



Art and Disrupting the Confederate Monumental Landscape

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Reflecting on his vacation throughout the southeast, W. E. B. Du Bois discussed the monuments he encountered as he avoided the indignity of traveling on segregated railroads. “The most terrible thing about War, I am convinced, is its monuments—the awful things we are compelled to build in order to remember the victims. In the South, particularly, human ingenuity has been put to it to explain on its war monuments, the Confederacy,” *The Crisis* editor bemoaned to his readers. “Of course,” he surmised, “the plain truth of the matter would be an inscription something like this: ‘Sacred to the memory of those who fought to Perpetuate Human Slavery.’ But that reads with increasing difficulty as time goes on. It does, however, seem to be overdoing the matter to read on a North Carolina Confederate monument: ‘Died Fighting for Liberty!’”¹

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Perfect Vacation,” *The Crisis* 40, no. 8 (August 1931): 279.

His brief remarks reveal the pains that African Americans went through to navigate a commemorative landscape defined by Confederate monuments. Yet, Du Bois and others creatively challenged these monuments by remembering emancipation, Reconstruction gains, and the long history of racial progress. Whether through reading publications such as *The Crisis*, which offered counter-narratives, or engaging in *Green Book* leisurely pursuits, these living monuments of the emancipationist Civil War collective memory defied the expectations of the individuals who dictated their acquiescence to Jim Crow racial geographies.

Debates over the Confederate monuments are not new. As southern women began placing monuments in cemeteries honoring the Confederate dead, African Americans protested by sustaining alternate understandings in their homes and communal spaces. The Civil Rights Movement disrupted some of the power embodied in the Confederate relics. The 2015 Charleston Massacre and 2017 Charlottesville events, however, renewed debates of how to address these monuments, their legacies, and reconcile communities affected by them. Building upon the legacy established by early African American activists, diverse communities are refusing to accept the top-down values of the generation that erected these monuments, and by so doing are building a more inclusive present and future. As the works of An-My Lê, Jonathan Calm, and Dannielle Bowman demonstrate, public art and other artistic expressions must be considered in any reconciliation effort moving forward.

After the Civil War, women, regardless of region, race and wartime allegiances, worked to care for the wartime dead. Often formally organized in the Ladies Memorial Association,

these women expanded their work to include monument building and annual commemorative events centered around and in these cemeteries. While women outside of the former Confederacy shifted to other turn-of-the-twentieth-century reforms and issues, southern Ladies Memorial Associations remained wedded to advancing a pro-Confederate memory and transitioned into the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC).²

Determined to assert women's cultural authority over the region's past, UDC members lobbied for the construction of state archives and museums, national historic sites, and historic highways; interviewed former soldiers; wrote history textbooks; and more importantly, erected monuments in public spaces. These monuments were central in their efforts to "vindicate Confederate men" and force southern African Americans "who had no stake in celebrating the Confederacy" to "share a cultural landscape that did."³ In short, these women, with the support of Jim Crow government officials and white supremacists, defined the terms of the ongoing cultural wars over the cause and legacy of the Civil War and enshrined racial geographies in the public and cultural landscapes throughout the region, nation and abroad.⁴

Unveiling ceremonies reinforced the UDC's Lost Cause message. At the 1913 dedication of Silent Sam, for instance, Julian Carr praised the UDC women and then boasted of horsewhipping "a negro wench until her skirts hung in shreds" on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill campus. These monuments were never neutral sites. Though emancipated, the resulting UDC landscape demanded southern African Americans' unquestioned allegiance and even their collective forgetting of slavery, the Civil War and post-emancipation successes in the new political order grounded in white supremacy.⁵

In the absence of an inclusive political discourse, African Americans creatively responded. In Charleston, South Carolina, officials, for instance, complained how children regularly threw rocks, sang "John Brown's Body," and openly mocked the first Calhoun statue and its replacement. Communities made claims to public spaces through parade routes that intentionally passed the monuments. Some resorted to vandalism. All developed strategies for contesting and navigating these new geographies; but they could not disrupt the UDC's hegemony until after the Civil Rights Movement gains made more inclusive landscapes possible.⁶

Since 2015, artists, especially those dedicated to creating social justice public art, have been essential partners, as have scholars, politicians, educators, and everyday residents who tackle difficult questions. Should these monuments be removed from public spaces, as they have been in New Orleans? Should they be destroyed, as they were on African American sites of memory during urban renewal and other periods of gentrification? Are new museums, new markers, and empty pedestals adequate without sustained education and dialogue? Ultimately, inclusive, community-based solutions and not legislation, lawsuits, and violence will bring about resolution. But this work requires listening, empathy, creativity and collaboration for reconciling the hegemonic UDC cultural landscape. Here, art, specifically the work of Lê, Calm and Bowman, has a major role to play.

2. See Caroline Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013) and Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture, With a New Preface* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2019).

3. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 49.

4. Southern Poverty Law Center, "Whose Heritage: Public Symbols of the Confederacy," February 1, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy>.

5. Julian S. Carr, "Unveiling of Confederate Monument at University, June 2, 1913" in the Julian Shakespeare Carr Papers #141, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

6. Ethan J. Kyle and Blain Roberts, *Denmark Vesey's Garden: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy* (New York: The New Press, 2016), 103-113; Katherine Ann Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 214-218.

Before the New Orleans mayor removed the city's General P.T.G. Beauregard monument in May 2017, photographer An-My Lê captured the possibility of the revised landscape devoid of the mounted Confederate general [Plate 51]. While still haunting the landscape behind the draped gauzy tarp, a ghost of the minor Confederate past has lost its power. Like the visible passing car, Lê's spectral rendering of the New Orleans monument poses as an obstacle to reconciliation in the wake of the murder of nine African Americans in a historic Charleston church. Now an empty pedestal, the hypothetical question asked by Lê's photograph of the Beauregard monument has been resolved.⁷

Jonathan Calm's *Green Book – Journey Through the South* photographs recall the alternative geography of Du Bois and others escaping the indignities of Jim Crow travel. He reminds us of these segregated safe spaces across Jackson, Mississippi, and other destinations throughout the American South. Some locales, like Crystal Palace and the barbershop-turned-museum of its famous African American patrons, show how celebrities, public intellectuals, politicians and everyday folks found refuge [Plate 61]. But other hollowed-out building shells and empty lots of overgrown grass occasionally marked by historical signage masks the once-thriving communities frequented by weary travelers following the bible created by an African American postal worker in the 1930s. With his photographs, Calm asks us to remember the previous vitality of these southern landscapes, but also to imagine their potential for revising the Confederate public landscape.⁸

Public artists also demand that we heal the scars left by the whitewashed remembrances of slavery encouraged by the UDC Confederate landscape. Dannielle Bowman spotlights this unresolved past in her *Weeping Time Landscape* (2019) featured in *The New York Times*' 1619 Project [Plate 54]. She forces audiences to confront the mandated separations of spouses, parents, and families at the auction block. In the shadows of a water tower and electrical poles, the current railroad crossing masks the tears, moans, and other guttural sounds of the 436 individuals sold at an 1859 auction. While their former enslaver netted \$303,850, the families' unspeakable traumas haunt the former makeshift Ten Broeck Race Course auction block outside of Savannah, Georgia. Bowman's critical photographic eye makes visible the work of historian Anne C. Bailey for a common audience and attempts to heal the lasting legacy of slavery for the descendants and communities broken and scattered to the four corners of the current railroad crossing. Reclamation of these diverse landscapes shaped by the Confederate monuments and African American counter-geographies remains essential work for public artists, scholars and communities. Lê, Calm, Bowman, and other artists, such as Matthew Shain [Plate 52], have offered some possibilities for reimagining, reclaiming, and transforming the American cultural landscape into one no longer defined by the UDC's white supremacist blueprint.⁹

7. Mitch Landrieu, "We Can't Walk Away From This Truth," *The Atlantic*, May 23, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/we-cant-walk-away-from-this-truth/527721/>

8. Jacinda Townsend, "How the Green Book Helped African-American Tourists Navigate a Segregated Nation," *Smithsonian Magazine* (April 2016), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/history-green-book-african-american-travelers-180958506/>

9. For additional information on the 1859 slave auction and its consequences, see Anne C. Bailey, *The Weeping Time: Memory and the Largest Slave Auction in American History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

PLATE 61

Jonathan Calm

Green Book (Jackson I), 2016

Gelatin silver print

11 × 14 inches (27.9 × 35.6 cm)

Courtesy the artist

