

Sample Abstract: Communication

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Counter-Confederate Culture Jamming: Radical Recontextualization as Anti-Racist Work

Culture jamming is typically thought of in terms of subverting advertisements and corporate messaging — reclaiming privatized messages and redirecting them toward more public, prosocial ends. This project, however, focuses on culture jamming to confront an already public cultural force: confederate statues. Such statues, often rebranded by activists as “participation trophies,” differ from mass media advertisements in substantial ways. They often stand on public grounds—courthouses, legislative buildings, universities, etc.—under the explicit authority of the state. They are often rendered in a style that is austere and monumental, rather than contemporary and ephemeral. Their formal qualities provide a rich canvass for anti-racist artistic expressions, and their authorization by the state provides a material exigency for acts of civil disobedience.

This presentation focuses on the online circulation of images associated with direct actions that recontextualize confederate monuments. Specifically, I focus on a series of direct actions in North Carolina: the removal of the Confederate Soldiers Monument in Durham, the removal of Silent Sam in Chapel Hill, and ongoing efforts to remove multiple statues from the grounds of the State Capitol in Raleigh. The presentation examines how activists-as-communicators insert their own narratives into public spaces in subversive, sometimes illegal ways that directly challenge narratives that are already inherent in these spaces. I argue that such anti-racist activism works as political, aesthetic, and affective communication simultaneously, with some specific communication acts elevating one register over the others. If they are successful, these direct actions and the messages that circulate around them shift the larger discourse from treating the monuments themselves from being purely representational to also having material presence effects--their affective power to continuously reconstitute logics of the past in the present. Accordingly, these direct actions raise key questions about communication as survival: they force us to consider what should survive—what ideas, what iconography, what structures of feeling—and under what conditions.