for handwringing is over,” and as she aptly points out, we must put our words into action.

We hope these contributions inspire and motivate our readers to be good allies, and reassure our friends, colleagues, and people of color whose perspectives are raised here that we are ready to listen and to follow. As the common cliché goes, everyone should have a seat at the table. We argue that everyone should be invited to help build the table, too.

REFERENCES CITED


DECENTERING WHITENESS AND REFocusing on the LOCAL: Reframing Debates on Confederate Monument Removal in New Orleans

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To start this discussion of Confederate monument removals, I need to state my own beliefs: (1) the Civil War was fought over slavery; (2) the monuments need to come down (and street names, etc., need to change); (3) community members where these
monuments are displayed are the only agents who can make the kind of effective change needed to address the underlying issues embedded in these debates; (4) individuals outside of those communities (including scholars) need to contribute to these efforts as secondary allies or monetarily; (5) although “new” to many hearing these conversations for the first time, these discussions have been going on for decades; and (6) this dialogue does not exist in a vacuum. In fact, to that last point, in the city of New Orleans, dialogues regarding monument removals are paired with conversations on weak infrastructure, fears on how rapidly parts of the city (read: historically Black parts of the city) are being gentrified, and how the rise of informal tourism, epitomized by AirBnB, is displacing long-time residents. As a New Orleans native and researcher, these are but a few of the comments and complexities that color discussions on monument removal. However, although these additional factors serve to complicate these debates, they do not excuse the blatantly anti-Black framing and unfocused national scale with which these removals are being discussed.

By unfocused, I mean a framing that has been dominated by a highly concentrated, white-centered narrative in discussing both the monuments individually and the histories they represent; this is problematic because it has prevented other communities and perspectives from being heard, further silencing already marginalized groups.

In this brief commentary, I will focus on the potential outcome of these debates if we, as anthropologists, decenter whiteness and refocus on local efforts. In doing so, not only do we refuse dominant, oversimplified narratives, but we create room to listen to the expertise of local community leaders who have been dealing with these debates and organizing these removals long before they were televised. Taking a page from decolonizing methodologies, specifically in changing who is centered in discussions of these monument creations and removals, and whose history is marked as the focal point of these debates, we can decenter whiteness to seek the more nuanced story of these monuments and push the conversation around their importance beyond just a question of physical markers, centering it instead toward actual community healing and tangible, recognized reparations. In doing so, we challenge who gets to tell the stories of these monuments, who gets to narrate the period of time they actually represent, and who gets to share their experiences, because the destruction of these whitewashed narratives is part of a much larger push toward radical community healing and public, formal acknowledgment of domestic terrorism and systematic oppression. To clarify, although New Orleans is (and has been) home to many different ethnorracial groups, these monuments were constructed by white supremacists in a desperate, rage-fueled response to post–Civil War Black liberation. As such, this article focuses exclusively on Black communities in New Orleans because they were the primary targets of this domestic terrorism and its monuments.

**Decentering Whiteness**

When discussing these removals, national questions overwhelmingly seem framed around whiteness (see Hartigan 1997): What happens to the descendants of those concrete Confederate leaders when the statues are removed? What’s wrong with white Southerners proudly flying the flag their ancestors fought under? With whiteness as the dominant, hegemonic framing used to structure these debates, the questions around monument removal then focus on a singular experience and a one-sided version of history, leaving more excluded from these conversations than is included; in New Orleans, a Black majority city, this framing decenters the majority of its residents. Media coverage and general buzz on the issue has centered around the outraged group of white individuals angered that their monuments and their heritage are being removed. This unfocused framing—almost exclusively based on whiteness—stifles other narratives from the attention they deserve, preventing real, impactful dialogue and any resulting healing from occurring.

One example of this framing was clearly revealed in the viral video popularized by HBO’s *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* in which one white protestor yells to an opposing Black protestor about the actual cost of a slave and how that affected poor whites; the resulting discussion around this clip centered on the white protestor’s comments. Countless examples of interracial conflict have appeared as central in these debates but have primarily centered around white Southern experiences—their comments, their
rhetoric, and so on. However, this whitened framing stifles the most important conversation from occurring: When and why were those statues erected? These questions cannot be answered under the anti-Black framing embedded in this overwhelmingly white-washed narrative. Instead, we need to change this narrative by decentering whiteness—a critique Black feminist anthropologists have made for decades in efforts to decolonize the discipline (see McClaurin 2001). As Faye V. Harrison asks: “When natives of the various cultures denied history and intellectual authority do indeed theorize, are those theories legitimated?” (1997, 7). By decentering whiteness, we focus on the history and intellectual authority coming from Black communities that has for too long stayed only within Black communities and been delegitimized in academic spaces. In the case of monument removal, we have a duty to confront these histories and use them in theoretical and applied debates on these monuments by challenging their whitewashed history; through this, we uncover a much messier, oppressive meaning behind their construction and who exactly these monuments were designed to influence.

As an example, take the Liberty Place monument, the first of four (to date) Confederate monuments removed from New Orleans. Built in 1891 by the Crescent City White League, this monument was created to commemorate the “Battle of September Fourteenth,” when in 1874 a militia violently overthrew the local government and surrendered only when confronted by federal troops; this event is credited with ending Reconstruction in Louisiana (Nystrom 2011; Powell 1999). When this monument was finally removed, it was done in the middle of the night by masked employees hiding their faces for fear of retaliation (Landrieu 2018). Originally erected on a major street in New Orleans, this monument commemorated a domestic terrorist act by a self-proclaimed white militia during the nascence of the Jim Crow era. To then see this monument as primarily a symbol of Confederate heritage for white Southerners and not as a reminder of the deadly realities of life in the Jim Crow South and representative of the white, domestic terrorist groups that still exist throughout the South today is not only to frame the debate perversely but to whitewash history further and perpetuate a romanticized, anti-Black account of Southern life. A similar narrative is found behind the additional three monuments, all to Confederate leaders, removed in Orleans Parish (Wendland 2017). While local Sons of Confederate Veterans chapters held candle-light vigils for each monument before the removals to mourn their loss of history, for non-white Southerners, the brutal and painful histories these monuments represent are not fading from memory anytime soon.

This type of white-centered, dominant narrative throughout the South is partially to blame for the current outcry over removal in the first place. I, a Black mixed-race woman, received nearly all of my education in the Deep South, well below the Mason-Dixon Line. My high school was located on Robert E. Lee Boulevard, but never was the street’s name and its historical reference discussed inside the building. We visited more than one plantation run by the National Park Service where we saw the (heavily staged) “servant” cabin and learned all about the various roles the “servants” played in daily plantation life. When I attended college in Jackson, Mississippi, the most popular fraternity formal was titled “Old South,” where women rented hoop-skirted antebellum dresses and men wore suspenders, so they could #partyinglikeits1830 (see Laymon 2013). As do so many Southern-educated individuals, I have dozens of stories like these where the Confederacy is dangerously romanticized, where the Confederate flag is not just something to fly but also a fashion statement of white “Southern pride,” where the Black pain of that era is either erased or intentionally ignored so that the parties aren’t tainted too much. This white-centered framing, mirrored now in conversations around the monument removals, is flattening and dangerous as erased history perpetuates and reaffirms the oppressive structures stifling these important narratives that challenge this romanticism in the first place (Trouil- lot 1995).

Refocusing on the Local
Perhaps one of the most frustrating parts of these debates is how individuals from outside New Orleans engaged in perpetuating these whitewashed narratives. The influx of nonresident opinions and protesters was seen throughout cities where these conversations visibly occurred, perhaps most notably in Charlottesville, Virginia. While the riots and
busses of Klansmen and Klanswomen made for interesting news coverage, we need to consider what happens when national news outlets come into town and sensationalize the ugliest, messiest parts of a debate, leaving before they address the years of work community activists have been doing. White supremacists didn’t suddenly “pop up” with these removals; although above ground much less frequently since the civil rights movement, these bigots have never stopped terrorizing Black communities.

If we refocus our lens to center local actors, we see that the conversations in New Orleans on these removals started before the civil rights movement and influenced both political and grassroots leaders in the following decades. Ernest N. Morial, a civil rights leader and the first Black mayor of the city, attempted to remove the Liberty Place monument in 1981 after years of growing tension over a plaque added in the 1970s that declared the monument as a symbol of white dominance (see The New York Times 1981). This monument was once again the center of violent protest during a rededication ceremony in 1993, when the monument was reinstalled elsewhere (as the result of a lawsuit from one of David Duke’s followers; Litten 2017). With this context, former Mayor Mitch Landrieu’s successful removal of the monuments (thanks to a 6-1 City Council vote) is but a fraction of a long line of locally led initiatives addressing public symbols of white supremacy (Mele 2017). What is even less frequently shown is the work of such groups as “Take ’Em Down NOLA,” who use grassroots methods of community organizing to lobby for systemic changes that eliminate the celebration behind these problematic Confederate symbols through education and policy.

The Roles of Academics in These Debates
Because this paper is based on a roundtable discussion at the 2017 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in which I participated, and since most institutional commentators are not from these communities, I feel it is important to offer both a critique and steps for addressing these issues. So, with this larger reframing in mind, one that decenters whiteness and refocuses on local efforts, there is still room for nonresident academics seeking to help. However, instead of debating the history or heritage of these concrete markers, we need to focus on the communities where they are displayed and those unique contexts. As anthropologists, we base our fieldwork experiences on local knowledge and local experts; why would we not extend the same methods and theories we use elsewhere to understand these issues as well?

Although these monuments are not in museums, the conversations of exclusions, voice, impact, and memory are all central tenets to the museum anthropology that espouses best practices today. These practices are heavily informed by the critiques that Native scholars have rightfully leveled at museums and cultural institutions, and they center on decolonizing methodologies that place an explicit focus on the lived experiences and perspectives of those who have long been silenced as their histories were told to them. Just as museum anthropology has taken these critiques and changed the way in which collaboration occurs with source communities, so too are we called to change the way African American history and culture is framed and discussed in this field. This adjustment requires that we address, as Amy Lonetree highlights, “legacies of historical unresolved grief” by challenging the hegemonic framing that continues to silence the theories and voices of the Black communities who persevered through years of terrorism perpetuated by white individuals who challenged their very humanity (2012, 5). How can we as scholars working to decolonize anthropology adequately address these issues if we can’t recognize and refuse anti-Black and unfocused, stifling framing?

For as long as these statues stand, and for as long as we center white fragility and romanticized histories as being of equal importance within this debate, the decolonizing work necessary to promote community reconciliation cannot and will not occur. Glamorizing these traumatic histories by focusing on the white men these monuments were built for does nothing but stifle healing and declare to entire (read: Black) communities that their pain and trauma are invalid and not worth recognition. I refuse this framing. Although racial histories are messy and complex, they need to be discussed, and anthropologists have a duty to facilitate these conversations.

The whitewashed, oversimplified framing of these issues is indicative of a larger structural problem in
which race is ignored in favor of more “digestible” topics such as heritage or history. We as anthropologists can’t run from, ignore, or remain apathetic to race any longer (Ifekwunigwe et al. 2017). Rather, we need to pressure those who teach students, publish any type of anthropological work, or feel the need to comment on these removals to critically engage with race scholarship and their individual privileges in order to put our critiques into action. We need to teach how these monolithic Confederate ideals are simply repackaged and reworded in the rhetoric used by a president whose slogan is no more than a poorly crafted “monument” designed to scare and intimidate people of color in a transparent mimicry of the very concrete markers that cities across the United States now seek to remove (Roland 2017). To decolonize our scholarship, we must address these larger issues within our own departments and communities. The work necessary to combat the underlying issues outlined in this paper, while central to a discussion on monument removal, are not exclusive to this situation.

**Conclusion**

The time for handwringing is over; consider this a call to action. Anthropology is about communities and is situated within them; we need to take a page from our methods in applied and activist-based scholarship, including the decolonizing methodologies of museum anthropology, when engaging in these conversations and spaces where we are not local and when deciding when and where to act on these issues. Through our teaching, public programming, museum exhibitions, and reflection—in our own spaces—we need to collectively step up and put in the work necessary to address the root causes of why these debates have become so monovocal and monolithic, and work to address those injustices. By reframing to decenter whiteness and refocus these debates on local histories and multivocal perspectives, we can challenge what narratives, voices, and perspectives are included, working to further decolonize this field and our institutions.

**NOTE**

1. At the author’s request, nonstandard capitalization of the word “Black” is used in her contribution.

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Regimes of Historicity and the Debate over Confederate Monuments

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It’s all now you see. Yesterday won’t be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago. For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it’s still not yet two o’clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out. William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust*

Although the Civil War ended a century and a half ago, skirmishes of the latter-day war over its legacy continue over large parts of the country.

I first entered the fray when I became the president of an autonomous expressive arts elementary school established in the Columbia Public School system in Missouri. Originally named Robert E. Lee Elementary, it later tried to sidestep its official name by transforming it into an acronym (Learn, Explore, Express, or Lee Expressive [Arts] Elementary). But that fig leaf covered little; children at one of the city’s most diverse schools still enter under stone lintels carved with the name of the Confederacy’s most venerated general. After several unsuccessful attempts to change the name, in 2017—and in the wake of national protests regarding Confederate memorials—the Columbia Board of Education agreed to begin the process of changing the school’s name.

Getting to this point has been difficult, and as the process has unfolded both the character and the vehemence of some comments by community members have taken me by surprise. For some, any discussion of changing the name represented a destruction of history, a failure to acknowledge a past too distant to be truly controversial; for others, changing the name because it no longer reflected the arts-integrated curriculum of the school—instead of explicitly because it represented a legacy of racism and prejudice—was an equally destructive and willful act of forgetting a more recent past (and present). Over the course of these debates I’ve tried to sit down and listen carefully to the views and concerns of everyone involved; although that has not changed my mind about what to do, it has significantly changed my understanding of the debate itself.

It’s misleading, I think, to characterize these debates in either historical or archaeological terms, unless in an incidental and trivial sense. They concern neither a historical past sensu stricto nor material traces or representations of that past but instead concern heritage and the ways conceptions of the past can be harnessed to present-day identity and values—that is, with the salience of the past (real or imagined) and the ways it is deployed to advance the interests of living communities. For me, the debate over Confederate monuments must be understood instead in terms of the ways the past can be implicated in and inflected by changing temporal regimes as theorized in contemporary historiography, particularly by thinkers such as Reinhard Koselleck and François Hartog: it has less to do with an actual, lived past than with our alienation from it.

I need to begin by drawing a bright line, therefore, between heritage on the one hand and the past on the other. The human past represents the lived experience of people, the social relationships, structures, and processes that organized their lives; disciplines studying the past (such as archaeology and history) attempt to understand those lives and the events, beliefs, circumstances, and processes that informed them. Heritage, on the other hand, is what we make of that past, its salience for latter-day communities. Archaeologists and historians constantly tack back and forth between the actual past and often quite different contemporary experiences of it, what we might call the “herited” past; unsurprisingly some fail to distinguish conceptually between the two.

Although different groups experience the past—which is to say, construct heritage—in quite different