

U.S. Contested Histories, Memory and Repair:

Navigating the Monuments Debate

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01: Introduction

01 Introduction

The upcoming 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence brings renewed attention to the founding of the United States of America, but also calls on us to consider how we wish to publicly remember the nation. Here remembering is not simply an act of accounting for the past; it is, at the same time, an active process wherein individuals across the country reflect on what will be carried into the future. An anniversary can be thought of as an opportunity to think about who and how we choose to memorialize. **This white paper will provide resources for community members, researchers, funders, scholars, and practitioners to understand the role of commemoration in**

public life, while also providing guidance for people to make practical and informed decisions. We write it not in order to make an ideological point on one side or another of the culture wars about memory and monuments but in order to give tools for people trying to decide how to think about and what to do about memorials in their community.

Before we begin, we should note that the etymological roots of the word “memorial” come from the Latin “monere” which means “to remind” or “to warn.” Between 2016 - 2022, protests around monuments and the historical figures and events they represent have resulted in reputations being challenged, statues being destroyed, and histories being reaffirmed. The fact that these “monument debates” are not limited to the United States but have occurred throughout the globe reminds and warns political actors of all stripes to gain a greater understanding of the meaning and importance monuments have in representing polities.

01: Introduction

Reckoning with the role of monumentalization in a country's history means not only figuring out what's worth celebrating but also means addressing historical disagreements and moments altogether missing from our public memory.

Throughout this guide, we will examine definitions around monuments, the meaning of monuments, popular misconceptions and objections about monuments, and provide examples of how communities have dealt with contestations around monuments



"Richmond Removes Robert E. Lee Statue, Largest Confederate Sculpture in the U.S."
Smithsonian Magazine, 2021
Photo by Eze Amos / Getty Images

02: What Is a Monument?

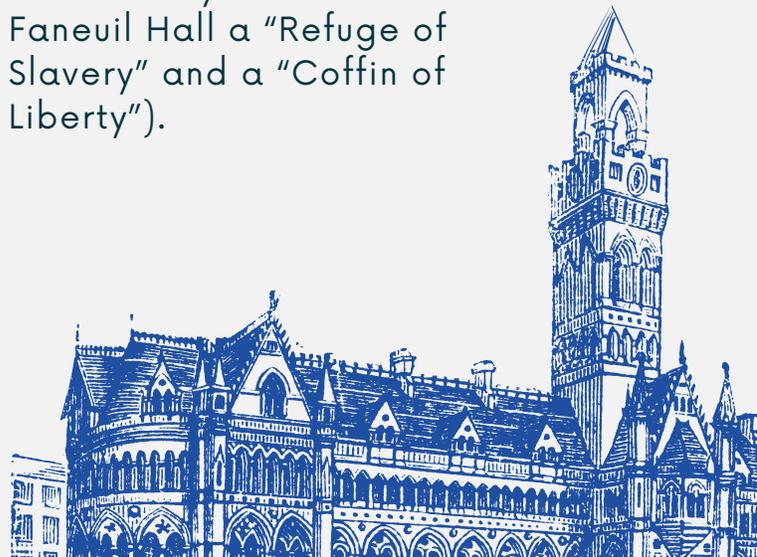
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What is a Monument?

Monuments are frequently defined as objects or structures whose function is to commemorate. Given this definition, both the content and form of monuments are significant. Both what is commemorated and how it is commemorated deserve our attention.

Let's start with the content. Take, for instance, Faneuil Hall, which has been preserved and celebrated as "The Cradle of Liberty" due to its revolutionary and abolitionist legacy in Boston, Massachusetts. This act of commemoration was historically a call for the public to remember

the struggle for national independence from the British, warn against tyranny, and celebrate democratic liberties. Importantly, commemoration does not prescribe how monuments are perceived by the public, nor does it preclude the public from perceiving monuments in unanticipated ways. This means that monuments can generate positive and negative reactions around the same historical event. For example, in recent years, Faneuil Hall has been the locus of discomfort and protest, with some communities calling for changing its name. The fact that Peter Faneuil, the namesake and patron for the site, participated in the slave trade has rendered the site tainted for many (the source of Faneuil's wealth prompted the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison to call Faneuil Hall a "Refuge of Slavery" and a "Coffin of Liberty").



02: What Is a Monument?

That many today think of Faneuil Hall in terms of Faneuil's activities in the slave trade and Garrison's scorn, rather than as a symbol of liberty, speaks to a basic fact of monuments: commemorations (statues, building and street names, even city names) proliferate responses even as they seek to inscribe or reify selected histories.

This brings us to the second area of importance for defining commemoration, the form of memorialization. Monuments are not limited by representation, even though they typically depict persons, events, historical deeds and accomplishments, anniversaries and deaths, acts of reconciliation, wars and peace accords, and treaties (this list is not exhaustive). While monuments and memorials are often classified as tangible objects (e.g., statues, street names, buildings, city and geographical site names) they can also include intangible cultural heritage, museums, archives, flags, graves, and holidays.

However, natural and sacred monuments (such as a tree or landscape with special meaning to specific communities) are often disregarded and dismissed for not being man-made structures. In many ways, contestations around monuments are not only about content, but frequently involve disagreements about form—or what is considered to be a monument.



03: Rethinking Monuments

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Rethinking Monuments

With this in mind, a richer understanding of what monuments are can help us gain clarity in some of the debates around commemoration. In particular, we want to offer a multidimensional model of understanding monuments that can expand on a reductive definition that focuses on statues, buildings and street names.

Monuments are best understood through six different dimensions:

- The political dimension: "How are monuments connected with political orders? Who gets to decide what belongs in public?"
- The historical dimension: Whose histories are represented or missing?"
- The aesthetic dimension: "What materials are used? Are these valuable artworks that need preservation?"
- The ethical dimension: "What ought monuments represent? What do we do with morally problematic histories?"
- The epistemic dimension: "What do viewers come to know through monuments?"
- The affective dimension: "What feelings do these monuments evoke?"

03: Rethinking Monuments

Consider the Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth Regiment in Boston, Massachusetts. During demonstrations in 2020

around the extrajudicial murder of George Floyd, the memorial itself became a canvas and was painted with slogans, including "Black Lives Matter" and "No Justice, No Peace."



Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-Fourth Regiment
copyright matthew teuten

03: Rethinking Monuments

The work depicts Colonel Shaw, a white commanding officer, riding on horseback while the first all-volunteer Black regiment of the Union Army marches beside him down Beacon Street. Though the monument is dedicated to the deeds of the entire regiment as well as their sacrifice during the Civil War, the two most prominent inscriptions on the memorial, located on the pedestal and the bronze sculpture, are focused on Shaw, the commander. Consider the following epigraph: "Omnia relinquat servare rempublicam" (He left behind everything to save the Republic). The inscriptions along with the placement of Black soldiers in the background has resulted in some calling the monument problematic.

For instance, L'Merchie Frazier, Executive Director of Creative Strategic Partnerships for SPOKEArts, has asked: "Whose story is being told with this monument?"

The hierarchy is very evident. White commander out front; Black soldiers in the background. It's the first thing you see" ([WBUR](#), July 27, 2020). Furthermore, it was not until the 1980s that the names of Black soldiers were etched into the monument. With this background in mind, **how would an examination of the oft-called Shaw Memorial yield different points of emphasis utilizing a multidimensional approach?**

In terms of the **political** dimension, one can examine how representations of interracial heroism may still showcase elements of antiblack racism, given that Black soldiers are visually confined to the background and receive no words of honor. As such, whether this monument is truly a celebration of Black historical figures becomes an open question for communities.

03: Rethinking Monuments

This can be further illustrated through the **historical** dimension which can reveal how the stories of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment are unevenly depicted. What are the names of the soldiers who fought and died for the cause of freedom? What does the monument tell us about them at all?

The **aesthetic** dimension can ask whether this monument, constructed by Augustus Saint-Gaudens in 1884, needs to be restored and preserved for future generations. As the first civic monument to African American soldiers, what is its artistic or cultural value?

Or reflect now on the **ethical** dimension. Is there a moral problem for a city still plagued with racism to showcase the accomplishments of Black soldiers through a monument that does not fully honor them?

Does Boston, with its problematic history on questions of race, have a special moral obligation to do better in how it acknowledges the soldiers of the 54th regiment? Should we protest or celebrate the monument?

The **epistemic** dimension, by contrast, considers how knowledge of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment is transmitted by the monument. Does the memorial obscure or illuminate history? Does it move or provoke us to learn more or does the memorial convey a completed story?

Finally, the **affective** dimension reveals the emotional responses community members have to the monument itself. Are people angered or honored by its public presence?

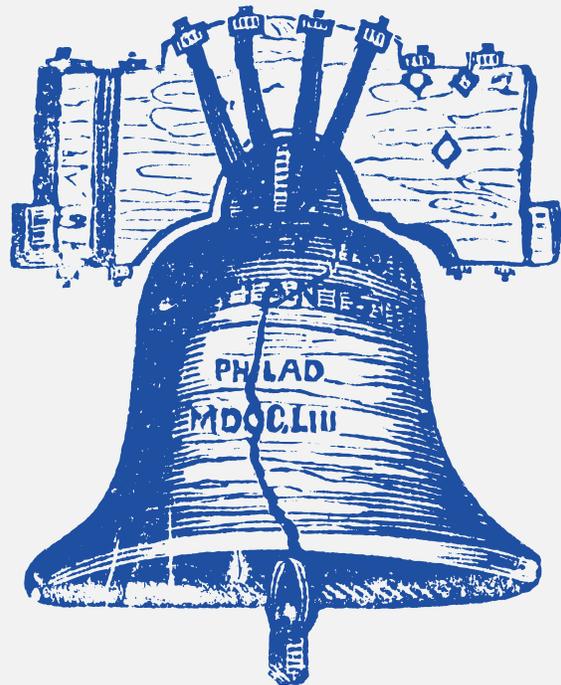
03: Rethinking Monuments

In considering these dimensions, it is important to note that these six perspectives can lead to divergent priorities and conflicting views. However, each of these dimensions must be considered in order to arrive at an epistemically rigorous account of how monuments function.

When parties to debates about monuments only consider them through one of these six dimensions, or simply do not consider all these characteristics holistically, this can result in misunderstanding and disagreement. For instance, the common refrain that “monuments are history” could only make sense by eliding the other five relevant dimensions.

Yet even though commemoration is often used to present a singular story or transmit an official meaning, such acts cannot and do not negate multidimensionality.

With this in mind, viewing monuments through these interdependent dimensions, we believe, has the benefit of preventing unitary readings of commemoration where only a singular field is considered pertinent.



04: Why Do Monuments Matter?

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Why Do Monuments Matter?

Between 2013 - 2022, many debates about historical and contemporary injustices have revolved around the legacy of controversial figures. These protests have congealed around monuments – from the statue to Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, to the statue of Columbus in Boston’s North End, to those of David Hume in Edinburgh and Cecil John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town. Why do monuments – and particularly why do statues, buildings, or other forms of commemoration denoting historical figures and deeds – become the focal points of these debates?

Why do monuments conjure up such strong feelings?

A simple answer is that **people across the world care about their political identity** – they are concerned with questions that go beyond their immediate personal interests – and monuments are shortcuts for evoking identity and belonging and for declaring them in public. In the United States, for example, a monument for Martin Luther King, Jr. brings up many associations, including memories and emotions about the depredations of the Jim Crow era and the struggle for civil rights. A monument for Mordechai Anielewicz, the leader of the Jewish uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, will raise associations about the horrors of the Holocaust and resistance against the Nazis. A monument to Robert E. Lee will generate emotional responses, such as anger or defensiveness, associated with the American Civil War and antebellum slavery.

04: Why do Monuments Matter?

A monument to Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta will produce moments of reflection for laborers and farm workers thinking about the struggle to improve working conditions.

Monuments are particularly good at raising such strong feelings because they serve as concentrated substitutes for historical events and figures. Under the multidimensional model, a monument is not a work of history. However, monuments can purposefully capture and emphasize select aspects of history through overemphasizing a particular dimension. When monuments direct attention to a specific dimension, they also bracket all others.

The complicated personal lives of those we monumentalize are usually not (for better and worse) expressed in monuments. However, it is this focus that makes monuments more evocative and moving than a history book (and, in certain cases, it makes them more misleading— especially if someone assumes they understand the fullness of a historical moment or a historical figure from interacting with a monument).



05: Popular Misconceptions and Objections

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Popular Misconceptions and Objections*

Thinking through the monuments debate requires us to take a closer look at some of the most popular arguments made in the public arena. Officials and activists are likely to encounter some or all of these arguments as they engage in discussions about what to do about controversial monuments.

- **Rewriting History**

Some people contend that removing controversial monuments amounts to erasing history. The argument is that while we can disagree about the legacy of a certain public figure, taking down a monument is the same as wiping out part of a community's history. A 2020 editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* calls New York City's decision to remove a statue of President Theodore Roosevelt from the Entrance to the Museum of Natural History, as well as the toppling of a statue of President Ulysses Grant, a "willy-nilly eradication of chunks of American history." The writer sees such acts as evidence that "the coerced erasing of U.S. history has gained momentum" ([Wall Street Journal](#), June 24, 2020). However, is removing a monument the same as erasing history?

*This section is adapted from Eisikovits, N. (2020). "[Not Set in Stone: Five Bad Arguments for Letting Monuments Stand.](#)" *Journal of Global Ethics* 16(3).

05: Popular Misconceptions and Objections

Consider the monument to Winston Churchill in Parliament Square, London. It's based on a famous photograph of him inspecting Nazi bombing damage in 1941. The monument celebrates Churchill's leadership during World War II. However, if this statue were removed, it would not erase history

because **history and a monument – any monument – are different things**. Thus, monuments can freeze one moment, or aspect, or feature, or series of events in the life of its subject. But a historical evaluation of that subject requires a panoramic view.



Crowds gather around the defaced statue of Sir Winston Churchill in London
Metro UK, 2020
Picture: Reuters

05: Popular Misconceptions and Objections

If all we knew of Churchill were the heroics contained in speeches like his famous “We shall fight them on the beaches” address after the evacuation from Dunkirk, or his walks around London immediately after bombings (which this particular monument celebrates), we would, for example, miss his racist attitudes and policies towards the British empire’s subjects in India or his blundering during some important campaigns in World War I. A historical appreciation of Churchill would have to encompass his leadership during World War II, his missteps during World War I, his role in the Bengal famine of 1943, his support of British imperialism, and much more.

Monuments may be moving, somber, impressive, beautiful; but by their very nature they are multidimensional; they are not only or primarily about history, nor are they primarily aimed at teaching us history (and, when they are they are not very good at doing so).

By this very logic we should also note that just as removing a problematic monument is not erasing history, building a new monument to a worthy cause or figure who has not received due attention does not constitute the filling of a historical lacuna. Building a monument is not “making history.” Thus, for example, creating a monument to Crispus Attucks, the forgotten first casualty of the War of Independence, who was of either African or Native American descent (or both – historians are not sure), would not be an act of writing history. At most it would be an invitation, a provocation, a reminder to go and study a history that most of us do not know.

05: Popular Misconceptions and Objections

- **Ex Post Facto Moralizing**

Other critics tell us that removing statues to controversial historical figures imposes our own (contemporary) moral standards and expectations onto the past, offering an anachronistic and therefore unfair evaluation of these figures. Washington and Jefferson owned slaves but so did many others in their milieu. The philosophers Hume and Kant were racist towards people of color, Jews, and other groups but these were the prejudices of the day, and these men were simply products of their times. Numerous presidents, heads of state, and political leaders were misogynists and worse. But those were the times, and we didn't think about the equality of the sexes as we do now. Are we really going to condemn historical figures for failing to meet moral standards that were not prevalent or even known when they operated?

There are two problems with this argument. First, there are cases where our contemporary moral standards would have been very recognizable to those who lived in earlier eras.

During the American founding, antiblack racism and slavery were deeply controversial for colonists and, needless to say, rejected outright by both enslaved and freed Blacks. For instance, Alexander Hamilton was uncomfortable and critical of slavery. His close friend, Colonel John Laurens of South Carolina, was more vehemently and openly opposed to it, writing, at one point in a letter:

I think we Americans at least in the Southern Colonies, cannot contend with a good Grace, for Liberty, until we shall have enfranchised our Slaves. How can we whose Jealousy has been alarm'd more at the Name of Oppression sometimes than at the Reality, reconcile to our spirited Assertions of the Rights of Mankind, the galling abject Slavery of our negroes...

05: Popular Misconceptions and Objections

If as some pretend, but I am persuaded more thro' interest, than from Conviction, the Culture of the Ground with us cannot be carried on without African Slaves, let us fly it as a hateful Country, and say ubi Libertas ibi Patria.*

The question of ex post facto moralizing, in other words, is often misplaced. If today's moral sensibility was a live option for those whose actions we are considering, the charge of anachronism loses its force. Second, and more strongly, there is nothing really wrong with ex post facto moralizing or with making a contemporary judgement about the past. What we reject and what we honor changes over time. Casual racism, antisemitism, and misogyny used to be ubiquitous, transparent, assumed. Now that is beginning to change (evidenced, for example, by the rise of #MeToo and the Black Lives Matter movement)

and, as a result, we retroactively reevaluate some of our public figures.

Having a statue erected in your honor is not an eternal guarantee of reverence. This is how judgments about reputation work, and it is not unique to historical figures. We regularly reevaluate our own moral standing as well as that of our parents, relatives, and friends. We are often horrified by the self-satisfaction, indiscretions, and infractions of our youth. Parents and other close relatives once revered are sometimes condemned in the fullness of time and in light of changed moral commitments. Reputations are built on moral assumptions about what is honorable. The fact that moral assumptions and hierarchies can and do change means that reputations do as well.

*Richard Borkow. *George Washington's Westchester Gamble: The Encampment on the Hudson and the Trapping of Cornwallis*. Cheltenham, UK: The History Press, 2011.

05: Popular Misconceptions and Objections

- **The Red Herring Argument**

The third argument goes something like this: debates around removing monuments engender intense emotions and lead to toxic polarization. Parties to such arguments believe that their very identities hang in the balance. Thus, in Newton, Massachusetts some members of the Italian American community were deeply offended about a proposal to rename Columbus Day and turn it into a holiday honoring Indigenous people. For instance, Leonard Gentile, a councilor-at-large from one of the city's neighborhoods, stated to the Boston Globe (September 24, 2020): "I'm here to tell you, that as an Italian-American, it is an insult to me, and it is an insult to a lot of other residents of the city of Newton." The proposal, in Gentile's view, amounted to "the complete elimination of a holiday that has come to represent a celebration of people's Italian heritage [and] is insulting."

On the other hand, Darlene Flores, a Newton resident and member of the Taíno organization Higuayagua, told the newspaper that the change "would be a first step in recognizing that we are here, we are part of this community, and that we're welcomed." Since these debates about memorials and memorialization can become contentious and violent, some claim that focusing on them squanders good will and derails practical accommodations that carry actual benefits. Monuments and symbolic memorialization are then diversions that get in the way of finding areas of agreement and making "real" as opposed to "symbolic" gains.

These claims underestimate both the harm caused by problematic monuments and the political potential of symbols. **Regularly passing by a statue that insults fundamental aspects of your identity causes real rather than figurative damage.**

05: Popular Misconceptions and Objections

The affective impact of walking to work every day under a 15-foot statue of someone who considered people of your social group subhuman is not merely symbolic. Second, symbolic gestures can have very real political effects – a focus on such gestures does not amount to trading practical progress for abstract gains. Quite on the contrary, symbolic moves (such as the toppling or removal of racist monuments, but also public apologies and gestures of contrition) can crystallize a collective sentiment – of anger, of relief, of reconciliation. It may also raise consciousness among those who were not alive during the relevant social tensions, change attitudes, and move people to action.

For instance, when a collective, including the artist and activist Jesse Pallotta, installed a bust of Marsha P. Johnson—a Black transgender woman who advocated for gay liberation and HIV/AIDS treatment—without permission, in Christopher Park in New York City, it was a purely symbolic act. But that gesture signaled to many that gay, lesbian, and transgender histories deserved to be fully represented in public and that such histories have been largely out of view until now.



Bust of Marsha P. Johnson
Image credit: Washington Square News
Photo by Sirui Wu

05: Popular Misconceptions and Objections

- **The Slippery Slope Argument**

The final claim we shall take up is the slippery slope argument. Such a claim was famously made by President Donald Trump who argued that the removal of Confederate statues would lead to the removal of monuments to some of the nation's founding figures: "So this week it's Robert E. Lee. I noticed that Stonewall Jackson is coming down. I wonder, is it George Washington next week? And is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You really have to ask yourself, where does it stop?" ([RealClear Politics](#), August 15, 2017).

The slippery slope argument makes regular appearances in the United States "culture wars." And, indeed, there are some cases where the predictions of those who have worried about sliding down the slope have come true.

But worries about slipping cannot justify a refusal to start down the slope. All they can justify is descending carefully and stopping where appropriate.

To move from the metaphorical to the concrete, removing statues of Confederate leaders may, indeed, lead us to think about removing statues to American founders. To figure out whether these further removals are merited we'd have to carefully identify the rationale for removing the statues of confederate leaders and see if it applies to figures like Jefferson and Washington. Slippery slope worries are not absurd; the worries they raise may come to pass. But all this means is that we have conceptual work to do – we need to articulate why we are taking the first step down the slope and ask ourselves whether these reasons would justify further steps.

05: Popular Misconceptions and Objections

The answer to that question is not determined solely by taking the first step.

It is also important to remember that slippery slope arguments are focused on future risks. But this focus obscures the costs of not acting in the present. And, unlike the necessarily speculative status of future risks—which either come to pass or fail to occur—the current costs of the status quo are concrete. Removing Confederate monuments may or may not open the flood gates to other removals which are more difficult to justify. However, keeping these objects in public already takes a psychological toll on current members of our society.

Those moved to inaction by the slippery slope argument are positing that speculative future dangers are weightier than current harms or they might ignore their existence altogether. This seems a difficult position to justify. At any rate, the burden of doing so falls on the party making the slippery slope argument.



06: Contestations and Responses

06

Contestations and Responses

Communities, grassroots organizations, and public officials across the United States have addressed contestations about monuments in a wide range of ways. Below we will examine eight methods that have frequently been used within the monuments debate:

- **Deaccession**

This method is at baseline an act of removal. Monuments that are deemed offensive, unwanted, or ill-placed are evicted from the commemorative landscape. Removal can be temporary or permanent. Removed monuments are typically either sold, stored, or repatriated to communities or institutions that desire the piece.

While this process might initially displace controversy, it must be noted that removal to other public, less frequented sites or museums with the intention of rededication can serve as a breeding ground for additional disputes.

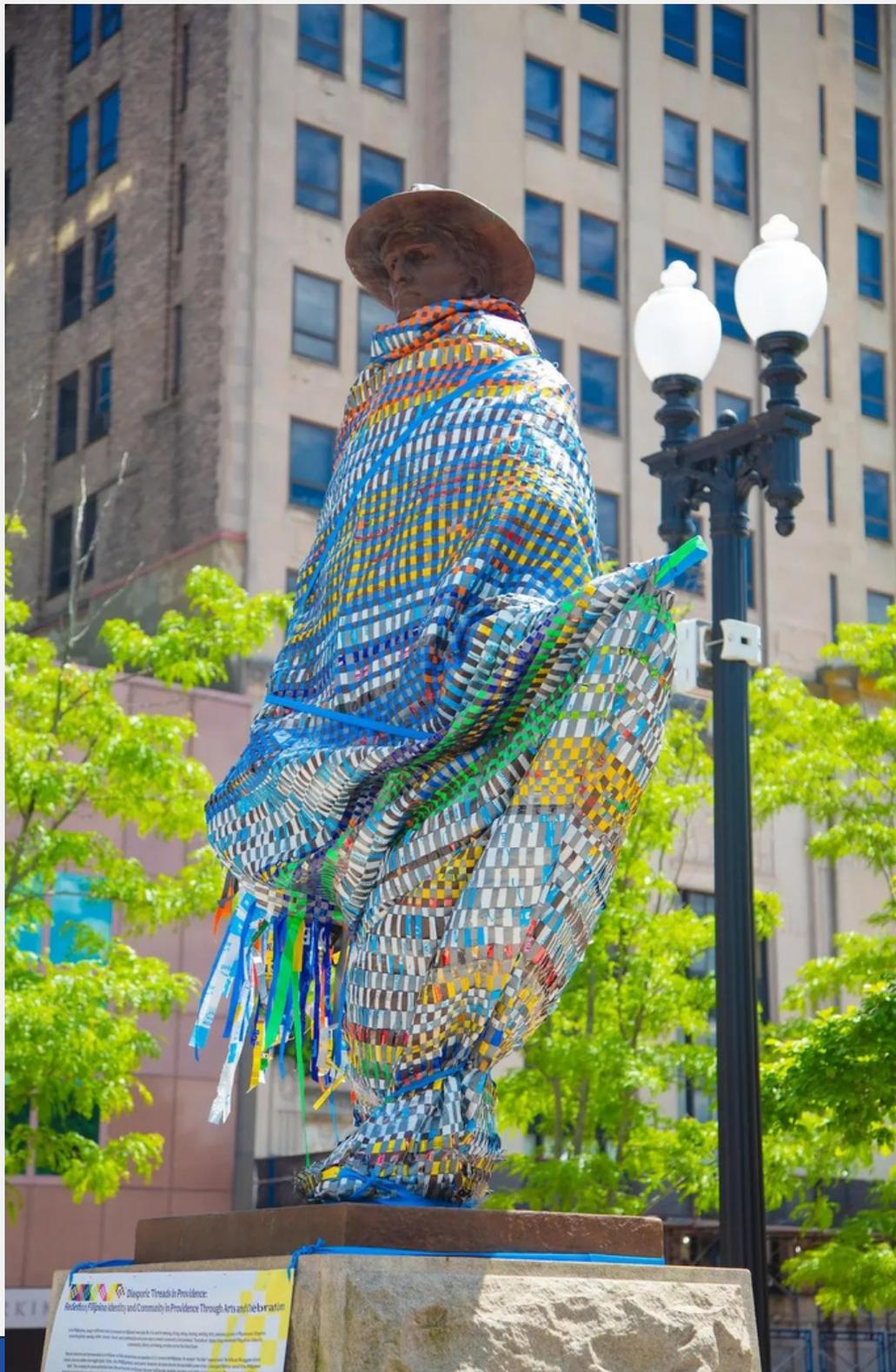
Example: Consider the case of Confederate Monuments dotted throughout the United States and their many removals. During protests against antiblack racism and police brutality, the statue of Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia was defaced with graffiti before being removed from public viewing and placed into storage. In fact, hundreds of confederate statues and symbols have been removed since 2015. However, according to the Whose Heritage? report by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) “2,089 Confederate memorials can still be found throughout the United States and its territories” ([Southern Poverty Law Center](#), February 1, 2022). Thus, while deaccession is frequently the focus of the monuments debate, the scale of removals in the United States is incremental at best.

06: Contestations and Responses

- **Resignification**

This method involves re-contextualizing or reshaping monuments and changing their meaning through physical or artistic intervention. These interventions are often (but not always) done with official approval and are undertaken with the intention of reimagining or repurposing monuments. Plaques and revised inscriptions are often utilized to address historical gaps or issues that a current community might find troubling. However, the act of ascribing a new meaning to a monument does raise some concerns. Given that the scale of resignification is often much smaller than the monument in question, communities might still wish to take a bolder stance on transforming monuments. Resignification thus sometimes also includes makeovers that are visually striking.

Example: Consider the artwork of Ben Alan which utilizes weaving to provide commentary on The Hiker statue in Providence, Rhode Island. This monument commemorates American soldiers who fought in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines during the Spanish-American War and Philippine-American War. Through binding the statue with the artist's weaving of a traditional Filipino mat called a "banig," the original meaning of commemoration was transmuted into a celebration of Filipino Independence, diasporic connections, and "cultural resistance." This new meaning was further activated through the performance of Filipino folk dances and communal activities, including a weaving workshop, which took place around the statue.



"Diasporic Threads: Redefining Filipino Identity and Community Through Arts and Celebration"

By **Bhen Alan**

<https://bhenalanart.com/public-art>

06: Contestations and Responses

- **Fabulation**

This method is fundamentally playful. Here monument-making is not a top-down act of reification which instructs us on who or what we should remember, but instead is a critical process wherein communities and artists work both jointly and independently to design objects for their commemorative landscapes. This reimagining can include design contests, posters, catalogues, and exhibitions. It is important to note that fabulation places a premium value on creativity and collaboration. Since there is no script for individuals to follow, the design of monuments are only limited by the imagination of participants.

Example: Consider the public posters developed around the “Statues Also Die” exhibit in Connecticut, which sought to radically reinterpret acts of memorializing. Through an open call that asked the public to fabricate new monuments, participants were able to submit designs and representations for the Connecticut landscape. One such proposal was called, “The Potential of Nothing,” and consisted of “a monument pedestal in which nobody stands, a place to look, to imagine instead the potentiality of what could be there, the unnamable, and hidden to take place in the forefront of the mind” ([Real Art Ways](#), January 6, 2021). While commemoration is typically focused on the past, collaborative or fabulated monuments can provide opportunities for reflecting about and making statements about the future as well. Fabulation can thus reconceive of monumentalization in brand new ways.

06: Contestations and Responses

- **Defacement**

This method works to confront monuments by shaping public understanding in an immediate and direct manner. This intervention is often done without official approval and as such is considered a criminal act both locally and federally. But much like resignification, defacement (or political vandalism) is done with the intention of repurposing the monument. This act typically involves damaging or altering the monument significantly. Criminalization is a key area of concern for individuals and communities who utilize this method. On this point, public officials should be mindful of the reasons that people might choose to deface monuments. Defacement can act to communicate political concerns when institutions are seen as being intractable.

Example: Consider the controversy of Christopher Columbus Waterfront Park in Boston, Massachusetts. Within the park, a statue of Columbus was tagged in 2004 with the word “murderer” in 2004, beheaded in 2006, marked with the phrase “Black Lives Matter” in 2015, and decapitated once again in 2020. These separate acts of defacement, although criminal offenses, document how celebratory estimations of Columbus are being revised. As Mahtowin Munro (Lakota) of the United American Indians of New England stated: “I don’t think that their feelings about loving Columbus should be privileged over the genuine damage that we feel as Indigenous people by going generation after generation where Columbus is held up as some kind of hero” ([Cultural Survival](#), August 20, 2020). Acts of defacement, while often done under the cover of night, still might indicate shifting perspectives or the emergence of previously excluded views from public appreciation.

06: Contestations and Responses

- **Destruction**

This method amplifies the benefits and damaging aspects of both deaccession and defacement. Contested monuments under this method are considered to be so offensive that they warrant not only removal, but ruination. The demolition of a monument can be done through official channels or be a spontaneous act coordinated by protestors or activists. This act is often seen to be iconoclastic or an act of “cancellation” by opponents of this method. However, proponents see this act not as an instance of historical erasure, but rather as a way to actively restructure the commemorative landscape so that it is attendant to “present-past” harms. It must be remembered that while this method is a permanent solution for dealing with the monument in question, the political disagreements and historical controversies represented can remain. In some cases, they can even be exacerbated by the act of destruction.

Example: Consider the toppling of a statue to King George III in New York City which occurred after the approval of the Declaration of Independence. The destructive argument can best be illustrated by this act of “symbolic regicide.” Here the commemorative landscape was being radically remade while the country was undergoing its own transformation. As soldiers and fervent participants dismantled this statue, they did so with the intention of never again monumentalizing their former sovereign. In fact, as U.S. Postmaster Ebenezer Hazard noted the felled statue was to be repurposed for war: “[The king’s statue] has been pulled down to make musket ball of, so that his troops will probably have melted Majesty fired at them” ([National Geographic](#), July 1, 2020).

06: Contestations and Responses

- **Abstention**

This method deals with controversy by abstaining from concretizing or representing historical figures and events within the commemorative landscape. It is thus important to be cognizant of histories some communities would like to highlight and monumentalize but cannot for a multitude of reasons. Missing monuments can therefore be as much a sign of distress and fracture as debates around existing memorials.



Example: Consider the case of the Middle Passage and Transatlantic Slavery. While monuments to the “peculiar institution” of slavery are often underrepresented within our commemorative landscape, the slave-trade, or what poet Lucille Clifton called “a bridge of ivory,” is altogether absent. It is for this reason that researchers, such as Ole Varmer, have argued for memorializing the Atlantic seabed: “The remains of the slave trade are tangible and intangible heritage that should be memorialized as the final resting place of the victims of the slave trade” ([Duke Today](#), November 10, 2020). The absence of monuments testifies to the unevenness of power and provides a good reminder that not all communities and heritages are represented in public space.

Emancipation and Freedom Monument
Image source: Gregory S. Schneider, *The Washington Post*

06: Contestations and Responses

- **Preservation**

This method acts to uphold the status quo regarding the commemorative landscape. Preservers take care of existing monuments and even sometimes repair defaced ones. Those performing acts of conservation are not typically focused on figuring out who is right or wrong about a given debate. In fact, by and large they assume these debates have been settled. It must be noted that any monument that is to remain in place must be maintained and cared for in some manner: “Maintaining a monument makes an investment in the current memorial landscape. It involves the effort and labor of others whose success is premised on making invisible change” ([Monument Lab](#), November 26, 2019). However, preservation efforts are not neutral acts. They go beyond simple maintenance insofar as they direct funds and labor towards some monuments. In doing so these efforts determine which historical representations or monuments deserve to remain in public and become sacrosanct.

Example: Consider the case of Mount Rushmore, a monument constructed upon The Six Grandfathers (Thuŋkášila Šákpe). The preservationist argument can best be illustrated in remarks Donald Trump made during the Mount Rushmore Fireworks Celebration: “This monument will never be desecrated —these heroes will never be defaced, their legacy will never, ever be destroyed, their achievements will never be forgotten, and Mount Rushmore will stand forever as an eternal tribute to our forefathers and to our freedom” ([The White House](#), July 4, 2020). The preservationist argument instead of considering the historical theft of the Hé Sápa (Black Hills) and the wishes of the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ for the return of their land, deem these political points to be immaterial. For once included in the commemorative landscape, the aim is only to safeguard the monument.

06: Contestations and Responses

- **Construction**

This method corrects for the omission of historical figures and events by building new monuments. Here the commemorative landscape is conceived as an incomplete canvas, which can be altered and transformed through accretion. However, inclusion is a costly affair. The process typically requires significant investment to not only commission a work, but also requires continuous and expensive maintenance (as we just noted above). In addition, this method can be controversial because just as an individual or group might decry the destruction of a monument, some might disagree with the presence of a figure who was previously unknown or deemed unworthy.

Example: Consider the dearth of monuments to women in the United States. According to the National Monument Audit, only six percent of statues in the country represent women. This gendered discrepancy has resulted in renewed calls for public representation. Take, for instance, the Women's Rights Pioneers Monument, dedicated and built to Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 2020. Meredith Bergmann, the artist who designed the statue, argued that the depiction of suffragettes would break the "bronze ceiling" around monumental inequality and provide "a positive image of diverse women working together to change the world" ([Hyperallergic](#), August 13, 2019). The construction of this monument was not however without some controversy. Since the original design only included Anthony and Stanton many felt that the project was whitewashing and erasing the contributions of Black women. It is thus important to remember that construction is not a foolproof method.



Women's Rights Pioneers Monument (2020)
By sculptor Meredith Bergmann
Smithsonian Magazine
TIMOTHY A. CLARY / AFP via Getty Images

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In fact, all of these commemorative methods can be used proactively or reactively. As such, people must remember that these techniques and processes are manifold. There is not just one way of responding to the monuments debate, just as there is not just one dimension to monuments. That said, one of the least productive responses to dealing with controversy over monuments is intentional disregard or minimization. Ignoring the issue does not and cannot address the serious importance of monuments and the role they play in public life. Monuments matter.

For this reason, communities must continuously work to address and carefully examine their histories before coming to a decision. This could include looking for inspiration from organizations—such as the Monument Lab, The Monuments Project, and Paper Monuments—that have pioneered creative and critical approaches to memory-making, including the co-production of monuments. The Contested Histories: Memory and Repair project also aims to provide additional tools for carrying out these discussions in productive ways.

07: Conclusion

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The upcoming 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence provides an occasion for political leaders and communities to come together and define best practices around commemoration. However, in order for the monuments debate to be productive we must first acknowledge historical and contemporary disagreements and second reaffirm the importance of monumentalization.

Through utilizing a multidimensional model, communities can better understand how monuments can shift in relevance and meaning, while also being empowered to make decisions about what belongs within their own commemorative landscapes. Our conflicts can retrench our worst tendencies and our disputes can easily lead to disunion. But it is our hope that this current reckoning around monuments can also lead to a reexamination of national and local identity. For commemorative landscapes are nothing if not a reflection of US.



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