

## Who's Worth Remembering?: American Modes of Memorialization and the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama

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### Late 19<sup>th</sup> – mid 20<sup>th</sup> century:

- The public's sense of national unity had been 'disturbed' by the Civil War, and a rapidly changing society during Reconstruction => Americans began erecting memorials on a large scale.
- Memorials helped recreate the "affective bonds of nationalism" (Benedict Anderson).
- Memorials in this period were most often dedicated to "great men" such as statesmen, explorers, pioneers and soldiers, and usually took the shape of a traditional statue.

### 1960s-1980s:

- Civil rights era inspires change in memorial culture – increase in memorials representing the diversity of American society.
- Earlier memorials devoted to unifying national objects seen as oppressive/non-representational of newly empowered special interest groups.
- This period of time signified "[...] a major shift in the American commemorative practices[...] from "official" national narratives to the subjective symbolic expressions of multiple American publics." (Erika Doss)
- Memorials became more abstract in design, leaving them open to interpretation.

### 1990s – 2000s:

- Memorial 'boom' inspired by post-1960s sense of universal entitlement to representation.
- "[...] Today's "obsession with memory" and memorials is grounded in a vastly expanded U.S. demographic and in heightened expectations of rights and representations among the nation's increasingly diverse publics." (Erika Doss)
- Groups defined by demographics, race, religion, ideology etc. 'claim' their place in the American collective memory.

- Many memorials to events and people, who had previously been excluded from the national narratives.
- Examples include The National Japanese American Memorial (2000) in Washington, D.C., honoring those Japanese Americans interned during WWII, and The National Memorial for the Unborn (1994) in Chattanooga, Tennessee to honor aborted fetuses and miscarriages.

### **The Civil Rights Memorial (1989), Montgomery, Alabama**

- Funded by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), a nonprofit civil rights organization founded in 1971 and based in Montgomery, AL.
- Built to honor the ‘martyrs’ of the civil rights movement, as well as important events such as the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The memorial covers the years from *Brown* (1954) to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. (1968).
- “*Selected were victims who fit at least one of three criteria: They were murdered because they were active in the movement; they were killed as acts of terror aimed at intimidating blacks and civil rights activists; or, their deaths [...] helped galvanize the movement by demonstrating the brutality faced by African Americans in the South.*” (SPLC website)
- The memorial consists of a black granite table with the important names and dates inscribed, as well as a granite wall featuring a Martin Luther King Jr. quotation. Moreover, in 2005, the SPLC established the Civil Rights Memorial Center to further memorialize the struggles of the civil rights era and inspire a continual fight for this cause. Included herein is a digital “Wall of Tolerance” featuring the names of more than half a million people, who have pledged to fight discrimination.

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