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COMMEMORATIVE ARTEFACTUAL SPEECH

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Commemorative artefacts purportedly speak – they communicate messages to their audience, even if no words are uttered. Sometimes, such artefacts purportedly communicate demeaning or pejorative messages about some members of society. The characteristics of such speech are, however, under-examined. I present an account of the paradigmatic characteristics of the speech of commemorative artefacts (or, "commemorative artefactual speech"), as a distinct form of political speech. According to my account, commemorative artefactual speech paradigmatically involves the use of an artefact by an authorised member of a group to declare the importance of remembering a subject, in virtue of some feature of the subject. Then, I outline a variety of ways that commemorative artefactual speech can go awry. Such speech can be unauthorised, involve unfair exclusion or incorrect identification, be aesthetically inadequate, invoke clandestine explanations, and be directed at inappropriate subjects. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of my account for resisting problematic commemorative artefactual speech.

1. Introduction

Recent philosophical attention has been directed at objectionable commemorations, especially monuments and statues. These commemorations are regarded as morally or politically objectionable in virtue of what or whom they honour. Much of the discussions about our responses to these commemorations begin from claim that the latter express hateful or pejorative messages. For instance, it has been argued that objectionable commemorations express derogatory views, declaring that some members of oppressed groups are inferior relative to others (Lai 2020; Lai 2022). Or that they publicly express disrespectful views (Archer & Matheson 2019; Lim 2020b; Schulz 2019) or inapt contempt for members of racially stigmatised groups (Bell 2022). Or that even that they are, or function like, slurs (Lai 2020; Shahvisi 2021). And so on (Burch-Brown 2022; Friedell & Liao 2022; Frowe 2019; Hobbs 2021; Lim & Lai 2024; Stemplowska 2021).

While there has been a fair amount of focus on *what* such commemorations say, there has been comparatively less attention directed at *how* they speak. In particular, the character of the speech of such commemorations has been relatively under-explored. In this paper, I offer an account of the key features of the speech of commemorative artefacts (or, "commemorative artefactual speech") in general, and a non-exhaustive outline of ways that such speech can be problematic. Through this, we see that (and how) commemorative artefactual speech is a distinct form of political speech. The thrust of the project is clarificatory. However, clarifying the structure of commemorative artefactual speech can help us to identify potential sites of resistance. In that respect, the analytic project serves an ameliorative project.[1]

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[1] For a discussion of the relationship between analytic and ameliorative projects in the context of race and gender, see (Haslanger, 2000).

I proceed as follows. In Section 2, I defend a general and idealised account of commemorative artefactual speech. I argue that commemorative artefactual speech paradigmatically involves the use of an artefact by an authorised member of a group to commemorate a given subject in virtue of some feature. In Section 3, I consider how commemorative artefactual speech can go awry, paying particular attention to the situation in which a subject is unworthy of commemoration. Because of the nature of my project – to map the contours of commemorative artefactual speech and its problems – my discussions of each of the relevant aspects of commemorative artefactual speech are necessarily brief. The depth of my discussions of each of these aspects is guided by what would best secure my overall aim. Fine-grained analyses enter only after the success of this project. I conclude in Section 5 with a list of questions engendered by my discussions.

Three quick clarifications are important. First, my examination of the character of commemorative artefactual speech does not commit me to the further claim that the only function of commemorative artefacts is speech. Indeed, such artefacts do a lot more than speech. For instance, we can think of commemorative artefacts as contributing to the material landscape in scaffolding and shaping people's affective experiences, or even their cognition more broadly (Archer 2024).

Second, commemorative artefacts – even if objectionable – typically exist as part of the physical background of people's lives. They are things that people encounter when they are engaged in other activities – such as on the way to work (in the case of monuments), or while making transactions (in the case of money), and so on. Because of this, they are generally unremarkable and inert especially for most residents (Kukla 2021: 79; Kukla 2022: 238–239). That commemorative artefacts typically do not engage our attention and appreciation in such ways, however, is a separate issue from what they say *when* our attention is directed at them. It is thus beside the point to mention, in response to complaints about problematic commemorative artefacts and their speech, that no one really pays attention to them. The project to elucidate the character of commemorative artefactual speech proceeds independently of sociological facts about our interactions with commemorative artefacts. Moreover, their general unremarkability is compatible with their being persistently salient and offensive to members of groups which were victimised by the subject of commemoration.

Third, I provide an account of the paradigmatic features of commemorative artefactual speech. These features should not be mistaken for necessary or sufficient conditions of a definition of such speech. Instead, they are the key features of paradigm cases of commemorative artefactual speech. A paradigm-case account improves on definitional accounts by allowing cases which lack "essential" features of a phenomenon to nonetheless count as instances of it. Whether any given case counts, will depend on further considerations such as the number of paradigmatic features they lack, or the interests that may be served or frustrated by counting them as part of any phenomenon, among others. Paradigm-case accounts allow us to avoid the trade of fantastical counter-examples that characterise discussions of definitions. It does so by inviting us to consider how cases which ostensibly deviate from what is paradigmatically present may nevertheless be connected to them in salient or interesting ways, and to reflect on the conditions that enable these connections – rather than dismiss them outright by definitional fiat.[2]

Relatedly, the features I discuss should not be mistaken for the felicity conditions for (something to count as) the speech act of commemorating. Several philosophers have proposed a speech act account of monuments, statues, and even public artefacts in general (Dixon 2022;

[2] For a discussion of the contrast between definitional and paradigm-case approaches, see (Brownlee 2004).

Friedell & Liao 2022; Kukla 2022; Scarre 2020). Drawing on J. L. Austin's terminology, they distinguish the speech of these artefacts at three levels – what they say (locutionary) or do (illocutionary), and their effects (perlocutionary). Their account is a welcome intervention in the ongoing neglect of the character of commemorative artefactual speech. I agree with their claim that the analyses of such speech can and should be more fine-grained – attending to the mechanisms of their speech, action, and effects. I am also open to the possibility that such speech is amenable to speech act analyses. However, I am cautious about the ease with which we can import Austin's framework to *commemorative artefactual speech in general,* where the category extends beyond statues and monuments in particular. Chief among the difficulties is identifying the relevant felicity conditions of commemorative artefactual speech, according to which the illocutionary act of commemoration succeed or fail. Unlike christening ships or marrying people, commemorative artefactual speech in general does not appear to be strongly governed by "accepted conventional procedures having a certain conventional effect". Nor do they involve procedures that regulate the "uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances" (Austin 1962: 14). The implausibility of there being such conventions is bolstered by the sheer variety of forms of commemorative artefacts, and of the ways that we engage in commemorative artefactual speech. Further, and even if such conventions exist, commemorative artefactual speech does not appear to be "void" when the speakers or artefacts involved depart from what typically happens, nor does it succeed in merely a "hollow" sense (Austin 1962: 14–17). Indeed, and as we shall see later, speech that explicitly and recognisably lacks or distorts any of the subsequent features can still count (and are often regarded) as commemorative artefactual speech. These concerns are, of course, not fatal to the speech act account of commemorative artefactual speech. Indeed, a "spiritually Austinian" account (Friedell & Liao 2022: 451) which does away with some of Austin's stricter commitments may do the job. However, that is not a project I undertake here.

2. Commemorative Artefactual Speech

In this section, I defend the following general account of the paradigmatic features of commemorative artefactual speech:

> Commemorative artefactual speech: With the use of an artefact, an authorised member of a group declares the importance of remembering a subject, in virtue of some feature of the subject.[3]

I clarify each of these aspects of the claim in turn.

2.1. Subject

In the context of commemorative artefacts, the subject typically refers to an individual – for instance, Christopher Codrington, Edward Colston, or Winston Churchill, among others. However, the subject can also refer to a group of individuals (for instance, soldiers who fought for the

[3] In my view, an artefact is (and becomes) a commemorative artefact in virtue of its being used for commemorative artefactual speech within a group. As such, the class of commemorative artefacts of a group is demarcated by what performs the specific social function of commemoration within that group. The metaphysics of this social kind is beyond the scope of this paper to defend.

Confederacy, or in a particular war), or to events (for instance, Independence Day, the end of war, and so on). Insofar as my interest is in giving an account of the speech of commemorative artefacts *in general*, I take a broad view of the referent of the subject of commemoration.

2.2. Artefact

The presentation of the subject in commemorative artefacts can vary. Commemorative artefacts typically comprise a direct representation of the subject (as when certain individuals are commemorated). However, they may comprise indirect representations of the subject (for instance, when the statue of a single soldier represents soldiers in general). They may also be non-representational (for instance, when an obelisk is established to commemorate dead soldiers). The form of the commemorative artefact can also vary. Commemorative artefacts can be tangible (such as money or memorials), or they can be intangible (such as sermons or songs). Of course, the speech of intangible commemorative artefacts can often be relatively less permanent compared to those of tangible commemorative artefacts. But a commemorative artefact can still be used for commemorative artefactual speech even if it is transient.

2.3. Importance

A commemoration, in its most basic sense, declares the importance of remembering a subject. This declaration is typically public, and often official – in the sense of being backed by common institutions. The relevant sense of importance may be cashed out in different ways. It may be important to remember the subject because of their significant achievements, because they made significant contributions to the group, or because their actions (almost/ could have/ indeed) adversely affected the group. The commemoration of the subject can take different forms. Typically, commemorative artefacts honour the subject – as in coins, stamps or statues dedicated to various people. They can sometimes repudiate or humiliate the subject – as in Guy Fawkes in the United Kingdom, or Qin Hui and Lady Wang in China. They can also lament the subject – as in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in the United States. Regardless of the specific form of commemoration, these artefacts are engaged in commemorative artefactual speech.[4]

A further indication of the importance of remembering the subject of commemoration, is found in a further feature of commemorative artefacts. They are typically not set up as snapshots or records of a community's valuational attitudes towards a subject at a certain point in time. Instead, they are designed and intended to speak in perpetuity.[5] Indeed, many of them are accompanied by inscriptions to that effect – such as "Lest we forget" on war memorials – or public statements explicitly stating the importance of remembering the subject in perpetuity. This intention also explains the choice material for many commemorative artefacts. Typically, very durable materials are chosen for such artefacts – metal, stone, and the like – to convey that the speech is intended to persist through time, and serve as (often literally) concrete reminders for future generations (Nguyen 2019: 978).

[4] We should resist the claim that we 'build statues *only* to those people whom also we think it fitting to admire' (Frowe 2019: 5, my emphasis). More generally, commemorations can be marshalled in service of a variety of goals.

[5] Such intention is distinct from, and not reducible to, the intentions of those who commission or design commemorative artefacts. That is, it is part of the "artwork-meaning" rather than the "artist-meaning" (Friedell & Liao 2022: 446).

2.4. Authorisation

Another paradigmatic feature of commemorative artefactual speech is that it is made by a member of the group who possess the right kind of authorisation to engage in commemoration (a "commemorator"). [6] For my purposes, it is enough to adopt a basic view – authorised commemorators are representatives who speak on behalf of others in public (Pitkin 1967). This authorisation can be official – as when the position that the commemorator occupies is undergirded by formal (and often institutionalised) rules. This can include democratically elected public officials of, or even institutions within, the group. More broadly, the commemorator can even be the state (Tsai 2016). The authorisation can also be informal, as when someone purports to speak on behalf of all who identify as members of a certain group, or who share certain experiences.

There are many competing accounts about what representation comprises, each of which are accompanied by several problems (Dovi 2018). One of the most common problems, is how to specify representation in a way that does not exclude the views of some (typically minority or marginalised) members of a group. Here, I do not defend any specific account of representation, or any solutions to the problems faced by such an account. That is because we do not need any specific account of representation to understand the structure of commemorative artefactual speech. We can plug in whichever theory of representation we prefer into my account of commemorative artefactual speech, without affecting its general structure. We may safely pass the buck.[7]

2.5. Identification

At a basic level, commemorative artefactual speech conveys the claim that the subject is on the whole worth of being commemorated. This basic commemorative artefactual speech can be relatively crude (Frowe 2019: 6). Its success need not turn on its audience successfully identifying any (or all) the specific features in virtue of which the subject is being commemorated. Indeed, most people's interactions with commemorative artefacts are brief and shallow. Acknowledging this, many commemorative artefacts are designed – through their size or elevation, or the clarity of their depiction of the subject – to communicate at this basic level. That is, they deliver a basic point about the subject of commemoration, even if most other details are neglected.

However, commemorative artefacts also regularly identify and mention some feature in virtue of which a subject is being commemorated. As before, we should adopt a broad view of which features render any given subject commemorable. Different groups, and at different times, may reach different views about the set of such features. And depending on the content of the commemorative artefactual speech, these features can range from significant achievements or failures, remarkable exemplifications of virtues or vices, or simply being members of a certain class (such as the aristocracy), among others. Often, several features are identified and mentioned in the commemorative artefactual speech. For instance, significant achievements or failures are often easily connected to the virtues or vices of the subject. Thus, it is common to see commemorations of soldiers who perished in war mention not only their contribution to the war

[6] My focus on the commemorator who makes the commemorative artefactual speech, is compatible with the claim that the ultimate speaker – at least in democratically structured groups – is the group or the people as a whole (Kukla 2022; Nguyen 2019; Nili 2020). This highlights the potential divergence of authorisation and representativeness of the commemorator. I set these complications aside.

[7] Commemorative artefactual speech can also be constitutive of the group, in the sense of creating or contributing to the material conditions for the creation and sustenance of the group. I set this issue aside.

efforts, but also their bravery or willingness to sacrifice their lives for the country, or the values for which they fought, and so on.

The feature in concern need not be mentioned directly or explicitly. An example illustrates the point. The statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square in London portrays him standing atop a plinth with, simply, "CHURCHILL" inscribed on it. On the surface, this does not appear to identify or mention any feature of Churchill as commemorable. However, attending to the details of the statue reveals more information. First, the statue is located in Parliament Square, an open area before the Palace of Westminster that is home to statues of other well-known statespersons. Insofar as the statue of Churchill is situated in that space, it identifies and mentions his achievements as a statesperson.[8] Second, the statue shows Churchill wearing a military greatcoat, and standing with his hand resting on his walking stick. This pose is based on, and refers to, a well-known photograph of Churchill inspecting the damages to the Palace of Westminster after it was bombed during the biggest air raid by Germany on London during the Second World War. Insofar as this knowledge was commonly available at the point of the commemoration, it would be obvious to the audience that Churchill's achievements during the Second World War were being mentioned.

Two aspects of this example are generalisable. First, to fully understand commemorative artefactual speech, we must not attend to the commemorative artefact in isolation from its context. Referring to the earlier example, we see that an important part of understanding the commemorative artefactual speech of the statue of Winston Churchill, consists in grasping the prestige of it being established in Parliament Square, rather than in, say, a hotel lobby. More generally, it is against the backdrop of the context of the commemorative artefact, that we can identify the feature (or features) in virtue of which a subject is being commemorated. Second, the details of the commemorative artefact – especially how it is presented – are important for fine-grained identification of the feature (or features) in concern. Referring, again, to the earlier example, Churchill's pose in the statue reveals that he is being commemorated not simply for his achievements as a statesperson in general, but also especially for his achievements during the Second World War. Conventions of sculpture and art can also help to clarify which features are being identified or mentioned. Decisions about the material used, the poses taken by the figures represented, their facial expressions, and so on, are often made with reference to such conventions – whether in accordance with, or in defiance of them (Scarre 2020: 24). For instance, it is common for commemorations of soldiers to present them in a "heroic" pose, as a way of highlighting their bravery and sacrifice (Savage 2009; Savage 2018). The subtlety of such conventions means that the feature in concern can be identified and mentioned with a high level of granularity, at least by those who are aware of them.

Situating such artefacts in the relevant context, and attending to their details, reveals that commemorative artefactual speech can also be fine-grained, and even sophisticated. Of course, fully understanding the commemorative artefactual speech will, in many cases, require extensive knowledge. On this point, our intuitive thought in cases of ignorance is revealing. We do not think that the basic commemorative artefactual speech is all that there is. Instead, we think that there must be some feature of the commemorative artefact that can help us to precisely identify the feature in virtue of which a subject is being commemorated. Our ignorance impugns our full understanding of the commemorative artefactual speech, and not its structure.

[8] Or we *can reasonably infer that* it identifies and mentions his achievements as a statesperson. I do not undertake an exploration of the differences between the two formulations here.

2.6. Explanation

The identification and mention of the feature in concern is typically accompanied by an explanation of how that feature is connected to commemorating the subject. However, such explanation need not be explicit. Often, it is enough to simply mention the feature, without needing to offer any explicit explanation. This is because commemorative artefactual speech (like speech in general) operates against a backdrop of common assumptions and understandings. In the context of commemorative artefactual speech, such understandings concern which features of persons or events are commemorable. This obviates the need to provide explicit explanations.

The redundancy of explicit explanations extends, perhaps surprisingly, to circumstances where such common understandings are absent. Suppose, for example, that a subject is being commemorated for a particular feature, in a context where few people (if any) make the connection between that feature and someone's being commemorable. Even so, the commemorative artefactual speech of an artefact that commemorates the subject would be perfectly understandable as comprising two parts: the identification and mention of that feature, and an explanation of how that feature is connected to the subject being commemorated. Commemorative artefactual speech – at least in its basic form – succeeds upon the assumption that there is some plausible explanation. It does not require understanding what that explanation is. A stylised example illustrates the point. Suppose we encounter a commemorative artefact portraying some subject eating something, in a context absent common understandings about the connection between eating and one's commemorability. Even so, we face no difficulty in understanding the commemorative artefact and speech at a basic level. We simply assume that there exists some plausible explanation for how that subject's eating something is connected to commemorating them – perhaps because of their contribution to the food culture of the group, or the like. This assumption is, in part, licensed by (our knowledge of) the conventions of commemoration – that most if not all commemorative artefacts and speech are accompanied by some plausible explanation.

Despite the identification and mention of the feature in concern, the focus of the commemorative artefact usually remains squarely on the subject. Typically, the feature in concern is important insofar as it appears in an explanation for commemorating the subject. This makes intuitive sense – we are, after all, commemorating *the subject*. Briefly addressing an alternative view clarifies the point. We might think, upon looking at the statues in Parliament Square in London, think that the *actual* focus of those commemorations is on the feature of great statesmanship, rather than any given statesperson. That is, the commemorations of any given subject – and of similar subjects in general – serve only to indicate the significance of great statesmanship for the group. On this view, the subject is merely the "conduit" to the feature in concern. This view runs into a whole host of problems. Chief among them is a missing explanation for why any given subject has been selected for commemoration, rather than any other person possessing the feature in concern. That is, why do we commemorate only a few great statespersons, rather than all of them (whose lives and actions were important to the United Kingdom)?

In response to this, it is untenable to defend *Feature Specificity* – that the feature in concern is so specific (and, thus, so rare) that only a few subjects have ever possessed it. In the context of the statues in Parliament Square, there is no one feature that is so specific which is shared by all subjects, to the exclusion of others. Even the most specific formulation – great statesperson whose actions in a time of political crisis helped shape the course of British history for the better – is general enough to include many more historical figures than are actually commemorated, both in that specific space and in general across the country. Some explanation is still needed for why

some members of this set are commemorated, while others are not. It is also unsatisfactory to assert *Commemorative Promiscuity* – that we are, and should be, prepared to commemorate anyone who possesses the feature in concern. Considering our commemorative practices, the claim that we are indeed thus prepared, is simply mistaken. The claim that we should be, while potentially useful for guiding future commemorations, features in an account of what commemorative artefactual speech should be, rather than an explanation of what it paradigmatically is.[9]

3. Problematic Speech

The account of commemorative artefactual speech sketched out above is both general and idealised. In this section, and by considering actual commemorative artefacts and speech, I outline several ways (non-exhaustively) in which such speech can be problematic. Through these discussions, I precisify my account of commemorative artefactual speech.

3.1. Unauthorised Speech

Commemorative artefactual speech can be problematic when the commemorator lacks the relevant authorisation. That is, members of the group reject the commemorator's standing to speak on their behalf. This can be for a variety of reasons. At least in democratically structured groups, one such reason is the non-representativeness of the commemorator (or their views), with regards to the group as a whole (Kukla 2022: 245; Nguyen 2019: 979–980). It is important to note that the commemorator's lack of standing may be fine-grained. Members of the group may regard the commemorator as lacking the standing to speak on their behalf on a specific issue (pertaining to the commemoration of a particular subject), without regarding them as lacking such standing on other issues. More broadly, insofar as commemorative artefactual speech involves representative speech, it is susceptible to the problems that plague representation more broadly.

3.2. Unfair Exclusion

Commemorative artefactual speech is problematic when it unfairly excludes some commemorable subject. An example illustrates the point. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall commemorates the American soldiers who died in service during the Vietnam War. Even if we suppose that these soldiers are indeed commemorable, the commemorative artefactual speech and concern can nonetheless be problematic – it excludes people who are commemorable for the same reasons, such as Americans (especially women) who served as civilians or in non-combatant capacities, or soldiers from Allied nations, who likewise died in service during the Vietnam War. The addition of the Vietnam Women's Memorial (dedicated to women who served during the Vietnam War), and grouping the two artefacts as part of a broader, Vietnam Veterans Memorial, goes some way in addressing this problem. Nonetheless, when taken on their own, the artefacts engage in unfair

[9] A potential counterexample appears to be the *Monument to Ordinary People* in Helsinki, and those like it, that honours the day-to-day lives of ordinary people. However, the monument is explicitly presented as a protest against current commemorative practices. It does not, therefore, disrupt the paradigmaticity of the account of commemorative artefactual speech that I defend here.

exclusions.[10] We see here, then, that commemorative artefactual speech can be problematic not just by saying the wrong things, but also by failing to say *all* the right things. This imposes a fairly stringent requirement on commemorative artefactual speech, if it is to go well. In practice, most commemorative artefactual speech may be guilty of unfair exclusions.

More generally, a commemorative artefactual speech may be problematic if the subject of commemoration is a member of a group that has been historically and currently prioritised in commemorations, relative to members of other (especially marginalised) groups. This prioritisation may be in terms of the number of commemorative artefacts dedicated to the community to which the subject belongs, as when there are few (if any) commemorative artefacts dedicated to members of a minority group who nonetheless contributed to the group as a whole. Or it may be in terms of the relative prestige of the artefacts themselves or the sites in which they are established, as when the commemorative artefacts of members of minority groups are relatively trivial (such as stamps or small denominations of coins), or located in far-flung places in the country rather than near centres of power in the city. In such cases, the commemorative artefactual speech is problematic in virtue of being a part of, and contributing to, an exclusionary commemorative landscape.[11]

3.3. Incorrect Identification

Commemorative artefactual speech goes astray when it identifies or mentions some feature that is not possessed by the subject. It can also be problematic when it refers to some subject that does not exist. For instance, the statue of John Harvard at Harvard University – upon which the words "JOHN HARVARD", "FOUNDER", and "1638" are inscribed – is known as the statue of three lies. First, the likeness of the statue is not actually that of John Harvard – no living representations of Harvard exist, and a different person's likeness was used for the statue. Second, Harvard was not the founder but merely the first major benefactor. Third, Harvard University was founded in 1636; the year inscribed refers instead to the date of Harvard's donation. While such cases can sometimes be accidental, often they are attempts to lie about the subject of commemoration. We might think of the numerous statues dedicated to soldiers of the Confederacy as being engaged in the latter project (Savage 2009; Savage 2018; Upton 2015).

Diagnosing whether commemorative artefactual speech is problematic in these senses, requires background knowledge about the subject and whether they indeed possessed the features in concern. Where the relevant knowledge is absent – whether lost or deliberately obscured – the diagnosis may be difficult or even impossible to make. In practice, and especially in the case of ancient commemorative artefacts the knowledge about which we have lost, the commemorative artefactual speech in concern may not be fully understandable.

3.4. Aesthetic Inadequacy

Recall that the aesthetic features of a commemorative artefact can help us to identify and mention – and with greater granularity – the feature or features in virtue of which a subject is being

[10] Such rectificatory moves, even if partial, are not always easy to make. For instance, the addition of the Women's Memorial faced systematic and significant resistance from those who claimed either that the existing commemorative artefactual speech already implicitly included such women, or made slippery slope arguments about where such concessions to special-interest groups would end (Gallagher 2006).

[11] I address this issue at length elsewhere.

commemorated. Commemorative artefactual speech can thus be problematic if these aesthetic features are inadequate for such purposes. This inadequacy can take a variety of forms; I briefly discuss two of them.

First, the aesthetic features of a commemorative artefact can be irrelevant to the feature in virtue of which a subject is being commemorated. Consider, for instance, The Embrace (established in 2022) – a commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King. The sculpture depicts four disembodied and intertwined arms, representing the hug that was shared by the Kings after the former was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. The Embrace has been widely criticised for its aesthetic failures – that it fails to depict the Kings in full, and that it is ugly and even appears pornographic when viewed from some angles. Moreover, and perhaps more pertinently, the artefact fails to specifically identify the Kings (or to adequately differentiate between them), and fails to identify the relevant feature or features of Martin Luther King that resulted in him being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (insofar as his love for his wife does not seem relevant in such a way).

On a conciliatory note, we may think that the *basic* commemorative artefactual speech succeeds in cases such as this. Despite the absence of aesthetic details that can help us to identify the features in virtue of which a subject is commemorated, we nonetheless can secure the claim that the subject is on the whole worthy of commemoration. While this is plausible, an important mistake has nonetheless been made – which centres on the irrelevance of the aesthetic details to the commemorable feature. To sharpen the problem, consider a commemorative artefact honouring a public figure who dedicated their lives to charitable work, but which depicts them as engaging in their favourite hobby of fly-fishing. While this artefact may succeed in capturing something distinctive about their personality (or their person as a whole), it nonetheless fails to identify the features in virtue of which they are being commemorated. Our discontent with such an artefact suggests that the connection between the aesthetic details of the commemorative artefact, and the feature in virtue of which a subject is being commemorated, needs to be closely connected.[12]

Second, a commemorative artefact may be problematic if it fails to adhere to accepted aesthetic conventions – including those of commemoration it particular, but also sculpture or art more generally. Consider, again, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. At the point of its creation, it was customary to commemorate soldiers by presenting them in the "heroic" pose, as a way of honouring their bravery and sacrifice. The Wall deviated from this convention – listing the names of deceased soldiers on black granite panels reminiscent of tombstones. In so doing, the Wall identifies and mentions their death *sans* glory. Its aesthetic features – especially their deviation from convention – was regarded as constitutive of its failure to make the "right" or "appropriate" kind of commemorative artefactual speech with regards to fallen soldiers. Because of this, the Wall was initially regarded as an insult to the soldiers – a "black gash of shame". People tried to block the construction of the Wall. Indeed, the public outcry was Objectionable Commemorations: Ethical and Political Issues so severe that a decision was made to erect an accompanying statue – Three Soldiers – near the Wall depicting three soldiers in line with the prevailing aesthetic conventions (Griswold 2007: 201–210; Savage 2009: 276). Of course, aesthetic conventions are neither static nor dictatorial. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall was eventually regarded as making an appropriate kind of commemorative artefactual speech about soldiers. Accompanying such success is the possibility for future commemorative artefacts to mirror or reference the aesthetic features of the Wall.

[12] I thank a reviewer for the example, and for pressing me to clarify the complication.

3.5. Clandestine Explanation

Recall that the explanation of the relationship between a subject and the feature in virtue of which they are being commemorated, needs not be explicit. Where we lack the relevant knowledge, we tend to simply assume that there exists some plausible explanation of the connection between the feature in concern and a subject's commemorability. This assumption is licenced by (our knowledge of) the conventions of commemoration. It is bolstered by the recognition that the commemorative artefactual speech is made by an authorised member of the group, and typically under the auspices of common institutions, or the state more generally. In practice, this tendency is ripe for abuse.

A commemorator could exploit the audience's assumption that there exists some plausible explanation, to obscure the fact that there exists no accepted connection between a given feature and a subject's commemorability. This sets a precedence for valuing that feature in a certain way – as being worthy of commemoration – if the latter does not already occur in the group. In so doing, the commemoration adds – and induces its audience to assume as plausible – a claim about the connection between the feature in concern and one's commemorability, to the group's common ground – the set of propositions (among others) shared by the members of the group. The optionality of providing an explicit explanation, means that the commemorative artefactual speech's contribution to the common ground could be made under-the-radar, or through the back-door (Langton 2018). This optionality can also mask the potential controversiality of the connection between the feature in concern and one's commemorability. Subsequent commemorators may then rely on this to push through the commemoration of some other subjects in virtue of their possession of that feature.

Here, it is important to note that the illicit character of such commemorative artefactual speech pertains only to its exploitation of this specific feature concerning the optionality of explanation. Such exploitation can serve progressive or regressive goals. A set of examples illustrate the point. Suppose that through an artefact, a commemorator honours a subject in virtue of caregiving, in a society where there exists no connection between caregiving and commemorability. If successful, they induce in their audience the belief in the plausibility of that connection. Other like-minded individuals can build upon this precedence to (slowly) dismantle people's derisive attitude towards caregiving. Or suppose, in the other direction, that a commemorator honours a subject for their racist actions. Their commemorative artefactual speech could likewise contribute to a shift in the common ground. It is in this way that commemorative artefactual speech can sometimes be seen as self-fulfilling prophecies (Upton 2015: 20–21).

As should be clear, this abuse can also be present in circumstances where the connection between a given feature and one's commemorability runs counter to existing beliefs within the group, or the beliefs of the group as a whole (as opposed to there being no such accepted connection). In these circumstances, a commemorator could disrupt or weaken the existing beliefs by through their commemorative artefactual speeches. Again, such exploitation can serve progressive or regressive goals. A commemorator could commemorate a subject for their warring achievements in a society that has typically commemorated peacemakers, or they could do the reverse. A simplified example illustrates the point. Statues of Confederate soldiers in the United States were mostly established in the century after the Civil War, as 'a bulwark against suggestions that white southerners had waged an immoral war while defending the institution of slavery, secession, and white supremacy', and to rehabilitate the public perception of the moral character or virtues of those who fought for the Confederacy (Brundage, 2018, p. 325). Here, we may see

these commemorative artefacts as attempting to establish the value and commemorability of those who are otherwise judged unfavourably.

3.6. Inappropriate Subject

The scenario that a given subject is not worthy of commemoration is the primary focus of extensive recent discussions of a certain class of commemorative artefacts (e.g. monuments and statues). It is claimed that such commemorative artefactual speech express contemptuous, derogatory, insulting, or even slurring views about certain individuals (especially in virtue of their group membership). Consider the statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square. Per our earlier discussions, it appears to only commemorate Churchill for his achievements as a statesperson during the Second World War. Nonetheless, this statue has been subject to multiple protests and vandalism attempts, on the basis that it expresses certain negative views. The challenge is to make sense of such claims on my account of commemorative artefactual speech.

To heighten the challenge, I posit that the problem with a commemorative artefactual speech directed at an inappropriate subject is distinct from the aforementioned problems. That is, it is not reducible to the commemorator's lack of authorisation, or the speech's unfair exclusion of commemorable others, incorrect identifications, or illicit explanations. Of course, any given commemoration of an inappropriate subject may also be guilty of these problems – in which case the problems with such commemorative artefacts are compounded.

Some background information about Churchill is relevant for specifying the problem. His ruthless policies led to a famine resulting in millions of deaths in Bengal in 1943. He responded to criticism of these policies by blaming the Bengalis for causing their own over-population. He also was a white supremacist. Further examples of his racism abound (Addison 1980; Limaye 2020). It is against the backdrop of such information about Churchill as a statesperson (or even more generally, as a person) that we should situate his commemoration. More generally, the claim that a subject is commemorable in virtue of some feature, is always made against the backdrop of their other features.

According to the discussions so far, the content of commemorative artefactual speech appears *minimal* – only that the subject is commemorable in virtue of some feature, where that feature is indeed commemorable (typically laudable), along with some explanation of the relationship between that feature and commemorability. Given this, it appears morally innocuous to commemorate – specifically, to honour – people like Churchill for their great statesmanship. Indeed, this appears to be the primary defence made by those seeking to preserve problematic commemorative artefacts, including that of Churchill. However, problems arise when we situate this commemorative artefactual speech in light of those morally or politically problematic features of a given subject – especially those that concern their responsibility for serious injustices. Choosing to focus on and honour a subject in virtue of a laudable feature, offers an implicit explanation of the relationship between that laudable feature and the subject's problematic features. Specifically, that those problematic features are not significant enough to *disqualify* the subject as being worthy of honouring. In the context of the statue of Churchill, the commemorative artefactual speech offers the explanation that his racism and white supremacy are insignificant relative to his statesmanship during the Second World War, and do not disqualify him from being honoured. The existence of this explanation fits with, and is accounted for by, one of the aforementioned features of commemorative artefactual speech – that the focus remains squarely

on the subject. In the case here, the commemorative artefactual speech is that *Churchill* is honourable despite whatever else he has done.[13]

We see, then, that the supposed minimal content of commemorative artefactual speech is an illusion. Even when commemorations of a given subject make explicit reference to some specific feature, they are nonetheless always made in the broader context of the other features of that subject. The commemoration of a given subject thus declares, in addition, that those other features are not significant enough to disqualify the subject's being commemorated, and more generally, that they do not disqualify one's commemorability. As should be clear, this is especially problematic when the commemoration of the subject takes the form of honouring them.

The additional claim concerning the relationship between these features can in some circumstances be connected to a broader view within a given group. Again, in the context of Churchill, we may see this claim as being arguably connected to a broader view – supported by public policies and the organisation of common institutions, among others – that systematically devalues or discriminates against certain individuals in virtue of their ethnic or racial membership. That a commemorative artefactual speech offers such an explanation may, in addition, be regarded as entrenching such a view – by way of reiterating the latter. The explanation is sometimes not kept implicit. In some circumstances, as with the Confederate monuments established to posthumously valorise the Confederate cause, it may be issued explicitly.

This explanation, if implicit, can in some circumstances be missed – such as when there is a lack of general knowledge about the subject of commemoration, or what they have done. As suggested above, this lack of general knowledge may be the result of loss across time, or of deliberate obfuscation. For instance, a systematic and pervasive whitewashing of Churchill's life and actions in textbooks and public discourse, may lead the British public to neglect the explanation offered by the commemoration, and thus fail to notice the problematic character of the latter. That the explanation can be missed, however, is a separate issue from the fact that it has nonetheless been offered. In this narrow sense, commemorative artefactual speech can be morally and politically problematic even if no one picks up on the explanation.

3.6.1. Interpretive Context

My discussion hitherto proceeds on the assumption that the context of interpreting and understanding commemorative artefactual speech, is the context of the speech's utterance (that is, at and around the context in which the commemorative artefact is created). However, the contexts of establishment and of interpretation are distinct. Most obviously, people can encounter commemorative artefacts and speech long after the contexts of their creation. There is, then, a question of which context is relevant for understanding commemorative artefactual speech. Indeed, it is often in such circumstances that the issue of inappropriate subjects purportedly arise – current members of a given group judge (because of new moral codes or the discovery of disqualifying information) that the subject of commemoration is inappropriate, contrary to the views of historical members.

My view is that commemorative artefactual speech should be understood with reference to the context of their establishment. Two caveats are important.

[13] The problems with *honouring* Churchill do not defeat the project of *commemorating* him, if the latter is understood as involving an honest recognition of his contributions – whether good or bad. More generally, I set aside questions arising from when a subject's involvement in injustices disqualify them from being appropriate subjects of honour. For further discussions, see (Archer & Matheson 2022).

First, fixing the context of interpretation at the context of establishment allows us to remain clear-sighted when commemorative artefacts are hijacked. Consider a commemorative artefact (in the form of a monument) honouring an appropriate subject. Suppose that the monument is now the meeting ground of a hate group that hijacks and uses it – based on their fantastical and ungrounded interpretation of the subject to which the commemorative artefact refers – as a rallying symbol for their hateful views. Understanding the commemorative artefactual speech in the current context is simply mistaken. The commemorative artefact does not speak in support of such views. The actions of the hate group do not alter the *content* of the commemorative artefactual speech. Insisting otherwise obscures the fact that the commemorative artefact has been *hijacked* by the hate group. That this is so, however, does not commit us to any specific view about what we should do about hijacked commemorative artefacts. Our responses to hijacked commemorative artefacts can in some cases licence inferences about how we evaluate the hijacking, and more generally, how we rank the importance of free expression or protecting minorities, among others. What can be *inferred from our actions*, however, is distinct from what the commemorative artefact says.

Second, contexts of establishment typically already contain enough resources to understand (and indeed criticise) commemorative artefactual speeches as problematic. Consider the oft-made claim (especially within public discourse) that the actions of certain subjects were not considered to be problematic – and much less as injustices – in their milieu. This claim is often accompanied by the diagnosis that contemporary complaints about that subject are due to the anachronistic application of contemporary moral standards to the past (Archer & Matheson 2024). These claims become much less plausible once we recognise that the subject's victims live in the same milieu (Moody-Adams 1997; Walker 2007). It would be peculiar, to say the least, if these victims regard the subject as commemorable (or even honourable) despite the latter's actions – especially if the injustices in concern are grave, such as forced familial separations or religious conversions, or genocide. The claim, then, is one which erases (and moreover entrenches the erasure of) the perspectives of victims. The claim gains plausibility only in contexts where there are genuine and global *revolutions* in moral codes, such that actions which were regarded as unproblematic even by the subject's victims are now regarded as problematic. This concession, however, does not licence us to say of many actual commemorative artefacts and speeches – such as that involving Churchill – that they are unproblematic.

3.6.2. Nearby Accounts

With this in hand, we can distinguish my account from some nearby accounts about the problem with commemorative artefacts of inappropriate subjects.

First, my account elaborates on and specifies the claims that such commemorative artefacts "convey", "declare" or "express" certain views. By elucidating the structure of such speech, I have clarified how exactly commemorative artefacts speak. They do not express hateful speech directly. Instead, they typically make a seemingly minimal claim about the commemorability of a given subject. The morally pernicious views enter at the point where we juxtapose such commemorative artefactual speech with other morally or politically problematic features of the subject.

Second, consider the claim that the problem with objectionable commemorative artefactual speech is that they are expressive of a disrespectful ideology that corresponds to some "existing and wrongful social hierarchy" (Schulz 2019: 2).[14] Thus, Schulz says of commemorations of Julius

[14] Schulz is not clear on this issue, oscillating between "correspondence" and "expressive connection". He does not specify either term.

Caesar that they are unproblematic – even though Caesar led a massacre of the Germanic Tencteri and Usipetes tribes, whom he considered barbarians, the underlying ideology does not correspond to any existing and wrongful social hierarchy between Germans and Italians. Schulz is right to say that commemorative artefactual speech which corresponds to an existing and wrongful social hierarchy is problematic on that basis. However, he neglects that commemorative artefactual speech which lacks such a correspondence, may nonetheless offer its audience an explanation comprising a morally and politically problematic view. In the context of commemorations of Caesar, we may say that the commemorative artefactual speech offers the explanation that not only that Romans (present day Italians) are superior to Germans in particular, but also that there is a hierarchy of human beings in general, and that such a hierarchy can be based on their ethnic or national membership (Frowe 2019: 23–24). The latter, I take it, is problematic disregarding its connection to any existing and wrongful social hierarchy. Of course, and on a conciliatory note, this is not to say that the problem with certain commemorative artefactual speeches is not exacerbated by their connection to such hierarchies.

Third, consider the claim that commemorative artefactual speech is equivalent, or function similarly, to slurs (Lai 2020; Shahvisi 2021). For instance, Arianne Shahvisi argues that objectionable commemorations "whose illocutionary acts involve the glorification of racism and colonialism often have the perlocutionary effect of entrenching racism and diminishing the suffering of racialised groups" (Shahvisi 2021: 462). I agree that objectionable commemorations can sometimes indeed have the perlocutionary effects of slurs. My account also specifies how some commemorative artefactual speeches can "involve" pejorative views. Where we differ, is with the claim that the problem with objectionable commemorations is that they involve the "glorification" of pejorative views. Per our earlier discussions of the statue of Churchill, the problem arises with the explanation that those who are responsible for serious injustices or held pejorative views are nonetheless honourable. That is, these features do not disqualify them from being honoured. This is distinct from, and falls short of, glorifying those injustices or pejorative views directly. Commemorative artefactual speech can be problematic on my account, without being problematic on Shahvisi's terms. Again, on a conciliatory note, they can be problematic in both ways.

A brief foray into the literature on slurring speech clarifies the difference between our accounts. Slurs are typically insults directed at individuals based on their group membership, which can include "race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ability, politics, immigrant status, geographic region" (Dovi 2018), among others. One important aspect of slurs is that the speaker typically cannot erase a slur's insult – its negative evaluation component – with a follow-up claim stating the opposite (Camp 2013; Hom 2008). Thus, for instance, the following statement is internally contradictory and makes no sense: "They gave my job to a ch*nk, but I don't mean to suggest that there is anything bad about being Chinese". This is because the slur is necessarily and inextricably connected to a pejorative view about the relevant individual based on their group membership. One cannot understand the slur in isolation from the pejorative view. In contrast, and as my account makes clear, one can without contradiction understand commemorative artefactual speech in isolation from any pejorative view (about the victims of the injustice which the subject of commemoration was responsible for), and even in isolation from its background context.

Indeed, and referring to public discourse, we see that those who seek to preserve objectionable commemorations are quick to exploit the isolability of a particular commemorative artefactual speech from any particular pejorative view, in a bid to deflect criticisms of their endorsements of such views. For instance, many preservationists assert that objectionable

commemorations – such as the Confederate battle flag or statues of Confederate soldiers – do not (explicitly) convey any pejorative views (Matthes 2018). Instead, the speech of such artefacts is purportedly narrow – they commemorate only certain features of their subjects. My account clarifies why it is difficult to respond to such moves. Because of the isolability of a commemorative artefactual speech from any particular pejorative view, those who defend objectionable commemorations (and commemorative speakers, more generally) can without contradiction deny the connection between them. This is typically achieved by asserting that they have no intention to make any pejorative claims, much less that they are committed to the latter. Those who wish to challenge their defence, typically must make explicit the relevant explanations implicit in the seemingly minimal commemorative artefactual speech. That is, their challenge typically is meta-linguistic – addressing not the speech directly, but the speech in the broader context of other neglected features of the subject of commemoration, as well as the explanation of the relationship between the laudable and morally or politically problematic features of the subject. Because of that, however, these challengers open themselves up to the (bad-faith) accusation either of changing the topic, or of making and imputing the explanation themselves.

My account does not let such preservationists of the hook. The isolability of commemorative artefactual speech from such views is distinct from – and, importantly, does not erase – the fact that the commemorative artefactual speech nonetheless offers a morally or politically problematic explanation. Preservationists thus cannot rely on isolability to defend the claim that certain commemorative artefactual speeches are unproblematic, in service of their preservationist endeavours.

4. (Political) Conclusions

To reiterate, I have defended the following:

> Commemorative artefactual speech: With the use of an artefact, an authorised member of a group declares the importance of remembering a subject, in virtue of some feature of the subject.

I then discussed the ways (non-exhaustively) in which commemorative artefactual speech can be problematic:

(a) The commemorator is unauthorised to engage in commemoration;
(b) the commemorative artefactual speech unfairly excludes other subjects who/which are commemorable for the same reason;
(c) the feature in concern or subject is incorrectly identified;
(d) the artefact possesses inappropriate aesthetic features for identifying and mentioning the feature in virtue of which the subject is being commemorated;
(e) there lacks a plausible explanation for the subject's commemorability;
(f) there are morally objectionable features of the subject that disqualify their being worthy of commemoration (especially honouring); and
(g) the commemorative artefactual speech is part of an exclusionary commemorative landscape.

The problems with commemorative artefactual speech are several and often severe. We have good reasons to avoid them (when creating new commemorative artefacts) or to rectify them (when dealing with existing commemorative artefacts). In this way, we can regard them as presumptions against creating new commemorative artefacts, and against preserving them as they are. However, these presumptions are not always conclusive – they are not always fatal to our commemorative endeavours. In many cases we may have strong moral or political reasons – such as those in transitional societies striving towards peace (Blustein 2014; Fabre 2016) – to establish or retain commemorative artefacts, even though they are not perfect. That this is so, however, should not obscure the fact that the commemorations are nonetheless problematic.

Because of the nature of my project – to map the contours of commemorative artefactual speech and its problems – my discussions of each aspect of commemorative artefactual speech have been necessarily brief. Nonetheless, they provide ample ground for subsequent fine-grained analyses. For instance, what are the relevant qualifying criteria or processes for someone to be authorised to engage in commemorative artefactual speech? What principle of inclusion is at play when determining whether the commemorative artefact is unfairly exclusionary? What kinds and extent of incorrect identifications can be tolerated? How exactly do the aesthetic features of commemorative artefacts relate to the success of their speech? What undergirds our evaluation of clandestine explanations? At what point do the unjust actions of any given subject disqualify them from being worthy of commemoration? What considerations can override the commemoration of an inappropriate subject? At what point does any given commemorative artefact become part of a problematic commemorative landscape? And we can ask of each of these aspects of commemorative artefactual speech, whether they generate duties that when unfulfilled render commemorative artefactual speech wrongful. And so on. There are also further questions about the relationships between and among different aspects of commemorative artefactual speech. For instance, might a commemorator's authority to engage in commemorative artefactual speech mitigate aesthetic inadequacy, by forcing a change in the aesthetic conventions through which we interpret commemorative artefacts? Might the need to avoid unfair exclusion in a specific case come into tension with the need to maintain a fair commemorative landscape? Might deploying clandestine explanations for progressive purposes override our concerns about inappropriate subjects? And so on. We see, then, that this map of commemorative artefactual speech is generative of, and supports, further exploration. Moreover, it provides a framework for sorting through the budding literature on commemorative artefactual speech.

By way of concluding, I outline two implications of my account for resisting problematic commemorative artefactual speech. First, philosophers have suggested various ways of responding to problematic commemorative artefacts, including removal (Frowe 2019; Schulz 2019), education and contextualisation (Rossi 2020; Schulz 2019; Shahvisi 2021; Sypnowich 2021), counter-memorialisation, vandalism (Bell 2022; Lai 2020; Lim 2020a; Lim 2020b) or other artistic interventions (Dixon 2022), among others (Lim & Lai 2024). My account clarifies how each of these candidate responses are unlikely to address all the problems with commemorative artefactual speech. For instance, while removing commemoratives artefacts with inappropriate subjects can mitigate or eliminate their potentially pernicious effects, it does not address their aesthetic inadequacies or the unfair exclusion of commemorable others. The vandalism of commemorative artefacts may fail to remove the badness of the accompanying explanations of the connection between a subject's laudable and problematic features, and also leave unaddressed the problems with an unfair commemorative landscape. And so on. My account, then, lends support to a pluralistic approach towards resisting problematic commemorative artefactual speech. Often, we

may find it necessary to concurrently deploy several responses to any given commemorative artefact. How we choose among these options will depend on fine-grained analyses of specific cases. Our decisions cannot be made in advance of the facts, nor about commemorative artefacts in general. This, I hope, constitutes a response on behalf of activists whose responses to, or actions against, commemorative artefacts are often criticised for being partial or incomplete.

Second, my account shows that each aspect of commemorative artefactual speech is connected to, and supported by, broader structures. These include our understanding of who has the authority to commemorate, who can be fairly excluded, which artistic conventions constrain us, who what is worthy of commemoration, and so on. This is unsurprising, albeit neglected. More broadly, the creation and persistence of commemorative artefacts, like most (if not all) aspects of our material world, depends on the setup of our institutions and social practices. These include institutions that, among other things: differentiate between official and unofficial commemorations, and delineate the processes of the former; determine the range of legal actions in relation to such artefacts (such as laws against defacing banknotes or monuments, or policies regulating what modifications can be made to historical buildings, among others); direct the activities that are required to monitor and preserve the physical states of some of these artefacts (especially historical buildings, or public monuments). This reveals numerous further avenues for political resistance, beyond targeting commemorative artefacts directly. It also suggests that the narrow focus on commemorative artefacts – if not accompanied by sustained political resistance directed at the broader structures – may in the end be myopic and even Sisyphean.

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