GOOD RIDDANCE

WATCHING CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS FALL IN BALTIMORE

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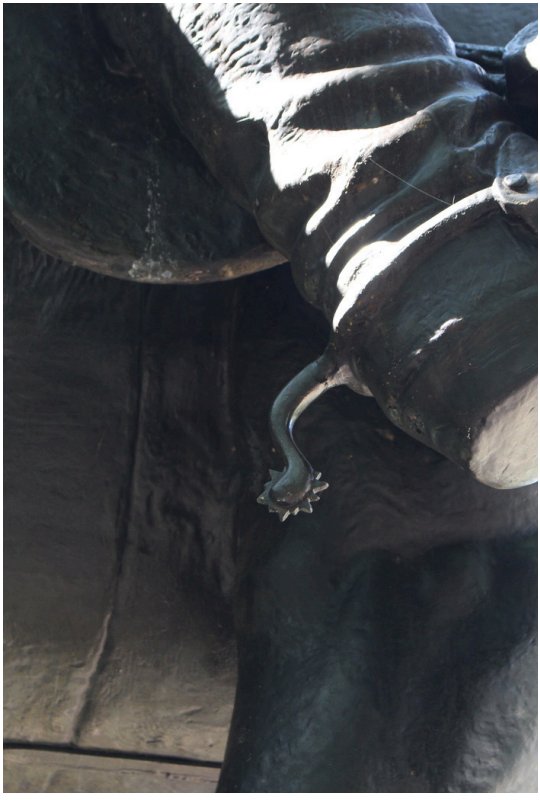



PURPOSE ★ ★ ★ SO GREAT IS MY CONFIDENCE IN GENERAL LEE THAT I AM WILLING TO FOLLOW HIM

I was visiting family in Baltimore in August of 2017 and had just put my daughter to bed with a bit of the usual struggle that comes with the time difference when traveling from the West Coast. I retreated to the guest bedroom to stare at my phone out of distraction and habit. Simply by chance, I touched the twitter icon, which for whatever reason was not my habit among the palette of social media platforms at the time, and typed in the hashtag Baltimore. Every tweet said the same thing: The confederate statues in Baltimore were coming down that night. In the aftermath of Charlottesville, Mayor Catherine Pugh had, without warning, sent city crews to take down four statues and it was happening. Right now. As I refreshed the feed, I realized that just a few blocks from where we were staying, they were preparing to take down a monstrous statue that I had been puzzling over for years. I thought back to my naive surprise when my father-in-law first mentioned the statue while driving by and my many subsequent visits to photograph and study it, to think about how to lobby for its removal, even to fantasize about destroying it, erasing it forever. Instead of going to sleep, I knew I had to go down and watch it disappear.

One version of the story of that particular monument is well documented in the archives of the *Baltimore Sun*. It goes something like this: In 1928, J. Henry Ferguson, President of the Colonial Trust Company, died and left in his will $100,000 for the construction of a monument to Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. The provisions in his will were quite specific and shaped the development of the monument explicitly. The funds became available to the Municipal Art Society only after the death of Ferguson's sister in 1934. The following year, six sculptors engaged in a limited competition organized by the Municipal Art Society. Laura Gardin Fraser was selected to design the monument. Over the next 12 years, she worked through a series of models to produce a massive monument to the two confederate generals on horseback.

A site was selected just across the street from the Baltimore Museum of Art, in Wyman Park. This city park was designed by the Olmstead brothers as part of a city-wide plan for an elaborate park system, commissioned by the Municipal Art Society in 1904 and extended by a second report in 1926. Given the outsized influence of the Olmstead's vision on the planning of the city and in particular on the neighborhoods of Guilford and Roland Park that surround the monument site, one might certainly ask how the Olmstead vision of a city connected via green space and manicured landscapes is itself intimately tied to the history of segregation in Baltimore and what Christopher Silver describes as a planning movement that "regarded land use controls as an effective social control mechanism for Blacks and other "undesirables."

The funding of the Lee-Jackson monument stipulated that the sculpture be constructed as a model, initially at a scale 1/3 of the final size, and progress through a series of refinements to achieve its ultimate monumental completion. Ferguson also indicated that the sculpture should be ringed by a series of texts, which read: "The parting of General Lee and Stonewall Jackson on the eve of Chancellorsville. They were great generals and Christian soldiers and waged war like gentlemen." Around the base is more text "So great is my confidence in General Lee that I am willing to follow him blindfolded straight as the needle to the pole Jackson advanced to the execution of my purpose." This quote is made even more strange by the fact that it was in the battle of Chancellorsville that Stonewall Jackson was mortally wounded by friendly fire.

The long delays in constructing and installing the monument received repeated attention in the press, with international conflicts interrupting delivery of necessary materials. First the Italian-Ethiopian war disrupted the supply of Italian clay to the US and prevented the sculptor from proceeding with her preferred materials. Then the onset of the second world war caused metal shortages and the foundry commissioned to cast the large bronze was unable to acquire sufficient material to complete the work for several years. An elaborate marble pedestal was designed by John Russell Pope - the architect who designed the Baltimore Museum of Art - and installed. For several years, the pedestal stood empty, in an eerie echo of how the monument appeared after removal. The press reported that those passing by were so confused by the empty pedestal that it was frequently mistaken for the grave of an "eccentric Baltimorean."


THE NEEDLE TO THE POLE JACKSON ADVANCED TO THE EXECUTION OF MY PURPOSE * * * SO GREAT

When the statue was finally dedicated on the anniversary of the battle of Chancellorsville in May 1948, thousands of people lined the streets waving confederate flags and both the Governor of Maryland and Mayor of Baltimore spoke. In a scathing opinion piece in the *Afro-American* newspaper soon after the dedication, the editors take both the governor and the mayor to task for the use of celebratory language and the rhetoric of reconciliation:

"Speaking at the dedication of a Robert E. Lee-Stonewall Jackson monument in Baltimore a week ago, Gov. William Preston Lane said that the scars of the Civil War have long since been healed. What does he mean 'healed'? The governor is president of a conference of governors of 17 southern states whose chief goal now is to keep all existing college, university and professional schools 'for whites only' and in general, to oppose President Truman's program of civil rights for all. Mayor Thomas D'Alessandro of Baltimore said 'we can look for inspiration to the lives of Lee and Jackson to be resolute and determined in preserving our sacred institutions.' The 'sacred institution' which Lee and Jackson sought to wreck was this Federal union of ours. The 'sacred institution' they sought to preserve was slavery."

In 1910, the city of Baltimore enacted what scholars have called the nation's first racial zoning law. The mayor of Baltimore, J Barry Mahool, is quoted in a large spread in the *New York Times* about the ordinance published on Christmas Day of that year, stating "Its sole object and intention is to protect our people in the possession of their property and to prevent the depreciation which is of necessity bound to follow when the colored family would move into a neighborhood that had hitherto been exclusively inhabited by white people. That such depreciation does of necessity follow we of Baltimore have learned after years of hard and sad experience." Hard and sad certainly, but to whom? Among the curious facts surrounding the law, which followed the purchase of a property on McCulloh Street by an African American lawyer named W. Ashbie Hawkins and rental of the property to his partner George W. McMechen in a white neighborhood, was the fact that the case was argued by the city solicitor - Edgar Allan Poe - the second cousin of the famous writer - who went on to become the attorney general of Maryland. The law explicitly prohibited black people from residing on a "white street" and white people from living where African Americans lived. The example of this law spread quickly and was adopted throughout the south. Although the law was declared unconstitutional by way of a 1917 supreme court ruling in the case of Buchanan v. Warley, Baltimore continued to enforce residential segregation through red-lining, restrictive covenants and the historical inheritance of these patterns and practices.

As Christopher Silver demonstrates in "The Racial Origins of Zoning in American Cities," city governments across the country consistently use the tools of urban planning after racial zoning laws are declared unconstitutional to maintain residential segregation and to consolidate economic power... "...the racial zoning movement is not just an historical aberration of the pre-civil rights era, but a central feature of American planning history throughout the twentieth century." As elsewhere in the United States, the city government in Baltimore used both legal and extra-legal means to control the accumulation of property and wealth by black citizens.

The construction of confederate monuments in Baltimore was in part a feature of this broad network of spatial planning that linked private and public institutions to both symbolically and materially enforce white supremacy. Cultural institutions, in particular the Municipal Art Society and the Baltimore Museum of Art, played a crucial role in linking private citizens' efforts to install confederate monuments with the resources and the legal power of the city. Like zoning, permitting processes also pinpoint the dynamics of city planning as an overt tool of racism. Of the four confederate statues removed in 2017, the double equestrian monument to Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson in Wyman Dell demonstrates this most explicitly and particularly how these dynamics continued late into the 20th century and reverberate into the present.

Ferguson, the sculpture's benefactor, lived through a period of tremendous growth in Baltimore, during which questions of adequate housing and struggles over segregation dominated the spatial politics of the city. He certainly must have followed with interest the enactment of the racist zoning law and the city's attempts to enforce that law, even going as far as sending a brief written by the solicitor general to the Supreme Court in Buchanan vs. Wiley in 1917. It's certainly possible that, as the head of a large financial institution, he may have had a hand in instituting red-lining policy. Rather than an artifact of history or an emblem of reconciliation, the Jackson-Lee monument was directly caught up in struggles over racist spatial policy and the ongoing attempts of white Baltimoreans to impose symbolic and material supremacy over people of color living in the city.

Missing from the accounts of the history of the statue is how, as the black population of the city increased dramatically, activists and everyday people consistently pushed to desegregate housing, education and public transportation in Baltimore. Against the efforts of the economic and political power brokers of the city, organizations like the NAACP and grassroots community groups consistently agitated against the logic of white supremacy. The archive fails to explicitly articulate the scale of attempts at white domination at the same time that it glosses over the the ways that poor people and people of color undermined, through struggle, the narratives of containment and separation that structure the white spatial imagination in Baltimore, and are given material form in public sculpture.

For many years, the monument served as the meeting site for colonial re-enactors. Yearly celebrations honoring the generals often coincided with the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., sometimes provoking counter demonstrations or silent vigils. In 2008, after twenty years of hosting receptions for those honoring the lost cause, Johns Hopkins University refused to rent a hall to the sons and daughters of the Confederacy. News reports cited complaints about the confederate flag flying on the Hopkins campus and the inauguration of the first black president in the nation the same month.

In 2015, after the white supremacist murder of 9 congregants in a church in Charleston, SC and growing pressure from Black Lives Matter activists, then Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake formed a commission to study three confederate monuments and a statue of Supreme court justice Roger Taney, the author of the Dred Scott decision, in Baltimore. The findings of the commission highlighted the ongoing financial commitment by the city, as the department of parks and recreation maintained the monuments. Throughout the life of the Jackson Lee sculpture, the institutional infrastructure of the city had supported the installation and preservation of this monument to white supremacy - economically, bureaucratically and culturally. Acknowledging how deeply white supremacy is woven into the fabric of city - that is to say, state - institutions is one of the steps required to undo it.

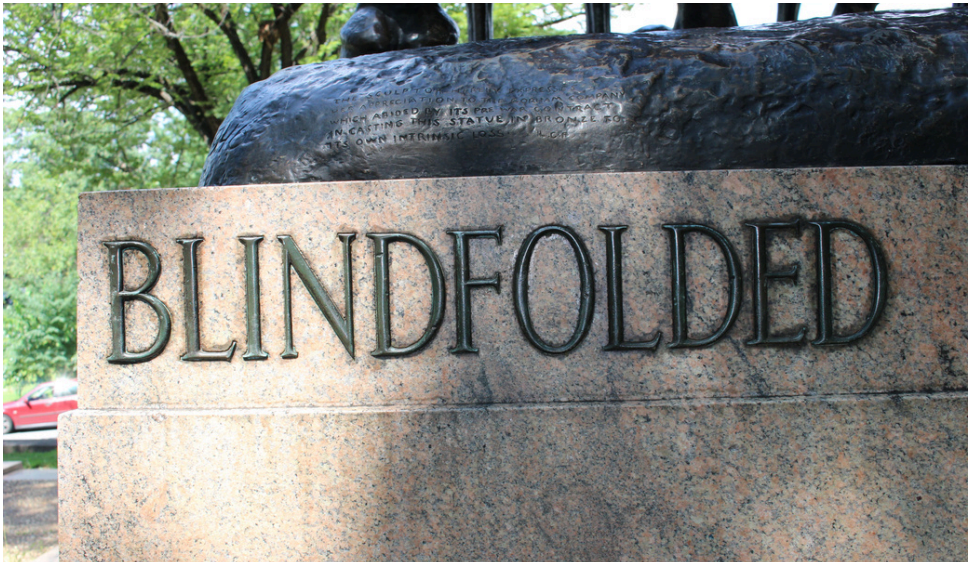
Around 1 a.m., I drove down to Wyman Dell, parked and walked towards the monument. I could see cop cars, yellow tape, two large cranes against blinding lights and a small crowd gathered around the monument. I could feel my heart beating in my chest. Racist symbols carry a lot of weight. I was excited to see it go and at the same time, uncertain of who was in that crowd and what mood was in the air. Spatial politics are shot through with the politics of memory – Suddenly I was remembering years and years of visits to Baltimore as a child: Climbing a tree at my grandmother's 80th birthday party in Aunt Shirley and Uncle Sol's backyard in the mid-1980's. Humid nights watching the Orioles games on TV with my cousin Charles in the front room. Trying to imagine what it must have been like when my dad attended Peabody conservatory back in the early 60's. Meeting Paul and Christine, my partner's parents for the first time and all the visits to their home since. Our families, Jews and Greeks, navigating the precarious advantages of whiteness, resisting and accommodating the perversities of structured hierarchies of difference. A visit to city hall to get a marriage license, where we watched prisoners led through the halls in chains. Time, as rendered by the monument, is a contest over memory and power.

A “Black Lives Matter” tag had been sprayed onto the base of the monument and local artist Pablo Machioli had placed a sculpture of a pregnant black woman in front of it. As workers propped up on ladders dragged bands of yellow webbing across the belly of the horses, I saw the scale, power and fragility of the thing as if for the first time. Representational sculpture often carries a bit of the uncanny and as I watched the slow, meticulous work of rigging this gigantic object, the profound strangeness of the object was clearer than ever. Though static, its meaning changed through time, harkening back to fictional heroic narratives drenched in actual blood. An object revered and despised, most often probably ignored or not even noticed at all, perched off a bucolic corner in a stand of trees.

In *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War and Monument*, Kirk Savage writes at length about how Robert E. Lee became the cult figure of the Lost Cause. He suggests that it is precisely the heroic representation of Lee and his horse Traveler rendered gracefully that portrays human dominion over animals as a natural phenomenon and reinforces the centuries-old armature that treats whiteness and masculinity as superior, ideal categories of being. Detailing the intensely fought struggles over the installation of a sixty foot high statue of Lee in Richmond, VA in 1890, Savage notes the complete inversion of confederate rhetoric as an attempt to rehabilitate the battle to preserve slavery as a struggle for freedom, cast in the language of states rights. Art is called upon to mediate not only the spatial struggles for segregation but to do the work of rendering history as precisely the thing it was not. Culture is called upon to do the work of racial reconciliation, even as the structures of white supremacy endure. Likewise, the long debates in Baltimore over Fraser's rendering of Jackson and Lee echo the representational struggles in Richmond. Fraser's critics argued her rendering of Lee's hat was incorrect, his horse not quite right, his pose insufficiently heroic. Savage makes it clear that these discussions were not abstract but instead "soon reveals slavery's hidden cultural work as a controlling absence, with a subtle but nevertheless crucial impact on the sculptural configuration of Southern white heroism."

That night I saw again how prominent the horses are in that statue. Elevated on a marble pedestal, from almost every vantage point it is two horses engaged in a delicate choreography that greet the viewer. Lee's horse appears still and looks towards the ground, echoing the pose made canonical in Richmond and Jackson's horse is on the move, one foot moving forward, head arching up. These two enormous horses rendered with exquisite muscular precision idealize moral virtue and symbolically erase the violence required to enforce domination:

"The equestrian Lee is at once a retrospective image of the benevolent master, good to his inferiors, and a prospective image of a postwar white government claiming to know what is best for its own black population. The great power of this equestrian image was that it could bridge the old regime of slavery and the new regime of white rule without explicitly representing either; it helped legitimate the continuity between the two even as it disguised the physical and institutional forces that propped up both of them."



And now it was going away. With a creak and a joyful cheer from the crowd, the enormous object separated from the base and hung in the air. Suspended over the truck which would eventually carry it away, it also seemed somehow suspended in space and time. Suspended between the hollow "debates" about the fate of confederate monuments and an honest reckoning with the legacy of white supremacy in the United States. Between lofty symbolism and harsh realities. Between a benefactor who worked for colonial trust, materials delayed because of colonial wars and people in the streets demanding decolonization. Between capitalism's cultures and cultural capital.

The contest of meaning continues: If there is no agreement on the meaning of the statue in place, if in fact it only ultimately meant something about the conflict and antagonism it tried to paper over, what could the removal possible mean? Activists in Baltimore articulated over and over again a particular conundrum: if the symbols of white supremacy are removed and yet the structures remain, what in fact has changed? No one denies the power of symbols – on the contrary, the Jackson/Lee monument reaffirms how deeply symbols are woven into the fabric of economic and institutional arrangements. But residential segregation, vastly disparate access to education and economic opportunity, and vulnerability to pre-mature death remain as racial-economic structures. Everything changes, and yet, so much stays the same.

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May 15, 1948, the editorial board of *The Baltimore Afro-American* Newspaper

IN REMOVING THE MONUMENT, BALTIMORE CITY COUNTER-INTUITIVELY CLARIFIED ITS MEANING AND - IN ACKNOWLEDGING ALL OF THE VIOLENCE AND STRUGGLE IN DEFIANCE OF WHAT WHITE SUPREMACY STANDS FOR - AFFIRMS THE POTENTIAL FOR PEOPLE TO PUSH BACK AGAINST STATE SANCTIONED FORMS OF RACIAL DOMINATION.