Received: 11 May 2021 | Revised: 13 October 2021 | Accepted: 16 October 2021

DOI: 10.1111/soc4.12944

ARTICLE

WILEY

# Black monument matters: Place-based commemoration and abolitionist memory work

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**Funding information**

National Science Foundation, Grant/Award Number: 1854274

## Abstract

Discrete monuments remain in the domain of the symbolic, land as mnemonic shifts to a more materialist commemorative praxis. This paper proposes a turn toward land as mnemonic of Black freedom struggle and place-making. Reviewing the scholarship on memoryscapes, I show that the critical insights of Black ecologies and geographies scholarship has moved further than traditional scholarship and offers multiple openings for new monuments and commemorative practices in honor of Black life. Black socio-ecologies scholarship centralizes the place-based epistemologies, spatial histories, and experiences of Black communities and clarifies the form and function of land or plots as mnemonics of the Black freedom struggle, place-making practices, and spatial epistemologies. Black plots are, therefore, ideal for orienting a new mode of Black commemoration. While much of the paper centers monuments to Black people, if Black commemoration is foregrounded in abolitionists thinking and practices, such memorialization must grapple with the histories of Indigenous dispossession and settler-colonialism. The paper concludes with a consideration of what the argument for land as mnemonic of Black freedom struggle and place-making might mean for future avenues of research.

**KEYWORDS**

Black Geographies, Black lives matter, collective memory, commemoration, indigenous studies

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Statues of traders, merchants, and planters involved in the Atlantic slave trade and plantation economy (notably in Australia, the United Kingdom, and South Africa), confederate generals (in the United States), and other racist and sexist figures the world over, have long been the subject of intense debates and direct actions of defacement, destruction, and removal (de-commemoration). Formal demands for removal of Christopher Columbus statuary and commemorative days, for example, date back at least to the International Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas 1977 (Wynter, 1995). And in 1970, Lakota Sioux activists occupied Mount Rushmore for several months in protest of the legacy of U.S. state-making commemorated by the faces of the four U.S. presidents carved into granite and gazing out onto the Black Hills of South Dakota. So Black and Indigenous groups, and their allies, have long recognized memorialization and commemoration as important to antiracist struggle. However, these acts of de-commemoration came to a head in the spring and summer of 2020. This climax was in significant part triggered by murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States, by a white police officer. While arresting Floyd on suspicion of tendering a counterfeit $20 bill to a store clerk, the officer knelt on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes after Floyd was already handcuffed and lying face down. Warnings from Floyd that he could not breathe and from bystanders that Floyd was clearly dying went unheeded. Echoing around the world, Floyd's lament that he could not breathe, and then his death—all caught on video—highlighted the physical stakes of white supremacy's stranglehold on Black life and institutionalized anti-blackness which results in premature death for Black people (Gilmore, 2002, 2017).

Racist investments in the symbolic and material violence that statues and commemorative days represent have also meant that there have been counter-protests demanding the preservation of these emblems of white supremacy. In 2017, for example, the right-wing white nationalist movement, Unite the Right, staged a rally to protest the proposed removal of a statue honoring confederate general Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia. A white nationalist drove into a crowd of antifascist and racial justice counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer and the injuring 19 other people. The case makes clear the deadly serious nature of contestations about monuments and landscapes of commemoration. As Black feminist scholar, LaToya Eaves has argued, de-commemoration alone runs the "risk of pacifying a moment of outrage and removing the attention from the structural issues that support and maintain white supremacy in the United States." (2016, p. 26). Nor is a radical Black counter-commemoration realized through only exhibits detailing slavery, or by Civil Rights Monuments and Black statuary, though those are important (Brooms, 2011; Dwyer & Alderman, 2008a; Pelak, 2015).

Beyond removing symbols of terror and replacing them with celebratory "Black" ones, monuments to Black struggle and a new commemorative praxis are needed to redeem spaces from white supremacist and racist commemoration. In this way, spaces can be reconstituted to redress the spatial politics and materiality of racial ideologies and hierarchies (Eaves, 2016; Foote, 2003; James-Wilson, 2018; Wills, 2005). Black monuments insist on the desanctification of white supremacist violence and thought. In demanding a re-shaping of space or re-taking space for affirmative Black memorialization, the Black Lives Matter movement raises questions about where the Black monuments are and what would constitute appropriate memorials to the Black experience. In this paper, I review literature on memory, commemorative landscapes, Black Geographies, and Indigenous Studies to propose a consideration of land as mnemonic to Black (and Indigenous) struggle—which is to say, conceiving of land as monument. Land allows us to commemorate the ways in which Black struggle took place in a double sense (and continues to take place): through insurgent appropriation of space that disrupts hegemonic or governmental geographies; and the actual everyday practices of socio-ecological reproduction that are rooted in place.

Mnemonics refers to the apparatuses by which remembering and forgetting is carried out. The social qualities of place are implicated in commemoration such that place serves as a mnemonic site (Jedlowski, 2001; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Zerubavel, 1996). A materialist politics of memorialization which foregrounds land (land as living space, land as life, land as living memory), goes further than symbolic memorialization, which while organized around physical public statues or monuments can often simply serve as hollow gesture by the political and cultural ruling class

(Clare, 2013; Pelak, 2015). A central argument of the paper is that the literature shows that landscape as an analytic remains largely in a terrain of symbolic cultural politics (Allen et al., 2019; Gilmore, 2017; Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Williams et al., 2020). Monuments understood as discrete sites of commemoration or veneration, remain in the domain of the symbolic, foregrounding land shifts memorialization into the domain of the material. The move to a more materialist commemorative praxis centers rights, territorial claims, and tangible effects of politics of memory on people and places.

Black land as monument decenters concrete, marble, and iron stuff for the ecological realities of a given place realized through the transformation of mind and matter according to a praxis of resistance. The existing practices of commemoration anticipate this possibility of land as mnemonic device. The US Antiquities Act of 1906, for example, enables the creation of national monuments from federal lands by presidential proclamation. The monuments the Antiquities Act enables privilege the past, discount the present through restrictive preservationist rules, and restructure uses in the process. In conceptualizing land as mnemonic, I am suggesting a foregrounding of what Symon James-Wilson (2018) describes as "the (im)possible spatial mnemonics of [B]lack infrastructure" (see also Scott, 2019). Polyvalent, and at times contradictory, Black infrastructures are the "mechanisms which have transported and transformed Black life globally for centuries that are remembered and reproduced through spatial mnemonics attentive to the (im)possibility of ever fully knowing black geographies and Black lived experiences in their entireties." (James-Wilson, 2018).

The next section provides an overview of literature on landscapes of commemoration and politics of memorialization. Section three considers the critical Black socio-ecologies scholarship that extends the insights of memory and monuments scholarship by centralizing the place-based epistemologies, spatial histories, and experiences of Black communities. Indeed, my review is inspired and mediated by Black Geographies scholarship which has coalesced out of critical human geography, sociology, African American studies, history, and the environmental humanities. This literature critiques the racial history and politics of the production and valuation of knowledge in traditional nature-society scholarship. Black Geographies also question the methodological purchase of normatively white methods of social science research. Section 3 examines the contours of this scholarship, showing how Black spatial, environmental, and political thought have foregrounded analysis of race and power in material rather than abstract ways. Section 4 argues that if land serves as the central mnemonic of Black freedom and place-making struggles, it grounds the workings of colonial conquest, racial capitalism, and white supremacy in ways that open space for doing allied work with Indigenous counter-hegemonic resistance. After all, the land beneath the layers of concrete and marble pedestals and underneath cast-iron figures is Indigenous peoples' land. By centering the material geographical relations and spatial epistemologies of Indigenous people, we can better situate land as mnemonic device as an approach, which while being proposed as a strategy of Black commemorative repair, is inseparable from Indigenous counter-colonial and decolonial geographies (Daigle & Ramírez, 2019; Estes, 2013; Goeman, 2008a). The paper concludes by suggesting what the argument for land as mnemonics might mean for future avenues of research.

## 2 | MONUMENTAL POLITICS: MEMORY, COMMEMORATION, AND THE INSCRIPTION OF POWER

Spaces of commemoration or memoryscapes are social and political terrains where what is worth remembering and honoring, and why, is contested according to racial, gender, and cultural ideologies (Conway, 2010; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Scott, 1998; Sidaway & Mayell, 2007; Till, 2003, 2006). Monuments derive symbolic and affective power from the ceremonial ritualization of remembering and honoring performed around them (Conway, 2003, 2010; Greider & Garkovich, 1994; Inwood & Alderman, 2016; Johnson, 1995; Schwartz, 1982). Their visual effect and aesthetic power work to engineer understandings of the relationship between citizens, territory, and government, making commemoration a place-making and place-framing process and practice (Alderman & Inwood, 2013; Azaryahu, 1996; Dwyer & Alderman, 2008b; Sidaway & Mayell, 2007; Till, 2003). As Johnson (1995, p. 55) for example argues, "space or

more particularly territory is as intrinsic to memory as historical consciousness in the definition of a national identity. These new sites of memory are not simply arbitrary assignations of historical referents in space but are consciously situated to connect or compete with existing nodes of collective remembering."

Both individual and collective national psyches are shaped by memorialization (Conway, 2003, 2010; Jedlowski, 2001; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Schwartz, 1982; Till, 2006). This is because commemorative activities allow a "mnemonic socialization" (Zerubavel, 1996) that inculcates "the shared traditions of remembering of local, state and national communities." (Wills, 2005). Monuments, then, occupy space and mind. Indeed, since many monuments commemorate national tragedies, folk heroes, and collective trauma, monuments are often sacralized (Foote, 2003; Till, 2012). As what Benedict Anderson (2016, p. 9) describes as "arresting emblems of the modern culture", monuments are constitutive elements of national memory informing our imagined national communities. Or as Jonathan Wynn (2020) put it, "monuments, like religion, are the way a society tells the story about itself, and that will always be contentious." The stories that monuments help tell, as well as what is contested about those stories and their meanings, change over time (Schwartz, 1982; Zerubavel, 1993).

The conceptualization of spaces of commemoration as "cultural arenas" (Alderman & Inwood, 2013; Dwyer & Alderman, 2008b), or "sites of mnemonic battle" (Zerubavel, 1996) aptly signal the social construction of imaginaries of place and the political nature of constituting and regulating public spaces of memory. Public remembering over time indexes shifting motivations for remembering and forgetting, silencing, as well as the changing moral evaluations in the social conscience. Public remembering also reflects the convergence or divergence of political interests concerning memorialization (Trouillot, 1995; Zerubavel, 1993, 1996). Remembering, therefore, is always an active and constructive process and never just a chronicling of events. Nor only about recognizing issues of shame and pride about events, places, and heroes that are commemorated (Foote, 2003). For while "chronicling allows for the marking and preservation of the historically real; commemoration, which is the evaluative aspect of chronicling, celebrates and safeguards the ideal. Commemoration lifts from an ordinary historical sequence those extraordinary events which embody our deepest and most fundamental values." (Schwartz, 1982, p. 377).

As an anti-racist and counter-hegemonic political praxis, critical memory work challenges whitewashing and conscious acts of forgetting through insurgent or informal counter-memorialization (Dwyer & Alderman, 2008b; Foucault, 1977). As the Black Lives Matter protests have made clear, such critical memory work is needed to challenge the way in which, as Bobby Wilson (2002, p. 32) put it, "to avoid a critical discourse on race, the U.S. has become a society—a land—"without memory." History disappears; the past is dead and is represented to us in this postmodern world as a series of glossy images and commemorations." Black monuments would challenge the amnesia and distracting glossiness of the current landscape of commemoration. A landscape in which, in the U.S. for example, confederate statuary and the confederate flag are sanitized of terroristic violence and framed as symbols of southern heritage and pride (Dwyer & Alderman, 2008a; Eaves, 2016; Inwood & Alderman, 2016; Pelak, 2015; Wills, 2005; Wynn, 2020).

Black socio-ecology scholars have clarified and commemorated Black production of space, sense of place, and struggles against white nationalism through critical memory work. In the next section, I discuss the openings for a politics of memorialization that is grounded in Black land by turning to Black Geographies scholarship. This scholarship has centered Black epistemologies of place, and in the process mapped Black place-making practices and places that constitute a rather rich constellation of Black monuments.

## 3 | BLACK GEOGRAPHIES AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY: HONOR, CELEBRATION, AND COUNTERING-HEGEMONIC POWER

Against the "glossy images and commemorations" (Wilson, 2002, p. 32), scholars in Black Geographies have argued for analyses of social and political power foregrounded in material space and not symbolic spaces (of landscapes of commemoration). Landscape as an analytic remains on the terrain of representation and imaginaries, and so it

sometimes misses the materiality of space—land, forests, air, and water. Through the dematerialization of nature—a move necessary for its representation and discussion as fictive space—land is pushed to the background. A mnemonic of land enables a grounded, but not fixed way to understand what Katherine McKittrick has defined as a "*black sense of place*." McKittrick's (2011, p. 949) notion designates "the process of materially and imaginatively situating historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter." As a through line of Black Geographies scholarship the concept of a Black sense of place calls attention to the ways in which Black people have come to understand and theorize their socio-spatial experiences. More than this, Black Geographies scholars have insisted that observers pay attention to the ways in which Black people have made spaces in which they could flourish and pursue liberatory dreams. What the multiple and varied examinations of Black agency, social movements, place-making, and epistemologies of place provide is a demonstration of the pluralities of Black geographies (Bledsoe & Wright, 2019). Black Geographies scholarship marks a shift in commemorative politics from abstract and symbolic meanings and figurative force of commemoration, to understandings of the physical and embodied effects of white supremacists' commemorations (McKittrick & Woods, 2007; Nieves, 2007; Williams, 2020; Woods, 1998, 2002; Wright, 2021). Clarifying the antiblack "race connected practices" (Wilson, 2000, 2002) of commemoration is, therefore, central to Black socio-ecological experiences of contested politics of place, and to a counter-memorialization that questions the racialized regimes of representation in museum exhibits and commemorative practices (Brooms, 2011).

To speak of Black monuments is to speak of modes of commemorating and monumentalizing through a "*Black register*" (Sithole, 2020) that challenges the archival fixation on the documentation and commemoration of violence and death (Hartman, 2007; McKittrick, 20014; Sharpe, 2016; Woods, 2002). More than this, Black socio-ecologies insist on remembering and honoring resistance, epistemologies, and the socio-ecological relations by which Black liberatory geographies, visions of freedom, and belonging have been effectuated (McCutcheon, 2021). These Black spaces, ways of knowing, and remembering, commemorate Black struggle and flourish, keeping Black ancestors in mind, while not discounting the workings of anti-blackness. Black counter-memorialization is, then, a decolonization of mind and land; understanding dominant commemoration (articulated through imposing statuary and toponymic inscriptions) as a territorialization of a mentality with and alongside the appropriation of space (Alderman & Inwood, 2013; Azaryahu, 1996; Clare, 2013; Madera, 2015).

Indeed, scholars in what Cedric Robinson (2000) described as the long Black Radical Tradition (BRT), have always rejected abstractions and dematerialized conceptions of how race, place, and space are articulated and experienced (see also McCutcheon, 2021). Conceptually, the BRT moves toward a consideration of a global history of Black resistance to anti-blackness. For Robinson, the BRT serves as an historical analytic for connecting Black struggles across time-space. More importantly, the BRT is the actual historical record of Black struggles for liberation and justice, united by a shared consciousness that is radical in its refusal of hegemony. In Robinson's reading, the BRT ensured the preservation and reconstitution of Black collective humanity by the African diaspora in the wake of and against the forces of European capitalism. And capitalism, Robinson argued, must be understood as racial capitalism. Which is to say: "the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force … racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism." (Robinson, 2000, p. 2). The BRT has always been foregrounded in land as the material domain where the symbolic politics of state-making and commemoration are worked out. Land has served as the physical ground for the reproduction of an affirmative Black life, Black social collectivity, and Black belonging, even as Black thought has worked to lay hold of symbolic metaphysical worlds (Du Bois, 1998; Fanon, 1963; Gilmore, 2017; Gilroy, 1993). And so, land is an ideal mnemonic of Black social, political, and ecological struggle because it centers both dependency on the physical spaces where life takes place and the socio-ecological matter on which life depends. The slave food plot or provision grounds provides one example of the groundings of Black traditions of constituting communal social life and enacting abolitionist geographical spaces and agencies informed by a praxis of Black commemoration. On plots or provision grounds, enslaved people cultivated provisions for the nourishment of their communities (Carney & Rosomoff, 2009; DeLoughrey, 2008, 2011; Parry, 1955; Wynter, 1971, 1990).

Initially allocated to the enslaved so that they would grow their own food and subsidize the plantation, the provision grounds became the site of a Black counter-cultural self-transformation into a multi-ethnic social collective. This transformation, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2017, p. 231) reminds, was possible because contrary to white supremacist designs, the African diaspora had retained "sensibilities, dependencies, talents, indeed a complement of consciousness and capacity" by which they made "where they were into places they wished to be". The plots were tended according to African ecological practices and so instantiated, remembered, and honored African ancestral epistemologies. The plots, therefore, are place-based memorials to the great effort of Black people to establish and maintain diaspora communities in the plantation world of the Americas (Castellano, 2021; Roane, 2018; Wynter, 1971, 1990). The plot memorializes the labors of making freedom in place. The plot as Black space—from the actual slave provision grounds to the clearing in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, from the Black Belt to Fannie Lou Hamer's *Freedom Farm Cooperative*—constitute mnemonics of Black peoples' ecological, political, and spatial resistance to normalized antiblack violence and dehumanization (Bledsoe, 2017, 2018; Davis et al., 2019; McCutcheon, 2019, 2021; McKittrick, 2013). In this way, Black Geographies map spaces that allow us to locate "the ways in which anti-black violence in the Americas evidence protean plantation futures as spaces of encounter that hold in them useful anti-colonial practices and narratives." (McKittrick, 2011, p. 950). This is something different than "the racial (re)signification of space" and is only partially about the "the (re)negotiation of individual and collective identity." (Alderman & Inwood, 2013, p. 217). It is about the valorization of space for collective memory in ways that extend the commemoration of acts away from monumental objects to commemoration of land as material terrain and symbolic ground of liberatory action.

Since, as Foote (2003, p. 81) argues, "memorial sometimes help to assure survivors that victims did not suffer alone, that their deaths meant something more to the community, and that the entire community grieves their sacrifice", Black monuments—from the small slave plot to a Maroon territory—offer hope and healing, a testimony of the horrors and of the survival of horrors (McCutcheon, 2021). Land as mnemonic might offer us a reparative commemorative politics by shoaling our memorial practices. The use of the term shoal here draws on Tiffany L. King's (2019) conceptualization of a zone of encounter and geological formation that disrupts normal space-time and emotive practices and creates openings for new analytical practices and vocabularies. Through King's formulation we can see that Black spaces were and are heterotopic spaces, spaces that are situated as "other" to political and social spaces of dominant society. Heterotopic spaces are counter-sites made in the interstices of hegemony as it is territorialized. These spaces remind us that projects of domination—especially regarding culture and memory—are always incomplete and contested (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). Since Black space has been, to a significant degree, characterized by tragedy and violence that make them mirror inversions of utopias, Black memory work calls us to read land as a haunted ecological space that demands a confrontation of the afterlives of slavery and conquest (Hartman, 2007; King, 2019; Vasudevan, 2021; Wright, 2021). Following what Christina Sharpe (2016, p. 14) describes as "*wake work*", a Black praxis of commemoration moves beyond political, juridical, and philosophical resolutions to the problems of Black exclusion and abjection, and "looks instead to current quotidian disasters in order to ask what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how do literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival." Part of the haunting legacies of Black exclusion and subjection is the specter of New World land expropriation from Indigenous peoples to create space for plantations of Black enslavement (King, 2019). Land as mnemonics of Black struggle and place-making leaves crucial openings for Indigenous peoples' memorialization, as well as Black and Indigenous counter-hegemonic political projects of abolition. The next section considers what such Black-Indigenous memorialization might look like. I discuss how Black land mapping must center Indigenous geographies and ecologies as part of an abolitionist project that is grounded in land relations.

## 4 | GROUNDING ABOLITIONIST ECOLOGIES: SITUATING SHARED LEGACIES AND SOLIDARITIES

Black geographies and ecologies were plot twists of colonialism. Which is to say that Black spaces were and remain intricately connected to the altered social and territorial trajectories of Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Black spaces were realized and reproduced within and alongside the wider colonialists' ecologies wrought by the contradictory settler-colonialists desires. Contradictory in that such desires sought to extinguish Indigenous peoples' land claims through genocidal violence and land expropriation, while also naturalizing settler nativist claims to Indigenous peoples' land through notions of terra nullius and res nullius (Estes, 2013; Jacob et al., 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wildcat et al., 2014; Wolfe, 2007). In this way, colonialism, especially settler-colonialism, produced an ostensibly legal claim to private ownership of public land—and land emerges through the thingification of nature as commodity (Blomley, 2003). The complex entanglements of what we now term land in ecological and social relations are altered and rendered simple by the conceptualization of a plot of land as a factor in economic production and as a unit of space that encompasses environmental assets.

The plantation, the encomienda, and the reservation, then, can be understood as indexing similar regimes of biopower and geopower. Therefore, notwithstanding the important differences in their histories, the experiences of both Afro-descended people and Indigenous peoples in the Americas can be understood comparatively as having been shaped by a political economy of racial capitalism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and destructive rationalizations of human and ecological disposability (King, 2019; McKittrick, 2006; Tinker, 1996). Turning toward a praxis of Black memorialization which clarifies these realities does not mean rendering Black and Indigenous experiences of colonial production of nature, relationships to land, or conceptualizations of the relationship between land, liberation, or decolonization equivalent. Rather, what such a praxis moves toward is a consideration of how given the similarities in the "*repertoire of strategies*" (Wolfe, 2007) of antiblack anti-indigenous regimes, and the similitude Black and Indigenous relationships to colonized land, land itself opens space for grasping the commensurability of Black and Indigenous liberation struggles (Daigle & Ramírez, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Van Sant et al., 2021).

Land as mnemonic centers the materiality of multiple and ongoing forms of exploitation and foregrounds the material stakes of distinctive projects of decolonization, abolition, and critical commemoration (de Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Estes, 2013; Tuck et al., 2014; Wildcat et al., 2014). Land as mnemonic also invites readings that are attentive of the incommensurability of Black and Indigenous geographies and decolonial, abolitionist, and liberatory political projects which, if ignored, can lead to memorialization that eclipse the history of one group vis-à-vis another. Black freedmen during the short-lived Reconstruction period following the American Civil War placed their hopes for economic stability on the perceived unassailability of land as property and property ownership enabling freedom. The redistribution of "*40 acres and a mule*" to African Americans would have no doubt brought about radical transformation of the status quo had the vision of Union General William T. Sherman's Special Field Order 15 of 16 January 1865, been realized. However, this radical transformation would have left unsettled the fact that it was stolen land that was being redistributed. The land wasn't really Sherman's to give, and it was not because former plantation owners and Confederate veterans said so.

Black land as mnemonic might, therefore, at first blush be critiqued as imperfect since basing Black freedom claims in land (as property) can easily elide discussions of Indigenous peoples' material dispossession which is ongoing in the settler-state (Heynen & Ybarra, 2021; King, 2019; Williams et al., 2020). Precisely because of these possibilities of elision and the dangers of equating land ownership with freedom, robust memory work is needed to clarify the polyvalence of place-based projects of domination and resistance. If landscape allows us to see how memory and culture have shaped human modification of the environment, in sometimes durable ways (Foote, 2003), foregrounding land reminds us of the material stakes and consequences of these modifications. As Mishuana Goeman (2008a, p. 25) of the Tonawanda Band of the Seneca has pointed out,

> naming the land from a tribal collective memory is one of the most important political and social tools to tie people together in a shared story. Land in this moment is living and layered memory. Experiences of space become expressions of self, and, through the shared experience of naming, connections to others are formed. The land acts as mnemonic device in many ways, by being the site of stories, which create cohesive understandings of longing and belonging.

Since land is a central site in the production of space and in how colonial conceptions of space are made productive, Native conceptions of space unsettle notions of territory, property, and the personification of land as feminine as natural instead of the outcomes of colonial spatializing technologies. These technologies—such as maps and colonial travel journals—manufactured and reinforced oppositional binary categories: Civilized/primitive; culture/nature; order/chaos (Goeman, 2008a, 2008b). Native counter-colonial conceptions of land and spatial discourses provide historical geographies before colonialism as well as in the wake of the settler state, and which imagine futures outside of the colonized present (Estes, 2013; Simpson, 2014). In these conceptions and discourses, land is textured by place activities and stories that link individuals with the community, the living with the ancestors. Or as Glen Coulthard's (2014) argues place is used as a way of knowing and experiencing the world, a place-based politics of relating to human and nonhuman others. Native remembering that recalls pre-colonial spatial epistemologies and practices serves as cultural resistance. Recalling and affirming creation stories of a sacred intimacy of land, flesh, and breathe calls attention to legal discourses and cultural practices that rely on the subjugation and denial of Indigenous land claims for the settler colony to exist (Alfred, 2017; Simpson, 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Wolfe, 2007).

In this conception, land is an actor and a shorthand for place and the suite of nonhuman material natures, whose being in place puts ethical demands on human movement, extraction of stuff, and relationship with the community (living, dead, and future). Land is part of the ceremony and the tangible space of ceremonies of commemoration (Estes, 2013; Simpson, 2012, 2017; Yazzie et al., 2018). And for these other-than-propertarian reasons, land is central to Indigenous, Native, and Aboriginal peoples struggles. The vision of liberation and freedom of Black Geographies and the Indigenous geographies vision of settler-colonial decolonization both converge around an understanding of land as the main terrain where the racial boundaries imposed by hegemonic whiteness have been reproduced. This convergence enables a critique of racialized land theft and redistribution as evidence of the contradictions of liberal notions of justice, freedom, recognition, and rights that dammned both Blacks and Indigenous peoples (Du Bois, 1998; Heynen, 2016; Williams, et al., 2020).

Land as mnemonic provides a means of moving beyond the treatment of land as a monument to racialized regimes property, materialization of capitalism, and the spatialization of racial ideology by looking at these shared meanings of land that can be gleaned from Indigenous and Black Geographies. Again, this does not mean collapsing Black and Indigenous stories and experience into a single historical challenge to colonial ones. Nor does it mean situating them as unified and distinct vis-à-vis colonial projects of domination and white supremacist monumentalizing. Rather, a relational ontology of Indigenous and Black struggles challenges colonial linear time, transparent space, and nature-society dualisms and related hierarchies. Such an ontology offers meanings of land that depart from white possessive, propertied logics, and materiality (Coulthard, 2017; Escobar, 2016; Estes, 2013; Lipsitz, 2006). Land as mnemonic foregrounds material space as an artifact of multiple, and therefore, sometimes contradictory social, economic, and political claims making.

Just as importantly, as an artifact, land archives the ecological and geophysical realities to which claims are made, as well as the different ecological and geophysical transformations that eventuate from those claims. For these reasons then, land as mnemonic is perfect because land indexes the competing logics of investment in space; on the one hand, capitalist, and property centric rationalizations of land as site and source of accumulation and dispossession, and on the other, polyvalent abolitionist conceptualizations of land as space for enacting relations of freedom for humans and nonhumans. Put differently, land as mnemonic offers a means to learn about the constituting and memorializing of abolition ecologies (Heynen, 2021; Heynen & Ybarra, 2021). As Gilmore (2017, p. 226) writes, "abolition geography starts from the homely premise that freedom is a place." For Gilmore, "Abolition geography is capacious (it

isn't only by, for, or about Black people) … (it's a guide to action for both understanding and rethinking how we combine our labor with each other and the earth)" (Gilmore, 2017, p. 239).

The idea of an abolition ecology that Nik Heynen and Meghan Ybarra (2021) advance and Gilmore's conception of abolition geography offer principles for abolitionist memory work that is careful about the emotional labor of remembering, forgetting, and imagining better futures. Abolitionist memory work is, therefore, understandable as a debordering commemorative praxis; a mode of historicization and commemoration that dismantles the colonial border lines that spatialize naturalized notions of spatial belonging through a regime of differentiated (racialized) citizenship and human value, as well as the domination of nature. A domination which, since rooted in a Cartesian model of subjectivity, understands the realm of nature as inclusive of nonhuman animals, as well as Natives and Blacks, who are deemed primitive (Goeman, 2008b). A debordering praxis makes annotations about how territory-body domination and extraction have been resisted and how those forms of domination/extraction and resistance are always connected to someplace, and someone else—it reclaims land physically and ideologically from colonial landscaping (Gilmore, 2017; Goeman, 2008a). Such memory work necessarily foregrounds land as a central site where the processes of political ecological change, the racialized logics of environmental governance, and the racialized distribution of socio-ecological benefits and harms are materialized.

Land as mnemonic focuses on the everyday, place-situated labor of making abolitionists spaces for dispossessed and marginalized peoples. In this way, critical Black commemorative praxis converges with an Indigenous one, if both are guided by a praxis of socio-ecological resistance and love (Simpson, 2014b). Such a praxis allows for the enactment of various abolitionist modes of remembering the past and future-building rather than a homogenous agenda for Black and Indigenous anti-colonial projects. If the plot spatializes space of Black commemoration vis-à-vis the plantation, it analytically and materially is also able to commemorate the ways Indigenous peoples refuse the spatial politics and racial mattering of the encomienda and the reservation (Clare, 2013; Coulthard, 2014; Wynter, 1984). Following George Tinker (1996, p. 173), we might see a new mode of commemorating land as an opening for telling the "communal stories that can generate… functional mythologies, that will undergird the life of the community (the lives of communities) in new and vibrant ways". This can give land meaning as more than the location of monuments that signal the "possessive investment in whiteness" (Lipsitz, 2006) and whiteness as possessive regimes of property (Harris, 1993; Williams et al., 2020).

## 5 | FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The call to think of land as mnemonic is to think with place-specific socio-ecologies—from the scale of a plot to a region—shaped by Black and Indigenous counter-hegemonic resistance, collectivity, multispecies kinship, and flourish as monuments. In this formulation, land is not naming real estate or space framed through Cartesian reductionism and or a Lockean formulation of the relationship between land and labor (King, 2019). This turn away from traditional commemoration studies offers openings for new directions of study. Much of the debates about the presence, absence, and prominence of monuments sparked by the protests of spring and summer of 2020, and indeed the last decade has been fixed on the commemorative landscape in North America and Europe. These debates suggest an urgent need to address the politics of memory, the affective force of commemorations implicated in histories of racial and colonial violence, the normative whiteness of public space, and the dangers of historical revisionism. There is much room to turn to "other" places and situate the presence-absence of monuments in North American and Europe within global geographies of monuments and the cultural sociology and sociology of memory.

The Caribbean, for example, a region shaped by European colonialism and U.S. imperialism has been little examined in the literature on public memory and monuments, even though the region has seen steady increases in the number of monuments and has seen robust discussions about commemorations of slavery and Black resistance (Brown, 2002; Dacres, 2004, 2009; Phulgence, 2016; Trouillot, 1995). The limited consideration of the Caribbean, the "majority Black space" in the U.S. backyard, is especially conspicuous given the U.S. and the Caribbean's shared

and entangled histories of Indigenous displacement and genocide, antiblack racism, and counter-hegemonic abolition movements. As Caribbean scholars remind, the U.S. was not the only British American colony, and at times it was not even the most important (Watts, 1990). Vincent Brown suggests, for example, that if only in the way that death pervaded the landscape of British colonial slavery in Jamaica and the U.S., the social and cultural histories of both places are analogous and not anomalous. That Jamaica is representative of early America, Brown argues, is an inconvenient truth considering popular histories that, through celebration of the advance of liberty and justice in post-revolutionary America, relegate the British Caribbean to "the 'Third World' or the 'non-west', a mélange of poor, postcolonial states on the margin of official memory." (Brown, 2010, p. 259).

As Brown suggests, "one might see similarities between the brutal, deadly, and profitable world of Jamaican slavery, on the one hand, and on the other, twenty-first century America's gross material inequalities, burgeoning prison populations, and seemingly constant warfare" (Brown, 2010, pp. 259 & 260). Taking Brown seriously, means examining the intersections of land, memory, and monuments in the Caribbean, particularly considering colonial marronage (Diouf, 2016; Price, 1996; Wright, 2021) and post-emancipation, as well as post-independence Black social movements and nationalism. Therefore, work to provincialize the North America and European landscapes of memory could begin by examining monuments and the commemorative terrain of the Caribbean (Brown, 2002; Dacres, 2004, 2009). Beyond the Caribbean, of course there are many avenues for examining place imaginaries and social movements seeking to unsettle colonial, racial, and other oppressive regimes of land control.

Within Black Geographies for example, scholars developing and working with the analytic of the Black Mediterranean, could examine place-making and place-attachments that center land as monument countering post-colonial Europe's amnesia regarding imperialism and contemporary commemorative silence regarding the death of Black migrants (Danewid, 2017). In Asia such work could provide insights on how memories of war and geopolitical conflicts shape place-attachments and relationships to land as monuments. This would shed light on the relationship between spatial trauma and Asia's supposed "memory problem" (Schumacher, 2015; Schwartz & Kim, 2010). Ongoing and contested land restitution in South Africa suggests that Africa offers much ground for examining the mnemonic battles around land reclamation and reconciliation as part of transitional justice in postcolonial and post-conflict settings (Walker et al., 2010). Such research can help provide more nuanced understandings of how land as monument is mobilized to repair dispossession and symbolically memorialize traumatic histories and shape public remembering and forgetting.

Furthermore, the relationship between the tragedy of settler-colonial violence, Indigenous genocide, African slavery, Black resistance, and the negotiation of symbolic and physical space also invite studies that explore the textures and intersections of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx places of memory and commemoration. As Tiffany Lethabo King's (2019) analytic of the shoal shows, such intersectional and interdisciplinary thinking, that centers spaces of encounter and incommensurability, provide radical new epistemologies of racialized embodiment, nonwhite aesthetics, and future-building imagination (see also Asaka, 2017; King et al., 2020; Yazzie et al., 2018). Indeed, an Indigenous resurgence across the Caribbean has unsettled histories of native replacement by African slaves through an indigenization process mediated by labor. These scholars point to the need for new Atlantic histories that examine how conceptualizations of indigeneity and blackness are formulated for and mediated by the imperatives of regimes of citizenship, environmental and social rights, and uneven development, sometimes amidst discourses of multiculturalism and a post-racialism (Anderson, 2009; Asher, 2010; Escobar, 2008, 2016; Mollett, 2006, 2011; Newton, 2013, 2014). Work to show how, as Audra Simpson (2014, pp. 10 & 11) put it, "sovereignty may exist within sovereignty", or a kind of "nested sovereignty", promises much for such studies of the aesthetics and poetics of place of subaltern encounter and care.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

The removal of the monuments without problematization of the ideologies propping them up can lead to historical and geographical erasures and can allow discussions of political hegemony and human-ecological domination to be evaded. Such evasions short-circuit critical remembering. Land as mnemonics of Black and Indigenous memorial designates land as a material site for foregrounding the place-making and place-taking means according to which Black and Indigenous peoples have survived and memorialized that survival. New World land has been invested with value as a complex socioecology which has been imbricated with the struggles and hopes of Black and Indigenous people, past and present, as they work to remember and contend with the horrible histories that have shaped Atlantic life. In centering land as mnemonic device, I am proposing land as monument, and not landscapes of commemoration. This is meant to trouble the dominnat logic of preservationists and memorialists because it challenges the integrity of the archives and imaginaries that have denied status to Black spaces and Black spatial histories, as well as Indigenous spaces and histories. The proposition also challenges a preoccupation with singular sites, such as historic buildings, which necessarily exclude the unmappable and extant geographies of much of the Black diaspora's lived experience and cultural production, and nonwhite geographies in general. Black Geographies offer a critical and interdisciplinary methodology which articulates an alternative rubric of what counts as significant sites and offers an insurgent historical mode of interpretation. Just as importantly, rethinking land, and with-it air, waterways—socio-ecologies—as mnemonic also means unsettling now common performative land acknowledgments (Robinson et al., 2019; Stewart-Ambo & Yang, 2021; Yazzie et al., 2018).

More broadly, the proposition of land as monument—as a place where Black and Indigenous peoples have improvised and worked out freedom, kinship, communality, and ecological relationships—is a proposition to think about how our modes of thought can be reorientated to grasp lives with only traces. A commemoration of land as monument is a mapping of lives where the archaeology of survival has not necessarily survived and is necessarily limited because of forces that have worked against life and worked to render life invisible. Thus, positioning land as monument is an orientation to theory and practice that takes seriously the qualitative linkages between life as praxis and the production of place. Since control of land as property has been inextricably connected to whiteness and white supremacist projects (plantation, settler-colonial, red-lining, or otherwise) framing land as monument offers a way to center the counter-hegemonic means by which plotting relations and plot-making as communing and commoning have worked to resist institutionalized spatial and social antiblackness. Land as monument is not land as the backdrop or witness to the production of life, but land as an actor and storyteller. The kind of commemoration I am proposing asks us to contemplate: what was in place before the monument was constructed, and what force relations were involved in construction and commemoration?

Land as mnemonic extends the scope of discussion on the social politics of commemoration, away from adding Black statuary in a newly imagined cultural landscape or including corrective inscriptions that might tell a fuller story of Black life. Rather, a Black eco-critical and socio-spatial approach, that centers land as mnemonic, makes the case for new modalities of commemoration that shift the focus from singular and stable objects to land. Just as radically, it insists on the centrality of land restitution to Indigenous peoples. Implicit in the suggestion for such a turn toward land is an assertion that the monuments to Black life exist, but our systems of valuation obscure them. Black land as monuments is eclipsed by slabs of cold marble, granite, or cast-iron. Land as mnemonic allows people to have living monuments—ecological monuments that are living systems. This is different from freezing the places in time and restructuring uses through restrictive regimes of cultural preservation and nature conservation. Land as mnemonics demand a narrational posture and curatorial ethic in commemoration that gestures our remembering towards the dynamism and immanence of Black world making. This also means commemorative practices that do not insist on space as timeless and to be protected from transformation, but as living and enriched by ongoing life supporting transformations.

Land as mnemonic reminds us that Black spaces have been made into what they are as a means of realizing what Black people wished and needed space to be, and very often in relation with Indigenous and other peoples of the

archipelago of the damned. This is a making that has always insisted on grounded and not just abstract aspirations for belonging and space. A making that, in the post-slavery world, has always been fashioned on other people's land. What might this mean practically? Well to begin with, it means we might re-read Hispaniola (the Maroon spaces of the Bahoruco Mountains of Dominican Republic, and Haiti as the first revolutionary Black republic in the Americas), the Maroon lands of Jamaica's Cockpit Country and Blue and John Crow Mountains; the Great Dismal Swamp, the Maroons spaces of Bas du Fleuve, Louisiana, the Gullah Region, Republic of New Afrika, Africville, all as monuments of the political and spatial labor, and socio-ecological accomplishments of Black people. Spaces of marronage and of fugitive Black resistance and place-making, from Mexico to Suriname, and from Virginia to Brazil are monuments to Black self-fashioning and ecological transformation. The constellation of caves, trails, tracks, and lands constitute the infrastructure of Black struggle for freedom, belonging, kinship, and communal flourish.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is part of a research project carried out with financial support from the National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Award (#1854274). The author would like to thank Rose Shelor for comments on various drafts of the paper, and Levi Van Sant and Brian Williams for their reading multiple early drafts of this paper and their constructive feedback. Thanks also to organizers of The Yi-Fu Lecture Series in the Department of Geography at thew University of Wisconsin–Madison where an early draft of this paper was presented as the 2020 Treacy Lecture. Questions from Kela Caldwell, Alicia Barceinas Cruz, Erin Clancy, Jenna Loyd, Matt Turner, Vignesh Ramachandran and Stepha Velednitsky on the presentation were especially helpful. The author would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful critiques.

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**How to cite this article:** Moulton, A. A. (2021). Black monument matters: Place-based commemoration and abolitionist memory work. *Sociology Compass*, e12944. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12944