Within the discourse about Confederate statues in the United States and what should be done with them, the issue of the meaning or intentions behind the monument’s construction is frequently discussed. This context is what Lloyd Bitzer describes as the rhetorical situation: “the context in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse” (Bitzer 1). While a monument may not be a speech or piece of writing, its rhetorical situation is still able to be analyzed by looking at its exigence, audience and constraints to properly understand its context (Bitzer 6). In the case of controversial Confederate monuments, rhetorical analysis can help a person make an informed decision when approaching this issue. When exploring the context of Confederate
monuments, one must first be aware of the historical context of the time period of a monument’s erection, as well as the history of the American Civil War. Understanding the history of the Civil War has been made more difficult than other historical events because of the Myth of the Lost Cause, “a romanticized recounting of Confederate history” used to justify the Confederate secession by pushing the narrative that secession was a noble act to protect states’ Constitutional right to secede from the Union, rather than simply to protect the institution of slavery that was being threatened at the time (Hartley 24).

The notion of protecting states’ rights, specifically the right to own and sell slaves, was very important to the southern states at the time, as well as to southern politicians like John C. Calhoun. While Calhoun never lived to see the Civil War occur, he has been considered “the ideological godfather of the Confederate cause,” as his views of states’ rights and slavery lie at the center of the war’s cause (Roberts and Kytle). With Calhoun’s famous view of slavery as “a positive good,” as well as the time period of its construction, the John C. Calhoun Monument previously located in Marion Square in Charleston, South Carolina is clearly a monument that should be rhetorically analyzed (Roberts and Kytle). In analyzing the exigence, audience and constraints of both the erection and removal of the monument, it becomes evident that the rhetorical situation of the statue of Vice President John C. Calhoun in Marion Square delivered a skewed historical narrative as a tool to intimidate African Americans during the era of Jim Crow, as well as to glorify Calhoun and the Confederacy.

Visually, the John C. Calhoun Monument was very simple. Originally about 90 feet in height (but later 115 feet in the second version), the monument featured Calhoun atop a parapet with a cloak over his shoulders, his right hand placed upon his hip, his left hand holding a scroll,
and an intimidating scowl shown on his face looking down on his observers (*A Monument to Mr. Calhoun, Collections*). Standing tall in a large, open area in Downtown Charleston, the John C. Calhoun Monument notably was situated in front of the Citadel, a military college originally founded as an arsenal to better police the slaves of the area after a failed insurrection in 1822 (Roberts and Kytle). The words “Truth, Justice and the Constitution” are engraved in the base of the statue, as those words describe the “sacred memory” of John C. Calhoun that the Ladies’ Calhoun Monument Association, the sponsors for this monument, wished to keep alive (Cunningham and Lamar 4). These feelings of admiration were not exclusive to the LCMA, as most White South Carolinians of the time considered Calhoun to be a hero. The widespread fame and respect for John C. Calhoun and his death on March 31, 1850 are ultimately what inspired the LCMA, the Ladies’ Calhoun Monument Association, to begin preparing a memorial statue in his honor (History.com). The association faced many constraints along the way, having to depend on wealthy Charleston philanthropists who shared their vision of Calhoun to fund the statue’s construction for several decades (Smith). Not only did the ladies face financial setbacks, but the start of the Civil War in 1861 slowed progress substantially, with a surge in pushback against anything associated with Calhoun (Roberts and Kytle). However, on April 27, 1887, nearly forty years since his death, the first unveiling of the John C. Calhoun statue was finally celebrated. On the day of this celebration, well-known southern writer and Confederate sympathizer E. B. Cheesborough’s ode to Calhoun was published in Charleston’s *The News and Courier* alongside the unveiling announcement. Cheesborough described Calhoun as a southern savior sent from God; the “Great Champion of Truth” (Cheesborough). With the undeniable support and love for the late vice president his stances, white Charlestonians of the post-Civil War era focused on this admiration to cope with their loss of the war. In glorifying and memorializing Calhoun, the
Ladies’ Calhoun Monument Association, Cheesborough and many other southerners began to construct and perpetuate the Lost Cause Myth, as described by Roger C. Hartley.

The Cult of the Lost Cause, as stated by Hartley, is “a romanticized recounting of Confederate history … to assuage ex-Confederate leaders’ anxieties that history would view them as murderers and traitors who had engaged in a rebellion” (Hartley 24). In other words, southerners after their defeat in the Civil War were embarrassed and paranoid, and to try to escape blame or guilt they decided to try to re-write history. They did this in many forms, but most notably they portrayed their Lost Cause Myth through monuments (Hartley 24). Mass producing pro-Confederate monuments during the late 1800’s in the south was admittedly a smart choice in the effort to control history, as due to anti-literacy laws forbidding enslaved people from learning to read in several southern states, nine-tenths of all slaves remained illiterate, with even one-tenths of the poor white southern population also being unable to read (Schweiger 333-335). Inaccessibility of education and low literacy rates carrying into the post-emancipation era made art such as statues a particularly effective method of portraying messages to lower class and newly freed Americans (Hartley 37). In the case of the John C. Calhoun memorial, what seemingly began as a tribute to a late beloved political figure became more notably a silent threat to newly freed Americans as part of a larger attempt to erase Confederate embarrassment from the nation’s history.

In this distortion of history, monuments like the one to Calhoun in Marion Square used to try to gaslight and/or intimidate Black Americans into a submissive role to preserve the ego of white upper-class southerners. And though statues like the John C. Calhoun Monument remained in place for hundreds of years, the intended audience of these tricks was not so easily subdued.
Black Charlestonians did not forget the man that Calhoun was, nor did they forget the messages his presence continued to send their way. Though nothing about the statue mentioned slavery, the placement of one of South Carolina’s most notably pro-slavery politicians upon a pedestal in a city which previously had been heavily involved in the slave trade told a story that did not need words. In the eyes of Black Americans, the Calhoun Monument implied that the end of slavery justified segregation, as the era of Jim Crow was just beginning. Mamie Garvin Fields, born in Charleston in 1888, stated that “As you passed by, here was Calhoun looking you in the face and telling you, ‘[racial slur redacted], you may not be a slave, but I am back to see you stay in your place’…he looked like he was telling you there was a place for [racial slur redacted] and [they] must stay there” (Roberts and Kytle). More broadly, Fields and other Black Charlestonians agreed that “white people were talking to us about Jim Crow through that statue” (Roberts and Kytle).

Protests and vandalism never ceased despite the restrictions of Jim Crow, and Black citizens often made a point to bring tools to deface the statue whenever convenient (Roberts and Kytle). Though the first make of the John C. Calhoun Monument was unveiled in 1887, it did not survive more than two decades before newly freed men and women vandalized it to the point of unrecognizability. Despite the challenges the Ladies’ Calhoun Monument Association faced in their initial construction of the statue, once white conservatives regained social control and brought the era of Reconstruction to an end, the second and longest-standing version of the John C. Calhoun Monument was dedicated by the LCMA in 1896 (Roberts and Kytle). This version was not only reconstructed but was made to stand more than 20 feet taller than the original in an effort to prevent vandalism (Roberts and Kytle). Though the statue of Calhoun himself sat much taller and was more difficult to deface, the base of the structure was continually vandalized from
the time of its construction into the modern day. For more than 120 years, the John C. Calhoun Memorial would be defaced then repaired on a continuous basis (Roberts and Kytle). And it was not until June of 2020, during a dramatic surge in Black Lives Matter protests, that the statue of Calhoun was finally removed (Porter).

Just as the construction of the John C. Calhoun Memorial was brought about by exigencies within the frame of its time period, so was its removal. In the 124 years that the memorial stood over the city of Charleston, the target audience for the statue’s message had gained many more liberties than they had in 1896. With the end of Jim Crow and later the introduction of global internet connection, racial injustices that would be considered all-too common in the 1800s have since become exigence for national—even global—protest. The understanding of John C. Calhoun’s values and the historical context of the time period in which he held those values were never forgotten by the people of Charleston, and the rhetorical situation of the statue which towered over the city became a subject of analysis as humanity moved into a more progressive time. Though many citizens were displeased with the presence of the memorial, and notions to properly contextualize the piece had been brought to light in recent years, ultimately the exigence for the memorial’s removal was the wide-spread social unrest resulting from the death of George Floyd, a Black man in Minneapolis killed by police a month prior to the statue being removed (Porter). When even proper contextualization was impossible to be agreed upon for the monument in 2015, the urgency of the Black Lives Matter Movement in summer of 2020 resulted in a unanimous decision for the removal of the statue all-together (Porter). And as the Black population of Charleston were the intended audience for the harmful message of John C. Calhoun for hundreds of years, they also were the group most positively affected by the long-overdue removal. Though the romanticized legacy of John C. Calhoun is
still deeply rooted in the city of Charleston, the face of the man who fought to enslave Black Americans until his dying breath no longer looks down upon them and perpetuates the monument’s original intended narrative.
Works Cited:


