Recall This Book
Episode 172: David Cunningham on Contesting Confederate Monuments
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John Plotz

What happens to a place and to a community when an unwelcome monument departs? That question has been asked in many ways. In many places, the Berlin wall comes to mind. So do Nazi era death camps. But those of us who lived through post Black Lives Matter reckoning in the United States have witnessed up close or from afar, another version of such a reckoning, and like every piece of real history, when viewed up close and grainy, it is not pretty and it is not easy. Hello, I'm John Plotz of recall this book and to look at the gritty surface of such rethought monuments past, I'm joined once again by my beloved former Brandeis colleague, David. I know you're so many other things, but you're still my beloved former Brandeis colleague, David Cunningham, sociology professor at Wash U St Louis. So David, welcome.

David Cunningham

Thank you. John, yeah, I'm happy to be your beloved Brandeis colleague. I appreciate that intro, and even happier to be here again.

John Plotz

So I interrupted to say hi, but I will just say a little bit more about you, because you're such an impressive person and your pedigree matters for this conversation. So you are the author of such influential books as "There's Something Happening Here: the new left, the Klan and FBI, counterintelligence" and the award winning "Clansville, USA: The rise and fall of the civil rights era KKK." You're a member of the city of St Louis reparations commission, and you're very interested in political signaling, in public arts and monuments, and that includes a lot of work that we're going to talk about today, but also some forthcoming work on murals in Protestant and Catholic communities and the interface areas that connect them in Belfast. You're also a Recall this Book regular. We don't have many, but you are definitely one of them. So listeners should check out earlier episodes on racialized policing in the United States on January 6, also in the 2024 presidential elections. And finally, and I think pertinent to this discussion, a recent conversation that you and I had with Glenn Patterson, who's the author of "Lapsed Protestant" who is also very interested in that question of interface spaces in Belfast and Northern Ireland. And so I think that conversation is a pushing off point for today, because we're going to

be exploring both monumentality and collective memory in darker forms, and also the question of how such darknesses get undone, removed or contested.

And I should say, when you think of darkness here Confederate era monuments is a good way. It's like the placeholder. It's not the only thing we're going to be talking about, but Confederate-era monuments and how they get repositioned in 21st Century America, that's kind of the core of the question. And David, you're asking questions not just about those monuments, but also about alternatives. Silence is obviously one response, undoing is another, but there's a whole other range that you have anatomized very beautifully, that has to do with redoing or counteracting such monuments. And each of them comes with its own delicate balancing act of benefits and risks. And you undertook an amazing recent project: you visited each of the 113 communities that removed or relocated Confederate symbols between 2015 and 2023. So one way that you documented it is a wonderful article published in September 2025 called "Monumental Juxtapositions". But I think you wanted to begin us actually slightly earlier with a 2022 collaborative article you wrote in social problems called "Contesting commemorative landscapes." So maybe can I invite you to set the scene for us with that article?

David Cunningham

Sure, I'd be happy to. I've long been interested in space as spaces as the holders of history, and one of the things that motivates that is this really powerful finding in the social sciences is that spaces that are marked by pronounced histories of racial violence, racial conflict continue today to exhibit greater than expected levels of racialized inequality.

John Plotz

I'm an interrupter. I'm so sorry. Can you talk more, as a social scientist, about spaces, as opposed to places. I think of those as having conceptual different registers. So are you talking about spaces, or are you talking about places?

David Cunningham

Yeah. So that's a great question. I was actually, maybe embarrassingly, now that you've called it out, I've been saying spaces because I thought it would sound more straightforward, but I really am referring to place in this case. So, you know, space, not necessarily these geographic sectors, but thinking about places having, you know, a deep cultural and social connotation associated with them. And you know, these places are the things that we kind of hash through and we interpret and we debate. I've been correctly, as you're saying, interested in places as holders of

these histories and these legacies. And, you know, related to that, back in I think it was 2016 I was working with two of my longtime collaborators, Christina Simcoe, at Williams College, and Nikki Fox, who's at Sacramento State.

And we were really interested in contested Confederate monuments, because this is at the outset of this wave that you're describing. And at the time, we were really interested in thinking broadly about how different ways of recontextualizing monuments, engaging with those histories, reckoning with those histories, would matter. This field has really progressed so quickly over the last decade. In 2016 2017 it was a very wide-open discussion of, should things be removed, or should they be contextualized in a variety of ways? The most straightforward would probably be to place a plaque in front of or near an object that like offered additional context, but left the object in place. But there are other ways to modify objects in place or think about them at museums and all, and we were hoping that by thinking about those different modes of addressing these objects, this would be a helpful resource to local officials and people who are actually making decisions about what to do with these things. One of the things that we found was that when an object is removed entirely, it tends to fall, largely fall out of public discourse.

John Plotz

There's three words you use, and maybe they're terms of art, or maybe they're your terms of art, but I found them really helpful. You talked about *expungement, amplification* and *repositioning*. Is that an adequate taxonomy, or is there a fourth category there?

David Cunningham

I mean, what we are interested in is whether objects were relocated or left in place, and whether objects were modified or left in their prior state. So it would, it would modify an object in place. And you know, this is what inevitably happened in the places that placed plaques in front of problematic objects, is that it amplified this idea that they're problematic, causing more people to ask, Well, why is this here? Yeah, so it would lead to this trajectory, but it was an amplification of discourse around this. You know, it really got people more involved in thinking about that object's presence and what it meant.

John Plotz

I just want to put down a marker that one of the crucial things you talk about, which we, probably most of us have not thought about, is what it means to move things from public land to private land. Because that's one of the repositionings that might seem like out of sight out of mind. Sometimes, if they go from a public space to

a private space, it's not really out of sight out of mind at all. It's like into mind in a new way.

David Cunningham

And that's incredibly important, and this idea of repositioning tries to capture the whole range of ways that can happen. You know, the most familiar one probably is thinking about moving an object from a public space like a park or in front of a courthouse to a space like a museum where it can become can shift from an object of veneration to an object of study. You see it in a museum, and you realize it's not there to honor the person so much as to teach us who that person was and why it matters in that space. So that repositioning can take a bunch of forms, we use the word expungement, even though it's a little obscure. It wasn't to try to find a vague word, but to be really precise, that when an object is removed entirely and placed in storage, et cetera. It really does, in a discursive sense, get expunged from the discourse, from the conversation, right? And we saw this sharp drop off after an object is removed entirely in terms of whether it's debated or discussed publicly,

John Plotz

yeah. I don't think we will get to this John Guillory article that I love about monuments and text as cultural objects, but you just paraphrased beautifully his core argument, which is that we have a cultural residue, or cultural heritage, and the decision to treat it monumentally, the way that, let's say Shakespeare is treated always monumentally, versus treating it as a text. We're sort of unaware of how often objects are sort of sliding between those two positions. But obviously you engaged in a project where you were watching objects at their moment of either disappearance or their moment of like repositioning into the analytic space. Their textualization. Isn't that a term?

David Cunningham

That's all fascinating, and I hope maybe later in the conversation, I would love to talk about a particular Jefferson Davis statue that's actually moved through three different spaces that have, like, kind of shifted in the ways you're describing multiple times. And so it becomes this really interesting instance of that kind of malleability and that shifting.

John Plotz

That sounds great. So let's get there by way of the timetable we set up, which is, you're still telling us the story of the work you started in 2016 which was object-centric…..

David Cunningham

Yeah, and we were focusing on objects because we thought that would be helpful. This is what you know, officials and others are hashing over, like, what to do with these objects. But it really left a big blind spot. Especially if you take seriously this idea of place, having this weight to it, this legacy to it. It made this assumption that one can make these kind of binary decisions, like the objects there, or it's not right, and it really ignores what might become of the site upon which an object would have stood. And you know that it we could live in a world where that is binary, where, you know, an object gets removed, and it's always just ends up being an empty space, which could be important, but it's important kind of in a similar way all the time. But what I quickly suspected, and you know, from media accounts and things like this, started to see, was that this is far from binary. There's all sorts of different ways in which these sites get refashioned and repurposed or, don't, you know, and that variation becomes really important if we want to take seriously like what a reckoning looks like. It's not just removing something, it's what do we do with that space, and how do we actually still engage with the idea that object would have stood there for decades?

John Plotz

And just to articulate the word reckoning, I mean you and I, many times, David, have talked about the fact that you're, you were hired to do quantitative sociology here at Brandeis, but you're a qualitative sociology person. But reckoning is right, because you're not, I won't say a completist, but you're a documentarian. You're interested in trying to exhaust the number, not just choose one or two and hope that they're exemplary. So let's fast forward you then, to how you got to the number 113 of the communities you wanted to visit. ,

David Cunningham

It really seemed important to do what you're describing, which is to try to get to all of these places and think systematically in the aggregate as to what this what this field looks like. And part of why I did that is that I suspected that I was going to find a relatively small proportion of these places to be interesting. And, you know, analytically interesting, theoretically interesting, but more importantly, interesting for what the space means to people who, you know, live around it, live in these communities. And I always sort of told myself, as I embarked on this, like, if 10% of these sites are interesting, like that, can still be successful. It's not like all of them need to be unique from each other in ways that I can kind of engage with deeply. And it ended up being well beyond that. I mean, easily, the majority of the sites

ended up being really interesting, and when I say interesting, it's different from other kinds of sites. The like the range and the spectrum of repurposings and refashionings was much greater than I anticipated. Yeah, different from other sites within the data set, meaning that there's just a lot more variation than I expected, both in terms of the sites themselves, but also how those sites are juxtaposed with their surroundings. And, you know, I will say too, it was really important to be there in these spaces. You know, one could imagine doing this project on Google Earth and street view and moving around in that way. And just, you know, there's so many things that actually occupying a space. It can be talking to people, of course, but even just visually and spatially, what you what you are able to know and realize from being there, is really important.

John Plotz

I totally get that. And that maybe goes back to the place in space distinction too, because the things that just make it a place in that sense, like distinctive carved out. Can I just put another ring of like the I really like your non reckoning point, but in terms of larger non reckoning one number you cite is that the Southern Poverty Law Center says there are probably around 900 such statues or monuments, out of which there's 113 that you think some action has been taken. So how do you contextualize that? So there's the 10 or 20% within the 113 and then there's the 113 within the 900?

David Cunningham

Yeah. So, I mean, it's important to know that that denominator, I guess, because, you know, we think of this as a massive reckoning, which it is in a lot of ways, but we're still dealing with, you know, only about 15% of objects were really, kind of truly debated and actualized in this way. So the majority of the Confederate landscape through the South, and not only the South, but predominantly the South, is intact. You know, these objects haven't been moved or shifted in any significant way that number gets much, much smaller when we take seriously the stated motivations and kind of the articulated reasons for moving these things, which I imagined, quite naively, as it turned out, that the bulk of these were through an actual reckoning, through a willingness to articulate that it is wrong to have these objects in these spaces, and if you're interested in justice and equity and these things, they shouldn't be there. And it turns out that fewer than 10% of these cases did we see those kinds of articulations. There's a lot of talk around public safety. There's a lot of talk about preserving these objects so they don't get damaged. And so this idea, I mean, we over- I guess I should say we overestimate the proportion of places that really have a fully fleshed out kind of racial-justice arc to them, because

so many of the places we know of in that way were really prominent. You know, they were in the news for a long time. They're places that people point to. But a lot of the other sites, the bulk of them, really were much more mundanely stated and much less a reckoning than kind of a pragmatic "you know, we need to address this somehow" kind of process,

John Plotz

I see. So there's kind of like a, there's a notoriety distortion effect, or something that causes things to be to loom larger because of the action?

David Cunningham

Yeah, I mean some larger, you know, prominent places like Richmond or Charlottesville, like places that have really been in the media attention are just discussed so much more than a lot of these places, which are in, like small towns, relatively rural places.

John Plotz

So Dave, can you fit that in with another thing you say, which is you emphasize that a lot of times these monuments are in (you had a couple of really nice phrases); you talk about "crown jewel city parks", and you also talk about them being "touchstone objects"? How do you think about the question of their existing prominence versus their being brought to prominence?

David Cunningham

It's really important to understand first that almost all of these objects were intentionally placed at a particular period. So the bulk of them were placed in the early 20th century, the first couple of decades, very few of these were placed in a decade or two after the Civil War. So there's a big lag.

John Plotz

It's so striking to me, all those 1890s monuments, when you go to Gettysburg, they're, you know, the glorious lost cause. And you know, the high-water mark of the Confederacy circa 1901, you know, like, that's the moment that people started marking it that way.

David Cunningham

You have to see these objects as of a piece of the solidification of Jim Crow and legalized segregation in the South and the United Daughters of the Confederacy really led a movement where they fundraised and they raised money, and they had

hundreds of these statues played. And this really was a movement. When we think of The Lost Cause as a movement, it was to try to recast the Civil War as this, like doomed but heroic struggle. And you know, not about enslavement, but about autonomy and states rights and people fighting for liberty and not to have the will of the federal government imposed upon them and all. So this is a recasting of the motivations of the Civil War, and these objects, did that work.

John Plotz

That's, I won't say that's ancient history, but that's important early history. And like Jim Crow, you said, like the new racial politics of America that has to form in a post slavery society. But you also make an argument about the 1960s too, about the Civil Rights era as an important time when people started building these monuments.

David Cunningham

So similarly, when you see a lot of struggle over will the center hold in terms of Jim Crow, et cetera, and as we see civil rights advances, you see both another wave of these kinds of monuments come into existence, but also existing monuments sometimes move here to make a point. So, a statue of Robert E Lee that's on a street corner gets moved to the brand new high school in Montgomery, Alabama, which is called Robert E Lee High School, a year after the Brown v Board of Education case goes through. And so this is a defiant move to name, kind of the crown jewel, brand new high school, state of the art high school, after Robert E Lee, and then to bring the statue to that space. And you can see the 50s and 60s as another place where this kind of contentious history is worked out in part through these kinds of objects.

John Plotz

The mobility of the objects seems so crucial to me, because part of what seems to work in favor of monuments. And this is a point John Guillory makes, is their seeming solidity, you know, like you're stuck with them. The Washington Monument, we are stuck with the Jefferson: you and I once had this argument about what it would mean to carve a letter S on the Jefferson Memorial to mark that he owned slaves. But, you know, we seem kind of stuck with them. But your point is no actually, often they're repositioned so as to be at the center of attention.

David Cunningham

Yeah. I mean, these are really mobile objects. Many of these objects have been in two or three or four places over the decades, and so this idea of like, we can't erase history, yeah, because this object has always been there in this way.

John Plotz

So wait a second, David, I hear what you're saying, and I'm not accusing you of arguing two different things, but you were arguing that expungement causes the thing to just go away, but you're also arguing that repositioning is part of a long history whereby these folks or these monumentalized. folks remained at the center of debate. I assume we're talking about like, Bedford Forrest or somebody like, like, Civil War generals stand for the Klan, or, yeah,

David Cunningham

I mean, that kind of, you know, potential contradiction is, you know, also rooted in the duality of objects and sites. So we, you know, we can see them of a piece like that object is occupying that site, but that object may have occupied other sites as well, may yet occupy different sites in the future. And so the place has meaning that kind of inheres in it through the current or past presence of that object, right? And then the object gains different meaning if it moves as well, as we see with Robert E Lee, yeah, so

John Plotz

Maybe you could talk about the Robert E Lee example. But if you, if you can it, we couldn't think about that in the larger argument that you're making about these new private locations where monuments arrive, partly as being like an anti government space, you know, like, we can't trust the government to do this anymore, so private property has to step in.

David Cunningham

Yeah. I mean, that's one of the things that I was quite surprised by, by visiting a lot of these places, is that is kind of a shadow counter movement that's going on, too, is trying to gain control of these objects if they leave public space. And so, you know, many of these objects are put in storage, but depending on what state you're in, you can actually people can bid on some of these. When I say bid, they're usually not spending money, but they can place a claim on it. And that's played out really interestingly, anything from an individual farm owner, let's say, claiming a single object and then carving a large space out of a cornfield to place that object in the center of it, to these kinds of private parks that are really being built up, often very well funded parks, to collect multiple objects and with this kind of anti-government

orientation that you're describing, which is, you know, we can't trust the government to always be shepherds and stewards of these objects. And this is even true right now. There's this recognition that, yes, Donald Trump is president now and seems to be promoting and is actively trying to re install some of these objects renamed, is not always going to be President..... So the only way you can perpetually ensure that these objects are cared for are to move them into these private spaces. This is kind of the rhetoric of that movement in North Carolina. There's a place called Valor Memorial Park in a small town called Denton that has done this in Texas. There is the owner of a large ranch that has become kind of a retreat for military veterans who struggle with PTSD and other kinds of things. It's designed to be a reflective space for them. That person has tried to create, tried to gather many of the removed statues in Texas and move it to the ranch space. In Bentonville, Arkansas, the birthplace of Walmart, the single Confederate monument that used to be in the town square is now moved about a half mile away to a brand new, very fancy park that, in theory, is about the Civil War, and it has it talks a lot about both the Union and the Confederacy, but the centerpiece of that park is the statue of a Confederate soldier that they now claim is a statue of a very particular person named John Berry, who was a confederate Officer but also then became governor of Arkansas.

John Plotz
That element of creative rebranding is fascinating.

David Cunningham
I mean, and this is what's happened with a bunch of our military bases now as well, right? They brought back Fort Bragg in these places, but they claimed it wasn't the same. It was a private Bragg

John Plotz
It is so "1984" I mean, it really is amazing.

David Cunningham
One thing we could say this is the Monuments exhibit that's currently in Los Angeles. It's amazing. It's in two institutions, the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Brick. I believe it's up till May. It's really amazing. And the Kara Walker piece will be up in perpetuity, because the Brick has purchased it for the permanent collection. that's called "Unmanned Drone." And what that is a disassembling and a reassembling of a Stonewall Jackson statue, where Kara Walker was able to work with the statue and manipulate the statue. And there are several parts of the exhibit

at MOCA and the brick that do this. Bethany Collins has taken the base of one of the Charlottesville statues and has carved rose petals out of it, like in the same like marble, and scattered them like, kind of spreading out from the base. It's really amazing. But the ability to manipulate these objects is, is not a frequent one or a common one, and it took years for the curators at MOCA and the Brick to be able to both collect some of these objects for the exhibit, but also collect them in a way where they could be manipulated by artists and responded to by artists.

John Plotz

You've just only began to scratch the surface of your 113 and I still want those anecdotes about your encounters, but if I could just frame it a tiny bit more, I think you're somewhat skeptical of an amplification that basically replaces the pantheon of Confederate heroes with other heroes. As you know, I'm obsessed with the Shaw memorial in Boston, which memorializes the African American Union soldiers who died in the Civil War. So I want a vision of like, what it means to have positive heroes, not victims of lynching as are memorialized in that wonderful new Alabama Museum, people who also belong to that ground and chart out an alternative genealogy where you could, let's not revere the people who used to be on the statues, let's have other statues. I think you're somewhat skeptical of that, and I'd love to hear you talk more about your sense of the complication of that, notion of replacing, like, bad statue set A with possibly good statue set B,

David Cunningham

I think there are two versions of it, and I might be more skeptical of one than the other. There, there are, there's one where there actually aren't a lot of examples of this happening. But there are people who clearly call for a repositioning through a new juxtaposition, which is, we're not going to remove the statue, but we're going to place basically a counter-object near it.

John Plotz

Oooh, *counter-object*, okay,

David Cunningham

Something that would that would really kind of shift how we can view that original object. I find that idea really interesting, and I find some of the more organic kind of counter placements really effective. I feel like the institutionalized versions of that often get read by publics who aren't necessarily like deeply reading the history of why this was placed here, etc, as kind of a "both sides" narrative where, yeah, you know, we see the Confederate figure and then we see another figure that

runs counter to that, and it's like, okay, well, now we're sort of acknowledging relatively equally, different sides of a story. There are two cases, though, in the south that where an object has been removed and replaced by a counter figure, and the first one is fairly well known. It's in Decatur, Georgia, right outside of Atlanta. And a Confederate obelisk was removed in front of the old courthouse in Decatur, and there is now a double life size statue of John Lewis there, the civil rights hero and Congressman, longtime congressman from Georgia. And that actually was really interesting to see, because I spent quite a bit of time just observing that site. More than any other object that I observed during all these travels, people were constantly going up to that statue, taking pictures, but also just spending time with it, like reading all of the material. There's a plaque, but then also a long inscription, talking to each other about it. It was really interesting to see how that's become, like a really engaged space now. There's another version in of this phenomenon in Roanoke, Virginia, where a statue of Robert E Lee was removed and it was replaced by a statue of Henrietta Lacks. So, Henrietta Lacks is known for her quote, unquote, immortal genes. Her genetic material was taken without her consent, yeah, by doctors and have lived on and continue to live on, and they've been the source of many medical breakthroughs since. So Henrietta Lacks is being honored in this space where Robert E Lee had stood. Yeah, so it's literally at the same plinth.

John Plotz

Maybe can I use a phrase that I think is yours, It's from one of your articles, the notion of mnemonic dramas. It's such a wonderful phrase: We're fighting memory wars here. And that your example of the the soldier who gets repositioned, and then you claim him as like a past governor of the state. These are, on the one hand, we're fighting about the past, and we all know, like antiquarian fights. You know, they can be kind of fossilized, you know, in a country where most people don't really remember what happened in the 19th century, but... new debates, new dramas, and I feel like that's especially poignant right now in the era of you were documenting what happened under Biden and what's happening under Trump's Administration must be different in kind, in some ways, because, you know, the new mnemonic drama of having a president who clearly wants to abolish Juneteenth as a national holiday, for example,

David Cunningham

I mean the interaction of that and what protest and challenges to these spaces look like now, you know, meaning the decline of that wave of the movement is really, really shifted a lot. I mean, there's, you know, we've seen on federal land already, multiple cases where statues are being reinstalled. The latest one is a

Christopher Columbus statue, so not Confederate, but in the same contested vein, has been reinstalled in the White House grounds. It's a replica in part of the statue that was thrown in the harbor in Baltimore. So now the new version of that it's, which is referred to on its plinth as "resurrected" this year, has just been reinstalled. But you get these kind of quiet struggles. You know, a small town like Silva, North Carolina, and they have a statue that they decided not to remove, a Confederate statue that they decided not to remove, but instead to place plaques over the Confederate battle flag and the part that says to our Confederate heroes with other, in theory, more inclusive language. So over the Confederate heroes part, it said E Pluribus Unum, and so they replaced particular images. And that occurred through sort of a battle between the local city council and the county council there, and I'm going to lose track of who controlled what, but there were kind of competing sides on this. And after Trump was elected, one of the things that happened is that, under the cover of darkness, whichever of those bodies that I just mentioned was opposed to this actually had the blacks pried off, but they didn't announce it to anyone. So the initial media coverage thought it was like a vandalism type thing or a theft of these objects, right? So there was no public discussion at all. And you know, there's clearly a sense that in this current climate like you can do things like that and not really meet scrutiny or as much controversy as certainly one would have several years ago.

John Plotz

So there's this concept that in the literature side we're really fond of. I bet sociologists are not so into it. But Nietzsche has this notion of "creative forgetting." There's this Ishiguro novel called I can't remember. It's called the buried giant, or the sleeping giant. I think it's the buried giant in which the idea is that there's this giant under the land. And if people remember that he's there, they're going to reawaken him, and then he's going to come and, you know, like, basically destroy the land. But it's better to just forget that he's there. I mean, of course, you have bad dreams, but you're better off. So is there a case for creative forgetting here? Like, is, it's like, I mean, you've shown us so many ways in which monumentality twists and turns us back to heated debates. Maybe they existed already, but maybe they didn't. Maybe if we creatively forgot, we wouldn't have these, we wouldn't even have the steps into fight underneath. Yeah,

David Cunningham

I might fall back like, as that bangs into, you know, some of the social science work that I mentioned at the outset. Yeah, you know, what the stakes of these kinds of debates and contestations are? Because we often just talk about these as symbolic

and, you know, maybe they indicate other political dynamics, but they sort of remain in the symbolic realm. And, you know, again, the research tradition that really demonstrates that that there is a legacy of past racial injustice and past racial violence that continues today, reproduces inequalities that we see today. The other side of that literature is actually one of the more kind of inspiring and optimistic set of findings that I've seen in social sciences, which is that even relatively small interventions that can interrupt the continuity of those histories actually make a difference. Like you can see it actually have effects in places, in terms of inequality over time, to a degree that is easy to be skeptical about, because, you know, there can be large interventions, but even these relatively modest things are really seen....

John Plotz

What's a great example of such an intervention?

David Cunningham

I mean, some of them are going to be in the South that are significant, like districts that actually meaningfully desegregated their schools in a relatively timely way, versus those that didn't. But at the more micro level, you know, you see things like initiatives run in communities that sort of recognize and honor particular occurrences, etc, are found to be valuable as well. And monuments tend to matter. So I mean the placement of monuments that recognize different sorts of histories, willingness to kind of address these commemorative landscapes when they're problematic are going to matter, and so the idea of creative forgetting also may. You can correct me, if I'm not interpreting the depth of the concept in the way I should, but could preclude this ability to kind of have this affirmative or active sense of reckoning, which is where the effect comes in?

John Plotz

It seems like it's related to another concept you talk about a lot in ways that I found really interesting, which is the notion of producing creative cognitive dissonance, like dissonance kind of as a good thing, like a sense of a disconnect.

David Cunningham

Dr King would always talk about creative tension. And I think, yeah, it's a real similar thing. And, you know, like something I would love to do and, maybe the next time we talk, I'll actually have done this. But is really a study, because one of the areas in which one can see these effects occurring, these legacy effects, are political polarization and kind of voting behavior. And I think it'll be, it would be really interesting to see if the communities where these objects have been removed, yeah,

actually have shifted internally, like their voting behavior between 2016 2020 and 2024, yeah. And so, you know, to see if it has that effect relative to other places.

John Plotz

I love your optimism. David. To me, I read the articles: they introduce an EV electric battery factory in Georgia, in suburban Atlanta and then people vote more Republican, you know, at a place where they are employed at the battery factory. So in other words, like you make an intervention towards a common good, and it produced the opposite effect.

David Cunningham

Yeah well, it certainly could become a backlash story. You know, it could be the very opposite. I mean, either one would be important to uncover, yeah, yeah. Because I do think the predominant affect in many of these places, if you visit these sites, is one of resentment. You know, there are a lot of places, I think, that for the kind of pragmatic reasons that we mentioned earlier, people remove statues or place them in different, more protected spaces. You know, there was a sense that there that they kind of jumped the gun on this, you know, they really thought they were in acute danger of the protest, quote, unquote mob, you know, sort of showing up there next.

John Plotz

Maybe we could touch on a moment that's very topical right now when we're recording this at the end of March, and I would imagine will still be a topic of conversation when it airs, which is the revelations about Chavez, his Cesar Chavez, and who, of course, it, has a lot of monuments associated with him. He has days named after him. There's a national monument that President Obama named, I believe, in 2012 maybe. Yeah, any thoughts about what, whether there's going to be a lightning fast reckoning around him as well?

David Cunningham

Yeah. I mean, you know, as you say, as we're talking this is a story that's only a couple of weeks old in terms of arc, where there are these disclosures of Chavez's behavior that are seen as certainly not befitting monumental status. Already, Cal State University of Fresno has removed a Chavez statue from their campus, it looks somewhat likely that the National Park Service will strip the National Monument status that you mentioned from the prior headquarters, you know, that people refer to as La Paz,

John Plotz
which is the site of the alleged crimes that he said to have committed...

David Cunningham
It'll be interesting. I I've been trying to think of this as juxtaposed with to some degree prior, but certainly in a more pitched way, potential future battles around Dr King's legacy. Because clearly, you know, one of the things that the Trump administration has been doing, to a degree that hasn't happened prior, is release many more documents associated with the investigation into, Dr King's assassination. And that includes things about personal indiscretions and things where we know that the FBI was illegally surveilling King and wiretapping spaces and things like this, and capturing very kind of private

John Plotz
Oh Jesus christ, so obtained illegally, but damning of him nonetheless, or potentially damning of him...

David Cunningham
yeah, and also filtered through the lens of FBI agents who are writing demos about it and things like this. And so we're getting their gaze on this and their interpretation of what they're seeing and what it means. And so, you know, there are lots of layers to this, but you know, the thing about Dr King that's really interesting. And there's a great book about this by a sociologist at USC named Hajar yesdiha, called the Struggle for the People's King. And one of the things about Dr King is that he is invoked and kind of repurposed in such a broad range of ways, including on the Right, where he's invoked quite frequently as a particular kind of symbol and heroic in a particular way that might not match what people on the left would say, but nonetheless, is used effectively in that way. And so Dr King seems like someone whose valence is really fluid and modular and things like this. It'll be interesting to see how that proceeds, because it does seem like maintaining his legacy as an American hero actually serves lots of different constituencies in different ways. And so one could imagine these materials getting released, and there isn't a high level of motivation in any area of the political spectrum to use that to, like, strip away the status.

John Plotz
That's really interesting. And, you know, this really sharpens, in a way we should have begun with this, because it's like there is this polyvalent quality to our usual monument monumental subjects, right? And of course, your example of the

Confederate soldier who later became a governor, is an example of that polyvalence. But Confederate generals, even Robert E Lee, it's like a hard stretch to see them occupying a polyvalent center.

David Cunningham

And one might see Chavez as like an inverse version of that, yeah, way that Chavez is not across the political spectrum, invoked in heroic or monumental ways. And so one imagines that this is something that, you know, opportunistically or not, will be pretty sharply moved upon.

John Plotz

That's a great point, and that this is, there's so much more to get to here. I started by mentioning the Berlin Wall. And of course, we could think about the Nazi era death camps, too. Those are very different from monuments. I mean, monuments are built as sites of reverence, whereas, obviously, the Berlin Wall was built essentially to create a prison. And the death camps similarly, like they are real spaces where horrible things happened.

David Cunningham

And along those lines, it seems really important to distinguish between objects of history and historical objects. The Berlin Wall, these are objects of history, like, history occurred. There those, yes, like, literally associated with these historical acts and these statues that we're talking about the Confederacy, are historical objects, meaning the history they're illuminating, are basically the the UDC movement to lionize the Confederacy. They're not really about the Confederacy itself. They're about this Lost Cause movement that fashioned the statues right. So they're historical because they, in theory, illuminate that even though they're designed to do the opposite.

John Plotz

You and I took a tour in Belfast, where one of the high points of the tour was where we saw the bullet holes that had torn through walls where the British had stormed from a Protestant into a Catholic neighborhood at a particular bloody night '68 or something. What's the indexicality of that? Is that an object of history? Or do you see what I mean like? And they've been kind of framed, they've been turned into historical evidence, but they were bullet holes for all that.

David Cunningham

That's a really interesting case. I might think of it personally as closer to the Berlin Wall side, meaning that it can be repurposed in different ways by particular people who are trying to present a particular narrative, but the object itself. I mean, it's undeniable that these historical events occurred there, and we can learn about those events, these statues are like a degree separated from that. They're trying to represent a history that goes further back, as if that object is the history. But it's, it really is telling us more about, like, who made the statue and why than it is about anything totally with the actual Civil War.

John Plotz

Yeah, it's so funny. It's like when I think about my experiences going through the south and visiting the landscapes are so shaped for me by this crucial walk that my son and I did. We only walked for like two miles, but we retraced the Trail of Tears at a point in Tennessee where people had gone south to avoid being on the toll road, and just the fact that that was like the index of where people had walked made all the difference. But I really see your point about these objects of history, like the things that people consciously craft in order to memorialize.

David Cunningham

Well, the most visceral instance of that is related to that Jefferson Davis statue that you mentioned earlier, which was for decades, was on Monument Avenue in Richmond. Right. Sounds one of the Confederate statues that is in this heavily trafficked area of Richmond. That statue was designed and crafted by a sculptor in Richmond. The sculptor's studio, and property is now a local history museum in Richmond, and that museum claimed the statue after it was taken down in Monument Avenue. Now that statue was pulled down forcibly so it had paint splattered all over it. All the activists had like, you know, pulled parts of it off and all these things. That museum did kind of an amazing thing. I think, where they created a display in the museum of that statue, and they presented it prone, so it's lying on its back as it was pulled down. And they have restored the object to preserve what they refer to as its 2020 state. There was a toilet paper noose that was placed around Davis's and they preserve it laminated so it's not going to dissolve.

John Plotz

Yeah, that's such a great note to make our final turn on. David, so the moment we end up with its recallable book, meaning like a book or a moment from a book that you think is pertinent. If people enjoyed this conversation, here's where they could go next.

David Cunningham

I love this aspect of all of your episodes here, and I've been thinking about, what I've been most interested in are the kinds of instances where books tell us things about these monuments and the history associated with these monuments without being about them. I mean, there's, there are several great books about Confederate monuments that people talk about all the time, and I would advocate for those as well. But one book that I really love in this kind of broader way is a book by two I believe, journalists, Blaine Roberts and Ethan kernel. It's called "Denmark Vecsey's Garden slavery and memory in the cradle of the Confederacy." What it really centers on is what they refer to as Charleston's. This is a quote, "elaborate architecture of racial control." Now that architecture is literal in some cases, but is also symbolic in a variety of ways, and monuments are part of that. But what it does is it kind of situates monuments amidst this much broader architecture and the story that it creates about, you know, race and memory in a place like Charleston.

John Plotz

That's great, David, and since we're really nerdy on this podcast, I'm going to get your deep list as well of the books about monuments that you admire. We'll put those up on the show notes for sure. Well, I'm going to just quickly say that John Guillory article that I mentioned is actually from his recent book "Professing criticism," and the proper title of it is "monuments and documents on the object of study in the humanities." And I actually think it's very pertinent to what we discussed.

And I'm also going to say, apropos of creative forgetting, I just want to read like the opening lines of Zora Neale Hurston's wonderful "Their Eyes Were Watching God," in which she proposes that there's basically two ways of seeing the world. She says, men and women. I actually don't think the gender designation is so important. I think she's just talking about two different ways of seeing the world. And this is what she says. She says," ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some, they come in with the with the tide. For others, they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing, until the watcher turns his eyes away in resignation". So that's type one, and then type two is "now women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly". So that's Hurston's version of the power of yearning and looking and remembering, versus the power of acting accordingly onto what you want to remember. So I love that way of divvying up the world; seems worth thinking about.

David Cunningham

That's such a great distillation of a number of the themes that we've been talking about here. So I appreciate you ending on that note.

John Plotz

Yeah, well, thank God Hurston's book got rediscovered and Alice Walker brought it back to the world. But I mean, you know, we should all read that book and reread it. It's unbelievable. But thank you so much, David once again, for your time and for your generosity. And then I'm just going to thank all of our listeners as well. So from all of us here to all of you, thanks.