

## Truth and Historical Amendment: Critical Mending in the Classroom

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We find ourselves in a thorny historical moment, in the United States and around the world. Like my colleagues on the JusticexDesign project—and like many educators—I wonder: How will we support our students in deepening their understanding of the world around them and exploring the complex interplay of histories we are taking part in? In the US, we are debating the fate of American [monuments](#), the legacy of American founders, and the impact of America's own super story on the lived experiences of its people. How might we offer a path of agency to our students that champions historical honesty? And as we guide our students in considering colonial legacies, migration crises, and global economic injustice, what are some ways we might actively value the voices of communities adding their own truth to a contested history, even at terrible risk?

Artist Titus Kaphar's work offers a rich model, pieces "that are honest, that wrestle with the struggles of our past but speak to the diversity and the advances of our present." WIS History teacher Nora Brennan, a colleague in Agency by Design's [Making Across the Curriculum](#) project, and I had been struck by [Kaphar's 2017 TED Talk](#), "Can Art Amend History?" He asks, with his own children in mind, "What is the impact of these kinds of paintings on some of our most vulnerable in society, seeing these kinds of depictions of themselves all the time?" Kaphar concludes by urging us to "amend our public sculptures, our national monuments" in order to expand and deepen our historical narrative.

In the fall of 2018, Nora took her history class to visit the Titus Kaphar collection in the "[UnSeen: Our Past in a New Light](#)" exhibit in the National Portrait Gallery. This experience was clearly powerful for students—we could sense that Kaphar's artworks were shifting their gazes, pointing them to an actively unfolding dialogue on American history. Nora knew she wanted her students to connect more deeply to Kaphar's philosophy of historical amendment. She combined

this art exhibit and the history lessons she was teaching on the Civil War and Reconstruction as the foundation to challenge students to research a Civil War monument and reimagine it.

At the same time, Nora knew it was important to contextualize this project in the very active conversation in the U.S.—and around the world—about [monuments and public memory](#). The controversy around Civil War monuments was and is a real current event—many city and state governments have been taking steps to [address the symbolic presence of historical racial terror embedded in public spaces](#) by tearing down monuments, renaming streets and buildings, etc. We wanted students to situate their thinking within these substantive critiques - not to attempt reconciliation but to explore their own perspective.

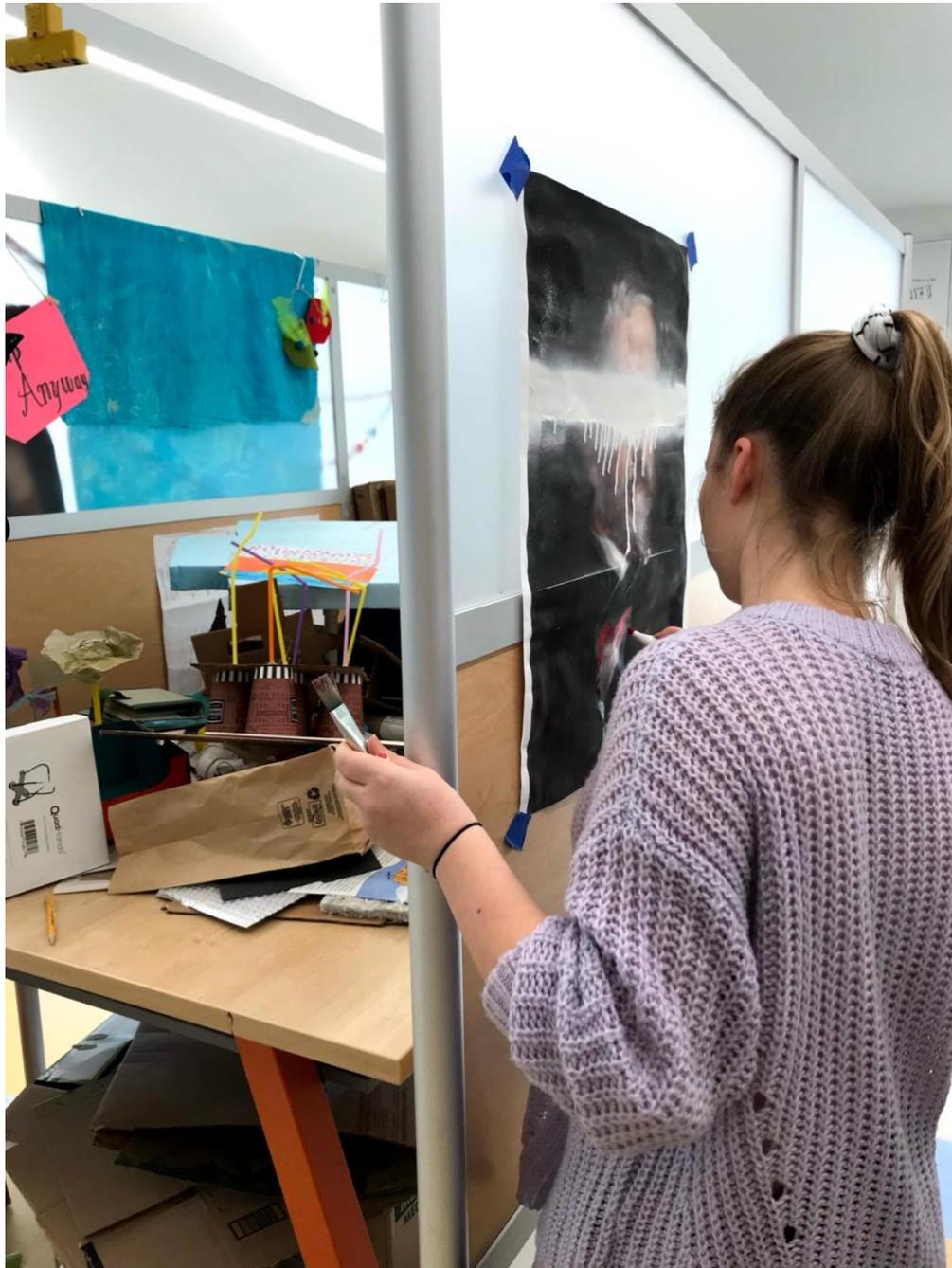
Nora drew on the [Agency by Design framework](#) to build her students’ sensitivity to the design of monuments and portraits. She knew that historical artworks can both express and obscure, offering us complex legacies that we can guide students in unpacking and probing. We wondered what [maker empowerment](#) might look like as students approach a portrait of Robert E. Lee or a statue of John. C. Calhoun.

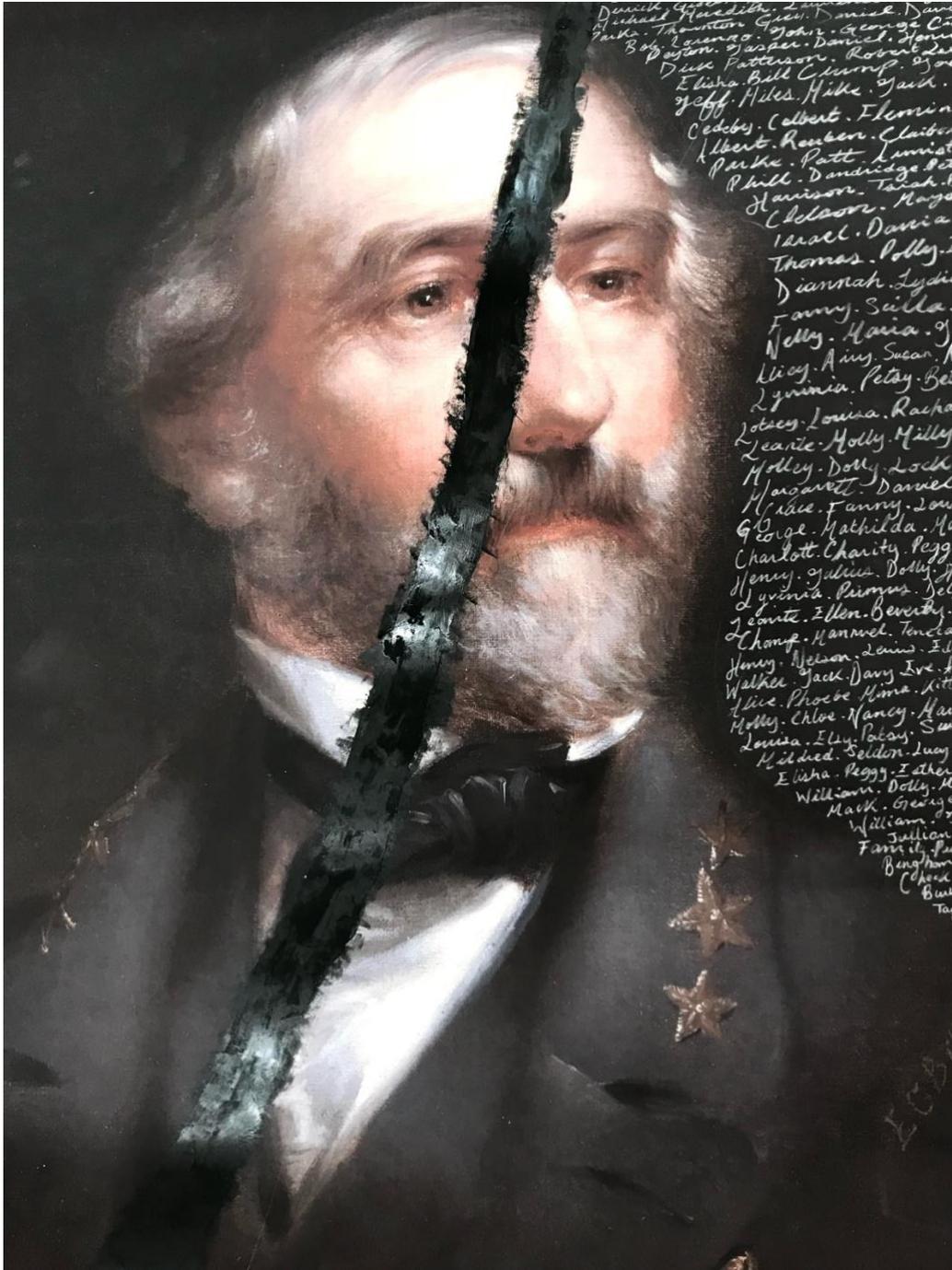


Student redesign of the Emancipation Memorial in Washington, DC, originally commissioned by Freedmen.

To build student capacity to attempt Kaphar’s “historical amendment,” JxD Project Director Sarah Sheya and I are developing a protocol that guides students in critical historical mending — mending together stories that challenge each other in a way that does not obscure or patch over their conflict. We ask students to tell the history of the systems within the piece, affirm the entirety of the struggle(s) and take their own stand.

As part of the JxD cohort, we are working with educators in DC to dive into teaching and learning toward critical historical mending and forthcoming posts will share documentation from classrooms and highlight in more detail the work educators are doing. Critical historical mending is a line of inquiry that we are excited to pursue with teachers across disciplines using the incredibly versatile tool Voice and Choice, developed by Sarah Sheya and several educators in the Agency by Design network, to explore the voices embedded in design, the voices missing, and our own perspectives. As we continue to interrogate designs, systems, and historical legacy with our students, we hope to expand our language and deepen our understanding of the opportunities we each have to reimagine, reshape, and amend our world.





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*Authored by*



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