

RICHMOND GRID & THE CHEATS MOVEMENT PRESENT

# VOICES

CRITICAL THOUGHT IN A CHALLENGING TIME



RVA

VOLUME one



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CRITICAL THOUGHT IN A CHALLENGING TIME



### EDITOR STATEMENT

VOICES is a community essay project – created by The Cheats Movement. The goal was simple: to highlight community voices that reflect the times we're living in. 2020 presented challenges that we'd never seen before and our community needed safe places to express their feelings and process their emotions.

The Cheats Movement blog provided a place for reflection and critical thought. A digital community where there were no wrong answers: no wrong essays.

The community submitted essays on race, protest, COVID-19, relationships, leadership, just about anything you could imagine. The only guidance was that your essay had to reflect these unique times and come from your vantage point (first-person).

Over a six-month period, the Cheats Movement collected approximately 40 essays and published 26 in Series I.

In addition, The Cheats Movement published over 40 amazing photography essays from 32 photographers who were capturing the energy of 2020 in real time. The street photography work presented by these brave individuals deserve your admiration and, frankly, they deserves journalistic and artistic awards.

As the founder of the Cheats Movement, I'm humbled that so many people would trust the blog with their words and images. I am honored to partner with Richmond Grid to highlight these phenomenal community members. And I hope you will consider submitting work for Series II launching in 2021.

#WESEEIT

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# REVISING REVISIONISM: BEYOND THE LOST CAUSE

BY JULIAN HAYTER, PH.D.

Richmond's memorials to Christopher Columbus and Jefferson Davis are gone. But they should not be forgotten.

If the recent events on Arthur Ashe Boulevard and Monument Avenue demonstrate anything, it's that history is not done with us. It shapes the present and dictates the strategies we organize to meet contemporary challenges.

History is always present. In fact, history and memory are as much about forgetting as remembering. So, now is due time for remembrance of a different persuasion.

We cannot make the long shadow of segregation and contemporary racism disappear by simply removing Confederate iconography from public spaces. Baltimore, New Orleans, and Charleston know this well. Confederate iconography may have been removed in those cities, but they are all still struggling to overcome the continuity of racism.

Institutional problems require institutional solutions.

I have written elsewhere about the sin of omission and mythologies that for far too long have characterized American history. Suffice it to say, the teaching of the American past is as much about productive citizenry and heritage as history. Until recently, textbooks portrayed America as a triumph narrative. The story often emphasized European progress, colonists' mastery of nature and natives, and the divine providence of Constitutional republicanism.

Until African Americans and racial minorities began to write their own histories, stories of the United States were written by and for white Americans. There's nothing controversial about this statement. Crack open any textbook from the mid-twentieth century—minorities are not merely absent, when they surface in these texts, they're almost always portrayed as inconsequential and dehumanized figures. African Americans, for instance, are actors without agency or event.

To this day, history remains one of the worst-taught subjects in the American K-12 system. It is, in fact, often taught by non-experts. Furthermore, most American students learn history as a conventional, direct narrative — a set of facts that point toward progress.

Yet, "history is essentially a collection of memories, analyzed and reduced into meaningful conclusions—but that collection depends on the memories chosen." —*Michael Conway*

We often fail to recognize how biases shape not merely instructional materials; prejudices also shape the questions experts ask about the past.

Which gets me to Monument Avenue and the crisis of now. In trying to explain the types of racial problems that characterize present-day America, many people rush to chattel slavery, leapfrogging the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the process. Yet, as important as slavery was/is in defining American history and race, the events that happened after the Civil War and during Jim Crow segregation explain more directly how we got to now—doubly so for the problems that gave rise to the recent unrest. Most Confederate monuments were built during and for racial segregation.

Confederate revisionism outlived Jim Crow—the South's sympathizers not only used the power vested in Jim Crow legislatures to mandate textbooks, but they also used Confederate statuary to reclaim public space in the name of white supremacy and African American serfdom.

In tearing down statues, people must remember that they're waging war not on structures only, but on a story.

Monument Avenue is but one example of the fiendishly covetous ways Southern politicians and profiteers used urban development and the institutionalization of the Lost Cause to cement their own economic and political power.

On the one hand, we know now that the creation of Monument Avenue was rooted in speculative real estate development. In fact, Virginia's then-governor, Fitzhugh Lee (nephew of Robert E. Lee) rejected appeals to place the statue at the State Capitol and openly called the creation of the avenue a "plain business proposition." This portion of Monument Avenue's story outlines the types of racist urban development strategies that paved the way for redlining, slum clearance, public housing, and freeway construction. In fact, segregationist law enforcement was often organized to safeguard white profits and property. Sound familiar?

These historical issues cannot be divorced from the current social unrest.

On the other hand, Virginians inherited an especially pernicious, yet deeply subtle, brand of institutionalized racism. The Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1901-02 used poll taxes to remove 80 percent of African Americans and 50 percent of whites (the dirty little secret) from the commonwealth's voting ranks.

Virginia's segregationists misappropriated the democratic process. The commonwealth had the lowest voter turnout rate in America, and one of the lowest voter turnout rates of any free democracy in the world. Confederate symbolism and segregation are inseparable.

There was no popular mandate to erect monuments—even poor whites had no say in the matter. Whites also used the power vested in the General Assembly to mandate Lost Cause talking points in Virginia's history books. These textbooks were not effectively phased out of the commonwealth's curriculum until the 1980s.

Shades of these mythologies still exist in current textbooks.

To this day, 48 percent of Americans still believe states' rights were the main cause of the Civil War—the principal Lost Cause mythology. Statues were the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Textbooks convinced generations of Americans that monuments reflected real history. Lost Cause revisionism also argued that slavery was a benign institution, slaveowners were benevolent paternalists, and African Americans were happy slaves who were unprepared for freedom.

The historical record demonstrates that none of these points are true. In fact, the historical record outlines the continuity of Black resistance, then as now, to these initiatives.

This story—which demonstrates that segregation went well beyond lunch counters and lynching—must be told. And what better way to tell it than by using the symbols of white supremacy themselves? If Americans have been good at anything, it's erasing African American history. Yet, to reimagine a monument in a museum is not to erase history, but to question a previous interpretation of history!

Removing and/or recontextualizing monuments is really about demystifying historical misinterpretation—that history is always evolving; that white Americans up to and during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century were incapable of writing about race objectively. Experts spent the last several decades writing histories that more accurately reflect the historical record. The Lost Cause, we now know, no longer holds water.

If the City of Richmond warehouses these monuments, it will have wasted an opportunity to set the historical record straight.

White southerners resolved to reshape the present and fashion a new future by rewriting history. Yet, Confederate statues are not the only artifacts to segregation in Richmond. Richmond Public Schools, the appalling rate of poverty, and public housing are also relics of segregation. And they have become points of profound disappointment.

It doesn't have to remain that way and history might help lead the way forward. History, in the end, can be used as a powerful weapon in addressing the continuity of Richmond's problems.

We cannot have reconciliation in Richmond without this type of recognition.

Removing these statues is not a solution in and of itself. It is the beginning of more robust phase of action—a phase that requires political actors to demand that their histories be told, their humanity respected, and, more broadly, their voices be heard.

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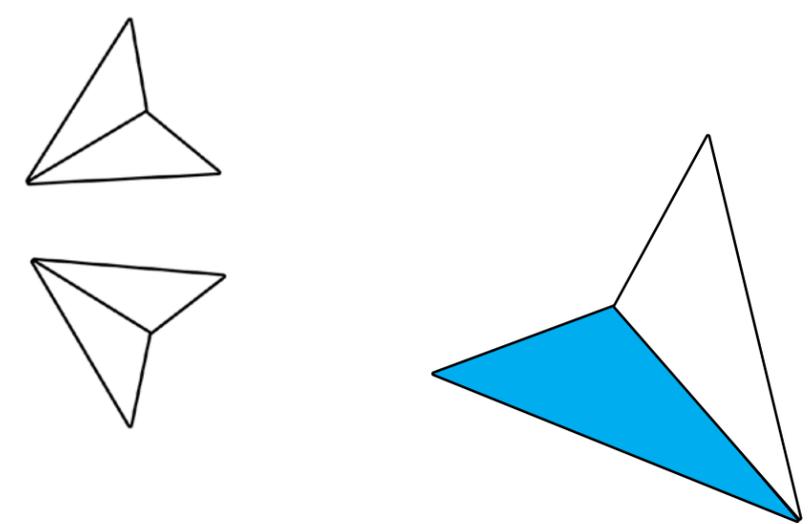


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# SOCIAL MEDIA & THE ILLUSION OF WORK



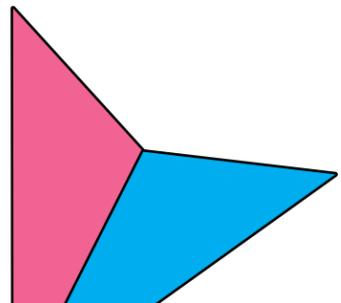
**At this moment, all I'm thinking about is:**

**What do we prioritize?  
What are we aspiring towards?**

I don't think it's a secret that there is a particular Instagram fatigue going on lately. It's tricky. How do you differentiate between performance and genuine care? Since the pandemic began, my internet has been running slower because of how many people are logging on to cyber-participate in the world they physically can't explore. I also don't think it's a secret that people show their "best selves" online. So what does that look like at this moment— showing how much you care?

Over the past few weeks it's been strange to see everyone, especially non-black people, chime in about their personal experience regarding the Black Lives Matter / Black Liberation Movement. Celebrities, companies, brands, people that otherwise normally post pictures of food or their pets. Some of the things I was seeing online honestly made me think "What the fuck is going on?" Visibility is a good thing, right? So why was there this feeling of frustration?

To better understand, I started to think about why a lot of people post on social media to begin with. Earlier this week, I was speaking with my roommate (and fellow musician) Calvin Presents about how there is this insane amount of pressure to create "content" within our generation. Taking a break from social app activity, especially if you're using social media for any work related to a project or a career, sometimes feels like a risk. As though the endless feed of content means people might forget you or why they followed you in the first place. The strange breed of insecurity this manifests can make one feel pressure to regularly draw people in. So my question is: If we're here drawing people in, does that mean our posts are like advertisements for who we are? Who we aspire to be? Are we functioning like mini-companies? Drawing this connection between social media and capitalism revealed the source of my personal frustration. While I realize we all use social media differently, I caught myself wondering who is sharing for "engagement"? Who is "decorating" their storefront? And who genuinely cares about the community and the state of the world?



Almost all of my friends and I have joked at some point about the concepts of online persona, internet bravery, and aesthetic, but this particular conversation, at this time, is much different. Protests in Richmond have been happening for 30+ days now. Now, more than ever, I am thinking about who is holding a microphone and why.

As I scroll through the people's newspaper of social media, I might not be "cancelling" or unfollowing every questionable perspective I take in, but I find my mind is now flooded with mental notes. Is this a form of real work? Does this person seem capable of having a deeper conversation? Captions and vibes aside, what is the utilitarian purpose of this post? These questions are especially deafening when I see the feeds of brands, businesses, and non-black people.

This wide spectrum of acknowledgment of the times (or lack thereof) on people's feeds has very clearly shown me how truly dangerous the concept of a "social media persona" can really be. At best some posts are unhelpful, at worst they further feed this beast of filtered reality. While visibility is important, I can't help but feel like any ounce of falsehood is a distraction from the Black Lives Matter/ Black Liberation Movement. I'd argue that aesthetic can be harmful because it can perpetuate the illusion of work.



ANYWAY, I hope everyone is doing okay. Follow community organizers like @chelseahiggswise, @realwizkaliaaaa, @campaign\_mama, @vmfa\_reform. Keep holding Institutions like Richmond Police Department and VMFA accountable for their participation in systematic racism. Keep defending and investing in ALL Black lives. Dismantling white supremacy is daily work.

**Angelica Garcia** is an East Los Angeles born, Richmond-based, musician on Spacebomb Records. Please check out her new album Cha Cha Palace.



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# STICKS + STONES

BY CHANCE FISCHER

“Sticks & stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”

I'd like to accept that statement as fact, that words are powerless when ignored. The truth is words have harmed Black people more than any bullet or fist ever could. Laws find power in words and words mean things. Words define a life we perpetually misinterpret and misunderstand. Words provide justification for police firing their weapons at me when I am unarmed, helpless, hopeless.

The unsolicited martyrdom of Black folk should not be what I recount in my final moments.

Maybe COVID-19 opened the eyes of the majority. Maybe now it's convenient for fellow humans to reflect on injustice because they have nothing more to occupy their time. Maybe the change will happen because the world is watching.

Maybe.

I do not have the luxury of placing faith in “maybe.” These days I am bereft of faith in any others but myself. Have I smothered myself in cynicism or awakened my soul with the Ghosts of Racism's past? The root of my hesitance changes nothing. Hesitating to believe in a false sense of equality, in infinitesimal change, is the only safety net I know. I am empowered by my skepticism, and my lack of hope nurtures my tenacity.

Words will adorn my tombstone. What will they say? Will I have died in vain? Will I have died at the hands of someone who dehumanized me before they took the time to learn my name? I hope my headstone captures my life as more than a hospitality professional – more than a rapper. I hope that my etched stone says I was a brother, son, boyfriend, friend, peacemaker, advocate. I hope the person chiseling finds inspiration in my postmortem elevator pitch.

I hope we will choose our words more carefully. I hope we will manage our internal conversations before impulsive actions. I hope we find the foundation of our strength in the words we use to change our perspectives.

I hope we change our perspectives. I hope we listen to the words of others. I hope we challenge them. I hope we hold them accountable for what they uttered, even if they claimed they misspoke. Words serve as the only medium amplifying our individuality. I hope we know when to keep the safety on.

Still entrenched in my hope for the world, I find myself fighting mirages. Intangible dreams spreading wings in my hallucinations become death sentences. I deserve more. We deserve more. We deserve dreams over insomnia. We deserve to pen new chapters instead of editing wills. We deserve to establish our own terms – words that amplify our power.

For years the words of the unchallenged majority contextualized my existence. I had no choice in being colored, negro, African-American, or the other “n” word buried in the argument of the letters used to end it. I had no choice in not being a man, in being three-fifths of a man, or being a whole man. I'm still using my words to justify that my existence matters.

I implore each of us to question our diction and its impact. I beg we apply the same focus on our word choice as we would surgery. I beg we internalize the power cavalierly relinquished through self-doubt. I can manage the sticks. I can manage the stones. I can even manage one or two broken bones. But words, especially ones ignorantly laced with venom, could very well be the end of my life.





# The President IS KILLING US & IT IS A TYPE OF NEO-GENOCIDE

BY TAWNYA PETTIFORD-WATES, PH.D.

It is not by accident that the United States president has ignored and fundamentally moved beyond the public health emergency that is COVID-19. This president and the administration he has assembled have designed and implemented a racist, white supremacist agenda since before he was inaugurated in January of 2017. My mother used to always tell us to "Be careful of the company you keep." The company that surrounds the POTUS and his closest and most trusted advisors are either white supremacists themselves, or they fundamentally align themselves with the doctrine and dogma of white supremacy and a distorted version of manifest destiny.

They came into office with a specific and clear set of directives: to dominate the office and the people, and to deliberately engage in the systematic removal of the legacy and accomplishments of the previous administration. The fact that for eight years a Black family with high moral values, standards of decency, propriety, integrity, and a genuine care and compassion for the American people inhabited the White House, the people's house, was something that the new president and his entourage simply could not tolerate. The 44<sup>th</sup> president has a deep and all-consuming hatred for our 44<sup>th</sup> President, Barack Hussein Obama.

Immediately upon taking office this administrative team began to remove and replace people, programs, policies, and procedures that were implemented in the Obama administration, all in an effort to negate and deny the historic successes of the former administration, the Black president. Further, as a type of throwing down the gauntlet, they wanted to make it clear that there was a new sheriff in town! Number 45, defined himself politically when he relentlessly pursued the myth that Barrack Obama was an illegitimate president because he was, according to the "birthers," not born in the United States but rather was born in Kenya. He was a Black man from the "Dark Continent!" This began

as a dog whistle to those so-called ALT right-wingers to come out into the open because now there was somebody in the White House who would be their champion. The Obama presidency was an abomination to these people and they were going to make certain that history would record it as so, or they were going to make sure that they so scrubbed Obama's legacy from the American consciousness that the revision of his historic rise and presidency would merely be seen as an insignificant blip on the radar screen of American presidents. An unfortunate mishap for which they blamed liberals and the "Democrat" party.

After his extraordinarily racist and hate-filled inaugural address, fast forward through three and a half years of promoting white males (known sexual assaulter and misogynists) to positions of power and influence and racist policies and practices such as the Muslim travel ban, the border wall, (for which Mexico will never pay a dime), blocked immigration saying in effect that it threatened white culture, criminalizing BIPOC in rhetoric and policy proposals, Charlottesville declaration of "good people on both sides," termination of temporary protective status for POC while liberally allowing immigration from white countries for white people, the targeting of the NFL protest as un-American, tightening the rules for people seeking asylum, separating thousands of children from their parents and detaining them in cages like animals, calling Black Lives Matter protesters hoodlums and gang bangers, STILL calling for the death penalty for the exonerated "Central Park 5," calling in the National Guard to fire on peaceful protesters exercising their 1st Amendment rights and so on, and so on.... The list is so long these brief paragraphs cannot contain it! The man is a racist, a white supremacist, and he is the president of the United States.

This is certainly not the first racist president, far from it. Many of our former presidents and leaders have been members of that club. However, within the modern era, we have not seen anything that compares to this man, who is the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. The inept response that this president and his administration have generated towards the COVID-19 pandemic is not only intentional, but it is also devious and demonic in nature, and rivals ideologies of ethnic cleansing as a type of neo-genocide inflicted upon Black and brown bodies in full view with no relief in sight. Although the virus is indiscriminate and infects all people of all races and ethnicities, including the white supremacists that Number 45 counts as his army of warriors to "Take our country back!" And of course, the MAGA-hatted, no mask-wearing zealots that have no idea that they too are vulnerable to the corona virus's wrath. They will see before it's over! But, because their "fearless" (and I use that term very loosely) leader parades around as though he is invincible, refusing to wear a mask, (because wearing a mask projects weakness, not strength, he continues to proclaim), and they continue to emulate him. He is messaging to them that they are the Master Race, the ones who are strong enough to WILL this pandemic into utter submission.

White grievance politics and the inevitability of the changing demographics in America has made the double pandemic of COVID-19 and racism inextricably bound together in 2020. So, the question remains: Where do we go from here? The public lynching of George Floyd—on top of the lynching of Ahmaud Arbery, and the terrorist attack and murder of Breonna Taylor in her home—are culminating events in concert with the public health emergency we are experiencing. Indeed, it has brought America to a standstill, an inflection point, and a time of self-reflection. But will it bring America to her knees, as the United States is publicly shamed on a global scale? Will America take this moment to recognize, and I have to say that the onus of

this "recognition" is primarily on white people, that America is a sick nation, in serious peril of losing the pseudo civil war for equality, freedom, and justice for ALL people while her identity as the world's greatest experiment continues to erode.

Can we survive intact? Will there be a breaking of what has been in order to build the nation that we want to become? Will WE the People have the courage, the will, and the fortitude to exercise our right to overthrow our government? The legitimacy of a democracy comes only from the will and consent of the governed. The right of revolution and/or rebellion is our duty. "It is the duty of the People to overthrow a government that acts against their common interests and/or threatens the safety and security of the people without cause."

The COVID andemic is inextricably bound to America's historic legacy of racism and systemic and institutional oppression. #BlackLivesMatter #DefundthePolice

**Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, Ph.D.**  
Artistic Director & Founder of The Conciliation Project



# NO JUSTICE



@BXPNYC



@THEPREPPYERIC

# FINDING Jesus THROUGH THE TEAR GAS

BY LAUREN GARCIA

I was baptized in an evangelical church as an infant. We don't sprinkle or submerge, it's more symbolic. You get baptized with the Holy Ghost when you're old enough to fake the syllables.

Through Bible class, Vacation Bible School, Character Camp and more I memorized scripture. 10 years out of the church and I can still recite it. Sometimes it enters my thoughts in those hazy moments before falling asleep. Give and it will come back to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over. The Lord pours contempt on nobles and disarms the mighty. He reveals the deep things of darkness and brings utter darkness into the light. Jesus wept.

For decades, I read stories and heard sermons about the steps of the righteous, about mercy, about fairness. I saw none of those virtues in real life. I did see the righteous forsaken and their seed begging for bread. I saw wicked men prosper. I saw the state and the church take advantage of the poor, and no one ran into the temple with a whip to save them. I questioned these contradictions constantly. If Jesus said it was easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than a rich man to get into Heaven, why did my pastor renew the lease on his Lexus every year while congregants struggled to keep food on the table? If Jesus said blessed are the peacemakers, why do we wholly support institutions whose purpose is death and destruction?

On May 29, 2020, the Minneapolis Police Department went up in flames. All those years I spent reading about peace, about justice, about evil men withering away like grass... I felt like it could actually be real. Supernatural hope. And then it came to Richmond.

Two years ago, Michael Nyantakyi of the Richmond Police Department tased, shot, and murdered Black Richmond Public School teacher Marcus-David Peters. He was unarmed and in the middle of a mental health crisis. He was 24 years old. His death and the way the city reacted to it created an uproar in our activist circles. I attended community meetings, office hours with Mayor Stoney and the chief of police, peaceful protests. I told Chief Durham and Mayor Stoney directly that I am afraid to call the police, and many of my fellow citizens expressed the same fear. Marcus's family clearly and consistently articulated demands: crisis alerts, training for police officers, and a civilian review board. For two years, begging and pleading with the mayor, the chief, and city council fell on deaf ears. They were invited to meetings and never showed up; they told us we needed a thorough investigation before implementing training for police. Two years.

After the murder of George Floyd, Richmonders took collective action to stand in solidarity for Black lives and with all people harmed at the hands of the state by an oppressive police force. We chanted the same phrase we'd been chanting for years: help not death. Our government responded to this cry by sending in city, county, and state police departments to inflict violence and attack our citizens, including members of the press. At the time of this writing, police are still using chemical weapons banned by the Geneva Convention on protestors, families, children, pets. They are gassing people in their homes. They are lying about their actions every step of the way. Is it reasonable that Richmond's leadership spent two years waffling on action over taking a life, but were ready to go at

a moment's notice over property damage? If the state can mobilize an army in just a few hours over broken windows and burning busses, they are actively choosing to dismiss concerns of the community to maintain the system that harms us daily.

Our leaders ignored our desperate cries for help for years, and when we finally had enough and took to the streets they called in an even bigger, and more violent, police force to attack us. This should be alarming to all those who live in our city and in the surrounding counties. People we pay to protect us are terrorizing us and no one is holding them accountable. With the first use of tear gas on June 1, 20 minutes before curfew, on a crowd simply standing in a circle, RPD created a war zone, and that use of force has not stopped. Over the last 30 days, the Richmond Police Department, much like police departments all over this country, has proven what Black, brown, indigenous, and poor people have known for years: Their true purpose is protecting property at the expense of the life and health of our citizens. Changing the police chief will not solve this problem. Fixing a broken taillight does nothing to salvage a totaled car. And we won't get justice by arresting bad cops. The solution to a corrupt system can't be the same corrupt system. Justice is reimagining the institution of policing altogether and finding better ways to provide the social service we pretend they do.

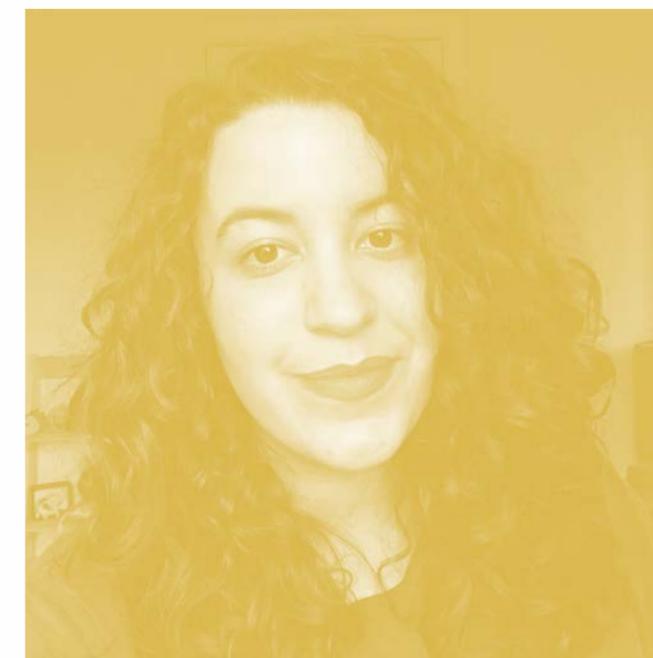
I am a sociologist by training. I understand that the conditions of massive unemployment, pandemic, worsening inequality and the filming of entitled, murderous cops all coalesced to create the current moment. People are tired of being tired and they're

not gonna take it anymore. What we are witnessing is a historic nationwide uprising and reclamation we haven't seen on this scale. But on a personal level, for a little girl who had the words of justice and righteousness seared into her mind and heart with no hope of ever getting any... it feels surreal. Marcus-David Peters Circle, formerly known as the Lee Monument, has been liberated and reclaimed from the shackles of its oppressive history. Black kids play on the statue and ride their bikes through the grass. Families take pictures and people cook and serve food for free. There's a free library, free seeds and plants, people set up tents to get signatures for petitions. During the day, MDP Circle is a dreamy little slice of what could be without the tyrannical hand of the state. At night, the police gas and shoot anyone gathered there. The oscillation between joy and terror is exhausting.

Sometimes I think about what we'll say to younger generations about this moment. All the pictures we'll show and the stories we'll tell of how we banded together in the face of pure evil. The hope for a better world makes the pain bearable. Like finding Jesus in the tear gas.

If you're interested in combating the tyranny of an unjust government, visit [8toabolition.com](https://8toabolition.com) to learn more about what public safety might look like without police. If you're interested in learning more about the history of policing, Haymarket is offering a free ebook. Solidarity forever.

Please follow **Lauren Garcia's** work via her website: <https://laurencgarcia.com/>





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# WHITE SUPREMACY GAVE US POVERTY: END IT BY MAKING RICHMOND INVESTIBLE

## BY MARLAND BUCKNER

Imagine awakening one morning a few months from now: A diverse group of protesters and reformers of all stripes are congratulating each other for tearing down white supremacist monuments, tearing up the police budget, and driving other steps toward what is often described as dismantling structures and systems of oppression. Gone are Davis, Stuart, perhaps Lee; a Marcus alert is active and his case reopened; citizen oversight of RPD has begun, and a large percentage of RPD's roughly \$100 million annual budget is redirected to critical human service priorities. Would these changes amount to or even advance transformative change? Sadly, no. Even if every item currently being advocated for is met, the vilest, lethal aspect of white supremacy will remain virtually untouched: the poverty that engulfs thousands of Richmonders of color.

Elsewhere, I have [argued](#) we need to tear down the centuries-old business model whose intellectual property is a sick belief in the hierarchy of human value that extracts profit either by expropriating Black labor and talent or by jailing then monetizing Black bodies. Police reform, however necessary, is not our gravest challenge. Neither is removing or relocating publicly subsidized statues glorifying degenerate traitors and their [insert profanity here] progeny who dedicated their lives to ensuring I could never write these words, regardless of how that might improve our cultural hygiene.

The most important step we can take is to immediately adopt a new business model organized around the principles of [inclusive growth](#), where both meanings of that wildly popular word "equity" – fairness, and ownership – are on display and practiced for all the world to see. To achieve this Richmond must make itself an investible city. We must organize ourselves to create and attract the billions of dollars it will take to pay the bill run up by white supremacy.

Making ourselves investible requires a changed approach. We must accept that the cost to overcome poverty is too large and our local resources too limited to do this entirely ourselves. We must accept that we do not yet have the structures and systems in place necessary to receive the capital needed to scale lasting anti-poverty solutions, but we could if we took some important first steps.

### Step 1. Admit We Have a Problem

Pre-pandemic Richmond was at an inflection point. Many Richmonders felt we were on the cusp of greatness as a city but the existential threat of racially concentrated poverty might be our undoing. Richmond was conflicted; it very much wanted to tackle its tough problems but there were roadblocks that kept us from fully admitting the gravity of the situation.

**Roadblock One:** the comically unrealistic view that the bulk of responsibility for change falls on the public sector. This expectation utterly fails to admit how limited we are by fiscal constraints, our governance culture, and the extraordinary capacity challenges faced by, and sometimes brought on, by, our city's policymakers. More on that later.

**Roadblock Two:** admitting that when large funders, the corporate community, and similarly situated (typically white) institutional leaders seek to drive change at scale, their efforts are quickly castigated as paternalistic and exclusionary by those claiming to represent "the community." To make matters worse, the boards and investment committees of these institutions sometimes bring perspectives charitably described as anachronistic. This dynamic creates cultural and management risks most funders seek to avoid meaning resources needed to catalyze scalable change cannot be deployed.

**Roadblock Three:** the self-lacerating narratives one frequently hears when discussing the possibilities for change. This is where white supremacy has succeeded beyond its wildest expectations. As the Navy Hill debate so clearly demonstrated, many Richmonders, regardless of race, have internalized the notion that mediocrity is all they deserve. This is made worse by the constituency who argue, without a trace of irony, that, among other things, monument removal will reduce property values. But white supremacy's triumph is never more painfully felt than when one hears the phrase so often uttered by Black Richmonders: "That's not for us." Richmonders of all races inherited the language of white supremacy. Too many still use it.

### Step 2. Confront the Scale of Our Problem

In addition to self-hate speech, white supremacy created socio-economic problems so costly they are hard to grasp.

**Exhibit A:** Housing. This is a perfectly understood problem we have nearly admired to death. We haven't been sufficiently candid about the cost to address just one part of this challenge: public housing. During a recent effort to secure federal funds to help redevelop public housing, we learned that redeveloping Creighton Court would cost approximately \$200 million, Gilpin Court, nearly \$300 million. That means without even touching our New York Times-worthy, affordable housing-driven eviction crisis, we have, conservatively, a \$1.5 to \$2 billion public housing cost mountain to climb. Where, exactly, are these billions to come from, a GoFundMe campaign?

**Exhibit B:** Human Services. The Office of Community Wealth Building estimates that, in aggregate, Richmond spends approximately \$350 million annually on what might broadly be described as human services. This includes public and private dollars dedicated to anti-poverty efforts such as homelessness reduction, food security, and the like. It is not that these efforts are failing. The problem is that after spending one third of a billion dollars we're still treading water which means too many low-income Richmonders are drowning.

Some, imprisoned in the brightly lit cell of socialism, believe tax increases and income redistribution can solve these problems. Realistically, there is no remotely plausible scenario in which tax dollars alone are the solution. Redistribution sounds good in theory, but that would require epochal Federal policy changes and we haven't that kind of time. Richmond must attract and generate billions of private anti-poverty focused capital over the coming years if we expect to create conditions to help those most in need. We need our public sector to work quickly to create an enabling environment for that capital. For that, we need a change in our civic governance culture.

### Step 3. Demand an Outcomes-Focused Municipal Governance Culture

Richmond desperately needs an outcomes-focused governance culture directed toward quantifiable, achievable poverty reduction goals. Such a culture requires the public and civic sectors to work together to embrace data-informed, evidence-based decision making that pushes public dollars toward proven anti-poverty solutions. But such a culture first requires a level of collaboration that too often seems inversely related to our ability to achieve it. City Council President Newbille – of apparently infinite patience – can regularly be seen working to build consensus across Council. But productive consensus building is too often thwarted by some Members who confuse obstruction and snarky RTD quotes with constructive policymaking.

An outcomes-focused governance culture requires more public candor and policy innovation. Whether it is constraints imposed by [Dillon's Rule](#), or the legacy of [annexation](#), our leaders have very few options to drive transformational policymaking. City Council must regularly reinforce with citizens just how constrained city government actually is so citizens can respond intelligently to the very hard choices we face. Those limitations also demand that we work creatively and aggressively to use the limited tools we have to showcase Richmond as investible. Short of massive real estate, cigarette, and other taxes to which everyone seems congenitally opposed, our ability to generate revenue – which remember, is used so the City can finance debt – is limited at best. That means we must be vastly more innovative and tough-minded when it comes to budgeting. Diligently measuring the anti-poverty impact of our limited public dollars will ensure money is moving toward proven, ideally scalable solutions. That begins with telling people truths they likely don't want to hear.

#### Step 4. Align Resources Across Sectors

Measuring the impact of anti-poverty public spending will be easier if we better align, integrate, and coordinate our social sector. It is said Richmond has a population of 230,000 but 231,000 non-profits. In truth, we have some incredibly high-functioning anti-poverty social service organizations. Unfortunately, these programs do not fit into a sufficiently robust architecture, structure, or system that allows their successes to be leveraged, let alone scaled. Our social sector is program rich but system poor. This is not to suggest that alignment and coordination are non-existent; rather, these civic assets are not yet organized to meet the size of our anti-poverty challenge. We do, however, have best practices that show us the way. Homeward, the entity that drives coordination among homelessness service providers is one, Feed More is another.

#### Step 5. Use What We Have To Show What Might Be

Attracting national anti-poverty investment requires that we showcase models that are investible. One way we can do this is by creating prototypes of scalable solutions using existing city assets that today sit idle. For example, the Richmond public school system has real estate on its books conservatively assessed at well over \$15 million. Some assets are leased, but much of it is owned by the city. Imagine if the School Board and City Council designated just one such property as a demonstration project requiring the developer to meet specific social impact and community wealth creation goals. Imagine if, as part of this project, the school system retained equity and benefitted as any other limited partner would? Imagine a surplus school transformed into a

mixed-income development that co-located a group of aligned social service providers (see Step 4) to create an opportunity-rich environment for families that generated a regular financial return for, say, the Richmond Public Schools Foundation? Imagine further that such a prototype project was designed to allow every Richmonder the chance to invest in amounts appropriate for them? Finally, imagine the impact if we applied this approach to all surplus city property? Wishful thinking? Hardly. Americans have done this since WWI when war bonds were sold by the Girl Scouts and in 2012 President Obama signed into law provisions that expanded this approach to include other types of securities. Such an approach would be a magnet for the scale of anti-poverty capital we need because investors would see clearly that Richmond understands how to generate economic returns by putting both meanings of the word equity into practice.

We need to stop nibbling around the edges of our poverty problem. Whether we “defund” the police or not, whether we remove Confederate monuments or not, if we continue thinking that million-dollar solutions will solve our billion-dollar problems we will fail. We need to take immediate steps to make Richmond a city ready to do business in a way that would make Maggie Walker proud. If we don't, white supremacy still wins.

**Marland Buckner,**  
*Co-Founder and Principal of MB<sup>2</sup> Solutions LLC, a Washington D.C.-and Richmond-based domestic strategy and impact development firm.*



@RVAPHOTOG



@RVAPHOTOG

# RESPECTFULLY RETURN WHAT'S NOT YOURS

BY ZBEY THA POET

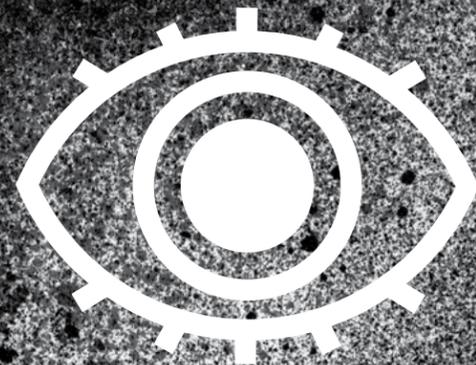
This (essay) won't be long, yet it will be long enough to start a much-needed dialogue. This essay will be long enough to start the process of permanent healing and removal of mental chains from a nation of people.

What we are witnessing is the fall of systems that were never designed for certain people to ever reach a level of economic prosperity, free will, and equality than a certain class.

People are angry and need guidance. People are ready for change, yet need healing. People are tapping into the spirit of our ancestors, and we have the power and spirit of our ancestors in us. So what do you think is going to happen now?

The uprising will continue, yet (it will continue) with strategy, determination, awareness, and love. Humanity was lost for too many years and it must return. God, Allah, Buddha, Jesus, Jehovah, or however you identify your higher power source is not pleased with the activity on Earth, and things must change for the fairness of all people. Definitely for the true GODS of this Earth... Part of the reason some Europeans are upset...The Truth Hurts.

**Stay Tuned...The AWAKENING continues...**



# A letter of Hope to my city

BY NICOLE MASON

Dear Richmond, RVA, & the Greater 804,

This is an open letter of hope to my city!

Four months ago, none of us would have predicted that our whole world would be upside down and that Richmond would be at the center of protests. But here we are, at a place that history books will call a "pivotal moment." Will we pivot back to what we know? Will we become uncomfortable and embrace the tough conversations, realities, and decisions that are sure to come?

Here are some hopes I hold onto:

## **We Will Finally See Things As They Truly Are:**

Recent events simply pulled the covers back on matters we were already struggling with. Richmond has struggled with racial tensions, questionable leadership motives, segregated communities, competing priorities, disregard for others, and myopic planning for years.

Folks who say, "I don't see color" and "we're in a post-racial society" have now had to take off their rose-colored glasses. Folks who hate based on color or class can no longer live unsuspectingly in the shadows. Now is our day of reckoning for the sins we've overlooked for years. While there has always been good in our city, what hid underneath was unhealed wounds of pride, arrogance, indifference, prejudice, corruption, and lies. So the good struggled to be lasting because its foundation was a festering wound.

Richmonders live separate but equal lives in so many areas that it's just normal. From the schools our children attend, to high-level business networking groups, and even where we attend church. But now we are being called out. Do we make this metropolitan city simply look diverse or will we actually become a just city that puts its movement where its "mouth is?"

## **We Will Stop Being Distracted by Cosmetic**

**Change:** Let's agree as a city that statues are a separate issue from our current police brutality issues. Somehow, we've once again gotten distracted by what's truly unjust. Interestingly enough, as a woman of color who was born and raised in the capital of the Confederacy, I have absolutely no desire to see statues removed.

I know how this typically plays out in Richmond. We get into an uproar on an issue that looks blatantly offensive, but we rarely touch the core issues that have allowed the remnants of the Confederacy to still influence folks today. **Until we address the tenets of what the Confederate Army fought to defend, which remain visible in our community, I say we keep the statues.**

The Confederate Army fought and died to keep people of color as property, and later second-class citizens. However, we still see that sentiment in the way we fund Richmond Public Schools, the way we isolate children of color in housing communities with no way out, the way we circulate dollars amongst the elite while offering leftovers to others. We live in a city where one's life expectancy is directly correlated to your zip code. Thanks to VCU's Life Expectancy Mapping research, we know that Gilpin Court and the Museum District residents don't have the same fighting chance at reaching the ripe old age of 77. Likewise, we live in a state that has ranked high for having the strongest "School to Prison" pipeline for our youth. So don't take the statue down until you address the true injustice in our city, which negatively impacts many people of color.

## **People of Color Will No Longer Have To Carry The**

**Burden of Injustice Alone:** A few weeks ago, I drove through Bon Air and saw a very large set of painted letters in a yard, which indicated they too wanted justice for all.

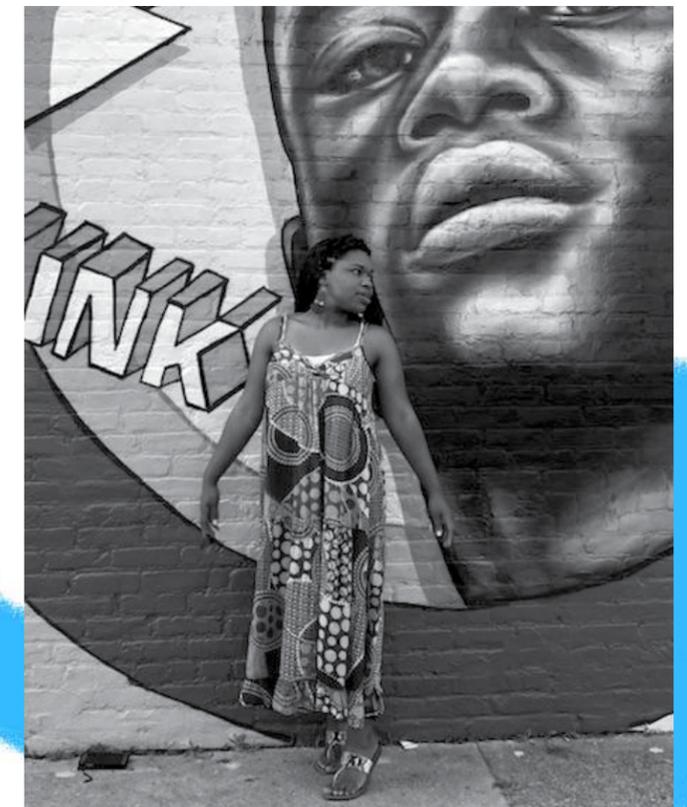
I'll be honest, I didn't have hope that the movement for true change would be lasting or impactful until I saw this. The justice conversation somehow traversed the James River, crossed over Chippenham Parkway, drove down several streets, and made its way to Bon Air. No offense to Bon Air, but I highlight this to say: **Black people alone can not carry the burden of repairing a city that has been built on the backs of slavery and injustice.**

I've seen what happens when white people get upset. Things change within a miraculous timeline when white folks get angry about things as small as insufficient sidewalks, potholes, and even the number of bike lanes.

For true change, communities of color need that same power in demanding change, becoming enraged, and challenging Richmond's status quo. I am hopeful that – finally – the conversation will move from "I am so sorry to hear what's happening in your (Black) community" to "what are we (Richmonders/Humans/Fellow Citizens) going to do about what's happening in our (Richmonders/Humans/Fellow Citizens) community"?

I am hopeful that compassion fatigue, advocacy fatigue, racial conversation fatigue won't set in. I am hopeful to sit down with my future kids and tell them how we used this pivotal moment to make lasting change!

**Nicole Mason** is a Social Enterprise Business Owner and Licensed Professional Counselor. Nicole is the Principal Founder of Glean LLC- Richmond's premier social enterprise and commercial cleaner.





@VARIANCE108



@SHOTBY\_CHAN

# X OTHER IS NOT A RACE,

## DO YOU SEE ME NOW?

BY PATRICIA BRADBY

There is no denying it, 2020 has been the most bizarre year of my life. It has taken a wave of protests for social justice, unlike anything this world (not just our country) has ever seen, for me to be seen as something I have always been: Black.

As a biracial child growing up in a predominantly white county, I am not sure I was ever seen as any race. My mom is Chinese-Malay. My dad is African-American. I never considered myself more Black than Asian, nor more Asian than Black. But I certainly identify as both, and always have. However, when you are racially ambiguous to the outside world, you are simply seen as "other." Even to some of my closest friends growing up, I was not Black. I was also not Asian. I was just Patricia.

While I am grateful that for much of my life my race did not define me, what I am finding now is that this "otherness" has put me in a unique position to have very vulnerable conversations with individuals who have very rarely talked about race with a person not of their same race, if they have ever really talked seriously about race at all.

I am glad that people are taking such an interest in educating themselves on racial disparities. Still, like many others, I find myself exhausted by the overwhelming volume of race conversations. I am aware that for many of the individuals I have talked to, there may be few (if any) other people of color to whom they can turn to have such vulnerable conversations. To me, it is a blessing to be given the opportunity to illuminate the many inequities in our society for individuals who otherwise may never see them. Their inability to see creates an inability to change. I like to think I am opening the door to both of those possibilities. Big or small, every change matters. And that is why even through the exhaustion, I continue to talk to whoever reaches out.

People are constantly asking, "What can I do? How can I use my privilege to help others?" To this, I have two things to say:

(1) Discussing this recently with a small group of girlfriends, one person expressed that it's not about making a seat at the table, it's about realizing that the table does not belong to you. The table belongs to all of us and the seats are for everyone. So not only should you be inviting people of color to the tables where you are seated, but you should be expanding your circle and sitting at tables where not everyone else looks like you. All the tables are for everyone.

2) Realize that it is what you are doing and saying in front of the smallest audiences that matters the most. Social media is full of noise. It's not that making a statement on those platforms means nothing, but to truly change hearts, minds, and systems these conversations have to take place offline. The smaller the circle, the more intimate the conversation. The smaller the circle, the less distraction and noise. The smaller the circle, the greater the focus and the higher the probability is for a true moment of empathy. No matter how many conversations I am asked to have, I know the impact of those one-on-one interactions are immeasurable in the fight against social injustice and systemic racism.

I hope the same people who now see me as Black, also come to see the racism against Black people in our economic infrastructure, academic institutions, housing opportunities, criminal justice system, highway construction, and even access to healthcare. If COVID-19 has not exposed the way healthcare disparities have failed Black people in this country, I am not sure if anything ever will. All of these systems are intertwined, and all of them were historically created to solely advance white people in America, holding back anyone and everyone else, my Black father and my immigrant mother included, me included. I have been afforded my own privileges in life by virtue of the hard work of my parents and their parents before them. I do not see my privilege as an opportunity to overlook that which I have the power to change, and I hope no one else will either.





@SHOTBY\_CHAN

# WHAT WAS THAT STATUE?

BY PRABIR MEHTA

I remember my first time seeing the Lee monument. I was 9 years old and still fresh to the USA. The family drove down Monument Avenue to get on Franklin to visit a family friend. We drove past the (Lee) monument, and I asked my parents what that statue was. They said something to the effect of "he must be someone who founded the city or something?" A little later we walked around and saw the statue up close. One of the inscriptions mentioned something about him being a general (or something) but there was no info anywhere ya know? No context, (lol)...literally. Nothing. Just "LEE" that's it.

We went about our way and moved on.

I can't remember when I actually learned who Robert E. Lee was, but spoiler alert – y'all – he didn't found the city. Being an immigrant and totally new to this land I did not see it as a sign of hate or as a hero, just assumed it was some important Richmonder. My point is that there was no context, no information. That was in 1989. There's been so much time since then to give it context (or something)... even after many conversations in recent years, we still have nada. Now, it's been announced that the Lee monument will be removed.

I guess the Confederate statue supporters didn't want to add context; the whole story wasn't worth telling, apparently. So, others have decided...hey look, if you're not going to tell the whole story about something in public, then is your half-told story really worth keeping around? Looks like the answer is "no," and I'm totally cool with it. And yes, I've learned all about him (Lee) since then, just wanted to share a little personal memory that jumped to the front of my mind.

Let's put some bad-ass public art up there. Maybe, after causing much division in our community, maybe, make it a park for people to come together, 6 feet apart for the time being, but closer in the future.

Richmond, where so much history has been made, continues to make history. Much more work needs to be done, but every journey starts with the first step, let's keep walking. Better yet, let's keep marching for what's right.



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@DAVID\_KENEDY\_PHOTO

LET'S FACE IT,  
PEOPLE ARE CALLING  
FOR REFORMS,  
WHAT WE NEED IS A

# REVOLUTION

BY DURON CHAVIS

Those of us who study history, particularly the Black liberation movement, it is understood that the civil rights movement did not emerge out of a vacuum. Long before Martin, there had been community-based responses to voting rights, police brutality and desegregation in Black communities across the country. However, due to the dismal way we are taught history, we only identify with the iconic folks like Martin.

Black-led organizations like SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) did work in communities during the '60s, and countless organizers tapped into local people to advance the struggle for human rights all across the South. The evolution of SNCC eventually led to the dismissal of white organizers as the call for Black power was raised. It is fascinating to watch the evolution of BLM (Black Lives Matter) across the country as we see the rise of white people adopting and superseding the numbers of Black people involved in the movement on a ground level, particularly in Richmond.

## AT WHAT POINT WILL THE WHITE ALLIES BE DISMISSED SO THAT THE MOVEMENT FOR REFORM OF THIS SYSTEM CAN EVOLVE INTO AN INTENTIONAL WORK TOWARDS BLACK LIBERATION?

At what point will the white allies be dismissed so that the movement for reform of this system can evolve into an intentional work towards Black liberation?

We know, through study, that the evolution from civil rights (struggle) to Black liberation (struggle) relied on the evolution of local Black leadership from one of reform to one of revolution – in the form of not only Black-led, community-based groups to national organizations such as the Black Panther Party and the paramilitary organizations such as the Black Liberation Army.

We saw the demand for nationalism raised by the Republic of New Afrika. We saw Black leaders advance our struggle internationally in the forms of Robert F. Williams, Kwame Ture, and Assata Shakur. We also saw the international span of the movement manifested in the form of the All African People's Revolutionary Party.

We also know that due to counterintelligence operations by the US government that the work of Black liberation during the '70s was disrupted. People were killed by the police and imprisoned with many still languishing in prison to this day. In the last 50 years, organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League have assumed an accommodationist position – solely focused, for the most part, on reform of policy. Cultural organizations have kept the fire of revolution alive in Black communities across the country. Organizations like the Nation of Islam have remained steadfast in building independent Black power across the country.

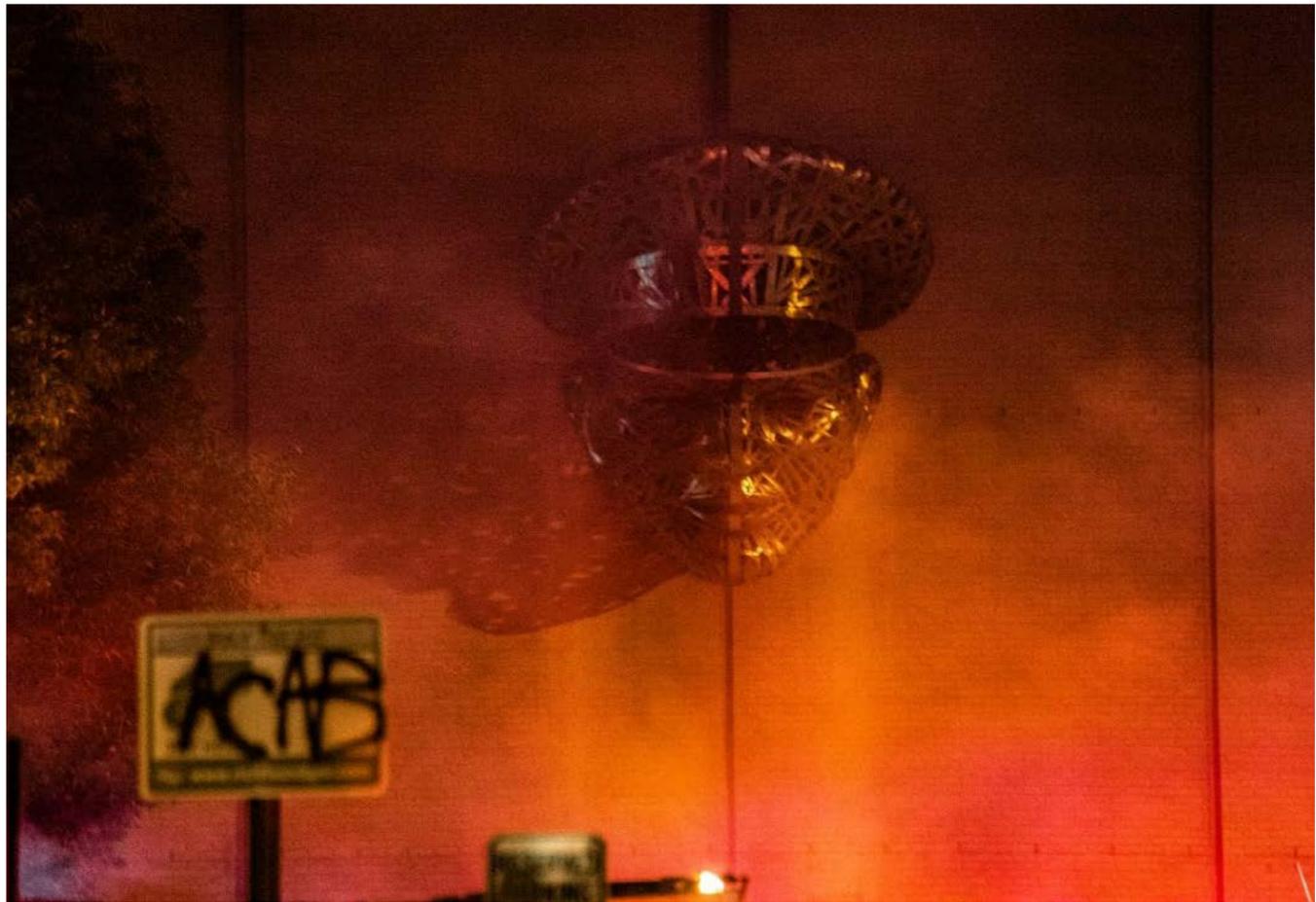
In the light of the BLM movement in Richmond, we have not seen this movement pick up where our predecessors left off. Across the country, we see calls for reform but not for revolution, as were the case before COINTELPRO (COunter INTELLIGENCE PROgram) defeated our movement before. **When do we become honest about this moment and address the regression it represents in light of what those who came before us fought for?**

We cannot get Black liberation via a predominately white ally-filled movement. Kwame Ture taught us to organize our communities – not to let white people be the political force that influences the change in our communities. Despite the claims that Black people lead the white allies – we know that

implicit bias, white saviorism and paternalism corrupts white efforts for social change. The few Black organizations that exist in comparison to the droves of white people who claim that Black Lives Matter do not have the funding, nor the political education necessary or the organizational experience necessary to check the predominate whiteness that surrounds them without a mass movement of revolutionary Black people to check the power differential.

The radical left Black voices that challenge the white "allies" are marginalized by the few Black folks the white allies are comfortable with because they benefit from the proximity they have to white folks repelling any and all critique of strategy and tactic being used. Calls for reparations and land are cast aside in favor of reformist demands, such as defunding the police or the Marcus Alert. Both are insufficient demands for the former capital of the Confederacy. They are aimed only at the police and the government – which allows all of the white folks who benefit from white privilege, and that have inherited land and money from slavery and discrimination off the hook. What is revolutionary about that? Nothing at all. Nothing at all.





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# THE VILLAGE IS BURNING

BY KIM YOUNG, LCSW

The estimated youth population in Richmond hovers around 41,000, of that 41,000 Black youth make up more than half of the total youth population in the city.<sup>1</sup> In FY 2019, Black youth comprised 87.9 percent of intake cases with the juvenile court, 95.7 percent of youth on probation,<sup>2</sup> and 55.4 percent of students who did not graduate from high school.<sup>3</sup> **THIS IS NOT NORMAL.**

Black youth in Richmond primarily live in overly policed communities and account for the vast majority of police interactions for status offenses, which are acts considered violations of the law due to age (i.e. curfew, truancy, running away, etc.). The most recent available data from the Virginia Department of Health in 2017, showed that 81 percent of hospitalizations due to gun-related non-fatal injuries were Black people, and 43 percent were between 15 and 24 years old. **THIS IS NOT NORMAL.**

Since 2016, Black youth ages 18 years old and younger have made up 100% of youth fatalities due to gun violence.<sup>4</sup> **THIS IS NOT NORMAL.**

I have worked as a social worker in various capacities in Richmond since 2013 and have spent the last decade joyfully working alongside at promise youth, families, and communities. Before moving upstream, away from direct services, I spent three and a half years supporting court-impacted youth and families. My career focus shifted when I asked one of my 16-year old clients what he planned to do over the summer. His response was "I'm just trying to stay out the way and not get shot."

**THIS IS NOT NORMAL.**

I had the worst year of my career in 2018 where I experienced the loss of three young people, one was the same kid who was "trying to stay out the way and not get shot." As a social worker on the frontlines, I have witnessed educational, juvenile legal, healthcare, social services, and behavioral health system failures. All of them have failed Black youth who are pushed towards the deep end of these systems. **THIS IS NOT NORMAL.**

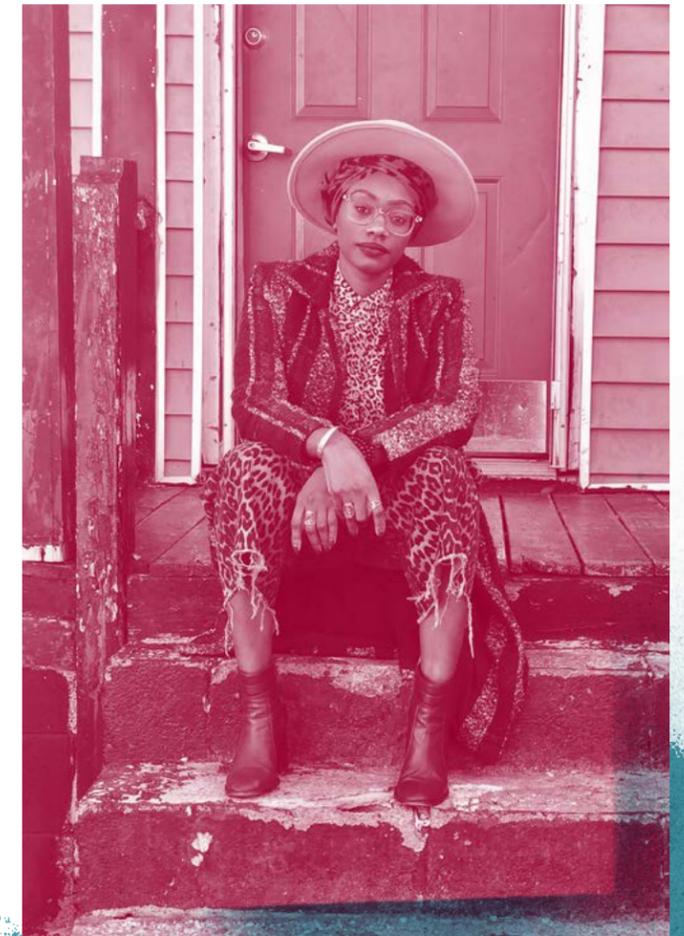
I have witnessed apathy lead to a failure to act. I have seen ego create barriers and prevent progress. I have experienced the dangers of maintaining status quo. I have watched the misuse of power cost someone housing, jobs, freedom or a future. I have seen the worst in people who were placed in positions to make decisions that could literally change and or save a Black youth's life.

**THIS IS NOT NORMAL,** and I refuse to accept these conditions as such. This is what happens when Black futures are consistently devalued and defunded. Black youth deserve to dream. Black youth deserve to believe. Black youth deserve love. Black youth deserve the absolute best from Richmond.

We often hear the appropriated African proverb, "it takes a village to raise a child" however attention is rarely given to "the child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth." The village is burning. Richmond is burning.

**Kim Young** is a licensed clinical social worker in Richmond Virginia and owner of [Dope Black Social Worker, LLC](#).

1. Kids Count Data Center
2. Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice Court Service Unit Data Resource Guide
3. Virginia Department of Education
4. Richmond Police Department Major Crimes Unit





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**PRAISE THE LIVING — RAISE THE DEAD:**

## **AN OPEN LETTER TO OUR BELOVED YOUNGINS AT THE FRONT LINE**

BY "MAMA" FREE BANGURA

For GABRIEL WEEK 2020...

Dearly Beloved Front Line Warriors Who Have Just Begun to Fight,

I'm writing to you in the name of the Most High Creator of all things, both seen and unseen and in the presence of our Honored Ancestors, upon whose shoulders we stand.

I greet you warmly and with peace.

How is your body? I know you must be exhausted. Look how much you've accomplished. It's fantastic. You're winning! Keep going. Don't give up. Forward ever, backward never.

Be extra kind to yourself today. Drink water! Never turn down the gift of water, btw. That's what my godfather Baba Hodari (iba e baye tonu) told me years ago. I listened because he was wise and he loved me and he was right. Don't be dry and ashy. Moisturize daily. Hydrate.

Of all the brave things you have taken upon yourself here lately, your most important mission should be to stay cool in all the ways: Cool head (ori tutu). Cool home (ile tutu). Cool path (ona tutu). Cool Ancestors (tutu egungun). Again, water helps. Try pouring a little bit on the ground right after you twist the cap. It's good practice for what's to come.

As the water splashes earth, be grateful. Cool your thoughts. Think of peace. Like water, you are essential. We need you. We salute you. We see you standing at the front line, in the thick of a battle you did not have time to prepare for. It's hard as hell. They who feel it know it.

Thank goodness you came forward when you did because so many of us are tired. We're also sad. This is the season where our beloved elders are crossing over to the other side. We celebrate their ascension but it still hurts to see them go. Suddenly, everything has shifted. Trust and believe, our community elders were divinely guided. They had the foresight to choose enough of us to hold the line. They prepared us to peep game and call bullshit. They expect us to win. We're not going to let them down.

You're part of the shift too. Like it or not, it's time to get into your new position. But first, there are things they'd want us to share with you. Let me drop some jewels.

**In this war against dark energies and wickedness in high places, seek the light of human kindness. The race will not be won by the swift, but by those who endure to the end. That's facts.**

**Don't put all your effort into tearing things down. Save some energy for manifesting the world of your dreams. Remember to build as well as destroy. Find the balance.**

**Do nothing without intention. Plan your work. Work your plan. Money moves mountains. It's not evil to be rich. It's actually a blessing. Get the bag.**

**Avoid using the words of the oppressor to describe the struggle of the oppressed. New rules, new tools. Innovate.**

Our Ancestors speak to some of us in the language of bright ideas. For this, they deserve to be held in the highest esteem. Tell people not to call Richmond's enslaved African ancestors the slaves. It's true that they were enslaved but it wasn't their identity. It was their circumstance. Use regenerative language as a sign of respect.

In the same way, don't ever call those wicked individuals a master because we know and understand that claiming ownership over another human being is despicable and wrong. For real for real, they weren't mastering a damn thing. They were human traffickers and abductors. They were reprobate felons. Speak the truth. Tell the facts.

I won't waste time talking about toxic opportunists and gaslighting charlatans in the midst. You've already peeped game. Wait for it. Whatever doesn't come out in the wash will come out in the rinse. They'll be gone as quickly as they arrived. History will not remember their names.

Some battles will be hard-fought. If all else fails, find strength in knowing that we are literally the audacious victory that all the elders before us have dared to imagine. We are our Honored Ancestors' wildest dreams! Wherever we go, there is an invisible squad of formidable warriors encamped about us on all sides. They are our first line of defense. It is upon their shoulders we stand.



Photo of Free Bangura shot by Patience Salgado

**Let me leave you with the recap:**

- Be grateful. Be kind.
- Be good to yourself.
- Do nothing without intention.
- Forward ever. Backward never.
- Speak the truth. Tell the facts.
- Plan your work. Work your plan.
- Measure twice. Cut once.
- Call an ace an ace.
- Do the best you can.
- The race will not be won by the swift, but by those who endure to the end.

With All the Best of Everything in a Double Portion, I Leave You as I Came,

General Bangura  
(but if you want, you can call me Mama Free)

**Mama Free Bangura**, Founder + CEO Untold RVA for GABRIEL WEEK 2020



@LATENT\_RG



@PORTSBYMITCH

# F\*CK CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

## A GLOBAL LEGACY OF IMPERIALISM, ANTI-BLACKNESS, WHITE SUPREMACY

BY SIONA PETEROUS

My earliest debate about why we should get rid of Christopher's Columbus statues and the holiday was in eighth grade.

It was with my geography teacher who often lost her cool with me. In hindsight, I was experiencing blatant racism and internalized sexism. The idea of a Black girl with a foreign-sounding name challenging her – an older white woman – and always telling her that she was racist enraged her. When you add that dynamic into the context of an extremely white, pro-military area like Stafford County, Virginia, it was borderline criminal.

My argument then, as it remains now, is rooted in understanding that Columbus didn't only represent the eventual intentional genocide of millions of Native Americans. He also represents the mass commodification of the slave trade which would ultimately kidnap an estimated 28 million Black people from Africa and send them to South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and everywhere else in between.

Columbus represents the onset of European Imperial powers forcibly creating a world that would serve the needs of the white, Christian elite; local cultures, religious beliefs, politics, and human life be damned. His so-called "discovery" embodies the imperial mindset that the Brown and Black bodies of the world must be saved by the white Christians and yes, that saviorism will include mass murders, exploitation of resources, bondage, cultural oppression, and rape as often as possible.

Just some classic, God-approved tactics, eh?

The phrase, "White men are saving brown women from brown men" from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1985 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" captures how slavery and colonization were justified. It also shows how those systems have been made modern. Now we have a police state and a system that does what it's been doing to Black and indigenous people all over the world for centuries – criminalizing and sexualizing us as threats that need guidance from the (white) state.

The solidification of anti-Blackness as a social doctrine that became the foundation of the relationships between white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy which are front and center in systems being protested, is best exemplified by Columbus. Even with the development of Orientalism, the justification used to colonize (and now, invade) the Middle East and parts of Asia, tie back anti-Black principles and white supremacy.

George Floyd should have never been murdered. I will not sit here and martyr someone who simply wanted to live, but people across the world went to the streets for him and chanted Black Lives Matter because they know of many people like Floyd who were impacted by those similar systems of state-sanctioned violence. Even if they are not Black, even if they aren't in American, even if they don't have the 'right' language to describe these systems. They understand the experience of pushing for your humanity to be valued and being told, "no" over the centuries.

**"George Floyd should have never been murdered. I will not sit here and martyr someone who simply wanted to live, but people across the world went to the streets for him and chanted Black Lives Matter because they know of many people like Floyd who were impacted by those similar systems of state-sanctioned violence."**

It's an experience that ties back to the celebration of Christopher Columbus.

### PART II

It should be no surprise that when I saw statues of slave owners and colonizers all over the world being brought down, I felt pure joy.

To deface a public effigy questions the people who had the influence to create the statue in the first place. More importantly, it signals that there is a reckoning coming for those who have benefitted from the social construct that comes with the public placement of statues.

There is one specific moment that has stuck with me through the months and I think it will stick with me through the years: it was watching the Columbus statue get torn down in Byrd Park in early June.

I felt all my ancestors were present with me at that moment. I felt them again when I went to the park a few days later to look at the now-empty platform where Columbus once stood. I was overcome with a range of feelings: elation, relief, and a really strong urge to cry. I especially felt the presence of my grandparents with a poignancy I last felt at their respective funerals nearly a decade ago.

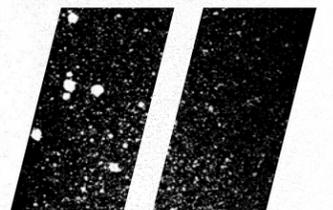
I felt my ancestors again when that same week, I saw a video of an Italian journalist, Indro Montanelli, admitting he kidnapped and married a 12-year-old Eritrean girl during the country's imperial period. The video resurfaced because as part of the global Black Lives Matter movement, people were demanding his statue be removed.

Again, anti-Blackness is a global phenomenon rooted in colonial attitudes.

Yet, many people are still angry at the removal of Columbus. Italian-Americans said it was an attack of their heritage. Others said it's an assault on history. As the so-called holiday named after him is around the corner, and more people shift to calling it Indigenous Peoples Day, I hear the same old tired debate. I can't imagine being so invested in celebrating a man who is a global symbol of white supremacy, violent anti-Blackness, orientalism, colonization, and all the things that come attached to that.

Unless of course, I had benefited from all of those things as they have.

As an Eritrean-American who navigates being a Black, queer woman from an immigrant background in every aspect of life, I often think about how Columbus' legacy so intimately affected my family.



Italy's colonization of Eritrea from the mid-19th century into the period right before Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea in the 1950s is particularly horrific for many reasons. The frustration at Eritrea's ability to avoid colonization for so long and an obsession with rebuilding the Roman Empire led to a brutal colonial experiment. I've researched the stories of that time period, but I've also listened to my elders and others in my community share their first-hand accounts – horrific is the only way to sum it up.

Italian colonization involved not only the killings of Black indigenous Eritreans and forcing them to serve in European wars, but strategic attempts to stamp out cultures and languages of the region's nine tribes. After all, you can't have a lucrative colony if you kill the entire labor force. Italian leaders got public support for colonization in parts of Africa by framing it as a source of national pride – they owed it to one of their own, ol' Christopher Columbus, to finally become a big imperial power like their European neighbors.

I felt disgusted when I watched the video of Montanelli justifying his marriage to a 12-year-old girl because she could have easily been one of my grandmothers. One of their friends, a neighbor. Technically, under Italian colonial rule, they were just a commodity. Another asset without any rights in the face of the white-supremacist empire rooted in controlling and policing Black bodies.

Sound familiar? I'm not alone in this experience.

Honestly, it's sometimes beyond difficult to remain hopeful in the face of how potent Columbus' global legacy is, and how it's able to morph and adjust with the times.

But I was raised in a community of freedom fighters and have learned from so many ongoing liberation movements, which include the Palestinian movement, the Oromo movement, the Kashmiri movement, and of course, the expansive Native, Latinx, and Black radical traditions and movements right here in America. I've been involved in these spaces for a formative part of my life. It's where I learned I'm passionate about storytelling and how I developed my unwavering belief that our push for equality is far beyond our lifetimes. We are working for the generations that come after us so they have at least one less barrier in the achievement of freedom. Undoing Columbus' true legacy is passion work that must happen with each generation.

So when I think back to that moment in June, I like to think that my emotional reaction that the statue drowning in Byrd Pond's lake were my grandparents, my great-grandparents, their parents, and so on reminding me it's my duty to keep with the traditions of freedom fighters before me. They were reminding me that these current systems we live in didn't always exist, they were created – we can and we must re-imagine them.

It was a much-needed spiritual and ancestral boost to keep chipping away at all aspects of Columbus' colonial, white supremacist, and anti-Black legacy. In other words, so the ignorant ones hear me as well, Fuck. Christopher. Columbus.



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# THE SHADOW OF LOOKING BACK, LET'S RE-IMAGINE

## MONUMENT AVENUE

Looking at the Lee statue and the Marcus-David Peters Circle — I see a place of discourse.

Greek philosophers, Socrates and Plato, would bring their philosophical theories to an amphitheater and debate them face-to-face. Those debates on our humanity and our role on this planet changed the ancient world.

Can you envision that in your mind? That is what MDP (Circle) is fighting to be right now.

One July afternoon, I went by Marcus-David Peters Circle (MDP) and saw two groups of bikers separated by the median, but meeting in the middle. Honda-riding Black men and white men with their Harleys on opposite sides, some openly armed, talking loudly. From across the way, it looked like a potentially dangerous situation, but, as I made my way closer, I heard a heated debate. They were discussing the Bible and what it teaches us about treating others with respect. After a lengthy conversation, the talk turned to the role of government, which led to our current politics, with both groups distrustful of both. These tough-looking men "agreed to disagree" on plenty but there was a universal sense that things in the country are not right. They came down to MDP expecting confrontations and what they got was discussion. I hoped that a few of these men were able to see each other as real people for a moment instead of the stereotypes put on them by the media. Maybe the conversation made a difference.

Looking around, I spotted a group of volunteers giving away free food. I walked over and sat down from a safe distance and just listened. I felt their confusion at the current state of the country and understood their frustration on how to make it better. Who speaks for their concerns? Where are the community leaders? Who should we trust?

After a few hours, I left.

Nothing had been solved but it made me realize that this type of open and honest conversation needs to be encouraged and facilitated by the community. It is important to have face-to-face civil discourse, in a safe place, as an important step towards creating solutions to our countries racial and class issues. Social media strips us of nuance and allows for mischaracterizations. Easy stereotypes are the first step in the dehumanization of peoples. You can easily block what you don't want to hear. You can dismiss someone with a click of a button. Label them "the enemy" and get lost in your own echo chamber. Instead of being afraid of the difficult conversations — what if we did the opposite and encouraged it?

We need a place to safely speak and to see each other. That place could be under the shadow of General Robert E. Lee in Marcus-David Peters Circle. The old guard of Richmond is sadly suing to keep the statue there for years (tied up in the legal system) — so why not keep it there and change the narrative? Block off traffic to create an open walkabout from the former Jeb Stuart Statue to the Robert E. Lee Statue similar to the Charlottesville Downtown Mall.

Create a new statue where the Jeb Stuart statue was — dedicated to the crime of slavery. Commission another artwork from Kehinde Wiley to add to his popular Rumors Of War statue outside the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

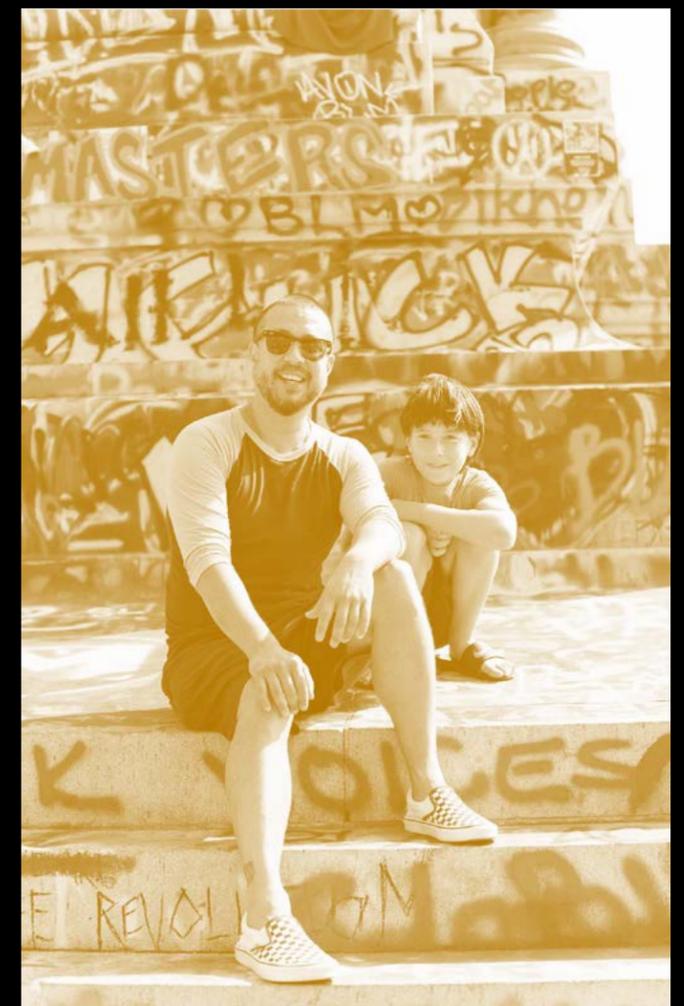
Build a 'wailing wall' on a paved median from the former Jeb Stuart to the Robert E. Lee statue engraved with the names of former Virginia slaves, like the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. Coming from a military family, I had a deep emotional reaction to seeing all the names of our fallen American soldiers on the Vietnam Memorial. I believe this wall engraved with former slaves' names would resonate and be a proper monument to anyone whose family was connected to slavery, whether as an ancestor of slaves or an ancestor of a slave master. People would be able to see the human cost of this terrible institution, and, maybe, have a chance to heal in some way.

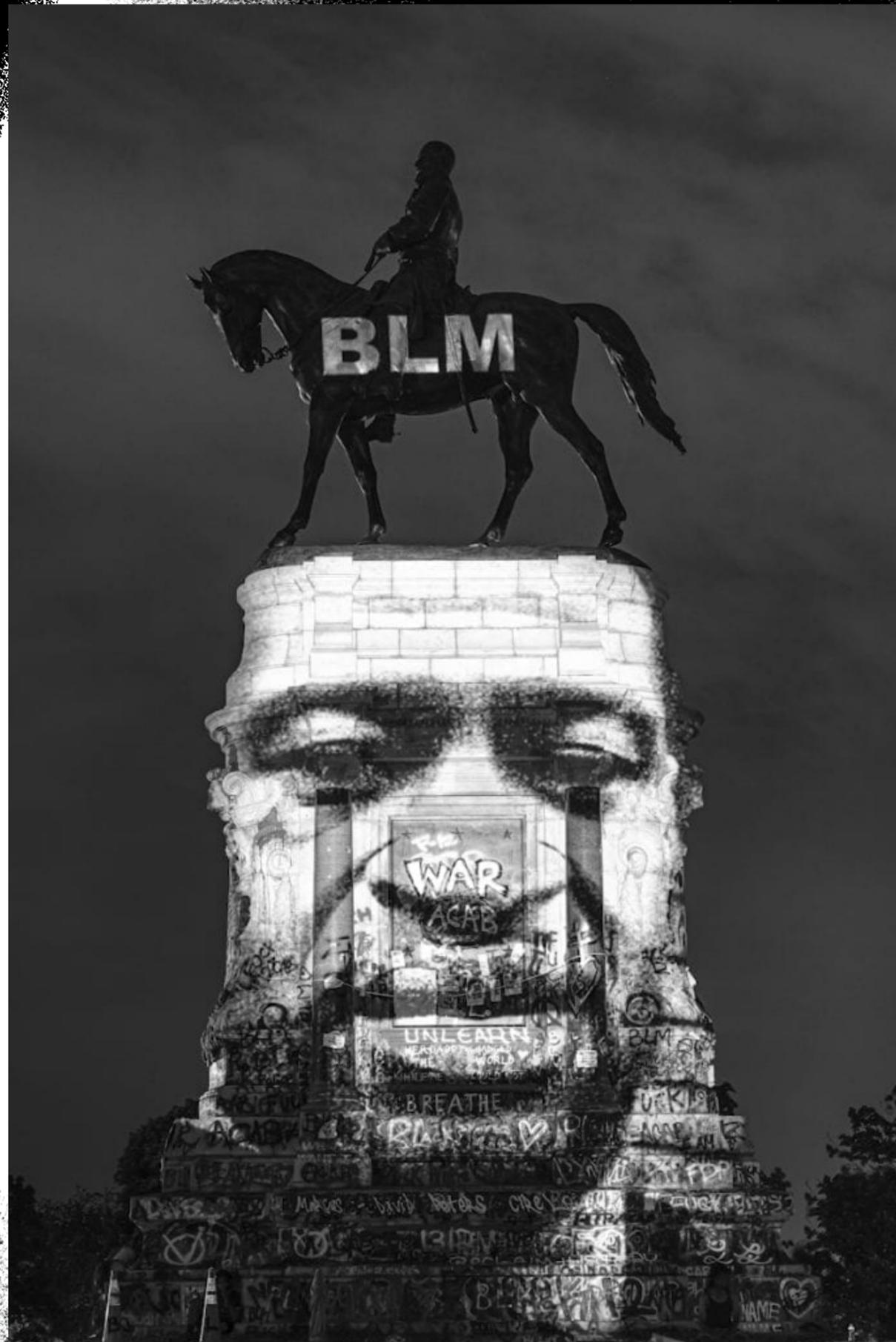
Surround a portion of MDP Circle with a small amphitheater that can be used as a place for public discourse every day, all day. It would be a public park and be set up for small performances from the theater, speakers from the community, or live shows from local musicians.

Let our politicians meet directly with their constituents there. Let our activists schedule times to talk with the media about their concerns there. Let concerned citizens have a platform to talk with their neighbors there.

Under the shadow of looking back, let's re-imagine Monument Avenue and start rebuilding Richmond as a place centered on positive ideas, contextualized art, and open debate.

**R. Anthony Harris** is the creator and creative director of RVA Magazine and Major Major Agency. He is looking forward to seeing a better Richmond, VA — one that includes everyone in its success.







## AN INTERVIEW WITH **DUSTIN KLEIN & ALEX CRIQUI,** THE DUO BEHIND THE AMAZING PROJECTIONS AT MARCUS-DAVID PETERS CIRCLE

**What was the creative thought process behind doing projections at Marcus-David Peters Circle?**

Dustin: In a lot of ways, I view the monument as a portal of intended negative energy that still resonates. When I saw the initial tagging, it felt as if the tagging helped eliminate some of the negative energy with proper contextualization. The tagging only traveled up the monument partially since it's six stories high. I knew I could walk out with a projector and continue messages where other protesters physically had not been able to access with ease. Once the images went somewhat viral, we felt a responsibility to keep coming back and providing light on the monument. Every day we started developing new content and experimenting with new images and concepts to integrate into the projections.

Alex: The projections started as a way to bring visibility to victims of police violence and to amplify the messages and voices that were coming out of the movement that we were experiencing. It seemed like a way we could contribute that was unique to us, and felt like an appropriate way to do something that didn't overshadow other voices that needed to have center-stage. Over time, it evolved into a reclamation that incorporated the images and voices of the pioneers of Black liberation in America. The people that laid the foundation for this movement have a strong juxtaposition with the historical nature and subject matter of the monument itself. Each day, each week, it evolved as we responded to what was happening in our city and around the nation. I think, through that process, the project has transformed from focusing on mourning and the tragedies that sparked this moment into more of a celebration of Black history, culture, life, and the special place that they hold in America. Black history and culture have really shaped so much of who we are as a people, and as a country.

**Why is this project personally important to both of you?**

Dustin: This project is personally important to me because police violence and racial discrimination in our country are unacceptable. Racism and white supremacy are unacceptable. All people deserve equality. I personally had the feeling that if I didn't contribute to the protests or stand out I would be like the officers who didn't do anything while George Floyd was murdered. Once the project morphed into something we were doing every day, I started appreciating the way that both the projections and the Circle itself were creating a community. It was amazing to meet so many people out there and hear direct feedback on how they felt about the projections. I feel very blessed to have had the opportunity to connect with so many people in the city through this project.

Alex: I think what Dustin said largely captures my feelings about the project. Having grown up in this city, I think we both had an acute awareness of the injustice that Black people face every day, and of the historical atrocities that have been minimized and swept under the rug for far too long by these symbols. I think we both knew this wasn't the time to stand on the sidelines, and that feeling drove us to do something out of the ordinary. The first few nights of the protests before we started this project, I experienced some really shocking police violence and that was personally a catalyst for me to go all-in on committing myself towards this movement. The response from the community just reinforced that notion, that we were doing something right and positive through our work, so we stuck with it. In many ways, this project has seemed to bring about some sort of healing and catharsis for people who see it. In some ways, it has taken some of the power back from these symbols and put it in the hands of the very people they were built to oppress. I think the magnitude of that made us realize that what we were part of something far bigger than the two of us, which, I think, is really what drove us to be out there for so long.

**Creatively, how does the team come up with the visuals?**

Alex: Initially we were working off of a graphic we got from the Black Lives Matter website – showing victims of police violence which really was the jumping-off point of our creative process. The graphic helped in establishing the look and feel of what we have been doing and we dialed-in from there. Once we landed on the giant George Floyd face, everything seemed to come together in terms of where we could take it visually. I studied history in college, so as the project evolved we started incorporating voices from the past like Frederick Douglass, W.E.B DuBois, and Ida B. Wells into our work. Adding those historical images and voices gave the project a whole new dimension. Eventually, that led to playing speeches and interviews, along with music and art. We usually just bounce ideas off of each other to find the middle ground between our different viewpoints. Dustin has a lot of strengths that I don't have, and I have different qualities that I bring that are unique. I think that through working with each other we are able to find a nice balance in our approach and how to respond to the different things that are happening around us.

"In some ways, (this project) has taken some of the power back from these symbols and put it in the hands of the very people they were built to oppress."

**Are you two the only team doing the projections at the Circle?**

Dustin: As far as I know, other than Moe and Bryan, we are the only team actually projecting on the monument. I know George Floyd's family came through for one night with an installation in front of the monument, but not actually on it. There was also a documentary called WeAReRVA created about the protests movement in Richmond that was screened inside the Circle.

Alex: Our friends Moe and Bryan who have been traveling around doing protest projections in places like Florida and Portland came up for a couple of nights to work with us. That was pretty special to have another team collaborating with us, since there aren't many people doing what we do. They got one side of the statue and we got on the other, which ended up looking pretty interesting in how it came together.

**What has been some of the feedback you've received on the projections?**

Dustin: The majority of the feedback, especially in person, has been very kind and positive. People are very appreciative of the way that something which had been perceived as a symbol of hate has been transformed and reclaimed into something that they feel is beautiful. It's been awesome to learn about historical figures through suggestions from people in the community.

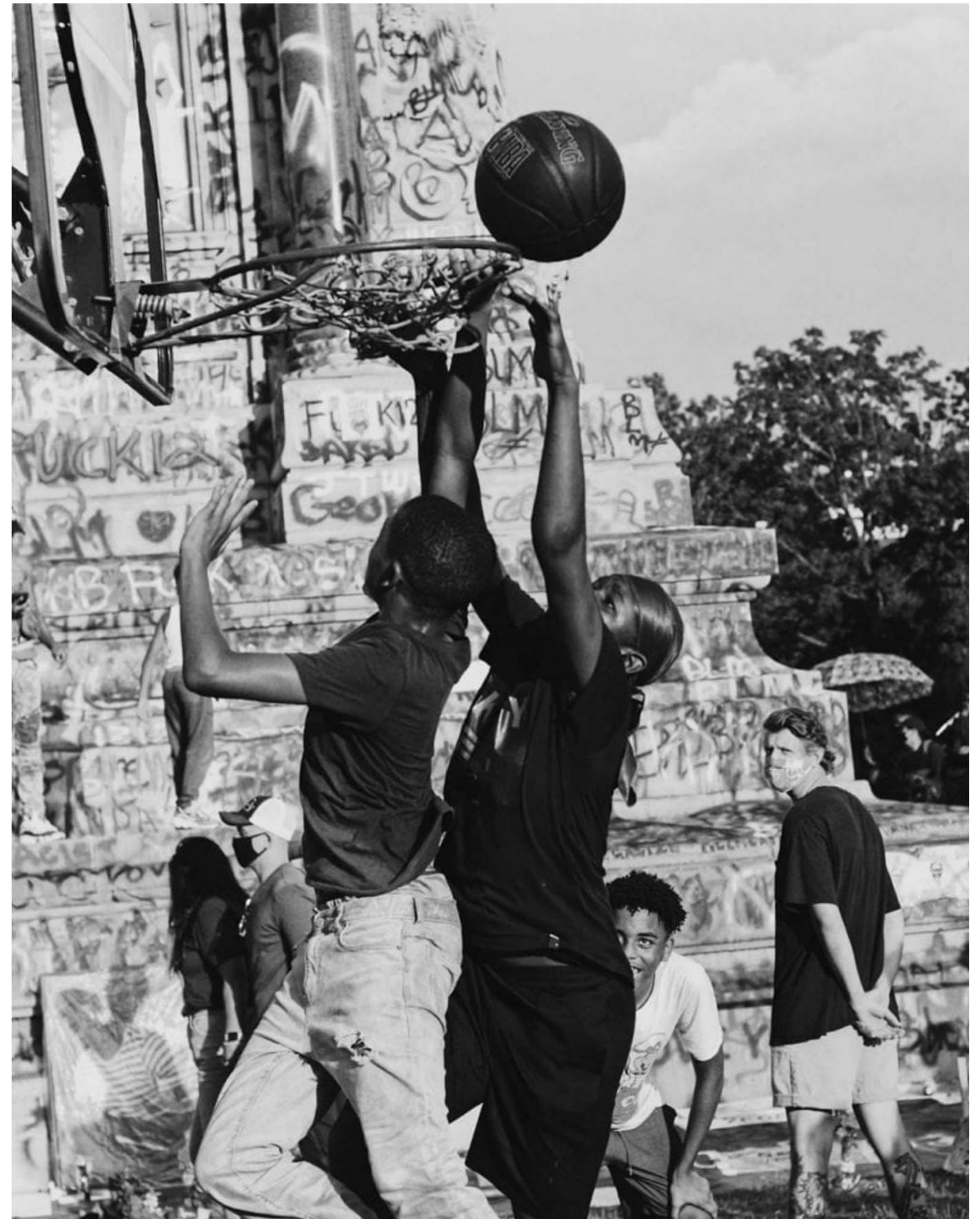
Alex: We have been really fortunate to have received mostly really positive feedback about this project from the people we have met out there. We have met people who knew some of the families of the victims of police violence that we have projected onto the monument, and to hear that their families were moved by our work was really powerful to hear. It really has affirmed our intentions to keep doing what we were doing.

Follow [Dustin Klein](#) and [Alex Criqui](#) for the latest on the projections and the [Reclaiming the Monument](#) fundraiser. Shout out to [Zach Fichter](#) on photography. #WESEEIT





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# **VOICES**

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