Elizabeth Anne Johnson

Confederate Monument 2.0

Mary Ellen Carroll at *Prospect.3*

Abstract

Since 2015, the discourse of public monuments has been dominated by questions of monument removals in the wake of the rise of the Rhodes Must Fall activist movement. However, prior to this emphasis on removals, there was also a strong tradition of contemporary artists proposing creative interventions that responded to the existing landscape of public monuments as markers of systemic inequalities. This essay focuses on an unrealised intervention proposed by New York-based artist Mary Ellen Carroll in the run up to the *Prospect.3* contemporary art triennial in New Orleans in 2014, which aimed to transform a monument to Robert E. Lee into a transmitter for free-to-use, long-range, high-speed wireless internet. Drawing from scholar of media Florian Cramer, it suggests Carroll's proposal to repurpose the Confederate monument was a post-digital choice that envisaged a radical solution to internet inequity while mobilizing the monument's symbolism to attend to the history of structural discrimination shaping unequal internet access in contemporary New Orleans.

Key Words

Monument, Confederate, internet, wi-fi, post-digital, Mary Ellen Carroll

The photograph shows a bronze statue on a marble plinth with its back to the camera (fig. 1). The statue is outside and must be raised some height, given only mottled clouds are visible around it. Despite appearing from behind, it is possible to make out its historical military attire: hat, belted coat, knee-high boots, and a sword suspended by its left side. Two fine lines extend upward from the hat like an insect's antennae that appear to have been added in photographic postproduction. Are they intended to be ridiculous? Are they receiving messages like the antenna of a TV? Or sending signals like a radio transmitter? And why is the statue facing away from the camera?

Titled *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0, Proposed Rabbit Ears Antenna Placement on General Lee in New Orleans at Lee Circle for Prospect.3 New Orleans*, the image was made in 2013 by New York-based artist Mary Ellen Carroll (b. 1961). It was published in the journal *October*

1   Mary Ellen Carroll, *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0, Proposed Rabbit Ears Antenna Placement on General Lee in New Orleans at Lee Circle for Prospect.3 New Orleans*, 2013, silver gelatin print, 8 × 10 in.

in 2018 as part of a special edition on monuments: an urgent and inflammatory issue in the wake of the Rhodes Must Fall movement and the Charlottesville car attack.[1] Over fifty artists and writers responded to the editors' prompt to consider the significance of monuments as markers of histories of racial conflict, but Carroll's was the only entry to explicitly engage the topic in relation to the internet. As her accompanying text explained, the photograph depicted her proposal to transform a nineteenth-century figurative monument to Confederate General Robert E. Lee in New Orleans into a transmission tower for a wireless internet network. However, what is represented in the image was never realized as sculpture. When Carroll made the proposal, the City of New Orleans's Department of Parks and Parkways (hereafter the Parks Department) oversaw the monument's care. It flatly refused her request for permission to add what it described as "rabbit ears" to the statue. This was not, they admonished, "an appropriate installation for this iconic historic landmark."[2]

1   When the image was published in *October* in 2018, it was under the title *General Robert E. Lee Statue with "Rabbit Ears"* and dated 2014. The title and date detailed in this essay were supplied by Mary Ellen Carroll in 2022. The Rhodes Must Fall movement began in 2015 when activist Chumani Maxwele threw human excrement on a monument to British imperialist Cecil Rhodes located on the campus of the University of Cape Town. Maxwele's act sparked renewed calls for the monument's removal and symbolized wider demands to decolonize educational practices across South Africa and beyond. In 2017, the debate over the continuing presence of Confederate monuments in the United States appeared to reach a fever pitch when the suggested removal of a monument to Confederate General Robert E. Lee from a city park in Charlottesville, Virginia, prompted a white supremacist rally and a peaceful counter-demonstration during which counter protestor Heather Heyer was murdered.

2   Mary Ellen Carroll, "Mary Ellen Carroll: Response to a Questionnaire on Monuments," *October*, no. 165 (Summer 2018): 22–27, here 23.

The proposal's unrealized status reflects the historically contingent conditions from which Carroll's sculptural statement (represented by the image) could not emerge. The historical contingency is important. Just a few years later, the same proposal would not have been possible; not only because the statue of Lee was stripped from the streets of New Orleans in 2017, but also because public debate on Confederate monuments changed significantly. After the wave of monument removals following the global Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, it would have been clear that Carroll's self-described "lampooning" of the Lee monument did not answer calls for its outright removal.[3] What this essay will show is how the proposal helped articulate the historical contours of the social, economic, political, and cultural systems that around 2013 both upheld the monument and contributed to the levels of internet connectivity in the city. I will suggest Carroll's proposal to transform the Lee monument into a wireless internet transmitter represents a post-digital repurposing of the monument that mobilizes its symbolism to attend to the longer histories of structural discrimination foundational to internet inequity in New Orleans.

Carroll first conceived of her proposal for the Lee monument in 2012, when curator Franklin Sirmans invited her to participate in *Prospect.3*, a citywide contemporary art triennial staged in New Orleans in 2014–15. Sirmans assigned Carroll the site of the American Institute of Architects' Center for Architecture and Design (hereafter AIA Center), which was located in the shadow of the city's monument to Lee. Carroll exhibited *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0*, an ongoing artwork begun in 2008, which models how underused bands of the electromagnetic spectrum can be repurposed to create high-speed, long-range wireless internet networks. The exhibition featured photographs, diagrams, and maquettes outlining Carroll's proposition. A printed timeline ran throughout, chronicling over a century of regional and national policies and events that ultimately had given rise to the landscape of infrastructure in New Orleans at the time of the exhibition. This timeline was repeated and also expanded by tweets issued hourly throughout the triennial by the Twitter handle @publicutility2.[4] For the duration of *Prospect.3*, Carroll's model of internet access was temporarily put into practice, and an experimental license was secured to permit a free-to-use wireless network at the AIA Center. Carroll also planned to extend the network in future along a portion of the Interstate 10 (I-10) freeway running through the center of New Orleans.

In the exhibition catalogue accompanying *Prospect.3*, artist and researcher Imani Jacqueline Brown describes how after the triennial Carroll intended to produce "transmission towers" that would "stand as functional monuments, marking and facilitating the redistribution of power."[5]

3   Carroll, "Mary Ellen Carroll: Response to a Questionnaire on Monuments," 2018, 24.
4   For example, "2014 PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0 LAUNCHES IN #NOLA @ #AIA FOR #PROSPECT3, INTRODUCES #SUPERWIFI: RETROFITTING #TV FOR 21ST CENTURY #PUBLICUTILITY2." At the time of writing, the Twitter handle @publicutility2 was ongoing and its last public post was in 2018. Additional content for transmission via the network was also created during public program community sessions.
5   Imani Jacqueline Brown, "Mary Ellen Carroll," in *Prospect.3: Notes for Now: A Project of Prospect New Orleans*, ed. Franklin Sirmans, exh. cat. Prospect New Orleans (New York: DelMonico Books, 2014), pp. 62–63, here p. 62.

Not only would the towers extend the reach of the *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* wireless network, but also provide highly visible markers of it. Due to time and funding constraints, no towers were realized during the triennial. In fact, the only reference to transmission towers in the AIA Center were two bright orange scale models of pylon-like towers placed carefully on a restrained wooden architect's model of a central slice of the city. The proposal for the Lee monument did not feature in the exhibition. Although unrealized, the envisaged repurposing of an existing monument reflects Carroll's resistance to an amnesiac discourse of the internet that overemphasizes the present and future. Instead, it sees Carroll exploring how the vectors of racism and structural discrimination shaped internet inequities in twenty-first century New Orleans.

Made by New York-based sculptor Alexander Doyle, the statue of Lee had looked down on New Orleans since 1884. It was commissioned and paid for by the Robert E. Lee Monumental Association in New Orleans, which was founded in 1870, the year of Lee's death, with the intention of building a local monument in his honor.[6] The sixteen-and-a-half-foot statue was elevated more than sixty-feet skyward by a towering marble Doric column, rooted in a vast flight of granite steps. The steps, in turn, rose from a mound at the center of a traffic intersection which came to be known as Lee Circle.[7] The colossal figure depicted Lee, arms folded confidently, casting a paternalistic gaze across the city. Its portrayal of a man racialized as white, with a tall, athletic build conformed to what scholar of monuments Kirk Savage calls the "canonical whiteness" of a classical sculptural tradition that falsely upheld the bodies of men racialized as white as images of physical perfection and intellectual superiority.[8]

New Orleans's monument to Lee did not represent a particular affiliation between Lee and the city, but rather was one of hundreds of Confederate monuments thrust into the civic landscape of the South, after the hopes of the Reconstruction era faltered, as public symbols of the propaganda campaign that came to be known as the Lost Cause. The perfidious narrative of the Lost Cause asserted the Confederacy had not fought the American Civil War in an effort to uphold chattel slavery based on racialization, but to defend the rights of individual States to determine their own governance without Federal intervention. Despite

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6 For a history of the monument, see Karen L. Cox, *No Common Ground: Confederate Monuments and the Ongoing Fight for Racial Justice* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), pp. 39–43, "History and Description of the Robert E. Lee Statue at Lee's Circle in New Orleans, Louisiana from the 1930s," Louisiana Works Progress Administration, Louisiana Digital Library, last modified 2007, https://louisianadigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/state-lwp%3A7942/ (accessed February 10, 2023), and Alex von Tunzelmann, *Fallen Idols: Twelve Statues That Made History* (London: Headline, 2021), pp. 153–72.

7 Prior to the erection of the Lee monument, the area was known as Tivoli Circle. In 2022, the local council approved a decision to rename the area Harmony Circle.

8 Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 132. For more on color in American sculpture and its correlation to a moral index see Charmaine Nelson, *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

leading his troops to defeat, many Southerners had come to regard Lee as "the embodiment of the Confederacy" and an emblem of nostalgia for an antebellum South expunged of its memory of slavery's horrors.[9] Since its grand unveiling, New Orleans's monument to Lee had operated as a communications transmitter of a different sort to the type imagined by Carroll's proposal. Its presence acted as a node in a network of monuments, statues, and names of streets, parks, and schools that sent the message of white supremacy across the city and the southern States.

By proposing the Lee monument as a wireless internet transmission tower, Carroll was not simply identifying the highest point close to her designated site (although its height would have offered certain practical advantages for extending the network's reach). She was putting the issue of internet equity in dialogue with the history symbolized by the monument. On the one hand, the proposal used ridicule to critique the public presence and symbolism of the monument; on the other, it represented a practicable solution to a genuine need for improving access to all but essential infrastructure.

Attempting to realize her vision, in 2014 during the run up to *Prospect.3*, on two separate occasions Carroll wrote to the Parks Department to request permission to repurpose the monument to Lee. Both times her appeals were denied; once on the grounds her proposal was an "unacceptable" way to treat "the treasured monument," and once because the Parks Department "must protect" this "significant piece of history … from potential damage."[10] The responses overlook the proposal's practical goals and focus on its incendiary symbolism. They also help enunciate the mechanisms that at the time of *Prospect.3* worked to hold the statue in place, including the active and ongoing support for its maintenance by a local governing body and the fallacy that history itself can reside in a sculptural object.

I suggest Carroll's proposal to use a Confederate monument as a wireless transmission tower represents what scholar of media Florian Cramer describes as a "post-digital choice."[11] In a 2019 interview with art historian David Joselit, Carroll signposted the post-digital as a constructive framing through which to address her work. She claimed, "My works are considerations and expansions of time in the age of the post-digital."[12] Whereas the word 'post-digital' might initially imply the end of the digital, in Cramer's 2014 article, "What is 'Post-Digital'?," he highlights how the influence and effects of "computersiation and global digital networking of communication, technical infrastructures, markets and geopolitics" have not been surpassed, but rather become ubiquitous.[13] The prefix in 'post-digital', then, signals not a termination as it does in 'postmodernism,' for instance, but a continuation

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9   Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, 1997, p. 130.
10 Carroll, "Mary Ellen Carroll: Response to a Questionnaire on Monuments," 2018, 23, 25.
11 Florian Cramer, "What Is 'Post-Digital'?," *APRJA* 3, no. 1 (2014): 11–23, here 21, https://doi.org/10.7146/aprja.v3i1.116068.
12 Carroll quoted in David Joselit, "A Conversation with Mary Ellen Carroll," *October*, no. 170 (Fall 2019): 120–45, here 135.
13 Cramer, "What Is 'Post-Digital'?," 2014, 13.
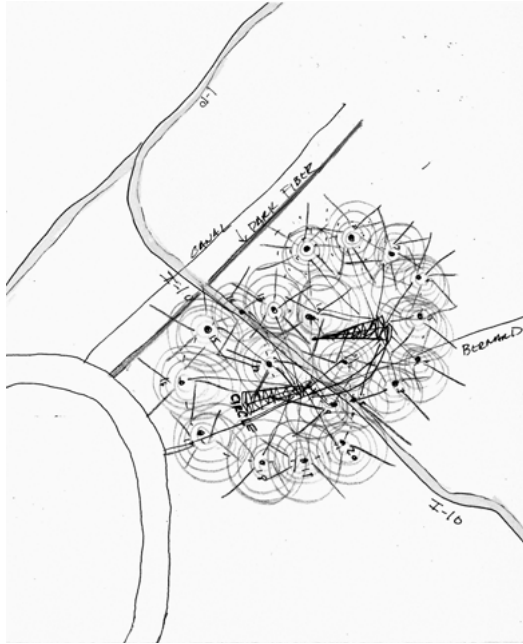
2   Mary Ellen Carroll, *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0,
Proposed Tower Location for Prospect.3
New Orleans*, 2013, ink and colored pencil
and marker on vellum, 8 ×10 in.

operating along the lines of "more subtle cultural shifts and ongoing mutations."[14] One of
the features of Cramer's account of the post-digital is an emphasis on the "hybridity of 'old'
and 'new' media." For Cramer, a "post-digital choice" often entails "giving the 'old' tech-
nology a new function usually associated with 'new media', by exploiting specific qualities
of the 'old' which make up for the limitations of the 'new'."[15] Carroll's proposal imagines
giving the old monument a new function as a wireless transmission tower. It exploits both
the physical features of a structure that stood in total at eighty-four foot high to create an
effective transmitter, while also putting the problem of inequitable internet access in dia-
logue with the history of racism in the United States symbolized by the monument.

The post-digital repurposing of the monument would have corresponded with Carroll's
intention to situate the *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* wireless network along a city-center section of
the I-10 freeway. The drawing, *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0, Proposed Tower Location for Prospect.3
New Orleans* (2013) (fig. 2) maps the freeway with a serpentine yellow line and shows the
position of two potential sites for towers (at the Circle Food Store and on the opposite
side of the I-10), presumably identified as alternatives to the Lee monument.[16] Drawn over

14   Ibid.
15   Ibid., 21.
16   This drawing is also referred to with the alternative title, *Public Utility 2.0 (Drawing of Nodes for a Mesh
Network in Conjunction with Super Wi-Fi Towers and Connectivity in New Orleans)*, and dated 2014
in the *Prospect.3* exhibition catalogue. The title and date detailed in this essay were supplied by Mary
Ellen Carroll in 2022.

these features in green pencil, concentric circles diagram the network's intended field of coverage across the famous neighborhoods of the 7th ward and the Tremé. One of the historical factors that had given shape to the distribution of internet access in New Orleans had been the building of the I-10 during the 1960s. In a brutal act of urban planning, the freeway's passage through the city was designed as a mammoth concrete overpass running along Claiborne Avenue. Prior to the freeway's construction, Claiborne Avenue's oak-lined thoroughfare had housed prospering businesses owned by people of the African diaspora, and doubled as a playground and social gathering place for New Orleanians who were excluded from the city's main retail and business area in Canal Street by Jim Crow laws.[17] When the overpass was built it laid waste to the thriving commercial hub and, as one period commentator put it, transformed the "broad landscaped boulevard into a dingy concrete cavern."[18] The I-10's route through New Orleans corresponded with a well-worn postwar national pattern that saw urban planners racialized as white build freeways in areas predominantly inhabited by populations racialized as black, where land was cheap and opposition to construction weakened by political power structures that worked to exclude people of the African diaspora from public decision-making processes. Not only did the construction of the freeway through the center of New Orleans cause lasting economic damage to the adjacent neighborhoods, but the colossal concrete slab created a physical barrier that would, in future, hinder traditional Wi-Fi coverage for those living in the vicinity of the overpass. The I-10, Carroll suggests, was an "unintended monument."[19]

The city's 7th ward was one of the districts cut into two by the I-10. When *Prospect.3* was staged the ward's broadband usage rates were reported as standing at just 10 percent, in comparison with averages of 56 percent citywide, and 68 percent nationally.[20] In addition

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17   For a discussion of the building of the I-10 in New Orleans in relation to the politics of race, see chapter 4, "Killing Claiborne's Avenue," in Michael E. Crutcher, *Tremé: Race and Place in a New Orleans Neighborhood* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), pp. 50–65. Carroll has noted how the initial plans for the passage of the I-10 through New Orleans were drawn up by urban planner Robert Moses, in Mary Ellen Carroll, "Mary Ellen Carroll: Response to a Questionnaire on Monuments," 25. Moses's work on the Long Island parkway system in New York has long stood accused of being designed to enable affluent car owners, who at the time would have been predominantly racialized as white, to move freely, while restricting the movement of working-class people reliant on buses, who at the time would predominantly have been racialized as black. For a summary of the racial segregation implemented architecturally by the Long Island parkway system, see Ruha Benjamin, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2019), pp. 91–93. However, while the involvement of Moses in the planning of the I-10 helps situate its construction in a broader picture of structural discrimination based on racialization, the specific plan put forward by Moses for the route of the I-10 in New Orleans situated it along the Mississippi riverfront rather than Claiborne Avenue.

18   Peirce F. Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1976), p. 99.

19   Carroll, "Mary Ellen Carroll: Response to a Questionnaire on Monuments," 2018, 25.

20   Nathan C. Martin, "Why Art, Not Google, Could Revolutionize Wifi in New Orleans, an Artist Experiments with a New Model for Connectivity," *Nextcity*, December 22, 2014, https://nextcity.org/features/cities-best-wifi-digital-divide-solution-new-orleans-mary-ellen-carroll-art/ (accessed February 10, 2023). The

to poor wireless coverage, the problem of inadequate access to high-speed internet was compounded by expensive recurring broadband fees that proved prohibitive for many low-income local residents. Brown suggests Carroll's plan to situate the *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* network along the I-10 was intended to link "sectors of the city neglected by private Internet providers because of a perceived lack of economic incentive."[21] Simultaneously, it framed the issue of inequitable internet access in New Orleans in relation to the decades of structural discrimination underpinning it.

If the metaphor of a road as an internet network seems familiar, that is because it is. Video art pioneer Nam June Paik coined the phrase "electronic superhighways" back in 1974 in anticipation of a vast two-way communications system, now recognizable as the internet and Carroll has cited this as an important reference for the work.[22] But Carroll has been clear, she does not deal in metaphor, and in New Orleans she intended a real freeway to route a real network. The framing of the internet as a road, like the title *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0*, positions high-speed internet as foundational infrastructure, akin to utilities such as clean water, sewerage, electricity, and gas. Few today might remember Paik's phrase had it not resurfaced in the 1990s, revived and revised by the Clinton-Gore administration as "information superhighway." (Paik would lament, "Bill Clinton stole my idea.")[23] In her path-breaking 2008 book, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, scholar of media Lisa Nakamura outlines how the emergence of the internet as a mass media in the 1990s was shaped by the political strategy of the Clinton-Gore administration which refused to engage the divisive political issue of race.[24] Nakamura suggests mainstream US politics at that time encouraged a "color-blind" framing of the internet, which often presented cyberspace as an immaterial realm in which the social coding of the body was transcended.[25] Carroll's staging of *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* in New Orleans used the specific political history of the I-10 to center questions of structural racism in its intervention into the issue of local connectivity. The

article also reported that at the time of the triennial, computer devices could be purchased locally for under $50.

21 Brown, "Mary Ellen Carroll," 2014, p. 62.

22 Nam June Paik, "Media Planning for the Post Industrial Age (1974): Only 26 Years Left until the 21st Century," reproduced in *We Are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik*, ed. John G. Hanhardt, Gregory Zinman, and Edith Decker-Phillips (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), p. 163. Carroll has described Paik's pioneering use of televisions as art as catalytic for her interest in sculpting the intangible material of television transmission bands in Joselit, "A Conversation with Mary Ellen Carroll," 2019, 138.

23 Nam June Paik, *Nam June Paik: Becoming Robot*, ed. Melissa Chiu and Michelle Yun (New York: Asia Society, 2014), p. 29.

24 Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 3–5.

25 This stance can by typified by John Perry Barlow's influential 1996 manifesto for cyberspace in which he exalts, "We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth." John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," Electronic Frontier Foundation, https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence/ (accessed May 10, 2022).

post-digital repurposing of the Lee monument would have advanced Carroll's engagement with the historical power relations that had given rise to internet inequity in the city.

Scholar of monuments Paul Farber defines monuments as highly visible "statements of power and presence in public space."[26] By proposing a monument as a wireless transmission tower, Carroll not only envisaged using its visibility to draw attention to the electromagnetic spectrum, but also to suggest this invisible realm is subject to the exertions of political power. *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* concerns efforts to sculpt the electromagnetic spectrum. In the migration from analog to digital television transmission, bands of the electromagnetic spectrum historically used for broadcasting terrestrial television have increasingly fallen into disuse. In response, researchers at Rice University, Houston, developed a software-defined radio technology known as Super WiFi that utilizes these underused bands to create long-range wireless internet networks.[27] The ultrahigh and very high frequencies (UHF and VHF) used for broadcasting analog television have the capacity to transmit over long distances and penetrate dense masses. Super WiFi harnesses these qualities, enabling it to outstrip the limited coverage of traditional Wi-Fi, which travels over only relatively short distances and can be blocked by dense physical structures. *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* utilized Super WiFi in a further layer of post-digital repurposing of old media, in which the "specific qualities of the 'old'… make up for the limitations of the 'new'."[28] As Carroll explained to me, in *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0*, "seemingly obsolete technologies are being essentially retrofitted for contemporary use."[29]

What is radical about *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* is how it models a practicable intervention in the politics of internet access which operates via reconceptualizing the electromagnetic spectrum as a public resource. In the US the spectrum is controlled by the communications regulator, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) who, from 1994 until 2015, auctioned off to the highest private bidder the right to transmit on certain bands.[30] Using a temporary, experimental license issued by the FCC, for the duration of *Prospect.3, PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* was able to model the potential of leaving the bands open as a public resource

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26 Paul M. Farber, "How to Build a Monument," in *Monument Lab Creative Speculations for Philadelphia*, ed. Paul M. Farber and Ken Lum (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020), p. 6.

27 In 2011, Super WiFi was successfully trialled by Rice's researchers in partnership with the charity Technology for All, in a project that supplied free, high-speed wireless connectivity to underserved residents in east Houston. "Houston Grandmother Is Nation's First 'Super Wi-Fi' User," *Science X*, last updated April 19, 2011, https://phys.org/news/2011-04-houston-grandmother-nation-super-wi-fi.html (accessed February 10, 2023).

28 Cramer, "What Is 'Post-Digital'?," 2014, 21.

29 Mary Ellen Carroll, video-conferencing interview with author, June 29, 2022.

30 In 2016, a new policy was introduced known as 'reverse auctioning' in which broadcasters could auction underutilized bands back to the FCC. My understanding of the history of the regulation of the electromagnetic spectrum and spectrum auctions comes from Paul Milgrom, Jonathan Levin, and Assaf Eilat, *The Case for Unlicensed Spectrum*, last modified October 12, 2011, https://web.stanford.edu/~jdlevin/Papers/UnlicensedSpectrum.pdf (accessed February 10, 2023), and Ben Christopher, "The Spectrum Auction: How Economists Saved the Day," *Priceonomics*, last modified August 19, 2016, https://priceonomics.com/the-spectrum-auction-how-economists-saved-the-day/.

like "national parkland."[31] The staging of *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* demonstrated how Super WiFi could supply free connectivity to residents underserved by private providers and priced out by recurring private broadband fees. Carroll's project showed how Super WiFi technology could be leveraged alongside a shift in public communications policy to achieve equitable internet access on a national scale.

Although radical, the type of deregulation proposed by *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* is not un-precedented. At the AIA Center, Carroll also exhibited a range of electronic goods that use Wi-Fi and Bluetooth connectivity, such as printers, cordless phones, laptops, wireless head-phones, and wireless speakers. Either readymades or 3D-printed replicas, the selection of electronic goods invoked the 1985 FCC decision to leave three bands of the electromagnetic spectrum, once referred to as "garbage bands," open for unlicensed use. It was a decision that led to technological innovations including Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. One of the goals of *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* is to try to reshape how FCC policy governs the electromagnetic spectrum. The work sees the practice of sculpture migrate from object to ether.

PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0 takes both the electromagnetic spectrum and public communications policy as its materials. The problem Carroll notes, "with these non-visible materials, how do you make them visible; how do you make them understandable?"[32] The public prominence of New Orleans's monument appeared to offer one solution. Situated at the center of the traffic intersection that bisects the grand boulevard of St. Charles Avenue, it was among the city's most conspicuous public landmarks. Its post-digital repurposing would have mobilized its sculptural presence to bring the politics of the electromagnetic spectrum into public view.

Carroll's proposal was certainly not the first time an artist had planned a monument that doubled as a wireless transmitter. In 1919, Vladimir Tatlin designed a *Monument to the Third International* in honor of Russia's October Revolution. The vast glass and steel tower comprised rotating geometric structures housing a conference hall, an executive committee meeting room, and an information center. At its summit were two radio masts, stretching above a dome housing radio equipment, ready to beam out the Socialist message honed in the information center below. Tatlin's Tower, as it became known, advanced the aims of the "Plan for Monumental Propaganda," authorized by Lenin in 1919, which set out to replace the Tsarist statues of the past with rapidly produced new monuments celebrating Socialist ideals.[33] By uniting the monument with the defining media of the age, both Tatlin's Tower

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31 Brown, "Mary Ellen Carroll," 2014, p. 62.
32 Mary Ellen Carroll, video-conferencing interview with author, June 29, 2022. Carroll addressed this question inside the AIA Center by exhibiting largescale multi-colored diagrams that mapped how the different frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum were portioned up, including showing where the wireless networks supplied by *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* would sit within this schema.
33 My understanding of the history of Tatlin's Tower comes from John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 151–80, and Iliana Cepero, "Reading Tatlin's Tower in Socialist Cuba," *Art Journal* 77, no. 2 (2018): 62–64. On monuments as radio trans-mitters see Mark Wigley, *Buckminster Fuller Inc.: Architecture in the Age of Radio* (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2015), pp. 30–37.

and Carroll's proposal for the Lee monument imagine the monument's political intervention as not only symbolic, but instrumental. But, whereas Tatlin's Tower sought to overturn the monumental landscape of the past by creating a vision of a new monumentality orientated towards the future, Carroll appropriates the monument's history to attend to the concealed power dynamics shaping internet access.

Like several of Carroll's other works, *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* has unfolded over a number of years. Initiated in 2008 and still ongoing, inevitably the discourses of both monuments and the internet have changed during the lifespan of the work. It is undeniable that adequate internet access increasingly affects full participation in many areas of daily life in the industrialized world (including access to work, healthcare, education, and personal financial management), and this was only accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The ongoing challenge of achieving internet equity in the US is reflected by the introduction of the Broadband Justice Act 2021, by Democratic Representatives Emanuel Cleaver and Jamaal Bowman, which sought to update existing utility legislation to expand affordable broadband access to residents of federally subsidized housing.[34] Nonetheless, leading scholars of digital technology, such as Safiya Umoja Noble and Ruha Benjamin, have challenged simplistic narratives of the "digital divide" advanced during earlier phases of the mass uptake of the internet that imply achieving social equality is merely a matter of securing better technological access.[35] Technological innovations made by people of color are minimized. Degrees and gradations of access are flattened. The reproduction of structural discrimination in wider digital ecologies, such as the labor conditions of workers in the Global South involved in both the manufacture of digital hardware and extraction of the raw minerals involved in these processes, are overlooked. The prevalence of narratives that focus on the binary of having or not having internet access have largely been overtaken by more nuanced considerations of the effects of the extent and types of access available to differently racialized, classed, and gendered groups.

The move towards discussions concerned with types of access can be seen reflected by another sculpture made by New York and Los Angeles-based artist Aria Dean (b. 1993). Like Carroll's proposal, Dean's 2017 sculpture, *Dead Zone (1)*, also addresses the internet through symbolism overtly bound to the history of discrimination based on racialization in the US. Dean takes cotton—a material freighted with the symbolism of the Transatlantic slave trade—and preserves and presents a fragile sprig of the plant like a botanical specimen

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34 "Reps. Cleaver, Bowman Introduce Bill to Expand Affordable Broadband to 8 Million Households," Press Release, Congressman Emanuel Cleaver, last modified March 16, 2021, https://cleaver.house. gov/media-center/press-releases/reps-cleaver-bowman-introduce-bill-expand-affordable-broadband-8 (accessed February 10, 2023).

35 The term the "digital divide" was initially promoted by the Clinton-Gore administration to describe the gap between those who did and did not have adequate access to digital hardware, software, connectivity, and education and training in computer technologies, but subsequently came increasingly to signify disparities in access to high-speed internet. See Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), pp. 160–65. Benjamin, *Race after Technology*, 2019, pp. 41–42.

beneath the glass dome of a bell jar. Dipped by Dean in polyurethane, the plant's typically downy cottontails are clagged thick with plastic, and slump into hardened lumps. Invisible to viewers, concealed in the bell jar's thick wooden base is a signal jammer; a device that disrupts the wireless signal between mobile internet devices and local base stations that enable their connection to the internet. Dean imagines producing a connective dead zone, barring internet access for those in the sculpture's immediate vicinity. I say "imagines" because Dean's act is largely rhetorical: in the US signal jammers are illegal to operate (and illegal to own in many other countries). *Dead Zone (1)* imagines disrupting connectivity as a critique of the conditions of online culture itself. Dean's title evokes both the local absence of connectivity supposedly instrumentalized by the sculpture and the millions of African men, women, and children whose enslavement, symbolized by the cotton, was foundational to the emergence of a global capitalist economic system. *Dead Zone (1)* weaves together the themes of connectivity and race to imagine resisting connectivity as a rejection of the online appropriation and commodification of the creative labor of people of the African diaspora. In her 2016 essay, "Poor Meme, Rich Meme," Dean claims: "When we say that the internet extends and exacerbates the same old offline relations, we mean it."[36]

The problem of inequitable internet access certainly did not disappear in the time between the initiation of *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* in 2008 and the creation of *Dead Zone (1)* in 2017, but this period saw a deepening cynicism concerning commercial applications of the internet and its myriad sociopolitical and environmental effects. The rich imaginary of Dean's sculpture offers a productive pairing with Carroll's proposal that reflects the shift in debate over the last decade from questions of access to the unequal power dynamics of wider internet ecologies.

Carroll's submission to the *October* special issue on monuments was bracketed by two images. The image discussed at the start of this essay was accompanied by a counterpart: a close-cropped photograph of the plinth on which Lee had stood, now empty against a clear sky (fig. 3). The statue facing away. The empty plinth. The sequence of images reflects the direction of travel. In 2015, New Orleans City Council voted in favor of removing four high-profile Confederate monuments, including the city's monument to Lee. By then, the maintenance of public symbols of white supremacy had become a matter of intense public debate following the Charleston church mass shooting in 2015.[37] Although Charleston

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36   Aria Dean, "Poor Meme, Rich Meme," *Real Life*, last modified July 25, 2016, https://reallifemag. com/poor-meme-rich-meme/ (accessed February 10, 2023). Dean's position corresponds with recent scholarship on race and technology that articulates how digital technologies, often wrongly perceived as neutral tools, frequently not only reinforce but extend existing forms of racial discrimination, such as Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, Benjamin, *Race after Technology*, and Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). I am grateful to Levi Prombaum for directing me toward Dean's *Dead Zone* series as an instructive comparison with Carroll's proposal.

37   In 2015, a white supremacist entered a Bible study group at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina, and murdered Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Rev. Daniel Simmons
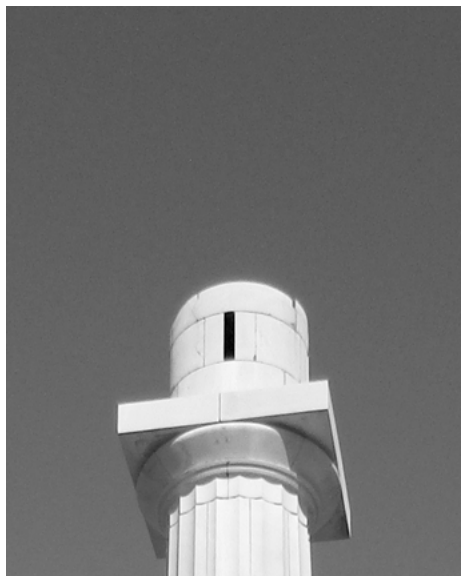
3 Mary Ellen Carroll, *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0, Empty Plinth with General Lee Removed at Lee Circle for Prospect.3 New Orleans*, 2017, silver gelatin print, 8 × 10 in.

represented a tipping point, the groundwork for the removals in New Orleans had been laid by longstanding pressure from local activists, including Rev. Avery Alexander, Angela Kinlaw, Michael "Quess?" Moore, and the activist group Take Em Down NOLA.[38] The racist murders prompted little change to the physical landscape of Confederate monuments in many other Southern cities, but in New Orleans decades of campaigning had set the stage for the Council's decision. Following a series of legal wranglings, in 2017 the bronze figure of Lee was bound with ropes, hostage to a new era, and lifted by a crane from the security of its neoclassical plinth, where it appeared momentarily to tremble in the air before the brooding clouds.

The question remains, what to make of the antennae? The two lines on the photograph signified not only the genuine solution *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0* posed to the problem of inequitable internet access, but Carroll suggests they were provocations intended to prompt the Parks Department to consider the monument's future. She claims, "It was intended that the lampooning of the monument and its transformation into something of utility would

Sr., Rev. Sharonda Singleton, and Myra Thompson, all of whom were people of the African diaspora. Following the attack, media reports emerged showing the perpetrator posing with a Confederate flag, prompting widespread national calls for the removal of public symbols of the Confederacy.

38 For details of the history of monument removal in New Orleans, see Mary Niall Mitchell, "We Always Knew It Was Possible: The Long Fight against Symbols of White Supremacy in New Orleans," *City* 24, nos. 3–4 (2020): 580–93; Taylor & Francis online; Ana Croegaert, "Architectures of Pain: Racism and Monuments Removal Activism in the 'New' New Orleans," *City & Society* 32, no. 3 (2020): 579–602; and Bailey J. Duhé, "Decentering Whiteness and Refocusing on the Local: Reframing Debates on Confederate Monument Removal in New Orleans," *Museum Anthropology* 41, no. 2 (2018): 120–25.

provoke a public discourse that would end up questioning the statue's usefulness *as a monument*."[39] Yet, the achievements of recent "fallist" movements might make it difficult for some to accept a critique of the monument that stops short of an outright call for its removal, particularly when made by an out-of-town artist racialized as white. Symbols are linked to systems, Rhodes Must Fall and Black Lives Matter activists told the world, and the maintenance of monuments corresponds with the maintenance of wider ongoing systems of oppression.[40] At *Prospect.3* Carroll sought to link a symbol to the systems perpetuating internet inequities, focusing on a proposal for the reform of certain systems rather than the outright removal of the symbol. Yet, the fact that Carroll chose to depict the statue of Lee facing away from the camera in the image at the start of this essay intimates that despite her efforts to repurpose the monument she was conscious of its symbolic violence—a violence that could be controlled and mitigated in a two-dimensional representation, but could not be contained when it stood on the streets of New Orleans.

As discussed here, at *Prospect.3* Carroll's proposal for transmission towers went unrealized, and she remains in talks with the triennial's organizers about the future development of *PUBLIC UTILITY 2.0*. Yet, I suggest Carroll's proposal evokes a new definition of a "monument," which strays beyond the term's more frequent uses as a descriptor of figurative statuary, ancient ruins, funerary architecture, memorials, Land Art, and colossal sculptures. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1992), philosopher Michel Foucault describes "discourse in its own volume, as a *monument*."[41] Of course, Foucault was not talking about any of the variety of sculptural monuments listed above, but rather the historically contingent organizing principles of thought that enable the production of knowledge. Carroll's proposal conjures something like an inversion of this, in which the monument is the enunciation of a historically contingent matrix of conditions from which a particular sculptural statement can, or, also crucially, *cannot* emerge. Carroll's proposal helped articulate the landscape of social, economic, political, and cultural systems that had evolved over centuries in New Orleans and the US and, at the time of *Prospect.3*, worked to uphold both the statue of Lee and the unequal levels of internet connectivity in the city. Her proposal exposes the set of conditions unable to countenance its own realization. Carroll did not create a monument in the form of a sculptural intervention. She created a monument as a discourse.

39   Carroll, "Mary Ellen Carroll: Response to a Questionnaire on Monuments," 2018, 24; original italics.
40   Rhodes Must Fall Oxford et al., *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire* (London: Zed, 2018).
41   Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 138–39, original italics. First published as *L'Archéologie du savoir* in 1969.