

One Landscape, Two Narratives: Competition for Memorial Space and the Search for Symbiosis at Home and Abroad

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In the summer of 2015, a white supremacist gunman murdered nine worshippers in Charleston South Carolina's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, an historically African-American church. It was a hate crime that opened renewed calls for the removal of the Civil War Confederate flag from the state's Capitol. Meanwhile, the act sparked a wave of graffiti not only in Charleston and in South Carolina, but across the U.S. South, targeting monuments to Confederate soldiers and statesmen. I try to limit myself to no more than an hour of online newspapers a day, but found myself captivated, scouring local websites for images.

My own adopted home in Europe, Salzburg, is a city with its own issues with memorials and history, somewhat less ancient than ours, if less contemporary than those a bit further east in Europe. The town's sidewalks are, like those in much of Germany and Austria, dotted with brass 'Stolperstein,' or 'stumbling stones,' discrete cobblestones set in the streets to mark former homes of Jews, Gypsies, the mentally or physically disabled, Communists, or homosexuals murdered some seventy years ago. My first winter here, I wrote a despairing email to the organization that installs them (through private donations), when one at the bottom of my street was torn up and lay unrepaired for a month. My suspicions had been an imagined neo-Nazi; I was reassured by the organization, however, that it was the result of an overzealous snowplow (a contraption for which my southern upbringing had done little to prepare me). Still, Nazi graffiti isn't unheard of here. Our local anarchists keep up a good fight with the spray paint, parrying each new swastika with a circled 'A,' and you can't miss noticing the results of these quiet, usually discreet battles on a stroll through almost any quarter, once you've developed an eye for seeing them. The city council here, after years of debate, has still made no move to create a memorial for the public book burning that took place near our university library in the city's central square in 1938 (now visited by some two million tourists each year, who step over the unmarked spot while stuffing themselves with chocolate-coated marzipan and hotdogs). The most recent delay comes with an oddly-worded statement of fears that any monument would be vandalized within days of installation, and would require twenty-four hour surveillance, at an inappropriate expense to taxpayers. I sigh, but can watch this narrative unfold (or stagnate), blissfully unengaged. After all, it's not my country, or 'my story.'

As I watched from across an ocean over that summer, images of perhaps more benign vandalism in the U.S. moved me, but also didn't touch close to home until a familiar monument from my own childhood was tagged with the now-familiar motto 'Black Lives Matter,' graffitied in red spray paint. Erected in 1896, the obelisk of the Zebulon Baird Vance memorial monument

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was something I knew from my childhood in Asheville, North Carolina, and something I vaguely knew was connected to my own family. Vance, a distant cousin, had left his name on two North Carolina towns, a county, a university building and at least three schools. As a child my grandparents had regularly taken me to what they called ‘one of the old homeplaces,’ his log cabin birthplace, now a state historic site. His role as the state’s governor during the Civil War wasn’t mentioned on those visits (nor was the fact that this ‘homeplace’ was also home to eighteen enslaved laborers). It wasn’t until more recently that I learned (with little effort on my part - it was reported in the local newspaper along with news on the graffiti) that the square in which the monument stands had once been in regular use for trading enslaved men, women, and children.

Surprising as it is that, having grown up in the town, I would learn this ‘news’ from a local newspaper article in 2015, more surprising is how this ‘news’ both was and wasn’t a riveting shock. As Katrina Browne, a descendent of New England slave traders and maker of the documentary *Traces of the Trade* explains her adult discovery of her own family’s past, what hit hard wasn’t the surprise of learning this new information, but the shock in realizing she *already* knew, that it was something known all along, kept in a locked box of the brain, in pieces marked ‘not for assembly.’¹ The surprise wasn’t that of a discovery, but of recognition, of something previously only framed outside language, what Marianne Hirsch might call a postmemory.²

In my own branch of the family, the monument-commemorated slave-owning governor’s first cousin, my grandfather three ‘greats’ back, had used enslaved workers, as well. Over the generations, official historical documents recording the location of his twenty-room home along a drovers’ road at the mouth of a small river in western North Carolina have meant different things in different ways. For my grandmother, who still kept a remnant of the house - a piano stool in the shape of a fluted Doric column - it was both a hushed open secret and, I suspect, in some ways, or at least in certain circles, an unspoken source of pride. My father, an upwardly and geographically mobile member of the Great Society generation, and somewhat less romantic, was convinced the twenty rooms were less marks of luxury than that the building was used more as a hotel for traders and drovers than as a home, downplaying the unspoken image of a plantation. Yet he had once, not without emotion, told me the story, as reported to him, of his great-grandfather’s return from the Civil War. Riding back home with his dead brother tied to the back of his horse, he found the house burned to the ground and his sisters and parents fled upstream to an outbuilding, having carried away little but the family piano and its fancy seat. The returning soldier, my great-great-great-grandfather, rebuilt the family’s fortunes more modestly on tobacco, abandoning the house’s site to build a smaller, if still imposing, columned house upriver in the hills (another regularly visited ‘old home site’ from my childhood summers).

To paste photos reading ‘Black Lives Matter’ into an article, and then to go on about dead white lives which (now going on two centuries later) frankly don’t, feels slightly disingenuous, particularly in a world where, across oceans, millions are working through very live struggles with other, more pressing, contemporary political nightmares. But the new knowledge of my town’s history - perhaps ‘newly conscious knowledge’ would be a better way to put it - sparked a question. Where *was* the site of the famed twenty-room river house burned to the ground in

¹ Katrina Browne, Alla Kovgan and Jude Ray. *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*. 2008.

² Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames, Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.

1865? For all the times stories had been told of it, no one in my family had ever gone there, as far as my father knew. Asking around, I realized it was a place in family history more mythological to my relatives than real. In email exchanges, they were happy to tell me who had most recently inherited the fluted piano seat (one hinted he had seen the remnants of the piano it went with in some uncle's cow shed as a child), to retell the tale of the burned mansion, and to provide locations of gravesites and names of regiments. But they seemed surprised that, of all things to ask, I was asking, 'where *was* it?' As if the house was a place in history, not in geography, the question seemed unfair to them, if not almost surreal. Where was it? Well, at the mouth of the Ivy River. But where is *that*? No one knew. No one had ever wondered, as if, perhaps, unmoored from space or place, the site had been able to loom all the larger in imagination.

But the Ivy River hadn't changed its name or its course and my father, an inveterate cartographer in his retirement, put his internet skills to work. The area hasn't changed much in a hundred and fifty years. A highway cuts through it now here and there, and generations of pinewood houses have risen and rotted in the river valley in the meantime, but the mouth of the river where records indicate the house had stood, running through a narrow rocky gap of mountain into the Swannanoa, couldn't have budged. On a drive over Christmas, my father and I expected a field, or a forest, ivy hiding perhaps a foundation or a bit of farm equipment, even an outcropping of brick, islanded in the river to gather driftwood. The drovers' road was now a lazy two-lane highway with a concrete bridge. At the river's mouth, however, oddly enough, a squat bungalow sat on the slight rise of the hill above (obviously still the best building site in the area). Below, where before there might have been rooms rented to drovers and a roadside warehouse for travelers' goods, sat a tiny stone gas station and a modest, well-kept church, with power lines wending their way through the forest above. It wasn't, as I expected, that the land had been taken over by some cleansing hand of nature, but that it was being used in much the same way, perhaps on a less grand scale and in a more modern context: subtract slavery and a grand piano, add a gas pump.

Whether my father and I, two men in an expensive car, would have felt as safe to park, stare and wander, snapping photographs, if we had been several decades younger and several skin tones darker is a question for activists, or sociologists, or locals, or for narratologists and semioticians in a more imaginative mode. But I think we both left with a sense not of having recovered something lost, or of letting go of past questions, but rather with an awareness of life's strange continuities, and of the enormous freedom we have - however much we are trapped in our own continuities - in being able to climb in a car afterward, closing the doors behind us with a reassuring thunk, and moving on.

What was it I was reminded of as the car doors closed at our sides, sealing us in, while I gazed warily through the windshield, observing my father's still-steady driving with attention as he, now just after his seventieth birthday, pulled onto the highway? It was of a less luxurious car, driven by less steady hands, on a less well-paved road, on a hotter day in full summer, on another trip, to someone else's past. It was of a Bulgarian lover, an ardent fan of Ronald Reagan, who believed, when we first met in the 1990s, that his own country had so much to learn from mine. This gave me, as an American, a kind of magical glow in his eyes, perhaps as magical and strange and new as his own country had seemed to me, that hot summer in 1998, as we made our way from Sofia to the Black Sea coast for a holiday with his family.

He was a terrible driver. The friend who had loaned us the car had diplomatically asked me to drive. 'His driving is lamentable...' he'd said. 'True,' I'd agreed. 'The roads in Bulgaria

are also lamentable...’ he’d continued. And I took the hint: I was to do most of the dodging of produce that spilled from the backs of trucks, the head-on cars careening toward us on our side, the vendors who pushed their carts square to the edge of the road. Over the highway to Plovdiv horse-drawn wagons passed each other on a concrete overpass. As we pulled into Burgas, I commented on the town’s beauty. And it was beautiful, to me - green space between weathered concrete towers. No flashing lights, no billboards, no sunburned men wielding poly-fiber stuffed animals every time we stopped the car, as they had in my childhood South Carolina beach summers. He was incredulous. ‘But it’s nice to drive into a beach town and not be immediately bombarded with advertising,’ I said.

‘Nice for you, maybe,’ he said. ‘But not so fun to live with.’ And perhaps Communist urban design is best viewed from a respectful decade of distance. It was hard to imagine planners discreetly tucking restaurants and cantinas within parks and leaving very few signs indicating amenities for those driving through. I came from a world where billboards grew so thick on the side of the highway you couldn’t read them all fast enough as you went by if you tried.

When I first arrived in Europe in the mid-1990s, western tourists were hailing the end of the Cold War by flooding, popularizing and finally romanticizing cities like Prague and Budapest, Krakow and Dubrovnik. As ‘wall-pickers’ prepared chunks of the Berlin Wall to greet them, East German marks became souvenirs, and Soviet military paraphernalia were piled for sale on street corners across Eastern Europe. Though western tourists did not immediately come streaming across the fallen Iron Curtain in equal number to Bulgaria, local would-be merchants with makeshift stands were, like their Czech, German, and Polish counterparts, well-prepared for those of us who did. Soviet military cuff links, buttons, watches, hatpins, shoe buckles, and all manner of badges and medals – in short, almost anything marked with a scythe and hammer – were laid out on blankets on sidewalks and in parks for passing foreign tourists, often quadrupling in price as the decade advanced. I’d seen some of this, that summer in Bulgaria, and knew that since then, much of this merchandise had been taken out of the country as souvenirs, upgraded to sit in shop windows or museum displays, or safely tucked away by collectors, effectively erasing many visible signs of a past many were eager to leave behind.

Larger aspects of urban landscapes, however, are less simple to dispose of. Vandalism and unofficial policies of neglect were two ways individuals and local governments dramatically, if temporarily, changed the narrative sense of some Soviet monuments, as photographers like Nikola Mihov have documented.³ Socialist sculpture in Cold War Eastern Europe, iconic and symbolic, was also frequently narrative, dependent on unfolding tableaux of scenes viewed as visitors moved through the spaces in which they were set, imposing as Georgia’s Stone Mountain. Such narratives were open to what Michel de Certeau would call tactical reworkings of the stories they were originally meant to tell.⁴ The stories of victorious Soviet troops advancing to rescue Axis power-controlled cities were given quite a different spin when 1990s passersby inserted Marlboro cigarettes into bronze mouths open in silent victory cries, or when ironic citizens used newly-available magic markers to give them Hitler moustaches, spray-paint to make sculptures of Soviet soldiers into American-style super-heroes, Santa Claus or Ronald McDonald or, more recently at a Soviet Army memorial in Sofia, placed woven hoods over their

³ Mihov, Nikola. “Forget Your Past: 2009-2012.” Web. 15 Feb. 2014.

⁴ De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1984.

heads like those worn by the Russian punk band Pussy Riot or, in solidarity, painted them with the colors of the Ukrainian flag.⁵

While a Brutalist concrete office block looks much the same whether it sits in Moscow or Miami, union halls can be turned into dance clubs, people's palaces revamped as shopping centers, and kiosks can sell Coca-Cola and Camel cigarettes just as easily as they can workers' newspapers and government tobacco, the memorial monuments of the Soviet empire tended to be figurative, massive, and charged with clearer, more insistent meanings. Aside from private acts of subversive meaning-making, how do societies subvert a monument's implied narrative, or at least dilute its presence, particularly when its Cold War-era designers expressly sought to embed its narrative in the landscape itself? In urban centers with high levels of private or federal investment, as authors like Czepczyński, de Lille, Guest and Bartetzky write⁶, monuments having outworn their welcome may be 'reincorporated',⁷ physically moved to less conspicuous spots, or, as often, simply destroyed or replaced. Yet in economically-strained areas with less options for removal or rebuilding, or where local sentiment remains ambivalent to political changes or no broad federal agenda for dealing with historical monuments exists, the question, left in the hands of municipal or private organizations and the public, is sometimes as much as to ask how to reframe a landscape's own narrative.

While such issues have long been deferred or actively resisted in the American South, they were perhaps unconsciously close to mind when I moved to Europe for graduate work in a French university department officially named 'The School of the History and Semiotics of Text and Image' by some over-exuberant structuralist in the wake of 1968 (an outmoded name subsequently downplayed by later generations of professors and administrators, disappearing from the department's letterhead, business cards and doorplates, so that I learned the school's full name only after being handed my diploma). It had been a fascinating experience, then, with an initially shaky grasp of French, navigating a landscape of verbal and visual texts as an outsider. It was perhaps this acquired taste that had led me to take my first teaching post at a university in Istanbul after graduating, and after two semesters there, to cross the border to Bulgaria again, tracing my previous steps backwards, going East to West. I had a free week at the end of the semester, Bulgaria was nearby, and I was curious to see if and how local governments and groups might have responded to questions of the landscape's symbols and semiotics more formally in the intervening years. Two hours after boarding a bus in Istanbul, we reached the crowded border, with its slow-flowing river of national symbols and products visible through the bus windows in car seats and open trunks as people ferried cosmetics and electronics from either side to the other, Turkish tobacco, appliances, and textiles; Bulgarian toiletries and European perfumes. As an

⁵ "Russia indignant at Soviet Army Monument 'vandalism.'" *Radio Bulgaria*. 24 Feb. 2014. Web. 12 March 2015.

⁶ Bartetzky, Arnold. "A Cumbersome Heritage: Political Monuments and Buildings of the GDR in Reunited Germany." *The Post-Socialist City: Continuity and Change in Urban Space and Memory*. Ed. Alfrun Kleims and Marina Dmitrieva. Berlin: Jovis, 2010. 52-65. Czepczyński, Mariusz. "Representations and Images of 'Recent History': The Transition of Post-Socialist Landscape Icons." *The Post-Socialist City: Continuity and Change in Urban Space and Memory*. Ed. Alfrun Kleims and Marina Dmitrieva. Berlin: Jovis, 2010. 16-33. De Lille, Lydia Coudroy and Miléna Guest. "Towards Banalization?: Trans-Forming the Legacies of the Post-Socialist City." *The Post-Socialist City: Continuity and Change in Urban Space and Memory*. Ed. Alfrun Kleims and Marina Dmitrieva, Berlin: Jovis, 2010. 34-51.

⁷ Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. New York: Cornell UP, 1975.

American in Europe, having learned to navigate social and semiotic spaces different than those most 'natural' to me (as well being as a veteran importer of American dental floss, French candies and Turkish spices across borders myself), the scene at the border, though more animated than the average airport customs line, did not seem all that uncanny. An hour later we were out on the other side, headed into open fields.

Set in the sloping country spreading up from the Black Sea to meet the Rhodops, a mountain range sheltering painted monasteries, a Dionysian oracle, and the birthplace of Orpheus, Haskovo, with a population just under 100,000, is a regional municipal center in eastern Bulgaria, around the same size as my own home town in the Appalachians. Here, a tenuous seeing-sawing between urban entrepreneurs and displaced collective farmers has in recent years led the government to swing from a policy of Perestroika-styled laissez-faire back to an outward semblance of Socialism. Haskovo's two main pedestrianized thoroughfares mark the contrast between two distinct social and economic classes as easily as any set of railroad tracks or parkways in the U.S. South. The first, punctuated with private casinos and lined with bouncers, hosts truck drivers, and farmers in from the outlying region for nights of gambling, drinking, and carousing under the watchful eyes of armed private police. A second pedestrian artery boasts storefronts lined with plasma screen televisions playing loops of advertisements for themselves late into the night, as teenagers in remarkably identical logo-less clothes strut between elegantly-lit cafe terraces serving the latest mix of martini, toying with cell phones.

All this is visible from the windows of the city's only hotel, a nameless cube built a quarter century ago on the main square. The remote for the hotel's television had yet to be programmed, leaving the screen locked to a single channel demonstrating penis pumps on sale by mail order for sixty-nine leva, marked down from eighty-nine – about half the area's average monthly salary. The advertisements, like the continually looping televisions in the shop windows downstairs, were ostensibly working to sell something. But they were also busy performing what Baudrillard would have called their more important function – making an ideology itself accessible to the public in general.⁸ Around midnight, a fight in front of one of the casinos crossed the boundary between the two streets as a shirtless man ran after another shouting, the police not far behind. Beyond them in the town square where the two main streets intersect, two enormous outdoor video screens faced each other, as if in a stand-off, one showing advertisements for Finnish cell phones, the other, on the lawn of the town hall, playing endless loops of municipal dump trucks carrying fresh asphalt to building sites. Above all this, overhead, a more striking visual juxtaposition hung just over the skyline, and one with its own contradictions, hidden from my window at first sight.

In 2003, on the hillside above their city, a group of Haskovo's citizens, with its municipal council's blessing, set the world's largest statue of the Virgin Mary holding an infant Christ on a stone base, with officials from the American Guinness Book of world records on hand to install a plaque, pointedly in English, confirming its status. Those familiar with the massive sculpture of a postwar Soviet soldier holding a German child on a similarly massive base in Berlin's Treptower Park can hardly miss the sculptural citation, here molded to religious, rather than political significance. Shortly after dusk, the surface of Haskovo's thirty-one-meter, eighty-ton polymer-concrete-clad statue blinks a pale electric white a couple of times, then glows from nine p.m. until

⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.

four a.m. with the unearthly radiance of the moon. My stroll toward the monument led through quiet, park-like streets of late Socialist housing, up an impressive set of stone stairs passing by newly constructed villas, and upward yet further to the statue's base – scrubbed, mulched, landscaped, and fortified with freshly-painted park benches and litter boxes. Next to the statue's obviously spanking-new base, the monumental stairway leading up toward it seemed curiously aged, and it was only by following a matching, nearly overgrown stone-laid path branching off between trees behind the statue that I discovered why. A quarter of a mile further up the gently sloping hill, once framed but now hidden by overgrown tree branches, stands the spray-painted Communist-era memorial for which this monumental staircase was originally built, its vast stone planters now blooming with weeds, its steps stained with fallen mulberries, an assortment of day-glow condoms littering the grass below. From a distance, it's strikingly similar in form to Asheville's Zebulon Baird Vance monument, though with an upper window and heroic friezes of Soviet soldiers.

None of the unbottled fury at iconic symbols that marked the removal of the Bastille, the overthrow of the Tsars, the invasion of Saddam Hussein's Baghdad, or, indeed, Sherman's march to the sea, is evident in the shift of symbols on Haskovo's dominating hillside. There was no demolition like that of Paris's Vendôme Column that Kristin Ross describes as being so symbolic during the heady months of the 1871 Commune.⁹ Haskovo's Mary was simply laid like a cuckoo's egg in a vacant nest-like hollow of borrowed space, on a convenient landing mid-way up the monumental stone stairs toward the original Soviet monument. Like an over-sized curio-cabinet figurine, her head tilts softly to one side, as if in a modest, apologetic gesture toward the slope above her. Set in the base supporting her is a stained-glass window depicting what, to an outsider, may appear to be a Sacred Heart. It's a symbol more likely recognized by Bulgarians (whose Orthodox church has no tradition of the Latin Catholic devotion to the Sacred Heart), however, as the flaming heart of Danko, from a Bessarbian folk tale made famous by Soviet writer Maxim Gorky, in which a courageous leader, despairing at his followers' rebellion, rips out his own flaming heart in order to offer them light, only to have it stomped to cinders (Dichev and Terziev, Smith-Johnson).¹⁰ A Soviet image reclaimed as Bulgarian Orthodox? A reiteration of Gorky's tale in post-Cold War tones? Mary's pedestal is itself a sort of crypt, and she rises from it as if in benediction. Does she intentionally echo Berlin's Treptower Park monument (also crypt-like, referencing fallen Soviet soldiers, with an over-sized figure rising triumphantly above it)? And where had I seen the contours of her pedestal before? Were its lines not eerily similar to those of Hitler's pulpit in Nuremberg? Whatever the symbolism going on - or not going on - my position as an outsider made it all the more enigmatic. I found myself staring with unanswered questions in a way I never had before the - usually more diminutive - monuments the Southern landscape of my own childhood was littered with. In short, Mary herself seemed the nexus of a bizarre confluence of possible meanings and visual citations. Though short of enigmatical gaze of the Mona Lisa, she was, for all her cartoonish, doe-eyed, goofy-smiled simplicity, more sophisticated than the blunt heroic bronzes of Charleston, or Dallas, or Asheville.

⁹ Ross, Kristin. *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.

¹⁰ Dichev, Ivaylo and Krasimir Terziev. "Monuments in Bulgaria - Historical Landmarks." Web. 13 March 2015. Smith-Johnson, Francheska. "The Flaming Heart of Danko." *Growing up in Communist Bulgaria: A Cheerful Story "About Bulgaria"*. 2015. Web. 12 March 2015.

As Henri Lefebvre suggested, monumental works erase ‘traces of violence and death,’ replacing them ‘with a tranquil power and certitude which can encompass violence and terror,’¹¹ transmuting ‘the fear of the passage of time, and anxiety about death, in splendour’.¹² Lessing, in the seventeenth century, suggested a stark division between plastic arts and narrative form, in his study of *Laocoön and His Sons*, that Roman copy of a Greek masterpiece showing the struggle of a Trojan priest and his sons against serpents sent by Athena as he tried to warn fellow citizens of the invading Greek army. Yet, as Klaus Speidel has explained more recently, a close reading shows that Lessing’s suggestion that plastic arts like sculpture are less *apt* at telling stories than textual works was never meant to suggest they are *incapable* of telling them.¹³ Such a suggestion is one point of entry for those of us trying to imagine in what ways landscapes, or the ways human structures are placed in them, might be read as narratives, both political and social.

Monuments, wrote Lefebvre, like musical works, do not have ‘a “signified” (or “signifieds”),’ but instead ‘a *horizon of meaning*: a specific or indefinite multiplicity of meanings, a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore, by means of – and for the sake of – a particular action’,¹⁴ and a stroll between Haskovo’s two hillside monuments underlines what is perhaps most important in the making of a monument – perspective. While the older Communist obelisk sits physically higher on the hill’s pinnacle, trees and brush at the edges of its flagged terrace have been left – or even encouraged – to grow wild, almost completely obscuring its once-dominating view of the city. Meanwhile, Mary’s perch, while topographically lower and technically less impressive, has its surrounding foliage carefully groomed to leave her visible from almost every crossroad in the center of town.

In the hilltop space between the two monuments, perspectives vie even more closely for the visitor’s visual attention. The original tree-lined stone stairway to the Communist monument above Mary remains intact, though neglected and now sprouting with grass. From these stairs, a perfectly planned postwar vista still allows the original monument to reveal itself temptingly before you as you climb the low-rising stone steps toward it, as perfectly as any folly set in a proper English landscape park, save for a bit of perhaps intentionally unclipped shrubbery. Yet Mary’s regular visitors, not to be outdone, have worn smooth an alternate parallel pathway in the grass alongside the stairs with a prospect allowing strollers to have the Communist monument completely occluded from view as they ascend, while the park’s groundskeepers have cut space in the tree branches above the stone stairs to leave an unobstructed view of the statue of Mary on the walk downward. Follow the stone stairs up and the worn dirt track down, and the park’s original Soviet-era prospects remain largely intact. Follow the dirt trail up and the monumental staircase down, and you can almost ignore its original focal point as you climb, while keeping the newer monument within your gaze as you descend.

The result is two parallel experiences, allowing visitors a choice in perspective that is more than a matter of mere aesthetics, but historical and cultural, allowing one to insert oneself, through one’s own movement, into one of two socio-historical or religious narratives. Sharing limited physical space while narrowly, discreetly avoiding crossing each other, two very different

¹¹ Lefebvre, 222.

¹² *ibid.* 221.

¹³ Speidel, Klaus. “Can a Single Still Picture Tell a Story? Definitions of Narrative and the Alleged Problem of Time with Single Still Pictures.” *Diegesis* 2.1 (2013): 173-94.

¹⁴ Lefebvre, 222.

versions of a single national heritage perch side by side, each drawing the surrounding landscape into its own story, in ‘a shifting hierarchy in which now one, now another meaning comes momentarily to the fore.’¹⁵ Such experiences, intentionally-created as they may be by visitors themselves, hardly seem to fit into the four types of created ‘narrative landscapes’ Maoz Azaryahu and Kenneth E. Foote describe in other places laid out by professional architects and planners like national parks or urban memorials.¹⁶ They are neither ‘narratives positioned at single points or places,’ ‘arranged as [clear] linear or sequential paths, routes or trails,’ ‘depicting complex spatial and temporal sequences over large areas or spanning long time periods’ or ‘hybrid narrative strategies using combinations’ of the other types they outline. Instead, seemingly unintended by their designers, they are created by the movements of visitors themselves, inscribed and traced in the space of the park, as what de Certeau called ‘tactics’ – those individual responses that personally reformulate narrative formats institutionally handed down from above – small-scale aesthetic reclaiming of cultural markers in a landscape already rich with its own systems of social or political meaning. Yet here, two subversive systems work at odds against each other but in tandem, neither quite impinging on the other, even as they tell very different stories in a single space.

Neither narrative, of course, was mine. My space, at least for the moment, was in the seat waiting for me downstairs at Haskovo’s bus depot, and in the ride back across the border. But I descended wondering if such a peaceful, if uneasy, negotiation of the space between two simultaneous but seemingly opposed narratives might in some way be a model, or even an emblem, for conflicting narratives closer to my own heart, and to my own political microcosm back across the Atlantic. In any case, I moved on, leaving Haskovo behind me. Many Bulgarians, since the nation joined the EU, have done the same. For a country with a population of some seven million five hundred thousand, more than half that number, some four million, now live outside the country.

Such spatial navigations of conflicting narratives, symbols and monuments seemed exotic, perhaps somewhat clumsy, and peculiar to Eastern Europe, a world of transitional space between waves of world history. Interesting as they were, the symbols they incorporated seemed, as an American expatriate once wrote of post-Wall Berlin, like ‘a card catalogue for a library that no longer exists; intricate, somehow superfluous’.¹⁷ Today, from the perspective of the summer of 2015, such navigations seem surprisingly sophisticated, and more resonant, as the United States itself is washed by controversial echoes of distant, or not so distant history, sometimes unsure how to negotiate a narrative path through fixed and stony points in its landscape which seem to draw the past into a violent clash with the present, or the present into a symbolic clash with the past, eliciting responses both institutional and personal, and questioning how or if monuments can tranquilize, as Lefebvre wrote, history’s traces of ‘violence and terror’.¹⁸

If Haskovo’s hilltop manages to encompass two different stories in one place, living abroad often feels like being in two places at once and, back home, a twist in events had evolved. Six months after my and my father’s visit, and a month after the Charleston shooting, a North

¹⁵ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991, p. 222.

¹⁶ Azaryahu, Maoz and Kenneth E. Foote. “Historical space as narrative medium: on the configuration of spatial narratives of time at historical sites.” *GeoJournal* 73.3 (2008): 179-94.

¹⁷ Marcus, J.S., *The Captain’s Fire*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996, p. 188.

¹⁸ Lefebvre, p. 222.

Carolina law¹⁹ signed in July 2015 was quickly passed barring state or local authorities from permanently removing any object on public land that ‘commemorates an event, person or military service that is part of North Carolina’s history’ - a sweep of objects that arguably might pose legal problems in the future to almost any changes on public land, for what, after all, is ‘part’ of a state’s history, and who decides? ‘Except as otherwise provided,’ the law reads, ‘a monument, memorial, or work of art owned by the State may not be removed, relocated, or altered in any way without the approval of the North Carolina Historical Commission’ - a commission whose members are directly appointed by a notoriously conservative governor who first made national headlines as the ‘Bathroom Monitor,’ for his support of legislation discriminatory of transgender citizens and visitors to the state, and whose congress has made the state the most gerrymandered in the nation, insuring their hold on power for at least another decade. Meanwhile, according to the law, monuments, memorials, or works of art ‘may not become the property of the State by purchase, gift or otherwise, unless such monument, memorial, or work of art, or a design of the same, together with the proposed location of the same, shall first have been submitted to and approved by the North Carolina Historical Commission.’ Nothing, the law continues, ‘shall be construed to prevent the ordinary maintenance or repair of any exterior architectural feature in a historic district or of a landmark which does not involve a change in design, material or appearance thereof,’ except when ‘necessary for construction, renovation, or reconfiguration of buildings, open spaces, parking, or transportation projects’. Meanwhile, in Ukraine, recent decommunization laws passed in April 2015, requiring the removal of communist symbols in that country, are moving in just the opposite direction (after some five hundred monuments to Lenin were torn down by the public there during the 2014 protests).²⁰ Russia’s invasion of Crimea has made the legislation impossible to implement there, sparking at least one artist, Alexander Milov, to turn a bronze Stalin in Odessa into to a Darth Vader.²¹ One must admit European creativity often outdoes our own, blunter, home-grown measures of protest.

North Carolina’s new law says little, interestingly, about recontextualization, or using space to renarrativize objects commemorating the state’s history. African-Americans in the state have little to be grateful for in the law, which almost seems intended to pour fresh salt on already long-brined wounds. But perhaps, at least for the final subsection of the law, we should, if not be grateful, stay tuned. U.S.-Americans may be famous for projecting our own racial politics of the moment onto almost any contemporary political or social movement abroad. Instead of projecting or proselytizing, we might instead become more attuned to the nuances of a range of tactics, one might almost say a palette or toolbox of tactics, used overseas for peacefully and quietly, if sometimes uneasily, renegotiating pathways for different viewpoints around and between the stones and molded metal humans use to mark our histories and mythologies, in the public landscapes through which we all must move. Perhaps, as my Bulgarian friends believed in those heady days of post-1989, as Eastern Europe entered its own brave new world, there was much for it to learn from the West, and even from America. But perhaps, too, that exchange, much like Haskovo’s hilltop, will not always be a one-way street.

¹⁹ General Assembly of North Carolina. Session 2015. Law 2015-170. Senate Bill 22.

²⁰ Stadny, Yegor. “Is decommunization good for Ukraine?” Al Jazeera America. 23 June, 2015. Web. 26 October 2015.

²¹ Chow, Andrew R. “Lenin Statue in Ukraine Turned into Darth Vader.” *New York Times*, 25 October 2015. Web. 26 October 2015.