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## ***When Your Topic Goes Viral: Building a Public Scholarship Practice***

**Sarah Beetham, Assistant Professor and Interim Chair of Liberal Arts,  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts**

I did not originally set out to become a public scholar. When I first began researching Civil War monuments as an undergraduate at Rutgers University, it was to satisfy a deep personal interest in the aftermath of the war and the politics of public sculpture. I continued to pursue the topic in graduate school with a master’s thesis on elaborate soldiers’ and sailors’ monuments and a dissertation on the emergence of the citizen soldier monument as a major sculptural type in the postbellum era. For much of that time, I was working in



Fig. 1. Henry Shrady and Leo Lentelli, *Robert E. Lee Monument*, unveiled 1924. Bronze and granite, 26 ft. high. Charlottesville, VA. Photograph by the author, April 2018

relative isolation. The soldier monuments I study are usually not the work of prestige artists, but instead mass-market companies, and my scholarship is heavily based in material culture and social history. Finishing my dissertation in 2014, I thought it would take some convincing to find a place for my work within the broader field.

But everything changed in June 2015. Following the racially motivated murder of nine black churchgoers at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, activists triggered a massive public reckoning over the future of Confederate symbols in American life. It began with tagging of Confederate monuments. Then the flags began to come down, and monuments followed. That in turn prompted a backlash from right-wing and white supremacist groups, which led to more demonstrations and more violence—most notably the deadly riot in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017 (fig. 1). And the furor over Confederate monuments has become a global movement, interrogating which narratives and ideologies we enshrine in our public space, and what we should do with monuments that no longer represent the values of modern society. For me, this has meant a

major adjustment in my identity as a scholar. I have used social media to keep abreast of new developments in the Civil War memorial landscape, and I have been asked to comment on the current monument debates in public forums and the news media. Through this, I have developed an appreciation for the role that public-facing scholarship can play in informing important debates on the national stage and in arguing for the continued relevance of art-historical inquiry. What follows is an account of my experience as a public scholar, followed by a series of practical suggestions on developing a public-facing platform.

Long before Confederate monuments became national news, I was lucky to receive excellent training in public humanities engagement while I was a graduate student at the University of Delaware (UD). In summer 2011, I participated in what is now called the Delaware Public Humanities Institute. In this two-week training program, UD graduate students build social media profiles, participate in mock interviews with a real television reporter, learn to condense their research into legible talking points, and meet with educators in public-facing roles at institutions in northern Delaware.<sup>1</sup> This invaluable experience should be a fixture in more graduate programs. Four years later, in spring 2015, an Associated Press reporter contacted me asking questions for a story he was writing on the citizen soldier monuments that had been the subject of my dissertation. After that story aired, a producer from the local Wilmington PBS television station invited me to appear on an episode of *The Delaware Way* with Larry Mendte. We taped in May for a planned airdate of June 20, 2015. Little did we know that by the time the episode aired, the future of Confederate monuments would suddenly be national news. In the days following the Charleston church shooting, activists connected with the Black Lives Matter movement powerfully advocated for the removal of the monuments, pointing out the roots of the current institutionalized violence against black Americans in the injustices of the past. Their advocacy has indelibly altered how we view our memorial landscapes.

In the weeks following Charleston, I had an opportunity to tailor a piece of scholarly writing toward the emerging Confederate monument crisis. I had already been invited to participate in a special issue of *Public Art Dialogue* on the destruction of monuments based on a 2014 College Art Association panel, and my deadline to turn in my manuscript was July 2015. Anticipating that Confederate monuments would continue to be a major topic of conversation, I tailored that manuscript so that it could be used to teach the subject in college classrooms. I presented the history of Confederate monuments and the argument for their removal in plain language that could be understood by a non-specialist audience. When the issue came out in 2016, I promoted it on my website and social media accounts, and Taylor and Francis decided to make it open access for several months, so that it could be read by people without an institutional affiliation. The piece seems to have had the intended result, as I have heard good things from colleagues who have used it in classroom discussions.<sup>2</sup>

The fight over Confederate monuments reached a boiling point in August 2017 in the wake of the violent white-supremacist demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia. In the days that followed, the city of Baltimore removed its four monuments in the middle of the night, and in Durham, North Carolina, a Confederate monument crashed to the ground in an act of carefully planned collective iconoclasm. I spent a lot of time on the telephone with reporters from venues including the *Washington Post*, the *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*. Over the course of the next several months, I gave a number of public lectures on monuments, and I monitored developments in the news with my social media feeds. Currently, cities all over the country are involved in community

discussions or litigation concerning Confederate monuments, and the potential for another act of iconoclasm is present at all times.

My experiences over the past few years have convinced me that public-facing scholarship is vital to the continuing survival of the humanities. For art historians especially, public scholarship is an essential tool for increasing engagement in a discipline that is sometimes used as a punchline. For academics seeking public recognition for their work, I suggest two key steps: developing a message and learning to communicate it in plain language, and building an online profile through social media and a personal website to share that message.

The first step in thinking about a path forward as a public scholar is to decide on the message that you plan to present with your advocacy. Art-historical scholarship touches upon so many pressing societal issues, from climate change to political polarization to stratification based on race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigration status, and more. Art history also teaches key skills in visual literacy and interpreting visual material that are vital to living in a fast-paced, imaged-based world. In my public advocacy, I focus on two key points: first, that impermanence is an inherent aspect of public monuments that should always be taken into account when discussing their future; and second, that local communities should be given as much leeway as possible when making decisions about the works of public art in their spaces. My research is all about the things that happen to monuments after the dedication ceremonies are over: vandalism, accidental damage, deliberate revision carried out legally, and the slow degradation that comes with time. Ultimately, I argue that moments of material crisis in the history of a monument tell us a great deal about our relationship with our public art, but also that any work of art placed outdoors in the public will inevitably change. And in the case of problematic monuments, it is my belief that the best outcomes occur when communities come together to do the difficult work of deciding what to do with them. These principles are at the heart of every public comment I make on the monument debate.

After deciding on your message, the next step is to build an online presence for your work. Especially if you are an emerging scholar, it is crucial for people who encounter your work to be able to find you. My online strategy has two major components: a personal website and a social media presence. My website summarizes my work as a scholar, teacher, and researcher. I built it using WordPress, one of several free platforms for producing professional websites accessible to the average user. If it is available, I recommend purchasing your name as a domain name to make your site easier to find. My site includes my CV, links to publications, information about booking me as a speaker, teaching resources, and a blog. I do not write in the blog regularly, but I have found it useful when I have wanted to get a statement out quickly after a major event involving a Confederate monument. I then share those posts on my social media feeds.

Social media is another key aspect of my public-facing scholarship. Clearly, there are reasons to think carefully about engaging in public conversations in these spaces, sharing private details, and trusting major technology companies with your personal information. For me, social media has been an important tool for building my network and keeping informed of breaking monument news. I currently use three social media services: Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Instagram is an image-based service that can be made public or restricted to approved followers. Its visual emphasis makes it appealing for art-minded scholars. Facebook can be used as a professional tool, but many users employ it to

keep in touch with friends and family. I keep my posts visible only to people I have added to my Friends list, and my posts on the site are much more personal than those on Twitter or Instagram. But I have also found it useful for maintaining relationships with colleagues in my network, and I sometimes use it to seek collective answers to questions that come up in my research.

While I have found both Instagram and Facebook useful in my public work, Twitter has been by far the most helpful service in raising my profile as a public scholar. Twitter has at times occupied a fraught place in public discourse, but it can be an excellent tool for promoting one's work and for building relationships with other scholars. You can use it to post thoughts about your scholarship and how it relates to current events and to boost links to other content you have written, such as open access journal articles or posts on your personal website. But even more powerfully, you can use it to engage with other scholars and thinkers. Following people you admire on Twitter may give you opportunities to retweet their posts, engage them in discussion, and keep tabs on the work that they are publicizing. Professional relationships formed online may then lead to opportunities to collaborate in other venues. Finally, Twitter is also extremely valuable as a means for keeping on top of developments in one's field, especially if that field is prone to fast-moving events. My Twitter feed allows me to keep abreast of developments in the Confederate monument debate, from acts of iconoclasm to city council decisions and court cases. That in turn enables me to respond quickly when a major event occurs, adding my comment before the news cycle shifts to another breaking story.<sup>3</sup>

My experience with the national monument debate over the last several years has taught me a great deal about public scholarship and about the importance of sharing the skills I have learned along the way. But even more crucially, I have seen how public scholarship can play a role in ensuring the overall health not only of art-historical inquiry, but of the academy as a whole. We are all aware that the future of employment as faculty in the humanities is precarious. The total number of tenured positions in the United States continues to rise, but the percentage of faculty members who are tenured or on the tenure track has dropped precipitously.<sup>4</sup> I have only recently been promoted to a full-time position after years as an adjunct, and I am keenly aware of how difficult it is to break through as an emerging scholar in the current climate. But at the same time, my experiences have convinced me that the voices of art historians are needed in public life more than ever. Even as I have struggled to find a permanent place for myself as a scholar, I have watched as questions regarding the future of public art and the meaning of monuments have become national news, debated by individuals in all walks of life and at all levels of government. This tells me that my work has value and that there is a place for me in public discourse. And it also tells me that if the future of the humanities in the academy is indeed precarious, then we all need to do everything we can to make our voices heard and to share our vital scholarship beyond our classrooms and academic circles.

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<sup>1</sup> See "DELPHI Fellowships," Center for Material Culture Studies, University of Delaware, accessed September 29, 2019, <https://www.materialculture.udel.edu/index.php/delphi>.

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<sup>2</sup> See Sarah Beetham, "From Spray Cans to Minivans: Contesting the Legacy of Confederate Soldier Monuments in the Era of 'Black Lives Matter,'" *Public Art Dialogue* 6, no. 1 (2016): 9–33.

<sup>3</sup> For further information on getting started on Twitter by using hashtags, see Dana Allen-Griel, "Glossary of Museum-Related Hashtags," accessed September 29, 2019,

<https://danamus.es/2016/08/01/glossary-of-museum-related-hashtags>; and "53 hashtags for academia to expand your academic network on Twitter," *The Leveraged PhD*, accessed September 29, 2019, <https://theleveragedphd.com/academic-hashtags-twitter>.

<sup>4</sup> Since 1980, college enrollment has increased by ninety percent, while the total number of tenure track faculty has only increased by twenty-two percent. More and more, colleges and universities have relied on contingent faculty to fill the gap. See Trevor Griffey, "The Decline of Faculty Tenure: Less From an Oversupply of PhDs, and More from the Systematic De-Valuation of the PhD as a Credential for College Teaching," *Labor and Working-Class History Association*, January 9, 2017, accessed October 24, 2019, <http://www.lawcha.org/2017/01/09/decline-faculty-tenure-less-oversupply-phds-systematic-de-valuation-phd-credential-college-teaching>; Colleen Flaherty, "A Non-Tenure-Track Profession?" *Inside Higher Ed*, October 12, 2018, accessed October 24, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/10/12/about-three-quarters-all-faculty-positions-are-tenure-track-according-new-aaup>.