

# The New York Times

Opinion

OP-ART

## Monuments for a New Era

What should replace statues celebrating the Confederacy? Six artists imagine a way forward.

Aug. 10, 2018

A year ago, torch-carrying white nationalists who opposed a plan to remove a statue of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee from a Charlottesville, Va., city park convened for a “Unite the Right” rally, where a participant killed a counterprotester. After the tragedy, that statue and another honoring Stonewall Jackson were shrouded, but only temporarily. Around the country, similar monuments have been removed. In some cases, only their pedestals remain.

We asked artists to contemplate these markers of our country’s racist and violent history — the space they take up, physically and psychically — and imagine what should happen when they are gone.

Dread Scott

It has taken a tremendous effort to remove the Confederate statues that have been taken down so far. This is a great beginning. I’d like to replace the 68-foot-4-inch column and base that for 133 years provided a platform for a figure of the white supremacist general Robert E. Lee with an anti-monument. I’d call it The Legacy of Slavery Is in the Way of Progress and Will Be Until America, Which Benefits From That Legacy, Has Been Replaced With a Completely Different Society.



A vision for the Robert E. Lee Monument in New Orleans: The statue of Lee was removed in May 2017, but the column remains. Credit Artwork by Dread Scott; Photograph by Annie Flanagan for The New York Times

Rather than sticking a monument to an African-American hero atop the structure that was once a pedestal for a racist, I would lay the upended column across the road — which is still called Lee Circle — making it impassable. This broken and shattered ruin would be an intentionally inconveniently placed eyesore, disrupting travel and commerce. The placement would demand that visitors confront how slavery and the ideals that maintained and rationalized it continue to stand in our way. A 84-foot-10-inch-deep hole (representing the height of the former monument including the now removed statue of Lee) would create a gaping abyss. There would be no barriers to protect people from falling in.

### Ekene Ijeoma

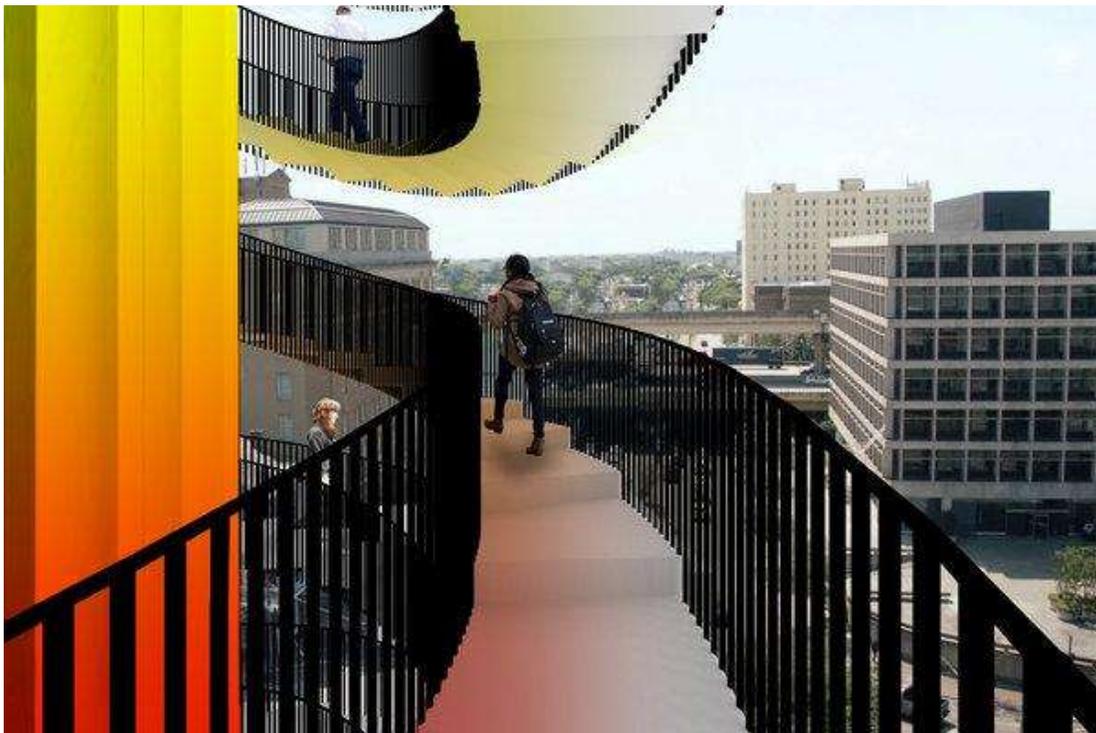
This reimagined monument transforms visitors from spectators of history to participants in a shared memory. It creates a space for confronting America's history of slavery and segregation — acknowledging their ongoing manifestations and the healing that can take place through reconciliation.



A plan to transform what remains of the Robert E. Lee Monument in New Orleans into a “living monument.” Credit Artwork by Studio Ijeoma/Michael Yarinsky Design; Photograph by Annie Flanagan for The New York Times



CreditStudio Ijeoma/Michael Yarinsky Design



CreditStudio Ijeoma/Michael Yarinsky Design

Inspired by the design agency Zerflin's project "But Slavery Was So Long Ago...", the six-story stone pedestal is stained red to represent the 339 years of American slavery, yellow for the 89 years of

American segregation and green for 60 plus more years of American inequality. The glass sky room allows participants to stand on the platform where Robert E. Lee's statue stood for 133 years. In this way, they become living monuments. Participants leave the room the way they entered. Walking up, they are reminded of how difficult it has been to get to where we are. Walking down, they're encouraged to think of how easy it is for us to forget. Passing one another on the double-helix stairway, they're reminded of today's ongoing struggle for justice and equality.

Nicole Awai

Near my home in Brooklyn is the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Arch that stands at Grand Army Plaza at the main entrance to Prospect Park as a tribute to defenders of the Union. It includes the figure of a crouching African-American man who seems to be surveying and assessing the battle situation.



An alternative to the Confederate monuments recently removed from Austin, Tx. and other locations around the country. Credit Artwork by Nicole Awai; Photograph by Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

He is confidently poised, holding his gun with his arm comfortably propped up across his knee next to a cannon, calmly awaiting the action to come. He is never a victim. For me he is truly an alchemist, a person who transforms or creates through a seemingly magical process, who has the power to

transform things for the better. He inspired this piece, which I call “The Spirit of Persistent Resistance of the Liquid Land.” It could alight anywhere and activate and occupy any of the recently divested plinths of Confederate monuments.

### Ariel Rene Jackson

As a New Orleanian, I see the Live Oak as more than just a common tree found in my city. It’s a marker of years past and years to come. To me, it represents the different races of people who came together to create a unique culture. To embrace the diversity of New Orleans is to embrace your neighbor’s culture while also celebrating your own.

I’m glad that the Beaugard monument has been taken down. When I imagine a replacement monument that reflects the diversity and creolization of New Orleans, I imagine an abstract Live Oak tree interpreted four ways, with each version covered in a soil type that is found in Louisiana. Driving on the roundabout, passers-by see the Live Oak Tree in its three-dimensionality. Each side has a unique look, but they all come together, forming a kind of family tree.

### Titus Kaphar

It is not enough to simply rename our buildings, tear down our statues and de-accession the relics of our flawed past. What do we do with the monuments of men whose values stand in utter contradiction to the Constitutional edicts that we hold so dear? I suggest what I call “Monumental Inversions” — sculptural amendments to our national monuments. The current iterations of this series I’ve created are made of wood, glass and marble.



A proposal for a series of “monumental inversions.” Credit Artwork by Titus Kaphar; Photograph courtesy of the artist and Princeton University Art Museum

Mold making is a fundamental stage for most sculptural work, but molds are rarely counted as works of art in their own right. Sculptural positives — the work they produce — are the objects to which we ascribe value. Presented as part of the final piece, molds suggest the latent potential of those immutable values from which American ideals are cast. Molten glass is blown into empty wooden molds, charring the surface. What emerges are distortions of the original sculptural reference. These “distorted replicas” are emblematic of our struggle as a society to conform our realities to the ideal.

### Kenya (Robinson)

Keep the statues. Keep the men on their horses, or at the top of the steps on Wall Street, or with a right hand forever tucked into a fitted vest, or with a finger pointed to a horizon of stolen riches. Because we need a visual reminder of our stubborn tendency to elevate mediocrity. Think of it as an educational defense against the kind of racism-obscuring erasure we continue to see — like textbooks that rename trans-Atlantic human trafficking the “Triangular Trade.”



An argument that all Confederate monuments are for the birds. CreditArtwork by Kenya (Robinson); Photographs by Edu Bayer for The New York Times, and Farinoza and Chamnan Phanthong, via Adobe Stock

Around each monument, I propose a sanctuary for African gray parrots. A wrought-iron flight cage with elevated walkways, providing a perched perspective, and featuring a cacophony of feathered talkers with unusual catchphrases. Or we could mimic a preschool project by coating the offending objects with peanut butter, shaking seed on the surface — massive feeders across the nation. George Washington Carver would be proud.

“Monuments for a New Era.” *The New York Times*, 10 August 2018. [online]