Politics of Memory
Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space

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The Challenge of Memorializing Slavery in North Carolina
The Unsung Founders Memorial and the North Carolina Freedom Monument Project

Renée Ater

Commemoration of the Atlantic slave trade, slavery, 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 depict the black body in bronze and marble.1 In the early twentieth century, amateur art historian Freeman Henry Morris Murray, in his volume, Emancipation and The Freed in American Sculpture (1916), recognized that the location of sculpture in civic and public spaces spoke to communities about who they were and how they remembered the past. He wrote:

The fact is, nearly all sculptural groups and a considerable number of individual statues, are based on some purpose beyond mere portraiture or illustration. Moreover, these commemorative and “speaking” groups generally stand in the open, at the intersections of the highways and in the most conspicuous places. We cannot be too concerned as to what they say or suggest, or what they leave unsaid.2

Murray succinctly articulated the problem and politics of representation, meaning, and remembrance of the slave past in public space. He was concerned, foremost, with how sculpture shaped the public’s understanding of slavery and of African Americans in the post-Civil War era. Murray feared that citizens and local governments would use monuments dedicated to the Civil War to erase slavery from public memory, and that they would only celebrate the white heroes and common soldiers of this seismic event. One might argue that Murray was right about erasure—a one-hundred-year gap exists between the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century monuments Murray discussed in his book and the current wave of monument building in communities in the South, Midwest, and Northeast. In the early twenty-first century, it seems there is a scramble to commemorate the slave past.
Slavery remains an unreconciled and painful aspect of the American past. It is not that the United States lacks nuanced histories on slavery; historians from Eugene Genovese to Ira Berlin have written on slavery, concentrating on the dynamics of African American lived experience in the antebellum South. Even with the dozens of histories on slavery, it is difficult as a nation to place slavery into a national narrative of freedom. Historians James Oliver Horton and Johanna 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 makes North Americans uncomfortable and often unwilling to engage in dialogue about its meaning because the slave past is linked inextricably to issues of race and race relations in the present.

In the twenty-first century, how then are slavery and its memory to be represented in public monuments in the United States? How are artists to render this sensitive subject, which has the potential to produce feelings of shame and antipathy? In the words of the art historian James Young who writes on Holocaust memorials, "How does a nation memorialize a past it might rather forget?" In the last two decades, artists and communities have come together to remember and to memorialize slavery through public monuments made of steel, bronze, stone, glass, and other organic materials. They use diverse forms: abstraction, figural representation, and the built and natural environment. Some reference the Middle Passage and slavery, others resistance to slavery, and still others the emancipated men and women. These monuments are about recovering the slave past and creating a public memory of slavery. The building of these monuments and memorials are often divisive, and foster difficult conversations about slavery, the black body, site, and artistic vision.

This chapter examines two memorials/monuments in North Carolina where conflict over and discussion of the meaning of slavery, the events of the Civil War, and the Confederate past are ongoing. In the past decade, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at Greensboro as well as the North Carolina State Archives have initiated digital library projects on slavery in the state. And the UNC School of Education in collaboration with the Documenting the American South initiative offers online lessons plans on slavery and the black experience across North Carolina to middle and high school teachers. In the past two decades, public conversations have erupted periodically regarding the numerous monuments to the Confederacy in North Carolina, particularly those monuments located on the grounds of the capital building. The monuments I examine here are the Unsung Founders Memorial situated on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the North Carolina Freedom Monument Project planned for downtown Raleigh (Figures 8.1 and 8.2). I assess the visual forms of the memorials and consider how the diverse constituencies,

the university community at Chapel Hill, and the monument planning committee and citizens of North Carolina, have sought to remember slavery in the public spaces of the campus and city. The two monuments take different forms: one, using figuration, text, and site, recalls the untold number of African Americans, free and slave, who helped to build the university, the other to be located in the state's capital utilizes abstraction, space, time, and movement to consider broadly the idea of freedom.

I am interested in the Unsung Founders Memorial and the North Carolina Freedom Monument Project as "sites of memory." Such sites are "places where we struggle over tensions between our experience of the past (memory) and our organization of it (history)." The purpose of sites of memory, according to the scholar Pierre Nora, is "to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial." Both the Unsung Founders Memorial and the North Carolina Freedom Monument Project act as sites of memory and typify larger issues in monument building regarding how to memorialize the slave past in visually comprehensible ways for various audiences.

This chapter is part of a larger research project entitled Unsettling Memory: Public Monuments to Slavery in the United States. From Peoria, Illinois, to Richmond, Virginia, to Savannah, Georgia, local governments and communities are in conversation about their cities' relationships to the slave
trade and slavery; some have built monuments to the slave past, and others are still engaged in conversation about what sort of memorials should be built. In *Unsettling Memory*, I examine a wide range of monuments as sites of memory and the way in which various publics interact and understand slavery through the process of monument building. At the core of my research are two questions: What should these monuments do? What should they look like? Issues related to figuration and abstraction, site relationship, materials and the significance of form, and the visitor encounter and the creation of meaning are at the core of the book project.

THE SLAVE PAST AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

In October 2001, the senior class at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill considered their class gift to the institution. The senior class officers presented three options to their fellow students: a freestanding sculpture, to be titled the Unsung Founders Memorial, "honoring men and women of color who helped raise the first buildings on campus"; a marquee for the campus' Memorial Hall to promote events; and a need-based scholarship for a senior student. Although the gift committee did not publicly indicate why they had chosen a monument to honor slavery, the Confederate soldier statue, Silent Sam, located on the north campus has generated an enormous amount of controversy over the years with repeated calls for its removal. In UNC classrooms, students have considered the significance of Silent Sam and slavery to the university.

In the discussions that ensued in the student paper about the three gift options, *The Daily Tar Heel*, one writer placed the class gift within the context of the September 11, 2001, attack on the Twin Towers in New York City. She wrote:

My senior year has been tainted with evil and the present reality of war. Things that I might have felt were very important before are not nearly as pressing now. The idea of giving money to a senior class gift... seems trite, when many are suffering not only in our own nation but all over the world from this unthinkable act of terrorism.

The writer made a plea that seniors should pursue "an alternative gift idea that better memorializes Carolina's own from Sept. 11." Although students apparently debated the efficacy of the gift, the suggestion of a memorial to September 11 never gained ground with the class of 2002. Of the seniors who voted, approximately 44 percent selected the Unsung Founders Memorial.

By March 2002, the senior class gift committee, which included African American students, had selected Korean-born artist Do-Ho Suh to create the memorial; he was one of fourteen candidates who submitted
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in Public Figures and emphasizes the collective who sustain those in power. Suh remarked, "I was asked to do some public sculpture in this public space. And I started to think about what it means, public space, and what is the meaning of public art or monument. I tried to rethink this whole notion of monument. Usually it is a bigger than life size, individual, an illogical figure. What I did was I took it down, and made it smaller, and made it into multiples. I just want to recognize anonymous everyday life, people who pass through that space."17

The Unsung Founders Memorial is deeply tied to Suh's previous installations in its subversion of what we think a monument should be. Public monuments often aggrandize our heroes and memories of them. They offer spaces of consolation, redeem traumatic events, or mend memory. They present a fixed point for engaging and understanding the past.18 In effect, Suh has created a countermonument, "a memorial space conceived to challenge the conventional premises of the monument," in the words of Young.19 Suh's memorial offers us no aggrandizing of black heroes or historic events and no redemption of the trauma of slavery. Instead, Suh focused on collective endeavor through the gesture of the upraised arms. "If you look at the figures' facial expressions they don't look oppressed, so it has a kind of positive gesture, but what they are doing actually is just bearing weight."20 It is this bearing weight as a community that Suh brings into presence.

The university dedicated the monument on November 5, 2005, with then chancellor James Moeser and then dean Bernadette Gray-Little delivering remarks. In their speeches, both Moeser and Gray-Little addressed the legacy of slavery and its role at the University of North Carolina. Moeser understood the memorial as encouraging public conversation about slavery, stating:

What we do today will not rectify what our ancestors did in the past. But this memorial, I believe, attests to our commitment to shed light on the darker corners of our history. Yes, the University's first leaders were slaveholders. It is also true that the contribution of African American servants and slaves were crucial to its success.21

Gray-Little spoke to the pain of the past: "One of the troublesome legacies of slavery is the pall that it casts over the family histories of those who were bought and sold. This monument finally recognizes the many unnamed whose toil and talent made the nation's first public university possible."22 The official interpretation of the memorial stressed willingness to recognize the slave past as integral to the fabric of the university with Moeser and Gray-Little celebrating the figuration of Suh's memorial expression. The university and local communities, however, responded to the memorial with wariness and understood it in competing ways.23

The struggle over meaning and interpretation of the Unsung Founders Memorial is related to the tension between the site and the nearby landmarks...
and to the issue of race relations in the past and present at the university. As a site of memory, McCorkle Place heralds the persistence and nobility of the university. The Unsung Founders Memorial resides within the context of four monuments that are indelibly linked to the history and iconography of the university: the Old Well, the Davie Poplar, the Joseph Caldwell Monument, and Silent Sam. Most important for the discussion here, the memorial has disturbed the celebratory narrative of McCorkle Place and provoked a rethinking of the university’s past and its identity.

The Old Well stands at the southern end of McCorkle Place and is the official logo of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For years, it was the primary water source for the Old East and Old West dormitories. In 1897, the old wooden structure was replaced with a small neoclassical rotunda with Ionic columns, the design based on the Temple of Love at the Palace of Versailles. The fountain located in the rotunda is said to bring good luck to students who drink from it on the first day of classes. The Davie Poplar is an enormous tulip poplar said to mark the spot where the Revolutionary War general William Richardson Davie picked the site for the university. The story is apocryphal: a six-man committee from the university’s governing board selected the location in November 1792; the tree was named for Davie by Cornelia Phillips Spencer almost a century later to commemorate this myth of origin. University lore maintains that as long as the poplar remains standing, the university will flourish.

The marble obelisk of the Joseph Caldwell Monument commemorates the first president of the university, who was also a slave owner, and serves as grave marker for Caldwell and his wife, who are buried at the base of the monument. The memorial on McCorkle Place is the second monument designed for Caldwell. The original obelisk, made of sandstone, was moved to the Old Chapel Hill Cemetery and rededicated to Wilson Caldwell, November Caldwell, David Barham, and Henry Smith, four African Americans who served the University. The most controversial of the monuments is Silent Sam, located at the northern end of McCorkle Place. The United Daughters of the Confederacy gave the statue to the university in 1909, and it was erected in 1913 to honor the memory of the 321 alumni of the school who fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. A statue of a confederate soldier holding a rifle, Silent Sam wears no cartridge box for ammunition, and thus, cannot fire his gun, which remains silent.

The university community’s relationship to and understanding of Silent Sam is complicated and often polarized. For some Silent Sam is a symbol of regional heritage and pride in the Confederacy. Others view the statue as an integral part of the university’s history that should not be erased. For others, he represents racial oppression, white supremacy, and continued social conflict. The statue has also been the site of numerous protests and acts of vandalism in the past. After the brutal beating of Rodney King by the Los Angeles police in March 1991, the subsequent April 1992 trial in which a juror acquitted the police, and the ensuing Los Angeles riot, students rallied at the statue to speak out against racism and injustice. In May 2000, April 2003, and most recently in January 2011, former UNC Professor Gerald Horne called for the removal of the statue: “There is no better example of racial separation than the Confederacy and the statues that honor it.” He suggested that the work should be moved to a historical society or museum. University officials responded that the statue would remain at McCorkle Place. Nancy Davis, associate vice chancellor for university relations, argued: “We are a Southern university, and we have to come to terms with that history. This sculpture tells people where we have been.”

By selecting McCorkle Place as the site for his memorial, Suh established a visual dialogue between Silent Sam and the Unsung Founders Memorial that has been contentious at times, something that Suh was surely aware would happen at this southern university. And from the time of its dedication, the Unsung Founders Memorial has provoked an equally wide range of responses from the university and local communities. The senior gift committee understood the monument to be “advanced and progressive,” and saw their gift as one of remembrance not glorification. Some feel that it stands in the shadow of Silent Sam, the memorial too low to the ground to compete with the monumental size of the Confederate soldier. Others see its use as a functional table as inappropriate for a memorial. Others are surprised that the word slavery is not inscribed on the table. Some view the miniature figures that hold up the table as inadequate and see the men and women as being crushed by the symbolic weight of the university. Still others feel that the anonymity of the figures continues a legacy of denial on the part of the university.

Local social activist Yonni Chapman, who died in 2009, said of the Unsung Founders Memorial, the black workers holding up the table are nearly invisible to such visitors, who inadvertently kick up mud in the faces of the unsung founders. Disrespected, poorly paid and anonymous black workers have always carried the weight of the university on their backs... Now they have a monument that supposedly honors them by mocking their sacrifice.

The Unsung Founders Memorial has elicited a charged response similar to that of Silent Sam, albeit for different reasons. This countermonument has interrupted the sacred memory work of McCorkle Place, making it a space where slavery remains an uncomfortable aspect of the university’s past.

Coinciding with the dedication of the Unsung Founders Memorial, the University Archives sponsored both a physical and digital exhibition entitled Slavery and the Making of the University. The physical exhibit was displayed in the Manuscripts Department of the Wilson Library from October 12, 2005, through February 28, 2006. The purpose of the exhibition was “to introduce materials that recognize and document the contributions of slaves, college servants and free persons of color primarily during the university’s antebellum period.” Do-Ho Suh’s memorial
and the exhibition were meant to work in concert, the memorial visually acknowledging slaves and free persons of color who labored on the campus, and the exhibition adding layers of information, mostly textual—letters, speeches, diaries, historical financial records, ledger and expense books, wills, slave narratives, advertisements, photographs, and a bibliography of sources. A graduate student in public history also created a self-guided walking tour of the campus that highlighted the contributions of enslaved people at the university. Officials at the University of North Carolina saw the unveiling of the Unsung Founders Memorial and “Slavery and the Making of the University” as intertwined, and as opportunities to begin a dialogue about the slave past, a slow, and at times, heart-searing one, and for some, unsatisfactory.

THE SLAVE PAST AND THE MOVEMENT TO FREEDOM

The planned North Carolina Freedom Monument Project in Raleigh (figure 8.2), in contrast, approaches the slave past and the memory of it in fundamentally different ways than the Unsung Founders Memorial. Instead of a singular monument, the project leaders envision a “space for contemplation and inspiration and an extraordinary work of public art” at the heart of North Carolina’s capital. It is meant “to pay tribute to those who experienced slavery, Jim Crow and other forms of discrimination and oppression,” to highlight the concept of freedom, and to provide a sensory experience of the past. The goals of the project are fourfold: “to create and strengthen bonds between diverse people; to educate and enhance mutual understanding; to honor the African American experience in North Carolina; and to serve as a model of cooperation, respect, and common values.” The slave past is one aspect of the project with the concept of freedom providing the ontological frame for the open plaza.

The project has its origins in the Paul Green Foundation, an organization established in 1982 to perpetuate the vision of the dramatist and civil rights activist Paul Green (1894–1981). His grandson, Paul Mac Green, traveled to Barbados in 2001 where he saw Karl Broodhagen’s Bussa Smancipation Statue (1983). The image of a slave breaking free from his shackles inspired Green to persuade the foundation to start a freedom monument project in North Carolina. In June 2002, the foundation convened a meeting of fifty community leaders and educators from across the state to discuss the conceptual and organizational issues related to creating the monument. Following this meeting, project leaders held regional town meetings across the state—in the cities of Durham, Raleigh, Greenville, Hickory, Asheville, and Elizabeth City—to encourage the public to share its opinion on what the monument should look like, and more importantly, to stimulate dialogue on the African American experience in North Carolina. The steering committee used these meetings to discuss the nature of oppression and freedom; they encouraged participants, both black and white, to conceptualize the legacy of the slave past within the context of their present lives. In June 2003, teachers, scholars, and community leaders reconvened at a meeting in Raleigh to “to identify the areas where this public process has led to consensus—and where it has not.”

The advisory board was determined to create a monument that looked and felt different from other monuments to the slave past. They turned to neighboring states to assess how statues and memorials in these capitals visualized slavery and the progress of African Americans, giving special consideration to Columbia, South Carolina’s African American History Monument. They did not want to honor a singular historical figure or event, nor did they want to materialize the African American body in the spaces of the North Carolina Freedom Monument. They desire a “living” public space that allows the school children, citizens, government workers, elected officials, and visitors of North Carolina to wrestle with the meaning of the slave past, to understand the historical experience of African Americans in the state, and to consider the nature of freedom—“freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and freedom to respect one another.”

An international competition was held to find an artist or design team to conceive and build the project. In 2006, a jury of artists, architects, and community leaders from North Carolina reviewed 108 proposals, selecting the Chapel Hill team of multimedia artist Juan Logan, art historian Lynese Williams; and landscape architect David Swanson to design the monument. With information from the town meetings contained in a report entitled Communicating the Project’s Vision and Voice, the Logan team designed a space that uses words and abstract forms; local granite, fieldstone, and slate; flowing water; walkways, walls, and benches; and native trees and plants. The proposed site for the monument is symbolically important: near the state’s Office of Archives and History, across from the Legislative Building, and several blocks away from the capital building. Although the project has been delayed due to the downturn in the economy, the Paul Green Foundation made a significant contribution to the project, and Governor Bev Perdue has appropriated state funds toward the construction of the monument. Recently, it received approval from the North Carolina Historical Commission, a major step toward its realization.

The North Carolina Freedom Monument Project will be composed of a series of interactive spaces and “sculptural vignettes.” The case statement for the monument outlines its form: “This public art installation has been designed to carry visitors on the circuitous path to freedom as experienced by African Americans. The composition uses landscape elements to powerfully convey fundamental and recurring themes of African American’s struggle for freedom: ingenuity and resilience, tension and hope.” Visitors will enter the monument from Lane Street, onto a sloped walkway symbolizing African Americans’ uphill struggle and through broken entrance arches that represent unachieved freedom. A wide, spiraling walkway will
lead visitors to several significant sculptural elements in the landscape: an auction block and weeping wall with the words “many thousands gone” inscribed on its surface; a circular granite fountain whose abstracted form is meant to suggest that “freedom originates in thoughts”; a serpentine wall whose undulations evoke the eastern coast of North Carolina, the arrival point for some slaves to the state; a wall fissured in two symbolizing Jim Crow; a jagged seating area representing turbulent times—the granite boulders will be placed strategically to interrupt the flow of the open plaza; and a reading bench signifying the connection between literacy and freedom. A large grassy area, “Freedom Ground,” and an amphitheater filled with large steel forms are designed to allow the public areas to engage in dialogue about the past and present.42

The North Carolina Freedom Monument Project attempts to harness bodily and intellectual experience through landscape and abstract form, and longitudinal movement. The Logan team’s design for Freedom Grove will require interaction not passive viewing. In its planned form, the monument appears to skillfully balance the tension between the remembrance of the past and experience in the present. In a 2006 interview, Logan remarked that the team hoped to create “moments of transcendence and reflection, such as when walking around the fountain and reading the engraved words Polaris, exodus, ownership, north, and others. Some of the words will be partially obscured by water flowing over various parts of the fountain. When people touch and connect with the individual elements of the monument, we hope that each will see themselves differently.”43 The aims of the North Carolina Freedom Monument Project are lofty. This monument is not meant to be static, but rather through the physical and sensory encounter with the space, and the activities and dialogues planned for schoolchildren and visitors, the artists and advisory board envision that the North Carolina public will be constantly challenged to remember the past as an agent for transformation in the present. “Freedom Grove will not only be a work of public art but a point of entry for North Carolinians to contemplate and reflect upon issues of race and humanity, past and present.”44

The design team and advisory board of the North Carolina Monument Project have created a “working memorial,” a term used by architect Julian Bond, to describe projects that encourage collective engagement and active dialogue.45 He proposes that the role of the artist and architect in creating memorials is to uncover and anchor histories and memories. “Neither art nor architecture can compensate for public trauma or mass murder. What artistic and architectural practices can do is establish a dialogical elation with those events and help frame the process of understanding,” argues Bond. “Hence, it seems important to conceive of these projects as oadmaps, as spatial topographies, condensing voices, opening spaces for tudy, re-presentation, and dialogue with a measure of spatial clarity and architectural depth.”46 The North Carolina Monument Project encourages his sort of collective engagement and dialogic experience. It asks North Carolinians to engage in conversation about the African American experience, and to inhabit the distance between past and the present, between remembrance and present-day struggles for freedom.

CONCLUSION

The Unsung Founders Memorial and the North Carolina Freedom Monument Project offer two differing approaches to memorializing the slave past and its legacy. Do-Ho Suh worked within the memory site of McCorkle Place to commemorate those men and women of color who helped to build the university, but remained unacknowledged. Suh purposefully called into question the nature of the public monument by challenging the monument form and asking the university community to consider the idea of the collective over the individual. For some, his miniaturized black bodies seem to bear the weight of the past with no visible acknowledgment of individuals or the historic role of slavery at the university. Like the other monuments at McCorkle Place, it has the potential to become yet another stone in the landscape. The North Carolina Freedom Monument Project will require visitors to experience its physical space as a somatic and cerebral journey to freedom. The project has the luxury of a large enclosed expanse of land that isolates visitors, to a certain degree, from competing surroundings. Interestingly enough, both monuments skirt picturing slavery by resorting to generic anonymity in the case of the Unsung Founders Memorial, and by using metaphor in the case of the North Carolina Freedom Monument. As sites of memory, they attempt to transcend the specifics of the slave past, particularly its abjection and suffering, in order to express larger truths.

NOTES

into part of its content, even as it is absorbed into the site and made part of a larger locale. The tension between site and memorial can be relieved by a seemingly natural extension of site by monument, or it can be aggravated by a perceived incongruity between site and monument.

25. For information on the buildings and memorials on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, see “Landmarks,” Virtual Tour of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, http://www.unc.edu/tour/index.html.

26. “Landmarks,” Virtual Tour of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.


37. Young, “Memory/Monument,” 240.

38. “Stories: Art21.”


40. “Celebrating the Unsung Founders.”


Slavery and Slave Trade in the Museum