

**ASHLEY:** "If there are those who want to remember the legacy of the Confederacy, if they want monuments, well, then, my body is a monument. My skin is a monument." Our guest, Caroline Randall Williams, wrote those words in a widely-read opinion column for The New York Times. As a Black Southern woman with white ancestors, her perspective on how America remembers its past is deeply personal.

**RICHARD:** This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

**ASHLEY:** And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

**RICHARD:** This episode is the latest in our podcast series on racism and its painful legacy. Recent protests across the country have led to a much more passionate debate over what to do about Confederate statues and monuments, as well as the namings of buildings and military bases. Should Confederate monuments be repurposed or removed?

**ASHLEY:** Caroline Randall Williams is a poet and Writer-in-Residence at Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

**RICHARD:** She was born and raised in Tennessee. Her Black ancestors include enslaved people and, in the 20th century, a well-known poet, lawyer, and civil rights leader. Caroline has white ancestors, too, and is the great-great-granddaughter of Edmund Pettus, who was a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan and a U.S. senator from Alabama. She joins us from Nashville.

**ASHLEY:** Caroline, you said, "My body is a monument." What do you mean?

**CAROLINE:** When I said that my skin is a monument, that my body is a monument, I arrived at that line by first sort of asking, "Well, what is a monument?" And I came to the conclusion that a monument is a tangible artifact that commemorates or acknowledges the past. There are mixed-race people for whom their light skin isn't a hard story, but for me, the fact that I am a light-skinned Black person in the American South is the result of only hard stories, right? All of my European ancestry happened pre-1910, and it happened in the South, on plantations either during Reconstruction and the birth of Jim Crow or during slavery. And by virtue of those dynamics alone, it's necessarily the result of sexual assault by white men who took advantage of the Black women in my family who were working on the property of those white men.

**RICHARD:** You say that you don't just come from the South, that you come from Confederates. In fact, you write, "I've got rebel-gray blue blood coursing in my veins." Tell us more.

**CAROLINE:** When I wrote that I have rebel-gray blue blood coursing my veins, I was sort of thinking about some of the ways that lines get drawn in this part of the world, throughout any sort of European, Westernized society, about who your ancestors are

and how that does and doesn't give you power. If you're a Southern Conservative organization, and you want to exclude people who are not of you, who are not from you, you wouldn't be leaving out the great-great-granddaughter of a man that was such an important symbol of what they have subsequently built. So my body is a wrench in that works. So, to me, when I point out I have rebel-gray blue blood, I'm saying, "I am from the fancy people that you want to celebrate, and still that truth makes me want to speak out and up and against the people that we come from." I'm not just saying "that y'all come from," I'm saying "that we come from."

**ASHLEY:** Yeah, you say, "Our ancestors don't deserve your unconditional pride."

**CAROLINE:** That's right. I think that people want to be proud of who they come from. It's a natural instinct to protect your own, to celebrate your bloodline, to want to have a sense of belonging that comes from a collective memory. Abiding in that instinct without examining it is really dangerous, and I think that I have to examine that instinct because I can't sit and say, "I celebrate the man who raped my great-great-grandmother the same as I celebrate my great-great-grandmother, who survived that."

**RICHARD:** Tell us more about Edmund Pettus and other ancestors. I know that Pettus served as a senior officer in the Confederate army, and also he was a politician, too, right?

**CAROLINE:** Yes, he was a politician. He was also the Grand Dragon at one point of the Ku Klux Klan. He was a senator from Alabama, a United States senator. I think he died a sitting senator. I'm not as interested in examining the vicissitudes of his life, and I just haven't been because I'm more interested in chronicling the untold stories of my family, and I think that his attachment to him and his legacy is a convenience that I use to amplify the other story.

**ASHLEY:** What do you know about those ancestors? What do you know about the women and men who were African-American and worked on plantations?

**CAROLINE:** My great-grandfather, Will Randall, my mom's grandpa, he was raised in Dallas County and Selma, knowing who his father was, in Selma, Alabama where the Edmund Pettus Bridge still remains in state, where Bloody Sunday took place. Will knew who his father was, and it was interesting because he never learned to read, but he always had a car. We went to a family reunion in Selma a few years back, and people were saying, "The Randalls, they always had more money. They didn't have to do the sharecropping work the same way, and we all know why." There was a different position within even the Black community, and it was complicated because you think, "This man gave his son stuff but didn't let him go to school." He thought there was sort of this strange pride of place but in your place that, as a result, when my great-grandparents were part of the Great Migration, they took my grandfather and his siblings, and they moved to Detroit. And Will Randall, Edmund Pettus's son, my great-grandfather, Will, he never let his wife do any cooking in their

house. He never let her do any of the housekeeping because that was how he was conceived, is by Black women working, doing that domestic labor, and he couldn't stand to watch his wife doing the work that begat him. And my great-grandmother, [Dear 00:07:17], Will Randall's wife, she was also mixed-race. Her mother was a Black woman who worked in the home of another Alabama family, and her father was a white man, as well. We've carried these stories of knowing how these light-skinned babies happen for generations without talking about it.

**RICHARD:** Well, talking about it, is that a way of finding common ground with people of different races and different values and also those who, at least until now, have been skeptical about the protests against these Confederate monuments?

**CAROLINE:** I love that question. I hope that it's the beginning of finding common ground. I've been really encouraged by the response to this article and the number of people that have actually written to me saying that what I said changed their mind.

**RICHARD:** In what ways did they change their minds?

**CAROLINE:** So, when people wrote to me and said that my article changed their minds, I think that they had thought that you could look at this as a one-side-or-the-other discussion. What I tried to do with my article, which seemed to have landed, is that I said, "There is very much an in-the-middle discussion," because it's not saying, "I am asking you to give up your family's story in favor of my family's story." I'm asking you not to look at a white Southern narrative in favor of looking at a Black Southern narrative. I'm asking you to have a conversation with me about the ways that the white Southern narrative and the Black southern narrative didn't just come together in terms of actions in history but in terms of my body, my story. I'm a living intersection of Black Southern narrative and white Southern narrative. I have to have common ground because I do come from both. I am not coming from that perspective saying, "Dismiss your ancestors, Sir." I'm saying, "These are our ancestors, Sir. What are we going to do about it because of the fact of my life?" My life means that whoever it is that we're talking about, we have to examine all of who he was. You have to acknowledge that there are shades to this, there are layers to this. It begins to sort of create a bridge. The article demands that we have a conversation in the middle, in that common ground, because you can't just say there's one side, and then there's another side, and that one is trying to dismiss the other.

**ASHLEY:** Caroline, before you wrote the piece, had you talked about this publicly before, or was this the first time that you went out there with this? I'm curious about whether you've had an... I know this is a really difficult time to have an actual conversation in person with anyone, but have you talked a white Southerner about this who might have previously been on the other side? Have you had an actual conversation either before or after you wrote the piece?

**CAROLINE:** Sure. I've had tons. I think I was raised in private school in Nashville. I went to boarding school in New Hampshire. I did my undergraduate degree at an institution that has a lot of rare air and spaces it likes to create. So I've spent a lot of time with a lot of conservative white people that I love, and the second they start talking about legacy and inheritance and the fear of getting erased, I get to bring out that, "Ooh, I'm related to fancy white people" card and then say, "Let's talk about why you're afraid of erasing this man or examining him." And I've certainly given talks in and around the ideas of the article, trying to get it really organized because what I knew that I did not want to do was write from only a place of rage. I wanted to write from a place of wanting us to all get to the same side of history. I want us all to feel like we can have our dignity and have some sense of shared understanding of American history that we can honor by continuing to push America to be the dream that it says it is in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, rather than even maybe what the founding fathers themselves might have envisioned with their limited perspective. When we say, "Let's get the Constitution to do what it says it wants to do instead of what Thomas Jefferson wrote it to do, let's get the Declaration of Independence to be the claiming of American freedom that Thomas Jefferson said it was but didn't really mean it was," I think people want to get excited about that. And then still you get the resistance of, "It is what he said it was," but we know that that isn't totally true in some functional ways. But I think that when we all say we want it to do what it says it means, I think then we can all then begin to have a conversation about how that happens and what we have to look at to get it there.

**ASHLEY:** You're listening to Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

**RICHARD:** And I'm Richard. This podcast is part of the Common Ground Committee's drive to shed light, not heat on public discourse.

**ASHLEY:** Subscribe to our newsletter at [CommonGroundCommittee.org](http://CommonGroundCommittee.org) and find out about our videos and events. And let us know what you think of the podcast or if you have ideas for future shows. Email us at [podcast@commongroundcommittee.org](mailto:podcast@commongroundcommittee.org).

**RICHARD:** Also, in the newsletter, learn more about whether you share our philosophy over what it means to be a Common Grounder at a time of deep divide. Now back to our interview with Caroline Randall Williams.

**ASHLEY:** Going back to what you said, "I've got all these white conservative people in my life that I love," when you've had these kinds of conversations with them, what have they said, and have they ended up being able to see your perspective?

**CAROLINE:** I think, in the moment, it can often be met with silence, but silence is actually a step forward because it's not... Or silence in that kind of exchange is a step forward because it's not a pushback. It's not a rejection of what I said, and that silence said to me you heard me. This is asking you to do a lot of rethinking and reframing of your position, and I am not going to argue with you right now. I'm going to digest that.

And I think sitting with silence because we're confounded with how to contemplate the past is valid. Being stunned into silence is a valid response to being presented with something you've never contemplated before.

**ASHLEY:** It's a good start.

**CAROLINE:** Yeah, that's right.

**RICHARD:** I'm assuming that you welcomed the growing protests against monuments to Confederate soldiers. That's not a stretch, to say that, right?

**CAROLINE:** That is not a stretch.

**RICHARD:** So what do you think should happen to those monuments?

**CAROLINE:** This is my specific personal preference. I think they belong in museums. I think I have had very powerful experiences at the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. You can see Jim Crow propaganda. You can see Ku Klux Klan ensembles. You can see Nazi uniforms. But they're in context. They're put in the context of how they were used, under what conditions. The monuments, sure, if people want to see them, let's have a place where people can see them, but I don't think that it makes sense to leave them in a place where people can see them and not have to think about what the men who died fighting and then got to be memorialized in them, what they were fighting for. I don't think we should forget that that happened, but I think that we should certainly reframe how we remember it.

**ASHLEY:** Some people say, "Leave them where they are, but put up a plaque to provide some context to the issue." What do you think of that idea?

**CAROLINE:** I'd come to the table to talk about that. I think that responsibly implementing a plan like that would be complicated, and I think that it leaves it open to any number of things: desecration, protests that create more divides than they create healing. Who decides what responsible context is when you leave it up? A healing gesture is an important one. It's the other part. I think that taking something down because it pains someone is valuable. If I have a belief that is important to me to some degree, but somebody that I'm speaking to hears that and says, "That hurts me. It hurts me that you want this, that you like this," I'd stop immediately. And I'd say, "How does it hurt you? Why does it hurt you? I've got to examine why something that I need or want is costing you something." And I think that the people who want the monuments to stay up because of some sense of nostalgia or pride, they have to examine why they think that their sense of nostalgia or pride outweighs generations of pain.

**RICHARD:** You mentioned the Holocaust Museum, which prompts this question. Do you think that the United States could learn from Germany over how it dealt with its Nazi past?

**CAROLINE:** Yes. It's a very delicate conversation to have, and I have a few friends of German descent, and not just German descent, who are from Germany. And one of the things I have found so striking is how, to a person, they are so prepared to discuss the legacy of their ancestors with swift and vigorous reproach. I spent a lot of time thinking, "Well, where are the Southerners, the thoughtful, right-minded, white Americans who are prepared to do that same thing that the Germans did?" Then I thought, "Well, what I really want is a descendant of Confederate soldiers to say, 'I don't celebrate this.'" And then I thought, "Well, I'm a descendant of Confederate soldiers. So I guess I'll do it." But my desire to do that came from my sense of that collective German instinct towards saying, "We did this. We are sorry. We must repair and reframe and acknowledge our responsibility."

**RICHARD:** You say the campaign to remove Confederate statues, to take them away, is not a matter of airbrushing history but of adding a new perspective. How can we do that? How can we add that new perspective rather than just simply removing something?

**CAROLINE:** Well, there is an argument to be made for leaving up the statue and putting up a statue of Frederick Douglass or Ida B. Wells or W.E.B. Du Bois or Harriet Jacobs or Harriet Tubman or Sojourner Truth right alongside. That's another way to do it. I mean, I think that the statues as they stand are a failure to acknowledge the system that those men were fighting for. They only speak to not even just one side of the war or not but one side of the South in that time because the war was fought to keep people enslaved. Even if it's a question of economics, the South's entire economic backbone was based on slavery, right? So, even when you say, "It was about this," still the root of it was about slavery. So, when you look at the monuments out of context, they're celebrating who were fighting and dying to preserve this thing. In order to reframe the past instead of airbrush it, we have to talk about this thing that they were fighting and dying for and why it's right that they lost. We have to put the people who were suffering on the other side of it because, right now, they're only monuments to a white Southern past. They're not monuments that acknowledge the truth of the Black Southern past that was coexisting at the same time in that same space.

**ASHLEY:** So, yeah, there is this much wider discussion now about whether monuments to founding fathers like Washington and Jefferson should also go. They owned slaves. They slept with their slaves. But a lot of people would say they also did a lot of good things and that they are in a different category from some of the Confederates. What do you think?

**CAROLINE:** I think that we are going to have to have a long conversation about that as a country. My short answer is, one, what makes the Confederate monuments distinct

and an easy first step is the simple necessity of acknowledging that the men who fought and died for that cause had declared war against the United States of America, and we are not, as a country, otherwise in the habit of erecting monuments to traitors. The question of Jefferson, the question of Washington, they're good men, and I had the opportunity to say this, I think, the other day on MSNBC. A good man can be an elder in his church and a regular blood donor and a father of five and a responsible lawyer, and then he can have too many drinks at dinner and kill some people in a car accident. It doesn't mean that he wasn't a contributing member of society, but he still has to sit in court and maybe go to jail for what he did. I think we have to think about how people pay for the thing they did that's egregious, even though they did good things, too. And I don't know how the memories of Jefferson and Washington are going to need to pay for the memories of what they did that was egregious alongside their meaningful contributions, but I think the idea that we just give them a free pass because they did great things set a really poor precedent. I don't know what the answer is to how we reckon with them, but I think they do need to be put into a lot more context and under a lot more scrutiny than we have put them under in the past.

**RICHARD:** Saying, "I don't know," and inviting a further conversation is a really honest and, I think, good way to end. Caroline Randall Williams, thank you very much for being on our podcast.

**CAROLINE:** Thank you for having me. It's been wonderful to talk with you all.

**ASHLEY:** Yeah, thank you so much.

**RICHARD:** You all.

**CAROLINE:** Y'all.

**RICHARD:** Caroline Randall Williams. Her op-ed article is called You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument.

**ASHLEY:** This episode is part of our podcast series, Race Matters. Hear more at [CommonGroundCommittee.org/podcasts](http://CommonGroundCommittee.org/podcasts).

**RICHARD:** If you like what you're hearing, please subscribe and download our episodes wherever you listen to podcasts.

**ASHLEY:** Let's Find Common Ground is a production of Common Ground Committee.

**RICHARD:** You know, we always say this, and we mean it. Thanks for listening.