Slavery and Its Memory in Public Monuments
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Slavery and Its Memory in Public Monuments

Commemoration of the enslavement and subsequent emancipation of African Americans has presented a formidable challenge for artists working in three-dimensional form in the United States. Nineteenth-century sculptors such as John Quincy Adams Ward, Edmonia Lewis, and Thomas Ball wrestled with the questions of how best to memorialize slavery and freedom, and how to embody the black body in their materials. Writer and amateur art historian Freeman Henry Morris Murray recognized the difficulties of artists “saying something” significant about slavery and emancipation in monuments that “stand in the open, at the intersections of the highways and in the most conspicuous places.” In his volume *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture* (1916), Murray raised important questions about the politics of representation, remembrance, and public monuments that still need to be asked today. He was concerned, foremost, with how sculptures celebrating emancipation would shape the public’s understanding of slavery and of African Americans in the post–Civil War era. Murray feared that public monuments to the Civil War would celebrate only its heroes and great battles, and thus would erase slavery from the national memory.

Slavery remains an unreconciled and painful aspect of the American past. It is not that we lack nuanced histories; historians from Eugene Genovese to Ira Berlin have written on this subject, concentrating on the dynamics of the African American lived experience in the antebellum South. Yet we find it difficult as a nation to place slavery into our national story of freedom. Historians James Oliver Horton and Johanna C. Kardux argue, “For Americans, a people who see their history as a freedom story and themselves as defenders of freedom, the integration of slavery into their national narrative is embarrassing and can be guilt-producing and disillusioning. It can also provoke defensiveness, anger and confrontation.” The anguish of this past encourages us to forget it, and, yet, it is deeply woven into the fabric of who we are as a nation. In the twenty-first century, the public conversation on how best to remember slavery has focused on apologies and reparations, whereas the push to create sculptural memorials has occurred more slowly.

How then to represent slavery and its “unsettling memory,” which can evoke feelings of shame and antipathy, in public monuments? In the words of art historian James Young, who writes on Holocaust memorials, “How does a nation memorialize a past it might rather forget?” In the last decade, artists and communities...
have come together to memorialize slavery through public monuments made of steel, bronze, stone, and organic materials such as trees and plants. They use diverse forms: abstraction, figural representation, and the built and natural environment. In part, these monuments are about recovering history and creating a common public memory of slavery, a seeming impossibility in the postmodern world. The artists and communities involved in these projects have created and are planning a range of monuments that also encourage reflection on the nature of bondage and freedom. Some are more successful than others at presenting the multiple, shifting meanings of slavery in three dimensions, allowing viewers to shape their own intellectual and emotional understandings of this tragic chapter in American history.

One such memorial is the Middle Passage Monument, conceived in 1998 by St. Croix native Wayne James and his Homeward Bound Foundation. Michael Walsh, an American metal sculptor living in St. Croix, designed the twelve-foot-high aluminum arch to commemorate the thousands of Africans who perished en route to the New World. Composed of two halves, it symbolizes "the need for the past, present, and future to converge in order for cultural identity and pride to be realized." On July 3, 1999, the Middle Passage Monument was dedicated at New York City's Riverbank State Park in an elaborate funeral procession and blessing ceremony conducted by clergy from many faiths and attended by participants representing diverse groups. After the dedication, the organizers of the event had the monument hoisted onto a replica of a slave ship, which carried it out to sea 427 kilometers (265 miles) east of New York Harbor to a site where it was lowered onto the floor of the Atlantic Ocean. Each kilometer represented one of the bodies unearthed in 1991 at a construction site in lower Manhattan, at what is now the African Burial Ground. The monument both metaphorically and literally acts as a gravestone on the ocean floor. Although replicas of the sculpture are being placed on land in other locations, including St. Croix, its memory work in New York appears finished; it offers no consolation in a public space in the city and it cannot serve as a gathering place for commemorative activity there. The burden of remembering rests with those women and men who witnessed the dedication ceremony or the lowering of the monument and those who continue to read about it.7

If the Middle Passage Monument functions as a counter-monument as described by Young—one that undermines the permanent materiality of its form and even the memorial idea attached it—The African American Monument in Savannah, Georgia, is weighted with its desire for permanence and fixed meaning. Erected on the tourist promenade of River Street on July 27, 2002, the monument depicts a modern black family—father, mother, daughter, and son—arranged in a tight embrace and standing within a circle of broken chains. It is meant to "commemorate and honor contributions of African Americans

Dorothy Spradley, The African American Monument, 2002, Savannah, Georgia. Photo, permission of the Park and Tree Department, Savannah, Georgia.
to the cultural, social, educational, economic, and spiritual life of the Savannah community.” Inscribed on the granite base is a quotation from Maya Angelou: “We were stolen, sold and bought together from the African continent. We got on the slave ships together. We lay back to belly in the holds of the slave ships together, sometimes died together, and our lifeless bodies thrown overboard together. Today, we are standing up together, with faith and even some joy.” This monument attempts to reconcile Savannah’s legacy of slavery, to “promote healing and reconciliation,” and to actively recognize the African American presence in the city. But its representation and meaning are anachronistic and dissonant. The text evokes the horror of the Middle Passage, yet the physical form of the monument is innocuous. It disappoints because of the way in which the monument association, artist, and city officials have conflated historical and modern time, borrowed nineteenth-century conceptions of freedom, and exploited early-twentieth-century ideas of racial uplift, including the rhetoric of progress.

The planned North Carolina Freedom Monument Project (NCFMP) for Raleigh approaches the past and the memory of slavery in ways fundamentally different from the Middle Passage Monument and The African American Monument. Instead of a singular sculpture, the NCFMP envisions a space—a “substantial shared work of public art”—at the heart of North Carolina’s capital, “where African American children can see the historical experience of their forebears honored and remembered, and where North Carolinians of all ages and all shades of color can see the fruits of their shared effort to consecrate their shared citizenship.” Within this space, the design team of multimedia artist Juan Logan, art historian Lyneise Williams, and landscape architect David Swanson plans an auction block and weeping wall representing slavery, a large grassy area titled “Freedom Ground,” a wall fissured in two symbolizing Jim Crow racial segregation, a seating area under an arbor created with native plants, and an amphitheater filled with large steel forms. Through the green interactive space and the use of abstract forms, the planners and designers hope to foster conversation about the African American experience in North Carolina, to offer a means to contemplate the struggle for and meaning of freedom today, and “to serve as a model of cooperation, respect, and common values.” The aims of the NCFMP are lofty. This monument is not meant to be static; through the physical encounter with and the activities and dialogues in the space, the planners hope the North Carolina public will be constantly challenged to remember the past as an agent for transformation in the present.

These three monuments suggest the diverse problems confronting those trying to memorialize slavery in the United States. In the twenty-first century, how we are to remember slavery and its legacy remains deeply contested. Yet these monuments all attempt to prevent the oblivion of memory. They stand as visible markers of slavery—at the bottom of the ocean or in the center of cities—and they ask us to do the memory work, to consider the continuing implication of slavery in our own lives.
Notes


Pamela H. Simpson

A Vernacular Recipe for Sculpture—Butter, Sugar, and Corn

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, visitors to state, regional, and international fairs regularly saw sculpture made from butter, sugar, corn, and other agricultural products. An entire model of Greenwich Village done in sugar paste was featured at the 1855 New York Crystal Palace. A bas-relief Dreaming Iolanthe in butter drew attention in the Women's Building of the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Iowa delegates presented a miniature model of their statehouse made of corn, while California offered a Liberty Bell of oranges and a larger-than-life equestrian knight covered in prunes. A novel way to interest fairgoers in agricultural products, the food sculptures also seemed to boast of the country's bounty. "Look," they seemed to say, "we have so much food, we can waste it making art!"

The modern scholar, used to working with more traditional sculpture, might dismiss such efforts as a campy form of folk art—interesting and fun, but hardly worthy of serious...