

The Race, Memory, and Democracy Project

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Introduction

All over the United States, national and local initiatives on truth and healing for racial injustice are emerging. These include the Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Movement, the Tulsa Race Massacre Graves Investigation, the Community Remembrance Projects on lynching supported by the Equal Justice Initiative, and numerous local efforts focused on truth-telling, reparations, memorialization, and institutional reform.

While taking many diverse and innovative forms, many of these projects are united by their common goal of grappling with the role of race in American public memory. Public memory refers to the ongoing choices that a community or a nation makes to remember, forget, and make meaning of its history and identity. These choices are contained within public memorials and monuments, museums, speeches, and holidays. In short, public memory represents the story we tell ourselves about ourselves.

The resurgent questioning of our collective national memory is an important opportunity for US democracy, one that can advance the work of creating a pluralistic, inclusive society. In a moment of national conversation about the gaps and distortions in the nation's public memory around race, communities are having difficult conversations about what to remember and how to do so. How these conversations take place may open up new possibilities for dialogue across differences and for building local narratives that encourage greater civic participation and belonging.

The development of public-memory projects—memorials, events, museums—is recognized as one critical tool to engage new generations.

The role of public history in democratic development is an important dimension of transitional justice, a global field of practice that developed after World War II out of the need to create new tools to help societies emerging out of political turmoil ensure accountability, restitution, reform, and non-reoccurrence of human-rights abuses. In that context, the development of public memory projects—memorials, events, museums—is recognized as one critical tool to engage new generations about past and contemporary human rights abuses and to convene conversations

across divides about contentious and painful parts of the past. The transitional justice field, drawing on the experiences of many different country contexts, may offer useful learning to inform ongoing debates in the United States about how to publicly remember its history on racially motivated harms, like the enslavement and lynching of Black Americans, the forced displacement of Native Americans, and the internment of Japanese Americans. It is in this context that the Race, Memory, and Democracy Project emerged to create opportunities for communities, scholars, and practitioners to ask questions, exchange ideas, and explore approaches to public memory projects that can serve as sites for democratic discourse, action, and revitalization.

Project Description

The Race, Memory, and Democracy Project drew on the domestic experience of state and city leaders as well as global practice on transitional justice, bringing together practitioners and experts from both realms to explore the relationship between public memory and democracy. The project

- *connected* communities and public officials in the United States to exchange challenges and share best practices on community engagement in truth-telling, public memory, and reparative projects;
- *shared learning* from scholars and practitioners of transitional justice, including international experience with truth-telling and public memory projects in support of healing after the commission of human rights abuses; and
- *expanded* awareness of the tools and approaches for community engagement around sites of memory and public space.

The Race, Memory, and Democracy Project held two workshops and a series of interviews with a select group of US-based leaders of truth and memory initiatives, as well as transitional and restorative justice practitioners and scholars. Each workshop session and interview surfaced key questions and dilemmas currently faced by practitioners and explored possible new approaches in collaboration with scholars and practitioners who have conducted similar work domestically and internationally.

- **Workshop Topic 1:** What models for truth-telling and truth-seeking are fit for purpose in the reckoning of racial violence and injustice in the United States? How do we create substantive rather than purely performative processes? Who are the stakeholders and audiences for these processes, and what are the mechanisms for engaging them?
- **Workshop Topic 2:** What are models and tools for both deconstructing and reconstructing markers of local and national public memory, particularly when that memory is contested? What are models for maximizing community engagement in memorialization initiatives? In what ways can memorialization processes create openings for additional methods of addressing racial injustice?

WORKSHOP 1: MODELS FOR US TRUTH-TELLING AND TRUTH-SEEKING

One of the most prominent ways communities are grappling with the role of race in American memory is through truth projects. These diverse, emergent efforts are focused on investigating and publicizing a wide variety of past and recent abuses against Black Americans both committed and sanctioned by the

state, including police violence, lynching, and slavery. Many efforts take inspiration from South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission; the proposed Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in Boston, San Francisco, and Philadelphia; the truth and reconciliation-inspired process underway in Minneapolis; and the existing Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Other localities have commissioned truth reports instead while some communities are collecting and publishing oral histories. Other methods of truth-telling focus on shaping public understanding of the past through narrative change, particularly through historical, educational, and cultural institutions like museums.

Though the United States can learn from the global truth-telling experience, it is already clear that the trajectory of truth-telling in the United States is unique. Truth-seeking has begun as a bottom-up process that is proliferating at local levels around the country rather than starting as a centrally driven national process. While a national process under the auspices of stalled legislation to establish a US Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation is unlikely to unfold in the short term, local efforts continue to blossom and will inform work at the national level. There is now a need to understand the models and strategies appropriate to undertake truth-telling work in this unique context.

What models for truth-telling and truth-seeking are fit for the purpose of reckoning with racial violence and injustice at the local level in the United States? Who are the stakeholders and audiences for these processes, and what are the mechanisms for engaging them? How can truth-telling mechanisms be structured in ways that open pathways for redress, repair, and reform? This workshop explored answers to these questions and also explored stakeholder interest in a community of practice around implementing processes for truth, repair, and redress for racial injustice in the United States.

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Presentations and Summary

Moderated by Ashley Quarcoo, an SNF Agora Visiting Fellow at Johns Hopkins University, the first workshop included presentations by Allan-Charles Chipman, faith-rooted organizer at Initiatives of Change; Theresa Guzmán Stokes and Keith Stokes, president and vice president (respectively) of the 1696 Heritage Group; and Virginie Ladisch, senior expert in truth-seeking and civic engagement at the International Center for Transitional Justice.

Chipman began the workshop by presenting on a public memory strategy being implemented in Richmond, Virginia, under the [Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation](#) framework. Chipman described a citywide coalition of museums and art institutions that collaborated to engage in public memory work, namely interrogating inherited histories, recovering and commemorating lost or endangered history, working with and amplifying marginalized artists, and empowering communities to engage in memory work and storytelling. The coalition works on making change through the five pillars of public memory: 1) communal testimony and witness; 2) commemorative justice; 3) institutionalized history; 4) marginalized histories; and 5) policy and built environment. A key benefit of this action model is that a broad coalition of museum and art institutions has greater leverage to propel the debate with more reluctant local government and stakeholders, and is less vulnerable to being marginalized or ignored.

Guzmán Stokes and Stokes then presented on [the “A Matter of Truth” report](#), a 194-page report on the history of racism and discrimination in Providence, Rhode Island, that makes up the first step of Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza’s truth, reconciliation, and municipal reparations program. Using over 600 primary and secondary sources, the report investigates discriminatory laws and policies and their present-day legacies in Providence from 1620 to 2020.

This truth-seeking model has served as the basis for further action in numerous ways. First, the report aims to make clear the links between past and present. It quantifies harm, disputes historical myths such as the notion that Rhode Island wasn’t a major participant in the slave trade, and documents the present-day consequences of historical abuses, including urban policies. Second, as a part of a larger tiered process, the report forms the basis for a comprehensive community engagement and reparation process where the city will take steps to redress the harms investigated in the report. The reparations process will be led by a city commission and accompanied by a series of reconciliation discussions, documentary-style interviews with residents, map visualizations, and opportunities for residents to provide testimonials. Third, the report served as the basis for a new comprehensive non-elective African American history curriculum requirement in Rhode Island public schools, beginning with a course on Africa before European colonization, pending adoption through legislation.

This presentation generated discussion on how truth projects can engage non-Black communities and build public support for reparations and other policies. The Stokeses pointed to two further strategies. First, their report uses inclusive terminology, like *persons of African heritage* rather than *Black or African Americans*, and emphasizes a rhetoric of unity that aims to bring people of non-African heritage into the report’s narrative. Second, the report provides explicit policy recommendations for leaders and strategic investment strategies for different institutions to get involved in the racial justice agenda.

Ladisich built off the Stokeses’ conversation by presenting best practices from global truth-telling practice, which most commonly involve truth commissions. Truth commissions are temporary bodies mandated to investigate patterns of gross human-rights violations committed over a period of time in the past, usually through victim testimony that reveals previous hidden or unknown facts. Ladisich

argued that when implemented by governments in a top-down manner, truth commissions risk being instrumentalized for political purposes. Truth commissions are most useful when truths are not previously known to the public, as Ladisich demonstrated using Argentina as a successful example. Argentina’s truth commission was narrowly focused on investigating the cases of individuals who had been disappeared by the government during the course of its military dictatorship, the full extent of which had never been publicly exposed.¹

However, alongside truth-seeking, truth commissions can also engage in and facilitate truth-telling and truth-listening. In the United

States, some injustices against some Native Americans were well known among descendant communities but not widely known beyond those communities. This can be attributed to lack of documentation and lack of a shared framework and language for interpreting and understanding the truth. Participatory public history initiatives can involve more segments of the population in the work of documentation, interpretation, and knowledge-sharing. For truths about racial injustices that are well known and documented but not widely acknowledged by certain segments of the population, truth commissions might need to place a greater emphasis on socializing the truth and creating spaces for citizens to listen.

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Ladisch points to the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as a teachable example for the United States. The Canadian TRC investigated the legacies of Indigenous residential schools and was very victim centered. However, the Canadian TRC did not broadly socialize its findings; the average non-Indigenous Canadian has not heard of the commission nor internalized its message.

The participant discussion following the presentations summarized key takeaways from the workshop:

- *Public memory work and truth projects require a theory of practice.* As Chipman argues, history is an instrument for transformation because understandings of history have outcomes on human lives. In this way, history can be used *correctively* to address myths lodged in public memory.
- *Relatedly, truth projects must clearly investigate and explain the links between past and present injustices.* Information about past racial abuses like slavery, lynchings, and redlining are not hidden; the contention lies in how citizens understand that history in regard to the present moment. Truth projects must clearly identify what truths need to be known and which audiences they would like to engage and focus on how to most effectively make the argument that past injustices have resulted in present outcomes. Participants stress that external models, like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, cannot be simply transplanted into the US context without modifications.
- *A key dilemma confronting US work is the possibility of civil society substituting for the state.* One participant noted that civil society-led truth projects are highly regarded and popular in the United States. While there are positives to truth projects led by civil society, such as greater citizen ownership over the process, these initiatives often suffer from lack of resources and influence. More importantly, because the US government participated in and sanctioned the harm of its Black citizens, it has a responsibility to acknowledge and repair harm through federal efforts. Another participant responded that the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission, itself a creation of state government, is combating this issue by making detailed recommendations, forming relationships with as many stakeholders as possible, and exerting pressure on policymakers through multiple channels.
- *Last, a community of practice could continue to uncover the questions and dilemmas that need to be addressed* and begin to build stakeholder awareness around the universe of actors and activities in the truth and racial-redress sector. The field of activity in the United States is diverse and innovative. Participants agreed that a key concern continues to be how to leverage truth projects to catalyze material changes and reform. A community of practice could share models, lessons, and information; support new initiatives; and build bottom-up pressure for national initiatives.

WORKSHOP 2: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC MEMORY AND MEMORIALIZATION

The commemorative landscape is one clear site of contestation over the public memory of racial and colonial violence in the United States. Americans contest, interrogate, and update public memory through engaging with monuments, memorials, commemorative events, parades, holidays, speeches, and other symbolic mediums. Confederate monuments to the Lost Cause reemerge as common sites of contestation, as in 2017 when communities across the nation forcibly removed and destroyed many of these monuments.

While the fight over Confederate monuments is not over, the field of public memory is broader than removing monuments to America's violent past. Many local movements, such as the Equal Justice

Initiative's Community Remembrance Projects, are striving now to put in place markers of past lynchings that have not been part of our nation's collective memory. The process of creating new markers that complicate our public memory also creates a unique opportunity for dialogue across communities and between citizens and governments as the stewards of public space.

How should the United States commemorate the violence of its past in a way that promotes an inclusive national narrative? What are models and tools for both deconstructing and reconstructing markers of local and national public memory, particularly when that memory is contested? What are models for maximizing community engagement in memorialization initiatives? In what ways can memorialization processes create openings for additional methods of addressing racial injustice, like reparations and reform?

The process of creating new markers that complicate our public memory also creates a unique opportunity for dialogue.

This workshop explored answers to these questions through two presentations and a discussion session and compiled practical strategies and avenues for action. It was supplemented with additional interviews.

Presentations and Discussion

Also moderated by Quarcoo, the second workshop included presentations by Emma Boast, arts and culture fellow at the Metropolitan Area Planning Council; Stephanie Fortunato, director of Providence's Department of Art, Culture, and Tourism; and Mel Isidor, designer, urban planner, and artist, followed by a breakout discussion session.

Who decides a city's commemorative landscape, and *how*? Boast and Fortunato answered this question by sharing lessons from their experience creating and implementing a Special Committee for the Review of Commemorative Works in Providence, Rhode Island. Following nationwide protests surrounding Confederate monuments in 2017, the City of Providence's Department of Art, Culture, and Tourism worked with Boast to design a policy for a municipal committee to proactively, rather than reactively, address issues surrounding commemoration and foster a more inclusive and equitable commemorative landscape.

To design the policy, Boast comparatively researched municipal practices, looked to examples of innovative public art and history projects—like Monument Lab's 2017 citywide exhibition in Philadelphia and Paper Monuments in New Orleans—and drew upon local and national expertise. Her framework centers on commemoration, which includes physical works, such as monuments, and experiential works, such as commemorative events. The special committee is equipped with protocols to review and approve proposals for new commemorative works as well as to review existing works. It is staffed with individuals with expertise in history, commemoration, and community-building. The committee makes decisions based on five criteria: local and community relevance; impact on public life and space; diversity, equity, and inclusion; historical complexity; and physical sites and conservation.

In a later interview, Fortunato provided more detail on the implementation of the policy in the case of a petition regarding a statue of Christopher Columbus. Three options were provided: no change, modification (relocation or interpretation), or removal. There were several points in the process for inputs to decision-makers, including a historical briefing and testimony from the community. The goal, according to Fortunato, was to give confidence to decision-makers that they were receiving information they could trust, to correct myths with historical facts and cultural context, and also to engage people

civically in a public decision-making process. The policy provided a scaffolding for people to participate but also a way to claim ownership over a collective decision. However, the committee is ultimately an advisory body, making a recommendation to the board of Parks Commissioners, a political body. After several meetings and over 100 pieces of written testimony, the board did not take the special committee's inaugural recommendation, which was to facilitate a sale of the statue as a work of art with proceeds supporting the community. Instead, the board determined that the Columbus statue would be donated to the Knights of Columbus while new public art would be commissioned in collaboration with the community. Providence's new process has created new levels of transparency and helped to structure public debate around the city's public history and memory but is also a reminder of the political dynamics that inevitably shape these decisions.

Community engagement requires going where the community lives. Whether in the research, design, or implementation stages, stakeholders must find creative ways to be accessible to local residents and act upon their needs.

Isidor then shared lessons about how to maximize community engagement at different stages of a new public-memory project. Isidor drew lessons from the Frederick Douglass memorial in Roxbury, Massachusetts, which she was involved in while working at the design firm Sasaki in partnership with the Frederick Douglass Sculpture Committee and the City of Boston, local artist Paul Goodnight, and sculptor Mario Chiodo. By depicting Douglass not in isolation but alongside other figures, including a woman suffragette, the monument encourages active identification from its audience and makes Douglass's legacy explicit. Additionally, Isidor and team hired local performance and spoken word artists to perform at the memorial. For the Charlotte Forten Memorial Park in Salem, Massachusetts, Isidor collaborated with a larger team to develop educational materials that survive as refrigerator art or postcards

and are available in multiple languages. Conducting research into community perspectives on new works in public space might be necessary; in one research project, *A Voice at the Table*, Isidor and her team collected 16 individual interviews and 109 survey responses and conducted community outreach through social media, street postings, local prizes, and a booth at a local market.

Isidor identified three main takeaways from her work. First, community engagement requires going where the community lives. Whether in the research, design, or implementation stages, stakeholders must find creative ways to be accessible to local residents and act upon their needs. Second, stakeholders must prioritize local partnerships. Communities will not feel ownership over memorials if they do not participate in creating them. Last, stakeholders must create memorials with attention to how they impact and complement the landscape around them.

Following the presentations, participants split into three small groups, yielding the following themes:

- *The construction and deconstruction of sites of public memory create inflection points for new understandings of history, particularly the history of state-sanctioned harms and citizen resistance and resilience to those harms.* Taking down statues requires confronting deeply held understandings of history that have heralded one set of national narratives at the expense of another. Success requires engaging with history in ways that can address myths and false narratives, such as in the way Providence officials drew on historians and communities as part of the public commemorations review process. Putting up monuments requires a qualitatively different engagement with the past and should be accompanied by a process that gives all community members an opportunity to make their case for a memorial in an open and transparent way. In her interview, Fortunato also noted that

wide community buy-in is required for new memorials in public spaces, which can be challenging. Even when there is socio-cultural merit of the need for a memorial, what the memorial looks like and who gets to decide can raise new questions about creating public spaces that are welcoming for everyone.

- *Community engagement in public memory work opens up avenues for innovation and citizen empowerment.* Public memory projects work best when they prioritize local partnerships, gauge and serve local needs, and meet communities where they are, using multiple trusted channels of communication. Further, workshop participants agreed that the tradition of isolated, metal statues of historical figures needs to be updated. In addition, physical monuments can be designed to be more engaging through adding interactive elements, audio or QR codes, creative displays, and staged commemorative events. Furthermore, changing municipal zoning codes to allow citizens to use public space more freely would allow communities to become more rooted in their geographies and create their own commemorative work. As funders are increasingly focused on community engagement, participants recommended taking advantage of this heightened donor focus to leverage resources for engagement around public memorials.
- *Polarization is a barrier to both citizen and stakeholder engagement, and local officials often struggle to create visions for addressing controversial memorials after they've been taken down.* Among citizens, political polarization can cause intense opposition to public memory projects that don't conform to their political views. Consequently, local government officials might refuse to support controversial public memory work, particularly efforts to engage with controversial monuments even after they've been removed. This occurs particularly in cases where monuments are removed quickly and reactively in response to heated racial justice debates. Participants surfaced two strategies to address this dilemma. First, participants recommended planned community dialogue as a necessary first step to create space and consensus for commemorative action. Because many citizens are primed to view town halls as platforms for conflict, other venues and formats might be more appropriate. Second, commemorative works can have multiple narratives built in through plaques, artist design choices, and audience engagement portions. However, these do not substitute or necessarily create *inter-community* dialogue. Commemoration policies, like the one deployed in Providence, can be an important procedural tool for community input and decision-making for public memory projects.
- *Public memory stakeholders face common dilemmas.* Stakeholders could benefit from a community of practice that shares information, strategies, visions, and guidelines to address the above dilemmas. One participant recommended learning from global memory practice in contexts where memory is politically weaponized, such as Eastern Europe.

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Conclusion

The Race, Memory, and Democracy Project only scratched the surface of the rich exchanges made possible by connecting racial justice practitioners around the country. Participants in the project expressed a desire for the continuation of similar kinds of peer-to-peer learning opportunities. In addition,

global scholars of transitional justice are eager to learn more about the unfolding of racial justice, truth, and memory work in the US context and to update the study and practice of global transitional justice with this important case.

Meanwhile, the work on the ground continues to expand. The Philadelphia-based nonprofit Monument Lab conducted the nation's first [National Monument Audit](#) as part of a large, multi-year investment by the [Mellon Foundation](#) to interrogate the way that history and public memory are shaped in the commemorative landscape. The audit is a tremendous contribution to understanding the current landscape of monuments and also includes educational materials. These and other efforts will create expanded opportunities for community engagement in the remaking of public space and of collective memory, including around the history of racial injustice.

Through the creation of new commemoration policy processes, urban planning initiatives, and truth-telling processes, opportunities like those described above will enable continued exploration of the place of race in our public memory and will bring citizens into new conversations with government and with each other. These conversations can be highly divisive and contentious. The challenge and opportunity are to surface the ways these conversations can be restorative to the state-society relationship, a relationship whose health is central to a democratic society.

For more information about ways to get involved in race and public memory work, please see the following resources:

[Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#)
[Maryland Lynching Memorial Project](#)
[Equal Justice Initiative Community Remembrance Project](#)
[Monument Lab Bulletin](#)
[Monument Lab National Monument Audit](#)

About the author. Ashley Quarcoo is a democracy scholar and practitioner with over 15 years of experience working on democratic development globally and in the United States. Most recently, she was the senior director of democracy programs and pillars with the Partnership for American Democracy, where she led policy, programs, and coalition engagement. Prior to joining the Partnership, Quarcoo was a senior fellow with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program. Her research focused on threats to democracy, social and political polarization, and comparative approaches toward building social cohesion and democratic renewal. Quarcoo also recently served as senior research manager with the Aspen Institute's Citizenship and American Identity Program, where she designed and managed "Who Is Us? A Project on American Identity." She spent over a decade supporting peacebuilding and democratic development in post-conflict countries and countries transitioning out of authoritarianism. She worked for the US Agency for International Development, where she supported strategy, policy, and program development for a nearly \$300 million democracy, human rights, and governance foreign assistance portfolio. She has also served with the State Department, as a legislative aide on Capitol Hill, and as a Teach for America corps member in New York City. Quarcoo was a 2020–2021 visiting fellow at SNF Agora Institute, where she led the Race, Memory, and Democracy Project, and a 2019–2020 Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow.

1 The public report on Argentina's 1983-1984 National Commission on the Disappeared (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas) is available on the United States Institute of Peace website at <https://www.usip.org/publications/1983/12/truth-commission-argentina>.

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