

CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS LESSON 7: HANDOUT 3**THE POWER OF EMPTY PEDESTALS: RACE, SPACE, AND
MEMORY¹**

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The statue of Robert E. Lee may be the latest in a series of Confederate Monument removals taking place after the tragic murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. This will certainly prove a contentious battle as numerous lawsuits have been filed to halt the removal. For many of Richmond's African American residents, the effort holds particular significance. The Lee monument was the first of the Confederate monuments erected along what is now Monument Avenue. In many ways, the statue symbolizes the deeply entrenched and lasting legacy of the Confederacy and white supremacy in the city. Though I am not from Richmond, it has been my adoptive city, which I happily call home, for the past four years. As an African American man and a historian, I understand the renewed calls for its removal. As a former resident of Monument Avenue, I understand how this monument and others like it provide insight into the separate realities that face Blacks and whites.

Relics to the Confederacy act as lightning rods for racial tensions which fester under the surface, easy enough for white residents to ignore between racial flashpoints. This was a central motive for erecting the monuments all those years ago. In the Jim Crow South, structures like the Lee monument became commonplace — exercises in historical erasure and power reclamation. As the generation of Confederate soldiers died off in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, their loved ones worked to honor their legacy. While seemingly harmless at first glance, this legacy maintenance was built upon the deliberate rewriting of history. These monuments along with false narratives in historical textbooks claimed that Confederate soldiers fought for noble pursuits like states' rights and preserving Southern culture instead of fighting to secure the futures of slavery and white supremacy. To be fair, these were half-truths. The South did fight to preserve the Southern way of life and maintain the autonomy of state power, to the extent that both related to slavery and white supremacy. These motivations were clear then, and Confederate leaders did not mince words about their motives at the time.

There is a human element within the insidious nature of historical re-writing around the Civil War. White Southerners were faced with the challenge of acknowledging that their relatives readily fought and died to maintain the systematic exploitation and marginalization

¹ Michael Dickinson, "The Power of Empty Pedestals: Race, Space, and Memory," *The Bitter Southerner*. Retrieved from <https://bittersoutherner.com/2020/the-power-of-empty-pedestals>.

of Black people. Instead, most chose to rebrand. The truth has the power to sting us all, but within that sting lies the hope of moving forward.

While reframing the Confederate narrative, the monuments simultaneously served an intentional, even more insidious purpose. As federal troops left the South in the 1870s, many white Southerners worked to reclaim dominance within the states and upend the progress made by Black leaders after the war. Using fear, whites terrorized African Americans into submission throughout the Jim Crow Era effectively suppressing Black voting and civil rights through racial violence. It was this historical legacy that the modern-day civil rights movement sought to address, and is what current protests seek to remedy. Confederate monuments in Richmond and elsewhere in the country were center stage amidst Southern efforts to reassert white dominance during the Jim Crow Era. In addition to preserving an idealized narrative of Southern nobility in the war, they also acted as massive, imposing physical reminders for African Americans about who was in power.

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It is with this background in mind that many African Americans interact with — but more often avoid — Confederate monuments. When I moved to Richmond, Monument Avenue was a peculiarity in my mind. My parents were always notably apprehensive on the rare occasions when we encountered the Confederate battle flag, but I grew up farther north, where monuments to the Confederate cause were rare. My first year in Richmond, wanting to live close to my university, I rented a place directly outside Robert E. Lee's monument with what could only be described as an unease blended with intellectual curiosity and pride — pride that, because of the struggles of my ancestors, I was able to inhabit a space and a position beyond their wildest dreams and above the ceilings of achievement which men like Lee effectively worked to preserve. But despite this pride, the unease constantly remained.

I regularly saw how the city's white residents interacted with these public spaces in harmony: taking photographs, having picnics, taking leisurely walks, and the like. I watched these interactions with the complex understanding that these statues were created to remind residents like me of our place in society. I know many white Southerners see these pieces of architecture as harmless reminders of history, but as a Black man, regardless of how much I tried, such a perspective proved difficult for me. This was particularly true for Monument Avenue, an affluent area where the barriers of economic inequity are clear as the vast majority of Black residents cannot afford to live there. So, I was not surprised by the occasional eyebrow raised at me nor was I shocked when I interacted with a neighbor who refused to reciprocate my "hello" in passing. See, as someone of African descent and as a historian, I understood that in the shadow of these monuments of slaveholders and proslavery advocates, I was not meant to feel comfortable, for they were meant to serve as reminders that I did not belong — that I was meant to follow not lead — that my presence was tolerated but not particularly welcome — that I did not belong.

By their very definition, monuments are meant to celebrate the actions and values of a society. It's telling that Southern states have far more structures honoring figures who

encouraged inequality than those who fought against it. To see these monuments as harmless is to ignore their historical genesis and the continued voices of African Americans who have long vocalized the discomfort and anguish they inflict. In response to claims that they remain innocuous, we have only to look to the recent defacing of the Arthur Ashe statue at the end of Monument Avenue: the only statue along the thoroughfare not erected to figures who were willing to die rather than grant equality to African Americans. The statue of Richmond's native son was the target of vandalism because, while often simple to dismiss or ignore, the insidious racial tensions that lie within and beyond spaces like Monument Avenue rear their head at moments of potential racial progress.

After the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others, we are reminded that Black Americans confront a very different America than their white counterparts on a regular basis as systemic racism and inequity pervade our lives. Confederate monuments, like that of Robert E. Lee, have rightly become part of this conversation. It's important, however, to highlight that this is not merely a difference in experience or perceived meaning. History clearly communicates that these sculptures were rooted in racial oppression, whether we want to acknowledge that history as a society is up to us. While removing these sculptures are, perhaps, tangible moves toward racial progress, more difficult will be efforts to remove the racial oppression they helped perpetuate. If such a comparatively minor step requires such a Herculean undertaking, the road toward a systemic change of equity promises to be an incredible climb, similarly arduous but far from impossible.