

Should I Stay or Should I Go: The Clash Over Public Art, Monuments and Memorials

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Abstract

The ability of public, historical, monuments to inform its viewers has reached new heights in the United States. Gone are the days of mindlessly walking past these structures that have littered our nation's municipalities. Now more than ever, citizens are (re)learning American's past through the deconstruction of Civil War-era structures. The protests, the vandalism and the installation of temporary works have all had a direct impact on the meaning and purpose of the original works. This recontextualization has generated an exciting atmosphere around memorials and monuments that have otherwise lost their meaning and purpose over time. Unfortunately, there is still a desire by many to depict historical events within a homogeneous context; void of women, people of color, or people within the gay and transgender communities. If public art continues on this path of representation we need to ask; how does this homogeny impact how we see ourselves and view others? In the case of war-related monuments and memorials; how is social identity altered if bombarded by images of white men, often bearing arms?

This presentation will examine these questions and discuss in detail a case involving the vandalism and eventually censorship of a public mural series in Baltimore, MD depicting Harriet Tubman; a historical symbol of freedom within the canon of African slavery and American history. How does an image of a black woman bearing a gun frighten people but not an image of white men with swords and guns?

Keywords

Public Art, Monuments, Memorials, Social Identity, Cultural Identity, History.