The public relations paradox of erasure: *Damnatio memoriae* as public relations strategy and tactic

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A B S T R A C T

Public relations scholars study how organizations co-create meaning with engaged stakeholders. Not well understood is how and why such co-creation modifies shared meaning, amplifies change, and even "erases" some piece of memory from the public record with the purpose of redirecting and redefining societal narratives. To help establish erasure as a concept for studying public relations, we draw from Freud's theory of memory to establish a foundation upon which to critique strategic erasure. We adapt Freud's theory of memory into the intersecting critique of visual rhetoric as public relations by analyzing, via narrative inquiry, remnants of Imperial Rome that have been modified, amplified, but even erased to present Rome's modern identity. For centuries, even during Imperial Rome, leaders practiced *damnatio memoriae* —a modern Latin phrase that means "condemnation of memory." We use this concept to interrogate the public relations identity process Rome's leaders have used to modify for emphasis and even obliterate Roman elites' names and images from the texts of public records by destroying, mutilating and modifying statues and monuments as a means for co-creating new public memory. Such analysis reveals how *damnatio memoriae* helps elites to redefine the "memory" of the Eternal City.

1. Introduction

As theorists and researchers work to define the character of public relations, especially its role in creating meaning, new concepts continue to be added to the list that defines the phenomena. To that end, this article examines how organizational elites use public relations to (re)create public memory; in doing so, they seek to correct or merely alter such memory as a means for shaping how communities and societies co-create their future. A narrative interpretation of public relations argues that it plays a major role in defining the characters, plots, themes, acts, and purposes of discourse as means for guiding collective relationships by co-creating a coherent and orderly society, one based on shared sensemaking and aligned interests. Such analysis can begin by identifying examples of how public relations reshapes the past to provide foundation for current and future enactments. For instance, Bill Cosby, an iconic entertainer, televised father-figure, and famous US actor, producer, and comedian experienced "one of the most thunderous falls from grace in American cultural history" when he was convicted of sexual assault charges (Roig-Franzia, 2018, para 1). Consequently, the Television Academy Hall of Fame *erased* Cosby's name from its website and removed a bust of his likeness from the Hall of Fame Plaza (Brown, 2018).

Similarly, on May 8, 2003, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)—the governing body that organizes collegiate sports programs and regulates college athletics for more than 1,200 institutions and conferences in the USA and Canada—forced the

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University of Michigan men's basketball team to vacate/forfeit more than 100 regular season and post-season tournament wins. By this action, the NCAA penalized the University of Michigan for violating NCAA rules and sought to *erase* from sports history an era of University of Michigan men's basketball team accomplishments. In a similar vein, in 2010 the NCAA levied harsh sanctions against the University of Southern California (USC). Due to star football and basketball players (Reggie Bush and O.J. Mayo respectively) receiving improper benefits (Zinser, 2010), the NCAA forced this team to vacate its wins and stripped the USC football team of its 2004 national championship title. Because of this sanction, Reggie Bush decided to forfeit college football's top individual honor (the Heisman Trophy) that he was awarded that year. These three examples share a common theme. Each example highlights how organizations make a strategic public relations decision, via the process of erasure, to alter the public memory.

When incidents such as these occur, organizations often default to image maintenance strategies including even reshaping commemoration situationally to recast cultural texts. Discussing the conflicted commemoration of African American Revolutionary War icon Crispus Attucks to explore "issues of identity, agency, and exemplarity," Browne (1999) noted how "producers and consumers of public memory were ever alert for self-interested attempts to fashion the past to partisan and selective ends" (p. 185). Paralleling this practice, public relations scholars have used image-repair frameworks (see Benoit, 1995) to study such issues, but often do not probe the nuances and contextual presentations and interpretations that led to the emergence of the issue in the first place or investigate the long-term implications of a changed narrative (Waymer & Bradley, 2018). Thus, image, reputation, and issues management are bona fide areas of study in public relations (see Heath, 1997), and insights into such phenomena can refine the study of public relations.

Public relations scholars, especially those who use history to investigate public relations, have understudied how and why organizations navigate competing stakeholder expectations. A deeper look into such strategic processes can provide a "revisionist history" of how organizations may opt to ease competing stakeholder tensions by "erasing" some offending entity's actions from the public record. However, no matter what "erasure" posture an organization takes (in defense or attack), memories linger but with modification. For example, as much as the Television Academy Hall of Fame attempts to erase images of Bill Cosby, most persons in the USA (arguably internationally) know who he is and how groundbreaking the Cosby Show was (Griffith, 2014). In the USA, sports enthusiasts remember the University of Michigan "Fab Five" men's basketball team and recall watching Reggie Bush excel on the football field as he and his USC Trojan teammates won the 2004 college football national championship. No action that the NCAA takes can completely erase those accomplishments from public memory but might put them in closed quotation marks or attach an asterisk to them. Thus, the public relations strategy of erasure appears to be ostensibly paradoxical: to promote, commemorate, alter, and even expunge details that co-create the public memory. Public relations is used to applaud accomplishment, but may alter the memory of such accomplishment for purposes of image and reputation. In this study, we interrogate this paradox by theorizing about "erasure" as a public relations concept, strategy, and tactic before applying it to the organizational textuality of Rome.

2. Literature review

2.1. Setting the analytical concepts

Scholars conduct research at the nexus of communication, public relations, historical text and collective memory (see Carneiro & Johnson, 2015; Heath & Waymer, 2014; Fitch, 2015; Waymer & Street, 2015). In such research, perhaps it is best to use the adjective, public, to set up public memory. It is a "cultural process in which a shared sense of the past is created from the symbolic resources of human community" (Browne, 2008, p. 3081). However, memory does not stay in the past, but carries forward as it is "provisional and shaped by vested interests and aspirations of organizations' members." From a rhetorical perspective, such "a view presupposes that public memory is never neutral, natural, or without consequence." Its construction is "the product of human ambition." It is "selective and purposive," and thus "intrinsically rhetorical" (p. 3081). Specific to public relations, scholars articulate the ways that memory studies inform and highlight the "centrality of public relations in the complexities of history making and historical understandings" (L'Etang, Coombs, & Xifra, 2015, p. 128). In this vein, we critically link scholarship in memory, erasure, and public relations.

Since erasure is not a concept found in public relations literature, we need to establish its conceptual foundation for our argument. As we undertake to flesh out a rhetorical theory of public relations, one pillar is the ancient and enduring attachment of rhetoric and memory. Memory is an inherent rationale for how humans strategically use the past to operationally define the present and project into the future. Public relations is inherently futuristic, but public relations also is linked to what is remembered, how it is remembered, and how memories guide current and future dialogue and decision-making (Waymer & Logan, 2016).

For ancient rhetoricians, memory was one of the five canons of the discipline. That meant that speakers had to remember arguments, facts, terms that could be used artfully, all of which presumed the cognitive ability to adapt to, incorporate, and challenge what publics remembered. A contemporary parallel occurs when commentators and pundits point to politicians' previous statements that are contradicted by their current ones. Memory is essential to rhetorical concepts such as enthymemic reasoning and topoi, classical themes that can connect any immediate statement to cultural truisms, enduring texts (Leichty & Warner, 2001). Memory can be employed to connect immediate ideas to cultural text. Also, cultural texts can be changed in ways that alter how memory affects the acceptability and implications of a rhetor's statements.

Memory, however, is not the exclusive domain of rhetorical scholars. As part of psychotherapy's approach to memory, Sigmund Freud famously used the metaphor of a children's toy, the *Wunderblock* (forerunner to Etch A Sketch). The *Wunderblock* (often referred to as the mystic writing pad) was composed of a stylus, a wax tablet, and a sheet of cellophane. If one lifts the cellophane sheet after writing on it, the writing disappears—ready for new writings and images. However, a faint trace of the original impression remains—forever etched on the wax slab. Freud's theory of memory argued that just as images drawn on the *Wunderblock* are never

fully erased, so too the mind records "indelible" memories.

Derrida wrestled with Freud's metaphor of the "artistic," mystic sketchpad (the *Wunderblock*) and wondered how a children's toy could nuance his deconstructionist theory of discourse. In his interrogation of Freud's metaphor, Derrida would not question "whether the Magic Writing Block metaphor is effective to represent the psyche"; rather, Derrida would ask: "what is a text?… What would be the psyche to be represented by a text?… there would be no machine nor text without a psychic origin…there is also no psyche without text" (Andrade, 2016, p. 99). Thus, Derrida argues that text is central to the human condition. This would lead one to ponder about texts—their creation, use, and even erasure. If memory cannot be completely erased, but altered, what implications does that have for public relations' role in the co-creation of ideals expressed through text? In this vein, scholars have begun to consider the discursive implications of erasure.

Carol Rambo Ronai—a former art major now a professor of sociology—used the metaphor of drawing and painting to interrogate the relationships among identity, lived experience, and consciousness (Ronai, 1998, 1999). Ronai built upon Derrida's (1976) discussion of Freud's mystic writing pad to show how people internalize and layer impressions from their experienced world onto existing memories and knowledge, thus altering how partial, shaded knowledge affects people's current and future lived experiences. The metaphor of drawing and art as a representation of memory assumes that physical objects viewed textually as discourse can influence individual and collective knowledge and memories which in turn affect humans' lived experiences. This is an important consideration to keep in mind as we make the argument that art, columns, edifices, monuments and sculptures (hereby referred to as artifacts) can and do serve public relations purposes.

In this vein, the authors posit critical viability of the rhetorical paradox of erasure, and we do so via the analysis of the intersecting realms of visual rhetoric, the remnant memory of Imperial Rome, and public relations. To punish offenders of the established order, leaders in ancient Rome practiced *damnatio memoriae* —a Latin phrase that means "condemnation of memory." To punish an offender, person, group or sub-state, ancient Roman leaders obliterated offenders' names from all public records and even destroyed or mutilated their statues and monuments to erase memory of them and therefore to set up a different narrative continuity than the statue or monument had been intended to state.

Basic to this article, it is important to know that the Roman Catholic Church sought to physically erase key details of famous ancient Roman (pagan) monuments by leaving artifacts (or some part of them) erect, and then adding significant Christian elements that erase previous meaning of the artifacts. Thus, Saint Peter triumphantly sits atop the Column of Marcus Aurelius.

To understand the implications of such erasure, we explore the public relations implications of "public relations erasure" as practice and theory. We begin this study with a deeper review of literature that supports the argument that physical, visual artifacts such as art, monuments, and statues can be used for public relations purposes. Accordingly, organizations can leverage artifacts to alter narratives of continuity which connect the past, with the present, and look to the future.

2.2. Artifacts as rhetorical public relations

Rhetoricians such as Sonja Foss (1994) have developed a theory of visual rhetoric, and a schema for evaluating visual imagery specifically. Additionally, rhetoricians have developed and applied rhetorical theory (see Gallagher's, 1995 rhetorical integration) to study how the presence of monuments communicate messages to audiences, how they shape public memory, and how audiences discuss, understand, and interact with monuments (Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1991; Dickinson, Ott, & Erica, 2005, 2010; Foss, 1986; Gallagher, 1999). Such scholarship establishes a firm foundation for viewing and interpreting artifacts rhetorically.

Bridging the gap the between memorialization, rhetoric, and public relations, Boyd (2000) chronicled corporate (re)naming—particularly of sports venues—and interrogated the practice of removing the commemorative name of a sports venue and replacing it with a paid corporate name. While Boyd did not conduct his study through the lens of erasure, one can draw parallels between corporate (re)naming and erasure—as people felt a sense of loss when their beloved ballparks took on corporate names. Specifically, Boyd discussed the often-unconsidered consequences of this practice on key stakeholders of a sports team: the fans. More specific to the phenomenon featured in this paper, Boyd (2009) parsed the impact on homerun legends' legitimacy if an asterisk is used to "correct" one hitter's total production (*756); that grammatical mark is used to note the "marred" achievement of Barry Bonds who was accused of doping. So while public relations scholars have conducted research on the periphery of memory (see also issues management literature that argues that issues do not die but rather they lie in a dormant—forgotten about—state, Heath & Palenchar, 2009), erasure remains a concept unexplored in the discipline.

In a similar vein, memorials communicate renewal, a form of post-crisis communication that can help publics' and communities' grief to transcend tragedy and disaster (Veil, Sellnow, & Heald, 2011). Critiquing another example of artifact as public relations memory, Xifra and Heath (2018) treated a mural painting as public relations text capable of advancing organizational (Spain's Republican government) and stakeholder interests; they argued that Picasso's "Guernica" brought worldwide attention to the Spanish Civil War by publicizing the atrocity and voicing moral outrage against the bombing of that Spanish city.

These examples highlight how statues, monuments, and murals can serve public relations strategic purposes. With that theme established, we apply the concept of erasure to examples of societal narrative expressed through statuary of Imperial Rome for interrogation.

2.3. The eternal city: background for the analysis of imperial rome

To begin, it is essential to ponder Rome's nickname, The Eternal City; that name seems fitting on multiple levels, given the fact that Rome is one of the oldest, notable, and continuously occupied sites in Europe with a history that spans more than 28 centuries.

Rome once was an empire, not a city. Moreover, it was mightier in concept and territory than Italy was until the 19th century (1861), and it still might be in terms of its regard in public memory. Whether prescient or prophetic, the 1st century BC, poet Tibullus dubbed Rome as The Eternal City, and other famous Augustan period poets such as Virgil, Ovid, and Livy adopted and used the expression—thus cementing its use more than 2000 years later (Hom, 2010). Tibullus' proclamation would ring hollow today if leaders in ancient Rome had not taken steps to build, expand, and unite the empire. Thus, the meaning of Rome is a work in progress.

A key component to the success of the Roman Empire was Caesar Augustus' strategic use of communication to court and influence public opinion (Everitt, 2007). Many 21st century public relations practitioners reflect fondly on Augustus' accomplishments as Rome's first emperor—most notably his successful orchestration of one of the best, multi-national, government public relations campaigns ever conducted (Bradford, 2016; Doyle, 2016). Doyle (2016) asked: "How do you run one of the largest empires in history, spanning thousands of miles, dozens of languages, and too many skin colors and cultures to count?" (para 1).

Successful examples of Augustan public relations include but are not limited to the following: first, he realized that he needed the support of the people in order to reign successfully; thus, he proclaimed to the people of Rome that Caesars (such as his adoptive father Julius Caesar) are deities. Augustus commissioned Virgil to write the epic poem, *The Aeneid,* which identifies Rome as the fulfillment of a divine plan and depicts Caesar Augustus as the person chosen and ordained by the gods to save and rebuild Rome after the collapse of the Republic. Even though the Roman Senate commissioned the construction of the Ara Pacis Augustae (the Altar of Augustan Peace), this war memorial monument served to bolster Augustus's image and reputation. The Ara Pacis Augustae communicated the Roman Empire's abundance and prosperity, and Augustus leveraged public memory and his regime's success in war strategically to persuade the people of Rome to accept the dynastic succession of his heir—an autocratic succession that likely would have been unacceptable in traditional republican Roman culture (Lamp, 2009). The Ara Pacis Augustae exemplifies the power of visual rhetoric in the form of a monument.

In short, visual rhetoric in the form of monuments and other artifacts was central to the empire-building process of Augustus in Rome and in the remote highlands of Anatolia in the east (Güven, 1998). Just before his death, Augustus recounted the import of the visual artifacts he played a role in creating for Rome: "I found Rome built of clay: I leave it to you in marble" (quoted in Everitt, 2007, p. xxxvii). In this quote, Augustus was not referring "simply to his redevelopment of the city, but also to the strength of the empire," reasoned Everitt, (2007, p. xxxvii). Even if this quotation is indeed Augustus' way of signaling the strength of the Empire, we cannot discount the significant impact of the marble constructions on image, legacy, and perception of the empire. In Rome, statues and monuments became "industrialized" textual tools used to etch into the public memory narratives of conquest, expansion, and control as represented by the character of Roman emperors (Beard, 2015). What is more telling is that more than 2000 years later—many years after the fall of the Roman Empire, a few ancient Roman edifices still are iconic.

While a few famous artifacts remain, a good question to ask is what happened to so many others. Studying their erasure and even the discourse surrounding the decisions to erase them is informative. As some scholars have noted, the erasure, mutilation, and even destruction of these artifacts constitute a form of political discourse whose purpose is to disgrace and stigmatize certain persons for their actions or (mis)deeds (Roller, 2010).

This particular process of erasure is known today as *damnatio memoriae*, which means "condemnation of memory." *Damnatio memoriae* was popularized in ancient Rome to express that a person must not be remembered, a form of banishment. Viewing *damnatio memoriae* as a punishment worse than death, Roman elites and emperors occasionally obliterated other Roman elites' names from all public records and destroyed or mutilated their statues. The study that follows interrogates evidence of *domnatio memoriae* practiced on ancient Roman artifacts by more recent actors that problematizes the practice of erasure in public relations.

3. Method: narrative inquiry: touring and walking the eternal city: critical analysis of imperial rome

To study Roman artifacts firsthand and to familiarize ourselves with them, as first author, I spent a two-week period in 2018 exploring, studying, and experiencing Rome. I immersed myself in the city of Rome (a contemporary, perhaps metaphorical, fragment of the Empire). While in Rome, I walked about the city, spent each day interacting with Roman citizens, and asked them about their perceptions of the history and present state of the city. Additionally, I participated in three guided tours to get a sense of how paid tour guides (as practitioners) talk about ancient, past, and contemporary Rome. Some of the sites I toured include the Roman Forum, The Colosseum, the Pantheon, Piazza Venezia & Mussolini's balcony, Piazza Navona, Trevi Fountain, the Vatican Museums, the Sistine Chapel, and St. Peter's Basilica.

This tourism approach informed our analysis because public relations scholars have argued that researchers, taking a critical orientation, can use tourism as a means to unearth key issues in promotional culture, including but not limited to issues of power and politics that take place in the site of investigation (L'Etang, Falkheimer, & Lugo, 2007). Additionally, rhetorical scholars Poirot and Watson (2015) used tourism as a means of advancing our understanding of the relationship between place and public memory. These authors closely examined memories of urban slavery and rebellion that circulate in Charleston, the gem of South Carolina's historical tourism industry. Specifically, they spent considerable time interrogating the aforementioned relationship between place and public memory in part by examining the place and discourse of the Denmark Vesey statue—a statue that honors a former slave who purchased his freedom in 1799 and became (read accused, convicted, and publicly hanged) the leader of a slave rebellion in 1822. Just as Poirot and Watson argued that historical and heritage tourism invites publics to remember slavery in strategic ways, tourism in Rome—and specifically an analysis of its artifacts—can invite publics to view and remember Rome in alternative ways, as well as via the lens of dominant and counter-narratives, which for better or worse is "today's" Rome.

Narrative functions as an "argument to view and understand the world in a particular way" (Foss, 1996, p. 400). Consequently, analyzing narratives systematically can allow researchers to understand the arguments being made via each narrative and unpack

them critically. Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as method, we provide a "comprehensive examination of the narrative" to gain thorough understanding of the narrative under investigation, and we focus on the aspects of the narrative that enables the critics to answer and interrogate questions that guide our analysis" (Foss, 1996, p. 402).

In this study, we use the method of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Elliott, 2005) to analyze these artifacts such as tour guides, statues, monuments, buildings, roadways and the first author's experiences gained by interacting with these artifacts. To study how people use narratives to create meaning in their lives, researchers using the narrative inquiry methodology draw upon field texts such as autobiography, short stories, field notes, journals, and conversations as units of analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, the point of analysis is the first author's "tourist" experience of the eternal city, Rome.

Even though first-person research accounts are not conducted widely in the field of public relations, some scholars have used these methods to advance knowledge in the public relations discipline (James, 2012; Waymer & Logan, 2016; Waymer, 2009, 2012). The first author's first-person accounts are important to include because he was simultaneously studying the artifacts and being shaped and influenced by them, tour guides' commentaries, and other persons' responses to the tour guides and Roman artifacts.

Scholars have criticized narrative inquiry methods for lacking theoretical rigor, and they argue that this research approach is biased, subjective, and does not actually uncover objective truths. However, if researchers' goals are to enlighten, to encourage critical thinking, to challenge, and to uncover various interpretations, meanings, and narratives then this is an appropriate methodology to use. Scholars in this vein respond to critics via their concern for verisimilitude: the quality or state that the findings that they articulate appear to be true—in a variety of confirmable ways (see Foltz & Griffin, 1996).

In pursuit of verisimilitude, the authors use the prescriptions set forth by a particular form of narrative inquiry—autobiography (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Tenni, Smyth, & Boucher, 2003)—to analyze *damnatio memoriae* of the remaining ancient Roman artifacts and the public relations' implications of that process.

Via narrative inquiry, we open up the world of (eternal) Rome so that readers can understand the phenomenon studied and draw their own interpretations and conclusions about meanings and significance of events, not as something static and predicted but emergent. Memory provides the context *damnatio memoriae* in Rome. What value does memory and narrative play in society and why does "counter-narrative" by erasure make statements strategic to public relations? One purpose of public relations is to memorialize, cocreate narrative continuity; another to "correct" the past so as to ground, modify and "strengthen" current narratives. This foundations leads to the following research questions. We use narrative inquiry methodologically (see Chan, Jones, & Wong, 2013; Gertsen & Søderberg, 2011) to analyze Rome, and then focus the results of this study around key themes that emerge; we then present the (narrative) story based on the emergent themes as they are specifically linked to each research question.

RQ1: What role does the practice of strategic erasure, that is damnatio memoriae, play in the narrative of contemporary Rome?
RQ2: What role does the practice of strategic erasure play in the (re)shaping of public memory in Rome?
RQ3: What is the significance of public memory/cultural discourse to public relations theory/practice?

4. Results

4.1. Erasure by repurposing: the case of the colosseum

Proudly recalling the mystic etching of what the Colosseum looked like in its heyday, our tour guide said, "Marble was everywhere. Marble statues were in all of those openings"— pointing at niches on the exterior wall of the Colosseum. "You see all of these holes?" pointing at the façade of the exterior wall. As she explained the history of the Colosseum to us, she said "iron clamps were used to hold the stones together, not mortar. Much of that iron was taken and used in other constructions…All of the marble was taken. When the Roman Catholic Church, decided to build the new St. Peter's Basilica in the 15th century, they used the Colosseum as their personal quarry with no regard to the history, legacy, and significance of the famed arena. When you visit Saint Peter's Basilica later today, you will also be visiting a part of ancient Rome and the Colosseum."

The Colosseum was one of the tallest pre-twentieth century structures by height—a structure that was built nearly 2000 years ago (completed in 80 AD), and that had more than 80 entrances and could accommodate more than 50,000 spectators. The Colosseum was built for propaganda and public relations purposes; it was a gift to increase the popularity, power, and prestige of Roman citizens from the Flavian Dynasty. A venue for entertainment, it highlighted to the rest of the world the expertise of Roman engineering techniques. Throughout its history, the iconic arena with "pagan origins" was used as a Christian church and was regarded as a significant Christian site since many believe that Christian martyrs were put to death in the arena. In fact, it continues to be used as such. In recent history, the Pope on Good Friday leads a Way of the Cross rite and procession around Rome's ancient Colosseum (Castelfranco, 2018). All of these are acts of *damnatio memoriae*: repurposing and reiterations of the Colosseum. The Eternal City is organic. Returning to RQ1 and RQ2 all of these acts, reiterations and repurposings also demonstrate how erasure has led to how the Colosseum has and continues to contribute to the public memory that is Rome and contribute to the narrative of contemporary Rome. For example, Christians make pilgrimages to the Colosseum each year to view a supposed major site of early Christian persecution. Simultaneously, some native Romans who serve as tour guides tell the story of how the Colosseum is a visible and metaphorical remnant of the city that has been under attack and strategically modified and erased for centuries.

4.2. Erasure by mutilation

In addition to "erasure by repurposing," another strategic way that various leaders in Rome used erasure was by mutilating remaining ancient Roman artifacts.

4.2.1. Erasure by mutilation: destruction on Capitoline Hill; construction of Altare Della Patria

On one of the tours, our tour guide Angie stated: "Rome is often known as the City of Seven Hills. The hills have meaning and special significance to people of Ancient Rome. According to legend, Romulus and Remus—twin brothers who were descendants of Greek and Latin nobility—could not agree upon which hill to build the city. Romulus preferred the Palatine Hill; Remus preferred the Aventine Hill. They could not resolve the dispute, and as a result Remus was killed by Romulus or one of Romulus' supporters. Romulus went on to found the city of Rome, its religious traditions, institutions, and government."

While the origins of Rome can be traced to Palatine Hill, many consider another hill in particular as the most sacred of Rome's seven hills (Perrottet, 2005). Capitoline Hill, also known as The Capitolium, was a significant site to ancient Romans—as Romans built several important temples there, including the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, which Romans built in 509 BCE and which was nearly as large as the Parthenon. Capitoline Hill, which served as the political and religious heart of Rome, became a symbol of Rome's reign as capital of the world; furthermore, ancient Romans viewed The Capitolium as a symbol of eternity, and they regarded it as indestructible (Perrottet, 2005).

While the physical hill might not be destroyed, today many of the ancient artifacts, including the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, that were an integral part of the ancient Roman landscape are no more (Perrottet, 2005). One of the most controversial modern buildings on Capitoline Hill is the Altare della Patria (Altar of the Fatherland) also known as the Vittorio Emanuele II Monument, built under the order of the Italian parliament in honor of its Victor Emmanuel, the first king of a unified Italy (Atkinson & Cosgrove, 2010).

The Altare della Patria, a striking building made of imported white marble, is the largest building in Rome, standing 135 m wide and 70 m tall. When the Italian parliament adopted a law for building a monument for Victor Emmanuel in 1878, the subsequent construction of the monument resulted in the demolition of many of the remains on Capitoline Hill—for they had to be destroyed to make room for the imposing monument (Atkinson & Cosgrove, 2010; Shapka, 2012). One Roman tourism cite states that this monument project, designed by architect Giuseppe Sacconi, "was built to celebrate the magnificence of Rome, capital of Italy, and to commemorate the unification of the country into a single nation." (RomaWonder, n.d., para 1).

Although this is an impressive building, this monument has had a contentious relationship with the people of Rome since its completion (Atkinson & Cosgrove, 2010; Shapka, 2012; University of Groningen Honours College, 2011). Criticisms include the following. 1) The building has too many statues, is too large, and overtly pompous, and as a result it is referred to as "the wedding cake" and "the typewriter" by residents and visitors; however, residents tend to use them pejoratively. 2) The location of the monument itself on the historic Capitoline Hill, not its gaudy appearance, has created the most criticism and controversy:

> To only add to the reasons why locals dislike the building is the fact that many tourists are drawn to it because of its impressive size and bright shiny marble. They walk past the important brown remains of the forums of ancient Rome to explore the massive "wedding cake", viewing it as an example of what the ancient architecture looked like in its heyday and ignoring the history that it eclipses. (Shapka, 2012, para 6).

3) The construction of the building led to the destruction of much of Capitoline Hill and its surrounding medieval neighborhood.

Returning to RQ1, strategic erasure plays a pivotal role in the narrative of contemporary Rome. Rome was an empire; the empire fell, and Rome became one of several cities in Italy. Modern era Italian leaders attempted to use the country's most iconic city to physically and symbolically unify the country via the construction of the Altare della Patria. Yet, many native Romans and art historians alike are not fond of this monument, and as such, it and the discourse surrounding it play major roles in the contemporary narrative of Rome.

> All in all it is not so weird that locals and art historians despise the building. The message that the building sends out is a truly mixed signal. The building is as full of different elements of style as it is gigantic in shape... There is an Italy, but how to make everyone believe in the unity? There was no shared cultural memory to which they could relate: no single thought that could denote the concept of 'Italy'…The big problem is, however, that all different parts of Italy had, sometimes slightly, different memories. To encompass all the different meanings meant that many different elements had to be used. This is what we see in the building, this is why art historians despise the building, this is why there are so many different styles in the Vittoriano. This struggle to please the cultural memory of all the parts of Italy, is traceable in the Vittoriano (University of Groningen Honours College, 2011, para. 73–76).

4) Furthermore, add to this the fact that the monument obscures the Colosseum from view, a more important and iconic Roman and Italian artifact many would argue, and one can see in this example how erasure plays a major role in shaping the narrative of contemporary Rome.

4.2.2. Erasure by mutilation: the actions of Mussolini

Following a tour of the Colosseum, with the tour group I walked past the Roman Forum on our way to Piazza Venezia. To get there, we walked down Via dei Fori Imperiali, a road in the center of Rome that runs in a straight line from the Colosseum to Piazza Venezia. "Mussolini built this road," Angie said. "See that balcony; that's Mussolini's balcony. He wanted to see the Colosseum from where he stayed. He wanted to connect himself literally and figuratively to the greatness of ancient Rome." She continued, "The good news is that you can see portions of the Forum of Trajan, Forum of Augustus, and Forum of Nerva from both sides of this road; the bad news is that more than 80% of excavated ruins of ancient Rome and thousands of artifacts from ancient, medieval, and Renaissance times are buried under this road!" The irony is that Mussolini, in an attempt to link his reign with the greatness of ancient Rome, erased thousands of ancient Roman artifacts that had not been already "altered" or even "erased" by others including the Roman

Catholic Church. Returning to RQ1 and RQ2, Mussolini's actions demonstrate how his attempts to link himself to the greatness of ancient Rome physically and literally (re)shaped public memory in Rome and continues to shape the contemporary narrative of Rome. "Mussolini's road" allows for persons to be surrounded by tranquility of ancient Roman ruins and simultaneously experience jarring modernity whereby they can witness people emerge from the subway and watch as cars and double decker buses hustle down the multilane street just outside the Roman Colosseum (where once chariots jockeyed).

4.2.3. Erasure by mutilation: the example of Trajan's column

On one particular tour, the theme of erasure by mutilation was recurrent but not overt. Rather, while walking from site to site and conversing about statues, monuments, and artifacts this theme (re)emerged.

Trajan's Forum is located on the corner of Piazza Venezia. We stopped at the corner to listen to our tour guide Angie tell us about what we are seeing. She went into detail describing Trajan's Forum and his Column. Trajan's Column is a vital piece of visual rhetoric, much like the Ara Pacis mentioned earlier. The column commemorates Emperor Trajan's victory in the Dacian Wars. Rick, a member of our tour group asked, "so that's Trajan atop the column?" Many of the tour participants tried to zoom in with their cell phone cameras to get a good picture of Trajan atop his namesake column. Angie said, "No, that is a bronze statue of St. Peter. It was placed there in the late 1500s by Pope Sixtus V." St. Peter atop Trajan's Column struck Rick and other tourers as odd. That is the power of erasure: damnatio memoriae! Returning to RQ1, St. Peter atop Trajan's Column demonstrates the emerging might of the Roman Catholic Church as it conquered arguably one of the greatest empires this world has experienced. As such, Trajan's Column, as an example of erasure, highlights the complex history of Rome and contributes to (re)shaping of Rome's public memory.

4.2.4. Erasure by mutilation: the example of Marcus Aurelius and his column

Days before I took my first official guided tour of Rome, I was out walking around the city with three other apartment mates. As we passed one statue, one of my apartment mates Kevin asked, "Whose column is this?" He said to Titus, "We've walked past this column several times over the past few days, and I have no idea who this is." It is my first day in Rome, so I jump at the opportunity to see something historical—something of significance. "Come on, let's cross the street and see," I said. The group of us go over to inspect the column. We stared at the column for a bit, and then Titus said, "see the inscription; this is Antoninus Pius." "I don't know" Kevin said. "That doesn't seem right." I look closely, admiring what remains of the detail on the column and the story it tells. I then spotted the name Marco Aurelio and said, "this is dedicated to Marcus Aurelius." Kevin looked up at the statue atop the column and said, "why does he have that circle over his head?" "I don't know" I said. "Well, Marcus Aurelius must be very popular because I am seeing him with that circle over his head everywhere" Kevin said…

A few days later during one of my Roman guided tours, our tour guide led our group through Piazza Colonna. She described the palace in front of us, The Palazzo Chigi—the official residence of the Prime Minister of the Italian Republic. As we walked through the Piazza, I saw the Column of Marcus Aurelius. I asked the tour guide: "Angie, tell me more about this column?" After she recounted the history of the column that has stood there since CE 193, I asked: "Is that Marcus up on top?" I was certain the answer would be yes. Angie said, "No. That is also St. Peter. Pope Sixtus V placed St. Peter up there as well." The tour continued for at least five additional hours. I was dumbfounded. Angrily I pondered, "How dare this Pope place St. Peter atop not one but two Roman Empire war victory columns? Peter has nothing to do with those victories!" At the end of the evening, I returned to my apartment from my tour perplexed.

To conclude, I spent the remaining part of my time in Rome "experiencing" other examples of erasure. When I spoke with people on the street and other tour guides and tour participants, I listened carefully to see how they perceived and understood the artifacts around them. How did they feel about the iconic Hadrian's Pantheon—a Roman temple dedicated to all gods—being converted to a church dedicated to "St. Mary and the Martyrs"? How many of them even knew that Castel Sant'Angelo (Castle of the Holy Angel) was initially commissioned by the Roman Emperor Hadrian as a mausoleum—a burial site—for himself and his family? In some way, I wanted them to experience the shock of erasure just as I had and to allow that shock of erasure to reshape and reform how they perceived, interpreted, and retold public memory.

4.3. What is the city of Rome? Narrative and discursive implications of erasure

What is presented in the analysis up to this point is a "tourist's narrative experience of the modern "eternal" city of Rome. However, the first two research questions—what role does the practice of strategic erasure, that is damnatio memoriae, play in the narrative of contemporary and what role does the practice of strategic erasure play in the (re)shaping of public memory in Rome—lead one to ponder: what is the city? Is it an empire, home of the Roman Catholic Church, seat of 20th century Fascism, or a mélange which by erasure has no identity but that assigned by personal experience of landmarks and travel/tour guides? In that sense, even residents are "tourists" who experience the city, as textual metaphor.

Beard (2015) argued for an interpretation regarding what it means/meant to be Roman. She used statues of emperors to reason that they represented Imperial Rome, the idea of being Roman. We argue that through erasure the identity of citizens of Rome and tourists of the city are again a work in progress, with a future that is not being guided by a single "mind," whether Empire or Roman Catholic Church, or fascist leader. Rather erasure in Rome is an exemplar of post-modernity that leads to a city whose identity is fractured, set at odds with itself, as are the citizens, and tourists. From order, the levels macro, meso, and micro identities are more chaotic than orderly, and the complexity of Roman identity is evident in current battles including contestations over ancient Rome's preservation, the Roman Catholic Church's dominant influence in the city, and tour guides' interpretation and telling of these events.

Modern archaeologists and other scholars often react with outrage when discussing the Via dei Fori Imperiali, the road that

Mussolini built that connected his balcony to the Roman Colosseum. The road destroyed a large percentage of ancient Fora; it divided the area in two—forever changing the character and landscape of the origins of Rome. Others might express outrage over the fact that in acts of establishing dominance, a new narrative, the Roman Catholic Church used St. Peter as a visual rhetorical tool to demonstrate that he, as a symbolic representation of the Church, sits atop the world in victory just as the ancient Roman emperors did. What is equally important to consider is this: Mussolini could have decided to destroy all of the Fora area. The Roman Catholic Church could have decided to level Trajan's Column, the Column of Marcus Aurelius, the Pantheon, and the Mausoleum of Hadrian. What then would society be left with in terms of ancient Roman artifacts, and their co-created narrative?

Some might argue that society is fortunate that these iconic historical artifacts remain for us to enjoy and study—even if they were repurposed to tell an alternative story: the story of Roman Catholic Church's power and prowess—and 20th century fascism. Throughout history, popes converted the Mausoleum of Hadrian into a castle and fortress. They converted the Pantheon into a church. Many people that the first author engaged either did not know or refused to acknowledge the ancient origins of these artifacts; rather, they saw these as great symbols of the Church narrative, like the more than 900 Roman ornate churches, many of which are open every day for visitors to tour. However, others—namely tour guides—recognized that these beautiful structures only survived because they became "property" co-opted by the Church. But they resented that these artifacts are a constant reminder that the city (according to Roman mythology) founded by twins Romulus and Remus nursed by a she-wolf has been conquered by a foreigner with a foreign god. In fact, on a Roman Food tour, the tour guide named Marco expressed outrage about the Church's conquest of Rome and the fact that Vatican City is its own sovereign country. "My people can't even go over there," he said. "They're robbing Rome." They have erased much of the ancient Roman heritage and they are profiting financially at the expense of contemporary Rome. At the conclusion of our "Rome in a Day" tour that ended before we were to enter St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, Angie graciously left us with these farewell words: "This is where I depart. Once you get on the other side of the barricade, you are outside of the Vatican and back into my country. I have enjoyed my time with you. I hope you enjoy the rest of your visit in my city."

Marco and other Romans are frustrated that Vatican City is so rich while Rome battles corruption and lacks the financial stability of the Vatican. They are frustrated by the fact that the Vatican possesses artifacts that they believe belong to the people of Rome and not the Vatican. For example, the Augustus of Prima Porta, a 2-meter statue of Caesar Augustus found in 1863 in the villa of his wife Livia, is on display in the Vatican Museum. It was evident from my experience with tour guides and more than 30 persons from the region that the presence of the Vatican is a source of contention. While the Roman Catholic Church's use of erasure has been effective on some fronts (signaling to the world the power of the Church), the combination of the erasure and destruction of ancient Roman artifacts, the erasure, repurposing, and mutilation of statues and monuments, the supplanting of the ancient Roman Empire, and the placement of visual reminders of their conquest (e.g. St. Peter atop many ancient Roman and Catholic columns throughout the city) still are not strong enough rhetorical actions to erase the memory, legacy, and spirit of ancient Rome. All of this apparent and less apparent narrative is likened to images left on etched wax when the cellophane is pulled back to allow for another narrative to be put on the writing and drawing device.

If we assume that a modern city, such as Rome, seeks to constantly redefine and recreate itself, in part because it must, then what do we make of its epochal antiquity? Is its textual past prologue of its future? Is the future textually coherent? Our findings highlight the problematic of the clash between daily urban life and a promotional culture that aspires, with great difficulty, to seek an orderly future based on the conflicting orderliness of its past. This textual analysis of modern Rome can suggest that tensions among meanings abound in ways that demonstrate that discourse alone cannot co-create meaning of purpose, the commoditization of identity (See Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2016). This concept can have macro, meso, and micro elements, and tour guides play a pivotal role in connecting these levels: as individual, members of an association, and as the voice of modern Rome.

5. Discussion

To contextualize the preceding analysis, and address our third research question—what is the significance of public memory/cultural discourse to public relations theory/practice—we turn to the critical/cultural public relations scholarship of Curtin, Gaither, and Ciszek (2016). These authors argued that culture is central to meaning-making and that "public relations practice is conceived as embedded in and formative of cultural, social and economic discourse in part by how power shapes their contours (p. 45). Acknowledging the influence of Stuart Hall, Curtin et al. (2016) argued that we give meaning to things based on how we represent them; moreover, the "meanings contained in representations are part of a fluid, shared, contextually bound cultural space" (p. 42). In light of this critical/cultural positioning, we recognize that, as we have presented the argument in this paper, public relations scholars—especially those from critical or cultural traditions—might criticize the concept of erasure and our presentation of it as being an instrumental, overly simplistic understanding of public relations. At the heart of our presentation, we highlight how The Roman Catholic Church erased, repurposed, or mutilated key ancient Roman artifacts and as a result some Roman citizens are still upset about such actions. We agree that such a presentation is simplistic, as we did not present discourse and the tensions per se that would be present if we interviewed Roman leaders, Church leaders, long-time city residents, newcomers to the city or systematically analyzed media accounts of Rome.

While our data would be richer if we had in fact used a larger pool of participants representing the different facets and strata of Rome, it is important to note that the authors still observed erasure and the tensions it presents via narrative inquiry. Additionally, by using Rome as the case for analysis and by focusing on erasure in practice as a public relations strategy, tactic, and concept, we are able to highlight that this phenomenon of erasure has occurred throughout history and appears to occur timelessly in the practice of public relations. The irony of the longevity and currency of erasure as strategy is particularly noteworthy—especially at a

contemporary time when publics as parts of deeply cultural meaning systems and systems of organizational relationships articulate and challenge interpretations of everything from rituals (what does it mean to kneel during the playing of the National Anthem during a professional sports contest in the USA) to policies (what does immigration reform look like in European nations and the USA).

Motion and Leitch (2016) argued: public relations practice "itself is heavily focused on the production of texts" (p. 145), and one can derive rich insights by critically interrogating these texts. Therefore, if researchers are interested in understanding and critically unpacking the myriad discursive elements of a public relations problem, and if practitioners want to get a better understanding of how a particular public relations strategic process such as erasure might be interpreted, then they would study "the texts; the discourse practices associated with the production, distribution and interpretation of texts; and the broader social practices within which these discourse practices are embedded" (p. 145). That is what we have attempted to do in this study of Rome by analyzing erasure as a public relations problem.

Returning to our third research question, from a public relations theoretical standpoint, we argue that our data support our position that erasure can be seen as a form of strategic definition. Definition, as Burke (1968) reasoned, "so sums things up that all the properties attributed to the thing defined can be as though 'derived' from the definition" (p. 3); "...it is prior to the observations that it summarizes" (p. 3). As a critical rhetorical tool, redefinition is merely the terministic shift whereby some conceptual phenomenon is given a different term to emphasize its attributes or the attributes are defined in a different way to assign to them a different conceptual configuration. To a pipeline company, putting a pipeline through land believed to be sacred by native people is "progress," providing energy to a people who need and want it for their self-interests; to Native People, the act of placing the pipeline is a transgression against the spirit of sacred burial. Thus, each side of the controversy seeks to define the act, and the other side redefines it, which paradoxically is merely a definition of a different meaning. As such, terms (and texts) point to aspects/elements of phenomena, and in doing so, point out as well how they should be acted toward, how they should guide actions. From a public relations practice and pragmatic standpoint, we see this dialectic play out in how some tour guides choose to narrate ancient and contemporary Rome in response to actions undertaken by the Roman Catholic Church centuries ago to announce its supplanting of the Roman Empire.

6. Conclusion

As Benzon and Sweeney (2015) noted, "as long as the human technology of mark-making has been in play, so has the possibility of erasure, the unmaking of the mark. Yet despite this longstanding possibility, the practice of erasure has taken on new meaning..." (para. 2). While other disciplines are interrogating "new meaning" and tackling some 21st century challenges of erasure, public relations has yet to conceptualize and theorize many of the concepts that occur in practice. Public relations scholars who are interested in research relevant to public memory history (narrative continuity and culture) need to problematize erasure further. In this study, we introduce the paradox of erasure in public relations and use it to explain the tension that results when organizations believe that the best course of action is to delete someone or something from the public record as a means for setting the record "straight."

Out of sight is out of mind. This might be an effective short-term strategy, but history suggests that inspiring or offending words, deeds, and actions cannot be erased, at least not completely, like Freud's *Wunderblock*. And if they could, or should, what implications would that strategy have for public relations? Should Auschwitz be bulldozed or memorialized in detail? Should slave cabins and family connections be destroyed, hidden, or ignored or narrated, for instance as they are by the Whitney Planation near New Orleans? Should lynching be forgotten, or memorialized so that the narrative reminds later societies of the failings of earlier ones? If they are forgotten, they are erased/obliterated, but traces are likely to persist in the "wax" impression of cultural history.

Remnants and memories can potentially remain indefinitely—especially in a day and age of digital permanence whereby all personal communications can be captured, stored, and analyzed by state actors (Benzon & Sweeney, 2015). Thus, public relations paradoxes lie in the fact that the prescribed strategy of erasure makes sense on its face but might lack any enduring effect because memories seem difficult to erase or destroy completely, if at all, and morally done.

As much as the NCAA might try, it cannot recreate the pseudo-Unperson as it attempts to blot offending collegiate teams from the annals of sports history. An Unperson (a figure made popular by George Orwell in his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*) is a vaporized person—someone who was murdered secretly, erased from society (books, photographs, and articles) and existence. An Unperson, in essence, is the embodiment of *damnatio memoriae*. At least in sports communication, writers highlight the impracticality of this practice:

Conceptually, a vacated title is a tough concept for the college sports world to accept. It's even harder when confronted with all the stuff championship teams have lying around to celebrate their victories: trophies, banners, hats, T-shirts, rings, "One Shining Moment" video tributes. The NCAA now requires athletic departments to return trophies, take down banners, remove signs and strike language from letterhead that recognizes records or championships achieved during vacated games. (Bogage, 2018, para 6–7)

Fans, however, remember the games. As such, sports writers are calling for the NCAA to reverse course and reinstate the wins to teams forced to vacate wins and titles (Pierce, 2018). An asterisk in key instances may be superior textually, discursively to using "white out" or "highlight and delete."

In a more relevant cultural history example, each year supporters of Gandhi (those who remember his activism and nonviolent civil disobedience well) ask the Nobel Committee to posthumously place his name in the vacant space of 1948 ("erase" the blank spot) which was left in his "memory."

In this study, using ancient and contemporary Rome as case for analysis, we drew upon Freud's theory of memory as a concept to problematize erasure as a public relations strategy and to identify and coin the paradox of erasure in public relations . Thus, in terms of the textual nature of Roman monuments and statues and strategic erasure and redefinition, each cultural generation (the Empire, the Church, Fascism) needs to define the markers by which people make choices of behavior, associations/dissociations (relationships), identity, and other aspects of orderly, legitimized relationship management. In such efforts, the hand of the power authority, even the aspiring one, leaves a fingerprint that becomes the clue as to whose hand is most prominently scribing the dominant narrative of the society—even if they attempt to alter or erase aspects of public memory in the process.

As this study shows, statues, monuments, and artifacts communicate something; they are purposeful, strategic statements (texts) of visual discourse. Thus, visual rhetoric is a rife area for public relations research. Publics interact and engage with these artifacts and with members of the public where these artifacts reside. Artifacts serve public relations functions (as cultural topoi). More work needs to be done to study this vital, strategic public relations form.

Acknowledgements

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