

A Monument to Our Shared Purpose; The Freedmen's Memorial in Washington embodies not white supremacy, but African-American agency and cooperative struggle.

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FULL TEXT

At the end of the Civil War, on April 11, 1865, Abraham Lincoln gave a speech proposing that, in Louisiana, freed slaves and black Union Army soldiers be given the right to vote. An enraged white supremacist who was in attendance left promising that he would "put him through." Three nights later, he—the actor John Wilkes Booth—did.

One hundred and fifty-five years on, it is the descendants of those Lincoln determined to free who are demanding the toppling of the bronze Freedmen's Memorial (sometimes known as the Emancipation Memorial) to Lincoln in Lincoln Park in Washington. It "embodies the white supremacy and the disempowerment of black people," announced Glenn Foster, the founder of Free Neighborhood, at a raucous meeting at the site on June 23. Marcus Goodwin, a candidate for the D.C. District Council, has collected more than 5,000 signatures on a petition to remove the statue. And Washington's congressional delegate, Eleanor Holmes Norton, announced in a tweet that she was introducing legislation to move it because the designers "didn't take into account the views of African Americans." With protests continuing at the site, on June 25 the National Park Service fenced it off. Demonstrations continued through the weekend.

What, exactly, is the message of the Freedmen's Memorial? The bronze group sits atop a 10-foot pedestal and shows a muscular, semi-nude African-American rising to his feet. His right leg is tensed and he is pushing up on the ball of his left foot in the act of rising. His wrists still wear shackles, no longer attached to chains. His right fist grips a chain he has broken; the left hand falls by his side in a relaxed gesture. His head is held high and there is a determined, hopeful expression on his face.

The African-American man is posed at a right angle to Lincoln's standing figure, which steps back as though to make room for him. Lincoln's left arm is held out as though to clasp the young man by the shoulder as he rises; his right grasps a scroll that contains the Emancipation Proclamation. Partially unrolled, it symbolizes the unfinished nature of the promise it contains. Seen frontally from below, the foreshortening of the two figures makes the scale of the freedman's body appear larger than Lincoln's.

Lincoln stands, but does not rule. The young man gazes somewhere far beyond Lincoln or any cues Lincoln might be giving. In fact, Lincoln seems to stand back, as though in mingled amazement and appreciation of this new apparition, a free black man. At the base of the figures is a single word: EMANCIPATION.

The creation of the statue was an unlikely intersection of two unrelated movements, both originating in the news of Lincoln's assassination. Charlotte Scott, who was born enslaved, labored in Covington, Va., for the family of Dr. William Rucker, which ultimately freed her and began paying her wages. Lincoln's assassination deeply moved her: "Mr. Lincoln was our best friend, and I will give five dollars of my wages toward erecting a monument in his memory," she said. In short order, the fund-raising came to the attention of James Yeatman, president of the

Western branch of the U.S. Sanitary Commission in St. Louis. He sought donations exclusively from freedmen, and especially soldiers, collecting over \$16,000 by the end of the year.

At almost the same moment, Thomas Ball (1819-1911), an expatriate sculptor based in Florence, heard of the assassination while returning to Italy from America. Back in his studio he immediately began a half-life-size study of an "Emancipation Group." Among the many tourists who stopped by his Florentine studio to see it was the Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot, another St. Louisan. A few years later Eliot, now the chairman of Freeman's Memorial Society, remembered Ball's work and asked him to submit a photograph of his model to the committee. Ball got the commission.

Ball's model had showed a slave boy, not a man, in a passive, almost dreamlike state, which made Lincoln appear to be casting some kind of spell. The pose recalled a well-known Ancient Greek statue called "The Crouching Venus." Sensitive to the possibility of offending the freedmen who had paid for the statue by representing the freed slave in a passive or servile posture, the memorial committee insisted that Ball redesign the child as an older, more powerful and independent figure.

Ball substituted, as a model, an adult African-American, Archer Alexander, and the final design for the bronze shows Alexander rising, in Eliot's words, "to break the chain that had bound him." Alexander was chosen as the model in part for symbolic reasons: He had been the last slave recaptured under the notorious Fugitive Slave Law. The finished sculpture was unveiled at a citywide celebration on the 11th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination. In attendance were President Ulysses S. Grant, the cabinet and the Supreme Court. The festivities themselves were the work of Washington's black community. The principal orator was the most famous African-American in the nation, Frederick Douglass.

The sculptural group, even as redesigned, still rubbed some the wrong way. In 1892, a Boston newspaper cruelly mocked the statue as an image of a shoeshine boy, "blackening Lincoln's boots," and in 1916, Freeman H.M. Murray, an African-American journalist, opined that the kneeling figure showed "little if any conception of the dignity and power of his own manhood."

More recent critics have inverted the entire purpose of the statue, seeing it as a monument to the continued subordination of African-Americans to white supremacy. The art historian Kirk Savage in a 2018 book wrote that "Ball's emancipated man is the very archetype of slavery: he is stripped, literally and figuratively, bereft of personal agency, social position, and accouterments of culture. ...the monument is not really about emancipation but about its opposite—domination."

But the most common denunciation of the memorial usually comes in the words Douglass used to describe Lincoln in his dedicatory oration. Reconstruction had soured Douglass on Lincoln, whom in 1865 he had described as "emphatically the black man's president." Now Douglass announced that "in his interests, in his associations, in his habits of thought, and in his prejudices, he was a white man" and was "pre-eminently the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men." If that did not seem to make the Freedmen's Memorial "a monument to white supremacy," it would be hard to imagine what else would.

But Eleanor Holmes Norton, George Foster and the rest are wrong. The Ball statue is a monument to African-American agency; but, even more, it is a monument to the mutual agency of blacks and whites together in the struggle to abolish the evil of "property in man," to use a phrase used by both Lincoln and Douglass. They would do well to remember what Douglass went on to say about Lincoln that day in 1876: "No man who knew Abraham Lincoln could hate him," and so "he is doubly dear to us, and will be precious forever." Their criticism and that of others suggests that there can never be mutuality of purpose, that all human relationships must be calibrated in terms of power and suspicion. Tear the statue down, and we have testified, in art and in society, that we now believe that we live only as creatures of blood and impulse, slaves to the past, not free men and women.

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Credit: By Allen C. Guelzo and James Hankins

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