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Food for Thought / no. 5

Mary Wang interviews Michael Diaz-Griffith

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West Window of Winchester Cathedral rebuilt in 1660 from shattered glass after destruction during Civil War, Nik Wheeler / Alamy Stock Photo

On Being an Anti-Racist Preservationist

Mary Wang interviews Michael Diaz-Griffith

The current pandemic and the global movement for racial justice have made clear that the decisions our society makes in this pivotal moment will affect how our history will be written. One set of those decisions involve the future of Confederate statues and other monuments symbolizing racial oppression, many of which protesters across the United States and Europe have toppled, tagged, and removed. This

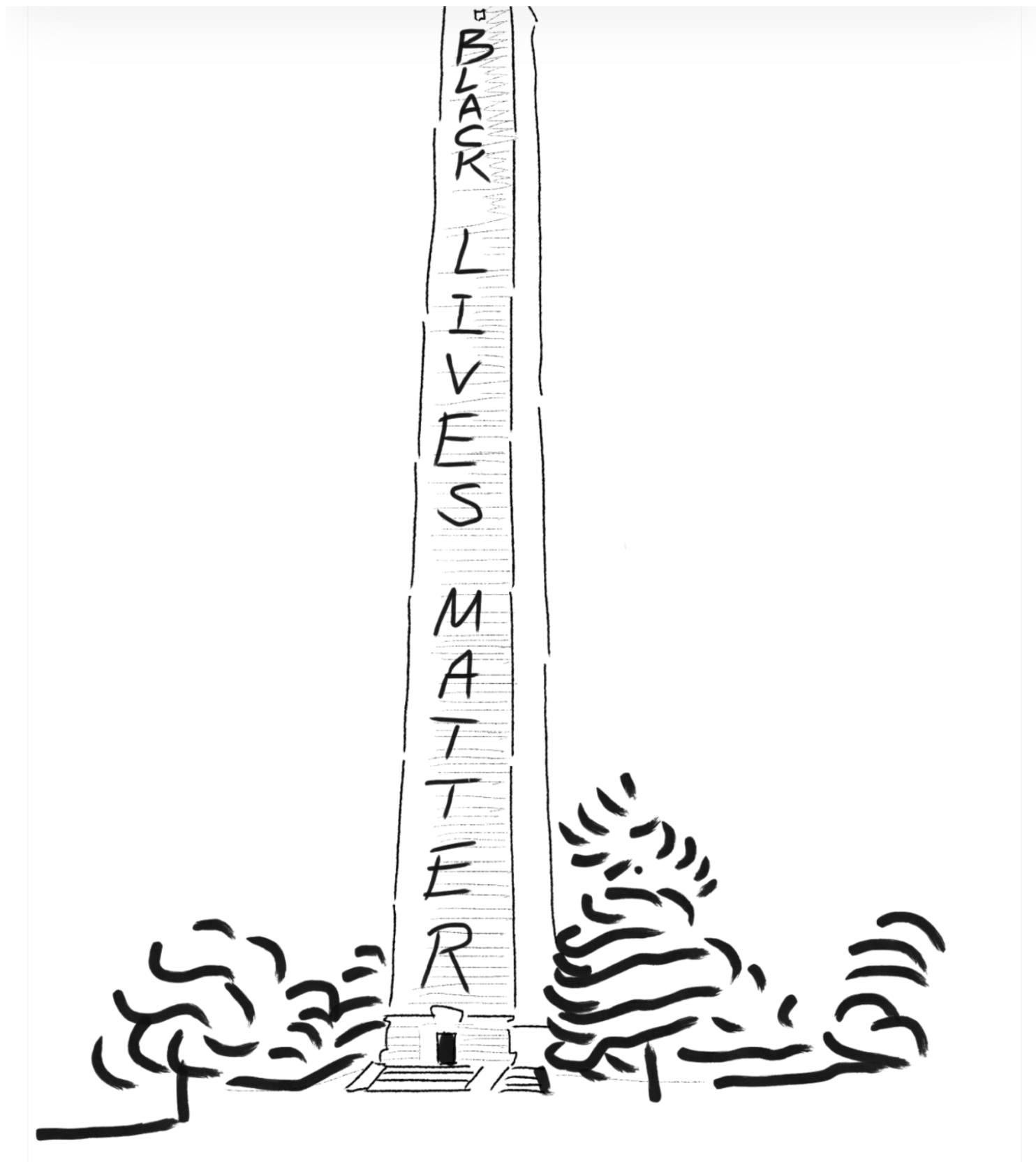
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One attempt to answer this question comes from Michael Diaz-Griffith, the executive director of the Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation and the co-founder of the New Antiquarians. On June 10th, he released "[The Anti-Racist Preservationist's Guide to Confederate Monuments](#)", an illustrated document that lays out the white supremacist history of such relics while proposing ways of moving forward, with or without them. In the two weeks since, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has ordered the portraits of four speakers of the Confederacy to be removed from the Capitol, the Museum of Natural History in New York has requested the removal of the Theodore Roosevelt statue at its entrance, while Ken Burns, the documentarian of "The Civil War", called for the removal of all Confederate monuments. I spoke to Diaz-Griffith, who grew up in the South, about the misunderstandings many hold of Confederate history, the contradictions inherent to the field of preservation, and what we can learn from more successful examples of memorialization around the world. While neither this conversation nor Diaz-Griffith's guide is meant to provide definitive answers, it's clear that a field entrusted with preserving a troublesome past can be equally responsible for imagining a better future.

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Jefferson Memorial Reimagined © 2020 Alonso Diaz Richards

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Michael Diaz-Griffith: There have been calls by activists to remove or re-contextualize Confederate monuments for a long time, but there has been very little clarity in the broad cultural debate around them. Complicating matters, the preservation field, which normally brings historical context to conversations like this, is increasingly understood to be problematic, because of the systemic racism in the institutions that develop preservation policy. An example is New Orleans. If you live in a historic area there, you may well be living below the poverty line. If you want to renovate your house, you have to abide by strict preservation policies developed, all too often, by upper-middle-class white people. This means that residents are forced to either let their houses run down, or borrow money—at exorbitantly high interest rates—to conduct a renovation at the required level of historical accuracy. Some organizations are beginning to address double binds like this one, produced by seemingly benign policies, and they represent one dimension of burgeoning anti-racist activity in the preservation realm.

The guide is an attempt to speak to people in the world of museums and preservation and get the narrative straight about how these monuments originated. We might think that Confederate monuments come down to a North versus South issue. But in fact, American history was actively “Confederatized” during periods of national reconciliation following the Civil War, when the North made concessions to the South and let it win certain narratives. The guide begins with an account of “Lost Cause” ideology [a narrative popular in the South stating that the Confederacy fought the Civil War to preserve states’ rights and the “Southern way of life” while denying its defense of slavery and white supremacy]. If you read transcripts of the dedication ceremonies for most of these Confederate memorials, they are explicit in the intent behind their creation, which is to bolster a reign of white supremacy in the South that is quietly (to white people) embedded in the built environment.

I think there’s an opportunity now for white Southerners to come to grips with the history of these monuments, and to understand what they have meant for Black people since they began springing up in the 1870s. It’s messy, uncomfortable work that’s also infinitely complex because of the municipal, county and state laws you have to unpack before doing anything. One of the solutions proposed in the guide is for some of these monuments to go into museums. For some museums, that prospect can feel threatening—these institutions are already underfunded. Others might want to knock these monuments down, which is a complicated prospect from a policy standpoint. I’ve received many messages from museum employees and academics, and the PDF will be used as a guiding document for conversations in public institutions. The best conversations I’ve had in the wake of its release were with Black artists about proposals to do things with either the monuments themselves or what remains, whether that’s a stone plinth or a bare site. And even though some of the monuments we’re talking about, whether we like it or not, are works of art made by skillful sculptors, that’s not the case for the majority of the Confederate monuments in the South. Many are mass-produced objects, so even in a very strict preservation context, if there are 500 versions of a certain thing, you don’t necessarily have to keep all of them. Some of those could be repurposed by artists, for example.

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was the strategy behind the groups that have funded these moments?

Diaz-Griffith: The United Daughters of the Confederacy is the group responsible, directly and indirectly, for the vast majority of these monuments. They wanted to erect as many as possible, because their mission was to colonize public space with the Confederate tenet of white supremacy, and that overrode concerns of aesthetic value or quality. And from an art-historical standpoint, the late 19th century and early 20th century, the period of great exhibitions and world's fairs, has been criticized as an era of high kitsch, including in academic art. I don't subscribe to that elitist account of "taste," but it's not a coincidence that much of this sculpture doesn't look very skillful to modern eyes. So these mass-produced monuments can be connected to that history. Another thing to note is that it was often local groups of the United Daughters doing fundraising for the monuments in small, rural towns. The costs were high, and the statues often had to travel a long way. You could read newspaper reports about their fundraising campaign and how everyone in town chipped in to import a Carrara marble base from Italy. That "crowd-funding" model gives a project over to popular taste.

In cities like Richmond, Virginia, we see more sophisticated approaches. Richmond is an interesting example, because Monument Avenue, which is true to its name and was built to house monuments, was a neighborhood development. The houses constructed along the Avenue were sold on the premise that they would overlook the heroes of the Confederacy. It was a segregated neighborhood, and Black Americans were restricted from buying property or living there. That continued right up to the time of the civil rights movement. Many houses in that area—and throughout the South—had clauses in their deed stating a person of "African origin" may not acquire them.

Wang: What does it mean to be an anti-racist preservationist? And considering that to preserve often means preserving objects from a racist culture, is there an inherent contradiction in the term?

Diaz-Griffith: It is possible to be an anti-racist preservationist, as long as we believe that historic buildings and objects should be interpreted rather than destroyed. That means you don't knock down the plantation, but reinterpret it in the context of slavery. In the realm of curatorial practice, it might also mean reconfiguring museum departments, because, for example, the Rockefeller wing at The Metropolitan Museum of Art began, based on colonial and imperialist ideas, as a collection of "primitive" art. That configuration still hasn't been unpicked. It might mean repatriating objects to their places of origin, or creating new kinds of agreements whereby objects are shared between institutions across national boundaries, or starting third-party institutions that are transnational. There are all sorts of—mostly untested—ideas about how one can fundamentally reconfigure the worlds of preservation and curatorial practice without giving up this fundamental principle of retaining material culture. So I'm not saying we should erase history—far from it. These solutions don't result in erasure, but in the full history finally being revealed, interpreted, and communicated to broader audiences.

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Because an object's history is often obscured by its interpretation in the context of its upper-class consumption, the fact that it was made by a Black craftsman is often overlooked. If we shift the context of appreciation from its consumption, which is only part of the story, to its production, we can reconstitute the true history of the object and shift attention to its maker.



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Lee Memorial Tagged © 2020 Alonso Diaz Rickards

Wang: I love the approach of this initiative. Are there other examples you've seen of how institutions—or even regions—have approached this issue that you find worthy of highlighting?

Diaz-Griffith: Some very familiar examples can be found in how Germany dealt with the Holocaust and World War II. Auschwitz, for example, was transformed into a museum, and ideological and policy frameworks went into creating that space. We can learn from approaches that have been successful elsewhere. You can look at how the sites of certain concentration camps in Eastern Europe deal with their sensitive subject matter, where environments are designed to be about mourning, healing, and coming to grips with the evil perpetrated there. Today, if Black Americans visit a plantation in the South, they might be greeted by a hoop skirt tour, or something about how lovely tea time was, with little to no recognition of the evils of chattel slavery, which was the foundation for elite lifestyles in the antebellum South. That is awful. Another example is the fragment of the tagged Berlin wall that remains. The Robert E. Lee memorial in Richmond has been thoroughly tagged by protesters, and as of this week light shows featuring "BLM" are being projected onto it. I think there's a powerful case to be made, in limited contexts, to leave in situ some of these monuments that have been modified by protesters as a way of memorializing the history of their struggle for equality.

And instead of giving Confederates all our attention, it could be more productive to think about the sites where Black people live and labored. The entire landscape, not just sites of trauma, belongs to their history. Right now, the built environment is interpreted mostly in the context of white European-descended Americans. There's a German project, Stolpersteine, started by the artist Gunter Demnig, that places beautiful, simple stone blocks with brass plaques memorializing victims of the Nazis at their last home address of choice. An initiative closer to home, the WitnessStor

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been marginalized in the mainstream history, and especially in public history. I think people like me also need to learn to think about Black culture beyond the context of slavery, and pay attention to all the positive and private stories of individuals who suffered under the system of slavery, Jim Crow, or systemic racism and overcame oppression to achieve remarkable things that have not been widely recognized until now. Once we've dealt with the Confederates, we should all focus on how to memorialize the people we really want, and need, to remember.

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Mary Wang is a writer and editor based in New York. She is a senior editor of *Guernica*, where she runs an interview series called *Miscellaneous Files*.

Michael Diaz-Griffith is Executive Director of Sir John Soane's Museum Foundation, the New York-based foundation that supports the Soane Museum in London. In 2019, he co-founded the New Antiquarians, a community of interest for young people who love old things, and he was recently named to House Beautiful's list of "2020 Visionaries" for his advocacy of antiques, historic art, and preservation.

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