A Questionnaire on Monuments

From Charlottesville to Cape Town, there have been struggles over monuments and other markers involving histories of racial conflict. How do these charged situations shed light on the ethics of images in civil society today? Speaking generally or with specific examples in mind, please consider any of the following questions: What histories do these public symbols represent, what histories do they obscure, and what models of memory do they imply? How do they do this work, and how might they do it differently? What social and political forces are in play in their erection or dismantling? Should artists, writers, and art historians seek a new intersection of theory and praxis in the social struggles around such monuments and markers? How might these debates relate to the question of who is authorized to work with particular images and archives?

—Leah Dickerman, Hal Foster, David Joselit, and Carrie Lambert-Beatty

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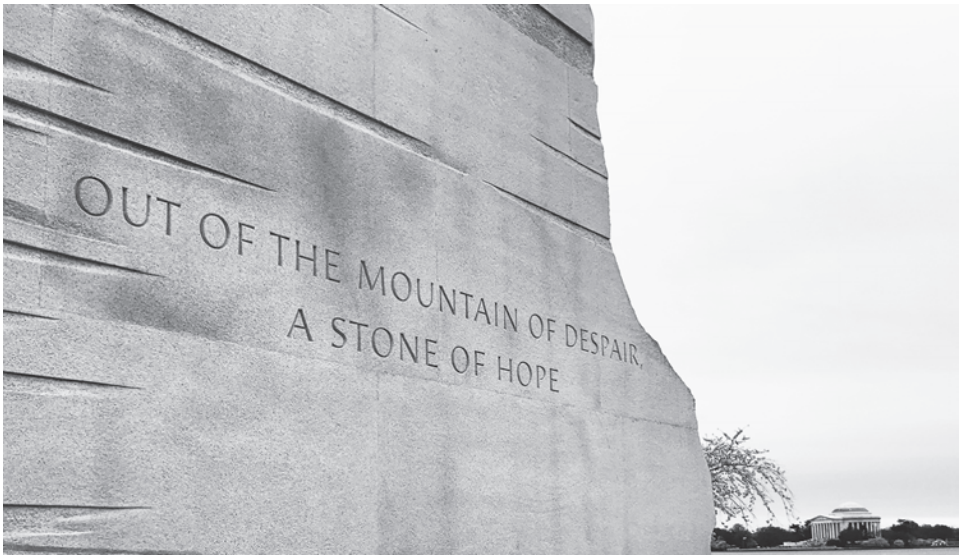
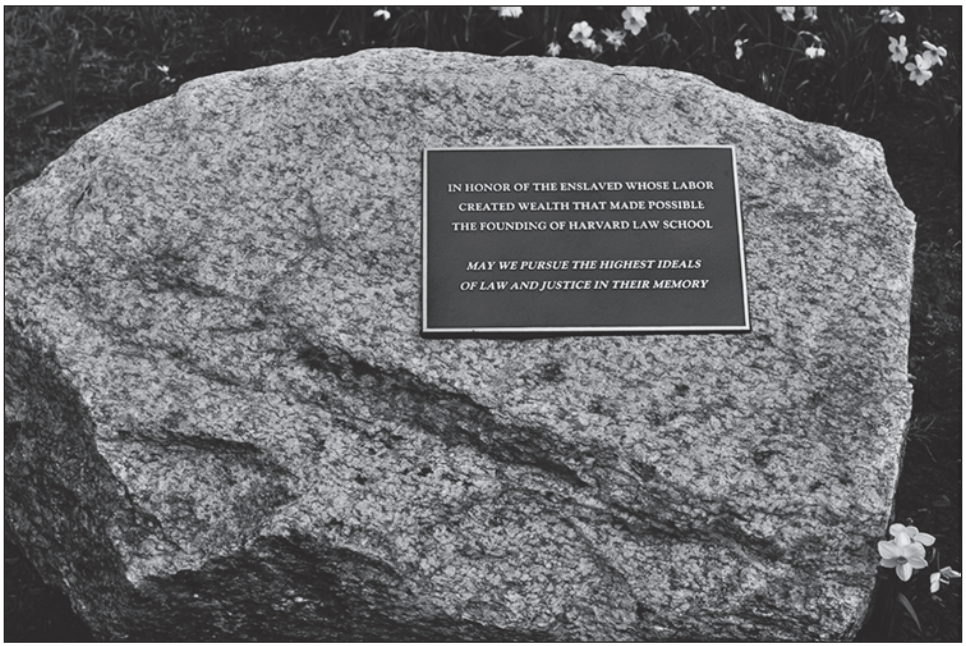
Standing next to the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial facing the Jefferson Memorial is a span of meters that allows the mind to consider the conditional tense, specifically the future-real conditional. It inspires a consideration of what will, and even must, have had to happen here, on this soil, in this country, for these two monuments to be set in relationship to one another. Tina Campt reminds us that in the context of race, possibility comes from an examination of not just the future tense—*what will be*—or even the future-perfect tense—*that which will have happened*—but the future-real conditional, or *that which will have had to happen*. It is, as she argues, an orientation toward what "should be true . . . it involves living the future now—as an imperative rather than subjunctive—as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present."[1] The future-real conditional is a tense we don't use often in conversation, but we do use it conceptually as we think about race and possibility. It is a tense that can arise, for example, when we pass (or when, generations from now, pedestrians pass), say, the Harvard Law School monument on the plaza dedicated to honor the role that slav-



Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial facing the Jefferson Memorial.

* Adapted from remarks delivered on the occasion of the "On Monuments" symposium, Harvard University, February 27, 2018, in honor of President Drew Faust.

1. Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 17.



Harvard Law School monument.
Photograph by Jon Chase.

ery played in the creation of the institution and ask what must have had to happen here for this to exist? A monument often forces this question out of its audience.

The topic of race and monuments in the American context requires such interrogatives born of the conditional tense if we are to understand the futurity of the practice in the United States. Now, you could imagine that by this question of tense, we could address the historical stratification of monuments—the material foundations. In the context of New York City, my hometown, I could talk about this in terms of Central Park and its foundations built on Seneca Village, destroyed in 1857, or Wall Street, built on the African Burial Ground. But those examples are not precisely what I'm after. Instead, I want to excavate the often hidden social, racial, and systemic conditions and strata that prevent figurative entrance into the category of American monuments for some and permit it for others. That is to say, I'm interested in how monuments are predetermined by a notion of belonging that is inscribed into aesthetic conventions.

To address this claim, I'd like to focus on narrative refusals, moments when a proposed monument could not be realized because of the tension between race, aesthetics, and form brought on by our failure to consider this conditional tense. Understanding why this is so requires revisiting the foundations born out of the Civil War, when civic society struggled to handle the new associations between freedom and race in the very composition and materiality of monuments.

Bree Newsome takes down the Confederate flag from a pole at the statehouse in Columbia, South Carolina, June 27, 2015. Photograph by REUTERS/Adam Anderson.

Let's consider the South Carolina statehouse as a case study in the conditional tense, the building often compositionally set behind the news of filmmaker, musician, and activist Brittany "Bree" Newsome scaling a thirty-foot flagpole in Columbia, South Carolina, in the dawn hours to take down the Confederate flag in 2015. I confess that I am struck by something seemingly unremarkable in the image—the blank pediment. Like many of us, I was also focused on the surrounding politics and tragedy. The day before, President Barack Obama had eulogized South Carolina state senator Rev. Clementa Pinckney, one of the nine churchgoers murdered at Emmanuel Baptist Church during evening Bible study in Charleston. During that funeral, the American flag was flying at half-mast, as was the South Carolina state flag. Yet the Confederate flag, raised in 1961 as a counterstatement to the civil-rights movement, was still flying high. Obama called for the removal of that flag from the South Carolina statehouse. The NAACP had been calling for its removal for at least fifteen years.

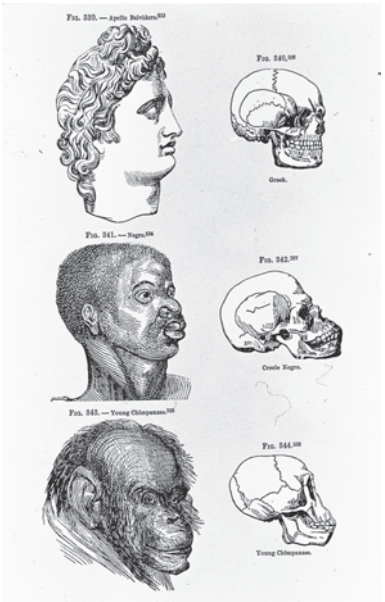
Yet as I looked at the picture, I was largely focused on the blank pediment and the impossibly perfect diptych that her body created with it—her figure seemed to fit precisely in the apex of the tympanum. Bree Newsome, herself the daughter of Howard University's Divinity School dean Clarence G. Newsome, had worked in concert with ten other activists, including a Greenpeace activist who knew what it meant to scale trees. She also deliberately chose to scale the fence with a white man, activist James Ian Tyson, to signify that their group was working across racial and gender lines. The team decided that the symbol of a black figurative form was necessary for the act, a figure that would be shown at that pediment's height. There, her body seemed to stand in for the figurative elements I imagined, or rather wondered about, being emblazoned on that statehouse pediment. "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?" Newsome said as she lowered herself down, released herself to the authorities, and was arrested.

From Kirk Savage's scholarship we know that the pediment was never meant to be left bare. The Civil War interrupted the project then underway that would have made it the grandest pediment outside of the capital, requiring half of the South Carolina state budget over several years. The Northern abolitionist sculptor Henry Kirke Brown received the commission. He had proposed pediment models before, including one in 1855 for the US Capitol in Washington that included enslaved figures, and was rejected. In 1859, when Brown was asked to work to create portrait medallions of two pro-slavery advocates, which went against his own politics, he was also asked to create a facade for the ninety-foot-long South Carolina statehouse pediment to sweeten the offer, one that again included enslaved figures.

The Civil War intervened. The project was halted. Brown moved back North. The pediment is still blank to this day.

South Carolina's long-unrealized pediment project emblematizes our work and the need to acknowledge the constantly forestalled futurity of the project to effect a relationship between race, figuration, and monuments. Part of the reason for this forestalled condition is that we have yet to interrogate how sculpture has been marshalled to delimit racial categories. The form, the material, the very concept of a monument is part of the way in which culture has served to delineate social strata, to literalize our visual sense of who counts in society.

Frederick Douglass knew it, lecturing as he did in 1854 about this marriage between racial science, aesthetics, and monuments years before his now better-known speeches about the importance of pictures and photographs for America's self-comprehension. For all of the focus on photography, we may forget that Douglass was also attuned to the use of sculpture in the American School of Ethnology's argument for polygenesis. In his library he had the then widely circulated anthropological racial treatise by George Gliddon and Josiah Nott, *Types of Mankind*, which used the head of the Apollo Belvedere, the highly celebrated work from classical antiquity championed as the Greek aesthetic ideal, as a representation of whiteness. As Savage reminds us, "Classical sculpture served as the benchmark of whiteness and, indeed, served that function over and over again in the writings of the racial taxonomists. The importance of the aesthetic dimension of racial theory cannot be overemphasized, and sculpture served as the aesthetic standard."[2] So,



J. C. Nott and George Gliddon. Types of Mankind *(detail). 1856.*

2. Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 11.

John Quincy Adams Ward.
The Freedman. *1863.*

parenthetically, I should say that works such as these that we celebrate as sculptures, often neutralized from their contextual usage, could in fact be considered racial monuments, so large do they loom in the civic realm of the nineteenth century to solidify and shore up a definitive conclusion in the literature and theories about racial superiority. Yet my main point here is that monuments are predetermined by conditions, a hardened notion of belonging inscribed into aesthetic conventions with which we have not yet contended as a field.

So deeply is the conditional tense embedded into the material limits of monument-making that it has led to narrative refusals, moments when a proposed monument could not be realized because of the tension between race, form, and futurity. A final way to consider this comes to us through the landmark work of Henry Kirke Brown's pupil John Quincy Adams Ward—*The Freedman*. This is the first bronze statuette of an African-American in the United States. It is small, just two feet tall. It appeared in New York at the National Academy of Design's spring exhibition months after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

Ward's *Freedman* represents a narrative, conceptual impossibility. Some critics began to suggest that it should become a public monument, even one that would be placed in the Capitol. Ward then had the plaster work produced in bronze and sold to subscribers. If realized, this would have been the first monument to an African-American man in the United States.

The monument never happened.

Emancipation had to enter sculpture through alternate means, through the body of Abraham Lincoln. Ward never again sculpted a black male form. His sculpture embodied uncertainties about post-emancipation life. The figure's nudity in the eyes of critics was now not a sign of heroism but of vulnerability. The figure does still bear the marks of subjugation: the broken shackle on his left wrist. Public monuments were meant to historicize, but emancipation asked citizens to consider futurity. This enterprise challenged sculptors, which we see translated

Harvard President Drew Faust, left, and Congressman John Lewis unveil a plaque at Harvard's Wadsworth House honoring four slaves who had been owned by and worked for Harvard's past presidents, April 6, 2016. Photograph by Keith Bedford / Boston Globe *via AP.*

through the indeterminate action of *The Freedman.* One is not sure if he is kneeling or about to rise.

There is a tense to monuments set within America's structurally racialized landscape. Ward's *Freedman* monument could have existed, but there was a conceptual limit: That which would have had to have happened had not yet occurred.

How do we account for the conditions that make monuments possible? Addressing this question represents our unfinished project. It is also work we have begun. This conditional tense is, I believe, what has created such anticipation around the 2018 Equal Justice Initiative Memorial to Peace and Justice. Taking conditionality quite seriously is what has inspired initiatives like the Black Monuments Project. It is what can let us start to reframe works—such as the Wadsworth plaque at Harvard University, dedicated by John Lewis and Drew Gilpin Faust, honoring the enslaved men and women who served two Harvard presidents—as in fact if not a monument, mark-making that is monumental. Here you're seeing how it invites the kind of immersive concentration that, as Jennifer Roberts has so eloquently described, can occur when engaging with a work of art and that you see occurring here as John Lewis turns to meditate on the power of that moment. The relationship between race and monuments reminds us that we live in a very specific tense, and not addressing it has led to tension and violence. Without this conditional tense, monuments can seem inert, as emblematized by Elihu Vedder's painting *The Questioner of the Sphinx* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, created during the Civil War.

If we are to understand which narratives about race and citizenship are created by monuments, we need to focus on considering their temporality anew. Do they historicize events or do they signal a narrative of futurity, an order, a narrative that will define a path of civic life? In the context of race, do American monuments truly offer a sense of fixity or do they mainly express a desire for it?

Even the composition of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial reminds us of

the need to grapple with this question. King's figure is set apart as a separate block of granite, as if having been cut from the rock behind it and placed in front. Yet, no matter the vantage point you take on the King memorial, neither the eye nor the camera can resolve a perspective such that it fits back into the rough-hewn stone. The linearity is broken. This perspectival riddle is fitting. Monuments shift our sense of the linear flow of tense—what was and what will be—to this conditional imperative, a futurity that alters our sense of what the relationship between race and history should be and will have to be to permit new possibilities.

Elihu Vedder. The Questioner of the Sphinx. *1863.*

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