Paper / Proposal Title:
Mapping Urban Memory: Multimodal Research and the Necropolitics of Vernacular Remembering

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Abstract (300 words):
For the past 3 years I have engaged in an ethnographic study of vernacular memorials in the Kensington section of Philadelphia, PA (USA). These take various forms, from urban media like graffiti, murals, and clothing, to park benches, shrines, and ghost bikes. Some memorials have survived the City’s streets for a decade, while others have existed for mere hours before being destroyed, removed, or vandalized. Whatever their form, these public performances of private emotions are important cultural artifacts. Not only are they threatened by gentrification, they also hint at a vibrant urban memorial culture that has arisen in response to the traumas and tragedies of those living in one of the most impoverished, most drug- and crime-ridden parts of the city. I utilized a multimodal approach to the production and communication of ethnographic knowledge about the city (Powell, 2010; Pink, 2011; Collins, et al, 2017). This work resulted in a digital humanities project titled Kensington Remembers. It includes an interactive map, an image gallery, and a blog which together preserve the “traces” of field research for the community which is its subject. In this presentation, I introduce the project and consider the value of multimodality for finding, documenting, researching and preserving urban collective memory, especially at a time when gentrification is profoundly reshaping the landscape.
of the city. I specifically consider collective urban memory in terms of “necropolitics” or “death work” (Mbembe, 2019). I argue that this concept offers a powerful way to frame the work through which ordinary people make memory matter in the city. Finally, I explore the ways GIS technology, photography, and interactive digital media may be used to shed light on the ways memory is produced, contested, and encountered in the course of everyday urban life.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Gordon Coonfield, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Villanova University. His research utilizes multiple media to document and study the unique relationship between cities and collective memory. He is the Project Director of the Kensington Remembers website (https://kensingtonremembers.org).