

Our Memorials, Ourselves

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Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture. By Lisa Woolfork. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 233 pages. \$40.00 (cloth).

Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument. By Seth C. Bruggeman. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. 260 pages. \$59.95 (cloth). \$24.95 (paper).

Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America. By Erika Doss. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 458 pages. \$35.00 (cloth).

Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape. By Kirk Savage. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 390 pages. \$34.95 (cloth).

The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing. By Patrick Hagopian. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009. 536 pages. \$49.95 (cloth).

As I write this essay, controversies about public space and historical commemoration lead the daily news. The so-called Ground Zero mosque has incited furor over the potential violation of “hallowed ground.” Glenn Beck has occupied the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington. In both cases, the central issue that concerns the books under review here—the nature of public engagement that coalesces around acts of historical memory—has been brought to the fore. These books represent some of the most recent American studies scholarship on the collective memorialization of the past—scholarship that seeks not to understand that past itself better but to ask what commemoration reveals about the present and future of civic engagement. This line of scholarship is often referred to as working in the field of “history and memory,” though I prefer the rubric “critical public history” to emphasize its engagement with acts of

memorialization in the public sphere. The premise of this scholarship has been powerfully demonstrated by both the Cordoba House controversy and the Beck rally: our decisions about historical commemoration become contentious because they so often serve contradictory notions about the nature of the body politic. In a way, the headlines of this past August could not have provided a better script for the reading of this scholarship on public history.

Yet this same turn of current events also serves as a depressing reminder about the current place of American studies scholarship among nonacademic publics. American studies can now claim a substantial cadre of scholars who have written extensively about historical commemoration in the United States, and doubtless recent events will be fodder for conference papers for years to come. Yet none of this expertise has been able to shape—or even to penetrate—the swamp of mass media of the contemporary United States. From Ed Linenthal's *Sacred Ground: Americans and Their Battlefields* (1991) to Erika Doss's *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*—released the very month that the Islamic center controversy hit the front pages—American studies has been producing an increasingly sophisticated and nuanced body of scholarship that addresses the disputes over historical commemoration and public space in the United States. Perhaps it is too much to ask Bill O'Reilly to book Linenthal or Doss for their insights at moments like these. But why should it be?

This gap between what scholarship about the public sphere has to offer and the influence of that scholarship on the public sphere matters, and not simply because the United States could profit from the knowledge of individual scholars on the questions that divide them here. The scholarship on historical commemoration cuts to the core purposes of American studies: it is relentlessly interdisciplinary (or should be), it addresses questions of national belonging and exclusion, and it actively imagines new modes of civic participation. Yet if this scholarship is capable solely of reacting to the public debates about collective memory—rather than participating in, let alone setting the terms of those debates—then what kind of public presence can we actually claim for our discipline? In *Memorial Mania*, Doss calls for a “critical pedagogy of public feelings—an emotional epistemology—which shrewdly considers how and why (and which) public feelings shape historical monuments, concepts of citizenship, and understandings of self and national identity” (59). The equally accomplished Kirk Savage writes in *Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape*, “To write a history of the memorial landscape is to subvert it, to watch it emerge from the fog of ‘identity’ and into the sharper light of human affairs” (10). Both Doss

and Savage are at the height of their powers in these books—which should be on the shelf of every graduate student considering how the tools of American studies can be brought to the texture of public space—but neither of them can answer how their “critical pedagogy” will actually work to “subvert” the feelings and actions of the people who inhabit the publics about which they write.

Consider the case of Seth Bruggeman. As he tells the story in *Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument*, Bruggeman was a graduate student when he first drove to George Washington Birthplace National Monument—a unit of the National Park Service that, as its name suggests, preserves and interprets the Virginia plantation upon which our first president was born. Seeking employment, he was contracted to write an administrative history for the National Park Service, which needed a scholar at an affordable rate. “Not yet having anything to contribute,” Bruggeman writes in describing an early meeting, “I listened quietly and wrote in my notebook, ‘really, how successful has the new social history been outside the academy?’” (5)

The answer to that question, like everything about the Birthplace National Monument, turns out not to be simple. Bruggeman’s engaging history of this site demonstrates how competing modes of historical commemoration have created a memorial landscape that is a pastiche of objects and impulses. “Despite all efforts by the National Park Service to perpetuate the myth of a ‘place untouched by time,’” he writes, “the most distinguishing feature of Washington’s birthplace today is its unwitting preservation of decade upon decade of commemorative recalibration—and each layer invokes the ideological exigencies of its time” (51). *Here, George Washington Was Born* tells this story from the first memorial placed on the site, in 1815, by Washington’s grandson, to the “living history” projects of the 1980s and the first substantial effort, in the 1990s, to interpret the place of slavery in the history of the plantation. Over time, those who have managed the site have had to contend with a paucity of information about the buildings at the time of Washington’s birth, as well as the simple fact that the place itself seems to have mattered little to Washington himself—whose family moved elsewhere when he was three.

Bruggeman’s book is especially useful in discussing the role of a volunteer association of women in developing the site for interpretation during the Colonial Revival of the early twentieth century. As Bruggeman notes, the management of historical house museums has frequently fallen to white women, who have used them as opportunities to express ideas about “propriety, order, and patriotism” (62). At George Washington’s Birthplace, as in other historical locations,

the women who managed the site would later come into direct conflict with the male professionals of the National Park Service, who had their own ideas about both the nature of historical authenticity and the content of the didactic message of the birthplace. But the earlier legacy of the female volunteers is still present at the Birthplace National Monument, particularly in the form of Memorial House—a house constructed in the 1930s to be a replica of the one in which Washington was born that is now interpreted as merely a general representation of the architecture of the period. With its costumed interpreters and display of “authentic” relics, the Memorial House still seems more genuine to most visitors than the nearby outlines of a house—a blueprint marked in lines of crushed shell on the earth—that marks what many believe to be the actual building in which Washington was born.

In his final chapter, Bruggeman describes returning to the Birthplace National Monument following the completion of his administrative history for a conference about the future of the site, only to be frustrated by the familiarity of the debate. “In what felt like a massive stroke of *déjà vu*, discussion of the park’s significance quickly devolved into a two-sided debate between those, like myself, who considered the park most significant for what it revealed about the history of commemoration and others who, committed to the *locus sanctorum*, refused to permit such ancillary considerations to obscure, as they still put it, “Washington the *man*” (199). Bruggeman argues that the site could be a place to explore, for instance, the significance of the Colonial Revival, the role of gender and race in public history, and the significance of changing technology of historical investigation; however, he cannot convince the interpretive staff of the site to follow the course he has charted. As a piece of scholarship, *Here, George Washington Was Born* is deeply successful, but it also offers a cautionary tale about the failure of that same scholarship to influence the object of its study.

One of Bruggeman’s most remarkable stories about the Birthplace National Monument comes from the 1930s, not long after the National Park Service assumed its administration. Philip Hough, the superintendent, decided to create a living exhibition by planting colonial crops alongside the entrance road to the birthplace—an idea that Bruggeman notes was well ahead of its interpretive time. In the name of authenticity, though, Hough went even farther: to tend the fields, he hired Annanias Johnson, an African American man born in the 1850s who claimed to be the last living person who had been enslaved on the nineteenth-century plantation that surrounded the birthplace. Hough made clear that the value he placed on Johnson emanated from an aura of bodily

authenticity that his physical bearing and personal tie to slavery generated. He was, as Bruggeman quotes Hough, “a darkey of the old school who can never be replaced. . . . Many is the picture that has been snapped of him by our visitors as he worked in his tobacco patch, and we have had people say that they appreciated him more than anything else we had on the place” (157).

The employment and display of Johnson encapsulates the complicated questions at the center of Lisa Woolfork’s *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*, a study of the variety of forms of historical commemoration of slavery. As she documents—and as Edlie Wong has recently noted in this journal—efforts to represent and memorialize the experience of slaves have proliferated in recent decades, not only in the United States but throughout the world.² Woolfork’s book deals primarily with U.S. examples, including novels, films, museums, reenactments, and rituals. In particular, Woolfork investigates and argues for the centrality of what she calls “bodily epistemology,” a strategy of historical representation that “uses the body of a present-day protagonist to register the traumatic slave past,” so that the boundaries between past and present become troubled (2). As Woolfork explains, “Talking with a slave character at a living-history museum, pouring a libation at a Middle Passage program, standing shoulder to shoulder with other blacks in a simulated slavehold during a Juneteenth commemoration, or being assigned the role of a fugitive slave during an immersion reenactment are all examples of bodily epistemology at work” (9).

Bodily epistemology presumably would also cover the National Park Service employing the elderly Annanias Johnson to work the fields surrounding the George Washington Birthplace. To her great credit, Woolfork is both aware of the limits of bodily epistemology throughout her book and careful to document the ways in which each of her examples contains its own set of possibilities and shortcomings. One of the book’s most compelling discussions concerns the representation of slavery at Colonial Williamsburg, both during the 1994 controversy over the reenactment of a slave auction and in more recent tourist experiences. In the case of the auction reenactment, Woolfork notes that both the vernacular criticism of Colonial Williamsburg and the scholarly skepticism of the representation of trauma cohered around a shared judgment that “slavery is a sacred, unique, and unknowable experience” (128). Rather than accepting this position, Woolfork takes up the opposite argument, contending that the representation of slavery frequently requires a mode of realist representation that has been too often dismissed as naive, sentimental, or even sensational. In the case of Colonial Williamsburg (as in the Washington Birthplace), she

explains, the very context of a tourist destination that privileges the experiences of white elites in order to attract paying customers will necessarily undermine such efforts at direct representation, but its failures should not consign the historical commemoration of slavery to the ineffable.

The representation of slavery at Colonial Williamsburg, Woolfork observes, is so fraught with difficulty that it is not surprising that “many blacks might choose a more insular, ritual reenactment with which to commemorate slavery.” *Embodying American Slavery* concludes with such ritual reenactments, which offer collective forms of memorialization in ways that combine theater, music, and worship. Such practices attempt to “create a proximate space to encounter slavery, a location that is both referential and reverential” (134). As insightful as Woolfork’s analysis of such rituals can be, as I was reading this discussion my mind kept slipping back to the early chapters of the book, where she takes up novels such as Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and films such as Haile Gerima’s *Sarafika*. The experiences of novel reading and even film viewing can be private, or can take place in bounded communities, in ways that more closely resemble the theatrical rituals (often held in churches) that Woolfork describes late in the book. While Woolfork has written an important book on the representational strategies employed in the commemoration of slavery, she points to further investigation that needs to take place on the reception of those strategies. In particular, the configuration and boundaries of the representational space occupied by historical memory suggests that we may need to reconsider what we mean when we use the phrase *public history*. While that phrase conjures up images of an expansive, boundless body politic, in fact Woolfork’s book shows us that the most effective historical commemoration often engages its public by circumscribing it.

The public nature of historical commemoration and the variety of publics that it engages is nowhere more evident than in the single most influential act of historical commemoration of the last half century—the construction of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall in Washington. The controversy created by Maya Lin’s minimalist design, the subsequent widespread acclaim for the memorial, and the very fact that the memorial commemorated such a divisive conflict have all contributed to its significance in the memorial landscape of the United States. It is impossible to miss its influence, both in terms of its aesthetics and in the contemporary explosion in the public commemoration of topics that cut across the grain of U.S. triumphalism, including slavery, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and U.S. violence against indigenous peoples at places like Sand Creek.

Patrick Hagopian’s *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* examines a wide range of commemorative practices marking the American war in Vietnam—he pegs the number of extant Vietnam War memorials at 461 (5)—but its central focus is rightfully the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. In fact, Hagopian’s book will likely stand for some time as the definitive history of the so-called Vietnam wall, including the forces that led to its construction, the debates that surrounded its design, and the role that the memorial has played in American political life since it was dedicated in November 1982. While many of these issues will be familiar to readers, Hagopian tells the story with a thoroughness and care that makes his story gripping and his arguments compelling.

The central achievement of *The Vietnam War in American Memory* is to document how acts of historical commemoration that attempted to overcome the divisiveness of the Vietnam era did so in the service of a political agenda. A crucial part of Hagopian’s story is the popularization of the discourse of post-traumatic stress disorder, and a watered-down language of healing that came with that discourse. Hagopian notes that PTSD became increasingly common as a way of understanding the experience of veterans throughout the 1970s, and then officially entered psychiatry with its inclusion in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980. While he never expresses doubt that many Vietnam veterans did indeed suffer from trauma, Hagopian demonstrates how as the language of trauma became popularized, the difficult work of treatment gave way to a “morally vacuous” rhetoric of healing that ignored the “historical political, and ethical sources of veterans’ pain and anger” (77).

This rhetoric was embraced by both backers of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Reagan White House, which sought to portray the “Vietnam syndrome” as something that needed to be healed through an aggressive, anti-Soviet military policy in places like Central America. Indeed, one of the most impressive findings of Hagopian’s scholarly investigation is the way that the Reagan administration offered quiet, calculated support to the construction of the memorial in spite of the objections of many conservatives (including some within the White House) to Lin’s design. The White House recognized the strong support that the memorial design had from veterans, and it also sought the construction of any memorial that could become an occasion for expressions of national unity. As Hagopian shows, the leaders of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund perpetuated a myth that they overcame the resistance of powerful, entrenched interests in order to secure their memorial on the

Mall, but in fact their efforts had the strong support of both key members of Congress and the White House (172).

One reason for the popularity of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, as Hagopian repeatedly observes, is that it is not a memorial to the Vietnam war but to Vietnam veterans. The ambiguity of the memorial's design and its emphasis on individual lives execute a populism that has been key to its success. But it has also rendered the Vietnam War in apolitical terms that are also exclusively focused on Americans as solely the recipients of suffering. In Washington and elsewhere, "the memorials recall the war as an experience undergone or suffered by those who served rather than as a matter of national policy involving decisions by the state, actions by the armed forces, and debates on the home front" (399). The experience of the Vietnamese has been pushed to the margins entirely. This depoliticization of the war goes some ways toward explaining how the Vietnam Veterans Memorial could remain one of the most popular destinations in Washington—with an estimated annual visitation of more than 4 million—and how the memorials to Vietnam veterans could continue to proliferate throughout the United States, even though polling data reveals that a majority of Americans consistently judge U.S. participation in the war to have been a mistake (14). We have found a way to love the veterans and to hate the war, but this compromise has come at the cost of genuine political engagement with the issues that have made the compromise necessary. "Americans," Hagopian writes in his conclusion, "have a long-destined, long-postponed appointment to confront and begin working through their own difficult memories of the Vietnam War" (431); however, if he has any optimism that Americans will keep this appointment, I see little evidence in his book to support it.

However, that does not mean that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial will forever be void of political activity. Memorial spaces are unpredictable, no matter how tightly the designers try to control their didactic content. The political content of the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, after all, has less to do with the affiliations of those who built its steps than with the fact that Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech there. This longer view of the public art of the National Mall is the subject of Kirk Savage's *Monument Wars*, a book that traces the transformation of that place over a span of more than two centuries. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial plays a crucial role in Savage's history as well, for it has created an expectation that national memorials "are to be spaces of experience, journeys of emotional discovery, rather than exemplary objects to be imitated" (21). For Savage, though, this development in the late twentieth century was not a complete rupture within the history

of public commemoration but a final, dramatic step that cemented what he calls "the spatial turn in monumental design" (20–21)—the use of memorials and monuments to create "a highly charged space of collective introspection, political strife, and yearning for change" (20).

This became possible, Savage explains, around the turn of the twentieth century, with "a shift from the nineteenth-century concept of *public grounds* to the twentieth-century concept of *public space*" (13–14). While the National Mall had once comprised carefully tended walks and gardens, statuary, and a treescape that included many "living memorials," it was cleared in the twentieth century to become an abstract space of gathering, reflection, and ordered design. (Luckily, the simple obelisk of the Washington Monument fit this new orientation astonishingly well.) This manner of thinking about public space has become so ingrained in our emotional and experiential vocabulary that we have come to take the transformation from "grounds" to "space" for granted. In the case of the National Mall, this historical amnesia was aided by urban planners who held themselves out to be the true stewards of the original design of Pierre Charles L'Enfant's original plan for the city—and who dismissed the nineteenth-century version of the mall as an unintended wilderness.

As in his previous book on memorial statuary—*Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997)—Savage's discussion of memorial public art in *Monument Wars* is both impressive in its attention to historical detail and insightful in its analysis. The chapters on the construction of the Washington Monument contain a narrative as compelling as many novels, but the most significant contribution may come in the book's discussion of the two Civil War monuments that now anchor the ends of the Mall: the Lincoln and Grant memorials. Each of these artifacts speaks to the cultural anxiety of the turn of the twentieth century, but each of them also creates emotionally rich possibilities. At the Lincoln Memorial, "we are asked not to celebrate Lincoln's triumph but to experience in our own way the tragic load he had to carry"; at the less-celebrated Grant Memorial, Henry Shradý's "intense focus on the individual experience of combat threatened to turn the monument's soldiers from heroes into victims, and the monument's viewers from reassured citizens into traumatized witnesses" (225, 236). As a result, the Mall has become a place of experiential potential that can be appropriated by everyone from Marian Anderson—whose 1939 Lincoln Memorial concert articulated a relationship between African American freedom struggles and the National Mall—to Glenn Beck.

Since the creation of the Lincoln and Grant memorials, the space between them has become notably more crowded, with not only the Vietnam Veterans Memorial but also the more recent Koreans War Veterans Memorial (dedicated in 1995) and the National World War II Memorial (dedicated in 2004). The National Capital Planning Commission and the U.S. Congress have declared the Mall to be a “substantially completed work of art” (quoted in Savage, 311), but Savage is rightfully skeptical that this sense of completion will foreclose further additions.³ So he concludes *Monument Wars* by proposing a moratorium that would allow for the construction of only *temporary* memorials on the Mall. He recognizes the power of what Erika Doss usefully calls in *Memorial Mania* the “excessive, frenzied, and extreme—hence manic” activity of memorialization in the contemporary United States (13). The fervor of the debate surrounding the proposed Islamic center near Ground Zero is but one symptom of this mania.

With its contemporary focus and astonishingly wide range of examples, Erika Doss’s *Memorial Mania* is an ideal companion to Savage’s historically oriented study of a single topos. Savage uses the National Mall to explain how public space has come to bear the burden of conveying psychological drama through an orchestrated system of artistic objects. Doss, on the other hand, provides a taxonomy of the varieties of emotion put into play by contemporary memorials and plumbs the affective structures that they set into motion. With chapters bearing titles such as “Grief,” “Gratitude,” and “Shame,” *Memorial Mania* considers not simply how commemorative practices reflect the feelings of Americans, but also how commemoration has become a crucial medium through which public feeling is structured, expressed, and archived.

A major contribution of Doss’s work here is the way that she connects the proliferation of commemorative activity in the United States to the “mushrooming of the public art industry” (31). As she explains, a variety of new funding streams—from set-asides in publicly funded construction projects to more modestly supported local arts agencies—have supported public art in recent decades working under the assumption that such artistic projects are necessary to the cultivation of authentic, local identities rooted in a sense of place. Moreover, Doss demonstrates that this proliferation of memorial construction has coincided with the ascension of an aesthetic minimalism represented by Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Doss explains that “minimalism is the style of choice for many contemporary memorials precisely because of its theatricality, its emphasis on felt experience and audience engagement” (127). She notes that this style has been redefined in a new generation of memorials

to victims of terrorism—including the victims of the 9/11 attacks—in ways that evoke “trauma’s dissociative affects of fear and anxiety” yet are “framed by sociotherapeutic assumptions that trauma can be represented and must be cured” (146). Similar to Hagopian’s contention regarding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Doss finds that such therapeutic purposes push to the margins any of the historical or political contexts that led to the violence being commemorated.

Doss’s analysis of memorials on the National Mall and at the sites of the Oklahoma City bombing and the 9/11 attacks would be enough to make *Memorial Mania* invaluable, but she goes far beyond these. While Doss does not claim to be comprehensive—the very mania that she documents makes such a project impossible—*Memorial Mania* is currently the closest thing we have to a comprehensive survey of commemorative memorials in the contemporary United States. She addresses the temporary memorials constructed in the aftermath of tragedy, the attempt to mark previously ignored historical atrocities, and the way that public commemoration can create spaces of both protest and community formation. It is perhaps no accident that many of the memorials that Doss considers to be most successful evoke challenging national histories of violence and displacement by marking intensely local events. These include the memorial dedicated in 2003 in Duluth, Minnesota, to three African American men who were lynched there in 1920, as well as *Danzas Indigenas*, a memorial gateway at a Los Angeles-area commuter rail station that tells the layered history of colonialism and immigration of the land upon which it sits. Both of these works provide examples of how memorials can unleash the “productivity” of emotion “by providing the spaces and subjects that permit cultural and political creativity and prompt acts of ‘good’ citizenship. Whether or not today’s Americans are up to the demands of emotionally productive politics remains to be seen” (376).

After this past summer, I think it would be difficult to argue that Americans are in fact “up to” this challenge. However, perhaps a better question is whether the scholars who comprise the field of American studies—at least those who reside in the United States—are prepared for these demands. Each of the books under review here demonstrates that American studies has developed a set of rigorous and flexible interdisciplinary tools for pursuing the questions that acts of public historical commemoration raise. But none of them actually creates the “critical pedagogy of public feelings” for which Doss calls—particularly if we believe such a pedagogy should be effective in teaching the nonacademic public itself. To be clear, I find all of these works exciting, invigorating, and

generative. Yet we will miss an opportunity if we fail to build on this generation of scholarship to find ways of engaging more directly with the publics who design, administer, and visit these sites of commemoration. What makes Doss's book so valuable is that it reveals the range, complexity, and depth of emotion produced by memorial acts. In a way, the academic tradition is meant to shield us from precisely this phenomenon, by sequestering scholarship via detached, critical distance from the tempestuous feelings of contemporary life. The arena of public history provides American studies a locus to reverse this trend, to think about how we can train ourselves and our graduate students to engage with nonacademic publics in matters of raw, public emotion. That project would be fraught with risk and difficulty, but to ignore it will mean condemning ourselves to read one generation after the next of scholarship that is perpetually disappointed in the execution of historical commemoration. If that is not motivation enough, the stakes on the ground of lower Manhattan, the National Mall, and the sites of thousands of less celebrated memorials, birthplaces, and historical museums should be.

Notes

1. To my knowledge, the most prominent media appearance of either Linenthal or Doss related to the Islamic center controversy was their being quoted (a single sentence each) in *USA Today*: Rick Hampson, "At Ground Zero, Proposed Mosque Not Only Controversy," *USA Today*, August 20, 2010, <http://www.usatoday.com> (accessed August 21, 2010).
2. Edlie Wong, "Slavery, Past and Present," *American Quarterly* 60.2 (June 2008): 455–65. The commemoration of slavery in Africa is the subject of Sadiya Hartman's recent *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
3. For a more recent update on the curatorship of the Mall, see Kate Taylor, "The Guardians of America's Front Lawn," *New York Times*, Sept. 9, 2010, C1, C5.