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Speaker key:

SM: Sarah McConnell, producer and host

AS: Audio Sample

JS: Jalane Schmidt

MH: Meredith Howard

EC: Elgin Cleckley

CI: Chioke l'Anson

KL: Kelley Libby

Transcript:

00:00:00

SM Many tours of Charlottesville, Virginia might start at Thomas Jefferson's famous rotunda on the University of Virginia grounds, or maybe at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's famous home nearby. But that's not where UVA professor Jalane Schmidt starts hers.

AS For those of you who are local, how many of you know where the slave auction block is?

SM On this tour, Dr. Schmidt is leading a group of Virginia teachers and librarians. Many don't know where the auction block is. But Dr. Schmidt says that's not really a surprise.

AS It's like, what? One foot by one foot? Basically and it's flush with the sidewalk. You'd walk over it, you know. Sure wouldn't see it.

- SM A visit to this tiny memorial is an effort to change how slavery and confederacy are taught in the state schools. Dr. Schmidt shows the teachers how some histories are permanently displayed and others are erased.
- AS And you know compared to all these other monuments that you'll see, even if you look across the street, there's a big Monticello plaque. You see that? It's at eye-level, about 3 feet by 3 feet pointing toward Jefferson's home. I mean, this is a statement of public priorities.
- SM To Dr. Schmidt, the history of this block helps explain these misplaced priorities.
- AS We're across the street from the courthouse. And this is the courthouse where Jefferson and Madison and Monroe alternately argued cases or met these, had meetings there, so this is a great historic significance locally. There were also markets here and, in some cases, enslaved gardeners would bring their extra produce here if they were allowed to travel in such ways. And other free folks too, and sell their vegetables, right, and this sort of thing. And of course other vendors would be here selling wagons, selling mule, selling humans.
- SM The educators and the tour guide pause. They take a moment to honor the lives of the people who'd once been trafficked through this spot.
- AS Every once in a while, somebody comes along, you kinda just see the tape residue here. And they would put a little label over slaves and they would put their humans...say enslaved people were here. They weren't slaves, this was not the totality of their lives or their identities—they were fathers and mothers and children and all sorts of things. But this is a site of a lot of pain.
- SM From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today we're closing out a 3 part series of what Virginia's historically confederate towns are doing to reckon with their pasts. On this week's show, how local history tours are reframing old history for a new generation. Later in the show, we'll return to Danville where our series began. That's where a vicious race riot once spurred the creation of a new segregationist constitution. We'll here how the city is now telling a different story.
- AS This is the site of the famous High Street Baptist Church. Martin Luther King spoke here and when he met here at the church, there were snipers on the roof.
- SM But first, back to Charlottesville. After the tour with Dr. Schmidt, we caught up with one of the teachers who stood next to that slave auction block plaque.
- AS So, the first part of the tour, we went to the very inconspicuous, forgotten kind of plaque in the ground—you literally step on it—that marks the slave auction block where they,

what's it say, "here's where slaves are bought and sold." And that's it. And that was really emotional for me because I was wondering whether or not I had ancestors that could have been bought or sold there. My father's family, as far as I know, which is my African-American side, were in the Orange area, which isn't too far away and it super rural, so if they were going to come to a larger city, it kinda makes sense that they would come to Charlottesville. Just kind of being in this space and feeling that possible connection to the blood flowing in my veins that would've flowed in my ancestor's veins, it was only, you know, 200 years ago. It's a very brief amount of time in the totality of history that people who would become me were being dehumanized in that way in that spot. It was really affecting.

00:05:21

SM That's Meredith Howard, a public school teacher in Richmond, Virginia. Meredith isn't alone in feeling the weight of Charlottesville history, and a desire to change it for the future. University of Virginia professor, Elgin Cleckley, is an architect who specializes in what he calls empathetic design. We spoke with him about how his work aims to transform hurtful landscapes into spaces of connection.

EC Say you're an African-American and you walk into that space of Court Square, downtown Charlottesville. This is the civil and political center of the city. You look to the left and you see the statue of General Stonewall Jackson, you look to another left and you see a statue of Johnny Reb, the confederate soldier. Behind you is a 1762 colonial courthouse that Jefferson and also Madison and Monroe, all slaveholders frequented. But also in the 1920s, the KKK met, but then right outside, now you have the John Henry James plaque. Ironic, this morning coming to this actual statue, I thought of John Henry James because the site of where he was lynched is actually right across, not far from here. It's walking distance. He was an African-American salesman. He sold ice cream. He was accused of assaulting a white woman named Julia Hotop here in the city of Charlottesville. Basically, he was intercepted by a mob. And he was taken off the train, strung up from a tree, shot over 75 times, pieces of his body and clothing were taken as souvenirs. Here I am thinking about how that can transfer into design. How his body, his legacy and memory are now placed in Court Square, the civic and political center of Charlottesville. You can imagine, as you're standing there, and you're looking at the historical marker, you're reading about his life and legacy, and then you look up and you see the slave market across the street. You look again and you see the Eagle Tavern where Jefferson's slaves were sold. And you realize that you're between 2 large pin oak trees and in the back of my head I hear Billie Holiday singing Strange Fruit. Over to your left, you see the Johnny Reb confederate statue. Behind that, you see the Stonewall Jackson statue. You're also processing that we as humans design spaces. And the plaque then of John Henry James is setting up an entirely new social space, which is making you think differently. It's also going to create empathy. A couple summers ago, I was at Cape Coast Castle, and I was standing inside the slave dungeon thinking about

what it must have been like to be in this space. And that emotion, I truly believe in that space creates different conversations.

SM How do you teach empathy to your architecture students? How do they respond?

EC Sure. We talk about a concept analysis of empathy where I teach how to take other perspectives, how to look at other perspectives. And there's a great article by Helen Rice and Gordon Craft-Todd that gives ideas of empathy in it. It's really straightforward—let's just take a [inaudible] of empathy. So E is to be aware of your eye contact, M is to watch your musculature, P is to pay attention to your posture, A to note the affect that you're having, T is to focus on your tone of voice, H is to be focused on your hearing, and Y is your response. And so students take these skills after understanding and practicing with one another, and they put them directly into action. And so you can imagine if you're using those skills from the letters of empathy in a conversation where you wanna learn about design with someone who might be very hesitant. Imagine an African-American coming to UVA who might be hesitant to come to this space. All of a sudden, I can now intervene using those skills to create a design that connects and shows empathy because I've understood intentions, circumstances, emotions, in a different way. What I also integrate with students is I provide them with an inclusive level of case studies. So these case studies are all across the world. These are artists and architects around the world who are creating empathic design.

SM Such as?

EC We looked at the work of Tidashi Kawamata in Toronto, whose Toronto project in 1989. We looked at the work of Romaire Bearden, the incredible African American collage artist. We looked at the incredible work of Tiffany Chung, that talked about Vietnamese connections in her life and visualized her father's story from the war. The idea is you think deeply about design, how these empathic designers work in the world. I think we have plenty of examples of buildings that do the opposite, where you walk into them and you see that there's no place to actually sit. If you have any sort of different ability, it's incredibly difficult for you to get up and down. You'll see someone carrying someone's baby carriage to get them up a flight of stairs, and I immediately start to think, "well, we design the world. We've designed this. Oof." [laughs] There's the moments we need to deeply think about.

SM It's so interesting you're talking about teaching at the University of Virginia now. You were an undergraduate there and felt somewhat out of place in the world of angles and math and architecture and structure.

EC Right. Well I was born in a small southern town, Orangeburg, South Carolina. My parents were born there as well. We used to have these beautiful African-American quilts. And I remember sleeping underneath them. They had lots of incredible patches

on them. But I found that they were basically an empathy device. So that I could lay it out and point at the squares and ask my parents questions. And I would find out history in really interesting ways. Let's say that I was already starting to think as a designer, because I realized that this quilt then enabled stories about a really difficult topic about slavery and about the origins of us in South Carolina. If I took that quilt and laid it out, inevitably, these patches would be history that happened at different times.

00:11:55

And that's basically how I see the world. So imagine coming to UVA as a student. Thomas Jefferson was regarded in basically one message...

SM And it was Mr. Jefferson's university.

EC 100 percent. Yesterday is a good example. I was walking to meet a student at the back end of the academical village. And the second I hit the bricks, I feel something come through my body. And what I feel is I think about all the enslaved who manufactured every brick and behind the parts of the academical village where you see the gardens, there are these waving serpentine walls, which are now lowered, but they were built at a height to hide the Black body. Now their gardens are beautiful but I walk into them and I see a hog being butchered. I think about what it must have been like day to day in those very spaces. But when I came to UVA, I wanted to know more about the African-American narrative in these spaces. And it simply wasn't spoken of.

SM There were actually enslaved people living on the grounds of the then much smaller University of Virginia. They were serving the students and the faculty.

EC Exactly. But when I had the opportunity to come back, I mostly came back because of the UVA walking tour, which is a walking tour for the enslaved African-Americans that I found on my visit when I came here for an interview. It took me about 2 hours to take the tour. And what was amazing is that as I walked around the tour, someone else would see what I was doing, and we'd start having conversation. And then all of a sudden, I realized that those thoughts, those emotions I was having, when I saw the serpentine wall, how I could feel it in my soul, the feeling I get through my feet walking on the bricks, the emotional fact that I get when you look at the design of the academical village where the Black body is hidden behind a facade. Blacks and whites have to be in the same space but Jefferson was a master in hiding the site of a Black body. And you see that when you're standing in the academical village. You see the columns, all the facing rooms where the students would be, the pavilions where the professors were. But behind those spaces were these gardens. And so returning, taking this tour, and then seeing the amazing work that the University citizens, scholars, community members, had undertaken, I decided to come back.

SM Because something as simple as people had begun to truly care and truly spend money and human resources to investigate this additional history.

EC Definitely. And I found since I've been back, I didn't expect what happened since I've been back. But what an incredible time to be here, to be part of this work. I think it's incredibly important work. And is there anything better than to help facilitate or to help be a part of this movement of design, spatial justice, thinking about how design can create this new empathic understanding.

SM So when you were tapped to create this memorial to John Henry James, who was brutally lynched, what influenced you in terms of your design? There is this plaque at the traditional old courthouse with the white columns and the statues of confederate generals. What was moving to you as you began to look for ideas for the way you would build this memorial?

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EC My ideas immediately transferred up to the national mall. When I was in high school, I would spend a lot of time in the Hirshhorn Gallery. It's my favorite places on Earth. And I would stand there at the Hirshhorn Gallery and have a lot of the same feelings I would have standing on Jefferson's academical village. I would look and I would see a large axis. It's dedicated to power. But also was supposed to connect to the entire country. And in it I thought, there's gotta be more to this story. And the more investigations of David Ojay, Philip Freelan, and Max Bonds National Museum of African American History and Culture, also reading a lot from David Ojay's incredible book Formed, Heft, Immaterial. The museum itself—by the way, I do love the term Blacksonian, which is from the New York Times from Still Processing. [laughs] Jenna Wortham. But this idea of how the building itself symbolizes the Black body. But then I remember looking up the first time I saw the museum and I was blown away because I saw the ironwork from nearby Charleston, not far from Orangeburg, South Carolina. And the idea that the slave craft is resembled in this amazing filigree around the building. And then just to be blown away by the building itself. Basically the ultimate in empathic architecture—it makes you think deeply about the space of the National Mall. When you're in the building, it's incredible in that you look out of a window and all of a sudden you see the Washington Monument. You find out that Martha Washington's slaves actually built the Renwick Castle which is at another view from this very site. Then you realize as you sit in the Contemplation Court, you find these incredible old maps which show the old shoreline that went through the mall. Those very locations were where slaves were sold. You can think in the back of your mind about Michelle Obama's speech about living in the Whitehouse built by slaves, which you can see right off in the distance. And all of a sudden you walk outside, front, and you sit on the African American porch, back to the quilt. Imagine the quilts being made on this African American porch. And you look over in the distance and you see the capitol that's base, built by slaves. The building becomes this new way of telling

a story. It also becomes a moment for these empathic conversations. You're going to build differently. You're going to think differently, and you're going to connect with other narratives, specifically an African American one, in a different way.

SM For the first time in Danville recently, the nearby university, Averett University arranged for students to take bus tours of the African American historical part of the city. And have people explained that history there and then arranged a talk about it?

EC That's it. Imagine those students then go back to their homes, back to their worlds, and now they're sharing that information. That's the opportunity I wanted to design at court square here in Charlottesville, when looking at John Henry James' life. A colleague of mine sent me a photograph of her two young kids reading the panel. And I just get really emotional, thinking, well, it's amazing to be in this space. But imagine those students in Danville. Now they're having new conversations. [music].

SM Elgin Cleckley is a professor of architecture and design thinking at the University of Virginia. Next, we head over to Danville. Producer, Cass Adair, got on a trolley to learn what that small city is doing to transform its confederate legacy.

CA Driving into Danville, Virginia, it's hard to miss the confederate flags that flutter along the highway. But now, some of Danville's residents want to share a different story of their city. This past October, I joined students and staff from Danville's Averett University as we explored Danville's rich, African American history.

AS Hello everybody, I'm Karise Luck-Brimmer with History United and I'm your tour guide for today. This first stop...

CA And, along the way, I learned a little bit about the Wu Tang Clan. [music]. Our guide, Karise Luck-Brimmer, pointed out a narrow residential street on a gently sloping hill. It was right here, she said, on Valley Street, that the famous hip hop crew once asked their drivers to let them take a pit stop.

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AS So they're like, "why do you want to go to Valley Street"? So they brought them here and they get out of their limos and they get out on the street and they start kissing the ground. And they're looking at them like, "y'all are idiots, don't you know you're walking on holy ground?" You know, so that's....

CA That holy ground was the childhood home of a Black radical leader named Clarence X. His influential religious group, the 5 percenters, went on to inspire generations of hip hop artists like the Wu Tang Clan. [music]. But of course, Danville's African American history

is much older than hip hop. Soon, we leave the residential district to learn about the history of Black business in the city.

AS Okay, we're ready to turn on North Union Street. Reverend Campbell called this the Black business mecca. In the early 1900s, it was the tobacco warehouse district. And then, by the late 20s, it was known as the African American business district. You can see the First State Bank which closed 2 years ago, 2 years shy of its 100th anniversary.

CA But successful businesses are still no substitute for political equality. By the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement had taken off in Danville. [singing]. The city's churches hosted important leaders and activists.

AS And this is the site of the famous High Street Baptist Church. Martin Luther King spoke here, and when he met here at the church, there were snipers on the roof.

CA Dr. King would later say that Danville's police department was one of the most vicious he'd ever seen.

AS After a peaceful demonstration right here downtown, dozens of Black protesters including women and children were beaten, hosed, and thrown in jail.

So [inaudible] that many demonstrations that I lead end up in violence in the sense that we who are demonstrated—demonstrating rather are inflicted with violence. [singing].

CA Finally, our trolley stopped at the Danville Museum of History and Culture. There, we learned even more about Danville's civil rights history from someone who'd lived it.

AS Right around 1960 was when sit-ins started in Greenville...

CA This is Danville attorney Jerry Williams. He was only a teenager when the movement came to town but he'd already been inspired by the young people who were making change across the border in North Carolina. So when he was only 14 years old, he became an activist himself.

AS So the local NAACP, we decided we were going to do some sit-ins and we met and tried to figure out where would be most beneficial, and we selected the public library which was here.

CA Literally, right here. The former segregated library is now the Danville Museum of History and Culture. We were all standing in the same room where Williams had staged a sit-in 59 years earlier.

AS So we sorta came and just walked in and sat down. And just waited. Of course that was widespread panic.

CA Within minutes, the police arrived.

AS And they kicked us out, told us to go out. And as a result of that, the library was shut down for 6 months to a year.

CA So rather than letting Black kids and teenagers use the public library, the city just closed it. Of course, that hurt white residents too. So the city of Danville came up with a more subtle form of exclusion.

AS And finally they realized that it was an issue and they opened the library back up, and what they had done is taken all the seats out so it was a library, it was open to the public for Black and white but it had no seats. You couldn't sit. You could buy a book and you had to take it with you but you could not sit in the library which is kind of foolish. But that's the way it was during those days. That's the way that they—they meaning the power structures, the segregationists, the white supremacists—that's the way they did things. That's their mindset at that time, and so...

25:05

CA Growing up, Williams learned a lot about that white supremacist mindset. But he also knew how to fight it. Williams' own father was also a lawyer and the elder Williams helped elder civil rights leaders stay in Danville.

AS Everything was segregated so there were no hotels that Blacks could stay in. So whenever somebody came, they usually stayed with friends, family, or with people who would let them stay in their homes. So people like Thurgood Marshall used to stay with us. I remember he was there plenty of times for NAACP business.

CA Thurgood Marshall made a particular impression on the young Williams. Not just because of his civil rights leadership, but also because he introduced the teenager to some new vocabulary.

AS Thurgood Marshall used to curse a lot. Every other word out of his mouth was [censored words] and other words. So my mother went to my father and said, "that man can't come in my house." My mother thought he was corrupting her kids.

CA But now, young people today are learning from the example of Jerry Williams.

AS I'm Ellen Cook, I'm a junior at Averett. I'm double majoring in equine assisted psychotherapy. I've been at Averett all three years of my schooling.

CA Cook is white. But she said that learning about Danville's African American history helps her understand where she fits into the community too. And inspires her to work for justice in the future.

AS At the end of the day, no matter who you are, these events end up affecting who we are. I'm at Averett now, I'm in Danville now, and it was formed based off of those previous events. So I feel like we all have a need to be almost activists in ourselves, even if we're not a part of an organization. It's almost our duty to remember and to know.

CA From Danville, Virginia, I'm Cass Adair. [music].

SM That was producer Cass Adair in Danville. You're listening to "I'm Free" by Danville native Angela Mecca Sky. Earlier, you heard the song "Night Shift" by Danville artist Corduroy Cassette. And you heard the voices of Karise Luck-Brimmer, Jerry Williams, and Ellen Cook. This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back. [music].

Welcome back to With Good Reason from Virginia Humanities. Up next is an encore presentation of an episode about Kelly Libby's Richmond, Virginia project called Unmonumental. Since the interview, her project has wrapped up, but you can still hear the story she uncovered by searching unmonumental@wvtf.org.

AS Always forward, never looking back, thank you very much. [clapping].

SM A crowd has gathered at this nearly forgotten parcel of ground crossed by an interstate and, until recently, covered by a parking lot. It's the African burial ground in Richmond, Virginia.

AS As a descendant of Solomon Norfolk...

SM Next to the spot is the former site of a holding pen where people were bought and sold and torn from their families.

AS Here, over 300,000 men, women, and children were sold and sent to other areas of the country to work for free laborers, building the infrastructure of this great nation.

SM This is Vera Williams. She's a descendant of Solomon Norfolk of 12 Years a Slave fame. He was a free man who was captured and held here before he was sold further south.

AS Unfortunately, a multitude of slaves never left here. This was the final destination of their slavery experience. They were killed and are buried here. We cannot allow the history of Shako Bottom to be forgotten. It must be preserved. It is time to stop thinking of the

slave experience in America as African American history and define it as it is: American history. Thank you. [cheering].

SM Things are changing. And Kelley Libby who is here with me in the studio, is documenting some of those changes in this former capital of the confederacy. Kelley, you call your project Unmonumental. Why is that?

KL So, Unmonumental is a multimedia project that's looking for answers from Richmond about how we should remember the past.

SM Why is your project called Unmonumental?

KL The most prominent statues in Richmond are 2 confederate war generals, not to people like Oliver Hill, famous civil rights attorney. There is not a monument to John Mitchell, who was a publisher of a Black newspaper in the early 20th century.

SM So, we're about to hear a conversation that you recorded more than a year ago with Chioke I'Anson. He's an instructor at Virginia Commonwealth University in African American history. And the relatively new voice of NPR's underwriting credits. He's black, you're white. What did you get into?

00:30:49

KL I think it's an awkward conversation but I also think it's instructive, because there are lots of people like me who want to talk and they don't know how, and what I've learned is it's going to be awkward, it's probably going to be hard, but do it anyway. And I think that's the first lesson I've learned from doing this work in Richmond. I've learned many lessons in Richmond. That's the first is: do it. Do it.

When you first came to Richmond, was it really apparent to you that these monuments were everywhere?

CI Yeah, cause you can't really kind of be in the city without taking a drive at some point down Monument Avenue. And I think that when I first visited Richmond, I didn't know the place that it had in confederate history. But I knew something was up, because I mean, you know, I'm from Alabama—Montgomery, Alabama specifically, so that's the first capital of the confederacy.

KL Wait what do you mean?

CI Well there were 2 capitals of the confederacy. If I'm not mistaken, the 1st was in Montgomery and then Richmond became the 2nd and then most prominent and most powerful. But all that to say that I was certainly acquainted with the southern legacy.

And, for me, it was always a split legacy. So there was the south of Black people and there was the South of white people. And they were the same in terms of maybe like food choices and not the same like every other way, right? And yet, there was always this bleed through. So, I remember being a kid watching Hee-haw, and also liking the Dukes of Hazzard very much. And so, to this day, I have very complicated feelings about the General Lee. And so Richmond then kind of calls to bear those complicated feelings. Like there are these super huge statues of people who fought to like make sure that my ancestors in particular stayed slaves. If you even step aside the moral outrage for the whole thing, which I definitely feel, it's just conceptually, it's so hard to get your mind around. And I guess that's—all those complicated feelings every time I come across the monuments on Monument Avenue. Like it's so funny. There's nowhere that I can go and live and escape Robert E. Lee. Because I'm from Montgomery, Alabama. My sister went to Robert E. Lee high school in Alabama. I went to Robert E. Lee high school in Jacksonville, Florida. And it's—it's this undeniable legacy that everyone has to either contend with or just kind of like ignore. But I feel like the ignoring thing is the same way that like, if you're a woman, you just know there's gonna be various instances of sexual harassment or whatever in your life and you know that you can't get upset about every single one because you won't be able to live your life, you know what I'm saying? And so instances of racism I think are that way for Black people generally speaking. Especially those who live in the South.

KL Yeah. I remember when I first moved to Richmond, and driving up and down Monument Avenue and just thinking, "This is a pretty street. It's old, it's brick lined, and all these big trees and super fancy houses." You know, and then there are these men on horses, which...I had known these men on horses my entire life.

CI I mean that's exactly the thing, you know. It's—and as much as it pains me to say this, I do recognize that there are these southerners out there who are so into being southern who are so into the rebel flag, who when they say, "It's not about hate," they mean it, and I think it's an indication that even they are disconnected from the southern history even as they try to make it a part of their own kind of aesthetic and historical understanding.

00:35:30

KL Yeah. On Twitter the other day, we were talking about this flea market that we both went to as young people cause it's near where both of us grew up.

CI Yeah, Pecan Park Flea Market.

KL Yeah, and so you were saying there was a t-shirt or, what was it that...

CI Yeah, this was when I was in high school right because I used to go to flea markets a lot. And there was a shirt. And it read “if I knew it was going to be this bad, I would’ve picked the cotton.” So it was the ultimate—it was just like such a pure expression of just hate for Black people that was just being openly sold on the flea market. Yeah and so I was just like, “Oh my god.” It was so—it was like one of those things—you hear people talk about this a lot where like something is so racist that you’re just impressed. You don’t even feel bad about it, you’re just impressed by it. I was like, “man, maybe I should buy that shirt.” [laughs]

KL [laughs] But, you know, like, and what I had said to you is, I should be shocked by that but I’m actually not because I’ve heard things like that. But I don’t think, well I think with a lot of people, they wouldn’t actually say it to a Black person.

CI Oh, I think—

KL Okay maybe they, maybe they, maybe some of them would, but I think—

CI No I mean I agree, right, I think that one of the hardest lessons that I had to learn was that a lot of white people would kind of want to be my friend, but, if I’m not in the room, they’ll say some crazy [censored word]

KL Yes

CI Yeah, yeah, yeah

KL Like in my family, they’re white, and they have Black friends, but they say nasty stuff like that. And then at the same time, we’ll just like hang out with Black people, and be friendly.

CI I mean I think this is one of those things that non-southerners can’t quite understand. It’s like, this racism is so deep into the ethos that it’s hard for people to conceptualize outside of it. But at the same time, a lot of white people and a lot of Black people in the south have so much in common. A lot of live in the same neighborhood, we have the same background, we go to the Black and white versions of the same church. You know what I mean? There’s so much that cuts across race lines, and it’s just people being basically kind of the same. I remember being in Alabama. We lived at the end of the road and after that it turned into a dirt road. And so then there was our house and if you kept going down the dirt road, then there was like white people who were living the exact same existence as us, you know what I mean? And you know, we always waved at them and never, I never was like, “Oo, those people,” but we never hung out [laughs]. You know what I’m saying? And, you know, but on occasion, if we were having like a big feast or whatever, then they would stop by, get some food, say what’s up, and then

leave. And it wasn't any ill will or anything like it. But I'm pretty sure those cats were racist.

KL Yeah, they were.

CI Yeah, they were racist.

KL Let me tell you. They were. Cause I had that same experience.

CI Right, yeah, and so it's an odd—excavating that. Cause we're talking generations and generations of living alongside one another. And so you get these immediate paradoxes. And I think that's what the south is about. The south is about these weird paradoxes and juxtapositions and as long as you don't talk about, like I know that I've had a lot of southern white friends that, we got along fine, until we started talking about the rebel flag or the generals or Black history month or whatever. And then they would get mad and I would get mad. And then we'd not be able to talk and we'd have to just stop talking about it, not revisit it, not say I'm sorry, just stop talking about it. And we could go forward and continue to get along. You see what I'm saying?

KL Yeah. Yeah. When I first moved to Richmond, I lived in a historically white working class neighborhood, Oregon Hill. And I was really interested in the idea of living in a historically white working class neighborhood because the preservationists were really interested in preserving the history there, which seemed to overlook that that used to be a really violent neighborhood for anybody who was not white.

CI Ugh, I mean it's funny that you say that because one of the things that's become clear is that there's not actually such a thing as preservation. Or, if there is, you can't think of preservation without thinking about selective editing of a thing. We're not just preserving the legacy, we're actually preserving the kind of creation myth or etiology of the thing that we want to flatter our presence. We're not really making claims about the past at all. We're just making claims about how we see things right now and how we want to see things.

00:40:59

KL Yeah, well even those monuments on Monument Avenue didn't go up right after the Civil War. They went up much later, like decades later. So it wasn't about the Civil War. It was about the people who were alive at that time in Richmond and who had power and wanted their story told.

CI Yes, yes, exactly. So the thing that the monument is it's a thing that is asking us to remember something in a certain kind of way. And the reason that monuments I feel are so contested is that the monuments themselves are denying or aren't letting us

remember these figures in the other kinds of ways that round out their full meaning. So okay look, I'm fully willing to accept that Robert E. Lee was a fantastic general who could master the battlefield in certain types of ways. I can't help but notice that, had he been successful, things would have been a lot worse for a pretty big chunk of the American population in the south. And I know that, and I would like you to also know that. And if we both know that, then the statue wouldn't really take the form of what it is. The statue would be a reflection on a certain kind of tragedy—the tragedy that somebody can fight so authentically for something that's so morally dubious, right? And that's a monument that I can get behind. I'd be totally okay with that, because I do think that we need to remember that feeling something with depth or standing under a flag—as powerful as it can be—can also be wrong. Or at the very least, can be complicated in ways that we all need to know that that's something that can happen to us. But those aren't the monuments that are on Monument Avenue.

KL When the shootings in Charleston happened, I saw that there was this enormous amount of pain and tension in this part of the country. I also come from people in the south who are responsible for that pain, and so I wanted to figure out how to reconcile that in myself, just being from a southern family, being from a southern family who were slave owners, and being a person who, I'd like to think of myself as a kind person. But you talked about, earlier, disconnection. I feel disconnected. I don't have...I know what's right, but I don't have the feelings about what's right...if that makes any sense. It's like, I can understand why the Robert E. Lee monument causes pain, but I don't feel that pain.

CI Right.

KL I do carry around a feeling of shame because I know that my family was on the wrong side of history.

CI [laughs] Right.

KL But that, just like, stays in there and never gets talked about. And then it feels like Black people see it in me. Like, see bad-ness.

CI [laughs].

KL Why is that funny?

CI I mean, I just, I don't really kind of like identify with your frame. At all. [laughs].

KL Does it not make sense at all to you? Like it's sort of like I was a racist. And so, and like, to some degree I still am. Like maybe it's still in there. I feel like...

CI We're from the south. We're all racists in some way, shape, or form. That's just a given that we have...that's our starting point. We're racists. [laughs]. Like it's...and not like we're racists, it's fine, but we're racist and we just have to know that as we kind of go forward to kind of like combat our racist-y elements. You know what I mean? If you're an American and you wake up in the morning and you're like, "I'm so glad I'm not racist," you know what I mean, it's like, "slow your roll, buddy," you know. Yeah, I mean...

KL Like I'm scared it's going to come out. Does that make sense to you?

CI I mean, yeah. Let's look at it like this. I'm a man. And so obviously there's some stuff surrounding Black masculinity or whatever that I have to contend with concerning racism and other things.

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But there's a very fundamental sense to which, as a man, I have certain aspects of male privilege that is also compounded or accelerated by my gross overeducation. Okay fine, so what that means is I am not immune from saying or doing or thinking something sexist. My job is to minimize that as much as I can. I think that the shame is a fundamental state. I don't think that the shame is a particular moral feeling. Like you know how in the movies where the character has some dark backstory, like you know if it was like, "Tell me your dark backstory." You know, and you were like, "my family was slave owners," then I'd be like, "This isn't going to motivate the movie at all." Do you see what I'm saying? Like, it's fine. It's a part of your lineage.

KL Well, it's not just a part of my lineage like it's a part of me and my actions. As a child, there were some racist actions.

CI Right, I know.

KL And words.

CI Oh, I believe it. Like I totally get that. But I guess what I'm saying is that, if you have the awareness of it now, then I think it's true that we, everybody, you, has to like atone in some way. But that atonement might just take the form of being a better person. [laughs] You know what I mean? I've had this conversation kind of a lot actually.

KL Really?

CI Yeah, because I'm a philosopher, right? I went to graduate school in philosophy, and I teach African-American studies now, et cetera, and so like, there's a fundamental claim which is like, it's not the job of Black people to like educate white people about racism.

KL Yes.

CI So that's true. But it's literally my job to do it because that's my actual post as an instructor. So I end of talking a lot to like white people who are trying to like deal because they kind of have that moment where they kind of get it and they're like, "Oh snap, I'm racist." You know, et cetera, and what I want to say to them is just like, "Yo yeah, it's bad. But your feelings don't matter." Right? This is what I mean. I mean that like, if I do something like sexist or whatever, and somebody kind of calls me on it, then my job isn't to respond back and be like, "that wasn't sexist. You just can't take a joke." My job isn't to be like, "Oh my goodness, I'm a sexist pig and it feels sad." My job is simply to apologize and not do that shit no more.

KL [laughs]

CI Do you see what I'm saying?

KL Yeah.

CI And that's it. That's it. I think that it's just down to people who know better to do the work and it's not down for them to like feel it deeply. I don't think that's something we should be pursuing.

KL Huh, that's funny cause you're kind of like, "Get over yourself."

CI I mean, yeah, I kind of am. And I'm only doing that because I had to get over myself with homophobia or like sexism and other isms that I have yet to confront. You know what I'm saying? You just have to figure out what's right, and then just do it. [music].

SM This has been an encore presentation of the conversation between Unmonumental producer Kelley Libby and Chioke l'Anson. Chioke is a professor of African-American studies at Virginia Commonwealth and is the voice of the Underwriting Credits at NPR. Unmonumental is a collaboration of Kelly Libby, WVTF radio IQ, and Air, with support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Unmonumental theme music is by Breakmaster Sullender. This show was produced in partnership with History United, a project of Virginia Humanities encouraging regional collaboration and building community trust through a greater understanding of shared history. History United's work is made possible by a grant from the Danville Regional Foundation. This program was also made possible by a grant from the WK Kellogg Foundation as part of its Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Initiative. Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the law firm of McGuireWoods and by the University of Virginia Health System, pioneering treatments to save lives and preserve brain function for stroke patients, UVAhealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Elliot Majerzik, and Cass Adair.

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