Monuments and Other Things That Change

Several Attempts at Titling a Photograph

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I WAS WALKING THE STREETS OF BISHKEK WITH A camera in hand. I had come to the Kyrgyz Republic to make a film about monuments in the city. Framing monuments, public spaces, and parks through my viewfinder, I felt at once welcomed and estranged, returned and displaced. The urban plan of Bishkek strongly resembled the town in which I spent my childhood. I imagined that I could navigate the city equipped with the memory of my hometown. But I could not. I was an outsider: a speaker of Russian and English but not Kyrgyz and a former citizen of the Soviet Union but not a local of Bishkek.

Out of this disorientation, a project emerged. It encompassed two sculptures, a film, a sixteen millimeter film installation, a film screening featuring experimental videos and documentaries from around the globe that take up monuments as their subject, and a series of talks given at visual ethnography and anthropology conferences. Evolving over several years, between the United States, Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, and Russia, the project became shaped by events as diverse as the annexation of Crimea and a failing relationship. With the recent controversy over the dismantling of monuments to the Confederacy in the United States, my questions and desires for the project, originally crystalized within the context of Bishkek, seem to have come full circle. The conversation, which previously seemed foreign, pertaining to shifting regimes and politics of far away, came home. This encircling urges me to return to the project today.

In 2012 in the National Archives in Bishkek, I found an image that captivated me. It didn't have a title, an author, or a definitive date. The catalog card was remarkably terse: "Bishkek, ca. 1970." The picture depicted a monument during a celebration after it had rained. In the picture, a man was standing by a puddle looking and smiling in the direction of the camera or perhaps a person holding the camera. The frame cropped the monument above the pedestal, but the puddle catches V. I. Lenin in reflection. Because the photographer had

pushed Lenin out of the frame, the image seemed to unwittingly foreshadow other images and events: the collapse of the Soviet Union and dismantling of Lenin from his pedestals all over the former Soviet Bloc.

I originally went to the National Archives looking for images of the removal of another Lenin monument from the main square in the city. I was researching what I came to call "monument rotations" in Bishkek and was particularly interested in a pedestal on the main square that has borne three different monuments in the mere two decades since Independence. My arrival to Bishkek came shortly after a revolution (the second one since Independence) in Bishkek, the northern capital, and a civil war in the south. Each shift in state authority put a new face on the main square of the country: from a Lenin to an allegorical image of Liberty, *Erkendik*, represented by a woman holding a symbol of the Kyrgyz home, to the current statue of Manas, the Kyrgyz epic hero and the mythological founder of the Kyrgyz nation.

In combing through the archives, I had an idea of what I was looking for—something resembling a scene from Wolfgang Becker's film *Good Bye Lenin* (2003),[1] where a shot follows a statue of Lenin flying through midair. In the film the protagonist's mother falls into a coma and sleeps through the fall of the Berlin Wall, unwittingly waking to a changed Berlin. The protagonist and the viewer both know that Lenin is being taken down from his plinth, but what the unknowing mother sees is Lenin on his way to a pedestal. Moved by the image from the film—an overwhelmingly literal illustration of the ambiguous state of transition and the fall of the Eastern Bloc—I wanted to seek out other such symbolizations. I found this image instead (figure 15.1). This image doesn't depict the monument in a state of transition. In this image the monument exists and does not exist simultaneously.

This image is symmetrical, split by a reflection, as if a metaphor for the photographic medium itself—the medium of reflections. In this image there is a mystery—no title, no author, no definitive date. The limited entry on the catalog card seemed to invite a wide variety of interpretations. I accept the invitation, and I give this image four different titles, four stories, four possible readings, hoping to find various ways of looking at the monument from the outside and within.

TITLE ONE: "A DISMANTLING OF THE MONUMENT TO V. I. LENIN ON DERZHINSKIY STREET (FUTURE ERKENDIK BOULEVARD), CA. 1970, BISHKEK, KYRGYZSTAN."

On Chuy Street, two kilometers from two Manas monuments. One is from the early 1970s; the other was put up after the 2010 revolution. This doubling echoes the two Lenin monuments that stood two blocks apart in Bishkek, ca. 1970. One stood in the spot of the new Manas until 2003. The other was cap-

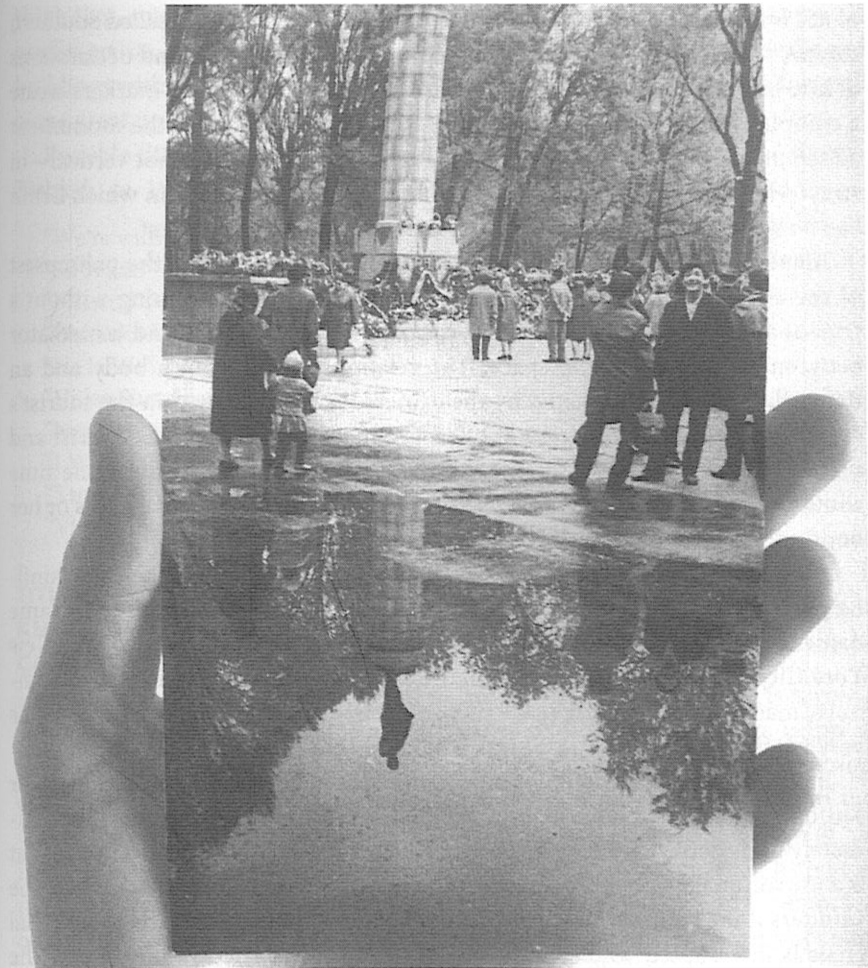

Figure 15.1. The Photograph: Anonymous, Untitled, ca. 1970, Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic. Archived at Kyrgyz National Archives, Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic.

tured reflected in the puddle of rainwater by the anonymous photographer. Why isn't Lenin in the frame here? Did the anonymous photographer think, what's the harm in one less Lenin?

In the picture, Lenin is cropped out of the frame, cut off his pedestal, dismantled, twenty years before countries all over the former Soviet Bloc—in Europe and Central Asia—began taking Lenins down from their pedestals and replacing them with celebrated poets, national leaders, and mythic heroes.

Whereas many post-Soviet cities have erased artifacts of state socialism, in Bishkek, Soviet-era and postindependence monuments often share the same

block. Similarly, postriot ruins and racist graffiti in Osh, the so-called Southern capital, share walls with a very different kind of graffiti—tags and declarations of love layered over the city's faded wall texts. These bittersweet markers create a complex image of a country in transition. Like the image of the monument edited out of the frame, they propose a view of history that is not vertical—in strata—but a horizontal web of interconnected events, a space in which Lenin can be both on and off the pedestal at the same time, a palimpsest.

Mentally holding the image from the archives, I navigated the palimpsest of the city on foot. And I carried my camera everywhere, filming without a tripod, and letting it be at once an entry point into a space and a mediator between my body and the space. The relationship between a body and an unfamiliar space, as mediated by the camera, is common within the tourist's experience. The camera serves at once as a mediator between the tourist and place: it frames the place for the vulnerable outsider and, at the same time shuts the tourist out of the place, creating a barrier or a veil between his or her body and the place.

Yet I was not quite a tourist. In many ways, I experienced Bishkek as a familiar post-Soviet urban space. Russophone, many of the streets bearing the same names as in my hometown in Russia, the town I left over a decade ago for New York City. Monuments, the layout of the city, trademarks of Soviet urban planning, made this unfamiliar place recognizable to me. At the same time I was very much outside of it—a cultural, historical, and even a linguistic foreigner.

In a story I once read as child, a woman could never get lost in an unfamiliar setting, guided by a mind map of the house in which she grew up. She ultimately finds herself in a foreign country, where she happens upon a house that is a mirror image of her childhood home.[2] Bewildered by this coincidence, she wonders if the memory has ever truly been hers to begin with. This existential crisis is interrupted when she finds a flaw in the reflected home, cracks the code of the faulty mirror, and forgets her childhood home completely. Without this mental guide, she becomes a true foreigner in a foreign land, finally able to be lost at last. If I am lost, do I see the city better?

My favorite graffiti in Bishkek: someone had scratched, "I'm a monument" into a city wall. Did the author of this anonymous gesture suggest that graffiti is a form of commemoration and remembrance? Was she, more radically, claiming monument status for herself? "I'm a monument" questions the function of a monument in the city. We think of monuments as erected by the government as a form of communication with the people, not the other way around. Perhaps this is what allows one pedestal to accommodate different messages, depending on the regime. This artist reverses the communication by claiming her graffiti to be a monument. I've turned to various wall texts and graffiti to seek out captions or possible titles for my photograph. I'd like to

think that, much like the author of "I'm a monument," the city's anonymous graffiti artists, vandals, and subversives were writing on the sides of walls and buildings with the purpose of titling my found photograph, as though through some great unconscious collective effort.

Possible titles of the untitled photograph of the monument to V. I. Lenin, Bishkek, ca. 1970:

"We're with the Nation"
"So What?"
"I [heart] You"
"Bishkek I Love You"
"He Is We"
"Video Surveillance"
"November 9th, 2013"
"I Went Out to Get Bread to Tashkent"
"Tsoi is Alive"
"Victor Tsoi is Alive, 2012"

TITLE TWO: "LENIN IS FLOATING IN A PUDDLE OF RAINWATER, KNOCKED OFF HIS PEDESTAL BY AN ANONYMOUS SUBVERSIVE CAMERA, CA. 1970"

I am turning the photograph around in my hands. The photograph is turning Lenin on his head. The specific gesture of the photographer to leave Lenin in the puddle reveals the unique meaning of a subversive action during the period often identified as Late Socialism (dated roughly from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s). The anthropologist Alexei Yurchak examines Late Socialism in his influential work *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More*. In it, he rejects the Cold War binary that an individual must choose to either actively embrace or subvert sociopolitical life, insisting that many Late Soviet citizens actually opted to do neither. Instead, they remained outside the state, even while their citizenship and geographic embedment positioned them very firmly *within* it. He turns to the Russian term *vnye*, to define this experience further.

> To be *vnye* usually translates at "outside." However, the meaning of this term, at least in many cases, is closer to a condition of being simultaneously inside and outside of some context—such as, being within a context while remaining oblivious of it, imagining yourself elsewhere, or being inside your own mind. It may also mean being simultaneously a part of the system and yet not following certain of its parameters.[3]

With the concept of *vnye*, defined as a unique state of being simultaneously inside and outside a state-assigned social setting or ritual, Yurchak proposes a radical refiguration of Late Socialist historiography, dismantling the com-

mon Cold War–born assumption that the Soviet experience was inherently polarized. Taken in Soviet Bishkek, probably in the 1970s, my found image exemplifies the monument to Lenin in the state of *vnye*, as both depicted and excised, both present and absent. Furthermore it reveals *vnye* as a possible motivation behind the image.

In Soviet Kyrgyzstan, the period of Late Socialism is linked with a revival of Kyrgyz cinema, the so-called Kyrgyz New Wave, known as "The Kyrgyz Miracle." It was a movement in the arts that challenged the accepted narrative of history through visual narration in film. Films such as *The White Mountains* (1964)[4] and *The Sky of Our Childhood* (1966), among others, veiled their often-controversial ideas in visual metaphor and cultural references obscure to the censors in Moscow. In *The White Mountains*, a young man stumbles upon a burned down encampment where only one yurt has survived. There he falls in love with a girl, who is soon to be married off to a rich *bai* (herdsman). Maybe the love story helped the film escape censorship. In small moments of dialogue, imagery, and music, the film illuminates a moment in Kyrgyz history that came to be known as the Kyrgyz genocide and the exodus of 1916.

After Kyrgyzstan became part of the Russian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century, Russian settlers moved into fertile lands, pushing the Kyrgyz out and sparking an uprising that the empire violently put down. Until the Bolshevik Revolution ended the genocide, thousands of Kyrgyz died or fled to China. In the film, there is no one left to bury the dead. There aren't even any yurts left to perform the burial ritual. Only the yurt's skeletal frames remain, as if the whole country has become a cemetery. Although obscure outside of Kyrgyzstan, the film has a second title, *Difficult Crossing*. It alludes to the girl's perilous escape to the other side of the river, which her lover does not survive. And it suggests another painful transition—a difficult parting with the past.

By the 1970s, photographers all over the Soviet Bloc were shooting Lenins in puddles, in pieces, and off pedestals. Was the author of the image an artist of the "Kyrgyz Miracle"? Did he try to get rid of it, afraid of the anti-authoritative connotations it might carry but couldn't bring himself to destroy it? Did he hide it in the safest place of all—the dusty archives—certain that no one would face digging in the bins, wrangling with grumpy archivists, and deciphering cryptic handwriting on a catalog card, just to find her small picture? Not to mention the dangers of actually finding the photograph, looking at it, or possessing it, even if only in memory? Did this image and others like it cause the collage and the ultimate dismantling? How dangerous was it to break with the past in the 1960s? In the 1970s? In the 1980s? In 2012? In 2017?

On a pedestal outside of Bishkek, Lenin's dates of birth and death are engraved. Was it a fluke, an anomaly, a Freudian slip, or another subversive act

that slipped by the authorities: to bring Lenin's mortality into focus and to turn a pedestal into a gravestone?

TITLE THREE: "THE HAUNTED PEDESTAL: GHOST OF LENIN APPEARING IN A PUDDLE OF RAINWATER. INDEFINITE DATE"

What if the monument to Lenin was already removed at the time this photograph was taken and his captured reflection is simply a trick of photo processing? What if the monument to Lenin was already removed at the time this photograph was taken and the reflection is a ghostly apparition of Lenin, peeking through the veil of history?

In Bishkek of 2012, when the memories of both revolutions and the civil war in the south were still fresh, one couldn't ignore the ghosts. One such ghost is the monument to Liberty, *Erkendik*. It was a gold-plated statue of a winged woman, reaching up to the sky, holding a *tyunduk*, an element of the traditional Kyrgyz home, the yurt, and symbol of the Kyrgyz nation, which also appears on the Kyrgyz flag. In 1999, *Erkendik* stood in the place of Lenin in the photograph from the archives, before being moved to the main square. After the second revolution of 2010, the monument to Manas replaced *Erkendik*. Since then, she has been a phantom that appears on outdated postcards and in documentaries—all monuments in their own right.

In Dalmira Telepbergenova's documentary film, *Crash Down from the Seventh Floor* (2005),[5] the author tries to make sense of the violence of 2005, outraged by the brutality of the revolution that overthrew Kyrgyzstan's first president, Askar Akaev, in what is known in the West as the Tulip Revolution. One thing about this therapeutic exercise in filmmaking that interests me is what the camera framed by accident. Here the *Erkendik* monument is cropped out of the frame, leaving an empty pedestal, already a ghost (figure 15.2).

Kyrgyzstan was again the scene of unrest and riots in 2010, when ethnic clashes between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek population in the south of the country led to a full-blown civil war in Osh. The ghostly remnants of that violence—the ruined bazaar, the graffiti, the rubble—are impossible to ignore. Some graffiti, demarcating ethnic neighborhoods, has been painted over, but it still peeks through, like a ghost appearing through a layer of time. When I went to the bazaar to film the ruins, it happened to be the first day that the city started cleaning up the ruins in two years.

Also, in Osh, I saw another strange relic: a one-handed Lenin who was once pointing into the bright socialist future. Unlike the "main" Lenin monument that towers over Lenin square, down Lenin Street on an enormous pedestal and with plenty of space for a viewer to contemplate his magnitude, my one-handed Lenin floats over a sea of greenery in a small park near a hospital. The park is overgrown, unkept. The only sign of someone paying attention

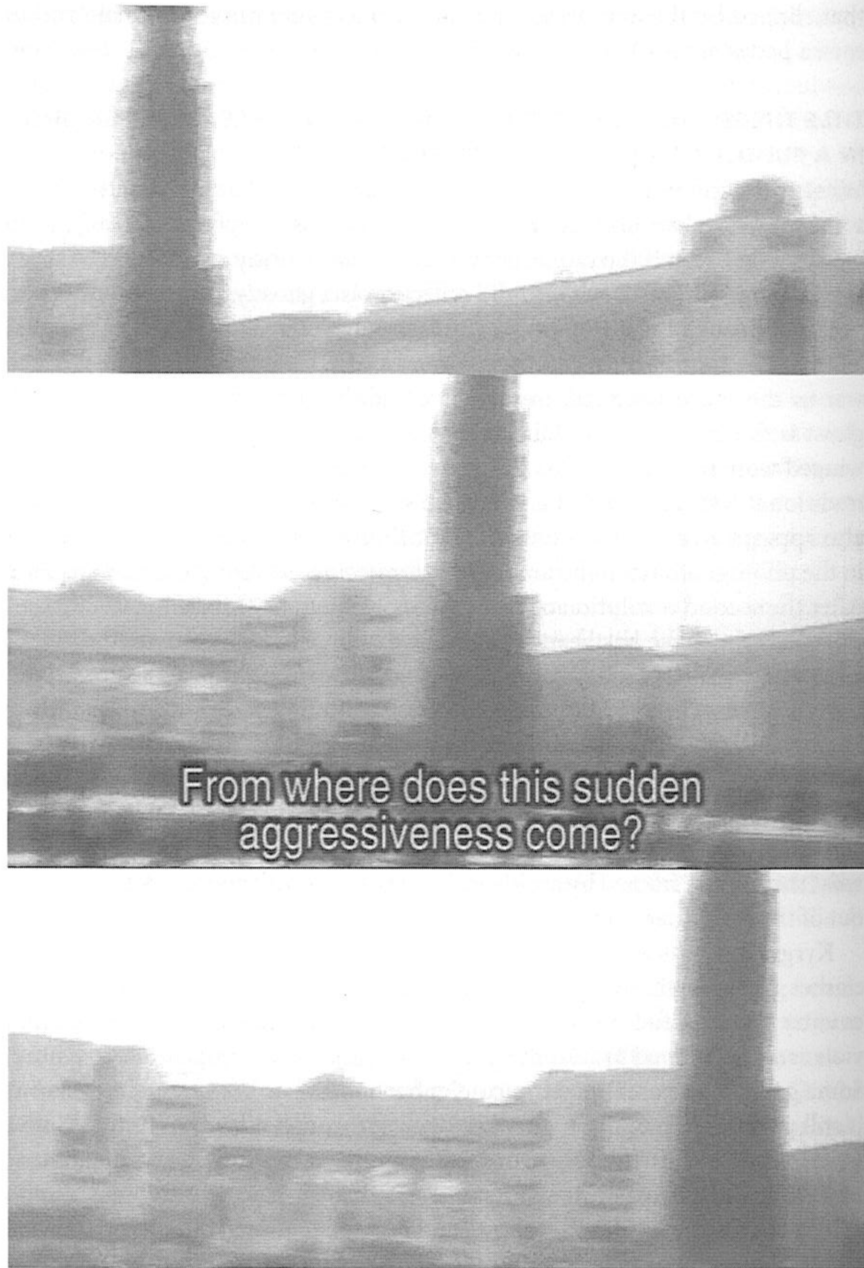

Figure 15.2. Monument to *Erkendik* (Liberty) cut out of the frame; film still from *Crash Down from the Seventh Floor* (*Vniz s Sed'mogo Etazha*). Dalmira Telepbergenova, dir., 2006, Kyrgyz Republic.
Courtesy of the author.

to this abandoned park are shiny *tyundyuks* welded onto the rusting gate—a reminder of the 2010 events and a territorial marking of the space of Kyrgyz.

My one-handed Lenin is almost to scale, life sized. He stands on a humble pedestal but remains the tallest construction in the park. What remains of other monuments and skeletons of once-benches is covered in graffiti. Lenin is also signed in the front and back.

Perhaps removing Lenin's hand is an artistic act, and the auteurs signed their names on Lenin's pedestal and body after finishing the job. Perhaps they are the same artists who took my picture. Perhaps undermining Lenin through the photographic medium was not enough for them, and they needed to physically disarm him. Like the author of "I'm a monument," the graffiti artists level the field with Lenin.

TITLE FOUR: "PORTRAIT OF AN UNKNOWN MAN BY AN UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER BY THE STATUE OF VLADIMIR ILYICH LENIN ON THE DAY OF HIS BIRTHDAY FLOATING IN THE PUDDLE OF RAINWATER"

The found photograph is a personal picture like so many in Soviet families, including my own: beside monuments, against the backdrop of history. I look at the photograph through a veil of shared history and see faces of my mother and her sisters, young, dressed up, posing in front of a monument to Lenin in their hometown in Russia. Taken in the 1970s, those snapshots embrace and inhabit the liminal space of *vnye*.

In this image, the man is standing by the puddle, looking straight into the camera, smiling. He is the only one in this scenario facing away from Lenin and remains anonymous like the photographer. At the same time he is extremely familiar, posing in front of the monument for the camera. Did he come to the monument with the photographer to get his picture taken next to Lenin? Could he be a foreigner like me? Is he a friend, a sibling, a lover of the photographer? These possibilities form an entryway into the image. A personal story and a mystery emerges from this photograph, one that exists in sync with revolutions and riots; regime shifts; and political, social, and cultural histories yet remains outside of the subversive act read into the image earlier.

Maybe the photographer came to the celebration as others lay flowers at Lenin's pedestal. Maybe it's Lenin's birthday in April, Bishkek's rainiest month. He or she comes there and chooses to cut out the hero of the occasion. It is an accidental transgression, perhaps, to leave Lenin lying in the cold puddle. But more so, it's a personal decision, to put this smiling man literally before the state.

POSTSCRIPT

Lenins started falling all over Ukraine during the Euromaidan protests in late 2013, like they did in the 1990s. At the same time in Russia, renovated Lenins—once dismantled or vandalized in the late 1980s and early 1990s—were erected back onto their pedestals. As through the window of the found Bishkek photograph, I was seeing Lenin on his way to and off the pedestal once again. Have I been looking at the Bishkek photograph upside down all along, mistakenly taking the reflection for the original? By reading the present into this image of the past, might we begin to see the future in the images of the present?

Through the many windows of my screen, I followed video reportages of Michael Khodorkovsky and members of the Russian activist art group Pussy Riot as they were released from prison, in the ominous gesture of the state's generosity before the upcoming Olympic Games in Sochi. My thoughts returned to the 1980 Summer Olympics in the Soviet Union, when twenty-four countries led by the United States boycotted the Games, a mere decade before its dissolution. My thoughts returned to a mural I saw when I was traveling in Osh, with the Olympic Bear and the date "1980" depicted on it in commemoration of the event, intact, sharing the street with a mosque, a bank, and the burned down remnants of the 2010 ethnic riots.

In 2014, when it came time to record the voiceover for the film, the Russian Federation annexed Crimea. In the middle of the recording, my voiceover actress, Yelena S., who it turned out was originally from Crimea, went off script. She spoke of the intensity she experienced seeing her hometown on the front

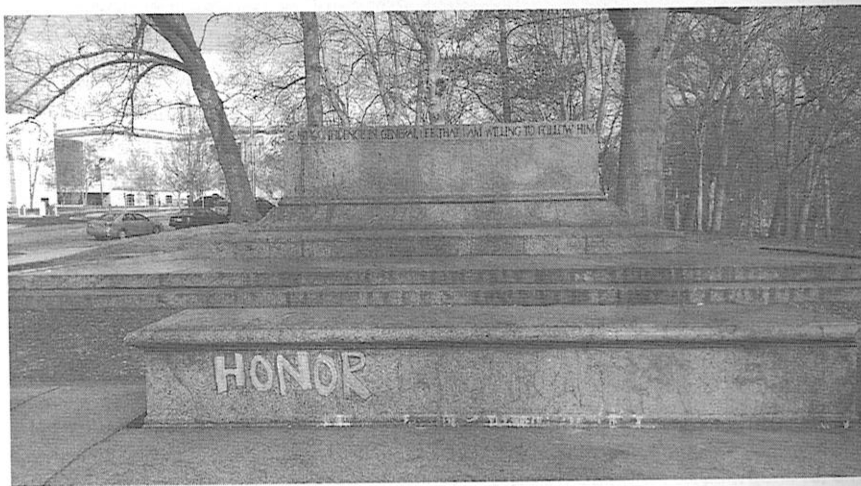

Figure 15.3. Empty pedestal that once supported a double equestrian statue to Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee and graffiti: "HONOR" and "HISTORY," Baltimore, Maryland, 2017.
Courtesy of A.K. Gatewood.

page of the *New York Times*; of the helplessness she felt being *here*, in America, while things are happening *there*; of not being able to let go and not knowing how to locate her responsibility from the liminal space of *vnye*, of being in between languages, countries, nationalities.

Today, I'm captivated by a different image, of a different pedestal. The image has an author and a definitive date. The picture is of an empty pedestal that once supported a double equestrian statue to Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee in Baltimore, Maryland. In the early morning of August 16, 2017, the statue was removed. A few weeks later, my friend A. K. Gatewood took a picture of the empty pedestal on her morning jog and emailed it to me (figure 15.3).

I'm drawn to the graffiti: two words are painted on the bench, in the foreground of the image. "HONOR" is in pale yellow with a black outline. "HISTORY," perhaps painted by the same hand, and now erased by a different hand, is barely legible.

NOTES

1. Wolfgang Becker, dir., *Good Bye Lenin!* (Los Angeles, CA: Sony Pictures Classics, Hollywood Classic Entertainment, 2003), DVD.
2. Milorad Pavic, "The Warsaw Corner" ("Varshavskij Ugol"), collection *Russian Hound (Russkaya Borzaya)*, 1979 (Amfora, Russia, 2000).
3. Alexei Yuchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 129.
4. Melis Ubukeev, dir., *The White Mountains/Difficult Crossing* (*Belye Gory/Trudnaya Pereprava*) (USSR, 1964), published in *Two Epochs of National Self-Determination in Central Asian.*
5. Dalmira Telepbergenova, dir., *Crash Down from the Seventh Floor* (*Vniz s Sed'mogo Etazha*) (Kyrgyz Republic, 2005), published in *Two Epochs of National Identity Formation: Documentary Films of Central Asia* (Budapest: The Open Society Institute, 2008), DVD.