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To remove or not to remove?

The "soft weapons" that continue to perpetuate structural racism in the US



Photo: Adnan Zillur Morshed

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Lincoln Park is our community hub on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Just a block away from where we have lived for nearly two decades, it is a magnificent swath of urban green, within walking distance from the US Capitol. This is where we often take a stroll, jog, watch toddlers doing fun stuff, and breathe fresh air that blows through a range of native and exotic trees: American Elm, Sawtooth Oak, Norway Maple, Black Locust, Chinese Elm and Saucer Magnolia, among others. The neighbourliness of our community flourishes here.

Yet, there is a monument in the park that has always made us uncomfortable: the Emancipation Memorial, built in 1876, to commemorate Abraham Lincoln for "freeing the slaves" with his Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Set on a high pedestal, the monument portrays Lincoln as a towering saviour and an unshackled slave, who kneels in front of him, as a grateful recipient of white mercy. Many in our neighbourhood view it as an unabashed embodiment of white supremacy. Many consider it repugnant.

But, as in any other diverse neighbourhood, not everybody finds the statue unnecessary. There are those who feel that monuments like this are necessary to remind people of America's birth defect: while, in 1776, the United States Declaration of

Independence stated that "all men are created equal," captured African slaves were transported to America in ships specially built to maximise human cargo and sold as "property" in slave markets. Not all men were created equal. Some "deserved" to be in chains and work in the cotton fields like animals. As the 1619 Project of *The New York Times* tells us, the period between 1760 and 1860 was the heyday of slave trading in the United States. Approximately 1.2 million enslaved men, women and children were sold during those hundred years. The White House Historical Association notes that at least eight of the first 12 US presidents brought slaves with them to work at the White House.

There is no black-and-white narrative about racism in the USA. Some of our black neighbours discover the promise of a new America in the slave "rising" before a Moses-like Lincoln glorifying the Emancipation Memorial. Some see in it a mutually respectful convergence of white and black America. Many white and black neighbours believe that Lincoln was more concerned about saving the Union than freeing the slaves. They want the monument gone. There has been no dearth of opinions. The lingering question has been: to remove or not to remove?

It was déjà vu when our neighbourhood suddenly found itself in the national spotlight. As the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement inspires people across America, local and out-of-town activists of all political persuasions converged on Lincoln Park. The young BLM activists described the Emancipation Memorial as a symbol of America's systemic racial injustice that makes the brutal police killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor possible. Therefore, it should be removed as soon as possible.

In late June, they convened a public meeting in front of the memorial to demand its removal. But the meeting quickly fizzled out in the cacophony of conflicted opinions: "topple it," "take it away," "put it in a museum," "no, keep it up, it is history," and "that statue ain't killing me, police is." The failed meeting, it seemed, was symptomatic of the never-ending national debate on America's entrenched racial inequality. Taking down a controversial statue in a civic space could be more difficult than winning a military battle.

In the context of the recent debate on Confederate monuments in the US, architectural historian Dell Upton suggested that making moral arguments against individual historic figures (such as Lincoln) was a "losing proposition" because good and bad coexist in individuals and, in the end, it is impossible to make a reasoned case for their erasure from history. He argued, "no final accounting convincing to everyone can be made." But one wonders why it is important to convince everybody. Could a statue with complicated histories ever be removed or retained by consensus?

Of course, not everybody agrees with Upton. Writing on the radical toppling in Bristol, UK, of the statue of seventeenth century slave trader and philanthropist Edward Colston, Oxford archaeologist Dan Hicks stated: "... these statues were never 'just statues,' but part of an apparatus of racism. Statues were used to make racial violence persist. Today, their physical removal is part of dismantling systems of oppression."

The debate on the Emancipation Memorial on Capitol Hill shows how structural racism does not necessarily need a racist police to enforce the ideology of racial domination or a frenzied white mob to lynch a black male. It can work, more powerfully, through public symbols, films, novels, and even white politeness in refusing to discuss race relationships. The pioneering American silent film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), didn't

need a knee to press down on anybody's oxygen supply. Instead, it normalised racial hierarchy. Embedded in its epic story and filmic innovation was the glorification of the slave-owning Old South and its ideology of white supremacy. The American film critic Roger Ebert wrote: "It is a great film that argues for evil."

Another American classic, *Gone With the Wind*, the 1939 Oscar winner, portrayed southern plantation slaves as a happy bunch, living harmoniously with their white masters in a peaceful pre-Civil War South. These slaves were made to look like they would never leave their plantation utopia even when free. A black-owned newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, called the film "a weapon of terror against black America."

The Emancipation Memorial, too, is a "soft weapon" that serves as a propaganda piece at the heart of a public park by reinforcing the hierarchy of the master and the slave. Modelled after a real-life freed slave named Archer Alexander, the kneeling slave—dependent on white benediction—hardly represents Alexander's heroic and arduous journey to freedom. His subservient presence on the pedestal is defined by what the African-American novelist Ralph Ellison called "invisibility." Before Lincoln's prophetic posture, he remains invisible, socially and politically. He is hardly given any historical space.

I kept wondering, why can't erasure or removal itself be part of a monument's continuing legacy? The presumed permanence of a public monument is itself an oppressive idea, dangerously incompatible with the democracy of a public place. The eternal presence of a statue, in the name of preserving history, impervious to criticism and revisionism, can perpetuate the inhumanity of the system that produced it in the first place.

The sustainability of an unjust system often depends on its ability to create perpetual, infallible public signs, symbols, monuments, and a compliant majority unwilling to question their original intent to intimidate. The idea of "emancipation" is complicated. Oppressive systems can adapt to evolving conditions and repurpose the very idea of emancipation to control what they consider both dangerous and inferior. That is the tragic side of the idea of emancipation.

Many in our neighbourhood thought that the restoration of normalcy in Lincoln Park would be possible only when the emblem of racial inequality is taken to a museum to educate people about America's past failings. The moral context of the monument's removal is that a city's civic realm must treat all its citizens equally and its history with the empathetic power of hindsight.

By the way, family DNA research reveals that Archer Alexander, born enslaved in Virginia in 1813 and the model for the kneeling slave, was the great-great-great-grandfather of boxing great Muhammad Ali.

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