

STATUES OF LIMITATION

Are museums the rightful home for Confederate monuments?

By Janeen Bryant, Jennifer Scott, and Suzanne Seriff

In the summer of 2017, white supremacists rallied in Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Heather Heyer, a 32-year-old paralegal, was killed by a man who drove his car through a crowd of counter-protesters.

In the wake of that tragedy, newspapers across the nation called for the removal of Confederate monuments from the American public sphere—and their “safe housing” in museums. “What to do with Confederate monuments? Put them in museums as examples of ugly history, not civic pride,” read an *LA Times* headline days after the Charlottesville riots. “Confederate Monuments Belong in Museums, Not Public Squares” stated a *Weekly Standard* headline on August 20, 2017.

In just over a year and a half, more than four dozen Confederate monuments in at least 27 cities across the US have, in fact, been removed, pulled down, “retired,” spray painted, chiseled, written on, or otherwise

physically altered (what some have described as “vandalized”), resulting in their official “safekeeping” in warehouses, research centers, cemeteries, and other sometimes unidentified spaces throughout the urban landscape.

Many of these monuments have made their way to museum cold-storage spaces; a smaller number have spawned new displays on museum exhibition floors. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has even proposed constructing an entirely new museum just to house the recently toppled “Silent Sam” statue that stood for decades on the main campus lawn. However, a number of history museums—including the Smithsonian—have out-and-out refused to take a Confederate statue, citing everything from the logistical challenges to the high cost to the misalignment with their missions.

But the debate about what to do with these monuments is far from over. In fact, the American Association for State and Local History recently

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Copy photograph of the dedication of the Robert E. Lee monument at Lee Circle, 1884, New Orleans, Louisiana.

released a guide for museum professionals, public historians, and community leaders on how to navigate the issue. Yet no “how-to” manual can supply an easy solution to this extremely complex issue. Many museums continue to grapple with what role they should, could, or must play in the storing or displaying of these gigantic “homages”—artifacts not even of the Civil War itself, but of the Jim Crow movements that fueled their commissioning and erection in prominent public places in the early 20th century.

Jefferson Davis at the University of Texas

The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin is an oft-cited example of an institution that has taken a definitive step in dealing with this issue. The museum agreed to house an 8 ½-foot-tall, 2,000-pound statue of Jefferson Davis, former president of the Confederacy, that was removed from the campus’ South Mall in 2015.

“I think this is the answer,” said Don Carleton, the center’s executive director, in an August 18, 2017, *USA Today* article that is pointedly titled “When a bronze Confederate needed to retire, University of Texas found a home.” He continued, “They are pieces of art; destroying that is like burning books. They need to be preserved and they belong in museums.”

He added that the center will not “be putting him in our building as some sort of shrine to Jefferson Davis, but as an educational experience and point of discussion.” The permanent exhibition “From Commemoration to Education” tells how the statue came to be and why it was later removed from its original spot on campus. According to the exhibition’s curator, Ben Wright, in the same story, “the presence of the statue in an educational exhibition, as opposed to a place of honor, underlines that Davis, as well as his ideas and actions, are no longer commemorated by the university.”

Yet some students, Austin citizens, and concerned museum-goers complain that the exhibition continues to glorify the statue because of the inherent value conferred on objects in a museum. In addition, they note, statues appear even more monumental when squeezed into a standard museum hallway space. No matter how sensitively museums contextualize the artifacts themselves, does their larger-than-life

presence in an enclosed exhibition space mitigate, or even parody, any interpretive value?

Confronting the Racism

A growing number of museum professionals—especially professionals of color and their allies—are increasingly cautioning that the “put them in a museum” response to Confederate memorials, no matter how sensitively stated, reflects a larger misunderstanding of what museums are for.

In addition, simply housing these monuments in museums sidesteps important questions that we need to ask in our communities and within our own institutions: Who are the “stakeholders” who are being brought to—or remain absent from—the table in these conversations about Confederate statues, and what is the role of “professionals” in the process? Do we trust that curators and museum personnel have the right stuff to lead the charge? Who will be the arbiters and decision makers in the meaning-making process? And how is this process limited—or framed—by the starting assumption that the monuments must be preserved in the public sphere?

Anti-racism educator and historian Ibram Kendi reflected on his youth in Manassas, Virginia, and the meaning of Confederate monuments during the keynote speech at the March 3, 2018, symposium “Mascots, Myths, Monuments and Memory” at the National Museum of African American History and Culture:

In thinking through my comments for today, I tried to really understand, first and foremost, how it felt for me, how it feels for so many of us to live day in and day out surrounded by so many Confederate monuments. How does it feel for those people that have to literally watch people cheer for mascots that are a desecration of their people? How does it feel to see myths memorialized in public squares, in massive stadiums? And more importantly, what do these feelings say about our memories and our histories, let alone the memories of the defenders of these monuments and mascots?



Canal Street, New Orleans, Louisiana

For years, the echoing silence from mainstream museums was a frustrating reminder that most staff were unwilling or unable to confront racist monuments, racist artifacts, or racism in any form. As museum professionals, we must be willing to create intellectually active spaces wherever we gather—in workshops, at conferences, in staff break rooms, and in our communities’ public spaces—to grapple with the overt assumptions surrounding these monuments.

Christy Coleman, CEO of the American Civil War Museum in Richmond, Virginia—a city once the seat of the Confederacy—was asked to co-chair Richmond’s Monument Avenue Commission to help bridge the different perspectives in her community on the fate of five Confederate monuments along one of the city’s main boulevards. She helped implement a groundbreaking community engagement process.

From July 2017 to May 2018, the commission solicited extensive community input about these monuments through emails, letters, and public forums. In the end, the final report (see Resources on p. 50 for a link) captures the nuanced ways in which people encounter the monuments and their yearning for more context, new possibilities, and alternative options for memorialization.

As museum professionals, we must formulate our own approach to where, whether, and how to re-contextualize these toppled monuments to our Jim Crow past. In doing so, we must recognize our own histories of complicity in the centering of white, male, hetero-normative heritages and the celebration of icons of white supremacy. We must also acknowledge that,

over the generations, communities of color and other marginalized groups have tirelessly contested these narratives and fought for their rightful place in history.

Recognizing Black Activism

Before the Richmond initiative, in 2015 the New Orleans City Council voted to remove all of its Confederate statues from city parks. The successful Take 'Em Down movement in New Orleans was the direct result of grassroots community activism led by black organizers.

To emphasize this history is all the more crucial given that most media coverage attributed the removals to the open-mindedness and forward thinking of Mitch Landrieu, New Orleans mayor at the time. The media lauded his speech and unprecedented action rather than acknowledging the black leadership that truly and thoughtfully catalyzed these changes.

By November 2014, black activists from BYP100 NOLA had already issued a petition for the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue. And as early as the 1970s, long-time activist Malcolm Suber had been calling for the removal of all white supremacist symbols, which resulted in the renaming of more than 30 schools in the 1990s. Yet this sustained activism has been rendered invisible.

A broader conversation about museums and monuments must include not only a recognition of the landscapes of oppression that the Confederate statues mark, but also an understanding of the self-determined landscapes of resistance that marginalized communities have created to mark their own histories, in opposition to, but also in spite of, these erasures.

Museo Urbano in El Paso, Texas; Pauli Murray Center in Durham, North Carolina; Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago; Weeksville Heritage Center in New York; the Abbe Museum in Maine; and the recently opened National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration in Montgomery, Alabama, are examples of “bottom-up” museums that are de-centering white supremacist narratives, centering marginalized histories and social justice, modeling innovative approaches to inclusion, and redefining memorials and monuments.

For example, the sole mission of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice is to examine the lasting legacy of lynching in the United States. The sheer scale of the memorial, strategically set atop a hill near downtown Montgomery, Alabama, with hundreds of six-foot-tall oxidizing iron columns, creates another form of canonization. Thousands of names have been carefully inscribed into the metal faces, boldly proclaiming a history that was deliberately silenced and largely erased but is now creating a new paradigm for what constitutes a Southern “narrative.”

Bryan Stevenson, founder of the memorial and the neighboring Legacy Museum, insists that such a monumental recognition of our nation's racist past is a necessary corrective to the museums and public history initiatives that have failed us by rushing headlong into memorialization instead of confronting our American history of exclusion and selective representation.

RESOURCES

An earlier version of this article (by Bryant, Scott, Seriff, and including co-authors Benjamin Filene and Louis Nelson) ran on AAM's Center for the Future of Museums blog and on Smithsonian.com.

aam-us.org/2018/04/03/are-museums-the-rightful-home-for-confederate-monuments/bit.ly/2VEzmi5

Controversial Monuments and Memorials: A Guide for Community Leaders, David B. Allison (ed.), 2018

Monument Avenue Commission Report, prepared for the Office of the Mayor and City Council, City of Richmond, Virginia, 2018

bit.ly/2MJ3wzf

Take 'Em Down NOLA Movement
takeemdownnola.org

“How Robert E. Lee Got Knocked Off His Pedestal,” Brentin Mock, CityLab, May 29, 2017
bit.ly/2LWOfgi

Princeton & Slavery
slavery.princeton.edu/stories/princeton-and-slavery-holding-the-center

“Princeton Confronts Its Slave-Owning Past With An ‘Anti-Monument,’” Priscilla Frank, HuffPost, Nov. 28, 2017
bit.ly/2SFmxSQ



Titus Kaphar's anti-monument, *Impressions of Liberty* (2017), was placed in front of the old president's residence on the Princeton campus.



The Anti-Monument Movement

We are beginning to see museums, universities, and public institutions support what some have called the “anti-monument.” These are sculptures, interventions, or tributes that bring to the fore contested histories and question how and why we memorialize people and legacies.

A great anti-monument example is Titus Kaphar's work for the Princeton & Slavery Project at Princeton University. His sculpture *Impressions of Liberty*, part of his *Monumental Inversions* series, was positioned for part of 2017 in front of the original Princeton president's house (now the alumni association building). The artwork includes a recognizable regal silhouette in the form of a wooden carving of former Princeton President Samuel Finley and, within his shadow, a depiction of a man, woman, and child that Finley owned and enslaved.

“Monuments are often erected to memorialize fallen heroes or otherwise reinforce a particular idea of the past,” said James Christen Steward, the director of the university's art museum, in a HuffPost article.

“In that light, I think Titus Kaphar's work is more ‘anti-monument,’ drawing our attention to forgotten histories and to the idea that history itself is being constantly rewritten. It is that understanding of history as fluid (and as a tale of both who is depicted and who is omitted) that indeed drew us to his work.”

No matter how museums ultimately come down on the Confederate monument debate, we believe that these and other public institutions of education and power must critically examine their own histories of exclusion and any continued complicities in what they monumentalize before they earn the right to properly contextualize racist memorials.

As artist Nayland Blake recently stated, “Museums need to decide whether or not they are active participants in the life of their city or if they are just some kind of trophy house.”



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