Introduction

Recent debate over historical monuments has focused on the question of removalism: under which circumstances should statues or other monuments to certain historical figures be removed. Such debate has focused on the ethical badness of the monuments’ subjects. Comparatively little discussion has been given to the question of what makes a good historical monument, and what should guide the erection of new monuments. In this paper I explicate and defend one such criterion for good public historical monuments: since public history not only represents but also shapes the public, public history monuments should shape the public in an ethically justifiable way. Call this the democracy condition.

In a democracy, the people serve as a source of legitimacy. They are who the government is supposed to serve, and the government is only legitimate so long as it meets their needs. Consequently, who counts as “the people” is very important. One way that “the people” are defined is historically: they share a common past and historical trajectory. The Canadian people, for instance, are in part defined by their relationship to a set of historical events like the Dominion Act of 1867 and the Constitution Act of 1982. Public historical monuments present some past events as historically important to the identity of the people. However, the selection of some past events over others for public memorialization serves to include or exclude certain groups as belonging to “the people.” For example, Nova Scotian public history has been put together so as to emphasize Scottish and Norse history while excluding Black and Indigenous history. Altogether this means that public history monuments help construct the people by presenting a history that includes some groups and may exclude others. The argument of this paper is that since public history helps construct the people, public history helps to define to whom a democratic government is accountable. If this is true, then public history monuments ought to be constructed such that they do not unjustly exclude or subordinate groups, since such a public history also affects democratic legitimacy.

My argument will be made across three sections. In the first section I present an account of public history and public identity. This will explicate the relationship between historical monuments and public identity, and provide the groundwork for what follows. In the second section, I defend the claim that public history helps to define to whom a democratic government is accountable. In the third section I articulate and defend the democracy condition as a means of evaluating and guiding the creation of public history monuments.

Public History and Public Identity

* Set out the connection between public history and public identity
* What makes monuments public history?
  + They are history
    - An active process of reconstructing a particular vision of the past, causal relationships between events
  + They are public:
    - these monuments are located in public areas so that they may be engaged and appreciated by members of the public.
* Public history turns into public memory
  + This is to say that public historical monuments present conceptions of the past that are preserved and transmitted across generations
    - The permanency of monuments
  + Not analogical to individual, biological memory. Rather, considered to be a property of the public broadly construed
    - In this sense, I’m picking up Maurice Halbwachs (and Pierre Nora)
* The role of public history in identity
  + Some identities are based (at least in part) on history
    - The paradigmatic case is Benedict Anderson’s articulation of national identities
      * Nations are historically extending groups of people, and historical events serve to delimit the group’s boundaries. Such that these events delimit the groups boundaries they define the group, by determining its historical trajectory.
  + The publicness of public history allows for the history to be common amongst members of the public
    - Not only do all have the experience of engaging the history, they are able to imagine others (and unseen, unmet others) as having that same experience
    - Monuments are in a public location, creating a connection between history and location
      * This allows the experience of engaging the history to be imagined to be universal to all members of the public. One does not just imagine oneself in relation to the history publicly presented, one imagines others as having that same relationship.
* You put this all together, and you get a connection between public history and public identity.
  + History-based identity
  + The public history monument presents an aspect of history which is part of that identity.
  + Monument ties history-based identity to location
  + Public location provides common experience which ties identity to people who are connected to that location

The Importance of Public History to Accountability

* Short, want to focus on previous and subsequent section
* There exists a conception of democracy where the government is legitimate insofar as it serves the people.
  + Who counts as “the people” will then be important to understanding democratic legitimacy
* There exist groups of people who are understood, in part, historically
  + As I mentioned in the previous section, one of these groups are national groups. This is important as many contemporary states are nation-states.
  + More broadly, though, governments exist within a territory, govern the people who live within that territory, and are accountable to the people within that territory. Historical narrative is one important way of understanding who are “the people” of that territory.
* As mentioned, public history does not just present a historical narrative, it ties that history to the territory in which it finds itself.
* Altogether, public history offers a vision of who the government is accountable to. It shows who “matters.”

The Democracy Condition

* So how does this bear on the evaluation of monuments?
  + To what criteria might we appeal to decide what’s a good monument?
* One line of thought has to do with the correctness of the history, and how well it represents the public. But that’s for another paper.
* For this paper, I would like to focus on evaluating a historical monument for how it shapes the public.
  + Call this the democracy condition: public history monuments may be evaluated as better or worse — as public history monuments — based on whether they help construct an ethically-acceptable conception of the public.
* What do we mean, an ethically-acceptable conception of the public?
  + If it creates a conception of the people that’s consonant with other demands about who a democratic government should be accountable to.
    - We understand this in the breach: celebrations of racist or exclusionary nationhood which unjustly denies certain groups membership
      * Confederate monuments
    - Put straightforwardly: public history should present a history that is properly inclusive. It presents (and thus helps create) a “people” that includes everyone who ought to be included as the relevant “people.”
    - This doesn’t require that all public history encompass everyone!
      * It can be inclusive: Jinnah Park in Winnipeg
      * Note that this also covers conventionally-significant events that don’t strictly include everyone
        + There is no problem with a monument to Canada’s war dead from WWI, even if Canada’s sizable Mennonite population were ethical objectors.
    - There are some groups it’s not wrong to exclude. Many anti-colonial figures are memorialized because of their struggle against colonial (or imperial) aggression. A history which celebrates them will exclude, marginalize, or otherwise degrade colonial figures. But it is not wrong to marginalize or degrade those figures.
      * Accordingly, there is a moral difference between e.g. South Africa erecting statues of Nelson Mandela and Canada erecting statues of John A Macdonald. Both may be founding figures, the concept of the nation they created (and thus the concept of the nation presented in public history) is critically different.
    - How can we tell the difference between exclusive and inclusive public history?
      * Aspects/perspectives on past events
        + Certain monuments stake membership at others’ expense, with Columbus monuments being paradigmatic
        + Monuments can present attitudes towards subjects: Macdonald in Picton
* Altogether, then, part of what makes a public history monument a good public history monument is that the history it presents is one that shapes the public in an ethically-acceptable way. Whether or not the history it presents is ethically acceptable depends, in part, on not unjustly excluding or subordinating particular groups.
* To conclude, then, I’ve presented the following
  + Public history helps shape public identity by tying historically-informed identities to particular public locations.
  + Such that democratic governments are legitimate insofar as they are accountable to, and promote the needs of, a public, public history is relevant to democratic accountability. It does this by helping shape the public to whom the government is accountable.
  + And, lastly, public history monuments may be evaluated as better or worse — as public history monuments — based on whether they help construct an ethically-acceptable conception of the public.