

A photograph of the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C., viewed from across the water under a cloudy sky. The monument is a tall, slender, white obelisk that tapers to a point. It stands on a small island or peninsula surrounded by green trees. In the foreground, there is a wide expanse of water, likely the Potomac River. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. The overall tone is somber and reflective.

“Perspective Matters”
The Original Sin of Racism in America

A Photographic Narrative
By: Jon Deters

The goal of this project is to illustrate some of the more revelatory experiences from my summer as an intern for the Project on Lived Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary. My work can best be categorized under the heading of faith based activism. This collection of photos is an attempt to depict what I understand to be fundamental racial biases that formed the United States in its foundation and continue to haunt the country today. Throughout the summer, this was one of the more epiphanic realizations that I encountered. Using ironic perspectives at a few of D.C.'s famously picturesque spots, I am attempting to play with the idea that perspective matters when it comes to issues as complex and deeply rooted as race and ethnicity. By identifying some of the ways that I have attempted to reconcile the spoon fed, sanitized version of history with my lived reality this summer, I hope to challenge this presentation's viewers and also continue to engage in these conversations myself. In doing this, I am also trying to express the shortcomings of words in this conversation. As the old adage goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words" and I hope that some of these photos can live into this. There isn't necessarily a succinct continuity between pictures but this is apropos as my summer experience was comprised of different experiences at different places.



The Washington Monument is arguably the most recognizable monument in Washington, D.C. Standing at almost 170 meters tall, Washington's shrine dominates the city's skyline. From this angle, the National Museum of African American History and Culture is the attempted focus of the picture. Even considering its robust structure and pronounced architecture, however, the AAHC cannot completely escape the ominous tyranny of the shining white obelisk behind it. Not only is this architecturally true, but it is reflective of a larger societal issue.

The history of America is, quite literally in some cases, built upon racial discrimination. It is propped up by pillars of White Supremacy, American Exceptionalism, Androcentrism, and many other demonic *-isms* that continue to oppress the current situation. Despite courageous strides towards equality from countless individuals and groups throughout the centuries, there remains a dangerous amount of complicity towards these foundational biases that I believe must be addressed and uprooted. Until such time, the dominating white obelisk will continue to loom in the background, dictating our landscape.




WE ARE DETERMINED... TO WORK AND FIGHT
UNTIL JUSTICE RUNS DOWN LIKE WATER AND
RIGHTEOUSNESS LIKE A MIGHTY STREAM.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. 1955

This picture is from an absolutely incredible space inside of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. This famous quote from MLK was something that I found inspiration at the beginning of my summer and many times thereafter. The work of activism is long and hard. It is often filled with more failures than successes. It involves knowing that the work before you will never be completed and still pursuing change with fervor and anticipation. MLK knew this.

All of the voices of the Civil Rights Movement knew this. The Black Lives Matter Movement knows this. MLK's resolve in fighting for the vision of these foundational injustices being ultimately resolved was gripping for me. After beginning to recognize the depths of these issues and the history behind them, I began to realize that this work would be infinitely more difficult should my convictions not come from a Christian vision for Beloved Community. Many of my experiences at Bread for the World including some massive policy failures and some pretty big policy wins can be accurately captured in this picture.



AMONG AMERICAN CITIZENS
THERE SHOULD BE NO FORGOTTEN MEN
AND NO FORGOTTEN RACES

This is a quote from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial. Celebrated as a man who fought for the little guys, this quote highlights the ways that we have sanitized the reality of some of our celebrated figures in order to fit them into themes of American optimism. FDR says that there should be “no forgotten races” but in reality, the 1940s allowed segregated America to feel justified in naming blacks as inferior and less deserving of human rights. Explicit slavery may have ended by this point, but the beast of racism had no intention of leaving and it manifested itself comfortably in implicit exploitation. FDR’s actions and policy in the 1940s continued to have drastically disproportionate impacts on communities of color. The most stark example of this is the G.I. bill. Housing policy and the implantation of redlining continues to have significant impacts on African Americans today.

THE ONE-THIRD OF A NATION ILL-HOUSE

THE TEST OF OUR PROGRESS
IS NOT WHETHER WE ADD MORE
TO THE ABUNDANCE OF THOSE
WHO HAVE MUCH; IT IS WHETHER
WE PROVIDE ENOUGH FOR
THOSE WHO HAVE TOO LITTLE.



This is another part of the FDR Memorial. The quote on the wall once again attempts to highlight Roosevelt's commitment to the American people. What is revelatory about this picture, however, is the people who are depicted in the statue beside the quote. They are white, American farmers. Not highlighted or displayed anywhere in this celebration of our famous FDR is Executive Order 9066 which sent 120,000 Japanese expatriates and Japanese Americans to Internment camps solely on the basis of their race. While the quote itself might be admirable, FDR's actions failed to live into his esteemed speeches and promises for countless Americans.



I HAVE SWORN UPON THE ALTAR OF GOD ETC



WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO BE SELF EVIDENT THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL THAT THEY ARE ENDOWED BY THEIR CREATOR WITH CERTAIN UNALIENABLE RIGHTS AMONG THESE ARE LIFE LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS THAT TO SECURE THESE RIGHTS GOVERNMENTS ARE INSTITUTED AMONG MEN WE SOLEMNLY PUBLISH AND DECLARE THAT THESE COLONIES ARE AND OF RIGHT OUGHT TO BE FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES—AND FOR THE SUPPORT OF THIS DECLARATION WITH A FIRM RELIANCE ON THE PROTECTION OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE WE MUTUALLY FEDGE OUR LIVES OUR FORTUNES AND OUR SACRED HONORS

UVa's very own Thomas Jefferson has no small part to play in all of this. There could be an entire project on each of the countless ways that Jefferson's blatantly racist principles ended up being foundational elements in the documents that continue to guide the nation, but there are two specific things that I want to highlight in this photo. First of all, from this angle our Founding Father appears to be crowned with the phrase, "I have sworn upon the alter of God..." It continues on, "...eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." This quote, along with many others by America's 3rd President, exemplifies the ways that our country tends to idealize its historical leaders. Jefferson himself was a tyrant and the ways in which he shaped the founding of our country to embody violent racism continues to influence the nation over two centuries later. The bastardization of religious rhetoric to deify racism was utilized by Jefferson and countless others and is a tactic that can also still be seen in today's climate.



In this final picture, Jefferson is looking to the Washington Monument in a way that is almost worshipful. He is surveying the capitol of the United States with a vision of White Supremacy, Androcentrism, and American Exceptionalism directly in his sights. In this same geographical space is the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. There are few, if any, angles that can capture him in the same frame as these two. What does this tell us? He is left out of the picture. He is left looking across the river, watching Jefferson and Washington in all their glory. What does this tell us about today? What does this tell us about tomorrow? What does this tell us about history?