Communities in Conflict
Memorializing Martin Luther King Jr. in Rocky Mount, North Carolina

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In the past fifty years, countless artists have captured Martin Luther King Jr.’s image as a preacher, orator, visionary, and dynamic leader of the civil rights movement. In addition to the many photographs, paintings, drawings, and prints of King, numerous monuments dedicated to the fallen leader stand in the public spaces of cities throughout the United States. From abstract memorials devoted to King’s ideals to statues of King as inspiring preacher to images of King as civic leader and agent of social change, sculptors have wrestled with how best to represent a man of such significance to American society. In this essay, I consider the controversy surrounding the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, as a case study for engaging with ideas about memorial making, history, race, and public space.

When sculptor Erik Blome designed and executed his statue of Martin Luther King Jr., he had no idea that his work would become the center of a heated civic debate. Blome, the city of Rocky Mount, and the city’s Martin
Luther King Jr. Commission followed standard procedure for a public art commission: Blome submitted sketches for approval, discussed his vision with city officials, created a small-scale model for public display, and sent photographs of the full-size clay statue before casting it in bronze. Unfortunately, the city and commission did not seek input from the neighborhood residents or the larger African American community in the decision-making process. As a result, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial became a lightning rod for the divisive racial politics of Rocky Mount—a town that was 56 percent black at the time but had been ruled by the same white mayor and a majority-white city council for thirty years. Rocky Mount’s economy had also taken a downward turn in early 2000, with a disproportionate impact on the African American population. All of these issues formed a combustible mix, and deep emotions erupted to the surface in heated public discussions—on the surface about the statue and the artist, but on a deeper level about local politics and the future of Rocky Mount.

Multiple constituencies in the city vied to shape the visual commemoration of King. The rancorous debate centered on three concerns. First, community members in the predominantly black neighborhood of Martin Luther King Jr. Park (where the statue resides) expressed outrage and dismay that they had not been consulted in the design process, believing that city officials had deliberately excluded them from the conversation. Second, passionate debates erupted over who was entitled to King’s image and who had the right to portray him—an African American artist, a white artist, or an artist of another racial/ethnic background. African Americans raised this contentious issue, arguing for the right to self-definition and insisting that a black artist would be better able to create an appropriate commemorative portrait of King. Most importantly, the various constituencies fought over Blome’s depiction of King, particularly his facial features. Many black elders remembered King—his face, demeanor, and personality—while others remembered King from photographs reproduced in newspapers and on television. They all felt a sense of private ownership over the memory of King, and desired an image of the civil rights leader.

Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, created by sculptor Erik Blome, in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. The immediate and intense public response following its installation in June 2003 led to the statue’s removal in September 2005. Ultimately, the work was re-installed in 2007. 

Courtesy, Renée Ater
that rendered him “true to life” and embodied his extraordinary oratorical skills and his charismatic personality.2

The controversy began in April 1999, when the city of Rocky Mount announced plans for a new park to be named for Martin Luther King Jr. and to be situated on a twenty-eight-acre site northeast of downtown at the former location of the wastewater treatment plant facility. City officials also wanted to commemorate King’s November 27, 1962, speech at Booker T. Washington High School in Rocky Mount.3 With funding from the North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, the city of Rocky Mount, and private individuals, city officials invited artists nationwide to submit designs for the memorial statue. They selected Erik Blome, an established and successful figurative sculptor from Chicago, who designed a seven-foot-tall bronze statue of the civil rights leader. Blome presented a quiet, reflective image of King in a tightly bound composition—wearing a Brooks Brothers suit and wing tips, with his arms crossed over his torso and a pen in his right hand. Installed in the park in June 2003, the sculpture immediately provoked complaints regarding its likeness to King. An acrimonious four-year struggle over the monument began, involving African American neighborhood residents, the majority-white city council, staff members of the city manager’s office, Parks and Recreation department officials, local religious leaders, officers of the NAACP, and commission members who had selected and approved Blome’s design.4

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2For a discussion of King’s public persona, see Scott W. Hoffman, “Holy Martin: The Overlooked Canonization of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation 10 (Summer 2000), 123-25.

3City Manager’s Column, “Comprehensive Recreation Master Plan,” City of Rocky Mount, North Carolina, April 25, 1999; and Drew Hansen, The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Speech that Inspired a Nation (New York, 2005), 110.

In an artist’s statement printed in the *Rocky Mount Telegram*, Blome wrote about his vision and work process: “I understood my work to be just one contribution: one small brick in the cathedral of Dr. King’s living legacy. But I also understood the supreme importance of my work and the responsibility of doing my very best in the realization of my interpretation of Dr. King.” He emphasized that his artistic interpretation of the civil rights leader was based on a “quieter, calmer and pondering” image inspired by Bob Fitch’s 1966 photograph of King in the Atlanta offices of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Blome wrote: “This spirit of universal humanity is what I had in mind and which inspired me when I created my interpretation of Dr. King.” He maintained that he was interested in conveying King’s internal state—a symbolic portrait of the mind of the man, rather than one of his physical presence. This decision would come to plague Blome.

City officials and commission members were caught off guard by the vehement public response that followed the installation of the statue. On viewing the statue, resident Samuel Gray remarked: “I couldn’t believe it. That’s not Dr. King. There’s no likeness, none.” Reverend Elbert Lee Jr. of the North End Missionary Baptist Church, who had marched with King, argued: “We don’t need no compromising. That statue has got to go.” Andre Knight, president of the Rocky Mount branch of the NAACP, summarized the feelings of the organization, stating that the “statue does not look like Dr. King and does not depict the dignity and honor accorded to his bearing.” Neighborhood resident Annette Armstrong reflected that “the more you look at it, the more you don’t see any similarities. . . . What I want to see is what I saw on TV.” Another resident, Kimberle Evans, averred, “I think (we’re) asking [Blome] to give us an exact likeness of King’s facial expression.”

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Although critics decried Blome’s King statue for different reasons, their most common complaint stemmed from a shared sense that it did not resemble the Martin Luther King Jr. whom many residents remembered.

Courtesy, Renée Ater
City officials responded to the complaints by holding town meetings, but failed to pacify the multiplying voices of dissent. In July 2003, the city council voted unanimously to postpone the dedication of the statue and appointed an eleven-member Martin Luther King Jr. Statue Committee to develop a new plan for the park. In October 2003, the committee—comprised of representatives from each of the city’s seven wards, an officer from the NAACP, a leader of the local social justice group called Voices for an Effective Change, and a member appointed by the mayor—decided to replace the work.8 While negotiating with a new artist, the city ordered the removal of Blome’s statue from the park in September 2005. City employees used a hacksaw to cut down the statue from its black granite pedestal and placed it in a corner of a municipal warehouse.9 The pedestal would stand empty in the park for the next two years.

In March 2006, the city council began new conversations with the Martin Luther King Jr. Commission, and all agreed that the park had a barren appearance without the statue: “The commission finds it regrettable to have an elegant statue of Dr. King draped, covered and stored in the city warehouse. To remove decent art presents an impression of censorship, and the park was not improved by this action. . . . Art is something about which reasonable people can and will disagree. Yet these disagreements do not destroy the validity of art.”10 In May 2007, the city council voted to restore Blome’s statue to the park; in August, the city dedicated the statue and Martin Luther King Jr. Park.11

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The controversy surrounding the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, is symptomatic of broader issues at the heart of monument building, memory, and history that continue to be played out on the local, regional, and national levels. The same mistakes seem to be repeated all too often each time a monument is created. Officials and communities need to be involved in open and inclusive discussions about the merit of monument building, about the transformation and use of public spaces as memorial landscapes, about artistic vision and intent, about the interpretation of history and its realization in concrete form, and about the politics of identity and race in the memorial-making process.