# Contested Site or Reclaimed Space?

## *Re-membering but Not Honoring the Past on the Empty Pedestal*

Jill Strauss

Debates over contested monuments often focus on the statue, but the pedestal also has significance. In May 2017, the New York City Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers recommended removing the controversial figure of Dr. J. Marion Sims. The base however, was left behind. The separation of sculpture from pedestal creates a space to research, document, commemorate and talk about the interruption of memory. In January 2019, undergraduate students created augmented reality images on the Sims pedestal to "bring to life" their interpretations that are not (yet) part of the prevailing history. The resulting images create another platform for exploring difficult histories in relation to present injustices.

*Keywords*: monuments; J. Marion Sims; memory; racism; augmented reality; women; slavery

> *And there's only my imagination where our history should be.*
> Cristina Garcia

### Introduction

Memorials visibly promote narratives that privilege some ideas over others, and governments have long recognized the power to shape a national story through commemoration in stone and metal. Downs, Foner and Masur maintain that "[h]istorical monuments are, among other things, an expression of power—an indication of who has the power to choose how history is remembered in public places" and by extension, who


DOI: 10.2979/histmemo.32.1.07

controls the space.[1] While statues appear permanent, memory is socially constructed and reconstructed over time "drag[ging] old meaning into new contexts."[2] Hence, the impermanence of memory opens monuments to interpretation and contestation based on the "vernacular interests" of a diverse populace focused on issues at the community level.[3] Public space is often where these struggles over who, what and how we remember take place. The United States is currently, and some would say finally, experiencing a historical reckoning with slavery and the structural racism and systemic injustice it produced.[4] For a nation aspiring to face its fraught and painful past and present, the question of how best to memorialize a conflicted legacy persists.

One option is adding statues, often called countermonuments, intended to offset the history, memory and values commemorated in the original sculpture.[5] However, an often-overlooked opportunity is the pedestal under the controversial statue. Memorials may include a stand that is merely a support for the sculpture but it can likewise be quite ornate and treated as an integral part of the monument as a whole.[6] For some people, taking away the statue and leaving the base is a reminder of culpability, while for others it is a constant "reminder of absence and the effacement of memory."[7] Then, there are those who point out that covering or removing monuments associated with legacies of racism and inequality will not remove racial injustice but will instead increase the resentment and antagonism of those who believe that their identity and heritage are under threat.[8] At the same time, the toppling of a statue by a marginalized group can be understood as both a (non)violent act of resistance and a way to reclaim agency. Just as the empty pedestal can be thought of as a break in constructed history and memory, it can be an interruption in the cycles of silencing and marginalization as well. In the opening up of history and memory that is made possible by the break, the removal of a statue while leaving the base in situ provides an opportunity to create a space for re-membering, reclaiming the past, and making visible a previously hidden history.[9]

To illustrate the potential of the seemingly empty pedestal, I describe an intervention I undertook with my undergraduate students using augmented reality technology to depict the stories that are not (yet) part of the dominant narrative about J. Marion Sims, the man known as "the father of modern gynecology." Augmented reality technology allows viewers to

enhance their visual experience by superimposing a computer-generated image on the material world—in this case, to make it possible to imagine what has been forgotten and to illuminate hidden histories. First, I outline the potential of the empty pedestal as a means to remember but not honor a dishonorable past. Then I explain the community-based efforts to remove the monument celebrating J. Marion Sims in New York City. I conclude with a description of my students' creative interventions in augmented reality on the pedestal.

## Background history

Dr. James Marion Sims (also known as J. Marion Sims) was originally from South Carolina but began his experiments on enslaved women when he lived in Alabama. Sims then moved to New York in 1853 and founded the first women's hospital in the United States in 1855. Slavery ended in New York in 1827 so Sims began operating on indigent women (along with wealthy white women who did receive anesthesia). He remained pro-slavery, and research indicates that during the Civil War he acted as a Confederate agent abroad, meeting with European heads of state under the pretext of providing medical treatment for their wives.[10]

For at least a century, Sims has been called "the father of modern gynecology" for the surgical advances he made in the mid-nineteenth century to treat vesicovaginal fistula (a terrible condition that can happen in childbirth making it impossible for a woman to control her bowels). Women (and men) benefit until today from this and other of Sims's scientific advances, including the invention of the speculum. However, these medical developments were the result of procedures carried out on poor, powerless and uninformed enslaved and Irish immigrant women, without anesthesia or consent.[11] Sims's indifference to the humanity of these women raised moral and ethical concerns for some of his contemporaries in the mid-nineteenth century. Nevertheless, he was posthumously honored with a memorial in New York City. More recently, grassroots efforts to take down the Sims monument and those of other contested figures in the city had been underway for years even though they received less attention than their southern counterparts. Then, northern as well as southern anti-racism movements benefited from the national attention paid to prominent cities

like New Orleans when several of its more celebrated Confederate statues were removed in 2017, which brought renewed interest to their cause. This article describes what happened when demand grew to reexamine existing memorials to individuals for their accomplishments in the past, but who are now recognized for their discriminatory and unethical beliefs and practices that often advanced their work.

The June 2015 shooting of nine worshipers by a white supremacist in Charleston, South Carolina, followed in August 2017 by the "Unite the Right" white nationalists' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, spurred the current actions for and against the removal of existing Civil War (1861–65) era monuments and other symbols of hate.[12] A few months prior, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu argued in a nationally publicized speech that an effort to right the wrongs of the past involves leaving the pedestal in place because "[t]here is a difference between remembrance of history and reverence of it."[13] In an effort to not repeat past wrongs, Landrieu additionally advocated for an inclusive decision-making process to determine what should be installed on the now empty platforms around the city. This speech and the subsequent removal of four prominent Confederate statues in New Orleans proved to be further turning points in the nation's reckoning with its conflicted past.

The current processes of rewriting the history of inequity and racism in the United States to include those excluded or misappropriated voices is, in effect, "turn[ing] the memorial landscape into a site for struggle and resistance."[14] As a result of the national attention given to these efforts across the American South, similar struggles to remove controversial statues in a few northern cities gained momentum. In New York City, historically a bastion of both liberalism and financial and political power, there were ever-increasing demands for the City to remove several public monuments and plaques. Prior to the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, activist groups had made little headway with New York City Government. Then, in the aftermath of that devastating August 2017 march, New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio tweeted that he would be creating a commission to make a ninety-day review of all "symbols of hate" on New York City-owned land.[15]

By early September when De Blasio announced the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers, he broadened the task to include developing criteria to assess future monument com-

missions as well as making recommendations on the controversial ones. The eighteen-member committee included an ethnically diverse group of museum administrators, historians, artists, activists and educators with expertise in preservation, cultural heritage, and diversity and inclusion. The commission framed its final report based on the social and political impact of remembering and erasure in the memory landscape for the present and future. As the monuments under consideration represented layers of historical and political interpretation, some on the committee expressed regret that they had been scheduled to meet only three times in as many months. Nevertheless, in this brief time they were able to make recommendations based on five guidelines they developed. They then applied these criteria in their discussions concerning what to do about contentious memorials and what to consider when choosing new ones. The "five guiding principles" are: (1) reckoning with power to represent history in public; (2) historical understanding; (3) inclusion; (4) complexity; and (5) justice.[16]

The mayor's commission deliberated on four controversial monuments in New York City: the statue of Christopher Columbus at Columbus Circle; the marker for Marshal Philippe Pétain on Lower Broadway; the Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt at the American Museum of Natural History; and the Dr. J. Marion Sims monument at Fifth Avenue and 103rd Street. The commission agreed that the Christopher Columbus statue bore competing interpretations, including that of hero to the Italian American community and that of brutal colonizer to Hispanic and Native Americans. Therefore, it was determined that adding context was the best solution.[17] Likewise, the equestrian statue of Theodore Roosevelt at the American Museum of Natural History recognizes his influence as a conservationist and the museum's relationship to the Roosevelt family. Yet, for many people of color he is also a symbol of colonialism and white supremacy as exemplified in the "racial hierarchy" the statue itself depicts.[18] The commission came to no consensus on this work.[19] The marker for Marshal Philippe Pétain, the French World War I general and World War II Nazi collaborator, is part of a series of sidewalk plaques called the "Canyon of Heroes" on Lower Broadway.[20] The commission struggled with the interesting question of whether a plaque in the sidewalk that people routinely walk over holds the same celebratory significance as a statue on a pedestal. In their report they noted that "[i]t is often difficult

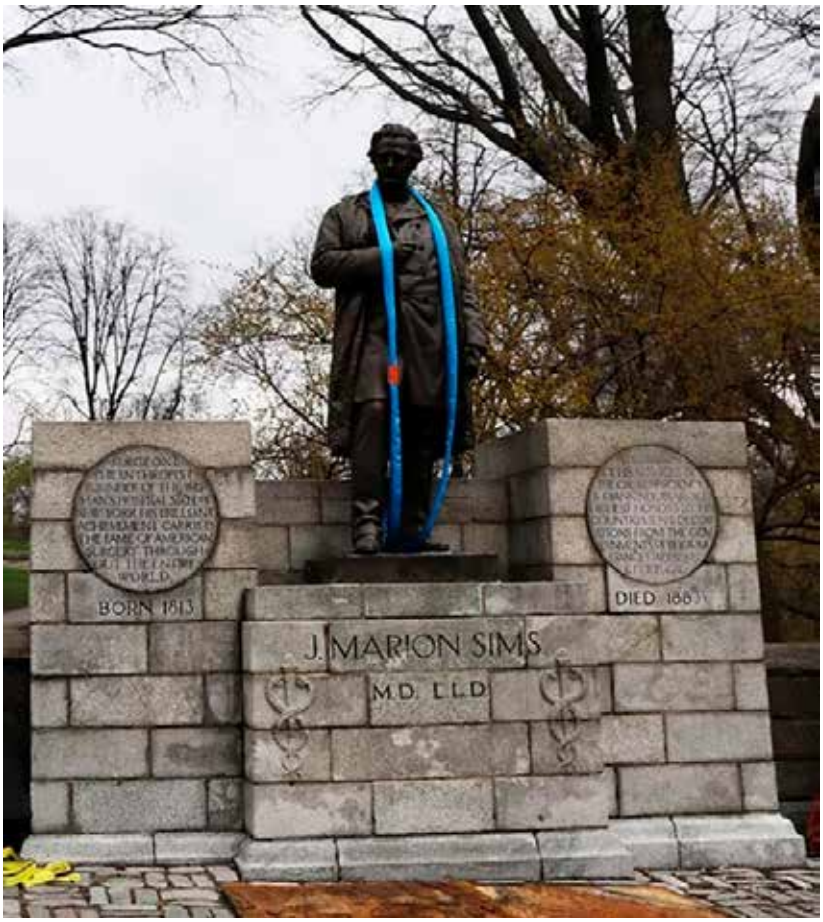


Fig. 1. J. Marion Sims statue on its base on Fifth Avenue and 103rd Street near Central Park (photo by author)

for us to acknowledge judgments of the past from our perspective in the present, but removal of the vestiges of past decisions risks leading to cultural amnesia."[21] It is not possible to anticipate how visual culture will be understood, or misunderstood, in a century.[22] With this in mind, rather than take down contested monuments, the City has decided to take "an additive approach" committing to the construction of new works primarily in honor of women and people of color.[23]

The commission did recommend altering one memorial: the bronze figure of Dr. J. Marion Sims (figure 1), which stood nearly life size on a large stone base at 103rd Street and Fifth Avenue across from the New


Fig. 2. The pedestal after the removal of the J. Marion Sims statue (photo by author)

York Academy of Medicine. The commission decided that the City should remove the statue according to the first of the five principles; "reckoning with power to represent history in public." They based their decision on "what [Sims] represents to the history of medicine, the people of the nearby community, and to the City as a whole."[24] Regardless of which side of the pedestal-removal debate commission members were on, there was no question of Sims's immoral behavior and so the statue fell. The remaining pedestal (figure 2) seems to be built into the low stone wall surrounding Central Park so that while most of the base is on the street side, some is inside the park. The top is long and flat with a recess in the

center where the statue stood giving the impression of a large heavy seat. Engraved into the stone base are two large markers commemorating Sims's birth and death, his medical achievements and international accolades, and two pictures of the Caduceus symbol.[25]

## The fame and infamy of J. Marion Sims

It is for his medical advances in gynecology that J. Marion Sims is celebrated internationally but it is the surgeries on enslaved and indigent women without consent or anesthesia for which he is reviled locally. His statue was originally installed in Bryant Park in 1894, a prestigious location adjacent to the Main Branch of the New York Public Library in mid-town Manhattan. Then, in 1934, the statue was relocated north to 103rd Street and Fifth Avenue opposite the New York Academy of Medicine in East Harlem. Also known as Spanish Harlem or El Barrio, the neighborhood has been home to waves of immigrants as well as African American and Hispanic/Latinx people. For these publics, the Sims statue is a continual reminder of similar kinds of medical research and testing on African Americans and Puerto Ricans without informed consent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moreover, it is a symbol of how racism became so integral to medical science in the United States that there is still the prevailing myth that black women do not feel pain to the degree or in the same way that white women do.[26] For these reasons, neighborhood residents oppose honoring Sims. Although there is rapid gentrification in the area, this part of Manhattan is still home to mainly people of color and the working poor. A time line on the website of the neighborhood advocacy organization, East Harlem Preservation, described how the popular campaign to remove the Sims memorial began in 2010 inspired by Harriet Washington's book, *Medical Apartheid*, which describes the history of medical experiments on black Americans.[27] The following year, then East Harlem Councilwoman and Chair of the Committee on Parks and Recreation, Melissa Mark-Viverito, who is Puerto Rican, supported her constituents' efforts to remove the memorial. In a letter to the New York City Parks Department she stated that the monument was "a constant reminder of the cruelty endured by women of color in our country's history."[28]

As part of the nationwide push to remove these monuments and other representations of hate, grassroots actions accelerated in 2016. Despite much advocacy and public pressure, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation upheld its position that public art would not be removed just because it might be objectionable to some.[29] That the information about Sims is carved into the pedestal rather than on plaques that could otherwise be changed has created further conflict. The local community board that includes Fifth Avenue and 103rd Street, tried unsuccessfully to come up with wording and location for accompanying markers "to provide sobering historical context" that would be acceptable to both the Parks Department and the neighborhood.[30] The Parks Department proposed adding a panel below the statue with the names of three of the enslaved women Sims experimented on, Anarcha, Betsy and Lucy (Sims never identified the other women). The community groups responded that this would both symbolically and literally perpetuate the racist hierarchy of white over black. Furthermore, what about all the other unnamed women on whom Sims operated?[31] Ultimately, the activists wanted the entire monument gone.

The Sims memorial had become a contested space. East Harlem Preservation collaborated with a community-based arts organization called the Laundromat Project on a women of color reproductive rights speak-out at the pedestal in September of the same year. Following this performance-based action, East Harlem Preservation moderated a televised panel with an academic, an activist and a local politician. It was broadcast on the public access channel, Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN), to inform the wider community about J. Marion Sims, his discriminatory medical practices and how these racist, sexist attitudes continue to plague us today.[32]

Then in August 2017 the "Unite the Right" rally happened.

According to the chronology that was recorded on the East Harlem Preservation website, in August and September a series of events occurred that kept the pressure on to topple the Sims statue. First, members of the New York City chapter of another social justice group, Black Youth Project 100, held a performance protest at the statue. The performance included young women of color wearing hospital gowns with dark red stains standing for the many unidentified enslaved women that Sims had operated on without consent or anesthesia.[33] These nonviolent perfor-

mance protests were followed by a defacement of the monument when the word "racist" was written on the back and red paint was thrown on the eyes by an unknown person or group. Then, activist artist Dimitri Kadiev portrayed the abolitionist Harriet Tubman in front of the Sims monument to promote the idea of a new monument celebrating African American women. In the wake of national conversations on symbols of hate, these actions and the attention they brought to the issue paid off. Representative Melissa Mark-Viverito wrote another letter to Mayor de Blasio asking for the Sims monument to be one of those considered by the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments and Markers and it was included. The City then partnered with the local community board, East Harlem Preservation, medical students and other activist groups to form the "Coalition to Remove the Dr. Sims Statue: Reclaiming Reproductive Rights of Women of Color."[34]

The J. Marion Sims sculpture was finally taken down in April 2018 to much fanfare and press attention. Many New Yorkers attended and documented the event. One person held a sign that read "Believe Women." The statue is currently in storage pending relocation to Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn where Sims is buried. However, many in the neighborhood surrounding the cemetery do not want his statue there either.[35] Now that their campaign had ended apparently successfully and recognizing that the work was not yet over, the "Coalition to Remove the Statue of Dr. J. Marion Sims: Reclaiming the Reproductive Rights of Women of Color" became the "Beyond Sims: The Committee to Empower Voices for Healing and Equity" now led by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. Meanwhile, Mayor De Blasio dedicated ten million dollars to the creation of new monuments throughout the city, including on the Sims site. The Department of Cultural Affairs held two community meetings in 2018 and an open artist selection panel in February 2019 for a new artwork to be installed in 2020. East Harlem Preservation tweeted out the artist call and announced it on their Facebook page. Ngozi Alston of Black Youth Project 100 pointed out that "[t]he artist selection plays a huge role in … starting to heal this terrifying thing that's been imposed as a fixture in this community for years."[36] One repeated request is that the commissioned artist be someone of color. Meanwhile, Kendal Henry of the Department of Cultural Affairs Percent for Art Program, which is overseeing the project, confirmed that representatives from the Parks

Department, the Department of Cultural Affairs, a design agency and three independent artists chosen by Commissioner of Cultural Affairs Tom Finkelpearl would select the artist. It seems that the community-based organizations so instrumental in the removal of the Sims statue will be consulted but not included in the decision-making process.

In the meantime, the large, heavy, throne-like pedestal remains on Fifth Avenue and this is where Sims continues to be celebrated. Removing only the statue was not enough for neighborhood activists and residents. According to Alston, "[t]he responses that we've heard so far is that they don't want really to see anything, any remnant of his presence, and I think that does include his name, especially when you have eleven other unnamed women that he practiced on."[37] It is possible that the decision to leave the pedestal in situ, even as this is what venerates Sims, could be a concession to those who believe that the empty pedestal is the best way to remember but not honor the past. Alternatively, perhaps it was considered too costly and disruptive to remove the large stone structure built into the wall surrounding Central Park. Regardless, activists were given no explanation as to why it was left behind. In addition, there is concern that the pedestal will constrain or obstruct the art work commissioned to replace the sculpture. To this, Henry responded that the chosen artist could propose to remove the base or design an artwork that would cover it up.[38] "Keeping it doesn't necessarily mean exposing it for what it is. It could be completely covering it up with tons of lights or camouflaging it… You know if you have a bad tattoo, it's still there, but you may not see it because it's covered up."[39] Activists responded skeptically.

## Re-membering but not honoring a contested past

"[E]xposing it for what it is" is exactly what a pedestal that is left behind can achieve when it is used to illustrate hidden histories. In the seemingly empty space, a platform emerges "that captures history's impact on the present."[40] It can be a setting for commemoration or celebration that welcomes many voices and perspectives, and a forum for dialogue that recognizes the interconnections of the past, present and future.[41] Furthermore, historian Kirk Savage who has written on public monuments and collective memory, argues that there is no longer a purpose for permanent

monuments.[42] Since meaning is ascribed to an object rather than being an intrinsic part of the piece, Dacia Viejo-Rose considers memorials the same as memory in that both are individual and collective processes. "The apparent 'permanence' of memorials is a delusion; they are transient, at least in their intended form and function" particularly with the increasing access and popularity of virtual space.[43] Furthermore, "[t]he distinction between the virtual and actual is not a binary as both are continuously present and real."[44] Since virtual and augmented reality give the illusion of real even as they do not take up space, they serve as at least one means to change the status quo by enabling multiple truths to become visible.

Like public installations, social media are ubiquitous in the twenty-first century. However, unlike the process of commissioning monuments, which is usually exclusionary, social media are easily accessible for most people, thus promoting ideas of participation and inclusion.[45] Digital technology is proving a powerful tool for documenting injustice and creating a more democratic platform for people to put forward their ideas and experiences. In fact, augmented and virtual reality technologies are only the most recent interventions enabling virtually shared experiences. Augmented reality is a twenty-first-century iteration of the device known as the stereoscope or stereo photography. Invented in 1841, the stereoscope came into its own at the same time as Sims. Both devices present the illusion of images in 3D when viewed through a special lens or using a computer application. As augmented reality technology is, like memory, virtual and creative, it is a relevant way to engage a controversial history in response to the concretized memory of the pedestal. The digital technology superimposes a computer-generated image that produces a merged view that appears three-dimensional. The image can be located anywhere in relation to the base, which increases the creative possibilities. With augmented reality, many images can be made by many people, which allows for multiple perspectives that can be viewed on most cell phones.

## Back at the pedestal

Rather than debate about who gets to decide what goes atop the pedestal, I am looking for ways to illuminate the multiple histories and truths. In the time and space between the removal of the Sims sculpture and the

addition of a new artwork, I implemented my theory of the potentials of the empty pedestal with my students. I teach in an urban community college with a diverse student body. Over 80 percent receive financial assistance for tuition, many are immigrants, most are of color, and they are often the first in their family to attend college. In this sense, these undergraduates are not unlike the residents of East Harlem/El Barrio or the immigrants and people of color Sims operated on. I created a research project to engage learners to consider the potential of the empty pedestal after a controversial sculpture is removed, as a space in which to research, commemorate and talk about "the fissure between past and present."[46] Initiating this intervention allowed me to demonstrate that the usual debate over whose truth is made permanent overshadows the conversations we need to have about how to understand the history and legacy of racism and slavery in the United States.

The conflict resolution course was an intensive one-month session in January 2019 that focused on the intersections of race, class and gender. Given their immigrant and economic backgrounds, I felt sure that my students would be able to understand the experience of the disenfranchised women. We studied conflict and power theory, read Deirdre Cooper Owens's *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* and went to see the Sims pedestal. While there, we discussed the ethical dilemma presented by the fact that women (and men) continue to benefit from Sims's medical discoveries that would not have been possible without the many anonymous women at the lowest rungs of society.

Artists and technology help us rethink the necessity of permanent monuments. My class worked with a media artist educator to learn photoshop and augmented reality technology to create our images. We then visited art and history museums to obtain ideas for how to reimagine monument sites. We went to the Tenement Museum in the historically immigrant neighborhood of the Lower East Side in Manhattan for a tour about the Irish immigrant experience, during which they learned that poor Irish newcomers had been racialized in the nineteenth century. There are examples of this phenomenon into the present in the form of negative attitudes toward migration in the United States and globally. The Tenement Museum made the twenty-first-century young people realize that those who are now considered part of the white privileged group could have been racialized and discriminated against not that long ago. Other

important connections were made. Upon leaving the museum, a first-generation student of Chinese descent reflected on how the apartment we had visited as part of the tour was very similar to the one her grandmother still lived in around the corner. Gaining a deeper understanding of the similarities in the immigration experience across generations proved meaningful for her. We then saw the play *Behind the Sheet*, based on Sims's life in Alabama told from the enslaved women's perspective, and then heard from the playwright, Charly Evon Simpson, and director, Colette Robert, both women of color. For some, this was their first play or the first time they had sat close to the stage, so both the subject matter and the experience of going to the theater together proved powerful. For all of them, it was the first time that they had had the opportunity to meet and speak to a playwright or theater director.

The course content, themes discussed and exhibition visits were meaningful to my students because they could relate to the women Sims had experimented on. Several questioned how, on the one hand, Sims could have been innovative and, on the other hand, cruel and exploitive. One student wrote in one of her assignments that, "[u]sing women as LAB RATS is not okay" (emphasis in original). Thinking about their own right to say no in the present, "he treated them as if their bodies didn't matter" and "he was doing this without their permission." Another important concept they came to appreciate is that the ends do not justify the means, "[w]e accept the medical advancements for women as we have all benefited, *not* how these advancements came to be" (emphasis in original). Reflecting on the course as a whole, another student observed that, "if it was not for the J. Marion Sims pedestal, would we even be having such important discussions?" Considering the legacies of slavery in the United States more generally, an African American student argued that the United States "was built and continues to rise on the blood, bones, and suffering of others, many of whom are suffering because they are different." She concluded, "many truths need to be vocalized so that wounds can heal." Here, she was referring to the historical or inherited trauma of slavery and racism that lives inside people who do not feel empathetically heard or validated about those inherited experiences. Furthermore, "trauma is about losing one's agency [and] [r]ecovery from trauma is an act of re-accessing one's agency."[47] In this context, initiating the removal of a statue of a white supremacist by activists of color can be understood as

a way to reclaim agency, as well as an act of resistance. Then, the empty pedestal can be used to make visible the hidden stories in another act of resistance and "re-accessing [of] one's agency."

Even though they had all seen the same artworks and exhibitions, they each brought their own individual interests and experience to their respective creations.[48] For example, two immigrant women in the class were particularly moved by the play *Behind the Sheet,* which made the history and legacy of slavery in the United States more tangible. These two women wanted to portray in their artwork the brutal dehumanization faced by the women in the play, as well as the solidarity and compassion they had for each other. Another student with some art training wanted to memorialize and mourn Anarcha, Betsy, Lucy and all the other women whose names or stories we do not know. To do this she opted to depict one mannequin head with purple flowers in its mouth and surrounded by beautiful white funerary flowers, which evoked the profusion of flowers in paintings of women from the nineteenth century that we had seen in the exhibition, *Posing Modernity*: *The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today,* at Columbia University's Wallach Gallery. This student also incorporated the feminist activist artist Betye Saar's phrase "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroines," which recurs in Saar's assemblage washboard series for the *Betye Saar: Keepin' It Clean* solo exhibit at the New York Historical Society. As he moved to take a closer look at an artwork that included the iconic image of a nineteenth-century slave ship deck with people lying head to toe, one student announced, "I don't like history but I like this!" Likewise, an African American woman in the class was strongly influenced by the *Posing Modernity* exhibit. In response to the white male gaze of objectification and exotification of black women by artists contemporary to Sims, she created an image of her idol, the famous performer and entrepreneur Rihanna, emerging from the flames confidently and with head held high. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, I thought.

On the same day that we saw the Betye Saar exhibit, we had a tour of the *Black Citizenship in the Age of Jim Crow* exhibition at the New York Historical Society, which provided necessary historical background. One student, who is of Asian descent and a military veteran, was distressed by the injustice and abuse he learned about. As a soldier whose responsibility it is to protect, he believed that Dr. Sims had shirked his. In one of his papers, he wrote about his good friend who was a medic in the army and

how the medic would treat anyone in need of medical care regardless of which side they were on. This student focused on the Caduceus symbols engraved into the front of the pedestal and the Hippocratic Oath. He reimagined the rod with two rifles similar to ones he had seen in Betye Saar's assemblages, in place of the wings at the top. Saar was part of the black power movement in the 1960s and 1970s which instilled a sense of pride and self-determination in African Americans. Fearing retaliation or retribution by police for their politics, some members had carried weapons. My student then added the nineteenth-century suffragist image "Am I not a Woman and a Sister," which highlights the connections between the anti-slavery and women's rights movements. Finally, faced with this history and our present, another undergraduate wanted to imagine a present and future of peace and justice. He wrote about how divisive we have become as a nation over the past decade and that we are all in need of "peace and grace."

On the last day of class, we returned to the Sims pedestal to see our augmented reality images in situ. Students presented their three-dimensional images on the pedestal and read their artist statements aloud. Then, to celebrate we went to a nearby café to continue the conversation. The discussion did not end there, however, for a few months later, in honor of Women's History Month, three students from this class volunteered to come speak to my spring semester students about the course and their augmented reality images. They were proud of their work and enjoyed sharing it with their peers.

## Conclusion

In this article I have presented an overview of the memory landscape in New York City and the struggle to re-member. In discussing the issues and concerns under debate about removal, relocation, adding text for context or adding monuments, I have presented a dynamic and creative moment in a reckoning with a contested past. Removing the statue and leaving the pedestal is a metaphorical as well as literal rupture of constructed history, memory and meaning. At the same time, eliminating public monuments to hate cannot change systemic racial injustice in the United States. Toppling a statue and leaving the base can however, create opportunities for

dialogue and acknowledgment of harms done in the past and in the present, and enable creative resistance.

The Sims statue is just one example of a sculpture moved but not in its entirety. In this case study with undergraduate students, I have demonstrated how the base of the monument can be a space for artistic interventions that "acknowledge both the conflicts of the past and the differing and even contrasting views of this troubling past that continue to exist in the present."[49] In all except one of the students' augmented reality images, there is an attempt to cover Sims's name in an effort to erase his memory. Only the reimagined Caduceus hovers near the top. These are virtual pictures that only temporarily cover "a bad tattoo" you no longer want visible. Clearly, the tattoo, like the history, is still there showing through just below the surface, and augmented reality technology is a tool for bringing these memories into the foreground.

Ultimately, whether the monument is virtual or made permanent, real transformation requires accountability for an unjust past in the present.[50] The sense of vindication and legitimization can be reinforced when it is made public, especially in shared spaces. The ostensibly empty pedestal offers a place to do this in a way that can be inclusive, collaborative, and potentially healing.

## Notes

I am grateful to my students for participating in the project and allowing me to write about their experiences and images in this article. I also would like to thank media artist and educator Will Roberts for collaborating with me on this project, which would not have happened without his talent and expertise. Finally, with gratitude to Ulrike Capdepón for her feedback on this article. Support for this project was provided by a Borough of Manhattan Community College Faculty Development Grant and a PSC-CUNY Award, jointly funded by the Professional Staff Congress and the City University of New York.

1. Gregory P. Downs, Eric Foner and Kate Masur, "Why We Need a National Monument to Reconstruction," *New York Times*, December 14, 2016.

2. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 47.

3. John E. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 20–21.

4. Recent events related to legacies of structural racism include the hearing of testimonies on slavery reparations before the United States Congress House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties, which was broadcast live on the National Cable news network, C-SPAN. In this historic hearing held on June 19, 2019, the anniversary of the last enslaved people freed in Texas and in the 400th year after the first African person was brought to "the New World" in bondage, citizens watched and listened as their congressional representatives faced the legacies of slavery and racism. See https://www.c-span.org/event/?461767/ (accessed June 19, 2019).

5. Quentin Stevens, Karen A. Franck and Ruth Fazakerley, "Counter-Monuments: The Anti-Monumental and the Dialogic," *Journal of Architecture* 17, no. 6 (2012): 951–72.

6. Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

7. James E. Young, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1992): 267–96.

8. Mary Dumas and Marina Piscolish, "Mindful Conflict: Trauma-Informed Tools for Highly-Charged and Structural Conflicts," paper presented at the Association for Conflict Resolution Annual Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, October 2018.

9. Michelle Fine and María Elena Torre, "Re-Membering Exclusions: Participatory Action Research in Public Institutions," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2004): 15–37.

10. J. C. Hallman, "J. Marion Sims and the Civil War—a Rollicking Tale of Deceit and Spycraft," *Montgomery Advertiser*, September 29, 2018.

11. Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Genecology* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2017).

12. Holland Cotter, "Review of City's Monuments Treads Carefully" *New York Times*, January 13, 2018, 16.

13. Mitch Landrieu, "We Can't Walk away from This Truth" (speech), *Atlantic*, May 23, 2017.

14. Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, "Memorial Landscapes: Analytic Questions and Metaphors," *GeoJournal* 73, no. 3 (2008): 168.

15. William Neuman. "Panel Will Devise Guidelines for Addressing Monuments Deemed Offensive," *New York Times*, September 8, 2017.

16. Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers, "Report to the City of New York," January 2018 (hereafter MAC, 2018), https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/monuments/downloads/pdf/mac-monuments-report.pdf.

17. The Ford Foundation provided seed money for a public history initiative called the New York Newark Public History Project to create context on the site of the Christopher Columbus Statue. John Kuo Wei (Jack) Tchen, "Who Decides? The History and Future of Monument Creation in New York City," paper presented to the public program series, "Difficult Histories/Public Spaces: The Challenge of Monuments in New York City and the Nation," City University of New York Graduate Center, October 9, 2018.

18. In the summer of 2019, the Museum of Natural History launched a permanent exhibit outlining the history of the Roosevelt monument, including one wall entirely devoted to quotes from a diverse group of scholars and the public on their opinions about this monument and controversial monuments in general.

19. Nancy Coleman, "A Monument, A Lightning Rod," *New York Times,* July 18, 2019.

20. Jelani Cobb, "New York City's Controversial Monuments Will Remain, but Their Meaning Will Be More Complicated," *New Yorker*, January 12, 2018.

21. MAC, 2018, 22.

22. Nicholas Lemann, "What to Do with Monuments Whose History We've Forgotten," *New Yorker*, November 26, 2017.

23. Tom Finkelpearl, "Memorials for People," paper presented at the conference "Traversing the Gap: Relevance as a Transformative Force at Sites of Public Memory," National September 11 Memorial and Museum, New York City, June 2019.

24. MAC, 2018.

25. The Caduceus symbol with its two serpents entwined around a winged staff is associated with the Greek god Hermes and symbolizes commerce. As in this instance, it is often mistaken for the similar Rod of Asclepius, the actual symbol of medicine, which has one serpent coiled around an unadorned staff. Asclepius was the god of medicine and healing.

26. Owens, *Medical Bondage*.

27. Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

28. East Harlem Preservation, "J. Marion Sims: Knocking White Supremacy off Its Pedestal" (hereafter EHP 2018), http://eastharlempreservation.org/parks-community-gardens-public-space/dr-marion-sims-statue/ (accessed December 28, 2018). The web page cited in this article has since been removed. Recently,

a summary of the original chronology was uploaded in its place. See http://ehp.nyc/beyond-sims/.

29. David Gonzalez, "An Antebellum Hero, but to Whom?," *New York Times*, August 18, 2017.

30. Ibid.

31. Sophie Putka, "Opponents of Sims Statue Worry His Pedestal Will Remain in Honored Spot," *City Limits*, January 4, 2019.

32. The episode was archived on MNN's website, https://www.mnn.org/video/clip-week-confederate-statues-and-nycs-monuments-racism (accessed December 30, 2019).

33. EHP 2018.

34. Ibid.

35. Nadja Sayej, "J. Marion Sims: Controversial Statue Taken down but Debate Still Rages," *Guardian*, April 21, 2018.

36. Putka, "Opponents of Sims Statue."

37. Ibid.

38. At the time of writing this article, June 2019, the artwork had not yet been chosen.

39. Putka, "Opponents of Sims Statue."

40. James McBride, *Five-Carat Soul* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), 6.

41. Robin Erica Wagner-Pacifici, *What Is an Event?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

42. Kirk Savage, "Confederacy and Civil War Era Monuments," paper presented at the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute, "The Visual Culture of the American Civil War and Its Aftermath," City University of New York Graduate Center, July 17, 2018.

43. Dacia Viejo-Rose, "Memorial Functions: Intent, Impact and the Right to Remember," *Memory Studies* 4, no. 4 (2011): 465–80.

44. Grant David Bollmer, "Virtuality in Systems of Memory: Toward an Ontology of Collective Memory, Ritual, and the Technological," *Memory Studies* 4, no. 4 (2011): 450–64.

45. Amelia Wong, "Social Media towards Social Change: Opportunities and Challenges for Museums," in Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale, eds., *Museums, Equality and Social Justice* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 281–93.

46. Brecht Deseure and Judith Pollmann, "The Experience of Rupture and the History of Memory," in Erika Kuijpers, Judith Pollmann, Johannes Müller and Jasper van der Steen, eds., *Memory before Modernity: Practices of Memory in Early Modern Europe* (Brill, 2013),324.

47. Dumas and Piscolish, "Mindful Conflict."

48. The students' 3D images will be included in a curated archive on the CUNY Academic Commons website in June 2020, See https://pressingpublicissues.commons. gc.cuny.edu/projects/.

49. Anna Cento Bull and David Clarke, "From Antagonistic to Agonistic Memory: Should the Statues Fall?" *The Policy Space*, May 24, 2017, https://www.thepolicyspace.com.au/2017/24/195-from-antagonistic-to-agonistic-memory-should-the-statues-fall.

50. Howard Zehr and Harry Mika, "Fundamental Concepts of Restorative Justice," in Eugene McLaughlin, ed., *Restorative Justice: Critical Issues* (London: Sage, 2003), 40–43.

---

Jill Strauss teaches Conflict Resolution and Intercultural Communications at the City University of New York Borough of Manhattan Community College. Her research involves Restorative Practices and the visual interpretation of narrative and difficult histories. She is co-editor of *Slavery's Descendants: Shared Legacies of Race and Reconciliation* (Rutgers University Press, 2019). (jstrauss@bmcc.cuny.edu)