Our physical landscape—natural or man-made, rural or urban, tangible or remembered—informs our sense of self in conscious and unconscious ways. “Know thyself” is an aspirational phrase that suggests an act of self-willed cognition, but knowing oneself is as much a collective as an individual act. Knowing too much or too well, however, can lead to anxiety and discontent. Sometimes one needs to selectively forget in order to achieve a sense of contentment. When a community declares who they are, forgetting becomes especially salient. Memorialization through monuments, plaques, names, and national landmarks shows communities in the act of turning selective memory into History.

In the article “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” Pierre Nora sought to distinguish between History, in the title case, and memory. History, Nora wrote, is a problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what no longer exists. History “belongs to everyone and to no one” because it claims universality and is therefore “suspicious” of contradictions. Memory is always evolving. Yet memory, in its inherent changeability, is vulnerable. Since memory does not claim universality, Nora felt that it was more accommodating: memory can account for multiple narratives while simultaneously

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allowing contradictions between those narratives. However, Nora’s assessment of memory does not take into account when one version of an event becomes dominant, when the collective no longer accepts the memories of certain individuals or groups, or when one memory is crafted as unimpeachable History.

Since the proliferation of cultural and memory studies in the 1980s, historians have analyzed monuments and memorials as creators of national memory and identity. Monuments force viewers to interact with a particular national or communal narrative. When particularly successful at shaping narratives, monuments become invisible. They fade into the physical landscape until we give them as little thought as the bank or bus stop we pass every day. At that point, the public no longer contends with the monument’s placement or its presentation of history. If we accept a monument, we verify it as a representation of both our nation and ourselves. This national memory becomes implicitly connected to visions of citizenship, as historian Jay Winter made clear in his analysis of memorialization of World War I. “After August, 1914,” writes Winter,

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Protestors have spray-painted the Silent Sam statue at UNC-Chapel Hill with epithets like “murderer.” Here, a university employee blasts graffiti from the statue. The statue’s June 2, 1913, dedication ceremony included public speeches supporting KKK ideology and behavior. (Photo courtesy of UNC-CH.)

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“commemoration was an act of citizenship. To remember was to affirm community, to assert its moral character, and to exclude ... those ... that placed it under threat.” Legal scholar Sanford Levinson similarly argues that “nothing less than the national culture is at stake,” as “monuments or even street names ... are thought to play some role in inculcating particular understandings of society within future generations.” Monuments have the power to represent, teach, and obscure. Their very invisibility is also their power: they become ingrained in our historical understanding. Thus, interrogating the history that monuments represent questions not only that particular narrative but also the master narrative of the nation. Recently, UNC-Chapel Hill itself has been at the center of debates over monuments, history, and invisibility.

The Unsung Founders Memorial and Silent Sam

Universities across the United States have witnessed a crisis of memorialization over the past few years. Many students argue that there is a connection between institutional racism and building names, campus monuments, and featured artwork. Yale announced in February 2017 that it would rename Calhoun College, named for John C. Calhoun, due to its namesake’s connections to slavery and white supremacy. The college’s new name will honor Grace Murray Hopper, a pioneering computer scientist and WWII veteran who received her MA and PhD in mathematics from Yale. Amherst College announced in January 2016 that its unofficial mascot would no longer be Lord Jeffery Amherst, since he advocated providing Native Americans with smallpox-infested blankets in the eighteenth century. The University of Texas at Austin removed a statue of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate States of America, in August 2016. Georgetown and Brown have acknowledged their institutional ties to slavery and the slave trade. Georgetown set up a scholarship fund for

the descendants of the slaves it sold to keep the university running. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) is undergoing its own introspection.

It could be argued that UNC-CH’s debate concerning campus

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monuments started in direct response to Silent Sam, the towering monument to university students who fought for the Confederacy. Silent Sam is the first thing a visitor entering the north side of the Chapel Hill campus notices. He is placed prominently in the center of McCorkle Place, standing triumphantly on a pedestal, a stone soldier staring off into the distance. Silent Sam has been a particularly controversial monument, due to its symbolic status as well as its documented connections to the Ku Klux Klan in its fundraising and dedication ceremony. The United Daughters of the Confederacy petitioned for and performed the bulk of the fundraising for the monument beginning in 1908. Silent Sam’s June 2, 1913 dedication ceremony included several public speeches supporting KKK ideology and behavior. One speech came from Julian Shakespeare Carr, a Confederate veteran, local industrialist, and UNC-CH trustee. His speech lauded the Confederate Army for “sav[ing] the very life of the Anglo-Saxon race in the South,” and he recalled personally “horse-whipp[ing] a negro wench until her skirts hung in shreds.”

When private fundraising to cover the cost of the monument came up short, the university paid the remainder in 1914. Arguably, with this money the university became implicated in the Lost Cause narrative.

In 2001, UNC-CH’s senior class presidents began proposing ideas for their class gift. There were three options: “a freestanding sculpture, to be titled the Unsung Founders Memorial, ‘honoring men and women of color who helped raise the first buildings on campus’; a marquee for the campus’ Memorial Hall to promote events; and a need-based scholarship for a senior student.”

In her essay on the Unsung Founders Memorial, Renée Ater, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Maryland, writes, “The gift committee did not publically indicate why they had chosen a monument to honor slavery,” but she suggests that the growing controversy surrounding Silent Sam may have contributed.

In the end, roughly 44 percent of the Class of 2002 voted for the Unsung

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8 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
Founders Memorial. The university dedicated the memorial on November 5, 2005, with speeches by Chancellor James Moeser and Dean Bernadette Gray-Little. Both addressed the legacy of slavery in their remarks. Moeser stated, “What we do today will not rectify what our ancestors did in the past. But this memorial, I believe, attests to our commitment to shed light on the darker corners of our history. Yes, the university’s first leaders were slaveholders. It is also true that the contribution of African American servants and slaves were crucial to its success.” Gray-Little added, “One of the troublesome legacies of slavery is the pall that it casts over the family histories of those who were bought and sold. This monument finally recognizes the many unnamed whose toil and talent made the nation’s first public university possible.”

Yet since its dedication, there has been continual debate about the Unsung Founders Memorial. Located a few dozen yards behind Silent Sam, the memorial is a black table invitingly surrounded by five stones. Visitors can be seen sitting at the memorial to complete homework, take a phone call, tie a shoe, or simply rest while viewing the buildings and trees. These visitors may take a moment to reflect and, looking down, notice the slick, black surface of the table. If not covered in dirt or snow or books, the memorial reflects the image of the viewer. At this point, the viewer may notice the inscription on the table’s surface: “The Class of 2002 honors the University’s unsung founders—the people of color bound and free—who helped build the Carolina that we cherish today.” Then the viewer may look down towards their feet and see what holds up the tabletop—three hundred small figures, representing the slaves who helped build the original buildings on UNC-CH’s campus. After places the figures into four categories: “The women are modeled wearing handkerchiefs or short hair and dressed in long skirts. The men are depicted in three ways: dressed in jacket, shirt and pants (freemen), attired in a simple shirt and pants (laborer), or bare chested and barefoot (slaves).” If the visitor notices all of these things, it may take another minute for them to recognize the fact that the word “slave” or “slavery” does not appear anywhere on the memorial. Does their relationship to the memorial change after this revelation? What happens if the viewer walks away unaware, never noting the absence

11 Ibid., 147.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 146.
or never realizing that this is a monument at all? How do these repeated moments of forgetting alter the monument’s narrative?

The Controversy

This potential for moments of forgetting—the pointed absences, the monument’s utilitarian nature, small stature, and placement behind Silent Sam—immediately provoked discussion over the Unsung Founders Memorial. Students questioned the memorial’s proposed design from sculptor Do-Ho Suh, who was known for interactive designs that incorporated small, anonymous figures holding up platforms. The fact that visitors could use the memorial as a table or a place to take a smoke break—neither of which asked the visitor to recognize the structure as a monument—struck many students as perpetuating problems experienced by African Americans on campus. Others felt it symbolized the university’s continued dismissal of its relationship to slavery, as the memorial depicted African American figures getting “crushed by the symbolic weight of the university.”14 As local social activist John Kenyon “Yonni” Chapman said, “The black workers holding up the table are nearly invisible to such

14 Ibid., 149.
visitors, who inadvertently kick mud in the faces of the unsung founders. Disrespected, poorly paid, and anonymous black workers have always carried the weight of the university on their backs. . . . Now they have a monument that supposedly honors them by mocking their sacrifice.\(^5\)

Others defend the utilitarian nature of the memorial as integral to any reflection on the university’s past. According to Ackland Art Museum’s Public Programs Manager Allison Portnow, Suh “wanted people to really think about what it meant to be supported by these figures at the same time as something is pressing them down.”\(^6\) Use of the memorial as a table, it was hoped, would force the user to think about what it means to use. Presumably, it would make the user question their relationship to any object or place, suggesting that nothing is purely practical or utilitarian. Others felt this very act of pressing down too closely mimicked African Americans’ historical role in the United States—to serve.\(^7\)

The problem of representation became even more acute for some because of the memorial’s physical and emotional relationship to Silent Sam. Silent Sam has been the site of protests directed against racism and violence. The University Archives’ “Guide to Resources About UNC’s Confederate Monument” lists protests of this nature beginning in 1968, and documents events that confront and debate Silent Sam’s symbolic meaning since 2003. Many protests attracted press coverage. In contrast, moments when visitors use the Unsung Founders Memorial in ways that do not respect it as a monument, like an individual’s use of the memorial as a diaper changing table documented by one student, do not attract as much coverage in either the student newspaper, The Daily Tar Heel (DTH), or other local news sources. A simple search for “Unsung Founders Memorial” on the DTH’s website brings up two pages of results. A similar search for “Silent Sam” yields 16.

It is the memorial’s very invisibility that fuels the debate. In this case, the debate surrounding the Unsung Founder’s Memorial is not solely in response to the invisibility of the narrative it represents—the university’s

\(^{15}\) Ibid.


connections to slavery, Jim Crow, and racism. UNC-CH is still uncovering and publicizing its relationships to these historical legacies. Most recently, the school renamed Saunders Hall as Carolina Hall and installed a small exhibit on the first floor that historicizes the initial dedication of the building in 1922 through examination of post-Civil War violence, white supremacy, and disenfranchisement of African Americans. The exhibit makes clear that the 1922 Board of Trustees named the building after alumnus William Laurence Saunders in part because of his leadership in the North Carolina chapter of the Ku Klux Klan and his political service during a time of white supremacy. It also explains that the 2015 decision of the Board of Trustees to remove Saunders’s name from the building is only one step toward reconciling the university’s past with its future. The final (or first, depending on which direction you read the exhibit) label quotes W. Lowry Caudill, present Chair of the Board of Trustees, saying, “Telling both the good and the bad makes an unequivocal statement about Carolina’s values. We will be reminded of the progress that has been made and the progress that must continue.” The exhibit text also states, “Whatever their differences, all of the parties involved in the Saunders debate agreed on one point: the ways we think about the past will define the University we imagine for the future” (bold in original text). In this way, renaming Saunders Hall acknowledges the power and place of individual memory within the collective. It also recognizes that the collective memory from a previous era may no longer represent the collective memory of a contemporary era. Memory can and should be analyzed just as History can and should be.

The controversy surrounding the Unsung Founders Memorial revolves around its invisibility as a monument. As Nora wrote, memory is both collective and individual and can accommodate inconsistencies. For Nora, memory can thereby inform multiple understandings of self and nation while History—problematically—insists on one. However, the current debate over the Unsung Founders Memorial brings into question whether a certain level of inconsistency is too much. More specifically, the debate questions whether the very structure of the memorial permits inappropriate interactions. Given that the memorial’s symbolic gravity and the fact that

19 Ibid.
those for whom it is dedicated have systematically been used and made invisible in history, this question is not taken lightly. A DTH poll posted on its website on October 14, 2015, asked: “Do you think people should sit on the Unsung Founders Memorial?” As of December 9, 2016, there were 516 responses:

- “Sure, isn’t it meant to be a table with chairs?” (58%)
- “No, that’s disrespectful.” (22%)
- “I don’t care.” (14%)
- “What’s that?” (6%)

Almost as many respondents to the poll did not know or care about the memorial as those who felt that its utilitarian use was inappropriate.20 Even if we take into account flippant or sarcastic answers, many respondents felt a utilitarian, unreflective use of the memorial was appropriate. That is not to say that all people who feel that the memorial should be left unchanged are not being genuine. In November 2016, a “Viewpoints” article in the DTH stated, “THE ISSUE: The Unsung Founders Memorial in McCorkle Place recognizes the enslaved people who built UNC. Over the years,  

20 Hillenburg, “Forgetting the founders causes frustration.”
people eating or changing their child’s diaper on the statue have attracted controversy. These viewpoints debate what the memorial’s purpose should be.” There were two responses. One respondent felt that the table must be used for reflection and potentially should be marked as such with a plaque. The other respondent felt that the potential for students to have a personal relationship with the memorial made it special. The respondent’s “affection developed as the sculpture served variously as a slippery stage for dancing during a snowy evening, a solitary spot for thinking sad thoughts after morning lectures and a resting point after drunken nights. It functioned as a place to pine, frolic and laugh, and I grew to love it for that.” These two opinion pieces both recognize, in their own ways, the invisibility of the Unsung Founders Memorial as a monument. However, the individuals quoted differ on whether this invisibility should be rectified or embraced. How this invisibility is or is not dealt with has implications for understanding oneself, the campus community, and ultimately the nation.

Representation vs. Invisibility

Debate on this monument will certainly continue. One of the major questions is: should the memorial be altered? Should the university add a plaque, move the memorial to a more prominent place, move it further away from Silent Sam, or remove its utilitarian potential (by erecting a fence, taking away the chairs, etc.)? Moreover, would these changes make the memorial more visible or would they irrevocably alter the memorial’s meaning and relationship to the university? Does UNC-CH want a monument, purposeful or not, that invites physical interaction and use? Does the university want this monument to invite individual memories or foster a collective one? The Unsung Founders Memorial not only represents a national narrative but a very personal one. However, the underlying question is that of representation. As student Amy Muyanga, a member of Real Silent Sam (a group that promotes critical thought about buildings and monuments in Chapel Hill and Carrboro “to collectively build a more just future”), asked the DTH in 2014, “Would you want to be misrepresented or not represented at all?”

We live within a landscape of memory, dotted with constant reminders of Americans’ changing definitions of self. But does this memorialized landscape help us to know or does it further disconnect us from a sense of (national) self? What should we, as contemporary Americans, do with past representations? When memory, or memorialization, becomes invisible, does it become individual? Is individual memory inherently problematic or embraced by the American views of democracy? Does visibility make memory or memorialization collective? Should we strive for collective understanding or is that, as Nora argued, counter to the beauty of it all? Memory is individual and collective, specific yet multiple. What we must decide is if we want that dynamic to continue and, if so, how?