# Stories from the Circle: Augmented reality as boundary infrastructure for decolonizing the site of monuments

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## Abstract

Around the country in recent years public monuments to controversial figures have sparked heated debate, protest and even violence. The need to ameliorate such eristic is great, however, dominant information channels such as print, television, and social media often preclude possibilities for productive dialogue due to structural constraints and systemic biases[1]. By contrast, experimental media like augmented reality applications for mobile devices (cellphones and tablets) create interactive communication structures that allow for a 'bottom up' mode of communication in the hands of content creators such as artists, designers and community organizers that can provide nuance to traditional narratives, challenge orthodoxy, enrich public memory, and can foster a productive dialogue. This, we argue, can allow a space for public discourse towards reconciliation of controversial issues.

## Keywords

Augmented reality, boundary infrastructure, public dialogue,

decolonization, resistance

## Introduction

In the past twenty years we have witnessed the migration of the public sphere from the physical realm, the public square, to the virtual realm, the Internet. In effect, the location of public discourse and the site of national identity formation has been extended from the town square to the virtual world. This 'extending' will only accelerate in the years to come as the structures of the metaverse metastasize into something more concrete. Additionally, AR devices will become cheaper, higher in fidelity as the geolocation technology becomes even more accurate.

Augmented reality allows us to overlay the virtual object onto our experience of the physical world. The way in which this augmentation is made can help or hinder the dimensions with which controversial monuments are framed, perceived, and ingrained in our public consciousness. In this paper we present a case study in an example of how public discourse around a controversial monument, a statue of Christopher Columbus at St. Mary's Circle, Syracuse, was augmented by AR technology to create an experience that helps generate authentic discussion and encourage deeper understanding among members of affected communities.

## Background

The Columbus statue was erected in 1934 and has been a site of controversy for decades. In 2018, Syracuse mayor Ben Walsh partnered with InterFaith Works to organize dialogue circles on the monument's future. Two years later, a petition to remove the monument received over 18,000 signatures, and the mayor announced plans to remake the site into a Heritage Park without the statue. The Columbus Monument Corporation launched a legal challenge, which is still ongoing.

## Mechanics

Users of the app hear reflections from fifteen individuals closely involved in debates about the statue, e.g. student activists who organized protests for the removal of the statue; participants in dialogue circles organized by the

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[1] Kilgo, D. K., & Harlow, S. (2019). Protests, Media Coverage, and a Hierarchy of Social Struggle. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 24(*4*), 508–530.

mayor's office and InterFaith Works to make recommendations about the statue's future; members of the Onondaga Nation, whose ancestral lands include the city of Syracuse; Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation, a CNY grassroots organization that works to support Indigenous land rights; and members of the Syracuse Italian American community.

This project attempts to 'liminalize' the form of hypertext, by helping viewers not to perceive hypertext as an 'otherness' with the personalizing of individual stories and views[2]. This creates a radically different reading environment which is site-situated and auditory, presenting the viewer with synthetic contact of alternate views and perspectives within the larger context of the monument. The app exposes users to varied perspectives about how to remember Christopher Columbus in relation to the stories of Indigenous peoples, Italian Americans, and other communities in and around Syracuse. Users of the app hear reflections from fifteen individuals closely involved in debates about the statue, e.g. student activists who organized protests for the removal of the statue; participants in dialogue circles organized by the mayor's office and InterFaith Works to make recommendations about the statue's future; members of the Onondaga Nation, a CNY grassroots organization that works to support Indigenous land rights; and members of the Syracuse Italian American community.

Building on recent work examining feminist rhetorical science studies[3] and technological infrastructure[4], this experience report describes the design and development of an augmented reality application (and supplementary materials) as boundary infrastructure[5] that supports the decolonization of the design of aesthetics by encouraging boundary crossing and enabling feminist modes of resistance like those found in Gloria Anzaldúa's border lands and embodied by Donna Haraway's cyborgs. This infrastructure can avoid both a bureaucratic approach to standards and a hierarchical approach to organization which in traditional communication media serve to prevent productive dialogue, encourage systemic bias, and exacerbate ideological divides. By contrast, such boundary infrastructure can use nonhierarchical organizational structures and avoid strict standardization, provide a remedy for orthodoxy, and allow resistance to hegemonic thought.

The methods of empathetic narrative techniques such as *character identification* i.e. naming, description, and indirect implication of traits, quality of attributed speech and mode of auditory representation of consciousness contributes to the potential for empathy with inherent *narrative situation* with the use of first person accounts[6]. This breaks down the ideology attached to the representation of this particular monument breaching its coded-iconic content presenting a punctum of the experience of the site by the varied subjective interpretations of those involved. The viewer is literally jutted against the symbolic experience with alternate interpretations.[7]

## Conclusion

We are all cyborgs in the Harawayan[8] sense. We are amalgamations of complicated histories of violence, socialization, and the internalization of the oppression that surrounds us. We have bodies mediated in complex, meaningful ways by technology which, in many cases *must* be separated into component parts pulled in multiple directions and perspectives. In a sense, our augmented experience makes this case very evident indeed. By reclaiming St. Mary's circle with all these views, we hope to reclaim a more holistic picture of the varied perspectives surrounding monuments.
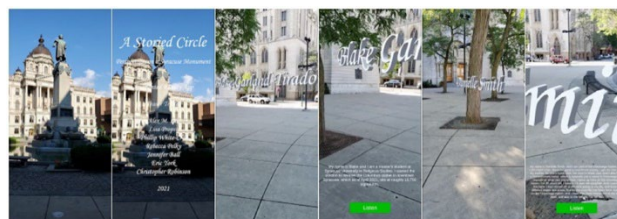


Screenshot montage of the work-in-progress (as of 6/21) prototype of our AR app 'Stories from the Circle'. Note app was using previous title in the image.

## Acknowledgements

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