



Queer monumentality: The power and ethics of symbolic form

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Abstract

This article engages with Dirk J. Smit's 1986 article "The Symbol of Reconciliation and Ideological Conflict in South Africa." The author illustrates and modifies Smit's analysis of symbols and their connection to ideology by way of a case study. The case study explores how LGBTQ Americans have sought to access symbolic power contained within their history. The author especially focuses on the forms that LGBTQ Americans have used to construct historical symbols. These forms are the tactical/ephemeral and the monumental. The author closes with a discussion of whether reconciliation symbolics play a role in representations of LGBTQ history in American society and specifically at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Keywords

Symbolics, LGBT, Memory, Monumentality, Princeton Theological Seminary

Dirk J. Smit's wide-ranging scholarship and wise mentorship have significantly influenced my own thought and life. I completed my master's thesis under his supervision at Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS) in 2018. The part of his scholarship that has most shaped my recent work is his nuanced analysis of the nature and *power* of symbols. In particular, Smit's 1986 article "The Symbol of Reconciliation and Ideological Conflict in South Africa" has been generative for me.¹ This is the case even though my own context and interests substantially differ from Smit's in his article. He theorizes South African society, while I theorize society in the United States. He writes as a confessional theologian primarily attuned to race and

1 Dirk J. Smit, "The Symbol of Reconciliation and Ideological Conflict in South Africa," in *Essays in Public Theology*, collected essays 1, edited by Ernst M. Conradie (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2007), 287–307.

class, while I write as a scholar of religion and ethics who prioritizes gender and sexuality.² In dialoguing with Smit here, I hope to display in written form what many of Smit’s students have personally experienced – that Smit is a thinker with whom one can engage confident that one’s varied perspectives will be met with hospitable curiosity and mutually invigorating rejoinder.³ I also aim in this essay to illustrate – as well as modify – Smit’s understanding of what symbols are, how they function, how they form, and how they relate to ideology. I do this by narrating the surprising story of how LGBTQ people in the United States have preserved and represented their history, interweaving Smit’s analysis wherever possible.

Before I begin my tale, allow me to outline in more detail both Smit’s article as well as the direction I am taking in this paper. “The Symbol of Reconciliation and Ideological Conflict in South Africa” is one of many articles Smit wrote about the possibility of and need for South African society to have a common moral grammar as it wrestled with and transitioned beyond apartheid.⁴ It was originally written at the invitation of the Research Institute at the University of South Africa (UNISA) for a seminar that invited participants to offer new symbols that could “challenge our own faith and so better equip us for the task of constructing a new society.”⁵ Like the organizers of the seminar, Smit recognized that some symbols, including religious symbols, hold within themselves the power to fuel societal transformation. Unlike those organizers, however, Smit did not believe that a seminar could actually offer new potent symbols, nor did he agree that “reconciliation” was a symbol that could help change South

2 I make these distinctions in a hesitant and heuristic manner for, as Queer of Color Critique and historians and anthropologists of sexuality tell us, gender and sexuality are always partly constituted by race – and vice versa. See Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Colour Critique* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Colour Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) and Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge, and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (University of California Press, 2002).

3 Len Hansen, Nico Koopman, and Robert Vosloo call this Smit’s “interpathy.” “Introduction,” in *Living Theology: Essays Presented to Dirk J. Smit on His Sixtieth Birthday*, edited by Len Hansen, Nico Koopman, and Robert Vosloo (Wellington: Bible Media, 2011), xvii.

4 Hansen, Koopman, and Vosloo, “Introduction,” xv.

5 Smit, “The Symbol,” 287.

African society at that time in its history. In other words, Smit challenged the very premise of the seminar.

Smit instead used his article to promote greater conceptual clarity, to make explicit the connection between symbols and ideology, and to show how then current ideological conflicts in South Africa render reconciliation an untenable symbol. He argues that this ancient, seemingly benevolent, Christian symbol is conceptually ambivalent and that it does not generate similar enough emotions in people from different groups to unite them. In fact, he writes that reconciliation language is currently being used as “ideological weaponry” by one group and that reclaiming it for its original intention would be exceedingly difficult.⁶ He spends the last third of his essay theorizing the conditions in which reconciliation could come to play a role in societal transformation. He argues that rational, public discourse ala Jürgen Habermas would only be minimally effective not only because “ideal speech situations” might not be attainable but also because “people normally do not change by way of such rational argument” and “symbols do not grip people’s imagination in such a rational or discursive way.”⁷ Instead, he states that for symbols to be created or redirected we need 1) influential figures or movements to adopt them, 2) persuasive rhetorical forms in which express them, 3) new, emotionally intense experiences associated with them, and 4) significant societal changes that undergird their presence in wider “symbolic universes.”⁸ Smit concludes that a mere academic seminar cannot hope to generate these conditions.⁹

6 Smit, “The Symbol,” 294.

7 Smit, “The Symbol,” 300.

8 Smit takes the language of “symbolic universe” from Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor, 1967).

9 Smit, “The Symbol,” 300-303. In later work, Smit documents how Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and a large segment of South African society did employ reconciliation symbolics after the end of apartheid. They were ultimately not successful in reconciling the country, however, and other symbols have since come into more prominence. See Dirk J. Smit, “Religion and Civil Society in ‘South Africa’? Searching for a Grammar of Life Together,” in *Church and Civil Society: German and South African Perspectives* edited by M. Welker, N. Koopman, and J. M. Vorster (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2017), 63–106.

In my own work, I focus on symbols that are connected to the historical past and not on biblical or theological symbols like reconciliation. I am interested in how monuments and narratives about the past function not just as “signs” of what happened but are turned into symbols that represent a community’s deeply held truths, beliefs, values, and goals.¹⁰ I also analyse the specific *form*, or medium, that such symbols take and the effect that form has on the promotion of or resistance to oppressive ideologies. Smit might refer to this as the “style of rhetoric” through which a symbol is communicated.¹¹ In what follows, I focus on one particular form that Smit does not theorize – the monumental. I show how and why American LGBTQ communities have seized on this form and explore what difference this has made in their resistance to cis-heteronormative ideology. This case study illuminates many of Smit’s insights, but it also forces us to modify some of them. By way of conclusion, I explore whether reconciliation symbolics appear in representations of LGBTQ history. I include a discussion of Princeton Theological Seminary’s relationship to its queer past in light of its recent reckoning with its history on slavery.

Forms of LGBTQ history: From tactical and ephemeral to monumental

Something surprising started to happen thirty-five years ago in how LGBTQ history is represented in the United States. The veritable sea change that occurred was the emergence of monumentality as a new medium for queer history.¹² Within this powerful rhetorical form, new symbols also emerged that have played a role in the advancement of LGBTQ rights in the United States. Monumentality has also brought with it dangers and

10 Smit, “The Symbol,” 288.

11 Smit, “The symbol,” 301.

12 I use LGBTQ and queer interchangeably in this article. I make explicit whenever I mean the latter term in the sense currently dominant in queer theory, i.e., non-normative, anti-binary, non-identarian. Furthermore, I am aware of how conceptually fraught it is to refer to people in the past as LGBTQ and when they might have used this terminology. As I make clear, I hold a social constructionist understanding of sexual and gender identities. I try to limit anachronism by only referring to people born in the late nineteenth century and afterwards as LGBTQ or queer.

controversies, however. What is the history of this surprising change and what are the dangers of which I speak?

Following Thomas Dunn, the leading scholar of LGBTQ memory rhetorics, I begin the story in the last third of the nineteenth century.¹³ This decision presumes that Michel Foucault, Jeffrey Weeks, and others are right to trace the origins of Western homosexual identity – rather than homosexual acts and relationships – to this time.¹⁴ From the moment that this identity was consolidated, and self-consciously gay and lesbian communities began forming, queer people have faced severe challenges around the preservation and representation of their pasts. The main reason is simple. Cis-heteronormativity, which I consider to be an ideology in the same sense Smit uses, found in memory and history discourses – and the symbols associated with them – unique ways to promote cis-heterosexual power and subjugate LGBTQ people.¹⁵ For example, between the late nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries, cis-heteronormativity was powerfully reinforced by the portrayal of the American past as an unquestionably straight, cisgender place. Countless queer lives were forcibly forgotten during these years because it was dangerous to write down queer desire, because it was common for the queer archival material that was written down or preserved to be destroyed or distorted, and because the standards of proof around describing a historical figure as LGBTQ were made almost unreachable.¹⁶ Additionally, it is important to note that non-white queer histories were especially vulnerable to annihilation. This is because non-white communities typically had to pass through cis-heteronormativity to attain respectability and access to citizenship rights since one widespread

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- 13 Unlike Dunn and other influential scholars, however, I do not make a strong distinction between memory and history in this essay. I am interested in all the ways that queer people accessed, represented, and gave meaning to their pasts whether those efforts traveled under the sign of memory or of history.
- 14 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) and Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain, from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet, 1977). We can also trace the heterosexual identity to this time period as well.
- 15 I follow Smit in using John Thompson's definition of ideology. Smit summarizes, "ideology refers to the use of language (or signification) to sustain relations of domination." Smit, "The Symbol," 293.
- 16 Thomas R. Dunn, *Queerly Remembered: Rhetorics for Representing the GLBTQ Past* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2016), 3–4.

rationale for white supremacy was that people of colour were sexually deviant. This reality increased the reasons why, for example, a family member might destroy a deceased relative's homoerotic letters. It also explains why knowledge of Two-Spirit gender variance – which was prevalent throughout precolonial, Indigenous North America – was suppressed in many, although not all, Indigenous nations until the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁷

Smit might, using Pierre Bourdieu's term, call all this "symbolic violence."¹⁸ I emphasize that it was *symbolic* violence because what cis-heteronormative people and institutions were fearing – consciously or subconsciously – was that stories of queer existence would not remain mere signs of what happened but could become meaning-laden symbols that could shape contemporary society.¹⁹ At the very least, queer existence could symbolize for people that cis-heteronormativity's claim to universal naturalness is questionable. Even worse, queer excellence or queer beauty could hold more disruptive meanings. These symbols would also be more powerful than those derived from the mere existence of queer people because they would be more tangible and emotionally compelling. In truth, cis-heteronormative people and institutions were right to fear that power lay in knowledge of LGBTQ pasts.

Despite overwhelming obstacles, LGBTQ people did find ways to preserve and draw strength and meaning from their history in this period. According to Dunn, the memory rhetorics that LGBTQ Americans employed between 1870 and 1980 were "tactical in aim" and "ephemeral in form." "Tactical" refers to Michel de Certeau's theories of how people who are not in control of the social terrain must subvert it for their needs, even if only temporarily.²⁰

17 Sabine Lang, "Lesbians, Men-Women, and Two-Spirits: Homosexuality and Gender in Native American Cultures," in *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices Across Cultures*, edited by Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia Wieringa (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 99, 101.

18 Smit, "The Symbol," 295. We must not forget that cis-heteronormative violence went beyond the symbolic. Wider society also disciplined queer people by criminalizing queer relationships, medicalizing queer identities, and overlooking or actively condoning physical, mental, and spiritual violence against queer people.

19 I agree with Smit that ideology does not require conscious assent or investment. Smit, "The Symbol," 299.

20 Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 14.

“Ephemeral” refers to what queer theorist José Muñoz calls the ability to “evaporate” at a touch.²¹

Tactical and ephemeral queer memory strategies can be seen in a variety of representational practices and forms. First, within LGBTQ communities, people passed down histories to each other through intergenerational storytelling, novels, myths, gossip, innuendo, and coded, fleeting performances that only those people within the queer epistemological sphere could understand.²² The symbols that came out of these ways of maintaining a relationship with the past strengthened community identity, empowered people to affirm themselves, and helped render reality outside of the norm legible. What is especially interesting about these symbols for our purposes is how they contradict Smit’s claim that powerful symbols do not need to be explained. Smit writes, “the moment that an idea needs to be clarified, it has already lost its power as a symbol. A symbol is precisely something that needs no explanation but is self-evident and immediately grips the imagination.”²³ In his case, the fact that reconciliation had ambivalent meanings to different South Africans was a weakness that delegitimated its status as a symbol. In our case, the fact that these symbols were not clear, required explanation, and were able to disappear were their *strengths*. Their veiled, ephemeral nature helped to ensure that their content – as well as their bearers – survived in the face of forces that would eradicate them. Smit’s theory, therefore, needs to be revised to make room for symbolics that are coded for various reasons.

Historical bricolage was another tactical and ephemeral way that LGBTQ Americans tapped history’s symbolic power. It was especially useful as a way for queer people to defend themselves from legal and medical establishments. In this strategy, queer people *took* whatever was available in “cis-heterosexual” history and redirected its symbolic power to different ends.²⁴ Playwright Oscar Wilde’s 1895 trial for gross indecency provides a clear example. To defend himself, Wilde argued that many historical – and some biblical – figures that wider society reveres were just like him.

21 Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 13.

22 Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 13.

23 Smit, “The Symbol,” 294.

24 Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 18.

He argued that Plato, David and Jonathan, and Shakespeare all shared in “The love that dare not speak its name.”²⁵ Other LGBTQ people took part in historical speculations like this as well, as is evident from the notes of psychotherapists and the journals of lesbian and gay organizations. For example, in 1925, sexologist William J. Robinson writes, “[T]he thing that struck me peculiarly in almost all homosexuals is their pathetic eagerness to claim ... as homosexual people whose homosexuality is extremely doubtful ... Thus they speak of Shakespeare, Byron, and Whitman as belonging to their class, as if their homosexuality ... were a well-established historical fact.²⁶ For an example of how lesbian or gay journals circulated bricolage material, consult *The Ladder* or *The Mattachine Review*.²⁷

Since cis-heteronormative society had an investment in and therefore a claim on many of these historical figures, queer people could not hold on to them or their symbolic power for too long. I concur with Dunn that historical bricolage worked only as a fleeting survival tactic for LGBTQ people, not as a solid foundation on which to build a less precarious life. This reality powerfully illustrates Smit’s observation that once one group claims a symbol, it is hard for other groups to adopt it.²⁸ At the same time, our case study suggests that we should qualify Smit’s insight. He writes, “In ideological use of language it often happens that one group almost concedes certain terminology to their opponents, never to use it again. You take ‘liberation’, we take ‘reconciliation’; you take ‘wet en orde’, we

25 Quoted in Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 16.

26 Emphasis in original. Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 2.

27 For example, see *The Ladder: A Lesbian Review*, October 1964, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 1–29, in *The Ladder: A Lesbian Review, 1956–1972: An Interpretation and Document Archive*, Introduction by Marcia M. Gallo (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2010). [Online]. Available: <https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1003347894>. In this edition of the Daughters of Bilitis’ famous periodical, one member, Vern Niven, reviews a 1964 book titled *Jonathan to Gide: The Homosexual in History* by Noel I. Garde. The book provides brief overviews of the lives of 300 famous men who were homosexual, bisexual, or who occasionally had homosexual relations. Niven celebrates the book and notes that it can help undo the censoring efforts of other writers and historians “to obliterate all traces of homosexual behavior in the lives of famous people.” In addition to providing society with proof that homosexuals have helped shape the world, she also promotes the book as a cure for the shame that some homosexuals feel about their orientation.

28 Smit, “The Symbol,” 294.

take ‘amandla.’²⁹ What Smit misses in this construction is that groups do sometimes use the symbols that they recognize are ultimately their opponents’ possession. They may not be able to hold on to the symbol, but they can leverage it or subvert it momentarily. And we must not forget that moments can be of great consequence. For a queer person at this time in the United States a tactical appropriation could be the difference between life and death.³⁰

At about the same time that Smit wrote “The Symbol of Reconciliation and Ideological Conflict in South Africa,” queer Americans began to use monumental forms to represent LGBTQ pasts. For example, beginning in the 1980s, they began to build material monuments to *known* and not speculated queer people and to have some success placing them on the landscape. The most famous of these early monuments was George Segal’s *Gay Liberation*. In 1984, it was installed on Stanford University’s campus, where it was repeatedly vandalized. In 1992, the monument was moved to its current location next to the Stonewall Inn in New York City. LGBTQ people did not only create monumental sculptures, however. They also began constructing monumental memory *discourses*. For example, LGBTQ people turned the memory of the 1998 murder of one obscure gay college student, Matthew Shepard, into an enduring, nationally known, rhetorically powerful symbol for hate crime and anti-discrimination legislation, and, in California in the 1980s, queer activists began petitioning for the inclusion of LGBTQ people into some of the most monumental transmitters of history in this country – high school textbooks. Queer monumentality has only accelerated in recent years. Besides the success

29 Smit, “The Symbol,” 294.

30 I do not mean to imply that anti-queer violence has disappeared from the United States. Far from it. Instead, as I make clear in the rest of the article, I am suggesting that queer Americans are increasingly--although not exclusively-- turning to other, less tactical strategies to protect themselves. Tactical strategies do remain common in other parts of the world, however. See Rahul Rao’s study on how LGBTQ rights activists in Uganda leverage the nationally known story of King Mwanga II and the Ugandan martyrs. Rao does not use the word “tactical,” but I believe this word captures what these activists are doing when they claim that King Mwanga II was homosexual and therefore homosexuality cannot be “Western.” This tactic has been a part of their wider strategies to resist the infamous Anti Homosexuality Bill (AHB) and Anti Homosexuality Act (AHA). The former called for sodomy to be punished by death while the latter act replaces the death penalty with life imprisonment. Rahul Rao, *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 75–106.

of some efforts to get LGBTQ people into textbooks, the most significant recent development has probably been that some government officials and agencies have lent support to the creation of queer monuments. President Obama, for example, designated the area around the Stonewall Inn the first LGBTQ national monument in 2016, and, in that same year, the National Parks Service published a theme study of significant LGBTQ sites around the country.³¹ Some states and cities have followed suit. In my own city, Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms designated the Atlanta Eagle the city's first LGBTQ historical landmark in 2020.³²

Perhaps I have gotten ahead of myself. What do I mean by “monumental”? As my examples show, monumental and monumentality are not synonymous with monument, as in stone sculpture. To say that something is monumental means that it has a “a weightiness, timelessness, and grandeur” to it.³³ Monumental things also intend to impinge on or call out to those that behold them.³⁴ They proclaim a message and urge others to join them in promoting it. They do this by appealing not primarily to rationality, à la Habermas, but to affect. Recall that this aligns with Smit's claim that transformative symbols are more effective than rational in nature.³⁵

There are three main reasons that queer monumentality emerged in the 1980s. First, the AIDS crisis led to an increased urgency to durably record

31 See *LGBTQ America: A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, ed. Megan E. Springate (Washington, DC: National Park Foundation, 2016), www.nps.gov/subjects/tellingallamericansstories/lgbtqthemestudy.htm.

32 The Atlanta Eagle is a gay bar known for its leather community and for the 2009 police raid that galvanized Atlanta's queer community and led to the reform of Atlanta's police department. Mayor's Office of Communication, *Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms Designates Atlanta Eagle Building as Historic Landmark*, News Release, December 17, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://www.atlantaga.gov/Home/Components/News/News/13527/1338>.

33 Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 4.

34 This does not mean that they succeed. Monumental things, especially material monuments, do not always capture our attention. See Robert Musil's famous article in which he claimed, “There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument.” “On Monuments,” *Harper's* (June 1988): 35.

35 Smit, “The symbol,” 300.

queer history and to publicly advocate for queer lives.³⁶ LGBTQ people feared not only that an entire generation of gay men would die, but also that they would take with them much of their community's knowledge of its past. Second, the gay and lesbian institutions of the 1950s and 1960s had gained institutional strength as had the archival projects that solidified in the 1970s. Strong organizations enabled queer people to organize effectively, and functioning archives provided material that queer people could monumentalize. Third, there was a memory boom occurring throughout wider society – and the academy – at this time. Importantly, however, many participants in this memory boom were critical of monumentality, viewing it as not modern at best and fascist and totalitarian at worst.³⁷ This was because the ideological conflicts of the twentieth century had employed monumentality to devastating effect. The worst offenders being the Nazis' Third Reich and Stalin's cult of personality. As a result, many Western artists and architects increasingly looked to anti-monumental forms to theorize the meaning of the past for the present. The most striking examples can be found in Europe, but new commemorative forms also appeared in the United States. Among the former, Jochen and Esther Gerz's "Monument against Fascism, War and Violence – and for Peace and Human Rights" stands out.³⁸ This Harberg (anti)monument, installed in 1986, was a twelve-meter high, one-meter square pillar plated with soft lead. The creators installed a plaque and styluses on the pillar that invited visitors to write on the lead and commit themselves to resisting fascism in the future. In other words, the Gerzs rejected monumentality's tendency to assume a passive viewer who will accept any message given them. The monument's most striking feature, however, was that it slowly, intentionally sank into the ground, eventually disappearing except in the memories of those who visited. It thereby relinquished its claim to durability. In the United States,

36 For a monograph that explores the varied responses of US Christian denominations to the AIDS epidemic see Anthony M. Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

37 Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 26–27.

38 See James E. Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1992): 267–296.

a monument that refused many of monumentality's traditional elements is Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial.³⁹

LGBTQ people were able to seize on monumentality because cis-heteronormative society's grip on it had weakened. In other words, they tactically appropriated it.⁴⁰ Despite its bad reputation, which they also had, monumentality was extremely appealing to queer people for several reasons: 1) it could provide *durability* in the face of the drive to forget and render invisible queer pasts, 2) it could ascribe queer people *honour* in the face of discourses that name queerness perversion and inherently anti-citizen, 3) it could provide *inspiration and persuasive appeal* to aid their struggle for rights, and 4) it could create a source of *power* not dependent on subverting cis-heterosexual histories.⁴¹ In other words, it addressed many of their deeply felt, serious needs. And so queer people set out crafting monumental symbols, the type with a clear meaning that everyone could theoretically understand, just like Smit theorizes.

As I intimated at the outset of this section, queer people also face dangers in grasping onto monumentality, and it is controversial for some members of the queer community. One of the most significant risks that queer people face is that they will create a new normativity, a homonormativity. Monumentality tends to be rigid and unitary and so any symbol cast in a monumental form can be norming, and the fact is that most queer monuments honour white, gay, cisgender men.⁴² This is tragically ironic for a community partially defined by its rejection of norms. Why did this happen? There are both social and formal reasons. First, in the quest for rights and acceptance, some queer people who are more "palatable" to the white, cis-heterosexual powerbrokers of society stand in for the whole queer community. Many of them believe that success is more likely this way. Less respectable queers – i.e., queer people of colour as well as non-conforming queers like drag queens, leather daddies, and exhibitionists –

39 For an analysis of this monument see Daniel Abramson, "Maya Lin and the 1960s: Monuments, Timelines and Minimalism," *Critical Inquiry* (Summer 1996): 679–709.

40 Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 25.

41 Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 25–26.

42 Thomas R Dunn, "Whence the Lesbian in Queer Monumentality? Intersections of Gender and Sexuality in Public Memory," *Southern Communication Journal* 82, no. 4 (September 2017): 204.

typically reject this strategy.⁴³ We can currently see this tension playing out around the figures selected to help forward anti-discrimination legislation. It is a point of extreme concern that the wider LGBTQ community has been able to successfully form monumental discourses around white male victims like Shepard, Tyler Clementi, and Brandon Teena but not around any of the dozens of trans women of colour who are murdered every year.⁴⁴

A second social reason is that monumental things tend to be expensive and require connections. For example, material monuments cost money to commission and usually have to be approved by local officials to be placed on public property. White, cisgender men tend to have more economic and social capital than other members of the LGBTQ community. Perhaps it is civil rights strategy that leads them to use these privileges disproportionately for their own representation. Or perhaps it is narrow vision, pride, or even prejudice.

The formal reasons that the majority of queer monuments represent this demographic are also significant. If we narrow our focus to material monuments once again, we see that this form, at least in the West, was never intended to valorise women, intersex and non-binary people, or people of color regardless of gender. In fact, Kirk Savage has shown that sculptural traditions played an active role in supporting white supremacy.⁴⁵ Sculpture has also traditionally been a masculine form, with female figures more often being allegorical ideals than real women. To this point, Monument Lab has recently shown that there are more monuments to mermaids in the United States than to congresswomen.⁴⁶

This whole line of thought makes me want to ask Smit to expand his thoughts on the importance of using the “correct kind of rhetoric”

43 Throughout his book, Dunn documents how these LGBTQ people have protested as well as “camped” queer monuments that have centered white men.

44 Shepard and Clementi were both cisgender men. Teena was transgender man.

45 See Savage’s discussion of the 1854 racial treatise *Types of Mankind* by J.C. Nott and George R. Gliddon. The treatise’s authors analyze the physical features of different races and use classical sculpture to defend the superiority of white embodiment. Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 9–10.

46 Monument Lab, *National Monument Audit* (Monument Lab and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2021), 18.

whenever forwarding a new symbol.⁴⁷ What is the role of ethics, and not merely persuasive ability, when choosing a rhetorical form? Queer people of different genders and ethnicities appear to be actively debating this today. Some believe that this form can be altered to ethically represent them, while others believe that it is too tainted and that other forms should be used. For his part, Dunn argues that monumentality can be saved but only if it incorporates the ephemeral and tactical strategies of early queer communities as well as contemporary insights from queer theory.⁴⁸

Further ethical questions arise when we consider how monumentality increasingly involves the support of the government. This is potentially concerning because queer people have historically been criminalized and declared antinational by this same government. For example, for much of the twentieth century, a person could be arrested for wearing clothes of the “wrong” gender. Furthermore, it was not until 2003 that the Supreme Court overturned all sodomy laws in the United States.⁴⁹ Until then, a gay or bisexual person could be imprisoned for having consensual sex in their own home. We could also mention the Lavender Scare and how government officials hunted down queer people and fired them *en masse* from state employment. Although no longer criminalized or viewed as inherently antinational in the same sense, queer people do still face discrimination today from US government as well. This understandably makes some queer people worry about collaborating with it.

I find concerns around collaborating with the government over textbooks especially salient. History textbooks, as well as all forms of national history, are extremely important to states and their power.⁵⁰ This is why, when queer people advocate for LGBTQ history to be included in them, they face intense pressures to acquiesce to American nationalism. As

47 Smit, “The Symbol”, 301.

48 Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 33–34.

49 *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003).

50 For a South African example, see Robert Vosloo, *Reforming Memory: Essays on South African Church and Theological History* (Matieland, South Africa: African Sun Media, 2017). Vosloo shows how historical narratives not only have the power to unite people and form collective identities but also have the power to severely wound those people who do not fit into these narratives. He calls for an ethically responsible historiography, especially from Christian historians.

Dunn documents, government representatives are likely to admit only those LGBTQ people who “contributed” to the American national project into textbooks.⁵¹ All the queer people who revolted or who were terrorized by the American nation are forgotten. Hence, there is a danger that queer monumentality in textbook form could engender a forgetting right at the heart of queer history. There is also a danger that these representations will make it appear to readers that all is well and there is no need for continued social change.⁵² Advocates must discern whether these dangers outweigh the benefits of durable, honourable representation and all the symbolic meaning that can be drawn from it. As long as queer children continue to be born in cis-heteronormative families without any out-role models, many advocates will continue to say that it is.

Conclusion: reconciliation, queer history, and Princeton Theological Seminary

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer some provisional thoughts on whether reconciliation symbolics appear in representations of LGBTQ history in the US, including in religious spaces like Princeton Theological Seminary. Within wider society, I argue that we do not see reconciliation language intertwined with narrations of queer history. We see isolated apologies for past discrimination and a commitment to inclusion, but not a robust vision of reconciliation.⁵³ Perhaps this is because American society is still heavily cis-heteronormative or because it is ideologically divided in other ways and reconciliation language is the possession of only some ideologies but not others. Or perhaps this is because reconciliation’s Christian overtones are too strong for non-Christian Americans to accept. Maybe the answer is simply that reconciliation symbolics would require the US government to move beyond the language of contribution, and it is not willing to do this.

51 Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 128.

52 Dunn, *Queerly Remembered*, 117.

53 For a recent apology and commitment to inclusion see Michael Gold and Derek M. Norman, “Stonewall Riot Apology: Police Actions Were ‘Wrong,’ Commissioner Admits,” *New York Times*, June 6, 2019. [Online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/06/nyregion/stonewall-riots-nypd.html> (Accessed: March 15, 2022).

Christian churches and organizations in the US have found language about reconciliation and historical injustice much more appealing and motivating than wider American society has. For example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA) both participated in their global body's dialogues on Lutheran violence against Mennonites during the Reformation. These dialogues, which began in 1980, eventually led to the publication of a report called "Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ" and culminated in ritual actions at the 2010 Lutheran World Assembly.⁵⁴ There, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) publicly repented to God and to the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) for persecuting (even unto death) its Anabaptist forebears, for forgetting about these actions, and for all continued misrepresentations of Mennonites since then.⁵⁵ The MWC for its part offered forgiveness to the LWF, confessed its own failings, and committed to a renewed relationship with Lutherans in light of the "Healing Memories" report.⁵⁶

Princeton Theological Seminary has also engaged reconciliation symbolics regarding its past. In 2018, it issued a historical audit called *Princeton Seminary and Slavery*. Therein PTS repented and committed to "tell the truth" about its past and to "move toward reconciliation."⁵⁷ The Seminary has taken tangible steps to do this, including funding reparations and changing the names of several buildings. For example, in October 2021, the Seminary renamed its famous library, known for being the second largest theological library in the world, after Theodore Sedgwick Wright. Wright was the Seminary's first African American graduate and a well-known abolitionist. Additionally, in January 2022, the Seminary's Board of Trustees stripped Samuel Miller's name from its chapel, deciding it was

54 Lutheran World Federation and Mennonite World Conference, eds., "Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ," in *Healing Memories: Implications of the Reconciliation between Lutherans and Mennonites*, LWF Studies, 2016/2 (Geneva, Switzerland: Lutheran World Federation, 2016).

55 Lutheran World Federation, ed., "Bearing Fruit: Implications of the 2010 Reconciliation between Lutherans and Anabaptist-Mennonites," in *Healing Memories: Implications of the Reconciliation between Lutherans and Mennonites*, LWF studies, 2016/2 (Geneva, Switzerland: Lutheran World Federation, 2016), 129.

56 Lutheran World Federation, "Bearing Fruit," 132.

57 Historical Audit Committee, *Princeton Seminary and Slavery*, 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://slavery.ptsem.edu/>, 1.

no longer acceptable to expect students to worship in a place named after “a slaveholder, opponent of abolitionism, and advocate for the American Colonization Society, which sought to send freed Blacks to Africa.”⁵⁸ Unlike the library, this decision was not initiated by Seminary leadership but by students. Numerous student groups, including the Gender and Sexuality Association for Seminarians (GSAS), followed the leadership of the Association for Black Seminarians (ABS) in successfully protesting the name of the chapel.

The willingness of Christian churches and organizations to seek reconciliation for their history of anti-LGBTQ violence is significantly less common than their willingness to pursue reconciliation over other matters. It does seem, however, that some denominations are moving this direction. For example, reconciliation language plays a central role for groups that advocate full LGBTQ inclusion and participation in mainline denominations. This is even evident in the names that some have chosen: the main Lutheran queer advocacy organization is called *Reconciling in Christ* while the main Methodist one is called *Reconciling Ministries*.

At PTS, there is currently very little indication that the Seminary will confront its history of cis-heteronormativity or include queer graduates in its monumental symbolics. Perhaps one reason for this is that LGBTQ students at PTS have yet to mobilize around this issue, focusing instead on more pressing issues relating to treatment. But there are signs that GSAS and queer students might eventually move in this direction. Namely, we are beginning to see queer graduates durably record and share LGBTQ history at PTS with later generations of students. These types of acts serve to strengthen the memory of the student body, which tends to be short and ephemeral because it is always changing, and to stand next to the Seminary’s institutional memory, which is long and may differ in content. I am aware of two recent examples. First, in 2018, David Henry Wall published an article in *Theology Today* called “A View from Within: The LGBTQ Struggle at Princeton Theological Seminary,” and in 2021, William Stell gave a campus lecture titled “They would look over their shoulder and

58 M. Craig Barnes, “Board Vote on Chapel’s Name Is Another Step Forward in the Seminary’s Journey of Repentance,” News Release, January 25, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.ptsem.edu/news/board-vote-on-chapel-name>.

whisper”: a history of GSAS.⁵⁹ This lecture was sponsored by the *Center for Theology, Women and Gender* in partnership with the NT 3376 Queer Hermeneutics class, taught by Lindsey Jodrey, and with GSAS.

If GSAS and queer students at PTS decide to move forward with looking back, I am left wondering what rhetorical strategies they should use in their quest to derive symbolic power from history. Should they seek to obtain queer monumentality? Petition for a building to be named after a queer community member or for a monument to be erected? Would this be the best, let alone the most ethical, course of action in light of all the dangers I mentioned above? If not, perhaps they could at least pursue the removal of monumental forms to anti-LGBTQ community members. But this is a negative solution that does not generate any positive symbolic power. Perhaps for that, they could employ ephemeral practices like storytelling or performance. Of course, these practices would be vulnerable to disappear every year commencement takes place.

I do not leave us with an answer to these fraught questions. Like Smit, I have sought to achieve greater conceptual clarity and to show how symbols get entangled with powerful ideologies that tangibly affect human life. My analysis has illustrated many of Smit’s insights but has also gone beyond them. For example, I showed how early queer memory strategies relied on symbols that were coded and not clear. I also explored in more depth what difference a symbol’s form makes for its chances of success. It should be obvious at this stage in my analysis that form was in fact crucial to queer memory practices. Societal conditions led LGBTQ Americans to primarily use tactical and ephemeral memory strategies from the late nineteenth century until the 1980s. These strategies helped queer people to affirm themselves, make sense of the world, and resist cis-heteronormative oppression. From the 1980s onward, queer monumentality has offered LGBTQ people solutions to many serious challenges and has been a valuable tool in the quest for queer rights. It has also burdened the community with new challenges. Many of these challenges are ethical in nature. It is here that I must put down Smit’s analysis of the symbolic and seek to renew my

59 William Stell, ““They would look over their shoulder and whisper’: a history of GSAS,” (Lecture, Princeton, NJ, October 29, 2021).

engagement with his ethics. I am confident that this engagement will be equally invigorating.

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