

## CHAPTER ONE

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### INTRODUCTION

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA originated as a slave society, holding millions of Africans and their descendants in bondage, and remained so until a civil war took the lives of a half million soldiers, some once slaves themselves.<sup>1</sup> This book explores how that history of slavery and its violent end was told in public space—specifically in the sculptural monuments that increasingly came to dominate public space in nineteenth-century America.

The shift from slavery to freedom precipitated by the Civil War was the cataclysmic event and the central dilemma of the century, one that continues to shape American society even today. That event reverberated throughout public space in countless ways, some obvious and others subtle. The war provoked the greatest era of monument building ever seen in this country, yet the role of the public monument in defining the war's legacy is a subject that has been considered only in fragments, if at all. The fragments tell us little because their significance depends on how they are put together. Doing that means interweaving three large themes: the meaning of race, the experience of war, and the function of the public monument. All three—race, war, and monument—were pivotal to the nation as it emerged from its long tradition of slavery. Passing through this epochal transformation, all three combined to reshape the American sense of its nationhood.

The Civil War did not simply emancipate four million individuals whose lives and histories had been shaped in slavery. That act of emancipation shook the life of the nation and everyone in it. The death of slavery required nothing less than “a new birth of freedom,” to use Lincoln's famous phrase from the Gettysburg Address, a reinvention of the very meaning and practice of liberty. Slaves could not shed bondage like a suit of clothes; they had to find new identities, new ways of work, new routes into society. Nor could the larger society suddenly shed its tradition of slavery without facing fundamental challenges to its own institutions and identity. What would freedom come to mean in a society still attached to the very concept of racial difference used to justify slavery? Would new barriers between the races have to be erected, or could race itself be rethought, reimagined? Far from solving an ideological crisis, the abolition

of slavery precipitated a new one—a momentous struggle over the idea of race and the terms of citizenship in a nation supposedly dedicated to equality.

That struggle dominated the politics of the period we call Reconstruction. Yet Reconstruction was not merely a contest over public policy—voting rights, land distribution, and so forth. Change of that kind could not be realized without a more profound cultural transformation. Reconstruction demanded nothing less than that the nation and its people re-imagine themselves. Public monuments were at the center of this highly abstract, and yet terrifying, conflict—a conflict that lasted long after Reconstruction's official demise.

Public monuments were meant to yield resolution and consensus, not to prolong conflict. The impulse behind the public monument was an impulse to mold history into its rightful pattern. And history was supposed to be a chronicle of heroic accomplishments, not a series of messy disputes with unresolved outcomes. Even now, to commemorate is to seek historical closure, to draw together the various strands of meaning in a historical event or personage and condense its significance for the present in a speech or a monument. It is true that the process of commemoration often leads to conflict, not closure, because in defining the past we define our present. Yet in choosing to remember “historical” events or heroes we still hope to plunge them into a past secured against the vicissitudes of the present.

Public monuments are the most conservative of commemorative forms precisely because they are meant to last, unchanged, forever. While other things come and go, are lost and forgotten, the monument is supposed to remain a fixed point, stabilizing both the physical and the cognitive landscape. Monuments attempt to mold a landscape of collective memory, to conserve what is worth remembering and discard the rest. Today public monuments are everywhere, so much a part of the landscape of our daily life that we hardly even notice them. But in the middle of the nineteenth century the public monument still meant something vital and precious. Public monuments were much rarer, and many of the types of monuments we now take for granted simply did not exist. Before the Civil War one could stroll through most streets or squares without ever encountering a bronze statue of a departed hero or even a simple stone shaft marking a historical event.<sup>2</sup>

The “new birth of freedom” proclaimed by Lincoln at Gettysburg in 1863 ushered in a new era of the public monument as well. The national soldier's cemetery Lincoln helped consecrate that day was the first of its kind, and the modern war memorial, dedicated to the ordinary soldier, originated around the same time. In the decades following the war, the number and variety of monuments erected throughout the country multi-

plied exponentially. Increasingly they commemorated the common man and, sometimes, woman. While monuments retained their traditional virtues of permanence and fixity, they became ever more popular—in more than one sense of the word. In an earlier century, public monuments had been part of a cult of rulership; now they claimed to be revelations of the popular will. Made of imperishable stone or metal, and erected prominently in shared civic space—parks, town squares, public buildings—public monuments were meant to be a genuine testimonial of the people's memory, an eternal repository of what they held most dear.<sup>3</sup>

Slavery constituted perhaps the single most difficult challenge facing “the people” as they struggled to build a democratic memory of their collective past. Slavery could hardly even be acknowledged in public space without exploding the myth of a democratically unified people from the very outset. The abolition of slavery after the Civil War did not solve the problem but only intensified it. Once abolished, slavery forced itself into the domain of memory, there to be reckoned with in one way or another—suppressed, integrated, romanticized. Emancipation introduced into national memory a new people (some four million ex-slaves) and a new history (*their* history of enslavement).<sup>4</sup> “The people” now included slaveowner and slave alike, multiple and opposing histories united under the same banner of the nation. While the democratization of monumental space tied it ever more closely to the image of the people, the question of who constituted the national people grew more divisive. Ultimately the war turned on the question of who belonged to the nation: who had a claim on the national possession of liberty, and what did the possession imply. The monuments of the war inevitably forced these issues to the surface; representational decisions had to be made, and they had public consequences. At the very time, therefore, that a resurgent nationality was sparking a new monumental era, the meaning of nationality was changing in dramatic and unpredictable ways. It is this conjunction of events—and the cultural and artistic problems arising from it—that my book investigates. \*

TODAY we are acutely aware of public space as a representational battleground, where many different social groups fight for access and fight for control of the images that define them. Recent controversies over the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, the John Ahearn bronzes in the Bronx, and the Arthur Ashe statue in Richmond—to name just three—have put the problem on the front page of newspapers and in the halls of government. Public space in the nineteenth century was also torn by conflict, though the terms of the conflict and the access to it were rather different. The battles fought and the decisions made in that era had a profound impact on the lives of people then and, at the same time, created an

enduring landscape of public monuments that continues to shape our public experience and expectations today.

In the expansive era of the nineteenth century, monuments were not bestowed by the state on the citizenry, or at least they weren't supposed to be. It was the reverse claim that animated the whole monumental enterprise: monuments were supposed to arise spontaneously by popular demand, only then to be donated to the state for safekeeping. What gave monuments their peculiar appeal in an era of rising nationalism was their claim to speak for "the people." Monuments were "true" only insofar as they seemed to display the people's heart. Most monuments therefore originated not as official projects of the state but as volunteer enterprises sponsored by associations of "public-spirited" citizens and funded by individual donations. These voluntary associations often had direct links to officialdom, but they achieved legitimacy only by manufacturing popular enthusiasm (and money) for the project. Sponsors usually worked hard to sustain the fiction that they were merely agents of a more universal collective whose shared memory the project embodied. For example, the sponsors of Lincoln's tomb monument in Springfield, Illinois, asked "to be regarded as only the *channel* through which the promptings of the popular heart may find expression,—the instrument to mould its offerings into forms of enduring strength and beauty."<sup>5</sup> Hence the importance of the "popular subscription," in which rich and poor, young and old, were canvassed alike for their financial contributions; and the rituals of cornerstone laying and dedication, where great crowds gathered and symbolically erected the monument. Sponsors had to publicize their enterprise from beginning to end; to marshal the resources and support needed to place a monument prominently in public space, they really did have to summon the symbolic and financial participation of a "public" that the monument would represent. The more widely the monument campaign appealed, the more enthusiasm it seemed to generate, the more convincingly its public would come to resemble the democratic vision of one people united by one memory.

Nowadays, in the academy at least, we are inclined to question this equation. We think of collective memory—and indeed the "people" who supposedly share this memory—as complicated fictions, manufactured to serve ideological ends. Monuments emerged within a public sphere that communicated between actual communities of people and the abstract machinery of the nation-state. Monuments were one space in which local communities based on geography or interest or both could define themselves and speak to or for the larger collective. The relationship between the local community and the more abstract collective was complex and at times, I will argue, quite strained. Monuments did not simply serve the official demands of the state. Nor did they simply channel spontaneous

popular sentiments, as the sponsors liked to claim in their standard rhetoric. The process of commemoration was in fact reciprocal: the monument manufactured its own public, but that public in turn had opinions about what constituted proper commemoration. In practical terms, the designers of public monuments—mostly sculptors, as it turns out—usually had to satisfy a committee of elite citizens who were themselves competing for popular approval with other philanthropic projects and even other monument proposals. The designer could not impose an official version of history but could only propose one possible version, which then had to win a place in this peculiarly competitive public arena.

In the process, elite and popular interests inevitably intertwined and reshaped one another. This was simply the nature of the public sphere in the nineteenth-century United States. A truly vernacular “folk” memory might be nurtured outside the public sphere, in quilts or tales or traditional rituals, but once memory turned public it became altogether different structurally: a composite creation of many different groups and voices acting and reacting in relation to one another. Some groups had more control over the process than others, but no one had enough mastery to set the agenda or dictate the result. The process included both the production of public monuments and their subsequent use. The public monument, after all, was not just a rhetorical space where people debated image and symbol, but was also a real physical space where publics could gather and define themselves at ceremonies and rallies. In the late twentieth century we are all too familiar with the competition among groups for representation in this public process. The difference is that now many groups openly stand for themselves and their own interests, while in the nineteenth century almost everyone claimed to speak for the people as a whole. Collective memory was just as much a brew, but it had to be presented as the product of a united people.<sup>6</sup>

There is good reason to believe that even in the nineteenth century people saw through this popular fiction of the public monument; they were not so naive as their rhetoric seems to suggest. They fought over the sponsorship and design of public monuments precisely because they knew what power the monuments had to define the will of a people. But a funny thing happened once a monument was built and took its place in the landscape of people's lives: it became a kind of natural fact, as if it had always been meant to be. The monument's rhetorical claims of popular status became self-fulfilling prophecy. Begun as a project designed by particular actors for particular political ends, the monument was transformed into the image of the people—even if some part of the people took the unusual step of contesting that image. Public monuments exercised a curious power to erase their own political origins and become sacrosanct, a power that is still evident today whenever people rise to defend

monuments from change or attack.<sup>7</sup> The individuals and interest groups that vied for representation in monumental space understood that there was a great deal at stake in the form and content of public monuments. They were competing not merely for the right to speak for the people but for the chance to etch the people's voice in stone, where it would remain forever.

The irony is that now, in the late twentieth century, we must work so hard to recover that voice once thought to be eternal. If many monuments from the past seem mute to us, they do still have stories to tell. But those stories are not necessarily what the monuments were intended to tell us. To make the monuments speak again we must question the often bland surface they show the world. We must investigate who were the people represented in and by monumental space, and how they competed to construct a history in the language of sculpture and in the spotlight of the public sphere.

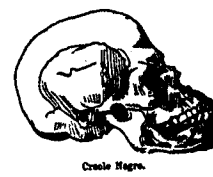
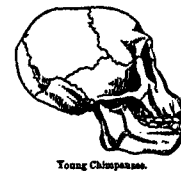
Throughout the nineteenth century, sculpture remained the public monument's central medium of expression. Monuments were architectural, of course, some more conspicuously than others, and the architecture was usually inscribed with texts, some laconic and others expansive. But the primary burden of the commemorative content fell on the sculptor, to condense the meaning of the monument into the deceptively simple language of human form. Colossal statues of heroes, bas-reliefs of great men in action, sleek female allegories for abstract principles—these were the stock in trade of the public monument.

The medium's obsession with ideal human form made the whole subject of slavery extremely difficult for sculptors to represent. More than any of the other arts, sculpture was embedded in the theoretical foundation of racism that supported American slavery and survived long after its demise. For racism, like sculpture, centered on the analysis and representation of the human body. The concept of race emerged in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century natural science as a way of explaining visible differences between bodies. Certain differences, notably of skin color, facial structure, and hair type, came to be correlated with moral and intellectual capacities thought to be inherited and therefore shared by the "race." The invention of the scientific notion of race transformed the intellectual understanding—indeed, the very perception—of the human body.<sup>8</sup> Sculpture helped effect this transformation of the human body and was in turn transformed by it. Sculpture's relation to the human body had always been more direct and intimate than painting's: the sculptor's main task was not to create illusions on a flat surface but to reproduce three-dimensional bodies in real space. Sculptors could even create exact molds of the human face and body in plaster, which gave their art a unique scientific and documentary power that lasted even after the advent

of photography.<sup>9</sup> This helps explain why racial theorists looked to classical sculpture specifically as an empirical model of white racial superiority. Blumenbach, Camper, Cuvier, and other pioneers of the modern concept of race discussed and measured the ways in which the bodies and particularly the heads of darker races departed from the supposedly perfect lines and proportions of antique sculpture. The sculpture of antiquity thus became an authenticating document of a normative white body, a "race" of white men.<sup>10</sup>

One of the more notorious examples of the scientific appeal to classical sculpture appears in the most widely discussed racial treatise of the antebellum period, *Types of Mankind* (1854) by J. C. Nott and George R. Gliddon. At the end of the book, as a kind of coup de grace, the authors provided a "comparative series of likenesses" in which an engraved profile of a bust of Apollo was placed above a caricatured face of a "Negro" and a head of a chimpanzee (fig. 1.1).<sup>11</sup> The burden of the book and the image was to prove that mankind was divided into a hierarchy of racial types whose characteristics were permanent and unalterable. The image is a deck peculiarly stacked against the "Negro": the engraver has filled his face with a grotesque pattern of curving lines to represent its dark skin tone; and this caricatured head has been placed underneath an image not of an ordinary white man but of Apollo, a god. What is quite literally a comparison of god, man, and animal is nevertheless meant to be read as a comparison of white man, Negro, and animal.<sup>12</sup>

How was this semiotic sleight of hand possible? It has everything to do with the peculiar status of sculpture as definitive of the human body. The head of Apollo illustrated here is taken from what was perhaps the most celebrated classical sculpture of them all—the ancient statue in the Vatican known as the Apollo Belvedere (fig. 1.2). It is hard now to appreciate the power that this antique piece and a few dozen others like it once held in Western culture: this sculptural canon constituted nothing less than a benchmark in the concept of the human.<sup>13</sup> The Apollo in particular was a widely recognized standard of male beauty and, by implication, a lesson in the relationship of physical beauty to intellect and culture. As sculpture, this head managed to sustain a dual status. It was at once an ideal representation and the real thing, imaginary god and canonical measure of humanity. The viewer's ability to see the head as both at once (an ability the authors were certainly counting on) is testament to sculpture's peculiar power to invest stone or metal bodies with real living force. The "likeness" of the god therefore became an authentic document of superior physical form, and the label "Apollo Belvedere" brought with it the prestigious associations of high culture and classical civilization; all of these qualities were now regrouped not under the banner of antiquity but of whiteness—a whiteness emphasized by the engraver's minimally

FIG. 339. — Apollo Belvidere.<sup>13</sup>FIG. 340.<sup>13</sup>FIG. 341. — Nègre.<sup>13</sup>FIG. 342.<sup>13</sup>FIG. 343. — Young Chimpanzee.<sup>13</sup>FIG. 344.<sup>13</sup>

1.1 J. C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia, 1854), 458.

hatched rendering of the white marble out of which this head was actually made. The upshot of this complex, though instantaneous, act of viewing is that “white” and “man” become conflated, and the Negro drops to a liminal status, wavering between the realm of man and the realm of animals.<sup>14</sup>

Nott and Gliddon’s illustration is far from an isolated example. It was in fact based on a similar illustration from an earlier French text by Virey, a student and popularizer of one of the pioneering racial taxonomists of the Enlightenment, Buffon.<sup>15</sup> The Virey illustration used a head of Zeus,



1.2 Apollo Belvedere, Roman imperial copy of a Greek bronze, Vatican.

which carried its own associations of naked might. The shift to Apollo subtly (and effectively) shifted the axis of comparison from brute power to more specifically aesthetic and intellectual qualities. In both cases, classical sculpture served as the benchmark of whiteness and, indeed, served that function over and over again in the writings of the racial taxonomists. The importance of the aesthetic dimension of racial theory cannot be overemphasized, and sculpture served as the aesthetic standard.<sup>16</sup> It hardly needs to be stated that these theorists did not generally apply the same rigorous standards of comparison to actual European heads and bodies, but this was because it was taken for granted that white Europeans were the legitimate progeny of the ideal classical type.

It is hard to fathom today how a canon of ancient sculpture could be used as scientific evidence, especially when that very canon has since been discredited by art historians and archaeologists as a collection of mostly inferior copies of lost originals. But such was the sway of this canonical sculpture that plaster casts of the most important pieces were