

Inequality in Bronze III

A Funeral for Mammies

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The purpose of our monument came from an agreed understanding of the books we've read this semester. Speaking from my experience alone, Michael Harris in his book *Colored Pictures* argues that the deep stereotyping of blackness is a deliberate attempt by elite whites to create an otherness. One of these ways was through the depiction of mammies, notably in his case study of "Aunt Jemima." He argues that the creation of the mammy was done with the hope to asexualize black women and to create an image that fits with the faithful slave narrative, like the ones we see with Dinah and many others across the country. We used this understanding to conclude that Dinah, whether she existed or not, was inextricably transformed into a "faithful slave." It was therefore important to us that we not represent Dinah herself, which was tangled in this complicated and downright dangerous narrative but instead discuss what this symbolism means. We decided to bury the Mammy not the woman.

Rather than stick with a depiction of Dinah, we instead found that a burial could communicate much more than just another statue. There's no footnote needed to say that funerals are a very symbolic gesture. Even regular one's are completely symbolic for the one's hosting the event. It's a way to curate emotions that correspond with how we want to remember the deceased. This grave would do just that but on a much broader scale. Even from our discussions in class it was clear that Dinah is only a small piece in a larger puzzle that Americans arranged between the 1890's and the 1920's. These ideas were based off of racist ideas, and the original Dinah monument at Stenton perpetuates mammy myths. This proposed memorial space will be conceptual, as to not repeat the same mistakes of previous people.

This brings us to the reasoning behind the physical content of our monument. A grave, even the simplest ones the Quakers use, has an inscription on it. For our purposes we wanted boldness. Part of being bold is standing out which is why we chose a reflective black granite.

This visual idea is based off of the Vietnam War memorial in DC. Other groups touched on this in their presentation but we all understood that a reflection is a powerful thing. When looking at the words, we wanted the people to see themselves and contextualize themselves in the world and this historical project. On the grave itself would not be Dinah's conceptualized birth and death (which we don't know of anyways,) but instead the erection of her monument. Not only would it be her but several (10-20) other prominent mammy statues across the U.S. and their erection date too. On the top of this slab would say something along the lines of "here lies a grave to Mammy memorials." While we were going for symbolic, it does not mean we wanted to be subtle. Both of us were touched by our readings and research on the subject and we felt that other should know about the harmful actions and perceptions that occurred as an extension of Lost Cause (in general) but Mammy monuments (in particular.)

This lack of subtlety was extended to a plaque we'd have by the side of the grave. It would literally state outright "This is not Dinah's grave." It would then go on to explain what this was a grave for, making it clear to the viewer what context they are seeing this from. Whether they agree or disagree with the monument itself or the idea behind it, they are still operating in the context and understanding that we've crafted. The plaque will also include resources which visitors can use to learn more about these histories.

Our hope is for Stenton to create a local outreach event in the form of a funeral. Rather than just have a stationary grave, which is still powerful in itself, we wanted our piece to have ritual surrounding it. This funeral would provide a moment for emotional catharsis. The African American community is extremely conscious of the deliberate and harmful attempts of black representation, like through the objects of Aunt Jemima and Co.¹ So to combat the danger of

¹ Michael Harris *Colored Pictures*, Ch. 3 "Aunt Jemima, the fantasy black mammy," 108-123

these portrayals, the funeral service would not only recognize mammy memorials, but also bury these contemporary iterations of mammy objects.

The event would theoretically proceed as follows: Every once a year, people from the local Germantown community and anyone else who wants to participate would gather racist paraphernalia (those of unfair or harmful stereotyping of blackness - such as Aunt Jemima) and head over to the Grave at Stenton. On this night, the stone would be moved and a tarp of some sort - something that could stretch to fit inside this grave- would be laid out. From there people could walk up one by one to the grave (almost as if it was a service at a wake) say their words and throw such-and-such racial item into the grave. The night would be one for discussion and celebration. Whether or not that celebration was positive or tinged with the sheer memory of all that racist imagery wouldn't be up to us. Within the week, these items would be excavated (hence the tarp), organized, and displayed at an exhibit. The point of this exhibit would be to portray people's perceptions of racism. This would make it a very personal yet far reaching event in total. There was r expressed interest, in our feedback, in expanding this idea of events around the Mammy Grave to also host events like a gun-drive, yet we were worried with how the monument itself would be perceived by the Stenton folks, therefore we did not expand any farther than the funeral. This also relates to our concern that this space might already be too highly conceptualized, and an event like a gun drive, while absolutely related to the dynamics previously discussed, may be a bridge too far.

What was clear from the feedback we received from classmates is that they were approaching Dinah with a different understanding than we did. Where some saw her as a historical figure, deserving of proper treatment, our readings and close discussions lead our group to understand the monument as a clear symbol of white power. Dinah herself never existed

“in any way that we could understand her,” and that the project of the Colonial Dames overlapped heavily with that of the Daughters of the Confederacy. Another response that is worth considering is the class’s interest in historical complexity. We’ve sought to highlight layers of memory and historical nuance wherever possible.

There are a fair number of criticism to consider of our own project however. One factor is that our argument relies on the Dinah story being part of a series of “Loyal Slave” narratives that occurred mainly after the Civil War and omitting the perspective that Dinah is a local hero to black people living in the local area. The problem is that the Dinah story originates from one account in 1820, which is long before the Civil War or any purposeful mass-silencing took place across the Mason-Dixon line. What we can argue, however, is that the Colonial Dames most likely took inspiration from the Daughters of the Confederacy and incorporated the story of Dinah into the larger movement at the time. In our minds, regardless of the time the story was first conceptualized, Dinah still served in a movement to rewrite and memorialize history. This is the history we want to address; without engaging in the overarching narrative of mammy monuments across America, we would make the same mistakes as places like the Union League.

A second issue can be made with the refusal to create a monument depicting a woman of color. Despite being a city full of statues, very few of them are people of color. This especially shocking when you consider that it wasn’t until 2017 that the first depiction of an African American, Octavius V. Catto, was created in in a public space. We acknowledge representation is important however our reserve is with depicting the right monument for the right reasons. There should be more African American representation in the city, Dinah is not the way to do it.

Our general approach to the Dinah Monument Proposal was to acknowledge the 1912 Dinah Monument as a participant in a long line of mammy memorials. From here, making a monument about just Dinah would repeat mistakes we've seen from other museums and exhibits. To address these different complex issues, our conceptual approach seeks to begin a conversation among visitors as to what these ideas mean and how to truly uproot them.