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Mnemonicide: The Killing of American Public Memory

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Project Description: Public memory studies is interdisciplinary by its very nature. There is currently a strong body of literature to assess and evaluate the current state of public memory in Alabama, the South, and beyond, as well as a large body of texts from historical markers to monuments and memorials, and to museums. However, the past few years have noticed a shift in American public memory where the number of public memory text being erected is slowing and the number of public memory texts being altered or removed is growing. The focus of this project will be to focus on the removals to document which texts are being removed, or altered, why, and how. Those who are removing these texts are having to make detailed arguments for each removal, but not about the after-effects of them. So, this project will attempt to map these removals, investigate the arguments being made for each removal, and then craft theory to explain how these actions are changing the rhetorical landscape of American public memory.

Let me be clear about what this project is not. We will not be trying to verify “truth” between what happened in the past and what is being presented in the present. We will not be arguing over which public memory texts should be removed or why. We also are not just creating a current list of all sites of mnemonicicide throughout the U.S.. Rather, we want to examine what these removals are doing to us as a citizenry in how it is changing the commemoration of our collective pasts.

There will be some focus on the body of scholarship defining public memory as well as the removal of memory sites. But the largest part of this project will be archival research into local newspapers and websites surrounding these removals.

Student Duties, Contributions, and Outcomes: The RCEU student will have three major tasks. First, the student will compile a master list of all American public memory texts to include all public historical markers, memorials, monuments, and museums that have been removed from public view from the year 2000 forward. The student will conduct research primarily online by examining listings on government websites, historical organizations’ websites, newspaper archives, and through official websites of some of the sites themselves. We will not examine any privately owned items or places not accessible to the general public. Second, the student will codify each item/place for what is being commemorated, and the story behind its removal. The student will use spreadsheets to collect and codify all research. Finally, the student will write a research paper summarizing all their findings. I will then combine the student’s ideas with my own to create a paper to be submitted to an academic conference. After receiving feedback, we

will revise the paper and submit it to an academic journal. Both my name and the student's name will be on both papers. Specific outcomes for the student will include gaining experience with conducting cultural, historical, and sociological research, performing close textual analysis of texts, synthesizing a wide amount of information, and crafting arguments over the rhetorical work of these vacated memory sites.

Student Selection Criteria: Junior or senior status in a major within the College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences is preferred. Experience writing papers including historical research is also preferred. There are no prerequisite classes.

Project Mentorship: The RCEU student and I will meet at least once a week, and more often when necessary. We will use a shared Dropbox folder for both of us to update the elements we are working on. I will provide some theoretical understanding of rhetoric how public memory works persuasively at the beginning of the collaboration. Our meetings will entail discussing the strategy for finding and analyzing the removal of memory sites, the results of the previous week's research, and an ongoing discussion of what the student is finding or not finding so that we can carefully craft our arguments.

Safety and Contingency Plan: Should we not be able to meet face-to-face, we would be able to meet via Zoom and still achieve every outcome for this project.