CONTINUED ENTANGLEMENTS: BETWEEN *EQUESTRIAN OBA* AND *RUMORS OF WAR*

A Thesis
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF ARTS

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by
Noah A. Randolph
May 2020

Thesis Approvals:

Gerald Silk, Ph.D., Advisory Chair, Department of Art History
James Merle Thomas, Ph.D., Department of Art History

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ABSTRACT

Using Kehinde Wiley's *Rumors of War* as a starting point, this thesis seeks to craft and engage in a larger dialogue about the complex global entanglements of art, trade, slavery, war, commemoration, and race that have existed since the first contacts between Europe and Africa. In September 2019 in New York's Time Square, Wiley unveiled the monument to be permanently installed outside of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia. This large work shows a black man in contemporary dress on a horse, created to counterbalance the ubiquitous Confederate equestrian monuments of the south. While this is an important step in the ongoing debate about public monuments of the United States, the equestrian depiction of rulers and warriors has not always been limited to white men. In the sixteenth century, the Edo peoples of Nigeria depicted their ruler, Oba Esigie, atop a horse in the bronze plaque *Equestrian Oba and Attendants,* now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Through material and iconographical analysis, I will show how the Benin plaque signifies peaceful relations and trade with the Portuguese. This interaction also marks the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade, which informed the dehumanizing beliefs of the commissioners of Confederate monuments as well as the colonizers who ultimately removed the plaque from Africa altogether. In this way, the histories embedded within the plaque can serve to enhance the new monument's meaning. This pairing shows the continued stakes of the history of exploration in the Early Modern period, as the encounters in Nigeria that made the plaque possible and placed it in the Met makes necessary the monument by the Nigerian-American artist in the former Confederate capital.

For Sam.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In September of 2019, Kehinde Wiley unveiled a new monument in Times Square in New York City: *Rumors of War,* which is now permanently installed outside of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia. The work is a sculptural continuation of a previous series of the same name from the early 2000s, in which he replaced white subjects of classical equestrian portraits with young black men in contemporary casual dress. The 27-foot-tall and 16-foot-wide cast bronze statue on a stone pedestal shows a young black man with tied up dreadlocks mounted atop a horse in a hoodie, ripped jeans, and Nike Kyrie 4s. Created to counterbalance the five equestrian monuments that celebrate defenders of slavery on nearby Monument Avenue in Richmond, a one and a half mile boulevard dedicated to Confederate memory, Wiley's sculpture questions the historical ideology behind such a representation. While *Rumors of War* is an important step in the ongoing debate about public monuments of the United States, the equestrian depiction of rulers and warriors has not always been limited to white men. Nearly half a millennia ago, the Edo peoples of Nigeria depicted their ruler, the Oba, atop a horse in a relief plaque titled *Equestrian Oba and Attendants* (1550-1680), now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This thesis will establish the broader connections and importance of *Rumors of War* in the history of art beyond the United States, and brings attention to the unacknowledged violence present within this specific display at the Met. The issues of

slavery, racial division and discrimination in the United States are at the center of *Rumors of War*, and this thesis will extend that conversation through analysis of the Benin plaque. This pairing shows the continued stakes of the history of exploration in the Early Modern period,. Encounters in Nigeria centuries ago made the plaque possible and its ultimate placement in the Met underscores the social and racial conditions that informed the placement of this counter-monument, if we might call it that, by a Nigerian-American artist in the former Confederate capital. The histories of trade and colonialism embedded within the plaque can serve to enhance the new monument's meaning.

Chapter 1 examines the plaque of the *Equestrian Oba* and the early history of Europeans in Benin in depth. While many scholars have noted the source of the material for the plaques as melted down brass from horseshoe-shaped bracelets called manillas received in trade from the Portuguese, there has not been a connection made to what the Portuguese received for the manillas. According to the sixteenth-century Portuguese captain Duarte Pacheco Pereira, the Portuguese would trade twelve to fifteen manilas per slave with the Oba. Following their purchase, the enslaved people would be sent to the castle of S. Jorze da Mina, the first European structure in sub-Saharan Africa and one of the most prominent bases of the transatlantic slave trade, also known as "Elmina." As the first enslaved people at Elmina were brought there from Benin, the process that signifies the creation of the plaques also marks the beginnings of the transatlantic slave trade.

This will serve as an entrée into a discussion about slavery and the Confederacy in the United States in chapter 2, as the trans-Atlantic slave trade was the primary source of enslaved peoples in the United States. Even after slavery was prohibited following the

Civil War, white supremacist ideology persisted throughout the former Confederacy, thinly veiled through the revisionist "Lost Cause" ideology that emphasized the bravery and morality of Confederate soldiers in their just cause of defending states' rights. This was conveyed symbolically and institutionally through the erection of massive monuments to Confederate heroes, like those on Monument Avenue, and the enactment of Jim Crow laws that all but effectively reversed Northern protections provided by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the United States Constitution. Like the monuments of the Jim Crow South, contemporary Europe was similarly justifying claims to territory through white supremacy shrouded in moralization, as so-called "New Imperialist" occupations in Africa were rationalized through the need of a "civilizing prescence."

The third chapter discusses the Benin Punitive Expedition of 1897, which took place seven years after the monument to Robert E. Lee was erected on Monument Avenue. This chapter looks at how the slave trade informed dehumanizing beliefs of the American commissioners of Confederate monuments as well as the European colonizers who ultimately removed the plaque from Africa altogether. I argue that this relationship is crucial through analyzing concurrent developments in the southern United States and colonial Africa and through tracing the Benin plaque's provenance and its itinerary from Africa to North America. Institutional racism persists in the Met's treatment of this "prized possession": its web page for the *Equestrian Oba* offers no acknowledgement of the British punitive expedition, which ultimately led to the museum's obtaining the plaque. The plaque is displayed alongside others from the Oba's palace complex in

Gallery 352 and the didactic material accompanying this group of works also makes no mention of the expedition.

While it is easy to look at *Rumors of War* and see a simple response to the Confederate monuments of the southern United States, this fourth chapter will establish a longer and wider narrative that places the work in a global context and in the rich culture of black equestrians in the United States. The sculpture engages its site and subject in a way that successfully negotiates the conversations around public monuments, heritage, and inclusion that extends beyond the southern United States. Ultimately, the type of dehumanizing beliefs that are unacknowledged in institutions with Benin plaques are the same that were used to trade slaves, defend slavery, colonize Africa, and defend Confederate monuments at protests like the Unite the Right rally in 2017. Altogether, this thesis will broaden the themes of art, trade, slavery, war, commemoration, and race that charge *Rumors of War* into Europe, Africa, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

CHAPTER 2

EQUESTRIAN OBA

The plaque with the given title *Equestrian Oba and Attendants* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is one of a large program formerly known as the "Benin Bronze." In actuality, the plaque is brass, and is a metanarrative of the mutually beneficial trade and cultural transference between Benin and the Portuguese beginning in 1486 when Afonso d'Aveiro first travelled there to arrange a trade agreement on behalf of the King of Portugal.[1] It is part of a larger program that consists of over 900 high relief plaques cast in the *cire perdue* (lost wax) method and used as ornamentation for the Oba's palace.

The palace was a large complex that housed the elaborate Royal Court. As described by the Dutch writer Olfert Dapper:

> It is divided into many magnificent palaces, houses, and apartments of the courtiers, and comprises beautiful and long square galleries, about as large as the exchange in Amsterdam, but one larger than another, resting on wooden pillars, from top to bottom covered in cast copper, on which are engraved the pictures of their war exploits and battles, and kept very clean.[2]

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[1] Barbara Winston Blackmun, "Obas' Portraits in Benin." *African Arts* 23, no. 3 (1990): 67.

[2] Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 117. It should be noted that Olfert Dapper himself never actually visited Benin, but instead gathered multiple accounts about the engraving from travelers.

The sheer volume of these plaques, erroneously described as "engraved" by Dapper, displayed the impressive magnificence and power of the kingdom to any visitor to the complex.

Dapper also failed to notice that the plaques depicted not only scenes of warfare, but also court ceremonies, as is shown in the *Equestrian Oba*. They were to be read together, rather than as individual scenes; the grouping would have provided context that conveyed a larger narrative.[3] Most likely what is represented is a ceremony similar to what Dapper described in the 1668 engraving *Description of Africa*: "The King shows himself only once a year to his people, going out of his court on horseback, beautifully attired with all sorts of royal ornaments, and accompanied by three or four hundred noblemen…"[4] In the plaque, the Oba sports elaborate coral beaded regalia that would have been used for such a ceremony.

This regalia displays products of the material trade with the Portuguese, such as the red Mediterranean coral for the *odigba* (the collar that extends past the Oba's mouth) and the *ede* (the beaded crown), which was introduced to Benin by the Portuguese.[5] The red coral was especially prized by the Edo because of its connection to the supreme water deity, Olokun and was exclusive to the Oba, and its value and exclusivity continues to the

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[3] For more on how the plaques were meant to operate in the Oba's palace, see Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin*, 121.

[4] Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin*, 117.

[5] Gregor M. Metzig, "Corals, Brass and Firearms. Material Commodities in Cultural Interactions between Edo and Portuguese in Benin around 1500," in *Material Culture in Modern Diplomacy from the 15th to the 20th Century,* eds. Metzig and Harriet Rudolph (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2016)*,* 35.

present. The Oba's connection to Olokun is important in Benin mythology, because the Oba's power is connected to the water, the ultimate source of overseas and river trade. Legend claims that Oba Ewuare won the aforementioned coral beaded regalia in a wrestling match with the god in the fifteenth century.[6] Through the forceful acquisition of these beads from "the owner of the Ocean," which Olokun literally means, the Oba has divine oversight of water, and all trade that passes through it.

Moreover, the decorative rosette program that constitutes the background shows the immaterial trade. These patterns are representative of *ebe-ame*, a type of leaf that was utilized for healing by priestesses of Olokun. Just as convincingly, though, the squared rosette has been argued as a derivation of the cross of the Order of Christ.[7] However, these readings are not mutually exclusive and the two motifs were used interchangeably. The Oba most identified with the cross, Esigie, and would routinely employ it in non-Christian religious rituals. This cross is associated with him in both Benin and Portuguese traditions, and he even commissioned a crucifix to be cast by the local guild—the same guild that made the plaques—to be given to the King of Portugal.[8]

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[6] Joseph Nevadomsky and Norma Rosen. "The Initiation of a Priestess: Performance and Imagery in Olokun Ritual." *TDR* 32, no. 2 (1988): 188. Nevadomsky cites William Fagg as interpreting this legend that coincides with the arrival of the Portuguese "as a metaphor for hard trading."

[7] The rosettes are most iconographically similar to the squared cross of the Order of Christ, which is the emblem of the Portuguese Order of Christ that would have been known throughout Benin at the time of the casting of the plaques. For more on Esigie's use of this motif, see Blackmun, "Oba's Portraits," 67.

[8] Ibid.

Oba Esigie is undoubtedly the king represented, and is especially associated with horsemanship, having learned equestrian skills on some of the first European horses available on the western coast of Africa. These horses were given to his father, Oba Ozolua, by the Portuguese King Manuel—a gift with added importance due to the rarity of horses in sub-Saharan Africa because of the predations of the tsetse fly.[9] As it pertains to equestrian portraiture, there is a common Benin saying—"only the Oba rides a horse"—as art historian Joseph Nevadomsky notes. Nevadomsky continues, "the image of the Oba on horseback conveys the idea of success in war, conquest, domination, and imperialism."[10] This places the portrayal of Oba Esigie on the plaque securely in line with the history and purpose of equestrian iconography.[11]

Beyond iconography, the very materiality of the plaque also speaks to the robust trade between Benin and the Portuguese that had flourished since the arrival of d'Aveiro. They are made of brass, which was not locally available. Rather, the material was acquired from melted down manillas, brass bracelets introduced to Benin by the

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[9] Barbara Winston Blackmun, "Iwebo and the White Men in Benin," *Through African Eyes: The European in African Art, 1500 to Present*, ed. Nii O. Quarcoopome (Detroit: The Detroit Institute of Art, 2010), 30.

[10] Joseph Nevadomsky, "A Note on the Benin Bronze Horseman." *African Arts* 17, no. 4 (1984): 10.

[11] Equestrian portraiture dates as far back as the fourth century BCE and flourished as a way to convey imperial dominance and power, as most famously depicted in the bronze equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome. Picked back up in the Renaissance by Donatello in the monument to Gattamelata, equestrian portraiture continued to be one of the most popular forms of representation for white nobility and military leaders through the twentieth century.

Portuguese that came to be both currency and wearable displays of individual wealth.[12] This inundation of Portuguese manillas to Benin provided the brass for the large program of plaques that decorated the Oba's palace and led to a flourishing of brasscasting and its related art forms through a robust guild of brasscasters called *Igun ne Eronmwon*. Benin tradition holds that the Oba's quarters within the palace complex was entirely made of copper from the melted brass, since the metal was far superior to the traditional home building materials of wood and clay for the humid tropical climate of Benin.[13] According to historian Gregor Metzig, "13,000 of such metal rings were imported from 1505 to 1507 from the Portuguese trading port at Ughoton. . . together with the textiles, metal goods constituted more than three-quarters of the Portuguese cargos to Morocco and West Africa."[14] The value and importance of the manillas in Benin at this time are indicated in the plaques themselves where Portuguese men are depicted with the bracelets in a hierarchical scale that overpowers the figures, in which the Portuguese body is equaled in height by only two manillas.

The Benin traded pepper, cloth, and ivory for the manillas that were melted down as the source material for the plaques. The most valuable export from Benin that yielded the most manillas in return, though, was humans. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese

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[12] See Charles Gore, "Casting Identities in Contemporary Benin City." African Arts 30, no. 3 (1997): 54-93.

[13] Metzig, "Corals, Brass, and Firearms," 37.

[14] Ibid., 36.

sea captain Duarte Pacheco Pereira wrote that Benin "is usually at war with its neighbors and takes many captives, whom we buy at twelve or fifteen brass bracelets each."[15] The iconography of the plaques are tied to slavery as well: the cross by Esigie was also a "branding" that marked the right arm of each slave that he sent to the Portuguese ships along the coast.[16] This connection is further evidenced by another plaque at the Met that shows two Portuguese men with twelve manillas—the starting cost of a single slave.

After the Portuguese acquired the captives from the Benin traders, Pacheco writes, "the slaves are brought to the castle of S. Jorze da Mina where they are sold for gold."[17] This castle, later known as "Elmina," was founded by the Portuguese in 1482 as a fortress for trade and storage for goods, and was the first European trade-post on the Gold Coast in modern-day Ghana.[18] Though the storage was initially used solely for the brass and cloth traded as well as the gold and ivory received, it was not long before the fortress held "slave-pens" for the captives referred to by Pereira.[19]

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[15] James D. Graham, "The Slave Trade, Depopulation and Human Sacrifice in Benin History: The General Approach," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* Vol. 5, Cahier 18 (1965): 319.

[16] Blackmun, "Obas' Portraits in Benin," 67.

[17] Duarte Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de situ orbis*, ed. George H.T. Kimble (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 126.

[18] Christopher Decorse, "Culture Contact, Continuity, and Change on the Gold Coast, AD 1400-1900." *The African Archaeological Review* 10 (1992): 164.

[19] Sean Kelly, "New Faces for Old Forts." *African Arts* 4, no. 4 (1971): 45.

It seems that the first enslaved people brought to the castle were from Benin, as indicated in Pereira's short history of the post in his 1506 manuscript *Esmeraldo de situ orbis* dedicated to the King of Portugal, written two years after the beginning of Esigie's rule. Following this, Elmina became one of the largest and most prominent stops in the transatlantic slave trade as the base of Portuguese and later Dutch slave trading operations, flourishing well into the nineteenth century. Thus, the same process that allowed for the material and decoration of the plaques also allowed for the beginnings of the transatlantic slave trade.

CHAPTER 3

THE CONFEDERATE MEMORY

Slavery was central to the economic success of the American colonies, and the United States of America was founded as a slave-holding society. The transatlantic slave trade was largely the source of the enslaved populations brought to the United States, with international trade only ending in 1808 with the Act Prohibiting the Importing of Slaves. Despite this, enslavement itself and the domestic trading of enslaved peoples continued.[20] It would be fifty-five more years before Abraham Lincoln delivered the Emancipation Proclamation, and another two years before the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude throughout the country.

This amendment was only enacted following the Civil War, which was fought because the Confederacy sought to secede from the United States in order to keep the institution of slavery. The Confederate loss and abolishment of slavery as established by the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments forced the former Confederate states to grant citizenship and recognize the civil rights of all former slaves during the Reconstruction period. As actively as the implementation of these amendments was contested, so was the meaning and legacy of the Civil War, leading to a crisis of memory and power in the

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[20] As observed by historian Adam Rothman, the domestic slave trade actually worked to strengthen and expand slavery in the United States. See Rothman, "The Domestication of the Slave Trade in the United States," in *The Chattel Principle: Internal Slave Trades in the Americas*, ed. John R. Gillis (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2004), 32-54.

south. Alongside the adoption of racial segregation laws that allowed for the continued discrimination of black citizens, a major part of recovery in the Reconstruction-era south was the persistence of the "Lost Cause" ideology. The Lost Cause argued that states' rights as opposed to the defense of slavery were the impetus for secession, emphasizing the bravery and tenacity of Confederate soldiers.

Beyond novels written by the wives and daughters of Confederate soldiers that began the southern apologist mythology during the war, the Lost Cause continued to be conveyed with the construction of monuments in the south to the defeated Confederate soldiers and generals.[21] Through the monuments themselves, the evolution of the Lost Cause and the communal reinvention of southern identity can be observed. In the immediate post-war South, the monuments were closely tied to grieving and bereavement and were thus placed in cemeteries where Confederate dead were buried. These were typically of a generic soldier-type with a simple pedestal, quickly made on spec by various foundries and grave-marker companies and sold via catalog to both the North and the South.

As soon as the former Union ceased its occupation and oversight of the implementation of the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments, the South began to adopt aggressive "Jim Crow" laws that struck down Northern protections and disfranchised the southern black population through voter suppression, discrimination, and segregation.

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[21] For more on literature by women of the Confederacy and the constructing of southern identity, see Sharon Talley, *Southern Women Novelists and the Civil War: Trauma and Collective Memory in the American Literary Tradition since 1861* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2014).

Contemporaneously, more Confederate monuments were sited in public spaces and moved beyond the generic soldier model, actively promoting the Lost Cause through massive pieces depicting Confederate generals. As observed by the art historian Kirk Savage, “the increasing tendency in the nineteenth century to construct memory in physical monuments—to inscribe it on the landscape itself—seems symptomatic of an increasing anxiety about memory left to its own unseen devices.”[22] To ensure that a more preferable memory be promoted, the dedication ceremonies were coupled with grandiose commemorative speeches that attempted to revise the historical record.

On May 29, 1890, nearly 100,000 people came to the former Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia for the dedication ceremony for the Robert E. Lee equestrian monument on a newly developed three-block boulevard called Monument Avenue. At the unveiling, former Confederate soldier Archer Anderson delivered an address that celebrated Robert E. Lee’s legacy:

> He was equally above the weak and passionate view of slavery as good in itself, into which the fanatical and unconstitutional agitation of the Abolition party had driven many strong minds in the South. He regarded slavery as an evil which the South had inherited . . . with him, the only question then, as at every moment of his spotless life, was to find out which way duty pointed.[23]

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[22] Kirk Savage, “The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. by John Gillis, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 130.

[23] Archer Anderson, “Dedication of the Monument to General Robert E. Lee,” address delivered in Richmond, Virginia on May 29, 1890. Papers of the Lee Family, Lee Family Digital Archive, https://leefamilyarchive.org/reference/addresses/anderson/index.html.

Though it is true that Lee's own views on slavery were seemingly ambivalent, Anderson promotes the narrative that slavery was a minor issue in the Confederate stance against apparent Northern aggression, minimizing Lee's ultimate defense of slavery.[24] This works to simultaneously ameliorate the Confederate cause and valorize Lee's "spotless" morality as the paragon of southern virtue.

Along with this obviously revisionist language that accompanied the dedication of the monuments, the words engraved into the monuments were similarly fallacious. During a round table on confederate monuments and memorialization, historian Gary Gallagher described the language as "torture, and very hard to work through. Obviously, trying to change something that everyone knows was another way, but now we are going to pretend it's this way . . . virtually unreadable."[25] This change is easily observed. In 1864, a Richmond newspaper proudly defended the true Confederate cause from any spinning: "'The people of the South,' says a contemporary, 'are not fighting for slavery but for independence.' Let us look into this matter . . . Our doctrine is this: WE ARE FIGHTING FOR INDEPENDENCE THAT OUR GREAT AND NECESSARY DOMESTIC INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY SHALL BE PRESERVED."[26] This is

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[24] Lee has been quoted as describing slavery as "moral and political evil," though he himself was a slaveholder.

[25] Catherine Clinton, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, Karen L. Cox, Gary W. Gallagher, and Nell Irvin Painter, *Confederate Statues and Memorialization* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019), 23.

[26] Ta-Nehisi Coates, "What This Cruel War Was Over," *The Atlantic*, June 22, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/what-this-cruel-war-was-over/396482/.

contrasted by the Latin words *PRO JURE CIVITATUM*, meaning “for the rights of states,” inscribed on the Monument Avenue statue of Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy. The champions of the Lost Cause worked to preserve and memorialize their racist and Confederate ideologies under the guise of a distracting political justification—or to use modern parlance, a kind of fake news.

Erected well after the defeat of the South, the equestrian monuments of Confederate generals, such as that of Robert E. Lee in Richmond, had an obvious function that served to intimidate blacks, invoking power through claiming physical and symbolic territory. As noted by art historian Dell Upton:

> They are political statements whose meaning was clearly understood by their targets. They were part of a campaign to reaffirm white supremacy during a period that the historian Rayford Logan called “the nadir” of American racial politics, one that took many forms, including Jim Crow laws, disfranchisement, the rewriting of state constitutions to deny citizenship to blacks, and legal and extralegal terrorism. They stood as affirmations that the American polity was a *white* polity.[27]

As is the case with most monuments, these Confederate statues say even more about those that built them than those depicted. Robert E. Lee stated multiple times that he was opposed to the construction of monuments dedicated to the Confederacy because of their divisive potential in the newly re-united Union; still, he is represented far more than any

[27] Dell Upton, “Confederate Monuments and Civic Values in the Wake of Charlottesville,” *Society of Architectural Historians* Blog, Sep. 13, 2017. https://www.sah.org/publications-and-research/sah-blog/sah-blog/2017/09/13/confederate-monuments-and-civic-values-in-the-wake-of-charlottesville.

other specific individual associated with the Confederacy.[28] His association with the military rather than the Confederate government itself made him a more potentially "heroic" figure in Southern symbolism, in which the heroic nobility of military service fed into the violent continuation of oppression of the black southern population. At the aforementioned dedication of the Lee monument in 1890, an elderly black man exclaimed, "The Southern white folks is on top . . . the Southern white folks is on top!"[29] In his *Dictionnaire Critique*, Georges Bataille states that the monuments raised by any given society express its true face, and thus "inspire social prudence and often even real fear" with their panoptic gaze.[30] Like Marcus Aurelius and Gattamelata watching and overseeing their territory in perpetuity from atop a horse and even crushing defeated enemies under hoof, the commissioners of these statues envisioned Robert E. Lee as partaking in this tradition of "heroic" dominance.

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[28] According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, "among the approximately 184 individual Confederates honored with monuments and place names, Robert E. Lee is by far the most prominent, with a total of 230. He's followed by Jefferson Davis (152), Stonewall Jackson (112), P.G.T. Beauregard (57) and J.E.B. Stuart (49)" ("Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy," Southern Poverty Law Center, February 1, 2019, https://www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy).

[29] Savage, "The Politics of Memory," 134.

[30] Denis Holier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 46. This statement is especially true of the symbolism of Confederate monuments erected in courthouse squares or in front of city halls, as they openly suggest a controlling white legal and administrative power that makes those spaces— where white justice and oppressive law-making was carried out—less friendly and hospitable to the black population.

In the years after 1890, Monument Avenue grew beyond this initial sculptural commemoration of Robert E. Lee to include four other monuments to members of the Confederacy: J.E.B. Stuart and Jefferson Davis in 1907, Stonewall Jackson in 1919, and Matthew Fontaine Murray in 1929. During these 39 years, it developed into a 180-foot-wide boulevard that stretches across a mile and a half in the center of Richmond, serving as the city's simultaneous white promenade and Confederate ritual ground. As observed by historian Charles Reagan Wilson, "Richmond was the Mecca of the Lost Cause, and Monument [Avenue] was the sacred road to it."[31] To protect the whiteness of the landscape, any person "of African descent" was prohibited from owning or renting the prime residential land that lined the mall, and the only black residents permitted were servants who were not even allowed to use the street-facing front doors of the homes.[32] This Jim Crow-enforced continuation of antebellum subjugation combined with the monuments of the wide tree-lined boulevard made it the sacred road indeed, as it became the premier site of Confederate reunions, parades, and celebrations.[33] Thus, every aspect of Monument Avenue, from the residents to the processions, were overt displays of white supremacy enforced through marble, stone, and bronze representations. In his essay on

[31] Charles Reagan Wilson, "The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865-1920," *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 2 (1980): 228.

[32] Kathy Edwards and Esmé Howard, "Monument Avenue: The Architecture of Consensus in the New South, 1890-1930," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 6 (1997): 102.

[33] Jonathan I. Leib, "Separate Times, Shared Spaces: Arthur Ashe, Monument Avenue and the Politics of Richmond, Virginia's Symbolic Landscape," Cultural Geographies 9, no. 3 (2002): 286.

the politics of memory, Savage writes: "Public monuments are important precisely because they do in some measure work to impose a permanent memory on the very landscape within which we order our lives."[34] Through what Alois Riegl called "deliberate commemorative value," the memory imposed by the symbolic and monumental landscape of Monument Avenue not only departs significantly from that of black southerners, but also works to erase it entirely.[35] Celebrating and lionizing Confederate leaders within the former Confederate capital all but ignores their defeat, and upholds and reinforces the dehumanizing beliefs they held.

These odious ideas that persisted in the American south, embodied in Jim Crow laws, were paralleled by a heightened moment of European imperialism. Much like the claims of territory made through Confederate monuments, so-called "New Imperialist" occupations in Africa emphasized white supremacy as a product of the master and slave relationship in the white cultural imaginary. Moreover, the justifications for such activity followed a common Lost Cause defense of slavery: civilization of the uncivilized. As a part of this process, objects were taken and displayed with the exact intention observed by the elderly man at the Robert E. Lee dedication ceremony; to claim territory, impose a memory, and show precisely who is on top. Often understood as part of the larger

[34] Savage, "The Politics of Memory," 143.

[35] As observed by Riegl, deliberate commemorative value keeps a moment "perpetually alive and present in the consciousness of future generations" (Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Essence and Its Development," in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, ed. Nicholas Price (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 77.

narrative about colonization and subjugation of African people, this is how the Benin plaque of the *Equestrian Oba* ended up in New York City.

CHAPTER 4

THE 1897 EXPEDITION THROUGH TODAY

Seven years after the 1890 monument to Robert E. Lee was put up in Richmond, the British launched an expedition in Benin in order to subjugate the population as a protectorate of the British Empire. The expedition was preceded by tensions between the British and the Oba in Benin. At the Berlin Conference of 1885, often cited as the height of the New Imperialist "Scramble for Africa," Great Britain laid claim to the lower Niger delta and thus over trade within the basin through the "principle of effective population."[36] However, the acting Oba of Benin refused to comply or recognize the British claims to sovereignty. After failed attempts to obtain permission for an expedition to "destool the Fetish-priest," the Acting Consul General James Phillips confronted the Oba directly despite warnings that he was performing a sacred ritual, leading to the killing of all but two of Phillips' eight-member crew.[37] Great Britain used this event, broadly reported as the "Benin massacre," as a motive to respond with a "punitive" expedition five weeks later.

On February 9, 1897, more than 1,000 British troops invaded Benin City. After ten days of fighting, the *New York Times* declared: "The expedition which was formed to

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[36] Tanja Bührer, "Berlin Conference," in *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures - Continental Europe and Its Empires*, edited by Poddar Prem, Patke Rajeev S., Jensen Lars, Beverley John, Forsdick Charles, Fraiture Pierre-Philippe, Ben-Ghiat, Dh'aen Theo, Kundrus Birthe, Monasterios Elizabeth, and Rothwell Phillip, 210, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

[37] Joseph Nevadomsky, "Studies of Benin Art and Material Culture, 1897-1997," *African Arts* 30, no. 3 (Summer, 1997): 20.

punish Drunami, King of Benin, for the murder of the members of a peaceable British expedition which was attempting to reach Benin City, has been entirely successful. The expedition has captured Benin City and the King is a fugitive."[38] The city was completely decimated and the Oba's Palace was burnt to the ground. Troops looted the city, taking nearly 3,000 objects that were immediately auctioned off to pay for the operation. British officer Captain Herbert Sutherland Walker wrote, "all the stuff of any value found in the king's palace, and surrounding houses, has been collected."[39] The commander of this expedition, Reginald Hugh Bacon, described Benin City as follows: "Crucifixions, human sacrifices, and every horror the eye could get accustomed to, to a large extent, but the smells no white man's internal economy could stand. . . Blood was everywhere; smeared over bronzes, ivory, and even the walls."[40] As it pertains to the plaques, Bacon describes them as being found "buried in the dirt of ages, in one house."[41] Such

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[38] "King Drunami a Fugitive: The British Expedition Sent Out to Punish Him Captures the City of Benin. VICTIMS OF RELIGIOUS RITES. The Place Well Called 'The City of Blood' — Story of the Massacre to Avenge Which the Expedition Was Sent." *New York Times* (New York, New York), February 23, 1897.

[39] Alex Marshall, "This Art Was Looted 123 Years Ago. Will It Ever Be Returned?" *New York Times* (New York, New York), January 27, 2020. In a memorandum submitted to the UK House of Parliament, Prince Edun Akenzua of Benin included the following excerpt from James Phillips' original letter requesting permission to invade Benin that shows the extent to which the looting and subsequent auctions were pre-meditated: "I would add that I have reason to hope that sufficient ivory would be found in the King's house to pay the expenses incurred in removing the King from his stool" (Prince Edun Akenzua to the Select Committee on Culture, Media, and Sport, March 2000, UK House of Parliament).

[40] Graham, "The Slave Trade," 317.

[41] Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin*, 118.

exaggerated and racially charged descriptions made for easy justification of saving those precious materials of bronze and ivory from the culture and behavior of such perceived “savages”—savages who were trading partners and crucial to providing the European slave labor force two centuries earlier.

As noted by Nevadomsky, despite these “initial commentaries [that] described the [seized] objects as crude, justification for a ‘civilizing’ presence . . . it soon became clear that these artifacts did not signify savagery.”[42] The same year of the expedition, the British Museum displayed the newly acquired works in the exhibition “Benin Antiquities at the British Museum.” Regardless of the curious curatorial decision to show them in a gallery alongside Medieval Assyrian art, nothing could overshadow the obvious virtuosity and mastery of the nearly three hundred objects in the exhibition.[43] What followed was the creation of a highly profitable market for Benin works of art. Excitement surrounding these artistic “discoveries” now available for consumption overshadowed the violence and brutality of their acquisition.[44]

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[42] Nevadomsky, “Studies of Benin Art and Material Culture”: 20.

[43] The general consensus of the European intelligentsia is summed up by the archaeologist and curator Felix von Luschan, who wrote: “These Benin works notably stand among the highest heights of European casting. Benvenuto Cellini himself could not have made better casts, nor anyone else before or since to the present day. These bronzes stand even at the summit of what can be technically achieved” (James Johnson Sweeney, *African Negro Art* [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1935], 15).

[44] For a more in depth look at the reception and market for Benin art immediately following the expedition, see Elazar Barkan,. "Aesthetics and Evolution: Benin Art in Europe," *African Arts* 30, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 36-41.

The plaque of the Oba on the horse as purchased in 1898 by the British Lieutenant-General Augustus Pitt-Rivers for a private museum in the making in Dorset, England, from a captain of the punitive expedition, Norman Burrows, on the recommendation of his curator and advisor, Henry Balfour.[45] It stayed there until the museum's collection began to be dispersed in the 1950s, shuttling between three different private collectors before landing in the hands of businessman and politician Nelson Rockefeller in 1957.[46] As the grandson of oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller and the son of Museum of Modern Art co-founder Abby Adrich Rockefeller, Rockefeller epitomized the American capitalist collecting class.[47] At this time, he was building the collection of his recently founded Museum of Primitive Art. The founding director, Robert Goldwater—one of the pioneering art historians to produce scholarship on "primitivism"—recommended the purchase to Rockefeller based on gallerist John J. Klejman's claim that it was "the most important plaque which ever appeared on the market."[48] At the Museum of Primitive Art, the plaque was a collection highlight, and was even featured as the

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[45] Ibid., 36.

[46] "Plaque: Equestrian Oba and Attendants," Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed October 30, 2019, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310752.

[47] In addition to these roots in capitalist industry and arts institutions, Rockefeller served as the 49th Governor of New York and the 41st Vice-President of the United States under Gerald Ford. Beginning the very year of his purchase of the *Equestrian Oba*, Rockefeller served as the Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the Museum of Modern Art. In this role, he has also been placed as a central figure in the CIA and USIA-funded shows of Abstract-Expressionist painters abroad in the 1950s that were used as Cold War cultural propaganda.

[48] Ibid.

cover of the museum's catalog for the 1958 exhibition, "Primitive Sculpture in Metal: Bronzes from Benin and Gold from the Americas." There it stayed until 1976 when the museum closed and was subsequently integrated into the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it is on view today.

At the Met, the plaque is representative of another moment in the history of race: the fetishization of African artifacts captured through imperial powers that continues into the present. The locations of the Benin plaques are direct evidence of colonialism, as the very acquisition and collection of the objects came to be "part of the equation in colonial rivalries."[49] Today, the active attempt at "righting" this has become a part of the equation in European progressive politics. In 2019, European museums pledged to work with Nigeria to set up a permanent display of some of the items taken in the 1897 punitive expedition, including the British Museum and the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford. Initiated in 2010, the group's vision statement says:

> The Benin Dialogue Group acknowledges the looting of Benin in 1897 and understands that many of the museum collections were assembled as a result of this event. Acknowledging the deep loss that this event caused, the members of the Benin Dialogue Group shared knowledge regarding various initiatives across Europe that are currently seeking to address the questions of return and restitution.[50]

Though the complete restitution called for by Nigeria since its proclamation of independence from British rule in 1960 is not a part of the current plan, these efforts by

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[49] Nevadomsky, "Studies of Benin Art and Material Culture," 20.

[50] "Press Statement of the meeting of the Benin Dialogue Group," Staatliche Museen zu Berlin website, July 7, 2019. https://smart.smb.museum/media/news/69069/Press_Statement__Benin_Dialogue_Group_2019.pdf.

the museums that make up the Benin Dialogue Group mark an important moment in the history of looted artifacts and repatriation.

The Met and dozens of other museums in the United States that have Benin plaques in their collections, however, are not a part of this group and have not made any statements about restitution or loaning agreements. One of the few museums that has made an effort is the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, interestingly home now to Wiley's *Rumors of War.* When asked about the plaque in the museum's collection with the given title *Plaque of Benin Chief*, Chief Curator Michael Taylor stated "we took that piece down, and we would like to actually return it. It is looting. We have returned Native American remains through the NAGPRA act, we have returned an old master painting to a Jewish family in Amsterdam because it was looted by the Nazis… Why is this Benin piece any different?"[51] In contrast, the Equestrian Oba and the Met's 162 other plaques remain silenced in New York City. In fact, the web page for the Equestrian Oba offers no acknowledgement of the British punitive expedition, which ultimately led to its obtaining the plaque. The piece is displayed alongside others from the Oba's palace complex in Gallery 352; didactic material, including the wall label, website entry, and audioguide (#2203) also make no mention of the expedition.

The question this glaring insensitivity seems to suggest is how appropriate or necessary is this narrative to the presentation of the artifacts. One answer can be found in the opening sequence of the 2018 film *Black Panther*. In the scene, the film's antagonist,

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[51] Michael Taylor (Chief Curator, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) in discussion with author, April 2020.

Killmonger (played by Michael B. Jordan), is introduced as a museumgoer at the Museum of Great Britain. He stands in front of a display case filled with African artifacts, joined by the museum's curator of the works. Asking her about the objects on display, she identifies two works as originating from the Edo people in Benin. Killmonger is quick to correct her identification of the second object, an axe, telling her "it was taken by British soldiers in Benin, but it's from Wakanda." After being told he was mistaken by the curator, Killmonger informs her that he is going to take the axe with him. When she objects, Killmonger replies: "How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it, like they took everything else?"[52] The film's storyline notwithstanding, the two-minute dialogue that directly references the 1897 British punitive expedition encapsulates and touches upon a multitude of museological issues—repatriation, museums as mechanisms of colonialism, and stereotyping in institutions. Implicit is a stark criticism of the display of African artifacts like that of the Met.

Killmonger's questions underscore institutional insensitivity and the refusal to acknowledge links between art display and colonialism. In the film, the curator's

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[52] Wakanda, the nation referred to by Killmonger, is a fictional nation from the Marvel Universe located at the north end of Lake Turkana in East Africa. The museum in which the scene takes place, the Museum of Great Britain, is a fictitious institution, understood by many as a thinly veiled reference to the British Museum, where most of the artifacts of the 1897 expedition were subsequently interred. The scene was filmed at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia. The visibility provided by the record-breaking Hollywood production could also be noted as the final push needed for the British Museum to join the Benin Dialogue group, which they did in the months following the film. (*Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler [2018; Burbank, California: Marvel Studios/Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures]).

patronizing tone in the description of the object's "discovery" is mirrored by the troubling omissions in the didactic material for the *Equestrian Oba* in the Met. There is not even a passing mention of the expedition; instead the voice on the audioguide tells us: "Just like today, out there on Madison Avenue, imported goods implied high status. Here, the imported goods are the coral on the Oba's neck, on his head piece, and on his horse. . . the artist has absolutely captured the exotic European costume most unsuitable for the tropics."[53] To the Met, the plaque itself is seen as an imported good whose holding implies the museum's own high status. The plaque is robbed of its history and functions as a market commodity (and fetish), similar to how Klejman viewed it half a century ago.

[53] "#2203. Plaque: Equestrian Oba and Attendants," audio, Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed November 14, 2019, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310752.

CHAPTER 5

RUMORS OF WAR

Two miles away from the silenced Benin plaque in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Rumors of War* spoke loudly when it was temporarily installed in Times Square accompanied by a backing track provided by the Malcolm X Shabazz High School marching band. Just as the *Equestrian Oba* offers multiple readings about the history of race in the world, so does Wiley's sculpture. Throughout his career, Wiley has investigated the complex history of race, working to "draw attention to [the black subject's] absence from canonical works of art history and from our cultural narrative," as pointed out by Eugenie Tsai, co-curator of the major retrospective *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic* at the Brooklyn Museum.[54] For the earlier series from which *Rumors of War* derives its name, Wiley looked to classical European equestrian portraiture, from Diego Velázquez's *Equestrian Portrait of the Count-Duke of Olivares* (1636) to Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1805). The 27-foot-tall, 16-foot-wide work of cast bronze atop a stone pedestal, however, speaks to Confederate monuments, addressing not only the historical omission of black people in art, but also the active oppression of black people in America.

Wiley became fascinated with Confederate monuments when visiting Richmond to give a lecture at the second venue of the Brooklyn Museum-organized retrospective,

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[54] Eugenie Tsai, introduction to *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic*, ed. Eugenie Tsai (New York: Prestel, 2017), 10.

the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts—even staying an extra week in the city to study and observe Monument Avenue. According to the director of the museum, Alex Nyerges, Wiley "was particularly struck by the monuments to the Confederate generals and the notion of the Lost Cause in the midst of a booming, 21st-century, hipster town."[55] This retrospective was held in the wake of the 2015 Charleston church shooting in which nine black parishioners were murdered during a bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Prior to the shooting, the 21-year-old white supremacist attacker wrote a manifesto that specified his racially charged hatred, published on his website alongside images of the Confederate battle flag. The ensuing years gave rise to a nearly unprecedented polemic surrounding the legacy of the Confederacy and what to do with monuments and symbols. Some locales removed Confederate flags and monuments from view, reflecting changing civics values about issues of race. Others advocated keeping the objects intact but contextualizing them through interpretive signage and educational programming. What became apparent, though, was that public opinion *had not* entirely shifted and the Lost Cause was promoted by some just as aggressively as it was the century before, even in apparently more progressive cities like Richmond.

Prior to these debates, Richmond had already tried to come to grips with its Confederate landscape, most notably with the erection of a statue of black tennis star and Richmond native Arthur Ashe on Monument Avenue in 1996. In the contentious

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[55] Colleen Curran, "VMFA acquires massive sculpture by artist Kehinde Wiley, created in response to Confederate monuments," *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (Richmond, Virginia), June 20, 2019, https://www.richmond.com/entertainment/museums/vmfa-acquires-massive-sculpture-by-artist-kehinde-wiley-created-in/article_fa82414f-c412-5308-a3ae-5426fde4532e.html.

discussions surrounding the monument to a black man on the historically white boulevard, Lost Cause concepts of "heritage" and "tradition" came to stand as proxies for the implicit racial tensions. These conversations foreshadowed the debates across the South twenty years later that led to racist polemics and violence, which many believed were a thing of the past—of the days of European imperialism and Jim Crow laws—which spurred many cities to take swift action, removing monuments unannounced in the middle of the night or early morning to avoid confrontation and violence.

However, cities in Virginia like Richmond came to realize that any such actions were out of their hands, as Virginia state law prohibited any removal or modification of war monuments including the addition of explanatory placards.[56] Assuming office in 2016, Mayor Levar Stoney took a more aggressive and out-spoken stance towards Monument Avenue than any other previous leader of Richmond, stating: "We're inclusive, welcoming, open-minded. I know Richmond. Those statues are not Richmond any longer."[57] This led to Mayor Stoney putting together a ten-person commission to resolve the monument debate. Even before this commission, though, the VMFA was actively thinking about a monument for the front of the museum as a way to engage the

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[56] Virginia law code 15.2-1812 states that a locality can "authorize and permit the erection of monuments or memorials for any war or conflict." It continues as saying, "if such are erected, it shall be unlawful for the authorities of the locality, or any other person or persons, to disturb or interfere with any monuments or memorials." This law was recently overturned by a bill adopted by the Virginia House of Representatives and Senate in March of 2020, to much opposition.

[57] Jaweed Kaleem, "A black mayor who leads the former capital of the Confederacy sees both sides of the monument debate," Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, California), August 18, 2017, https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-richmond-confederate-monuments-08182017-story.html.

larger community of Richmond. “One of the things we decided,” Chief Curator Michael Taylor said, “was that we needed a work of art at the entrance to the museum that really spoke about the community and made it a welcoming and inclusive place.”[58] In a two-fold answer to the museum’s institutional goals and the city’s civic aspirations, Wiley approached the VMFA with the proposal of a countermonument that would be on a scale with those on Monument Avenue.

The pose realized in *Rumors of War* is lifted from the monument to the Confederate general J.E.B. Stuart, unveiled in 1907 in Stuart Circle on Monument Avenue. In his choice of model and pose, Wiley tackles two issues at the center of American politics that tend to be separate, but are inextricably connected: the issue of the Confederate legacy and the vibrancy of black youth in the face of daily threats of systemic racism and institutionalized violence. In discussing countermonuments, Upton notes that such a strategy has the possibility of promoting what he calls “*dual heritage*, which treats white and black southerners as having traveled parallel, equally honorable paths.”[59] The risk this poses is to conflate the struggles of black Americans with those of the Confederacy in the name of representation. In *Rumors of War*, the precarity is successfully negotiated.

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[58] Michael Taylor (Chief Curator of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) in conversation with author, April 2020.

[59] Dell Upton, *What Can and Can’t Be Said: Race, Uplift, and Monument Building in the Contemporary South*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 18.

In his writings, the eminent African American philosopher Alain Locke suggests a "primary association between the African American body as an artifact of slavery and the artist's role in maintaining and sustaining an archive of memory in ways that transform, memorialize, mourn, and regenerate that artifact as a work of art."[60] In the sourcing of models directly from encounters on the street, Wiley has said that he looks for people with "a certain type of power;" a power that lies within the African American body as explained by Locke.[61] By combining the latent power of the body with the context and status inherent within a pose historically reserved for white military and political leaders, Wiley achieves the critical transformation, memorialization, and regeneration through his work of art— not only confronting the fetishization of the African artifact that was so central to the collecting of Benin Bronzes, but also providing a contemporary corrective to the power structures conveyed by equestrian representations. At once, *Rumors of War* depends on how Confederate monuments express oppression, while appropriating and reclaiming them to celebrate and honor black youth in public space.

In this, the equation of the iconography becomes leveled, as the first statue seen automatically becomes the referent—is the nameless black everyman of the 21st century in Wiley's sculpture posed as J.E.B. Stuart, or is J.E.B. Stuart posed as him? Despite the chronology of the two, it is not difficult to imagine future visitors to Richmond seeing the monument to J.E.B. Stuart and recognizing the pose as that of *Rumors of War*, not vice-

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[60] Fionnghuala Sweeney, "The Chattel Record: Visualising the Archive in Diasporan Art." In *Visualising Slavery: Art Across the African Diaspora*, ed. Celeste-Marie Bernier and Hannah Durkin (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 89.

[61] Richard Aste, "The Canon in Crisis," in *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic*, 54.

versa. Operating similar to a paradoxical encomium, the juxtaposition of a young black man astride a rearing, muscular horse makes the spectator ask why such a representation is so shocking. Is it that we don't expect to see a black man with tied up deadlocks on a horse in a hoodie and Nike Kyrie 4s? Do we not expect to see a black man represented in bronze? Ironically, the materiality of a bronze equestrian statue is uniquely suited to the representation of dark skin, a factor certainly not lost on the bronze casters of Benin. As noted by the art historian Joaneath Spicer, "there are more depictions of Africans in bronze than in other sculptural media."[62] What *Rumors of War* does, then, is reclaim the medium of bronze for the representation of dark skin. As posited by Wiley, "[t]his story begins with my seeing the Confederate monuments. What does it feel like if you are black and walking beneath this? We come from a beautiful, fractured situation. Let's take these fractured pieces and put them back together."[63] Wiley thus gives the black population of Richmond—which has for so long been subjected to being looked down on by the Confederate monuments,—a work of monumental equestrian sculpture that they literally look up to and moreover looks like them.

In recent years, the concept of representation of "those who look like me" has become a buzz phrase in visual culture, from movies to curatorial statements. At the unveiling of *Rumors of War* in Times Square, Wiley announced that it was "time to say

[62] Joneath Spicer, "European Perceptions of Blackness," in *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Joaneath Spicer (Baltimore: The Walters Art Museum, 2012), 51.

[63] "Sculpture Created by Kehinde Wiley for VMFA," Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, accessed December 20, 2019, https://www.vmfa.museum/about/rumors-of-war/.

yes to something that looks like us."[64] In an op-ed for the New York Times, scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah explored how representation in this vein operates. What such works of media achieve is "a way of 'looking like me' that's as much about aspiration as identification. We say that their characters look like us; maybe what we mean is that we wish to look like them."[65] This is critical in understanding the role of *Rumors of War* in the Confederate monumental landscape of Richmond where black people are the largest group in the city, making up 48 percent of the population.[66]

Appiah also unpacks other cultural phenomenon spurred by Lil Nas X's record-breaking 2019 song "Old Town Road" and its accompanying video, in which the rapper sings "I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road, I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more" while riding a horse in a cowboy hat and knee-high cowboy boots. Appiah writes: "A young black man from Atlanta, Lil Nas X had never been on a horse. The 'yeehaw agenda' . . . is chiefly an aesthetic. It proceeds in defiance of social realism, that default mode of early-stage minority representations… an exercise in cultural unbundling."[67]

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[64] Kehinde Wiley, "Rumors of War," Times Square NYC, November 21, 2019, video, 1:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=48&v=N3Bs0EpDe38&feature=emb_logo.

[65] Kwame Anthony Appiah, "What Does It Mean to 'Look Like Me'?" *New York Times* (New York, New York), September 21, 2019.

[66] This is compared to white people, who represent 45.4% of the population according to 2019 census data ("QuickFacts: Richmond, Virginia," United States Census Bureau, accessed March 20, 2020, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/richmondcityvirginia).

[67] Appiah, "What Does It Mean to 'Look Like Me'?"

These comments that speak directly to the zeitgeist in which *Rumors of War* was unveiled, enhances our reading of Wiley's monument. Much of the analysis surrounding *Rumors of War* follow this sort of cultural unbundling narrative, citing the sculpture as "offering an exquisite example of how to imagine and enact a more complete and inclusive American story."[68] As true and necessary as this may be, it is also valid that no imagination is needed to see the realism of the monument.

Such a representation of a black man in jeans on a horse is not merely a juxtaposition of the contemporary and the historical, serving the rhetorical function of an ironic trope or historical clap-back, but is actually a living reality. In Philadelphia, there is a long tradition of black horsemanship spanning over 100 years. The members of Fletcher Street Urban Riding Club with stables in Strawberry Mansion neighborhood of the city can routinely be seen riding horses throughout North Philadelphia, a predominantly black and poverty-stricken part of the city. Beyond Fletcher Street, there are many other urban stables in the United States from the Federation of Black Cowboys in New York City to Horses in the Hood in Los Angeles, part of a history of black equestrians that stretches from the current streets of North Philly all the way back to the Oba. What *Rumors of War* also provides then is a powerful (if unintentioned) representation of black cowboys that provides a corrective to the white cowboy narrative in popular culture, propagated through novels, films, and television as well as in the work of artists from Frederic Remington to Richard Prince—even though it is estimated that

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[68] "Rumors of War," Times Square Arts, accessed October 25, 2019, http://arts.timessquarenyc.org/times-square-arts/projects/at-the-crossroads/rumors-of-war/index.aspx

one in four cowboys in the postbellum West were black.[69] This narrative historically stigmatized non-white cultures in the creation of an American "discovery" myth—a seeming mash-up of Confederate and imperialist ideals.

Of course, not everyone approves of *Rumors of War* or sees it as a welcome addition to America's monumental landscape. In Richmond, objectors include a group called the Virginia Flaggers, who protest the museum twice a week by flying oversized Confederate flags at the front of the building, as well as donors that explicitly rescinded their support of the museum because of the monument.[70] Even outside of Richmond, the opposition persists. For the YouTube video produced by Times Square NYC of the unveiling, viewers posted comments such as "tear it down" and "the upcoming civil war . . . will be starting in Virginia if the democrats keep up with this bullshit."[71] Beyond these publicly available comments, even more threatening views are shared in private. As shared by Michael Taylor, "We worked very closely with the police and the FBI for the [Richmond] unveiling and they have access to the dark web. There are horrendous things

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[69] A noted response to this omission is the 1974 satire *Blazing Saddles*, in which a black sheriff is in charge of an all white frontier town shortly after the Civil War. A more recent attempt to complicate this narrative was the 2017 exhibition *Black Cowboy* at the Studio Museum in Harlem featuring work from Deana Lawson, Brad Trent, Chandra McCormick, Mohamed Bourouissa, Ron Tarver, and Khalil Joseph.

[70] According to Taylor, the Virginia Flaggers began protesting because the museum took down the Confederate flag that they used to fly.

[71] Wiley, "Rumors of War," Times Square NYC.

out there, and Kehinde did wear a bullet-proof vest at the unveiling."[72] Far from their intent, such threats and protestation actually *prove* the critical value within *Rumors of War* in understanding the complexities of racism and the legacy of slavery.

Though not on Monument Avenue, *Rumors of War's* ultimate site at the entrance of the VMFA has its own significance. The very grounds that the museum is located on was previously a plantation called The Grove that used enslaved labor and served as a Confederate veteran's home after the Civil War where its non-denominational Confederate Memorial Chapel still stands. Founded in 1936, the museum itself actively practiced segregation through the 1960s. In trying to both address this long history and enact a more representative landscape in Richmond, the VMFA sponsored a bill that renamed street in which the museum is located to Arthur Ashe Boulevard at the beginning of 2019. Intersecting Monument Avenue at the Stonewall Jackson monument, the boulevard stretches from the Arthur Ashe Athletic Center to the previously whites-only tennis courts that Ashe was not allowed to play on in the segregated Richmond of his youth.

On the former plantation in the center of this boulevard, *Rumors of War* embraces and reveals this history. As the art historian Miwon Kwon explains, "site-specific art can lead to the unearthing of repressed histories, provide support for greater visibility of marginalized groups and issues, and initiate the re(dis)covery of 'minor' places so far

[72] Michael Taylor (Chief Curator of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts) in conversation with author, April 2020.

ignored by the dominant culture."[73] At once, the location at the entrance of the museum gives the monument the status of the city's introductory representative of culture while loudly revealing unseen realities that reverberate from Richmond across the world: from slavery, colonialism, and segregation of the past to the systemic and institutionalized racism of today.

[73] Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 105

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In a statement that accompanied the unveiling of *Rumors of War* in Times Square, Wiley explained his motivations behind the monument and the initial location:

> The inspiration for *Rumors of War* is war—is an engagement with violence. Art and violence have for an eternity held a strong narrative grip with each other. *Rumors of War* attempts to use the language of equestrian portraiture to both embrace and subsume the fetishization of state violence. New York and Times Square in particular sit at the crossroads of human movement on a global scale. To have the *Rumors of War* sculpture presented in such a context lays bare the scope and scale of the project in its conceit to expose the beautiful and terrible potentiality of art to sculpt the language of domination.[74]

The Benin Brass plaque at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a narrative of these themes as well—art, violence, equestrian portraiture, and human movement. In their material casting, representation, and ultimate function at the Oba's Palace, these bronzes synergistically embody a language of domination—of the Oba's control over trade and the enemies of the Edo. They accord with the popular Benin saying: "going to a palace ceremony is like going to war."[75] At the Met, however, the plaque speaks to a different language of domination, of white culture over perceived black barbarism, from its original looting to its history of "ownership" and display. This second language of dominance was also the native tongue of the officers of the Confederacy, who as

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[74] "Rumors of War," Times Square Arts.

[75] Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin*, 215.

monumental statues continue to look down on the residents and visitors of Richmond, Virginia.

The *Equestrian Oba* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art allows for an entry into the larger and more complicated conversation surrounding art, trade, slavery, war, and commemoration. While the Benin plaque signifies peaceful relations and trade with the Portuguese, what the Portuguese were receiving from them for the very material by which it was made would ultimately serve as the basis for the dehumanizing beliefs that informed the commissioners of Confederate monuments as well as the colonizers who ultimately removed the plaque from Africa altogether. For the Benin plaque to ever be made, human beings were traded for bracelets, a dehumanizing and brutalizing valuation. The inhumanity and violence of white supremacist thought continued in an American civil war, racist monuments, and even today through insensitive institutional and cultural exhibition and possession. All of this history comes together in *Rumors of War*, a monument that was made necessary by the current dialogue in American society that seeks to correct these beliefs. Wiley, who encourages the understanding of his work in the context of history, especially as represented in visual culture, sheds acute light on the complex entanglements of race in the global society. Where the Met troublingly ignores racial context in its display of *Equestrian Oba and Attendants,* the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts installed and sited *Rumors of War* to interact in the nettlesome geographical and historical context of the former Confederate capital.

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