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Petra McDonnell-Ingoglia
Western Washington University

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Stonewalls and Statues: A Personal Exploration of Memorialization Culture within the United States

By Petra McDonnell-Ingoglia

History is rarely, truly objective. Sure, you can look at History.com and get the basic facts but when you read a memoir, an article on an event, or even a textbook, you encounter a narrative. It doesn't necessarily mean that it is wrong. Just because something adheres to a certain narrative means that it is incorrect, it's merely the way that author has remembered and recorded that event or that concept. Cambridge Dictionary defines history as the "study of, or the record of, past events considered together," with the key word being the "record." To those of who are not historians, who do not actively spend time seeking and questioning the recorded history that we encounter every day and the different narratives that circulate, it can be hard to grasp how much those narratives impact our governments, our personal beliefs, and the overall way our society functions and develops.

History is memory. Of course, there are many kinds of memory and history, from personal testimonies to documentaries to journal articles, or even objects. I have long been fascinated and drawn to another type of history and memory, something called "public memory." Public memory is anything essentially designed for public consumption.¹ While technically this is anything written about history, this type of history doesn't focus on scholarly articles, college curriculums, and things like history symposiums as this is not in the general public eye. Often these are physical objects and physical places to visit. Monuments, museums, memorial plaques and statues, and education centers are all examples of public memory. So are state curriculum for K-12 education, federal and state holidays, and even film in some cases. Public memories are the

¹ Diane F. Britton, "Public History and Public Memory," *The Public Historian* 19, no. 3 (1997): 11–23.

things that people encounter every day, in simpler terms. They are the things and concepts people don't necessarily need to spend a lot of time seeking out.

When you walk through the streets of the city or town that you live in you will inevitably come across some type of monument or memorial. They are all over the place, and this goes for any city you visit. From fallen soldiers, to town founders, to bird dogs, to the first drugstore in the historic district, they are in parks, in front of government buildings, and on every street corner. Now bird dogs probably haven't significantly changed the historical narrative of the town and certainly not the country, but I am not overly concerned with Milo in the larger picture. But someone with enough power and enough money convinced the town to make a monument to Milo a permanent fixture of their narrative. That is what has captured my attention and kept it. It is also the second key piece of public memory, not just physical representations of the past but also "the activity that brought them into being, the constant give and take between memorials and viewers, and... the responses of viewers to their own world in light of a memorialized past."² I have always wondered why we choose to memorial and remember the things we do. The answer of course is power and money. But beyond that do monuments and memorials shape the way we remember our past or are they merely symbols of how those with money and power want us to remember the past? Are they right, are they wrong, is it even that easy of a question most of the time? How do they affect societal dynamics and oppressed groups? How do they limit our society? Should we tear them down and replace them? How do we meet the needs of every community to properly represent their history?

² James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), xi.

This essay seeks to be essentially a journal to my own thoughts and exploration of memorialization through the commemoration of the Confederacy, the Lost Cause narrative and its expansive physical memorial culture, and the lack of the memorialization of Jim Crow. Despite my training, this is not a proper historical inquiry. I could not do this subject justice with the time and resources of a broke, extremely busy college student during a global pandemic. It merely seeks to reckon my own thoughts and concentration on memorial studies with the world around me.

The Study of Memorialization

The formal study of memorialization is relatively new, and by relatively new I mean in the last 70 or so years. This is not to say that people did not think about memorialization, they certainly did because there are memorials and monuments that are much, much older than 70 years but the discipline is not that old. It developed in the decades after the atrocities committed by the Nazis across the European continent. Thousands of memorials appeared to remember the millions that were murdered, as well as the role European governments played in the genocide of these minorities.³ Some memorials appeared shortly after the war, but many larger ones took almost 30 to 50 years to be established, partially because of the debate over what they should look like, how they should honor, and how they should represent these horrific events. James Young calls this “never-to-be-resolved debate over which kind of memory to preserve, how to do it, in whose name, and to what end” the best memorial to the “fascist era and its victims.”⁴ I am

³ Although generally recognized as the Nazis murdering the Jews, the Nazis also killed millions of others including political prisoners, Roma, POWs, and LGBTQ people. Other governments including France and the USSR also aided in the genocide.

⁴ Young, *Texture of Memory*, 81.

inclined to agree with Young. Memorials may be to the past, but they will very much be for the future in many ways.

The phrase “never again” has been popularized since WWII. There is this idea that if we put monuments and memorials in public places, have days of remembrance and keep artifacts in museums, it will prevent atrocity crimes from happening again. If that were true, Rwanda wouldn't have happened, Cambodia and Guatemala⁵ wouldn't have happened, and the genocide of the Rohingya and Uyghurs⁶ wouldn't be happening today. This “hope of prevention and power of museums and sights of memory to serve as facilitators in this utopian preventive undertaking...rings hollow”⁷ in this regard. But the fact remains that these public memorials are parts of a larger narrative, and their role in that can't be disregarded.

While much of my studies have been concentrated in the arena of Holocaust, genocide, and atrocity crimes, I am also an African American historian and an American and so I felt that it was only appropriate for this capstone to focus on the things happening in my own culture and country. American memorial culture is unique to say the least. While there are many types of memorials in the United States, as well as my types that don't exist to the extent that they should, one narrative and one memorial culture has dominated US politics, history, and society. My

⁵ In 1994, Hutu nationalists murdered almost 800,000 in less than three months in Rwanda. Millions of Rwandans were left as refugees and the country still struggles to reflect and rebuild today. Under the leadership of Pol Pot the Khmer Rouge killed almost a quarter of Cambodia's population, around 2 million, from 1975 to 1979. Aided by the U.S. government the Guatemalan military government massacred most of the naïve Mayan peoples during the Guatemalan Civil War in 1960.

⁶ Since late 2016 the Burmese military has been committing a series of mass killings and persecutions against the Muslim Rohingya people. More than a million have fled the country as refugees but continue to face persecution in other places. In the Xinjiang region in China, millions of Uyghurs have been forced into concentration camps, had their children taken from them, and forcibly sterilized. The Chinese government denies that this is happening.

⁷ Joyce Apsel, and Amy Sodaro, *Museums and Sites of Persuasion: Politics, Memory and Human Rights* (London: Routledge, 2019), 12.

formative years began with the election of the first African American president, went to high school during the Charlottesville Protests, and attended college when George Floyd was murdered. The conversation around racial violence, Southern culture, and white supremacy was something I thought about constantly, and at the center of it there seemed to be two things: Confederate memorials and the Lost Cause narrative. The rest of this paper seeks to explore these things and the effect that they have had on our country. It also seeks to understand where we go from here and what changes need to be made to change this narrative and how we can better support African Americans in our society.

Monuments

When looking at monuments there are three rules to keep in mind. One, that all monuments have a message. Two, that monuments say more about the times when they were built than the times they memorialize. And three, all monuments are created by interested parties.⁸ By 2020, the Southern Poverty Law Center had documented more than 1,700 Confederate monuments, with estimates of another 50 to 200 remaining undocumented in more isolated and enclosed communities.⁹ While a majority are concentrated in the states that seceded from the Union in 1861, a surprising number of monuments can be found outside the South in states that did not exist when the Civil War was fought. In fact, the only two states recorded to not have any public Confederate monuments or memorials as of 2020, according to the SPLC, are Massachusetts and Oregon.

⁸ David Walter Gobel, and Daves Rossell, *Commemoration in America: Essays on Monuments, Memorialization, and Memory*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 22.

⁹ Karen L Cox, *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 24.

While there are many that have garnered national attention for their sheer size and visibility like Stone Mountain near Atlanta, Georgia and Monument Ave in Richmond, Virginia, and which highlight Confederate notables like Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, Nathan Bedford Forest, and others, most Confederate monuments and memorials are smaller statues that commemorate “Johnny Reb” – ordinary Confederate soldiers – as well as plaques, street or park names, and school names. Monuments celebrating the Confederacy did not immediately spring up everywhere following the Civil War. Initially, they were primarily restricted to cemeteries though their geographic reach expanded to encompass other public spaces in just a few years. Today they are most prevalent at state capitols and courthouses, which are among the most important locations for defining political and civic belonging.

Memorials and monuments began to be built as early as 1866, less than a year after the Civil War ended. While the number of monuments expanded over the next 30 years, the projects built in the first quarter century after the war pale in comparison to the explosion of support and funding for large, monumental projects after 1890. As Bourbon politicians constructed Jim Crow in the final decades of the 19th century, Confederate monuments began to metastasize—a first wave of monument building that lasted until 1930. Between 1900 and 1911 alone there were over 300 confederate monuments built. Many of the monuments built or initiated during this time remain significant today. The Pensacola Confederate Monument went up in Lee Square, a park dedicated to memorializing key Confederate figures, in 1861.¹⁰ In 1895, the North Carolina Confederate Monument was erected in Raleigh. The 75-foot statue stood directly in front of the state capitol building and was a fixture of the capitol grounds.¹¹ The John Hunt Morgan

¹⁰ This monument was removed in 2020.

¹¹ This monument was removed in 2020 after great public outcry.

Memorial was initiated in 1906 and then erected in 1911, in Lexington, Kentucky on the grounds of the courthouse. Even Stone Mountain Park and Monument were initiated in 1915, although it wasn't finished until 1970. This carving, into the world's largest exposed granite rockface, stretches nine-stories high, etched across three acres of granite. Monuments continued to be built over the next 50 years but at a slower pace as the country turned its attention and money outward with the Cold War until the sparking of a second wave after World War II and during the Civil Rights movement. A third smaller wave has been happening since the 1990s and the rise of memorializing Civil Rights movements and Civil Rights leaders, and continues today. The building of confederate monuments rose again around 1995, with over 30 being built since 2000.¹²

Who

White women have had the most significant control over the geographic location, design, and publicity of Confederate monuments and memorials. To be sure plenty of powerful white men shaped and supported efforts to remember the Confederacy, but it was wealthy, white women who are responsible for Confederate memorial culture. Beginning as early as 1862, women of the Confederacy made efforts to preserve and honor their husbands, brothers, and sons who died fighting in the Civil War. These women, generally took charge of finding and preserving their final resting places. What started as the acquisition of burial grounds and proper gravestones by the widows, daughters, and sisters of Confederate soldiers, turned into fundraising and lobbying for large public monuments that celebrated these men as heroes. Women have had a significant role in the transmission of culture and ideals. In the U.S. southern

¹² Cox, *No Common Ground*, 144.

states where the ideas of republican motherhood¹³ and the cult of domesticity¹⁴ are particularly strong the ability to transmit the ideas of a noble Confederacy were potent. The ability of black men to vote was a threat of a more democratic society where Southern women could lose their place and voice. Taking control of the narrative gave them power in areas where they felt threatened. Along with this, while the 15th amendment had granted black men the right to vote, the Jim Crow laws and intimidation tactics that appeared in the years following the Civil War in large part kept black men out of politics, not completely, but enough and in ways that gave white women more power, which they in turn used to lionize those that had oppressed black men and women for hundreds of years.

Built almost like corporations, white women developed extensive memorial organizations. With over 100,000 members by World War I, these organizations developed the extensive lobbying powers we see of organizations today. The most prominent and widespread was the United Daughters of the Confederacy, or the UDC. Founded by Caroline Douglas Meriwether Goodlett in 1894, the sister of a Civil War soldier, after almost 30 years of organizing grave markers for Confederate soldiers and preserving sites important to the Confederacy. She founded the organization to keep alive “the sacred principles for which Southern men and boys fought so bravely.”¹⁵ The UDC would go on to fund many memorials as they excelled at raising large amounts of money. To put this in perspective, the Jefferson Davis Memorial that was on Richmond’s Monument Ave, was funded by them. When Confederate

¹³ Appearing in the 18th century it was a term to describe the supposed civic responsibility woman had to uphold the morality of their husbands, brothers, sons, etc.

¹⁴ Value system emphasizing women's role in the home. Primarily in the upper and middle class, it revolved around woman being the heart of the family and the “light of the home.”

¹⁵ *United Daughters of the Confederacy*. 2022. [United Daughters of the Confederacy | Historical – Educational – Benevolent – Memorial – Patriotic \(hqudc.org\)](https://www.hqudc.org)

veterans failed to raise the funds to build the monument the women of the UDC raised almost \$100,000 in less than five years to erect it. They were also responsible for raising the initial funds to start the carving and construction of Stone Mountain. Not only would the UDC propose and fund memorials, but it also supported other memorial organizations led by women. The UDC was arguably the biggest but smaller, more local organizations popped up all over. The Ladies Memorial Association was created specifically to plan and raise the Pensacola Confederate Monument, led by Angela S. Mallory, the daughter of the Confederate Secretary of the Navy. More chapters, and other organizations like it, would pop up all over the South in a similar fashion.

Why does it matter

The memorials and monuments to the Confederacy are more than just physical hunks of stone and metal, or names on the side of a building. They are representative of a larger narrative that has been spun by those in the former Confederate states. They were built to promote a mythological history by those coping with huge demographic, social, and economic changes happening and to vindicate southern white men and women. Remember in middle school or high school when you heard that the Civil War wasn't really about slavery? Or maybe it is one of your relatives on Thanksgiving who says that the Confederacy was formed to protect states' rights. Either way that concept was created by people and organizations like the UDC, and Confederate monuments and memorials were a part of it. History was rewritten in this narrative to show the Confederacy as a noble pursuit and the heroes of "confederate generation as models of manhood and Christian virtue to endure"¹⁶ for generations to come. This shield of nobility and sacrifice

¹⁶ Cox, *No Common Ground*, 225.

and the federal government's refusal to recognize the rights of states was in reality a way to deny the centrality of slavery and continue the horrible oppression of African Americans. Called the “Lost Cause” narrative, the ideas were and are very much about upholding white power and supremacy. Beginning in 1866 and continuing into the present day, the Lost Cause became the prevailing idea quickly, erasing slaves and slavery from the overall narrative, except as faithful, well-treated servants. This narrative does not include the fact that the majority of Southerners did not own slaves, and the broad material divisions in the South during the Civil War led to mass desertions and impoverished widows and families.

While it is easy to wave statues and plaques off as inconsequential in the long run, their locations, dedication ceremonies, and chosen subjects show differently. When the Robert E. Lee Monument on Monument Avenue in Richmond was unveiled, more than 150,000 people attended the celebration. Among those were dozens of Confederate leaders, their descendants, and many tourists who had come to see the monument to the great Confederate general. The site of the statue, and the others that would join it along the same stretch of land, would become one of the city's most prestigious places to live, with many wealthy families looking to live there. Even as a desirable local, its main purpose would be to promote a visible racialized social hierarchy under the guise of a mythical narrative. It was a popular site for children’s school field trips and many ceremonies would be held there on important dates like Confederate Memorial Day.¹⁷ The North Carolina Confederate received significant funding from the legislature in North

¹⁷ An official holiday in some states, it is celebrated sometimes in May and sometimes in April. Read more in Martha E. Kinney, “‘If Vanquished I Am Still Victorious’: Religious and Cultural Symbolism in Virginia’s Confederate Memorial Day Celebrations, 1866-1930,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 106, no. 3 (1998): 237–66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4249719>.

Carolina and upon its unveiling brought almost 30,000 tourists in to witness. There was a grand “Confederate concert” and it drew many Confederate veterans as speakers and honorees.

The Lost Cause narrative grew beyond the south and soon was wove its power and ideals into the rest of the country and the actions of the federal government. The Confederate Memorial in Arlington National Cemetery is a good example. Unveiled in 1914, it was built primarily because of complaints by former confederate states and congressmen that Union graves were more protected, and that Confederates were labelled as “traitors and rebels,” even if that was very well true. At the unveiling the Confederate flag was flown next to the American flag and was attended by many descendants of famous Confederates.

The Arlington Monument also included on the statue a figure of “black mammy.” Black mammy was something created by the Lost Cause narrative. Many people may recognize this type of figure from the movie *Gone with the Wind*. A desexualized, loyal, black woman who served as a faithful servant and thought of her white family as her whole world was a popular caricature of slaves in the pre - and post - Reconstruction south. This caricature didn’t often appear on monuments and memorials, save for the one at Arlington. Rather it was more of a commercial fixture in the south's tourism culture and in America’s film and literature. Before and after the Civil War, the south had a very large tourist culture which prevails today. Like many places in the U.S. with numerous historical sites, southern cities often had, and still do, have historical tours. In the south this includes plantations, slave markets, battlefields, and historic homes. Despite its immense history many of these tours have historically avoided the topic of slavery or black people in general, quite literally pretending that they didn’t exist. Except for narratives like “black mammy” who appeared on plates and figures, and a figurehead of “the perfect black person.” This is one way the Lost Cause narrative portrays black people, the second

is by erasing them. A popular tourist activity in the South, and in the U.S. in general, the touring of historical sites. These tourist activities fail to even mention the slave population at all.¹⁸

Statues were, and still are, objects that define public space, and thus symbols of white superiority and racial hatred that white supremacists could rally to. Stone Mountain and the surrounding park is one good example of that. Upon its dedication, President Nixon's Vice President Spiro Agnew called for the South to embrace the future, but the monument would do the opposite. The monument had taken more than 15 years to be finished but upon its initial proposal it was the site of the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan. In early 1915, the film *The Birth of a Nation*,¹⁹ premiered and was taken to heart by Joseph Simmons, who would gather 15 men and breathe new life into the KKK in late 1915 on the top of Stone Mountain. Confederate statues have proven to be a visible symbol of white power, as would other things like the Confederate flag that has been a popular rallying point for groups like the KKK and Americans for the Preservation of the White Race both during the Civil Rights movement and today.

Black Counter movements

Despite its dominance since the demise of Reconstruction, the Lost Cause narrative has always been resisted by many Black Americans. The violent, counter-revolution that restored the white elite to power in the South and ended Reconstruction created the terrain in which the Lost Cause narrative could crowd out a more honest accounting of the violence, theft, and anti-democratic ideals that lay at the heart of the Confederacy. Even so, Black counternarratives have

¹⁸ Karen L Cox, *Destination Dixie: Tourism and Southern History* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2012).

¹⁹ This film depicts the Civil War and was popular with white audiences, even being screened by Woodrow Wilson in the White House. Extremely racist, it portrays the KKK as saviors of white women and upholders of white supremacy.

persisted despite Jim Crow laws and systemic racism that is woven into every system in the United States. African Americans generally did not have the access or support to build monuments and memorials to counter the Confederate statues going up, but they did have multiple avenues to celebrate and acknowledge a different history within their community and to protest this white narrative.

The first was the use of public spaces. In many places before the Civil War slaves had not been able to gather in large groups for whites feared they would rebel. Public ceremonies and celebrations would become the expression of black history.²⁰ In large parades and gatherings, concerts and barbeques African Americans would gather to express and celebrate important days like Emancipation Day, Fredrick Douglass's birthday and Juneteenth. African Americans would also utilize press as a way to protest Confederate memorial culture. Any form of protest was a threat to their lives and livelihood and so black newspapers toed a very careful line when opposing Confederate monuments, but they were the primary medium for protest. Fredrick Douglass was a proponent of this, and so was John Mitchell Jr. Mitchell was a black councilman and newspaper owner in Richmond in 1890 who vehemently protested the building of the Robert E. Lee statue on Monument Avenue. He was unsuccessful, like many of his time, in stopping the construction of the memorial but was able to provide an alternate voice.

Museums and Monuments today

For the most part, Confederate monuments and memorials are still standing today. There has been pretty steady pressure to tear down and replace monuments since the Charleston

²⁰W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 60.

massacre in 2015. The Charlottesville incident in 2017 continued to add pressure, and the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the protests that followed triggered the removal of many monuments, many by force. Both the Pensacola Confederate Monument and the North Carolina Confederate Monument were taken down in 2020, and many others have followed. But the fact remains that while many have been taken or forced down, it is a miniscule amount in comparison to the sheer number of Confederate memorials and monuments.

And even though these statues came down, it wasn't an easy process. In most former Confederate states, the public outcry has been directed at those who tore them down, not those who put them up or perpetrate the abuses they represent. In many of these states, GOP lawmakers and governors have passed and signed acts that essentially prohibit the removal of Confederate monuments. The Alabama Memorial Preservation Act passed in 2017 prohibits the removal, alteration, or renaming of any monument or memorial created before 1977. The majority of Alabama's Confederate monuments were built before then. Georgia has passed a series of laws to protect Confederate statues as well. The most recent restricts a monument from being moved from its permanent location to a museum, as many have tried to do with Confederate monuments. Governor Brian Kemp signed this law next to a popular tourist destination, a plantation built by slave labor. These so-called "heritage acts" are passed under the guise of stopping "historical censorship." These "heritage acts" are proposed most frequently by politicians - white politicians - who rose to power in gerrymandered districts. Private actors have also exercised enormous control over what happens to these monuments, working to keep them in public spaces. Most of the women's memorial organizations that were so influential in creating these monuments still exist today and many have sued to keep these monuments in

place. They have been largely successful and stick to the same tune of stopping “historical censorship” and protecting memory.

When I was talking to people about this project, I got a lot of “yeah so it may not be great, but it doesn’t matter anyways because it's all in the past.” It’s not. The U.S. is a deeply broken place. Thousands of hate crimes are committed against black people every year. They are still denied housing, jobs, and healthcare because of their skin color. African Americans make up more than 38% of the incarcerated population in the U.S., when they make up only 13% of the general population. New laws increasingly target voting access and make it harder for African Americans to be represented in politics and in the decisions of this nation. In other words, a return to the Jim Crow laws established during reconstruction - or arguably a resurgence - because for many Jim Crow never really ended. With the election of a President in 2016 who actively supported white supremacy, the U.S. has seen a continued expression of racial hatred that in many cases have turned violent. For many who commit these hateful acts the Confederacy has proved to be a uniting and inspiring symbol. The Charleston Massacre of 2015 provides one of the clearest examples of the inspiration of hatred the Confederacy provides. In June, Dylann Roof walked into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and murdered nine African Americans, including a state senator and the church’s pastor. Before the attack, Roof took a tour of places associated with white supremacy and slavery and posed with symbols of white supremacy including his car which was decorated with the Confederate flag. He later admitted that his intention was to start another civil war in the U.S., a race war.

Every time I would finish talking about this paper, I would get “so what do we do?” And I wish I had a simple answer. Do we tear these monuments down? That’s probably part of the solution but as I have described above, that’s not so easy. People in power who support the ideals

these monuments project will do whatever they can to keep them up. The more we pull them down the harder they are going to fight to put them back up. Does that mean that we stop fighting to get them taken down? Absolutely not, we should all push to get them taken down. Still, it doesn't solve the overall problem. All these monuments are to blatantly wrong, racist, anti-democratic history which has been used to oppress Americans for decades of years. Removing a statue does not magically remove racism.

Many people have suggested that alternative monuments, memorials, and museums take their place. There has been in an increase in Civil Rights museums, monuments to African American leaders, and centers dedicated to equity and racial justice. The 1990s saw a large wave of construction of various museums. In 1991 the National Civil rights Museum was founded at the motel where Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. In 1992 both the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham, Alabama and the National Voting Rights Museum in Selma, Alabama were constructed. But it is too much to ask, these museums have been “to revise misconceptions about the past, teach inspirational lessons, attract tourists, revive troubled neighborhoods, and spur political activism.”²¹ Museums still require that people take the effort to go visit them, to be open to learning and letting their minds be changed. In order to actively combat the Lost Cause narrative and the racial hatred that is tied to it, it requires the participation of everyone in every aspect of society. So yes, tear down the monuments but also put-up new ones, create new museums, rename roads and schools and military bases, and revise curriculum. Take the opportunities to fight for racial justice, correct yourself, and correct your friends. It won't happen overnight, but it will happen but only if we take the imitative and the responsibility to make it happen. We are not responsible for the actions of our ancestors, but we

²¹ Ibid, 360.

are responsible for our own actions, and by not working to change the system in whatever way we are able we are complicit. Or in the words of Sue Campbell “re-experiencing the past with different meaning and different emotions is how we learn to take responsibility for the people we are becoming.” (149)

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