On November 18, 1999, Texas A&M University (TAMU) experienced profound tragedy when the famed Aggie Bonfire collapsed, killing 12 students and injuring 27 others. This essay examines the rhetorical dynamics of the TAMU Bonfire Memorial and explores how it navigates the tension created when a constitutive symbol is implicated in a moment of tragedy. Specifically, we use this case to explore how memorials help shape perceptions of victim agency in commemorative form. As we argue, the memorial taps into resonant modes of public reasoning—including temporal metaphors, Christian theology, and campus tradition—to imply the tragic outcome of the 1999 collapse had cause beyond human or institutional control. Our analysis of the Bonfire Memorial illustrates the importance of commemorative agency and, in particular, how eliding victim agency can limit epideictic encounters that might foster a sense of present and future engagement on unreconciled issues.

ADAM J. GAFFEY is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Winona State University in Winona, Minnesota. JENNIFER L. JONES BARBOUR is a Lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies in the Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin. They are co-first authors of this essay. The authors thank Martin Medhurst and two anonymous reviewers for their criticism and encouragement of this work. Katherine Miller and Charles Conrad offered access to personal archives related to the Bonfire collapse and the memorial. Leroy Dorsey read early drafts of this article and offered insightful perspective to its improvement. We are grateful for their generosity to this project. Finally, the authors thank the many Aggie students who toured the Bonfire Memorial as part of class and gave thoughtful responses to early versions of arguments made in this essay.

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I still can’t believe something we loved so much and dedicated all our time to could kill 12 people.

—Texas A&M University student John Dramer, 2000.¹

I think “eerie” is the word. You know, twelve means so much to this school, and then Bonfire meant so much, and by God, twelve kids died.

—Texas A&M University student and Bonfire “Redpot” Aaron Horn, 2009.²

During the predawn hours of November 18, 1999, nearly 60 students at Texas A&M University (TAMU) were working feverishly to finish the famed Aggie Bonfire.³ At 59 feet, the structure resembled a many-tiered cake, with its “Bunyanesque logs”⁴ circled together and “stair-stepped” in ascending form.⁵ Operating two cranes on the site, volunteers were moving logs onto the fifth—and second-to-last—tier of their gigantic totem. Suddenly everything stopped. At approximately 2:42 AM, a creaking noise permeated the workspace, and the incomplete stack fell to one side.⁶ A structure of over 5,000 logs weighing more than 2 million pounds collapsed in seconds.⁷ The atmosphere, once buzzing with activity, was now a raw, topsy-turvy world of dust and screams. First responders arrived to a grisly scene of bodies and mangled wood, “eerily reminiscent of the children’s game of pick-up sticks.”⁸ The human toll of the 1999 Bonfire collapse was 27 students injured and 12 dead.⁹

This was no ordinary campus accident.¹⁰ Bonfire was the preeminent ritual in a lexicon of Aggie traditions (TAMU’s moniker is Aggieland and the students are Aggies).¹¹ Many students considered it “the biggest moment of the year” and the arduous, months-long construction process as an “act of faith.”¹² Since its improvised inception in 1909, Bonfire evolved in scope and meaning to represent hope for victory in the annual football game against the University of Texas and “an undying flame of love that every Aggie carries in his heart for the school.”¹³ For apostles of Bonfire, its centrality to campus life made the 1999 collapse especially unsettling, as the “tradition that represents the essence of Aggie life brought death.”¹⁴ The collapse also accented the debate on Bonfire’s standing. Dissenting voices had long worried that the unsupervised student activity was akin to a “zoo without cages,”¹⁵ and they viewed it as a vehicle for racist and misogynistic behavior.¹⁶ Even TAMU admirer Paul Burka offered a vivid, postcollapse
summary of the conflicted tradition: “There are a lot of things to dislike about Bonfire: It is dangerous, harmful to academic standing, rife with drinking and hazing, and prone to occasional public displays of racism and other forms of inexcusable behavior.” His sobering assessment was true up to the 1999 collapse. Even more, organizations like “Aggies against Bonfire,” led by TAMU biology professor Hugh Wilson, argued warning signs of the dangers of Bonfire were apparent for years and suggestions of the tradition’s innocence in the death of students were unfounded. “People are saying these students gave their lives for the cause, but their lives were clearly taken,” Wilson opined.

The 1999 collapse expanded fault lines on Bonfire’s public standing. Administrators initially postponed its continuation on campus until 2002, then indefinitely. Even more, an independent inquiry concluded that the collapse followed, in part, from “tunnel vision,” meaning the enthusiasm Bonfire encouraged was also an obstruction to recognizing its hazards. Veronica Kastrin, an El Paso representative of the inquiry, observed, “If the university were to interpret alcohol hazing problems as an indication of Bonfire’s organization... then... ongoing problems were so overwhelming, it should have triggered an overhaul of the organization of Bonfire. Unfortunately, this did not occur.” From tragedy and uncertain standing, the campus faced an unwelcome tension between a tainted tradition and a communal identity built, in part, on its multitiered formation. In the cavity of no formal apology from the university, TAMU addressed this tension with a campus memorial unveiled five years after the 1999 collapse.

This was no ordinary campus memorial. Thanks to public interest in the collapse and anticipation of the dedication, the TAMU Bonfire Memorial transcended its local scene and quickly “achieved a place in the national commemorative coda.” As a public message, the memorial is rhetorically novel in both remembering the victims of the 1999 collapse and also celebrating the 90-year history of Bonfire. It is both a memorial to the deceased and a monument to the activity by which they died. Given the range of choices by which key events can take commemorative form, we use this essay to explore how the coupling of Bonfire’s history with the 1999 collapse frames perceptions of the tragedy and its pedagogical lessons for visitors. In doing so, we expand scholarly attention to Bonfire and use the memorial’s dual focus of expansive time (the tradition) and an isolated moment of time (the collapse) to explore how commemorative structures
constitute victim agency. We argue the memorial’s representations of
time, religious symbolism, and campus vernacular rhetorically limit the
agency of those it seeks to commemorate, obviating institutional responsi-
bility and protecting the memory of the Bonfire tradition. While one might
suggest this is common in commemorative practice, we posit from exam-
ining the Bonfire Memorial that rhetorical critics should consider victim
agency to be a normative criterion to evaluate memorials in future studies.
From this alternative reading, finally, we suggest commemorative struc-
tures benefit from a certain level of ambiguity in offering visitors an oppor-
tunity to inherit and continue the virtues of the dead.

To develop these claims, we first ground our study in the scholarly quest
to understand memorials as sites of rhetorical identity and agency. Next, we
provide an overview of the inventional topoi from the TAMU campus both
appropriated and reconstituted in the memorial. Finally, we present an
analysis of the structure’s rhetoric using victim agency as our criteria of
evaluation. We close by considering alternatives and possibilities for the
complex task of memorializing public tragedies and fostering the relational
potential of commemorative agency.

**PERFORMATIVE EPIDEICTIC AND COMMEMORATIVE AGENCY**

Commemorative sites are classrooms of cultural identity and civic activ-
ity. They perform the epideictic function of instructing visitors in the
values and commitments of a community, and they focus on the “lumi-
nosity of noble acts and thoughts.” In Marita Sturken’s view, memorials
recover what time has lost as “tribute or obligation” and “serve to frame
particular historical narratives.” As rhetoric that displays, memorials fit
Lawrence J. Prelli’s description of messages that “animate moral (or moral-
izing) presumptions about what constitutes the worthwhile and worthless,
the praiseworthy and blameworthy, the significant and the insignificant.”
More than an unwavering vision of the past, however, a memorial aligns
with epideictic rhetoric’s purpose of enabling a performative response for
audiences, offering the opportunity to “participat[e] in the reality to which
it refers.” As Gerard Hauser clarifies, epideictic rhetoric offers audiences
“mimesis” of deeds unfathomable were they not publicly exhibited and
validated. In sum, memorials frame a vision of the past that serves as a
value premise for navigating future encounters. This process is understand-
ably complicated when the object of commemoration is tinged by tragedy and resonant public questions of responsibility.\textsuperscript{35}

The participation of virtues central to epideictic rhetoric often speaks to the concerns of agency. For our purposes, agency refers not only to the instrumentality of what Hauser calls a “performed concept” and what Karlyn Kohrs Campbell defines as an “invention, however temporary, of \textit{personae}” but also to what Carolyn R. Miller notes as “the property of a relationship between rhetor and audience.”\textsuperscript{36} Agency is not attributed to a speaker or event but is rather an engaged performance, “positioned exactly between the agent’s capacity and the effect on an audience.”\textsuperscript{37} In addition to its relational dimension, Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische have noted that agency is a “temporally embedded process,” meaning the “agentic dimension” of relational action is best understood as being situated—constrained or expanded—“within the flow of time.”\textsuperscript{38} Temporality matters to agency because “conceptions of agentic possibility in relation to structural contexts” can influence how individuals “see their world as more or less responsive to human imagination, purpose, and effort.”\textsuperscript{39} In short, we consider public memorials an essential part of such temporal/structural contexts. As enduring forms of public pedagogy, memorials function as hubs of agency that help visitors remember the past and navigate questions of civic culture through the symbolic depiction of resonant virtues and temporal possibilities. When agency is the central inquiry of memorial criticism, relevant questions arise: What value(s) does the memorial embody for the deceased, and how are the living symbolically invited, if they choose, to appropriate and continue such ethics in their own lives?

The ability for viewers to discern and emulate the virtues imbued in a memorial is crucial to its ability to constitute civic identity. James W. Loewen notes one reason the Lincoln Memorial has been a frequent site of protest (as opposed to the nearby Jefferson Memorial) is that the former offers a scene with complete texts. Being present with the Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural allows groups to “conflate [Lincoln’s] memory with their cause.”\textsuperscript{40} In short, the epideictic value of a memorial is intricately dependent on the agency it provides the living. Indeed, an agency-focused reading of public memorials not only aligns to the performative character of epideictic rhetoric but also offers a useful criterion to evaluate how time is rhetorically presented. Thus, we consider commemorative agency an appropriate response to V. William Balthrop, Carole Blair,
and Neil Michel’s call for public memory scholars to “distinguish between a politically and ethically responsible ‘use’ of the past in the present and an irresponsible one.” While scholars like Peter Ehrenhaus and Marouf Hasian have praised memorials dedicated to Vietnam veterans and the Holocaust for, respectively, “invit[ing] us to participate in the argument” and serving as “catalysts for continued debates,” an explicit alignment with agency helps clarify how such memorials become so “useful” for the living. In this way, a memorial’s status as a site for negotiating cultural identity and civic activity is premised on how it offers visitors the agency to affirm the values it seeks to espouse, should visitors choose. Such accessibility can have a profound impact on perceived “effectiveness,” “appropriateness,” “goodness,” or usability of a memorial. Relational interaction is accessible, moreover, insofar as memorials offer this agency to living and dead alike, meaning the deeds that made the dead exemplary are, in some sense, accessible to the process of mimesis for the living. If, contrary to this position, a memorial valorizes the dead but ensures the qualities that make him or her exemplary cannot be performed or appropriated by an observer, the latter’s involvement in civic culture is diminished, and the agency of the former is relationally insulated. In giving agency to the dead, memorials assure the possibility of agency to the living; in denying agency to the dead, memorials fail to invest the preferred qualities of civic culture in the living.

Finally, a critical focus on agency is important to the Bonfire Memorial particularly because organizers and architects repeatedly asserted that the structure promotes a special sense of agency by encouraging visitors and students of TAMU (former, current, and potential) to embody the virtues that made the 12 students exemplary. Against these assertions, however, we see the memorial as important rhetoric because it fails to encourage such participation. Instead, we argue that its message—conveyed in representations of time, Christian theology, and campus lore—suggests a vision of determinism and is thereby useful in protecting the institution and its tradition, not nurturing the agency of those it memorializes or the preferred qualities of civic engagement by visitors.

THE “SPIRIT” OF BONFIRE

Rescuing the postcollapse symbolism of Bonfire was no easy task. What material arrangement could heed the design jury’s prescription to “honor
the victims, as well as the tradition’s legacy”?46 The answer envisioned by Overland Partners—an architectural team of TAMU alumni led by Robert Shemwell—was to construct a memorial vividly recalling features of Bonfire’s history and the altruistic “spirit” that animated its construction. Each portion of the memorial harkens back to a key feature of the ritual: (1) Traditions Plaza, the point of entry, features a poem read before the lighting of Bonfire; (2) History Walk, a 300-foot pathway of 89 stone slabs, marks each year Bonfire was constructed beginning in 1909; and (3) Spirit Ring, a 170-foot circle formation, designates the final site where Bonfire was constructed. Of the three portions, Spirit Ring resonated strongest with visitors and spectators, particularly the 12 portals along the perimeter dedicated to each student who perished in the 1999 collapse47 (see fig. 1). For Shemwell, these portals are “indicative of the spirit” of Bonfire and tailored to the ineffable ethos of Aggieland.48 Because Shemwell’s claim is central to our later analysis of commemorative agency in the memorial, it is important to account for Bonfire’s “spirit” before analyzing the structure’s rhetorical dynamics.

Fig. 1. Spirit Ring. Photograph by Jennifer L. Jones Barbour.
Belief in the Aggie Spirit is apparent in the TAMU school song, which is liberally quoted on campus and referenced in the Bonfire Memorial: “Some may boast of the prowess bold. Of the school they think so grand; But there’s a spirit that can ne’er be told. It’s the spirit of Aggieland.” Translated in more austere (but opaque) terms, campus enthusiasts commonly rejoin outside critique thus: “From the outside you can’t understand it. From the inside you can’t explain it.” For generations of students, Bonfire was the best way to understand this ineffable “spirit of being an Aggie.” The origin of this “spirit” is recalled in the campus narrative of the 12th Man. If Bonfire was the “manifestation” of the Aggie Spirit, the 12th Man is the “incarnation” of the same ethos. The story refers to E. King Gill, a sophomore “former reserve fullback” who watched the 1922 football game between TAMU and Centre College (Kentucky) from the stands. TAMU Coach D. X. Bible, down to a single reserve player in a game rife with injury, asked Gill to trade civilian clothes for football pads. Gill obliged. Though he never played, his voluntary act of readiness blossomed into the most prolific tale to grace the campus. His “willingness to serve” and “readiness to contribute and help the Aggie cause” in an act of supererogatory goodwill in 1922 “is now referred to as the spirit of the 12th Man,” a sentiment that reigns large still. On a campus where football is akin to religion, loyalty trumps achievement: the only past player valorized in memorial form “never left the bench.”

Portals dedicated to victims of the collapse seemed an ideal match to invoke the altruistic 12th Man tradition. When visitors pass through the portals to access Spirit Ring, memorial director George Rogers noted, they “symbolically fill the void left by the Aggie who died in the collapse.” Gill stood ready to play. Visitors similarly complete the circle ruptured by the student’s absence in death. As J. Donald Ragsdale has also argued, Spirit Ring’s visual resemblance to Stonehenge serves other functions, such as evoking a sense of eternity for the fallen and hence creating an “unmistakable persuasive effect” on visitors. We do not doubt Shemwell’s sincere intentions in aligning two renowned traditions in his design and take Ragsdale’s observations with the understanding that themes of peaceful eternity extend needed solace to grieving families and members of the Aggie community. However, in reading the Bonfire Memorial through the lens of commemorative agency, we posit an alternative set of conclusions that accounts for Spirit Ring and the preceding portions visitors encounter.
through a purposefully choreographed progression. In what follows, we begin our alternative reading by surveying relevant components of the memorial, then highlight how the components taken together encourage a deterministic explanation of events that follows in (at least) two variations.

**The Texas A&M University Bonfire Memorial**

Viewed from above, the Bonfire Memorial resembles a large magnifying glass with a slight, perpendicular extension from its handle. Like the object it resembles, the memorial invites visitors to look closer at the connection between the Aggie Spirit and Bonfire. This connection begins as “Spirit Wall” welcomes visitors with a fragment of the opening line of the school song, “There is a spirit that can ne’er be told...” The entry wall closes off the external environment of a nearby parking lot and tells visitors that what they are about to encounter is both special and indicative of the Aggie Spirit (see fig. 2). The truncated form of Spirit Wall encourages those with knowledge of the school song to silently finish the refrain, “It is the Spirit of Aggieland.” At this hallowed place, it can only refer to Bonfire. School spirit is the central theme from the start.

Past the entrance, visitors enter Traditions Plaza, a small standing area that faces an imposing wall. Here they read “The Last Corps Trip,” a poem originally recited by the campus Yell Leader before the lighting of Bonfire (see fig. 3). Traditions Plaza grounds visitors with a record of past Bonfires and signals how the traditional ritual would begin. The poem is presented without contextual cues to signal its significance. Yet, this area is also special. The poem chronicles how groups of Aggie students—the football team, Corps of Cadets, and marching band—each stood before Saint Peter in final judgment before going to Heaven. Reading the poem requires prolonged attention, and, as the title indicates, prepares visitors for the transition from one realm of life to another with its themes of death and transcendence.

From this scene that blends the local and the otherworldly, a pathway opens to History Walk. Of the major portions of the memorial, History Walk most clearly corresponds to the selection jury’s insistence that the 90-year tradition of Bonfire be celebrated in the commemorative design. As a walkway from Traditions Plaza, this “subtle tribute to Bonfires past” forges a bridge—the only intended path—to Spirit Ring. Though it makes up the
most material substance of the memorial, its form is plain. Proceeding on crushed black rock—an invitation for visitors to slow their pace and contemplate the surroundings—the walkway moves directly north on an ever-narrowing path alongside low-lying granite stone markers representing each year Bonfire stack was constructed since 1909\textsuperscript{64} (see fig. 4). History Walk answers two factual questions: Did Bonfire burn, and what—if any—casualties occurred along the way? The answers arrive in the presence of 89 stones, each with an etching at the 11/12th mark to indicate a November burn and an amber bulb that illuminates at night, “symbolizing the burning of Bonfire.”\textsuperscript{65} Only two represented years are unique from the rest: the stone representing 1963 is lower to the ground than the rest, indicating how the
stack was dismantled before burn out of respect following the assassination of President Kennedy, and 1999, the final construction of Bonfire represented in “Spirit Ring” and the material end for this chronology. Names of past deaths that occurred during construction are noted in 1955, 1982, and 1996, with the victim’s name and class year etched into the relevant stone.66

Spirit Ring, the third and final section of the memorial, is a 170-foot circle that was intended to symbolize the original safe distance once imposed on crowds before final burn67 (see fig. 5). This section of the memorial is more complex. It commemorates those who were killed in the 1999 collapse with 12 individual portals dotting the circumference as well as 27 bronze slabs placed atop the circle honoring those injured (without individual recognition). Each portal offers a gateway to what is collectively known as center-pole, or the area where the anchor of Bonfire stood. Here the environment shifts from cool granite and crushed rock to a spacious green walking area. In the middle of Spirit Ring lies an 18-inch-diameter marker giving visitors the dimensions of center-pole as well as a compass of the four cardinal directions. Time on the marker is stamped, “11.18.99, 2:42 a.m.”68 In addition to marking the time and space of the collapse, Spirit Ring also
features portals dedicated to fallen students. Each portal is staggered in height, comprising a 16-foot cut of granite encasing a 12-foot cut of bronze, creating a flattop “A” shape ascending upward. Inside the portals resides a “vivid personalization” of each victim, including a portrait, signature, reflections from friends and family, and a marker of the student’s hometown.

Fig. 4. History Walk. Photograph by Jennifer L. Jones Barbour.

at the base. Finally, using center-pole as its axis, portals are geographically positioned on the circle to face the hometown of each respective student, creating an uneven but personalized distribution of markers.

The Shemwell design is seemingly austere. Its elements are familiar: a square wall (Traditions Plaza), a straight line (History Walk), and a circle (Spirit Ring). In what follows, however, we suggest that a holistic analysis of the Bonfire Memorial—one that accounts for the path a visitor is encouraged to follow—yields a more complicated reading not found by focusing on Spirit Ring alone. In offering a sequential experience that utilizes the invention of temporal metaphors, Christian theology, and the 12th Man tradition, the memorial positions the victims of the 1999 collapse—and, by extension, visitors—with diminished agency. In choosing to honor both the Bonfire tradition and the 1999 collapse, each is invited to be remembered within the context of the other. The consequence of this decision, we argue, not only diminishes the agency of the dead but makes the memorial ill-prepared to offer visitors rhetorical resources to navigate future questions about Bonfire, to honor the dead by adopting their values, and, perhaps most importantly, to interrogate the valorization and adherence to traditions both at TAMU and also within civic culture more broadly. Our analysis develops thematically and identifies how portions of the memorial express different premises of an appeal suggestive of determinism. Specifically, we argue that the symbolic interactions of the memorial invite
visitors to understand (1) that time within the memorial is progressive and moves from the past toward a goal, and (2) that this movement of time is caused or directed by one of two possible sources: an omnipotent, omniscient God and/or the eternal presence of Bonfire.

**Time’s Progression: From “History” To Eternity**

The dominant theme of the Bonfire Memorial is time. In novel form, the structure includes temporal frameworks conventionally ascribed to monuments and memorials. As a monument, History Walk helps to “commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings”; as a memorial, Spirit Ring functions to “ritualize remembrance and mark the reality of ends.” Here monument and memorial hang together on distant ends of an elongated pathway. Distance, Yi-Fu Tuan clarifies, “implies time.” In creating a shared home for temporal perspectives via distance, the structure invites visitors to witness time as progressive from start (1909) to finish (1999). History Walk manifests the most significant distancing of the Bonfire Memorial and begins an invitation for visitors to conceptualize time as unfolding and transformative.

In addition to marrying the conventions of monument and memorial, the structure also aligns resonant temporal metaphors. Metaphors of time as an arrow or time as a circle—the former being finite and one-directional and the latter being eternally repetitive—are useful heuristics for contrasting worldviews. In the Bonfire Memorial, however, the advancement from History Walk to Spirit Ring introduces a *transition* between these normally dichotomous views on time. History Walk, with its straight, steady advancement and unwavering progress, establishes a vision of time that is straight like an arrow, giving a sense of “sequential, irreversible time.” The progressive attitude invited by History Walk is considered in finer details as well: the width of the walking path from the “1909” marker to the end of the line narrows considerably in an attempt to unite visitors for the ultimate transition of both time and mortality witnessed in Spirit Ring. Further, Spirit Ring’s position from Traditions Plaza follows a path directly northward, “that part of the earth or the heavens most remote from the midday sun.” In representing time as an arrow, the Bonfire Memorial directs visitors on a linear path toward something greater than that left
behind insomuch as an “arrow represents directional time but also movement in space to a goal.” Linearity, Randall A. Lake elaborates, “can be used to dissociate the past from the present, treating the latter, while perhaps the product of the former, as nonetheless a qualitatively different stage in evolutionary progress.” One thing leads to another; monument blends into and guides visitors toward memorial. Walking along the path of the Bonfire Memorial, we have, in other words, followed the transition from time as sequential and earthly to time as circular and eternal. Up to the circle, time has led to this point of space, and nothing continues beyond it. In addition to offering a vision of time developing, History Walk advances to Spirit Ring and halts the possibility of everlasting progression, as a period cuts off the possibility of an infinite sentence. Though the fields near the memorial are open and spacious, the walking path is not. It encourages visitors to experience the story of Bonfire and its 1999 collapse as a journey toward, then away from, Spirit Ring.

Representations of time signal limitations of agency in the Bonfire Memorial. Though time is progressive here, it is also cloistered. Time within the memorial space is never represented in the present or future tense. Indeed, Blair and Michel define the purpose of commemorative space as not to “merely reflect or re-iterate community values” but to “focus, shape, and amplify particular values in particular ways, forming and advocating specific constructions of the community and the individual.” This task is arguably hindered when the temporal orientation of a memorial is closed off from the visitor’s present or future tense. When lessons are limited to past observation, agency takes the form of iteration, or what Emirbayer and Mische define as the “selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action . . . giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time.” In offering such specific representations of time (by year in History Walk, through eternity in Spirit Ring), the Bonfire Memorial neglects to invite visitors to imagine how any lessons of the past might be used or employed through the visitors’ future initiative. As evidenced elsewhere, memorials can imagine (and materially represent) time more ambiguously and thereby invite visitors to imagine their response in a variety of ways. Representations of time in the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, for example, offer one such alternative. As Blair and Michel note, the structure echoes strategies of protest, offering an incomplete timeline representative of an
uncertain present, making the future decisions of visitors unwritten and thereby relevant. Depicting time as open ended, the authors note, "draws attention, announces resolve, and enjoins the moral agency of the individual." Absent such ambiguity, values seem observable but temporally limited in the symbolic space of the Bonfire Memorial.

History Walk was originally planned to "represent the progression of Bonfire from 1909 to 1999," and additional components of the Memorial suggest a divine theme driving this "progression." To further the argument that time's progression moves from a purpose beyond human control, we consider how the key temporal metaphors contextualize and reconstitute the interpretive possibilities of other portions of the memorial. When reading the components together, we posit, the memorial suggests this progression can advance from two sources of causal constancy: God and Bonfire. One might expect commemorative symbolism that speaks to religious belief or campus tradition as a source of reassurance. We suggest, however, that such themes are destabilized when folded into the memorial's display of time progressing from history to eternity.

**Time's Purpose: God's Atemporality**

The Bonfire Memorial's closed temporal arrangement allows for further reflection on how the blending of linear and eternal time accent different themes in other portions of the structure. As Victoria J. Gallagher has noted, some displays comprise both entrance and exit and, taken with a whole experience, "may evoke a new and/or renewed set of associations." For our case, this description applies to Traditions Plaza. When read against the progression of time from linear to eternal, "The Last Corps Trip" takes added significance as a poem of supreme transition. On the day of judgment before God, Aggies from different walks of life transcend their earthly bonds and win approval to pass the Pearly Gates—a scene that anticipates the long walk of the Bonfire Memorial. As mentioned earlier, the poem imagines the Aggie football team, Corps of Cadets, and marching band standing before Saint Peter: "It was Judgment Day in Aggieland. And tenseness filled the air; All knew there was a trip at hand. But not a soul knew where." At world's end, a surprised group of Aggies begin filing through the earthly realm one section of the student body at a time. Saint Peter quickly deems the football
team worthy of eternal life thanks to their unrelenting determination—a
gesture to the pervasive 12th Man ethos. Upon hearing the good news, the
Corps of Cadets, speaking as one voice, gain Saint Peter’s attention and
approval: “And when the Twelfth Man heard this, they let out a mighty yell;
That echoed clear to Heaven and shook the gates of Hell. ‘And what group
is this upon the side,’ Saint Peter asked his aide, ‘That swelled as if to burst
with pride; When we our judgment made?’” Told of the Corps’s reputa-
tion—“known both far and wide; For backing up their fighting team;
Whether they won lost or tied,” Saint Peter concludes that their loyalty
necessitates a similar, everlasting fate—“That within the realms of Heaven;
They should spend eternity.” The same conclusion is repeated once more
for the Aggie band that played to the occasion: “And when the band had
finished, St. Peter wiped his eyes; And said, ‘It’s not so hard to see: They’re
meant for paradise.’” In three separate turns, the determined will of Aggies
pays out in a heavenly reward.

Originally “The Last Corps Trip” was a jocular response that P. H. DuVal
Jr. penned against a TAMU professor’s complaint on low student atten-
dance before a football game: “If you guys were going on a one-way trip to
hell, you’d leave a week early,” the disgruntled professor apparently
opined.89 Inspired by this critique, DuVal imagined a heavenly destination
for his cohorts, and the resulting prose was adopted as the opening salvo for
lighting Bonfire. In its first form, the poem was a joke. Set against the
temporal shift in the Bonfire Memorial, however, it offers a haunting
prelude to mortal transitions that define a tradition past and present. The
ultimate moment of transition alluded to in “The Last Corps Trip” (“It was
Judgment Day in Aggieland”; synonyms for Heaven as “eternity” and
“paradise”) serves as the “beginning” of Bonfire in “1909,” the first marker
of History Walk, and is brought to material fruition in the eternal design of
Spirit Ring. From talk of final judgment and eternal paradise, visitors walk
to the space symbolic of eternity in Spirit Ring. Edwyn Bevan suggests
eternity is closely aligned with religious perspectives, with God being that
which “is known as the being that ‘inhabiteth eternity.’”90 Eternity, more-
over, is not time as an expansive outlet but rather time as unchanging. “A
Nunc Stans,” Bevan elaborates, “if it can be pictured at all, would be much
more like an instantaneous flash, only a flash after which nothing more
came.”91 To stand in eternity, in other words, means to exist in “a Now that
remains unchanging, with no past and with no future.”92 Here is a space
wherein visitors move from a linear progression of years represented block by block to a circular endpoint—a space of perpetual Now, marked only as, “11.18.99, 2:42 a.m.” This “instantaneous flash” begins from the moment Bonfire collapsed and continues in eternal pause. History Walk presents visitors a linear pathway wherein students killed in the 1999 collapse meet an eternal space at the final moment of the ritual’s history. Yet, this history has an author. Walking along the path of the memorial, we have not only followed the transition from time as sequential to time as eternal but have also witnessed the transition previewed in “The Last Corps Trip” as sanctioned by God, the being of eternity and presumably the source of “Judgment Day in Aggieland.” The only thing to do after Judgment Day is wander in eternity.

The relation between divine transcendence in “The Last Corps Trip” and the later symbolism invites a fated temporal perspective for the otherwise unassuming student portals. With Saint Peter’s judgment of the student body as a thematic anchor in “The Last Corps Trip,” visitors follow History Walk akin to those entering the “New Jerusalem” after “the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” and advance toward Spirit Ring. Indeed, traversing Bonfire Memorial visually resembles the description of entering God’s realm outlined in the New Testament book of Revelation. New Jerusalem is made with “a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel,” with an even distribution of gates, three facing each of the four cardinal directions. Like the scene of renewal offered in Revelation, each gate of the Bonfire Memorial is made in uniform granite: “The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl.” Despite positioning portals to face the student’s hometown instead of the four cardinal directions noted in scripture, the similarities between these transcendent transitions are striking.

This story connecting a student’s activity in Bonfire and their entrance into an eternal realm is reinforced, finally, by the discourse within individual portals. Each structure profiles a deceased student and uses his or her likeness as a threshold to access the sacred space around center-pole. The detailed representation stands at a conventional adult height, creating a mirror effect indicative of the original purpose of the portals. Moreover, the interior discourse of the student portals advances the conclusion that not only was the tradition’s time serving a divine purpose but that an
individual’s time was directed by a higher, heavenly call. This claim requires some sensitivity, as victim’s families were closely involved in fashioning the content for each student’s portal. By themselves, the portals function as families might expect—to remember the fallen and provide insight to their character and qualities. Our claim, however, is that they are also destabilized when placed in the memorial’s temporal current from a linear path to the gates of eternity. Central themes of the portals vary. However, three focal points are reiterated: the student’s loyalty to Texas A&M and the Aggie Spirit (often from an early age), the notion that his or her life was complete upon death, and that he or she has transcended to eternity to be with God—three resonant themes also profiled by their fictional counterparts in the memorial’s prelude, “The Last Corps Trip.”

Unsurprisingly, enthusiasm for attending Texas A&M (as the fulfillment of one’s goal) was high among students working a late-night shift of the Bonfire stack. Bryan McClain’s portal notes how attending TAMU “had been a dream of Bryan’s since he was a small child.” “Since the day I set foot on the Texas A&M campus, I fell in love with it,” Miranda Adams notes by her own words, continuing later that she “couldn’t imagine attending another school.” Jamie Hand’s application essay to be a Freshman Fish Camp counselor emphasizes her “desire to become a Fightin’ Texas Aggie,” among other qualities. Michael Ebanks knew he was “bound for Aggieland” once his brother enrolled. Jerry Self’s portal proclaims his devotion to “Serving God,” “A&M, The Corps, and Bonfire.” Nathan West’s family commemorated his portal by noting that he taught people around him “the true meaning of the Aggie Spirit and what life is about”; a similar sentiment is also expressed for Miranda Adams, who “possessed the ‘Aggie Spirit’ deep within [her].” Such preparation for life seems unlikely for students between 17 and 25 years old, but the sense of one’s life being complete also resonates within the content of the portals. Bryan McClain’s family reflected that he “put more into his 19 years of life than a person 80 years old,” and Christopher Heard is remembered by how he “attained his goal of earning a Corps scholarship to Texas A&M University,” while living with “determination and focus” that were “absolute and set an example to inspire others.” He was “proud to be involved in the Bonfire tradition.” Michael Ebanks is similarly regarded as having “mastered the secret of life at a very early age, and God was ready for him to move on to the next plateau.” Tim Kerlee, who was the last of the deceased to be pulled
from the collapsed logs due to his admirable insistence that first responders
attend to his friends first, is remembered by one family member: “He
provided me with an example of how to live.”

Nathan West’s portal offers
a similar sense of completion, as a family story recounts a moment his
parents thought he was lost but, as he responded, “You just didn’t know
where I was.” His family, as a reflection on his death, reconstitutes the story:
“You knew where you were at A&M and I know where you are now. When
I find the way, although the search will take a lifetime, I will look for you in
your Father’s house.”

Jeremy Frampton’s grandparents similarly take
confidence that they “know where he is and we are looking forward to seeing
him one of these days.”

From a school devotion to a sense of completion, the inscriptions on the
Bonfire Memorial also speak to a transcendence to the eternal realm. Again,
Michael Ebanks’s portal offers a lucid description, with one family member
noting,

when that stack fell, I cannot believe that Michael fell, because Michael never
fell. No, Michael flew—he flew right out of that pile of lumber and he has not
come down yet. When I think about him, I am sad because I lost a friend, but
a smile crosses my face and shivers run up my neck in knowing that he is
doing the one thing he loved more than anything.

The confusion offered in the above inscription is clarified by the intimate
knowledge that Michael Ebanks and his father used to fly small-craft air-
planes together. Without such a premise, however, the activity that is
Michael “doing the one thing he loved” resonates with other reflections on
the victims of Bonfire and their dedication to the tradition to their last
moments.

In sum, the interior discourse of the Sprit Ring portals fosters a paradox-
ical tension in the Bonfire Memorial. On first sight, visitors engage each
unique character of the deceased, and—given their affection for their
school, the tradition, and hard work—each seems propelled by firm belief
and lucid choice. Once read within the context of the memorial’s larger
temporal flow, however, comments on students having lived a full life,
having achieved their goals, and being engaged in their preferred actions
make relevant different themes of divine providence to explain what hap-
pened. If God’s final judgment sets the stage for understanding the progres-
sion from 1909 through 1999 starting with “The Last Corps Trip,” our presence in the eternal realm of Spirit Ring also implies God’s foreknowledge. As Linda Zagzebski explains, one interpretation of a deterministic universe is that “if everything occurs under the control of the divine will, then apparently everything happens the way God determines it and . . . it looks as if we lack the power to act differently and so we are not free.”115 In other words, if God was the reason for time’s progression toward the Bonfire collapse, individual control or choice could be undermined. Under such premises, human agency would be largely reduced to fulfilling a fated future, as God’s atemporality means that foreknowledge of events—omniscience—was also true eternally.116 Relative to agency, the qualities the living are invited to admire and emulate in deceased students—perseverance, hard work, egalitarianism—are paradoxically undercut by other suggestions of a divine causal source of time’s progression. Even if the gusto of volunteering for Bonfire construction were a reason for being on the stack, individual work ethic is still folded into a larger movement driven by God’s will. In framing the “history” of Bonfire through themes of divine light, such mortal choices and actions are not obtainable unless God chooses. Yet, as we demonstrate in further analysis, the memorial offers a second potential source of time’s progression—one potentially even more harmful to victim agency: the eternal presence and power of Bonfire.

**Time’s Purpose: Bonfire’s Atemporality**

As noted above, attempts to explain the tragedy of the Bonfire collapse through external cause create a paradox between individual action and responsibility. As Burka argued, one tendency soon following the collapse was “to treat the victims . . . as martyrs to a cause.”117 Before the memorial’s dedication, a writer for the student newspaper elaborated this sentiment, arguing, “the best response to the tragedy would be to continue the work of those who died for it.”118 Lest we attribute this overly simplistic view to youth, a similar position was voiced in the Bryan–College Station newspaper. Despite frustrations with parsing out “God’s mysterious ways,” the editorial staff of the Eagle took “small comfort” that “they [the students] died doing something they loved, something that was a rich part of their Aggie Spirit.”119 Such a death, the paper noted, made the victims “part of a
long line of Aggies who have given so much.” This latter suggestion likens the students to soldiers who, like Corps members, died in service to a larger mission. “The Aggies had been strong before, especially in wartime, when many Cadets had given their lives for their country,” Homer Jacobs wrote, reflecting on the aftermath of the Bonfire collapse. Such sentiment arguably expands the requisite level of sacrifice to participate in the 12th Man “spirit,” or what Jacobs defines broadly as “working together, building friendships, and going the extra mile—or, if need be, a hundred—to be true to their school.”

Still other voices positioned the Bonfire collapse in a more fated and mysterious context. In her defense of the tradition following the collapse, Pamela Freni aligned the spirit of the 12th Man to the deceased before the final scope of the tragedy was clear. By Friday, November 19, 1999, Freni recalls, “The death count stood at eleven. I felt that God would want a Twelfth Man and I went to sleep that night saddened, but with the crystal clear certainty that a twelfth student would die soon. The Twelfth Man tradition, bandied about the nation fairly freely today, originated at A&M.” Thus, in addition to the presence of God, many found solace in the idea that victims of the Bonfire collapse had some special relationship to its metaphysical mysteries. As we conclude our analysis of the memorial, we highlight how the structure’s design offers Bonfire itself as a second possible cause leading time’s progression to the 1999 collapse. To elaborate this claim, we return to additional features of Spirit Ring that support the thesis that time’s progression within the memorial has a source in the tradition of Bonfire.

Spirit Ring represents a temporal metaphor of transcendent eternity. Yet, the placement of this unique commemorative feature speaks to a spatial as well as temporal message. The original conception of Spirit Ring reinforces this point. Its perimeter not only represents Bonfire’s placement on campus but was also intended to “serv[e] as a compass, acknowledging the direction A&M provides students,” according to Shemwell. Read in the temporal and religious frameworks utilized in the memorial as a whole as well as the purposeful spatial and temporal markers of each student’s hometown, Spirit Ring is not just a compass indicative of a school’s place in a student’s life but rather a meeting point for each student’s life from before enrolling at TAMU to the collapse. Like the framework of Christian theology, this claim begins with Spirit Ring (as metonym of Bonfire) as a place of eternal
constancy inclusive of the histories and stories represented in the student portals (metonyms for students). Here it is important to return to the interactions of Spirit Ring’s eternity and the placement of the portals against prior observations on the progression of events leading to November 18, 1999.

Portals stand between two reference points: center-pole in eternity, and one’s hometown—a spatial and temporal reference to students’ lives before enrolling at Texas A&M. In this regard, Spirit Ring signals a transition from time as progressive to time as eternal not for one path in History Walk but for 12 additional paths, insofar as each portal suggests a spatial flow—positioned toward one place while facing another. Where visitors experience the temporal movement on a physical path that must be walked with material bodies confined by both gravel and concrete, Spirit Ring’s perimeter does not physically allow but does suggest 12 additional paths between the eternal realm in the circle and the past lives for each of its student volunteers. These 12 paths from hometown to center-pole (and from center-pole to hometown) transcend boundaries a visitor can physically walk but are nevertheless open to the imagination as a connection between time, space, and spirit.125

Portals are the ideal pathways for the deceased. As Douglas Keister notes, symbolic uses of gates are often invoked to communicate transcendence to another realm. He elaborates, “In scenes of the Last Judgment, gates are always central in the picture.”126 A door, for example, doesn’t offer the same “porous” nature of gates, which “provide us with a ready view into the world beyond” that we are traversing toward.127 While the idea of a portal leading outward from the Bonfire site toward hometowns forges a bond from person to action, the structural formation of a portal also invites visitors to perceive space and time flowing in two directions, not one (see fig. 6). Portals can signify the distance traveled by each victim to the site of Bonfire but also the reach of Bonfire to each victim before the collapse, as the presence of hometown markers indicates. Applying the same logic that distance indicates time,128 reference to one’s hometown in Spirit Ring makes relevant a student’s life before enrolling at A&M, drawn both to the eternal place of center-pole and drawn by the eternal place of center-pole.129 Spirit Ring is a meeting place of two kinds of paths: the material path of History Walk for the mortal visitor and the invisible temporal paths leading from each victim’s time before attending TAMU to the Bonfire collapse.
Past meets eternity in the selection of relevant spaces. This place, the memorial suggests, was relevant to their linear stories before enrolling at A&M.\textsuperscript{130}

The atemporal eternity of Spirit Ring can be further read as representing the direction of time’s purpose in both God’s heavenly realm and the

Fig. 6. Student Portals on Spirit Ring. Photograph by Jennifer L. Jones Barbour.
enduring permanence—or eternal burn—of Bonfire. The implications for time’s progression and determinism still stand when Bonfire is read as a substitution or synonym for God’s necessary permanence. In an influential take on the relationship between God’s time and mortal time, for example, Thomas Aquinas posits that God’s eternity—an atemporal position outside our chronological time—reaches each individual as the center of a circle reaches individual points on its circumference. Writes Aquinas, “whatever is found in any part of time co-exists with what is eternal as being present to it, although with respect to some other time it be past or future.”

God, based in eternity and aware of all things past and future, “has a knowledge of those things that according to the march of time do not yet exist.” Points on the circle are their own, but each remains equidistant and relevant to God’s sacred eternity. When substituting Bonfire for God as a cause of time’s progression the Thomistic logic still applies: each point on the circle is equally relevant and connected to the eternal foundation and personal relevance of victims. From linear to eternal time, they were led here.

Alone, the Spirit Ring portals speak to individual remembrance and a conventional sense of the 12th Man tradition. When read against other components of the memorial, however, the much-celebrated portals reconstitute the magnitude and meaning of the 12th Man ethos. Visitors may complete the circle by standing in for the dead, but the virtues that are celebrated and the material means of telling such a story—braided between the history of the act and the people mortally affected by the act—imply the “spirit” animating the lost is largely inaccessible to the living. This sentiment is further reinforced by the presence of 27 bronze slabs on Spirit Ring representing those injured in the collapse. The injured arguably applied the “spirit” of Bonfire in their lives and actions. Without individual markers or stories, however, such material representations imply no distance—spatial, temporal, spiritual—traveled for those affected but still alive. This rhetoric is relegated only to the journey of the deceased. Those who died in the 1999 collapse were seemingly connected into a moment advanced by an eternal and supernatural cause. A memorial narrative suggesting God’s will in the deaths of individuals is familiar; a memorial narrative suggesting a university’s cosmic tradition in the death of students is dangerous.

Bonfire’s eternal presence is echoed, finally, in the unchanging character of History Walk—the portion of the memorial that is easiest to overlook. As markers of past Bonfires, the walk represents a steady and near-uniform
timeline of adherence. The 12th Man ethos that so powerfully supported and fueled nearly a century of “other education” on the flagship campus of a major American university is reconstituted around the unbending and eternal character of the event itself. Bonfire’s unwavering stability is indistinguishable with the scene in which we live. It is as much a part of us as a spirit that can never—and need never—be told. Yet, grounding Bonfire in the eternal realm as another source of time’s progression affects the trans-action of agency the memorial can offer. If our lives seem fated by an outcome determined beyond our means, the reason for choosing to better ourselves from representative models loses potency. One cannot emulate someone whose actions seem determined but can only wonder whether the same fate also applies.

**IMPLICATIONS AND ALTERNATIVES**

The TAMU Bonfire Memorial addresses one of the most traumatic and unsettling incidents to occur on a contemporary college campus. As fatal encounters continue in spaces of higher education (and beyond), the implications for how victim agency is addressed in commemoration carry heightened importance. One of the notable traits of the Bonfire Memorial’s extensional reputation is its limited applicability as a site of remembrance. Victim families don’t agree on the structure’s thematic focus. Freshmen tours and university-sponsored remembrance ceremonies have been discontinued. Indeed, the consistent extensional meaning of the memorial is limited to signify the tradition’s apex on campus. In a recent retelling of the collapse and aftermath for ABC’s 20/20: In an Instant series, “Buried by Bonfire,” the memorial looms large in the film’s conclusion as a marker to a bygone era on campus. After recounting stories of survival and heartbreak, the program closes with several shots of the structure as a range of witnesses identify the cause of the collapse as ultimately unknowable. “I never wondered if Bonfire would ever fall,” former student body president Will Hurd recounts, continuing, “We had done it for 90-some times. There had never been any significant injury or catastrophe.” Despite the benefit of multiple forensic studies and the opportunity to discuss the jagged reputation of the tradition on campus, the program never mentions Bonfire as a source of controversy, or that student culture contributed to the disaster. Like the memorial it profiles, the program avoids viewers’ involvement in question-
ing the tradition or the cause by which it occurred. Admiration of past efforts is all that is asked. In conjunction with our argument, the Bonfire Memorial appears to serve a “useful” purpose as a symbolic reference for continuing the essence of tunnel vision, not as a source for encouraging victim or citizen agency.137

Agency as a normative standard is not intended to clarify a memorial’s precise or static meaning. Rather, agency, as we’ve applied it in this case, is a participatory phenomenon that implies and encourages, in Campbell’s words, “a capacity to act . . . in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one’s community.”138 Remembering victims of tragedy through a rhetoric that echoes determinism mitigates their agency and, in turn, eliminates the possibility of a desirable epideictic encounter that might foster present and future engagement on unreconciled issues.139 Offering such tools for engagement would have been particularly appropriate in the case of Bonfire, as the potential danger of the tradition was widely known yet uncorrected before the collapse.140

Our analysis suggests the unsettling pedagogy offered in this memorial emerged from the design jury’s insistence that the structure honor both the dead and the scope of the tradition together, a decision that closed off a visitor’s temporal experience in many ways. Moreover, in preserving the tradition from the possibility of future reflection, this decision undercut the very idea planners intended to honor. We have greater difficulty emulating the 12th Man tradition—to stand in for the fallen, however we deem appropriate—when their story is framed as being directed by forces beyond anyone’s control. In this respect, our call for rhetorical critics to consider the issue of commemoratory agency implies that a memorial should make resonant virtues of the dead evident and accessible for visitors to adopt, appropriate, or ignore on their terms. Such choice is negated in a seemingly deterministic world. As a prescription and critique, we would recommend future memorials take caution in bracketing off representations of time in commemorative spaces. For our specific case, the Bonfire Memorial without Traditions Plaza and/or History Walk would maintain Spirit Ring’s unique tribute to the fallen but open new temporal associations between the tragedy of 1999 and our time. Such a different character might allow visitors to engage the moment and meaning of the collapse, then move into their own experiences without being funneled back into a loop from 1909 and forward again. Additionally, memorializing Bonfire victims need not ex-
plicitly include Bonfire. Such proposals for the campus memorial were offered but ultimately rejected in favor of the design jury’s parameters.\textsuperscript{141} However, a more encouraging rhetoric was apparent during the one-year anniversary of the collapse, as thousands gathered at the Bonfire site for a ceremonial remembrance. “Students who received scholarships in honor of the 12 who died” then lit candles from “a large memorial flame,” before then spreading the flames to a sea of candles held by spectators.\textsuperscript{142} By emphasizing education in Aggieland, these students were participating in a preferable transaction of commemorative agency. This public memory of the victims, moreover, seems an appropriate vehicle for emulating and interrogating the values of the dead without closing off the possibility that the activity by which they died is worth examining.

What ought memorials to tragedies do with victim agency? Tragedies encourage debates about responsibility.\textsuperscript{143} In arguing against the deterministic worldview of the Bonfire Memorial, we encourage memorial critics and planners to take counsel with William James, who imagined a world “devoid either of transparency or stability,” defined as a “pluralistic, restless universe” of possibility.\textsuperscript{144} In this, our findings dovetail with critics who have argued that memorials benefit from a level of ambiguity—whether that be directed to measurements of time, intention, or purpose.\textsuperscript{145} Such ambiguity allows for the crucial work of memorials to follow—namely, their ability to engage visitors in critical questions relevant to civic culture. Yet, mutability need not be opaque but rather could allow for what we imagine agency can provide as meaningful remembrance: the ability for visitors to communicate, recognize, and legitimate the resonant qualities of the dead that are both accessible and mutable. In other words, memorials should be understood as potential hubs of agency that define and collect visions of the past and also distribute and invite for consideration the resources of further engagement in present and future circumstances. Closing off this process by denying agency to the dead minimizes rhetorical impact—or even the need for reflection—for the living.

Memorials educate.\textsuperscript{146} They are pillars to support communal values in and beyond moments of crisis. Like institutions of higher education, they require expense, commitment, and time to construct a meaningful endeavor.\textsuperscript{147} However, in cases like the TAMU Bonfire Memorial, the promise of public pedagogy is filled by a commitment to a prior order, not the possibility of something that might renew. If the Bonfire case is an indicator,
our future evaluation of memorials should account for the pedagogical promise they invite in transforming tragedy into something truly educational—aiding an audience in appropriating something in a way they have not yet considered or imagined. Learning through public memory ought to require more than repetition of the original problem, but something that constructively expands public perception and participation. Sharing such important and sometimes painful insights in commemorative form is a process that should be encouraged. It is a story that must be told.

NOTES

7. As Cook elaborates, the stack comprised 5,000 logs while “as many as 2,000 more scattered around on the ground.” Cook, “Bonfire Collapse,” 13.
9. The collapse of Bonfire was so complex that rescue workers had to remove logs methodically to reach the wounded. Workers also established an onsite morgue. The final survivor was not removed from the disjointed pile until 1:00 AM Friday,


15. John Williams, “Design for Disaster?” *Houston Chronicle*, January 30, 2000, 1E and 4E. As Pierce noted shortly after the collapse, “Since the bonfire is on state property, it doesn’t have to conform to any building codes.” Pierce, “A Crushing Wave of Wood,” 44.

16. By 1985, it was understood that “students blamed drinking as a contributing factor for bonfire related injuries. Because the activity was a student function, university officials rely upon the students to enforce the rules.” Cook, “Bonfire Collapse,” 15. One resonant example of sexism from 1989 included two women—journalists for the school newspaper assigned to write about Bonfire—who were pelted with spit and obscenities for “having dared to cross the Bonfire perimeter.” Anne G. Glenn, “Is A&M Bonfire Really a Tradition Worth Preserving?” *News and Record*, December 6, 1999, A10.


18. Two of the deceased students were found by early tests to have been legally intoxicated when they died, and alcohol consumption was an ongoing source of trouble for organizers of Bonfire. See Cook, “Bonfire Collapse,” 21. Multiple witnesses recalled “seeing students
standing on the fourth layer of logs the night of the collapse, drinking beer and urinating.” McGraw, “Deaths Might Not End a Texas Tradition,” 29.


20. Following the 1999 collapse, university president Ray Bowen instituted a two-year moratorium on Bonfire, pausing the ritual until 2002. Students continued to advocate for the return of the ritual, while administrators weighed costs of insuring the activity amid litigation from victims of the collapse. By the end of 2001, lawsuits on behalf of 11 students (five who were injured and six families of students who were killed) against the university, the company that rented use of the construction cranes, and the student leaders (Red Pots) in charge of the 1999 Bonfire were filed. With no affordable way to insure the activity and safely ensure Bonfire’s construction, Bowen cancelled the 2002 burn. In 2003, President Robert Gates announced that no further discussion on continuing Bonfire would happen until the litigation was resolved. See John Lebas, “We Go Forward’: University Struggles to Find Means to Move On,” Eagle, November 18, 2000, A1; Craig Kapitan, “Monetary Costs from Collapse in the Millions,” Eagle, November 18, 2004, A5; and Holly Huffman, “Unifying Tradition Now Divides,” Eagle, November 18, 2004, A1 and A4.

21. Holly Huffman, “Investigating Commission Felt ‘Call to Duty,’” Eagle, November 18, 2004. “Tunnel vision” is defined by Cook as “organizational factors,” such as “an environment in which a complex and dangerous structure was allowed to be built without adequate physical or engineering controls,” including “the absence of an appropriate written design or design process; a cultural bias, which impedes risk identification; and the lack of a proactive risk management approach.” See Cook, “Bonfire Collapse,” 3. One reflection from former student Luigi Angelucci epitomizes the impact of tunnel vision: “We were building a structure out of five thousand trees that had no engineering to it at all.” Quoted in Colloff, “Ring of Fire,” 174.


23. On the lack of formal apology, Tang observes, “It is ironic that at a university as conservative as Texas A&M, many would like to set aside the concept of ‘personal responsibility’ in the preventable deaths of twelve students.” See Irwin Tang, The Texas Aggie Bonfire: Tradition & Tragedy at Texas A&M (Austin, TX: Morgan Printing, 2000), 81.

25. The dual focus was a requirement from the design jury, which stipulated that entries for consideration must “capture the Aggie Spirit and the teamwork the Bonfire tradition has shown over the past 90 years.” Tanya Nading, “Memorial Designs Set to Be Unveiled November 18,” *Battalion*, October 17, 2001, 1–2. Competition manager and professor of landscape architecture Chang-Shan Huang noted, “There is a strong balance of expertise and Aggie perspective. There are members of the jury who have been directly involved with Texas A&M as well as members who have been affected personally by the tragedy.” Quoted in Nading, “Memorial Designs,” 2.


44. This transactional position on victim agency appropriates Lincoln’s 1862 message to Congress in which he argued, “In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve.” See Abraham Lincoln, “Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862,” in The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1957), 537.

45. George Rogers argued that the structure would “forever link the tradition to the tragedy of Nov. 18, 1999” and will serve to “help people understand why those 12 Aggies were out on that stack at 2:42 a.m. when it fell. They understood what the spirit of Bonfire was about.” Rogers quoted in Brett Nauman, “Granite Monument Built to Represent Bonfire Tragedy,” Eagle, November 18, 2004, 2.


47. As sacred space to the 1999 collapse, Lisa Gartner opined that “the ‘real memorial’ would be a granite circle that marked the spot of the Bonfire’s center pole and the time of the collapse.” See Gartner, “Aggie Muster,” Texas Monthly, November 2009. The TAMU campus covers significant area. For spatial reference, the Bonfire Memorial is located on the campus Polo Fields—just under one mile from the central classroom buildings.

48. Shemwell quoted in Bernard Hall, “Memorial Planners Say Site to Be ‘Uplifting,’” Battalion, April 17, 2003, 1A, 5A.


54. Cooper and Dethloff, Footsteps, 27.

55. Tang, The Texas Aggie Bonfire, 15; This ethic is palpable on campus, as students in a section of Kyle Field marked “Home of the 12th Man” stand throughout the entire game, signifying their “readiness to enter the game, if needed—to be ‘the twelfth man on that fighting Aggie team.’” See Cooper and Dethloff, Footsteps, 27. The commitment to the 12th Man takes other public forms, such as the 12th Man Foundation, which maintains the 12th Man Newsletter, a regular campus publication. See https://www.12thmanfoundation.com/ and http://aggietraditions.tamu.edu/team/12thman.html.

57. Only dedicated volunteerism and school pride could explain the physical effort to bring the material magnitude of Bonfire to fruition on an annual basis. A typical burn required at least two telephone poles notched and spliced together to form an anchoring “center-pole,” several gallons of wood glue to keep the poles together, roughly 7,000–8,000 logs weighing over 2 million pounds—the equivalent of two 747 jumbo jets—and 800 feet of steel cable to harness the wood for each tier, topped with 700 gallons of diesel to fuel the blaze. Student volunteerism was similarly impressive, with 125,000 work hours from 5,000 students. See Tang, *The Texas Aggie Bonfire*, 10; Kelly Brown, “More than Memories Remain for Some Survivors of Collapse,” *Eagle*, November 18, 2004, A1, A5; Cook, “Bonfire Collapse,” 39; and Henry Petrovski, “Vanities of Bonfire,” *American Scientist*, 88 (2000): 486–90. At the time of the 1999 collapse, TAMU enrollment was over 43,000 undergraduate students, which made it the fifth largest public university in the country. The combination of massive enrollment with a clearly defined campus identity is remarkable. For a vocal contingent of the campus population, Bonfire helped this unlikely combination happen. See Yardley, “Aggies, Shaken by Accident.”

58. Quoted in Nauman, “Granite Monument,” 2. Shemwell echoes this sentiment, noting, “The essence of the Twelfth Man tradition is being there for buddies, stepping in when you could be there. You have the opportunity to step in and complete the circle.” Victoria White, “Firm Says Memorial Gives Glimpses into Bonfire Victims’ Personalities,” *Battalion*, November 18, 2004, 8A. This description is also noted on the TAMU webpage: “Stepping into one of the oversized gateways on the circle, the visitor symbolically fills the void left by one of the twelve Aggies, embodying the spirit of the 12th Man.” See bonfire.tamu.edu/memorial.


60. Ragsdale’s observations recognize the Bonfire Memorial as epideictic rhetoric, but his treatment of the memorial is limited to only Spirit Ring.


67. Dupre, Monuments, 216. Bonfire was not 170-feet wide when it was constructed. One memorial design attempted to reproduce the width of a Bonfire circle (45 feet) but was ultimately rejected. As noted elsewhere, the memorial’s perimeter represents the fencing that would have been in place to keep both a safe distance during a burn as well as a secure site during construction.


69. As one poet reflected, the portals resemble “12 perfect standing rectangles that loo[m] like open doorways . . . all leaving behind distinct caskets of long afternoon shadows over the grass.” Carlo Paul, “Bonfire Monument,” Callaloo 34 (2011): 714.

70. Hissong, “Gone, but Not Forgotten.”

71. Nauman, “Granite Monument.”

72. Such seemingly simple design elements align with the designer’s intent, namely that “the key to the project was to say what needed to be said and say no more.” Shemwell quoted in White, “Firm Says Memorial Gives Glimpses.”


74. Young argues that the difference between memorials and monuments doesn’t hold against scrutiny. He treats “all memory-sites as memorials,” elaborating that “a monument . . . is always a kind of memorial.” Given the functional affiliation with different perspectives on time, Danto’s distinction helps explain the rhetorical importance of our subject. See James E. Young, The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 4.

75. Yi-Fu Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 119.

76. For Lake, temporal metaphors are the basis for how “individuals and societies endow their lives and actions with meaning.” Randall A. Lake, “Temporal Metaphors, Religions, and Arguments,” in Readings on Political Communication, ed. Theodore F. Sheckels, Janette Kenner Muir, Terry Robertson, and Lisa M. Gring-Pemble (State College, PA: STRATA Publishing, 2007), 430.


79. Tuan, *Space and Place*, 179. Lake echoes this sentiment, offering the view that “anteriority often signifies inferiority while posteriority implies superiority.” See Lake, “Temporal Metaphors,” 431.


81. As Bachelard has argued, “images of full roundness help us to collect ourselves, permit us to confer an initial constitution on ourselves, and to confirm our being intimately, inside. For when it is experienced from the inside, devoid of all exterior features, being cannot be otherwise than round.” Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958; rpt., Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 234.


86. Hall, “Memorial Planners Say Site to Be ‘Uplifting.’”


88. “The Last Corps Trip” is reproduced in its entirety in Jacobs, *The Pride of Aggieland*, 143. All quotations refer to this source.


93. Our discussion of Spirit Ring temporality refers to the symbolic importance of eternity within the memorial. We do not attempt to define the necessary or sufficient conditions of eternity. That task is addressed, among other places, in Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, “Eternity,” *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 429–58.

94. Rev. 21:1.

95. Rev. 21:12–14.

97. Each family was closely consulted and given editorial privilege on the creation of the bio-portraits that make each portal so striking. See Kendra Kingsley, “A Memory in Progress,” Battalion, May 3, 2003, A1; and Brett Nauman, “A Vision in Bronze,” Eagle, November 18, 2004, 1A.

98. In memory, the student’s profile is detailed and whole, a notable choice as multiple victims of the collapse were unrecognizable from their injuries. See Cook, “Bonfire Collapse,” 15.


106. “Miranda Denise Adams.”


111. “Nathan Scott West.”


118. Mike Walters, “Return of Bonfire Best Memorial to Deceased,” Battalion, November 18, 2004, 5D.
120. Eagle editorial, “Remember Loved Ones Left Behind.”
125. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “Spirit” in three helpful ways relative to this claim: “The animating or vital principle in man (and animals); that which gives life to the physical organism, in contrast to its purely material elements; the breath of life”; “Incorporeal or immaterial being, as opposed to body or matter; being or intelligence conceived as distinct from, or independent of, anything physical or material”; and “The disembodied soul of a (deceased) person, regarded as a separate entity.” Oxford English Dictionary, vol. 10, Sole–Sz, s.v. “Spirit.”
128. Tuan, Space and Place, 119.
129. Consider the case of Tim Kerlee, who spent his childhood in Charleston, South Carolina (arguably his hometown), until the family moved to Bartlett, Tennessee (his designated “hometown” in the memorial). What matters is the student’s place prior to enrolling at Texas A&M. See Freni, Angels on the Bonfire, 33.
130. Ragsdale notes how the hometowns and portals serve as a way to “connect the viewer to the origins of the lives lost that November night.” His observations are not extended, however, to other portions of the memorial. See Ragsdale, “Thinking Beyond Buildings,” 107.
131. Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book One: God, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 219. By Aquinas’s philosophy of God’s atemporal status, it makes no sense to attribute his beliefs as happening before or after an event. “God is timeless and God’s beliefs are timeless as well.” See Mark Bernstein, “Fatalism,” in Kane, ed., The Oxford Handbook of Free Will, 79.
“Other education” refers to the pedagogical belief that students learn through hands-on experience, even without direct supervision. Bonfire was an example of this belief in practice. See Burka, “The Aggie Bonfire Tragedy,” 120.

Marian Breen, mother of Christopher Breen, opined on the eve of the memorial’s unveiling that the thematic focus should remain on the victims, not Bonfire: “It shouldn’t be about bonfire. It should be about these 12. The less said about bonfire, the better.” See Kelly Brown, “Everyday Remembrances,” Eagle, November 7, 2004, A6. Neva Hand, mother of Jamie Hand, openly questioned the act of remembering students in a “tribute” memorial at all: “My daughter is not some kind of hero. It’s not like she gave her life. Their lives were taken by a freak accident, yet they are being memorialized. You have to ask why.” As Nauman elaborates, Hand “has concluded the tradition of Bonfire is mostly what’s being remembered.” See Brett Nauman, “Remembering Jamie,” Eagle, November 10, 2004, A4–A5.

See http://hospitality.tamu.edu/bonfiredemorial. Vimal Patel, “10 Year Remembrances May Be Last Ones Set Up by A&M,” Eagle, November 15, 2009. As interim president of TAMU, Bowen Loftin decided after the 10-year anniversary that the university would no longer sponsor Bonfire remembrance activities. Loftin argued in his decision that other presidents might chose otherwise, leaving the space open for future university-sponsored activities. So far no one has changed this practice, leaving all Bonfire remembrance activities up to the individual families of victims and interested students, much like how Bonfire operated as a tradition.

“Buried by Bonfire,” 20/20: In an Instant, episode 6, directed by Brandon Boulay, Raul Cadena, and Bo Hakala, written by Maria Awes, Brian Forrest, and Carly Samuelson (New York: ABC, July 23, 2016).

Another sign that the Bonfire Memorial’s “usefulness” might be waning on campus is that the practice of building and burning Bonfire continues, though as an unsanctioned student activity and on an off-campus site. For a profile of this new iteration, see Scott Eden, “The Burning Desire of Texas A&M,” ESPN.com, November 26, 2014 http://www.espn.com/espn/video/story/_/id/11937545/texas-bonfire-burns-fifteen-years-collapse-kills-12-students.


Agency as “projectivity” and agency as “practical evaluation” both heavily rely on reasoning, communication, and interactive dialogue. See Emirbayer and Mische, “What Is Agency?” 984–94.

In addition to the commission findings on uncorrected behavior and policies related to Bonfire, Tang has noted that there were, in fact, two prior instances of the stack collapsing prior to burn. Both times resulted in no major injury. See Tang, The Texas
Aggie Bonfire, 74 and 110. Moreover, Terry Hirsch (emeritus professor of engineering at TAMU) offered a refutation to any suggestion that the Bonfire was incident-free for its 90-year tradition in the months following the collapse: “You hear people say, ‘We’ve been building Bonfire for ninety years, and this is the first catastrophe.’ Well, it’s not so. This design is only twenty years old, and the center pole has fallen twice in six years.” Hirsch quoted in Burka, “The Aggie Bonfire Tragedy,” 123. These observations, plus the fact that the final Bonfire Memorial notes three deaths prior to the 1999 collapse on History Walk, make any contemporary suggestion that the tragedy was a surprise dubious at best. Finally, one structural reason for the collapse was the absence of steel cable ties on the base. These steel cable ties had been used in the past, but organizers in 1999 wanted to avoid a Bonfire that burned too quickly. Legend told that if the stack stayed lit and standing past midnight, A&M would beat the University of Texas. If the reverse happened, the opposite effect would transpire. Absent the steel cables holding the base in place, the pressure of additional layers of wood became too much, or, as Petroski notes, like a “barrel without barrel hoops” when additional logs were added on top. The combination of design failure and “engineering hubris” made the collapse an “all-but-inevitable accident waiting to happen.” Petroski, “Vanities of the Bonfire,” 489.

141. In addition to commemorative visions like “a marble reflecting pool placed next to an eternal flame,” a “45 foot tall sculpture of a phoenix,” and other designs that replicated the size and scope of Bonfire, one entry proposed to build a 36-foot-tall Roman numeral “XII” within a tree-filled garden area with a sculpture that would cast no shade on the anniversary of the collapse, hence “[eradicating] the shadow on the A&M family.” See “Bonfire Memorial Designs Go on Display,” Battalion, September 13, 2001, 7; Justin Smith, “Memorial Finalists Chosen,” Battalion, November 19, 2001, 10; Laura Hipp, “4 Finalists Unveiled in Search to Memorialize Bonfire Victims,” Eagle, November 19, 2001, A1; and John LeBas, “‘Fitting Tribute’ Selected,” Eagle, March 7, 2002, A1.

142. Kelly Brown, “Memorial to Honor Fallen Ags,” Eagle, November 17, 2000, A1 and A6. Another alternative came from the city of College Station, which dedicated 12 light posts inside the city’s oldest park. The name of each victim and his or her hometown are marked on a plaque at the base of each lamp. Coleen Kavanagh, “CS Plans Memorial Ceremonies,” Eagle, November 17, 2004, A6.

143. The discussion of gun laws in light of regular public shootings in the United States indicates that the question of determinism is very much still with us. Consider how voices from the political right in the United States often circumvent the idea that laws have agency by positing that the threat—whether terrorism or people with maleficient
motives—is *always* more resilient than a measure to minimize it. For a discussion on this theme, see Amy Davidson, “Comment: Guns and Terror,” *New Yorker*, December 14, 2015, 23–24.


145. See Blair, Jeppeson, and Pucci Jr., “Public Memorializing in Postmodernity.”

146. Blair and Michel aptly note that commemorative structures don’t tell us “what to think” but rather “invite us to think, to pose questions, to examine our experiences in relation to the memorial’s discourse.” See “Designing Memories . . . of What?” 189.


148. One definition of education seems especially apt for this study. Learning is “an encounter with what you don’t know, what you haven’t thought of, what you couldn’t conceive, and what you never understood or entertained as possible. It’s an encounter with the other—even with otherness as such.” Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything (and Why We Should Worry)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 182.