

CRAIG L. WILKINS —

Innervisions

When initially approached about writing a critique of the Equal Justice Initiative’s National Memorial for Peace and Justice designed by MASS Design Group, I was wary.[1] So much had already been written about the memorial, I felt the subject had essentially been covered.[2] In truth, I probably would’ve declined the solicitation had it not come a week before an already scheduled studio trip through Georgia and Alabama that included a stop in Montgomery. I figured since I was going anyway, maybe I’d find an angle yet unexplored. So, I agreed.

My hunch was somewhat confirmed during our visit to the Confederacy’s first capital, and upon my return to the upper confines of the Mason–Dixon line, I wasn’t sure such affirmation alone would be enough to sustain a full critique for the pages of this journal—at least, not an interesting one. Yet I felt compelled to write something; publishable or not, memorial and journal deserved at least that much. What I submitted for review I fully expect to be deemed something of a failure on my part to complete the task to which I agreed, so if you are reading this, at least it was a failure the editors felt worth sharing. But you should know going in: this might not end up where you expect.

What follows is a brief peek into how at least one critic works, or in this case, didn’t: a mashup of impressions, reflections, internal conversations, critical commentary, and research brought to bear to tell a story—a story about architecture and design, yes, but hopefully not only that. Architecture doesn’t exist in a vacuum, nor is it simply the purview of an elite cadre of practitioners, writers, developers, critics, and academics to bandy about in closely held circles that require acquiescence to the primacy of particular knowledges simply to enter. Regardless of the object, I mean to write to the broadest swath of the public I can about why architecture matters and why everyone—and I mean everyone—should be all up on it.

This is one such attempt...

Atop the highest hill in Montgomery sits a whisper that wants to shout. Except no one shouts here. Out of awe, respect, or simply bereft of things to say, this is a quiet place. On my left, a stylishly dressed young woman of about thirty, bobbing along, *tap, tap, tapping* in heels, is walking arm in arm with a similarly stylish female companion several generations her elder, steady and silent in

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[1] Full disclosure: MASS and I were members of a competition team led by the Minneapolis firm TenxTen for the design of the Detroit Institute of Arts town plaza, which concluded in 2019.

[2] Particularly insightful essays about the memorial include DeNeen L. Brown, “‘Lynch Him!’: New Lynching Memorial Confronts the Nation’s Brutal History of Racial Terrorism,” *Washington Post*, April 24, 2018, [link](#); Mark Lamster, “The Single Greatest Work of Twenty-First-Century American Architecture Will Break Your Heart,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 29, 2018, [link](#); Bryan C. Lee Jr., “How to Mark an American Atrocity,” *CityLab*, May 15, 2018, [link](#); Wanda Sabir, “The Legacy Museum: From Slavery to Mass Incarceration Demands We Face the Truth,” *San Francisco Bay View*, May 24, 2018, [link](#); Jamil Smith, “On a Hill in Alabama, the Lynched Haunt Us: The New Museum and Memorial in Montgomery Are Exactly the Remembrance America Needs,” *Rolling Stone*, May 6, 2018, [link](#).

flats. As they get closer, the younger leans in on the elder and says softly, “Wow, it’s bigger than I thought.” Her companion, who I imagine is a grandmother or auntie, smiles, squeezes her younger charge’s arm slightly, and nods in agreement. Assuming a kinship encouraged by proximity, I quietly agree as well, squeezing no one in particular. Still entwined, the two pass slowly down the walkway, heads upward, turning this way and that, searching the names captured on copperish blocks floating seemingly without end above. Watching the couple’s close, unhurried procession is surprisingly and reassuringly touching. I grew curious. About why they were so sharply dressed on a Saturday midafternoon, sure, but more so about the other why: the unsettled why, the kinship why. What makes this place, less than a city block, bigger than we thought?

KILLINGS INTENDED TO TERRORIZE BLACK POPULATIONS AND REINFORCE WHITE SUPREMACY [SIC] WHOSE PERPETRATORS—WHILE KNOWN TO LOCALS—WERE ALMOST NEVER CONVICTED OR EVEN NAMED.[3]

Could it be the reason we, strangers and companions alike—kids, parents, grandparents, friends, students, journalists, tourists; the curious, cautious, and the callous—gathered here under cover of soggy, breezy mid-morning gray? The size, scope, and magnitude of the extrajudicial yet socially sanctioned practice of mob violence each were there to acknowledge? Was it the story of lynching?

A uniquely perfected American form of terrorism operational to this day, lynching was a shockingly common occurrence, most enthusiastically practiced from the 1860s to 1960s. A direct descendant of that “peculiar institution” deployed primarily to keep people of color subjected by fear as well as law. To date, lynchings have claimed at least 4,742 documented victims that are known, with less than 1 percent of all perpetrators brought before the court and an infinitesimal number of those actually found guilty. Despite the introduction of nearly two hundred Senate anti-lynching bills, three House bills, seven separate presidential requests, and a 2005 apology for failure to provide “protection against lynching [which] was the minimum and most basic of Federal responsibilities,” it has taken a hundred years for the Senate to pass anti-lynching legislation and, at the time of this publication, it is still not the law of the land.[4]

Maybe they were thinking, as I was, about the expanse of time and space this trauma occupies: a century-plus of largely unpunished brutality shared among forty-six of the nation’s fifty states like so many family traditions—a

[3] Stephanie McCrummen, “The Keeper of the Secret,” *Washington Post*, April 1, 2019, [link](#).

[4] U.S. Congress, Senate, Justice for Victims of Lynching Act of 2019, S 488, 116th Cong., 1st sess., introduced in Senate February 14, 2019, [link](#). 2.



Approach to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, MASS Design Group, Montgomery Alabama. Photograph by the author, 2019.

breath and magnitude difficult for even the most forgiving minds to grasp. It is no small thing, this act of lynching; no matter how big we think it is, it will always be bigger than that.

SO, AS FAR AS BLACK PEOPLE ARE CONCERNED, WHEN IN THE WORLD HAVE WE EVER SOUGHT COUNSELING FOR ALL THE THINGS THAT HAPPENED TO US?[5]

Was it the memorial itself? Maybe. Memorials are curious things, probably best understood as markers of narratives whose “destiny is to recall the past and provide conditions for new responses in the future.”[6] Like statues, plazas, plaques, gardens, fountains, cemeteries, and even street names, memorials helps us “consider trauma and rethink and reactualize the past”[7] by molding “a landscape of collective memory, to conserve what is worth remembering and discard the rest.”[8] Of each, the endgame is always to render all citizens “the same... to perpetuate the notion that all share collective national history and identity.”[9] Yet we know not all stories are told boldly; not all are embraced magnanimously. Some are blessed with recognition, praise, and emulation; others, not so much. Some become so familiar we no longer recognize them as stories—we call those “reality.” “Truth.” *A fait accompli*. This is the distinction to which monuments and memorials aspire—to convey an essential, fundamental truth into the public realm to all that encounter it.

BLACK LANDSCAPES MATTER.[10]

As others and I have written, space is life.[11] From Jamestown to your town, my town, or any town USA, Black access to space—to tell our painful, joyous, complicated, confused, loud, incomplete stories—has been and remains severely curtailed always and in all ways. This is no accident. The power of space is real; control of it is always/already of vital political, social, and economic interest. The erasure of Black landscapes in all their fullness remains a frequent, tactical deployment of that power to support said interests. Without acknowledgment by sanctioned scribes—governments, agencies, institutions, landowners, banks, developers, police, schools, fellow citizens, and the like, all of which have yet to grant Black landscapes long-term legitimacy and lease—Black claims to space are tenuous at best, treasonous at worst. Monticello is a prime example. Descendants of the nation’s third president could change the reading of that landscape—and with it, alter the course of racial discourse in this country—by simply acknowledging what is becoming increasingly untenable to deny: the rightful place of Sally Hemming in the family narrative. Yet they continue to deflect and obfuscate, efforts that have less to do with acknowledging a legitimate claim to space and place than an investment in the game of “You win, I lose.” This zero-sum view of the landscape is but a microcosm of what happens to Black space writ large.

Imprimaturs aside, Black people in this country have never forgotten their presence in the landscape; it’s been too hard earned, a tale passed from generation to generation beyond the reach of official recorders. If anything, it’s

[5] McCrummen, “The Keeper of the Secret,” [link](#).

[6] Julian Bonder, “On Memory, Trauma, Public Space, Monuments, and Memorials,” *Places Journal*, vol. 2, issue 1 (2009): 62.

[7] Bonder, “On Memory, Trauma, Public Space, Monuments, and Memorials,” 62.

[8] Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4.

[9] Erika Doss, “Memorial Mania: Fear, Anxiety, and Public Culture,” *Museum News* (April 2008): 40.

[10] Kofi Boone, “Black Landscapes Matter,” *Ground Up*, [link](#).

[11] Boone, “Black Landscapes Matter,” [link](#); for more on the topic, see the works of Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Kara Walker, bell hooks, Mike Davis, Edward Soja, and Yi-Fu Tan to start.

the scribes and their audience who've forgotten, or perhaps more accurately, adopted a stance of willful ignorance. All that Blackness, lost. Stolen. Silenced. Driven underground, erased; or so believed. However, such erasures—the type that require the abused to adopt the abuser's narrative and forget everything else—are an impossibility. For oppression requires memories, if only to remind of the consequences of forgetfulness. Yet it's anathema to speak of them, to name them for what they are, because in naming, much of the power to oppress is lost. Given the memories this landscape names, it's not a stretch to say some would rather it not speak so loudly; others would rather it not speak at all. "What's past is past," they say. "It's going to cause an uproar and open old wounds," they say. "It's a waste of money, a waste of space and it's bringing up bullshit," they say.[12] These people have never read Faulkner.[13]

[12] Sam Levin, "Lynching Memorial Leaves Some Quietly Seething: 'Let Sleeping Dogs Lie,'" the *Guardian*, April 28, 2018, [link](#).

[13] William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage International, 2011), 73. "The past is never dead; it's not even past."

HEY BOY, YOU WANT TO GO SEE A HANGIN'?[14]

Entering this memoir ongoing is a slow, deliberate process, fraught with difficulties both real and imagined. Understanding the folly of approaching the complexity of such terror with reckless abandon, the six-acre testimonial of the Peace and Justice Memorial—essentially a square, open-air structure housing eight hundred six-foot rectangular, column-like, corten steel blocks inscribed with the names of almost five thousand victims of racial violence suspended from the ceiling—cannot be approached full-on. In a test of one's will to know, visitors must climb, turn, and twist just to enter. To reach its open center, a small grass mound from which the racial/spatial relationship of a nation can be read on a city—at its historical heart, the legacy embodied in the first Confederacy capital and the river that transported Black gold to warehouses and auction blocks slinking by just beyond; buffeted on its flanks by the city's oldest AME congregation and its newest equal justice warrior, standing like sentinels, prepared for yet another of what seems a never-ending, no-quarter battle with that legacy's entitled progeny—much patience is required, and rewarded.

Deliberately shifting—oblique from some angles, opaque from others,

[14] Jonathan Capehart, "'Hey Boy, You Want to Go See a Hangin'?': A Lynching from a White Southerner's View," *Washington Post*, June 9, 2017, [link](#).



Block body. Photograph by the author, 2019.

impenetrable or transparent from others still—the monument doesn't offer a singular focal point or identifiable element to announce arrival, despite being intentionally, even aggressively situated horizontally on the site. Without a specific organizing element on which to rest, the eye is left searching for one, scanning from one end of the memorial to the other and beyond. The quick read of its blatant horizontality is that the form is driven by the sheer number of items it must host, and that might indeed be the case. However, I'd like to propose another. That in its breadth, the emphasis on the horizontal implies a kind of continuation as well, one that suggests the memorial's impact is dispersed, shared, a datum that stretches far beyond this place. It's not the center, only the *centerline*—that which focuses, situates, and connects elements before and after, near and far. As the memorial and its companion museum make perfectly clear, the memorialized incidents of racial violence are not the isolated incidents so many work so desperately to believe. No, they are part of a legacy of indefensible, systemic brutality visited upon the Black body across the land that spans centuries. Alabama certainly plays an outsize role in that brutality, but it is not the only place such atrocities occurred. Each line of the memorial's horizon encourages you to consider that fact, to imagine this structure continuing unabated, extending far beyond this location. To imagine the implications of that line reaching Illinois or Oregon or Minnesota or Texas or any of the forty-one other states forever linked by the unmitigated cruelty remembered here. Accomplices all, their complicity cannot be seen, much less considered, through hurried eyes.

In contrast to the circuitous ascent, upon reaching the memorial proper, visitors easily pass through porous boundaries to meet, face-to-face, eye-to-eye as equals, columns inscribed with the names of counties where each death occurred. One can easily imagine such presumptuous eyeballin' being the cause for which so many remembered here have been included. Perhaps in honor of those who came on boats, docked and warehoused only a few streets away; of those whose history has been buried; and of those alive that recover it, visitors quickly learn the memorial doesn't encourage resting or stable proximities. A continued, albeit measured, movement is primary, as if to suggest that to stay ahead of the horror, stopping is not recommended. Turning the corner from the entry corridor, the long, wide wooden walkway gradually descends, slowly causing your relationship with the Black bodies to change. Each appears to rise. By the time you reach the end of the similarly long and wide third corridor—this one lined with descriptions of incidents for which some of the honored are found here—all the Blacks are hanging above. Stopping along the sloping procession to read the details of the unavenged, it is not surprising the effort requires one to be slightly askew, off balance, both physically and emotionally. To proceed down the sloping walkways requires a gentle but consistent counterweight to resist the physical tug. For the increasing emotional tug, alas, there's no such immediate solution. Interior moments where the body is not asked to lean, lift, or turn are few. Rounding the final corner finds a welcome respite: seating opposite a long wall displaying several quotes under a slow but steady flow of water. Taking advantage of this belated but welcome gift, I wonder if the objective of all the subtle gestures to destabilize both body and vision is echoing the reality that the Black body in space is never settled, never comfortable; it is always on alert, at the ready; moving, contorting; required to



Unknown lynching victim. Photograph by the author, 2019.

be malleable, and more often that not, differential. Given panel after panel recounting the slight, infinitesimal, and nonexistent incidents that set in motion such horrific responses, it's not hard to see the epidemic of calls to authorities to police Black bodies cooking, napping, gardening, campaigning; in parks, on sidewalks, in cars, in malls, on trains, in driveways, in backyards, at graduation ceremonies, at Starbucks—the list seemingly expands daily—as a pattern of a centuries-long spatial animus best described by bell hooks' observation that our very presence is a disruption.[15]

If so, the choice to continue that condition is curious. This place should certainly be the antithesis of hooks' observation. Grief keeps no calendar, wears no watch. It moves when, where, and at any pace it deems appropriate, a recognition addressed along the final corridor, yes, but perhaps more accommodations could have found purchase throughout, especially considering those closest to the trauma are the elderly, often not able to transverse long distances without resting, not to mention even the most spry and stouthearted can be overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the viciousness housed within.

[15] bell hooks, *YEARNING: race, gender, and cultural politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 48.

WHAT TIME IS THIS PLACE?[16]

Dragging my fingertips gingerly along that sharp, cragged water wall—listening to the scraping, trickling sound of my disruption and hoping to replace the emotional discomfort of having my spatial relationship tainted from equal to perpetrator to spectator with one more physical—I walk onto the grounds toward a plaza of pillars. There, Blocks matching the hanging eight hundred lie rusting in rows like raw, quiet accusations awaiting transport to long-delayed reckonings. Under the hazy light of a shy and melancholy sky, I'm still no closer to “why” than when I began. Worse, I'd even added another possibility. If it's neither the story nor the manner in which it's told, could it be the storyteller itself?

All over the country, efforts like StoryCorps and the Moth series, regional showcases like poetry slams and spoken word performances, and hyper-local events like the Secret Society of Twisted Storytellers of Detroit

[16] Kevin Lynch, *What Time Is This Place?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).

show the art of storytelling enjoying a much-welcomed public renaissance. And no wonder; it is a form of communication as old as time that at its best elevates specific individual moments to common relatable experiences. In a way, storytelling might be understood as the original memorial; drawing on the past to understand our present and direct our future. Through them we learn, preserve, and pass on who and what we are as humans. In an ever-increasing climate of xenophobia, tribalism, and authoritarianism, it's not surprising that people, often without the financial or political access to larger bully pulpits to combat the fracturing of a flawed but once-promising experiment, return to something still fully within their control: the story.

I am a fan of stories: the grand, bland, and everything in-between tales we tell about our lives, our beliefs, our family, our friends, our places. My family has been blessed with several excellent storytellers in my lifetime, my father being one. His stories about traveling with my grandfather to visit family in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama were epic. Like all the best griots, he had a way of taking you to a particular time and place while keeping you tied to home. No matter how outlandish the tale, someone would invariably say something akin to, "I've been to a place like that," "This cat at work is like that," or "Yup, I woulda done the same thing." Licensed for effect (typically humor), sure, but his stories never seemed a lie. I could know these people and places because I trusted that the storyteller respected both the subject and the audience.

In telling the stories of the 4,742, no one can doubt the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI)'s respect for subject and audience. Founded in 1989 by Bryan Stevenson to defend inmates on death row, EJI is committed to changing the racial narrative in America through representation, advocacy, programming, and most recently, its museum and memorial. Working in and with communities marginalized by poverty and unequal treatment, EJI challenges practices that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable Americans in general and Black people in particular. As a repository of knowledge and champion for justice for those who've too long gone without either, its place as respected orator is secure.

But MASS? At first glance, maybe not so much.

A relatively young firm, the practice began in 2008 with two core beliefs—that justice is beauty and that architecture has the power to heal. A 2017 Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award winner, MASS (Model of Architecture Serving Society) began by earnestly seeking to provide high-quality professional design “services to people who haven’t worked with architects” by inviting local residents to partner in the planning, design, and building process.[17] MASS uses “architecture to create impact... beyond the building” to improve the communities where it works. Understandably, early projects were typically self-initiated, by approaching potential partners, organizations, agencies, institutes, and individuals with a simple query: “How can we support you?”[18] True to its origin story, it was an article about Stevenson and his work that led cofounder Michael Murphy to reach out and offer assistance. MASS is a unique design collaborative that clearly has a successful background in doing work sensitive to marginalized communities and people of color, all of which might make the choice less curious. Still, one could reasonably argue they’re hardly steeped in the kind of experience this particular story requires. Put more succinctly by cofounder Alan Ricks, “There are certain questions we

[17] Katie Gerfen, “MASS in Context,” *ARCHITECT*, May 16, 2017, [link](#).

[18] Gerfen, “MASS in Context,” [link](#). See also Sam Lubell, “How MASS Design Group Uses Architecture to Empower Communities,” *Curbed*, November 12, 2015, [link](#). This philosophy has produced the Butaro District Hospital, Rwanda; the Ilima Primary School, Congo; the Gheskio Cholera Treatment Center, Haiti; and most recently, the winning proposal for the Martin Luther & Coretta Scott King Memorial in Boston in collaboration with conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas.

get about ‘Is our work a colonial act?’”[19]

The query bears consideration. Stories are embedded in the people that shepherd each through time and space, and each person must possess at least a semblance of authority and believability to have any chance of the story being heard. In architecture, this is particularly true in the case of museums, memorials, and monuments. When specifically asked about commissions in, for, and about the Black experience, one prominent commentator responded:

THE MUSEUM SHOULD REFLECT THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BLACK MAN'S STRUGGLE OVER THE LAST FOUR HUNDRED YEARS. IT IS ONLY RIGHT THAT THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE ACTUALLY PARTICIPATED IN THIS STRUGGLE, FELT THE PAINS OF INJUSTICE, YET CONTINUED TO FIGHT TO GAIN CREDIBILITY IN THIS COUNTRY, BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WORK DONE ON THIS MUSEUM.[20]... HOW CAN WE ANSWER TO OUR LITTLE BLACK BOYS AND GIRLS IN THE FUTURE THAT WE DID NOT HAVE A BLACK ARCHITECTURAL FIRM CAPABLE OF BUILDING A HOUSE FOR OUR FAMILY CONTRIBUTIONS?[21]

Said another:

PEOPLE NEED TO UNDERSTAND WHY THIS IS SO IMPORTANT TO SO MANY WITHIN THE BLACK COMMUNITY. FOR ALMOST FOUR HUNDRED YEARS, WE HAVE ENDURED THE TELLING OF OUR HISTORY BY OTHERS... MOST RECENTLY, THE HIGHLY SOUGHT AFTER COMMISSION FOR THE DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. MEMORIAL IN WASHINGTON, DC, WAS AWARDED TO ROMA DESIGN—A FIRM LED BY THREE WHITE PRINCIPALS. WHEN FORMER VIRGINIA GOVERNOR DOUGLASS WILDER NEEDED AN ARCHITECT FOR THE DESIGN OF UNITED STATES NATIONAL SLAVERY MUSEUM, HE HANDPICKED CHIEN CHUNG PEI—THE SON OF DISTINGUISHED ARCHITECT I. M. PEI. BUT WHEN THE STORY OF THE HOLOCAUST NEEDED TO BE TOLD, THE COMMISSION WENT TO ARCHITECT JIM FREED—A JEW WHO, AT THE TENDER AGE OF NINE, FLED GERMANY WITH HIS FAMILY TO ESCAPE THE NAZI REGIME. DOUGLASS CARDINAL AND JOHN PAUL JONES WERE AMONG THE NATIVE AMERICAN ARCHITECTS WHO CONCEIVED THE UNIQUELY DESIGNED NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN... WITH HISTORY AS THE MEASURE, SIMPLY ALLOWING DUE PROCESS TO TAKE ITS COURSE APPEARED, AT BEST, TO BE A RISKY PROPOSITION FOR THOSE BLACK ARCHITECTS..[22]

The first remarks are those of state of Ohio representative Clarence Josef “C. J.” McLin, commenting on the choice of Wright, Porteous, and Lowe—a majority white firm—to design the proposed Afro-American Museum of History and Cultural Center at historically Black Wilberforce University in 1982. The second, from then-NOMA president and AIA Whitney Young Award recipient R. Steven Lewis on the selection of Phil Freelon, David Adjaye, and J. Max Bond—three exceptional architects who are also practitioners of color—to

[19] Katie Gerfen, “MASS in Context,” [link](#). Ricks argues that while this is a legitimate query, in truth MASS does just the opposite: “[W]e think it is actually about decolonizing the way things are built by fostering locally produced modes of design and construction—not just importing methods. We are coming to places that we are invited, and working deeply with those communities and finding local people to partner with.”

[20] Mary Anne Sharkey, “Choice of Architects Criticized,” *Journal Herald*, July 1, 1982.

[21] “McLin Critical of Museum Designers,” *Dayton Daily News*, July 1, 1982.

[22] R. Steven Lewis, “Who Will Tell the Story? Smithsonian Institution’s Selection of the Architect,” *NOMA*, issue 6 (Spring 2010), 54.



National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Photograph by Jordan H. Carver, 2019.

design the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture in 2010. Written almost forty years apart by different men for different projects, they're almost interchangeable; each as if written at the same time with the same pen. It's not hyperbole to say "who gets to tell the story" is a decades-, if not centuries-long refrain that runs through most discussions of signature commissions of the Black experience, despite their relative scarcity outside the Negro Buildings of fairs and expositions.[23]

Yet, it is a tricky thing, this orator of whom such projects await; for if there is no single way to tell a story or more than one story to tell, it can be argued there is no one ideal storyteller. Black architects may indeed have an insight into the Black experience not immediately or intimately accessible by others, but that does not always ensure an accurate (if there is such a thing), much less, interesting, exploration of that experience. Commenting on the design of several recent Black museums by Black architects, Mario Gooden—himself a Black architect—concludes each suffers from a failure to look deeper into the actual cultural production of everyday life in Black America. Offering music and literature mined from the specific African American experience as cultural expressions that "also exploit paradox, irony, subversion, and nuance translated through language, meter, syncopation, manner, and self-consciousness," he argues that "this expression of black self-awareness within American consciousness has not fully extended to black visual arts and architecture." [24] Instead, he observes how these new works settle for stereotypes of Blackness, often in the form of specific color palettes, motifs, patterns; abstractions of cultural symbols (Kente, Adinkra, etc.); and direct formal appropriation of objects (crowns, stools, staffs, etc.), which may speak to the origin of Blackness in Africa, perhaps, but not so much the permutations of Blackness in America.[25]

I think about stereotypes and permutations while staring at a sculpture by Hank Willis Thomas depicting a group of Black men almost completely encased in concrete, standing side by side, only their heads and hands up as if in a police lineup or shooting gallery. I can't decide if they are imploring unseen assailants

[23] For insight into Negro Buildings, see Mabel O. Wilson, *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

[24] Mario Gooden, *Dark Space* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2016), 100.

[25] Gooden, *Dark Space*, 102. On 104, he further states, "Superficialities and generalizations regarding cultural identity usually play out through the constructions of stereotypes... Whether from the white or black perspective, such stereotypes lead not to fixity and order but to simplemindedness—one of the prime dangers of lowest-common-denominator thinking in a society that privileges image over idea in politics, popular culture, and mass media. Likewise, the use of cultural stereotypes in architecture reduces a building to the flatness of its two-dimensional representation (image); a sound-bite or 'one-liner' figurative symbol (metaphor); or an overused idea, depleted of its original intensity, uncritical, and no longer contributing anything new to the discourse of architecture (cliché)."

for a mercy rarely granted or reaching for uncertain divine deliverance. Perhaps both. Or neither. The conundrum reminds me of many long, sometimes contentious conversations with my mother who, perhaps as a way to prod her increasingly militant son, was fond of saying, “I don’t like anything *all Black*.” Sometimes she would say it in reference to a movie, television show, or magazine. Said in those moments with a mischievous smile or maybe an overly animated tone, which, in a rush to deliver my Pavlovian response to the contrary, I could not see the obvious signs that I was being played. Other times, though, it was said in all seriousness, and in those moments it was always in reference to things more substantive, like education, business, politics, or ideologies. I recall it being at the heart of especially contentious debates at both the beginning of my professional and academic careers, each intentionally initiated at *all Black* institutions. Now, don’t get it twisted; my mother was definitely pro-Black, she just wasn’t *all Black*. Her point—which she made with great alacrity at every opportunity—was that no matter how much I may have wanted it to be true, *all Black* just wasn’t how the world operated, and the sooner I understood that, the better. A banker by profession, she believed the more I understood how and why things worked, the better able I’d be to shape forces to my benefit. Remaining in the world I knew most intimately wouldn’t develop the kind of critical or social skills need to be successful. On the other hand my father, a systems analyst, did not necessarily share her convictions, but strategic man that he was, rather than choose a side in our frequent forays, he let his *bona fides*—Urban League, Operation Breadbasket, PUSH, social clubs—do his talking, trusting me to discern his position. I did, and while we were always *simpatico* on this point, maybe we weren’t always correct.

Still facing those anguished, half-buried figures, the message—that someone or something outside your circle or purview often has the power to affect your fate—was mom’s point made visible in rock, stone, and steel. It was not their palms on the whip, hands on the rope, or fingers on the trigger; yet, they represent the millions of Black men and women who are still physically and psychologically subjected to whip, rope, and trigger every day for no other reason than color. I shut my eyes tight, hoping that when they open, those dozen or so open hands will have become closed fists. Alas, upon opening, they had not. Still, the disappointment of that failed transformation was quickly replaced by my mom’s greatest lesson made concrete: the realization that regardless of object or objective, all movements—every single one—need allies, and they’re not always going to look the way you expect. If actual and sustained change is the goal, you have to be smart enough to recognize allies when presented, open enough to embrace their assistance, and facile enough to keep them on board for the duration.

FOR PEOPLE TO GET OVER A TRAGEDY, MOST TIMES YOU ASK QUESTIONS TO TAKE THEM BACK TO WHERE THAT TRAGEDY HAPPENED, RIGHT?[26]

Can an object in the landscape actually change a national narrative? Can something you must visit—which implies at least a minimum amount of self-selection, self-awareness, and choice—really have an impact on a narrative that has done its best to ignore, if not deny, a memorial’s *raison*

[26] McCrummen, “The Keeper of the Secret,” [link](#).

d'être? In a world where shock manifests every day in ways unimaginable even a decade ago, can the recalling of a terror that at its peak was so cavalier yet so virulent as to shape the lives of an entire nation ever be understood? Is it even reasonable to think such is possible? America—read White America—is pathologically obsessed with race and its relationship to denizens of color has been nothing short of schizophrenic at best, treacherous at worst. The recent demonization of refugees, immigrants, and the hyper-policing of Black bodies, not to mention the continued executions of Black women and men in public space, is only the latest manifestation of this chronic disorder. Without the kind of mental gymnastics it takes to win Olympic medals, it's simply not possible to consider the heinous acts that led to this place without asking, "What kind of person, what kind of people, could perpetrate such atrocities upon another human being? What kind of people could condone it? Celebrate it? Continue it?" Black Americans know the answer, but a goodly amount of White Americans don't, or pretend they don't. If there is any hope of a collective future, avoiding the answer to those questions is simply no longer acceptable, if it ever was.

Black people are not the only ones wounded by the terrorism of lynching. Silent in the shade of that schizophrenia, I wondered if maybe, just maybe, White America needed this place—or a place like this—as much if not more so than Black America. It is not Black people who must be convinced of the crime. And if I step into the fog of that premise, the selection of MASS becomes slightly more perceptible. Might the choice of a designer of color—say, someone who wants to turn hands into fists—provide a disingenuous yet convenient cover for those who do not wish to even face the questions, much less the answers? After all, who would you want pointing out your social apotemnophilia? One you hope will empathize with your disorder or one you know will not?

Whether Black Lives Matter, Me Too, Civil, Equal, LGBTQX, or any other movement NOT focused on expanding the privilege of white heterosexual men, it is always the abused who educates the abuser about the abuse and even then, only as far as the abuser is willing to listen and learn. Thus the abuser retains power, dictating how much can be said, how much will be tolerated, how far and fast change proceeds. Yet to truly move forward, victims cannot continuously be required to educate; the perpetrator must take ownership of the offense and put forth a good faith effort to make amends. And someone other than the perpetrator must sit in judgment of that effort. The power dynamic has to shift, change. Said another way, Black America must be in the position to say to their counterparts, "We want to know your answers to these questions, your thoughts on these deeds; we already know ours" and be free to conclude, "That response is inadequate. Try again." That kind of agency is rare in the built realm in general; even rarer for communities of color, yet MASS has a history of being comfortable in that space.

Now, I'm not arguing the choice to work with MASS was indeed a product of such thinking; these are my ruminations, nothing more. I have no exclusive insights, my own recent work with the firm notwithstanding. Nor do I want this to read as a kind of capitulation to the white tears of snowflakes that cannot understand why they are not always at the center of all things. Further, I fully acknowledge the many Black architects who could have taken on this project with sensitivity and aplomb and produced incredible work—Mabel O. Wilson, Walter Hood, Sara Zwede, or the aforementioned Freelon, Adjaye, or

Gooden, just to name a few. Prior to my visit, my initial preference—and I would hazard to guess that of a good number of Black people in general and Black practitioners in particular—would've favored a choice from that list or one similarly compiled.[27] But not so much my mom; for *this* project, in *this* site, at *this* time, I suspect she would've argued for MASS. She said on more than one occasion, "It's hard to write a story with bitter fingers that not only the bitter will read."

[27] Craig L. Wilkins, "African Americans and Signature Commissions," in *Diversity Among Architects: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge Press, 2016).

Unfortunately, this is all speculation. As both parents have recently passed, I'll never know for sure their thoughts about this memorial. I do wish they'd had the chance to visit, though; it is ultimately an exquisitely executed testament to the lesser and better angels of our nature, worthy of every bit of praise it has received. I think both would've been pleased, albeit for different reasons. In all its hulking brittleness, my father may have seen a story of endurance, a kind of precarious defiance that recalled his younger days in Chicago marching for fair housing. In its redemptive permanence, my mother may have seen a validation of her position that allies like her bank had to fund the construction and purchase of that housing. I am not yet ready to say I agree with my mom's overall thesis, but I am no longer so quick to say she was wrong

And that, like this memorial, maybe even because of it, is a victory in itself.