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Up until just a few years ago, I had always seen statues only for what they appeared to be: large pieces of rock or metal shaped in the form of someone

famous. Most of the time, I would pass by them without thinking twice. It wasn't until my sophomore year of high school that I reconsidered the significance of statues. Sitting in my history class, I watched as others engaged in a discussion about tearing down confederate monuments. I distinctly remember that as one of the first times I realized that statues carry a message, even if society no longer agrees with it. As the fight for social justice has intensified, so too has the debate around controversial monuments, and the campaign to remove or modify them has been pushed to the forefront.

On a whim, I chose to take *Monuments and Memory* with Dr. Andrew Tharler for my Writing 101 class purely. As a STEM major, I wanted to diversify my course load, and I thought it'd be an interesting class to take. It's no exaggeration when I say that the course completely changed my outlook on statues. Everything about a statue is intentional—its location, inscriptions, posture, and even its placement relative to its landscape. When researching noteworthy monuments, the Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt was the first one that truly shocked me. While other statues may portray figures who held problematic beliefs, this statue literally and physically depicted an explicit racial hierarchy. As such, I chose to dedicate my essay to the Roosevelt statue, in hopes of providing an analytical interpretation of the statue that could ultimately spur remedial action.

I would like to thank Dr. Tharler for introducing me to the field of archeology, challenging me to always think one step further than I normally would, and supporting me through every step of the writing process. His passion for archeology is infectious, and his ability to extract a story from seemingly mundane monuments is truly remarkable. I would also like to thank Dr. Sheryl Welte Emch, as well as the *Deliberations* editorial board, for offering valuable insights and commentary through the publication process.

“To Tell the Truth”: Representing Race and Power in the Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt

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Writing 101: *Monuments and Memory*

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Figure 1: A frontal view of the statue showcases Theodore Roosevelt sitting on the horse with an African man on his left and a Native American man on his right.

As former President Theodore Roosevelt once remarked, “it is more important to tell the truth, pleasant or unpleasant, about [the president] than about anyone else.” While Roosevelt delivered this statement in reflection of his presidency, his association with this quote has recently resurfaced amidst the controversy surrounding his statue in New York City. Located on the doorstep of the American National History Museum, the bronze Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt depicts the president sitting on horseback with an African man walking on his left and a Native American chief walking on his right (Fig. 1). Although originally intended to commemorate the president as a naturalist and conservationist, to some, the statue serves as an extension of obsolete values, ones which fuel racism and perpetuate social unrest. Debates between the two sides have escalated, culminating recently in public protests around the statue. Current arguments hinge

primarily on appraisals of Theodore Roosevelt's various accomplishments and ideologies. This paper seeks to reframe the existing discourse by drawing attention to the physical monument instead of the man it represents. I argue that while a tribute to Roosevelt's presidential accomplishments is justifiable, the current statue's hierarchical representations of race and prominent location in New York City impose an unacceptable white supremacist message onto today's society. As such, I suggest that the statue be altered to align with its original goal of honoring Roosevelt for his conservation efforts in the early twentieth century.

Shortly after Theodore Roosevelt's death in 1919, the New York state government chose to honor Roosevelt, who, at the time, was the only New York native to serve as president, by commissioning a statue in his name. The project was undertaken by sculptor James Earle Fraser, who also designed the Benjamin Franklin memorial and the End of the Trail sculpture. The statue was set to be constructed on the steps of the American Natural History Museum. Supporters envisioned the monument serving two primary purposes: to celebrate Roosevelt as a trailblazing environmentalist and a progressive leader. The American Natural History Museum endorsed the statue to honor Roosevelt's passion for nature and his renown as a naturalist and conservationist (Addressing the Theodore). Roosevelt's efforts to conserve nature through the creation of national parks and forest reserves set him apart from his predecessors. In fact, historian Douglas Brinkley, in his book *The Wilderness Warrior*, considers Roosevelt's "crusade for American wilderness" as the greatest U.S. presidential initiative between the Civil War and World War I. His endeavors not only prevented widespread environmental damage, but also sparked an "educational campaign... purely in the interest of the people," generating eco-friendly awareness across the nation (Ponder). At the same time, the New York state government also wanted to commemorate Roosevelt as a bold and progressive leader who "symbolically united the races of America" during his presidency (Theodore Roosevelt Park). The statue was officially revealed to the public in 1940.

Although the statue may have been well-intentioned, many critics contend that Roosevelt does not merit his reputation as a racial progressive. While Roosevelt did indeed serve as the driving force for the conservationist movements in the early twentieth century, he also publicly harbored racist beliefs, many of which would be deemed inappropriate by today's standards. For example, Roosevelt openly supported social Darwinism, the idea that certain groups of people hold power in society because they are innately better. In his 1905 speech titled "Lincoln and the Race Problem," Roosevelt expressed his views on race relations in the United States. In this speech, he openly labeled black people as the "backward race," who must be "trained [to accept] the priceless boons of freedom, industrial

efficiency, political capacity, and domestic morality," while simultaneously referring to white people as "the forward race" who must "preserve... the high civilization wrought out by its forefathers" (Theodore Roosevelt, Lincoln). Roosevelt's racist ideologies spilled beyond domestic boundaries as well. According to historian David H. Burton, Roosevelt was known to claim with "dramatic, pungent confidence" that there were "superior and inferior peoples possessing differing responsibilities and privileges, that force was frequently needed to accomplish good among men as among nations". This sentiment is reflected in Roosevelt's foreign policy decisions, as he exerted military control over Cuba, Puerto Rico, and other Latin American countries (Russell). Due to these racist attitudes, opponents argue that Roosevelt does not merit being celebrated in a monument.

Indeed, in many ways, the Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt mirrors Roosevelt's own social Darwinist beliefs. Upon first glance, the positioning of Roosevelt, the Native American man, and the African man establishes a telling relationship between them. From a frontal view, Roosevelt is sitting on a horse facing forwards, with the African man on his left and the Native American man on his right. Roosevelt's horse is noticeably wider than the Native American man and the African man, almost squeezing the two figures off the edge of the pedestal. Roosevelt straddles the horse comfortably, holding the reins in his left hand and reaching for his pistol with his right (Fig. 2). The contrast in the positioning of the three figures reveals a clear hierarchy: Roosevelt's place atop the horse suggests his importance and power, while the Native American and African man, traveling on foot below, are subordinate (Loewen). And while Roosevelt rides freely in the center of the composition, the other figures are pushed



Figure 2: Roosevelt's right hand hovers over a holstered pistol while his left hand holds the horse's reins



Figure 3: Roosevelt's face suggests determination and courage as his eyes look out to the skyline. Left and a Native American man on his right.



Figure 4: The Native American man's face seems more dejected, as there are creases all around his face and his eyes are more weary.



Figure 5: The African man's face is also very dispirited, with no expression and eyes clearly downcast.



Figure 6: Theodore Roosevelt is seen wearing a well-fitting long sleeve shirt, pants, and riding boots.

to the sides. In a crude double entendre, the statue marginalizes minority races by physically confining them to the margins of the pedestal.

Differences in gesture and countenance portray Theodore Roosevelt as a vitalizing leader and the two other men as passive followers. Roosevelt, on horseback, appears energetic and enterprising. His face is set in determined lines with his eyes gaze towards the skyline (Fig. 3). Additionally, with his left-hand on the reins and his right-hand hovering over his pistol, Roosevelt exudes an air of confidence and seems primed for action. By contrast, the African man and the Native American man both appear weary and dejected. On the left, the Native American man's face is heavier set, lined with creases, and his eyes simply stare straight ahead (Fig. 4). On the right, the African man's head is visibly tilted down, and his face is virtually expressionless, suggesting a sense of defeat and hopelessness (Fig. 5). With these differing poses, the statue again propagates a racist view, portraying white people as more fit and competent than Africans and Native Americans.

The clothing donned by each figure drives home these racial connotations, as Roosevelt's dapper attire eclipses the two other men's indigenous outfits. Roosevelt wears a long sleeve shirt that has been rolled up to his elbows, a belt, pants, and riding boots (Fig. 6). Not only is the attire suitable for horseback riding, but it also seems to fit him well, accentuating his musculature and imparting on him an air of majesty. On the other hand, the outfits worn by the Native American man and African man are extremely stereotypical to their respective cultures. The Native American man is wearing a feathered headdress, medallions, and moccasins—all articles of clothing indicative of a Native American chief (Fig. 7). The African man is only wearing a loincloth, which is seen as traditional African clothing for men (Fig. 8). The stark contrast between Roosevelt's attire and the clothing of the Native American man and African man sends a racist message on two levels. First, it emphasizes the socioeconomic gap separating white men from black and native people, as



Figure 7: The Native American man wears traditional clothes, such as a feathered headdress, a breechcloth, and moccasins.



Figure 8: The African man also wears stereotypical traditional clothes, as seen by the loincloth and a lack of other clothing.

Roosevelt is able to dress comfortably and appropriately, whereas the African man and the Native American man are significantly underdressed. Second, in juxtaposing Roosevelt's contemporary clothing with the two men's traditional attire, it conveys the idea that the white people have progressed to modern times while black people and Native Americans have been left behind. These two messages combine to firmly instill the impression that white people are superior to black and native races.

These racist messages are amplified by the monument's size and prominent location. Standing at ten feet tall, the statue towers over its surroundings, naturally drawing the attention of passersby. It also occupies a central

location in front of the American Museum of Natural History at the base of the front steps (Fig. 9). Its rectangular platform divides the lowest flight of stairs into two halves, while the main staircase leading up to the museum entrance continues directly behind the statue's platform. Visitors to the museum are then forced to physically confront the monument as they enter. This positioning sets the monument on the axis of symmetry for the entire building, thereby focusing attention toward the statue. As a result, New Yorkers and tourists alike can hardly avoid the monument, and in turn, its racist message.

The recent debates over Roosevelt's legacy have culminated in public protests centered around the equestrian statue—to date, there have been two documented incidents of defacement. In 1971, Native American protesters splashed red paint on the statue's pedestal, fighting the government's decision to evict a group of indigenous people off of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco (Oelsner). More recently, in the wake of controversies over Confederate monuments, activists have renewed their fury towards the Roosevelt statue. In 2017, protesters again vandalized the base with red paint (Fig. 10). This time, they claimed that the gesture represented a “counter-monumental act that does symbolic damage to the values [the statue] represents: genocide, dispossession, displacement, enslavement, and state terror” (Voon). In the wake of the 2017 incident, a new city commission was assembled to reconsider the statue's presence. Although the commission was split on keeping or relocating the statue, they ultimately reached a decision to add more historical context around the statue in an attempt to “re-think how the statue is presented [and] to frame it in a way that discloses the historical distance we have traveled from once-popular ideas” (Mayoral Advisory Commission).

In June 2019, the museum opened an indoor exhibit titled “Addressing the Statue,” which presents various perspectives on the statue's message and origins. The exhibit attempts to contextualize the Roosevelt statue on placards for visitors to peruse. In particular, it addresses the original motive for construction, Roosevelt's troubling views on race relations, and how the statue can play a role in modern dialogue. Additionally, the museum has also published resources on its website regarding the statue's controversy, providing a more balanced interpretation of the statue that highlights both the merits and faults of the statue.

With all factors in consideration, I still believe that there is merit to honoring Roosevelt outside the Natural History Museum. Despite the statue's overtly racist



Figure 9: The statue stands in a centralized spot in front of the museum and divides the stairs into two walkways.



Figure 10: Red paint coats the pedestal of the statue after a protest in 2017, symbolizing the “bleeding” of the statue.

message, a closer look at the historical context surrounding its commission reveals an unintentional mismatch between the statue's intent and its execution. As previously mentioned, the board of commissioners wanted the statue both to commend Roosevelt's dedication to nature conservation and celebrate his willingness to improve race relations. However, the statue's final racist and white supremacist message grossly misrepresents the original celebratory vision of Roosevelt's accomplishments as president. As such, I propose that the current statue be altered in such a way that more aptly depicts Roosevelt as a naturalist rather than an imperialist. To do this, I suggest replacing the current statue with one that shows Roosevelt interacting with nature, such as surveying land or engaging in outdoor activities. To avoid downplaying Roosevelt's problematic racist beliefs, I also suggest that the current statue be moved into the museum's "Addressing the Statue" exhibit, where it would not interfere with public proceedings while still educating visitors about Roosevelt's shortcomings.

While the Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt was constructed with well-founded intentions, its final portrayal of Roosevelt yields a drastically different result. Rather than depicting him as a naturalist, the statue mirrors his racist views and imposes them on the public. To remedy this, a statue celebrating Roosevelt's environmentalism, as originally intended, would be more suitable in the present location, and the current monument should be relocated inside the museum for educational purposes. Though some may disagree, I presumptuously submit the argument that even Roosevelt himself may be more pleased with this result—after all, in accordance with his own words, the truth about him, both pleasant and unpleasant, will be on display around the museum, presenting a raw and uncensored account of his legacy for future visitors to consider.

Author's Note: As of June 21, 2020, the American Natural History Museum and the New York City government have jointly decided to remove the Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt from the museum's entrance. Further steps have not been disclosed.

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