

Smashing Statues: The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments

By Erin L. Thompson

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A Book Review by

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Smashing Statues: The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments is a multilayered review and critique of American monuments written by Erin L. Thompson, a professor of art crime at John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY). Thompson presents readers with complex histories and critical thoughts on the motivations behind the figures that have been honored through monuments. This book promotes the importance of questioning and informing oneself about a monument's power and the narratives it presents to viewers. It encourages conversations about what should be done with these monuments in times of social change, when the narratives they present are no longer relevant or are recognized as harmful to the society in which they stand.

Smashing Statues presents a critical overview of monuments by uncovering the history surrounding their development, creators, funding, underlying purposes, and ideals they present to the viewing public. Thompson covers the inception, maintenance, and fall of monuments in the United States of America over a timeframe spanning from 1776 to 2020. This period includes multiple movements and eras in American history, beginning with revolutionaries' destruction and repurposing of a monument to King George III and ending with protestors dismantling numerous Confederate monuments following the murder of George Floyd by police on May 25, 2020.

Each chapter focuses on the interconnected concepts, history, contributors, and affected groups or individuals behind one or two monuments. Some of the monuments discussed in the text include *Stone Mountain* in Georgia; the *Hannah Duston Memorial* in New Hampshire; *Rescue* in Washington, DC; and the *Soldiers Monument* in Vermont. Thompson, through these meticulously investigated examples, claims that monuments are not about representing and conserving an accurate and valued history in which the majority of American society is included. She argues that monuments instead are solely about who is being honored, in what way, and why.

She describes some of the motivations behind these statues, which include White supremacy, union suppression, deterrence of BIPOC voters and leaders, the rewriting of Confederate history, and an artist's financial debt. Amidst her recounting of the history of these monuments, Thompson addresses the question of what should be done with these monuments when a portion of society rejects them and considers some of the solutions that have been offered in recent years. Thompson acknowledges why the inclusion of additional signage on monuments may not adequately influence messaging. She addresses the narrative and conservation issues in placing statues in museums and discusses the political and legal consequences of destroying a monument without permission from the local government.

This book stresses the importance of critical thinking and engagement in these discussions by academics, politicians, visitors, and citizens. The overarching goal is to demonstrate the need for conversations surrounding monuments and question why society chooses to honor certain individuals and ideals in this form. Thompson promotes the production of novel solutions to the problem of what should be done with monuments that are no longer deemed relevant. She reminds us that when there is large-scale political and social change, the fall of monuments usually follows.

A particularly interesting portion of the book details the current location and status of a monument called “The Spirit of the Confederacy.” Thompson uses this statue as a case study to provide context to the suggestion usually proposed when a monument needs to come down: why not put it in a museum? Through an interview with John Guess Jr., the CEO of the Houston Museum of African American Culture, Thompson explores the issues with this solution. Thompson demonstrates that putting monuments in a museum is much more complex than one would think, and it does not provide a solution to the problem of representing problematic ideals to the viewing public. This segment is an illuminating example and provides further evidence to support the goal of the book, to renew conversations and encourage readers to create fresh solutions to a problem brought to public attention time and time again.

Smashing Statues: The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments is highly informed, intentional in its critiques, and accessible to both academic and non-academic readers. The content of this book is relevant and brings important considerations of current issues to light. The diverse array of subjects and monuments is this book's greatest strength. The author offers perspectives of multiple communities across time whilst still being a targeted survey of American monuments. A weakness of the book is the limited discussion on monuments that have remained culturally relevant, which may have led to further fruitful discussions about what differs between the culturally relevant monuments and the ones being criticized. Thompson does a skilled job of presenting the history of these monuments, drawing attention to the possible reasons behind the actions of the participants involved in monument creation and destruction. The author gives the reader fascinating case studies of monuments, each with its own complex story of participants and their unique motivations. This style keeps readers invested, allowing for thoughtful engagement with difficult material such as White supremacy, slavery, and the colonization of Indigenous peoples.

Thompson has accomplished no easy task in creating this survey of critical histories surrounding monuments and other forms of American propagandistic art. Through interviews and deep dives into the historical writings of multiple figures, Thompson investigates the complex histories behind each of these public monuments. This book is a necessary text in this period of immense social and political change in North America, where decolonization efforts and thorough questioning of national histories are occurring. This book reminds readers that the perspective of history that is often presented to them is not the only—or even the most accurate—version of what occurred. And it urges us to learn more about the multilayered and complex histories of the nations in which we live as well as to continuously call into question the narratives that are presented to us by monuments and who benefits from the narratives that these statues evoke.

About the Reviewer

Emma De Sousa (Métis/Portuguese) was born and raised in Mohkinstsis, Treaty 7 territory (Calgary, Alberta) and is a citizen of Métis Nation of Alberta Region 3. De Sousa descends from multiple Métis families originating from the Red River region in the communities of St. Laurent, St. Boniface, St. Francois Xavier, and Baie St. Paul. De Sousa holds a BSc in Biological Anthropology from the University of Calgary and is currently a graduate student in Cultural Studies – the Curatorial Practices stream at the University of Winnipeg. Her research and future field of study lies in the representation of Métis and mixed cultural identities in museum and heritage spaces.

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