ABSTRACT

JESSICA RAE ODOM. Countervailing University Commemoration: For Whom Do the Bells Toll? (Under the direction of Professor Jason Miller.)

American academic landscapes have a material language all their own. Within material rhetoric, the commemorative sites on the National Mall have been analyzed extensively for their rhetorical tendencies, while those on university campuses have been largely overlooked. The pervasive university culture of commemoration creates rhetorical spaces that encourage unique rhetorical statements. This analysis assesses the power dynamics implicit within university structures by critically analyzing the iconic Memorial Bell Tower at North Carolina State University. Informed by Marxist criticism, this analysis unmasks the ironic nature and the multiple layers of tension that are present in this sacred space that significantly shapes this academic institution’s narrative. In addition to the tension between those commemorating and those being commemorated, this structure exhibits tension between students’ ever present need for spaces of utility and alumni’s desire for symbolism created by their absence from the university campus. Analysis of this bell tower also reveals a rhetoric of reimbursement, whereby those responsible for commemorating alumni-soldiers who died while fighting in the First World War inscribe a new kind a memory —the memory of those who remember. Universities have a long tradition of extolling the virtues of its heroes by creating memories through material structures. This analysis of a commemorative bell tower offers a useful starting point for understanding a complex material language within the university culture of commemoration. This critical examination further reveals patterns underlying this material language, and suggests a potential rhetorical trajectory for future practices of commemoration on university campuses.