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Understanding the Importance of Statues: Symbols of Racism in Modern Society

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Abstract

Whether it is a monument, statue, plaque, or mural, the values and ideologies that are memorialized on public land reflect what reality the people of a country are choosing to remember. The United States' political and racial history has led to the creation of controversial memorials, including memorials that honor the Confederacy and its leaders, influencing moral concepts based in racism, violence, and oppression. The continued veneration of these symbols on public land sends the message to the Black community that their oppressors are honored as heroes and that the society they live in still allows for their abuse. Annette-Gordon Reed, a Harvard historian, claims that public memorials could be used to celebrate the Black Americans who built the United States, and Confederate monuments could be better placed in locations of remembrance.

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Abstract: *Whether it is a monument, statue, plaque, or mural, the values and ideologies that are memorialized on public land influence what reality the people of a country are choosing to remember. The United States' political and racial history has led to the creation of controversial memorials, including memorials that honor the Confederacy and its leaders, influencing moral concepts based in racism, violence, and oppression. The continued veneration of these symbols on public land sends the message to the Black community that their oppressors are being honored as heroes and that the society they live in still allows for their abuse. Annette-Gordon Reed, a Harvard Historian, claims that public memorials could be used to celebrate the Black Americans who built the United States, and Confederate monuments could be better placed in locations of remembrance.*

What a society chooses to use their public land for tends to symbolize the ideas that the community considers to be important. Whether it is a monument, statue, plaque, or mural, the values and ideologies that are memorialized on public land influence what reality the people are choosing to remember. The values and morals that are symbolized through public remembrance are often-times concepts that are honored in a society, for example: hard-work, honesty, and bravery. Relations between members of a society are influenced by these concepts, considering they are deemed important enough to publicly remember in the first place.

While many of these statues promote good concepts, The United States' political and racial history has led to the creation of controversial memorials. The legal oppression and abuse of a race of people for the economic success of another is a major part of American history. In Southern states, the Reconstruction period after the Civil War was used to enforce the ideas of white supremacy in as many ways as possible. This included memorializing and creating statues that honored the Confederacy and its leaders, honoring a people who had moral concepts based in racism, violence, and oppression. The continued veneration of these symbols on public land sends the

message to the Black community that their oppressors are being honored as heroes and that the society they live in still allows for their abuse.

The removal of these statues often invokes controversial beliefs. While some say the monuments should stay as a remembrance of history, others argue they are modern forms of racial terrorism. So, what is to be done with these statues? Annette Gordon-Reed is an historian of U.S. slavery and legal scholar who might have an answer. As well as being a professor of history at Harvard and a successful author, Gordon-Reed did an interview with the *Harvard Gazette* in which she makes an argument that unravels the meaning that these statues perpetuate. In the article titled, "Historian Puts the Push to Remove Confederate Statues in Context," Gordon-Reed argues that statues on American public land should be further evaluated for what they represent, and then removed if they are deemed to honor white supremacist and racist ideologies. Gordon-Reed's argument is supported by her conceptualization of visual rhetoric to understand the effects of these monuments. Her argument builds upon the understanding that what a society chooses to memorialize shapes the reality of their community and that these specific statues contribute to the

current state of racial unrest within the United States.

When discussing statues and public monuments, visual rhetoric is a necessary component. Although a statue has a material form, it is also a form of symbolic action. A statue might be considered to be a remembrance of history and culture at face value; however, they are much more than that: “They guide people in their thinking about those facts from the past, how to act in the present, and what possible futures to seek... they also direct people’s views of themselves” (Palczewski, et. al 84). What is shown in public monuments selects what a culture is choosing to perpetuate within their society. The values of a community shape their culture and the relationships its members have with each other. Subsequently, the relationships members of a community have with each other, based on the selected beliefs of that society, contribute to the individual’s self-identity. The individual’s identification and relationship with the beliefs of their society is also an important part of individual identity. Depending on what the society is choosing to perpetuate, these ideals can either respect and honor the individual, or create detrimental narratives.

Harmful narratives are perpetuated by statues of Confederate Leaders. In the *Harvard Gazette* interview, Gordon-Reed alludes to the effect of these harmful narratives within American society; “the values of the Confederacy, open and unrepentant white supremacy and total disregard for the humanity of Black people, to the extent they still exist, have produced tragedy and discord. There is no path to a peaceful and prosperous country without challenging and rejecting that as a basis for our society” (Walsh). When the values that a society encourages their people to engage with are harmful to certain members of the community, it creates an unjust and unstable

society. Gordon-Reed is arguing that the existence of these beliefs in American history has done enough damage already, they do not need to be further perpetuated through public monuments. She refers to the pain and blatant oppression the Black community has faced in the past, but also in the present. Color-based stereotypes totally disregard the individuality and humanity of the Black individual.

In the interview, Gordon-Reed also discusses the nature and purpose behind many of these statues, “The Confederate statues were put up... [not just after the war but largely during periods of Civil Rights tension in the 20th century], to send a message about white supremacy, and to sentimentalize people who had actively fought to preserve the system of slavery” (Walsh). Sentimentalizing, as Gordon-Reed puts it, the history of the Confederacy creates the narrative that what the rebel states fought for was honorable. These statues honor white men who fought and died to preserve a part of American history that devalues and dehumanizes Black Americans. Honoring the Confederacy, instead of the millions who were enslaved and died building the foundations of the United States, perpetuates the narrative that Black lives are not as important as white lives. This in turn becomes a reflection of how individuals see themselves and their importance within modern America. These memorials send a message that reminds Black communities, who were so horrifically abused and murdered, that America is still memorializing the leaders that believed in that evil. It also can influence favored, in this case white, members of a community to treat marginalized peoples as if they are less important or deserving, under the narrative that White Supremacy should be allowed.

So, what should be done with these Confederate Statues? While there is reason

to remove them, some groups advocate that the statues provide certain benefits to American society. In Gordon-Reed's interview, she is able to break down these arguments into the slippery slope fallacies that they contain. One of the controversial questions Gordon-Reed answers poses the idea that the removal of the statues will dishonor the Confederate soldiers who died in the war. Gordon-Reed appeals with pathos at the beginning of her response, noting that "there are other places for [Confederate soldier remembrance] — on battlefields and cemeteries" (Walsh). She does not deny the soldiers their remembrance, but simply suggests that they be in more appropriate places that will better contextualize the message of the statue. The location of a Confederate remembrance on public ground becomes a symbol of oppression and a threat to the Black community's right to liberty due to the inherent morals and values those people carried. It becomes an institutionalized statement that suggests white supremacy. A Confederate remembrance at a battle memorial or a cemetery of Civil War relevance would better honor their death in a way of stoic remembrance instead of a way that encourages public glory.

"As Monuments Fall, How Does the World Reckon with a Racist Past?" goes into depth about the controversy surrounding monument removal, and also provides a map of remaining Confederate/white supremacist statues that stand on public ground today. The horrific death of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man who was brutally suffocated to death over a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill by white law enforcement, sparked a cultural revolution against institutionalized racism. While there were many peaceful protests, others became physical. Groups of people began defacing statues of confederate leaders and pulling them down at rallies. *National Geographic*

photos of the events capture an image of the massive statue of Robert E. Lee in Richmond Virginia, covered in graffiti and symbols of the Black Lives Matter Movement. "Visual symbols teach generations how to treat each other," and the Black community is tired of the way they have been marginalized both socially and institutionally (Morris).

Gordon-Reed touches on this in her article as well, noting that Floyd's death led to a "great-awakening" within the country in regards to institutionalized police violence. She states that she understands the emotion and passion that has led marginalized communities to take up physical protest (Walsh). Gordon-Reed builds her persona within this article through her compassion for all the people and their opinions on this topic. Gordon-Reed's persona is characterized by her extensive academic accomplishments, her racial and gender orientation as a Black woman, and her capability to understand and tolerate other opinions. Gordon-Reed is able to sympathize and provide a solution, like the idea of placing confederate statues in more appropriate places instead of entirely invalidating the opposing opinion.

When remembering the Civil War on public ground, public memory should be used to uplift or support the marginalized communities and those who fought for the equality of all people. Visual symbols such as statues serve as reminders of the values that a community identified with. This can be both a positive and negative influence on society depending on the memorial, but unfortunately Confederate symbols tend to have a negative impact. The memorialization of Confederate soldiers and symbols insinuates that the ideas of racial discrimination and institutionalized racism should be perpetuated within American society. In response to this, Gordon-Reed made arguments that were understanding of

all sides' beliefs and offered solutions that promote more positive ways of historical remembrance. The *Harvard Gazette's* interview highlights the social reality that

monuments and symbols influence not only the world they are present in, but also influence individuals' opinions on themselves.

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