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Confederate Monuments: Southern Heritage or Southern Art?

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The future of Confederate monuments in the American memorial landscape is uncertain. Since the Charleston church shooting in June 2015, there have been increasing calls to remove all symbols of Confederate memory from American public spaces. Confederate monuments have been bodily hauled to the ground in acts of iconoclasm, tagged with graffiti connecting them with the Black Lives Matter movement, removed or relocated through legal channels, and recontextualized with text linking them with the history of racial injustice in America. At the same time, Confederate heritage organizations have defended the monuments as key symbols of Southern history and have lobbied to protect them from alteration through legal means. Many state legislatures have passed laws protecting the monuments from alteration, but these laws are also facing legal challenges on constitutional grounds. Public debate has centered on what to do with the monuments: whether to keep them up or take them down, and whether amending them with additional text or art might mitigate their power. But this essay will center on a different set of questions: what role do these monuments play in the field of Southern art? How do they contribute to a regional artistic identity, and how should their position as Southern artworks affect their future fate? In seeking an answer, this essay will explore the conditions under which the monuments were manufactured, their claims of Southern heritage, and their relationship with other forms of Southern public art. Ultimately, it is clear that these works do not represent the lived experience of all Southerners, and that there may be other types of work by Southern artists that would better represent the region.

In order to understand the status of Confederate monuments within Southern art, it is necessary to consider their origins. In the wake of the American Civil War, which cost the lives of an estimated 750,000 soldiers, including both Union and Confederate fatalities, and caused untold damage to civilian lives and property, communities across the nation began to erect monuments to the conflict. In the North, this process began almost immediately, with monuments honoring both the rank and file soldiers and the war's military and political leaders. But in the South, memorialization proceeded more slowly. The region had been decimated by war, and communities put their scant resources toward rebuilding lost infrastructure rather than erecting expensive monuments. And in the first years after the end of the war, honoring the Confederacy with triumphal monuments was politically risky as former rebels looked to regain their public status within a reunified nation. With political concerns in mind, most memorializing efforts were carried out by Ladies' Memorial Associations, groups of elite women who organized the reburial of the Confederate dead in special cemeteries and commissioned modest monuments in their honor. But with the end of Reconstruction, as white Northerners gave up on reinforcing respect for the Union and

civil rights for all, Confederate monuments grew more numerous and more elaborate. The majority of these monuments were erected between about 1890 and 1920, one of the darkest periods for race relations in the South.¹

Most Confederate monuments were not manufactured by Southern artists. Due to the lack of an established public sculpture tradition or the necessary industrial infrastructure to produce fine art statuary. Southern monument committees had to look outside the region for sources of sculpture. Many soldier statues were manufactured by Italian carvers who churned out Confederate statues in white marble. Others were the products of large Northern firms, such as the Monumental Bronze Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut, that sold their replicated soldiers in trade catalogues. In many cases, statues sourced outside the region were placed on bases carved out of local stone and marketed by local firms: the Muldoon Monument Company of Lexington, Kentucky, and the McNeel Marble Works of Marietta, Georgia, were both successful with this model (fig. 1). In iconography, Confederate statues also borrowed from their Northern counterparts: like Union monuments, most Confederate statues feature soldiers standing at some form of parade rest. And in costume, they tended either to be indistinguishable from their Union counterparts—wearing a long overcoat and a kepi-or conforming to the type popularized by the Monumental Bronze Company, with a short shell jacket and slouch hat (fig. 2). In form and manufacture, these statues reflect both the national and international nature of the postbellum memorial landscape.²



Figs. 1, 2. Left: Muldoon Monument Company (base) and Carlo Nicoli (figure), Bibb County Confederate Monument, 1878. Carrara marble and Georgia granite, 42 ft. high. Macon, GA. Photograph by the author, April 2012; right: Monumental Bronze Company, Tyrrell County Confederate Monument, 1902. Zinc, 18 ft. high. Columbia, NC. Photograph by the author, April 2012

One of the few Confederate soldier monuments to be carved entirely in the South in the nineteenth century met with a humiliating end. The Elbert County Confederate Monument, the work of German-American carver Peter Arthur Beiter, was unveiled in 1898 in Elberton, Georgia, to immediate and intense criticism. Born in Ohio to German immigrant parents in 1867, Beiter traveled southward sometime in the 1890s and was involved in carving the base

for another Confederate statue in Cuthbert, Georgia, before receiving what was likely his first commission for a full-length statue in Elberton.³ But the resulting monument was a disaster: locals hated its ponderous form, Yankee overcoat, and unsettling, startled expression, and they gave it the nickname "Dutchy" as a nod to its German ancestry. On August 13, 1900, a mob attacked the statue in the middle of the night and brought it to the ground, breaking it into several pieces. The next day, the townspeople buried it where it lay, facedown as a traitor to the Confederacy. In the 1980s, the statue was exhumed, and it now lies on its back on a gurney at the Elberton Granite Museum, enshrined as one of the first products of the town's



Fig. 3. Peter Arthur Beiter, Elbert County Confederate Monument, 1898. Elberton blue granite, approx. 82 1/2 x 31 1/2 x 9 1/4 in. Elberton Granite Museum, Elberton, GA. Photograph by the author, April 2012

successful granite industry (fig. 3). It has been replaced in the town square by one of the mass-produced statues of the Monumental Bronze Company—an embarrassment of local manufacture exchanged for a sleek Yankee interloper.⁴



Fig. 4. Antonin Mercié and Paul Pujol, Robert E. Lee Monument, unveiled 1890. Bronze, granite, and marble, 61 ft. high. Monument Avenue, Richmond, VA. Photograph by the author, April 2012

Many of the South's most iconic monuments to military and political leaders of the Confederacy were also manufactured outside the region. A major equestrian monument was an expensive investment, and the first examples did not appear until well after the end of Reconstruction. Two of the most discussed monuments to Robert E. Lee, located in Richmond and Charlottesville, Virginia, are both at the center of highly contested public debates on whether they should remain in the public eye. Richmond's monument was sculpted by Antonin Mercié after an intense artistic competition, and was cast in Paris under his direction (fig. 4). The committee chosen to judge the competition consisted of architect Edward Clark and sculptors John Quincy Adams Ward and Augustus Saint-Gaudens, all Northerners and highly respected professionals. The Richmond Lee Monument was the first to be placed on the storied Monument Avenue, which became one of the key

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Fig. 5. Henry Shrady and Leo Lentelli, Robert E. Lee Monument, unveiled 1924. Bronze and granite, 26 ft. high. Charlottesville, VA. Photograph by the author, April 2018

Southern examples of the City Beautiful Movement.⁵ Also linked with that movement is the Robert E. Lee Monument in Charlottesville, Virginia, the planned removal of which was the catalyst for the deadly Unite the Right rally in August 2017 (fig. 5). Charlottesville's statue was begun by New York City–born sculptor Henry Shrady, who is best known for the Ulysses S. Grant Memorial in front of the United States Capitol. The statue was completed by Italian immigrant Leo Lentelli after Shrady's death.⁶

Not all Confederate monuments were sculpted by artists from outside the South, however. Edward Valentine and Moses Ezekiel were both Richmond-born sculptors and prominent in the field of Confederate memory. Ezekiel served in the Confederate army, while Valentine spent the war years studying sculpture in Europe. Returning to Virginia in 1865, Valentine distinguished himself as a sculptor of Confederate subjects, including the gisant covering Lee's tomb in Lexington, Virginia, a statue of Lee that is now in the United States Capitol Statuary Hall, and the monuments to Jefferson Davis and Matthew Fontaine Maury on Monument Avenue (fig. 6).⁷ As for Ezekiel, after his stint in the Confederate army, he left America, first for Berlin, and then for Rome,

where he lived for the rest of his life. Over the course of his career, he was knighted in Italy and Germany and received many prestigious honors for his art. His most famous Confederate monument is the colossal bronze memorial in Arlington National Cemetery, commissioned after the establishment of a special section of the cemetery for the Confederate dead in the wake of the Spanish-American War.⁸ Both Valentine and Ezekiel lived cosmopolitan lives, taking advantage of the best artistic training and facilities for producing sculpture across the United States and in Europe. Like the soldier monuments ordered from international manufacturers, their work reflects the global scope of sculptural knowledge and materials brought to bear on post-Civil War commemorative activities.



Fig. 6. Edward V. Valentine, *Recumbent Lee*, 1871–75. Marble, 100 1/2 in. long. Lee Chapel, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA. Photograph by the author, October 2016

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With this history in mind, let us turn to an assessment of Confederate monuments within the field of Southern art. Confederate monuments are cosmopolitan works, made by sculptors and artisans from within and outside the region. Their visual language comes from Greek and Roman sources filtered through the Neoclassicism of European and American sculptors in the nineteenth century. And yet, they have been claimed today as key markers of white Southern heritage and culture. The women of the Ladies' Memorial Associations and, later, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, took ownership of the monuments as one facet of their highly successful campaign to replace the truth of the Civil War with the myth of the Lost Cause. Like the elite woman reading the funeral rite for William Latané in the A. G. Campbell engraving of William D. Washington's popular painting, they centered their histories of the monuments on their own agency in commissioning them.9 When looking into the archive to learn about the origin of a particular Confederate soldier monument, information about the artist or manufacturer can sometimes be difficult to find. Often an account will include the names of the women involved in fundraising for the monument, the methods they used to raise the money and the amounts they procured, and the ceremonies they enacted in order to dedicate it. As for the monument itself, accounts might specify merely "an Italian sculptor," or in the case of Northern monument firms such as the Monumental Bronze Company, no information at all.¹⁰ For Southern women's organizations, then, the act of commissioning and dedicating a monument was significantly more important than the facts of its creation. It should therefore not be surprising to see the monuments folded into the neo-Confederate mythmaking that has resulted from the spread of Lost Cause ideology, which recasts the Civil War from a conflict fought to preserve slavery into a battle for states' rights fought by an agrarian South against Northern industrial power.11

But it is also important to remember that Confederate monuments do not represent the history or heritage of all Southerners or all Americans. As recent protests have emphasized, Confederate monuments are clearly implicated in the history of slavery leading up to the Civil War and the violence and terrorism of Reconstruction, both of which fuel continued racial persecution against black Americans today. Most of these monuments were built between the 1890s and the 1920s, when race relations in the South were at their worst and violence directed toward black Americans was at its highest point. And the siting of Confederate monuments in front of the county courthouse makes this connection explicit: these spaces were implicated in the violence of lynching, a terroristic act perpetrated to suppress all who opposed white supremacist rule. That profound injustice is clearly linked to continued injustices that disproportionately affect black Americans today, including mass incarceration and the police violence that is central to the Black Lives Matter movement. Confederate soldier monuments have long been associated with political and racial power structures that perpetuate violence against black bodies, and the recent debate over their future makes this association clear.¹²

Just as the ideology of the Confederate monument does not represent all Southerners, its form fails to reflect the folk visual tradition that is one of the region's great strengths. Confederate monuments are variations on a fairly narrow theme: the exalted human figure on a pedestal. Whether equestrian statues of military leaders, standing portraits of politicians, or soldiers at parade rest, they follow a conventional formula handed down from ancient classical tradition. They communicate power and take up most of the central spaces in the public landscape. But during the same time period in which Confederate monuments have come to dominate civic spaces, African American Southern artists have developed an

extraordinary artistic tradition using the materials and spaces available to them. From the vard shows of artists such as Joe Minter and Lonnie Holley to the quilts of Gee's Bend, these artists have forged a vital visual language that rivals any modern art movement within the mainstream art world. Denied access to public space and prestigious art training, they have used found objects and privately owned land to build worlds for their art. Joe Minter's African Village in America in Birmingham, Alabama, is one of the few extant examples of the yard show, a tradition that flourished in the Deep South in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement.¹³ Minter continues to add to his environment, which includes many monuments to the darker moments in American history, from slavery and lynching to recent tragedies such as 9/11 and the Sandy Hook Massacre.¹⁴ Yard shows are dying out due to the aging of the generation that produced them, instances of aggressive zoning, the incursions of the art market, and other factors. But these spaces offer an alternative to the sterile Confederate monument. Unlike the traditional monument, which presents as an unchanging and unchangeable edifice, vernacular installations are constantly in flux. Their creators add and remove material, and individual elements break down with exposure to weather and time. Meaning is unstable, and there is always room to add new context or ideas. If the Confederate monument is intended to communicate an inflexible interpretation of history, the yard show allows for nuance, improvisation, and chance.

Some of that improvisational spirit has already made itself evident in spaces where Confederate monuments have been removed. In places such as Durham (North Carolina), Baltimore, and New Orleans, the empty plinths have become charged spaces for a different form of remembrance. These unoccupied pedestals tug at the mind in a way that a whole monument might not, calling attention to the existence of an interpretation of history that the community has decided to retire. In Durham, the granite base of the statue pulled down just days after the Charlottesville riot remains in limbo. North Carolina state law prohibits any alteration to monuments on public property, even those that have been partially

destroyed due to acts of iconoclasm. And so the pedestal sits, asking for intervention. On at least two separate occasions, artists have installed guerrilla monuments on the base in place of the Confederate statue in the dead of night: a heart shape last August, and a thicket of defiantly raised fists in November.¹⁵ Empty plinths in other cities have also become targets for graffiti and other extralegal installations. Perhaps there is a way forward in which these unsettling objects could become a counter-monument, a celebration of the resistance against Confederate ideology.

Several artists have also imagined one other powerful force that could overtake the Confederate monument: kudzu. This invasive vine, native to Asia, was introduced to the American Southeast in 1883 and has gained a reputation as "the vine that ate the South." Fast-growing and difficult to eradicate, kudzu exists simultaneously as a nightmare and a source of regional pride. In 2017, Dave Loewenstein, a muralist and printmaker based in Lawrence, Kansas, made a series of postcards for "<u>defunct monuments</u>," in which he imagined the vine consuming monuments associated with racism, materialism, and militarism (fig. 7).¹⁶ Loewenstein's



Fig. 7. Dave Loewenstein, *Defunct Monument I: Racism*, 2018. Drawing and digital media on paper, image courtesy of the artist

postcard shows the now-removed monument to Jefferson Davis in New Orleans completely obscured by kudzu vines, rendering all but the statue's silhouette virtually unrecognizable. Shortly after he published the illustration, a group of anonymous artists based in Charlottesville, Virginia, used it as a model for their <u>Kudzu Project</u>. For the project, more than thirty knitters knitted hundreds of kudzu leaves, arranged them in loops and vines, and tossed them over the top of local Confederate monuments, taking photos of their work for posterity in each instance before the vines could be removed by authorities (fig. 8).¹⁷ Kudzu also factors into Aaron McIntosh's <u>Invasive Queer Kudzu</u> project, in which he uses the weed as a metaphor for how queer people are viewed in American society (fig. 9). Hailing from Kingsport, Tennessee, and currently based in Richmond, Virginia, McIntosh holds workshops in which attendees make leaves telling aspects of their own stories, and he advertises for the workshops with images of the vine overtaking local monuments.¹⁸ In the spring of 2019, McIntosh reimagined the project with a life-scale installation of the kudzu vine taking over a toppled Confederate monument at Richmond's 1708 Gallery.¹⁹



Figs. 8, 9. Left: *The Kudzu Project at Albemarle County Courthouse, Charlottesville, VA*, November, 2017. Photo: Tom Cogill; image courtesy of The Kudzu Project; right: Aaron McIntosh, *Monument Invasion: Robert E. Lee Memorial, Richmond, VA*, 2018, digital collage on archival inkjet print, 30 x 40 inches, image courtesy of the artist

These artists may have hit on a fitting metaphor for the Confederate monument, imagining an alternate future in which these monuments are reclaimed by the land on which they stand. Like kudzu, the Confederate monument is an invasive species. Born out of a classical visual tradition and imported by travelers to foreign shores, the monument form took root in soil ideally suited for its cultivation. In the 150 years since the Civil War, approximately 1500 separate memorials to the Confederacy have appeared across the United States, spreading the Lost Cause myth and perpetuating the injustices begun under slavery and the rifts that have kept the nation from moving forward. In the manifesto on their website, the artists of the Kudzu Project liken the romanticized architectural ruin covered in kudzu vines to the ideology of the Lost Cause, which cloaks slavery and racism in the pretty language of gentility and honor. For both invasive plants and invasive ideas, the way forward to a healthier landscape is to fight to eradicate the invader and to uproot it from the soil that protects it. But as that fight continues, it is comforting to imagine one invasive species covering and overwhelming the other.

Notes

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