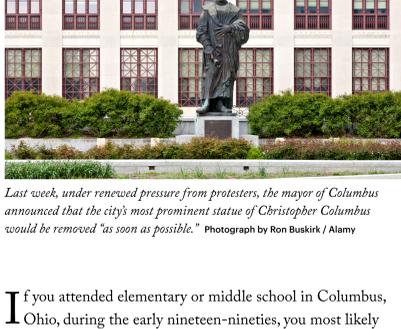




DISPATCH

THE VANISHING MONUMENTS OF COLUMBUS, OHIO

By Hanif Abdurraqib
June 24, 2020



Last week, under renewed pressure from protesters, the mayor of Columbus announced that the city's most prominent statue of Christopher Columbus would be removed "as soon as possible." Photograph by Ron Buskirk / Alamy

If you attended elementary or middle school in Columbus, Ohio, during the early nineteen-nineties, you most likely took a field trip downtown, to the banks of the Scioto River, to visit the Santa Maria Museum. Docked just offshore, it was a full-size replica of Christopher Columbus's flagship, unveiled in 1992 to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's first voyage across the Atlantic, in 1492. My parents—who wrestled to serve as a barrier between their children and the sanitization of the country's history, however impossible the task—never signed the permission slip for me to go on the trip. On the designated day of the fifth grade, I stayed behind, in a dimly lit classroom, thumbing through highlighted literature that my father had given me to read. There were people in the city who believed the ship to be a marvel, something beautiful enough to obscure the history of the place where it rested, or the blood that was shed in the name of conquest. On the day that the Santa Maria was officially dedicated, a large crowd gathered along the river to celebrate. In the street by a nearby park, more than a hundred people protested. From the ship's deck, a visitor could look up toward the mouth of the Scioto, to an area that was once known as Salt-Lick Town, where, in 1774, soldiers from Virginia opened fire on a village of indigenous men, women, and children, killing ninety-six people. There were no memorials for this chapter of our history. Just the replica of the boat, casting a long shadow.

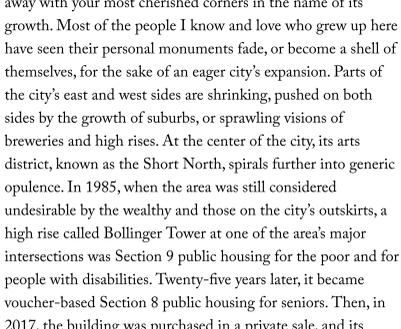
We are at the doorstep of an era in which the once impossible is becoming newly possible. The Santa Maria replica was pulled from the Scioto River in the early twenty-tens—not because of what it represented, or because of the people who'd spent the previous decades calling for its removal, but to make room for renovations along the river. Other monuments to Christopher Columbus remain woven into the fabric of the city named in his honor. The most prominent of three statues, a twenty-two-foot, three-ton likeness cast in bronze, was sent, in 1955, by the citizens of Genoa, Italy, and has towered outside of City Hall ever since. In August of 2017, in the wake of the violent white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, as monuments to Confederate leaders began to be taken down elsewhere in the country, protesters in Columbus gathered outside of City Hall to demand the statue's removal. The city's mayor, Andrew Ginther, responded by stating that such protests were distracting from the "real problem," which was the racial divide in America. The removal of a statue wouldn't address that problem, Ginther decided then. Three years later, in the midst of renewed calls for monuments across the country to fall, his tune has changed. Last week, Columbus State Community College announced that it would remove a Columbus statue that has stood on its campus since 1988. Two days later, Ginther announced that the City Hall statue would be removed "as soon as possible."

I have lived in Columbus for most of my life, and hope to be here for whatever uncertain time I have left. Sometimes a place is a thing that happens to you, or the result of a series of happenings. My people's people moved until they chose to stop moving. My father, who was raised in New Jersey and New York, travelled to Providence, Rhode Island, in the early eighties for a job interview. When that job didn't come through, he packed our family into a car and drove to Columbus, where work was more plentiful. I love Columbus, though to love any place has always seemed to me to involve a series of calculated choices, ones that must be continually weighed and measured. And, as in any other relationship, one must be prepared to reckon with the possibility of withdrawing one's affections if the math stops adding up.

For most of my adult years in Columbus, I have been thinking about the way monuments can vanish. For the kids in my east-side neighborhood, downtown was a distant planet, only a few miles and an entire universe away from where we kicked broken glass off of basketball courts or climbed atop the roofs of neglected school buildings. I grew to love the monuments of my neighborhood, while also coming to understand that they could disappear, without warning, at any moment. At the start of spring, for instance, the basketball hoops at Scottwood Elementary School would be adorned with fresh, white nets, attempting to lure players back to the park as the temperatures rose. Whoever put them up knew how shooters craved the rewarding slurp of a ball spinning through a net. Then, one spring, the nets didn't appear. The rims twisted away from one another and never turned back. In my early twenties, I worked at a dollar store a short walk from my father's house. It was in the same plaza as the Super Duper market, whose sign was topped by a massive, smiling elephant. I'd stared up at it from the back seats of cars as a kid; it was a reminder that I was returning to my neighborhood, where my people were. The lights illuminating the letters of the Super Duper sign never all worked at once, making it read "S ER DUP," or some variation. The red lights would flicker at night, briefly pulling the curtain of darkness away from the elephant—until the store closed and became something else, and then something else, and then the elephant was gone.

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It feels foolish to believe in any place, knowing that it might do away with your most cherished corners in the name of its growth. Most of the people I know and love who grew up here have seen their personal monuments fade, or become a shell of themselves, for the sake of an eager city's expansion. Parts of the city's east and west sides are shrinking, pushed on both sides by the growth of suburbs, or sprawling visions of breweries and high rises. At the center of the city, its arts district, known as the Short North, spirals further into generic opulence. In 1985, when the area was still considered undesirable by the wealthy and those on the city's outskirts, a high rise called Bollinger Tower at one of the area's major intersections was Section 9 public housing for the poor and for people with disabilities. Twenty-five years later, it became voucher-based Section 8 public housing for seniors. Then, in 2017, the building was purchased in a private sale, and its hundred residents were relocated haphazardly. Some moved to alternative public housing nearby; others, thrown out of the building they called home, ended up far from an adequate bus line or grocery store. The trappings of the old Short North have all given way. The Bollinger Tower building is going to become a luxury hotel. The center where I used to donate plasma for quick cash when there were no checks on the horizon is now a bar, or a restaurant, or a shop of some kind. At a certain point, one remapping blurs into the next until an area becomes gray, a border between your present and past selves.

But, of course, it bears mentioning that my presence in the city of Columbus is part of its own long process of reformatting the landscape. Just as the mouth of the Scioto River was once home to a village before a massacre, the basketball courts where I learned to shoot were built upon land that was once home to another people. In Central Ohio, our land acknowledgements give praise to the Shawnee, Miami, Lenape, and Wyandotte peoples as those who lived on and cared for this stretch of earth. Much of our living is an act of painting over an existence before ours, though my complicity in that story doesn't quiet the ache I feel at seeing the city spaces I grew up in become unfamiliar; at seeing the police who once hovered over these neighborhoods move out of them and find new people at the margins to hover over; at seeing the machinery of power in the city hum along, unaware of who it is leaving behind.

Toppling a statue is a symbolic act, but it comes after years of concrete work and pressure. There were the people who took to the streets, in 1992, to say, No, this boat cannot sit here, and the people in the years after who stood at the feet of Christopher Columbus and said, No, this statue cannot sit here—the people who told the present and past mayors that there is a debt for the history that the city still chooses to revel in. In recent weeks, people have once again taken to the streets in Columbus and across the country. There is a bigger picture propelling them, but even the smaller fights serve as a bridge to something larger. After the City Hall statue is taken down and tucked away, some of those same people will be right back, tapping their fingers on the city's flag and seal, which bear the image of the Santa Maria. They'll be taking aim at the city's third and oldest Columbus statue, which stands at the statehouse, and writing letters to the mayor demanding to change the city's name—which now, in this era of new possibilities, seems not out of the question. Among these people are those who have seen their small sanctuaries in the city get swept away—the people who lost the buildings that they grew up in, or the restaurants where their folks worked when they were starting from nothing. A city cannot consistently transform itself at the expense of its most marginalized citizens and not expect those citizens to have a vast imagination about what a further transformation—whether of statues, a name, or leadership—could be.

The work of the people is what endures. It's unromantic work, done in small increments, sometimes just as a more precious whatever future movements might arise, and it's more precise than any bronzed monument or seal or city name. The work of the students who will not rest until the cops leave their schools. Of the medics who guide people under the shade of a tree and flush the tear gas out of their eyes. Of the people who sew masks, or make bags of supplies and bike them across the city through police barricades. Of the people who carry bags of ice so that the water barricades cold. Of the black people who sacrifice their own safety to keep their people safe. Of the people who show up to courthouses, and in front of police stations, and in the suburbs. Of the mothers who grieve for their dead children and who, despite their grief, continue to fight for the living. The new monuments the people are building toward cannot yet be seen. And still, here we are, leaping forward.

Hanif Abdurraqib is a writer from the east side of Columbus, Ohio. His most recent book is "A Little Deceit in America."

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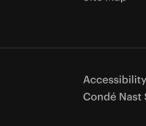
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