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Reflection #5

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After being able to actually get out of the vehicle and study the monuments on Monument Ave last week, I have a different understanding of these things I drive past every few weeks on my way into the city. I never really stopped to think about the Lee statue other than the fact that it is big and somewhat tacky in my opinion. After Tuesday, I realize that there may be an underlying reason for the fact that it is so large, compared to the Arthur Ashe monument which is so small. I feel that when the statue was originally put up in the early 1920s, the builders wanted to make Lee imposing and fantastic even after the loss, because he personified the lost cause so perfectly. His stature and demeanor in the statue convey the idea of the Southern gentleman who only wished to protect his home state and way of life, and was only fighting to defend those ideals, when reality was quite different. The Arthur Ashe monument, on the other end of the avenue, is quite different. It is demure in stature and you can almost miss it when you drive past, because it is hidden by two enormous trees. Ashe himself is smaller than life size, and on a modest pedestal that hardly stands a story high altogether. This is perhaps because it was such a controversial monument to begin with, as Ashe was African American and was known to have AIDS.

As far as speaking to the commission is concerned, there are several points I would like to make. First, the Lee monument in particular is technically state property, but it is maintained and protected by Richmond dollars. I would propose that if the state wants to keep it up, it should take over all maintenance and protection costs off the hands of Richmond taxpayers and

police officers. Additionally, I do not in any way want the monuments to be destroyed. I think that removing Lee from his enormous pedestal and placing him and his horse in a museum or a more appropriate location, such as Hollywood Cemetery or a Confederate cemetery, would be an excellent compromise. This is something that Dell Upton discussed in his article “Confederate Monuments and Civic Values in the Wake of Charlottesville.” History should not be erased, but removing a statue does not erase history. People choose to place their historical understanding in things like these statues, or the oak tree Mr. Williams was telling us about, but it is unfounded and often a warped understanding of actual historical events. The argument also made in his article about it being a values debate rather than a monument debate is also important to note; these debates on whether or not to move the statues are more about what kind of history we want to remember and commemorate, rather than the physical items themselves.

I also agree with Upton’s assertion that the monuments aren’t necessarily about commemorating the Civil War. I would make the leap that the monuments were put up to remind African Americans what life would really be like for them after northerners left the south post-Reconstruction, and that many of them were intended to be intimidating to communities of African Americans. The “common soldier” statues that stand across Virginia and the South in general point to this conclusion, they are always watching to make sure nothing steps out of the line of design that white southerners set up for the post-Reconstruction South. In this vein, I think it is absolutely essential to remove the statues on Monument given that the area surrounding the street has grown to be a largely African American community.

I would urge the commission to begin looking into alternatives for the avenue for the future. If it would like to continue being known as Monument Avenue, I agree with Mr.

Williams in that perhaps an art competition should be held to fill up the street with as many unique and beautiful pieces as possible. If the Confederate statues should stand, monuments to other, hopefully *winning* war heroes should also be erected. Great Virginians like Douglas Wilder or Native American chiefs should be added to the street. A monument to enslaved peoples and to abolitionists should also be erected in memorium and commemoration of the sacrifices and contributions to the state and the nation. These should be as, if not more, grandiose than the Lee statue. It would be in the best interest of the city and ultimately the state to transform “Loser’s Lane” into something much better that all citizens can actually be proud of.