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Statues & Reclaiming Space-Time

A Focus on One Aspect of the Revolt in Richmond

Monadists

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May 27, 2021

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I wrote this so that a history of these protesters and their uprising may be preserved. This is not a comprehensive history of what happened but just one part of it. My goal was to illustrate the agency of the protesters in the events that unfolded, not the agency of politicians and powerful men, as history is typically written. This was an unprecedented revolt for Black liberation and Black autonomy. It was one of the most significant periods of revolt in Richmond's history since the Confederacy burned down the city in their retreat in 1865.

No politician aided it.

The efforts of politicians to take back this history while police take back physical space shows how they view this reclaimed space-time as a threat to their very existence. Unfortunately, they currently continue to lay claim to these.

Yet still...

The present remains unwritten

When we do this, we change our whole view of history from our angle. In doing so, we are engaging in an odd sort of time travel, in which time itself ruptures and stops, and the past leaps forward into the present and is redeemed. This is a reclaiming of the past. It is a messianic time and a rupture in our way of understanding space-time.

This is precisely what happens when a statue commemorating those who fought for slavery, built by the wealth stolen through slavery, is transformed into a space of community and joy by the descendants of the enslaved in a single night. **In the moments of destruction and appropriation of these monuments, every moment of despair and anguish as those Black Richmonders in the past have looked upon those statues, is called forth instantly, to be redeemed in the present.**

...

Afterword

In January 2021, the State of Virginia reclaimed the statue, building large heavy-duty fences around it to prevent people from forming community there and, rumor has it, to protect the time capsule in the cornerstone. They said it was to prepare to take down the statue, but that was six months ago.

As the state attempts to take back reclaimed space, it is no coincidence that politicians attempt to take back reclaimed history as well.

Mayor Stoney recently published a New York Times article in which he wrote an utterly false tale about how he led efforts to take down the statues and how the police violence was an accident along the way. That may be the only New York Times article profiling the timeline of events in Richmond that exists, and so Stoney's revisionist history will likely shape how outsiders understand what happened in Richmond in the summer of 2020.

Do statues actually matter?

This is a question many activists in the south have grappled with in recent years. Some argue that statues don't affect people's lives directly; they just represent something symbolic and that getting rid of statues doesn't have a concrete, material gain for individuals.

This would probably be true if statues were stand-alone, if they didn't come coupled with the labor and time stolen and put into them, with the histories they invoke (and erase) as well as the histories they help create themselves, and with the surrounding cities that work in tandem with them to achieve certain ideological objectives.

Instead, statues claim both space and time, in their physical construction and in the histories they occupy. They serve as time capsules, haunted by the past, bringing it forth to spectators in the present.

How might we break the clicking clock in Lee's coat pocket and free the past for reclamation?

...

Richmond's statues vs. Richmonders

The Daughters of the Confederacy was founded squarely with the principle that, in fact, monuments did matter. They mattered for constructing a mythologized history of the Confederacy, and in doing so, perpetuating the "Lost Cause" myth: that the south never had a fighting chance, that they were vastly overpowered by a Northern invading army while just trying to preserve their sovereignty and property rights (for whites to own Blacks), and so they were martyred for their ideals.

This myth also perpetuated the lie that slaves in the American south had been happy with slavery, that slavery was benign, and that slavery had been the best possible thing for a people who

were considered by whites to be docile, savage, and immoral. They believed that the ideas from the bourgeois revolutions of the century past about human equality and self-determination did not apply to Black people; that Black people could not and would not participate in such revolutions without outside influence, because their humanity was lesser, and therefore void of the same notions of “rights.” This conception of southernness and whiteness, which views the dead of the Confederacy as martyrs to white southerners alongside the idea that Black people in the United States are too docile and therefore incapable of having their own revolution without outside influence, is a set of ideas that continue to live till this day thanks in part to the memorializing of the Daughters of the Confederacy.

The Daughters of the Confederacy was established twenty-nine years after the end of the Civil War, in 1894, and spent the decades after funding the erection of Confederate monuments all over the country, particularly in the south. To perpetuate their conception of southernness and whiteness, they materialized a revisionist history in the form of monuments so that they could create cultural icons around figures of the Confederacy.

When a victor wins a war, they construct statues to their icons, and the loser typically does not. But the Daughters of the Confederacy understood that their war would extend well into the future, and so their iconography must as well. Not only did their iconography last many decades, but in recent years, they gained more attention (and in some cases active support) than ever before.

...

But while the Daughters of the Confederacy were convinced of their mission and the importance of monuments, we still have to ask ourselves how and why do they really matter today?

The Lee Statue at Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia (the former capital of the Confederacy) preceded the Daughters of the Confederacy, and the idea for the statue preceded the idea for Mon-

conditions of humanity: a history of progress. Instead, Benjamin invokes the painting *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee as a metaphor to explain how history should actually be viewed. The painting features an angel facing the viewer and seemingly drifting backwards.

A Klee painting named ‘*Angelus Novus*’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Benjamin suggests that the fault of historical materialists is that their conception of a history of progress is from a warped perspective, in that history is defined by victors, in a series of successions from the last. While we should view history like the angel drifting backwards, seeing the piles of rubble stack on top of one another in the distance as time passes, with those who did not reach redemption in their lifetimes lost in the wake. **Benjamin suggests that our true mission in the present is to redeem the past.**

There is no inevitable progress of history, it is an optical illusion, and instead, the present is what you make of it.

Rather than waiting for a revolutionary future to save us, we instead have to engage in revolutionary action which saves this past in our present, and therefore **the perfect time for action is now!**

time, but instead of being reanimated for Black people, they are reanimated to serve the agency of white property owners who weaponize these statues against the Black descendants whose ancestors' labor they stole.

But in certain moments, this paradigm bursts at its seams. Sometimes Black people in Black revolt declare themselves as the proper owners of that which has been stolen from them. In acts of looting and destruction, poor and working-class Black people are not just engaging in what white media refers to as senseless nihilism, but instead are engaging in acts that are spiritual and rooted in liberation: by taking back the autonomy stored as dead-time in the commodity-form, and in choosing to use or destroy it, they are truly embracing that autonomy. This idea that Black revolt can engage in this time-hacking and reclaim the primitive accumulation that was stolen from their predecessors is the absolute kryptonite to the American colony.

...

As Walter Benjamin awaited what he saw as inevitable Nazi capture in 1940, before fleeing to Spain and committing suicide, he wrote one final piece, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," where he lamented the almost religious aspect of Marxists' historical materialism, which seeks to keep its adherents waiting for the proper moment for change, or rupture, which will happen when the material circumstances are perfect. For someone awaiting certain doom by Nazi capture, this was a hopeless vision, as it is a hopeless vision for the millions of people who have perished and anguished due to systems built on white supremacy and colonialism. The idea that "progress is on the way, you just have to be patient and calm down" continues to be invoked in various liberal and leftist iterations.

Benjamin goes further with his critique and says the problem of historical materialists is viewing the past as something that remains linear after each moment passes by, and in doing so, they view the past as a series of events which continue to improve the

ument Avenue itself. Funding for a Lee statue began being raised in 1870 after Lee's death, and the city began plans for the avenue in 1887, erecting it in 1890. The unveiling drew in one hundred thousand people and marked Monument Avenue as a place of pilgrimage for those that saw themselves connected to the legacy of the Confederacy. The Daughters of the Confederacy headquarters would eventually be established a few blocks from the end of the avenue, and they helped raise funds for other statues to be erected on the avenue while simultaneously erecting similar statues across the country.

In Richmond, Virginia, Monument Avenue was constructed into empty fields past the ends of the existing urban area at the time, on land donated by a land speculator, Otway Allen. This area designated in the middle of nothing, where these monuments were to be constructed, would become one of the most central streets in an urbanized area in the 20th century. Looking at Monument Avenue this way, it becomes apparent how the myths of the past became integrally intertwined with the daily lives of southerners and their urbanizing environments throughout the 20th century, especially in the case of Richmonders.

These monuments grew alongside the growing urbanism of the American south, including as more Black people began to move into them after the end of slavery and throughout the Great Migrations, as cities got blacker and blacker while these monuments remained. Over time, the city of Richmond's civic identity became largely defined by Monument Avenue, and by relation, the "Lost Cause" myth. Otway Allen, the land speculator who donated the land for the Lee statue, would become a Virginia delegate and would be seminal in helping pass a constitutional amendment that disenfranchised poor and working-class Black Virginians after Reconstruction. This newly strengthened sector of "Lost Cause" civic society was, in part, a reaction against the modest foothold that a coalition of working-class Black people had gained in Richmond city government in the 1880s, during

Reconstruction, of whom city council members opposed a Lee unveiling ceremony “to get up a big parade to benefit only a certain class of people.”

But the statues remained well-protected, in part because as Richmond urbanized throughout the 20th century, old white money moved in where it felt it rightly belonged, along Monument Avenue. Otway Allen changed his occupation in the city directory from “farmer” to “capitalist” two years after the construction of the Lee statue, representative of the capitalist class’s shift from plantations and slavery to alliances within manufacturing in the American south, and also representative of the shifting gentry who moved into Monument Avenue as it developed. This gentry was set on creating an enclave of old white money on Monument Avenue as the city of Richmond grew. From its beginning in 1890, every deed on Monument Avenue forbade the sale or lease of any property to Black people. By 1910, 85% of households on Monument Avenue had live-in servants, the vast majority of whom were Black women.

...

To think that these statues stood alone, disconnected from the experience of daily life in the city of Richmond, would be incorrect. There is an idea from the Situationists called unitary urbanism: that there is a combined effect from the aggregated material forms that urbanism has on those that experience it. That every section of an urban area has a unique unified experience on those who pass through it because different modes of urbanism work in conjunction: everything from the masonry of a building, to how streets are laid out, to the width of the street, to the sign that stops you at the end of the street, to the passing guard that discriminately arrests you when you cross the street illegally. All these things taken together have a unified effect on the person going through urban space.

Likewise, Confederate statues grew into the unified urban effect of the American south as its cities developed, and existed in

destroyed. They knew they were speaking to the future. In building these statues and passing legislation that would preserve them forever, they were playing with the nature of time, **making all of Monument Avenue a giant time capsule itself, which would defy their own deaths and survive long after them.**

...

Where is time?

The spirit is something that is immaterial that continues to exist in the material world, something that defies time by projecting the past into the future.

Similarly, dead-labor or dead-time is the labor that occupies the capital and commodities that are created by it. Labor that was once alienated from those who produced it but remains still in the commodity form. America as a project, as a colony, is one massive pile of dead-time, the base of which is almost exclusively from African slaves.

The three-hundred-year-old bricks at the base of some streets in Richmond are not simply bricks; they are also the weeks, days, years, lifetimes stolen from Black people. It is also everything that time represents to a living being. It is self-determination, autonomy, freedom, agency. Slavery and the systems of labor that followed stole all those things and embodied them in material forms.

But this dead-time, this labor continues to exist today and is foundational to this colony. Sometimes this labor is just a brick; sometimes it is bought and sold many times over for many centuries and no longer resembles its original form.

The statues on Monument Avenue, the city of Richmond, and the colony of America are not just made up of the inanimate, but instead of dead-time. The labor stolen, at the expense of Black’s people self-determination and agency, continues to live in these objects. These statues reanimate this dead-

statues themselves. Protesters were notably teargassed on June 1st at the base of the Lee statue in broad daylight in front of news cameras, for no apparent reason, a few days after protesters first laid claim to the statues. But that was just one of several dozen attacks and teargassing events that would follow in the area. In another instance, a Richmond police officer drove his vehicle through a crowd of protesters at the Lee statue. For months to follow, Richmonders stayed long nights at Marcus-David Peters Circle to prevent eviction by police and faced brutal and relentless attacks.

At one point, a police brutality tracker listed Richmond as second place for the most instances of police brutality per capita within the uprisings from the 2020 summer.

One night included over 200 curfew arrests (**about 1 out of every 1000 people in the city of Richmond**), with police searching with rifles under cars and in alleyways for protesters. Richmond Police reported using force on 94 separate incidents throughout the uprising, many of which involved the deployment of dozens of tear gas canisters and flashbangs at each instance.

...

As politicians and police worked their hardest to repress and appropriate the struggles for Black liberation in the city of Richmond (of which the statues were only one small part), I can't help but think of the foresight the Daughters of the Confederacy and those that helped perpetuate the "Lost Cause" myth must have had in conceptualizing their purpose for their successors.

They knew how long the statues would last. They knew to construct them so high and heavy that many of them would be impossible to pull down with rope and hands.

I also think about how the legend that a cornerstone of the Lee statue contains a time capsule with one of the only existing photos of Lincoln on his deathbed, which Mary Todd had wished to be

conjunction with new and developing modes of urban control on Black populations in these cities, particularly policing, redlining, and Jim Crow. Looking at it this way, the point of Monument Avenue wasn't just to communicate a message from the past. The point of Monument Avenue was to become one with the city of Richmond, and to have the city of Richmond, itself, be that message from the past.

This delivers home the point of the Daughters of the Confederacy in speaking from the past: white protectors of slavery have a right to be lifted up and praised in places like Richmond, while Black rebellions from Virginia's past are notably missing from Monument Avenue. There are no statues there to Nat Turner, nor those who rebelled at Chatham Manor, nor to abolitionists in revolt such as John Brown (in former Virginia, now West Virginia.) There is no statue on Monument Avenue to Gabriel, who organized enslaved people from 10 counties in Virginia to attack plantations in the Richmond area and then take the Governor of Virginia hostage to negotiate their freedom. Nor are there statues on Monument Avenue to the countless other unnamed rebellions of the enslaved that happened regularly over 300 years. Instead, much of that history has been erased by the same gentry that call for "preservation" on Monument Avenue.

At the same time, these statues to defenders of slavery on Monument Avenue are lifted high and praised, in some cases lifted so far above the observer that they are utterly untouchable, the Lee statue on Monument Avenue being 60 feet tall, the base of which is 46 feet. They were placed on those pedestals with the notion that there is a reason why they should be so far from the ground, because of how the future might change the perception of them. These individuals who are lifted up are the same whose armies burnt down the city of Richmond in 1865 in their retreat, no longer finding Richmond useful and hoping for the city to die with the Confederacy. When we view the statues in this way, it becomes clear that these are hostile objects to those who have to view them, both in their

physical construction and in the histories they invoke. The goal of the Daughters of the Confederacy was to preserve these people indefinitely, **not for southerners, but in spite of them.**

...

I grew up in Richmond, and I remember conversations about the statues from a very early age. Monument Avenue was one of the most notable features to outsiders visiting Richmond. But it was always something shameful to many of us.

I remember when I was young, they unveiled an Abraham Lincoln statue down at the waterfront. At the time, it was probably the only Union-related statue in the city. I went with my family to see the unveiling of the statue and I remember seeing the first protest I had ever seen there, people holding up cardboard signs shaped like pennies that read, "Lincoln wasn't worth a cent." Someone flew a plane over the event with a banner that read "Sic Semper Tyrannis," the words that John Wilkes Booth yelled as he shot Lincoln.

I remember being surprised at how passionate they were about protesting a president who had died over a century earlier. But they weren't there to protest Lincoln, but instead to protest the idea of emancipation that they had equated him with (while in actuality, the emancipation of the enslaved was far more due to their own efforts, with frequent and immense attacks on plantation society.)

But instead, they were there to protest on behalf of the mythology of southernness and whiteness that the Daughters of the Confederacy worked so hard to preserve in their own statues.

That was one of my earliest political memories.

...

It was long an accepted fact that the statues on Monument Avenue and the city of Richmond were so intertwined in their legacy that they weren't ever going away, despite being shameful to many. Around five years ago, that rhetoric started to shift slightly as areas in the periphery to Richmond and Richmond, to a lesser extent, had attention paid to Confederate statue removal.

had. It was now drenched in the paint of Black autonomous action, drenched so deep that it would be impossible to restore it to its former state.

Every week the paint deepened, making its state the previous week appear bare. Skateboarders poured concrete and laid wood boards at the base of the J. E. B. Stuart statue so it could be used as a ramp. People set up a basketball court on the lawn at the Lee statue. They played jazz. They projected Billie Holiday on the statue. They set up orchestras. Sometimes they played solo. They established community gardens. And perhaps most importantly, they surrounded the base of the statue with memorials for Black people killed by the police...

...and they renamed the area Marcus-David Peters Circle, named after Marcus-David Peters, who was killed by Richmond Police.

...

Richmonders exorcised the spirit of the Confederacy that haunted their streets for over a century in the form of monuments. But in doing so, they also started to imagine what they truly wanted their city to look like, a place that fosters community and mutual aid, that values anti-racism and solidarity, that chooses Black liberation, Black autonomy, collective joy, and revolutionary play instead of monuments to racists.

These spaces on Monument Avenue that had long haunted Richmonders were no longer places of a shameful history. Instead, they were a history of the present rebellion, a history that was changing every day. They were a place of pride, a place of rage and passion, and also joy and elation. They attracted far more foot traffic than they had ever before, including from tourists from all over.

At the same time, these were spaces of trauma for protesters, as the Richmond Police Department, Virginia State Police, and the office of Mayor Stoney declared war against them for taking their statues. From the beginning, there were continual attacks on protesters, oftentimes at the

Because the injunction, triggered by the actions of Richmonders alone, overruled any legal protections the statues had.

The city of Richmond first removed the Richmond Police Memorial on June 11th, the Stonewall Jackson statue on July 1st, two Confederate cannons on July 2nd, then Matthew Fontaine Maury on July 2nd, then J. E. B. Stuart on July 7th, the Confederate Soldiers and Sailors Monument on July 8th, the Fitzhugh Lee Cross on July 9th, the statue of Joseph Bryan on July 9th, at the Virginia State Capitol, a smaller statue of Robert E. Lee, busts of Fitzhugh Lee, J. E. B. Stuart, Stonewall Jackson, Joseph E. Johnston, Jefferson Davis, and Alexander Stephens, a plaque for Thomas Bocoock on July 24th. This doesn't include the various plaques, statues, and busts removed by multiple private institutions throughout Richmond in this period.

Out of anywhere in the world during this uprising, Richmond easily had the most removal of iconography of anywhere. **It was a period of well-justified and well overdue iconoclasm by Richmonders, a period of ruthlessly stripping away the iconography of the old world which had long haunted them.**

In addition to the statue removal, the crowds battled police for months, taking the fight to their headquarters and all over the city, elsewhere. Property was attacked and looted continuously. Two police chiefs resigned in the process.

The crowds were disproportionately Black people while other races also participated in the militant actions, including white people.

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The Reclamation

But the reinvention of the city didn't end there. The Lee statue, once a place of shame, became a meeting place for protesters. It became a base camp where people hosted events, slept overnight, played music and sports. The statue looked nothing like it once

There was the battle in North Carolina over the Silent Sam statue, which protesters eventually tore down in 2018. And of course, in Charlottesville, discussions within the city council about taking their Lee statue down ultimately escalated to the Unite the Right rally in 2017.

But while these events were playing out in Richmond's orbit, Richmond remained an untouchable place. "You could take down all the statues in the world, but they aren't going to come down in Richmond," was a familiar type of refrain from Richmonders. But if they did come down in Richmond, then surely everything else would start to fall with it.

In the wake of the Unite the Right rally, the city of Richmond invited public comments on what to do with the Monument Avenue statues through the Monument Avenue Commission. Despite strong sentiment for removal from many Richmonders, the commission resulted in more shoulder-shrugging from local politicians who pointed out various legal protections established by "Lost Cause" politicians of the past, which prevented their removal.

Throughout all the efforts for removal, wealthy property owners on Monument Avenue continued to argue that their properties' value was integrally intertwined with the "tourism" and value that the Confederate statues brought to the area. The gentry of Monument Avenue continue to have powerful friends in high places in the city of Richmond and were therefore reasonably successful at obstructing the many political efforts to get the statues taken down.

So Richmonders, seeing their city not reflecting them, did little things to change it. Throughout the years, Richmonders began attacks on the monuments, throwing paint and engaging in repeated vandalism against them. These attacks cost the city of Richmond thousands of dollars to polish off the statues, to maintain this materialized "Lost Cause" mythology. The monuments also served as a flashpoint to highlight events elsewhere. After the United the Right

rally, a banner was dropped at the Lee statue in ode to Heather Heyer, killed by fascists in Charlottesville days prior.

...

The Rupture

But then one night everything changed.

On the second night of the George Floyd uprising in Richmond on May 30th, 2020, 130 years and one day after the Lee statue had been unveiled, Richmonders descended upon Monument Avenue in a fury. **People who had been told for years they were powerless to change anything about their lives or the city they lived in were all of a sudden encumbered with Herculean strength.** They flooded west on Monument Avenue, first approaching the J. E. B. Stuart monument, where **people tore away at the iron rebar surrounding it with their bare hands, it as if it were made of cardboard, totally destroying the fencing,** and vandalizing the statue in the act.

Police fled in terror as Richmonders stormed westward towards the Lee statue. One police car got caught going eastbound against the Richmonders and, to evade them, sped at nearly 60 miles per hour in their direction as people jumped out of the way. **In response, a Richmonder picked up an entire stop sign, pole and sign in all, and one-hand lunged it like an Olympic javelin thrower directly into the front of the police car, perfectly spearing through the front window.** The police car continued at full speed with the sign hanging out of the front of the car.

When the protesters reached the Lee statue, they tore the spotlights out of the ground with their hands and applied the first layer of spray paint of what would become many hundred layers. Richmonders continued to the headquarters of the Daughters of the Confederacy, where the building was attacked and set ablaze. **Jef-**

erson Davis's personal Confederate flag was destroyed in the fire there.

A few days later, on June 6th, Richmonders tore down the statue of Williams Carter Wickham, and in doing so **tapped into a primal urge in the hearts of Richmonders: to reinvent the city in their vision.** From this point on, the attacks on statues were ordinary and ritualistic, **as though gravity were knocking them over itself.**

On June 9th, at a protest for the indigenous of Richmond, Richmonders toppled a Christopher Columbus statue. **Richmonders took the statue, which appeared to weigh several tons, and rolled it playfully like a child's bouncy ball down a hill, depositing it in a lake.** This was similar to how a slave trader statue in Bristol, of Edward Colston, had been toppled and drowned a few days earlier.

Then the Jefferson Davis Memorial was partially toppled by Richmonders on June 10th, then the Howitzer Monument on June 16th, then the First Regiment of Virginia Infantry on June 19th. Over an eerie police head statue at the Richmond Police Headquarters, someone spray-painted a giant "ACAB."

Richmonders had done it. They had proven that they could change the city that would never change with their own bare hands. Politicians were helpless and out of sight, booed at every public appearance, hiding like cowards in the shadows from the inhabitants of Richmond. **Richmonders had unleashed a wolf within them, bent on Black liberation and Black autonomy.**

So the city government politicians, out of their personal fears and in the hope of preventing damage to the rest of the statues, magically figured out how to take down the rest of the statues. **They filed an emergency injunction, declaring the statues a public safety hazard because the statues would be taken down by protesters if the city didn't. This is the most literal example of forcing someone's hand by Richmonders.**