

In These Times, Season 2 | National Myths and Monuments

Alex Schein:

Last fall, we launched our podcast In These Times with an examination of COVID-19 and its far-reaching impacts. This season, we're focusing on Black lives and exploring the nation's complex history with race. We'll consider some challenging questions. Who controls the narrative about the U.S.? How far have we moved beyond our history of enslavement and Jim Crow? Are we at a moment of reckoning? In these times, knowledge is more important than ever.

During the worldwide protests that followed the death of George Floyd in May, 2020, demonstrators mobilized to challenge the representations of history presented by some of the monuments and memorials that occupy our public squares. For years, many have spoken out against artworks that honored Confederate officers or slave owners. In 2020 protestors took action.

Speaker 2:

Those protestors at a Black Lives Matter march to the port city of Bristol toppled a statue of 17th century slave trader, Edward Colston.

Speaker 3:

The city of Philadelphia has removed the statue of former mayor. Frank Rizzo overnight. Rizzo was considered an icon amongst conservative groups, but many Philadelphians say that the statue represents racism, bigotry and police brutality.

Speaker 4:

In Boston protestors be headed the Christopher Columbus statue. In Virginia, they threw it in the water. These images caught the attention of native American groups in Minnesota who have petitioned for years to take down a 1930s era Columbus statue here.

Speaker 5:

I spoke with one of my elders this morning and he said, "Can't do it that way. You can't be passive anymore. You have to go down there and you've got to take it down."

Alex Schein:

A year later, more than 100 monuments have been removed in the U.S. by protestors and by government and property owners. Today, we talk to an anthropologist, a sociologist, and an art historian about why there has been such a focus on these public symbols in this moment, and how they shape our historical narrative and myths. Welcome to episode four, National Myths and Monuments.

Speaker 6:

The statue of general, Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia has been a potent symbol of the Civil War, the Confederacy, and for many, racism and oppression. Yesterday, governor Ralph Northam announced that the statue will be taken down.

Governor Ralph Northam

Yes, that statute has been there for a long time, but it was wrong then, and it is wrong now.

Alex Schein:

Tukufu Zuberi is the Lasry Professor of Race Relations in the Department of Sociology and Africana Studies. His research focused on race and African and African diaspora populations. And he was the founding director of the Center for Africana Studies.

Tukufu Zuberi:

Look, the racism inherent in putting up a statue of Robert E. Lee in a very public place without a disclaimer and a cover so that I don't have to see it is an insult. And the only way people don't see it as an insult is because of a fake conversation about what the Civil War was about. It is a way to hide the truth. When you don't recognize that the Civil War was about the continued enslavement of Africans in this country, then you don't understand the Civil War and you don't understand US history, and you cannot understand US history. If you do not understand Native American history. You can not understand American history if you do not understand African American history. You cannot understand American history if you do not understand the history of women in this country. And let me put it to you like this. Most people do not understand American history.

So was I shocked about the tearing down of statues in London, statues in South Africa, in Cape Town, statues in the United States, statues in Virginia, statues in the Carolinas, statues all over this country? No, I invited this forum of public rejection of Eurocentric narratives that have led us to the brink of human destruction. And going forward, people need to know George Washington, they need to know some of the things he did that were good, but they need to know also he was one of those who mis-identified the potential of democracy, who misunderstood what the independence of the United States could mean. And so these misunderstandings are what we need to capture. It's like you don't go back in time and use the science that has been proven to be wrong from the 18th century in trying to solve a disease for the 21st century.

Alex Schein:

For years, Professor Zuberi has been engaged in bringing a fresh view of culture and society to the public, through film and television, his books, and lectures and interactive social media and exhibitions. He recently led the redesign of the Africa galleries at the Penn Museum.

Tukufu Zuberi:

We had long been trying to think about the role of monuments, the roles of material culture in how we understand our national narrative. So understand I was organizing a new Africa gallery, but organizing it to have a critical intervention in what people in the United States think about who they are. Because it is our national narratives that we end up telling, it is not the narratives of those places. It is not the narratives of the past. We put objects in our wave to be viewed as a way of triggering things in our mind, to bring to our consciousness, certain symbolic representations of what we think is important.

And this is the same thing we do when we place a monument outside. This is the same thing we do when we build a monument in Washington, DC. When we build a monument in Philadelphia. Is that we're putting something in front of the public in order to stimulate public discourse. So in some ways,

monuments, as well as museums, are places of public conversation. They are places for public debate and discussion about what and who we think we are. So we have to be careful about what we're memorializing, because sometimes we will end up memorializing the wrong thing for the people who are here. You don't build statues for the people in the past. You build statues for the people in now, because you want those people to be remembered for a particular reason. You want those historical acts to be remembered for a particular reason.

Alex Schein:

Professor Zuberi is a demographer, who's book, *Thicker Than Blood: How Racial Statistics Lie*, critiques the concept of racial statistics, which he said were being used to serve a particular narrative. He sees the same thing in the stories we tell about our history.

Tukufu Zuberi:

Museums and monuments began to serve the same role in my mind, from what I had learned in demography that the national narratives we tell are based on how we define who we are. This national narrative in the United States that has been hijacked by white supremacy is one of the most important national narratives for humanity right now. People use this national narrative to define the potential of democracy, people use this national narrative to define the rules for how to deal with diversity.

Alex Schein:

One of the United States' biggest national narratives goes almost all the way back to the beginning. And for many years, was thought of as a positive story of Europeans and indigenous people working together. Here's Margaret Bruchac, Associate Professor of Anthropology and coordinator of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Program at Penn.

Margaret Bruchac:

So one of the perhaps most popular and pervasive myths in American history is this notion of the so-called first Thanksgiving, which is an event in the fall of 1621 when the surviving Wampanoag communities in what we now call Southeastern Massachusetts gather for three days with the surviving colonists of Plymouth colony, which was in Patuxent homeland. And that event is so encoded in American memory because many people think that it somehow justifies manifest destiny. That the survival of the colony and the assistance offered by the Wampanoag somehow made it ... While it did make it possible for the colonists to survive, the intention was not to then encourage them to take over the entire continent. And so, in many cases, the way that people remember that history is entangled with the eraser of indigenous history, and even when you think back to the Mayflower. I mean the Mayflower arrives with 101 men, women, and children. In the first few months, half of them die.

They are a struggling colony made up of survivors who know nothing about this indigenous territory, know nothing about indigenous diplomacy or kinship, but they are met with a group of Wampanoag people who have similarly suffered extreme deaths from diseases introduced earlier, by earlier European colonists and settlers. So these starving people on both sides are working out a peace treaty among themselves that's very delicately negotiated. And from the Wampanoag perspective, they think that they are assisting a small group who is seeking refuge. From the English perspective, they think that they have a God-given right to take over this territory and their survival somehow proves that right.

Alex Schein:

Professor Bruchac's research includes Native American studies, cultural expression, indigenous arts and technologies and material culture, curation, and representation. She too believes this reckoning with history and narrative has been too long and coming.

Margaret Bruchac:

There were small groups of people who have been pushing for generations to draw attention to the legacies of colonization, the monuments to colonization, the naming of places for places in Europe, the complete destruction in some cases of indigenous homelands, indigenous histories at the expense of promoting colonizer's histories. That is not a new issue. But somehow in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, you could almost see the lens turn and the focus turn. And so I've actually had people say to me, isn't it wonderful that the Black Lives Matter movement has brought a little bit of attention to Native American lives? And I like to say, no, that's not wonderful. That is yet another aspect of the problem. And it's another part of the effects of systemic racism are such that some kinds of racism are more visible than others. And some acts are seen as more destructive than others.

That's one reason why in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, a lot of us started saying stolen people on stolen lands. And that was a way of tying these two movements together to get people to remember that even as we are attending to the horrific legacy of slavery and the taking of African peoples and African lives, we must remember that they were taken to lands that had been taken away from indigenous peoples. So these histories are really inextricable from one another.

Alex Schein:

For Professor Bruchac, monuments that depict indigenous Americans can be a double-edged sword. In Plymouth, the site of the first Thanksgiving, there was a statue of Massasoit, a Wampanoag sachem who carried out peaceful relations with the pilgrims.

Margaret Bruchac:

The Massasoit statue created by Cyrus Dallin that stands in Plymouth, looking out to the ocean was intended as an honorific to a long deceased male native figure. And there are statues like that around the country. And that one in particular has been copied in many forms and it appears in many places. It appears in Colorado. It appears in multiple locations. It appears in maquettes and museums. So it's a very famous statue. And unlike the one that's in Wissahickon Park that Dallin created, like the one that's in front of the Boston Art Museum, there are a series of these statues of native men in some pensive or reflective pose standing or on horseback, holding a weapon. And they are meant to evoke absence. They are created in an honorific way, but they are usually installed to say, native people are no longer here. Here is the image of the noble warrior.

But the one in Plymouth has been completely taken back conceptually by the American Indians of New England, by the Wampanoag community, by the Nipmuc community, by multiple Native communities and activists, including the American Indian movement who created a day of mourning that takes place on Thanksgiving every year, when hundreds of native people gather around that monument with Massasoit as their inspiration for speaking back to colonization. For saying, we are here despite everything that we encountered and we endured. We are here despite the attempts at manifest destiny. We are here to remember that this is where it started.

Alex Schein:

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw knows the power a monument or physical objects can wield. She is the class of 1940 bicentennial term associate professor of history of art, and she studies race, gender, sexuality, and class in the art of the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean. She's curated exhibitions for the Philadelphia museum of art and the National Portrait Gallery, and worked with students to organize exhibitions on contemporary and historical American, Polynesian, Brazilian and Cuban art.

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw,:

At their best, I think ideas of community can be expressed in monuments and that monuments are these things that they assert power within public spaces. So if they really reflect community ideals then having them in a public space can be something that's very supportive. But one of the things that is a real dilemma is that because many of these monuments that are in American civic environments, represent the kind of the triumph of one group over another, and that's inherently an oppressive project. It's a language of victory and victory is always the expense of somebody else or something else.

So having a monument that can be liberatory, that can be inspiring in a productive way that isn't about stomping on or covering over some other community's values or presence, I think is a really challenging thing. And that's one of the big dilemmas that monuments presents and memorials present in our contemporary society, is that so many of them were erected at different times in order to support certain ideological structure, certain ideas about how society should be. That really establish a way of being at the expense of another, that something else has to seed its space, give up its space in order for the monument to be present.

Alex Schein:

The removal of a monument can be complex and emotional. During the summer of 2020, a group of residents in Philadelphia came out to guard a statue of Columbus against removal.

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw,:

And the process of changing our larger national ideas about Columbus has been one that's been in process for the last 40 or 50 years. We're just beginning to think about changing the name of the holiday that celebrates Columbus to Indigenous Peoples Day to recognize the people whose world his arrival drastically impacted. And it's very hard for communities, particularly immigrant communities like Italian-Americans who saw themselves in this figure and saw their right to America who saw themselves in this figure for so long. And it can be very hard for those people who are most fervent about it to recognize the pain and honor the pain that those same monuments represent to the people upon whose ancestors that triumph was achieved. And there aren't easy answers, and for myself, I have very mixed feelings about the destruction of monuments and also about the preservation of monuments. And I think that each situation is really singular and that there aren't blanket answers that scholars can provide or that communities should follow because our communities are constantly in flux, constantly changing.

Alex Schein:

Another statute has been debated less because of whom it depicts than how. The emancipation or Freedman's Memorial in Washington, DC was funded by formerly enslaved people. They collected money to pay a white sculptor Thomas Ball, who designed a memorial which shows Abraham Lincoln with a kneeling and slave person in front of him whose chains have been broken.

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw,:

And so think about who and why and what the visual language was at the time that that sculpture was made, I think is important to considering whether or not to remove it. Because the intention behind it was very different than the reception of it today. In that moment, enslaved people wanted to show that they were present and that they could organize and activate their collective feelings about emancipation. And they were working within parameters, they had to commission an artist and this was the guy to get it from. And if we know the history of it, I think it's really different to consider it and whether to take it down.

However, it does show a very paternalistic view of what emancipation meant at that moment. In the 1870s and 80s, it meant black people kneeling and saying, thank you because our society was still incredibly repressive and reconstruction had just been utterly destroyed. Reconstruction didn't fail. It was destroyed politically. And recognizing that history I think is really important, but it's not something that can be easily communicated. And just putting up a new plaque there that explains all this, like not everybody reads these things. They see, and then immediately things get moving and they don't necessarily ... They're interpretive juices get moving and they don't necessarily read all the plaques that are right. And that's the challenge. When visual representation is so powerful that the textual accompaniment is obscured and overlooked and insufficient.

Alex Schein:

What happened last year at a Richmond, Virginia monument to Lee made Professor Shaw reevaluate what a monument could be.

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw,:

The statue itself is on a pedestal that's about 30 feet high. It's really high up there in the air. So it was not a statue that protestors could easily tear down. It was out of reach, but people repurposed the base of it. They spray painted all over the base of it and they spray painted the names of people who had been killed by police. And they used that statute, which is in a traffic circle in the center of downtown Richmond.

Alex Schein:

Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy during the Civil War, but the monuments to Lee and other Confederate war figures were not placed there until the beginning of the 20th century.

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw,:

And these statues had dominated the public sphere, dominated the civic neighborhoods of Richmond and said very directly to that community, which has a large percentage of African-Americans in that community. Said very specifically what the values were, that the Confederacy was still part of this city, even though it wasn't but it was. So when people came to this traffic circle, which they had been forced to drive around, like for their whole lives to shift their bodies around this oppressive one, they took it over.

And at night they would during the protests, they occupied this space and would have cookouts there. And there was an artist who set up a projector that projected films onto the side of the base of the statue and projected the faces of people like Breanna Taylor, George Floyd, onto that. And it became a site through which community was built in spite of the efforts, the historical efforts, to divide and

repress that community that that sculpture had represented. And I thought that was really powerful and super interesting. And rather than if you just removed it and took it away, that gathering wouldn't need to have happen there anymore. And people would not have connected there and organize there.

Alex Schein:

One Native nation opted to leave up a monument to remember the history it represented. A statue of Samuel de Champlain on the shore of Lake Champlain in New York. Champlain stands at the top of the large monument with the depiction of a generic native American man kneeling the bottom. The text on the monument reads, "Samuel Champlain, navigator, discoverer, colonizer." Professor Bruchac explains why this monument was left to stand.

Margaret Bruchac:

When monuments were being attacked last year, when people were trying to take down Civil War monuments, vandalizing Columbus monuments, demanding that these monuments to racists be destroyed. The Abenaki said, "No, leave that one. We want evidence to remain of what this ideal was. What this idea of colonization and occupation and discovery was about. Because if we erase all traces of that, it also erases our history." And that monument was actually constructed at a moment in time when French descendants in the Northeast wanted to celebrate their ancestor.

And Champlain was such a complicated character because he was actually invited by Algonquian Indian people to assist them in their conflicts with Haudenosaunee people, specifically the Mohawk. And so the battle of Lake Champlain when Champlain and his Algonquian allies are fighting Mohawk people on the other side to try to settle an inter-tribal war, but the use of European guns, the first use of European guns on this continent makes everything so much worse. And so when the goal of indigenous warfare was to ensure that your neighbors and your kin survive, the goal of colonial settler warfare was to do away with someone so you could take over their lands.

Alex Schein:

Professor Zuberi wants new monuments.

Tukufu Zuberi:

So for me, monuments are critical in this debate. We must have things that we teach children that we put in front of them. You need that spirit. The little white girl driving down the street past city hall, going towards a west Philadelphia should be able to look over and say, "Hey, mommy, is that Harriet Tubman?" And get told that story, of that courage, of this woman who free hundreds of enslaved individuals, some say close to thousands of individuals. Especially if you count those she freed during the Civil War. Here's this woman. She has a story to tell. She has a narrative that will help uplift this young girl.

Alex Schein:

Whatever the monuments, the popular conversation about them and about history is necessary.

Tukufu Zuberi:

There is a struggle right now, and people are struggling to define what the future of the United States would be. But now we know that that depends on how we interpret the past. Now more than ever, we recognize that this battle over the past is about now. The United States is in need of reconciliation, to

reconcile with its future, it will need to change how it looks at its past. To move forward as a nation of a people who think they related to each other, you will have to change the narrative of the past to be more inclusive of the voices left out. You can't just tell a white lie over and over and over and over and over again. And to get any more than being a white lie. You tell a white lie a million times, and the millionth time you tell it is going to be a white lie.

The only thing that can fix a white lie is the truth. And the truth is you can't understand the history of Philadelphia if you don't understand the history of the Underground Railroad, if you don't understand the history of the fight for the 15th amendment, if you understand the history of the fight for the right to vote, for everybody to have the right to vote in Philadelphia, for women to have the right to vote in Philadelphia. You cannot understand that. So somehow we need to get beyond the ignorance, which is the national narrative we've been telling ourselves and move towards a narrative which is inclusive of stories that have been blocked.

Alex Schein:

Through a new grant from the Mellon Foundation, Professor Bruchac will be working with the Association on American Indian Affairs in DC and with tribal archives, libraries and museums to create materials that help people understand detribalization and territorial dispossession. And as the topic director for the Wolf Humanity Center Forum in 2022 and 23, Professor Bruchac will be focusing on heritage.

Margaret Bruchac:

And the goal there will be to work with native playwrights, native authors, and even creating a graphic novel, but creating materials that grapple with this notion of heritage and create better understandings of how we remember histories in Philadelphia and elsewhere. And so coming back around to this notion of how we create monuments, how we create histories, how we interpret histories, there's a magnificent play that was created called *Manahatta* that was staged here by Natives at Penn and some of the students in the theater program.

So imagine a play called *Lenapehoking* that revisits that encounter between William Penn and Tamanend and Lenape people. And through that, re-imagined enactment of the past to create a more critical view of how things went so wrong. Of why the Lenape nation today is in Oklahoma and not in Philadelphia. Because for so many native peoples, their histories have been displaced and they have physically been displaced. So when I think about all of these movements to recover from the past, we're already dealing with broken land, and broken communities, and broken peoples and scattered places. So whether it's thinking about history or heritage or narratives, I feel that my role is often as a liaison among these communities, these museums, these educational institutions, these indigenous communities, to try to create threads to reconnect what has been lost, to try to find modes of repair and recovery. It's not always possible, but that's the goal that I feel that I'm often working towards.

Alex Schein:

Professor Shaw looks to programs like Philadelphia's Mural Arts, which works with the community before putting up a mural so that people have an opportunity to say what they want to see in the public space they live near.

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw,:

I think we need to be nimble and flexible and really seek to celebrate community and community values, rather than individuals in the monuments that we have and values, positive values as a way to bring people with different histories together. And to value communal space and to value civic engagement around aspects of character that are not held by an individual, but that are valued by a community.

Alex Schein:

This wraps up episode four: National Myths and Monuments. Join us in two weeks for our fifth episode, Environmental Justice and Race, where we'll hear from an English professor, a sociologist and a college junior who is a public research intern at the Penn Program in environmental humanities.

In These Times as a production of Penn Arts and Sciences, special thanks to Professors Margaret Bruchac, Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, and Tukufu Zuberi. I'm Alex Schein. Thanks for listening.

Be sure to subscribe to the Omnia Podcast by Penn Arts and Sciences on Apple iTunes, wherever you find your podcasts. To listen to all six episodes of season two of In These Times, Black Lives and the Call For Justice.