

Hidden in Plain Sight: A Response to “Mourning and Terror” by Jeffery Frank

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In Jeffrey Frank’s article “Civil War Monuments: Mourning and Terror,” a case is made for the value of careful philosophical reflection when facing the “pressure to decide [that] often keeps us from appreciating the broader significance of those decisions.” Lurking in the background of the article are stark moral questions raised by the horrors of enslavement, the Confederate-monument debate, Charlottesville, and a general atmosphere of White *ressentiment*. Many of us may feel that those questions demand a quick, unequivocal, and morally informed response. Frank asks his readers to resist the pressure to make quick decisions, and argues for the value of a pause long enough to consider that which is not thrust upon our consciousness from moment to moment. Reading the article provided me with a pause and I would like to share a few thoughts that emerged from it.

Frank invites us to draw upon what is universally human, the experience of mourning, in order to better understand what Confederate soldiers, the enemy, might have thought and felt when listening to Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Frank’s words create space for the reader to imagine the address as a triumphal speech given for those who died killing our comrades. Jörn Rüsen, a philosopher of historical consciousness, calls this *trauerarbeit*, the work of mourning the human condition, particularly the humanity of inhumanity. He writes of such mourning as a post-Holocaust German attempting to reckon with a difficult history that implicates his identity. Rüsen’s hope is that through such reckoning a new culture and identity will emerge.¹ That is the work of historical

consciousness. An exercise that brings together knowledge, affect, and imagination in order to *empathize* with those whose lived contexts were very different from our own.² We are hopeful that such work will develop the capacity for wise judgment.

Today, over 150 years after the Civil War ended, we are still tentative about exploring that conflict and what it meant. The stakes of that sense-making often seem too high in the moral economy of the present to take a pause to consider perspectives that might muddy the stark moral frameworks for the war. That is why we are presented with binary choices, such as doing nothing about “lost cause” iconography or erasing it from our landscape. We can think of Civil War monuments in the North and the South as what historian Erica Doss calls “archives of public affect.”³ They exist so that we can engage emotionally with what some people at another time decided we were supposed to feel when we thought about their war. In the case of the most controversial Confederate monuments, that feeling was not just pride, but what Pankaj Mishra calls “the thrill of moral superiority.”⁴ In the case of monuments to the “lost cause,” moral superiority was to be found in romantic notions of sacrifice and loss, possible only with the occlusion of enslavement that powered 19th century industrial commodity agriculture.

The Gettysburg Address, arguably the most moving presidential speech in American history, is also a monument of sorts. If we contextualize that speech in a time when republican government was both rare and threatened by powerful enemies we see that Lincoln framed the idea of America as the Union cause. Today we are more likely to read the speech as a re-consecration of the American creed to include African Americans as equal citizens. As Frank points out, there is a third equally valid interpretation of the Address as an exhortation to more war, to the total defeat of the enslavers’ rebellion. The battle was horrific, and had

the Confederacy won it, the road to Washington D.C. and a quick suit for peace between two sovereign nations would have been much more likely. History is often a story of such contingencies.

Empathizing with the perception of Lincoln by a Confederate survivor of Gettysburg asks us to see Lincoln not as a martyred emancipator but as a relentless 19th century politician, a man of blood and iron willing to accept great loss of life to get his way. To do so, we must suspend our moral judgment of both that Confederate and of Lincoln. Pausing moral judgment allows us to step away from our current context and towards understanding fellow human beings in very different circumstances. Peter Seixas argues, however, that it is equally important to re-engage our moral judgment. Without it, history loses its significance, particularly as a civic practice.⁵ For Rösen, all histories are moral arguments in narrative form. Suspending moral judgment to consider the perspective of the Other means entertaining, at least for a time, their moral universe.⁶

The question we must turn back to is what should we do about the presence of Confederate monuments in our midst today? Understanding the public art of the post-Civil War era requires us to toggle between the past and the present, and between moral perspectives. When I first moved to Richmond from New York City, I was morally shocked by the existence and audacity of the Confederate statues. Once I moved here and passed them on a regular basis, that shock ebbed away as they became just part of the landscape. I was also shocked when I returned to New York and re-encountered well-known spaces there as Union monuments. Some of those, like the triumphal arch in Brooklyn's aptly named Grand Army Plaza, were not at all diminutive either. What I gain from those experiences is an appreciation for the power of a pedagogy that employs shock in the form of change, or an uncomfortable moral juxtaposition, to put what is hidden in plain sight into relief and ultimately

to encourage reflection.

Currently in Richmond there are four major positions on Confederate monuments that have emerged in public debate:

1. do nothing;
2. remove all Confederate monuments;
3. leave the monuments but add context;
4. recontextualize the monuments as works of public art.

Following Frank's suggestion, it is worth considering each for the potential they provide towards a reflective reckoning with the Civil War that might impact our historical consciousness. The first option, do nothing, allows for reflection but does not invite it. It makes of the monuments religious fetishes that can either be worshipped or reviled. The second option creates an opportunity for a cathartic moment, when cranes pull up and the statues are removed. In New Orleans the removal of Confederate statues was protected by a paramilitary force, mourned by a small group, and celebrated boisterously by a larger one. Today, New Orleans' Lee Circle contains a three-story-pillar with nothing on top. If Lee is replaced, even with a narratively satisfying figure like Fats Domino, the opportunity for reflection on the Civil War is probably lost for future generations. Leaving it empty, however, invites reflection because it looks strange. Eventually, however, even an empty plinth recedes from our conscious attention. The third choice is the favorite of historians, lovers of words, read by few. A historical marker with context about the epoch when Confederate monuments were erected would explain how, following Reconstruction, White supremacy was reinstated through violence and institutionalized through law. That, at least, explains why such monuments exist and why many find them objectionable. The final choice is to allow artists to use the existing statues in ways that recontextualize them. For example, an artist might project an image onto the plinth of

R. E. Lee's statue that juxtaposes his heroic stance with the violence of enslavement. Other artists have suggested removing Lee from his plinth and partially burying him in the circle that surrounds it with only his and his horse's heads visible above ground.

In an age when our consciousness is bombarded it takes a lot to prompt slow reflection. Personally, I believe it will take a combination of choices three through four: removal of some monuments, the addition of written context, and a recontextualization of the statues by artists that is powerful enough to have a lasting impact beyond a cathartic moment. In solidarity with my moment of empathy with that Confederate soldier listening to Lincoln, I think that memorials to the ordinary soldiers of the Confederacy need not be disturbed. Their deaths were not in vain if we honor them as fellow human beings caught up in the meat grinder of history, rather than as the instrument of evil or martyrs to a lost cause.

1 Jörn Rüsen, *History: Narration, interpretation, orientation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

2 For a discipline specific definition of empathy, see Peter J. Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, "Empathy, Perspective Taking, and Rational Understanding," in *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 21-50. For more on the role of affect in the history classroom, see Mark Helmsing, "Virtuous Subjects: A Critical Analysis of the Affective Substance of Social Studies Education," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 42, no.1 (2014): 127-40. Also, of interest here is Cathryn Van Kessel, "A Phenomenographic Study of Youth Conceptualizations of Evil: Order-Words and the Politics of Evil," *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne de l'Éducation* 40, no. 4 (2017): 576-602.

3 Erica Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

4 Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), 111.

5 Jonathan Lear, "Gettysburg Mourning," *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 1 (2018): 97-121; Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013).

6 Rüsen, *History*.