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Dead Monuments

Pre-publication draft

Please cite final version in Issue 91 of *The Philosopher's Magazine*

In the past few months, we've witnessed citizen groups from all over the world protesting racist monuments and demanding their removal. In some cases, the statues were graffitied, in others they were forcibly toppled. Now, even more are coming down with the aid of local governments.

Following George Floyd's murder, protesters toppled the statue of Jefferson Davis formerly erected on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia. A month later, Richmond removed several surrounding monuments. After a statue of Christopher Columbus was decapitated this past summer in Boston, its pieces were removed and placed in storage. In England, a monument to slave-trader Edward Colson was toppled and thrown into Bristol Harbour.

I leave it to others to provide guidance for which monuments should be taken down and by what specific criteria. But I'd like to discuss what should be done once these statues are removed. I will argue that we should allow racist monuments to die, and leave their bones bare in a monument graveyard. The removal of statues has been powerfully symbolic; how we treat them in their death can be, too.

Some have responded to the recent calls to tear down racist monuments with puzzlement – why should we spend our time and resources on symbolic actions rather than addressing the root of such problems? Why, in other words, should we care about these monuments?

Simply put, we should care because people care. As C. Thi Nguyen argues in "Monuments as Commitments: How Art Speaks to Groups and How Groups Think in Art," monuments express group commitments. Groups can use them to communicate across time and generations. While we might approach these monuments as solitary individuals, their meaning is derived from our collective experience. By placing a monument in a public place, we are staking our claim on public values and public memory. If monuments embody group commitments, we may rightfully decide to jettison values that no longer serve us – and the monuments which embody these values.

Public monuments embody public meanings; this is evidenced not only by the protesters who want to topple racist monuments, but by the governments wedded to keeping them erect. For example, the Foreign Minister of Spain reportedly sent several letters to the United States expressing concern over statues of Spanish explorers that have recently been vandalised or removed. Spain is concerned with how our shared history is being retold. The White House announced an executive order to rebuild the toppled monuments, forming a "Task Force for Building and Rebuilding Monuments to America Heroes." Trump called the toppling of these statues "an assault on our collective national memory," ordering U.S. marshals to protect these symbols during protests. This evidence suggests a war on narratives is being fought, which will determine what values we should honour and which people are worthy of standing on a pedestal.

In "The Necessity for Ruins," essayist and cultural geographer, J.B. Jackson distinguished several purposes of monuments. The first is to remind us of a debt that is owed and the second is to commemorate "a golden age." He states, "A traditional monument, as the origin of the word

indicates, is an object which is supposed to remind us of something important. That is to say, it exists to put people in mind of some obligation they have incurred: a great public figure, a great public event, a great public declaration which the group had pledged itself to honour.”

Traditional monuments bring the past into the present.

The second purpose of a monument is to memorialise a specific event or list specific names. These types of monuments do not try to remind us of any particular obligation; rather they are an attempt to commemorate “a golden age.” These monuments are to “The Old Days” and attempt to “safeguard our heritage” or “keep alive our cherished traditions.” Many contested monuments in the United States are of this second sort. While confederate statues adorned cemeteries right after the Civil War, they did not appear *en masse* in town squares and other public sites until the 20th century. For example, the United Daughters of the Confederacy spearheaded the building of 400 monuments to shape our collective memory of the past. Rather than remind us of a debt owed to Confederate soldiers, these monuments serve to remind people of the Confederacy’s values. These monuments stand as group commitments to shared values, demanding of us – through time – to uphold these values.

David Lowenthal (author of *The Past is a Foreign Country*) argues that: “Monuments embellish the past by evoking some epoch’s splendour, some person’s power or genius, some glorious or piteous occasion. Created after the event, they honour the past in late guise.” He discusses the history of the modern monument stating that early American and European monuments reminded people how to behave and what to believe. Monuments – according to Lowenthal – aggrandise and abridge the past. Lowenthal and Jackson do not distinguish monuments from memorials, blurring the two categories together. While memorials may also aggrandise and abridge the past, I believe some characteristics make memorials distinct from monuments.

Memorials evoke a shared mournful experience. Some of the most powerful memorials are those on sites where people lost their lives or where their earthly remains remain. The sense of time distinguishes memorials from monuments. As discussed earlier, monuments want us to remember some value or act – bringing it into the present with us. Memorials are more retrospective. According to Lowenthal, “The memorial act itself implies termination.... Being commemorated alive makes us queasy.” Graveyards serve as literal memorials, but so do more communal sites, such as the Vietnam War Memorial. Importantly, memorials allow us to grieve, both privately and communally.

I propose that removed statues be placed in a monument graveyard. This would transfigure a monument, whose purpose is to honour a person or evoke a “glorious past,” into a memorial, whose purpose is to help us grieve. Thus, we dethrone the man who committed violent racists acts, like Edward Colson, and place the statue’s corpse in a graveyard. This repurposing will give old monuments new meanings more in line with our contemporary values.

The idea of a monument graveyard is not new. Monuments have been intentionally toppled, re-erected, and placed in graveyards throughout history. Cultural geographers Jordan Brasher and Derek Alderman suggested a Confederate Statue Graveyard several years ago, modelling a potential graveyard after the former communist block nations’ handling of the statues of Lenin and Stalin. One such Soviet state graveyard is in Tallinn, Estonia. Decapitated Lenin heads were “dumped” behind the Museum of Estonian History on the outskirts of town. These statues do not look intentionally placed or well looked after, yet I believe their being strewn about is meaningful conceptual framing. They – and what they stand for – are not worth care. Some of

these statues are upright, others are placed on their side. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to their placement. A visitor to the graveyard blogged: “The statue graveyard is odd, to say the least. Everything here seems to fit into some kind of purgatorial limbo. The statues are not respected enough to be displayed as history but are culturally significant enough not to just be destroyed. Are the Estonians hedging their bets, prepared to put them back on the streets if the Russians suddenly invade again one day, like the ugly vase your grandmother gave you?”

Another monument graveyard can be found in Memento Park in Budapest, Hungary. Conceptualised as an open-air museum, Memento Park houses statues of Lenin and former Hungarian Communist leaders. The park, designed by architect Ákos Eleőd, is heavily curated – divided into two sections: Statue Park, and Witness Square. Statue Park, named “A Sentence About Tyranny” Park, comprises 42 statues removed from Budapest while Witness Square houses a collection of monumental statues. Grutas Park, unofficially known as Stalin’s World, in Lithuanian, is another sculpture garden replete with Soviet-era statues. However, both Memento and Grutas Parks read more like museums than memorial graveyards.

A monument graveyard leaves monuments to decay. As such, these graveyards can be conceived of as ruins. I believe one of the most salient features of ruins is that they are objects in transition, in the process of decay. Thus, every time we visit ruins, we encounter different aesthetic properties. Elsewhere I have referred to this as the tripartite nature of ruins – the fact that ruins ask us to reimagine the past, engage with what’s on the ground in the present, and project ourselves into the future. In this sense, ruins stand apart from monuments and memorials. Ruins have a distinct contemplative and aesthetic function. Monuments and memorials ask us to remember the past, ruins ask more of us: to imagine those who came before, to engage in the present, and to project into the future.

While ruins serve as effective memento mori, they are not effective memorials, since their ephemerality does not allow us to fix time. So while monuments and memorials attempt to keep time static, ruins allow time to be contemplated, history to be in flux. If the traditional role of the monument is to force spectators into a passive stance and dictate history, a monument graveyard would involve its audience in active contemplation. Within the context of a monument graveyard, the focus will be not on keeping time static or bringing a moment in time or commitment to the present. Rather, it will ask us to focus on the racist legacy of the past, to reflect on what our country looks like today, and will ask us to imagine what it could be in the future.

Placing a racist monument in a graveyard is a symbolic act of disavowing previously held beliefs. We don’t just put racism to bed, but allow it to rot before our eyes. A monument graveyard is an attempt to memorialise not the men that bear the statue’s face but to memorialise those who suffered oppression at the hands of those men. A graveyard is a place for grieving, and we need time to grieve to acknowledge wounds. The wounds of racism and colonialism are still oozing. Perhaps a place to witness these statues rot and ruinate could be healing for some.

A natural question to ask at this point is what would a monument graveyard look like? Would we physically bury the monuments? Historian Elizabeth Archibald advocates for ritual burial, an option with a historical precedent. She researched intentionally buried monuments from the 18th century when a group of Byzantine explorers took down Constantinople’s monuments from its pagan past. The book that describes this practice, *Parastaseis Syntomoni Chronikai* (“Brief Historical Notes”), advocates for burying some worrisome pagan statues to neutralise their

supernatural powers. Professor Archibald is not the only person who has advocated for an underground burial for these monuments. In a particularly powerful piece published in *Forbes* in 2019, art critic Jonathon Keats also advocated for literal statue burial. He argued, “We can bury the statues of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson – literally put them under dirt – with tombstone epitaphs composed by the descendants of those they oppressed.”

I, however, am not in favour of interring toppled statues. A ritual burial might be giving them (and the ideas they stand for) more than they deserve. Burying a monument is too symbolic of the idea that what the monument represents is fully dead. But these wounds are still open; the ideas these monuments represent are not dead. Like ruins, these statues and the racist ideals they espouse are in transition. If the goal of removing statues is to rectify racial injustice or to attest to different shared values, allowing the statues to be buried or warehoused out of sight does not fulfil that goal. Nor does contextualising the statues in museums, which gives them (and the ideas they represent) an air of legitimacy. At the same time, allowing these statues to stand tall is still putting these men and their values (literally) on pedestals. So, too, would burying them the way one buries a loved one.

Racist statues must be felled; they must not remain on pedestals but be toppled. Likewise, such statues should not be “saved” from the ravages of time; they should wither and decay. One worry we saw from the Estonian example was that a monument graveyard could be seen as a way-station or monument purgatory, a place for monuments while they are out of vogue only to be re-erected when times shift again. Allowing the statues to decay allays this worry. They should not be cleaned; they should be allowed to be reabsorbed into the landscape. They should be allowed to ruinate.

My proposal is to turn racist monuments into ruins, and through ruination, turn monuments into a memorial. Ruinating monuments show us that these objects are not worthy of protection and better reflect contemporary values in decay. We need not start from scratch when imagining what our monument graveyard will look like. Not only is history replete with examples, but we can also turn to modern artists for help. Artists Do-Ho Suh, Caryn Olivier, and Nicholas Galanin have already helped us re-imagine monuments by challenging their authority and permanence. As I write this, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation announced a \$250 million “Monument Project” to reimagine commemorative spaces. Part of the funds is earmarked for relocating existing monuments. I believe that once we bring these men down from their pedestals, we should deliver them to a graveyard. Both monuments and memorial can unintentionally legitimise the history they represent. By allowing a monument to ruinate in a graveyard we can create a contemplative space to grieve the past, see our current moment in time, and imagine a better future.