

Review of *Monumental Mobility: The Memory Work of Massasoit*, by Lisa Blee and Jean M. O'Brien

*Monumental Mobility* is a welcome addition to a growing literature examining monuments and memorials related to the history of settler colonialism. While Confederate statues have sparked high-profile public controversies, monuments that address the history of settler colonialism have garnered less attention; nevertheless, some have provoked strong criticisms, especially from activists who seek to “decolonize” museums and public history. The statue of Theodore Roosevelt outside the American Museum of Natural History in New York City has been a particularly visible target of protests, and the museum has responded with a contextualizing exhibit entitled “Addressing the Statue.”\* In a similar fashion, *Monumental Mobility* offers a richly layered historical and cultural analysis of another iconic statue sculpted during the first half of the twentieth century.

Lisa Blee and Jean M. O'Brien's valuable study examines the surprisingly complex and geographically far-reaching history of Plymouth, Massachusetts's 1921 monument to 8sâmeeqan, known to many as “Massasoit,” which is the Wampanoag word for “leader” or “chief” (10). The sculptor Cyrus Dallin is best known for his *Paul Revere* and *Appeal to the Great Spirit* sculptures, both of which are still highly visible parts of Boston's monumental landscape. Throughout his career, in numerous works depicting Native people, Dallin “sought to recast Indian men . . . as desirable, inspiring, and educational figures” and to present “idealized male Indian bodies” (34). The driving force behind the erection of the *Massasoit* statue was the International Order of Red Men (IORM), a white fraternal organization that encouraged its members to emulate qualities that they associated with North American Indians. Dallin and the IORM saw *Massasoit* as a genuine tribute to an important Native leader. Blee and O'Brien argue

convincingly that the statue rapidly became a potent symbol of the supposedly “peaceable encounter” between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags, contributing to a narrative of “friendly cooperation” that has come to define public understandings of U.S. settler colonialism (8, 76). Enmeshed with the Thanksgiving myth, *Massasoit* became part of the larger ideological project of erasing Euro-American genocidal violence and obscuring Indigenous resistance to colonization. Blee and O’Brien take this story beyond Plymouth, showing how versions of the statue in Utah, Kansas City, and other places promoted notions of American innocence and reinforced the false idea that interactions between Native people and Euro-Americans were often characterized by “friendly cooperation.” This is the “mobility” of the title. *Massasoit* did not stay fixed only in Plymouth; rather, various reproductions, as well as the original plaster cast, traveled widely and furthered the ideological work of U.S. settler colonialism.

Despite the authors’ emphasis on mobility, the sections that focus on Plymouth and the ways in which Indigenous people have used the *Massasoit* statue to frame counter-narratives of resistance and survival are the most compelling parts of the book, especially for public historians. Blee and O’Brien illuminate how place-based histories can be re-shaped through protests, counter-memorialization, and radically re-framed interpretations. Their research with contemporary New England Indigenous people, including descendants of 8sâmeeqan, illustrates vividly how Native people have worked effectively to challenge prevailing myths and combat erasure and dispossession.

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\*Please note that between the time this review was drafted and its publication, the American Museum of Natural History made the decision to remove the statue of Theodore Roosevelt outside the museum.