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Curating Conflict: Political violence in Museums, Memorials, and Exhibitions

Introduction to a *Critical Military Studies* Special Issue

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Amidst the protest movements sparked by the death of George Floyd at the hand of police officers in Minneapolis in May 2020, anti-racist demonstrators have taken over prominent statues evoking people and systems that supported the enslavement of people of colour. In Richmond, Virginia, the statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee became a site of confrontations between protesters and the police (Schneider 2020). Imposing themselves as co-curators of the statue, protesters covered the imposing pedestal in colourful slogans, drawings, and homemade memorials to African-Americans killed by the police. After June 4th, when Virginia Governor Ralph Northam announced the removal of the statue, protesters continued to actively re-interpret what the site stood for. Pointedly, on June 5th, two young African-American ballerinas posed at the foot of the memorial in pointe shoes, black leotards and skirts, and with raised fists. The photographs that captured the moment exclude Lee from the frame, focusing on the dancers and the graffiti. The moment was acclaimed as ‘a confluence of creative expression and black empowerment’ (Shaw 2020). Thanks to such interventions, the site was evolving from one primarily associated with the ‘lost cause’ of the Confederate States, to make space for the commemoration of black injury and the celebration of black resistance.

The same week that crowds took over Lee’s memorial in Richmond, Black Lives Matter protesters toppled the statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, England. The crowds dropped the bronze figure in the harbour waters, a performance later described by Bristol Mayor Marvin Rees as an act of ‘historical poetry’ (cited in Morris 2020). Rees, born to a Jamaican father and white mother, found a degree of enjoyable irony in knowing that the statue of Colston, from whose ships living human beings had been thrown overboard, lay at the bottom of a river. Others disagreed. For some of Bristol’s citizens, tearing down Colston’s statue was ‘a desecration’ and ‘an assault on his city’s heritage’ (Landler 2020) – framing Bristolians as benefitting from the philanthropy of those who, like Colston, enriched themselves by trading in enslaved people.

From Virginia to England – two of the locales from which this special issue was put together – disputes and controversies have erupted over the legitimacy of certain statues and monuments, and of attempts to transform their appearance or remove them. These examples illustrate that readings of what constitutes appropriate curation are animated by different readings of historical events. Those who oppose the removal of controversial monuments often invoke their role as witnesses to the past, framing them as devices which allow history to be remembered. In Richmond, on June 12th, a white woman wearing a Civil War era dress knelt at the foot of Lee’s statue to publicly grieve its proposed dismantling. She pleaded with journalists and onlookers that ‘the statues are history: take them down, and people forget’ (Schneider 2020). This notion, however, eludes questions of whose history these monuments represent. Lee ‘hated tyranny’ and ‘was fighting for freedom’, said the woman in the Civil War dress. ‘He was fighting for freedom under a system that wants to keep people enslaved’ responded a young African-American woman. Such disputes over monuments foreground whether white-centric accounts should continue to be privileged over the perspectives of marginalized groups,

who have not historically been given space to publicly grieve their dead nor celebrate their hard-won victories (Rao 2016; 2017).

The debates that arise from the most recent iteration of the Black Lives Matter protests are a timely opportunity to revisit conversations over the complicated relation between conflict and memory. It has often been said that, 'in war, truth is the first casualty'. Sometimes attributed to ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus, the first recorded citation of this maxim comes from the pen of British politician Philip Snowden (1916). Writing during the First World War, Snowden lamented the difficulty of honestly critiquing British foreign policy in times of war, at the risk of passing for insufficiently patriotic. This maxim is also applied to the dynamics of subterfuge in conflict. Here, deception is a tactic used strategically to gain an advantage over an enemy. This special issue illuminates a third reading – the special and enduring connection between political violence and the memory of such violence. During conflict, protagonists live radically different experiences. This leads to variegated narrations of armed conflict or state violence, including with regard to chronology (when did the violence start and who was at fault?), experience (who suffered the most?) and responsibility (who perpetrated what violence, following what chain of command?). These different accounts carry over into peacetime, disrupting efforts to secure a common frame of reference to make sense of past events. Political violence entrenches the splits between political communities, embedding their separation in the very structures of their memories.

These fractures in collective memory often lead to different practices of historical curation – as in the example of different forms of interaction with monuments to Confederate monuments and statues of Edward Colston, Cecil Rhodes, and Winston Churchill. Efforts to curate difficult knowledges about the past and resolve (or silence) the divided communities of post-conflict memory might be understood as discursive accompaniments to the physical scars of violent assault. They take at least four forms. First, as long as the historical record goes, conflicts have been remembered through the performance of stories, poems, songs, dances, ceremonies, and plays. Performed for the first time in 458 BC, Aeschylus's play *Agamemnon* begins with an account of the end of the Trojan War. In today's digitalized society, such accounts also circulate through films, TV series, and podcasts. These dramatized renderings now increasingly circulate alongside the recordings of actual militarized violence by those who witness it first-hand – such as the video recordings of a white police officer kneeling on George Floyd's neck for almost eight minutes. Second, curation entails the creation and circulation of objects of art and historical artefacts, including paintings, sculptures, quilts and other textiles, and art installations. As evidenced by articles and essays collected here (see especially the *Encounters* section), these objects may condone or contest militarized violence and resistance to this violence. Third, the curation of conflict involves the regulation of bodies that have perpetrated and/or suffered the violence of conflict. Paul Achter's work on *unruly bodies* (2010) explores the state practices that rhetorically domesticate the disruptive, injured bodies of veterans who return from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹ A fourth set of practices of collective memory also associated with the remains of conflict is the maintenance and management of spaces of memory such as museums, memorials, monuments, and exhibitions. Most of the articles and essays in this special issue attend to how such spaces curate the conflicts of the past, with implications for the present.

¹ Thank you to Jamie Johnson for pressing us on this point, and for introducing us to Achter's work.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the term curator refers to the ‘keeper or custodian of a museum or other collection’. This usage begins in the 17th century, as museums emerge as spaces of memory in Europe. The word derives from the Latin *curare*, ‘to take care of’. Prior to taking its contemporary meaning, it was used in a medical context that gave the English language the verb *to cure*. *Curare* also had a spiritual connotation – to take care of someone’s spiritual development. In medieval times, a curator was an ecclesiastical pastor, and contemporary French still refers to a parish priest as a *curé*. When we think about the practice of curating conflicted memories about past violence, we may thus think of a work that aims to promote collective healing and spiritual growth after traumatic times.

What ailments might these efforts be responding to? These are not solely the ailments of the corporeal bodies and individual psyches that bear the scars and wounds of war, but also those of the body politic. In the late nineteenth century, Ernest Renan (2018 [1882]) famously remarked that ‘periods of mourning are worth more to national memory than triumphs because they impose duties and require a common effort’, such as gathering to grieve the dead. This, he suggested, favours the emergence of feelings of national unity. Nationalist movements, however, often came with the production and entrenchment of racist hierarchies and the promotion of military domination of groups characterised as racially inferiors. This was the case in Renan’s own writings (see the critique by Césaire 2001, 14–16). Memory practices, however, are not necessarily associated with nationalist projects. One example is found in the *Négritude* movement. In 1987, Aimé Césaire defined *négritude* as involving, for people of African descent, the ‘seiz[ing] of our own past’ and the ‘re-rooting of our selves in a history’, the history of ‘human groups that endured the worst abuses in history’ (Césaire 2001, 81–85). We find ourselves positively inclined towards curation practices that enable a healthy critical engagement of nationalist narratives and military policy, and unsettle remembrance cultures that cultivate an unquestioning reverence towards militarised institutions, particularly wherever these institutions have often been found to promote racist, anti-Semitic, sexist, and/or homophobic agendas.

A reflection of what such critical curation of conflict may look like could turn to Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. Studies point to this play as an early attempt to solve (or curate?) tensions in Greek war memory through a new critical literary style. *Agamemnon* has achieved seminal status in classical literature because of its literary realism when discussing the Trojan War for Athenian audiences. Aeschylus used visceral realism as a contrast to the dominance of epic styles of Greek narration. Classicists have remarked that Aeschylus’ reflections on warfare were a form of cultural criticism, designed to provoke debate and discussion of military policy in the audience (Leahy 1974). In this way, the play can be read as a critical reflection on the glorification of warfare and militaristic traditions. *Agamemnon* is written as a revisionist take on the epic tradition of relating wars to domestic audiences. By focusing on the gritty, unglamorous experiences of Athenians in battle, Aeschylus altered the way wars were narrated for domestic audiences. In *Agamemnon*, realism reclaims the truth ‘lost in war’. Modern audiences might see contemporary parallels in the efforts of contemporary cinema to portray more realistic accounts of U.S. personnel deployed abroad, in movies such as *The Hurt Locker*. Similarly war novels and memoirs have become an important venue for protagonists to narrate their own experiences of conflict (Sylvester 2019, 61–67). Against traditional depictions of military heroism, the portrayal of gritty experience in war makes a claim upon the authority to narrate political violence. Widening the scope of experiences deemed permissible as war-memory conveys an authenticity within the account, which consolidates the status of the text or object, and allows it to challenge or productively complicate official state narratives of war.

Across the history of war memorialisation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we witness the wax-and-wane between styles of epic glorification and gritty realism – and the proliferation of media and objects through which war memory can be narrated. Underlying all these attempts to convey war experience are contestations over the authority to narrate, and to fix, the memory of political violence. There is, of course, concern about the gendered and racialized politics of ‘ground truth’ in relation to ‘authenticity claims regarding war’ (Tidy 2016), or militarized violence more broadly. The process through which some voices are authorised, said to have authority, and/or considered authentic enough to speak truth about armed violence is complex and often reflects existing power structures. Problematically, popular culture remains dominated by wartime memories curated by white, masculine, Western, and heteronormative voices. In full awareness of this state of things, our special issue responds to Christine Sylvester’s call for International Relations to explore whose memories – and whose wars – feature in public displays, and whose are ignored (Sylvester 2019, 45).

We were, from the outset, keen on assembling contributions from feminist, postcolonial, queer, and other critical perspectives emphasising diverse curation practices generated by differentiated experiences of conflict. The result includes investigations of sites located around the globe. Some focus on state-funded memorial architecture and burial sites in the United States (see for instance Heath-Kelly, this issue; and Sylvester, this issue) and Europe (see Danilova and Purnell, this issue; and Reeves, this issue). Others, at a very different level of power and privilege, acquaint us with the memory practices of marginalized and persecuted groups, notably in Palestine and Latin America. These contributions also highlight curation possibilities that remain often marginalized due to their indigenous (see Poets on indigenous curation in one of Rio’s *favelas*), feminized (see Andrä et al, this issue; on embroidery as curation), and/or queer aesthetics (see Heyam, this issue; on transgender performances in a World War I prisoner of war camp). As we consider this wide range of practices, from centre to margins, we explore what curation practices tell us about broader configurations of power and conventional theorizing of conflict. In light of the recent resurgence of movements protesting police brutality against people of colour, it is particularly important to take note of practices that silence the everyday memories of militarised state violence against the racialized populations of many parts of the world considered formally ‘at peace’, and those that break this silence.

Although we have consciously striven towards assembling analyses of curation that would be critical, inclusive, and diverse, we are certainly guilty of our own omissions. Editing a special issue, after all, is also a form of curation, and one that will always reflect the situated position of the curators. The pieces included here come from authors located, institutionally, in the United Kingdom and the United States, and who enjoy a fair degree of white privilege. As a result – and in spite of the important and meaningful efforts of those who attempt the delicate work of translation of practices produced by different life-worlds for an English-speaking audience – the offered analyses necessarily exhibit a certain Anglo- and Euro-centric bias. In a moment when museums are called out as sites of ongoing colonial struggle, epistemic violence, and racist oppression (Museum Detox 2020; see also Tidy and Turner 2019; Muppidi 2012, 14–16), this is certainly a weakness and a problem. We hope, however, that making this gap visible will open the door for future work that will better ensure representative (and no doubt more radical) views on the curation of militarised conflict on a global level, by ourselves as well as others.

The socio-cultural, geographical, and linguistic situation of this special issue and its authors can be usefully understood through an account of its genesis. This special issue emerges from two workshops

that we, the editors, convened in June 2017 in England and Wales. We aimed to explore the idea, then emergent in International Relations, that museums, memorials, and exhibitions are sites through which societies represent, enact, and curate conflict. A growing body of scholarly work had established sites of curation and practices of memory as privileged sites for diplomatic visits, official state ceremonies, and international tourism (Luke 2002; Lisle 2000; 2004; 2006; Sylvester 2011; 2013; 2015; Auchter 2014; Basham 2015a & 2015b; Millar 2015). As these authors argued, this made museums, memorials, and exhibitions salient arenas for (trans)national communication and public debate on military intervention, warfare, and terrorism, amongst other manifestations of violence and conflict. This is a theme that we have both also explored in our own work (Heath-Kelly 2016a; 2016b; 2015a; 2015b; Reeves 2017; 2018; 2020). We found it productively developed in the context of these workshops, which brought together scholars interested in the political dimension of exhibitions, museums, and memorials, particularly with regard to the question of gender and conflict (in workshop 1, at the University of Bristol) and international politics (in workshop 2, at Cardiff University, in the context of the European Workshops in International Studies). Both workshops built on a panel held at the 2017 convention of the US-based International Studies Association, in Baltimore. This panel was convened by Lene Hansen, Cecelia Lynch, and Christine Sylvester, and one of us (Audrey Reeves) also participated. Professors Hansen and Sylvester attended our workshops in order to continue that conversation, and our Cardiff event was one of the largest organised for the EWIS program (18 speakers). This made us confident that the theme had tapped into a significant research seam.

We were particularly enthused by the richness of the papers considering that, with the exception of the pioneering work cited above, museums, memorials and art exhibitions have so far generated little analysis within IR. To paraphrase Christine Sylvester (2015, 2), art and museums are where IR is least expected to be found. Indeed, visits to museums, memorials, and exhibitions tend to be classified as education, leisure, the everyday, and the mundane. Thus, they are typically considered domestic, pacified, feminine, and too futile and fugitive to be worthy of consideration in the masculinised disciplines of Political Science and International Relations. Now that interest in aesthetics, the everyday, and popular culture has gained grounds in IR (Weldes 2003; Bleiker 2009; Moore and Shepherd 2010; Opondo and Shapiro 2012; Caso and Hamilton 2015), the moment is ripe for museums, exhibitions, and memorials to receive more sustained and focused attention through an IR lens. In this respect, we were encouraged to see that our workshops attracted funding from the British International Studies Association as well as three University of Bristol sponsors – the Faculty of Social Sciences and Arts Gender Research Group, the Gender Research Centre, and the Global Insecurities Centre.

Equally encouraging and essential to the successful realisation of this Special Issue was the unwavering support and thoughtful critical input of *Critical Military Studies'* editorial team. Our contact with the journal was facilitated by the participation of the journal's editor-in-chief, Victoria Basham, at our Cardiff workshop. Although the global political significance of curation practices extends to many areas, including climate change, human rights, and migration and refugee policies, our shared interest in the curation of violent conflict chimed with the journal's vocation as a forum for critical debate on 'military, militarism, and militarization'. We are grateful to Victoria for encouraging us to pursue this special issue project, as well as to special issue editors Harriet Gray, for her guidance on our initial proposal, and Jamie Johnson, for shepherding nine full-length research articles through a rich but

often exacting peer-review process. We are also highly grateful to Joanna Tidy for her editorial guidance in relation to the shorter *Encounters* essays.

This special issue was also especially well suited for *Critical Military Studies* given a shared commitment to transdisciplinary research on military power. We encouraged authors to draw on rich traditions of scholarship on curation beyond Politics and IR, in history, history of art, anthropology, sociology, memory studies, cultural studies, and heritage and museum studies. These bodies of work allow us to productively expand and revisit conventional understandings of conflict and militarization. Conversely, we found that bringing a critical IR lens to the curation of conflict contributes to shed light on how such sites are produced by and productive of global political and economic struggles. This insight helps overcome depoliticised accounts of sites of memory coming from disciplines less attuned to the global circulation of power (for critiques see Sylvester 2015, 4; Lisle 2016, 192–99). Thus, this special issue produces insights of interest for audiences in Politics and IR – the home disciplines of most contributors – as well as for colleagues in museum studies, heritage studies, and memory studies, *inter alia*.

This special issue comprises, in addition to this introduction, nine research articles and four short essays. The research articles come in three parts, dedicated respectively to 1) hegemonic curation and military empires; 2) unsettling war objects; and 3) curation as, and of, resistance against military regimes. Part 1, on hegemonic and/or imperial curation, offers critical interpretations of museums, memorials, and exhibitions located in the United States, Britain, and Japan, which are some of the most significant military empires of modern history. These research articles pay critical attention to how museums, memorials, and exhibitions enable and shape the reproduction of military capacities, as well as facilitate the continuation of security alliances between certain nations. We open with a piece by Christine Sylvester on the curation of wars waged by the United States in Vietnam and Iraq at two prominent US sites: Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C., burial site of the dead of the superpower's armed conflicts, and the *Wall That Heals*, a travelling facsimile of the Vietnam War Memorial. Sylvester reads these memorials as obscuring the perspectives and shared humanity of those on the receiving end of both wars, thus enabling and favouring the resurgence of contemporary forms of US militarism. Charlotte Heath-Kelly also takes us to Washington, D.C., this time to consider the unusual and intriguing character of the Pentagon Memorial, which commemorates the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the Pentagon. The article unpacks how the establishment of a common memorial for both civilian and military victims next to the headquarters of the US Department of Defense re-shapes gendered understandings of the civilian/military divide in the United States. In the third piece, Natasha Danilova and Kandida Purnell discuss representations of Scottishness as a racialized and gendered national identity in Scotland's military museums. The authors attend to the complex racial hierarchies that those museums reproduce, constructing the Scots as superiorly suited to fill military functions within the British Armed Forces, and implicitly condoning principles of white-Anglo supremacy on the rest of the world.

Developing a trend already present in part 1, part 2 focuses on unsettling practices in the curation of war objects. Audrey Reeves turns to statues at war memorials in the US and Western Europe, with attention to the curation and public reception of a sculpture representing a sailor kissing a woman in a white dress. Her study draws attention to visitors' affective connections to sculptures, which in this case range from playful embraces and kisses to feminist protest, and argues that the curation of

cultural objects enables both the promotion and contestation of US militarism in the North-Atlantic space. Also examining the gender politics of war-themed objects, Kit Heyam offers a queer reading of the curation of glass plate slides surviving from the First World War civilian internment camp at Knockaloe, Isle of Man, which show internees who were assigned male at birth presenting as female. Heyam discusses the problems surrounding the representation of queer, trans, and non-binary people in exhibitions about military history, and advocates a polyvocal approach that leaves space to consider a multiplicity of possible motivations for internees who were photographed adopting a female presentation. Further broadening the discussion on the importance of material objects for understanding and interpreting war, Christine Andrä, Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Lydia Cole, and Danielle House develop a wonderfully creative discussion on the curation of conflict textiles. Fabric that speaks of people's histories of violence, from handkerchiefs dedicated to the disappeared of Mexico to the banners of activists protesting against nuclear arsenals, hold the potential of communicating marginalized perspectives about peace and conflict. They also open the possibility for academics to use curation as an affective, relational, and open-ended research methodology.

Part 3 turns more firmly towards the global South, and towards curation as, and of, resistance against militaristic, heterosexist, and imperialist warrior cultures. This section opens with Francesca Burke's investigation of the Palestinian Museum. The museum opened in 2016 in the West Bank despite lacking a collection and being inaccessible to most Palestinians. Burke makes sense of this atypical museum as a form of cultural activism and political communication between Palestinians living in a context of resistance against Israeli military occupation, and the international community whose attention, sympathy, and support they are attempting to win over. Although curation may thus provide a creative avenue of resistance, this relationship is far from straightforward. This comes across most clearly from Henrique Furtado's examination of the Resistance Memorial of São Paulo, Brazil's most important monument to the political and social movement that opposed the military dictatorship of 1964-1988. The monument, while carrying the important task of acknowledging and tending to the scars left by relatively recent political violence, carries an unhelpful liberal bias. It locates problematic forms of militarism in the past, thus thwarting resistance against contemporary forms of militarism in Brazil. Finally, Desirée Poets concludes this section with a powerful message of hope coming from the community museum of one of Brazil's *favela* complexes, the *Museu da Maré* in Rio de Janeiro. This museum, curated by a community that has been racialised and problematized as a security risk, offers a rich, fluid, and interactive encounter with favela life that challenges reductive representations of favela as a security problem and thus interrupts militarisation.

Following these full-length research interventions, we conclude with four shorter essays. These essays are gathered together in a space of encounters between academics, artists, and curators – including some between individuals who inhabit more than one of these positions. We open with two art essays by interdisciplinary artists Eileen Harrisson and Gail Ritchie. Both artists experienced life in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, and their art and academic practice draw on their past in rich and generative ways. Harrisson's piece introduces stitching – her main creative medium – as holding the potential to express both the violence of conflict and the human potential for healing. Needles, after all, pierce and puncture matter like weapons do, but also suture torn skin and tissue, and weave new forms together. The essay presents Harrisson's stitched piece *Continuum*, also featured in the exhibition *Stitched Voices* at Aberystwyth University, curated by the authors of the conflict textile article mentioned above. Harrisson's essay and art thus also offer a rich illustration of the argument

developed by Andrä et al, also in this issue, that conflict textiles generate new ways of knowing conflict and peace informed by interactions between human bodies and material objects. Ritchie's essay discusses the creative process behind her installation *Aporia: A Room for Dwelling and Doubt*, exhibited at Platform Arts Belfast in 2017. Scholarly research on conflict and peace informed her conception of this small wooden cabin in which visitors encounter photographs, a music box mechanism, an art essay (Ritchie 2015), and vantage points on prints of poppies exhibited elsewhere in the room. The essay gives us access to the creative process behind the curation of a musing place to meditate on how war crosses the private-public divide, and is always accessible in limited and partial ways.

In the following essay, D-M Withers offers a thoughtful response to Ritchie's pieces *Wounded Poppies*, read alongside Paul Cummins' art installation *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* (2014). Withers discusses the importance of artists in questioning familiar objects such as the poppy, the visual focal point of First World War commemoration practices. This discussion springs from a roundtable dedicated to Ritchie's internationally exhibited artwork on gender identity and war memories during our Bristol workshop. Like the *Stitched Voices* exhibition, this roundtable generated a rich and rare (in IR) direct exchange between an established contemporary artist and academics with an aesthetic sensibility. We are pleased to make fragments of these conversations available here to a wider audience. Elseph Van Veeren, who also participated in this roundtable, echoes in her essay Ritchie's suggestion (in the context of her installation) that visions of war are always partial, as she discusses the exhibition *Age of Terror: Art since 9/11*, held at the Imperial War Museum London in 2017-18. Van Veeren points to the 'absent presence' of the dead of 9/11, of war fighters, and of everyday practices of war cultures at the exhibition. Through this salient example, she concludes that omission is also a curatorial practice that allows past wars to make sense in the present. As they read through this and other contributions, we hope that readers will appreciate first of all to find concrete contemporary illustrations of the continuing political relevance of established notions in memory studies, such as the idea that every form of collective memory involves a share of collective forgetting. In addition, we certainly hope that the new concepts and theoretical lenses deployed by the different contributors will encourage new, diverse, and critical scholarship that will continue the project of making political sense of the curation of conflict.

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