



KELVIN PARNELL JR.:

Reclaiming Space Through Art, Activism and Joy

By Emily E. Stock, A'17

When Kelvin Parnell Jr. came to Duquesne for his freshman year in 2012, the buildup of the 2012 presidential election made him excited to dive into his studies as a political science major. However, in his first semester, he changed his major to history after taking his first college history class and falling in love with its study.

As he progressed, he eventually became a double major in art history and history. During his senior year, he started working with the Hill House Foundation's recovery project for American sculptor Selma Burke's *Together* statue. "I knew then my passion was sculpture."

Parnell—a Canonsburg, Pa. native and a 2016 Duquesne graduate—is currently pursuing his doctoral degree in art and architectural history from the University of Virginia (UVA) in Charlottesville, Va. His work focuses on 19th-century American art with specific attention to bronze sculpture and the racial implications of those pieces.

Parnell was drawn to sculpture because of its ability to assign racial identities to bodies and spaces. "We often use sculpture to mark our own identities. It's both inspiring and provocative, but also has an assumed permanence and makes us think about who we are and who controls physical spaces."

In August of 2017, Parnell had just finished his first year of graduate school and was living and working in Charlottesville, Va. As the new academic year approached, news of the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis and white nationalists coming to town and demonstrating on UVA's campus introduced Parnell to a living depiction of what he was studying.

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"I've experienced racism before, but this was something different," he recalls. "This was something I had only seen before in books."

Parnell recalls seeing Nazi flags, assault rifles, tear gas and tanks lining the streets of Charlottesville. Despite the chaos, attacks and violence, he remembers seeing groups of police officers guarding Confederate monuments.

"This is when it really hit me that in these instances, protecting property is more important than protecting people," Parnell says. "It was never about the sculpture itself. It's about what the sculpture represents and the ideology behind it—the racialization and controlling of space."

This all happened just before he started a teaching assistant position for an undergraduate art history class. Once the semester began, his students were struggling to understand what was happening on their campus. Parnell did what he knew had to be done: He used what they had experienced as an opportunity to learn together and have tough conversations about race.

Realizing equity and opportunity begin at home, he has continued to do just that throughout his professional life. Parnell was selected as the keynote speaker during



Photos: © Tom Cogill, 2019. These photos were taken at an exhibition opening for a show Parnell co-curated called *Beyond Dreamings: The Rise of Indigenous Australian Art in the United States* at Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Va.

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the Feb. 18 Duquesne Alumni Association talk *Contested Landscapes: Discussing Race, Space and Memory*, which featured several Duquesne Department of History alumni and faculty members. His talk focused on statues featuring the likenesses of George Washington and Confederate Generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson—statues that were deliberately erected to “surveil” the area and remind Americans of old hierarchical systems.

“Sculptures are historical actors,” explains Parnell. “They tell us where we were, but also can express where we want to be.” He references Black Lives Matter protests and the spray painting of Confederate monuments in summer 2020 as a way to reclaim space through art and activism. But he wants to stress that American sculpture is about more than just Confederate monuments in public spaces.

“In the 21st century, we’ve really seen artists reinscribe what it means to be Black and what it means to be American,” he says. “It’s been fascinating to analyze how Black individuals are using the power of sculpture to reinterpret Blackness and push back against assumed and learned narratives about race and identity.”

Parnell has accepted a prestigious fellowship position with the Smithsonian American Art Museum for fall 2021 where he will work alongside the museum’s sculpture curator Dr. Karen Lemmey. He hopes to complete his doctoral program by 2023 and dreams of one day teaching at an R1 (highest classification of research) university.

“I want to be able to make the visual arts real to people,” says Parnell. “Sculptures are not merely aesthetic objects we pass by. People have bled and died, and these works are designed to do something and make us feel something. Sculptures are very active in our lives.”

He is adamant that recent events regarding statues and monuments are testaments to the importance of studying art, history and the humanities. These disciplines help us to make sense of and process events unfolding in our world.

“The humanities in general are under attack financially, and universities really need to invest in departments and individuals that are doing this important work,” Parnell presses. “We need the humanities now more than ever.”◆