

GROWING UP IN THE SHADOW OF CONFEDERATE MONUMENTS

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I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1941. Some of my earliest memories include trips to Stone Mountain. In those days, Stone Mountain, Georgia, was a small town out in the country, clearly different from an Atlanta that was, even then, a bustling metropolis. The mountain—a giant monadnock (and I was proud of early learning such a big word)—was located just off Robert E. Lee Boulevard, which was really a narrow, dusty country highway (figure 1). Its huge gray presence hovered over the surrounding area, whose people and soil were poor, as is still true of much of the state of Georgia. None of the amusement park features were yet in place when my family, and later my high school friends and I, went there to hike: no chairlift and no SkyHike, only a few picnic tables at the foot of the sheer rock face, below which lay giant rock pieces from the huge carving.¹ The gently sloping back side of the mountain offered a gradual if lengthy climb, with only one steep part close to the top. I must have been ten or eleven when I finally managed to make the more arduous climb and reach the top part of the mountain, having earlier always stopped before the steep slope and turned around.

1. On the white supremacist connections of the sculptor of the Stone Mountain Memorial, Gutzon Borglum, see Pietsch and Fortin, “How Mount Rushmore Became

Mount Rushmore.” I thank the Very Reverend R. William Franklin for sharing his memories of growing up in the South as I was writing this article.

Common Knowledge 27:2

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-8906103

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Figure 1. Stone Mountain in DeKalb County, Stone Mountain, GA, viewed from a distance. Photo by Truth Falcon—Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=76686419.

What did I know about the Confederate Memorial Carving in those days (figure 2)? I think I confused Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson with Andrew Jackson, after whom my father had been named. I had no idea who Jefferson Davis was. I was impressed, however, by pictures my parents showed me of Margaret Mitchell, the author of *Gone with the Wind*, and other dignitaries having a picnic on the shoulder of the gigantic Robert E. Lee, mostly because this showed how big the carving and hence the mountain really were. When I was in high school in the 1950s and went to Stone Mountain on some of our first trips with boys who were allowed to drive the family car (no high school student in my middle-class neighborhood owned a car of his own in those days), we wondered vaguely why the carving had not been finished but paid little attention to what it was a carving of.

Such was the willful amnesia of the American South in the 1940s and '50s. My parents, born in the South but with graduate degrees from Harvard Univer-



Figure 2. Confederate Civil War Memorial in Stone Mountain Park, Stone Mountain, GA, depicting Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson. Photographer: Jim Bowen. Title: “Stone Mountain Carving.”

sity, considered themselves liberals.² My father had been a passionate supporter of both FDR and Harry Truman, and we children were mobilized to collect money for Adlai Stevenson in his 1952 presidential campaign. My parents joined a group of the Episcopal Church that supported lunch-counter sit-ins in the 1960s and considered themselves fighters for integration. But no one in my childhood really talked about race.

My grandparents on both sides were racists in both thoughtless and explicit, determined ways. My Virginia grandmother prided herself on membership in the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), collected mementos for the local Confederate museum, and sat comfortably in the swing on the front porch while she told dire stories of attempted rape by Black men—stories that moved my mother (who refused to join the UDC) to squirm and mumble “Not when the children can hear, please.” My Alabama grandmother, less vocal and an altogether kinder person, prided herself, nonetheless, on descent from the southern aristocrat “Lighthouse Harry” Lee, Robert E.’s father. (It had been a long way down, that descent; my Alabama grandfather had to leave school at thirteen to support the family. My father was the first in a long line of Walkers to gain any advanced education.)

Relationships with Blacks were stereotypical. The “colored woman” (as she was called), Leslie, who took care of my Virginia grandmother long after my mother died, fairly young, was always poorly paid. In later years, when my grand-

2. For the story of how sexism limited my brilliant mother’s opportunities, see Bynum, “Curriculum Vitae,” esp. 8–9; and Patek, “Tales from the Whitehead Mines.”

mother refused to increase her salary or even to pay for food, I had to send Leslie money surreptitiously and then provide funds to a neighbor to buy groceries and offer them to my grandmother as a “gift.” To the end of her life, Granny kept a rusty pistol under her pillow, along with her dividend checks in a cracked plastic purse, to ward off the imagined Black rapists when they came. Even friendlier and more cordial relations were fraught with what were, to a child, mysterious assumptions. One of my earliest memories of the farm in Trussville, Alabama, is of a trip far back into the country, on a dirt road, with a little black dog named Flicka that had been bitten by a snake.³ The hope was that an old Black woman who lived there had a kind of “magic” that would save the dog. To this day, I remember that the magic was hot milk with black pepper in it, and that little Flicka, whom I loved, survived. I was too young to make the connection of Blackness and Woman and witchcraft, but it was clearly there.

The prejudice I was actively aware of, early on, was anti-Semitism, not anti-Black racism. I later read William Styron, who makes the connection between anti-Semitism and racism in the American South, and Susan Neiman has written of it recently.⁴ I alluded to it myself in an earlier essay here, discussing how I first learned in grammar school that I could not have a Jewish boyfriend and squirmed with unease at certain things I heard in church.⁵ I clung stubbornly to my third-grade friend Sharon when a cross was burned on the lawn of her father’s synagogue. But I could not in that earlier essay bear to write of the hideous guilt and responsibility I felt when my mother proposed, I’m certain in innocence, that we share a Maundy Thursday service with the friend who had so kindly invited me to her family’s seder. When I heard for the first time the blaming of the Jews for Christ’s death in that service (the liturgy has since been revised), I experienced a guilt and humiliation I still burn with, but I did not dare to speak of it either to Sharon or to my mother. I was nine years old. And southerners just didn’t talk about such things. To this day, I regret that I didn’t know what to say, but my guilt permanently clouded my relationship to my friend, to my family, and to my church.

Why was it so hard to understand the racism around me? There was really no place in the 1950s to see it. Schools in Atlanta were still segregated, and my greatest pain was not being invited to join the social club of the popular girls, who had been friends when I was younger but who discarded me ruthlessly as opportunity arose. In tenth grade, when the rest of the class in American history was copying out and memorizing questions and answers, I was consid-

3. Trussville is now a thriving suburb of Birmingham. See a video tour of Trussville on the City of Trussville website, trussville.org/ (accessed August 5, 2020). When my grandparents retired there to a small farm after my grandfather had an early breakdown, it was a small and sleepy town, quite rural.

4. Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*.

5. Bynum, “Curriculum Vitae,” 6. Neiman’s experience is discussed in *Learning from the Germans*, 1–6.

ered too advanced for that. (No wonder the social club did not want me!) I was told to sit in the corner and read Douglas Southall Freeman's Pulitzer Prize-winning, four-volume biography of Robert E. Lee.⁶ All I remember is that it was excruciatingly boring and made me determined never to study history; but it was held up to me as the story of my brave southern forerunners fighting for our region. Freeman described Lee and Stonewall Jackson as "men of principle unimpeachable, of valor indescribable." Even today, the website of the Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia, where Freeman is buried, says of his "great" work, "Freeman's admiration for the Confederates never influenced his historical conclusions."⁷

My own history leads me to hold that Confederate statues must come down. Not only the American South—although especially the South—profited from slavery. As Bryan Stevenson has said, the economy of the North was also predicated on the labor of the slave-owning South.⁸ And historians of the United States are beginning to come to terms with this complicity. But I do not think that removing monuments to Lee and other Confederate generals, renaming bridges and army barracks, and even melting down or drowning statues of slave owners and traders is nearly enough. Once the objects are erased, their message is erased, and it is easy to forget the evil they stood for. Perhaps the pedestals of such monuments should be left glaringly empty with the names still there and some explanation of the reasons for the removal affixed in placards.⁹ It might be better not to erase the carving on Stone Mountain but to allow it to erode, scoring the surface with cracks into which that bane of southern farmers, kudzu, could grow and gradually take over, with explicit photos and pamphlets in the Stone Mountain gift shop to explain why the decay is encouraged.¹⁰

I argued, in a piece published in this journal in 2004, that the German approach to some anti-Semitic objects—the approach of allowing them to stand

6. Freeman, *R. E. Lee*.

7. See Hollywood Cemetery, "Douglas Southall Freeman," www.hollywoodcemetery.org/douglas-southall-freeman (accessed August 2, 2020). See also Wikipedia, s.v. "Douglas Southall Freeman," last modified December 7, 2020, 19:09, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas_Southall_Freeman.

8. See Stevenson, "Interview by Ezra Klein." I thank Mary Doyno and Anna Harrison for discussing the interview with me at length.

9. This is not to argue that images that can offend should necessarily be destroyed or mutilated. I would argue, for example, that the statue of Theodore Roosevelt that once stood before the Museum of Natural History in New York should be retained, although not outside. I argue for retention, inside the museum and with explanation, because it is a good work of art, because Roosevelt played a com-

plex role in American history, including his support for the environment, and because, at the time it was made, the figures of Native American and African Man alongside Roosevelt were intended (however misguidedly) to express their dignity and liberation, not their subordination. Thus, the statue is a good object to display, with glossing, for the education of the public. But the glossing is essential. See Pogrebin, "Roosevelt Statue to Be Removed from Museum of Natural History."

10. Thoughtful people have differed about exactly how to reject the hideousness of the Southern past as it has been honored in statues. Among much that could be cited, see Gorra, "A Heritage of Evil," and several *New York Times* editorials: Ackerman, "The Confederate Monuments We Shouldn't Tear Down"; Cohen, "'Let Freedom Ring' from Georgia"; Egan, "Let's Finish the American Revolution"; and Williams, "You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument."

but glossing them with powerful German self-accusations (not just explanations but self-accusations) for the Holocaust—is better than erasure. And many people have pointed out that Germany has done a better job than the United States at dealing with its ugly past.¹¹ Some have even used this observation to argue that what we need in this country is a “truth and reconciliation” commission—which may be true.¹² But I would point out that, as Bryan Stevenson has argued, the places that have dealt in this way with their pasts are all places that have seen regime change: South Africa, for example, is now under Black majority rule; Germany lost World War II decisively.¹³ The appropriate parallel between Germany and the United States is the parallel between our hideous treatment of the First Nations and German treatment of the Jews. In both cases, the treatment was nearly universal slaughter. Just as there are very, very few Jews in Germany today, so the Native Americans here were almost wiped out.¹⁴ The guilt we should experience for our treatment of those who lived here when white people first came is enormous, and we have not even begun to deal with it.

The situation with American guilt for slavery and its aftermath is a bit different. The descendants of those who suffered it are still here in large numbers. Therefore, we as a country need to take action for all these people now. Yes, it would be good to have reconciliation via testimonies and storytelling; but we should also begin a conversation about reparation payments to all the communities and individuals injured by continuing racism. And we need to recognize that “Black Lives Matter” not only by mounting demonstrations and marches but also by reforming the police, the racist prison system, and the still de facto segregated and unequal schools. To affirm this is not to argue that we should ignore or devalue the ideals of American democracy or renounce the courage of those of all races who came before us. Even partial courage is courage; even imperfectly realized Enlightenment aspirations are aspirations worth articulating. It is rather to argue for what President Steinmeier of Germany called, in 2018, “the ambivalence of memory,” a determination to honor the best of a country’s ideals exactly by recognizing when and where it has failed them, and fails them still.¹⁵

Hence, both as a woman born in the South and as a historian, I argue that we need the presence, not the erasure, of objects from the past. We need to record, not simply disassemble or remove, our racist history, so we cannot forget it as easily as we have done in the 150 years since the Civil War. The Community

11. See Bynum, “The Presence of Objects”; and Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*.

12. See Morris, “The Reconciliation Must Be Televised.” On the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, see the wrenching account by Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull*.

13. Stevenson, “Interview by Ezra Klein.”

14. Jews have begun to return to Germany, and I thank my friend, the writer Karen Margolis, for her lively accounts of synagogues in Berlin and of the work of Jewish groups, especially Jewish feminist groups.

15. Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*, 383.

Remembrance Project of the Equal Justice Initiative—to collect dirt from lynching sites—is one such endeavor.¹⁶ I think we need many more. Not only should the Stone Mountain carving and similar monuments stand, slowly eroding, as accusations to those who perpetrated—indeed, glorified—the evils of Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the segregation of the 1950s; the long refusal of communities to deal with their own guilt must also be documented. It is not enough to remove or gloss racist objects that glorify the South; places of horror must also be marked. Auction blocks where human beings were sold like cattle; slave cabins and gorgeous plantation houses alike, where Black women were systematically raped; nooses on trees where Black men were hanged and rivers where they were drowned; doorsteps where Black people were refused entrance when white mobs pursued them—all these places need to have plaques like those the Germans have installed at deportation sites. Just as no Jewish or Christian child should ever hear a liturgy in which Jews are blamed for the crucifixion of Christ, so no child in the United States of America of any background should hear praise of the Confederacy or the southern culture it made possible. And no American should fail to confront, understand, and grieve for our development of an economic system to which owning human beings was vital.¹⁷

We must do more than erase monuments to past evil. We must learn from our capacity for such evil by keeping reminders before our eyes. If schoolchildren in Georgia gazed up at the shoulder of a Robert E. Lee crumbling and sprouting kudzu, they might see not a gigantic picnic table for the author whose creation, *Scarlett O'Hara*, embodied the “Lost Cause” of the South but instead a rebuke to many aspects of the southern heritage; thus they, white children and children of color, might feel impelled to ask, as I never asked in adolescence: “What was the problem with what he did?”¹⁸ In this way, the objects from the past that historians and art historians study and ordinary citizens encounter can become something positive—not just tools of education, repair, and reconciliation, but also pledges that, in never forgetting or ignoring our real past, we promise to do better in our shared American future.

16. See “The National Memorial for Peace and Justice” on the Equal Justice Initiative’s website, museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial (accessed August 5, 2020).

17. Similar arguments should be made about how the westward movement and the pioneers are dealt with in school curricula and in the wider culture, especially in “cowboys and Indians” cinema. And arguments are needed about the suppression and victimization of immi-

grant groups as well. I do not have space to do any of that here—and, as I have pointed out above, the situations of peoples toward whom we should feel guilt at the present moment differ, and different sorts of reparations, reconciliations, and apologies are necessary.

18. On southern “Lost Cause” ideology, see the *Encyclopedia Virginia*, s.v. “Lost Cause,” last modified July 27, 2016, www.encyclopediavirginia.org/lost_cause_the.

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