

Public Art and Racial Reckoning in Twenty-First Century America: Symbolic Capital and Cultural Vandalism

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How does public art, including monuments and memorials, guide American thinking today about racism and racial justice? In recent years, public art has been at the epicenter of demonstrations in the United States (and around the world) protesting White supremacy, systemic racism, and police brutality. This article considers how and why many Americans today aim to reconcile historical accountability (such as the history of slavery), immediate concerns (inequality and unaddressed institutional racism), and national futurity (aspirational goals) through practices of 'cultural vandalism': damaging and removing public art to legitimate alternative forms of social and political purpose and identity. These practices raise questions about the permanence and responsibility of public art. Are monuments eternal: do they or should they last forever? Does public art have an ethical or moral obligation to serve or contribute to a common good? What should happen to public art that Americans consider troubling or problematic?

Wie beeinflusst öffentliche Kunst, darunter Denkmäler und Gedenkstätten, das amerikanische Denken über Rassismus und Gerechtigkeit? In den Vereinigten Staaten (und auf der ganzen Welt) stand öffentliche Kunst in den letzten Jahren im Mittelpunkt von Demonstrationen gegen weiße Vorherrschaft, systemischen Rassismus und Polizeibrutalität. Dieser Artikel untersucht, wie und warum viele Amerikaner heute versuchen, historische Verantwortung zu übernehmen (u. a. für die Geschichte der Sklaverei), unmittelbare Probleme zu lösen (soziale Ungleichheit und ungelöster institutioneller Rassismus) und ehrgeizige Ziele für die nationale Zukunft zu erreichen, indem sie ‚kulturellen Vandalismus‘ begehen: die Beschädigung und Entfernung öffentlicher Kunstwerke, um alternative Möglichkeiten der sozialen und politischen Zielsetzung und Identität zu legitimieren. Diese Praxis wirft Fragen zur Permanenz und Verantwortung von Kunst im öffentlichen Raum auf. Sind Denkmäler für die Ewigkeit? Halten sie oder sollten sie ewig halten?

Hat öffentliche Kunst eine ethische und moralische Verpflichtung dem Gemeinwohl zu dienen oder zu diesem beizutragen? Was sollte mit öffentlicher Kunst geschehen, die als belastet oder problematisch angesehen wird?

Introduction

My pedagogy as an art historian and American Studies scholar centers on how visual and material cultures inform various perspectives on the United States. Much of my teaching and writing focuses on public art, analyzing what monuments and memorials mean to different audiences and why today they have become contested battlegrounds over American concepts of history, memory, identity, and national purpose. Recognizing that the term “America” extends to countries in North and South America, my use here references the United States, parsed in terms of its imagined unity and its multiple inconsistencies.

In recent years, public art has been at the epicenter of heated American debates about who and what to remember, and to honor, in American public life. Multiple monuments, memorials, statues, and other forms of public art have been denounced, defaced, and/or removed from American parks, plazas, courthouse lawns, and other public sites. This essay considers how and why many Americans target public art through practices of cultural vandalism in order to reconcile historical accountability (such as the history of slavery), present-day concerns (including inequality and unaddressed institutional racism), and national futurity (aspirational goals).

Public Art

Public art is presentist: typically made to conform to the feelings and beliefs of patrons and audiences at the time it was made. Broadly defined as

“art in the public realm,” public art is diverse and wide ranging, from sculptures and fountains to sculptures, murals, memorials, and monuments. It is made out of multiple materials, from bronze and marble to concrete, wood, mosaic, plastics, and new media including digital art, computer graphics, and AR (augmented reality). Some public art is temporary, like the 7,500 saffron-colored fabric gates that were made by Christo and Jeanne-Claude and installed in New York’s Central Park in February 2005. Some public art features figurative statues of generals on horseback, the stuff of ‘statue-mania’ in the nineteenth-century. Other forms of public art include abstract forms and experiential spaces that invite public participation in modern times. “Open to artists of all stripes,” Jack Becker writes, public art has no “predetermined rules or a mutually agreed upon critical language” (Becker, 2004, p. 5).

What public art shares, of course, is public response. Public art is art made for the public, usually through a public process. Unlike art in museums or in private collections, public art exists for public audiences. It depends, in fact, on the public spaces it occupies and the public responses it generates. Following the public murder of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, by White police officers in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, widespread protests against police violence and racial inequality targeted monuments erected throughout the United States that symbolized White supremacy. In Birmingham, Alabama, a statue of Charles Linn, a Civil War era industrialist and captain in the Confederate States Navy, was toppled in a city park. In Nashville, Tennessee, a statue of Edward Carmack, a White supremacist newspaper publisher and politician who in 1892 incited a mob to firebomb the office of journalist and civil rights activist Ida B. Wells, was toppled from its pedestal in front of the state capitol. In Philadelphia, a huge bronze statue of Frank Rizzo, a former mayor and police commissioner who was a virulent racist and homophobe, was pulled down from where it had been prominently placed in 1999, in front of the city’s Municipal Services Building (fig. 1).



Figure 1: Statue of Frank Rizzo, Philadelphia, PA, dedicated 1998. Photo 2007. Courtesy Creative Commons.

And in Saint Paul, on the grounds of the Minnesota state capitol, a ten-foot statue of Christopher Columbus was pulled down by local Native American activists (fig. 2). “It was the right thing to do and it was the right time to do it,” said Mike Forcia (Anishinaabe), a member of the activist group the American Indian Movement. Forcia added: “People don’t realize that systematic racism, slavery, White supremacy and genocide created America and having symbols representing that genocide is a continuous reminder of the atrocious history people continue to celebrate” (Forcia qtd. in Pfofi, 2020 and in Thompson, 2020). Charged with felony destruction of property, he stated: “I’ll accept it fully [...]. Whatever has happened to me is of little consequence compared to the conversation the state needs to have about this” (Forcia qtd. in Sawyer, 2020). Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan, a member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe, agreed with him, commenting: “I can’t say I’m

sad the statue of Christopher Columbus is gone. I'm not. All Minnesotans should feel welcome at the Minnesota State Capitol, and our state is long overdue for a hard look at the symbols, statues, and icons that were created without the input of many of our communities." On social media, Flanagan added: "I will not shed a tear over the loss of a statue that honored someone that by his own admission sold 9- and 10-year-old girls into sex slavery. So, let us start there" (Flanagan qtd. in Nesterak, 2020).



Figure 2: Statue of Christopher Columbus, Saint Paul, MN, toppled on June 10, 2020. Photo courtesy Darren Thompson, Native News Online.

Cultural Vandalism

Statues, monuments, and other kinds of public art are the physical markers of social, political, and economic interests. They are highly visible stakeholders in historical memory, and as such possess enormous influence in terms of shaping public opinion. Their "symbolic capital," following French theorist Pierre Bourdieu, helps to legitimize certain social, cultural, and political concepts and guide public perceptions of social order, political transition, and national identity (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 114–120). In addition to their presentist origins, public art is processual: dependent on a variety of cultural and social relationships and subject to the volatile intangibles of multiple audiences and their fluctuating interests and preferences (Doss, 2016, p. 403).

When public art contradicts or violates currently held beliefs and values or represents histories and politics that Americans find aberrant and inappropriate, or embodies 'negative' symbolic capital, it may be subject to cultural vandalism: damaging and removing public art for sociopolitical reasons related to changed understandings of national identity and purpose. Cultural vandalism articulates struggles over self and state during critically transformative sociopolitical moments, such as declarations of independence and civil war. Importantly, it is distinct from cultural heritage vandalism, also called "Elginism," which refers to acts of looting and illegally exporting cultural treasures as "spoils of war" or for financial profit, such as Lord Elgin's plundering of the Parthenon Marbles in Athens in 1801.¹

Monuments are not permanent. Although some assume they are everlasting, or eternal, monuments are vulnerable to the same realities as all bodies, all things. Indeed, Americans have a long history of destroying public art, from defacing and toppling statues to removing monuments and memorials that they deem oppressive, shameful, and 'out of sync' with presentist values and interests, both personal and shared. Cultural vandalism has been a regular practice in the United States.

On July 9, 1776, for example, General George Washington organized a public reading of the Declaration of Independence in New York (Marks, 1981). Inspired by words encouraging them to "dissolve the political bands" of tyranny and seek "unalienable rights" of life, liberty, and happiness, the crowd responded by toppling a large equestrian statue of King George III, modeled on a Roman statue of Marcus Aurelius. Since the nation's founding, in other words, Americans have practiced cultural vandalism as an act of political resistance. Defacing and removing despised examples of public art legitimates claims to, or desires for, new forms of social and political authority.

Cultural vandalism in America today is sparked by incessant episodes of racist violence and the enduring visibility of Confederate symbols. In

2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) identified over 1,500 monuments, memorials, statues, schools, streets, parks, military bases, historical markers, and more honoring the Confederate States of America: a coalition of Southern states that believed in White supremacy and started a Civil War to preserve (and perpetuate) the institution of slavery, which it depended on for labor and profit (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016).² The Confederate states seceded from the United States in 1861, waged war against the United States from 1861 to 1865, and lost. Despite its defeat, the Confederacy promoted a ‘Lost Cause’ mythology justifying its racist ideology and its secession from the Union on noble and heroic terms, explaining that it started the Civil War to save and protect a ‘Southern’ way of life. It paid homage to White supremacy in multiple monuments and symbols erected from the later decades of the nineteenth century to today, from statues of Confederate



Figure 3: Robert E. Lee Monument, Richmond, VA, dedicated 1890. Photo 2013, courtesy Martin Falbisoner, Creative Commons.

generals located in Southern town squares to Confederate flags displayed in front of Southern County Courthouses (fig. 3). And for decades, the rest of the United States allowed the defeated traitors of the Confederacy to display its racist monuments and symbols, and even replicated them, suggesting that racism in America was hardly contained in the South but was, in fact, widely shared.

The Symbolic Capital of Confederate Monuments Then and Now

At the same time, monuments honoring the Confederacy did not go unchallenged. African Americans recognized them as instruments of White power and, historian Karen Cox writes, “participated in a tradition of protest against Confederate monuments and the Lost Cause since the late nineteenth century” (Cox, 2021, p. 25). In 1870, Frederick Douglass warned:

Every monument built in memory of the Confederacy will perpetuate that which it would be more creditable in the actors to desire to have forgotten. [...] If it is not to reawaken the conflict, by cultivating hatred against the Government, that these monuments are built, there is little or no purpose in their erection. Monuments to the ‘lost cause’ will prove monuments of folly, both in the memories of wicked rebellion which they must necessarily perpetuate, and in the failure to accomplish the particular purpose had in view by those who build them. It is a needless record of stupidity and wrong. (Douglass, 1870, p. 3)

Likewise, in 1890, when a huge equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee was dedicated on Monument Avenue in Richmond, multiple African American journalists protested including a writer at the Louisville, Kentucky newspaper *The Champion*:

No such scenes as transpired in Richmond, Virginia upon the unveiling of the monument of Gen. Robert E. Lee Thursday, would be permitted in any other country under the blue expanse of heaven. [...] [T]hey were defeated. They hold their lives by the mercy of the nation they attempted to destroy, and this rehabilitation of the infamous cause of the Confederacy is rank treason. (Voice of the Colored Press, 1890)

In 1931, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that the text panels on Confederate monuments should more appropriately read, “Sacred to the memory of those who fought to Perpetuate Human Slavery” (Du Bois, 1931, p. 279; see also Cox, 2021, p. 67).

In the twenty-first century, protests against Confederate monuments have exploded. In the wake of the July 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the fatal shooting of Black teenager Trayvon Martin seventeen months earlier, the social and political movement Black Lives Matter (BLM) was organized. Leading demonstrations against racially motivated violence and police brutality, BLM has been instrumental in encouraging tens of thousands of Americans to recognize and protest against systemic racism and excessive police force, and to advocate for policy and behavioral changes dedicated to racial justice in multiple institutions. Black Lives Matter may be the largest social justice movement in U.S. history: in 2020, in 550 cities across the country, over 26 million citizens participated in more than 4,600 demonstrations against America’s “racial caste system” (Glenn, 2021).

Since its inception, BLM’s anti-racist activism has spurred many Americans to protest against public art that promotes racist injustices and White supremacy. From the murder of nine black parishioners in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 by a Neo-Nazi who wanted to “start a race war” (qtd. in Mosendz, 2015) to the murder of George Floyd in 2020 by Minneapolis police, millions of Black Lives Matter protesters have taken to the streets to demand the removal of multiple monuments, memorials, and statues that promote racist figures, histories, and ideologies. The SPLC estimates that from 2015 to today, more than 300 Confederate symbols have been removed from American public spaces, including 170 monuments (Vinson, 2021). In June 2021, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to remove statues and busts from the U.S. Capitol that honor men who upheld slavery or fought for the Confederacy.



Figure 4: Liberty Place Monument, New Orleans, dedicated 1891. Photo c. 1912. Courtesy Wikipedia Commons.

In New Orleans, four Confederate monuments were removed in spring 2017 after the City Council declared them a “public nuisance” (Wendland, 2017). These included the notorious Liberty Place Monument, a 35-foot stone obelisk erected in the middle of Canal Street in 1891 to commemorate a Reconstruction Era coup d’état called the “Battle of Liberty Place,” a racially motivated riot of Confederate veterans in 1874 against recently elected Black politicians (fig. 4). A statue of Jefferson Davis was erected in New Orleans in 1911, on the fiftieth anniversary of his inauguration as the President of the Confederate States of America. Prior to their removal, these and other Confederate monuments were repeatedly defaced with graffiti, including statements such as

“SLAVE OWNER,” “NAZI SCUM,” “BLACK LIVES MATTER,” and “TAKE ‘EM DOWN” (fig. 5). New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu orchestrated their removal, remarking, “There is a difference between remembrance of history and reverence of it.” He added:

These statues are not just stone and metal. They are not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments purposely celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, and the terror that it actually stood for. [...] To literally put the Confederacy on a pedestal in our most prominent places of honor is an inaccurate recitation of our full past. It is an affront to our present, and it is a bad prescription for our future. (Landrieu, 2017)



Figure 5: Statue of Jefferson Davis, New Orleans, dedicated 1911. Photo 2004, courtesy Bart Everson, Creative Commons.

Likewise, in August 2017, Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and members of the city council authorized the removal of four Confederate memorials just days after the deadly “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, during which a Neo-Nazi intentionally rammed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one woman and critically injuring dozens of other people. The “Unite the Right” rally was specifically held on Saturday, August 12, 2017, to protest the Charlottesville City Council’s decision to remove the city’s Confederate memorials, and to rename a park honoring Confederate General Robert E. Lee “Emancipation Park.” On the night before the rally, White supremacists held a “Blood and Soil” rally in Emancipation Park, holding torches, chanting racist and anti-Semitic slogans referencing racial purity, and surrounding a towering equestrian statue dedicated to Lee.

Many Americans watched these events in horror, making the connections between public art, racism, and violence in the public sphere. Within days, Confederate monuments all over the United States were vandalized and pulled down. In cities ranging from Annapolis (Maryland) to Austin (Texas) and including Daytona Beach (Florida), Durham (North Carolina), Franklin (Ohio), Gainesville (Florida), Helena (Montana), Los Angeles (California), Madison (Wisconsin), New York (New York), San Diego (California), St. Louis (Missouri), St. Petersburg (Florida), and Worthington (Ohio), Confederate monuments, memorials, and statues were defaced and removed from public spaces and places. Some were toppled by crowds of protesters determined to destabilize and destroy their offensive symbolic capital. Others were ordered removed and placed in storage in undisclosed locations and city-owned warehouses by mayors and other city officials worried about public safety and potential civil lawsuits.

In Baltimore, public protests had been mounted for years against the city’s Confederate monuments, including a double equestrian statue of Confederate generals Lee and Stonewall Jackson that was designed by Laura Gardin Fraser and

dedicated in 1948 – more than eighty years after the secessionist forces of the Confederate States of America were defeated in the Civil War (fig. 6). As the SPLC determined, the majority of Confederate monuments in the United States were erected long after the war ended and, more specifically, during the era of Jim Crow – from the 1890s through the 1920s – and then again after World War II, during the era of Civil Rights. In each of these time periods, Confederate monuments were not erected as “somber postbellum reminders of a brutal war” (Drum, 2017), which is how they are often defended today, but as symbols of intimidation: as deliberate, physical assertions of White power and racial terrorism directed against people of color.³



Figure 6: Lee-Jackson Monument, Wyman Park Dell, Baltimore, dedicated 1948. Photo 2015, courtesy C. Ryan Patterson for the Special Commission to Review Baltimore’s Public Confederate Monuments. Monument removed August 16, 2017.



Figure 7: Roger B. Taney Monument, Mount Vernon Place, Baltimore, dedicated 1887. Photo 2015, courtesy C. Ryan Patterson for the Special Commission to Review Baltimore’s Public Confederate Monuments. Monument removed August 16, 2017.

The monuments removed in Baltimore on August 16, 2017, included a statue of U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney, a Maryland native who authored the infamous 1857 Dred Scott decision ruling that African Americans were not and never could be citizens of the United States (fig. 7). Taney’s notorious defense of slavery and the non-citizen status of slaves is widely considered the worst decision ever made by the Supreme Court, if not the worst in the history of American jurisprudence. Maryland governor Larry Hogan called the removal of Taney’s statue and Baltimore’s Confederate monuments “the right thing to do,” adding: “The time has come to make clear the difference

between properly acknowledging our past and glorifying the darkest chapters of our history” (qtd. in Chappell, 2017).

Growing numbers of Americans today reject the symbolic capital of racist monuments because they recognize that public art honoring White supremacists is offensive and untenable in a racially diverse nation that endorses civil rights. They further understand that removing Confederate monuments not only has tremendous cathartic value for communities but upholds the nation’s dominant democratic interests in advancing racial equity, and its commitment to racial justice.

Public art is an important national touchstone today for reconsidering the complexities and contradictions of American history. Grounded in historical precedence, today’s protests over public art highlight nationwide debates about struc-

tural racism, White privilege, public agency, civic responsibility, and the difficulties of representing traumatic legacies. Recent and widespread incidents of cultural vandalism, most often erupting after similarly widespread incidents of racially motivated murders and police brutality, indicate that contemporary Americans are resolute about removing public art that violates their beliefs and does not correspond to core national values.

Concluding Remarks and Outlook

Questions remain about what Americans should ‘do’ with problematic public art. Some propose contextualizing egregious public art with plaques and text panels, or ‘adding’ to and expanding its historical overview. In 2016, for example, lengthy descriptive plaques were added to Baltimore’s four Confederate monuments, each concluding in their final paragraph, “this

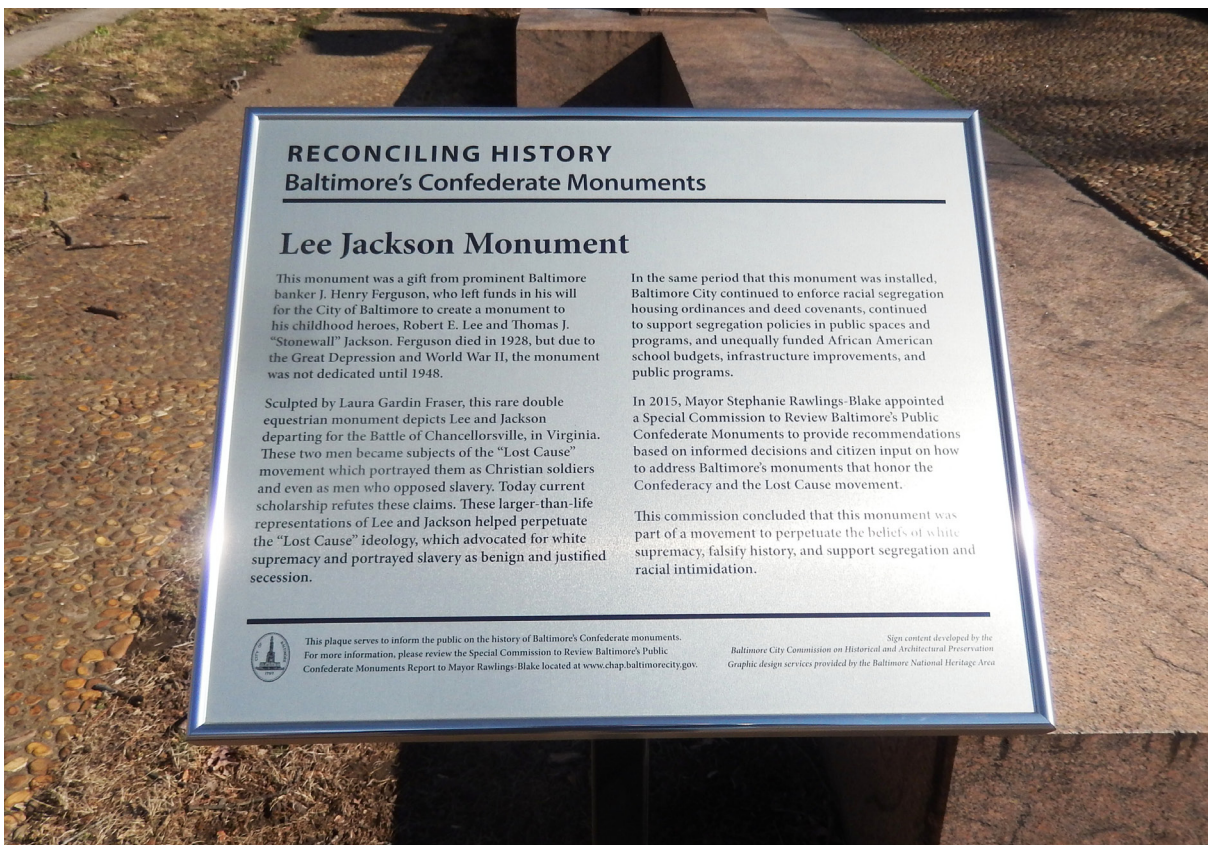


Figure 8: Lee-Jackson Monument plaque, added to monument in 2015. Photo August 19, 2017, courtesy Don Morfe, taken after removal of monument.

monument was part of a movement to perpetuate the beliefs of White supremacy, falsify history, and support segregation and racial intimidation” (fig. 8). Yet keeping Confederate monuments in place keeps the Confederacy’s racist ideology of White supremacy in place: on a pedestal, visible in the public sphere. As historian Daniel Sherman notes, contextualization of public art “begs the question of who determines what context is appropriate” (Tear Down, 2017).

Nor are plaques and text panels a match for the visual and physical authority that many Confederate monuments and memorials command or used to command. Richmond’s equestrian statue of Lee was 61-foot tall, weighed twelve tons, and dominated the center of a very large grass island – Lee Circle – at the terminus of Monument Avenue, the main street in a Whites-only real estate development where property could not be sold “to any person of African descent” (Levin, 2020). The huge statue’s imposing size and space lent it considerable authority: more than 150,000 people attended the dedication of the Lee Monument in 1890, and thousands more flocked to it over the following decades, attending rallies that paid tribute to the leading general of the Confederacy and its racist ideology.

During Black Lives Matter demonstrations in June 2020, Lee Circle became a major hub of public protest. The pedestal of the Lee Monument was covered in spray-painted slogans and colorful graffiti, and the statue was lit up at night with projected images of Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and George Floyd (fig. 9). On July 1, 2020, Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney ordered the removal of the Lee Monument and other Confederate tributes on Monument Avenue, remarking: “These statues, although symbolic, have cast a shadow on the dreams of our children of color. Let me be clear, removing these monuments is not a solution to the deeply embedded racial injustices in our city and nation, but is a down payment” (Ebrahimji et al., 2020). In summer 2021, plans were finalized regarding the removal of the Lee Monument to an undisclosed location (Rankin & Lavoie, 2021).



Figure 9: Robert E. Lee Monument, Richmond, with projection of Harriet Tubman, designed by Dustin Klein and Alex Criqui, June 16, 2020. Photo courtesy Kevin M. Levin and @FreePressRVA.

Some suggest moving problematic public art like Richmond’s statue of Robert E. Lee to art or history museums. “We need to move, not destroy, Confederate monuments” Holland Cotter stated in 2017, arguing that “truth-telling institutions” can best preserve and present them “as the propaganda they are” (Cotter, 2017). Yet the modern museum’s operational mission as trophy gallery and cultural guardian begs the question of what Confederate monuments venerate: secession from the nation based on slave holding, “toxic nostalgia” for White privilege (Emba, 2017). Moving disgraced monuments to museums may simply “bestow the same value and authority upon them that they ‘enjoyed’ as ‘stand-alone’ monuments, or even worse – further aggrandizing them – even if we contextualize them in more complicated ways.” Their “very monumentality” could “spark an even fiercer form of physical intimidation when squeezed into the

small space of a standard museum building” (Bryant et al., 2018). Museum curators and directors remark that they do not have the space, time, funding, or personnel to take on these public art problems. Sheffield Hale, president and CEO of the Atlanta History Center observes, “Most of us have said we’re not interested [...] they’re toxic” (Wright, 2020).

A more viable solution might be the development of ‘disgraced memorial parks,’ following the examples of monuments and memorials that have been removed and then dumped in ‘unwanted heritage sites’ in the former Soviet Union. These include Muzeon (also called the Fallen Monument Park) in Moscow and Memento Park in Budapest, Hungary, both of which feature statues of Lenin, Marx, Stalin, and other formerly celebrated historical figures. Similarly, Coronation Park in Delhi, India features a graveyard of British colonial statues, including those of Queen Victoria, King George V, and various British viceroys. In Taiwan, the Cihu Memorial Sculpture Park features hundreds of statues of Chiang Kai-Shek, the former dictator who ruled the nation from 1945 to 1975 and whose ‘cult of personality’ was perpetuated in thousands of statues erected in schools, government buildings, and popular shrines. Removal paired with ruination distances these monuments from their dominant power and authority, vanquishes their representative ideologies, and permits audiences opportunities for reconsidering their symbolic capital on entirely different terms.

Ruins – from the Latin word *ruere*, for ‘to fall’ – are the appropriate context for the collapse of core values that publics deem aberrant. Worries that disaffected Americans might gather in disgraced memorial parks full of Confederate monuments and statues of White supremacists are offset by the fact that defaced, vandalized, and otherwise ‘failed’ monuments are humiliating and shameful, not honorific or triumphant. Reckoning with problematic public art in America today might begin, then, by re-imagining it as ruins: and using its physical degradation and decay as a prompt to rethink and reset the nation’s social and political priorities.

Endnotes

¹ While serving as British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in the early nineteenth-century, Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin, stole over half of the original marble frieze of the Parthenon, the ancient Greek temple built on the Athenian Acropolis. In 1816, he sold the sculptures to the British Museum where, nicknamed the “Elgin Marbles,” they remain today.

² In recent years, the SPLC increased that estimate to over 2,000 public symbols.

³ On the findings of the Southern Poverty Law Center see <https://www.splcenter.org/20160421/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy>.

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