

To move, to mourn, to exist: anti-Black ontology and the architecture of the memorial

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Abstract

This thesis reads three Black memorial sites: the African Burial Ground National Monument, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and George Floyd Square as architectural articulations of remembrance of Black life in response to anti-Black ontology. Each site recognizes and responds to a discrete (re)instantiation of Black death: slavery, lynching and police killings respectively. Through these sites, I ask not how memory heals, but how architecture performs the ongoing labor of mourning death that is never past.

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Mom, I cannot express enough gratitude for your love and support throughout my journey. Je t'aime.

Dedication

For all those who were lost

For all those who were stolen

For all those who were left behind

For all those who were not forgotten

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Before the memorial, there is death. Death, for someone who is Black¹, that does not occur as a singular event, but as an ontological condition (Fanon, 2004; Hartman, 1997; Harney & Moten, 2013; Wilderson, 2020). Death of Blackness does not end with the body; it extends into the soil, the monument, and the street. Sites of Black memorial and remembrance mark sites of movement, mourning, and existence that are created in spite of conditions that pervasively deprive Blackness of access to breath, space, movement, and time.

This thesis reads three such Black memorial sites: the African Burial Ground National Monument, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and George Floyd Square as architectural articulations of remembrance of Black life in response to anti-Black ontology. I appreciate the work done by the authors of *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction* (Wilderson et al., 2017) to help contextualize how emergent scholars have been approaching the concept of anti-Black ontology, that provides a framework for how this paper will be understanding the operation of the phenomenon. They outline:

¹ This essay chooses to capitalize Black, following conventions of an evolution of scholarship, language, and recognition of the utility in conventions of a proper noun to associate a shared history, identity, culture, and community among people who identify as Black (Likis, 2020). Recognizing the scholarship is divided on this issue, and the debate about capitalizing Black in context of lowercase white is far from over, at the time of writing, this essay will juxtapose Blackness with lowercase whiteness to denote reparation and resistance to structures of white supremacy.

“The social death of the slave goes to the very level of their *being*, defining their ontology. Thus, according to Afro-pessimism, the slave experiences their ‘slaveness’ ontologically, as ‘*being for the captor*,’ not as an oppressed subject, who experiences exploitation and alienation, but as an object of accumulation and fungibility (exchangability)” (p. 8).

This schema for the approach to Black life understands Blackness as operating in the zone of constant death/captivation/*non*-livingness and is made legible through conceptualizations of natal alienation, gratuitous violence, and social death (Wilderson, 2020) that will be explored in the *On Anti-Blackness* section of the Literature Review.

Each site included in this thesis recognizes and responds to a discrete (re)instantiation of Black death: slavery, lynching, and police killings respectively. While scholars have previously engaged in rhetorical analysis of these three monuments², this thesis seeks to add to this scholarly inquiry by uncovering the ways each space specifically addresses one of the aforementioned constitutive tenets of anti-Blackness: natal alienation, gratuitous violence, and social death. Through these sites, I ask not how memory heals, but how architecture performs the ongoing labor of mourning death that is never past.

The analysis will be broken into five primary sections: Chapter 1: *Introduction*, Chapter 2: *Elevating those the Wake Alienated*, Chapter 3: *Lynching’s Gratuitous Memory*, Chapter 4: *(Re)Honoring George Floyd in George Floyd Square*, Chapter 5: *Conclusions and Discussions*.

² On African Burial Ground National Monument: Blakey, 2010; Frohne, 2010. On National Memorial for Peace and Justice: Aden, 2023; Blainey, 2024; Pless, 2020; Simko, 2021; Hasian & Paliewicz, 2020. On George Floyd Square: Villanueva, 2024; Samayeen et al., 2020; Smiles, 2021.

The Introduction will include a Literature Review and Methodology section. The Literature Review seeks to situate this scholarship among existing scholarship in the field of Black studies, rhetorical studies, and space/place studies by focusing on three primary themes: *On Anti-Blackness*, *On Memory*, and *On Memorials*. The Methodology section outlines the use of critical interpretive qualitative approach, grounded in the use of narrative analysis to engage with space/place studies through an analysis of each site's architectural vernaculars. Each chapter will begin with an introduction about the chosen site and its histories, before moving into the rhetorical analysis. Lastly, the Conclusions and Discussions section will unpack the ways architects, designers, and spatial inhabitants alike should approach memorial sites that seek to remember Black livingness. Natal alienation, gratuitous violence, and social death are used as a theoretical frame to ground the ways that anti-Black ontology, and attendant Black death, manifests itself metaphysically. The sites for this project, then, were chosen as sites that seek to materially (re)represent and memorialized the life lost as a result of each tenet.

While many other design projects may have also fit well into conversations about one (or more) of the tenets of anti-Black ontology, two additional themes were of importance when curating these sites. Firstly, I found importance in the projects representing different manifestations of anti-Black violence. While three projects all memorializing the US' legacy of slavery, for example, could have been presented, the discussion of violence being limited to occurring only in the slave-era context seems to bracket out important conversations on the evolving, manipulated, pervasive form of anti-Blackness – that is core to justifications as to *why* anti-Blackness is rooted in ontological certainty. The chapters are ordered beginning at the wake with the most historic instantiations of anti-Blackness, moving to the post-emancipation era, and ending in contexts of the contemporary (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Project Timeline from "Wake of Slavery" to "Today"

The three sites selected all hold unique characteristics making them apt for inclusion in the multi-case study analysis. The African Burial Ground National Monument is the oldest and largest burial ground for African slaves in the United States (*African Burial Ground National Monument*, n.d.-b). The National Memorial for Peace and Justice is the first memorial dedicated to the legacy of those killing in racial terror lynchings (*National Memorial for Peace and Justice*, n.d.). George Floyd Square is the only (semi-)permanent memorial dedicated to a victim of police killing. Together, these justifications offer opportunity for the site to serve as a conduit to inform future sites that seek to memorialize the same typology of violence.

Second, I found importance in diversity of material representation: African Burial Ground National Monument being a site that houses bodies, National Memorial for Peace and Justice being a commemorative site, and George Floyd Square being a site that exists in hybridity, being the exact place a life was taken but is commemoratively honored rather than being buried (Fig. 2). This level of difference allows similarities and differences to be drawn regarding how the participatory audience (Kirkham, 2020) makes meaning of rhetorical architectural vernaculars – and provides a contextual backdrop for investigating similarities and differences needed in architectural strategy when grappling with distinct but ontologically similar forms of anti-Black violence.



Figure 2. Project Material Representation Delineations

This thesis selects discrete resonate architectural vernaculars for close-reading analysis that are understood through their affective resonance in relation to Black breath, space, movement, and time. To break down the large-scale design form into discrete components, I borrow from Mike Christenson’s (2011) concept of *architectural vernacular*³ and assert “vernacular” design as a practice of “structuring information about architecture...to both scholarly and nonscholarly audiences” (p. 2) as an establishment of a high-level of place specificity to become a “tool for transitioning architecture—*any* architecture—from the unknown to the known” (p. 9)⁴. Additionally, I have chosen to highlight particular architectural

³ Though I appreciate the imagery embedded in Blair, Dickinson, and Ott’s (2010) conception of *techné*, I choose to leverage *architectural vernacular* instead – as an acknowledgement of the public (ie. “nonscholarly”) role in deciphering symbolic design decisions. The public does not play a passive role, in experiencing architectural environments, as *techné*’s roots in public ignorance to the Greek language would lead one to believe.

⁴ An example may be the way columns function. While those trained in architecture understand that columns exist (hidden) in most structures, architects occasionally pronounce columnar support, allowing columns to become in-view, making them a perceivable architectural vernacular.

vernaculars at the sites that align with four key descriptors of Black death: deprivation of Black breath, space, movement, and time. While these nouns were chosen in part due to their alignment with what happens to the body during the process of being stripped of life, they are also situated in theoretical approaches to epistemological forms of memory in response to anti-Black gratuitous violence.

Drawing on Katherine McKittrick's theorization of Black geographies (2007) and Christina Sharpe's understanding of the wake (2016), breath, space, movement, and time represent instantiations of resistance and remembrance that are modes of grappling with anti-Black ontologies' drive to deprive Black bodies of such life forces. McKittrick notes that Black spatial practices are often overlooked or constrained by dominant exclusionary epistemologies⁵, yet they are critical to understanding how Black life persists. Similarly, Sharpe insists on the importance of breathing as a site of bodily survival and metaphoric resistance in the wake of slavery and sanctioned gratuitous violence. Thus, breath, space, movement, and time are not only interpretive lenses, but heuristics for the measurement of theoretical refusals embedding within narrative truths – refusing the dominant narratives that frame Black death as always/already and Black life as marginal. These themes help lead to the primary research question: How do memorial sites create meaning through architectural vernaculars that honor Black life lost as a result of anti-Black ontologies?

⁵ ie. redlining, restrictive home loan terms, school busing, etc.

Literature Review

On Anti-Blackness

Drawing on the works of scholars within the field of Black studies, this thesis contends that Blackness exists as a site of ontological death (Fanon, 2004; Hartman, 1997; Moten & Harney, 2013; Wilderson, 2020). This death is characterized by the subsuming of Black life/livingness by pervasive modes of attendant white structures of livability/livingness. The Black ontological (non)being begins at the Middle Passage, where Black folks were stripped of their livelihoods (sites of living/being) and posited onto new lands for white production and exploitation vis a vis slave plantations.

Blackness becomes characterized by phenotypical fleshy symbols – dichotomies that are created by whiteness and only able to be calculated in relation to whiteness. Humanistic characteristics such as skin, eyes, hair of course are involved in these calculation schemas. So too are *projected* fleshy characteristics – spoken vernacular, personality traits, forms of movement/mobilization, etc (Wynter, 2013). Whiteness posits itself as the gatekeeper of inclusion/exclusion in these logics – at certain times and within certain settings – to maintain a relational dichotomy of (non)proximity, where whiteness is strategically brings closer/distances itself to conceptions of Blackness only when convenient for self-interest. This hierarchical status becomes contemporarily grounded an ontology of anti-Blackness that is structured through three interlocking tenets: natal alienation, gratuitous violence, and social death (Fig. 3).

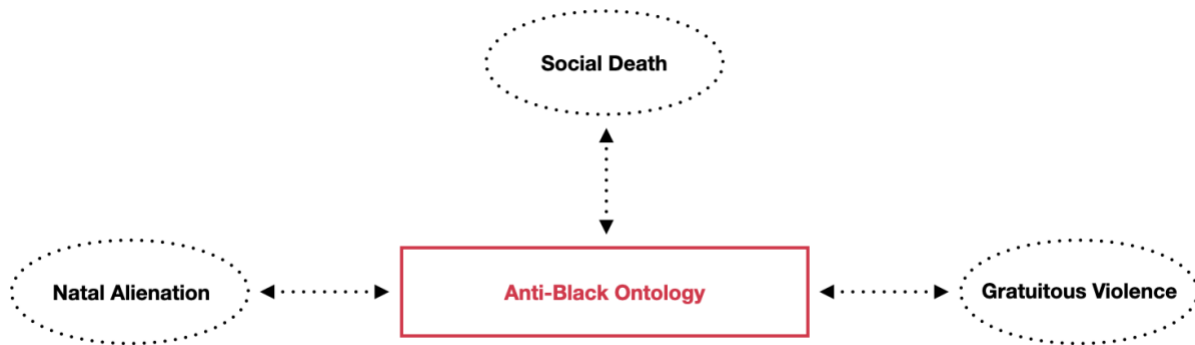


Figure 3. Anti-Black Ontology and Tenets

Natal alienation describes the severing of kinship and ancestry, the disconnection of the enslaved from familial, cultural, and historic lineages. The enslaved (recognizing Wilderson's account that the contemporary Black body *is* enslaved) has no legitimate origin story within the social order (Patterson, 1982). This is why the wake (the ripples in the ocean as ships carrying slaves as cargo sailed across the Atlantic Ocean during the Triangle Slave Trade) marks stasis for the birth (death) of Blackness (Sharpe, 2016). I appreciate the vividness in the description of the wake that Glissant provides in *Poetics of Relation* (1997):

"The Slave Trade came through the cramped doorway of the slave ship, leaving a wake like that of crawling desert caravans. It might be drawn like this:  African countries to the East; the lands of America to the West⁶. This creature is in the image of a fibril" (p. 5).

⁶ While I am appreciative of the written description of the phenomenon, I am also struck by the use of sketch to continue to detail and illustrate the idea. This is a praxis of visual (re)representation I will borrow from and leverage throughout this thesis.

The ripple is not just historical, but structural: being continuously experienced, reinforced, and renegotiated through the social order.

Gratuitous violence references violence that is unprovoked, unsanctioned by transgression, and socially necessary – enacted on Black bodies not because of actions taken, but because of markers of Blackness. Notions of inherent criminality and deviancy are associated Black bodies that result in dehumanized punishment. Unlike the violence that non-Black subjects may experience that is contingent, for Black bodies, the violence enacted requires no justification. Wilderson (2020) describes this as a violence without analog, that structures the grammar of anti-Blackness to produce coherence for all other social relations.

Social death refers to a state of symbolic and relational non-livingness within the social order. Blackness embodies positionality outside of relational life, law, and recognition that is a slave-like commodity for trade, use, and discarding; but, never recognition – even in the face of emancipation (Hartman, 1997; Sexton, 2008; Spillers, 1987). The semiotics of (anti)Blackness are caught up in fictitious Disneyland-esque structures of white hyper-reality (Gillespie, 2017) – where Blackness exists only within/between the discursive acts of white fictional rhetorical theme park narratives: a rhetoric of Black non-existence. The Black body begins from the point of still birth (Gillespie, 2017, p. 7) where it is posited into the white hyperreal structure that guarantees Blackness’ own death and exclusion from the system.

Understanding the makeup of anti-Blackness as an ontology begins to inform how each instance of violence enacted on the Black body produced the death that each memorial seeks to remember. As these theoretical structures predicate Black death differently, each site should seek to address each constitutive tenet discretely. While each chapter will further situate each instance of violence (slavery, lynching, police killings) into the schema of anti-Black ontology (Fig. 4).

This preface provides heuristics useful to understand why the violence had to occur in the first place.

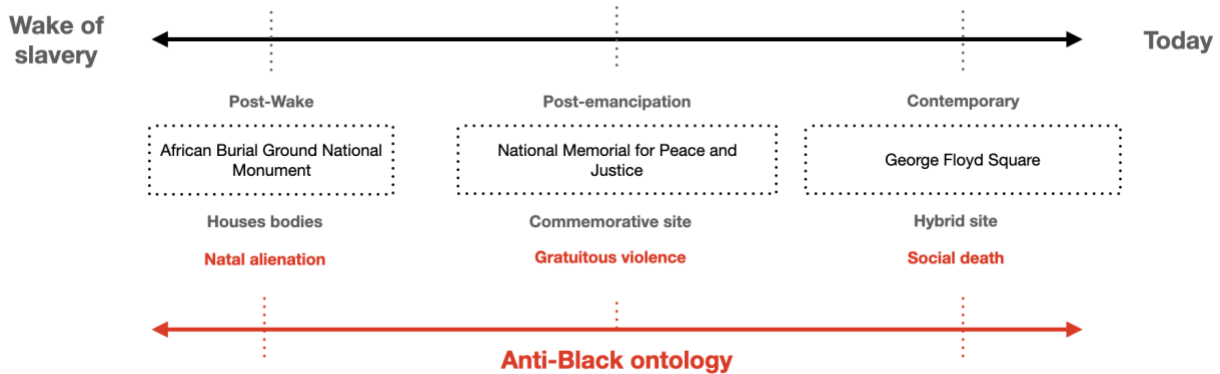


Figure 4. Monuments in Relation to Anti-Black Ontology

On Memory

As white hyper-reality controls the stasis point of Black being, through manipulation of the social order, it also controls the brevity of Black memory. Typical modes of being/livingness rely exclusively on a rhetorical recount of *lieux* production of space, that is concrete, identifiable, and stagnant. (Wells, 2022). I join Justine Wells in a call to depart from *lieux* understandings of space production for an exploration of sites of honorable *milieux* (2022) – an exploration of dynamic and immersive sites of reclaimed *lieux* memories, utilizing the wake of slavery as praxis for reclamation of Blackness from within Disney-landscapes of white supremacy.

Antebellum America's plots and plantations harbored *lieux* sites of material Blackness, that offer space for an application of *milieux* memorializing – instead, honoring practices to recall affects, moods, and logics that emanate from the places Blackness (and its death) inhabited for moments affective overcoming. Black memorial practices are tasked with the difficulties of grappling with: (a) the *lieux* stagnation of memory created by slavery's turbulent waters, (b) the incompleteness of emancipation – that has been promised, but contemporary modes of gratuitous

Black violence demonstrates it has not yet arrived. Justine Wells, when analyzing contributions within the study of memory articulated beyond/through anti-Black experiences, applies Derek Walcott's (1996) poem, "The Sea is History," which describes the rift within Black public memories through a dialogic storytelling scene:

"'Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?/Where is your tribal memory?' The addressee responds: 'Sirs,/in that gray vault. The sea. The sea/has locked them up. The sea is History (p. 253).' As the exchange indicates, left in the violent severance of the Middle Passage was any proper archive for monumental memory, with its celebrated 'battles,' 'martyrs,' and tribalisms. This entails not a lack of history, but its embodiment in the 'gray vault' of the sea, where the materials for memory lurk 'all subtle and submarine' (Walcott, 1996: p. 253; 254)" (Wells, 2023, p. 287).

Walcott's imagery of the "gray vault" of the sea is a description of Hartman's understanding that Black memory occurs within the site of loss and rupture from the Middle Passage's turbulent waters, which forecloses the ability for Black memory to act within "the service of continuity but incessantly reiterates and enacts the contradictions and antagonisms of enslavement, the ruptures of history, and the disassociated and dispersed networks of affiliation" (Hartman, 1997, p. 74) shaped by anti-Black ontologies. This thesis will hold Black architectural sites of memoriam in tension with more normatively ornamented memorials, to understand their capacity to interrogate what was lost in the gray vault.

Sites of memoriam can, of course, occur at a local discursive level, through spoken or written language, with the discussion of historical events and accounts. The memory of whiteness seems to move nominally through these schemes – living within history books, national holidays, and school stories (I'm remembering: "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue...", a widely recited children's fable that centers Columbus' white explorer positionality

rather than non-nominally memorable tales of those of subordinate status that existed parallel to Columbus' story). However, the question then becomes: where do narratives of Blackness fit into these schemas of storytelling? As these stories are told and memori(al)ized and retold to uphold structures of white hyper-reality, Blackness turns to alternate forms of being/living that harken back to plantation survival tactics. These modes of harboring memory come in the form of analogic practices such as Black song making (slave songs' alternative messaging : rap music) or subliminal messaging (Underground Railroad's fugitive planning : BLM) as an alternative means of aiding and abetting moments of remembering livingness.

Memory is not merely the recollection of the past; it is a performative and political act. In rhetorical studies, memory can be understood as an ongoing negotiation of meaning, spatiality, and power – that, when aligned with cultural studies, works through affective intensities, material forms, and embodied encounters (Ghalambordezfooly et al., 2025; Dickinson, Blair, Ott, 2010). In the context of the Black experience in the United States, memory is not only a site of historical recovery in response to the wake of slavery, but one of survival, resistance, and refusal in response to the always/already present ontology of anti-Blackness.

In *Places of Public Memory* (2010), Dickinson, Blair, and Ott indicate memory is material, situated, and embodied. "Public" memory is not simply established and mediated through words or images, but through spaces that structure movement, visibility, and haptic sensation, as places "mobilize power because they are implacably material. They act directly on the body in ways that may reinforce or subvert their symbolic memory contents" (p. 30). These spaces embed arguments at every level of their architectural production: in their design, curation, location, and sensory environments. Memorials, monuments, and museums hold a unique power in their production as distinct "memory places" – sites that are designed specifically to engage in

active memory production. Dickinson, Blair, and Ott add “Memory places are destinations; they typically require visitors to travel to them. Thus, is created a unique context for understanding the past, one that is rooted in touristic practices” (p. 26) that becomes imperative in an analysis of Black versus non-Black affectual relation to the storytelling within strategic opacity within monuments that seek to establish moments of Black (re)livingness.

The stakes of remembering are particularly acute for Black publics. Achille Mbembe’s (2019) theorizing of necropower is leveraged in this essay as a means of interpreting *how* Black death is controlled through spatialized patterns of remembering and forgetting. Drawing on Fanon, Mbembe details the practice of spatialized necropolitical control:

“First and foremost, he [Fanon] argues, colonial occupation entails a division of space into compartments. It involves the setting of boundaries and internal frontiers epitomized by barracks and police stations; it is regulated by the language of pure force, immediate presence, and frequent and direct action; and it is premised on the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. But more important, this is how necropower operates...sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (p. 79-80).

Necropolitical control becomes the arbiter of the speed and intensity of remembrance and bodily function and is used as a mechanism for the continuation of colonial occupation.

Memory is not one of constant celebration but one of trauma, recurrence, and grief in response to the wake’s turbulent waters. In *#BlackatUARK: Digital Counterpublic Memories of Anti-Black Racism on Campus* (2023), Dionne, Hatfield, and Willingham highlight a form of counterpublic memory that is grounded in Black students’ acts of testimony and documented of embodied racialized encounters. Students utilize(d) social media to construct a digital archive that works to resist erasure and assert presence within institutional spaces that render Blackness

as unwelcome. Counterpublic memory work is articulated as incomplete, messy, and disruptive – as a result of the need to engage in opaque mechanisms for establishing moments of livingness. #BlackatUARK demonstrates that memory is not simply about the content of the epistemologies that are preserved/produced, but about who is allowed to remember, and who controls the terms of that memory.

The affective labor of memory in the context of anti-Blackness is further explored by scholars such as Saidiya Hartman (1997), Frank Wilderson (2020), and Christina Sharpe (2016). Hartman points to the afterlife of slavery as an underscoring of the continuity of Black suffering. Memory becomes understood not in proximity to pastness, but about repetition – an account for violence that does not end, and lives in breath, flesh, architecture, and many other forms. Wilderson extends this framework, understanding anti-Blackness not as a discrete moment, but as a structure through which the world coheres – a structure in which the repetition of Black pain and suffering is foundational to the existence of civil society. Sharpe imagines how we live from within the constant rippling of the water from slavery and its wake, where the process of remembrance can operate as mechanisms of care and resistance. Remembering anti-Blackness should not operate as a banal “looking back”, but as a generative process to inhabit the enduring death, life, and survival.

On Memorials

Importantly, vernacular-based approaches are not the only means for remembering and memorializing Black livingness in the aftermath of the wake. Material placemaking practices are means of symbolically reacting to a lived reality – and can be similarly analyzed through a rhetorical paradigmatic approach. The rhetor (in the above instances, the Black subject deploying survival tactics) has influence in the production of the rhetorical response, as they reactive

deploy it in response to a lived reality. Similarly to how verbal discourse is shaped by an imagined (white) or lived (Black) societal reality,

“Architecture is both process (design) and product (artifact). As professionals, architects work both for themselves and for society, as a result of which architectural symbols are both internally (professionally) and external (socially) meaningful” (Gutenschwager, 1996, p. 247).

The artifactual production architecture provides helps understand the rhetors’ response to a given societal condition, as “communication is the [foundational, material] cement that holds together the social order” (Gutenschwager, 1996, p. 249). Material design decisions, therefore, directly implicate social structures through rhetorically engaging public memory.

While #BlackatUARK provides a productive mechanism for understanding the establishment of counterpublics in the figurative/imaginative sphere, Blair, Dickinson, and Ott emphasize the importance of memory sites’ existence in the material realm, where “certain places must be fixed upon, and that of the things which they desire to keep in memory, symbols must be conceived in the mind, and ranged, as it were, in those places” (p. 1) that may not be observable in online settings. As such, particular kinds of places – such as museum, preservation sites, battlefields, memorials, etc. – can be identified as “memory places” (p. 25), material sites that are constituted by their significance harnessing and establishing sites of public memory through material artifacts. Memory places become imperative sites of rhetorical analysis/reckoning, as “Americans put more trust in history museums and historic sites than in

any other sources for exploring in the past”⁷ (p. 25). This can be attributed to the forms of relational affect that can be cultivated between a place and an in-person participant in its construction components.

Ghalambordezfooly et al. (2025) help synthesize the kinds of architectural vernaculars that make memory places – particularly those commemorating death and dying – so affectively resonant. Their findings “demonstrate that architecture possesses an inherent capacity to encode and evoke unconscious psychological powers” (p. 283), unconsciousness which is particularly salient in discussions of an unconscious ontology of anti-Blackness. The recurrent design themes (or, architectural vernaculars) of how the permeability of resonance materializes are seen in “transcendence, symmetry, centrality, spiral or radial geometry, balance, and symbolic transitions from material to metaphysical dimensions” that have the potential to “reveal architecture not merely as a physical construct but as a medium of psychological integration and cultural continuity” (p. 283). Those visiting sites in memoriam are not only experiencing architecture but experiencing discrete moments of continuance for a life that has transitioned to death.

While the analysis of how the vernaculars within each site engage in the motif representations described by Ghalambordezfooly et al. will occur in the body of each chapter, it is important to note that these themes closely align with the themes of breath, space, movement, and time that McKittrick and Sharpe leverage in their discussions of Black geographies.

⁷ The difference is quite drastic. On a ten-point scale of trustworthiness, history museums and historic sites scored a mean score of 8.4. In contrast, conversations with a witness scored 7.8, a college history professor scored 7.3, and movies and television programs scored 5.0.

Rhetorical analysis of these themes will happen in conversation with one another, where the *material* rhetorics (transcendence, symmetry, centrality, spiral/radial, balance, and symbolic transitions) are compared contrasted with *imaginative* rhetorics (breath, space, movement, and time) that provides a wholistic understanding of the way the chosen sites may speak to the unconscious mind, and the deprivation of Black life.

This thesis aims to provide a dueling material-rhetorical analysis of place that is missing from current scholarship on public memory of anti-Black violence. Paul Williams (2007) concludes similarly to Blair, Dickinson, and Ott and on the importance of memorial museums in and audience's understanding of historical events, with "Unfortunately, there is a lack of critical writing that that establishes how—or even whether—they are effective in this regard" (p. 22-23). Kirkham adds:

"A memorial museum may have every intention to help people work through a traumatic event or to inspire them to prevent future atrocities, but we need to see whether those missions are fulfilled. There are overtly practical purposes of this knowledge: if a memorial museum is not accomplishing its goal, what needs to change?" (p. 216-217).

This work seeks to positively contribute to and help fill portions of the literature gap by critically analyzing three material memorial museum sites and conduct rhetorical analysis on the expressed architectural vernaculars' ability to achieve the fulfillment for those the monuments seek to commemorate.

Method

This thesis leverages a critical interpretive lens that draws from qualitative methods that include narrative analysis, material space analysis, and critical rhetorical methods. Importantly,

the malleability of qualitative methods seems to be the best fit for analysis of the ever-evolving sociological and material environment. In the work, *Riving the Past: The Role of Funerary Architecture in Urban Renewal and the Evolution of Rites of Passage*, Nwambuonwu et al. (2025) cite qualitative research's ability to provide "in-depth understanding of complex phenomena through the lens of contextual and subjective interpretations" is what allows for "the integration of historical narratives, cultural symbolism, and architectural design principles" (p. 11) in spaces such as funerary sites and memorials.

Returning to Kirkham's work on sites of memorial in particular, this thesis seeks to draw on the qualitative method of close-reading textual analysis used in *Making Memory, Making Meaning: Memorial Museums and the Participatory Audience* while integrating a critical interpretive analysis technique. This close-reading analysis does not understand the building as a site of materiality in a vacuum, but draws on narrative study techniques, that understand materials that narrative produces, such as "guestbooks, letters, periodicals, and Instagram posts" to "examine memorial museums' aims and rhetorical strategies while analyzing visitors' roles and contributions, illustrating how both guest and site collaborate to create memory and meaning" (Abstract). While this thesis does not rely on analysis of the same materials per se, similar types of surrounding rhetorics are referenced (such as visitor conversations, media surrounding the monument, and geographical contexts) to establish materials of production surrounding the monuments help establish heuristics of effectiveness of affect, rhetoric, and life that do not begin/end at the body, but extend into the soil, monument, and streets.

I will intersperse narrative analysis throughout the project, in the form of text and images. This flexibility of narrative "exposes different, and sometimes opposed, plots weaved into the experiences of urban space, thereby enabling researchers to tell a larger narrative of the

underlying causes that bring people together (or apart)” (Glover & Mayer, 2023, para. 1) to uncover stories about the ways that a memorial’s material conditions may be co-creating visitors’ (Black visitors’ in particular) understanding of Black breath, space, movement, and time from underneath the shadow of the whip that perpetuates systems of anti-Black violence.

This thesis leverages ethnographic and autoethnographic narrative accounts derived from engaging in first-hand fieldwork at each selected site. Golubchikov (2015) coins the term “feel-work” to describe the field work analysis of the human subject in relation to their affective resonance (“feel”) towards the architectures. This method emphasizes *being* within a site (taking a “feel trip”) before responding to its discrete contextual conditions. Rai and Gottschalk Druschke (2018) similarly describe the benefits of “being there” (ie. “the presence of the rhetorician’s body within a field site” [p. 5]) as:

being “well suited for capturing, comprehending, and sometimes intervening within everyday rhetorical performance and production; for cataloguing and representing myriad *vernacular* [emphasis added] and situated experiences, cultures, practices, embodiments, and meaning-making systems, and texts” (p. 1-2).

Complimentary ethnographic and autoethnographic narratives were documented through notetaking, sketches, and photographs taken at each site – privileging narratives from both the positionality of the Black rhetorician alongside a myriad of additional viewer subjectivities.

Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* indicates that *opacity* can be understood as the mechanism that challenges dominant hegemonic logics to allow for successive reclamation practices of responding, resisting, and surviving. Opacity refuses calls and assumptions that the knowledge of the Other must come through clarity, legibility, or explanation. Opacity is a move towards existing otherwise, and a recognition that there is no hope for reclamation of a world that was built on an ontology of anti-Blackness. Rather than using assimilationist tactics in

attempt to overcome always/already existing within a site of death, Black populations should engage in moments of opaque relationality with other Black beings. This expression comes in the form of embracing new, exploratory, modes of Being – which helps inform why the sites, narratives, and ontologies selected may seem so non-normative and irregular to the dominant population. Rhetoricians navigating such sites must attend to not only what is seen and named, but what is withheld, obscured, or made illegible by design – what embraces the right to remain opaque. For Black rhetoricians and/or monument goers in particular, opacity may offer a space for affective survival. This essay seeks to interrogate the way that opacity plays a role in the discursive rhetoric communicated affectively from the monuments’ placemaking to Black forms of memory.

In the following sections, I will perform a critical-interpretive narrative and material space analysis of the African Burial Ground National Monument, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and George Floyd Square as architectural articulations of remembrance of Black life in response to anti-Black ontology. In these chapters, I will investigate their rhetorical elements for the materialization of Black breath, space, movement, and time through the engaging in moments of honoring opacity as a refusal of anti-Black ontologies.

Chapter 2 - Elevating those the Wake Alienated

Introduction

The African Burial Ground National Monument, where the enslaved were buried in mass to erase their connection to lineage seeks to respond to the site of precarity structured by natal alienation as a tenet of anti-Black ontology. In 1991, the General Services Administration (GSA) began construction on a 34-story federal office tower located on 290 Broadway in New York City, NY. As preliminary archeological research was conducted to aid in the land surveying of the site, intact skeletal remains were found located 30 feet below the city's street level – on Broadway. It was later discovered these skeletal remains were part of a much larger network of burials – termed “Negroes Burial Ground” – a 6-acre landmass containing around 15,000 intact skeletal remains of enslaved (and free) Black folks residing in colonial New York from the 1630s to 1795 (Moore, 2021).

The aforementioned information provided on the monument is restricted to the depth provided on the National Park Service's “History & Culture” page, though there is far more information within the site's 300-plus year history located the monument should redress through an exploration of an “archive of this forgetting” (Kessel, 2022, p. E-47). The sanctioning of land followed a 1697 law preventing deceased Black bodies from being integrated alongside white parishioners (Frohne, 2010, p. 42) – which is when it was officially deemed the “Negroes Burial Ground”. Embracing full operation through 1795, the site reinforced and reflecting the treacherous plantation geographies of Manhattan. In 1794, the site was closed to any new burials and was transformed consecutively into a department store, a credit reporting agency, then a federal building – which each erect “an architectural stage in a process of forgetting that

transmuted slave society in a multicultural democratic space” (Kessel, p. E-47) that was reinforced by the GSA’s drive to continue the process of memory abdication.

Fortunately, lobbying was successful in blocking the construction of a new wholly context-unaware federal project the GSA was proposing (Blakey, 2010) – and reharnessing the memory of the slaves that form the grounds for the site was proposed. The organizations that lead the lobbying initiatives identified Black communities’ attachment to the site, and those buried at it, as sacred grounds (Kessel, p. E-47) for ancestral remembrance. Policymakers passed legislation to resituate the site within new context of memory – changing the name to “African Burial Ground”, officiating it as an official historical landmark, and dedicating it specifically to “Americans of African descent,” in a move to reharness a genealogical connection between the dead and Black visitors who arrive at the site (Kessel, p. E-55).

After the legislative rule to deny encroachment and protect the African Burial Ground was finalized, stakeholders held a design competition to select a proposal that honored and acknowledged the histories of the bodies that lay within the grounds. The winning design – proposed by Haitian American architect Rodney Léon and AARIS Architects founded by African American architect Nicole Hollant-Denis (Gamolina, 2021) sought to establish an “affective relationship between the Black diaspora and Africa as a lost homeland, wherein the imagination and performance of a return to West Africa repairs an experience of absence, lack, and forgetting,” (Kessel, p. E-48). These set of design objectives seem to be an important – and explicit – move towards recapturing moments that live within/between the wake’s turbulent water, in attempt to establish a milieu of memory for those within the diaspora that have been affected by fallen ancestors and harnessing the moments of generation within a memorialized artifact.

This chapter engages in critical rhetorical analysis of the African Burial Ground National Monument, seeks to rhetorically engage public memory of natal alienation through the material burial of Slave bodies. Returning to the central structuring schema of the thesis (Fig. 4), the African Burial Ground National Monument exists as the memory site closest to the wake, that houses bodies, and engages most directly with the tenet of natal alienation. The site exists as the “oldest and largest known excavated burial site in North America for both free and enslaved Africans” (*African Burial Ground National Monument*, n.d.-b), making it apt for its position within the organization scheme.

The status of the slave is not a descriptive of the transaction of humans but describes the ontological condition of non-personhood to which Black subjectivity is confined. Returning to Sharpe’s depiction of the wake, the ripples of the Middle Passage are still reaching, disrupting, and impacting “post-slavery” contexts. As a recognition of Blackness’ always/already slave status (where anti-Black death is inscribed as a pattern of familiarity), Sharpe argues rather than seek a resolution to “blackness’s ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of consciousness” (p. 13). This reorientation serves as a recognition of the moments of pain, suffering, and death that always/already exist within the wake and its rippled effects, and due to an overarching ontological structure of anti-Blackness, will continue to be (re)projected onto Black beings.

Though civil society has leveraged its privilege to subordinate Blackness into the wake’s galloping waters, Black beings continue to take advantage of the volleying moments to gasp for reprieve. Anti-Black ontology may not be structurally contingent or malleable, though Sharpe acknowledges a progression from: *wake* → *the state of wakefulness* → *consciousness* (p. 4). Moving from the recognition the wake has been established, to embracing existence from within,

leads to consciousness of death-dealing treachery and hope-building healing. George Moses Horton embodies consciousness and documents the death-dealing and hope-building duality in *On Liberty and Slavery*, published in 1829, documenting his slave status (McMahon & Curdy, 2006, p. 781). Excerpts include:

*Alas! and am I born for this,
To wear this slavish chain?
Deprived of all created bliss,
Through hardship, toil and pain!*

Where Moses Horton is acknowledging the structural (being *born* into this ontological positionality) and material (bearing *chains, hardship, pain*, etc.) conditions the Middle Passage fosters. In the shadow of anti-Black ontology's conditions of subordination, he adds:

*Oh, Heaven! and is there no relief
This side the silent grave—
To soothe the pain—to quell the grief
And anguish of a slave?*

These cries for *relief* speak to and support the immutable ontological condition of anti-Black suffering, rather than brief contingent moments of discomfort. The piece ends with an embrace of the duality within optimistic pessimism:

*Soar on the pinions of that dove
Which long has cooed for thee,
And breathed her notes from Afric's grove
The sound of Liberty.*

*Oh, Liberty! thou golden prize,
So often sought by blood—*

[...]

*And in thy shades the storm shall calm,
With songs of Liberty!*

The calls utopianly optimistic calls for Liberty/asylum/freedom in spite of the recognition of anti-Blackness' permeance demonstrates the need for moments of hope from beneath the shadow of slavery's whip⁸. Moses Horton's poetry serves as an ethnographic account of conditions of slavery while engaging in the (cautiously optimistic) project of artistic artifact production in the face of forced ontological subjugation.

From slaveness comes the status of natal alienation. Natal alienation references the severing of the slave from "all formal, legally enforceable ties of 'blood,' and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master" (Sexton, 2010, p. 41) that erases cultural and genealogical ties to "Afric's grove"⁹. Orlando Patterson (1982) builds on the concept of natal alienation, as related to a disruption of (public) memory:

"Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate. Formally

⁸ Similar to Sharpe's descriptive visuality in the use of the term "wake", McKittrick (2014) utilizes "shadow of the whip" to describe the ways "the plantocracy underwrites and anticipates the historically present persistence of anti-Black violence" (p. 21-22) and affirms "we might not simply access Black suffering and white supremacy but perhaps generate new ways of encountering this history of blackness" (p. 22) – similarly to the opaque forms of livingness that Moses Horton helps establish and frame.

⁹ A reference to a line from the Moses Horton excerpts.

isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he was also culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. [...] Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory” (p. 4).

Patterson identifies the precarity in tension between the slave experiencing dead/aliveness, pessimism/optimism, and hope/hate. Not only does this positionality affect ties to past knowledge but affects the ability to establish affective future relations – and attempts to overwhelm the ability to imagine new sites of memory formation.

Architects interested in creating artifacts that grapple with unique memory stipulations structured by anti-Black *forgetting* must depart from the normative symbolic projections of *remembering* rooted in notions of colonized Antebellum America – and instead engage in counterpublic memory making through strategic opacity. Sites such as the Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial operate in the realm of colossal monumentality (to forward the sanctity of Americanness as it relates to the antiquity – sites residing in stagnant lieux) (Wells, 2022) – rather than reflective memoriam (milieux) sites those dealing with the waves of colonialism’s wake require. Justine Wells calls upon the application of this theorizing to rupture and disperse imperial hubris as a move away from monumentality’s supremacist modes of occupying space and towards alternative and “ecological styles of memorial dwelling enabled and called for by Black experiences of the ruinous wake of slavery,” (Wells, p. 282). Alternative sites of belonging engage in strategic opacity to offer moments of solitude (through being without being seen) from the wake’s turbulent waters.

Léon and Hollant-Denis’ proposal did seem to be distinctly non-normative in form when compared to aforementioned memorial structures such as the Lincoln Memorial, Washington

Monument, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial that are rooted in vernacular monumentality and white hyper-reality. Rather than the monument embracing modes of disjointed observation (ie. the Washington Monument's monumentality having far more to do with its colossal obelisk form than George Washington himself; or, the GSA's initial plan to "mount a plaque on the wall of their building and provide for a study of race differences in skeletal observations," [Blakey, p. 67]), the designers chose to deploy methods of (re)embodied subjectivity – creating a space for artifact that represents seven (proximate but ruinous) sites of memorial acknowledgement: Wall of Remembrance, Ancestral Re-Internment Grove, Memorial Wall, The Ancestral Chamber, Circle of the Diaspora, Spiral Processional Ramp, and Ancestral Liberation Court. These seven sites situated amongst a sequential procession that encourage the viewer to embody varying modes of ritualistic memorialization for the bodies resting in the site.

Though there seems to be a sufficient amount of scholarship and literature discussing the material approach (Moore, 2021; Frohne, 2010) or the epistemological approach grounded in a historical account (McKittrick, 2013) to the conception of the African Burial Ground National Monument, little scholarship exists that combines the two approaches of analysis. The African Burial Ground National Monument is the nation's earliest and largest African burial ground rediscovered in the United States (Moore) which makes it an ideal site for the continuation and expansion of rhetorically analytical scholarship. This chapter groups the seven discrete design interventions into four primary architectural vernaculars: site access, the Libation Court, the Wall of Remembrance, and the Door of No Return, as instances of the memorial engaging, rhetorically, in the natal alienation that Black subjects always/already face as a result of anti-Black ontology – and situates these vernaculars in relation to the breath, space, movement, and time slaves (residing at the site or otherwise) have been abdicated from.

Analysis

For all those who were lost

For all those who were stolen

For all those who were left behind

*For all those who were not forgotten*¹⁰



Figure 5. African Burial Ground National Monument ([National Museum of African American History & Culture, 2021](#))

Vernacular I: Wall of Remembrance | Breath

To (re)harness the breath within advocacy and autonomy of those existing along the Black diaspora, Léon and Hollant-Denis worked in close consultation with the “descendent community” (Blakey) to inform symbolic gestures in the form of engravings and writing

¹⁰ Poetry from an anonymous author prominently inscribed on the monument, depicted on the right side of Figure 4.

throughout the site. As established by Moses Horton's calls for *notes from Afric's grove*, Black descendant communities yearn for sites of genealogic connection to find moments of reprieve from the alienation process. Within the *Wall of Remembrance* (Fig. 6), the African Burial Ground National Monument provides glimpses of (re)established rhetorical connections to Motherland lineages in the form of traditional Adinkra symbol projection along primary structure of the memorial – where the difference in origin particularity and relation along the same circular band marks both heterogeneity and unity.



Figure 6. Photo of Wall of Remembrance | ([African Burial Ground National Monument](#))

Each symbol represents a slave vessel on its voyage across the Atlantic (Paradise, 2023), where each slave brings different traditions and beliefs to the space. A description of *Love and*

unity lies beneath the first symbol along the path's procession. This is the Nsibidi¹¹, one the oldest forms of writing in Africa that, when translated into spoken form, means "cruel letters" (*Nsibidi Symbol*, n.d.-c) in reference to the abstraction and uncertainty associated with its age. The *Wall of Remembrance* beginning at the Nsibidi rhetorically speaks to the deep histories¹² of the Black diaspora and allows each of the following symbols in the procession to contribute to, but not overwrite, the ad hoc process of contributing to a relationally relevant diasporic language.

The most prominent traditional symbol used once in the *Wall of Remembrance* and repeated several times in other instances throughout the monument is the Sankofa symbol¹³. The Sankofa symbol translates to "'look to the past to inform the future'", where National Park Service writes the repeated projection throughout the monument seeks to shed "light on the struggles of enslaved African peoples; though long gone, slavery is still a large chunk [*sic*] of African American history, and should be acknowledged rather than forgotten in order to move forward productively" (*Sankofa*, n.d.-d). While I do agree, to some, the perception of material conditions of slavery may no longer be glaringly perceptible, as established through the lens of anti-Black ontology, conditions of slavery are still pervasively present – and natal alienation is one tenet of the whispering legacy.

Nsibidi, Sankofa, and the culmination of all additional symbols at the *Wall of Remembrance* work to rhetorically establish a common grammar for grappling with the reality of

¹¹ 

¹² Culturally and temporally.

¹³ 

natal alienation. While ties to kinship and genealogy may have been subsumed by the turbulence of the wake, this space offers piecemeal moments of reprieve – giving a shared language to allow those across the diaspora to communicate, speak, and *breathe* together. The words at the beginning of the *Analysis* section are located next to the largest Sankofa symbol on the site (Fig. 7), and they speaking to the relevant of searching the wake for remnants that can be contemporarily (re)projected as contemporary symbolic interventions to disrupt the violent anti-Black forgetting process that natal alienation demands.

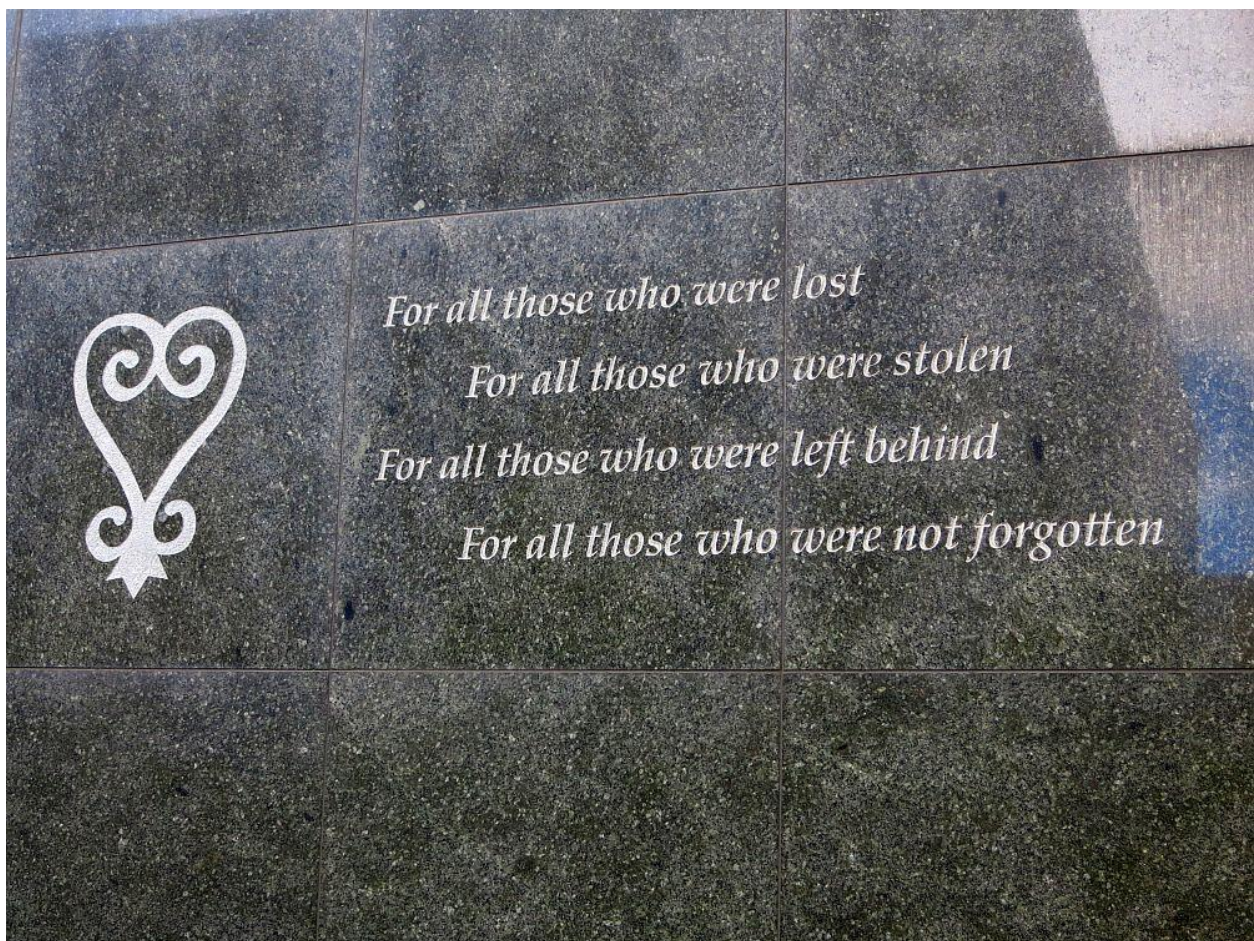


Figure 7. Photo of Sankofa and Poem ([Rachel Heller](#))

Vernacular II: Site Access | Space

The African Burial Ground National Monument resides at the corner of Elk and Duane St in an area of lower Manhattan densely punctuated by high-rise federal administrative buildings. African Burial Ground National Monument's architectural "footprint" takes up about one-quarter of the city block's area, but, importantly, the total area where bodies lie is much larger (Fig. 8; dark-red shading indicating the monument, light-red shading indicating burial area). While *Vernacular I* offered an instance of positive reparations of Black symbolic freedom, the "white monopoly of public space" (David, 2016, p. 97) is ever-present at the site, demonstrated in the necropolitical allowance to continue "business as normal" atop a large portion of burial remains, which retrenches the impact of ancestral alienation.

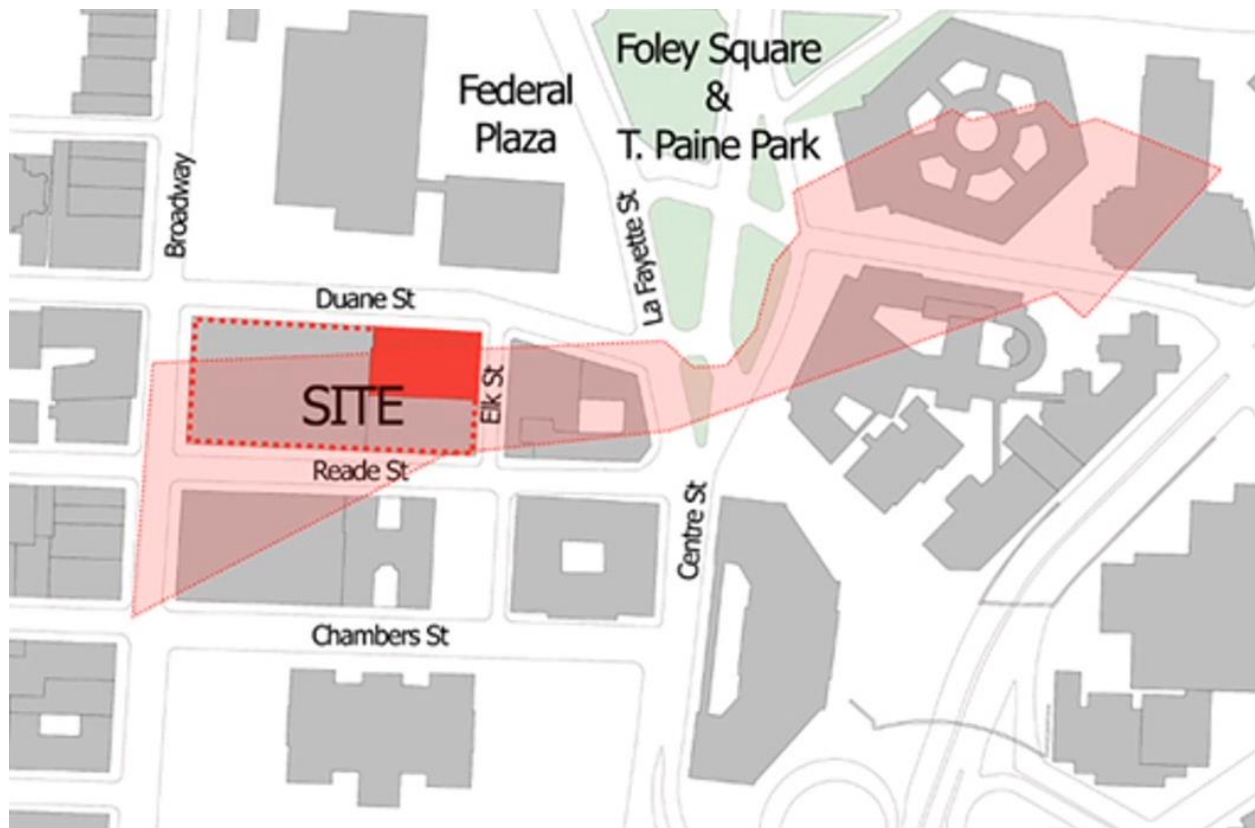


Figure 8. Map of Site ([Nicole Hollant-Denis, AIA, NOMA, NCARB Discusses African Burial Ground Memorial National Monument, 2022](#))

Previous scholarship engaging in ethnographic and autoethnographic analysis (Moore, 2021; Frohne, 2010) does praise the site articulation for its perceived disruption of normalized and institutionalized hegemony. I agree with these analyses in context of the monument being a visual puncture in the urban fabric comprised of many symbolically bureaucratic buildings¹⁴ – being a (comparatively) small artistic work standing who sits on the same lot size as much taller monumental building forms. Kessel (2022) notes not only is this disruption visual, but after

¹⁴ See, for example, Agarez’ et al.’s *The Puzzle of Architecture and Bureaucracy* (2022), a special collection publication exploring the roots of bureaucratic prominence and its connection to architectural expressions.

entering the site and descending downward into the monument's central space, the monument assists "in producing a feeling of reflection by intervening in the aural experience of a city block" (p. E-50). Micro-moments of Black space is fostered through visual and auditorial disruptions to the macro-contexts of bureaucratic and judicial systems that are closely associated with Black exclusion.

While some narrative analysis does provide hope of Black representational freedom within the monument's architectural design and form, anti-Black ontologies still perpetuate the slave's alienation through necropolitical control. During initial research, I found narratives of other's experiences with the site's attachment to exclusion through necropolitical control of visitor access. While Kessel had primarily positive remarks regarding the monument's material approaches to the establishment of Black space, at the end of the publication, they were left questioning the way aesthetics alone are unable to grapple with the full scope anti-Black ontology and its attendant model of pervasive necropolitical control. As they were walking the site, they simultaneously visited the monument's website, and note they were greeted with a banner from the National Park Service (NPS) expressing:

"support for 'peaceful assembly,' but warns that it cannot 'tolerate violence to citizens or officers or damage to our nation's resources that we are entrusted to protect,'" (p. E-57).

Here, the National Park Service leverages perceptibly threatening and purposefully ambiguous language to ensure access to policing of what activities are/not allowed at the site – even if that means controlling how people are/not allowed to mourn ancestors subsumed by death.

When I visited the site in late-October 2025, governmental systems of necropolitical control transformed from ambiguous threats to offensive material strategies. October 1st to

November 12th marked the longest government shutdown in United States history, with the National Park Service being one of the many government entities struggling with administrative challenges resulting from a stoppage in government funding. In the days leading up to my trip, I was having a hard time decoding messages from the National Park Service, as “With limited staff, websites weren’t kept up to date with clear messages as to whether a park was open or not,” (Garder, 2025, para. 7) – a problem that myself and many other visitors to parks around the country were attempting to grapple with. Though official NPS guidance updated in 2025 states “...open-air memorials will generally remain accessible to visitors,” which would seem to allow the African Burial Ground National Monument to remain open¹⁵, the guidance adds “except in the case of facilities or areas that would typically be locked during non-business hours, which in general are to be ‘locked for the duration of the shutdown’” (*National Park Service*, 2026, paras. 5-6) a category the monument also falls into. The language used regarding shutdown action plans rings similarly to language used in response to fears of protest “violence”: intentionally abstract and indirect, for the allowance of quick manipulation/application to a variety of potential scenarios.

Amidst the unknown, I decided to continue forward with the trip, where I was met by an onslaught of spatial control mechanisms preventing me from getting anywhere near the monument – where ancestors are laid. Metal barriers protected by police presence line multiple city blocks, “protecting” federal buildings and, by proximity, the federal monument. Though the

¹⁵ Though the Visitor Center is indoor, the NPS website distinguishes the indoor center as a separate entity from the open-air outdoor memorial (*African Burial Ground: Basic Information*, n.d.-a).

monument is primarily outdoor and open-air, access was not permitted within ~200 feet¹⁶ of the space designed for mourning and remembrance (Fig. 9)¹⁷. When following the police barricades to be sure there was no path to the monument, I encountered a sign labeled *ICE Entrance* (fig. 10). ICE, or Immigration and Customs Enforcement, being a tool of bodily control that President Trump emphatically touts for maintaining (false) notions of national security¹⁸. This false premise, along with the unsettling premise the protectors of the African Burial Ground National Monument use to alienate Black mourning and remembrance, are tools of the white monopolization of space that are born from and practiced through anti-Black ontology.

¹⁶ This is the reason writings in the other vernaculars at this site rely primarily on outside narratives rather than involving autoethnographic narrative accounts, as I could not first-hand interact with other parts of the monument.

¹⁷ The monument can be seen projecting above the dumpster in this photo.

¹⁸ Politics of exclusion, marginalization, and control that will be discussed more robustly in Chapter 4.



Figure 9. Photo of Barricaded Site Access (Photo by author, 2025)

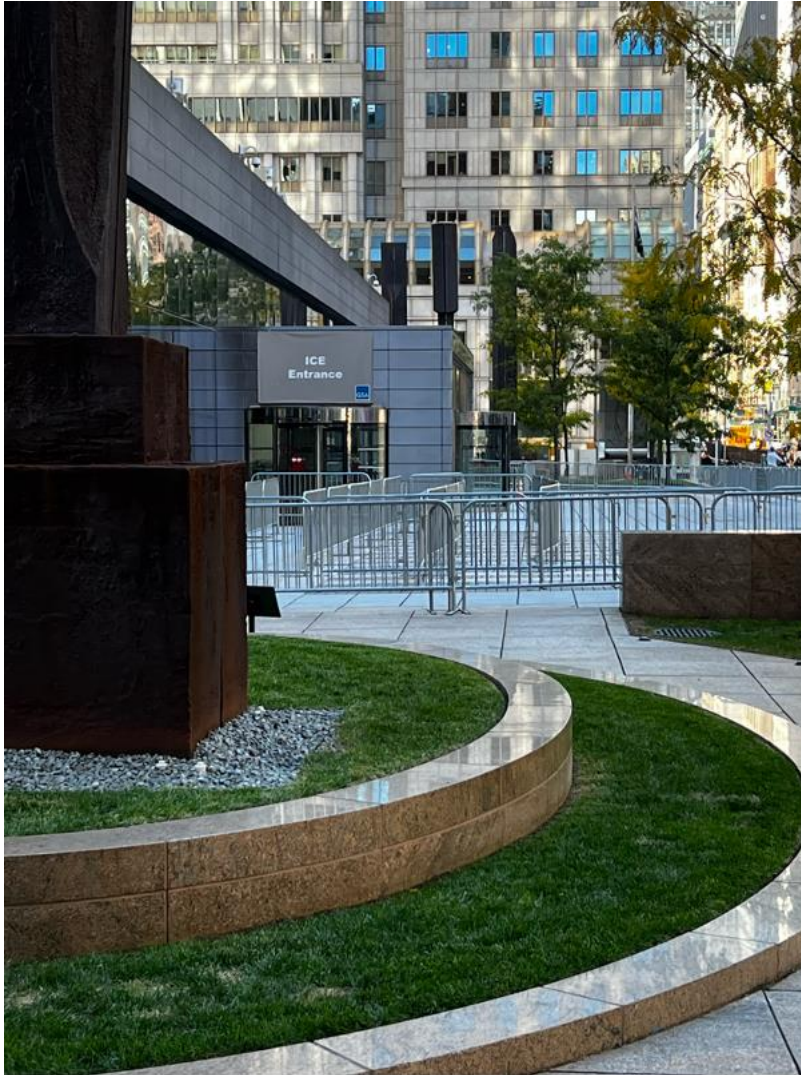


Figure 10. Photo of ICE Entrance (Photo by author, 2025)

Vernacular III: Libation Court | Movement

The Libation Court resides in the center of the monument. The circular form harnesses a “spiritual space” for traditional libations, a form of movement that harnesses “rituals that link ‘past, present, and future generations’” (Kessel, p. E-50) – moments of honorable remembrance to sanctify that which the wake always/already subsumed. While the court is rhetorically adorned with representational hierarchy and sanctity by being located at center of monument, it is also the furthest vertically recessed point of the monument, bringing “the visitor into a physical proximity

to the burial ground” (p. E-50) – and ancestors buried – below. Much like the Wall of Remembrance, this serves as moments to rebind the threads of genealogy and kinship natal alienation has severed.

Ornamented on the floor of the Libation Court lies the Circle of the Diaspora, “a map that centers the eastern coast of North America and the western coast of Africa” (p. E-50). The Circle represents the dueling nature of Black lineages proximity along the diaspora brought together by the wake which disrupted familial ties to place. Nicole Hollant-Denis, lead architect on the project, describes the togetherness of Blackness being expressed through the globe’s articulation (Fig. 11), where:

“The stone itself is the exact same stone all across. The darker version is a different finish, it’s a power jet-wash finish. And the lighter gray is a flame-finish. And so when it rains, it all becomes one unified color. And that was symbolic of the idea that, you know, we’re [those along the diaspora] all one really in the world. All one together” (*Nicole Hollant-Denis, AIA, NOMA, NCARB Discusses African Burial Ground Memorial National Monument*, 2022, 29:57-30:22).

The monument then speaks to the nuance lying between strategic togetherness, when “selected descriptions of the exhumed remains from the burial ground are written into the pavement: ‘Burial 189 – Adult of Undetermined Age and Gender’” (Kessell, p. E-54; fig. 12), along with “numerous inscriptions following one another along a spiral line toward the center of the Circle, arriving finally at the map’s representation of an area somewhere near present-day Senegal” (Kessell, p. E-54). These adornments gesture towards the intricacies lost to slavery’s alienating structures.



Figure 11. Photo of Circle of the Diaspora ([cultureNOW](#))



Figure 12. Photo of Burial Markings ([Kessel, 2022](#))

While allowing space for intimate proximity to those buried at the monument is an instance of rhetorically reparative design, much like *Vernacular II*, pervasive power dynamics still (re)establish their anti-Black mechanisms of control over autonomous movement. Michael Blakey (2024) touts the Howard University research team who pioneered preservation of the site’s skeletal remains for the “object” “self-definition” (p. 67) biological, archeological, and historical work they completed before the monument began construction. Blakey’s cohort examined 419 human skeletal remains found at the site to answer questions of scientific idealism – through data-fied pinpoints such as: territorialized birthplace, reproductive rates, life expectancy, rates of disease, etc. The primary “descendant community” lobbying group

consulted refused Howard's research proposed and asked for "immediate reburial of remains without laboratory analysis" (p. 63) – an ask that the slaves' movement be *free* of manipulation and control. This request was tentatively accepted, until the research team decided the demands were "inconsistent with the defining principles of scholarship (an honest search for truth) and science (dependent on systematic material evidence)," (p. 63); so, the demands were overridden and the research endeavor unilaterally greenlit. Blakey concludes the published study with several additional justifications to the researchers' abdication of the descendant communities' wishes:

"Archaeologists, biological anthropologists and historians are no more objective when they disregard these public goals than when they attend to them. In our case, we are certain many of the research questions were both different *and better* [emphasis added] than those created exclusively among our specialist colleagues behind the walls of the academy. The claim that we are objective by not attending to the expressed needs of the people most affected by the history we construct (descendant communities) simply constitutes serving the needs of others," (p. 67).

Blakey may be correct in the assertion that these decisions certainly do not achieve attending to expressed needs of Black communities most affected by the legacies of slavery, instead merely "serving the needs of others" – the only logical "other" served is the reflexive white hegemon that thrives on ontological anti-Blackness.

Understanding the semiotic needs of Black subjects seeking glimpses of remembering beyond/into natal alienation requires a departure from the normative processes of memory (ie. objective scientific factualization), towards a recentering of embodied subjective encounter. The datafication of the dead (for something like a "plaque on a wall" – that this author critiques in the same article [Blakey, 2010, p. 67]) excludes the affective experiential evocation of the captive Africans experiencing being mashed together like animals on the slave ship, the existential

loneliness described in George Moses Horton’s poetry, or the necropolitical sense of “power suffocating the subject, power pushing upon the skin, power so intimate that it seems to emanate from within the body,” (Rutland, 2017, p. 243). Reorienting the approach to the memorial as a site of encounter and recognizing serves as a recognition of the ways that space “feels, how it molds action and controls the body,” (Rutland, 2017, p. 243) to affectively reharness memories and connection to ancestors that exist within materially imaginative spaces (spaces of otherwise being).

Vernacular IV: Door of No Return | Time

The Door of No Return is the symbolic portal that brings audience members down through the Wall of Remembrance’s procession and into the Libation Court. Inscribed on the Door is the Sankofa symbol – which is largely depicted next to the poetry that leads the *Analysis* section of this chapter (see Figure 7). The Sankofa’s presentation alongside the poetry offers an opportunity to reframe the temporal experience of entering the monument – the monument is not intended for static recognition of past wrongdoings, but of remembering those in the past, present, and future who *shall not be forgotten*.

The Door of No Return receives its name from the recognition there is *no return* to a society free of anti-Blackness post-wake. An original “Door of No Return” is found as an architectural feature in mythics of the Maison des Esclaves on Île de Gorée in Senegal, and marks “the last portal through which slaves passed before being transported across the Atlantic as chattel” (Kessell, footnote 13). The symbolic marker serves a dueling rhetorical purpose: (a) acknowledgment of slave status now as ontological, (b) cementing a severing of the ability to return to kinship’s knowingness. Articulations of natal alienation operating as a tenet of anti-Black ontology is originally expressed as narrative myths of the Mison des Esclave before

becoming architecturally (re)represented at the memory site of the African Burial Ground National Monument.

Architecturally, the Door of No Return makes several symbolic gestures through its form. Firstly, the Door operates as an expressed threshold to “a serene space” (Purnell, 2010, p. 738) to linear “direct, forward procession” (Kessell, E-55) – the body perceives a sense of force through the architecture – into “a final resting place for people whose lives were shaped by arduous labor, harsh living conditions, and the disconnect from home that comes with living in diaspora” (Purnell, p. 738) that lies in the Libation Court. Much like the architecture conveys the symbolic force of *beginning* no return, the design also symbolically recreates sensations of being “on a ship reminiscent of the vessels that carried people from the African continent through the Americas” (Purnell, p. 738) through the confined nature of the structure. Apertures that allow for a slim concentration of exterior light to permeate the Door (Fig. 13) provide a “glowing contrast with the darkness of the chamber” (Kessell) that encourages visitors to continue forward through the procession. This light provides a glimpse of meaning within the darkness of Black death. Lastly, instead of taking a normative square or rectangular arch form, the Door is ornamented as a triangle, symbolizing the triangularity of the Middle Passage’s operations. Together, these articulations allow the Door of No Return to (re)articulate how time should/not be operating at the monument – and affectively connects viewers to the alienating experience of the Slave. Rearticulation of temporal linearity serves as a disruption of normative conceptions that slavery is a distant past event, as well as the establishment of new forms of public memory that rhetorically engages slavery in the contemporary.



Figure 13. Entrance to the Door of No Return ([ILoveNY](http://ILoveNY.com))

Conclusion

The merging of anti-Blackness, memory, and architectural theories provide a useful rhetorical lens for understanding the design processes and epistemological presuppositions surrounding the African Burial Ground National Monument. Natal alienation, one of the three tenets of anti-Black ontology, structures the conditions of the loss of (past and future) ties to ancestral lineage for the Black slave that navigated Triangle Trade's treacherous terrain. As a recognition of this loss of kinship, the architects of the memorial, Nicole Hollant-Denis and Rodney Léon sought to establish a Black sense of place that rhetorically (re)establish a site of public memory that grounds those living in the contemporary to stories of Africa as the lost homeland.

The creation of a site of remembrance through reckoning is not an attempt to heal memory, but to establish the architecture as a site for performing labor of mourning death that is never past, due to the continuation of the wake's waters crashing onto the shore. Four primary architecture vernaculars are identified as rhetorically addressing the breath, space, movement, and time the captive slave is always/already deprived of. *Vernacular I: Wall of Remembrance* creates space for grammar from across the Black diaspora, as a recognition of a collectivist history of anti-Black trauma. *Vernacular II: Site Access* establishes a Blackened sense of place by disrupting a nominally legislative and judicial urban fabric with a site of Black belonging. *Vernacular III: Libation Court* offers a site of Black proximity, where the diaspora can come together and mourn those buried just beneath the monument. *Vernacular IV: Door of No Return* simulates the experience of the beginning of the Middle Passage, boarding the cramped slave ship, and recognizing, natively, there is no return. Though these design vernaculars demonstrated success in the creation of a Black sense of place, the pervasiveness of anti-Black ontology substantiates opportunity for outside forces, such as necropolitical power, to intrude on the designed space: such as the forced closure of the monument as well as the undue objectification and disruption of the bodies at rest.

Instances of necropolitical encroachment should not be a reason to describe the design decisions as failures or abandon future similar design projects, but a recognition that anti-Blackness is ontological – and though true liberation may be a utopian imaginary, architects, designers, and spatial inhabitants alike should continue curating sites of Black place to provide moments of reprieve from the wake's turbulent waters. Moses Horton's poetry offers a depiction of the search for Liberty through scenes of no relief. Upon Jennifer Bain's visit to the park, they

heard a similar narrative of searching for sites of hope rather than dwelling on the conditions of pain:

“What he said was, ‘If I could go back in time and talk to any of the individuals who used this space and who were buried here, I wouldn’t ask them about the conditions that they faced because I’m sure that was horrific. Instead, what I would ask them is, in all that happened to you, and in all that continued to happen to you, what did you hope for and what did you tell your children?’” (Bain, 2024, para. 45).

The African Burial Ground National monument serves as a memory site for the reconnection of descendants to slaves taken by the wake to reconnect severed lineages and listen to the stories of hope being whispered from the grave.

Chapter 3 - Lynching's Gratuitous Memory

Introduction

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama represents an ideal memory place – one that attempts to re-establish memory surrounding 4,400 documented Black people killing in racial terror Lynchings¹⁹ between 1877 and 1950. The monument was designed and produced by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) with express goals of challenging “the distorted national narrative” and acknowledging the “harms borne by the African American Community” (*The Guardian*, 0:30). While the subject-driver behind the monument’s creation becomes quite apparent (those impacted by the wake of racial terror lynchings), the affective resonance spurred from participants’ engagement with the site’s rhetorical moves is not as explicit.

Current scholarship explores the nuance and distance between the design’s modes of subject remembrance and interpretations by those participating in the experiences the monument has to offer. Blainey (2024) and Pless (2020) offer insights that surround the structural dynamics of white supremacy (organized through ontologies of anti-Blackness) that implicate the consumption of the memory realm the monument has created. Blainey draws particular attention

¹⁹ In this essay, I use a capital L in “Lynching” to delineate between the material act of public execution (through means such as hanging, burying alive, deception, etc.) as compared to symbolic “lynching” through acts of anti-Black epistemologies that result in the deprivation of Black life. The former, I contend, has produced (note the past-tense – in regard to its historical significance) the latter.

to the romanticization of memorial spaces in general, and this site in particular, with a focus on how forces, such as anti-Blackness, may shape behaviors such as a white man casually photographing the suspending columns in the monument; “‘*They’re still taking photos*’” (Anderson, as cited in Blainey, 2024, p. 148), that obfuscates the reckoning with anti-Blackness process the monument offers to viewers²⁰. While Blainey describes the ontological implications of the monument²¹, Pless describes the way the monument seeks to disrupt epistemologies that fuel white supremacist ideals. Contrasting the NMPJ with Confederate monuments (installed in similar geographic locations), they argue most U.S. monuments perpetuate white supremacy through static, sanitized histories – ones that are cemented in public memory, not able to be contested or changed. In contrast, the NMPJ refuses finality, having an explicit “openness to change, the memorial never claims to be complete” (Pless, 2020, p. 7). With spaces dedicated to “*unknown* [emphasis added] victims of racial terror lynchings” (p. 7), many argue the monument provides space for more contemporary victims of lynching²² – such as George Floyd, Breonna

²⁰ While Blainey recognizes photographs are not pieces of irrefutable evidence of privilege for every (white) viewer engaging in the monument (acknowledging the need of photographs for things like this analysis), they certainly “should not be dismissed, as being able to disconnect from the sensitive nature of the memorial” and Anderson’s African American affective response (through skepticism) to the scene should – at the very least – call into question the way “‘white onlookers engage in the spectacle of lynching’” (Anderson, as cited in Blainey, 2024, p. 148-49).

²¹ Briefly, at the very end of the essay – far from the main focus of the writing.

²² Note the shift in capitalization.

Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other victims of “police and vigilante killings” (Simko, 2021, p. 157).

Simko (2021), Aden (2023), and Hasian and Paliewicz (2020) each explore the affective and rhetorical dimensions of the NMPJ, but constrain themselves, notably, to the relationality of *white* visitor consumption. Simko indicates the memorial leverages dominant themes such as “freedom” and “terrorism” to create mnemonic bridges between Black and white Americans, suggesting that white Americans are also denied freedom by historical accounts: “because white Americans are burdened by the legacies of the past, they, too, are blocked from fully realizing the quintessential American value of freedom” (Simko, 2021, p. 164). Not only does this reading seem to be antithetical to accounts of how pervasive anti-Black ontologies casts freedom as a ruse of analogy²³ for Black beings always/already residing in a site of social death that locks in their slave status, it seems to (problematically) center the emotional needs of white visitors as a heuristic of success²⁴.

Aden (2023) similarly frames the NMPJ as an invitation for audiences to participate in “feeling-with” Black grief through gestural solace and mourning. Drawing on personal reflections and ethnographic accounts of fellow monument-goers, Aden contends “while visitors such as me cannot mourn the victims of white supremacist violence in the same ways Black Americans do”, the memorial allows non-Black others to “*acknowledge [sic]* Black Americans’ experiences” (p. 3). While Aden’s notion of “feeling-with” may be valuable to grapple with the

²³ Wilderson, 2010.

²⁴ Which seems to further the idea the epistemological underpinnings of white consumption through photographs being an indication of parasitism for entertainment of reckoning purposes.

viscerality of participation by white visitors, it risks flattening unfathomable Black grief to an object-lesson learned for white growth and attendant tokenization.

Through these accounts, a central tension emerges – existing scholarship primarily discusses and surrounds the monument’s emotional, rhetorical, and pedagogical power through the lens of white subjectivity shift. This essay seeks to build upon the foundation that Blainey and Pless have provided. While their scholarship centers epistemologies of white supremacy, this thesis seeks to analyze and understand the National Monument for Peace and Justice through a lens of anti-Black ontology, privileged by a Black rhetorician’s autoethnographic account. Through the exploration of the architectural vernaculars that speak relationally to the anti-Blackness that Black visitors always/already face, this thesis employs a close-reading textual analysis of the site to understand the rhetorics that may work to re-instantiate Black breath, space, movement, and time from those who have been victims of racial terror lynching.

Lynching is not a discrete moment within the legacy of American history, but provocation of an enduring ontology of anti-Blackness that pervasively manifests in symbolic, material, and affective registers of the contemporary. With roots traced to the post-Reconstruction era, Lynching functioned as a form of racial terrorism – a public spectacle that enforced white supremacy through the horrifying spectacles of murdering the Black body. Investigative journalist Ida B. Wells’ work on white performativity during Lynching practices (*Southern Horrors*, 1892; *The Red Record*, 1895) was historically imperative to exposing and disrupting dominant narratives of anxieties surrounding Black criminality, sexuality, and economic status that led to Lynching performances. Wells’ early resistance to Lynching’s discursive and visual regimes becomes a cornerstone in the prefiguration of contemporary

scholarship's efforts to understand its pervasion within/between systems of power and knowledge.

Building on this formwork, Jacqueline Goldsby's *A Spectacular Secret* (2006) and Amy Louise Wood's *Lynching and Spectacle* (2009) examine how Lynching operated through technologies of mass spectatorship – displayed through photographs, postcards, and public performance. Lynching was identified as a ritual of visual culture and consumption – that was not only an act of physical domination, but of necropolitical control over how Blackness is imagined and disseminated. Ersula Ore (2023) concludes similarly, that white “American racism takes many forms” the resonance of the “lynched Black body remains an ever-constant symbol of democratic declension” (as cited in Ore, 2023, p. 5). Through this frame, lynching²⁵ is rearticulated as always/already a mode of aesthetic violence that is a provocation of grammars for anti-Black terror.

Ore extends this analysis further and identifies how Lynching reconfigures itself through contemporary discursive practices. In *Twenty-First Century Discourses of American Lynching* (2023), lynching is identified as a rhetorical form that anchors/(re)cements the logics of anti-Blackness into the present. lynching becomes an event and a genre, that manipulates within/between/through different contexts to re-instantiate racialized domination, exemplified in modern discourses of surveillance, policing, and racial governance. Situating practices of Lynching alongside the discourses of “I can't breathe” – uttered by Eric Garner, George Floyd, and lifeless individuals from across the Black diaspora – seems to allow vernacular

²⁵ Note the shift in capitalization.

commonalities between Lynching and lynching to emerge: the necropolitical deprivation of Black breath, space, movement, and time.

While some may understand the criminalization and stigmatization of Lynching as a markedly positive reformatory practice, many Black beings understand gratuitous violence repercussions the Black being continues to reside in as a result of anti-Black ontologies²⁶ (Hartman, 1997; Wilderson, 2010; Sharpe, 2016). Ore (2023) indicates, in fact, the criminalization process can be increasingly dangerous as it “produced a rhetoric of silence and forgetting” that can lead to the un-remembering of the violent pasts that work(ed) to lock in racial subordination. This is why the analysis of Lynching and identification, and naming of contemporary lynching becomes particularly important, to rupture “the temporal orientation of hegemonic memorial and legal time” and allow for “telling different stories that exceed the logics of closure, suffocation, and forgetting” (p. 455) – an act of reclamation of the breath, space, movement, and time that Black subjects have always/already been deprived of. Returning to Glissant’s articulation of opacity, even in acts of naming non-denotative acts of Lynching “lynching” is a mechanism of Black opacity – by refusing oversimplified “logics” of fixidity in favor of embracing lived experience that emergences from the density of Black experience(s).

Together, these scholarly approaches indicate that lynching must be understood not only as an act of physical violence (established by Lynching), but as a spatial, temporal, and rhetorical project of that instantiates anti-Black violence that is enacted through the gratuitous violence

²⁶ Similar to the acceptance that the 13th Amendment only symbolically ended Slavery – it did not prohibit the creation of new material practices (ie. Black criminalization, redlining, etc.) that replicate forms of contemporary slave-status.

tenant of anti-Black ontology. As such, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice does not merely recount a history of Lynching – it seeks to engage in an ongoing grammar of the violence of unprovoked, unsanctioned, and socially necessary gratuitous nature of lynching. Rhetoricians navigating the site must attend to not only what is seen and named, but what is withheld, obscured, or made illegible by design – what embraces the right to remain opaque. For Black rhetoricians and/or monument goers in particular, opacity may offer a space for affective survival. This essay seeks to interrogate the way that opacity plays a role in the discursive rhetoric communicated affectively from the monument’s placemaking to Black forms of memory.

Analysis

After touring the memorial, Montgomery native and African American Wretha Hudson reflected how “to me, this is more than just a memorial. It’s also a sacred place because my ancestors paid the ultimate price” (Blainey, p. 147-8).

Vernacular I: The Hanging Columns | Breath



Figure 14. Photo of NMPJ ([Paula J, 2018](#))

The most prominent vernacular – “the heart of the memorial” (Pless, p. 5) – are over 800 rectangular corten steel monuments (Fig. 14), that I describe with the oxymoronic phrase *the hanging columns*²⁷. When approaching the site through an architectural lens of normativity, the forms do appear columnar – there are many steel rods that are protruding into the roof plane²⁸ that, from a distance, appear to be structurally preventing the roof from collapse, like a column is intended to do. Upon closer engagement and inspection, these forms are not normative columns, but coffin-sized rectangular monuments that lay suspended – not attached to the ground plane (Fig. 15) – from the roof above. Each monument names a county in the United States, along with the names and date of Lynchings that have occurred in that county. As one descends into the site,

²⁷ Oxymoronic through the understanding that a column hanging would be antithetical to its structural responsibility.

²⁸ One can assume, then into beams, girders, etc.

the monuments begin to rise higher above the viewer, recreating images of Black bodies being hung overhead from trees.

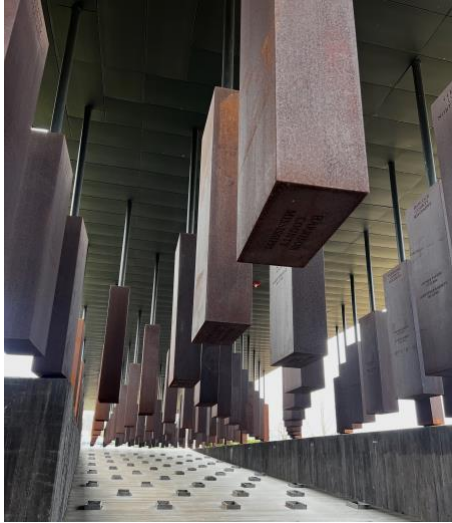


Figure 15. Photo of "Hanging Columns" (Photo by author, 2026)

The form of the columns is not exclusively an archival marker, but also serves, in their form, as affective and architectural instantiation of Black opacity to grapple with the hegemonic hold anti-Black violence has on Black subjects. Aden’s personal ethnography details their initial epistemological understanding of lynching as “the *act* [*sic*] of [...] extra-judicial hanging”, while the monument caused a reorientation towards the “*systematic practice* [*sic*] of lynching as racial terror *and* [*sic*] unjust death” (Aden, p. 12). This understanding begins to align with how the vernacular is architecturally expressed – where frames of white normativity may *prescribe* the *systematic placing* of steel columns into a roof plane as simple columns; but upon closer expression, the reality is much more complex. The systems (embodying forms of Black[living]ness) begin to operate in more nuanced in opaque ways – forcing viewers to question the structural integrity of the building, with forms that (seemingly) defy the logics of physics and gravity – much like how our death through lynching (seemingly) defies the logics of

traditional death structures²⁹. In this sense, the visitor is forcibly reoriented “into a state of inferiority”, where “focus is solely on the thousands of lives lost in the terrible affair” (Blainey, p. 146-7).

While the design decisions of the vernacular can be seen as resonating affectively with the Black experience, so too can the way that Black and non-Black visitors engage with the coffin-like structures. As they navigate the closely-placed intrusive steel structures, Aden recalls the lessons they learned from visits to cemeteries as a child:

“show respect to the deceased and their families by not walking on or across the places where others are interred. I struggled to sort through the extent to which my uncertainty was rooted in my childhood experiences, respect for Black space, and/or white fragility about being embedded within the horrors of racial violence” (Aden, p. 14).

Here, Aden explicitly acknowledges the way they, other non-Black rhetorical scholars, and non-Black visitors engage with the vernacular (and the monument as a whole) has distinction. For Aden, when they began thinking about the counties listed on the coffins, they and other non-Black visitors question “‘Will my home county be listed’” as “an affirmative answer would confirm their home’s complicity in systemic racial violence” (p. 13). As I read this perspective, I think back to the words from Wretha Hudson that precede this vernacular section: the monument is a “sacred place because my ancestors paid the ultimate price” (Blainey, p. 148).

From a Black ontological perspective, it is difficult to interpret the coffins as a site of apprehension for fear of finding your home county being listed, or a place to *still take photos*;

²⁹ That can only be understood through an analysis of gratuitous violence fueled by anti-Black ontologies.

rather, a Black ontological frame provides an opaque sense of humanization to the non-human memorial forms. Rather than being understood normatively as corten steel boxes suspended from the ceiling, the memorial provides the rhetorics through architectural vernaculars for Black ontologies to understand the coffin's material as one that changes "colors and 'bleeds' onto the ground below", (Aden, p. 2) where each coffin "'has a unique personality of its in own in hues – cocoa, burnt umber, ochre – as varied as the skin tones of the victims it represents'" (Chandler, as cited in Aden, 2023). Through this humanization, Black visitors may be clamoring to engage with their home county, intimately and physically, to connect with their ancestors who were deprived of breath and paid the ultimate price – whose form recreations embody the memory echoing of chants like "I can't breathe".

The particularities associated with the names inscribed in the coffins hold significant rhetorical weight in the affective dimension. Christen Smith et al. (2021) detail the naming and citation of Black women as a critical praxis, that is able to reinscribe life in Black being that is socially dead, as "naming is an act of rebellion.[...]acknowledge those who are not named" (p. 10). While acknowledging that Black women exist in a particularly precarious social location, the utility of naming-as-praxis can extend across the Black diaspora – as "A Black identity is a self and collectively conscious effort for people of African descent to be self-naming and self-defining in route to increasing human respect and dignity of African people and their descendants" (Claybrook, para. 2)³⁰. Returning to Ore's theorization, each name inscribed does

³⁰ Here, Claybrook is specifically addressing the need for the capitalization of Black as a self-naming practice, as discussed and affirmed in Footnote 1; and rearticulated in the capitalization of Lynching discussed in Footnote 6.

serve as a dignifying breath-dealing instantiation of remembering life after death. On visiting the monument, towards the entry to the main memorial, I overheard a child say to a companion, an older Black man:

They have the same last name.

It looks like they're married.

While towards the end of the monument:

That was a lot of people that died.

I'm particularly struck by the child's use of present-tense during initial engagement, before transitioning to past-tense when the interaction was concluding – affirming traces of present life found from within past death.

Each column has a different composition of naming: in quantity (number of names listed) and quality (what characteristics comprise the names). While there are several columns with only one name listed, ascribing numerating (a) column(s) with the most names seems antithetical to the project's perceptually incomplete and evolving nature. Characteristically, however, the naming of "Unknown" as a marker of remembrance is utilized to designate life to those whose bodies may have been found, but names may never be known. This mode of death dealing and attempted forced forgetting is gratuitous violence par excellence, and the grammars of (lack of) breath (re)established through the hanging columns offer a moment of bringing life back to the dead.

Vernacular II: The Geographic Landscape | Space



Figure 16. Photo of Site Composition ([Lam Partners](#))

The geographic location of the National Monument for Peace and Justice is a vernacular that can be easily overlooked in an architectural sense but does hold a great degree of importance in the monument's composite rhetorical presence. The NMPJ is located on an expansive six-acre site on a hill overlooking downtown Montgomery, Alabama (Fig. 16). Montgomery, being central to the Confederacy and the exchange of slaves, provides an ideal spatialized backdrop of normalized anti-Blackness for the monument to interject in.

My visit to the site marked the first time I visited Alabama. Montgomery was far different than I imagined. I stayed downtown, walking distance to the site, in what seemed to be one of the most prestigious hotels in the city (with the thought in mind that if I ever felt uncomfortable with the city, I could retreat to a luxurious room or one of the on-site dining options). Though I never felt any overt acts of aggression due to my perceivable positionality as a non-native Black gay man in the South, the city did often give off eerie vibes.

During my Uber ride from the airport to the hotel, the older white male driver asked what the occasion was for my visit. Though we seemed to be having cordial conversation up until this point, when I told him I was doing research on the NMPJ, he fell silent for several minutes, before restarting conversation with a different topic. It was around 11pm when I arrived to the luxury hotel – and when exiting the car, the Uber driver said to me: *Be careful, there's a killing every night around here*. This added a layer of indiscernible apprehension to my visit, acknowledging that resonant comment is caught up in tensions between my subjectivity, my research, the history of the city, and stereotypes of urbanity that emerged as one succinct microaggressive comment.

I did most of my travel by foot during my time in the city, though I saw an uncomfortably low number of others doing the same. The site is about a ten-minute walk from downtown, where you begin slowly gaining elevation before reaching the plateau the monument is located atop. When describing one's initial engagements with the site itself, Simko (2021), describes the accent as:

“Visitors begin their journey up a gently ascending gravel pathway. On the right side, several panels of text advance an argument for understanding lynching as a form of terrorism.... Lynchings were ‘vicious acts of murder’ whose perpetrators ‘acted with impunity.’ Some even took place ‘on the courthouse lawn.’” (Simko, p. 162).

The reorientation of gratuitous violence from a distant past to the space that is currently being inhabited (ie. the proximity of where the visitor is standing to the iconographic courthouse) is able to foster what McKittrick (2007) calls a “Black sense of place”: a disruption of geographic order that makes space for otherwise suppressed experiences. The establishment of my *being* at the site, in the white man's Uber, in the city was, in itself, cultivating a Black sense of place.

Importantly, this also aligns closely with understandings of architectural vernacular expression – the moving of architecture from the unknown to the known. Rather than framing the memorial as a space for invitation into white enlightenment (ie. a space for white visitors in a place previously inhabited by white slaveowners), the NMPJ can instead be understood as a geography of refusal: a space that unsettles white epistemologies by centering Black mourning and Black reckoning within the broader spatial and political landscape of Montgomery.

Vernacular III: The Pathways | Movement



Figure 17. Photo of Pathways (Photo by author, 2026)

Visitors to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice are not static observers, but active participants in an encounter of public memory creation. The memorial’s movement operates non-normatively through opaque forms – physical navigation through hanging steel, past text panels and sculptures and along winding walkways. While these strategies of transportation may seem unfamiliar and uncomfortable to white onlookers, they are active strategies of reshaping Black life for Black ontological beings.

The NMPJ's grounds are shaped and perform similarly to a clock – as a visitor “you wind around a circular path that represents the time the memorial covers, from the transatlantic slave trade through the present” (Pless, p. 5). These logics do not work to lock-in conceptions of Black suffering's temporal linearity (as the following section reinforces and demonstrates) but allows viewers to understand the full breath of violences that lynching undergirds – where “there is no obvious route round the space and therefore visitors wander at will and perhaps randomly, encountering different parts of the narrative in different order” (Blainey, p. 146). Though there are varying discrete members of the composite performance that are beyond the scope of this essay (ie. smaller statues/monuments on the grounds that depict scenes such as the civil rights era and police brutality), the allowance of affective resonance for Black viewers – with the presentation of varying scenes allowing for personal interpretations of the implication of the depicted anti-Black violence – becomes apparent.

When the allowance of Black freedom of movement is contrasted with normative conceptions of how to affectively navigate a monument, ontological distinctions reappear. Returning to Aden's account of the monument, they describe the forced encounter (Fig. 17) with the path of movement weaving intimately between the coffins as:

“This awkward dance with the dead, which all visitors to the memorial installation must experience, adds a corporeal dimension to the cognitive dilemma that emerged at the beginning of the installation, for I was quite literally working to avoid bumping into tangible reminders of white violence and systemic racism – Rufus Moncrief, Miller McLean, Ben Gates” (Aden, p. 17).

While “bumping into” Rufus Moncrief, Miller McLean, and Ben Gates may have been an uncomfortable interaction for Aden, the drive for nominal vernaculars of “perfection” can be traced back to slave-era necropolitical control, as “Planters’ control over enslaved people made it

easier for them to fit their slaves [enslaved African people] into neat empirical rows and columns” (Milner & Traub, 2021, p. 8). Rather than being an “awkward dance with the dead”, Black bodies appreciate the opportunity to intimately engage with those whose movement was restricted to the limbs of a tree, the hands of a cop, or the barrel of a gun – and for the first time, have been granted the mobility to exist in a memorial site of honoring. While engagement strategies may be opaque to non-Black viewership, Black visitors have been provided with the unique opportunity to intimately embrace, touch, and cry on the ancestors that Lynching deprived of movement too soon.

Vernacular IV: Temporal Abdication | Time



Figure 18. Image of Supporting Counties Foregrounding NMPJ ([Hasian & Paliewicz, 2021](#))

Time at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice is non-linear – with the abdication of a set beginning, middle, and end; it resists the narrative arc of redemption³¹. This temporally strategy reflects Sharpe’s theory of the wake of slavery, where “past that is not past” structures Black existence. The temporal vernaculars within the monument are shaped by the “expectation that it will change as time passes” (Pless, p. 7), as alluded to in the previous analysis sections.

The monument demonstrates its dedication to evolution through a variety of designed strategies, that speak affectively to Blackness’ understanding of always/already living in pervasive zones of Black death. First, county-specific monuments left blank space under the names of Lynching victims – acknowledging that Black records are convoluted – that has allowed for at least three hundred additional names of Lynching victims to be added to coffins since initial planning (Pless, 2020). Next, a waterfall near the exit stands dedicated with dedication script: “Thousands of African Americans are unknown victims of racial terror lynching whose deaths cannot be documented, many whose names will never be known. They are all honored here” (Aden, p. 21) – acknowledging that even after departing from the monument, the monument is not all-encompassing, mourning and remembrance may not be complete. Last, the memorial intends to reproduce itself through duplicate monuments (Fig. 18) for each country inside of the original monument. The provisions are:

³¹ Despite Aden’s (2023) application of David Howard-Pitney’s “hopeful story of ‘liberation and social redemption’”. Further analysis in this section shows this is not demonstrated through architectural vernaculars; and analysis that epistemological redemption is presupposed by anti-Black ontologies was completed in the *On Anti-Blackness* section.

“The EJI is currently collaborating with local authorities to send each duplicate to the US county it names. As the duplicates go out, the memorial will spread across the United States to the particular places where lynchings occurred. In this way, the memorial refuses to be restricted to its physical place. As it spreads itself across the nation, the memorial insists that Americans locally acknowledge the violence that it bears witness to” (Pless, p. 7).

Not only do these provisions, as well as the other two instantiations of temporal abdication underscore the gratuitous violence Black bodies always/already face, it establishes that “Forgetting comes naturally; remembering takes work” (Pless, p. 7). When I was engaging with the monument, a white woman called my attention to the column representing Carroll County, Mississippi, where 22 victims, 10 of which are Unknown, all share the Lynching date of 03.17.1886 (Fig. 19). She narrates:

It makes you wonder what happened that day. 22 people...22. I don't get it. I mean...I don't get any of it...

I initially walked past this column without noticing this important detail, which enhances its rhetorical implications: the number of dead in combination with gratuitous nature of Lynching becomes unfathomable. There are too many names, columns, and symbols for the body and mind to digest all at once. It is imperative that monuments continue to actively engage populations to create sites of generative public memory, particularly to find interlude moments to reharness the breath, space, movement, and time that Black beings have been historically deprived from.

Conclusion

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice is not simply a site of remembrance; it is a place for reckoning. This chapter has approached the memorial through an analysis of the ways that gratuitous violence, a tenet of anti-Black ontology, produces and constitutes the forms of lynching violence the monument seeks to commemorate. The Equal Justice Initiative sponsored the construction of the monument to curate a site for counterpublic memory to challenge the “distorted national narrative” (*The Guardian*, 0:30) of the Black experience. Returning to Wretha Hudson, the Analysis’ opening narrative, for Black visitors, the monument provides a sacred place to intimately engage and remember ancestors that paid the ultimate price of death due to anti-Black ontological structures.

This chapter seeks to understand the ways the spatial design speaks to Black visitors and participants that reside in close proximity to the ways that gratuitous violence always/already exists within a non-resolute state. To experience gratuitous violence is to experience unprovoked and unsanctioned violence, which is an experience that is unfathomable to non-Black beings. This chapter identifies four key architectural vernaculars that provide rhetorical grammar to the breath, space, movement, and time the Black body is deprived from as it is left lynched.

Vernacular I: The Hanging Columns provides a sense of breath for those who experiencing Lynching by: (a) providing a visual representation of how a column, something constructed for stability, can do what it is not designed to do, and be hung (speaking to the way a body, similarly, must defy physics to be stripped of air), (b) utilizing naming as a praxis of identification and voice-dealing to each individual body. *Vernacular II: The Geographic Landscape* affirms a Black sense of place within a broader Southern landscape historically rooted in Black exclusion. *Vernacular III: The Pathways* offers visitors an opportunity to move

in intimacy with the caskets – for embrace, touch, and being otherwise, should they choose.

Vernacular IV: Temporal Abdication is a recognition that anti-Blackness does view time linearly – politics of lynching are not complete, and the monument offers sites to rhetorically affirm its attendant incompleteness and disruption of conceptions of linearity. Much like the African Burial Ground National Monument, necropolitical structures continue to be ushered in by an ontology of anti-Blackness in attempt to establish bodily control and disrupt the harnessing of a Black sense of place (ie. an uncomfortable interaction with an Uber driver, narratives of white museum goers “not understanding”, or *still taking photos*). Despite these forces, the vernaculars demonstrate the positive associations between the monument’s architectural form and (re)establishing modes of Black public memory.

I do not seek to invalidate the experience of non-Black visitors, such as the woman I interacted with at the monument, Aden, and/or those they cite, (Blainey, Pless, etc.) – but I seek to resituate the resonance of Black affective engagement (the audience the monument was constructed for) in the forefront of rhetorical conversations regarding the site. Through this process, I hope to not neglect the insights of non-Black engagement (rhetoricians, visitors, or otherwise), but open conversations for the kinds of memory that may exist when we use Black rhetorical frames to think *otherwise* about the structures that comprise the setting and experience.

To read the memorial rhetorically is to attend to what it does rather than merely what it says. This essay explores the opaque ways the architectural vernaculars within the memorial may reinstate modes of Black breath, space, movement, and time that provide Black solace and reckoning in the echoes of ancestors exclaiming “I can’t breathe”, while *they’re still taking photos*. In attending to these vernaculars, we come closer to understanding how Black space may be re-instantiated, even if only momentarily. Not through the ruse of analogy of liberation or

redemption, but through the instance on existing otherwise. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice does not resolve the question of how to remember Black Death. But it carves out a place where Black breath, space, movement, and time of the Black dead – and alive – might echo, however briefly, against the silences that sought to erase them.

Chapter 4 - (Re)Honoring George Floyd in George Floyd Square

Introduction

George Floyd Square, improvised and living, is a situated representation of social death – where resistance and care become a response to Black life facing unwarranted and fabricated premature death. Social death is the third constitutive tenet of Wilderson’s conceptualization of anti-Black ontology, that references “preemptive and perpetual criminalization and dehumanization and the containment and removal” (Medina Falzone, 2021, p. 236) from the social order or civil (white, dominant) society. The criminalization and dehumanization process stems from the consumptive exploitation of the wake – that predetermined existence as slave – as permeates into contemporary manifestation of anti-Black desire.

Criminalization is a substantial contemporary manifestation of social death’s non-person categorization schema. Cacho’s (2012) work on the effects of incarceration politics outlines the ways that dominant society’s projection of racial “status”, “assumes embodiment and fixidity, *de facto status crime* [sic] captures the many ways in which people and places of color have become necessary signifiers to recognize illegality or criminality, thus marking certain behaviors as not only illegal but also innate, inherent, and inherited” (p. 44). The Black racial status is prefigured an anti-Black ontology and controlled and punished through a paradigm of criminality – where those with biocentric markers of Blackness are presumed to engage in criminal activities. This ontological spillage into epistemological formations is what leads to the continuation of violence onto the slave: unequal legal representation, unfair financial lending rates, and medical neglect, all stemming from a presumed (deviant) difference in status of Blackness.

George Floyd’s Blackness marked him as socially dead – and he paid the ultimate price of material death as a result. George Floyd was accused of attempting to use a counterfeit \$20

bill to make a purchase at the Cup Foods convenience store in Minneapolis, Minnesota. When police arrived, Floyd was forcibly removed from a vehicle, pinned to the ground with a white officer's knee to his neck for over four minutes calling out *I can't breathe*, until eventually becoming unresponsive. Several more minutes pass with the officer's knee still on George Floyd's neck³², before paramedics arrive and carry his lifeless body into an ambulance (Selby, 2020).

While the phrase *Innocent until proven guilty* is often heard as a hallmark descriptor of the United States' "fair" judicial process, Black subjects' non-existence within the parameters of civil society strips away access to such processes. The Innocence Project, a national litigation and public policy organization dedicated to exonerating individuals wrongly convicted by the US judicial system, details an interview with the owner of Cup Foods to described Floyd's de facto status crime:

"Most of the times when patrons give us a counterfeit bill they don't even know it's fake so when the police are called there is no crime being committed."

But the police never conducted an investigation into whether or not the bill was fake" (Selby, 2020, para. 8-9).

This demonstrates a strong correlation to Floyd's body, marked by Blackness, *as de facto criminal*, rather than the alleged crime that was being committed – and that Floyd was presumed to be guilty; (socially) dead on arrival.

The correlation between the Black body and criminality does not end at this particular criminal accusation – but extends into the epistemological predisposition for the Black body to

³² With the officer ignoring requests of bystanders to check Floyd's breathing (Selby).

be engaged in other illegal activities. Cacho continues the application of social death to particular examples of crime, where:

“if the black body is necessary for an audience to recognize criminal activity, then the difference between [Black] ‘looting’ and [white] ‘finding’ is not just a stereotype, not just proof of a distorted image that obfuscates ‘truth’ and complexity. The example illustrates that race is much more than a fraudulent mask that we have been forced to wear that prevents other people from ‘truly seeing’ who we ‘really’ are” (Cacho, p.2).

This reinforcement of the unequal distribution of financial criminalization is salient in connection with the testimony from the Cup Foods owner that most patrons “don’t even know” their counterfeit bill is fake – those deemed to be participants within civil society may be ignorantly “finding” the bill, while the Black body is de facto positioned as deviantly “looting” the store. Though the true validity of the bill is (officially) unknown, a rise in additional discourse about George Floyd came as a result of the contested nature of the original crime’s validity, indicating Floyd “died from a drug overdose, was a “career criminal”, etc. (Ramirez, 2021)– all serving as additional layers of criminality projected to the lifeless Black body as a result of social death.

May 25, 2025, marked the five years since the day a police officer knelt on George Floyd’s neck, suffocating him to death. This five-year anniversary also marked the beginning of our current era, where the Minneapolis municipalities have begun to deliberate and propose what should be done with what remains at the corner of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue, “George

Floyd Square”, the site where the Black man was murdered³³. Currently, the site represents a history of shared trauma – of police brutality, rooted in anti-Blackness – that the grassroots and piecemeal offerings murals, flowers, and statues seek to memorialize, honor, and remember that are “expressions of pain and hope” brought to “bear witness to the energy of those who shaped or chose it; ‘bears witness to what the people were offering in joy or sadness’” (Patterson, 2021, para. 38). As architectural and aesthetic expression of the monument is shaped by its participatory audience’s offerings, the monument becomes “self-transforming” (Patterson), responding to the rituals of viewers, who may choose to leave artifacts, hold a vigil, or take in the sights offered by those before them.

The community-led and participant-respondent nature of the monument is a celebrated aspect of the site, but one that may be jeopardized by renewed claims of ownership by the city³⁴. Patterson discusses the history of the current space in combatting hierarchical tactics of ownership to engage ethical remembrance:

“If community is more important than objects, then our reasoning could be clear:
If the mysteries of grief and traditions of oblation are, in a profound sense, anti-art;
are antithetical to the museological and art-historical practices of identifying artist

³³ A final design has been agreed upon with construction to start in June 2026 (*George Floyd Square: Next phase of improvements begins June 2026*, 2026), though more public meetings regarding the new design are scheduled, which could continue to delay the process (Wurzer et al., 2026).

³⁴ As demonstrated in previous chapters, mediating grief through entities such as the National Park Service or central architectural organizations can quickly unravel and devolve into reinforced modes of necropolitical exclusion and control.

and collector and provenance (market value); then there could be a choice in the offering. If our values and understandings allow us to distinguish between the spectacular appreciation of art and artifacts, and the active, on-the-ground works of anonymous hands – if we accept such divisions between art-making and mourning, then every subsequent consideration would be modeled along the same binary” (Patterson, para. 48).

The ever-evolving nature of the art-making process establishes a gap in currently existing research on the monument – where most existing fieldwork was completed shortly after Floyd’s murder and the conception of the site (ie. Villanueva, 2024; Samayeen, 2022; Smiles, 2022; Hottinger, 2023; Patterson, 2021) and there has been a lack of scholarship tracing the site through its evolution in form.

In recognition of the site’s shifting visual form, this chapter deviates from the organizational structure of previous chapters; rather than grouping rhetorics into architectural vernaculars, this chapter is divided into two primary rhetorical themes: *Identification of Violence* and *Collective Care*. While the African Burial Ground National Monument and National Memorial for Peace and Justice provided static and objective pieces of vernacular, such as *Site*, George Floyd Square seeks to intentionally disrupt the fixidity associated with vernaculars – with there being no “site” the memorial begins/ends on, for example – to respond more attunely the mourning communities’ needs and desires. Returning to Glissant’s conception of opacity, this strategic disruption of the Known can provide effective sites for Black autonomy, care, and remembrance. This chapter engages in narrative analysis to identify two primary rhetorical themes that demonstrate George Floyd Square’s grappling with Black (social) death structured by an ontology of anti-Blackness. Upon visiting the site in February 2026, the sites’ rhetorical *Identification of Violence* (Theme I) reharnesses the Black body’s access to breath and time,

while the *Collective Care* (Theme II) rhetoric correlates with new (Blackened) sites of space and movement.

Analysis

“My impulse to report on the systemic is shaped by my identity. My most obvious affiliation is with people who have been named in the roll calls [of death].

I am thinking about the object of state force; I am writing from that position. I’m choosing, for now, not to focus my attention on the individuals who are leading these attacks. I am striving to consider the grace shown by people who live under the knee of state force.

Reader, grant me the authority to use the passive voice.

Grant me the respect of deciding when and where to announce myself, when and where to announce agency” (Patterson, para. 68-70).

Theme I: Identification of Violence | Breath & Time

“This is a made space.” (para. 7) is the succinct statement that Patterson uses to begin their documentation of fieldwork at George Floyd Square – a statement that underscores the communal intentionality in the place’s inception and creation. When arriving at the site, the sense of creation from mourning becomes apparent; public memory curation is being injected – as breath – through the artifacts existing at the site, those which are seen, spoken, and observed, architecturally or otherwise. While I was going into this fieldwork study hoping to gain insights

about *architectures* or *architectural vernaculars* that situated the site as a funerary site³⁵, that is not the direction my experience lead. Rather than an attempt to forcibly restrict/confine/delineate this site to non-attendant vernaculars, I recognize this site is one that is responsive to the anti-Black ontologies' death drive that structures Black death as so pervasive, that at this site, there is no clear temporal beginning/end to where one was killed, one is mourning, one is loving: "You might think careful about where you will step and where you don't want your foot to fall" (Patterson, para. 15), much like how many experiencing social death must navigate the treacherous terrain of an anti-Black world daily. In the same way that Patterson seeks grace in the Analysis' introductory quotation, I seek grace in the understanding that this monument's construction is contingent on subversive forces – and I have captured one snapshot of the ways breath was inserted into George Floyd's death at the exact temporal moment that I was paying my visit.

"George Floyd Square" is a name that breathed into the site by community activism. Interventions such as non-official stickers over street signs (Fig. 20) or large sculptures (Fig. 21) begin to articulate the space, while simultaneously refusing the confines of legal definition and/or articulation. Returning to the powerful affect associating with the politics of naming discusses in Chapter 3, George Floyd Square affirms a similar rhetorical praxis, as "the power of a name is its ability to encapsulate an individual human life. Names are not *text*. They have more visual and psychological power" (Patterson, para. 16). As you approach the site, you are greeted

³⁵ During preliminary research before the trip, I hypothesized vernaculars such as the Cup Foods storefront or the outline of Floyd's body on the street may be the kinds of important architectures that emerge as resonant.

with the visual indication that “YOU ARE NOW ENTERING THE FREE STATE OF GEORGE FLOYD” (para. 54), acknowledging the dueling treacherousness and sacredness of the site, while opaquely grappling with terms of “freedom” and “state” – much like Moses Horton’s “Liberty” – that shall be utopianized outside the confines of civil society.



Figure 20 (Left). Street Sign Reading "George Floyd Av" ([Patterson, 2021](#))

Figure 21 (Right). Corner of 38th St and Chicago Ave ([Patterson, 2021](#))

While George Floyd is named on surrounding street signs and at entry thresholds, the site situates itself as a site of mourning and organizing for those experiencing violence associated with subordinate statuses of many types – not reducing to one person in memoriam or one type of violence commemorated. My visit to the site occurred in February 2026, one month after the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) killings of Renee Good (January 7) and Alex Pretti (January 24) in Minneapolis. Though non-Black, Good and Pretti were subsumed by state force, experiencing the “campaign of genocidal violence committed by the U.S. government” (Robinson, 2026, p. 3), similarly to the genocidal violences perpetuated onto Black bodies by traditional police forces. The site identifies instances of overlapping grief – and visitors have integrated anti-ICE artifacts (Figs. 22-23) into their ritualistic offerings as a recognition of the overlap in violences. These offerings are not an undermining of the nuance associated with anti-

Black violence (and ontology) in particular, but are a recognition that “Every act of resistance, every expression of care, every outcry against an authoritarian regime helps to slow its effectiveness, and by extension, lessen the harm it is capable of committing” (Robinson, p. 12). Returning to analysis from Smith et al., Claybrook, and Ore in Chapter 3, naming, as a form rhetoric, is a disruption to sites (and politics) of normativity. Continuing to name and add moments of shared experience, embodies the praxis of outcry as the first *naming* step of breathing life (back) into public memory.

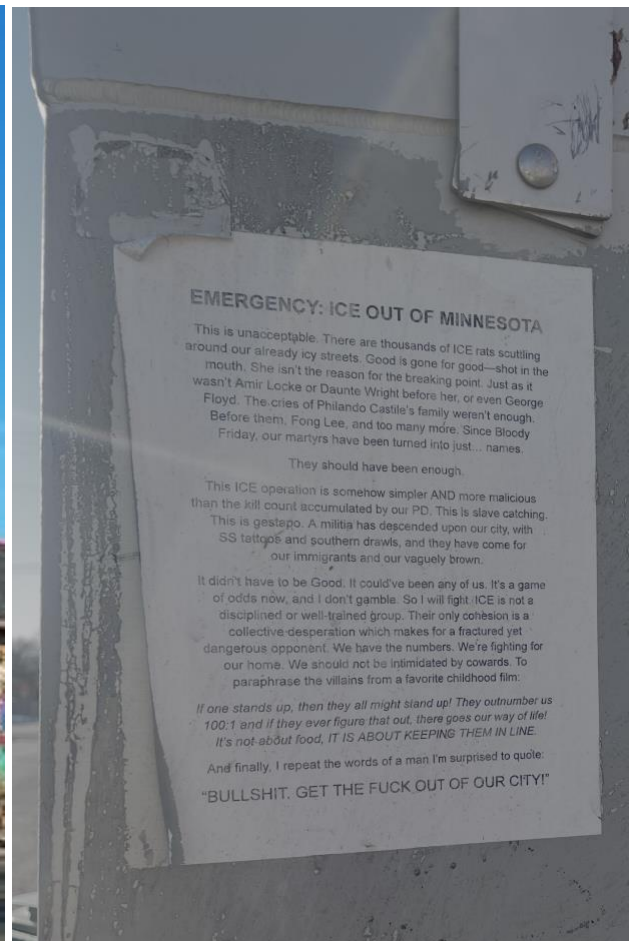


Figure 22 (Left). "FUCK ICE" Below Black Power Statue (Photo by author, 2026)

Figure 23 (Right). "ICE OUT" Flier on an Electrical Box (Photo by author, 2026)

During my trip to the site, I was met by a *Pilgrimage Guide*. This is a practice that Patterson identified during their 2020 fieldwork visit that I was, frankly, surprised to see continued in 2026. The person I met with was a Minneapolis community member who is closely connected to George Floyd and his family. I met with the guide inside the barricaded small area on the very corner that George Floyd was murdered, and we talked next to the outline of where the life was taken from his body that is now surrounded by the offerings those in mourning have left in his remembrance. During my time inside the most sacred and intimate part of the monument, I chose not to take any notes or photos; I wanted to be completely present to the Pilgrimage Guide that was describing their process of grief to me. This process felt like an individuated vigil that was being held next to where George Floyd last laid – and the guide is performing a eulogy in his remembrance. The continuing of this process six years after Floyd’s death is a refusal of linear time’s want to forget distant atrocities from public memory and identifies the ripples of anti-Blackness as ever-present.

The presence of a Pilgrimage Guide to continue telling the story of George Floyd and the legacy of the monument is critical in disrupting the linearity of (normative, non-Blackened) public memory’s temporal perceptions. Notions of “plaque on the wall” (Blakey) memorial structures are unable to grapple with the magnitude of tumultuous death the Black body is always/already undergoing and must be remembered. On the day of his death, George Floyd breathes a Blackened (linearly disruptive) sense of time back into space, when:

“As he was vanishing, George Floyd announced a primal belonging.

George Floyd called out for his mother before he died. She was already dead.”

(Patterson, paras. 21-22).

George Floyd's last gasps for breath demonstrate: an abdication of traditional temporal structures – if the Black body is always/already dead, it can reflexively be understood as always/already living³⁶, through being in intimate proximity while residing in a site of death. The ability to create space for the Pilgrimage Guide is the ability to retell this, and many other, stories of George Floyd – to break linear notions of time, identify and organize around similar forms of violence, and breath moments of life back into his death.

Theme II: Collective Care | Space & Movement

The manipulation of the space that exists at the corner of 38th and Chicago streets is, in itself, a mode of conjuring work that reestablishes Blackness' space within public memory for the creation of an honor Black sense of place. Lipsitz describes this honoring work as occurring through “manipulation of material objects, place, and social relations to hone and refine the capacity for collective action through interruption, inversion, disguise, and surprise” (p. 121) which is accomplished not only through the (re)naming practices of the monument, but involved in the kinds of collective care space the site fosters. When Patterson conducted field work in 2020, they identified the creation of space for physical health examinations, community members acting as anti-vandalism staff, instructions for “White allies”, bus shelter acting as a free clothing store, non-profit team heading conversations of the offerings, all work to underscore that the slogan purported several times by the monument and activists “No Justice, No Streets” “was not only a symbolic rallying cry but had the weight of politicized community members who took it upon themselves to mutually steward the space memorialization of George Floyd and a site for Black radical placemaking that builds community” (Patterson, p. 128). These

³⁶ Since no socially dead Black body obtains true access to “life”.

works are critical in ensuring Blackness not only has a space to exist, but those in mourning throughout the space are able to move and conduct rituals in the way that best serves themselves and their communities.

During my visit to the George Floyd Square, the bus shelter serving as a clothing store was still intact, fully stocked, and being utilized (with a consistent rotation of people coming in/out while I was present) and new scene had been added: a free food market taking place underneath the canopy of an out of use gas station (Fig. 24)³⁷. This newly inhabited space continues the (re)naming practice of violence identification as praxis and changes the store name to “Peoples’ Way”³⁸ and on the canopy have written “WHERE THERE’S PEOPLE THERE’S POWER”. The inscriptions not only serve as a renaming of space, but serve to also establish a collective *place* for community care; demonstrating that when community members are able to care for one another, the *people* possess the *power* to fight against violent institutional forces.

³⁷ The “market” portion of the photo is cropped out to protect the identity of its users.

³⁸ Seen in the back left of Fig. 24.



Figure 24. Food Market Canopy (Photo by author, 2026)

While the space-cultivation inhabited by the monument offers monuments of reparative reprieve, similar to the two previous monuments discussed, anti-Black ontology continues to structure necropolitical control – that determines mechanisms of reinforced social death.

Patterson describes the state-sanctioned necropolitical violence that took place “On the night of May 30th, five days after the killing of George Floyd” in which:

“the National Guard raided the memorial that had already been established at the intersection, displacing the posters and flowers and votive candles.

The police and the city have been variously assigned responsibility for the destruction. But most of the volunteers I spoke to said determining culpability is less important than the action itself: the very fact that it took place” (Patterson, para. 61-62).

While culpability may not be of the utmost importance, as Patterson correctly identifies, the allowance of state-sanctioned entities to continue to project necropolitical exclusion onto those mourning the (socially) dead is abhorrent.

When I met with the Pilgrimage Guide at the site, they demonstrated a level of skepticism about my connection to the site and the violence the site seeks to commemorate. I joined a group of older white bystanders that were already in conversation with the Pilgrimage Guide³⁹. When I caught the guide's attention, I was asked questions: about where I am from; why I chose to travel to this site rather than doing mourning at sites like Michael Brown's memorial⁴⁰; why I did not bring offerings to the site; how do I present myself at my family's burial sites; etc. Being posed with such questions immediately lead me down a path of defensive over-rationalization: Michael Brown's original memorial was destroyed within days of his killing, a temporary memorial only constructed 10-years after his death⁴¹ – George Floyd Square's semi-permanence is much more conducive to data collection; I did not bring offerings to the site as it is not a part of my personal grieving rituals; etc. These answers and many others (for example, from the visitors I joined during the interaction) could serve as logistical over-simplifications to the questions asked, but these rationalizations mask the power behind the rhetorical exchange occurring – in that the Pilgrimage Guide, myself, and the other visitors at the site are provided a place to collectively recon with grief and inquire about attendant mutual care strategies.

While the questions posed by the Pilgrimage Guide may be read as abrasive and/or invasive to some, these questions are important in the Guide protecting the space of George

³⁹ Meaning, I am not sure what conversations (with similar/different attitudes) may have lead up to my interaction.

⁴⁰ Which is geographically much closer to my home and University than George Floyd Square.

⁴¹ Lee, 2015; Holcomb, 2025

Floyd Square from the movement of hostile infiltrators⁴², such as those described in the initial destruction of the monument's offerings. This offensive approach to inquiry about movement within the monument is, in itself, a rhetorical act of establishing a Black sense of place through disrupting the risk associated with not breaking silence. When describing the dangers associated with being complacent to state-sanctioned Necropolitical violence, Robinson adds:

“Silence breaking is not just speaking. We must wear away at the passive bystander within ourselves. Silence breaking is about moving from a place of stuckness into a place of creation and care.

Silence breaking is a disruption. I believe that silence breaking is best felt and shared simultaneously. [...] It is an act of defiance, a refusal, and an expression of love. [...] I want to carry grief for all the violence that has been imposed through colonization, genocide, and tyranny. I want to carry love for all people and make this noise more than a hollow platitude. I want to make care tangible. This is not only possible, it is essential” (p. 14).

The Pilgrimage Guide chose to continue conversation after their initial set of “vetting” questions, and identified several ways they have noticed visitor’s attempts at care become *hollow platitude*: those that drive by in large tour busses, those that are led by guides not directly involved in the community and abdicate conversations with community members, and those that refuse to engage with local businesses. This silence-breaking was reflexively greeted with an invitation for me, and the other visitors, to provide care: by leaving offerings, going to the nearby coffee shop, holding the door open for community members, etc. – as a demonstration that George Floyd

⁴² It is also important to recognize the role that anger/hostility innately plays in the grieving process.

Square provides the architectural proscenium for the establishment of a collective care praxis to mourn anti-Black ontology's stripping of life.

Conclusion

George Floyd Square is a community-led site of activism to remember the violence projected onto George Floyd's body and mourn his death. An ontology of anti-Blackness provides the conditions for the killing of George Floyd, and countless other victims of police violence and brutality, through the conception of social death – where Blackness exists outside civil society, is marked defacto criminal, and always/already exists in a site of derelict death. George Floyd, being a victim of these death structures, became the lynchpin for the monument's construction, where after his death the community lost most clearly:

“a sense of connection. The emptiness addressed most frequently was the absence of a fundamental declension, a grammar of belonging. What was missing was the genitive ‘of’ – *of* relationship, *of* place, *of* continuity” (Patterson, para. 20).

George Floyd Square acts as a countermemory site to (re)establish a Black sense of place that focuses on community and care to mobilize around violence projected onto marginalized communities.

Rather than engaging in rhetorical analysis through an identification of architectural vernaculars, this chapter recognizes that George Floyd Square is an ever-evolving site, with few static “vernaculars”; as a result, two primary rhetorical themes were identified, rather than vernaculars, as an acknowledgment of the mutability of the site and design. Each theme helps identify the ways George Floyd Square provides a rhetorical grammar to provide breath, space, movement, and time back to George Floyd's body in proclamation of cries that *I can't breathe*.

Theme I: Identification of Violence utilizes the anti-Black violence George Floyd faced as a framing locus for bridging the breath and time deprivation from Black communities to other communities experiencing state-sanctioned necropolitical violence (at the time of my visit, primarily Alex Pretti, Renée Good, and the many other victims of ICE violence). *Theme II: Collective Care* recognizes that George Floyd Square provides a space and place for reckoning with violence and ritualistic praxes for collective care. Similar to the previous two chapters, instances of necropolitical creep are present at the monument – such as attempted destruction of the monument by federal authorities – but narratives demonstrate a prioritization of continuing community over culpability.

For this site, in particular, it is imperative that scholarship, activism, and artistic offerings continue to persist beyond instances of necropolitical instantiation. While, at the time of writing, the full scope of the City of Minneapolis plans for the area are still unknown, the African Burial Ground National Monument provides a frame for the ways that governmental ownership/jurisdiction can quickly prevent access to *any* grieving practices. As Patterson identifies, the

“memorial is a self-transforming monument. It is a testament to one remarkable act (and smaller reenactments) of violence, and a testament to resistance and resilience on the part of intersection communities. These communities span major demographics of race and ethnicity and age and orientation, of income and occupation and entitlement” (Patterson, para. 95).

Though the City of Minneapolis may decide to change George Floyd Square’s form, the activist architects still possess the power to continue establishing rituals of livingness for Floyd, those socially dead, and marginalized populations affected by unequally distributed mechanisms of violence.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions & Discussions

Returning to the introductory words of this thesis: Before the memorial, there is death. This thesis engaged in critical rhetorical analysis of three sites seeking to commemorate Black death: the African Burial Ground National Monument (slavery), the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (Lynching), and George Floyd Square (police killings). Each monument selected serves as a depiction of the discrete tenets of anti-Black ontology's death drive that are experienced by the Black body *before* the memorial has rhetorical meaning: natal alienation, gratuitous violence, and social death. The forms of (violent) death that anti-Blackness and its attendant structuring tenets produces deprives the Black body of four conditions of livingness: breath, space, movement, and time. When the Black body is enslaved, the slave cannot speak out of turn, leave the plantation, break the chains, or be reconnected to past ancestries. The Black body being Lynched requires the body being dangled from a tree, unable to gasp for air, move ant limbs, let itself down, or prevent future Lynchings from occurring. Black bodies experiencing police killings cry out *I can't breathe*, are surveilled as a result of defacto criminalization, are trapped by an officer's knee, and must endure an always/already prescribed death. Through the analysis of the selected monuments, I ask not how many heals in response to these traumas, but how architecture performs a rhetorical role in the labor of mourning ontological death that is always/already present.

To memorialize anti-Black violences, it is imperative to recognize their starting point: the wake. The wake of slavery serves as the beginning of the end, where anti-Blackness was cemented as ontological, residing in the psyche. As a result, contingent reforms such as the 13th amendment, anti-discrimination acts, etc. may (momentarily) effect the material conditions of Black populations, but do not have an effect on the structural condition of the Black body as

slave. Three tenets mark and make up anti-Black ontology. Natal alienation, where relation to past and future kinship has been stripped in crossing the Middle Passage – slaves no longer have a connection to Africa as a homeland, which translates into the forcing of new (unknown) lineages in the Americas. Gratuitous violence marks the unprovoked and unsanctioned moments of extraordinary violence onto the Black body, crafting sites of extrajudicial punishment. Social death is the prescription that Blackness exists outside or normative, civil society, forcing it to be marked as always/already dead – residing in a zone of nonexistence. The wake's establishment of an ontology of anti-Blackness spills into increasingly contemporary manifestations of anti-Black violence, such as slavery, Lynching, and police killings.

The plight of the experience of Blackness living under the shadow of the whip is one that is ontology predisposed to be forgotten from (dominant) public memoryscapes. Returning to the childhood tune, *In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue...*, depiction of colonial control are often celebrated and widely circulated, while tales like George Moses Horton's poetry discussing life as a slave are hidden from public reception. Memory is the link between historical experiences and contemporary public perceptions, and architecture's haptic and ephemeral sensibilities offer a profound site to (re)establish connections of forgotten histories to the public.

Architecture serves as the conduit to turn memory into sites of memorial. Christina Sharpe discusses the importance of memorial work for Black communities in her call for a defending of the dead:

“What does it mean to defend the dead? To tend to the Black dead and dying: to tend to the Black person, to Black people, always living in the push toward our death? It means work. It is work: hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance to the needs of the dying, to ease their way, and also to the needs of the living” (Sharpe, p.10)

Not only are memorial sites performing the labor of memorializing and defending (through a refusal of forgetting) those who are dead, but they are tasked with the (equally as laborious) work of caring for the living, who are in mourning. Though many memory sites have been constructed, little literature exists engaging how effective memory sites are at achieving the goal of performing this dueling emotional labor of memory (Williams; Kirkham). This thesis seeks to address that gap by analyzing the three sites that engage the three tenets of anti-Black ontology as counterpublic memory.

The qualitative analysis of memorial sites was conducted through the heuristic of the rhetorical as an establishment of public memory. Qualitative fieldwork in the form of notetaking, sketching, and photography was conducted at each site to engage in critical rhetorical analysis of place through (autoethnographic and ethnographic) narrative and material space analysis. My personal subjectivity of having a graduate-level architectural education and being Black rhetorical researcher aided in the collection and analysis of the data for two primary reasons. Firstly, having an architectural education helped identify the *architectural vernaculars*, or, the moves that architects/designers were intentionally making to be perceived by the public. While, to the non-architecturally trained viewer, some of these moves may not be perceptible or may see to be “default”, this lens allows my data collection to pick up on additional layers of design intention through experiencing the space. Secondly, my positionality as a Black rhetorical scholar increases my opportunity to identify/resonate with/sympathize with moments of *opacity* – or, opportunities that Blackness attempts to veil its perceptibility. Opaque structures allow Blackness to autonomously exist outside of the structures of civil society (ie. Patterson’s refusal to use active voice, the Blackness’ tampering with language, etc). Altogether, the use of

qualitative inquiry allows for a more intimate connection and analysis of the data, increasing the validity of findings.

At the African Burial Ground National Monument and National Memorial for Peace and Justice, findings suggested each site contains four key vernaculars that rhetorically connect those lost to anti-Black ontology and viewers of the monument. George Floyd Square, a monument that is intentionally ever evolving and piecemeal does not offer static “vernaculars”, but rather two rhetorical themes for remembrance, grounded the typologies of symbolic offerings being left at the site. Though each site offered positive instances of designed rhetorical grappling with anti-Black death, each site also offered examples of how anti-Blackness, through necropower, continues an attempt to control bodies – and their access to these memory sites. The inability of the architectures to grapple with 100% of anti-Black violence is not a call to abandon similar work in the future, but demonstrates a need to continue the process of rhetorical examination of differing sites of public memory – “and particularly those grappling with the incompleteness of emancipation,” (Wells, 2022, p. 282) that are constantly seeking moments of memory and memorial.

While an anti-Black ontology may not be mutable by contingent reforms, architects and rhetoricians alike still play an important role in crafting moments of reprieve for those mourning/receiving the brunt of the violence. For architects⁴³, I return to Gutenschwager’s analysis that architecture is both *design* and *artifact*. Each chapter introduction discussed the

⁴³ I use this as a term loosely to describe those that hold a role in the design of space. Community activists at George Floyd Square, for example, who may not hold architectural training are still intimately involved in the space curation and articulate themselves as architects.

design's intention – acknowledging anti-Black ontology as a theoretical lens in the design stage can help inform more productive artifact sites of memory, as the three case study sites were able to achieve. Roundbari et al. (2020) adds that producing architecture comes with the privilege of utilizing “material resources (design expertise and practice)” in combination with “symbolic [rhetorical] resources (status position in the socio-economic, political and cultural system)” (p. 6) to shape future architectural practices. For rhetoricians, return to Williams and Kirkham's call for an increase in scholarship discussing the successes and shortcomings of memorial sites. It is important the artifact production of architects be followed up with an analysis of if the work being produced is successful or not. This thesis seeks to offer theoretical contributions for both practices: being intentional about one memoryscape expands public memory to be intentional about future memory sites.

This case study analysis of three sites of Black death seeks to fill the scholarship void that practicing architecture or rhetoric in a vacuum creates. Rhetoric production creates a site of precarity, where researchers and practitioners are pulled into two directions: the researchers being an investigator into the particularities of place and time, and the practitioner operating through a lens of pure (architectural abstraction). This thesis embodies the qualitative study and field methodologies that are “especially promising for navigating these pulls between particularity and abstraction and for infusing fieldwork within these tensions” (Rai & Druschke, 2018, p. 3). This thesis engages in theoretical contributions to both the fields of rhetoric and architecture by proposing models for engaged architectural training and design, that understands space not only as an object of study, but as an operative tool for resistance. Through my analysis, I have uncovered the ways anti-Black ontology predetermined the death of slaves, Lynching

victims, and George Floyd, and encourage the continuation of architecture and rhetorical scholarship that promotes memoryscapes that honorably memorialize Black death.

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