

Thinking through Monuments

Episode III

Obelisk of Axum

Dating to fourth century, the Obelisk of Axum is a roughly 79-foot-tall stele. Its original purpose was to be a monumental headstone for the royalty of the prosperous Kingdom of Axum in present day Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, and Yemen. In 1937, occupying Italian forces stole the obelisk from Ethiopia as a war trophy for Mussolini and his fascist regime and relocated it to Rome, Italy. The stele was repatriated and reinstalled in Axum, Ethiopia in 2008.

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Don Juan de Oñate

The Spanish conquistador Don Juan de Oñate (1550-1656) was a colonial governor from New Spain (present day Mexico) known for his ruthless and violent treatment of indigenous people. On one infamous occasion, he ordered all able-bodied men from Acoma Pueblo to have a foot cut off. Today, many monuments stand in dedication to Oñate in the American Southwest. In a symbolic protest in 1998, an anonymous person cut off the foot of an equestrian statue of Oñate in Ohkay Owingeh, New Mexico, prompting the people in the region to ask what story of this controversial figure should stand in the forefront.

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Lorraine Motel

Located in Memphis, Tennessee, the Lorraine Motel became a site of tragedy on April 4, 1968, when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on its balcony. Part of the National Civil Rights Museum today, it is reclaimed as a monument to the memory and life of King. The motel exemplifies how an ordinary site can become a monument as a result of a historically significant event.

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Bessie Coleman

Bessie Coleman (1892-1926) was the first African American woman and the first Native American to hold a pilot license. She became well known in her lifetime for her daring and exciting air shows. Coleman passed away at the age of twenty-six in a plane crash. Her contributions to aviation are increasingly recognized and celebrated through attributing her name to roads near airports in the US.

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↗ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/obituaries/bessie-coleman-overlooked.html>.