

CULTURE DESK

THE NEW MONUMENTS THAT AMERICA NEEDS

Every statue defends an idea about history, but what if those ideas are wrong?



By Hua Hsu

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Many images surrounding recent monument protests, including one of young people playing basketball next to a graffiti-covered statue of Robert E. Lee, in Richmond, convey a sense that anything is possible. Photograph by Eze Amos / Getty

Before protesters in America and Europe began painting over statues, or toppling them, or hanging them from trees, or rolling them into the nearest river, the historian Paul Farber noticed that people were putting masks on them. In the early

days of the pandemic, from Wuhan to New York, Valencia, and Limerick, anonymous people placed COVID-19 coverings over the faces of local monuments. There was something tender, even a little funny, about these gestures, the kind of thing done for Instagram: a photo of a masked Patience and Fortitude, the two lions that sit outside the main branch of the New York Public Library, went viral. Whether monuments take the form of a statue, building, or pillar, they present themselves as universal and timeless, expressing something essential about all of us—at least in a way that flatters the powers that be. Putting a mask on these inanimate objects shifted them to a new context: the present, rather than the historical past. The act suggested a kind of solidarity, a symbol that we are all in this pandemic together. Yet Farber, who is the artistic director and senior curator of Monument Lab, a public art initiative that creates new monuments, saw the masked statues as an accusation, a reminder of how official systems had failed us.



In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, from Wuhan to New York, anonymous people placed mask-like coverings over the faces of local monuments. Photograph by Byron Smith / Getty

Farber and the artist and scholar Ken Lum started Monument Lab in 2012, shortly after they each began teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. Farber is a native of Philadelphia, where Lum had just arrived from Vancouver, Canada, a city with comparatively few historical markers. They shared a fascination with Philadelphia's rich monumental landscape, from the Liberty Bell and Robert Indiana's "Love" sculpture to the famed "Rocky" steps. But they were curious about what stories these monuments weren't telling. Lum lived near Billie Holiday's childhood home, where only a small marker indicated its history. "I would see these white guys on pedestals who I'd never heard of," he said. "I was really interested in this unevenness."

In 2015, Farber and Lum set up a makeshift office in a shipping container in the courtyard of City Hall and asked visitors: “What is an appropriate monument for the current city of Philadelphia?” They shared their answers with a team of artists, which included locals, such as the poet Ursula Rucker and the video artist and animator Kara Crombie, and others who shared Monument Lab’s fascination with the politics of public space, such as Mel Chin, a conceptual artist interested in the ecological imagination, and Tyree Guyton, who is famed for the decades-long Heidelberg Project, in which he turned a block in his native Detroit into a kind of living sculpture. Working with these artists, the Monument Lab installed prototype monuments throughout the city. One of the most striking pieces, a twelve-foot-high Black Power Afro pick, by the artist Hank Willis Thomas, was recently acquired by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

In March, Farber and Lum had just welcomed a new class of international fellows when COVID-19 forced everyone indoors. Suddenly, conversations about public space seemed a tease. But in the wake of George Floyd’s death, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in protest, and they congregated in familiar spaces—near statues and monuments, in the shadows of yesterday’s supposed heroes. Soon thereafter, statues across the country started coming down—removed by crowds or by city officials trying to get ahead of a controversy. President Trump signed a series of executive orders to protect monuments from defacement, which provided the rationale for a violent crackdown on protesters in Portland, in July.

When I spoke to Farber earlier this summer, he was excited, likening the statue-toppling to the celebrations that took place along the Berlin Wall in the dying days of Communism. Indeed, the scenes we were seeing throughout America felt like reënactments of news footage celebrating upheaval somewhere far away—the long-subjugated people, inspired by the democratic West, toppling a despot’s statue. We were still in the “dancing on the wall” phase, he joked. “We still don’t know if East Germany will be dismantled.”

What *isn’t* a monument? The term is used to describe an incredibly wide range of structures, from ancient burial mounds, stones arranged with some kind of intention, and the pyramids, to concrete archways, magnificent palaces, columns, and statues of obscure local merchants. Monuments connect us to the furthest reaches of history, though why we value these things later on may have little relation to why someone was inspired to alter the landscape in the first place. The Great Wall remains a symbol of Chinese manpower, as well as a willingness to reject foreign influence; in contrast, the ornate façades of antiquity no longer communicate civilization’s greatness so much as warnings about imperial hubris. In the case of Stonehenge—designated a “scheduled ancient monument” by the U.K. government—the mystery surrounding its origins and use contribute to its aura.

When we speak of monuments in America, we’re often talking about structures such as statues, obelisks, and memorials that celebrate a relatively narrow band of our history: the Civil War, the First and Second World Wars, the civil-rights era. Our monumental landscape preserves a sense that we are an exceptional, upstart nation. (American civilization may not boast standing stones that date back to the prehistoric era, but we do have Carhenge.) The relative youth of our monuments also speaks to the enthusiasm with which previous generations simply erased the histories of those who came before. Mount Rushmore, for example, was carved onto a mountain that was of great significance to the Lakota Sioux, who had previously been promised the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming.

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, there were not many monuments to the Confederacy, beyond memorials placed in cemeteries for soldiers who had died. Today, there are over seven hundred Confederate monuments, situated in far more than the eleven states that seceded from the Union in 1860. Many of these monuments went up in city squares or in front of official

buildings between 1890 and 1950, coinciding with the Jim Crow era. As the historian Mark Elliott observes, groups like the Daughters of the Confederacy were interested in rehabilitating and glorifying the Southern cause. Monuments of this kind exist at the intersection of art and infrastructure, public memory and elite whim. They possess what Farber calls an “aura of permanence.” But they embody the struggle to interpret a shared past, and they contain a desire, he said, to “stop time, to hold on to power.”

For the past few years, Monument Lab has worked with fellows around the world to bring conversations about power and public space to new communities. Initially, Farber and Lum found it was often hard to convince local officials to act on problematic old statues and placards in their cities. A turning point in the broader public imagination came with the Unite the Right rally in August of 2017, when white-nationalist groups went to Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of Confederate statues and memorials. The protests turned violent, resulting in the death of a counter-protester, Heather Heyer. Monument Lab is now invited to assist forward-thinking local governments and historical commissions.

Earlier this summer, I spoke with the indigenous artist and organizer Joel Garcia, a former Monument Lab fellow. Garcia grew up in Los Angeles, deeply immersed in the local punk scene. He found meaning in the punk ethos of D.I.Y. resourcefulness, particularly when it came to repurposing spaces, like restaurants or community centers, to perform, create, and commune. As a teen-ager, he got a job at Epitaph Records, a respected punk label. Although the office was a straight shot across the city from his home on the Eastside, he had to transfer buses at Grand Park, where a statue of Christopher Columbus stood on the courthouse steps. Looking at all the homeless people and those awaiting their court hearings, Garcia said, was a contrast of “domination and poverty.”

Over time, Garcia became fixated on how the city landscape was decorated with these tributes to a colonial past. “Who gets to decide what is the authentic history of Los Angeles?” Garcia drew on his experiences working as an organizer and realized that “you can spend a lot of energy doing a huge push and not move an inch. Or you can become this little pebble in somebody’s shoe that they’re always having to deal with. That’s what I became.” He familiarized himself with the county officials and their protocols, showed up to all the meetings, and became a kind of community liaison. When the city finally agreed, in 2018, to remove the Columbus statue, Garcia took part in a purification ceremony.

As part of the removal process, the city had hired an assessor to estimate the statue’s artistic or historic value. “It’s not worth shit,” Garcia told me, laughing. As far as Garcia knows, the Columbus statue is gathering dust in a warehouse. The question of what to do with these monuments after they’ve been taken down has proved vexing for many cities. Should they remain on public display in museums or historical institutions, where they might be surrounded by more detailed context materials? Or will they end up as a kind of petulant, elite in-joke? That’s the impression many came away with when a statue of Robert E. Lee that had been removed in Dallas in 2017 was purchased two years later and placed in a luxury golf course along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The question of what a community wants is at the heart of the Monument Project, but where does one find that data? In 2017, Farber and Lum worked with Sue Mobley, an organizer and researcher, and Bryan Lee, Jr., an architect and design activist, on Paper Monuments, a participatory design project in New Orleans. The people of New Orleans, Mobley explained, have a tendency to see themselves and their city as exceptional, overlooking the way that New Orleans reflects the same inequalities felt acutely throughout the American South. Mobley and her team posed similar questions to the ones that Farber and Lum had asked Philadelphians, about what new monuments people wanted to see. Predictably, many of the proposals were about culture—jazz, the Mardi Gras Indians, and other vestiges of New Orleans’s identity that are increasingly imperilled by gentrification. But many answers engaged with the deeper structures of civic life, Mobley said: “People were suggesting, ‘Tear down the statues. . . . but

what I need is a police budget that's half what it is.' 'What we need is health care, what we need are protections to voting rights.' 'What I actually need is a living wage for all. That's my monument. That's what I would propose.' ”

Mobley was also in the midst of a separate research project that mapped the locations of protests in New Orleans. In the mid-nineteenth century, protests would take place at the headquarters of local political parties, the docks, or trade institutions. In the twentieth century, they took place in city squares and plazas. More recently, they've moved to the elevated highways. The two projects orbited the same set of questions about the politics of shared space. “What does it mean to try and create a demos that has room for all if inclusion is defined by ‘I get a statue, so you get a statue’ that breaks into further constituent parts?” asked Mobley. “Is there a way in which we can weave together and lift up what it means to occupy space together?”



On June 5th, photos circulated of “BLACK LIVES MATTER” painted in fifty-foot-tall letters along Sixteenth Street N.W., in Washington, D.C., near the White House. Photograph by Marvin Joseph / The Washington Post / Getty

From the perspective of the establishment, it would actually be easier to simply give everyone their own statue than to reckon with what it might mean to constitute a “demos that has room for all.” On June 5th, photos circulated of “BLACK LIVES MATTER” painted in fifty-foot-tall yellow capital letters along Sixteenth Street N.W., in Washington, D.C., near the White House. For many, this was a stunning and brazen rebuke of President Trump’s violent response to the Black Lives Matter protests. It turned out that Muriel Bowser, the mayor of Washington, D.C., had commissioned it. The gesture came to seem hollow when D.C. activists pointed out that Bowser hadn’t cut the police budget at all. Within days, activists had added their own fugitive addendum, which would be harder to coöpt by the establishment: “DEFUND THE POLICE.”

When those images went viral, friends began calling Michelle Angela Ortiz, a Philadelphia-based artist, to ask if she had seen them. In 2015, she had overseen a similar piece, when she led community members and undocumented families to the city's Immigration and Customs Enforcement building. They painted "WE ARE HUMAN BEINGS, RISKING OUR LIVES, FOR OUR FAMILIES & OUR FUTURE" on the ground just outside, as agents looked on. In contrast to what was happening in D.C., where Bowser eventually renamed part of the intersection Black Lives Matter Plaza, Ortiz's installation was always meant to be temporary. (She was not involved in the D.C. painting but has been working elsewhere with groups interested in making a similar statement.) For Ortiz, the fact that the words came and went outside the ICE building captured something essential about the protest. "The temporary nature of it responds to the temporary nature of this voice not always having a platform," she said. In 2017, Ortiz worked with Monument Lab on an installation where the voices of families detained at the Berks County detention center, outside Philadelphia, were broadcast for an hour each day from City Hall.

Ortiz spoke to me from her home in South Philadelphia, where she was born and raised. When her family moved there, they were among the first Latinos in a predominantly Italian-American neighborhood. As such, she grew up in a community that admired Frank Rizzo, the former police commissioner and Philadelphia mayor, who came to be seen as an abrasive rags-to-riches hero in certain parts of the city's large Italian-American community. As a child, she even won a drawing contest sponsored by the mayor and appeared at a public celebration by his side. Like many Americans, Ortiz felt that the monuments around us must be there for a good reason. "We've been taught to appreciate statues," Lum said. "We've been taught to read and receive them with reverence. We are also taught to read them as unitary and their message as unified, rooted in consensus, as opposed to rooted in a subjective decision that is only a reflection of a segment of the community that had power."

Ortiz eventually learned that Rizzo's rise to power was fuelled by brutalizing Black and brown communities. ("Vote white," he famously told voters.) I talked to her shortly after a controversial statue of Rizzo, which had gone up in 1998, was finally taken down. The statue—already known as one of the city's most frequently defaced monuments—became a symbol for how little had changed in the treatment of Black people in America. In 2016, local activists began campaigning for its removal. Though the city eventually agreed to take it down, Mayor Jim Kenney balked at the time, owing to cost. After protesters tried to pull it down themselves, in early June, Kenney relented and ordered its immediate removal.

A mural of Rizzo in South Philadelphia was also being painted over, much to the chagrin of some local Italian Americans. "It's a gesture for racial justice," Ortiz said. "There's so much work that needs to be done. As we move forward and think about monuments, think about what could be here or what doesn't need to be here. There's a power in just the absence of an image. As we're looking at empty stairs, a blank wall, everything is about action and urgency. It's also necessary to have this pause and let these spaces be empty, let them breathe. Not having a monument here is monument enough."

She said that her "paintbrushes were ready" if she were invited to paint a new mural where Rizzo's once was. But this process of reimagining monuments was for the community to make together. Philadelphia, she said, is a Black city. How do we think about a monument to Black communities, Black history, Black presence? To Black love, to Black triumph? "How do we make it *monumental*?"

That a monument seems to, in Farber's words, "stop time," helps explain why so many are eager to defend them from overzealous protesters. We've seen pictures of police flanking the Wall Street bull and armed civilians standing guard in front of Confederate monuments and a statue of a sixteenth-century Spanish colonist. A group of British men even organized to

protect a statue of the writer George Eliot, and, presumably, it wasn't because they were devotees of "Daniel Deronda." What they're defending, though, isn't just a specific figure or cause from the past. They're also defending an idea about history—who makes it, who gets to shape its narrative arc, and whether a nation's story is finished or a work in progress.

Some of the most viral images convey a sense that anything is possible: the video of protesters toppling a statue of Edward Colston, a British merchant who built his fortune through slave labor, and rolling him into the river; the photos of young people in Richmond playing basketball next to a graffiti- and sticker-covered statue of Robert E. Lee. The intense popularity of these images speaks to a desire to see society change quickly. The question of what to do with that space instead is a thorny one. Can a statue ever be benign? As our most visible symbols, monuments are also easy accomplices to cosmetic change. One imagines that raising a million dollars to move a statue of a Confederate soldier is ultimately cheaper than a serious contemplation of reparations or the allocation of educational resources to Black and brown communities.

Perhaps it's inevitable that in a democratic society, where you're free to believe that anything compulsory—such as wearing masks inside public buildings—represents a slide toward authoritarianism, the interpretation of symbols has become a central part of our cultural conflicts. Most of our officially designated national monuments that were recognized as such went up in the twentieth century, a reflection of the nation's swelling self-esteem in a period of global ascendancy. Even when the nation failed these symbols, they were still in place to provide a measure for our hypocrisy, as when Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, facing the Washington Monument. The civil-rights leader John Lewis later observed that King's speech had been so powerful that he had transformed "those steps on the Lincoln Memorial into a monumental area." It was only as this sense of national character faced serious challenge that monument construction took on a more complicated and deliberative character, as seen in the debates that surrounded Maya Lin's memorial to the veterans of the Vietnam War, or the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, both of which sought to create a space for contemplation rather than solemn triumph.

In 2017, the city of Richmond unveiled a statue honoring Maggie Walker, an African-American businesswoman and banker who anchored the town's "Black Wall Street" and the first woman ever to charter an American bank. Yet Walker's presence couldn't undo Richmond's past as the capital of the Confederacy. It did little to disturb the city's famed Monument Avenue, which is flanked with imposing monuments honoring famous Confederates. Free Egunfemi Bangura, an independent historical strategist and founder of Untold RVA and chair of Richmond's History and Cultural Commission, told me how these resources might have been better allocated. When we spoke in mid-June, she was excited about how quickly statues were coming down but wary of what might come next. She was particularly concerned that institutions, from museums to city officials, would coöpt the moment. She hoped that younger activists would formulate more ambitious asks, rooted in notions of "commemorative justice" rather than simply asking for new statues. Wouldn't it be more lasting, she asked, if they set their sights on making these Eurocentric forms of commemoration obsolete? Why stop with some statues?

Bangura pointed to the artist Kehinde Wiley's sculpture "Rumors of War," from 2019, which was his response to the Confederate statues that line Monument Avenue. It's modelled after Frederick Moynihan's depiction of a Confederate general on horseback, only Wiley's version features a young African-American man wearing Nike sneakers and dreadlocks. "You have this brother on a horse," Bangura said. She felt that it still centered whiteness: "It's stylistically exact. If I look at it through a critical African-centered lens, it exists as a reactionary expression." Bangura prefers surreptitious disruptions of everyday life. "In the twenty-first century, there are far more innovative strategies that we can use to amplify Black freedom narratives than by erecting more Gilded

Age statuary,” she said. She has designed a series of interactive signage—posters she installed along the existing streetscape throughout the city, ads for phone numbers you could call to hear untold stories about Black freedom that had happened hundreds of years ago where you now stood. “Basically my work is to show that there is another way to do this than adding more giant iron horses parading down the most racist street in America.”

In the wake of the pandemic as well as the growing movement for Black lives, this year has stretched our capacity to imagine what comes next, and the question of what to put in a newly vacant town plaza might seem a small one. But this image of empty pedestals everywhere, left to “breathe,” probably holds more appeal for the artist than the average citizen. The history of human civilization would suggest that we find meaning in leaving something behind, whether it’s a pile of stones or a face carved out of stone.

Some want to see problematic statues come down, but others would prefer for them to stay, so long as they are surrounded by placards and descriptive texts that contextualize and shame them. Your perspective on an “appropriate” monument for our time might rest on whether you see democracy as a process, always in flux, or a goal that has already been achieved. Ultimately, the issue isn’t whether there are “good” and “bad” monuments. At stake is whether we retain a critical relationship to the past or simply surrender to an illusion that it is fixed, reducible to a single man or woman, and just out of reach.

Instead of a monument, why not a portal? A couple of weeks after I spoke to Bangura, she hosted an Untold RVA event for the RVA26—an informal collective made up of the first group of young people arrested last month during protests at Richmond’s City Hall—at the African Ancestral Burial Ground in the city’s Shockoe Bottom, one of America’s most notorious slave-trading districts. Bangura had invited Farber down to Richmond for this event, which was called “Praise the Living, Raise the Dead” and centered on a large altar, sans statue. The site was where Gabriel Prosser, an enslaved blacksmith, was hanged after a failed rebellion in 1800. “When I arrived, I was deeply moved,” he told me. “I have visited numerous cities where empty pedestals were removed or cut off from public activity. In hindsight, it was a mistake to try to erase struggle. The deeper harms of racism were not addressed in those sites because there was no space or time to heal. In Richmond, it seemed the grassroots activists and artists changed the monument into something that reflects on the past and imagines it anew. A platform for truth, reckoning, and actual care.” About a hundred and thirty artists and activists had gathered around the portal. Everyone was asked to wear white and call out the names of their ancestors. “The purpose of today is literally to introduce all of you to one another,” Bangura said. “Because you’re not doing the work alone. You are not by yourself—you are the continuity of their wildest dream come true.”



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