Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Material Religion
The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief

ISSN: 1743-2200 (Print) 1751-8342 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfmr20

Soldier Statues and Empty Pedestals: Public Memory in the Wake of the Confederacy

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To cite this article: David Morgan (2018): Soldier Statues and Empty Pedestals: Public Memory in the Wake of the Confederacy, Material Religion, DOI: 10.1080/17432200.2017.1418231

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2017.1418231

Published online: 05 Mar 2018.

outlook

soldier statues and empty pedestals: public memory in the wake of the confederacy

Some images live an unpredictable life. They stand or hang quietly for a long while, inviting inattention to the point that they waver on the cusp of invisibility. Think of the virtually anonymous statuary in parks around the country. They were placed there to commemorate events or people that have gradually slipped into municipal unconsciousness. The figures collect bird droppings and only announce their vague presence with the occasional thud of a Frisbee.

But one day a forgotten image suddenly awakens as crowds gather about it. A sun-bleached soldier stands once again on a battle line, but an encounter with militant protesters rather than military forces. As the newly charged symbol of social conflict, the statue has become two things in one—contrary icons of two groups feverishly debating what the statue is doing there. This occurred on several occasions over the summer in the American South. On August 12, 2017, a rally of White supremacists on the campus of the University of Virginia at Charlottesville clashed with students and activists. The rally consisted of a range of groups advocating White supremacy and White American nationalism. Rally participants were angered by the city council's decision in February 2017 to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee from a park in Charlottesville. On July 8, the Ku Klux Klan had conducted a march in the city also protesting the planned removal. Violence erupted among marchers and protesters on August 12, and the confrontation turned deadly when one member of the rally drove his car into a group of protesters, killing one of them.

Two days later in Durham, North Carolina, a crowd gathered around a Confederate soldier monument in front of the city's old county courthouse, eventually pulling down the bronze figure from its granite base. The figure had been erected in 1924 in memory of Confederate soldiers. A few days after the destruction of the statue, Vincent Price, the president of Duke University in Durham, authorized the removal in the early morning hours of August 19 of a stone carving of Robert E. Lee. The carving had stood for over 85 years at the main entrance to the Duke University Chapel, where Lee's effigy had perched between two other Southern culture heroes—Thomas Jefferson, third president of the USA, and Sidney Lanier, poet and musician (Figure 1). Later that morning, Price circulated a memo to the university community in which he stated that he had made the decision to remove the figure in order "to protect Duke Chapel, to ensure the vital safety of students and community members who worship there, and above all to express the deep and abiding values of our university."[1] The carving had been vandalized only days before. He also indicated that the figure would be preserved for study.

Meanwhile, on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, another bronze Confederate soldier still awaits the outcome of a conflicted process of deciding if he will remain or be removed. "Silent Sam," as he is known (Figure 2), stands atop a granite pedestal on a quad where he was proudly installed in 1913 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and alumni of the university in memory of "the sons of the university" who served in "the war of 1861–1865," read plaques on the statue's base. But the speech delivered at the dedication of the statue by Julian Carr, a local tobacco manufacturer, alumnus of the university, and veteran of the war, made very clear that the purpose of the monument was as much about the present in 1913 as it was about those who fought in the Civil War 50 years before. In what may be a reference to the first generation of the Klan, organized by Confederate veterans in 1866, Carr claimed that Confederate soldiers saved the South for Anglo-Saxons immediately following the end of the war: "today, as a consequence, the purest strain of the Anglo Saxon is to be found in the 13 Southern States—Praise God."[2]

Conflict centering on public monuments associated with deep rifts in cultural history caused by civil war, slavery, and colonialism has erupted around the world in recent years. In South Africa a bronze figure of Cecil Rhodes was removed from the campus of the University of Cape Town in 2015 after organized protest called for it, contending that the statue was a symbol of white supremacy as well as a symbol of the slow efforts of the university to turn the corner on the legacy of racism. A different fate awaited another sculpture of Rhodes, poised on the façade of Oriel College at the University of Oxford. The sculpture was not removed, but left in place by college officials, who determined after consulting with members, alumni, and donors that the majority view endorsed keeping the figure where it was. A Wikipedia website, "Rhodes Must Fall," named after an international movement that began in Cape Town, lists several campaigns at universities in South Africa and elsewhere directed against statuary that commemorates wars and personalities of colonial history and armed conflict, from the Anglo-Boer War to the American Civil War.

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FIG 1
Empty niche at the entrance to Duke University Chapel, Durham, North Carolina. Stone carvings by John Donnelly, 1932. Photograph by David Morgan.

For scholars, educators, and museum workers engaged in the study and exhibition of religious material culture, these many events raise a host of issues. Among them are four whose interconnection is striking. I would like to touch briefly on each of them.

First, objects such as statues are put in place to secure memory—not just any memory, but one that serves the interests of a particular group and its ideology, or view of itself and the events that it assembles in the stories that the group celebrates. Leaders, heroes, battles, and wars are surely among the most common memorials of the past. That is because each of them marks the boundary of a cultural or social regime. Leaders and heroes were men or women of action whose deeds and force of personality are regarded as agents that were critical in bringing about a certain state of affairs. Battles and wars likewise anchor a particular way of thinking and feeling in time and place by marking before and after, end and beginning. All four are powerful narrative devices that create and transmit arche-

FIG 2

"Silent Sam," Confederate soldier monument, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Sculpture by John Wilson, erected 1913. Photograph by David Morgan.

typal stories. Together, stories, objects, persons, and events compose the form and substance of what is repeated again and again in schools, homes, and on public occasions of ritual remembrance in order to promote shared ways of thinking and feeling.

Second, with these remarks on the form and content of public memory in mind, how is it that so many of the statues in city parks commemorating heroes and wars so easily fade into the background? What is their status as material objects? If their purpose is to memorialize, they do not seem very good at it. Maybe their material presence operates most through invisibility. Perhaps these anchors of tradition do not always need to operate at conscious levels of thought to accomplish their task. If so, that does not mean they are feeble or unable to preserve memory. They stand there, on the edge of awareness, waiting to come to life, to regain visibility in ritual moments such as patriotic parades or in episodes of crisis, when they polarize

public life by serving as lightning rods of social conflict. What appeared dead and forgotten suddenly roars to life, galvanizing public opinion and political action.

The materiality of these public objects, in other words, consists largely of the way they secure a contested past or, for others, offer a way to reprove and emend that past by destroying or removing the statue. Commemorative statues provide devotees the material means for venerating what they regard as holy, and dissenters the opportunity to eradicate what they hold to be demonic. Veneration and iconoclasm are two modes of the civil religion that puts these statues to work. In contrast to institutional religions that observe rites in regular patterns of worship, civil religion works episodically. It is dormant outside of its authorizing rites—the parades and speeches and flag-raising (or protest marches and rallies). During the rest of the year the figures slumber, awaiting ceremonial re-ignition. It takes a rally or a protest to rouse them. Once awake their ritual work is to make good citizens—those who enact a sense of belonging by defending or assailing an ideal as right or wrong.

Third, the conflict that played out this summer in the American South reveals the instability of historical narratives and the important role that objects perform in attempting to anchor them. The objects offer access to the past, but only through the window of the present. As one person's icon and another's idol, public images are quickly imbued with intense feeling. Adored and despised, they become sharply politicized in the clash of conflicting cultural claims. History is not an objective other, a dispassionate, neutral reality. It is what people write, and what historians write from the turf of their own social engagement in what matters to them and their readers. But public memory is less concerned with the presumption of neutrality. It consists of lore that is rarely subjected to suspicion and testing because doing so is unpatriotic or impious. In the cauldron of social conflict that means that public memory is forever fluid. In the arena of public imagination the past will never be a stable foundation for the ideological constructions of the present. Over the last year it has become especially clear that American citizens, for example, cannot agree what their nation stands for—the privilege of one race and religion, or the ongoing expansion and protection of civil liberties? Each position imagines that it upholds a heritage of values invested in the symbols it cherishes.

But "heritage" is not only inherited. It is shaped by what people choose to honor. Speaking after the spate of statue removals, and addressing the call for removing the statue commemorating Christopher Columbus in Manhattan's Columbus Circle, Donald Trump proclaimed, "We believe we should preserve our history, not tear it down. Now, they are trying to destroy statues of Christopher Columbus. What's next? It has to be stopped; it's heritage."[3] When the former director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Sir Roy Strong, heard someone call for dismantling the massive monument to Lord Nelson, the column towering over Trafalgar Square in London, his reply was "Once you start rewriting history on that scale, there won't be a statue or a historic house standing. It's ridiculous. The past is the past. You can't rewrite history."[4]

Yet if leaving things in place means tacitly endorsing the values they represent to some, but not to everyone, the result is to privilege one ideology over another. Is the solution a series of empty niches and unoccupied pedestals? History is not the neutral past, but events portrayed in an interpretive narrative. But that is where history clashes with memory. History admits of as many critical discourses as the evidence can be made to support; memory is about unifying groups in shared forms of imagination, feeling, and purpose. What is the best way to remember the conflicted past? Should every monument be paired with its counter-monument? A former mayor of Chapel Hill suggested that public land across the street from Silent Sam become the site for a "Peace and Justice Plaza" since a law enacted by North Carolina's Republican-dominated legislature in 2015 made it illegal to remove public monuments without legislative approval.[5] There is a track record for such counter-monuments in the USA. One thinks, for instance, of the three components to the Vietnam Veteran Memorial on the National Mall in Washington DC—Maya Lin's iconic earthwork, a figural group of GIs, and a third monument to military nurses.

When statues are eventually removed for evoking an unwanted heritage, where should they go? To landfill, warehouse, original donor, or to the museum? This brings us to the final point I should like to consider. The museum may be a helpful resource in visioning or re-visioning the past. As places in which objects are preserved and displayed as artifacts rather than political instruments, museums provide an enduring space for debate, study, and conversation. Rather than destroying the objects that offend some, a municipal authority can remove them to a place where they remain accessible, but in some sense defused. Inevitably, the move to a museum places the artifact in a different kind of space, but the task of good museum work includes preserving the ideological settings in which artifacts were crafted and came to be experienced. Museums are at least part of an important alternative to the empty niche or pedestal. They may also provide the occasion for a public conver-

sation about those objects that remain in parks and public squares, thereby treating the municipal landscape as a kind of museum without walls, a domain for civil discourse as well as for political speech and ideological disagreement. Museums and scholarship should be resources for public discourse.

But the museum is a secondary space, where things go to be taxonomized and shelved. Most of what museums possess, after all, lies quietly in storage. Keeping a few niches and pedestals empty is, therefore, a good idea if there is a way to remember what used to occupy them. Another possibility is to replace images removed with others that offer an alternative sense of heritage. For example, some in Durham want to replace the figure of Robert E. Lee with a figure of the African-American architect, Julian Abele, who designed the university chapel, or a carving of the African-American Episcopal priest and civil-rights heroine, Pauli Murray, who grew up in the city. Doing so would counter the prominence of white men in the history of American race and religion, ousting a Confederate general with a representative of the people he and the South fought to keep enslaved. Abele and Murray represent a less celebrated aspect of Southern heritage. Replacing Lee with one of these figures, advocates insist, would challenge the normative force of the national heritage, the unspoken discourse of a preponderance of monuments to white men who fought a war of rebellion.

We are trailed by our past, but not doomed to repeat it. To avoid repeating its mistakes we need the empty niche, new statues, and the museum. Civil society need not tolerate public monuments that glorify the heritage of racism. But we should resist the urge to expunge it from the historical record. We need the past to speak powerfully to the present so that we do not forget it.

Notes

[1] President Vincent Price, Letter to the Duke Community, August 19, 2017.

[2] Julian Carr, "Unveiling of Confederate Monument at University," speech delivered at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; on June 2, 1913; University of North Carolina Library, 14.

[3] Gabby Morrongiello, "Trump condemns effort to remove Christopher Columbus statues: 'It's Heritage'," *Washington Examiner*, October 22, 2017, online: http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/trump-condemns-effort-to-remove-christopher-columbus-statues-its-heritage/article/2637834.

[4] Laura Freeman, "Everywhere he looks, the thumbscrews are tightening," *Sunday Times* (London, England), September 3, 2017, 18.

[5] Mark Kleinschmidt, "What we could do about Silent Sam, the Confederate statue at UNC," guest column, opinion page, *The Herald-Sun*, August 17, 2017, 9A.

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DOI:10.1080/17432200.2017.1418231