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Suspended Identification: *Atopos* and the Work of Public Memory

Joshua Reeves

ABSTRACT

As commemorative artifacts have come to saturate our public culture, many scholars have revisited the question of genre and the commemorative experience. Responding to this work, I argue that by subverting the commonplaces of our commemorative culture, certain works of public memory have the capacity to suspend audiences in a deferred event of identification. I describe the creative potential of this process by arguing that when compelled to forge common ground with an *atopon* (out-of-place) work of public memory, one can be unsettled in one's ordinary habits and resituated toward the world and toward others. By redescribing the problem of identification as it relates to the disruption of our everyday rhetorical encounters, this article's significance extends beyond public memory and suggests the transformative potential of suspense and the out-of-place in our broader rhetorical culture.

KEYWORDS: Public Memory, Identification, Rhetoric, Commemorative Experience, Hermeneutics.

In the vicinity of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be.

—Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*

In “the age of commemoration” (Stone 2010), it is ironic that we have developed such an affective immunity to the commemorative artifacts that fill our cities.

In downtown Washington, Boston, or Philadelphia, many pedestrians stroll past a dozen or more memorials in a single afternoon, usually failing to pay much attention to the specific historical calling they make. Outside the ritualistic and consumptive settings where tourists encounter a city's most popular monuments, many artifacts of public memory simply blend into the mundane architectural atmosphere that surrounds them. As John Berger has pointed out, works of art—and in this context we might specify works of public memory—have come to surround us “in the same way language surrounds us” (1977, 32). While it can be argued that this growing cultural investment in public memory is a positive development, it is somewhat troubling that commemorative artifacts, like language, have become transparent in their ubiquity. Yet this transparency is not simply a quantitative problem. It is, just as importantly, a problem of generic reproduction and conventional conformity. Our commemorative sites provide a compelling illustration of how the widespread reproduction of formal conventions can have a stifling impact on our rhetorical culture. Commonplace forms of public memory—such as equestrian statues, obelisks, and monuments embodying a stale, populist realism—have taken on this invisible prevalence, as they are frequently erected at the expense of more innovative rhetorical forms (Plagens 1996).

As John Durham Peters has argued, an important measure of our cultural vitality is the extent to which our public artifacts evoke critical engagement. Peters argues that an animal “might see a sculpture, say, as a piece of stone useful for shelter or other purposes but could not recognize it as a ‘sculpture,’ as an object enjoying a standing and meaning not exhausted by its animal uses and as belonging to a given community or given moment in the history of the human species. To recognize it as a work of art or human expression is to be a member of a world in which the sculpture has meaning and to be capable of practices of intelligent participation” (1999, 116). For Peters, to “recognize” an artifact is not to simply catch it in the corner of one's eye while walking to work; instead, it is the capacity to relate that artifact to an unfolding historical and cultural horizon that transcends the confines of one's individual experience. In this sense, to recognize an artifact of public memory is to become unsettled in the everydayness of one's present, such that a renewed pathos of community comes to inform how one lives toward others. In the age of commemoration, however, when the vast majority of commemorative artifacts allow us to continue on our way undisturbed, it is rare that a work of public memory opens the space for this kind of transformation.

By examining the production of affective experience in the age of commemoration, this article contributes to a growing literature on the conditions

of legibility and identification in commemorative spaces (e.g., Balthrop, Blair, and Michel 2010, Blair and Michel 2001, and Gallagher and LaWare 2010). I approach this problem by describing the rhetorical implications of widespread generic reproduction in our commemorative culture. As others have illustrated (Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci 1991 and Foss 1986, for example), this highly conventional rhetoric elicits a detached or generalized response, as audiences tend to experience these artifacts as representatives of a generic class rather than as unsettled (and unsettling) spaces of cultural terrain that, in the words of James Young, “weave themselves into the course of ongoing events” (1993, 12). Yet as these authors point out, there are many provocative, unorthodox memorials that have the potential to disrupt this everyday experience of the commemorative. By violating the social contract of genre, these works challenge observers to invest themselves more vulnerably in the interpretive act (see Kellner 2008, 218), helping constitute a unique material forum in which the commemorated past ruptures the present of an experiencing subject. My analysis of this process pivots on the productive interplay of two concepts from rhetorical theory, *atopos* and identification. Since at least the time of Plato, *atopos*—which designates the out of place—has come to signify not only provocative and novel rhetoric but also the temporary “displacement” that such rhetoric can foster in its audiences. I situate *atopos* alongside identification, which has been theorized through the lenses of place and “common ground” by Kenneth Burke, Judith Butler, and others. In this article, I offer an account of *suspended* identification by describing the process by which *atopon* works of public memory can confuse and displace their observers, initiating a temporally suspended identification drive that is only fulfilled when one subdues the alterity of the rhetorical act with which one has been confronted. Yet this is not a subjective displacement of alterity; it is a creative restructuring of common ground *with* the encountered other. At the culmination of this process, then, one comes to feel newly in place vis-à-vis one’s rearranged and recharged surroundings. By redescribing the problem of identification as it relates to the rupture of our everyday grounding in the world, this article’s significance extends beyond public memory, suggesting the transformative potential of suspense and the out of place in our broader rhetorical culture.

GENRE, COMMONPLACE, AND THE COMMEMORATIVE ACT

As public memory studies has grown in popularity, many scholars have noted the tensions that constrain artworks exhibited in public spaces. The

term “public art,” indeed, seems fraught with ambivalence. Art is often held to be the preserve of experts and critics, while the public is composed of “the rest of us”—those who, in the eyes of many commentators, simply do not understand or appreciate challenging or unsettling art. According to artist Peter Plagens, this tension has resulted in a crisis in which the apparent sensibilities of the public are politically mobilized against the creativity of the public artist: “[Public art] usually doesn’t work in a society like ours. And by ‘doesn’t work,’ I mean that the enterprise called ‘public art’ has little chance of producing either monuments capable of earning consensus appreciation from a wide public or toothy, edgy art to be appreciated by a smaller, more specialized audience. . . . The subtle burden placed on the new public art by the society that sponsors it is unbearable” (1995, 58, 65). As Plagens’s critique implies, often central to this debate is a disagreement over the characteristics and tastes of “the public,” with many authorities arguing that public art should avoid creative excess in order to remain easily accessible to the pedestrian masses. Public art is thus often forced to occupy an ambiguous middle ground between the peculiar tastes of the public and the peculiar tastes of an artist class, where it is then assailed by critics on all sides. Frequently this conflict results in the erection of an obelisk, equestrian statue, or other common topos of public memory that simply recycles the conventions and themes found in countless other commemorative spaces.

This attraction to commonplace works of public memory has important consequences for our commemorative culture. As Sonja K. Foss has argued, it is difficult to see memorials cast in highly common generic forms as distinctive works with unique stories to share: “These traditional kinds of realistic depictions of a person, action, clothing, and facial expression suggest that these conventional statues are to be viewed as representative of a universal type. The soldier depicted is to be seen as wearing the uniform all soldiers wore, wearing the facial expression common to soldiers, and performing actions they all performed or were capable of performing. We are asked, at such memorials, to focus on a representative of a class and thus to see the [commemorated past] in abstract terms” (1986, 332). Since traditional commemorative topoi are perceived as merely reproducing a conventional type, their audiences are not challenged to bring anything from their own experiences into their interaction with the artifact. Having seen dozens of other grand equestrian statues, for example, observers feel that they have “been there before,” that the artifact at hand is somehow strangely familiar.

Yet Carole Blair, Marsha Jeppeson, and Enrico Pucci have identified a “multivalent” rhetoric of public memory that invites a multiplicity of commemorative responses, arguing that such memorials evoke in their audiences “an *interrogative, critical* stance. . . . They are ‘difficult,’ strewn with allusions . . . and cryptic in the extreme. Their rhetoric requires more than a glance; it demands engagement” (1991, 269, 271). Taking the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) in Washington, D.C., as an example of this multivalent commemorative rhetoric, Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci argue that a genre-defying “textual ‘difficulty’ enhances the Memorial’s capacity to evoke response” (1991, 272). By defying generic expectations, the VVM “provokes engagement; it is not easily consumed or immediately intelligible. Its rhetoric does not sanction a touristic, consumptive response; it invites an engaged and thoughtful reading” (278). The authors go on to contrast the “multiple and disjunctive” VVM with the ubiquitous generic realism in which so many memorials are cast (1991, 279). As Carole Blair and Neil Michel (2001) have argued, this formal contrast demands a reevaluation not only of commemorative rhetoric but also of commemorative practice itself. In an eloquent redescription of the commemorative work’s rhetorical task, they assert that “public commemoration, when effective, solicits reactions of proximity and participation from its audience. It invites us to confront our own values, to *reflect* on how we will integrate the loss of others’ lives as we live the remainder of our own. . . . Successful commemoration spaces engage us by asking us to think. Rather than tell us *what* to think, they invite us *to* think, to pose questions, to examine our experiences in relation to the memorial’s discourse” (2001, 189). By inviting us to examine our own experiences and prejudices as they relate to its rhetorical form, the “successful” work of public memory demands self-reflection and historical sensitivity. While there are certainly numerous gauges of a memorial’s success, Blair and Michel have identified an important measure of a memorial’s rhetorical utility: instead of imposing a rigid, univocal interpretation, many memorials have the potential to pull us into an interrogative position from which we can be resituated toward our futures, our pasts, and the everyday worlds in which we are embedded.

As Blair and Michel make clear, not only do memorials like the VVM reject the traditional tropes and representational logics of public memory; they also urge us to call into question the social and “commemorative” activities that take place at sites of commemoration. Just as generic works of public memory tend to elicit a detached, consumptive encounter, more subversive works have the potential to disturb the audience’s complacent,

everyday interpretive composites. If the traditional memorial's task is to console and calm, the task of the "countermonument," according to James Young, is to incite and discomfort. The countermonument, Young writes, flouts the cherished conventions of traditional commemorative forms: "Its aim is not to console but to provoke; not to remain fixed but to change; not to be everlasting but to disappear; not to be ignored by its passersby but to demand interaction; not to remain pristine but to invite its own violation and desecration. . . . By defining itself in opposition to the traditional memorial's task, the counter-monument illustrates concisely the possibilities and limitations of all memorials everywhere. In this way, it functions as a valuable 'counter-index' to the ways time, memory, and current history intersect at any memorial site" (1992, 277). The countermonument, therefore, transforms the commemorative act. Even the steadfast permanence of memory—an ideal that most steel and stone memorials take for granted—is dismissed through an invitation to "violation" and vandalism. Young thus emphasizes the pivotal role of the audience in the commemorative encounter: with the countermonument, the rhetorical and interpretive creativity of the audience—as opposed to the monolithic representational stability of the memorial itself—is paramount. The rhetoric of the countermonument, according to Young, "undermines its own authority by inviting and then incorporating the *authority* of passersby. . . . It remains the obligation of passersby to enter into the art" (279). Not only does the countermonument "invite" the attention and engagement of passersby, but it also "incorporates" their own creativity into the commemorative act. The individual events of commemoration that take place at these countermonuments are undertaken by audiences that, in Young's words, are "forced to remember for themselves" (276).

This is a key capability of multivalent, subversive works like the "countermonument": they elicit an audience response that is grasping, engaged, and ultimately creative in its forging of interpretive common ground. Torn from a state of hermeneutic passivity, the audience of the countermonument is compelled to assume a creative posture of engagement that, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer, is analogous to rhetorical invention: that interpretive process takes on "the character of an independent productive act, one that resembles more the art of the orator than the process of mere listening" (1997, 317–18). By allowing ourselves to be drawn into the world of a countermonument, we have not embarked on a typical interpretive endeavor; rather, we have adopted a task similar to that of the orator, who must find a commonplace appropriate to the challenges at

hand. With public memory, then, genre and countergenre are implicated in questions of what constitutes the commemorative act. I would like to follow Young and Gadamer, then, in emphasizing the importance of a productive, creative hermeneutics of commemoration. Reframing this hermeneutics in terms of rhetorical invention, as Gadamer has done, highlights the complicity of generic reproduction in the numbed, detached commemorative practice that has become so commonplace in the age of commemoration.

ATOPOS AND COMMON GROUND

A defining element of the countermonument's rhetorical power is what thinkers in classical Greece called *atopos* (the "strange," "uncommon," or "out of place"). Although the concept of *topoi*, typically discussed as "commonplaces" in contemporary rhetorical theory, has preoccupied scholars since at least the time of Aristotle's *Categories* (see Leff 1983), its semantic inverse, *atopoi*, has received relatively little attention. While the *topoi* provide common topics and argumentative patterns that a rhetor can turn to in various situations, *atopos* signifies "something extraordinary," "something new," and, in oral rhetoric, an "unusual combination of sounds and words" (Dunker 2011, 127; see also Vitanza 1997, 58–68). In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes describes his lover as an unplaceable, fascinating other who becomes the cynosure of his desire: "The other whom I love and who fascinates me is *atopos*. I cannot classify the other, for the other is, precisely, Unique, the singular Image which has miraculously come to correspond to the specialty of my desire. The other. . . cannot be imprisoned in any stereotype" (1990, 34). The *atopon* cannot be reduced to a stereotype or a commonplace but is "unclassifiable, of . . . [an] unforeseen originality" (34). For Barthes, *atopos* does not become invisible in its conformity to a class of other objects. Rather, it is provocative and alluring in its unplaceable alterity.

Tying *atopos* to the subversion of commonplaces, Gadamer has described it as "that which does not 'fit' into the customary order of our expectation based on experience" (1997, 318): "The Greeks had a very fine word for that which brings our understanding to a standstill. They called it the *atopon*. This actually means 'the placeless,' that which cannot be fitted into the categories of expectation in our understanding and which therefore causes us to be suspicious of it. The famous Platonic doctrine that philosophizing begins with wonder has this suspicion in mind, this experience of not being able to go any further with the pre-schematized

expectations of our orientation to this world, which therefore beckons to thinking" (2006, 14).¹ Gadamer describes how the *atopon* acquires rhetorical force in the audience's imagination: it violates a hermeneutic threshold that is undergirded by an audience's expectations and prior experiences. *Atopoi* subvert our generic competencies, beg for creative engagement, and "beckon us to thinking." Thus in a cultural landscape filled with commonplace works of public memory, an *atopon* memorial does violence to our complacent spectatorship; like Young's countermonument, it demands engagement, initiating an audience's anxiety to "place" itself intelligibly in accordance with that artifact.

Gadamer's analysis unearths an essential characteristic of the *atopon*: not merely an unusual collection of sounds, sights, or words, it also signifies the peculiar position from which an extraordinary rhetorical act compels its audiences to reencounter the world. This sense of *atopos*, in fact, is apparent in one of the concept's earliest appearances in Greek literature. In the *Republic's* well-known allegory of the cave, Plato gives special currency to *atopos*. When illustrating his theory of forms to Glaucon, Socrates introduces the allegory by asking his student to imagine a group of prisoners chained to the floor of a cave, their bodies and heads bound in such a way that they can only see one of the cave's walls. While a great fire burned behind the prisoners' backs, actors would parade in front of the flames, casting grotesque shadows on the wall. If these prisoners had been so chained throughout their lives, Socrates argues, they would be unable to recognize the shadows as misleading *reflections* of reality but would instead interpret them *as* reality. This great mistake would then reverberate throughout the prisoners' social consciousness, as distorted worldviews would be deduced from their shared delusion.

Socrates' strange allegory, of course, was a figural tale meant to clarify and inform a certain claim on reality: that phenomena are merely "shadows" of essential forms. But Socrates' student Glaucon does not "get it." The allegory, in its recognized yet unplaceable excess, remains wholly other to him. Responding to this evasive alterity, Glaucon remarks, "It's a strange [*atopon*] image, and they are strange prisoners" (1961, 747). Because Glaucon fails to place the tropological significance of the tale, because he fails to see reflections of himself in the "strange" prisoners, Glaucon becomes displaced vis-à-vis Socrates' discourse. According to Jonathan Lear's reading of the *Republic*, this displacement "is precisely the 'position' of an allegory-not-recognized-as-such: we do not yet know its place in the scheme of things. Insofar as we . . . lack the capacity to recognize allegory

as such, we shall be unlocated, for we cannot orient ourselves with respect to these allegories" (2006, 35). Because Glaucon cannot see beyond the allegory to the figural claim it makes on reality, he remains unable to place himself in a meaningful position vis-à-vis the recognized yet indecipherable figuralism of Socrates' strange tale. Thus Lear's analysis hints at a key issue in Plato's allegory: it is not simply that the tale and its characters are *atopon*; Glaucon, through his innocent inability to locate the significance of the allegory, has been rendered out of place.

When Socrates' allegory fails to hit home with Glaucon, he finds himself grasping for meaning, suspended in what Edward S. Casey calls a state of "dysplacement." When struck by such dysplacement, Casey argues, "We feel not so much displaced as *without place*. The Greek word *atopos* (literally, 'no place') means 'bizarre' or 'strange.' No wonder we feel estranged when we are out of place" (1993, ix–x). Although our lives are marked by the nonchalant competence with which we carry out everyday tasks—such as walking, speaking, and seeing and making sense of the objects that surround us—instances of "atopic" dysplacement compel us to puzzle over our surroundings, to struggle to regain common ground. Occasionally we, like Glaucon, have extraordinary rhetorical encounters that displace us from the rhythm of our everyday lives. But the confusion and anxiety that accompany this "involuntary exile" (Casey 1993) are not left unaddressed: at such times we enter a momentary struggle to feel in place once again. Casey argues that when we are displaced we strive to etch out a space of intelligibility from which we can relieve this "place panic": "in the face of [this] panic, we resort to elaborate stratagems to avoid the void that looms before us" (1993, x). This "event of taking place" (Brockelman 2003, 46) re-forms and domesticates the looming alterity of *atopos*, what Casey later calls the "relative void of shapelessness" (1997, 12). As with Glaucon, our anxious curiosity about the unplaceable other gets the best of us: we strive to know, to domesticate, to name.

In Casey's account of *atopos*, tropes of place are used to explore the comfort and panic that structure one's being in the world. As such, being in place possesses a homeostatic quality: it is a proficient, rhythmic disposition that, when disrupted by the *atopon*, requires the experiencing subject to adopt "elaborate stratagems" to feel in place once again. For Casey, this suspended placement provokes a creative response, compelling one to forge a common ground with the object of one's dysplacement.² It is this impulse to common ground, this drive to identify with, that Judith Butler has described as essentially a struggle to "assume place" (1993, 99). For Butler,

“Identification is a phantasmatic trajectory and resolution of desire[,] . . . a territorializing of an object which enables identity through the temporary resolution of desire” (99). Identification overcomes one’s sense of placelessness by territorializing a shared ground on which one’s loyalties, affiliations, and empathies can settle. The identification that precedes and relieves atopic displacement, then, is not a function of an isolated individual but of an individual’s relational placement in a world of objects, such that any grounding in the world is always “common ground” (see Butler 1993, 143–44; also see Ratcliffe 2005, 54–55). To be identified with, then, is to no longer be *atopon*; it is to be in place with the other.

The impulse to common ground described by Casey and Butler is bound up with what G. Mitchell Reyes calls the “inevitable sublimation of difference” (2010, 231). This sublimation, however, is not a subjective displacement of alterity but is a mutual restructuring of common ground *with* the encountered other. To get over the other, then, is not to resume being at home in one’s own original place. Instead, it is to restructure one’s own placement vis-à-vis the other. Thus if we agree with Reyes that encountered alterity is inevitably (if incompletely) resolved through processes of identification, we must also keep in mind that alterity is a violent yet productive imposition on the experiencing subject: one’s own identity is compromised as one is rendered *atopos*. Thus identifying with the other is not simply a subjective process of appropriation; it is, instead, the production of a new ground of commonality on which difference can be gotten over (see Davis 2005). As Gadamer insists, subduing the *atopos* is a *creative* and not merely a negational process (cf. Bernard-Donals 2011, 407–8). In other words, if the other is unplaceable (*atopon*), one must forge a new place with it.

This anxiety about placement and common ground, of course, also dominates Kenneth Burke’s thoughts on identification. Even “consubstantiation,” which in Burke’s lexicon is the companion term to identification, illustrates this rhetorical process through the metaphor of “common ground” (see, e.g., 1969a, xix–xx). Burke highlights the etymology of the word “substance” (“sub-stance”), demonstrating that it derives from concepts like placement and that it implies the foundation in which an object is grounded (1969a, 21; see also 1969b, 27–8). In Burke’s theory of consubstantiation/identification, the importance of place and placement is clearest when he illustrates the essential relationship between identification and division: for Burke, the identification drive springs from our desire to dissolve the corporal boundaries that divide “individuals” from the other: “Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because

there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity" (1969b, 22; cf. Davis 2008). According to Burke, identification seeks to conceal the psychological and corporal biases that forge the illusion of autonomous subjectivity, to compensate for the displacement that divides us from the world and the other. Because this is accomplished by the production of a symbolic ground that is perceived to be "common," there is an intimate relationship between identification and one's placement-in-the-world. Thus while rhetorical encounters might facilitate identification, they do not make us "one" with the other; rather, they provide us with a con-substance, a symbolic/relational common ground in which self and other can be temporarily rooted. Thus for identification to get underway, the subject can no more stay in place than can the encountered other, as they must come to relate to one another on some newly forged common ground. The essential work of identification is the construction of this common ground, this invented con-substance. Identification, then, is not an immediate and vague psychic commingling of discoursing subjects, and it is not a passive reception of the other; it is the working out of a common ground that will allow one to get back into place *with* the object of his or her displacement (cf. Lipari 2012, 237).

To Ann Dufourmantelle, this process of identification can be likened to the diminishing vulnerability that we experience after entering a strange and perhaps threatening place for the first time. "When we enter an unknown place," she writes, "the emotion experienced is almost always that of an indefinable anxiety. There then begins the slow work of taming the unknown, and gradually the unease fades away. A new familiarity succeeds the fear provoked in us by the irruption of the 'wholly other.' . . . Thought is in essence a force of mastery. It is continually bringing the unknown back to the known, breaking up its mystery to possess it, shed light on it. Name it" (2000, 26, 28). Dufourmantelle describes how the unknown, indefinable *atopos* is eventually tamed. *Atopos*, which in its unplaceable alterity first appears as wholly other, is slowly domesticated into the unique known. Likewise, the tale of the *atopon* rhetorical encounter is often a tale of diminishing alterity. The unplaceable other tears us from our own place, and we respond with compensatory strategies by which we strive to assimilate and subdue the other in order to pull ourselves back into some place. As Casey argues, while *atopos* instigates fascination and fear, it also instigates an "elaborate," anxious impulse toward recovery of common ground. So while it is important to acknowledge the tendency of *atopos* to resolve

in the common ground of identification, the ambivalence of the other—its (diminishing) resistance to identification—should also be emphasized.

Because of these obstacles to the mutual production of common ground, the temporality of a rhetorical encounter allows individuals to be gradually pulled in, to reel slowly and sometimes exasperatingly toward identification. This is why with Burke we find that identification is a temporally suspended and potentially tortured process of placement. Emphasizing the centrality of frustration to the process of identification, Burke remarks that “form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite. This satisfaction . . . at times involves a temporary set of frustrations, but in the end these frustrations prove to be simply a more involved kind of satisfaction, and furthermore serve to make the satisfaction of fulfillment more intense” (1968, 31).³ For Burke, rhetoric dialectically arouses *and* frustrates desires—via appearances of the unpredictable and the *atopon*—in order to climax in the fulfillment of identification (see 1968, 124–29). The production of suspense, therefore, is important to the function of *atopos* in our commemorative culture. While suspense has long been theorized in film and literature, its application to works of public memory calls for a perspective that is sensitive to the shock of the unplaceable other and the temporal struggle for common ground. Exploring the role of the unplaceable in visual rhetoric, David Blakesley gives us a launch pad for tackling this problem of suspended identification: There is, according to Blakesley, “a rhetoric that elaborates and exploits visual ambiguity to foster identification” (2004, 130; see also Zelizer 2010). In an individual static artwork, no plot temporally unfolds.⁴ Yet by exploiting visual ambiguity in the service of identification, an *atopon* rhetorical artifact—an artifact that displaces its audiences—can initiate a temporally suspended identification drive. When one encounters a visual object that loudly asserts its inventedness, a telos of identification is presupposed. Yet when *atopon* rhetorical artifacts command this attention, the desire they conjure is left without precise, immediate fulfillment; this can leave their audiences out of place, with their confused desire radiating homelessly. Only when this identificatory desire is “placed” can the observer’s displacement be resolved through the relief of common ground. At the culmination of this suspended process of identification, one newly territorializes an unstable yet common ground in which to settle vis-à-vis the *atopos*, whose alterity—in inviting and displacing the experiencing subject—has itself been assimilated. Hence to subdue an *atopon* rhetorical act is to regard things from a new place, to be resettled in and reoriented toward the world.

THE BRONZE STATUES ON PETŘÍN HILL

Each day, hundreds of tourists and Czech locals ascend Petřín Hill on their way to one of Prague's most popular cultural districts. Soon after they begin their trek toward Petřín, a series of steps appears on their left, offering a short detour from the main walking path. On this stairway that leads about ten meters into the surrounding woods, there are two rows of sculptured male bodies staggered individually on the stairs. While the front body appears distraught but whole, those behind him progressively lose limbs and torsos until the last "body" is merely a pair of legs. Like the unplaceable allegory, the obvious yet strange inventedness of the statues becomes an object of desire for the passerby: in the words of Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, and Brian Ott, "this inventedness commands attention because it announces itself as a marker of collective identity. It is an object of desire because of its claim to represent, inspire, instruct, remind, admonish, exemplify, and/or offer the opportunity for affiliation and public identification" (2010, 25). The statues, the staircase, and the cultivated emptiness bordering the artifact announce this space as an invented bearer of collective identity, expressing a rhetorical magnetism that precedes any cognitive domestication by language or conceptual understanding. However, while the artifact summons the attention of passersby, it does not offer them easily digestible commonplaces with which to identify; instead, it presents them with something of a puzzle that must be slowly pieced together. Most standard devices of visual identification are lacking: the figures' eyes are blind and narrowed to slits, preventing the illusion of interpersonal connection that eye contact can provide. And the figures, which are naked and have no markers of affiliation, give no indication as to their class, occupation, or even nationality; they remain anonymous. In their machinic alterity, they even appear inhuman, staggering forth in various states of dissolution. Although these statues are obviously located within an invented rhetorical space, they give few immediate clues as to how they might be placeable within a broader cultural horizon.

This unplaceable excess has the potential to rattle passersby, who find themselves suddenly uprooted from the practical rhythm of their journey to the top of the hill. Suspended in a state of displaced curiosity, these observers are urged to create some kind of common ground with the *atopon* statues. While the most alluring elements of the artifact—the menacing statues receding into the woods—are presented immediately to the attention of pedestrians, the artifact's verbal accompaniments are relatively inconspicuous. Observers must take pains to find any linguistic legends that



FIG. 1 Prague Memorial to the Victims of Communism. Photograph by Dmitry Permenov.

help decipher the statues. Planted flatly into the bottom stair, however, are two Czech-language bronze placards that seem to be strategically obscure. The first placard reads “*OBETI KOMUNISMU: 205486 ODSOUZENO, 248 POPRAVENO, 4500 ZEMRELO VE VEZNICICH.*” The second, lodged beside it, continues: “*1948–1989: 327 ZAHYNULO NA HRANICICH 170938 OBCANU EMIGROVALO.*” Because the placards are hidden, pedestrians—especially those who cannot read Czech—have no easy way to discover that what they have stumbled upon is the Prague Memorial to the Victims of Communism (PMVC). While perhaps a few tourists and commemorators will intentionally seek out the PMVC, its placement in such a well-trod and tourist-heavy district ensures that most individuals who encounter it are merely passersby. Thus the PMVC is out of place geographically, in that it is anchored outside the typical commonplaces of urban memorial space. Many memorials—such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington or Prague’s Jan Žižka Monument, which is just a few kilometers away from the PMVC—are found in ritualistic, touristic “destinations” (see Casey 2000, 216–57; Sturken 2007, 211–18). Yet the PMVC is not a destination at all; because of its location on the hill to Petřín, it is almost always encountered on the path to somewhere else. The PMVC, then, disrupts the destination-oriented commonplaces of touristic commemoration by confronting passersby with a rhetorical encounter where they least expect it.



FIG. 2 PMVC. Photograph by Joshua Reeves.

By surprising passersby and giving them very little immediate interpretive ground on which to stand, the PMVC actively implicates their creativity in the identificatory process. While the PMVC piques an identification drive, it offers no immediate resolution. Instead, it defies placement within preconceived notions of what a commemorative site should be—where it should be located, how it should be accessed, and what it should look like—leaving its viewers in suspense as they struggle to forge some kind of common ground with it. One can watch instances of this suspended identification unfold in the vicinity of the PMVC.⁵ As pedestrians pass the memorial, some of them stop, turn their heads, and puzzle for a moment over the unusual statues, not able to make sense of them. One can see these passersby succumb to the tyranny of attention and become absorbed in a sort of place panic, striving to interpret the as-yet unplaceable artifact. Entering this new interrogative relationship with the memorial, many observers walk over to it and step carefully onto its stairs, as if they are not sure if they are permitted to enter its space. Some individuals, disinterested or confused—and perhaps lacking the historical-cultural awareness that the artifact demands—continue their trek toward Petřín's more popular attractions; as with Glaucon, the *atopos* remains simply “strange” to them. Yet others stick around until they, faced with a convergence of the statues’ implied narrative and the obscured placards’ written explanation, forge a sudden ground of commonality with the PMVC. The allegory is

thus domesticated as the observer recognizes, in his or her own way, that the statues represent the products of a murderous and dehumanizing state apparatus (that of the Czechoslovakian regime).⁶ Those who work to forge this common ground are rewarded with the relief of identification, to be sure, but also with the sense that they have been newly re-placed—that through this suspended and vulnerable experience they have been resettled vis-à-vis a culture and its past.

This process of suspended identification is most remarkable because of the creative engagement it demands of audiences. The PMVC and other *atopon*, genre-defying works beckon audiences to interrogate their pasts and their cultural experience in search of a common ground where those memorials' veiled worlds can be brought to life. These works, therefore, can transform their audiences from complacent spectators into active, inquiring participants in a temporally distributed identificatory/commemorative event. While the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington is a vastly different artifact from the PMVC, by virtue of *atopos* it, too, suspends observers in engagement and wonder, encouraging them to listen and respond to the monument's call rather than walking past undisturbed or unchallenged (see Hyde 1994; Lipari 2012). While neither of these memorials has been universally lauded by the public, they both succeeded in generating public controversies about history and its appropriate representation; just as important, they continue to displace individual observers from their everyday habits of life, challenging them to interrogate the past/present conjuncture within a potentially transformative rhetorical space.⁷

To conclude my discussion of the PMVC, I would like to clarify that the *atopon* is relative to what is *topon*, what is commonplace. The *atopon*, like the commonplace, is not a universally stable category but derives its status from the culture of rhetorical customs in which it appears. This implies that the memorial style represented by the PMVC—and by extension, the “postmodern” (Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci 1991) style in which the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial is cast—cannot retain their allure indefinitely. The *atopon* is a historically contingent quality that, in its current form, might eventually be overcome with the weight of mundane custom that dampens many “traditional” artifacts today. As Daniel L. Smith has pointed out, “the vitality and integrity of a rhetorical culture cannot be reduced to or sustained by norms” (2003, 101). Despite its many unique and compelling qualities, if this so-called postmodern commemoration style were to become as ubiquitous as obelisks or equestrian statues are today, then a revitalized sense of the *atopon* would need to rescue our commemorative culture from that

generic hegemony. In other words, what is currently *atopon* risks becoming *topon*; it risks becoming commonplace. The *atopon*, then, is not simply an epistemological or representational concept, and we should be careful not to conflate it with the trends of our “postmodern” artistic culture (although many so-called postmodern works do appear *atopon* to our current commemorative sensibilities); rather, the *atopon* shifts with custom and rhetorical trends, offering an innovative, subversive framing of entrenched *topoi* (see Hesk 2007, 369). This subversion, not conformity to a specific postmodern style, is the mark of the *atopon*, which works to continuously challenge and refresh the norms of our rhetorical culture.

THE SWEETNESS OF THE UNFAMILIAR, THE POWER OF THE STRANGE

By teasing out the relationship between *atopos* and identification, this article has explored the potential of out-of-place commemorative rhetoric. But this framework gives insight into other rhetorical encounters that render us lost, compelling us to struggle back onto common ground. In fact, there is a long tradition of rhetorical thinking that praises the novel and the provocative. Although Isocrates does not openly base his model of rhetorical education on cultivating the *atopon*, his resistance to treating oratory as a “fixed” art is well known (see Hesk 2007, 366). Based in the agonistic rhetorical culture of fourth-century Athens, Isocrates opposed what he considered to be the formulaic simplicity of the Attic orators: “For what has been said by one speaker is not equally useful for the speaker who comes after him; on the contrary, he is accounted most skilled in this art who speaks in a manner worthy of his subject and yet is able to discover in it topics which are nowise the same as those used by others” (1990, 48). According to Isocrates, “originality of treatment” was one of the essential ingredients of effective rhetoric (48). Aristotle, too, taught his students that “to deviate [from prevailing usage] makes language seem more elevated; for people feel the same in regard to word usage as they do in regard to strangers compared with citizens. As a result, one should make the language unfamiliar; for people are admirers of what is far off, and what is marvelous is sweet” (2007, 198). With these early rhetoricians and others, it has long been thought that one of the tasks of invention is to creatively disrupt the reproduction of rhetorical norms—to strike and entice audiences with the *atopon*.

In a discussion of Gadamer’s theory of aesthetic experience, Robert Bernasconi observes that if we do not take anything from an

aesthetic-rhetorical act, if we are unchanged by it, then we will have missed the claim that rhetoric makes on us: “We will have reduced it to a mere entertainment, an interlude” (1986, xiv–xv). Commemoration, like many rhetorical acts, is a well-entrenched aspect of our public/entertainment culture; we see it take place all the time, not just on our streets but also on our television and computer screens, as public figures dedicate national holidays or stage “commemorative” publicity stunts at national memorials. But because the *atopon* subverts our understanding of what a given rhetorical act can be, it can transform our commemorative culture—and its participants—through a subversive reconstitution of that act and its normative effects. Indeed the “power of strangeness,” as Richard Rorty calls it, can be a transformative force. For Rorty, “edifying discourse is supposed to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings” (1979, 360). Being suspended vulnerably between the other and oneself forces one to respond creatively to alterity, to work with it to forge a new common ground of relationality. This process of identification, whether viewed as compensation (Burke) or recovery (Davis), is not only implicated in our drives for being-with-others but for being other as well (Vivian 2001). Thus while the *atopon*’s “appropriate indecorum” challenges the logic of reproduction that can stifle creativity within our rhetorical culture (Stoneman 2011), it also has the potential to transform how we situate ourselves toward one another and toward the world we share.

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NOTES

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1. Qtd. in Hryschko 2008, 116.

2. For examples of how Casey’s work has been used in rhetoric scholarship, see Muckelbauer 2008, 130–32, and Rice 2012.

3. Qtd. in Clark 2008, 98.

4. This has become a topic of increasing interest in public memory studies as theorists consider how the rhetoric of a museum, for example, unfolds in the experience of an individual visitor. See Zagacki and Gallagher 2009 and Aoki, Dickinson, and Ott 2010.

5. I made these observations during a visit to Prague in 2009.

6. Although rhetorical conventions might be biased toward generically praising national war heroes and other “great men,” there are commemorative artifacts that commemorate national victories in *atopon* and penetrating ways. The Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington—which according to Barry Schwartz and Todd Bayma “resembles nothing ever erected to commemorate an American war” (1999, 947)—is a good example of an *atopon* memorial that commemorates a U.S. military “victory.”

7. For information about the reception of the VVM, see Hagopian 2009. The PMVC has encouraged much deliberation about the place of the Communist regime in Czech history, and the appropriate ways to commemorate that past. This has resulted in public controversies, political scandals, and vandalistic violence. For example, see Cameron 2003.



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