

## Are Museums the Right Home for Confederate Monuments?

The idea that once they are taken down, these statues “belong in a museum” doesn’t take into account that museums may not want them. Should they?



A 1933 statue of Confederate leader Jefferson Davis is removed from University of Texas' South Mall after UT President Gregory Fenves cleared it to be placed in a campus museum. (Bob Daemrich / Alamy Stock Photo)

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In the wake of the Charlottesville riots last summer, newspaper headlines throughout the nation were calling for the removal of Confederate war monuments from the American public sphere—and their “safe housing” in museums. “What to do with Confederate monuments? Put them in museums as examples of ugly history, not civic pride,” read a Los Angeles Times headline days after the riots. “Confederate Monuments Belong in Museums, Not Public Squares” stated a Weekly Standard headline from last August. “We Need to Move, Not Destroy, Confederate Monuments,” was the heading for a thoughtful article by New York Times critic Holland Cotter.

In the subsequent months, dozens of Confederate monuments across the nation have, in fact, been “removed” or toppled, and many have made their way to the “cold storage” of museum collections spaces.

But for many of us who actually work in and interpret museums, the issue of our institutions’ rightful role in this debate does not seem to be either straightforward or obvious. Are museums, in fact, the appropriate place for storing these gigantic homages—not even to the Civil War itself—but to the Jim Crow movements that fueled their commissioning and erection on state capitol grounds, university commons, city parks and other places of power in the early decades of the 20th century?

We would argue that the “put them in a museum” response to Confederate memorials reflects a misunderstanding of what museums are for—and an effort to sidestep conversations that we really need to have.

Yes, museums do collect things—savory and unsavory—and, yes, they often put things away and preserve them for a very long time. But 21st century museums are striving hard to expand their reach, shift their focus and repair their popular perception as public warehouses primarily in the cold storage business for art and artifacts. More and more, we aim to surface issues, not hide them—to be places where communities come together to discuss and wrestle with contemporary questions.

There are those who respond that museums should just put Confederate monuments “in context,” and by doing so, fulfill the mission of many contemporary museums to serve as sites of civic engagement nimbly poised to investigate, convene and discuss the most contested issues of the day.

Yet putting monuments in context is anything but a simple, declarative act: power dynamics come into play. First, museums are physical spaces that convey authority. Statues remain powerful—and physically imposing—visual forms that will keep speaking even when they are in new settings. They can and certainly will shape social experiences in ways that curators may not be able to anticipate.

A simple label is not enough.

In displaying statues, museums will need to be prepared to contextualize them visually and dramatically, to represent the layers of their history—from the story of their creation to the story of them being taken down and collected.

This is exactly the approach taken by the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin when they agreed to house the 8-½-foot-tall, 2,000-pound statue of Jefferson Davis, former president of the Confederacy, that was removed from the campus grounds in 2015.

The controversial decision to transfer the statue to the history center, rather than store or destroy it, represented one possible solution to the Confederate statue debate. “I think this is the answer,” wrote Don Carleton, the center’s executive director, in a USA Today article that is pointedly titled “When a bronze Confederate needed to retire, the University of Texas found a home.” “They are pieces of art; destroying that is like burning books. They need to be preserved and they belong in museums.”

He added, “We will not be putting him in our building as some sort of shrine to Jefferson Davis, but as an educational experience and point of discussion.” Using old letters, diary entries, and original sketches, the permanent exhibit, titled “From Commemoration to Education,” tells the story of how the statue came to be and why it was later moved from the campus’ south. The presence of the statue in an educational exhibit, as opposed to a place of honor, underlines that

Davis, as well as his ideas and actions, are no longer commemorated by the university, said exhibit curator Ben Wright.

Yet the question still remains whether, by accepting monuments into permanent collections, museums are not continuing to bestow the same value and authority upon them that they “enjoyed” as ‘stand-alone’ monuments – or even worse, further aggrandizing them. Even if museums contextualize them in more complicated ways, their very monumentality might spark an even fiercer form of physical intimidation when squeezed into the small space of a standard museum building.

More than 25 years ago, the Maryland Historical Society shocked the museum world by inviting artist Fred Wilson to “mine” its collections for the revolutionary “Mining the Museum” project. In that exhibit, Wilson juxtaposed slavery-era documents, objects and texts traditionally consigned to storage along with the comfortable objects of privileged white history. The most dramatic example involved the placement of slave shackles next to a polished collection of silver repoussé vessels of the white Maryland upper class.

Could the lessons learned from “Mining the Museum” exhibit inform a museum’s approach to displaying Confederate statues with their not-so-subtle messages of white supremacy? Perhaps, but the broader question still remains: No matter how sensitively we contextualize the artifacts themselves, does their larger-than-life presence mitigate or even parody any interpretive value they might otherwise have in the dwarfing gaze of an enclosed exhibition space?

Our co-author Louis P. Nelson, a University of Virginia professor of architectural history, suggested in a 2017 interview that perhaps one solution is not to try to transfer gigantic statues to museum buildings, but rather to create museums around the statues themselves:

“Such statues cannot stand alone in the middle of a square with azaleas. I have argued that we need to transform these open spaces into open-air museums, where we can learn about the simultaneous histories of lynching, Confederate monuments and Jim Crow policies. These are powerful objects so they will need powerful recontextualization...They need to become catalysts for conversations as objects in a museum might.”

Yet even this approach raises critical questions about the nature of these conversations, the particular “stakeholders” who are brought to—or absent from—the table, and the role of “professionals” in the process. Do we really trust that curators and museum personnel have the right stuff to make this happen? Who will be the arbiters and decision-makers in the meaning-making process? And how is this process limited—or framed—by the starting assumption that the monuments must be preserved in the public sphere in the first place?

Another co-author, museum educator Janeen Bryant, born and raised in South Carolina, echoes this apprehension about museum professionals’ training—and ability—to both facilitate, and effectively translate, historically marginalized community voices about the embodied outrage and pain of such monuments on the landscape. An informal social media poll she conducted corroborated these concerns about whether museums really have the preparation and capacity to house and display these monuments to our racist national past.

“As a native southerner,” she says, “I often consider the monuments (and Confederate flags) as a social marker of claimed territory for white people/whiteness—a visual cue of which town/courthouse/pit-stop is safe and not safe.”

For years, the deadening silence from mainstream museums was a frustrating reminder that most staff were unwilling or unable to confront racist monuments, racist artifacts or racism in any form. Fortunately now, museums are beginning to recognize the important role they can and should play in facilitating community engagement and response. Our challenge as professionals is a willingness to create intellectually active spaces wherever we gather—in workshops, in conferences, and in staff break rooms—to grapple with the overt assumptions surrounding monuments.

Ibram Kendi, noted historian and anti-racism educator reflected on his childhood in Manassas, Virginia, home to a Civil War battlefield, during a recent speech at the Smithsonian’s symposium on “Mascots, Myths, Monuments and Memory.” “In thinking through my comments for today,” he said, “I tried to really understand, first and

foremost, how it felt for me, how it feels for so many of us to live day in and day out surrounded by so many Confederate monuments.

*How does it feel for those people that have to literally watch people cheer for mascots that are a desecration of their people?...*

*And more importantly, what do these feelings say about our memories and our histories, let alone the memories of the defenders of these monuments and mascots?*

*How can we use these feelings and memories as a motivation to never stop digging into American history to uncover the graves of racial violence?*

*And how can we study these graves, the dead, to give us a better sense of the living—the life of racial violence in the United States today?”*

As we museum professionals formulate our own approach to the thorny issues of where and whether and how to re-contextualize these toppled monuments to our Jim Crow past, we must recognize our own histories of complicity in the centering of white, male, heteronormative heritages and the celebration of icons of white supremacy in our centuries of collection and display.

It is no secret that a willful erasure of people of color (and the long histories of racist assaults) exists in museums and the public landscape in this country. This has prompted generations of activism whereby communities of color have tirelessly contested these narratives and fought for their rightful place in history.

The successful Take ‘Em Down Movement in New Orleans that led to the dismantling of four Confederate monuments, for example, was the direct result of community activism led by black organizers such as Michael Moore. However, most coverage attributed the removals to the open-mindedness and forward thinking of New Orleans’ then-Mayor Mitch Landrieu, lauding his speech and unprecedented action, rather than acknowledging the movement and the black leadership that truly and thoughtfully catalyzed these changes.

A broader conversation about museums and monuments must include not only a recognition of the landscapes of oppression that the

Confederate statues mark, but also an understanding of the self-determined landscapes of resistance that marginalized communities have created, of necessity, to mark their own histories, in opposition to, but also in spite of these erasures.

Museo Urbano in El Paso, Museum of Chinese in America in New York, Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn, Pauli Murray Center in Durham, Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago, and the now-open, National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration in Montgomery are only a handful of examples of “bottom-up” museums that are de-centering white supremacist narratives, centering marginalized histories and social justice, modeling innovative approaches to inclusion and redefining the very idea of what constitutes memorials and monuments.

Mainstream museums have much to learn from the foresight and sophistication of these and other culturally, ethnically and racially specific museums, many of which began to emerge as long as 50 years ago. Museums need to critically examine their own histories before they earn the right to properly contextualize racist memorials.

As Holland Cotter so correctly noted in his column from last year, in order for museums to name the message of these oversized propaganda monuments for what they are, they “will have to relinquish their pretense of ideological neutrality. They will have to become truth-telling institutions.”

The five of us who have jointly authored this blog—museum directors, curators, scholars, educators and architects—will be moderating a roundtable on this topic with the wider museum community this week at the American Alliance of Museum’s annual conference in Phoenix. Perhaps an apt point of departure to spark our conversation might be the prophetic words of artist Nayland Blake, who recently stated, “Museums need to decide whether or not they are active participants in the life of their city or if they are just some kind of trophy house.”