

***No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice***

By Karen L. Cox

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A Book Review by

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On January 6, 2021, Kevin Seefried of Laurel, Delaware stormed the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. Beside him were thousands of other white rioters who all held the mistaken belief that the presidential election had been “stolen” from Donald Trump. Seefried was immortalized when someone snapped a photo of him proudly brandishing a large Confederate battle flag—the symbol of the Southern army that had fought to retain slavery—in the Rotunda of the Capitol Building. The photograph was rapidly shared around the world as a visual index of just how intensified American political divides had become, and it allowed authorities to identify Seefried, who was arrested a mere eight days later.

How are we to understand the historical importance of this striking image? A 2021 book by Karen L. Cox titled *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice* is an excellent place to start. Cox argues that Confederate symbols and their cultural attendants—the “Lost Cause” rebranding of the Civil War, the racist justifications for segregation, and the violent pushback against social justice movements—stand as “flashpoints in the crusade for white supremacy” and “the struggle for civil rights” (8). As Cox convincingly lays out, Confederate monuments, which have recently come into sharp focus in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests and prominent removal debates, have never been neutral markers of a great and shared American past.

Cox advances two key claims in this illuminating book: first, that these statues, often depicting celebrated generals such as Robert E. Lee, have always carried with them a white supremacist message that was explicit when they were installed; and second, that African Americans have always been aware of this ideological function and have protested their existence from the start. In doing so, Cox reframes current debates over the memorialization of American history by reminding readers that what we are currently witnessing is just the latest in a long representational battle that has been waged in stone since 1865.

The book traces the history of community-based Confederate statues (as opposed to those erected on battlefields) from the end of the Civil War to the present, employing a methodology that moves effortlessly between examinations of expansive historical events and contracted individual accounts. At times the book gets a bit bogged down in its own minutia, but given the contemporary relevance of the political terrain she navigates, it is understandable that Cox errs on the side of more detail rather than less. Her oscillation between macro- and micro-level histories allows her to sharply analyze these memorials from multiple viewpoints, combining first-hand oral

accounts, archival newspaper articles, magazine advertisements, and original photographs. *No Common Ground* provides a fulsome investigation of the cultural work these objects were historically intended to do—work that has consistently been met by an equal force of resistance from Black activists.

The book begins with a searing indictment of the United Daughters of the Confederacy: a still-active and politically powerful white women’s organization. The UDC has systematically buttressed the Lost Cause narrative by organizing the installation of Confederate monuments, fueling white supremacist fantasies of an idyllic antebellum past. The history Cox engages includes moments that will be familiar for most readers, such as the horrific murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till that galvanized the Civil Rights movement. Till’s murderers were acquitted by an all-white jury at the Tallahatchie Courthouse in Sumner, Mississippi in September 1955, deep in the heart of a still-segregated South.

As Cox explains, observers eager to hear the verdict spilled outside of the crowded courthouse that day, and white onlookers avoided the midday sun by gathering under the shade of the courthouse trees. Black observers, however, were left to find the only other available respite beneath the long shadow of a tall monument depicting a Confederate soldier, installed by the UDC in 1913 and inscribed with the words “by the low tents of the deathless dead they lift the cause that never yet has failed.” Cox includes an archival photograph of this scene to underscore the fact that these statues have for generations stood silently in the background of key moments in the struggle for racial justice.

It is in these elegant moves that Cox’s book is at its most powerful. She achieves an impressively nuanced historical account that manages to critique white supremacy along both its symbolic and material axes. For instance, she invokes Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens’ virulently racist 1861 “Cornerstone Speech” at the beginning of the book, which subtly inflects her subsequent discussion of monument cornerstones—often installed first to spur fundraising efforts to complete Confederate memorials in the South. In this way, *No Common Ground* repeatedly encourages its readers to critically interrogate the important connections between the architectural and ideological manifestations of how America chooses to represent itself to its own citizens.

The book’s most important intervention, however, might be the archival accounts of Black resistance to Confederate memorials stretching back to Reconstruction. This is the less well-known side of the story of these statues, and it presses against the dominant narratives that have kept them standing for over 150 years. Frederick Douglass, for example, criticized the “*nauseating* flatteries of the late Robert E. Lee” as far back as 1870 (60), and Mamie Garvin Fields, a Black woman born in Charleston, South Carolina in 1888, said about the city’s John C. Calhoun monument, “Blacks took that statue personally ... . We used to carry something with us, if we knew we would be passing that way, in order to deface that statue—scratch up the coat, break the watch chain, try to knock off the nose ... I believe white people were talking to us about Jim Crow through that statue” (61). The book emphasizes that activist interventions were a direct response to the explicitly racist motivations undergirding these monuments, and that all efforts to remove or deface the statues have only ever occurred out of desperation, after legal channels have been exhausted.

Cox ends the book by considering the current climate surrounding Confederate statues, spending some time discussing the image on the book’s cover: the projection of George Floyd’s

face onto the Lee monument in Richmond, Virginia in 2020. As Cox explains, over that summer, “images of Black leaders like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, W.E.B. Du Bois, and John Lewis were projected onto the statue’s pedestal, as were other victims of police violence including Breonna Taylor. For many, it was the historical context that these Confederate icons long deserved” (170). This is an apt characterization, too, of the importance of this book. *No Common Ground* provides a crucial historical corrective to a white supremacist mythology that reared its head again on January 6th as Seefried raised that flag in the Rotunda. Most importantly, though, it reminds us of the long and powerful history of dissent that continues to realize the true spirit of what America could, someday, be.

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### About the Reviewer

**Alyson Brickey** is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Winnipeg, where she teaches and writes about the relationship between American literary aesthetics and contemporary politics. Her recent work can be found in *Journal of Modern Literature* and *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*. She is currently writing a book-length study that reads representations of thresholds in American literature from 1892-1991 against the backdrop of American socio-political history.

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