

TOWARD TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION:  
PUBLIC MEMORY, PHILOSOPHICAL PAIRS, AND THE EDMUND PETTUS BRIDGE

by

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A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
in Communication

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

December 2023

ABSTRACT

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2023  
Under the Supervision of Professor Leslie J. Harris

This thesis connects the rhetoric of Bryan Stevenson which advances truth and reconciliation for racial healing in the United States to a case study of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. I examine common cultural invocations of the bridge that support the persistence of a blurry public memory that occludes visibility of its original memorial dedication to a known white supremacist and instead celebrates it as a landmark of the civil rights movement. I also analyze arguments for both changing and keeping the name of the bridge that occurred between 2015-2020, illustrating ways in which Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's philosophical pairs manifest through and across these arguments. Instantiating the bridge in duality as both a monument to the confederacy and the civil rights movement, I contemplate what lessons the bridge makes available to a public that desires to engage in conversations that approach the truth-telling and reconciliation Stevenson has advocated.

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For my mother,  
for my future.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is a literal army of exceptional people who I wish to acknowledge as being instrumental to my completion of this project and enduring my master's program. First, I owe expedient and deeply heartfelt thank-yous to three individuals on the ground who engaged with me in conversation and contributed toward this thesis project's genesis, research, and completion. Who knew that four days wandering around Alabama during the summer of 2022 would result in such an awakening that it would calibrate my internal compass to arrive at where we are today? I left home with only an itinerary, an awareness that I was relatively ignorant concerning the places I was going to visit, and an intense curiosity and desire to learn everything I possibly could. It is beautiful, to me, that I couldn't have finished my master's program without the generosity of strangers.

Six months before I had anything resembling even the slightest inkling that I'd be writing anything (let alone my thesis) about the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Columbus Williams intercepted another unsuspecting tourist at the intersection of Broad Street and Water Avenue in Selma, Alabama. As he gave me his speech about who the bridge was named after, my critical senses were piqued that something deeply rhetorical and complex was going on with this bridge. To Columbus, thank you for your tireless dedication that tipped me off and inspired me to dig for myself - I owe this entire thesis to the educational work you do day in and day out. Teachers make a difference for every student willing to put in the work.

As I began to familiarize myself with the bridge less as symbol and more as structure, an early-on conversation with Dr. Danielle Willkens at Georgia Tech confirmed that there is so much going on with this bridge that can be thoughtfully examined through the lens of rhetorical criticism. Dr. Willkens, thank you for your willingness to connect, your

interest in this project, your incredibly helpful suggestions, and your excitement about the Milwaukee connection to the bridge. I felt deeply fortunate over the course of this project to know there was at least one other person out there who shared my passion for it.

I am sincerely grateful to Mr. Stephen Posey at the Selma-Dallas County Public Library. Your thoughtfulness and generosity in providing artifacts to an out-of-towner you'd only met via email warmed my heart in so many ways and contributed substantially to a richer understanding of Selma and the bridge. The final version of this thesis would be incomplete without the time and effort you spent providing archival materials that contextualized the bridge's dedication.

I also want to express my significant gratitude to Dr. Sara C. VanderHaagen and Dr. William M. Keith, who generously agreed to serve on my thesis committee, availing their time, perspective, and feedback to make this project something I can feel proud of finishing. Thank you to Cheryl Strayed for the profound influence your work has had on my life, and for putting so much of what cannot otherwise be communicated into words. Thank you to Bryan Stevenson for embodying service, leadership, courage, compassion, and commitment – you are a light charting a course through the darkness and beckoning us to follow.

Closer to home, I would be remiss if I didn't thank the team of professionals that I have the privilege of working with day in and day out who support my academic curiosity, love me for my cerebral awkwardness, value my deep thinking, and have taken a keen interest in this masochistic hobby of mine called "getting a master's degree." To Grady, Laila, Kristin, Melissa, Cassie, Dean, Rod, Ryan, Jeb, Rekha, Kay, Dave, James, Anthony, Jane, Bonnie, Tom, Ted, and Matt (and the grocery list of others inadvertently omitted); thank you for all the times you made me laugh or (wryly?) said, "that's really interesting" through

this process, particularly when you were running into me in the office on nights and weekends. Those interactions made all the difference in getting me across the finish line when all I wanted to do was quit.

To Evamarie, Paul, and Sylvia, thank you for being brave enough to put pen to paper in 2020 and vouch that I belonged in a graduate program. Your belief in me kept me determinedly in my seat all the times that I felt like I didn't belong and held me accountable to finishing. Your pride stoked my passion, my passion stoked your enthusiasm, and your enthusiasm lifted me every time I felt torn down, discouraged, and like I had no place in this. Evamarie – thank you for your charismatic style and embodying so many things for me; you give me unlimited hope that I am the one who gets to call the shots concerning my future. Paul, thank you for all the multi-disciplinary coaching and encouragement over the years – your gentleness, humor, and articulation of my general attitude toward life make me smile. Sylvia – you saucy, sassy, envelope-pusher! Never change. I treasure you, our deep and sensitive conversations, and our bonds over the experiences of grief, loss, and trauma. Life can be cruel and hard, but friends make it easier.

To Eileen and Davis – thank you for helping me fill and refill the two empty bowls I carry to the point of overflowing – your tireless belief has put me back on my feet more times than I could ever fully thank you for. I wouldn't be the person I am today without your willingness to chew me out and build me back up over the years, and that requires no shortage of love and commitment to help form a person the way that both of you have. To my cousins Natalie and Amanda – you two are my heroes, the sisters I never had, and my constant inspiration; I am so thankful for you. To my mother's sister, Karen – thank you for

always opening your home without hesitation and helping me keep Katie's spirit burning bright. To my brothers Ethan and Aaron, we will always be bound, no matter what.

To Rob and Chantal (and maybe even Shea) – thank you for giving me a second home, for all the laughter, and for all the days spent banishing loneliness while indulging in each other's company. To Robbin, my most empathetic friend, for your persistent support and cheerleading – I don't know where you find the leftover energy after being such an incredible mother, wife, and professional. To Dawn, the travel-size to my Costco-size can of whoop-ass, you are ferocious, divine, and will always be five days older than me. To those I have not named, congratulations on being an unsung hero of this journey and possessing mystique – who are you?

Lastly, to Dr. Leslie J. Harris, thank you for your encouragement and for seeing me. Thank you for your unequivocal willingness to engage in conversation so that I could build confidence in my skills and understanding. Thank you for your empathetic commitment, effusive praise, and thoughtful suggestions. Thank you for helping me navigate foreign territory, amplify what was true to clear the dissonance, and bring this all to a conclusion.



The Edmund Pettus Bridge – Selma, Alabama.  
Photo: Allyson K. Hayden, June 29, 2022.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In 1989, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) was founded by lawyer Bryan Stevenson in the cradle of the confederacy: Montgomery, Alabama. In the more than three decades since, Stevenson and his team have worked relentlessly on their mission toward criminal justice reform, racial justice, anti-poverty measures, and public education. Stevenson has argued in front of the United States Supreme Court five times, winning cases that have resulted in protections for prisoners suffering from dementia and abolishing mandatory life without parole sentences for children seventeen and younger.<sup>1</sup> As a part of the EJI's mission of public education, The Legacy Museum and National Memorial to Peace and Justice opened to the public in 2018 and have since beckoned visitors from around the world to confront America's dark history of enslavement, racial terror lynchings, and the generational effects of segregation and mass incarceration.<sup>2</sup>

Stevenson has gone on record multiple times articulating his position that for America to truly heal from its history of racial inequality as a nation, it must first engage in truth-telling before racial reconciliation can occur. Against the backdrop of persistent unrest and instability in communities across the nation that occurred during the summer of 2020 following the death of George Floyd at the knee of a Minneapolis Police Department officer,<sup>3</sup> Stevenson claimed:

I'm persuaded that each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done... but until we tell the truth, we deny ourselves the opportunity for beauty. Justice can be beautiful. Reconciliation can be beautiful... and we deny ourselves that when we insist on denying our broken past, our ugly past, our racist past, [and] when we insist on avoiding the truth.<sup>4</sup>

While Stevenson has spent his career fighting for abolition of the death penalty and of cruel and unusual punishment within the American criminal justice system, the EJI more broadly

advances a daily argument that “to overcome racial inequality, we must confront our history.”<sup>5</sup> Our history is not confined solely within the city limits of Montgomery, to the state of Alabama, or even within the region of the American south. Our history is not neatly contained to a bygone era of which there are no survivors; it continues to be written daily. Across the country, the American landscape is littered with landmarks not limited to museums and memorials that invite us to pause and consider the shared history that exists in public spaces, how its meaning has been derived, sustained, and challenged, and what opportunities exist for narratives principally concerned with justice to emerge from these material sites.

Can the places that manifested the worst of us come to epitomize the best of us? How do disagreements over the meaning of everyday public places reflect broader attitudes about the type of truth-telling which Stevenson advocates? What can Alabama and all of its complicated, tragic histories teach us about how we engage with strangers, neighbors, and our own humanity? While these are massive questions worthy of personal reflection that can work to challenge what we know about power, relationships, and the public spaces we traverse (and that this thesis cannot fully answer), we need look no further than the city of Selma, Alabama for a place to begin this inquiry. In this thesis, I will argue that the Edmund Pettus Bridge is more than a structure of concrete and steel; it is a rhetorically charged symbol of America’s legacy of racial strife that to this day serves as a public mirror reflecting broader social attitudes toward truth and reconciliation.

I chose to analyze the bridge as a case study because of its broad social significance and the complexity of its existence both as local place and global landmark. The instability of the bridge’s rhetorical and material existence is a microcosm of broader national

discourse concerned with narratives of racial difference and white supremacy, as well as counter narratives advocating for truth and reconciliation. More specifically, I have foregrounded Bryan Stevenson as a leading advocate for these counter-narratives because he has publicly and repeatedly identified ways in which narratives of racial difference and white supremacy can be countered through the process of truth-telling in pursuit of reconciliation. While Stevenson's rhetoric does not appear in every chapter of this thesis, I use the bridge as a case study where a local issue has implications reaching far beyond a city's limits. When examining the discourse that engages this bridge, the legacy and generational effects of narratives of racial difference and white supremacy are observably in play as the bridge's complicated history produces public deliberation concerning its future.

The analysis I perform across the pages of this thesis is not incongruent with Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian Ott's examination in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials* of the ways in which rhetorical scholars are concerned with "meaningful"<sup>6</sup> subjects of analysis. The prevalence and visibility of the Edmund Pettus Bridge are part of what render it a meaningful subject for analysis. The authors define a meaningful subject in two parts. First, that "meaningful discourses, events, objects, and practices carry evocative, affective weight – they create and/or sustain emotional affiliation... meaningful-ness invites us to consider how discourses, events, objects, and practice inflect, deploy, and circulate affective investments."<sup>7</sup> The Edmund Pettus Bridge is an object in place, and the discourses concerned with it are evocative, affective, and emotional in nature. The second definitional component of a meaningful subject for analysis points toward ways that these subjects are "filled with meaning – thus discourses,

events, objects, and practices are composed of signs that may take on a range of signification.”<sup>8</sup> The Edmund Pettus Bridge is socially significant and signifies – and the authors note that for rhetoricians, “the notion of signification is of serious importance, for it suggests in what ways a discourse, event, object, or practice might come to reference particular meanings.”<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, analysis of the Edmund Pettus Bridge and the ways the bridge is involved in signification localizes our attention to a particular material site while anchoring us to a broader contemplation of ways in which narratives of racial difference and white supremacy and counter-narratives advocating for truth and reconciliation influence our relationships and society.

In this introductory chapter, I begin with a broad review of the relevant literature related to rhetorical analysis of space and place and explicate how rhetorical activity in public space works to effect transformations of those spaces into places imbued with meaning, particularly within the American south. The second and third chapters of this thesis offer a more directly applied analysis of the discourses circulating around the bridge that maintain and challenge its shared meaning through its layered public memory and ongoing arguments related to renaming it. The fourth and concluding chapter of this thesis reflects on the contemporary counter-narratives of Stevenson, articulates this project’s scholarly contribution, and suggests future directions in which this work could continue.

For purposes of this thesis, I define rhetoric to be the narratives and public discourse we encounter daily that shape our understanding of the environments we share and inhabit. Rhetoric influences our ability to justify actions we take that reinforce the status quo or reform the spaces that we occupy. Messages we absorb are more than mere phenomenon; the ways that we experience rhetoric can strengthen or challenge our

worldview and shake to the core our comfort zones and approaches to making sense of things. In this way, we can observe Robert L. Scott's argument that "people generally have a sense of rhetoric; this sense or feeling, which precedes any definition of rhetoric, is immediately rooted in experience; [but] one's sense of rhetoric is mediated by his set toward reality."<sup>10</sup> As we rely on our senses to navigate life's experiences and the world around us, rhetoric becomes a key input to extrapolating the meaning of events that occur and justifying our choices to disengage or respond.

Returning to Bryan Stevenson, in an interview with NPR given in January of 2020 Stevenson made clear the pivotal role that narratives and rhetoric play in assuaging the conscience of America throughout its history when claiming that "we justified violence by creating a narrative of racial difference... and we used rhetoric to justify the violence."<sup>11</sup> Rhetorical scholars have critically analyzed the extraordinary effects rhetoric can have on establishing, destabilizing, reforming, and strengthening communities. Roger Stahl argued that "rhetoric is not 'material' in the sense that it can be picked up and handled. Instead, rhetoric is part of a material phenomenon that can be studied only by its effects."<sup>12</sup> When we consider the ways that meaning is contested and negotiated in perpetuity through discourse related to the history and meaning of public spaces, we are led in the direction of critiquing power, its movements, and its manifestations. We can more plainly see the ways in which narratives galvanize community members and the broader public toward actions that simultaneously create the future and write our collective history at the same time. Whether that history will ultimately be worthy of praise or shame is often influenced by the ethicality of the rhetoric employed and the leaders who espouse it.

## **The Rationale for Studying Rhetoric About a Bridge**

The ways that we discuss public spaces and the meaning that constitutes place are part of the broader public discourse called rhetoric that this thesis examines in a four-chapter pursuit of making a contribution toward truth and reconciliation. Greg Dickinson argued that “rhetorical criticism of space is a mode by which we explore the complexities, challenges, and joys of living together [and] writing about material places... localizes our attention, demands that we critically evaluate power, and requires that we think carefully about bodies, selves, others, and identity.”<sup>13</sup> In this literature review, I begin by examining the ways in which recent scholarship has focused critical attention on confederate iconography such as monuments and memorials, and the ways in which this iconography reinforces racial fault lines within communities rooted in the narratives they represent. I then suggest that beyond the more obvious iconography, it is within the scope of our exigence to take a broader survey of public spaces, and how those spaces are transformed through the rhetoric circulating about them into places imbued with meaning and that can be contested and redefined. Consequently, we can more clearly understand why this thesis is concerned with one specific public space in the state of Alabama, and how the meaning we ascribe to this site has been rhetorically derived and perpetuated. By localizing our focus to the Edmund Pettus Bridge and the narratives and discourse circulating around it, we broaden our understanding of the landscape of confederate iconography, and how rhetoric works to transform the meaning of space and place.

In their book *Memory and Monument Wars in American Cities*, Marouf Hasian, Jr. and Nicholas Paliewicz interrogated the agentic performances of two cities in the American south.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, they examined how “cities’ reactions to various racial divides, societal fissures, and wounds can be linked to various acts of commemorative remembering and

forgetting.”<sup>15</sup> The authors spent two chapters analyzing Charlottesville, Virginia and Montgomery, Alabama, respectively. In their analysis of Charlottesville, the authors are particularly focused on the ways that confederate monuments and memorials found throughout the city promote remembrance of lost cause narratives. Roger C. Hartley explained that:

The lost cause narrative denies any significant role for slavery in the south’s decision to secede from the union; the narrative justifies secession as a noble choice to protect southern liberties... the lost cause myth claims that slavery was a benign institution [and]... glorifies whites whose fate it was to fight steadfastly and valiantly for a noble cause they were not able to attain.<sup>16</sup>

While Hasian and Paliewicz focused on the ways in which Charlottesville’s cityscape aids in remembering lost cause narratives, their analysis of Montgomery, Alabama focused on critical engagement with a city whose landscape has a much more complicated task in remembering due to the competing narratives and memories it hosts.

In the state capitol of Alabama, the First White House of the Confederacy is kept in pristine condition just across the street from the capitol building. A nearly twenty-foot-tall statue of Jefferson Davis stands on the front lawn of the state capitol and gazes down Dexter Avenue, situated a mere block from the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church. Just around the corner from the statue of Davis on the capitol grounds is an even larger, eighty-eight-foot-tall monument to the confederate dead. With confederate iconography seemingly everywhere, what’s also unmistakable about the cityscape is the evidence that in many ways, Montgomery was the ground zero of the civil rights movement. The Rosa Parks Museum, the Freedom Rides Museum, and the Civil Rights Memorial at the Southern Poverty Law Center are only a few of the city’s landmarks that remember the movement.

Looking beyond the visible tensions between the confederacy and the civil rights movement, what Hasian and Paliewicz exhibit is the way in which Montgomery's memories are further complicated by Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative's National Memorial to Peace and Justice and The Legacy Museum. The authors argue that the city "is taking up a material form of memory-work that asks both Alabama residents and U.S. citizens to acknowledge 'forgotten' histories of lynching and racial terror legacies... Montgomery is creating new memoryscapes for those who no longer want to see their city portrayed as an Old Alabama Town."<sup>17</sup> Stevenson and EJI have reclaimed spaces in the city that used to be sites of the slavery economy by situating their National Memorial to Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum both near to and on grounds where enslaved bodies were brokered.<sup>18</sup> In examining the ways that both Charlottesville and Montgomery perform different forms of remembering that are anchored to the city's material memoryscapes, the authors "put on display how U.S. cities evolve and adapt to changing ideological environments"<sup>19</sup> while regionalizing their attention predominantly toward the American south.

Remaining localized to the American south and in complement to the claim by M. Kelly Carr that "monuments are not really historians; they are storytellers,"<sup>20</sup> Karen Cox methodically traced the role the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) played in enshrining the lost cause in her book *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice*.<sup>21</sup> The UDC vigorously campaigned for monuments and memorials that were installed on the lawns of capitol buildings, courthouses, and other public spaces, while simultaneously infusing the lost cause myth and narratives into classroom curriculums and civic celebrations. In detailing this history and arguing that "the

south, in particular, has been a hostage to lost cause rhetoric since the end of the civil war... it was a powerful narrative to which white northerners capitulated in the nineteenth century and one that influenced the young minds of generations of white southerners,"<sup>22</sup> Cox, like Stevenson, points toward the power of narratives and rhetoric in perpetuating racial inequality. In the concluding paragraph of the book, Cox asserts that:

In the simplest of terms, it's about competing versions of history. One is based in fact and the centrality of slavery to the civil war and of white supremacy in the building of monuments. The other is based on a fabricated account of a battle over states' rights, stripped of the ugliness of slavery, which massages the truth as a means of dealing with confederate defeat and regards monuments as honoring a just cause and virtuous heritage.<sup>23</sup>

With respect to claims put forward by Karen Cox and Bryan Stevenson independently, arguments can be observed that until the power of rhetoric is put toward truth-telling rather than perpetuating narratives of lost cause mythology or racial difference and white supremacy, there is no common ground and no ability to move toward reconciliation.

While there have been varying levels of success in tearing down confederate iconography in communities around the country, J. David Maxson investigated what comes into the spaces these monuments and memorials used to occupy once they are removed.<sup>24</sup> While conceptualizing residual memory following the removal of the Liberty Place Monument in New Orleans, Maxson observed the ways that discourse orbits monuments and noted that "place – and more specifically the histories ascribed to that place – arranges monumental narratives in ways that foreground certain historical perspectives while distancing others."<sup>25</sup> Maxson's arguments again point toward the transformative power of narratives operating in relationship to space, the public, and community – both supporting what is remembered, what is forgotten, and what aids participation in each respective activity. Robin Autry argued that narratives are deployed to transform places, particularly

places where confederate monumentality is highly visible, and that these monuments and memorials rely on elements of elasticity and ability to be reframed discursively to obfuscate legacies of hate and Ku Klux Klan activity.<sup>26</sup>

In analyzing the ways that the confederate memorial at Stone Mountain has been transformed into a family-friendly tourist attraction that plays up nostalgia, heritage, and romanticized antebellum charm while downplaying its overtly white supremacist roots, Autry broadens the critical focus to not only consider the memorial, but the grounds on which it operates. Over the course of explaining the park's history, Autry surfaces the story of the Venable family, who were generationally involved in the Klan and owned much of the mountain and the surrounding grounds on which today's park exists.<sup>27</sup> The author documents the generational fingerprints of the Klan across the grounds, particularly when explaining that following his election as the first black mayor of Stone Mountain in 1997, Chuck Burris was able to persuade a member of the Venable family to bar the Klan from continuing to hold rallies in the park in exchange for leaving Venable Street named as-is.<sup>28</sup> Even today, Venable Street connects visitors to Robert E. Lee Boulevard, the ring road which circles the park around the base of the mountain.

Sometimes, iconography doesn't look like iconography. Sometimes, it takes the form of naming city streets, public parks, high schools, and bridges.<sup>29</sup> Sometimes, it lurks dormant yet in plain sight beneath the shadow of a public memory, like the Edmund Pettus Bridge. It is here that I wish to further our understanding of the ways in which an everyday place like a bridge in Alabama is transformed through rhetoric, in the form of the law, into part of the landscape of confederate iconography. Gerald Wetlaufer put forward that "law is rhetoric, but the particular rhetoric embraced by the law operates through the systemic

*denial* that it is rhetoric.”<sup>30</sup> The laws that govern our societies are an important component of shaping our lives and communities, just as narratives are. The law is far more than an ideologically neutral set of rules and statutes – it plays a key role in dictating, constraining, and agitating our reality. Following the removal of the confederate battle flag flying over the state capitol in 2015 by then-Governor Robert Bentley, State Senator Gerald Allen (R-Tuscaloosa) began submitting legislation in response to “a revisionist movement afoot to cover over many parts of American history... the politically correct movement to strike whole periods of the past from our collective memory is divisive and unnecessary.”<sup>31</sup> What ultimately resulted was the passage of the Alabama Memorial Preservation Act of 2017.<sup>32</sup>

The act extends protections to any “architecturally significant building, memorial building, memorial street, or monument located on public property”<sup>33</sup> that falls within its stipulated aging requirements. There are no occurrences of the word bridge in the act, and on its surface, a bridge doesn’t readily fit within the category of an architecturally significant building, a memorial building, a memorial street, or a monument. However, the act defines a memorial building as “a building, structure, park, or other institution other than a memorial school, that is located on public property and has been erected for, or named or dedicated in honor of, an event a person, a group, a movement, or military service.”<sup>34</sup> Consequently, since 2017 the Edmund Pettus Bridge has been a legally protected memorial building under the act and treated in the same manner as any other memorial street, architecturally significant building, or monument covered under the act’s aging requirements.<sup>35</sup>

This is a transformation effected by the rhetoric of the law. Prior to the passage of the act the bridge had already been designated as a National Historic Landmark in 2013.<sup>36</sup>

Following the passage of the act, the bill retained its landmark status and was also now constituted a memorial building eligible for the act's protections. Efforts have been made since 2015 to change the name of the bridge, but the potential for success has been inevitably complicated by the passage of the act. In the following section I provide some additional history relative to the bridge to further elucidate reasons why this bridge must be situated within the same landscape of confederate monuments across the American south that the literature reviewed thus far has been concerned with. While bridges are an everyday space of life, the narratives and rhetoric operating in relationship to this bridge are what transform it from merely an economic conduit and means of crossing the Alabama River into a rhetorically charged symbol and meaningful site worthy of critical attention.

### **Background of the Edmund Pettus Bridge**

This introductory chapter includes some orientation to the history of the bridge, the man for whom it was named, and the events of March 1965 that transformed it into a globally recognized symbol of triumph in the face of brutality during the civil rights movement in the United States. The bridge is far more than an aging structure of concrete and steel; when viewed rhetorically, we see the bridge as a public mirror that reflects a complex history of violence, progress, and hope for justice. Through analyzing the symbolic and contested meaning of the bridge, we can more deeply appreciate the ways in which the everyday spaces we traverse can be transformed into places that carry social significance so rich in meaning that they become the landmarks of a global community. In the chapters that follow I will explicate how a prevailing, yet blurry public memory of the bridge has supported a rewriting of the meaning of the site, and how ongoing efforts to change the

name of the bridge are a microcosm of broader conversations occurring at the national level that grapple with social values, identity, community, and ultimately power.

In May of 1940, a community in Alabama hosted the opening of a new bridge spanning the Alabama River. Purported by the president of the city's chamber of commerce to be "the finest bridge between Savannah and San Diego,"<sup>37</sup> a three-day festival to commemorate the occasion took place. In the opening pages of a program that outlined the pageantry for the bridge's dedication, the Dallas County Judge of Probate remarked on the symbolic nature of the bridge, claiming it would be "an outstanding emblem of foresight and the progressive spirit... the new bridge is the answer to 'the march of progress.'"<sup>38</sup> This bridge was named in memorial of a man viewed as a beloved son of the community who had served it with great distinction at the local and federal level up until his death in 1907. This man was Edmund Winston Pettus; a United States senator, brigadier general in the confederate army, and grand dragon in the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>39</sup>

The bridge as famous today is not widely known for its homage to white supremacy. The Edmund Pettus Bridge has become emblematic of an altogether different type of march of progress; the Selma to Montgomery march that occurred twenty-five years after the bridge's christening. Weeks shy of a century after Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox, the bridge was transformed from local symbol of economic progress to a national symbol of racial strife. On March 7, 1965, between five and six-hundred voting rights marchers departed from Brown Chapel AME in Selma, Alabama and crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge with intent to march to the state capitol of Montgomery.<sup>40</sup> After crossing the bridge, marchers were confronted by state agents who deployed teargas, bullwhips, rubber tubing

wrapped in barbed wire, and nightsticks to terrorize the marchers and chase them back across the bridge into the city of Selma.<sup>41</sup>

National media coverage depicted the events of what has become known as Bloody Sunday, and the bridge has become a symbolic marker of the ideological battlefield where a march of progress toward voting rights was violently confronted, but ultimately prevailed. Weeks after Bloody Sunday, marchers numbering in the thousands crossed the bridge under federal protection and successfully completed their journey to the state capitol. Today, the Selma Interpretive Center operated by the National Park Service is situated at the intersection of Broad Street and Water Avenue just across from the bridge. The Interpretive Center is one of three situated along the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail chronicling the legacy of the civil rights movement and the events of March 1965 that began steps from its door and ended on the steps of the Alabama state capitol.<sup>42</sup>

In the more than half a century that has elapsed since Bloody Sunday, the bridge as a symbol of the civil rights movement has not been forgotten. On an annual basis, Selma hosts memorial celebrations the during the first weekend of March – the jubilee commemorating Bloody Sunday, the Selma to Montgomery march, and the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson is claimed to be the largest annual black history event in America.<sup>43</sup> Presidents Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden have given remarks at the foot of the bridge. Vice President Kamala Harris attended the jubilee in 2022. When John Lewis died in 2020, there was widespread media coverage of the horse-drawn carriage carrying his casket across the bridge, then strewn with rose petals, one last time.<sup>44</sup> Fifty-five years earlier, a young Lewis was an organizer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and led the Bloody Sunday march with Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference (SCLC). Lewis famously criticized the Johnson Administration, claiming “I don’t see how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam, I don’t see how he can send troops to the Congo... and can’t send troops to Selma, Alabama”<sup>45</sup> while suffering from a fractured skull that resulted from the beating he’d taken at the hands of state agents that day. The bridge was designated as a National Landmark in 2013, nominated to become a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2016, and remains socially significant to this day.<sup>46</sup>

### **Outline of Chapters**

To support the analysis of the chapters that follow and nest this thesis within ongoing conversations, I will draw extensively from existing scholarship concerned with public memory sites of the civil rights movement and from the work of Chaïm Perelman that centered on justice and argumentation. Perelman was a Jewish philosopher and legal scholar born in Poland who lived in Belgium and observed the horrors of the Holocaust throughout the duration of World War II. His work on justice and argumentation was extended into more expansive theorization concerning rhetoric through academic partnership with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca to jointly author *The New Rhetoric*,<sup>47</sup> which this thesis engages with directly and substantively in its third chapter. It is poignant to engage Perelman’s thinking forged in the crucible of violent antisemitism when considering the ways in which America’s journey toward truth and racial reconciliation has been notably divergent from countries like Germany and South Africa, particularly given legislative movements in Alabama to amend the Memorial Preservation Act that began to unfold as this thesis was being written.

In April of 2023, local media coverage indicated that a draft bill had emerged recommending enhancements to the act and the bill was in search of sponsorship.<sup>48</sup> Some of the enhancements were observed as being aimed at resolving penalty structure gaps and

ambiguity in the language of the original legislation that surfaced during the 2020 case *Alabama v. Birmingham*. The draft bill eventually found sponsorship among a group of nearly thirty state senators, its first reading occurring on April 20, 2023.<sup>49</sup> In the reporting on these developments, State Representative Phillip Ensler (D-Montgomery) drew an explicit link between the justifications being offered for increasing the fines and penalties and the level of perceived willingness to engage in truth-telling and reconciliation. More pointedly, coverage of the subject reflects that “Ensler, who is Jewish, said he sometimes thinks about the disagreements over confederate symbols in the context of the Holocaust.”<sup>50</sup> Ensler is directly quoted as follows:

I think about how traumatizing and horrible it would be if there were statues of Hitler or Nazis or schools or entities named after them in Germany. And then the second part of that, if someone were going around and saying “Well, the Holocaust and World War II weren’t about Hitler wanting to wipe out Jews and other minority groups - it was really about economic conditions,” that would be on a personal level incredibly offensive and also troubling because it means we’re not learning the history of it.<sup>51</sup>

Ensler is not alone in this observation – it is noted by several of the scholars whose literature was reviewed in the justification for this thesis and by Bryan Stevenson, who has been vocal in drawing parallels between the memory work, truth-telling, and education that Germany engages in compared to the ways that narratives of the lost cause continue circulating with limited impediment in the United States.<sup>52</sup>

On the subject of reasoning and justifications offered in the pursuit of justice, Perelman wrote that “to reason is not merely to verify and to demonstrate, but also to deliberate, to criticize, and to justify; to give reasons for and against; in a word, to argue.”<sup>53</sup> Through the chapters that follow, I will argue that the Edmund Pettus Bridge is a rhetorically-charged symbol that can work as a public mirror reflecting social attitudes toward truth and reconciliation. I will demonstrate how a pervasive, yet blurry public

memory of the bridge recalls and memorializes the victory of the civil rights movement while occluding the legacy of the man for whom it is named, and subsequently analyze the public deliberations concerning the bridge's name.

While engaging in this examination, complicated narratives and justifications for and against changing the name will be confronted that do not fall neatly along the lines of visible identity markers, political status, or social class. These deliberations reveal and enable us to feel the weight of the possibility that in changing the name, we might stand to lose just as much as we stand to gain. If I am successful in my argument, upon reaching its conclusion each of us should feel a heightened sense of consciousness that beckons us to engage in self-reflection on what we have been made aware of during the course of this analysis, the ways in which we are implicated by our shared history, and how the weight of these revelations obligate us to engage with conviction in shaping a more just future for our local, national, and global communities if we also feel compelled to strive toward truth and reconciliation.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I will argue that a pervasive public memory celebrating the bridge often occludes visibility of the man for which it is named. I conceptualize public memory as different from the formal history of textbooks in that public memory is more collectively derived, publicly shared, and generally subject to different interpretations or levels of agreement depending on personal worldviews and experiences. Houdek and Phillips offered a summary orientation to public memory as being “the circulation of recollections among members of a given community” that “differs from official histories in that the former is more informal, diverse, and mutable where the latter is often presented as formal, singular, and stable.”<sup>54</sup> Edward Casey argued that “public

memory is not a nebulous pursuit that can occur anywhere; it always occurs in some particular place... [the place] lends itself to the remembering and facilitates it... but also in certain cases embodies the memory itself.”<sup>55</sup>

The Edmund Pettus Bridge is rightfully situated among the landmarks of the civil rights movement by Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman in their book *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory*,<sup>56</sup> and while other rhetorical scholars have dedicated their focus to analyzing sites such as the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute or the Civil Rights Memorial at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, the Edmund Pettus Bridge has yet to be the central focus of anyone’s rhetorical criticism.<sup>57</sup> Situating the bridge among other public memory sites of the civil rights movement expands our understanding of the landscape by broadening our perspective beyond the doors of museums or the performances of monuments and memorials. Understanding the bridge’s duality in its existence as both a confederate memorial and a condensation symbol of the movement furthers our appreciation for the reconstitutive power of narratives in our public discourse and rhetoric.

Analyzing the significance and meaningful existence of the bridge within the landscape of public memory accepts an invitation to look toward the more every day, familiar, and oftentimes unremarkable public spaces of life central to our communities. Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook argued that social movements can challenge the meaning of these type of public spaces by “using protest events to create temporary fissures in the dominant meanings of places.”<sup>58</sup> These fissures result in a subsequent reconstitution of meaning when memories of protest or social unrest are remembered; what was previously recalled more passively as merely a park or a street is transformed in

our memories to a site of social activism and demands for reform and change. In this way, the Edmund Pettus Bridge was transformed by the events that transpired in 1965 and offers a productive site of criticism of the ways that rhetoric and material space and place engage in relationship to each other in the formation and evolution of communities centered around them and the public memories that emerge.

Through the course of chapter two's analysis, I begin by providing an introductory review of how Edmund Pettus was remembered by his congressional colleagues after his death. Closer to home, Selma's affection for Pettus was celebrated with the memorialization of his name across the Edmund Pettus Bridge slightly more than thirty years later. I then proceed with a review of the relevant literature and contextualize the need for an analysis of the ways in which this bridge's initial public memory faded and was reconstituted into something else entirely, and the ways in which this reconstitution points toward the fluidity and relationality of rhetoric, place, memory, community, and meaning. I then explicate the ways in which the current public memory of the bridge is sustained by its National Historic Landmark designation, the 2014 movie *Selma*, annual commemorations that occur during the first weekend of March that have historically included presidential visits, and the appearance of the bridge in the first video of President Joe Biden's 2023 re-election campaign. Methodically tracing the significance of the bridge in public memory enhances our ability to appreciate arguments put forward concerning the name of the bridge in the third chapter of this thesis, especially when considering that many of these arguments are in some way related to the layered public memory of the bridge.

In chapter three of this thesis, I will analyze the arguments concerned with renaming the bridge that occurred between 2015 to 2020, and the social values that these

arguments advanced. More specifically, chapter three will inquire how the essence of an inert, material place is reflected in the values of philosophical pairs that emerge in the dialogues concerning the name of the bridge. This chapter heavily engages with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's notions of the loci of essence and philosophical pairs as introduced in *The New Rhetoric*. The authors are brief in their explanation of the loci of essence, claiming only "that which best incarnates a type, an essence, or a function acquires value by this very fact."<sup>59</sup> While they provide an example that points toward how an individual can represent an ideal or hold intrinsic value, J. Robert Cox noted that "according a higher value to objects, individuals, or ideas to the extent they embody some important reality – what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca term loci of essence – becomes an important starting point of argument."<sup>60</sup>

Extending Cox's observations, I contend that the Edmund Pettus Bridge is a material place with an essence that symbolically reflects social attitudes toward truth and reconciliation. This essence can be traced through the surfacing of philosophical pairs that emerge in arguments over renaming the bridge. I have identified three philosophical pairs for analysis in this thesis. Those three pairs are: preservation/change; visibility/erasure; and insider/outsider. I contend that by evaluating these philosophical pairs, we can more clearly see the values represented by each concept constituting the pairs. In performing this chapter's analysis, I map argument fragments sourced from local media coverage, editorial pieces, and an online town hall meeting to the values that constitute the philosophical pairs. By doing this, the complexity of these dialogues and the diversity of the individuals who are engaged in them becomes available for observation and consideration.

Upon completing the analysis constituted by chapters two and three of this thesis, the concluding chapter will present an opportunity to reflect on how focusing critical attention on the Edmund Pettus Bridge has revealed that this local issue is a microcosm of broader, national discourses concerned with race relations in the United States. Consequently, we should be more capable of perceptibly feeling the weight that follows a revelation of the ways that what appears superficially to be a fight over the name of a bridge is much more than that. This fight over the name of the bridge implicates our attitudes toward telling the truth of its history of who it was originally named for, and how we reconcile the generational legacies of white supremacist lost cause narratives with the essence of who we (as a society) truly wish to be today and in the future.

## **CHAPTER TWO: BLURRY PUBLIC MEMORY AND THE OCCLUSION OF EDMUND PETTUS**

In the summer of 1907, the state of Alabama found itself in a peculiar and unprecedented position in a young nation's history - both of its United States senators were dead. John Tyler Morgan and Edmund Pettus had much in common: both had been officers in the confederate army; both had made their homes in Selma; both had careers in law preceding their senate appointments. Pettus arrived in the senate twenty years after Morgan and served for ten years until his death. Morgan and Pettus died within a month of each other, and the state appointed men who had already been elected as reserves in anticipation of either of its octogenarian senators dying.<sup>61</sup> The following spring, Pettus and Morgan's colleagues in both houses of congress convened and performed tributes to the deceased statesmen. The memorial addresses were subsequently printed in book form and remain available through the Library of Congress.<sup>62</sup>

Newly admitted Alabama Senator Joseph Johnston, elected in reserve by the state legislature to succeed Pettus in the event of his death, remembered Pettus physically and professionally as “tall, strongly built, with a noble head and rugged features... he was a strong lawyer, brushing aside immaterial issues and driving hard for the main points... he had few of the graces of the orator and but little imagination.”<sup>63</sup> Senator Gallinger of New Hampshire memorialized that “Senator Pettus was singularly kindly and gracious... literally as brave as a lion and gentle as a child... [if he] had an enemy, it was certainly not in Washington. Here he was respected by all and greatly loved... when he died, a real gentleman passed away.”<sup>64</sup> From California, Senator Perkins recalled that “Senator Pettus believed in states’ rights and that they had never been delegated to the federal government. He was democratic in every sense of the word... this made him a true American.”<sup>65</sup> Senator Daniel of Virginia described Pettus as “a pillar of power... his figure intimated the soldier who rode with the Ironsides and would cleave with the broadsword in battle. A powerful brain filled his massive, Websterian head, and his strong features... had the noble expression of the St. Bernard dog.”<sup>66</sup> All told, fifteen senators and twelve U.S. representatives paid their respects within the halls of congress over the course of two weekends in April 1908.

While many of these memorial addresses generally extolled the statesmanship of Senator Pettus and exalted his public service as one would generally expect during eulogistic performances, some members of congress also used the occasion to glorify the causes of which the late senator was emblematic. Senator Overman of North Carolina chose to explicitly praise the confederate valor Pettus exemplified:

Edmund Winston Pettus was cast in a heroic mold – heroic in stature, heroic in character, heroic in intellect. Destined by nature to be a leader, a man of action and

strength... especially will his services be recalled during the dark days that followed civil strife. When it seemed that in the heat of passion the south was to be delivered into the hands of the carpetbagger and a race but lately out of bondage, Senator Pettus, by his coolness and his courage... forced back the wave of anarchy and confusion that threatened to engulf them... withal gentle as a woman, the life of Senator Pettus breathes the spirit of the old south, of a regime that is rapidly passing away.<sup>67</sup>

In the House of Representatives, the congressmen of Alabama showed little hesitation toward venerating the confederacy and extolling white supremacy in their memorial remarks for Pettus.

Congressman Underwood praised his colleague in the upper house for being one of Alabama's public servants who "lived to see their state in their declining years, through their guidance, restored to caucasian rule and prosperity."<sup>68</sup> Congressman Clayton followed in similar fashion that Pettus "believed that the states had the right to secede from the union... Pettus and other confederate soldiers showed the way to liberation from oppression and pointed out the course by which the people of that state came again into the possession of their own and the blessings of a white man's government."<sup>69</sup> Fourth among the eight total U.S. Representatives from Alabama to memorialize Pettus, Congressman Taylor left nothing to the imagination:

[Pettus] believed absolutely in the inherent superiority of the white race... in defense of his race, especially the women of his race, his life and the lives of all were a willing sacrifice. He regarded the supremacy of his people as the life of his people... under his stern leadership... the policy of reconstruction failed... the reign of the carpetbagger is at an end and the stranger no longer sits in the judgment seat... the old general lived to see his hopes realized and his course vindicated.<sup>70</sup>

The penultimate representative from Alabama, Congressman Heflin, was rewarded with applause not noted after any other memorial address in the transcripts.<sup>71</sup>

Heflin charged that "slaves bought of our own white brethren in the North were without authority set free... the ballot, that which represented privileges and powers for...

the quick-witted celt and the thoughtful saxon... was given in the twinkling of an eye to the unfit hordes of an inferior race."<sup>72</sup> Continuing a barn-burning lambaste of the

reconstruction era, Heflin immortalized Pettus as one of the state's two senators who:

Saw the slave of yesterday go up and occupy the seat of civic authority... no two men in Alabama... did more to stay the hideous tide of negro domination... they realized that submission to the reign of the carpetbagger meant the overthrow, the destruction, of all that was sacred to the white man in the south... it were better to die defending the institutions of the white man than to live to see that imperial race submerged in the degradation that negro dominance would bring... Senators Morgan and Pettus were able, courageous, manly men.<sup>73</sup>

Upon the conclusion of this pageantry to remember the late senators, the house proceeded to recess until the following Monday.

This expansive review of the congressional rhetoric memorializing Edmund Pettus is provided not to engage in any form of honoring the memory of the late senator from Alabama, but rather to demonstrate the pervasiveness with which the confederacy and white supremacist ideology were romanticized by some of his fellow legislators at the time of his death. Furthermore, the ways in which these subjects surfaced across multiple memorial addresses provides some evidence of how freely they circulated within and permeated the halls of congress during the early years of the twentieth century in a way that was neither shunned nor resulted in the ostracization of those who subscribed to their acceptability in shaping public life. These were not the closely held, private beliefs of Pettus kept secret from his colleagues out of shame or contrition for his actions in the past as a leading advocate for secession, a brigadier general in the confederate army, or a fierce opponent of reconstruction-era policies. Pettus' peers not only knew of his convictions, many of them also expressed sentiments extolling them as virtuous elements of his character, part of his legacy, and worthy of memorializing through public address.

These memorial addresses worked to establish a memory of Edmund Pettus as a man of honor - one who served his community, state, and country - one who held fast to his principles and beliefs to the end of his life and his public service. Paying further homage to the memory of Edmund Pettus, a bridge spanning the Alabama River was later dedicated in his honor amid three days of pageantry to commemorate the occasion in May of 1940.<sup>74</sup> At the time, his grandson E.W. Pettus was the president of the city's chamber of commerce. Twenty-five years later, events involving that bridge catapulted the city of Selma into the global spotlight, forging new memories not of Edmund Pettus, but of the hardships and brutality faced by the foot soldiers of the civil rights movement in the United States.

In this chapter, I will argue that the legacy of Edmund Pettus has been largely occluded from public memory, even as it gazes upon the bridge that bears his very name. This clouding of memory is encouraged by portrayals of the bridge that offer no insight into the legacy of who Edmund Pettus was because they are preoccupied with celebrating the achievements of the civil rights movement and reifying the social significance of the bridge. This chapter proceeds in five parts. First, I have centered this introduction around the ways that Edmund Pettus had his day both among his congressional peers and within his home community of Selma after his death. Second, I proceed with a review of extant scholarship concerned with rhetorical analysis of sites of public memory of the civil rights movement. Specifically, I surface ways in which the work of these scholars points toward the dynamism and fluidity of the public's relationship with memory sites. Subsequently, I situate the Edmund Pettus Bridge for inclusion in this dynamic among sites of public memory in a way that is unique as a condensation symbol. Third, I provide a narrative summary of the events of March 1965 often subsumed and condensed within the symbolic meaning of the bridge.

Fourth, having established the historical context which constitutes a significant amount of what belies the symbolic meaning of the bridge, I then proceed to explicate ways in which recurring public commemorations occlude visibility of the legacy of Edmund Pettus from public view by reinforcing the narratives of struggle, progress, and victory attributed to the bridge as a condensation symbol. I do this by pointing to the ways in which the bridge emerges symbolically in its National Historic Landmark nomination and website description, the 2014 film *Selma*, the stated purpose of the annual Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee, and presidential visits that have occurred during these annual Jubilees.

I do not critically analyze each of these source texts exhaustively, rather I offer them as evidence of an observable pattern of the bridge's public significance in association with narratives of progress and social struggle toward justice. In this way, the bridge as a condensation symbol signifies an invocation of the civil rights movement, the events of March 1965, the city of Selma, and the continued American march of progress. I conclude with reviewing the appearance of the bridge in President Joe Biden's 2023 re-election campaign launch video and consideration of the ways in which the persistent material existence of the bridge as honorific to Pettus complicates and agitates individual encounters at the intersection of the historical accountings of who Pettus was and memories of the bridge that bears his name.

### **Arriving at the Edmund Pettus Bridge Amid the Movement's Places of Public Memory**

Before proceeding with any analysis of the ways in which the legacy of Edmund Pettus is often occluded from public memory, it is important to identify the existing scholarship to which this chapter is intended to make a complementary contribution. I begin first by providing some conceptual orientation toward public memory before considering ways that scholars have observed the role that communication plays in

facilitating fluidity and relationality between public, place, and memory. I then center my attention on the previous work of authors who have critically analyzed the narratives and performances of public memory sites of the civil rights movement in the United States. What then follows is my situating of the Edmund Pettus Bridge among these public memory sites of the civil rights movement as a landmark of the movement and a rhetorically potent condensation symbol that encourages the forgetting of Edmund Pettus in the collective consciousness of public memory.

For purposes of initiation, public memory is conceptually summarized by Houdek and Phillips as “the circulation of recollections among members of a given community” that “differs from official histories in that the former is more informal, diverse, and mutable where the latter is often presented as formal, singular, and stable.”<sup>75</sup> Public memory can reflect an amalgamation of historic events that happened in a particular place, be evoked by monuments and memorials installed to encourage certain kinds of remembering, and the ways that discourse concerned with collective memories of those places and events circulates. This instability and multiplicity in memory implicates an ongoing and existential presence of a relational dynamic among places, events, self, and others. Celeste Condit argued that “the notion of relationship... presumes fluidity and is nonessentialist... communication constitutes relationships and, in so doing, it reconstitutes the entities that are related... relationality captures the force that is exerted by language and all other modes of material being.”<sup>76</sup> When public communication is performed, the discourse it constitutes operates rhetorically in relationship to those who encounter it and the places with which it is concerned. This facilitates varying levels of interpretive instability and invention points for opportunistic reinterpretation or redefinition.

Regarding the instability and fluidity of public memory, Edward Casey argued that “public memory is not a sure thing; it has its own degrees of endurance and reliability... to be public is to be subject to continual reassessment and revision.”<sup>77</sup> Casey’s claim of continual reassessment and revisions to public memory reflects the layers of memories that can exist and be recalled by members of the public. Casey suggested four major forms of memory, which were “individual memory, social memory, collective memory, and public memory proper.”<sup>78</sup> Casey’s conceptualization of individual memory, noted that “every single act of remembering... comes saturated with social and collective aspects.”<sup>79</sup> Beyond individuated remembering, according to Casey social memories are, “held in common by those who are affiliated either by kinship ties, by geographical proximity... or by engagement in a common project”<sup>80</sup> but have yet to be shared outside the relational boundaries of the group.

Collective memories are those “in which different persons, not necessarily known to each other at all, nevertheless recall the same event... a case of remembering neither individually in isolation from others nor in the company of others with whom one is acquainted.”<sup>81</sup> More pointedly, Casey argued that “social memory derives from a basis in shared experience, shared history or place, or shared project; collective memory, in contrast, has no such basis but is instead distributed over a given population or set of places.”<sup>82</sup> Whether individual, social, or collective, Casey’s observations concerning the major forms of memory implicate an affective, participative, and relational experience between people, places, events, and memories. Casey’s observations were echoed by Dustin, et al. when analyzing the affective dimensions of public parks, who noted that “our affective responses to our cultural and natural heritage help form our public memory.”<sup>83</sup>

When conceptualizing public memory proper, Casey noted that “public memory is not a nebulous pursuit that can occur anywhere; it always occurs in some particular place”<sup>84</sup> and observed five aspects that distinguish public memory: public place; public presence; public discussion; common topic; and commemoration in place.<sup>85</sup> These five aspects of public memory are what set it apart from the individual, social, and collective forms of memory. When concluding, Casey underscored the importance of place, arguing that “place is part of public memory in the making... [and] place remains central to a more fully consolidated public memory that has become a horizon for the future remembering.”<sup>86</sup> Further analyzing the importance of place and memory, in the introduction to their edited volume *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott argued that “memory is rhetorical, and... memory places are especially powerful rhetorically.”<sup>87</sup> By directing critical focus toward the ways in which “rhetoric, memory, and place seem to haunt each other in recent scholarship and how that haunting might be materialized in a serious, productive, and animated conversation,”<sup>88</sup> the authors offer an entry point to interrogating the relationship between the public, its places, and the ways that place can evoke remembering and communicating.

Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook argued that when protests are performed by social movements in the everyday spaces of public life, the disruption and reappropriation of these spaces can “create temporary fissures in the dominant meanings of places.”<sup>89</sup> As these fissures are created, so are instability and potential for resituating of the public memory attached to these places. The authors define place as “particular locations... that are semi-bounded, a combination of symbolic qualities, and embodied.”<sup>90</sup> The symbolic meaning of place as observed during the civil rights movement in the United

States reconstituted segregated lunch counters to sites of sit-ins, bus routes to boycotts and eventually freedom rides, and public thoroughfares to march routes arriving in Washington and Montgomery.

Owen Dwyer and Derek Alderman argued that “studying civil rights memorials – where they are located, what they honor, and what they forget – offers insights into the evolving verities of power and racism in American society.”<sup>91</sup> Analysis of public memory sites of the civil rights movement among scholars is rich in both content and volume. In Montgomery, Alabama, Daniel Abramson critiqued Maya Lin’s Civil Rights Memorial at the Southern Poverty Law Center as being part of a larger body of work in which “the radical events of the 1960s lose their charge as crises in the nation’s history or challenges to established authority.”<sup>92</sup> Arguing that Lin’s body of work represents “a fundamentally conservative position of conciliation and continuity towards the political, social, and artistic movements of the 1960s [where] memory is partial, events are reduced and represented in such a manner as to reestablish points of traditional authority, and minimalism’s radical aesthetic critique seems to have dissipated,”<sup>93</sup> Abramson read the Civil Rights Memorial as a less than just conceptualization of the radical magnitude of the movement and other related historical events.

Carole Blair and Neil Michel took exception with Abramson’s “more formalist reading”<sup>94</sup> and interpretation of Lin’s memorial to the movement. Countering that when read rhetorically the memorial reproduces tactics of the civil rights movement, the authors argued that “these reproductions work toward a commentary on race issues of the present and open up possibilities for politics rather than advancing a summary or unitary stance.”<sup>95</sup> In analyzing the ways in which “the memorial itself is now the ‘black body’ positioned so as

to create dislocation, tension, and minor inconvenience”<sup>96</sup> the authors illustrate how the memorial claims space in a way that engages both pedestrian visitors and occupies ground “in a position of overt challenge to most of the landmarks in the area... [where] there are few prominent markers in the area of anything but the glories of the confederacy.”<sup>97</sup>

By moving beyond the memorial to a more broad and holistically localized engagement with the space it occupies, Blair and Michel were able to note the constant presence of security guards patrolling the grounds of the memorial and how this presence performs an implicit reminder to visitors “that there remains a forceful and dangerous opposition, willing to engage in violence to halt moves toward racial justice.”<sup>98</sup> In a comprehensive rebuttal toward Abramson’s original critique, the authors concluded that “nothing in the memorial’s timeline should lead to the conclusion that the past it inscribes is a past that we should ‘emulate’... if anything, the highly unsatisfying and troubling end of the timeline seems... to imply precisely the obverse, that this is a past we should remember but not repeat or continue.”<sup>99</sup> The timeline to which the authors refer is artist Maya Lin’s timeline of events that span from *Brown v. Board of Education* through the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. featured prominently at the site of the memorial. Fifty-three inscriptions in total are etched into a granite table over which water constantly flows, inviting visitors to contemplate the ripples caused when they engage in tactile ways with the history of disenfranchisement endured by black Americans, racially motivated violence and terror perpetrated against these Americans, and the deaths that have resulted from those actions.

To the north of Montgomery in Birmingham, Victoria Gallagher sought to interrogate the ways in which “the highly contested nature of race relations and civil rights in the

United States means that related memorials enact a dialectical tension between reconciliation and amnesia, conflicts resolved, and conflicts simply reconfigured.”<sup>100</sup> Acknowledging that “the development of a shared vision of the past can be elusive,”<sup>101</sup> Gallagher observed that “memories of past events are formulated through the recreations of the exhibits”<sup>102</sup> at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. The Institute facilitates, for some, the very inception of memories of the movement when confronted by its narratives and exhibits, and this can be a complicated experience dependent upon the extent of one’s previous knowledge of and/or relationship to the movement. “Engaged in a kind of representational pilgrimage, some visitors assuage guilt, some gain wisdom or understanding, others create and re-create racial identity or gain a sense of the past, some experience humility... but they are all engaged in an experience centered on remembrance”<sup>103</sup> Gallagher noted.

I read the conclusions drawn by Gallagher’s analysis as complementary to Condit’s observations regarding the fluidity and dynamism of relationships between the public and place, and the ways in which they can be affected and reconstituted through the experience of communication; particularly through the narratives of institutionalized rhetoric performed by memorials, museums, and other public memory sites. By analyzing the multivariate ways in which visitors to the institute reconstitute their understanding of and relationship to the movement through their encounters with its narratives and exhibits, Gallagher underscored the importance of public memory sites of the movement in both complicating and progressing our understanding of our shared history and its implications toward our communities’ futures.

Museums and memorials are overtly narrative places of memory, but as Endres and Senda-Cook argued, the often less-remarkable public spaces of everyday life are also rhetorical as reflected through the ways in which place, and by extension meaning, are established, disrupted, and resituated. Concerning the Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights, Ronald Krotoszynski Jr. observed that “it is doubtful that the Selma march would be long remembered had it taken place on a single day on a side street or seldom-used park in Selma.”<sup>104</sup> This observation underscores not only the rhetoricity of public place and its opportunities for meaning to be reconstituted that Endres and Senda-Cook elucidate, but also that there is consideration to be given by social movement organizers to the visibility and perceived importance of public places selected to be the sites of protests and other image events. The historic march took place over the course of four days in March of 1965 as voting rights marchers proceeded down US-80 from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. As the marchers departed from Selma, they safely crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge without incident, where only days prior the events of Bloody Sunday unfolded and the bridge’s mythic status in public memory began to emerge. It is here that I wish to situate the Edmund Pettus Bridge among the public memory sites of the civil rights movement, and as one that operates rhetorically as a condensation symbol of the events that transpired in and around Selma in March of 1965.

Kaufer and Carley theorized that a condensation symbol “compresses or condenses a network of historical meaning”<sup>105</sup> into a singular symbol and consequently, condensation symbols are particularly important when engaged rhetorically. The authors observe that among these condensation symbols, standard symbols are words that are high in situational conductivity, density, and consensus; they are the concepts that best represent

an entire web of meaning and are considered the richest of the condensation symbols.<sup>106</sup> Kristin Hoerl argued that “the sixties” is a condensation symbol, and when it is invoked in popular culture and entertainment, it represents “images, ideas, and protest actions that challenged the legitimacy of traditional American values and the United States’ relationship to the rest of the world.”<sup>107</sup> In March of 1965, the Edmund Pettus Bridge was a part of the site of protest actions that were broadcast domestically and around the world. In the aftermath of the events which became known as Bloody Sunday, the bridge became a condensation symbol representing the events of March 1965, the struggle for voting rights, and the broader civil rights movement, even though the confrontation between Alabama state agents and voting rights marchers was instigated after the march had crossed the span of the bridge and begun its procession on US-80. When considering the bridge within the context of Kaufer and Carley’s theoretical framework, the Edmund Pettus Bridge is a standard symbol among the larger family of condensation symbols because of the richness of the meaning associated to it, which the remainder of this chapter will illustrate. However, for purposes of this analysis I refer to it more generally as a condensation symbol to first establish it as such. This is not to take away from the powerful meaning of the bridge, but rather to first instantiate it broadly as a condensation symbol because the argument that the bridge is a condensation symbol has not yet been made by any other author.

In the section that follows, I begin by tracing the historical events of the civil rights movement in Selma, Alabama often recalled when viewing the bridge rhetorically as a condensation symbol. I then turn my attention toward the commemorative rhetoric and activities that have occurred in the more than half century since March of 1965 that reinforces a public memory that occludes the legacy Edmund Pettus. In summarizing these

commemorative activities that engage the public memory of the bridge as a condensation symbol, I connect fragments from the bridge's National Historic Landmark Designation, reviews of the 2014 film *Selma*, and presidential visits that have occurred during the annual Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee. This collection of evidence represents an observable pattern of ways that the bridge is referred to in public discourse and recalled in public memory. This public memory is not one that venerates the man for whom the bridge is named, rather it treasures the bridge as a condensation symbol representing the march of progress toward equality and justice, and honors a legacy not of Edmund Pettus, but of the hard-won victories of the foot soldiers of the civil rights movement in the United States.

#### **A Narrative Summary: The Historical Events of Selma in 1965**

Prior to illustrating the ways in which public memory often recalls the symbolic meaning of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, I begin here by offering a narrative summary of the historical events of March 1965 often pointed toward when the bridge is invoked rhetorically as a condensation symbol.<sup>108</sup> Chuck Fager's *Selma, 1965* is cited by many scholars as an authoritative source as it documents in diligent detail what occurred during the months leading up to Bloody Sunday, the long days of the Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights, and the complicated, repercussive aftermath of the city being in the national spotlight as corruption and division plagued the community when the movement moved on.<sup>109</sup> Throughout the state of Alabama, local activists had struggled to get black voters registered since long before the spring of 1965. The persistency and volume of challenges they endured prompted a request for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to come to Selma and aid the community in its efforts.<sup>110</sup>

During a night march in Marion, Alabama in late February 1965, state troopers halted marchers just outside the doors of Zion's Chapel Methodist Church before the surrounding streetlights cut out and beatings began that injured march participants and nearby reporters alike. Twenty-six-year-old Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot point blank in Mack's Café after lunging at a state trooper who'd clubbed his mother Viola Jackson to the floor; his eighty-two-year-old grandfather, Cager Lee, had been caught and beaten bloody behind the church not long before the three had attempted to find refuge inside the café.<sup>111</sup> Jackson survived being shot and was subsequently beaten in the street, but later died from infection of his injuries after several days in the hospital. These events precipitated James Bevel's conception of a march from Marion to Montgomery to confront Governor George Wallace and demand the enfranchisement of black voters in the state.<sup>112</sup> The next month, Bevel's initial idea ultimately manifested as the historic Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights.

On Sunday, March 7, 1965 somewhere between five and six-hundred marchers departed from Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in a column of twos, led by a young John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Hosea Williams of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).<sup>113</sup> Just outside the city limits of Selma, and consequently beyond the jurisdiction of the city's comparatively more temperate public safety director Wilson Baker, waited Dallas County Sheriff James G. Clark and his possemen, reinforced by Major John Cloud and his Alabama State Troopers "spread for nearly a hundred yards shoulder to shoulder across the highway's four lanes."<sup>114</sup> On the side of the road stood "a crowd of about a hundred whites, laughing and hollering [and] waving confederate flags."<sup>115</sup> The brutality and chaos that ensued following

Cloud's order of "troopers, advance!"<sup>116</sup> made headlines as images and video evidence of unarmed marchers dressed in their Sunday best being viciously beaten unconscious were broadcast around the world.<sup>117</sup> Activist Amelia Platts Boyton Robinson wrote:

Those standing at attention began to club us... I felt a blow on my arm that could have injured me permanently had it been on my head. Another blow by a trooper as I was gasping for breath knocked me to the ground and there I lay, unconscious... one of them shot tear gas all over me... Some of the marchers said to the trooper, "she is dead" and they were told to drag me to the side of the road.<sup>118</sup>

U.S. Representative John Lewis recalled:

I remember how vivid the sounds were as the troopers rushed toward us – the clunk of the troopers' heavy boots, the whoops of the rebel yells from the white onlookers, the clip-clop of horses' hooves hitting the hard asphalt of the highway... and then they were upon us... I heard something that sounded like gunshots and then a cloud of smoke rose all around us - tear gas.<sup>119</sup>

Clouds of teargas choked the air as Sheriff Clark's possemen emerged from among the nearby trees on horseback, armed with "bullwhips, ropes, and lengths of rubber tubing wrapped in barbed wire... [they] rode into the melee with wild rebel yells, while behind them the cheers of spectators grew even louder."<sup>120</sup>

The marchers were terrorized and chased back across the bridge into the city of Selma, and reporters "had captured almost the entire attack on their telephoto lenses."<sup>121</sup> A reporter from the *New York Times* observed that "before the cloud finally hid it all, there were several seconds of unobstructed view. Fifteen or twenty nightsticks could be seen through the gas, flailing at the heads of the marchers. The negroes broke and ran... troopers and possemen, mounted and unmounted, went after them."<sup>122</sup> That night, ABC television's Sunday night broadcast of *Judgement at Nuremburg* was "interrupted for a long film report of the assault on Highway 80, a sequence which showed clearly the quiet column, the flailing clubs, the stampeding horses, the jeering crowd, and the stricken, fleeing blacks."<sup>123</sup>

Footage of the march “was featured again on the television news shows Monday”<sup>124</sup> and national outrage ensued over what became known as Bloody Sunday, stoked by continued reporting of the dysfunction and violence ongoing in Selma. Indeed, “the brutality of the Alabama authorities provoked national and international revulsion”<sup>125</sup> as accounts of the events circulated broadly. Photographs of Bloody Sunday published in *Life* magazine “functioned rhetorically to evoke the common humanity of blacks and whites in compelling and profound ways by enabling viewers to recognize – and confront the implications of – themselves, their values, and their habits in the actions and experiences of others.”<sup>126</sup>

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put out a subsequent call for members of the clergy and faith leaders to converge on Selma while his attorneys sought redress and protection from the courts.<sup>127</sup> On Tuesday March 9, Dr. King led another march departing from Brown Chapel, accompanied by “ranks loaded down with religious celebrities... hundreds of priests, rabbis, and ministers followed.”<sup>128</sup> Upon being confronted by the Alabama State Troopers’ Major Cloud, “Dr. King asked the marchers to kneel, and the line stretching back up the ramp to the bridge for almost a mile sank down [and] prayers were offered.”<sup>129</sup> After the group turned around and returned without incident to the home church in Selma, it was suggested that the presence of white clergy members had prompted the restraint of state agents who previously terrorized the voting rights marchers only days before.<sup>130</sup> Out from under the watchful eye of reporters’ cameras, however, Unitarian Reverend James Reeb from Boston was attacked that night after taking a wrong turn while walking home from a dinner with other ministers at a black restaurant known locally for serving Alabama soul food. Reeb died from the brain injuries he sustained while his assailants pulverized his skull

several days later, further fueling the righteous anger simmering within the movement and across the nation.<sup>131</sup>

After four days of hearings in the case of *Williams v. Wallace* that “established a conclusive record of systemic state-sponsored brutality against black citizens designed to deny them the vote,”<sup>132</sup> U.S. District Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr. ordered that the organized march was to be permitted without interference, and preparations began in earnest for what would ultimately manifest as the historic Selma to Montgomery march.<sup>133</sup> A series of increasingly escalated rhetorical and political maneuvers between President Lyndon B. Johnson and Governor George Wallace capitulated with Alabama’s national guard being federalized by President Johnson to provide protection for the march.<sup>134</sup> On March 21, 1965, “about 1:15 PM the march appeared over the rise of the Pettus Bridge, with the voices of the three thousand plus drifting down ahead of them and two big army helicopters cruising watchfully overhead”<sup>135</sup> as the march set out on its more than fifty mile journey to Montgomery. The marchers reached the steps of the state capitol four days later, on March 25, 1965.<sup>136</sup> That night Viola Liuzzo, a mother of five from Michigan, was gunned down by four Ku Klux Klansmen while giving a black teenager named Leroy Moton a ride home to Selma from Montgomery. Moton, covered in Liuzzo’s blood from two shots to the head, played dead until the attackers left and he could run to safety.<sup>137</sup>

Less than a day after Liuzzo’s murder, President Johnson appeared on television announcing the arrest of the klansmen involved and decrying the “hooded society of bigots,” pledging that Americans would not be “intimidated by the terrorists of the Ku Klux Klan”<sup>138</sup> and calling for the House Committee on Un-American Activities to pursue an investigation of the Klan. Several months later, Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach’s

voting rights bill that had begun moving forward around the same time that Rev. James Reeb had died was signed into law on August 6, 1965.<sup>139</sup> It has been argued that “the Selma march represents a high-water point for the vindication of speech rights and the democratic values they embody... by focusing national attention on the disenfranchisement of southern blacks, it prompted congress to pass one of the most sweeping civil rights laws in history.”<sup>140</sup> The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is considered a landmark piece of federal legislation and its enforcement-related provisions, originally designed to expire five years after passage, reflected the hopes of congress at the time that the issues that preceded the act’s passage would subside not long after. The provisions were just renewed for another twenty-five years most recently in 2007.<sup>141</sup> In the more than half-century that has elapsed since the events of March 1965, the Edmund Pettus Bridge has become an international symbol as a turning-point landmark of the civil rights movement.

The meaning encompassed by the bridge as a condensation symbol poignantly evidences the nation’s dark history of white supremacy, narratives of racial difference, segregation, and the generational reverberations of racially motivated disenfranchisement, suppression, violence, and death. However, the bridge also exemplifies the power harnessed by a public constituted of everyday people committed to advancing the march of progress toward equality and justice. In a place that manifested the worst of what America can be, the bridge emerges as a condensation symbol, forged with potential for ongoing reflection and transcendent connections toward truth and reconciliation. The public is literally and symbolically bridged by a shared history of where it came from toward where it someday hopes to be. The bridge, materially and symbolically, offers a path from hate to love, from intimidation to the transparency, from division to unity, from despair to action,

from apathy to resolve, and from past to future. In the next section, I proceed with evidencing ways in which the bridge is recalled as a condensation symbol in a public memory that celebrates this narrative summary and occludes the legacy of the man for which it is named.

### **The Bridge as a Condensation Symbol in Public Memory**

While the first national park was established in 1873, the National Park Service's inception did not arrive until 1916.<sup>142</sup> Beyond caring for the country's national parks and conserving wild places, the administrative scope of the National Park Service also includes designating National Historic Landmarks. The National Park Service offers a definition that "National Historic Landmarks are buildings, sites, districts, structures, and objects that have been determined by the Secretary of the Interior to be nationally significant in American history and culture... that illustrate important contributions to the nation's historical development."<sup>143</sup> Dwyer and Alderman noted that "public space... is an especially potent site for transmitting notions of what is right and true, because it is authorized by the government on behalf of all citizens."<sup>144</sup> By awarding the designation of National Historic Landmark to a place, a division of the United States government engages in formally signifying the importance of that place to the public. In 2013, the Edmund Pettus Bridge became officially recognized by the National Park Service as a National Historic Landmark, connotating the bridge's national significance both historically and culturally.<sup>145</sup> More than a decade and a half earlier, congress had established the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail to preserve the memory of the march for voting rights.<sup>146</sup>

National Historic Landmarks can be identified for designation through studies conducted by the National Park Service, or by following a nomination process that is

subject to evaluation and approval or denial. When the Edmund Pettus Bridge was nominated in 2012, the following summary of the bridge's significance was offered:

The Edmund Pettus Bridge meets National Historic Landmark Criterion 1 for its association with the civil rights movement, particularly the events of March 7, 1965, now known as "Bloody Sunday." On that day, law enforcement officers violently stopped members of the civil rights movement from crossing the bridge. The marchers were attempting to march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capitol in Montgomery, Alabama, to dramatize the need for voting rights legislation. Media coverage of the violent confrontation between law enforcement officers and the marchers produced a national outcry that pressured politicians to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.<sup>147</sup>

This summary of the national significance of the bridge to history and culture focuses exclusively on the relationship of the bridge to the civil rights movement, the events of March 1965, and the ultimate passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The nomination form, approved in February of 2013, also largely informs the official, government-sanctioned meaning associated with the site as a designated National Historic Landmark. This authoritative narrative which conveys what the national significance of the bridge is to the public is reflected on the bridge's National Park Service website as well, occluding visibility of the legacy of Edmund Pettus.

Dustin et al. argued that for public parks administrators, who play a key role in supporting public parks' ability to tell the nation's story, "the interpretive goal should always be to strive for the fullest possible accounting of what came before."<sup>148</sup> In the National Park Service website description of the bridge, there is no explanation of who Edmund Pettus was, not even a cursory mention to the effect that the bridge is named in memorial of a United States senator. Rather, the website amplifies the role that the bridge played in "the political and emotional peak of the modern civil rights movement."<sup>149</sup> The site's brief descriptive summary below the photo of the bridge is not the only location in

which an omission by the National Park Service of a historical accounting for who Edmund Pettus was can be observed.

The nomination of the site for National Historic Landmark status makes no disclosure of what Edmund Pettus was lauded to exemplify within the halls of congress slightly more than a century before the designation was effective either.<sup>150</sup> Whether the omission of the historical facts concerning who the bridge was originally dedicated in honor of was inadvertent or intentional cannot be surmised by reviewing the website and nomination texts alone. However, these presentations of the Edmund Pettus Bridge by the National Park Service provide initial evidence of how the bridge operates rhetorically as a potent condensation symbol of the civil rights movement and Bloody Sunday. Depictions and descriptions of the bridge that focus predominantly on the bridge as a landmark of the movement rather than offering a more complete and historical accounting of when the bridge was built and whom it was dedicated for obscures visibility of the legacy of the man for whom the bridge is named and contributes to the blurring of public memory.

In 2014, the year after the Edmund Pettus Bridge was designated as a National Historic Landmark, the film *Selma* was released in theatres as the fifty-year anniversary of the events it depicted approached.<sup>151</sup> Kristin Hoerl argued that “fictionalized film and television depictions are particularly salient resources of shared understanding for audiences born after 1970 because they provide the most accessible visual medium for observing the decade’s social movements... [and] offer viewers a sense of participation and experience in the decade’s defining events.”<sup>152</sup> It is here that I transition analytical focus away from the government-sanctioned narratives concerning the importance of the Edmund Pettus Bridge toward observing the public prevalence of the film *Selma*. Rather

than analyze the entire film, which does not center exclusively on the bridge, I chose to conduct this analysis by sourcing fragments from reviews of the film that point to the importance of the Edmund Pettus Bridge and conform toward narrative recollections that celebrate the legacy of the civil rights movement without offering context of who Edmund Pettus was. By focusing on these reviews that reinforce narratives which occlude the legacy of Edmund Pettus from view, I further illustrate that public memory is encouraged to celebrate the significance of the bridge as a condensation symbol rather than as a memorial to the man for whom the bridge is named.

Grossing \$67.8M worldwide, the film *Selma* is described as telling “the unforgettable true story” of “the tumultuous three-month period in 1965 when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a dangerous campaign to secure equal voting rights in the face of violent opposition.”<sup>153</sup> When analyzing how cinematic depictions of historical events can encourage the public to remember certain details and forget others, Hoerl argued that “those who define and interpret the past for society are empowered to shape its meaning and values, its power relations, and its possibilities for political and social change... films about racial struggles in United States history also illustrate the political and ideological struggles over memory in popular culture.”<sup>154</sup> During the course of the film *Selma*, all three marches involving the Edmund Pettus Bridge - Bloody Sunday, turn-around Tuesday, and the eventual successful crossing en route to Montgomery - are depicted as part of a dramatized re-telling that features the bridge in both its theatrical trailer and the marketing imagery.<sup>155</sup> In a review of the film, Odie Henderson noted that:

[Director Ava DuVernay’s] staging of ‘Bloody Sunday’ on the Edmund Pettis [sic] Bridge is a spectacular mini-movie that could stand on its own as a short. Narrated by a journalist calling in the story, the scene takes on documentarian proportions... [making] you feel the intensity and chaotic terror of the violence. Dozens of kneeling,

peaceful protests fill the screen end to end, and the juxtaposition between the historical depiction on the movie screen and the current images on today's TV screens does not go unnoticed.<sup>156</sup>

Henderson's review points toward the potency of the bridge operating rhetorically as a condensation symbol in three immediately observable ways. First, it acknowledges the historical significance of the events that happened both on and in proximity to the place. Second, it acknowledges the role that the media played in narrativizing the violence that unfolded as coverage of what happened on March 7, 1965, was broadcast. Third, it connects past to present by explicitly linking the kneeling voting rights marchers in 1965 to the "hands up, don't shoot"<sup>157</sup> protests that were occurring around the same time as the film's release. These three observations concerning the ways in which the review invokes the bridge as a condensation symbol in the film *Selma* track closely with Hoerl's argument that "ongoing interest in the turmoil of the late sixties reveals the ways in which social conflicts from that period continue to resound in contemporary politics"<sup>158</sup> through the review's connection of past to present.

The *New York Times* reviewed the film as "not a manifesto, a battle cry, or a history lesson."<sup>159</sup> By doing so and without stated intent, they point toward the film's use in sustaining public memory and the centrality of the bridge as condensation symbol of the events dramatized for consumption through an entertainment vector. While the film and its reviews include the central relevance of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, absent is any acknowledgement of the man that the bridge is named for. The film, its critics, and those who view it are left with no awareness of or understanding that the bridge was originally intended to honor a man who viewed those marching in 1965 it as inherently inferior and worthy only of subjugation. Consequently, there is no power or place in public memory for

Edmund Pettus as told by the story of the movie *Selma*; his name appears inert, uncontextualized, and meaningful only to the extent in which it is used as a geographical identifier on the bridge depicted by the film.

Beyond cinematic depictions of the bridge's significance in public memory, the bridge continues to host annual jubilee celebrations during the first weekend of March. These jubilee celebrations have been attended by presidents as well as other important public officials over the years. When President Barack Obama stood at the intersection of Broad Street and Water Avenue in Selma, Alabama on March 7, 2015, his speech never once invoked the name of Edmund Pettus.<sup>160</sup> Mute, meaningless, and unremarkable, the black letters of his name yawned across the aging steel of the global landmark that had come to signify the events that unfolded fifty years prior. Absent was any acknowledgement of Pettus other than the visibility of his name as the president stood at the foot of the bridge and questioned his audience, "What could be more American than what happened in this place?"<sup>161</sup> The speech, meticulously analyzed by Allison M. Prasch, was unique in the way that "Obama's rhetorical display... [chose] to define places like the Edmund Pettus Bridge, people like 25-year-old John Lewis, and shameful events like Bloody Sunday as representative of the 'true meaning of America.'"<sup>162</sup>

Indeed, the introductory context of the essay by Prasch points toward the public memory of the bridge as a condensation symbol when describing it as "the site where Alabama state troopers attacked 600 peaceful protestors with tear gas and billy clubs when they attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery in the spring of 1965."<sup>163</sup> Throughout the course of the speech, Obama refers only to "this bridge," further compounding its significance as a rhetorically potent condensation symbol:

In one afternoon 50 years ago, so much of our turbulent history - the stain of slavery and anguish of civil war; the yoke of segregation and tyranny of Jim Crow; the death of four little girls in Birmingham; and the dream of a baptist preacher - all that history met on this bridge.<sup>164</sup>

Throughout the 2015 oration, we observe the first black president of the United States, delivering his remarks against the backdrop of a bridge named in honor of a secessionist, confederate officer, and known white supremacist, anchoring a longer arc of racial inequality and violence to the place at which he stands.<sup>165</sup>

President Obama had been introduced by U.S. Representative John Lewis on the stage at the foot of the bridge that day, both participating in the commemorative activities that celebrated the fifty-year anniversary of Bloody Sunday. The annual festivities, coordinated by The Bridge Crossing Jubilee, Inc., nurture the rhetorical potency of the bridge operating as a condensation symbol in public memory. Every year, the global community is invited to return to Selma and honor “the struggle for the right to vote by gathering at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in a festival of music, art, and historical remembrance.”<sup>166</sup> Past guests have included celebrities, political figures, and countless others who gather to commemorate “Bloody Sunday, the Selma to Montgomery March, and the death of Jimmy Lee Jackson” during what is “the largest annual black history event in America”<sup>167</sup> according to the Jubilee’s website. These annual celebrations of the bridge as a condensation symbol continue to occlude the legacy of Edmund Pettus from the public’s visibility, consequently blurring the public memory of the bridge.

### **Conclusion**

While neither President Bill Clinton nor Barack Obama so much as mentioned the name of Edmund Pettus while delivering their remarks at the foot of the bridge when attending Jubilee celebrations, President Joe Biden has taken a notably different tact.<sup>168</sup> In

2022 while Vice President Kamala Harris attended the annual Jubilee, the president issued a statement on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday from Washington describing the Edmund Pettus Bridge as “a bridge named for a Klansman in Selma, Alabama”<sup>169</sup> without mentioning Pettus or the bridge by name. The next year, Biden attended the Jubilee, remarking that “six hundred believers put faith into action to march across that bridge named after the Grand Dragon of the KKK.”<sup>170</sup> It was the most direct acknowledgement of the honorific to white supremacy that any president who had participated in the Jubilee had made while speaking at the commemorative ceremonies against the backdrop of the bridge. And yet, beyond this brief statement, no additional contemplation of Pettus or what should be done about his name spanning the width of the bridge was provided. Instead, Biden followed in the footsteps of his predecessors by standing at the foot of the bridge, paying homage to the foot soldiers of the civil rights movement and reinforcing a public memory that occludes the very Grand Dragon whose name is emblazoned across the steel arch in front of which Biden stood.

Slightly less than two months later, imagery of the bridge and President Biden participating in the commemorative anniversary walk across its span appeared in the first video of his re-election campaign.<sup>171</sup> The video opens by featuring imagery of social division and protest as Biden spends two minutes narrating his commitment to fighting for democracy, protecting voting rights, and ensuring Americans have equal access to opportunity. Subsequently, the ad begins its capitulation with a call to “stand up for our freedom, stand up for the right to vote and our civil rights”<sup>172</sup> as a mural portraying John Lewis is panned. Immediately, an editorial cut to Biden locking arms with those around him crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge occurs, succeeded by a cut to black and white

photographs of the steel arch rising behind Biden and the marchers is displayed.<sup>173</sup> While the imagery related to Biden and the bridge only consumes a brief three-second duration in the ad, the progression links Biden both visually and through narrative to the legacy of the civil rights movement. Consequently, this performs another reinforcement of the bridge as a rhetorically potent condensation symbol, symbolizing the intergenerational march of progress toward equality and justice.

In this chapter, I have argued that public memory has been blurred by occlusion of the legacy of Edmund Pettus, even as it gazes upon the bridge that bears his very name. This blurring is encouraged by the ways in which the bridge operates rhetorically as a condensation symbol and is called forward in various forms of commemorative rhetoric. By observing the ways in which the bridge is invoked as a condensation symbol, we can see a repetition of what the public is encouraged to remember, but also what is obscured from sight. This is why I argue that the public memory is blurred and the legacy of Pettus occluded, rather than arguing that these depictions of the bridge actively encourage the public to forget. The historical facts concerning who Edmund Pettus was are publicly accessible and discussed, but one first has to be encouraged to look for them beyond the celebrations of the moment.

As public awareness of the legacy of Edmund Pettus is raised, the potential for a more complicated but comprehensive and accurate public memory emerges. Popular depictions of the bridge do not function as a monument to Edmund Pettus as originally dedicated, but as a treasured place in public memory rich in meaning and representative of the events that transpired on and around it. As the public encounters imagery of the bridge, this condensation symbol evokes a public memory in which Edmund Pettus is occluded.

Consequently, a blurred public memory emerges that does not associate the bridge with its origins as a monument to a white supremacist who served his community, state, and country. The honorific sits inert, inconsequential, and stripped of its original meaning. While the Pettus name is visible, it operates in public memory in a way that promotes recollection of the events of 1965, the city of Selma, and continued efforts toward equality and justice more than anything else.

While a blurred public memory of the bridge exists, it is important to return to Casey's argument that there are four primary types of human memory: individual, social, collective, and public memory proper. The existence of a blurry public memory of the Edmund Pettus Bridge creates complications for those who become aware of the history of the bridge's namesake and feel conflicted as to whether the name of the bridge should be changed or remain the same. In the next chapter of this thesis, I analyze the ways in which efforts to change the name of the bridge that originated in the state legislature in 2015 were publicly rejected and subsequently failed. Five years later, efforts to rename the bridge began anew, with advocates from around the United States arguing that the name of Edmund Pettus as a symbol of treason and white supremacy should be erased from view and replaced with a name more directly honoring the foot soldiers of the civil rights movement. Both before and immediately following the death of U.S. Representative John Lewis, some advocates felt the bridge should be renamed in his honor and failed to incorporate the perspective of the local community before advancing these claims. While this public disagreement remains unresolved, much can be learned by examining the ways in which the bridge operates rhetorically as a public mirror reflecting social values and attitudes toward the process of truth and reconciliation in the pursuit of justice.

Central to the disagreement over whether the bridge's name should remain or be changed are the four layers of memory advanced by Casey. The public memory of the bridge which occludes the legacy of Edmund Pettus is complementary to a more dispersed, collective memory that advances arguments that the name of the bridge should be changed because the bridge should be a memorial to the movement, not to Pettus. As media coverage of the social movements to change the bridge's name surface, however, there is a more local, social memory in Selma constituted amongst the foot soldiers of the movement who do not wish to see the name of the bridge changed. In 2020, a virtual town hall was hosted that provided a platform for Selma residents to make their voices heard in the face of a change.org petition that had garnered signatures from around the world petitioning that the name of the bridge should be changed.

Of the 2020 virtual town hall participants, most were residents of Selma, and many shared stories of their individual memories being a foot soldier for voting rights during the civil rights movement. "I'm a foot soldier... I participated in the march over the bridge. I was one of the originals that marched all the way to Montgomery - fifty miles," Albert Southhall said, "in my participation as a foot soldier - a freedom fighter... I'm a stickler for history. History prints in the books... the Edmund Pettus Bridge was the bridge that we conquered, and I know what Edmund Pettus represents - I know this... right now I'm for leaving the name as it is."<sup>174</sup> Jo Ann Bland, who was on the bridge with her sister Lynda Lowery in 1965, also pointed toward the importance of history, asserting that "when we start changing names, you start to rewrite our history, and I don't want that... I think it's such an important piece of the puzzle for social change that it cannot be forgotten... when we start to rewrite that history, that history's gonna be gone, and I don't think the world will be

better for it.”<sup>175</sup> Helen Brooks shared “I’ve always considered the bridge as just a bridge of hope... when I think about the time I was on the bridge and what happened in 1965... I just see it as hope, freedom... my family members are really not looking at the name, they’re just looking at the bridge from the memories.”<sup>176</sup> All three of these Selmians participate in constituting a social memory of the bridge held among members of the movement by publicly recalling individual memories. They are bound together through their involvement in the local movement and the events of March 1965.

There is a belief held by Jo Ann Bland and others in Selma that there is “something delicious in how the name of a white supremacist has come to symbolize freedom for black people.”<sup>177</sup> Bland’s comment acknowledges the importance of the bridge as a condensation symbol in public memory, even reinforcing that the signifying of the bridge is important to maintain. However, Bland’s comment also points toward a more local, social memory that does not occlude the legacy of Edmund Pettus from view. In the social memory espoused by members of the movement, it is crucial that the history and legacy of who Edmund Pettus was not be forgotten, and that his name remain in place on the bridge so that context becomes available to the public of who the bridge was intended to honor, and who the bridge is regularly assumed to honor today, encouraged by the performances of public memory. For Bland, there’s an element of satisfaction to be had in a memory that does not occlude who Edmund Pettus was, claiming “what happened on that bridge changed the whole meaning of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, of Edmund Pettus... I bet he’s rolling in his grave every time we walk across that bridge.”<sup>178</sup> This reconstitution of meaning is rhetorically derived through public celebrations of the bridge as a condensation symbol

that has come to signify not the man for which it is named, but for the very things he spent a lifetime trying to repress.

### **CHAPTER THREE: PHILOSOPHICAL PAIRS AND THE ESSENCE OF THE EDMUND PETTUS BRIDGE**

On June 3, 2015, Alabama State Senator Hank Sanders (D-Selma) introduced Senate Joint Resolution 103 (SJR103) in the state legislature.<sup>179</sup> The resolution was brought forward after a change.org petition by Students UNITE to rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge garnered more than 185,000 signatures.<sup>180</sup> The resolution sought to rename the bridge the “Journey to Freedom Bridge”<sup>181</sup> rather than for any one member of the civil rights movement. Sanders proposed that “the Journey to Freedom Bridge will be a lasting monument that will encompass the entirety of the civil rights movement and all the individuals that have fought and continue to fight to lift all people.”<sup>182</sup> In an opinion piece published on *AL.com* the day after the reading of SJR103, Sanders sought broader public support for his position that:

Every time we say the words Edmund Pettus Bridge, we lift two very powerful but opposite messages. Edmund Pettus sends a message of violence, terror, oppression, white supremacy, the destruction of the right to vote, and death. The bridge sends a message of non-violence, freedom, equality, voting rights for all, democracy, and life. We cannot serve two masters with one symbol.<sup>183</sup>

While the resolution passed the Alabama state senate, it was never taken up by the house of representatives before the end of the 2015 legislative session and it subsequently died.<sup>184</sup>

The resolution introduced by Sanders prompted immediate reactions locally and nationally. The day that SJR103 was read, U.S. Representative Terri Sewell (D-AL) and Alabama State Representative Darrio Melton (D-67) both issued statements, published jointly, making clear that they were “strongly opposed to changing the name.”<sup>185</sup> U.S. Representative John Lewis (D-GA) issued a statement that renaming the bridge was “a

decision for the people of Alabama to make... you can change the name of the bridge, but you cannot change the facts of history.”<sup>186</sup> Within weeks, Lewis and Sewell partnered in writing an opinion piece stating their position that the historical irony of the bridge, originally a memorial to a man who embodied white supremacist ideals, had been transformed by the events that occurred in Selma in March of 1965. “The irony is that a bridge named after a man who inflamed racial hatred is now known worldwide as a symbol of equality and justice. It is biblical--what was meant for evil, God uses for good,”<sup>187</sup> the U.S. Representatives opined.

In the years since, the state legislature passed the Alabama Memorial Preservation Act of 2017. The act prohibits “the relocation, removal, alteration, renaming, or other disturbance of monuments located on public property”<sup>188</sup> and resulted from years of State Senator Gerald Allen (R-Tuscaloosa) submitting legislation after the confederate flag was taken down from the state capitol grounds.<sup>189</sup> Following the passage of the Act, the Edmund Pettus Bridge is now constituted as a “memorial building”<sup>190</sup> according to two stipulations of the act. First, it is a “structure,” and second, it is “named or dedicated in honor of a person.”<sup>191</sup> The third condition that sweeps the bridge under the act’s protections is that it has been in place for forty years or more, and consequently there is no “mechanism”<sup>192</sup> available to petition for changing the bridge as there is for covered entities that have been in place between twenty and forty years.

Despite the Alabama Memorial Preservation Act, after the death of John Lewis in 2020, efforts began anew to change the name of the bridge - the intensity of these efforts escalated against the backdrop of ongoing social unrest and protests.<sup>193</sup> Across the country, resistance to institutionalized iconography of white supremacy continues today, even in a

community that served host to events that stirred national consciousness 1965 and put the city of Selma on a global stage. Ongoing public deliberations concerning the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge are a microcosm and useful case study of issues that communities around the United States are grappling with. These local issues and their narratives all contribute in aggregate to broader national conversations concerned with race relations in the United States and how neighbors who share community spaces regard and ultimately treat each other.

In this thesis chapter, I will investigate arguments about the essence of material space and place. By analyzing fragments of arguments for and against changing the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, it is possible to see more clearly the ways in which the bridge operates rhetorically as a public mirror reflecting values and attitudes toward race relations in the United States. These values and attitudes more broadly connect to a national sentiment and appetite toward conversations that involve truth-telling and reconciliation to heal from the darkest chapters of the nation's history. Specifically, I argue that these values manifest in what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca theorized as philosophical pairs, and that the constituents of these pairs emerge through argument from various loci by those engaged in the efforts to keep or change the bridge's name.<sup>194</sup>

This chapter proceeds in five parts. First, I begin with a review of the relevant literature to provide a more thorough understanding of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's work, what other scholars have since found applicable from those concepts to their own work, and the theoretical framework under which I pursue mine. I then proceed with critical engagement of arguments principally concerned with the name of the bridge through analysis of three philosophical pairs identified during my review of source texts

that include legislation, opinion pieces, media coverage of renaming efforts, and an online town hall meeting. These three philosophical pairs are: preservation/change; visibility/erasure; and insider/outsider. To comprehensively illustrate the activation of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's concepts of loci in this complex and unresolved public deliberation, analysis of the insider/outsider pair observes arguments grounded in the loci of quantity and quality rather than from the loci of essence as can be observed in the first two pairs. In each of the subsequent analytical sections, I map argument fragments from the source text collection in a chronological progression from their genesis in 2015 to their more contemporary manifestations in 2020. I conclude with reflections on this applied theoretical framework and implications for future directions.

### **The Utility of Embracing Alternative Approaches to Critical Engagement**

Prior to conducting any analysis of the discourse concerned with the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, it is necessary to nest this chapter's forthcoming considerations among the existing and relevant literature that provides its theoretical backing. This literature review begins with an introduction to concepts emergent in Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric* such as loci, values and their hierarchies, and philosophical pairs.<sup>195</sup> It then proceeds with the inclusion of other critical perspectives from the fields of rhetorical and argumentation scholarship that engage these concepts. What then follows is my conceptualization of how the loci of essence operates in relationship to the values that manifest in philosophical pairs, and the need for interrogation of how this theoretical framework is evidenced and active in the discourse concerned with the name of the bridge.

Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca introduced the subject of loci in *The New Rhetoric* by defining loci as "headings under which arguments can be classified."<sup>196</sup> The

authors subsequently enumerated six general categories of loci, those being the loci of “quantity, quality, order, the existing, essence, and the person.”<sup>197</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are brief in their explanation of the loci of essence, claiming only “that which best incarnates a type, an essence, or a function acquires value by this very fact.”<sup>198</sup> While the authors provide an example that points toward how an individual can represent an ideal or hold intrinsic value, J. Robert Cox noted that “according a higher value to objects, individuals, or ideas to the extent they embody some important reality – what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca term loci of essence – becomes an important starting point of argument.”<sup>199</sup>

Cox observed that the loci of essence was evident in arguments put forward by Henry David Thoreau’s *Walking*, initially delivered as a lecture in 1851. Thoreau’s arguments reflected transcendentalist thinking of the time which posited that spiritual truths were most clearly revealed by the wilderness. While Cox did not theorize on the essence of material space and place, his observation that the transcendentalists were arguing from the loci of essence as it related to the wilderness provides a helpful precedent to consider the ways that the loci of essence is also active in arguments concerned with the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and the essence of material place. This chapter seeks to analyze the ways in which loci, particularly the loci of essence, operate in relationship to philosophical pairs as put forward by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, and the utility and flexibility of their theoretical framework.

Returning to the text of *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca theorized the notion of philosophical pairs, which for purposes of this analysis are viewed as a set of values that are in relationship to each other. However, values in this context do not

necessarily manifest with a social or moral connotation, such as the values of courage, integrity, honor, or selflessness. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca delineate between concrete and abstract values by arguing that “a concrete value is one attaching to a living being, a specific group, or a particular object, considered as a unique entity... by displaying the unique character of something, we automatically increase its value.”<sup>200</sup> There is a certain materiality implicated by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca concerning concrete values. As such, the authors argue that there is an intrinsic value associated with things that are visible, tangible, measurable, and distinct – and that concrete values are persuasive for audiences when faced with making choices that require them to weigh what they consider most important. The authors further argue that concrete values “are most frequently used as the foundation of abstract values, and conversely,”<sup>201</sup> pointing toward a relational dynamic existing between concrete and abstract values.

Further exploring the relationship between concrete and abstract values, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca note that reliance on concrete values can be a hallmark of conservative argumentation.<sup>202</sup> This conservatism is not implicated in the political sense as a right/left bifurcation of ideologies; rather the authors observe something more practical - that reliance on concrete values would be “much easier when one wishes to preserve rather than to renovate.”<sup>203</sup> In contrast to or in tension with these concrete values are abstract values, which Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca observe as “perhaps essentially connected with change; they seemingly manifest in a revolutionary spirit... they are no respectors of persons and seem to provide criteria for one wishing to change the established order.”<sup>204</sup> As previously noted, the authors observe abstract values as ones that rise in relationship to and originating from concrete values, particularly in Western argumentation where they

are “suited for raising incompatibilities... the confusion of these abstract notions would allow us, after these incompatibilities have been raised, to form new concepts of these values... they are constantly being recast and remodeled.”<sup>205</sup> With this understanding, abstract values could be conceptualized as notions redefining values of patriotism, inclusion, equitable treatment, and others that the authors allude are capable of being reconstituted through argumentation that pits the abstract value against its point of origin in the foundational concrete value.

In this dynamic, concrete and abstract values are not oscillating in polarity with each other on a binary as much as they are fluid and used to contrast against past and present understandings toward the future direction or potential redefinition of a value. It is here that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca observed that values are capable of being contested and subordinated in what they consider “value hierarchies,” and argued that “accepted hierarchies occur in practice with two distinct aspects: next to concrete hierarchies, like that expressing the superiority of men over animals, there are abstract hierarchies, like that expressing the superiority of the just over the useful.”<sup>206</sup> Through this illustration it can again be observed the way in which the authors implicate the materiality of the concrete (men/animals) in contrast with the abstract (just/useful), and these values being ordered hierarchically in contrast to each other begins to manifest the emergence of philosophical pairs in argumentation.

Barbara Warnick illustrated the ways in which philosophical pairs “function to enable arguers and their audiences to order values in hierarchies, and they are usually specific to a given cultural milieu... [pairs] work to order our thoughts and to contribute to value orderings when arguments are made... based on common thought and values.”<sup>207</sup>

Warnick observed that in arguments regarding artificial intelligence, the pair artificial/real reflected an argumentative disposition that considered machine logic and intelligence less fallible than human logic. In this pair, the value of artificial is hierarchically positioned as superior or preferable to the value of real.<sup>208</sup> Philosophical pairs tend to emerge through the process of dissociation, which Edward Schiappa observed to be “a strategy whereby an advocate attempts to break up a previously unified idea into two concepts: one which will be positively valued by the audience, and one which will be negatively valued.”<sup>209</sup> Schiappa further articulated the ways in which dissociation is a powerful argumentative maneuver, claiming that “philosophical pairs entice us to select *this* theory because it is based on philosophically firmer ground than *that* theory.”<sup>210</sup> Schiappa argued that when audiences are “faced with each philosophical pair, we hardly hesitate”<sup>211</sup> to make judgments concerning which value is superior to the other. When philosophical pairs are presented, the opportunity emerges for a reflexive choice to be made and a prior conceptualization of a value redefined. Schiappa also noted this, claiming that pairs combine “the force of value and reality to persuade an audience to accept one interpretation or definition over another,”<sup>212</sup> echoing the sentiments of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s perspective on the relationship between concrete and abstract values.

David Frank suggested that Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca intended “to offer a rhetoric designed for a world of deep pluralism, one in which values could coexist rather than as subject for fission or fusion.”<sup>213</sup> Conveying methodological optimism for the utility of philosophical pairs, Frank argued that the “vision of dissociation remains an important tool of moral criticism and has a rich future.”<sup>214</sup> Indeed, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argued that “value hierarchies are, no doubt, more important to the structure of an

argument than the actual values; most values are indeed shared by a great number of audiences, and a particular audience is characterized less by which values it accepts than by the way it grades them.”<sup>215</sup> Underscoring the centrality and social importance of values and their constitutive properties for communities, the authors argued that “the hierarchic ordering of abstract values... does not mean that these values are independent of one another. Quite the opposite... values are generally considered to be interconnected, and this very connection... is often the basis of their subordination.”<sup>216</sup> In analysis of arguments concerned with the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, we can observe the ways in which philosophical pairs come forward, and that these pairs are constituted of values that can be ordered hierarchically.

Arguments for and against changing the name of the bridge are dependent upon various loci and reflect the aspirational nature of how we (as a society) want to be seen, which definitions of values are desired to prevail, and the ways in which communities are established, maintained, reformed, and evolved through the contestation of values. Analyzing the discourse concerned with the naming of the Edmund Pettus Bridge presents an opportunity to examine how the loci of essence is performed in relationship to space and place, and how rhetoric evokes, stokes, and revokes that essence depending on the values intimated by those engaged in public deliberations. One value of the pair being privileged above the other does not render a matter settled; though it might be resolved that a particular course of action should be undertaken, it is a false equivalency to assume that the privileging of one value results in the annihilation of the other. In this way, a realistic theoretical reflection of society emerges; the losing participants in a debate do not cease to exist upon the identification of a winner, everyone returns to the community that

they share and must figure out how to coexist and continue in the direction of a more perfect union.

This perspective is not incongruent with the observation made by David Frank that more broadly, Perelman's body of work sought to "create an alternative to the binary thinking that is prevalent in post-Enlightenment thought [and] provides a reason and logic designed for a world of pluralism that is in need of a system of justice."<sup>217</sup> As further support from moving away from binary ways of thinking when engaging in critical analysis, Celeste Condit cautioned against totalizing stances and assessments, instead advocating for an empathic approach that "attends not to lifestyles, but to the intentionally constructed rhetorical messages of groups engaged in public struggle... in a way that fully engages with understanding their authenticity."<sup>218</sup> Don Kramer also extended an invitation while moving through Perelman and Burke's scholarship toward a rhetorical theory of justice to "test the claim that forms of universal fairness cannot properly be co-created until we work with, through, and into our own sensation-thick, attitude-laden values – the better to respond to others, the better to consider how such values should inform our claims on one another."<sup>219</sup>

Engaging empathically with the public deliberations concerning the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge provides an opportunity to participate in work that "does not involve the repudiation of theory, but the softening of it, the fragmentation of it, and the use of it as a tool rather than blueprint."<sup>220</sup> Through examining the ways in which the observable philosophical pairs of preservation/change, visibility/erasure, and insider/outsider are negotiated by those engaged in the public deliberations concerning the bridge's name, the opportunity emerges to further advance our understanding of how loci,

particularly the loci of essence, and abstract values are applicable to the concrete values of space and place.

### **What gets preserved, and what gets changed?**

Regarding ordering values in a hierarchical structure, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argued that “the reason why one feels obliged to order values in a hierarchy, regardless of the result, is that simultaneous pursuit of these values leads to incompatibilities [and] obliges one to make choices.”<sup>221</sup> Beginning in 2015, Alabama State Senator Hank Sanders endeavored to create public awareness of the potential for a choice to be made whether the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge would remain or be altered with his submission of SJR103. The resolution brought forward in the state house found its exigence in efforts by student organizers who sought action toward changing the name of the bridge and garnered 185,000 signatures in mere months expressing support of their petition for change.

The text of SJR103 explicitly pointed to the existential incompatibility of a landmark of the civil rights movement remaining named for a white supremacist, arguing that “Edmund Pettus will forever be remembered for the enforcement of laws that prevented African Americans from equal access to education, jobs, political representation, and other benefits of American citizenship.”<sup>222</sup> The resolution’s argument proceeded that the bridge’s meaning was transformed by the events of March 1965 and consequently that it should be renamed to more accurately reflect this transformation and pay homage to the movement rather than to Pettus. However, SJR103 was met with swift and unmistakable opposition from members of the U.S. House of Representatives Terri Sewell and John Lewis. The U.S. Representatives charged that changing the name of the bridge would jeopardize the historical integrity of the site and put at risk an opportunity for Americans to learn from the

history of the bridge when observing the long arc of progress away from racial hierarchy and toward national unity.

In this first of three sections concerning philosophical pairs, I analyze the objections raised by U.S. Representative Terri Sewell in immediate response to Alabama State Senator Hank Sanders' submission of SJR103, and the further contributions of an op-ed published on *AL.com* that Sewell jointly authored with U.S. Representative John Lewis within weeks of the resolution's submission. The philosophical pair of preservation/change emerges and becomes apparent through analysis of this rhetorical exchange in 2015 when contrasting Sewell and Lewis' arguments for preservation of historical integrity with Sanders' advocacy for change. While arguments concerned with changing the name of the bridge have continued through 2020 and beyond, I chose to center this section's analysis on the 2015 rhetorical exchanges between Sanders, Sewell, and Lewis in service of chronologically progressing this chapter's overall analysis of public deliberation from its point of origin in 2015 to its still-unresolved status today.

It is unknown whether State Senator Hank Sanders solicited the opinions of any of his colleagues prior to the introduction of SJR103 in June of 2015. It seems unlikely his federal counterpart representing Selma, U.S. Representative Terri Sewell was consulted or given advance notice of the pending resolution given the veracity of the statement issued by her office the day SJR103 was read in the state senate. "I am strongly opposed to changing the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge,"<sup>223</sup> Sewell's statement began. The immediate objection to changing the name continued, "the bridge is an iconic symbol of the struggle for voting rights... changing the name of the bridge would... compromise the historical integrity... we must safeguard that history, good and bad, and resist attempts to rewrite

it.”<sup>224</sup> Throughout the course of the statement, Sewell argued largely for the value of historical integrity being worthy of preservation and not only preferable to change, but necessary to protect the broader legacy of the civil rights movement by not changing the name of its historical sites.

The statement by Sewell affirms the essence of the bridge as being one of iconic symbolism and a landmark of the struggle for voting rights – a treasured national symbol of perseverance and victory in the face of brutality and violence. Sanders highlights this social significance as well in SJR103 when claiming that “as peaceful marchers fearlessly crossed the bridge, the nation had its consciousness awakened by the images of brutality wreaked upon them by those sworn to uphold the law.”<sup>225</sup> The imagery Sanders points toward is the very imagery that Sewell invokes when claiming that the bridge is an “iconic symbol of the struggle for voting rights”<sup>226</sup> in her statement. Sewell and Sanders both draw from the imagery of public memory often attributed to the bridge but are oppositional toward each other when weighing the choice of whether the name of the bridge should be preserved or changed. Sanders argues that the bridge is not a symbol of Edmund Pettus, but of the civil rights movement, and consequently the name of the bridge must be changed to resolve the material incompatibility and more accurately reflect its symbolic meaning. Sewell also points toward the symbolism of the bridge but argues that changing the name of the bridge would undermine the historical integrity of the site and by extension diminish the achievements of the movement in relationship to that site.

Those acquainted more closely with the full history of the bridge are aware that it is named for a known white supremacist. In the opening paragraph of SJR103, Sanders immediately makes the connection - that “33 years after his death, the bridge spanning the

Alabama River in Selma was named for Edmund Pettus, a Grand Dragon of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan.”<sup>227</sup> When initially raising objections to SJR103, Sewell directly addressed that the historical facts of the bridge’s significance are “both good and bad.”<sup>228</sup> Tracing Sewell’s implicit logic, that the bridge was originally intended as an honorific to a known white supremacist is bad, but the way in which the national significance of the bridge is inextricably linked to the civil rights movement is good. For Sewell, these historical facts operate in relationship to each other in a way that must be preserved to fully appreciate the bridge’s iconic symbolism. Sewell’s position that preserving the name of Pettus and by extension the historical integrity of the material site - what is referred to as historical irony - preserves victories accomplished by the civil rights movement, not the ongoing memorialization of a white supremacist.

To further expand on this point, Sewell argues that preservation of the bridge as-is upholds a collective obligation that she feels a part of “as inheritors of the legacy surrounding the historical events that took place in Selma.”<sup>229</sup> Sewell espouses a sense of obligation for furthering the legacy of the movement on down through the generations that follow the march of progress. In this way, Sewell’s argument from the loci of essence is that the bridge, named for Edmund Pettus, reflects a society that values historical integrity by preservation of material sites of significance as-is because “the historical irony is an integral part of the complicated history of Selma – a city known for its pivotal role in the civil war and the civil rights movement.”<sup>230</sup> For Sewell, if the name of the bridge were to be changed, it would lessen the magnitude of the achievements of the movement, the Dallas County Voters League, and the countless foot soldiers who for years risked their personal safety and their lives to eventually prevail over those more interested in preserving the

legacy of Pettus, the disenfranchisement of black voters, and furthering narratives of racial difference which undergirded a generational hierarchy of second-class citizenship for black Americans. To both honor the movement and protect the magnitude of the accomplishments that constitute its legacy, Sewell contends that there is a public obligation to preserve the complicated historical integrity of the bridge by keeping rather than changing its name.

Two weeks after SJR103 was first read and Sewell raised her initial objections, she doubled down in an op-ed jointly written with fellow U.S. Representative John Lewis and published on *AL.com*.<sup>231</sup> Lewis, who suffered a fractured skull as a result of the beating he took from state agents during Bloody Sunday might be a surprising advocate for keeping things the way they are. However, the position Lewis puts forward with Sewell is unmistakable: “keeping the name of the bridge is not an endorsement of the man who bares [sic] its name but rather an acknowledgement that the name of the bridge today is synonymous with the voting rights movement which changed the face of this nation and the world.”<sup>232</sup> The op-ed furthered the early rebuke of Sanders’ legislation by Sewell with the additional voice of John Lewis.

In concert, the U.S. Representatives argue for values of tolerance and nonviolence, and that the iconic symbolism of the bridge has naught to do with its white supremacist roots, but rather everything to do with the transcendent accomplishments that resulted from decades of perseverance by black Americans who strove toward equal treatment under the law and for a measure of justice and dignity for their lives. “The Edmund Pettus Bridge symbolizes both who we once were, and who we have become today,”<sup>233</sup> the representatives argued. The name of Edmund Pettus symbolized a history of oppression

and subjugation undergirded by narratives of racial difference and an all-too-often violently enforced old order of racial hierarchy, and yet the bridge preserved-as-named for Pettus has come to symbolize something entirely altern to the very values and causes Pettus stood for because of the events of 1965 venerated in the prevailing public memory of the bridge.

By arguing for the preservation of the name of a white supremacist on the bridge, the representatives hold fast to their concluding sentiments that “in the end, it is the lessons learned from our past that will instruct our future. We should never forget that ordinary people can collectively achieve social change through the discipline and philosophy of nonviolence.”<sup>234</sup> Through championing values of tolerance and furthering the philosophy of nonviolence, Lewis and Sewell envision an American public capable of achieving transcendence and a more harmonious existence – one that has already proven its capability of doing so. In this way, Sewell and Lewis argue from the loci of essence that the bridge, preserved-as-named for Edmund Pettus, reflects the potential of a society that can confront the reality of its past and commit to not repeating its injustices in the future.

Through analysis of this 2015 exchange concerned with both historical integrity and symbolic meaning it can be observed that by preserving the bridge as-named for a white supremacist, an opportunity emerges for one form of the truth-telling Bryan Stevenson advocates for in the struggle toward reconciliation and national healing. There is no hiding from the truth of who Edmund Pettus was, the causes he fought in service of, and the racial hierarchy he spent most of his life working to maintain. These facts were openly advanced in SJR103 by Hank Sanders as justification for changing the name of the bridge. However, the arguments put forward by U.S. Representatives Sewell and Lewis illustrate that when the public is confronted with the truth of who Edmund Pettus was, a more profound

appreciation for the national affect associated with the bridge that bears his name becomes available for contemplation as Americans collectively work to reconcile that a landmark of the civil rights movement is named for a man who would have stopped at nothing to bar its progress and achievements.

At the time the Lewis/Sewell op-ed was authored in 2015, the confederate flag still flew on the grounds of the state capitol in Montgomery, and State Senator Gerald Allen (R-Tuscaloosa) had yet to begin his push that resulted in the eventual passage of the Alabama Memorial Preservation Act of 2017. Allen's arguments for broad-based preservation began later in the summer of 2015, and originated in response to Governor Robert Bentley's decision to remove the confederate flags from the state capitol's grounds a week after the massacre Dylann Roof perpetrated in Charleston at Mother Emanuel.<sup>235</sup> The state senator decried a perceived "revisionist movement afoot to cover over many parts of American history" and began submitting legislation to counter a "politically correct movement to strike whole periods of the past from our collective memory."<sup>236</sup> While it is important to remember that the act's exigence was not explicitly linked to SJR103, the eventual passage of the act swept the Edmund Pettus Bridge under its protections, and what Gerald Allen was arguing for was also historical integrity.

Here we catch our first glimpse of the political messiness and complexity preservation as a value within the philosophical pair of preservation/change constitutes. We also see the utility of a theoretical framework that can accommodate the cognitive dissonance that may occur when confronted by the evidence that John Lewis, Terri Sewell, and Gerald Allen are all arguing for historical integrity and preservation. When Lewis and Sewell argue from the loci of essence for preservation of the of the material site, they view

that preservation as essential to the bridge's symbolic ability to reflect values of integrity, tolerance, and nonviolence. Two years later, preservation was codified through the passage of the act, but the historical integrity Gerald Allen was fighting for when efforts to get the legislation passed began had nothing to do with the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The act preserves confederate iconography despite never invoking the confederacy by name; by the text of the act, if a monument has stood for forty years or more, no matter what it honors, any form of disruption to it is prohibited.

Is this what bipartisanship looks like in practice? Perhaps in the most abstract possible sense – the act was not co-authored across party lines, and Lewis and Sewell occupied seats at the federal rather than state level when the act was signed into law by Governor Kay Ivey. However, the textual evidence tells us that Lewis, Sewell, and Allen all wanted historical integrity in the preservation of material sites. The motives were divergent, but the outcome is singular. Can we sit with the discomfort of knowing that the preservation Lewis and Sewell advocated for came about indirectly as a collateral benefit of legislation motivated by the removal of confederate flags that once flew on the state capitol grounds? The theoretical flexibility of philosophical pairs offers utility in the way that Lewis, Sewell, and Allen are permitted to diverge in party affiliation, ideology, and likely other unknown ways, but are all bound as constituents in the value of preservation within the pair of preservation/change.

When critically evaluating these exchanges, we are not required to make a moral judgement regarding whether preservation is morally right or wrong, we only see that it is one of two values in a relational and ongoing tension with each other. Consequently, when we consider that philosophical pairs present a set of values being hierarchically ordered in

a way that reflects which value is preferable to the other rather than which value is morally right versus wrong, a more realistic view of the messiness of public deliberation can emerge. I make this point not to engage in some form of moral relativism, but rather to point to a very practical means by which theoretical backing can be applied to analyzing the ways that true diversity is extant in our communities and their discourses and can pose moral challenges when engaging with perspectives the critic may personally find repugnant.

Lewis and Sewell recognized in their op-ed that by championing historical integrity, they were bound to have something in common with those who wish to preserve memorials to white supremacy. What they also recognized, however, is the power of narratives and rhetoric in contextualizing history to chart a course in the direction of their vision for a more just future. Accordingly, they argued that if the material site of the Edmund Pettus Bridge was changed instead of preserved, some ability to teach who we were in relationship to who we are is at risk of being lost with that change. For the U.S. Representatives, some measure of the win that followed the events of March 1965 was at risk of being vacated through the erasure of Edmund Pettus' name. According to Lewis and Sewell, what would be erased through a change in the bridge's name was not merely the memorialized name of a white supremacist, but evidence of the magnitude of what the foot soldiers were faced with overcoming during the civil rights movement. It is here that I turn toward analysis of the philosophical pair visibility/erasure in the next section of this chapter.

### **What remains visible, and what can be erased?**

Within days of SJR103 being read in the state senate, Hank Sanders endeavored to arouse public consciousness and engender support for changing the name of the Edmund

Pettus Bridge by publishing an op-ed on *AL.com* that articulated his justification for SJR103 and more directly confronted what he perceived as the existential incompatibility of the bridge's symbolism. In this section, I continue to focus on rhetorical exchanges that occurred in 2015 by drawing from three primary source texts: the *AL.com* op-ed published by State Senator Hank Sanders; a public statement issued by State Representative Darrio Melton (D-67); and continued incorporation of arguments made by U.S. Representatives Terri Sewell and John Lewis from their jointly authored op-ed referenced in the prior section. Public deliberation concerning the choice to preserve or change the name of the bridge, and how the choice to keep the name of Edmund Pettus visible rather than erasing it makes a statement about values is still in contention today. Consequently, it is prerequisite to focus on the arguments that emerged in 2015 to more fully appreciate in subsequent analysis the way that arguments concerning the name of the bridge contain both echoes of familiarity and evidence of evolution reflecting the social conditions in which they are made.

Through continued analysis of these 2015 texts, a second philosophical pair of visibility/erasure emerges and becomes available for critical observation. Turning toward the philosophical pair of visibility/erasure invites a more pointed consideration of how the choice to preserve and keep visible the name of a known white supremacist versus the choice to change the name of the bridge and erase this memorialization of the confederacy lays bare the type of competing values Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca were observing when arguing that “the hierarchic ordering of abstract values... does not mean that these values are independent of one another. Quite the opposite... values are generally considered to be interconnected, and this very connection between them is often the basis of their

subordination.”<sup>237</sup> Indeed, when analyzing arguments made by U.S. Representatives Terri Sewell and John Lewis in the prior section, the ability to situate oneself in relationship historically, morally, and otherwise to Edmund Pettus was a key justification for preserving rather than changing the name of the bridge to feel a sense of progress from where we were (collectively) to where we are. This interconnection between present and past is evoked by engaging with the values symbolically enshrined by the bridge and the core of what will be specifically probed in this section. By exploring the arguments made concerning visibility and erasure of the name of Edmund Pettus, an opportunity becomes available to weigh what we choose to elevate or subordinate in our communities when engaging with the rhetoric and potency of their symbols and landmarks.

Weeks before U.S. Reps. Lewis and Sewell would argue for the bridge’s symbolic ability to teach lessons of the past and point toward the potential of the future, State Senator Hank Sanders envisioned a different form of teaching anchored to the symbolism of the bridge. The word symbol appears twenty-one times in his op-ed that is only seven hundred and seventy words long, three times in the first paragraph alone. Notably, every paragraph but one in Sanders’ essay closes with the phrase “symbols are powerful.”<sup>238</sup> The point Sanders makes via this stylistic repetition is not only is the bridge a symbol, but the name on the bridge is also a discrete symbol. Sanders argued it was possible to remove and replace one symbol while keeping the other to unify the symbolic meaning of the bridge and resolve the existential incompatibility that a landmark of the civil rights movement is named for a white supremacist.

While championing the values of protecting children and setting good examples, Sanders argued that erasing the name of Edmund Pettus from the bridge would prove that

“when we know better, we must do better.”<sup>239</sup> For Sanders, doing better would come from erasing the name of Edmund Pettus so that children would be protected from confusion over “whether we are lifting a vision of terrorism, white supremacy, destruction of the right to vote and death, or the vision of freedom, the right to vote, equality, and life.”<sup>240</sup> Sanders asked his readers “would anyone in Alabama stand for one of its most important monuments to be named after any modern-day terrorist?”<sup>241</sup> He then drew parallels between the Joe Paterno controversy at Penn State and the erasure of Bill Cosby’s name from visibility at Temple University and Spelman College to demonstrate the inequitable social standards evidenced by permitting the Pettus name to remain despite his shameful actions. “Only symbols destructive to black people are allowed to stand in the face of oppressive history”<sup>242</sup> Sanders asserted.

The arguments from the loci of essence which Sanders advanced point toward the bridge’s symbolic potential to reflect values that can be instructive to future generations; that the community will no longer honor those who represent a desire for its subjugation and failure. In arguing for erasure in this philosophical pair, Sanders posited that our standards of who is worthy of the visible honor such as being memorialized on the bridge have changed, and correspondingly the symbol of the Edmund Pettus name must be erased. While erasing the name of a white supremacist from public view appears to be an appropriate solution when juxtaposed against the erasure of honorifics to Joe Paterno and Bill Cosby, Sanders faced substantial resistance from within his own party by members who argued that Pettus’ name could not be erased if the community truly wanted to benchmark itself along the march of progress.

In a statement issued by Alabama State Representative Darrio Melton in response to SJR103, Selma's state representative argued that "we have no choice but to embrace, not erase, our history and heritage as a city."<sup>243</sup> The use of the word embrace in contrast to erasure in Melton's statement is a powerful rhetorical choice pointing toward reconciliation and community unification with full view of the truth concerning historical facts of who Edmund Pettus was and the causes of which he was emblematic. To choose to embrace rather than erase implicates the philosophy of nonviolence embodied by the foot soldiers of the movement who time and time again were brutalized and did not return violence for violence.

Melton's statement continued, "while the bridge carries memories of division, it also holds promises of hope and freedom; currently it symbolizes our opportunity to move into the future with a new perspective of inclusion."<sup>244</sup> Melton's statement reflects the values of progress and optimism, but far from naïveté, Melton makes clear that he isn't viewing history through rose-colored glasses. "I understand the historical irony of the bridge being named after a... Klan leader, but what was birthed on that bridge has become a world symbol of democracy and the voting rights movement, and that is a beautiful testimony."<sup>245</sup> In his statements, Melton seems to almost redefine what we previously conceptualized our understanding of inclusion to be by arguing that we look to the ugliness of our past and choose love instead of violence. He also points toward the prevailing public memory of the bridge that occludes the legacy of Edmund Pettus from sight while acknowledging a more localized social memory that incorporates an understanding of who Edmund Pettus was to contextually enhance the public significance of the bridge.

Arguing for the necessity of embracing over erasing, Melton does not suggest that we forgive and forget, but rather that we acknowledge and do better together; that we engage in the community building work of truth-telling and reconciliation. Through championing values of progress and optimism, Melton argues for a transformative vision of inclusion. In this way, Melton's argument from the loci of essence is that the bridge, named for Edmund Pettus, reflects a society that is clear-sighted in its view of where they came from and sees the need to remain committed to an inclusive future. To have this clear-sightedness, the name of Edmund Pettus must remain visible rather than be erased. Melton saw "no reason to hastily change what has become the cradle of democracy"<sup>246</sup> and John Lewis and Terri Sewell agreed.

"We can no more rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge than we can erase this nation's history of racial intolerance," the U.S. Representatives argued, "we must tell our story fully rather than hide the chapters we wish did not exist for without adversity there can be no redemption."<sup>247</sup> Lewis and Sewell argued that if the name of Edmund Pettus was erased, so too would be an opportunity to learn from the ugliest and most challenging chapters of United States history. Responding to Sanders' arguments for protecting future generations, Lewis and Sewell countered, "children should be taught the context of the events that unfolded on the bridge, and why its name is emblematic of the fight for the very soul of this nation-- the democratic values of equality and justice."<sup>248</sup> Again, Lewis and Sewell point to the power of narratives in contextualizing why the name of a known white supremacist should remain visible on a bridge that became a central feature in the stories of Bloody Sunday and the Selma to Montgomery march of 1965.

Here, Lewis and Sewell jointly argue from the loci of essence that the bridge reflects values of justice and equality, and consequently, the name of Edmund Pettus must remain visible rather than being erased. The bridge's essence reflecting the values of progress, optimism, equality, and justice are why Melton, Lewis, and Sewell argue for visibility rather than erasure. The advocates argue that by not erasing the name of Edmund Pettus, even though the historical legacy of white supremacy remains visible, Pettus and that legacy visibly remain on the losing side of history and on the wayside of the march of progress toward a more inclusive future. Arguably, this more inclusive future and subsequent community unification are a microcosm of the type of national healing that Bryan Stevenson has advocated for when advancing truth and reconciliation. But just how much can a small community in the middle of Alabama teach us about how we view ourselves in relationship to our surroundings and to each other, and how do these interconnections and tensions between preservation/change and visibility/erasure reflect broader values on the national stage? In the next section, I consider how the existence of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in its duality as both a memorial to the movement and an avowed white supremacist came under the national spotlight during the summer of 2020 as Black Lives Matter protests erupted around the country following the death of George Floyd.

### **Insider or outsider, who gets to decide?**

In 2020, a political strategist living in Washington D.C. named Michael Starr Hopkins decided to do something about the bridge named in memorial of a white supremacist in Selma, Alabama. According to media reporting on his efforts, the moment of invention for Hopkins occurred when sitting at home relaxing on the couch after attending several Black Lives Matter protests.<sup>249</sup> "As I was watching *Selma* I realized we wait far too often until

people are gone to honor them... while he's still here, it would be the perfect time for Lewis to see Pettus' name taken down and his name put there"<sup>250</sup> Hopkins said. On July 17, 2020, John Lewis died from an aggressive form of pancreatic cancer at the age of 80.<sup>251</sup> A horse-drawn caisson carried his casket across the bridge he had crossed so many times, strewn with rose petals, still named for Edmund Pettus.<sup>252</sup> Calls to change the name of the bridge and erase its homage to white supremacy began to spring forth from all over the country in the wake of Lewis' death.

In this section, I focus on analysis of public deliberation anchored to texts from 2020 where national efforts to change the name of the bridge and erase the name of Edmund Pettus were resisted by residents of Selma who argued that their local, personal connections to the bridge as community insiders carried a more substantive weight than the desires of outsiders with no discernible ties to the city or vested interest in its socioeconomic prosperity. These texts are sourced from media coverage and the recording of a virtual town hall that provided a platform to Selma residents and veterans of the movement to make their arguments concerning the name of the bridge heard. Throughout the analysis of this discourse, the persistence of the philosophical pairs of preservation/change and visibility/erasure are clearly implicated, but I will not re-evaluate these pairs as contemporary public deliberation concerning the name of the bridge is essentially a revival of these pairs rather than the apparition of a novel choice to be made. I begin first by surfacing arguments that originated outside of Selma before presenting arguments made by those with direct, local ties to the city.

By focusing this section on more contemporary rhetorical exchanges that occurred in 2020, an opportunity emerges to consider how communities perceive their collective

identity, the strength of their communal ties, and their appreciation of or disregard for arguments and efforts originating outside of their perceived boundaries. When analyzing the insider/outsider philosophical pair, an opportunity becomes available to evaluate what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca observed whereby “values may be admitted by many different audiences, but the degree of their acceptance will vary from one audience to another.”<sup>253</sup> The analysis which follows reflects a broader sense of national community and effectively links the microcosm of what was a local issue largely contained within the borders of Alabama to national conversations concerned with race relations and vestiges of white supremacy that are socially contested today.

The day after John Lewis died, his colleague, U.S. Representative Jim Clyburn (D-S.C.) called for change during a television interview. “Pettus was a grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan... take his name off that bridge and replace it with a good man – John Lewis, the personification of the goodness of America – rather than honor someone who disrespected individual freedoms”<sup>254</sup> Clyburn argued. Efforts to rename the bridge for John Lewis had already been initiated prior to his death by Michael Starr Hopkins, and commentary on the national stage by public figures such as Clyburn only served to accelerate the momentum of those efforts and exert pressure on the community of Selma. This pressure was implicated in coverage of a statement made by the great-great-granddaughter of Edmund Pettus, Caroline Randall Williams, approximately a week and a half later.<sup>255</sup>

In a statement unequivocally shaming the legacy of Edmund Pettus and those who would advocate for preservation of the bridge as named by extension, Williams argued bluntly for elevation of the values of progress and striving toward freedom by stripping the honorific of the bridge from Pettus and erasing his name. Williams argued:

We name things after honorable Americans to commemorate their legacies. That bridge is named after a treasonous American who cultivated and prospered from systems of degradation and oppression... John Lewis secured that bridge's place on the right side of history. We are not a people that were made to cling to relics of the past at the cost of our hope for the future. Renaming the bridge... would be a testament to the capacity for progress, the right-mindedness, and the striving toward freedom that are at the heart of what's best about the American spirit.<sup>256</sup>

Williams was not the only descendent of the Pettus family to weigh in. David Pettus, great-grand-nephew of Edmund Pettus, also issued a statement to the media after attending a virtual town hall concerned with renaming the bridge.<sup>257</sup> The statement by Pettus also points toward the shameful truth of the past and a need to shun the values Edmund Pettus embodied that were no longer worthy of honoring by 2020 standards. Arguing for changing the name of the bridge, Pettus offered the following:

I share the name of Pettus with secessionists, slave owners, and traitors to the United States... as nothing more than a concerned citizen of this country – though as one who bears some relation to that disgraced name, I humbly make the following suggestion... that the name of Edmund Pettus be removed from the bridge in Selma, to show that we can learn from our mistakes and be a better people than we have in the past.<sup>258</sup>

While Pettus felt that the name of the bridge should be changed to “The Bloody Sunday Bridge”<sup>259</sup> reflecting his personal belief that things should not be named after people because people are inherently fallible, Pettus became another member of a chorus of outsiders thrusting a national spotlight on a city whose foot soldiers of the movement did not share the interest in changing the bridge's name.

While there was inconsistency in what the bridge's name should be changed to, there was a generally observable consistency among the growing chorus of outside voices that the name of the bridge should be changed. Outside arguments coalesced around a perspective that that the bridge as a symbol is incongruent with the symbol of the Edmund Pettus name, an argument originally advanced by Hank Sanders in 2015, though there is no

textual evidence that anyone agitating to change the name of the bridge in 2020 at the national level was aware of these past efforts to credit him. The arguments of outsiders often invoked themes of freedom, equality, and progress being reflected by the bridge; an America no longer shackled to the darkest chapters of its past. However, media coverage of local reactions in Selma and a virtual town hall offer evidence that national sentiments toward change were not necessarily shared at the local level. Five years earlier the man so many wanted to bridge to be renamed for, U.S. Representative John Lewis, issued a statement that even though he believed the bridge should not be changed, renaming the bridge was “a decision for the people of Alabama to make.”<sup>260</sup> While philosophically Lewis disagreed with the arguments being advanced to change the name of the bridge in 2015, he believed it was ultimately a decision that should be left in the hands of the local community to make. In the summer of 2020, it seemed that those most interested in having the name of the bridge changed were outsiders with no discernible ties to the city of Selma.

Selma, Alabama is deeply ingrained in public memory as a turning point of the civil rights movement following the events of Bloody Sunday and the ultimate Selma to Montgomery march for voting rights. However, it also has a documented history of being forgotten when the national spotlight shifts from its city limits. Chuck Fager wrote extensively concerning the stories of corruption and inequitable distribution of aid following the events of March 1965.<sup>261</sup> For the better part of the last half-century, Selma has experienced economic downturn, high crime rates, and has observed a significant decline in its population as its young people move beyond the city limits in search of better job opportunities.<sup>262</sup> While people flock to Selma perennially for its Bridge Crossing Jubilee, it has been noted that “usually... they don’t stay for long... people won’t spend the night, or

even buy a sandwich.”<sup>263</sup> For those who are local residents and veterans of the movement who chose to make Selma a life-long home rather than a pilgrimage, the efforts to rename the bridge led by outsiders were not warmly welcomed. “They need to leave my bridge alone,”<sup>264</sup> Linda Lowery said in an interview, casting those who sought change as outsiders who lacked the same level of personal connection that she had to the bridge as both a Selma resident and a veteran of the movement. Lowery was the youngest person on the bridge on Bloody Sunday and the youngest person to participate in the full march to Montgomery.<sup>265</sup> At fourteen years old, the beating she survived on March 7, 1965 resulted in 35 stitches to her head.<sup>266</sup> During the 2020 Selma Matters Town Hall, the insider/outsider pair was central to arguments made by Lowery and other Selma residents and veterans of the movement who attended.

During the meeting, Alabama State Representative Prince Chestnut (D-67) recalled a phone conversation with U.S. Representative Terri Sewell earlier in the year as the petition to rename the bridge for John Lewis started to garner signatures.<sup>267</sup> “I told her immediately, ‘Terri, I can tell you just from being a Selmian... folks are not gonna be feeling this. This is something... so many people have an investment in that bridge, what happened on that bridge, what happened prior to March 7, 1965, and what happened after.’”<sup>268</sup> As protests erupted around the country that summer, Chestnut began receiving calls:

Outside of the area, people were saying “you guys should just do it, you guys should just do it!” I can tell you this: from my conversations, and from me knowing the people I know, and from the people who were close to Mr. Lewis, this was not something that he wanted, this was not something that he asked for... he, like 99.9% of the people who participated in the movement believed that the authenticity of the movement would be compromised if you started to change things and change names... from all accounts, from people that I’ve talked to... this is something that’s totally from somewhere else.<sup>269</sup>

Chestnut first identifies himself as a Selmian – a son of the community. He then proceeds to position himself as being inside a network of legislators and those familiar with both the civil rights movement and those close to U.S. Representative John Lewis. Having intimated the multi-layered ways in which he is an insider, Chestnut argues for the value of legacy. As Chestnut presents the facts as he knows them to be based on his insider status – being from Selma, representing Selma in the state house, being close to veterans of the movement and from his personal conversations with John Lewis himself – the bridge symbolically reflects the legacy of the movement, and the community has an obligation to protect the legacy of the movement and resist outsider attempts to change the material sites of the movement.

There is an observable tension that surfaces in arguments made by those who feel a sense of belonging to and responsibility for their community and who viewed it as being subjected to outside pressure from those with no discernible attachment to the city. Insiders viewed the pressure to change the name as an unwelcome disruption being wrought upon their community by those who had no vested interest in Selma. Outsider arguments advanced that values of freedom, equality, and progress are symbolically reflected by the bridge and while there was unlikely to be disagreement from insiders that the bridge as a symbol does indeed reflect those values, arguments from the loci of quantity are being countered by arguments from the loci of quality. Despite what is a larger quantity of outside voices arguing for the bridge to be changed, insiders countered that outside voices to not have the same quality of influence because they lack the same level of personal connection to the bridge, to the movement and its veterans, and to Selma.

According to 2021 Census data, there are 17,625 residents in the city of Selma and it is estimated that 29.4% of them live below the poverty line; approximately 80% of the

city's residents are black, and the median household income was reported to be \$29,656.<sup>270</sup> While the city hosts its annual bridge crossing jubilee drawing visitors to remember a turning point in the civil rights movement, it has yet to reach a level of material prosperity on par with the level of veneration it receives in the public memory of the bridge.<sup>271</sup> When commenting on the "insulting" efforts that had originated outside the community to change the name of the bridge, Darrio Melton, then the mayor of Selma, asserted that "everybody is talking about changing the name of the bridge, but they're not talking about investing in Selma... to me, it's more about the system than it is the symbol."<sup>272</sup> As mayor of Selma and consequently an insider in the philosophical pair, Melton discards the quantity of outside voices calling for changing the name of the bridge because the outsiders were chiefly concerned with effecting superficial changes to the optics of a symbol rather than effecting systemic changes that could deliver more tangible and sustained socioeconomic benefits to the community.

From the insider perspective of Melton, outsider focus on the name of the bridge rather than reforming systems that have contributed to socioeconomic disparities "disrespects Lewis' legacy."<sup>273</sup> This disrespect is evidenced through the lack of awareness that existed among many of those advocating for changing the name that the late U.S. Representative had vocally and publicly opposed the name change during his lifetime. To rename the bridge for only one member of the movement, and a member who argued against changing the name of the bridge for that matter, was to disrespect the legacy of the hundreds of foot soldiers who were active in Selma. Similar to State Rep. Chestnut, Mayor Melton argued that the bridge reflects the legacy of the civil rights movement - a legacy embodied by many of the insiders living in Selma. Chestnut and Melton alike rebuked

arguments from the loci of quantity – that a large volume of outside voices calling for change should have a say in changing the name of the bridge – with arguments from the loci of quality that outside voices are disrespectful to the insiders of both the movement and the residents of Selma and consequently unworthy of being influential in any decisions ultimately made.

At the time of Melton’s comments, The John Lewis Bridge Project founded by Michael Starr Hopkins had engaged in fundraising not for the city of Selma, but for his non-profit fighting to rename the bridge for Lewis. When asked about the fundraising total, it was reported that “Starr said he didn’t know how much money has been raised... and likely wouldn’t release a fundraising total if he did.”<sup>274</sup> When pressed, Hopkins deflected. “We are in a moment. Are we going to fight each other, or the system of oppression that has held Selma back?”<sup>275</sup> The John Lewis Bridge project no longer accepts donations through its website, but the change.org petition that has collected more than half a million signatures since 2020 remains open to additional signatories. The name on the bridge remains the same despite the quantity of outsider voices calling for change and erasure. However, the concluding section of this chapter observes a modification of the position of one public figure counted among the insiders of the insider/outsider philosophical pair, U.S. Representative Teri Sewell. The U.S. Representative’s 2020 statement articulating a modified position is offered as evidence that even among insiders, there is room for evolution in an individual’s position on the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

## **Conclusion**

When U.S. Representative Terri Sewell issued her original statement in the summer of 2015, her opposition to re-naming was communicated in no uncertain terms. “Changing

the name of the bridge would change the course of history and compromise the historical integrity of the voting rights movement... we must safeguard that history, good and bad, and resist attempts to rewrite it,"<sup>276</sup> Sewell claimed. Five years later the sociopolitical climate changed, and so had Sewell's position. Tracing the evolution of Terri Sewell's position concerning the name of the bridge offers a unique opportunity to observe the ways in which individual meaning and perspective of public symbols can change over time and surface in arguments. I do this not to construct U.S. Representative Sewell as self-contradictory or to undermine the original arguments made in 2015. The arguments made in both 2015 and 2020 are instructive in this public deliberation as this issue will not be singularly resolved and it provides evidence of the ways in which convictions and justifications offered by public officials can change over time. Correspondingly, while Sewell as an individual has publicly stated a new position concerning the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, there are still many who advocate the original position that she advanced in 2015 both independently and in collaboration with John Lewis.

In short, Representative Sewell did not invalidate arguments originally advanced in 2015 or make some acknowledgement of being wrong and wishing to recant. Rather, Representative Sewell pointed toward a phenomenon of social awakening and efforts to dismantle persistent relics of racial hierarchy while underscoring the importance of local voices in decision-making for their communities. While invited to the Selma Matters Town Hall Forum in August of 2020, Sewell was unable to attend. In lieu, a written statement was read by one of the facilitators:

As a daughter of Selma, I understand the complexities surrounding the renaming of the bridge. While I believe that the symbolism of the bridge transcends its name, I also understand that in this moment of deep cultural awakening, it is essential that we do

everything in our power to dismantle structures of racial hierarchy, including removing names and statues that glorify racists.

Ultimately, I believe that the most important thing is that the people of Selma should be the ones to decide what should happen with the bridge and its naming. The best way we can honor the legacy of the foot soldiers is to invest in the economic future of Selma.<sup>277</sup>

Sewell positions herself as a daughter of Selma and consequently an insider in the insider/outsider philosophical pair. She also reifies the social significance of the bridge and its symbolism in public memory.

By advocating from her elected position at the federal level that the decision to rename the bridge be made by the people of Selma, she reinforces the importance of insider voices over outsider voices. While her statement acknowledges the importance of national efforts to dismantle structures that serve the persistence of racial hierarchies, Sewell advocates for this issue impacting a local community to be decided by those counted among its residents and those with ties and a vested interest in the community. The unique complexity of Sewell's relationship to the site as a daughter of Selma and a delegate of the city representing its interests at the national level when facing an evolving national sociopolitical climate creates a challenging rhetorical situation that Sewell navigates neither by recanting her 2015 rhetoric nor by shunning her hometown roots. Instead, Sewell acknowledges the significance of the national moment, but steps aside and delegates the ultimate decision-making power to the people of Selma rather than reserving that influence for herself, while also underscoring the positive impact that socioeconomic investment in the community could make.

In this chapter, I have argued that the Edmund Pettus Bridge operates rhetorically as a public mirror reflecting social values and attitudes, and that this case study serves as a

microcosm of broader national discussions concerning race relations and the process of truth-telling and reconciliation advanced by Bryan Stevenson. The arguments for and against changing the name of the bridge surface values that constitute what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca theorized as philosophical pairs, and these values require arguments to be made from various loci. I have directed specific and intentional critical attention toward the ways in which arguments from the loci of essence convey the socially significant essence of a particular public place. By employing a theoretical framework designed for a pluralistic society, I advanced that the critic can more effectively navigate the material reality that the bridge's existence is one of duality: both a legally protected memorial building dedicated in honor of a known white supremacist and a global landmark of the civil rights movement. Through employing the utility of philosophical pairs, unresolvable tensions that exist in discourse can be captured and organized for analysis without engaging in moral judgments of the values or their substratal arguments.

The ordering of values in philosophical pairs by rhetors and participants in public deliberation invites critical analysis of both the arguments underlying the value as well as the critic's interpretation of that discourse and the ordering of values in the pair as evidenced by the rhetors' arguments. I do not mean to imply that there is an empirically correct or incorrect ordering of values in any given debate, or that the value constituents of the pairs are inherently right or wrong in a moral sense – those arguments are to be advanced by the rhetor and analyzed by the critic. Rather, I believe that the spirit of philosophical pairs invites varying levels of agreement or disagreement with which value is awarded the prevailing position in the hierarchy by those advocating for a particular public choice to be made. One value is observed as preferable to the other by the arguments

advanced, and the ordering is existentially unstable. Naturally, discussion of the positioning or repositioning of the values then contributes to discourse that destabilizes and potentially reconstitutes the value hierarchy. By probing the multivariate ways in which the values that constitute these pairs can be derived, a more robust capability to appreciate the diversity of those participating in public discourse can be incorporated into critical analysis.

In this chapter, I have chosen to focus primarily on arguments from the loci of essence because the arguments concerning the bridge's name offer evidence that the bridge itself has an essence that is rhetorically bestowed, maintained, and contested. The bridge is a condensation symbol of many things: the city of Selma and the events of March 1965; the long civil rights movement; nonviolent perseverance overcoming violent restraint; the vision of justice and equality prevailing against the headwinds of injustice and inequality. The essence of the bridge and its symbolism in the public memory are what draw visitors from around the world to Selma, to cross the bridge, and to find their own individual meaning of the otherwise everyday public space of a bridge. This material space is place, and this place has an essence that will continue to draw outsiders toward insiders neither because nor in spite of the man whose name is on the bridge, but because of the events which happened there in 1965, and the lasting essence that the discourse surrounding the bridge imparts upon it. Whether the name is preserved or changed, whether it remains visible or is erased, the transcendent victory achieved by the foot soldiers is the prevailing legacy binding humanity in community, anchored to the essence of the bridge across the Alabama River immortalized in public memory. In the next and concluding chapter of this thesis, I return to the task of connecting this case study of the Edmund Pettus Bridge to

broader national discourse concerned with race relations and the process of truth and reconciliation.

#### **CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION**

On Wednesday June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof joined a bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>278</sup> To this day, the violence that rang through the historic church's halls that evening is unconscionable. Nine unsuspecting community members gathered in faith and fellowship were massacred by the stranger they hospitably welcomed forty-five minutes earlier, most of them while prone and cowering under the tables in the room.<sup>279</sup> Following the manhunt that resulted in his capture, the white supremacist narratives of Roof's manifesto began to circulate as coverage of the charges levied against him spread. In his own words, Roof viewed himself as a hero of the cause, claiming:

I have no choice... I chose Charleston because it is the most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to whites in the country. We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the internet. Well, someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.<sup>280</sup>

What is known since Roof's capture, conviction, and rejected appeal of his capital sentence in 2022 is this: if given the choice, Roof would do it all again - no regrets, no remorse.<sup>281</sup>

In the wake of this crime, removal of confederate iconography from public spaces began in earnest in communities across the United States.<sup>282</sup> After Roof's killing spree, then-Alabama Governor Robert Bentley ordered the removal of confederate flags flying on state capitol grounds in Montgomery.<sup>283</sup> When pressed for answers, Bentley responded, "This is the right thing to do. We are facing some major issues in this state... I have taxes to raise. We have work to do."<sup>284</sup> Only two weeks prior on June 3, 2015, State Senator Hank

Sanders (D-Selma) had introduced Senate Joint Resolution 103 (SJR103) in the Alabama Legislature to rename the Edmund Pettus Bridge, advocating for the removal of a symbol of white supremacy from the iconic bridge in his home community of Selma.<sup>285</sup>

When asked for his thoughts on the Charleston massacre at Mother Emmanuel, Bryan Stevenson connected the violence to a longer arc of American history yet unreconciled:

I think it was pretty clear early on that a young white man going into a historic black church and slaughtering people in this way couldn't be understood outside the context of our racial history of violence and terror directed at black people... when more information came about the racially-motivated character of this assault, it just confirmed all of my fears about what our failure to deal more honestly with our history of racial injustice - where that has left us.<sup>286</sup>

In his remarks, Stevenson pointed toward the need to engage in truth-telling when commenting on the country's failure to "deal more honestly"<sup>287</sup> with its shared history. Based on Stevenson's remarks cited both in relationship to the Charleston massacre in 2015 and again in 2020, he is consistent in his prescription: for the United States to begin healing from the generational effects of narratives of racial difference and the violence they have been used to justify, the public must engage, in earnest, in conversations that involve the truth of the country's shared history. Once that truth-telling has begun and the facts are increasingly on the table for full confrontation, only then does the possibility of movement toward reconciliation begin to emerge.

This thesis has been concerned with analysis of the Edmund Pettus Bridge as a case study in how public narratives can occlude aspects of the truth of our shared history from view in public memory. The bridge is a cultural icon and a condensation symbol; it is the backdrop to annual jubilee celebrations and presidential visits, and when its symbolism is invoked, it is a powerful beacon for the march of progress. The cultural importance of the

site is not a matter of opinion, but one of official designation by the U.S. government's National Park Service. In another interview concerning Charleston in 2015, Stevenson pointed toward the bridge's significance in the context of what he contends is a prevalent, condensed, and partial public understanding of the civil rights movement:

Everybody gets to celebrate the courage that it took to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge... and no one is held accountable for all of the resistance to civil rights, all of the damage that was done by segregation. I hear people talking about the civil rights movement and it sounds like a three-day carnival. Day one: Rosa Parks gave up her seat on the bus. Day two: Dr. King led a march on Washington, and day three: we just changed all these laws... we tell our history as if it's the true history when in fact that's not the true history... the true history is that for decades, we humiliated black people... we did not let them vote, we did not let them get full education... and so we are very confused when we start talking about race in this country.<sup>288</sup>

The narrative summary of the movement provided by Stevenson not only points toward the celebrated symbolism of the bridge in public memory, but also toward the general persistence of an occluded public memory that does not have a full grasp of the historical facts that preceded the movement, or adequate recognition of the magnitude of its events. This environment of partial understanding and fuzzy grasp of historical facts are at times directly encouraged by the pop cultural depictions of biopic films and omissions of facts in government-sanctioned narratives concerning historic sites. As much as rhetoric can be used to celebrate, honor, and remember momentous achievements that resulted from years of perseverance, at times that very same laudatory rhetoric gets in the way of the truth and historical facts.

To engage in truth-telling is to understand that the man for whom the bridge spanning the Alabama River in Selma is named in memorial of spent his lifetime protecting vestiges of white supremacy. It is to reckon with the truth that the causes he believed in, that were celebrated by some of his peers in the halls of congress after his death, were the

antithesis of what the voting rights marchers were marching for in the early months of 1965. It is to recognize that the violence wreaked upon John Lewis, Hosea Williams, Amelia Platts Boynton Robinson, Lynda Lowery, Jo Ann Bland, Albert Southhall, Helen Brooks, and other foot soldiers by Alabama state agents on US-80 after crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday stemmed from generational roots nurtured by men such as Pettus. It is to begin to read the bridge as one landmark on an ideological battlefield that connects lost cause narratives and mythology to the still ongoing fight for a full historical accounting of the country's history of racial injustice and violence today.

Once these facts concerning the history of the Edmund Pettus Bridge and who Edmund Pettus was are brought to light for consideration, the public memory of the bridge becomes less blurry and more sharply brought into focus for widespread contemplation. Not only acknowledging, but understanding these historical facts does not require the community to keep or change the name of the bridge, and it does not settle the public deliberation at hand concerning the future of the bridge. It does, however, present the opportunity for individual contemplation of how these facts alter their perspective of the bridge, and how this information shifts their relationship to the bridge, its history, and the movement. It also offers a self-reflexive prompt for those encountering the historical truth to question what other occluded public memories they may be subscribed to and to pursue the type of conversations which Stevenson advocates.

### **Scholarly Contribution**

In her book *The Bad Sixties: Hollywood Memories of the Counterculture, Antiwar, and Black Power Movements*, Kristin Hoerl advanced a theory of selective amnesia practiced in movies and television shows.<sup>289</sup> By definition, Hoerl argued that selective amnesia

“highlight[s] how popular media render[s] radical left-wing ideas and political projects illegitimate within contemporary public life; through selective amnesia, public discourse routinely omits events and issues that defy seamless narratives of progress and unity.”<sup>290</sup> Hoerl also applied this theoretical framework to an earlier article analyzing the film *Mississippi Burning*, contending that “the movie’s simultaneous remembrance and forgetfulness provided an inventional resource for the mainstream press to provide alternative memories of civil rights activism that complemented the memories of many former activists and historians.”<sup>291</sup> When viewing the film *Selma*, there is potential that selective amnesia is in play by not providing an accounting for who Edmund Pettus was while depicting the events of Bloody Sunday. However, without any type of textual evidence, I find it difficult to prove that there was intent to omit that information from the film’s depiction of the bridge, particularly given that the film’s central objective was a dramatized retelling of the events occurring in and around Selma in the early months of 1965.

What I have chosen to advance instead of claiming selective amnesia or an active encouragement of forgetting in the film *Selma* is that public memory can be blurry, and the facts of who Edmund Pettus was are often obscured from view by popular depictions and invocations of the bridge. The film *Selma* works to support a public memory that doesn’t question who Edmund Pettus was, but instead celebrates the bridge bearing his name as a condensation symbol of the civil rights movement. In the analysis of *Mississippi Burning*, Hoerl argued that “disagreements over depictions of black struggles in popular culture prevent white hegemonic memories from ossifying by encouraging audiences to think critically about whose version of the past is selected and how those remembrances shape social and political realities in the present.”<sup>292</sup> While the film *Selma* provides a dramatized

retelling of the events that transpired during the early months of 1965 and celebrates the legacy of the civil rights movement and its foot soldiers, it also contributes indirectly to bolstering a public memory whose affection for the bridge as a condensation symbol occludes historical truths and the legacy of white supremacy that the bridge was originally intended to memorialize.

This cinematic depiction, in conjunction with an incomplete historical accounting by the National Park Service both in its website description of the bridge and the original nomination document requesting that the bridge be designated a National Historic Landmark, undermine the public's ability to engage in truth-telling concerning who Edmund Pettus was and reconcile that the bridge as celebrated in public memory has a much more complicated story than the one depicted by the film and the National Park Service. There are published and publicly accessible sources of information that offer insight into the history of who Edmund Pettus was. However, the public must be prompted to go looking for this information, which is why I have argued that the public's view is occluded by celebratory depictions of the bridge rather than there being an active encouragement of forgetting Edmund Pettus in relationship to memory.

In a *Smithsonian Magazine* article published on the fiftieth anniversary of Bloody Sunday that asked, "Who was Edmund Pettus?"<sup>293</sup> author Errin Whack recalled a conversation with Andrew Young, who was active with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and participated in the events that transpired in Selma in 1965. Whack indicated that many people did not know who Edmund Pettus was, and Young acknowledged, "I don't either."<sup>294</sup> This interaction is surfaced in conclusion not to portray Young as historically ignorant, but rather to situate him as a participant in a broader,

pervasive public phenomenon. This broader public phenomenon is a generalized understanding of the bridge in public memory that recalls it first as a condensation symbol of the civil rights movement and a landmark along the historic Selma to Montgomery march. This public memory is so preoccupied with celebrating these aspects of the bridge's historical and cultural significance that the longer arc of the bridge's history is occluded from the public's immediate view.

To revisit the questions in the introductory chapter of whether the places that manifested the worst of us can come to epitomize the best of us, that is a question for which the bridge as a case study provides helpful evidence pointing toward the material impacts of rhetoric and its effects over time. That a bridge dedicated to memorializing a white supremacist in the 1940s could be transformed a mere 25 years later speaks to the contestability of public place and the instability of the meanings which can be associated to it. The events of March 1965 were globally broadcast and provoked tremendous public response. When looking backward to March 7, 1965, and the chain of events that followed, the disruption of everyday public space was so monumental that there is an observable forgetting of what came before and an instantiation of what is now remembered upon the invocation of that place. Rhetorical scholars have dedicated time and professional skill in their practices of analyzing the relationships between public, space, place, meaning, and the narratives and discourse of rhetoric that influence all these elements of everyday life. To view the Edmund Pettus Bridge as the central subject of focus as a rhetorical critic is to remain both inspired and confounded by its complexity, public significance, and ability to provide a multitude of considerations regarding power, our relationships to strangers,

neighbors, and our own humanity, and the ways in which we want to situate ourselves in relationship to the process of truth and reconciliation.

### **Future Directions**

In this thesis, I have focused my critical attention on connecting the Edmund Pettus Bridge to broader national discourse concerned with national healing from racial strife through a process advanced by Bryan Stevenson that he refers to as truth and reconciliation. I first introduced the rhetoric of Stevenson and situated the Edmund Pettus Bridge as a confederate monument against the backdrop of ongoing social movements to tear down confederate iconography around the country. It is noteworthy that the bridge is not immediately recognizable as a fixture amid the landscape of confederate iconography due to the persistence of a blurry public memory which primarily celebrates the bridge as a condensation symbol of the victories of the civil rights movement. Indeed, scholars have rightly situated the bridge as a public memory site of the movement. However, it is important to acknowledge the bridge's existence is one of duality and contestation.

I proceeded with presenting a prevailing public memory of the bridge and offering evidence of how this public memory is supported by governmental narratives such as its National Historic Landmark designation and through filmic depictions such as *Selma* and its associated media reviews. In relationship to each other, these depictions foster a blurry public memory which stops short of participating in a full historical accounting of the bridge's history, including whom the bridge was originally intended to memorialize. It is altogether human for our memories to blur over time as specific details we choose to remember can encourage others to fade away. Sometimes this blurring occurs as we simply forget the specifics that weren't particularly important to us – we hold on more tightly to

the details that are prized – and in the context of the bridge, the details that are prized are those that celebrate the victories of the civil rights movement and honor the sacrifices of its foot soldiers. However, this public memory is becoming less blurry as public remarks such as the ones given by President Joe Biden introduce the historical facts of who the bridge is named for within the context of celebrating the bridge. In this way, we see that narratives concerning the bridge are part of what constitute the power of rhetoric's ability to both occlude and to clarify public memories.

Subsequently, I attended to the ongoing public deliberations concerning the name of the bridge, and within this discourse we begin to see an emergence of the historical facts of the bridge as they relate to Edmund Pettus surfacing and being used as justification both for keeping and changing the name of the bridge. Through this public deliberation, arguments from various loci are made to undergird value hierarchies that have manifested as philosophical pairs. I have given particular attention to extending the theoretical concept of the loci of essence, submitting that the arguments advanced concerning the bridge imbue it with an essence that stokes its public and cultural significance as a condensation symbol. Put differently, I have argued that material place can have an essence, and that that essence is rhetorically derived.

I conclude by reestablishing a connection between the bridge, Bryan Stevenson, and the ongoing need for truth-telling to occur in relationship to events such as the death of George Floyd and the Charleston massacre in 2015. When Stevenson observes that the United States has yet to deal honestly with many of the facets of racial injustice and violence dating back to the country's inception, one needs look no further for an example of an opportunity to pause, listen, and reflect than the ongoing public deliberations over the

name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The truth is the bridge is a confederate memorial. The truth is also that the bridge is a landmark of the civil rights movement. Both things can be and are true; what becomes worthy of critical attention when confronting this multiplicity of truth is the ways in which rhetoric serves to encourage recollection of one truth before another, who participates in contributing to the discourse that constitutes this rhetoric, and how the narratives that emerge contribute to reconstituting the public memory of the bridge. My hope is that the scholarly contribution of arguing that public memory can be blurred by occluding historical facts from the public's view will enable future critics and memory scholars to consider not only what is remembered or forgotten, but what contributes to a fuzzy understanding of places as nationally significant as the Edmund Pettus Bridge, and how rhetoric operates in relationship to all parties involved to foster that environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House LLC, 2014); Equal Justice Initiative, "Supreme Court Bans Mandatory Life-Without-Parole Sentences for Children Convicted of Homicide," *EJI.org*, June 25, 2012, <https://eji.org/news/supreme-court-bans-mandatory-life-without-parole-sentences-for-children-miller-v-alabama/>.

<sup>2</sup> "About EJI," Equal Justice Initiative, last accessed April 15, 2023, <https://eji.org/about/>.

<sup>3</sup> Derrick Bryson Taylor, "George Floyd Protests: A Timeline," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ezra Klein, "Bryan Stevenson on How America Can Heal," *Vox*, July 20, 2020 9:20 AM EDT, <https://www.vox.com/21327742/bryan-stevenson-the-ezra-klein-show-america-slavery-healing-racism-george-floyd-protests>.

<sup>5</sup> The Equal Justice Initiative updates its Instagram story daily, populating it with entries from the organization's "A History of Racial Injustice" calendar. These Instagram stories are composed of two sequential screens: the first screen of the story summarizes an act of racial terrorism that occurred and often includes images of either the victim of violence, or of headline media coverage that reported the event at the time it happened; the second screen is the EJI's argument that, "To overcome racial inequality, we must first confront our history." Because this is a daily occurrence from the organization's Instagram account, I am not identifying a specific date for this citation. The organization's Instagram account can be found at [https://www.instagram.com/eji\\_org/](https://www.instagram.com/eji_org/).

<sup>6</sup> Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian L. Ott, "Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place," in *Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*, eds. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2010): 3

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- <sup>7</sup> Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, "Introduction," 3.
- <sup>8</sup> Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, "Introduction," 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Blair, Dickinson, and Ott, "Introduction," 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Robert L. Scott, "On Not Defining 'Rhetoric,'" *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 6, no. 2 (1973): 85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40236837>.
- <sup>11</sup> Terry Gross, "'Just Mercy' Attorney asks U.S. to Reckon With its Racist Past and Present," *NPR.org*, January 20, 2020 9:00 AM ET, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/796234496>.
- <sup>12</sup> Roger Stahl, "Weaponizing Speech," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102, no. 4 (2016): 379, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2016.1208365>.
- <sup>13</sup> Greg Dickinson, "Space, Place, and the Textures of Rhetorical Criticism." *Western Journal of Communication* 84, no. 3 (2020): 300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2019.1672886>.
- <sup>14</sup> Marouf Hasian, Jr., and Nicholas S. Paliewicz, *Memory and Monument Wars in American Cities: New York, Charlottesville, and Montgomery* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
- <sup>15</sup> Hasian and Paliewicz, *Memory*, 3.
- <sup>16</sup> Roger C. Hartley, *Monumental Harm: Reckoning with Jim Crow Era Confederate Monuments* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2021): 24.
- <sup>17</sup> Hasian and Paliewicz, *Memory*, 107.
- <sup>18</sup> While this thesis was in its review period prior to defense, the EJI announced their new Freedom Monument Sculpture Park would be opening in 2024. The new site will expand the work that Bryan Stevenson and the EJI are already doing, beyond the scope of what was available for Hasian and Paliewicz to analyze at the time of publication of their book. Equal Justice Initiative, "EJI Announces New Freedom Monument Sculpture Park," [legacysites.eji.org](https://legacysites.eji.org), October 11, 2023, <https://legacysites.eji.org/news/eji-announces-new-freedom-monument-sculpture-park/>; Hilarie M. Sheets, "Alabama Sculpture Park Aims to Look at Slavery Without Flinching," *The New York Times*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/11/arts/design/freedom-monument-sculpture-park-alabama.html>.
- <sup>19</sup> Hasian and Paliewicz, *Memory*, 135.
- <sup>20</sup> M. Kelly Carr, "'Lost Cause' Memories and Cultural Amnesias: Mayor Mitch Landrieu's Tragicomic Speech on Confederate Monument Removals," *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 3 (May 2021): 1034, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12964>.
- <sup>21</sup> Karen L. Cox, *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021).
- <sup>22</sup> Cox, No, 172.
- <sup>23</sup> Cox, No, 174.
- <sup>24</sup> J. David Maxson, "'Second Line to Bury White Supremacy': Take 'Em Down Nola, Monument Removal, and Residual Memory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106, no. 1 (2020): 48-71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2019.1704428>.
- <sup>25</sup> Maxson, "Second," 64.
- <sup>26</sup> Robyn Autry, "Elastic Monumentality? The Stone Mountain Confederate Memorial and Counterpublic Historical Space," *Social Identities* 25, no. 2 (2019): 169-185, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2017.1376278>.
- <sup>27</sup> Frank Sikora also mentioned the Venable family's ties to the Georgia Ku Klux Klan in his book about the life of federal Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr. When writing about the hearings the judge presided over regarding the 1961 Freedom Rides, Sikora noted that an objection was raised by "James Venable (the Grand Dragon for the Georgia KKK) from the defense table" in Judge Johnson's courtroom. Frank Sikora, *The Judge: The Life and Opinions of Alabama's Frank M. Johnson, Jr.* (Montgomery, AL: The Black Belt Press, 1992): 113-114.

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<sup>28</sup> Autry, "Elastic," 180.

<sup>29</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy," *splcenter.org*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy#top>.

<sup>30</sup> Gerald B. Wetlaufer, "Rhetoric and its Denial in Legal Discourse," *Virginia Law Review* 76, no. 8 (1990): 1555, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uwm.edu/10.2307/1073163>; Erin J. Rand, "Fear the Frill: Ruth Bader Ginsburg and the Uncertain Futurity of Feminist Judicial Dissent," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 1 (2015): 72-84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2015.994898>. Emphasis original.

<sup>31</sup> Mike Cason, "Alabama Senator Calls for Prohibition Against Moving Historic Monuments," *AL.com*, July 15, 2015, 10:12 PM, <https://www.al.com/news/2015/07/alabama-senator-calls-for-proh.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Mike Cason, "Bill to Block Removal of Historical Monuments Close to Passing," *AL.com*, May 18, 2017 6:25 PM,

<https://www.al.com/news/birmingham/2017/05/bill-to-block-removal-of-histo.html>; Howard Koplowitz, "Legislature Passes Monuments Preservation Bill," *AL.com*, May 19, 2017 3:52 PM, <https://www.al.com/news/2017/05/house-passes-monuments-preserv.html>; Mike Cason, "Gov. Kay Ivey Signs Bill Protecting Confederate Monuments," *AL.com*, May 25, 2017 12:00 AM, <https://www.al.com/news/2017/05/house-passes-monuments-preserv.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Alabama Memorial Preservation Act of 2017, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Alabama Memorial Preservation Act of 2017, 2-3.

<sup>35</sup> While the Act does not make any explicit invocations of the Confederacy, it is notable that the only enforcement of its protections arrived via *Alabama v. Birmingham* in 2020, when State Attorney General Steve Marshall sued the city of Birmingham for "disturbing" a monument to the Confederate dead in Linn Park. As recently as March 2023 there was reporting on efforts within the state's legislature to modify the bill. Arguments for strengthening the bill's financial penalty structure were undergirded with support from lost cause narratives claiming that slavery was not a central issue of the Civil War. Mike Cason, "Proposed Alabama Bill Would Raise Penalty for Removing Confederate Monuments," *AL.com*, March 3, 2023 7:41 AM, <https://www.al.com/news/2023/03/proposed-alabama-bill-would-raise-penalty-for-removing-confederate-monuments.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Alvin Benn, "'Bloody Sunday' Bridge Named National Historic Landmark," *USA Today*, March 12, 2013 2:05 PM, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/03/12/edmund-pettus-bridge-national-historic-landmark/1981183/>.

<sup>37</sup> Edmund Winston Pettus Bridge Celebration Souvenir Program, May 1940, page 3, scanned copy provided via email March 7, 2023, courtesy of the Selma-Dallas County Library's collection.

<sup>38</sup> Edmund Winston Pettus Bridge Celebration Souvenir Program.

<sup>39</sup> Elbert L. Watson, "Edmund Pettus," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, last modified August 5, 2020, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-2962>; Errin Whack, "Who Was Edmund Pettus?" *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 7, 2015, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/who-was-edmund-pettus-180954501/>; Keith S. Hébert, "Ku Klux Klan in Alabama During the Reconstruction Era," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, Last modified March 27, 2023, <https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/ku-klux-klan-in-alabama-during-the-reconstruction-era/>.

<sup>40</sup> Across all the literature reviewed, there is limited consistency and no real agreement as to the number of marchers who were part of the Bloody Sunday march attempt. Some authors indicate less than five hundred, and some more than six hundred. Rather than speculate as to what the "right" number of marchers is or over-generalize with a reference to merely "hundreds" of

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marchers, I indicate that between five and six hundred marchers set out from Brown Chapel on what would become Bloody Sunday. Some sources would agree with that range, others would disagree. For example, in Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr.'s order permitting the Selma to Montgomery march following *Williams v. Wallace*, the order indicates there were "approximately 650" marchers who departed Brown Chapel on March 7, 1965. Sikora, *The Judge*, 223.

<sup>41</sup> Victoria J. Gallagher and Kenneth S. Zagacki, "Visibility and Rhetoric: Epiphanies and Transformations in the Life Photographs of the Selma Marches of 1965," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 113-135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940601016056>; Sharon Monteith, "A Tale of Three Bridges: Pont Saint-Michel, Paris, 1961; Trefechan Bridge, Aberystwyth, Wales, 1963; Edmund Pettus Bridge, Selma, Alabama, 1965," in *The Transatlantic Sixties*, 4:283-312. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013; Charles Fager, *Selma, 1965* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974): 94.

<sup>42</sup> National Park Service, "Alabama: Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail," *nps.gov*, last accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/places/selma-to-montgomery-national-historic-trail.htm>.

<sup>43</sup> Selma Jubilee, "Founders," Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee, last accessed April 15, 2023, <https://www.selmajubilee.com/founders>.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew S. Schwartz, "In Selma, A 'Final Crossing' for John Lewis Across the Edmund Pettus Bridge," *NPR.org*, July 26, 2020 10:43 AM ET, <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/26/895149942/in-selma-a-final-crossing-for-john-lewis-across-the-edmund-pettus-bridge>.

<sup>45</sup> Fager, "Selma," 96.

<sup>46</sup> Cart Blackwell and Robert Gamble, "Edmund Pettus Bridge," *Society of Architectural Historians*, last accessed November 3, 2023, <https://sah-archipedia.org/buildings/AL-01-047-0012>; CADC Communications, "Edmund Pettus Bridge: Historical Structures Report," *Auburn University*, September 20, 2019, <https://cadc.auburn.edu/edmund-pettus-bridge-historic-structures-report/>; Birmingham City Council. "Civil Rights Landmarks Proposed for World Heritage Status," Press Releases, July 15, 2016, <https://www.birminghamal.gov/2016/07/04/civil-rights-landmarks-proposed-for-world-heritage-status/>; Hadley Hitson, "10 Famous Faces (Drew Barrymore!) from Bloody Sunday Commemorations," *Montgomery Advertiser*, March 3, 2023 3:11 PM CT, <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/local/alabama/2023/03/03/10-celebrities-who-have-visited-selma-for-bloody-sunday-anniversary/69956336007/>; Selma Jubilee, "Mission & History," Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee, last accessed April 15, 2023, <https://www.selmajubilee.com/mission-history>.

While this thesis was in its review period prior to defense, the twelve-foot puppet "Little Amal" also visited Selma in her tour across the United States that included stops in Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama as well. Shauna Stuart, "Little Amal, the 12-foot Puppet of a Syrian Refugee Girl, is Coming to Alabama," *AL.com*, October 11, 2023 3:32 PM, <https://www.al.com/life/2023/10/little-amal-the-12-foot-puppet-of-a-syrian-refugee-girl-is-coming-to-alabama.html?outputType=amp>; Jake Crandall, "Little Amal, a 12-foot Puppet of a Refugee Syrian Girl, Visits Historic Selma, Ala.," *Montgomery Advertiser*, October 13, 2023 1:48 PM Ct, <https://www.al.com/life/2023/10/little-amal-the-12-foot-puppet-of-a-syrian-refugee-girl-is-coming-to-alabama.html?outputType=amp>.

<sup>47</sup> Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

<sup>48</sup> Tom Butler, "Senate Bill 237," *trackbill.com*, last accessed May 7, 2023, <https://trackbill.com/bill/alabama-senate-bill-237-to-amend-sections-41-9-233-and-41-9-235-code-of-alabama-1975-relating-to-the-alabama-memorial-preservation-act-of-2017-to-require-a-controlling-governmental-entity-that-replaces-a-memorial-building-to-maintain-the-original>

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[name-or-erect-a-marker-memorializing-the-name-to-provide-that-a-petition-for-waiver-is-deemed-denied-if-the-committee-on-alabama-monument-protection-fails-to-act-on-an-application-for-waiver-within-90-days-to-revise-penalties-for-violations-to-authorize/2420426/.](#)

<sup>49</sup> Butler, "Senate Bill 237."

<sup>50</sup> Cason, "Proposed," <https://www.al.com/news/2023/03/proposed-alabama-bill-would-raise-penalty-for-removing-confederate-monuments.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Cason, "Proposed," <https://www.al.com/news/2023/03/proposed-alabama-bill-would-raise-penalty-for-removing-confederate-monuments.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Klein, "Bryan Stevenson;" Jenny Wüstenberg, "What is Memory Culture?" *Goethe-Institut*, n.d., <https://www.goethe.de/ins/us/en/kul/art/stp/22106958.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Chaïm Perelman, "Justice and Justification," *Natural Law Forum* 10 (1965): 5.

<sup>54</sup> Matthew Houdek and Kendall R. Phillips, "Public Memory," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.181>.

<sup>55</sup> Edward S. Casey, "Public Memory in Place and Time," in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2004): 32.

<sup>56</sup> Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory* (Chicago, IL: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, distributed by the University of Georgia Press, 2008).

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published prior to the judge's retirement. For a thoroughly researched and thoughtfully constructed summation of the judge that offers a delightful read, consult *Taming the Storm* authored by Jack Bass. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., *Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr.* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1978); Tinsley E. Yarbrough, *Judge Frank Johnson and Human Rights in Alabama* (University, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1981); Jack Bass, *Taming the Storm: The Life and Times of Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr., and the South's Fight Over Civil Rights* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993).

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