

# As the Statues Fall

## An (Abridged) Conversation about Monuments and the Power of Memory

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and Tsione Wolde-Michael

In the wake of the global civil unrest following the brutal killings of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Tony McDade, Atatiana Jefferson, Aura Rosser, Elijah McClain, and so many others at the hands of police in the United States, #BlackLivesMatter protesters and their allies have critiqued the anti-Black racism imbued in the erection and maintenance of Confederate historical monuments. The legacy of social movements seeking to remove Confederate statues is long-standing. However, unlike in previous moments, what began as the forced removal of Confederate statues during protests has rippled to the removal of colonialist, imperialist, and enslaver monuments all over the world. In this webinar, scholars and artists shared their insights on the power of monumentality and the work they are doing to reconfigure historical markers. In the midst of this most recent turmoil, the Society of Black Archaeologists, in collaboration with the Wenner-Gren Foundation and SAPIENS and the Cornell Institute of Archaeology and Material Studies, hosted a panel discussion between scholars, activists, artists, and public historians titled “As the Statues Fall: A Conversation about Monuments and the Power of Memory.” This piece provides a look into that conversation and its highlights.

What makes memory powerful? For one, memory exists in the here and now—though it projects itself onto the past, muddying our temporal sensibilities and disrupting the tidy organization of our chronological timescales. Whereas we might best understand history as a codified (whether by custom or archive) narrative of events and processes, memory emerges as a sensibility about experience. Though discursive in nature, both history and memory rely on the materiality of the world: the archive, the assemblage, the body, the landscape (Alexander 2006; Connerton 1989; Koselleck 2004 [1985]; Trouillot 1995). Moreover, established histories tend to avoid critique—until they cannot. Memory and criticism, however, are familiar bedfellows. Criticism, according to anthropologist David Scott (2008), is “a dimension of a community’s mode of remembering, an exercise, literally and metaphorically, of remembering, of putting back together aspects of our common life so as to make visible what has been obscured, what has been excluded, what has been forgotten . . . an exercise in arguing with the past, negotiating it” (vi). What those of us witnessing this moment will remember about the murders of Black people at the hands of law enforcement will, at least in part, be tied to the sweeping actions of deep public critique that have been made visible through the retaliatory overturn and symbolic killing of the monuments, naming practices, and public inscriptions under-

pinning landscapes of white supremacy in the United States and across the globe.<sup>1</sup> It is memory and criticism that rewrite history.

It is no surprise, therefore, that monuments should be invoked both to recall certain narratives about the past and to dismantle them. Beginning as a movement demanding justice for anti-Black police violence, #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) organizers and their accomplices have extended their critical gaze from the immediacies of killing and abuse to the omnipresent anti-Blackness of American public space—an anti-Blackness made known through the continued public maintenance and protection of Confederate historical monuments and markers, as well as public commemorations of known eugenicists, racists, and conquistadors.

Although monuments and other commemorative public markings are already falling, media coverage and popular opinion pieces have centered on whether the monuments *should*

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1. In addition to #BlackLivesMatter, more targeted hashtag campaigns, including #RhodesMustFall and #TakeItDown, have emerged, especially through Twitter. For a crowdsourced accounting of monument removals since the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, MN, see “List of Monuments and Memorials Removed during the George Floyd Protests” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_monuments\\_and\\_memorials\\_removed\\_during\\_the\\_George\\_Floyd\\_protests](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_monuments_and_memorials_removed_during_the_George_Floyd_protests); accessed July 21, 2020).

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fall—and if so, what we should do with them when they do. They present the controversy: One side argues that monuments represent history and therefore deserve protecting. #BLM activists argue that racist monuments do not need protection; people against whom racial terror is constantly perpetrated do. Approaches to what to do about these monuments vary: some face protest, others enclosure or toppling, others unsanctioned alteration (what is typically called defacement or vandalization by the media), and others any combination thereof. But as public arts historian Paul Farber (2020) argues, the very framing of a monuments “controversy” plays to a politics of white comfort by suggesting that both sides of the controversy may be equally valid. (In most cases, they are not.)

In this piece, readers will encounter segments of a conversation between a group of artists-scholars-activists who think alongside and against American monumentality and heritage practice. On July 23, 2020, the Society of Black Archaeologists, the Cornell Institute of Archaeology and Material Studies, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation and SAPIENS collaborated to host a virtual event titled “As the Statues Fall: A Conversation about Monuments and the Power of Memory,” which was moderated by anthropologist Tiffany C. Fryer (then Tiffany Cain; fig. 1). More than 1,000 concurrent attendees tuned in, and nearly as many have viewed the conversation since. Fryer asked the panelists to consider the watershed moment that we continue to witness as monuments across the globe are being rethought and removed (from the toppling of Edward Colston into the Bristol harbor and the unprecedentedly swift removal of monuments to the Confederacy across the United States to the worldwide tearing down of Columbus statues or even—and in some spheres more controversially—statues of Mahatma Gandhi and the sudden willingness of college campuses to change campus building names previously dedicated to similar figures). All this is at the risk of life and livelihood amid the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The panel was joined by two artist-activists whose methods and processes work toward decolonization. La Vaughn Belle is a multidisciplinary artist whose work challenges colonial hierarchies and attends to the material culture of coloniality (see, e.g., her collection *Chaney (We Live in the Fragments)*). Belle is the cocreator (with Danish artist Jeannette Ehlers) of the groundbreaking artist-led monumental work *I Am Queen Mary*, inspired by an infamous leader of the 1878 “Fireburn” labor riot on the island of Saint Croix. It confronts Danish colonial amnesia while commemorating the legacies of resistance by captive Africans brought to the former Danish West Indies.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Unanga) is a multidisciplinary artist whose work exposes intentionally obscured collective memory. His incisive pieces interrogate what we take for granted about land, form, image, and sound.<sup>3</sup> He was re-

cently invited to contribute to a biennale in Sydney, Australia, for which he was tasked with responding to a statue of Captain Cook in recognition of the nearing 250th anniversary of Cook’s voyage. His response? *Shadow on the Land: An Excavation and Bush Burial* is a grave dug to the monument’s specifications on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour (see Rami 2020). Artists like Galanin and Belle help us reimagine public spaces while affirming both the profound loss and unapologetic joy that can and do emerge in the spaces of Black and Indigenous life despite the violences that would just as soon bury both.

Scholar-activist Dell Upton and public historian Tsione Wolde-Michael also joined the conversation. Together, they reminded us that while this moment may be watershed, it emerges after a slow but fierce rumble of decades of activism refusing to divorce monumental practice from the realities of anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, and xenophobia in this country. Upton is a distinguished research professor of architectural and art history at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has written extensively on civic monuments, the African American built environment after Emancipation, and the world history of architecture. His book *What Can and Can’t Be Said: Race, Uplift, and Monument Building in the Contemporary South* (Upton 2015) is a study of monuments to the civil rights movement and Black history that have been erected in the American South over the past three decades.

Finally, Tsione Wolde-Michael is a curator of African American social justice history at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History (NMAH) in Washington, DC. Wolde-Michael’s decade-long experience in the field of public history includes creating the landmark 2016 *Slavery and Freedom* exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and spearheading several community engagement projects around the country.<sup>4</sup> Working in partnership with communities is central to her curatorial practice. Currently, she is collaborating on a special joint Smithsonian-wide initiative documenting the history of the #BLM movement from 2012 to the present (Bowley 2020; Salahu-Din 2019).

In reproducing this conversation for publication, we have done our best to maintain its cadence and direction. It has been edited for length and coherence, meaning that, occasionally, direct quotes have been replaced with editorial paraphrasing. The unedited recorded conversation is freely available online for anyone wishing to watch.<sup>5</sup>

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*Tiffany C. Fryer (TCF):* We know that monuments have long been sites of contestation. But I’m curious what you think has changed recently?

2. <http://www.iamqueenmary.com/>.

3. Currently on exhibit at the Peter Blum Gallery in New York (<http://www.peterblumgallery.com/artists/nicholas-galanin/featured-works>).

4. <http://nmaahc.si.edu/slavery-and-freedom>.

5. <http://vimeo.com/439042290>.



Figure 1. Panelists gathered for a virtual discussion via Zoom, July 23, 2020, from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. (EDT).

*La Vaughn Belle (LVB):* For me, it definitely has to do with the pandemic and this kind of slowing down of time. At first I was quite despondent at a lot of the protests because I felt like we've seen this before. You know? I was in college when Rodney King was murdered, and there was also this kind of eruption. To see it again produced a feeling of more despondency. But there was something really hopeful when I started seeing people were beginning to take sculptures down—and tossing them into the ocean!

*Tsione Wolde-Michael (TWM):* There's this articulated resistance on the part of the public to white supremacy. People are literally taking history into their own hands and changing the narrative. They're altering the visual landscape and layering the present moment onto it. And by doing so, they are actively dictating what should be preserved and what should not. From a heritage perspective, destruction is typically frowned upon, but right now it's being celebrated. And this movement is more diverse than we've seen before; it's international. Still, while the changes we're seeing today in some ways feel surprisingly quick, in reality, they have been painfully slow. The sad truth of the matter is what's happening with monuments is partly predicated on Black death: How many Black people had to die for us to get to this point?

*Nicholas Galanin (NG):* Yes, this is not new. But the white supremacist narrative is not sustainable. And it's only a matter of time before these myths are revealed.

*TWM:* I think that's a great point. We have been living in a society that's preferred to preserve monuments to traitors rather than attempt to heal historical trauma.

*LVB:* I find it really interesting when the statues don't fall. What happens even in a moment like this—where you see people taking action all over the world—what does it say about a community that they're not taking them down? We are still a colony of the United States here in the Virgin Islands, asking for statues to come down, living with colonial, symbolic violence embedded in the names of our towns and the sugar mills scattered across our landscape. We live in the remnants of forced labor camps. Of course, this conversation is about the monuments that are coming down and what may happen with them, but it's interesting to think about the ones that are still up. Why are some communities not responding by taking them down?

*TCF:* Absolutely—a certain level of trepidation continues to show itself. And there are often legal constructs precluding removals of monuments or memorial expressions even when we might desire to remove them. Many people have decided to take that into their own hands lately, but there are certain aspects like the *unnaming* of buildings, for instance, which move much slower.

*Dell Upton (DU):* I was surprised by how quickly these removals have happened. I agree with La Vaughn that it has to do with the pandemic: practically, the streets and roads have been emptier, facilitating large-scale kinds of demonstrations and actions that couldn't take place under normal circumstances. But the statues are also a kind of symbolic conflict over deeper issues still needing to be dealt with. And the legal structures: many southern states and cities (in the US) have laws forbidding the removal of Confederate monuments. Alabama has a particularly egregious one. It says not only can you not move them, you can't rename them,



add to them, subtract from them. You can't do anything that would alter the message they offer.

I sent you all an example of an obelisk in Birmingham with a plywood wall around it to obscure the inscription from view (Burch 2020; see fig. 2). The state of Alabama sued the city over the covering, but the city won in lower court. So they carried it to the state supreme court, who reversed the ruling and said they had to take the plywood down and could be fined \$25,000—which would go to the historic preservation fund for the state—for violating the law. During the George Floyd protests, the city took the monument down anyway, and the state attorney general vowed to enforce the law against the city. But in the last few days, a number of Alabama counties, mostly rural, primarily Black counties, have voted to take theirs down as well. I am hoping the numbers of people and places making that choice will lead to the removal of all of those monuments and show the state how futile keeping them up is. But the people who are against taking down monuments understand that these represent a social order they want to retain.



Figure 2. Enclosed Confederate obelisk. Birmingham, Alabama. Photo by Dell Upton.

**TCF:** Does attending to the monuments shift attention away from systemic change? What are the links between systemic and symbolic change, and what work do you think needs to be done at their intersection?

**NG:** I think a lot of the resistance is to the ideologies these monuments represent more so than resistance to the object itself. Our communities are not here to tiptoe around what necessary change or systematic change might be. We need it right now. We want it right now; these monuments need to come down. What happens with them? The price of bronze is a \$1.48 market value right now. There are lots of art programs in schools that have no funding for materials. Let the children build something with those funds. I don't care what happens with them, but to have the monuments to oppressors, which act as if they're some form of honorable heritage, while denying our communities human rights is absolutely insane to me.

**LVB:** It's really important to start thinking symbolically because we have our greatest power in our imaginations. If you can't begin to think about divesting symbolically, how do you move to the material?

**DU:** When I give talks, people often ask: "But will removing monuments really change anything?" My response is usually, "If you are not willing to do something as simple as removing a monument, how can you claim you are interested in making serious change?" Monuments create an entire landscape of political and civic imagination. Even if we never pay any attention to the statue of Robert E. Lee we walk by, his presence there says he's a legitimate part of our civic life, that he belongs there, that the values he represents belong there and deserve to remain.

I think one of the things we need to do is move beyond individual monuments to confront the entire civic narrative that's told by the collective body of monuments. That's why I think it's interesting to see protesters have moved beyond destroying Confederate monuments to destroying monuments to Columbus and other kinds of monuments that are part of a larger civic narrative. And I think that's part of what worries people about tearing them down: they are being asked to rethink not just whether this person was admirable or not but the entire mythology they've been taught and lived in.

**LVB:** One of the critiques we've received of the monument we put up in Copenhagen, Denmark (fig. 3), is that we don't have a lot of historical narrative attached to the work. We've had so many people write us upset we don't describe who she is. But I've pushed back because even if you don't know *who* she is, the sculpture



Figure 3. *I Am Queen Mary* (2018) by La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers. Copenhagen, Denmark. Photo by La Vaughn Belle.

can't be reduced to *who* Mary Thomas was. She means so many things; we cannot put that on a plaque. However, it *is* a two-story image of a Black woman who's important enough to claim space in Copenhagen. That's a very important disrupter.

**TWM:** I'd add to this idea about modifying civic narratives that #BLM prompts us to imagine what an antiracist, pro-Black way of remembering might look like—which is a productive place to start. Symbolic representation—in this instance isn't *symbolic* at all. It's about erasure, like Nicholas is saying. It's about the fear and intimidation these objects represent, which is grounded in *actual* violence. It's about long histories of people of color assaulting racist monuments like the John Calhoun statue in Charleston. It wasn't a symbolic act for Black people chipping away at that statue in the 1890s. You could be killed for that. And today there are FBI wanted posters out on people who have defaced monuments.

So, for #BLM, this has really gone beyond an interest in symbolism alone. The goal isn't just to take down a statue because the issue of symbolic representation *is* a systemic one. As a political movement, #BLM has not only interrogated monuments and memorials. It's gone a step further by calling museums and other institutions to task as colonial entities, for the controversial collections they hold, and for how they haven't hired enough staff of color—especially in curatorial ranks. As art and history institutions issue these #BlackLivesMatter statements, people are publicly slamming them for only providing lip service to these commitments. What's heartening for me is to see people in the movement also trying to document internally and participate in these conversations on commemoration and begin to figure out how they can represent their own narratives for themselves.

**TCF:** Maybe you could speak for a moment about some of your work collecting the #BLM archive?

**TWM:** With respect to #BLM, the Smithsonian is engaged in a joint collecting initiative that brings together the National Museum of American History, the National Museum of African American History, and the Anacostia Community Museum to document recent protests (fig. 4). The Smithsonian NMAH, which is documenting the movement from 2012 onward, has some of the oldest and largest collections on political reform in this country. How do we inject this newer history into that archive? We are looking at traditional ways of documenting reform and political activism and thinking about the typical things you might expect: ephemera, buttons, banners, protest posters, T-shirts. But we are also interested in the archive of policing, militarization, the violent response to protests. We are doing all of this work in very close consultation with organizers and local communities. That's something I think distinguishes our work from similar collecting initiatives at other institutions.

**LVB:** Thinking about your work, Tsione, as transforming an archive brings something to mind. Part of our monument *I Am Queen Mary* people don't often engage with at first is its bottom half. Most people see a portrait of a woman. It's a reenactment, a performance piece where Jeannette Ehlers and I joined our bodies together to craft the representation of Queen Mary. But it's actually two statues in one. The bottom half of the sculpture is coral stones, historically brought out of the ocean by enslaved Africans to form the foundations of most of the colonial-era buildings in the Virgin Islands. That coral is another archive of the labor that underpins the wealth and foundation of these colonial societies. It helps us think about things that





Figure 4. Ephemera of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Photos by Tsione Wolde-Michael.

have been made invisible—how they can reshape the archive, rematerialize it. That’s why I was really interested, Nicholas, in your work on the shadow excavation in Australia. It felt very archaeological.

NG: *Shadow on the Land: An Excavation and Bush Burial* was a response to the statue of Captain Cook in Hyde Park (Sydney; fig. 5). In Australia, the narrative of Cook discovering what is scientifically known as one of the oldest civilizations documented in the world is ironic. (A discovery? Really?) Even here in the US, Indigenous communities continue to fight erasure in the face of the government’s preference for the convenience of not having an Indigenous history, to uphold Manifest Destiny, to maintain their access to resources and land without the hindrance of Indigenous communities or their histories. *Shadow on the Land* is a reference to the colonial shadow cast over all of our histories and land—a shadow that comes with the destruction of our environment through resource extraction. The excavation of the Cook monument’s shadow shape was a kind of archaeology (but I say this while also highlighting archaeology’s status as a process and science that is largely used to uphold white supremacist narratives of Indigenous community histories, especially).

TCF: Much of the public response to monuments we’ve witnessed lately has been targeted specifically at *figurative* monuments—although not exclusively. Still, there is a particular power to the figurative genre. How does genre affect our notions of monumentality and the specific forms of commemoration or memorial making we invoke? Do you imagine a counterpoint to or replacement for the kinds of monumentality we have lived with and alongside now for so long?

LVB: I’ve participated now in four or five different projects thinking through monuments, and I don’t

always go to the figurative. It really depends on the site and what’s needed. For example, there was a historic house in Stenton (a neighborhood in Philadelphia, PA). It had been a museum for almost 100 years. There were three of us that had to think through what a monument to a woman previously enslaved there would be.<sup>6</sup> I was the only one who actually went with a figure. We had no idea what this person looked like; there was very little information about her. But I thought a figure was really important because even the architecture of that place hid its relationship to African bodies. You know? In the way that the space hid how servants came through the buildings and things like that. So, for me, it was really important to disrupt that space with a figure.

But some monuments don’t need a figure. I have been working on a proposal for a Middle Passage monument that’s actually a 20-foot libation, thinking about the performance ritual of remembering. But yes, there is definitely something about the figurative. I’m curious what others think about the relationship between the figurative monument and empire because a lot of much older monuments were really of kings and queens. There needs to be a challenge to these forms of monumentality because they are challenges to empire.

DU: Well, I’ll say as someone who has an interest in ancient Greece and Rome, I think about the history of figurative monuments to emperors. They are meant to deify those figures. That implication remains in the traditional figurative monuments we have today. Monuments to individuals—the ways they are scaled, represented, their poses—all essentially invoke idols. I’ve come to think maybe there should not be figurative memorial statues because they remove the person’s humanity and prevent us from seeing them in their

6. The Dinah Memorial Project (<http://www.stenton.org/dinah>).



Figure 5. *Shadow on the Land: An Excavation and Bush Burial* (2020) by Nicholas Galanin. Sydney, Australia. Photo by Nicholas Galanin.

fullness. I'm thinking if monuments *are* figurative, they shouldn't be monuments of individuals. For instance, at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama—in my opinion the greatest monument made in this country in the last 50 years, with no exceptions—there is a sculpture of young Black men's arms coming out of a wall (fig. 6).<sup>7</sup> That kind of figurative image to me remains valid because it's not asking us for uncritical admiration of a certain person. It's asking us to rethink our society and our civic monumental landscape.

**LVB:** I find that really interesting. I think that's part of the reason we titled our piece in Denmark *I Am Queen Mary*. We were looking to other political movements such as the 1968 sanitation workers' strike, where they are holding up these placards saying, "I Am a Man," or to the Cuban revolutionary slogan "*Seremos como el Che*." It's the thought that declaring your presence, your humanity, is very much a part of civil protest. And each one of us can step into that same role: I am Queen Mary.

Certain kinds of figurative monuments are very connected to empire. But I'm hesitant to say that

figurative monuments altogether don't have a place because they serve as a counter to the devaluing of Black lives, Black bodies, and Black heroes. We are responding by constructing images for ourselves.

**DU:** I do like that your title *I Am . . .* invites an engagement with the figure rather than passive admiration. I think that does make it different from typical figurative monuments honoring a specific person.

**LVB:** And trust me! We used our own figures to create that work, and we got a lot of pushback here in the Virgin Islands. We sing songs about Queen Mary; we have a highway named after her. It was seen as very audacious—almost blasphemous—that we would dare to put our likeness up there. But we can all be up there. Isn't that what we tell our children? That you can be like these heroes we celebrate?

**TWM:** I really appreciate what's happening now. That people are also exploring other traditions of monumentality. They're asking questions like "How have people of the global majority made permanent alterations to the land? How have they made monuments that are less long-lived than the monuments that we've come to know? What cues do we get from other histories?" There's tension we don't always get to explore: making monuments isn't just a white practice. And as artist-activists respond to what's happening, the genre they chose in one community might be more figurative, whereas in another you might get something like an abstract rendering of a tear gas canister. Decisions about collecting and monument making don't get made in a vacuum. There are all these political relationships at play determining who gets to choose what's in public space.

**LVB:** A lot of my work thinks about the monuments we already live in.<sup>8</sup> There's this amazing baobab tree in Grove Place in Saint Croix. Even just the existence of baobab trees here reflects African traditions of bringing seeds, planting them here. And in the 1878 labor revolt Queen Mary led, there were about 15 women who were burnt at that tree. That's *oral history*. It isn't something written in most of our history books. But when we see that tree, we know that story. It's another way of commemorating those women. It has monumentality to it in a way, and we might look to these ideas when we are thinking about ways the genre might change.

7. *Raise Up* by Hank Willis Thomas (<http://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/01/arts/design/national-memorial-for-peace-and-justice-montgomery-alabama.html>); Equal Justice Initiative National Memorial for Peace and Justice (<http://museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial>).

8. See also Belle's recent photo essay about monuments for the Echoes Project (<http://keywordsechoes.com/la-vaughn-belle-the-monuments-that-wont-fall>).





Figure 6. *Raise Up* (2018) by Hank Willis Thomas. National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama. Photo by Tiffany C. Fryer.

NG: The act of removal also has a power. In the process of colonizing our homelands, everything was removed by the colonizers. Everything—from our monumental totemic works to our language to our food sources to our children—all removed from our places. The conversations about removal right now are highly political. But they also represent a shift in power back to community: the concept of removal takes on new meaning when it's white supremacist monuments of falsified historical contexts that are being removed.

Someone in the audience asked a question about the work of monuments in promoting healing in our communities I'd like to tie in. In the '60s, a Tlingit village in Juneau, Alaska, was purposefully burnt down to remove homes and make way for a boat harbor. Recently, I served as head carver with five apprentices to design and raise a 40-foot totem pole commemorating that story. It was a healing pole. But healing is not just the pole standing there. The healing takes place through the training and continuity of cultural practice, the engagement of elders, and the marking of the land with a monument that affirms rather than erases that history. It's never really just about the object. Our totem poles fall back to the earth, and they give life to everything there. They come back through future generations, through their shared knowledge. I tie that back to what you were saying, La Vaughn, about oral histories.

I suppose a big issue I take with national monuments is that we're not represented. And the side that is represented glorifies those responsible for the slaughter of our children and our women in order to colonize our lands, to make America. Take Abraham

Lincoln. He hung 38 Dakota people. America's largest mass execution, and he gets a monument. There are countless instances where Indigenous people approach a monument and think, "Whose hero is this?"

DU: If I could highlight two points coming out of this conversation? One of the interesting yet distressing aspects in the debate over individual monuments is who gets to decide whether the person being depicted was a good person or a bad person. For instance, people express their worries about taking down statues of people like Thomas Jefferson because even though he held slaves, didn't he do a lot for the founding of this country? That's the defense—but never from people whose ancestors were enslaved or mistreated. It's similar to what you've just raised about Lincoln, Nicholas.

The other point I think is spot-on relates to what La Vaughn was saying about the tree. How do we think about places where horrible (or inspiring) things happened, but there is nothing about the place that suggests that history to you? How, when momentous things happen in ordinary places, do those places appear to go back to what they were before?

TCF: Allow me to push a bit further with respect to this conversation about removal. If we accept that certain monuments ought to be removed, where do we remove them to? What happens to them? What do we do with them?

LVB: That's very controversial. I'm hesitant because I think it depends on what the monument is, the community it is in, the resources they have. I think in



some places it would seem egregious to spend a bunch of money to store these removed monuments when that money could be better used for something else. . . . I am open to burying them, though. I love the idea of throwing them in the ocean, but I found it so interesting how many resources were spent to go fetch the Colston one out—I found that wild (BBC News 2020).

*DU:* And I like the person who altered the Google map and put it in the middle of the bay (see Varghese 2020)!

But I'd second that it depends on the monument. Confederate monuments are mostly mass-produced. No one could possibly argue they have any aesthetic value. Scrapping these monuments is a great idea. Let people use them as art materials. Make a dustbin of history and throw them in that!

*LVB:* And does art always have to be permanent? This is a central preservation question. Take murals, for example. All the sudden, people feel like murals have to be preserved forever and ever. I never saw murals as a permanent art form. We need to think about these monuments as things that need not be permanent. They can be destroyed or replaced.

*NG:* And what is permanence? I think permanence should be the idea of passing on and leaving one's community with something greater than what we had. A permanence of contribution.

*TWM:* We can see this moment as a kind of initiation. The process of removal needs to be coupled with truth telling and a real reckoning with the past—and in a way that allows harmed communities to be at the center of the process of deciding how to move forward.

I also think we need to talk about the violence being perpetrated against Black and Brown monuments and memorials. We saw this last summer and again in the fall with the bullet-ridden Emmett Till marker sign in Mississippi (see Ortiz 2019). We saw it twice in less than two years with the statue of John Brown in Kansas City (Ziegler 2019). Earlier this month, a Frederick Douglass statue was chopped down in Rochester (Brown 2020).

*TCF:* What about war memorials and the complicated conversation about violence they engender? On the one hand, reactions against memorials and monuments lately have revealed the structural violences they represent. On the other, the right to honor our dead—even if what they were participating in may have been wrong or misguided—is an important component of the drive to produce war memorials. What do we do with the war memorial as a genre? And, perhaps related, are there kinds of monuments that might be

appropriate or permissible in some arenas but not others? I'm thinking here of the argument often made that monuments to Confederate soldiers in cemeteries should be allowed to stay there but those in other public spaces ought to be removed.

*DU:* Well, several historians have demonstrated that Confederate monuments in cemeteries were put there in an effort to disguise their real meanings. In the years immediately following the Civil War, when the federal government exerted more control over the South than it later did, it wouldn't tolerate open celebration of the Confederacy. People put the monuments up ostensibly to mourn the dead, but they were widely understood as statements of continuing allegiance. After the end of Reconstruction, they moved into the civic spaces where they always wanted to be. Perhaps they have a right to their sentiments? But they certainly don't have a right for those sentiments to be supported by or offered to the public in the guise of something admirable.

*LVB:* But I think, for instance, of the Vietnam War memorial. How do we commemorate and honor people who participated in what was understood as their civic duty to defend national interests? Anyone who understands the Vietnam War would also say there's something quite problematic in the celebration of empire that way. How do we begin to disentangle that?

*DU:* I think that's a key question because war memorials really cloud this discussion about memory and monuments. Civil War memorials are thought to be the origin of this murky debate because they shifted memorial practice from depicting generals and admirals to depicting the so-called common soldier (Savage 2016, 2018). This shifts conversations to abstract notions of duty: these soldiers served the state, so whether you're fighting the Civil War or the Vietnam War, you are merely doing your duty. So when people defend Confederate memorials, they often defend them as war memorials. "These are soldiers, and we need to honor them."

*LVB:* Yet at this moment we question police officers, right? Who are "just doing their duty." I think we can do the same in the context of soldiers. We understand there are some aspects of policing that are deeply problematic, and we could apply the same lens to war and soldiers.

*TWM:* This one is hard for me because I feel like what we're left sitting with is whether there are righteous forms of violence? And if there are, how do we choose to commemorate them? That's a really tough one to unpack.

But if I could circle back to the question about what the place for removed monuments is? Being situated in a museum, I can say there's a lot of conversation about whether museums should be the place for them.

NG: If museums are that space, they need to have protocols around contextualizing monuments truthfully. And they should bring in artists who have not been allowed to enter these spaces before. Museums have to positively engage with living communities right now, to uphold their voices in all of this.

TWM: I agree 100%. Neither the literature in public history nor museum studies adequately addresses the root causes—the systemic causes—of what we're dealing with now. Calls to put monuments in museums often come from people outside of our field who don't always demonstrate an understanding that not all museums function in the same way. They aren't always thinking about how a monument would be read differently in a general history museum like my own rather than in an art museum or in a Black history museum, for instance. I think it's telling that Black-owned museums have not rushed to take these monuments in.

Practitioners are really divided. Does it make sense to extend resources to preserve a 2-ton sculpture? If I'm an underresourced museum—which most history museums are—do I really want to reinforce my floors to support those objects when I could be doing other things to uplift and preserve the history of people of color? You have to think about curatorial decisions and display, too. Do you keep a plinth? Without the plinth you could end up with a simple statue of a nameless man, stripping away some of its power. But in a museum, such a monument could somehow be made more palatable and wind up reinforcing white supremacy. At the end of the day, museums have an obligation to truth telling and research. They are uniquely positioned to tell stories. We need to know that if removed monuments go on display, they'll have appropriate interpretation. That's hard to guarantee.

NG: While I don't think museums are a great option for these monuments, I would say that just because something is sent to a museum doesn't mean that it needs to ever be on display. We know this because objects removed from or stolen from our communities often never see the light of day. If we want to visit them, we must get permission to go to some warehouse or dusty basement to spend time with our ancestors' objects, our cultural objects.

TWM: If museums are going to take in monuments, I like the idea of taking the ones that are already de-

faced or marked by the visible evidence of contestation because it would come with some context.

TCF: What about virtual museums?

TWM: Virtual archives are great ways of engaging communities, so it's an interesting alternative.

DU: The only thing is that the force of a monument is its scale and physicality—what it's like to stand next to a 50-foot-tall image. Seeing it on the small screen isn't quite the same. And with regard to vandalized monuments, I think some of them should stay in place now. I would love to see Robert E. Lee in Richmond stay in place as he is now because history is happening on that monument (fig. 7). Leave him standing, changed, in the middle of that upper-crust white neighborhood as a record of what's happened.

TCF: Perhaps we might see that as a means of healing? As we bring this discussion to an end, I want to pose two final thoughts for your consideration. First, we have been circling around the notion of healing, of repair. We have seen removal as one potential form of repair but also that the creation of new forms of monumentality can function in that capacity as well. We might view both of these engagements with the monumental landscape as heritage work. What work remains to be done? What are the possibilities you see emerging from this moment?

LVB: I'd like to see all kinds of combinations of responses. And I think we still have a lot of work to do around *who* gets to put up public sculptures—what is the *process*? There has to be dialogue between communities and artists.

TWM: I agree. We have to expect monuments and memorials moving forward will look different in different places. They need to. And repair is about addressing a harm—right? That is the demand. People in my field especially prefer to talk about *healing* and *reconciliation*, but those aren't what the work of repair demands. Even the concept “truth and reconciliation” requires we understand those interventions sequentially—truth, then reconciliation. So, when we are talking about repair work and accountability, we can't *demand* healing on the other end. Instead, we should be asking questions like “Have you been angry long enough?” Moving to redress does not mean we will immediately reach some sort of reconciliation.

NG: Right. Reconciliation versus restitution. Land *acknowledgment* versus *land back*. These are very different conversations that create very different outcomes.



Figure 7. Protesters altered the monument to Confederate General Robert E. Lee, renaming the roundabout Marcus-David Peters Circle in commemoration of Marcus-David Peters, who was fatally shot by police in May 2018. Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia. 2020. Photo by Tiffany C. Fryer.

One is recognizing, and one is action. Can you envision what that might look like? Land back for Indigenous peoples? Can you envision what America's monuments might look like with a reality of land back for Indigenous peoples in the US?

*LVB:* Although, for me, it *was* a shift to hear even the acknowledgment today. I definitely appreciate that shift.

*TWM:* I spent earlier today talking about land acknowledgments. I think it's an important shift in that, again, it's an initiation. I'm not Indigenous. But if my land were stolen and people were on it, acknowledging they were on it but not talking about ending settler colonialism, I'd be upset. It would feel like a slap in the face. Ask yourselves when you practice land acknowledgment whether you're also in conversation with Indigenous peoples. Are you working to listen? To understand how people are feeling? To understand their history?

*DU:* It brings to mind the Supreme Court decision made last week affirming most of Oklahoma still belongs to Indigenous people.<sup>9</sup> What will that mean? Will it simply be symbolic acknowledgment? Is it a step toward restitution?

*LVB:* You know, with our sculpture in Denmark, we've been hesitant to get it institutionalized because we worry people will read it as a form of restitution. Some people feel that monuments can act as that—like: let's just put up some sculptures of Black and Indigenous stuff—and that's equity and justice. No. It can only be one step in the journey toward justice.

## Acknowledgments

We convened this conversation mourning the loss of so much vibrant Black and Brown life yet so invigorated by the emergent opportunities to challenge and unsettle the contours of systemic racism and settler colonialism that have emerged in their wake. We know that this moment is one flash in a long history of contestation, but we maintain hope that we can in fact shake the foundations of these systems so much that they will topple themselves. At a more immediate level, we wish to thank the conveners and sponsors of this conversation for envisioning this dialogue, as follows: Dr. Justin Dunnavant and Dr. Ayana Flewellen, cofounders of the Society of Black Archaeologists; Dr. Adam Smith and the Cornell Institute of Archaeology and Material Studies; Dr. Danilyn Rutherford, president of the Wenner-Gren Foundation; and Dr. Chip Colwell, editor of *SAPIENS*. We also thank Kathryn Derfler, Joshua Edwards, and Dr. Laura Heath-Stout for the roles they played in making this event run smoothly in the virtual world.

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