

Introduction

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In recent years, scores of “troublesome” monuments and other kinds of public art have been vandalized and removed from parks, plazas, courthouse lawns, and other public places in the United States and around the world. In New Orleans in April 2017, four monuments dedicated to the Confederate States of America (CSA), the eleven Southern states that seceded from the nation in 1861 to preserve slavery and white supremacy and were subsequently defeated in the American Civil War (1861–1865), were removed after the city council declared them a “public nuisance.”¹ These included the notorious Battle of Liberty Place Monument, a thirty-five-foot stone obelisk erected in the middle of Canal Street in 1891 to commemorate the murderous actions of a paramilitary group called the White League, a group of Confederate veterans who attempted to oust the city’s Reconstruction-era government. Another monument removed in New Orleans was dedicated in 1911 to CSA president Jefferson Davis, on the fiftieth anniversary of his inauguration. Both monuments had been repeatedly vandalized with graffiti and paint.

In the United States, monuments to the Confederacy are among the most troubling examples of public art in part because there are so many of them. In 2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center documented more than 1,500 monuments, markers, statues, parks, and

other kinds of commemorative spaces and symbols dedicated to the Confederacy. These are scattered all over the United States, including states such as Montana and Idaho that never participated in the Civil War. In Helena, Montana’s state capitol, a monumental fountain was commissioned in 1915 by the Daughters of the Confederacy as “A Loving Tribute to Our Confederate Soldiers.” Following citizen protests that it was a “symbol of racism and slavery” and a “blight” on Montana, city officials ordered the monument removed in 2017.²

Montana’s monument was one of many erected long after the Civil War ended and, more specifically, during the era of Jim Crow, from the 1890s through the 1920s, and then again in the 1950s and 1960s, during the postwar era of Civil Rights. In each era, Confederate monuments were not erected as “somber postbellum reminders of a brutal war,” which is how they are often described and defended, but as symbols of intimidation—as deliberate, physical assertions of white power, bigotry, and racial terrorism.³ Their removal today speaks to how Americans, among others, are rethinking what monuments mean, and questioning presumptions of their fixity or their permanence in public places.

Monuments, memorials, and other forms of public art are highly visible stakeholders in historical memory. As the physical markers of social, political, and

economic interests, they possess enormous degrees of power, influence, and emotional persuasion.⁴ Their “symbolic capital,” following Pierre Bourdieu, helps shape and direct our perceptions of social order, political transition, and national identity.⁵ When they are perceived as troublesome—as shameful, hateful, and incompatible with personal and national values—they may be contested. When the histories and ideologies they embody are deemed illegitimate and invalid, they may be vandalized, defaced, and destroyed.⁶

This is an age-old practice. In ancient Rome, for example, imperial monuments were routinely vandalized in rituals of dishonor and oblivion that classical scholars term *damnatio memoriae* and consider “the first widespread example of the negation of artistic monuments for political and ideological reasons.”⁷ Monuments for the Romans “were neither immutable nor monolithic, and should an emperor be overthrown, his images were systematically mutilated or physically altered in to the likenesses of other emperors.”⁸ Destruction and creation, in other words, went hand in hand. As the fourth-century historian Jerome recounted, “When a tyrant is destroyed, his portraits and statues are also deposed. The face is exchanged or the head removed, and the likeness of he who has conquered is superimposed. Only the body remains and another head is exchanged for those that have been decapitated.”⁹ Acts of sanction and destruction were instrumental to creative processes of transformation and reconstruction—of re-remembering, or revising, the social, political, and historical record.¹⁰ Recognizing these historical practices is helpful as we rethink the function and meaning of monuments today.

Many Americans believe that vandalizing, defacing, and removing monuments is something that only “others” do, like French revolutionaries during the Reign of Terror in the 1790s, or Islamic State militants destroying the Temple of Bel in Palmyra, Syria, in 2015. But reckoning with and removing problematic public art has also been a consistent practice in American history. In New York on July 9, 1776, freedom-seeking colonists toppled an equestrian statue of King George III shortly after a public reading of the Declaration of Independence.¹¹ Inspired to “dissolve the political bands” of tyranny, and seek “unalienable rights” of life, liberty, and happiness, they knocked the statue off its pedestal, eventually melting it down to make musket balls for the Continental Army, who relished the idea of firing “melted Majesty” at British troops. The tail of the king’s horse was saved and is on display at the New-York Historical Society; the king’s head was decapitated and placed on a stake just outside Fort Washington in Upper Manhattan.¹²

Today in America, monuments to Christopher Columbus provoke similar public responses. At the turn of the last century, Columbus was honored with statues, fountains, murals, plazas, and parks all over the United States and championed as the most important actor in the drama of American discovery. This was complete invention, of course: Columbus was a minor figure in the history of European exploration in the New World, a “mediocre Italian sailor” who never touched the North American continent and summarily enslaved and killed the indigenous populations he encountered, the Arawak and the Taino Indians, in the Caribbean. Yet on the four hundredth anniversary of his first voyage, he was lauded as a “great man” and

celebrated in the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, called the "Columbian Exposition."¹³

A decade earlier at the University of Notre Dame, a set of murals similarly celebrated Columbus as a triumphant explorer and exemplary missionary. Painted by Vatican portrait artist Luigi Gregori, Notre Dame's murals include scenes of Columbus converting Amerindians to Christianity and "presenting" them, after their enslavement, at the Spanish court of Queen Isabella. Gregori's paintings are painfully derogatory and blatantly inaccurate. In the panel titled *Taking Possession of the New World (Columbus Coming Ashore)*, the artist depicted the Arawak with blank, passive, and "primitive" expressions. In *Return of Columbus and Reception at Court*, he depicted them wearing deerskin shirts and quill breastplates that he copied from the university's collection of Great Plains Native American art. In the nineteenth century, stereotypes and biases about American Indians were accepted and approved; the US Post Office, in fact, chose Gregori's reception scene for a "commemorative stamp issued in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893."¹⁴ Its title: "Columbus Presenting Natives."

Today, however, Columbus is largely seen as a genocidal imperialist, and the monuments commemorating him are routinely vandalized and targeted for removal. In 2002, the Columbus Memorial Fountain in Washington, DC was splashed with red paint and inscribed with the message "510 years oppression, 510 years resistance." In 2017, Columbus monuments in New Haven, Providence, Buffalo, Binghamton, Houston, Manhattan, and Yonkers were targeted with red paint imitating blood or were smashed and beheaded. At Notre Dame,

the activist group Rising Tide Michiana unfurled a banner in the campus library reading, "This is Potawatomi land! F*ck the KKKolumbus murals!" Their protest was accompanied by a petition signed by six hundred people urging university administrators to remove the Columbus murals.¹⁵

The essays in this volume consider "monumental troubles" from multiple historical, geographic, and theoretical perspectives. First presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Art History Society in 2018, each is framed by this prompt:

Papers are sought that contribute to contemporary conversations about monuments, broadly defined as commemorative objects, images, and spaces. The recent removal, and call for removal, of monuments and memorials throughout the United States and around the globe—in South Africa, England, Taiwan, India, Hungary, and Canada, among other countries—suggests a generative rethinking about why they are made, how their meaning changes over time, and issues regarding their removal, relocation, and destruction.

Their range includes case studies discussing monuments built in recent centuries, including a marble shaft erected at Williams College in 1867 and dedicated to Christian missionaries; the "New Monumentality" of post-World War II artists and architects in Europe; and the New York City AIDS Memorial, dedicated in the West Village in 2016. Other articles focus on how and why certain monuments are subject to public reprobation—including Confederate memorials and a mural by Thomas Hart Benton. And several essays consider

issues and presumptions of permanence and ephemerality, from an analysis of nineteenth-century funerary monuments in the Paris cemetery Père-Lachaise to the contemporary land art projects of artists such as Nancy Holt and Patricia Johanson. Each essay points to new ways of thinking about monuments in the United States and around the world.

¹ Tegan Wendland, "With Lee Statue's Removal, Another Battle of New Orleans Comes to a Close," *NPR*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/20/529232823/with-lee-statues-removal-another-battle-of-new-orleans-comes-to-a-close>.

² Angela Brandt, "City of Helena to Remove Confederate Fountain," *Helena Independent Record*, August 16, 2017, http://helenair.com/news/local/city-of-helena-to-remove-confederate-fountain/article_606b058a-4e09-5802-a7b8-dc07f2b0a27e.html.

³ Kevin Drum, "The Real Story Behind All Those Confederate Statues," *Mother Jones*, August 15, 2017, <http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2017/08/the-real-story-of-all-those-confederate-statues/>. On the findings of the Southern Poverty Law Center, see "Whose Heritage?: A Report on Public Symbols of the Confederacy," Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/20160421/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy>.

⁴ Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in Contemporary America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 114–20.

⁶ Erika Doss, "The Process Frame: Vandalism, Removal, Re-Siting, Destruction," in *A Companion to Public Art*, ed. Cher Krause Knight and Harriet F. Senie (New York: Wiley, 2016), 403–21.

⁷ Eric R. Varner, *Mutilation and Transformation: Damnatio Memoriae and Roman Imperial Portraiture* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 1.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See, for example, Adrastus Omissi, "Damnatio Memoriae or Creatio Memoriae? Memory Sanctions as Creative Processes in the 4th Century AD," *Cambridge Classical Journal* 62 (December 2016): 170–99, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1750270516000038>.

¹¹ Arthur S. Marks, "The Statue of King George III in New York and the Iconography of Regicide," *American Art Journal* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 61–82.

¹² Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 309–10.

¹³ Edward Burmila, "The Invention of Christopher Columbus, American Hero," *The Nation*, October 9, 2017.

¹⁴ As noted in the brochure "Columbus Murals," developed by the University of Notre Dame in the 1990s; see https://tour.nd.edu/assets/220427/columbus_mural.pdf.

¹⁵ Rising Tide Michiana, "Banner Drop Against Columbus Murals at University of Notre Dame," December 8, 2017, <https://itsgoingdown.org/banner-drop-columbus-murals-university-notre-dame/>; Margaret Fosmoe, "Calls at Notre Dame for Removal of Christopher Columbus Murals," *South Bend Tribune*, November 30, 2017, https://www.southbendtribune.com/news/education/calls-at-notre-dame-for-removal-of-christopher-columbus-murals/article_84d5caa8-9f0d-5602-a729-2bedafb61e4b.html.