

Memorializing the Struggle for Freedom and Equality

Interview Thread Transcript

Chris Bonner

The argument that I hear most often in favor of keeping Confederate monuments is that by taking them down, by destroying them, we are destroying history. I would say that that's wrong for a couple of reasons. One, the monuments, you know, a monument to Robert E. Lee that stands in Richmond does not really reflect the history of Robert E. Lee. It shows you an image of a guy on a horse, high up on a pillar in the former capital of the Confederacy. What that shows you is not a history of Robert E. Lee or of the Confederacy, it shows you an image, an idol to be worshiped. So taking down that image does not destroy the history of Robert E. Lee, a person who I talk about in history courses and offer a really complex portrait of.

Another reason why this sort of idea that Confederate monuments represent history is inaccurate or incorrect is that the history that they actually reflect is not being depicted in... part of the history that they reflect is not being depicted in the monuments, right? Again, a monument to Robert E. Lee in Richmond is not a product of the Civil War era. It is not a product of Confederate veterans placing this monument there in the immediate aftermath of the war because they want to reflect on this image that they had of Lee. These images, most Confederate statues, were erected in the era of Jim Crow in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries by white southerners who were trying to reassert their dominance of Black people and re-secure white supremacy by making the landscape look like it was unwelcoming to Black people. So a way to make Black southerners feel uncomfortable is to put up a bunch of statues of former Confederate soldiers. People who fought for the bondage of Black people and their ancestors.

And so I think that when we take down Confederate monuments, what we do is eradicate that history of white supremacy that has been placed on the landscape of the United States, and not only in the South, but across the country. And so I think that it's a good project to make the physical geography of the nation look like a place that is available and accessible and welcoming to the people who might move through those spaces. And statues of white supremacists, statues of men who fought for slavery, are not a way to really make that landscape open to American people.

I think there is one possibility of countering Confederate memorials with statues of enslaved people, or statues of activists or abolitionists, whoever it might be, you know, a statue of Frederick Douglass next to every statue of Robert E. Lee. The problem with that is that statues and

memorials and monuments do not educate. And if our goal is to help people understand the past, a bunch of idols popped up across the country, idols of Frederick Douglass, are not really going to educate people beyond saying, "Oh, Frederick Douglass was an important guy," which yes, more people should know that Frederick Douglass was an important person, but more people should also know more about Frederick Douglass. More people should also know more about Robert E. Lee. They should know more about the Confederacy and what its cause was. The cause of slavery, the cause of white supremacy. And so if that is our project, we need to think about things other than memorials to try to convey the complex history of this country.

Kellie Carter Jackson

I've always had an issue with the statue [Emancipation Memorial {Freedman's Memorial}], but I appreciate it because it's teachable, it's useful. There's a way that we can look at the statue and we can deconstruct all of the things that we see in it, and I think art is never intended for us to just look at it and pass it by. It's meant for us to sit in front of it, to stare at it, and to really think about the message that's trying to be conveyed. And to figure out how we can interpret how we each individually see art in a particular way. So there are certain statues, and Confederate statues included in this, that I'm conflicted... I'm conflicted over how they're presented. There's sometimes I wish there were a disclaimer underneath the statue that sort of gave you the historical context or gave the viewer the moment in which it's being created and the moment in which we're seeing it right now, a breakdown of that, so that people would be able to understand what was happening in a historical context and why this statue had meaning and who funded the statue and how much did they pay for it, and who created it and what were they thinking when they sculpted it? All of that is so important to understanding art that it's too easy or too simplistic to just sort of dismiss it because we don't like it or because it doesn't fit our cultural narrative anymore. I think art requires that we grapple with it.

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This statue [Emancipation Memorial] was funded by Black people, not entirely, but a big portion of it is funded by Black people. Frederick Douglass gives a speech, an unforgettable speech, while the unveiling of the statue takes place, and it sort of baffles my mind because Douglass is standing at the statue and he's like, "We aren't Lincoln's children. We're his stepchildren. You're his real

know about the dimensions, like how tall it is – but the statue, it's a large sculpture of Abraham Lincoln towering over an enslaved person who is in a kneeling position that has chains around their ankles, chains around their feet. And it looks as though Lincoln is not just sort of towering over them, but sort of presenting this enslaved person with the world, with their freedom.

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There's a really good art history essay on the sculpture that also talks about how the image and what it looked like, an enslaved person giving Lincoln a shoeshine because they're bent over at his feet. But there's a lot about the image that speaks of subservience and servitude, what it means to be in deep gratitude to Lincoln, and to see Lincoln as the sole emancipator, or the one person responsible for Black liberation. It's also, I think, interesting that Lincoln is, you know, fully clothed and the enslaved person is wearing nothing more than his chains and sort of a loincloth. And I wonder, too, if they had, like, sketches of the statue. I imagine they thought it would probably look completely different than what the final product was. I think of the abolitionists' symbol that is the, "Am I not a man and a brother?" It is like a circular emblem of an enslaved man who's kneeling with his chained hands out, like, in prostrate, but out as a way of sort of, like, asking for his liberation. And the top part of the crest said, "Am I not a man?" And the bottom part says, "Am I not a brother?" That was probably one of the most popular symbolic, like, portraits or medallions that was used at the time. So Frederick Douglass and the National Republican newspaper in 1876 says, "Admirable as the monument by Mr. Ball in Lincoln Park. It does not, as it seems to me, tell the whole truth. And perhaps no one monument could be made to tell the whole truth of any subject, which it might be designed to illustrate." Facts. Facts.

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I think Douglass is absolutely right. There is no monument, no portrait, no symbol – There is no one thing that can encapsulate the leadership of Lincoln, the 400-plus years of enslavement of chattel slavery, the amount of death of people that were lost during the Civil War, the casualties of the Civil War. There's no one thing that can encapsulate that. But I think what we can do is we can try to get people to remember things that happened, things that were important, and to think about how these major events, and major people, have an impact on us today. "The negro here, though rising, is still on his knees and nude. What I want to see before I die is a monument representing the negro not crouching on his knees like a four-footed animal, but erect on his feet like a man." What I think about when I read a quote like that is so much about the abolitionist movement. It's not necessarily about abolishing the institution of slavery. That's part of it. But the major thrust is Black humanity. Acknowledging,

recognizing, affirming Black humanity. Yes, Black people are human beings. And so much of the movement has had to push back on the ideas that Black people aren't people. Even within the abolitionist movement that has been a struggle.

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So, you know, I talk about this in my classes, that I... one of my professors said that the abolitionist movement was like a free the whales campaign. It's like "free the whales, don't hurt the whales." But whales can't vote and whales can't marry my daughter and whales aren't people. And I think that everything that Douglass is saying in that quote is so representative of the fights that Black people have to get their humanity recognized and affirmed. But also nowhere is it seen in which the enslaved took their freedom themselves, that it was not given to them, they took it. They saw the writing on the wall, as I said earlier, and they left the plantation and they fled, and they fought. And to me, I think we are so used to pinpointing, like, major moments to white male leadership and denying Black activism, Black agency, that it dismisses the work of so many people that helped to make slavery a thing of the past. And so, yeah. I mean, there's a lot that goes into that quote, but I think what he is essentially saying is that, like, we forget about... We want to put this all on Lincoln. This is not about Lincoln. Lincoln is not the "Great Emancipator" that we all think he is. And I don't think Lincoln himself saw himself in that way.

Edward Widmer

The Freedman's Memorial is tough and all of these memories are tough right now. They've actually become tougher in the last few years. You think everything would get easier. In fact, they got tougher. And there are so many people I cannot speak for. I cannot speak for any group of Americans who feel the pain of an ancestor who was enslaved. I cannot speak for them. I can only ask for their understanding and to apologize on behalf of whatever group of Americans I represent. And I too am a mixture of some immigrants and some Americans who were here longer.

But the Freedman's Memorial is a really complicated story because it's an unfortunate statue. It looks bad now. The African American is in an inferior role, kneeling. Lincoln is standing up almost as if he has a magic wand in his hand, but he doesn't. But it just looks bad, and it even looked bad at the time. Frederick Douglass commented that it was not his favorite pose he would have chosen. But he still went. He still gave the most important speech at the dedication. And a great deal of thought went into that statue from the African American community. They contributed to it, knowing the design that was coming. A former slave posed. It's a realistic sculpture based on a real slave, a former slave, freedman. They were really

trying their best by the light that was available to them in the 1860s and '70s and early 1880s, and they also dedicated a huge park, the statue's in the center of, in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, which is where Frederick Douglass lived at the time. And so I truly believe their intention was good, but it is an unfortunate-looking statue.

There are replicas of that statue in other parts of America, including Boston, where I was born, and there was a movement that succeeded in bringing down that statue in Boston, and I supported that movement because it didn't do anything where it was. It was not in a neighborhood associated with Lincoln or the African American community, and I thought it was giving some pain to people and it should come down, and it did. In Washington it's harder because it's in the center of a park named after Lincoln, and there was this famous dedication by Frederick Douglass with a huge number of African Americans there.

So, I support a recommendation that Douglass' biographer, David Blight, made, which is that we should keep the statue but contextualize it. And let's put up lots of other statues all around. Certainly, the biggest one should be to Frederick Douglass, I think, but then how about a few statues to the women who endured so much trauma during the Civil War? The women of the North, the women of the South, African American women, and Native Americans, and let's get committees from the neighborhood, committees from around the country to think about how to make a new set of messages in Lincoln Park. It's actually a very beautiful park that most tourists don't go to, but it is in the middle of a great neighborhood not too far from the Capitol and the Supreme Court. So let's reclaim that neighborhood in a really creative new way, and put new markers and new statues around that statue.