Public Art, Public Response
Negotiating Civic Shame in Duluth, Minnesota

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Many of America’s most compelling public art projects today critique conventional assumptions, and address the possibilities of cultural, social, and political transformation. Not surprisingly, such changes can be controversial, yielding highly emotional public responses, especially when they address issues as fraught as race and representation. Yet change can also generate profound responses of renewal and reconciliation.

Consider the Clayton Jackson McGhie Memorial, dedicated in 2003 in downtown Duluth, Minnesota. The memorial recalls the June 1920 murders of three African American men employed with the John Robinson Circus, which had stopped in Duluth for a single day of performances. Falsely accused of sexually assaulting a local white woman, the men were arrested and incarcerated. That night, a mob of 10,000 people (about one-tenth of the city’s population) attacked the jail, grabbed three of the prisoners, dragged them up a hill, and lynched them from the crook of an electric light pole.

Built directly across the street from the site of the lynching, Duluth’s memorial is a small courtyard plaza with a curving sidewalk and beige-colored walls featuring quotes from Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King

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Jr., and others. The walls are bordered by a quote from British philosopher and statesman Edmund Burke: “An event has happened upon which it is difficult to speak and impossible to remain silent.” The sidewalks are embedded with the words “respect,” “compassion,” and “atonement.” On the far right stand three life-sized bronze figures dedicated to the three murdered men: Elias Clayton (age 19), Elmer Jackson (22), and Isaac McGhie (20). This memorial is the first in the nation dedicated to lynching, which the NAACP in 1920 declared “the greatest shame” in the United States.

Growing numbers of “victim” memorials have been built in recent years: memorials to those harmed by political, social, religious, economic, and cultural injustices, or by the ravages of nature and misfortune. These sites represent part of a larger commemorative movement I call “memorial mania”: a pervasive preoccupation with issues of memory and history accompanied by urgent desires to express—and claim—those concerns through public art. Memorials that focus on shameful historical moments, such as racial terrorism, raise questions about how to remember, represent, and perhaps redeem those histories.1

Memorial mania is driven by heated debates over self-definition, national purpose, and the politics of representation. These issues are not entirely new, of course: there were plenty of conversations about appropriate subjects and styles during the post-Civil War “statue mania” era, when patriotic lobbies and nostalgic constituencies created public art to honor historical subjects. The Soldiers and Sailors Monument, dedicated in Indianapolis in 1902, offers one example of public artworks that “were not meant to revive old struggles and debates,” as Kirk Savage writes, “but to put them to rest—to show how great men and their deeds had made the nation better and stronger. Commemoration was a process of condensing the moral lessons of history and fixing them in place for all time.”2

Today’s memorials, by contrast, often address especially difficult, complex, and shameful historical subjects. Challenging normative understandings of a virtuous American history, countering national assumptions of innocence and blamelessness, refusing historical amnesia about episodes and events that we would rather forget or deny, many evoke terms of social, political, and moral accountability.

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1Erika Doss, Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America (Chicago, 2010).
After the Civil War and throughout the twentieth century, whites employed racial terrorism to extend the dehumanizing inequities of slavery, and to sustain assumptions of white superiority. Acts of lynching were deliberate restraints on the autonomy and citizenship of the black body (or any other “body” that threatened white power). Lynching was a cancerous eruption all over the country: in California, Wyoming, Texas, Indiana, Georgia, Minnesota. The federal government repeatedly failed to enact anti-lynching legislation, and local courts were similarly unresponsive; in Duluth, for example, only three men from the 10,000-member lynch mob were tried and convicted for rioting, each serving less than fifteen months in prison. No one was ever convicted for the murders of Clayton, Jackson, and McGhie.

Memories of their murders never entirely disappeared, however. Sinclair Lewis’s 1947 novel *Kingsblood Royal*, for example, examines postwar American racism and an attempted lynching in a Minnesota city he named “Grand Republic.” Musician Bob Dylan, who was born in Duluth and whose father lived in a downtown apartment there in 1920, alluded to his birthplace’s notorious lynching in his 1965 song “Desolation Row”:

They’re selling postcards of the hanging
They’re painting the passports brown
The beauty parlor is filled with sailors
The circus is in town . . .

Clayton Jackson McGhie Memorial, Duluth, Minnesota. The walls of the memorial feature quotes from Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and other peacemakers.

Courtesy, Erika Doss
Recently, the history and visual culture of lynching in the United States has been painstakingly recovered, most notably by historians including Fitzhugh Brundage and Leon Litwack, and in exhibitions such as Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America. In Duluth, such recovery began in 2000, when local journalists, community activists, and teachers disturbed by their city's lack of historical knowledge about its racist past, and by recurrent episodes of racism in its present, came together to form the Clayton Jackson McGhie Committee. As one of their first initiatives, they organized a citywide reading of The Lynchings of Duluth, a book about the murders. Next, collaborating with the city of Duluth, the Duluth Public Arts Commission, and the Minnesota Historical Society, the committee raised several hundred thousand dollars to build a memorial. Donations came from area churches, law firms, community chests, schools, and from Bill Berry, a former member of the band REM, who was born in Duluth. Over a three-year period, the committee revived civic remembrance of Duluth's 1920 lynching, and generated broad civic support for the commemoration of its victims.

Rather than projecting an idealized story of triumph over adversity, whereby victims falsely become heroes, or, conversely, focusing only on traumatic representations of degradation, Duluth's memorial posits an interaction among victims and their perpetrators that, as Elazar Barkan writes in his discussion of political restitution, “enables the rewriting of memory and historical identity in ways that both can share.” Memorial designer Carla Stetson observes: “Most people 'read' the memorial from left to right. By the time they get to the information about the lynching (in the panel on the far right side) and see the bronze figures, the word 'you' has been used three times in the various quotes.”

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6 Carla Stetson, August 9, 2005, interview with author.
Duluth’s memorial is further framed by “bearing witness,” which, as Shoshana Felman explains, is “not merely to narrate, but to commit oneself and . . . the narrative to others: to take responsibility for history or for the truth of the occurrence.” Bearing witness liberates victims from historical amnesia and restores their humanity. It “connects us, and obligates us, to each other,” writes Kelly Oliver, who argues that witnessing, as the basis of human subjectivity, is “an ethical and social responsibility.”

For some Americans, shameful historical moments are far removed from present-day feelings of responsibility. But as Aaron Lazare explains:

> Just as people take pride in things for which they had no responsibility (such as famous ancestors . . . and great accomplishments of their nation), so, too, must these people accept the shame of their family . . . and their nations. Accepting national pride must

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Among the quotes on the walls of the memorial is one from Albert Einstein: “The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.”

Courtesy, Erika Doss

include willingness to accept national shame when one’s country has not measured up . . . this accountability is what we mean when we speak of having a national identity.8

In 2003, more than 3,000 people attended the dedication of Duluth’s lynching memorial, which included a silent march, prayers, and a speech of apology from Warren Read, a teacher from Kingston, Washington, who was horrified to learn while researching his family’s genealogy that his great-grandfather had helped lead Duluth’s lynch mob. His voice choking with emotion, Read apologized to Clayton, Jackson, and McGhie during his remarks and observed: “True shame is not in the discovery of a terrible event such as this, but in the refusal to acknowledge and learn from that

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8 Aaron Lazare, On Apology (New York, 2004), 41.
event.” He added: “I stand here as a representative of [my great-grandfather’s] legacy, and I willingly place that responsibility upon my shoulders.”

The city holds remembrance ceremonies each year at the memorial, and the history of the lynching has become part of Duluth’s public school curriculum. Members of the memorial committee also network with other communities around the nation who are “likewise working to confront historic wrongs and create a present and future where a true and deep racial reconciliation is achieved.”

Expectations that communities, and nations, “act morally and acknowledge their own gross historical injustices” emerge from shared public feelings that they have shamefully failed to live up to their ideals, and can work to right those wrongs. Shame has enormous potential, then, as a revitalizing instrument of shared civic and national purpose centered on redeeming the past. Working to remember a fraught history of racial intolerance, Duluth’s memorial stands as a compelling example of restorative justice in contemporary public art.

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10 See the Clayton Jackson McGhie Memorial website at: http://www.claytonjacksonmcghie.org/.