

Transcript: Absence of Monuments Part 2

(First part of an interview conducted over Zoom, interviewers Marvin and Margarethe, interviewee Dr. Lorna Bracewell)

Marvin: Here with us today is Dr. Lorna Bracewell, who is a political theorist and a professor of political science at Flagler College in St Augustine. Before becoming a professor she was actually a singer and songwriter. Her scholarship focuses on feminist theory and the history of critical thought. She's actually previously held a lecture for this specific seminar, the Monuments & Memories seminar, on the Pulse Nightclub Shooting and its role in Queer Remembrance Culture.

And we would just start off our interview here with asking you what your perspective on Queer Remembrance Culture in general is.

Lorna: Yeah, so as we talked about during the seminar, right, I think that there's a real important political dimension to practices of remembrance, be they queer or otherwise, and so I think it's important to think of the work of remembering- well, first of all, it's important to acknowledge that a lot of work goes into remembering something. It doesn't just happen without a tremendous amount of effort and intention behind it, and it's important to recognize that that work is political work, is the work of movements, right? And particularly liberation movements, which the LGBTQ+ liberation movement is one example. So, yeah, my thought on Queer Remembrance Culture broadly is that it's really politically vital. Now, I'm sure I might be biased, I'm a political theorist, I'm a political scientist, I'm very interested in politics. That's not the only thing that's important about remembering or building the capacity as a movement or as a group or as people or as an individual to remember, there's also important, I think, spiritual, emotional, psychological dimensions that I am not equipped to talk about. But those are my thoughts, that it's vitally important movement work, political work.

Margarethe: Part two of the first question is, what do you think is the state of Queer Remembrance Culture specifically in the U.S. right now? Especially with all kinds of new bills and laws passed at the moment.

Lorna: I worry it's not robust enough. I feel like the movement for LGBTQ+ rights, or LGBTQ+ liberation, has a really short memory, actually. And I think that that's a real political weakness. Now that's not to say that nobody remembers or that there aren't important remembrance practices. I've been following closely news about the Monkeypox outbreak that's happening globally, and is right now the community being most impacted are men who have sex with men. And in that subset of the LGBTQ+ community, there are vivid strong memories of the AIDS epidemic. It's been wonderful, not to see this community

plagued by an awful disease, but to see this community be able to draw on that repository of experience and collective memory now to guard itself against this latest plague. You've seen all the kinds of public health messaging about safe sex practices that were developed by queer activists in the midst of the AIDS pandemic. You've seen the community be able to draw on that repertoire.

There are I guess kind of bright spots, there are instances where our movement does remember and draws on that capacity to remember, to be more politically affective in the contemporary moment, but I think we need to do more of that. We've forgotten so much and as a professor who teaches LGBTQ+ politics and history, so much of what I do is teach young people, much younger than me, history that our community has not taught them. I would love for LGBT people who don't go to college, or who don't have the good fortune - or the bad fortune, depending on how you look at it - to end up in one of my classes, to have avenues through which they can learn this history.

Publishing an anthology of LGBTQ+ history, all that can seem very effete, esoteric, and impractical, and I get it, but I think it's wrong. I think that people are mistaken. They dismiss this sort of work as just aesthetic or something, kind of, for elites to indulge. I think that's a real short sighted view and a really politically demoralising view.

Margarethe: Do you think there are events specific to the queer community that might need reexamination, and if yes, what are they, of course, why do they need it, are there thoughts?

Lorna: You have to understand how gay the sex wars were, like in every way. When contemporary people think about the feminist sex wars to the extent that they think about them at all, they think of it as being predominantly about kind of heterosexual stuff, drama, baggage, issues, and there were trench and critiques of heterosexuality as a political institution offered in the course of the sex wars, but it wasn't just the kind of hegemony of heterosexuality that was being challenged, it was also really vigorous, robust debates about what it meant to be like a kind of politically correct lesbian, whether or not viewing pornography or participating in BDSM was compatible with the kind of lesbian politics and y'know, all that stuff. So, yeah, I mean the sex wars would be on the list of significant historical events that were super gay and should be remembered as such.

So much of what we quote unquote "know" about Stonewall isn't accurate and I think it would behoove us as a movement to really remember what happened at Stonewall, to remember who the main actors were and what the goals were, the objectives were, how the problems that the actors in Stonewall were responding to, how they framed and understood those problems. They weren't throwing rocks at the NYPD so they could get the right to marry. There can be this reduction of the queer liberation movement to a kind of simplistic politics and marriage equality, or something like that, that just leaves a whole lot

of the most radical and significant dimensions of gay liberation out of the frame. So, I would put Stonewall on the list.

I mean talk about a rich but forgotten episode in LGBTQ+ history. Germany is like a rich, rich resource for reflecting on this history. I mean, some of these terms that we use to describe our desires, our orientations in terms of our gender, many of these terms were by German sexologists in the 19th century. There's problematic medicalizing aspects to all that, but they also provided literally the vocabulary that made politicized queer identity possible. Pride, although it is rooted in this uniquely American thing Stonewall, Stonewall is not just an American thing. The identities that were politically mobilized and galvanized in Stonewall, they have their origins and their roots in Germany and many other places. It really is a global history, so maybe that's something too I would add to the list. To the extent that we think of LGBTQ+ liberation, or gay liberation, queer liberation, or whatever, as some weird American thing, like no, there are global histories here that we should do a better job of recovering, and I add myself to that list, because I am an americanist, I am an American, and I am also trained in terms of my scholarship as an American, I study American politics and American history. We as a movement should be better at learning the multiple transnational and global histories that have made our movement what it is today.