

## Statues & Social Context: Washington DC

February 2018

***"So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep."***

*-Oscar Wilde, The Happy Prince*

### Introduction

As if his command never ceased, the general mounts his horse with a certain vigor customarily not akin to a slab of granite. His twenty-two foot frame towers above the square which bears his name. Meanwhile, the historian is positioned as if he sauntered in on an afternoon jaunt, waiting for a passerby to strike up conversation. Seated on his bench of granite his modest figure rests in the park that bears his name.

Both remain eternally stoic in form, but their influence flourishes in the minds of the patrons who care to consciously visit. Objectively, the general is seen by thousands every hour. The historian is visited by a handful of visitors everyday in his shaded spot near the location where he once dwelled.

Each of these monuments commemorate men whose virtuous acts rank amongst the most profound and moral in American history. However, the gap in their statue's influence on the collective unconscious is unmistakable. The flurry of commuters marching through McPherson Square glance up at Major General James B. McPherson and see an image of a true Union hero of the American Civil War. They see a white man on horseback poised in his wartime regalia. Even if their glance is not direct, this is the symbol of statuary that has been lodged into the subconscious aura which constitutes one's idea of what a statue should "look like". In Carter G. Woodson's pocket park, the "father of african-american history" waits nearly alone for those who wish to come. The placement of his statue is immediately adjacent to the home he once occupied in Washington, DC; a notion that seems "correct" but also "convenient".

Since 1876 (12 years after his death), Major General McPherson has projected an image of strength and heritage; an image that commands one of the largest public nodes of the nation's capital. A cornerstone of Washington's urban identity, he and other union generals organize the entire urban fabric of downtown. On the contrary, only during the Obama presidency, were statues of black men erected in Washington DC. Carter G. Woodson, received his commemorative monument in 2014 (65 years after his death) in a triangle in a historically black neighborhood.

### The Problem at Hand

Out of the 150 "statues" or "monuments" surveyed in Washington DC for this study, almost 100 are of prominent white men<sup>1</sup>. Apart from the Mary Macleod Bethune statue erected in 1974, which could be classified as a true anomaly in this analysis' spectrum, there was no true monument dedicated to a prominent black individual until Martin Luther King Jr. finally got his long overdue memorial in 2011 (43 years after his death!)<sup>2</sup>. Even though MLK gained his seat at the table with Lincoln and Jefferson on the

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<sup>1</sup> The underrepresentation of women in statuary will be recognized later in this essay, as it is another glaring topic of discussion

<sup>2</sup> Prior to 2011, there were a few monuments erected to African American individuals - however these were either part of the new Nationals Stadium in 2009 (hence more a part of that institution, than "public"); others dedicated to African American Civil War "groups" (hence not to an individual, but an idea or symbol); and others which bore more resemble of african-american influenced art

National Mall, one could still argue that his statue is positioned in such a way that does not command public space, but is rather a “destination” that one must seek out.

Undoubtedly in number and prominence, the statue landscape in Washington DC is dominated far and away by white men; typically those who held public office or served in major wars. This point is not meant to discredit any man or woman monumentalized who truly deserves their place of remembrance. This point is meant to illuminate the glaring underrepresentation of monuments dedicated to minority groups (and women) who have been historically disenfranchised in life, and thus not given the adequate chance to commemorate in death. The faces that children see on the statues which organize their urban fabric should be faces that represent the truly diverse tapestry that is America.

In this time of heightened American introspection, it is our collective responsibility to question the state and nature of our statuary. The persons in which we chose to memorialize in public monuments should be those who directly represent the ideals and virtues that society holds most dearly. The fluidity of the American societal ethos is one that evolves with time. A statue, on the other hand, remains a constant reminder of the collective morality and values of society the day it was erected. Through tumultuous generations of inequality it seems as though America has reached a new fulcrum of ideology which finally begins to value inclusion, empathy and morality over anything else.

The dawn of this social epoch at times has peaked in bouts of warranted rage, protest, and cries for justice that seek to end oppressive symbology in our cities. The events at Charlottesville in 2017 sparked a nationwide debate on the validity of historical statues, often vilifying the white male symbology. This vilification stemmed from an abundance of Confederate statues which still organize and dominant predominantly Southern cities.

The events at Charlottesville sparked this investigation into which statues populate the DC landscape.

## **The Statue Landscape**

It should be noted that in the fall of 2015 I embarked on a similar study in Richmond VA, stemming from research at the University of Maryland pertaining to an architectural thesis. At first glance it is entirely apparent that Richmond’s main axis, Monument Avenue, is organized by a series of nodes with prominent statues. The four main statues being the highest ranking Confederate Civil War figureheads including Robert E. Lee, JEB Stuart, Jefferson Davis and Stonewall Jackson (See Figure B.1). The ever present symbology of the confederacy remains as evident in Richmond today as ever.

Here society treads a dangerous line between historical commemoration and immorality. At their inception, these statues were surely put up with heavy hearts by those who valued these leaders with true genuine spirit. In fact, Robert E. Lee was offered to be the leader of the Union army before he accepted the Confederate generalship in his native Virginia<sup>3</sup>. This simple notion speaks to his perceived character as a man and prowess as a leader. However, because he aligned with the losing side, a side which actively fought to uphold the unforgivable and inhumane act of slavery, his moral character is forever shattered. As he should be touted as a fascinating historical figure and actively discussed amongst scholars, his image is undeniably one which exudes rampant oppression and down-right hurtfulness to millions of people, especially those in Richmond which have to experience it everyday. Even though Robert E. Lee may have once been a man of genuine nature and morality, his alignment on the immoral side of history warrants his removal from the public sphere, and placement in a setting which allows for constructive discussion.

Our cities are living historical documents of our past. Sometimes, and in fact more often than not, the past was filled with oppression and suffering often at the hands of white men. Viewing historical monuments from an objective lens as “merely history” that shouldn’t move regardless of their symbology is

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<sup>3</sup> Verify source - Nonesuch Place: A History of the Richmond Landscape, Potterfield

a convenient perpetuation of more of the same. If true change on a conscious and subconscious level can occur, than bold and radical propositions must be made with revolutionary tendencies. The toppling of statues upon the liberation of an oppressive regime is all too common of a scene fueled by the rapid shift in thinking. American attitudes toward inequality didn't end with the abolition of slavery; one could argue that it had just begun to take shape. When it takes generations for the seed change to occur, inevitably people will become used to the norms of history and take sides for or against the prevailing symbology depending on their own situation in life.

Although the collective statuary in DC is dominated by white men, there is only one major Confederate monument in public space in the city (Albert Pike). Quite contrary to the Richmond landscape, many of the most prominent nodes are occupied by the Union generals who helped shepard our country through some of its most grueling and tumultuous times. At the time of large urban expansion in the latter half of the 19th century, these heroes were the most potent and recent symbols for American city planners to immortalize in statuary.

### **Development Overtime, Trends and Observations (In Progress)**

Initial Observations (*refer to master diagrams and map*)

1. *Civil war generals were the chief "node" in the early planning phase of DC's downtown; they organize public space*
2. *Monuments to revolutionary figures and general warfare make up the "federal downtown" and around tidal basin; along with civil war generals these are historic white male figures*
3. *Influx of international leaders with rise of embassy - especially on Massachusetts Ave and the Organization of American States (most hispanic/spanish speaking leaders) - DC as global city post WWII*
4. *Nearly all group symbology monuments (ex: civil war nurses) located very close to national mall in downtown (global/national center - monuments that apply "to all")*
5. *Nearly all religious monuments are north of city (mostly NW other than Basilica at Catholic and Monastery)*
6. *Rise of symbolic group monumentalization post WW1, leading to cultural/symbolic street sculpture and eventually to African American sculpture*
7. *Most African American sculpture located in "black neighborhoods" on exterior of city - no black monuments are in grand public forum - do not organize space - number of statues to black people are alarmingly low*
8. *Monuments attributed to women are alarmingly low - most female monuments are fallacy - either are symbols of woman objectifying and sexualizing the body, are secondary to masculine counterpart, are devoted to groups of women, are small busts, are located in clumps around OAS, at an embassy - no monuments of women organize public space.*

*(to be continued)*