ingrained within the very memory of the body. In

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 170.

order to train, there must be distinct guidelines of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. Disciplinary power is therefore “corrective” in nature.¹⁰ Any bodies not in line with the desired action are disciplined into the acceptable range of action. The gaze of authority figures and formal punishments reinforce this process of normalization—which I will say more about in a moment—but the norm is also achieved through a self-monitoring of the masses. The desired actions are ingrained so deeply through various processes of discipline that individuals begin to police themselves when someone is not performing appropriately.



For instance, when I am observed taking pictures of the crowds at the Lincoln Memorial rather than of Lincoln himself, I am met with curious and disapproving looks. Subtle hints of disapproval at my breach of ‘normal’ behavior act as normalizing reinforcers from those being normalized themselves. In this sense, the authority not only promotes and maintains the status quo of power relations through reinforcing bodily actions, but the docile bodies themselves become complicit in the recreation of the current power relations by their disapproving glances towards those who are not sufficiently normalized as national subjects.

It is the combined influence of the actual physical space of the National Mall—and the individual monuments on the Mall—with the normalizing gaze of both the authority, in this case the National Parks Service, and the docile bodies of the visitors that provide a space of disciplinary power so effective in the construction of a National identity useful to the state. At

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 179.

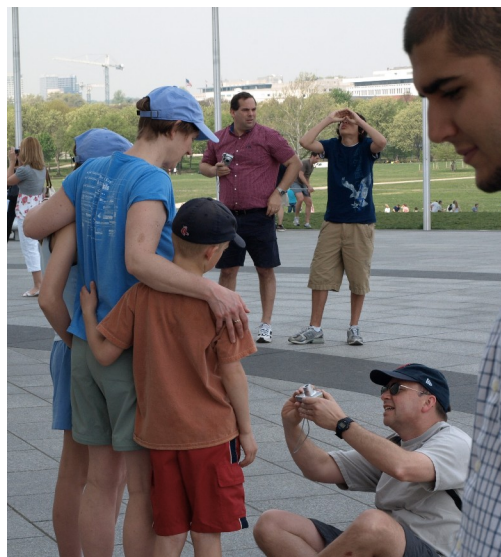
this time, I think it best to explore further how these disciplinary processes work to construct a national identity, and how the construction of a certain type of national identity is useful to the state to retain its position of authority over the individuals of nation.

One of the key processes of disciplinary power is subject formation. By taking the individual as its object, disciplinary power atomizes people into individual subjects. Processes of normalization then shape how this subject will relate to itself. Choices available for the subject to conceive of itself and to relate to itself are promoted or discouraged based on the workings of normalization at play. In order to retain the dominant position of the state, a nationalized subject is required that will conceive of itself as part of a nation and act accordingly. A docile subject, who chooses not to interrogate its options critically is largely preferred to a subject that forces dialogue about what it means to be a subject in a nation. The exclusion of individuals who lie outside the acceptable norms acts as an incentive to become the type of subject desired by the state (in this case); the incentive to avoid punishment or exclusion reinforces certain conceptions of subjectivity, at the same time the spatial processes of disciplinary subject formation are at work on the National Mall through the promotion of certain values over others. I will now turn to a more specific discussion of how national symbols—particularly the monuments on the National Mall—work to promote a certain process of subject formation through disciplinary normalization.

National symbols function as one of these disciplinary mechanisms of the state. These symbols—the flag, the national anthem, and as we will speak about here the National Mall—all act as markers of “true” patriotism. There are proper ways to interact with these symbols set forth by the government and societal norms of interacting with commemorative spaces. Much like talking during a movie, interacting “improperly” with the monuments will often garner

disapproving looks from fellow visitors, or even an official reprimand from a Park Service Ranger. These social policings reinforce and legitimize the official constructions of the monuments and the people and events they represent, by bringing resisters back into the normalized mode of interaction with national symbols.

More specifically, national symbols do not just act as normalizers of general social behavior, but serve two very important purposes in terms of shaping national identity. National symbols reinforce constructions of nationhood and nationality by helping create “the Nation” and by fusing “the Nation” to the state or government apparatus. First, “national symbols are charged with the difficult task of creating a



nation,”¹¹ by bringing a group of people together under a set of common values, traits, or dispositions. National symbols come to represent not only people or events, but the very core of what a nation is. In the United States, for example, Abraham Lincoln is not only remembered for his time as president and actions during the civil war, but also has come to represent honesty and self-sufficiency, two values claimed as part of a legacy of the American nation. Once united under a common set of values, a population begins to consider themselves a nation—an intentional grouping of people, rather than a random gathering of individuals.

Once national symbols have accomplished the difficult work of creating a nation of people, these symbols continue to function in multiple ways. Of course, national symbols are constantly invoked in the reconstruction and continuation of “the Nation” whose values must be

¹¹ Michael E. Geisler, “What Are National Symbols—and What Do They Do to Us?” in *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, ed. Michael E. Geisler (Lebanon, NH: Middlebury College Press, 2005), XV.

transmitted from generation to generation, but they also begin to take on their second, very important function of fusing the Nation to the State.



The state, in order to govern effectively, needs to be seen as legitimate and one of the ways it does so is by fusing itself to the subject formation of individuals through an appeal to the values and construction of the Nation with these disciplinary mechanisms. One of the most effective ways of doing this is through the use of national symbols, which have come to embody the values of the Nation and serve as points of instant recognition in the eyes of the population. As such, the

state “makes use of these same symbols to communicate its authority as a hegemonic power structure.”¹² By aligning itself with the symbols—and therefore values—of the Nation, the state gains legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Once legitimated, the state has more freedom to govern without question or intervention from other mechanisms of power working in society. But how does this all actually work? What is it about national symbols that are so persuasive?

Symbols in general take on meaning through a process of “overdetermination,” meaning that the symbol becomes more than just the object that it is, and becomes the thing it symbolizes. As such, the two concepts are linked so strongly in our minds and social consciousness that an apple ceases to become just an apple, but also New York City, Thomas Jefferson ceases to become simply Jefferson the man, but also independence from tyranny. This attachment of

¹² Michael E. Geisler, “What Are National Symbols—and What Do They Do to Us?” in *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, ed. Michael E. Geisler (Lebanon, NH: Middlebury College Press, 2005), XX.

symbol to concept is produced through nearly constant repetition.¹³ The likeness between Jefferson and independence is repeated and reinforced in school, by the government, on television, in Independence Day sales commercials, and through social celebrations of Independence Day. Through these constant repetitions, an “invisible web of meaning [is] formed by state institution or ideological state apparatuses [the church, school, family, media, etc.], which implicate everybody in an all-encompassing arch of signification...Overdetermination works because each of these institutions echoes what each of the others say.”¹⁴ Because the same message is repeated in multiple forums and each forum echoes and reinforces the other, we fuse the symbol to its object of signification in our minds.

The most effective symbols are those that speak to more than one segment of the population, or are multivocal, since these symbols will reach more people, more effectively.¹⁵ No one group or individual is completely powerless. Through the democratic mechanisms and values in the United States, citizens are allowed a voice in the selection of national symbols through an application process for historical site selection. While this may seem like a small voice, the actual selection of national sites involves a dialogic process between the National Park Service and the American public, which will be further expanded on below. However, in order to engage in dialogue, there must be, at the most basic level, a common language.

John Bodnar argues, quite effectively, that the language of patriotism in the United States has been the most effective in developing multivocal symbols of American identity. He writes,

¹³ Michael E. Geisler, “What Are National Symbols—and What Do They Do to Us?” in *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, ed. Michael E. Geisler (Lebanon, NH: Middlebury College Press, 2005), XXVIII.

¹⁴ Michael E. Geisler, “What Are National Symbols—and What Do They Do to Us?” in *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, ed. Michael E. Geisler (Lebanon, NH: Middlebury College Press, 2005), XXXVII note 6.

¹⁵ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 16.

“the symbolic language of patriotism is central to public memory in the United States because it has the capacity to mediate both vernacular loyalties to local and familiar places and loyalties to national and imagined structures.”¹⁶ Values, such as liberty, freedom from tyranny, honesty, justice, and truth, are all embodied in the symbols and language of patriotism in the United States. In order to foster and maintain these values as part of American national identity, appropriate symbols needed to be chosen, and there is “no better way to inculcate true patriotism than to preserve and cherish objects...identified with the evolution of the nation.”¹⁷ Due to America’s “birth” through revolution, the legacy of patriotism begins in the ideals of the founding fathers, and is maintained throughout the years through symbols that harken back to the “original American values,” as evidenced in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution.

Unfortunately, this legacy of patriotism can in itself become a mechanism of disciplinary power. By identifying the “American spirit” with the founding fathers and their actions against Britain, we have inherited certain values that are so often repeated, and are so ingrained in our conceptions of ourselves, that they are rarely questioned because “such inherited beliefs can be accepted in a powerful way because their presence reduces the imagination of alternatives.”¹⁸ Since we are simply the next generation interacting with a construction of national identity through values such as freedom. Because we have been raised within this system of values, it is often difficult to step outside of our own identity construction to see alternatives. It seems appropriate that I now turn to a reading of the official presentation of monuments on the National Mall in Washington, DC through National Park Service literature, to see what values are being

¹⁶ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 14-15.

¹⁷ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 180.

¹⁸ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 204.

presented as American by the state in order to better see how our identity is being constructed for us.

According to the National Parks Service's brochure on Washington, DC, the capitol city



is a “place that defines us as a people” and the monuments serve as one of the major places of definition. In fact, the monuments are not considered just memorials to what has past, but indicators of who we are as a people. The monuments on the National Mall are, in fact, “most important in what they say about us...beyond the sites and structures, beyond the events and people they commemorate, are the truths they embody: justice, equality, courage, honor—the tools of a free society.”¹⁹ Though part of the larger

milieu of sites and symbols that serve to shape national memory and identity, the seven main monuments and memorials on the National Mall—the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, World War II Memorial, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Korean War Veterans Memorial, Thomas Jefferson Memorial, and the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial—can be examined both separately and as a unit which shapes American memory. By creating a shared memory, the state brings diverse individuals of a population together with shared values through their common memory. These values in turn mold the national identity of national subjects created through disciplinary mechanisms. The issue of freedom is often a prominent topic of

¹⁹ National Parks Service, “Washington: The Nation’s Capital,” 2005.

discussion in literature about the Mall, and I feel the examination of “freedom on the Mall” gives a fairly representative picture of these mechanisms at work.

Whether we are fighting for it, defending it, or guaranteeing it for our own country or another, much of the rhetoric in the National Park Service handouts center on the concept of freedom. The concept of freedom is so important that four of the seven pamphlets mention freedom on the front of the document, and all but one—the pamphlet for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial—refer to freedom, independence, or liberty explicitly. Each of the memorials engages freedom in the specific context of the event or person being remembered, but these “secondary” values also work together to form a tighter conception of American identity.

The Washington Monument couples freedom with an anti-tyranny stance. Through his position as General of the Continental Army, Washington opposed the tyranny of Great Britain. In the Capitol, when he first refused the power Congress bestowed on him, and then again after being elected president, finishing his two terms as president and “refus[ing] pressure to run for a third”²⁰ Washington again took a stance against tyranny. Freedom from tyranny continues through to the Lincoln Memorial, where it is now joined by morality. Lincoln is noted for having raised the Civil War to “a higher moral plane” by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Much of the pamphlet is focused on Lincoln’s views of slavery as detrimental to the United States. The Park Service notes that “in freeing the slaves Lincoln left a legacy to freedom that is one of the most enduring birthrights Americans possess”²¹. Lincoln’s conception of freedom and morality is also linked back to the revolution by noting his belief in the “principles of the Declaration of Independence.”²² Particularly mentioned is the phrase “all men are created

²⁰ National Parks Service, “Washington Monument,” 2004.

²¹ National Parks Service, “Lincoln Memorial,” 2004.

²² Ibid.

equal,” which also graces the front of the Park Services brochure for the Thomas Jefferson Memorial.

Moving from the examples of Washington and Lincoln to the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, we see a marked difference in focus. Jefferson’s conception of freedom is focused on ideas rather than actions. His authorship of the Declaration of Independence is noted more than once, as well as his belief in “freedom of



religion and the separation between church and state, and in education available to all.”²³ The descriptions of Jefferson echo the anti-tyrannical stance of Washington, though through intellectualism, rather than war, as well as connect Jefferson with presidents of the twentieth century through mention of FDR and John F. Kennedy, thereby continuing the ideal of freedom as a contemporary value. The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial blends the promotion of freedom through action and thought with the prominent position of the “Four Freedoms”—which grace the front cover of the pamphlet—as well as his role in World War II. Roosevelt’s memorial also adds another layer to the American story with the Park Service’s focus on his disability after a bout with polio. Traits such as “determination,” “courage,” and “persistence” color the brochure, though always connected to his confinement in a wheelchair. A theme of ‘triumph over hardship’ resonates in each section of the pamphlet and his characterization as “one of this

²³ National Parks Service, “Thomas Jefferson Memorial,” 2004.

nation's greatest leaders" and "a founding father" of the United Nations²⁴ universalizes this trait to the other presidents memorialized on the Mall, further ingrainning them as integral characteristics of all Americans.

Sacrifice and triumph over hardship are further attributed to the American people in the World War II Memorial. The Memorial itself connects to FDR through the use of his quotations on parts of the Memorial, but the bulk of the Memorial is directed to the common American, honoring the "many millions who supported the war effort on the home front."²⁵ Again, the ideal American is depicted as fighting tyranny—this time on the world stage—and directly linked to the ideals of both Washington and Lincoln by the Memorial's location between their monuments on the National Mall. In this memorial, the "spirit of sacrifice"²⁶ is credited to all Americans who share in the higher moral calling to defend the world from tyranny.

The threat of tyranny is once again invoked, though implicitly as a "threat to democratic nations,"²⁷ in the Korean War Veterans Memorial. The phrase "Freedom is not Free" plays a prominent role in the characterization of this Memorial, and invokes the recurrent theme of America's sacrifices for freedom at home and abroad. This is made clear on the front cover of the pamphlet:

"Freedom Is Not Free." These four words on the wall of the Korean War Veterans Memorial reflect the sentiments of men and women who served in the Korean War—as well as those who fought and sacrificed to preserve democracy throughout our nation's history.²⁸

²⁴ National Parks Service, "Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial," 2005.

²⁵ National Parks Service, "World War II Memorial," 2007.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ National Parks Service, "Korean War Veterans Memorial," 2007.

²⁸ Ibid.

Inside the pamphlet continues this universalizing language by noting that 1.5 million Americans were involved in the conflict, “a true cross-section of the nation’s populace.”²⁹ With this language, every American can feel connected to those who fought, because someone similar to them must have given something to the cause of freedom and democracy.

The one outlier in the group of pamphlets, the only one that makes no mention of freedom, is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. However, despite this difference—and the distinct difference in focus and layout of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial pamphlet—similar themes are still embraced. Instead of focusing on freedom, courage, honor, and duty to country take center stage. Though the concept of sacrifice to the nation, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial remains connected to the others by harkening back to the duty of the founding fathers to the young United States, and to Lincoln through the “important process of national reconciliation.”³⁰ While the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is clouded over by a much contested debate over the Vietnam War, the framing of the Memorial by the National Park Service focuses on the sacrifice of those who fought, as well as the “price of freedom,”³¹ and suggests that, perhaps, the unmentioned conflict was a necessary evil to be undertaken by those who have sworn to protect freedom and democracy around the world.

By framing each of the monuments under the concept of freedom, our memory of the events and people being memorialized is also framed. These times, places, and men are so often combined with freedom and courage and duty that these memories take precedence over others. As freedom has become a central value of Americanism, if not the central value, the strong association between the official memories of the Mall and freedom allows this reading of national history to predominate. Women’s memories of working in the factories during World

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ National Parks Service, “Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” 2007.

³¹ Ibid.

War II and then being forced out are pushed aside in favor of the bravery of GIs on the front line fighting for freedom. Memories of African Americans who were not included in Jefferson's conception of "all men" when it came to voting rights as our country was established are forgotten as we remember Jefferson's insistence on the separation between church and state and freedom of religion. Memories of blacklisted actors in the fifties are forgotten when remembering the valiant fight against the tyranny of Communism for freedom in South Korea and the rest of the world. By including certain values into American identity, other values are excluded. National identity becomes so strongly internalized through repetition and spatial constructions that certain counter memories or alternative identity constructions are largely prevented from being made.³² Counter memories and identity constructions are still possible, but these dominant symbols become so strongly connected to the concept of an American nation that it becomes very difficult for alternate voices to be heard. This is largely a result of the process by which national symbols—in this case monuments on the National Mall—are selected.

As discussed above, the Nation is not a naturally occurring phenomenon, but a social construction that has been developed and refined over time. As a result, the origin of the Nation "cannot be described as a historical community or ethnic group but...as a myth fabricated by (mostly urban) elites who shape what they consider to be the cultural historical and ethnic character of a particular population group into a powerful myth."³³ Symbols are chosen by those in positions of power to reinforce this myth of national identity. Through these symbols a public memory is shaped, which involves fundamental issues about the existence of a society—its origins, its values, and its traits. While individuals or groups in positions of authority select these

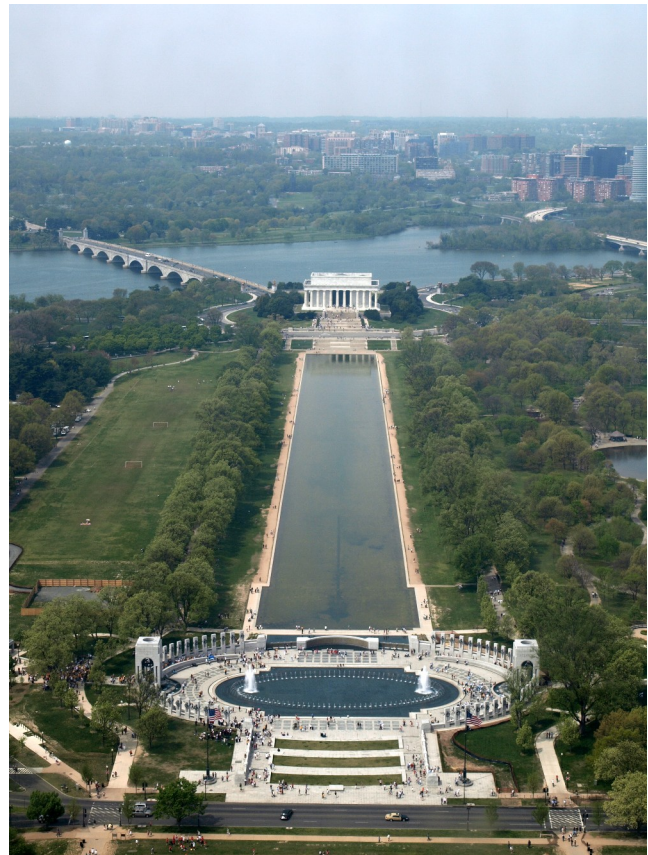
³² John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 19-20.

³³ Michael E. Geisler, "What Are National Symbols—and What Do They Do to Us?" in *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, ed. Michael E. Geisler (Lebanon, NH: Middlebury College Press, 2005), XIV.

symbols, no one person is completely without influence in a society. As such, even the vernacular culture has an influence over what symbols take hold for the general public. National symbols, as previously discussed, are most effective when they contain elements of multivocality, in order to speak most effectively to both the official and vernacular culture. National monuments in particular, such as those on the National Mall, are the ultimate expressions of our national identity and so must serve, often times, conflicting roles in attempting to appease and speak to different constituencies.

Since symbols work through a process of overdetermination, expressions of our national identity in the form of national monuments are never just about commemorating important events or people in the history of the nation, but serve to reinforce certain values and conceptions of a “good American.” We are able to see this process of value selection more clearly when looking at how National Park Service sites are chosen.

The National Park Service became responsible for all national historical sites with the Historic Preservation Act of 1933. John Bodnar's chapter on "The National Park Service and History" in *Remaking America* outlines the process and deliberations of the committee to accept or deny proposals for national historic sites all over the country. He notes that the "alleged objectivity and rationality of the professionals could be swayed considerably by sentiments of passionate patriotism"³⁴ while this may seem like a relatively mundane sentiment in terms of American national identity, this example highlights the element of choice in selecting national sites, which have the potential to become national symbols. Bodnar also discusses the discourse and language of the applications for national site recognition that were more likely to be accepted: those that spoke to both national and local interests (though the former was more likely to triumph over the latter), and sites that projected the image of patriotism and other "historically" American values of liberty, freedom, and equality. The committee also identified several conceptual areas that were valued over others in determining site selection, which further solidified the official reading of American



identity as action-oriented, enterprising, and persevering over hardship.³⁵ Continuity was valued

³⁴ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 85.

³⁵ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 181.

over change, and “accounts of fundamental change, except those of the declarations of 1776, were usually reinterpreted in ways that fostered patriotism and made them seem inevitable and desirable.”³⁶ While not all of the monuments on the Mall were constructed after 1933 under the purview of the National Parks Service, older monuments were also selected by committee from a pool of designs with varying implications, both theoretical and structural. So, one can see that national symbols and sites of collective memory did not naturally arise out of the course of history, but were purposefully selected over others to reinforce certain conceptions of American history and to create the illusion of a continuous national identity through conscious themes such as “European Exploration and Settlement,” “Major American Wars,” “Westward Expansion,” and “Political and Military Affairs”³⁷ as a guiding force in the acceptance or denial of proposals for national monuments, and therefore in the construction of American identity.

In order to relate the functioning of national symbols fully as a mechanism of disciplinary power, we must take one final step in the argument. National symbols become mechanisms of disciplinary power because the values and conceptions of national identity that they reinforce in turn act to legitimate and uphold certain power structures and relations in a national society. Despite the multivocality of a symbol or monument, and its ability to relate multiple meanings to different segments of the population, the official interpretation of the symbol tends to overshadow any alternative readings. The American Revolution, though visible as a symbol of critical evaluation of government policies, is more readily framed on the Mall as representing the glory of the American people as freedom fighters against the tyranny of the

³⁶ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 246.

³⁷ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 181.

British Empire, rather than the need to critically examine the current policies of the United States government.

It is “through national symbols a nation talks to itself”³⁸ and passes on the construction of national identity from generation to generation and to newly arrived citizens. But despite a dialogic construction of identity through multivocal national symbols, one set of meanings will predominate. As we have seen, national symbols and “images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order.”³⁹ National symbols will largely reinforce values that promote an identity that supports the current incarnation of the state. Those in a position to choose national symbols and sites of public memory will “ultimately foster the ‘triumph of a public memory that serve[s] the cause of a powerful nation state.’”⁴⁰ As such, national symbols are highly influential mechanism of disciplinary power, shaping the actions of the population through normalized embodiment of values vital to a national identity that supports the current constructions and systems of power in the United States.

While we must keep this subtle connection between a reinforced state power mechanism and national symbols in mind as a powerful determinant of national identity, it is important not to negate counter readings of national symbols. While the state has a greater influence in shaping what symbols and national monuments are constructed, including where they will be and what they will look like, the state cannot completely control how individuals and groups will read the messages projected by these monuments. In the huge number of proposals for national monuments sent to the Park Service each year, we can see that “the shaping of a past worthy of

³⁸ Michael E. Geisler, “What Are National Symbols—and What Do They Do to Us?” in *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, ed. Michael E. Geisler (Lebanon, NH: Middlebury College Press, 2005), XXXVII.

³⁹ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

⁴⁰ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 205.

public commemoration in the present is contested and involves a struggle for supremacy between advocates of various political ideas and sentiments,”⁴¹ including those memories and conceptions of identity that run counter to the state’s objectives. Such contestation of national symbols remains an integral part in the perpetual reconstruction of American national identity, as well as a potential form of resistance to hegemonic national narratives.

As Geisler notes, “A nation is not an entirely stable construction...the national narrative at its core is continually amended, edited, and rewritten by each successive generation.”⁴² As a result, national narratives are not objective expressions, but subjective creations of disciplinary power. In order to preserve the civic culture of democracy, citizens should be critical of mechanisms of power that deny individuals agency in their own subject formation through the marginalization of minority opinions.

Since it is usually the “local and personal past that is incorporated into a nationalized public memory, rather than the other way around,” vernacular culture is in constant danger of being subsumed into the official culture, thereby legitimating current configurations of power whose primary interest is maintaining the status quo.⁴³ In order to maintain such conceptions of power, docile subjects are encouraged to accept these “official” constructions of national identity with little exploration of alternative readings of the events presented. It is in this prescribed relationship to the self that we encounter what Foucault would consider to be the major ethical dilemma. Most of the current monuments on the National Mall dictate quite strongly how subjects should interact with them, what crucial values should be extrapolated from them, and

⁴¹ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13.

⁴² Michael E. Geisler, “What Are National Symbols—and What Do They Do to Us?” in *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, ed. Michael E. Geisler (Lebanon, NH: Middlebury College Press, 2005), XVI.

⁴³ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 17.

therefore, what subjects make “good Americans.” The structures as they stand currently leave little room for dialogue over how they should be read as texts on American patriotism. Foucault’s conception of ethics are not one of right and wrong here, in the sense that the monuments are not simply sending a “wrong” or “bad” message about what Americans are, although the values and actions legitimated by the current conceptions of American values could certainly be seen as legitimating unethical actions in the more traditional sense of the word. Rather, the problem here is one of ethics in that the disciplinary processes are limiting individuals’ agency in determining how they conceive of themselves. But this is not to say that evidence of alternative subject formation is absent from the National Mall as it stands, or that the Mall could not evolve in such a way as to promote a different process of subject formation because “national symbols, extracted from their ‘naturalized’ position embedded in to the political rhetoric, reveal not only the contestations to their own signification by competing symbols, but also the historical struggles between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces articulated in alternate choices of signification practiced over time,”⁴⁴ therefore allowing space for alternative conceptions of the self. By encouraging counter readings of national symbols as well as alternative choices for collective commemoration, we can perhaps begin to explore the possibility of constructing the National Mall as a space for more dialogic subject formation within a national identity.

In order to achieve an alternative process of subject formation, there needs to be more room for counter memories to be examined and explored on the National Mall. Counter memories are memories, or accounts of experience, that center the experience of oppressed groups such as women, non-whites, non-heterosexual, working class, and disabled people are all considered counter memories since these groups of people have been historically constructed as

⁴⁴ Michael E. Geisler, “What Are National Symbols—and What Do They Do to Us?” in *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, ed. Michael E. Geisler (Lebanon, NH: Middlebury College Press, 2005), XXXI.

outside the official nation and therefore any knowledge emanating from their experiences could be utilized to engage in an alternative, more dialogic process of subject formation, with greater agency allocated to the individual, rather than the state.

These counter memories often come about in opposition to the dominant knowledge of the time. As memories of oppressed groups, these ways of knowing the world encourage dialogue and critical reflection, as well as personal relationship to theory and a focus on individual context. I



believe that these counter memories could be the key to a more dialogic subject formation on the National Mall. Of the seven monuments commonly referred to as being on the Mall, none is dedicated to women⁴⁵ and only the Lincoln Memorial obliquely refers to African Americans through a discussion of how Lincoln freed the slaves. Additionally, nearly every monument on the Mall refers directly or indirectly to war and militarism in some way. All the monuments are also constructed in such a way as to promote little dialogue or confusion about what the “correct” reading of the monument is, through the use of space and normalization as discussed earlier. The one exception to a strong disciplinary structure is the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, which I would like to discuss in light of its potential as a possible counter monument in terms of subject formation and normalization.

⁴⁵ While the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial does have a statue dedicated to the “women of the U.S. Armed Forces” in the war, the women depicted are filled only with concern for the fallen (male) soldier and reinforces the construction of women as only men’s caretakers rather than as fighting for their country in their own right.

The FDR Memorial is unique in its construction, in that it is much more organic looking than any of the other monuments on the Mall. Containing five rooms, the Memorial stretches across the edge of the Potomac Basin and is full of waterfalls, flowering trees, and unsmoothed rock. Beginning with a “Prologue Room” and continuing on with a room for each of Roosevelt’s terms as President of the United States, the architecture encourages visitors to interact with the Memorial at every step. There are no signs asking visitors to stay off the rocks or even out of the water. Statues of Roosevelt are accessible to the public, and though he is often sculpted larger than life, his fingers have often been rubbed gold from so much human contact. Roosevelt is depicted seated in his wheelchair with his beloved dog, and visitors are often seen posing with



either the dog or Roosevelt as if they were alive—holding Roosevelt’s hand or petting the dog.

Room two, covering the main years of the Depression, has sculptures depicting the hard times endured by the people, including a farmer and his wife and men in a bread line. Visitors often have their pictures taken as though they were part of the farmer's family or standing between the men in the bread line.

Interaction is also common with the four pillars on the other side of room two, where indented hand prints encourage visitors to match place their own hand in the indentation left, thereby connecting physically to the monument and the



messages being projected. In the third room, large stone blocks are piled haphazardly upon one another with the words "I hate war" inscribed on various surfaces in the pile. On the already roughly cut blocks, it is often difficult to make out the words until you are right on top of them. Children and adults alike are often seen climbing on the blocks and discovering the inscriptions as they touch and explore the pile for themselves.

There are two important aspects to this Memorial that work to create an alternative process of subject formation. First, the voices and memories represented are more than simply the official voice of the state. Stories of the working class, disabled, and women are represented and brought to the forefront of the Memorial, as well as a call for peace. Each of these counter memories encourages critical reflection on the part of the visitor to examine how she conceives of herself and how she fits into the Memorial. Each of these dialogic knowledges is reinforced by

the construction of the very space of the Memorial, the second and most important way in which the FDR Memorial challenges docile subject formations in favor of a more dialogic process.



The meandering layout of the Memorial provides more options for individuals to choose how they would like to experience the Memorial based on their interests and inclinations. Entering from the end of the Memorial is

just as easy as entering from the beginning, and there is no “correct” way of ordering how visitors experience the rooms. A loose chronological flow is suggested by the ordering of FDR’s terms, but traffic flows easily in both and all directions. In each of the rooms, there are spatial elements, some described above, that encourage a physical interaction with the Memorial, building a theoretical and conceptual conversation at the same time as the physical experience. The physical interactions also promote a dialogue with the Memorial in how one interprets the pieces put forth. By being able to insert yourself physically on a bread line in the Great Depression, you trigger thoughts about what it would be like to live with those people in that time period, and subsequently have the potential relate to yourself in a different way and conceive of yourself in a different light. By highlighting subjugated experiences in the country during FDR’s presidency, we are given examples of different ways we can conceive of ourselves and therefore are given the opportunity to take a larger part in our own subject formation than with the Lincoln Memorial, for example. It is this possibility and ability to be able to conceive of ourselves differently as subjects that leads to a more ethical subject formation than the

disciplinary power at work in some of the other monuments on the National Mall, where we are simply constructed as subjects, rather than part of the construction process to any meaningful extent. And while, as discussed above, we are never without any ability to construct ourselves differently than we are constructed by the mechanisms of disciplinary power, there are many times in which our role in our own subject formation is severely limited or discouraged for the sake of creating docile bodies that will uphold and legitimate the current relationships of power that—in this case—the state relies on.

While the FDR Memorial is not without its share of disciplinary mechanisms, it is certainly more open to dialogue and interaction in visitor's national subject formation than most, if not all, the other monuments and memorials on the National Mall. And the existence of such a structure gives hope for the possibility of resistance to rigid subject formation and normalization in the form of commemorative monuments.

In this paper I attempted to expose national identity as a construction reinforced by national symbols, which are not randomly assembled. This construction of national identity is carefully shaped by the state through agencies, such as the National Park Service, to promote values useful to forming a docile national subject. Values of freedom, duty, and persistence are constructed as integral to being “American” and serve to shape a hegemonic conception of the Nation. These values are then invoked by the state through national symbols, such as the monuments on the National Mall, in order to effectively fuse the State to the Nation, thereby legitimating the State in the eyes of a national subject. By revealing this relationship I have attempted to “peel back the mask of innocence”⁴⁶ surrounding the National Mall as a natural collection of commemoration and reveal the National Mall as a mechanism of disciplinary power

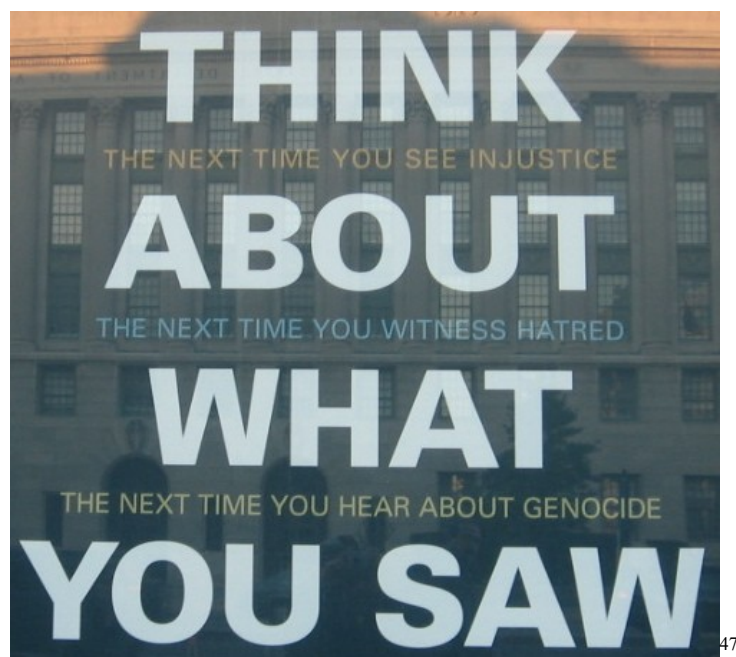
⁴⁶ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 20.

reinforcing the hegemonic projection of national identity. By shaping the commemorative space of the monuments in a particular way, a single way of interacting with national memory is deemed acceptable. By ostracizing any other interactions with these sites of commemoration, disciplinary mechanisms engage in a process of normalization that produces a certain kind of national subject. This normalization discourages other conceptions of how one can be a national subject, and as such is problematic.

Through a discussion of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, I have tried to show that, by including counter memories in official spaces of national commemoration, these hegemonic narratives of identity can be contested. By constructing spaces that allow individuals to interact with the space, and explore memories counter to the official memory of the state, we can perhaps bring about a more dialectical construction of national subjects. Of course, even FDR Memorial is not perfect, and we must, as individuals and groups work towards creating more such spaces where dialogic processes of subject formation can flourish. We, as citizens, must also realize that the state still determines what spaces become national sites of commemoration, and therefore sites of identity construction and national subject formation.

By identifying the National Mall, and other national symbols, as mechanisms of disciplinary power, there are many big questions that arise. First, and perhaps most importantly, is can memorialization be “saved,” so to speak, from this oppressive process of subject formation? The FDR Memorial has show us that the oppressive processes of subject formation can be mitigated, and alternative processes can begin to develop, but is this enough? Can official space of commemoration be altered enough to eradicate oppressive subject formation and thus resuscitate the practice of commemoration for those who prize a critical civic culture?

These thoughts bring us to even deeper questions that must be explored in order to fully understand what new direction(s) to move in, should we want to resist the disciplinary power of the state, as it is used on the National Mall. Why do we build monuments to begin with? Why is it important to us as nations, as societies, as humans to commemorate the past? Are there other issues or fears at work, unconsciously, in our struggle to remember and commemorate the past? If we follow these questions to their logical ends, I believe we will end up interrogating what it means to be part of a society, and ultimately, what it means to be human. While the answers to these last questions are well beyond the scope of this paper, and have eluded so many thinkers for thousands of years, I believe exploring how national subjects are formed through discourses of national identity, particularly in the physical spaces where we see national identity embodied is another point of entry into an alternative way of constructing ourselves as subjects and our ideas of what it means to be a subject.



⁴⁷ This is a window at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. While the museum is not referring to the topic of this paper, I feel “think about what you saw” is a fitting suggestion to help foster alternative processes of national subject formation.

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