RE-VISIONING THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY
THROUGH THE MEMORIAL LANDSCAPE IN ARTIS LANE’S *SOJOURNER TRUTH*
AND ALISON SAAR’S *SWING LOW*

By

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For my grandmother, Ruth Ellen Teasley
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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RE-VISIONING THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY
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By

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Recent commemorative sculptures of slaves highlight the United States’s changing relationship with the legacy of slavery. Commemorations, such as the Sojourner Truth (2009) by Artis Lane in Washington, D.C. and Swing Low: A Harriet Tubman Memorial (2008) by Alison Saar in Harlem, begin to unravel a history of exclusion and subordination of blacks in nineteenth-century commemorations of slavery, the Civil War, and Emancipation. In Against Race, Paul Gilroy contends, “recognition of past sufferings and their projection in public sites of memory and commemoration provide an important ethical alternative to the pursuit of financial compensation within the juridical and fiscal orders of discrete nation-states.”¹ The recent additions to the United States Capitol and Harlem reflect such recognition amid contested debates about reparations to descendants of African American slaves. This study examines how modern commemorations of slavery and Emancipation confound

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and supplant the ideology of commemorative sculptures produced in the late nineteenth-century.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Contemporary government sponsored commemorations of slavery highlight an evolving relationship between the United States and the historical legacy of slavery. Powerful examples of these memorials recognize the contributions of slaves to building the nation, and they employ original modes of representation that engage with the literary genre of the neo-slave narrative. Recent commemorations have begun to augment the American public memorial landscape in a nuanced way that reconciles the narrative deficiencies of the past approaches to the public commemoration of slavery, as well as the exclusion of African Americans from the national narrative in Washington, D.C.

Several scholars have offered important analyses concerning the commemoration of slavery and its implications on the paradigms of racial identity in American history. However, recent additions of commemorative sculptures to the United States Capitol and Harlem reflect a shift in those nineteenth-century paradigms. In Against Race, Paul Gilroy suggests that

we need self-consciously to become more future oriented. We need to look toward the future and to find political languages in which it can be discussed. There is absolutely no question of choosing now to try and forget what it took so long to remember, or of simply setting the past and its traumas aside. The recognition of past sufferings and their projection in public sites of memory and commemoration provide an important ethical alternative to the pursuit of financial compensation within the juridical and fiscal orders of discrete nation-states.¹

Recent commemorations destabilize the American memory of slavery, as artists presented it immediately following the Civil War, and they create a constructive

Language for a vexed history. They also expose a contrasting dialogue between commemorative sculptures produced in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War and contemporary sculptures concerning Emancipation and slavery. Recent commemorations confound and supplant the sculptural monuments produced in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. In my study, I will examine how contemporary commemorations of slavery confront the artistic, historical, and racial contradictions that scholars have identified in earlier research; thus this study provides a timely investigation of specific transformations regarding slavery in the American memorial landscape of the twenty-first century.

**Literature Review**

In 1916, Henry Morris Murray wrote *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation*, which is a thorough analytical account of sculpture concerning the theme of Emancipation and its social implications on the image of blacks. Murray’s study emerged from a series of lectures in 1913 that he presented to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.² As a freedman, Murray vested his research in understanding the social consequences of the ways in which public art and sculpture represented blacks in the narrative of slavery. He did not believe that there was value in creating “art for art’s sake.”³ Like his colleague W.E.B. DuBois, Murray was a proponent of art that could advance the political agenda


³ Murray, xviii-xix.
of African Americans. Murray’s major concern in *Emancipation and the Freed* was racial uplift through the arts that could influence political change and inspire discourse about works that contradicted those aims. His interpretations exposed the systems of bodily representation in the early twentieth-century memorial landscape that visually reinforced the social subordination of blacks to whites. In *Forever Free* (1867), for instance, Murray contends that Edmonia Lewis’s depiction of a recently freed man and woman demonstrates their tenuous relationship with Emancipation, because they still wear chains. The woman kneels, and the hand of her male counterpart rests on her shoulder. The male figure’s other hand, though raised triumphantly, is chained. Both of the figure’s gazes extend upward toward an unspecified source in gratitude and supplication. The pose also denoted a liminal position between bondage and freedom. According to Murray, an effective representation of Emancipation should include “no broken shackles, no obvious parchments, no discarded whips, no crouching slave with uncertain face… (nor a) kindly benignant Liberator.” He contends that the most effective and uplifting way of representing Emancipation was through an allegory that could capture the intense emotions of the tumultuous era.

Murray also took issue with Thomas Crawford’s *Freedom*, which stands atop the Capitol’s dome. Even though *Freedom* is an allegorical construction of freedom, Murray felt that it embodied a certain irony in that it avoids the issues of enslaved blacks in the United States. Of the exclusionary metaphor of *Freedom*, Murray notes that Jefferson

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5 Murray, 65; Murray endorsed Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller’s *Emancipation* (Boston; 1913) as the ideal representation of the event. The bronze, multi-figured sculpture depicts two black, adolescent youths in loincloths stepping away from an ominous looking tree. A weeping woman kneels beside them, covers her face, and pushes them forward. The unclothed youths represent a brave, new beginning in the face of adversity and possible danger; the woman represents grieving, apprehensive humanity (51-66).
Davis lobbied successfully for the exclusion of the liberty cap, which originated from an Ancient Roman Phrygian cap for manumitted slaves. Davis reasoned that Americans had always been free, so the liberty cap was an inappropriate symbol. He obviously excluded blacks from his definition of American citizens. The blatant omission of the United States’s relationship with slavery in its sculpture about freedom was as sardonic a representation as the submissively kneeling slaves. Both represented a mockery of African American citizenship.

Vivien Green Fryd undertook similar analyses in 1992 in her book *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol, 1815-1860*. In the chapter “Liberty, Justice, and Slavery,” Fryd discusses the efforts of nineteenth-century proponents of slavery, within congressional committees, to omit overt and covert references to race and slavery in the Capitol’s decoration. Their efforts underscored the irony of the pervading themes and allegories of justice, liberty, and freedom in the Capitol’s politically sacred spaces in the nineteenth-century. Like Murray, she identifies Crawford’s *Freedom* as a representation of the tensions of slavery. She elaborates her argument further than Murray’s argument, noting the particular rift between Southern and Northern factions to ensure that references to slavery would not jeopardize unity within the governing bodies.

Thomas Crawford, with input from Jefferson Davis, initially named the sculpture *Armed Liberty*. Fryd notes that it was not until 1991 that the Capitol curator began to refer to it by its current name, which is *Freedom*. Although Crawford received the

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6 Ibid, 4.

commissioned for *Freedom*, Davis set the criteria for the symbols that could represent the concept of freedom in the United States. The heavily draped female figure stands on the Capitol's Dome watching over the city, and ready for battle; one hand grasps a sword, while the other holds a shield and a laurel wreath. To situate the symbolism within the framework of the national identity, the shield has stars and stripes reminiscent of the American flag. The initials U.S.A on her breastplate further identify her as a symbol of the United States, rather than her a reference to her Greco-Roman origins, with. Furthermore, the feathered helmet recalls a Native American headdress that commonly served as a symbol of a female allegory of America.

Before he completed *Freedom*, Crawford altered his original conception of the project several times under Davis's supervision. The most notable alteration was Crawford’s avoidance of the traditional symbols associated with Libertas, the allegory for Liberty. In the tradition of the ancient Romans, Crawford used a female allegory to represent a social ideal. However, the ancients were concerned with the goddess Libertas as a symbol of personal freedom; during the Roman Empire, Libertas was the embodiment of freedom in a constitutional government. The symbols of Libertas—the cap, pole, broken yoke, and flying bird—were important appropriations for later European insurrections against tyranny. The symbols eventually became crucial to defining the United States and its successful Revolution against British rule. However, the triumphant symbols associated with Libertas during the Revolutionary period of the

8 Ibid, 193.
eighteenth-century became polarizing symbols for a fragile American government on the cusp of the Civil War in the nineteenth-century.

Abolitionists eventually appropriated the symbolism associated with Libertas to support their cause of ending slavery in the United States. Therefore, Jefferson Davis, the Chairman of the Capitol Building Program and future president of the Confederacy, became concerned that the once unifying and unambiguous interpretation of Libertas would become confused with the growing abolitionist movement and thereby undermine the narrative of Liberty within the Capitol. Davis’s political roles made him particularly sensitive to and personally invested in the growing tensions surrounding issues of slavery. Davis was adamant about his positions because he did not believe that blacks were citizens, nor did he believe that they should benefit from the freedoms of the Constitution. The amalgamated symbolism in Armed Liberty represented a conditional American liberty only available to those with the appropriate skin color in the nineteenth-century. Her combative props, inspired by images of the goddess Minerva, contradict traditional representations of liberty. Armed Liberty was the defender of the antebellum South’s status quo, which was to maintain the chattel status of African Americans while touting conflicting ideals of a just society.

In 1997, Kirk Savage extended Murray’s discussion of sculpture that dealt with the visual conventions of slavery and Emancipation during the nineteenth-century. Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves is a seminal text about American commemorative sculpture. In the book, he examined the effects of race on the medium of sculpture, as well as the implications of race on the prevailing neoclassical style of the period. According to

10 Fryd, 193.
Savage, representing slavery, Emancipation, and freedom in the nineteenth-century defied the neoclassical ideals that were inherent to a prized American art form. The tendency of nineteenth-century American neo-classical artists was to adhere to idealized conventions of ancient Greek sculpture. Savage discussed the iconography associated with representations of African Americans in the nineteenth-century in contrast to Greek ideals of neo-classicism. He maintained that audiences and artists deemed African Americans as the antithesis of the Greek aesthetic and ideological ideal because of their physiognomy. Additionally, the physical idealization that is inherent in classical sculpture conflicted with the physically enslaved black body, thus dually exposing the false idealization of American freedom and neo-classical art.

As a result, artists commissioned to create monuments about Emancipation often shunned images of African Americans. Hence, the theme of freedom in reference to race was difficult to represent in the nineteenth-century. Savage notes that Abraham Lincoln and white Union soldiers of the Civil War became the face of Emancipation in sculptural monuments, rather than the slaves themselves. The concept and practice of freedom for newly freed black citizens was a tenuous subject, and Reconstruction only underscored the complications of integrating blacks into mainstream American history and culture. Former slaves and free blacks faced challenges that reinscribed the status of chattel upon them. To make a desirable memorial with an ideologically unambiguous collective history for America, artists seemed obligated to shun and marginalize blackness. Consequently, the theme of Emancipation in sculpture yielded a visual formula that Savage alludes to in the title of his book, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*. 
Savage traced the source of the kneeling slave iconography to a late eighteenth-century medallion that Englishman Josiah Wedgewood created to support the abolitionist cause. Most of the medallions read, “Am I not a Man and a Brother?,” but other editions use a female figure and the words, “Am I not a Woman and a Sister?” Abolitionists in the United States eventually adopted the format of the kneeling slave for their cause as well. The image appeared in books, pamphlets, and on coins. The iconography of the kneeling slave became so popular that after the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in 1865, artists continued to appropriate the image as an emblem for Emancipation.

Thomas Ball’s *Emancipation Group* (1867) is one of the most prominent examples of this visual formula. The composition reinforces social subordination through the slave’s kneeling position in contrast to Abraham Lincoln is standing over him with an outstretched arm. The kneeling figure’s chains and limited clothing further separate the two figures socially. Clothing indicates social status and position. The juxtaposition between the former slave’s loincloth and Lincoln’s suit provides an important contemplation on the period’s societal expectations of African Americans. The emphasis that Ball places upon the black body underscores the dogmatic beliefs that the black body was only useful for labor. Meanwhile, Lincoln’s suit, coupled with his connection to the documents on the pillar, emphasizes his assumed social and intellectual superiority. In other words, the sculpture’s emphasis on the bared slave body, along with his uncertain facial expression, connotes the continued exploitation of the black body for labor, while the Emancipator will continue to be at the core of social progress.
When Fryd wrote *Art and Empire*, one sculptural representation of an African American inhabited the Capitol, and the decoration reflected the assiduous efforts of Civil War era statesmen to censor issues of race and slavery.¹¹ The addition of Artis Lane’s portrait bust of Sojourner Truth in 2009 changes that history, and the renaming of the Capitol’s Visitor Center to Emancipation Hall implies a further shift. Savage’s study maintains that artists in the nineteenth-century had intrinsic conceptual limitations upon their methods of portraying African Americans in sculptures about Emancipation, slavery, and the Civil War. Alison Saar’s *Swing Low* (2008) challenged those limited methods by providing a more diverse visual narrative of slaves and defying earlier representations of them as subordinate and passive characters with no agency in their own freedom. Recent works by Lane, Saar, and others upset the monolithic nineteenth-century narrative that insisted upon perpetuating the notion of a singular “great emancipator.”

**Origins and New Directions**

Contemporary artists use modes of expression that creatively augment master narratives and mainstream historical accounts of slavery. Saar and Lane’s artistic methods operate on the same level as the literary form, neo-slave narrative. The artists’ methods expound more on the lives and experiences of blacks, rather than on the narrative of a liberator. The literary genre of neo-slave narrative uses collected oral histories, archival information, and the author’s imagination to create a cohesive story about slavery from a viewpoint of the slaves.¹² The genre derives from ante-bellum

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¹¹ A bronze bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. by John Wilson was added to the Rotunda in 1985.

texts that escaped slaves wrote to support the abolitionist cause. They reported the injustice and dehumanization of being a slave to agitate their audiences to action. Since free blacks wrote these slave narratives for a public audience, they often neglected personal points of view. Moreover, since most slaves were necessarily illiterate, they told their stories to an author who then wrote the narrative. Nineteenth-century slave narratives are essentially fictive constructions of facts and personal recollections.

When writing Beloved, Toni Morrison was concerned with the interior lives of those held in bondage, citing the likelihood of nineteenth-century authors to suppress the feelings and experiences of slavery.\textsuperscript{13} Morrison’s study of slave narratives elucidates the places at which authors stopped short in their descriptions of slavery, leaving aside any gruesome details that would offend a skittish audience. She considers the recovery of those rejected portions of the slave narratives an integral piece of her artistic project.

Morrison refers to her process as a “literary archaeology,” because she journeys “to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply.”\textsuperscript{14} Her starting point is in slave narratives and archival data. She continues reconstructing the slaves’ stories with her own inferences, intuition, and imagination. Visual artists, such as Betye Saar and Kara Walker, known for their controversial art dealing with slave and plantation life, utilize similar strategies. They take existing text and images concerning slavery; then they imbue it with their own commentary about the conditions of slavery.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 302.
Neo-slave narrative surpasses biographies or collected oral histories by reconstructing a fuller point of view that combines the traditional narrative data with cultural and archival data, and thereby renders the texts rich with cultural and religious histories that often reflect values of survival and kinship. The process involved in neo-slave narrative, that is the collection and combination of fragmented slave histories by contemporary authors to create a compelling narrative of the slave experience, informs the practices of many visual artists who deal with slavery as their subject matter. By adopting such strategies, artists create a dialogue about visualizing a period for which very few images exist. Consequently, they call the dominant historical narratives and legacies of slavery into question, and expose a visual medium for conveying the black experience in the nineteenth-century.

I will begin my discussion with *Swing Low: A Harriet Tubman Memorial* (2008) in Harlem by Alison Saar. *Swing Low* uses inventive ways of representing slavery in a visual language meant to mobilize the community in which it stands. I will then assess the portrait bust of Sojourner Truth in the United States Capitol by Artis Lane. Recently installed in the newly named Emancipation Hall, the portrait bust was the first image of a woman of African descent in the Capitol, and the culmination of a lengthy legislative process and political battle. After discussing the contemporary examples of sculptural commemorations of slavery and Emancipation, I will compare them to their nineteenth-century counterparts. This research will focus on specific changes in the narrative of slavery and Emancipation over the past centuries.
CHAPTER 2
THE CORNER: ALISON SAAR’S SWING LOW

Contemporary memorials of slavery provide an important voice for those Americans held as chattel in the nineteenth-century. Anti-Reconstruction propaganda and anxiety about post-Civil War reconciliation are less likely to tinge commemorative sculpture in the twenty-first century. Recent memorials augment the central history that was set forth in the nineteenth-century memorial landscape of slavery. The difference between the works of Walker and the elder Saar versus Lane and the younger Saar is their placement within the public view. Swing Low and the Sojourner Truth Bust were specifically commissioned, created, and displayed for a public that reaches beyond the gallery and the museum. Consequently, the memorials have the opportunity to reach a larger audience to more broadly and publicly alter the hegemonic discourse of slavery.

Installed in 2008, the bronze sculpture Swing Low stands at the intersection of St. Nicholas Avenue, West 122nd Street, and Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Harlem, New York. Swing Low stakes a claim within the Harlem community with its impressive scale. A monumental nine-foot-tall female figure of patinaed bronze stands atop a pedestal and a roughly hewn, natural stone base. The pedestal is not just a functional part of the overall composition but also an integral part of the memorial. Etched with the refrain of “Go Down Moses,” the pedestal contributes to memorializing Tubman’s courageous deeds and personal biography. Together the statue, its pedestal, and the stone base that supports them both are thirteen feet high and twenty-one feet long. A satchel hangs from a strap over her shoulder, crosses her body, and rests upon her hip. Her arms bend at her waist near her satchel. The figure wears a jacket and a floor-length skirt. The bottom-front of her skirt gives way to a series of vertical lines that resemble a
train’s cattle pusher. Human faces and footprints, as well as various trinkets, such as keys, locks, and bottles intersperse the skirt in low relief. Despite the embellishments distributed over the skirt, Tubman’s legs are still visible and appear to be in motion, recalling a train’s pistons. From the back of the skirt, roots emerge connecting her to the base of the statue. Throughout her body of work, Alison Saar (1956– ) has imbued her art and the space it inhabits with sacred and spiritual meanings, and *Swing Low* is only a continuation of that practice.

Saar spent her formative years in Laurel Canyon, California, a rural suburb of Los Angeles. Both of Saar’s parents had a profound impact on her current artistic methods and philosophies. An integral part of her process involves rescuing jettisoned objects and building materials that she finds in abandoned buildings. Saar favors old materials because their history and wisdom, as she calls it, imbues her resulting sculptures with greater depth of in appearance and meaning.\(^1\) Her affinity for recognizing and restoring found materials is a result of working with her father Richard Saar, who is an art conservator. Saar’s mother, Betye is an accomplished artist, who exposed her daughter to several religions and cultures.

She received her formal education from Scripps College in Claremont, California, studying African diasporic art with the prominent artist and art historian Samella Lewis, who later secured a fellowship for Saar to travel to the Southeastern United States to research African American folk artists. The experience provided Saar with a greater understanding of folk culture in the South. She applied that expanded understanding to her own artistic practice as she worked toward her Master of Fine Arts, which she

\(^1\) *Tangible Spirits with Alison Saar: A Portrait of the Artist*, VHS, directed by Ruth Twiggs and Bruce Berryhill (Richmond, Virginia: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1996): n.p.
earned from Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles in 1981. Two years after she graduated, Saar she began a residency with The Studio Museum in Harlem.

On the East coast, Saar developed an aesthetic and narrative sensibility that earned her a commission with the city of New York in 1991. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s Arts for Transit Program commissioned Saar to create a sculpture for the train platform of the Harlem line. The project, *Hear the Lone Whistle Moan*, consists of three bronze grilles with sculptural reliefs. In each grille, Saar narrates individual and collective histories of African Americans using the metaphor of the train to elicit multiple meanings.

In one panel, a man with a downcast gaze stands holding a suitcase. The background of the grille contains a cross, a rooster, a comb, and a dog in the flourishing, curvilinear pattern of the grille. These elements narrate the story of a man departing the city. According to Saar, he had once come to New York for the financial opportunity, but now he desires to return to his roots in the South. Saar firmly situates the iconography of the objects in the grille in African belief systems from Western and Central Africa.\(^2\) The cross represents the Central African Congolese Cosmogram: birth, life, death, and rebirth and are indicative of railroad crossings.\(^3\) Robert Farris Thompson explains the importance of the Cosmogram in Congolese cosmology and its circular representation of time. The man has reached a literal crossroads or a major place of transition in his life. He was born in the South and then migrated to New York where he matured. The narrative depicted in the sculpture references his return to the

\(^2\) *Tangible Spirits*, n.p.

South at the end of his life. The chicken, according to Thompson, is an offering that is customary and necessary to ensure that his decision will bring him good fortune.

Additionally the cross has symbolic ties to Christianity, especially when considering Saar’s use of so-called Negro spirituals throughout the memorial. The spirituals emerged as an important facet of the enslaved African Americans in the antebellum South. The South also elicits notions of “down home” or the return of those blacks who had migrated north. In the context of “down home,” the rooster conveys a transition from an urban environment to a rural one.

The male figure also recalls the Yoruba Oriṣa, Eshu, who is the West African deity in charge of major decisions and crossroads, again indicated by the cross. The comb and the dog are items also associated with or offered to Eshu. In Yoruba cosmology, Eshu is a homeless Oriṣa because of his domain is the outdoors. As a result, he occupies public places, such as train platforms or marketplaces, rather than domestic environments. He is also the Oriṣa who regulates communication between the mortal and spirit worlds. His role as a messenger often results in chaos and confusion, because of the inherent difficulties of relating messages between two parties. Semantics, intonation, and a host of other factors can alter the understanding for the intended recipient of the message. Like Eshu, Tubman is a messenger – a conduit for slaves to access freedom in the North. Eshu is the spirit of the crossroads in much the same way that Tubman provides a crossroads for slaves desiring to be free. Saar’s approach to manufacturing the memory is astutely syncretic as she combines multiple perspectives and cosmologies to commemorate Tubman.

Trains and crossings hold important literal and symbolic meanings in African American culture. Trains facilitated post-World War II migratory patterns of Southern blacks towards economic opportunity and (questionably) more equitable social conditions in comparison to the South. Northern migration provided the possibility of fortune for hopeful blacks traveling from Southern states. Furthermore, the train represents the Underground Railroad—a covert logistical system of people, buildings, and pathways that aided runaway slaves. The conductor in one of the three grilles in the installation is not only literal, but also representative of the conductors on the Underground Railroad. Trains symbolize freedom and the transgression of once prohibited movement during slavery. The train is a testimony to the black body no longer held captive through the brutal slave system. The title, \textit{Hear the Lone Whistle Moan}, operates on a symbolic level in that the moan in the title evokes the sound of the train. Thompson argues, “the train whistle is a quintessential symbol of black yearning,” and “if your ear (is) culturally prepared, you could hear a lonesome train whistle in the night and think of black people on the move.”

\textit{Swing Low} also elicits the “spiritual presence in the landscape,” that is a meaning within a place that creates an ideological place connected to history, memory and emotion. At the crossroads of St. Nicholas Avenue, West 122nd Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Harlem, the memorial provides an anachronistic narrative that exemplifies birth, life, death, and rebirth. The Harlem intersection where \textit{Swing Low} stands was an abandoned traffic triangle before the city re-designated the space,

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\textsuperscript{5} Tangible Spirits, n.p.
\textsuperscript{6} Thompson, “Kongo Presence in Landscape” in Keep Your Head to the Sky in Zable, 39, 121
\textsuperscript{7} Tangible Spirits, n.p.
renamed it Harriet Tubman Triangle, and commissioned Saar to create Tubman’s likeness in bronze. Because of where the memorial is situated, it shares the fundamental concepts of the Kongo Cosmogram, similarly to the cross and crossing in Hear the Lone Whistle Moan. The cosmological underpinning of the Cosmogram, as conjured by its placement at a literal crossroads, is a representation of Tubman’s birth, life, death, and rebirth through her abounding legacy. Saar deploys an important relationship to the circular journey through Tubman’s life cycle represented in the memorial. The placement of the memorial at a literal crossroads affirms the presence of ideological and theological crossings and passages.

The memorial’s circular time structure, calls to mind Tubman’s commemorative presence as an ancestor and guide in Harlem. In the context of the Cosmogram, Tubman is in the rebirth phase of her journey – she is dead only in a physical sense. Her existence in the spirit world situates her as an ancestor. In “Who Set You Flowin?: The African American Migration Narrative,” Jasmine Farrah Griffin offers the concept of an ancestor as an omnipresent guide, a model of black survival, and “a space for enlightenment, sustenance, and renewal.” She extracts her theory from Toni Morrison, who states “(ancestors) are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of

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9 Jeffrey Bruce, Director of Exhibitions (Tubman African American Museum, Macon, Georgia), conversation with the author, June 29, 2010.

10 Griffin, 5-6.
In Swing Low, the ancestor exists as the memorial. Saar’s conceptual framework for Swing Low was the idea that Tubman’s life legacy could transcend generations and inspire a new era of citizens to take up her mantle of service, heroism, and humanitarianism.

The surrounding landscape design also reflects life cycles. Saar added foliage and rocks to surround the memorial, purposefully choosing landscape materials to reflect the spaces to which Tubman traveled and in which she lived as she moved through her life cycle. Tubman was born in Maryland, and she spent the latter part of her life in New York. With the landscape, which Quennell Rothschild and Partners, LLP co-designed, Saar acknowledges the multiple locations within the American landscape that served as settings in Tubman’s biography, by evoking the spaces she navigated as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. The plants create a wooded area within an urban neighborhood.

Tubman never actually lived in Harlem, but the process of symbolic accretion legitimizes Swing Low’s location. Symbolic accretion “describes the appending of commemorative elements onto already existing memorials.”

I contend that Harlem is a memorial within itself. In his ethnography, Harlemworld, James Jackson, Jr., argues that Harlem functions as the embodiment of African American site of culture and history. Internationally and locally Harlem is “African America’s Africa.” It exists as the seat of African American culture. From his ethnographic fieldwork, Jackson was able to

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conclude, “Harlem is a symbolic center for African American culture, a key reference point for blacks who seek to define themselves.”

In addition, the Harlem Renaissance and its influx of cultural production from jazz musicians, writers, poets, intellectuals, and artists represented the highest African American achievements. As a site of an early twentieth-century Renaissance in African American culture, Harlem’s residents irrevocably claim the memory of that particular cultural moment. The historical references make Harlem sacred to its current inhabitants. One informant remarks, “Harlem, is home if you’re black,” which demonstrates the city’s ability to provide a legacy of racial heritage and pride. By appending a well-known slave history to the site, viewers can access various facets of African American history and thereby align the community with the goals of the memorial. Symbolic accretion speaks to the power of Swing Low in creating a sacred and contemplative site on a Harlem intersection.

The corner, crossing, intersection of Swing Low has further symbolic implications that emerge in hip hop music. Common and The Last Poets, a group that originated during the Black Arts Movement, convey the hallowedness of the urban corner as a site of black culture in “The Corner.” Common and The Last Poets aurally establishes the corner as a cultural crossroads between the present and an ancestral legacy. Common’s gritty lyrics about life in urban neighborhoods provide a verbal juxtaposition for the legacy and possibilities of the corner that the Last Poets tout:

The corner was our magic, our music, our politics
Fires raised as tribal dancers and

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13 Jackson, 9.

14 Ibid, 9.
war cries that broke out on different corners
Power to the people, black power, black is beautiful…

The corner was our Rock of Gibraltar, our Stonehenge
Our Taj Mahal, our monument,
Our testimonial to freedom, to peace and to love
Down on the corner...  

Hip hop emerged at a time of social unrest and economic hardship. In “The Chain remain the Same,” Geneva Smitherman argues, “The Hip Hop Nation employs African American communicative traditions and discursive practices to convey the Black struggle for survival in the face of America’s abandonment of the descendants of enslaved Africans.” Spirituals, blues, and hip hop represent instances in which social issues manifest in African American cultural production. All three genres function as counter-narratives to racial oppression. Clyde Woods elaborates further, saying, “the blues are not simply mechanistic responses to oppression; they are conscious recodifications of African American knowledge systems, soundscapes, (and) spirituality.” So-called Negro Spirituals, the blues, and hip hop provide a fascinating cultural crossroads in which artists demonstrate the circularity and perpetuity of several aspects of the African American social, economic, and political condition in the United States.

The Blues Aesthetic, as described by Richard Powell, provides strong links between “The Corner,” and Swing Low, and elucidates their social significance. Powell describes the Blues Aesthetic as contemporary art that comes from artists who empathize with the issues and ideals of African American society and culture. In

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15 Common and The Last Poets, “The Corner,” Be, performed by Common and others, MP4, 2005.
addition, the art exists within the intellectual reach and conceptual understanding of the African American community in its entirety with a humanistic perspective.\textsuperscript{16}

In name, formal qualities, and symbolisms, \textit{Swing Low} represents the Blues Aesthetic. The so-called Negro spiritual that Saar uses to name the memorial served as a subversive and covert language against slavery in the nineteenth-century, according to Tubman biographer Sarah Bradford. The powerful language and intonations that are characteristic of spirituals left an auditory legacy in blues music. The blues music was the soundtrack to the struggles of African Americans in era immediately following slavery. Blues crooners used song as a medium through which they vented their frustrations concerning the American social and economic order. In the twenty-first century, \textit{Swing Low} and “The Corner” continue to communicate humanistic social imperatives through blues music’s predecessor, so-called Negro Spirituals, and its descendant, hip hop. Moreover, their dialogue about the transcendent meaning of place creates a cultural understanding of the corner as a cultural site in need of reclamation and revival. \textit{Swing Low}’s placement at a crossroads in Harlem constructs a location in which viewers can reconcile African American history and culture and contemplate future trajectories.

The elements of the formal composition also reflect \textit{Swing Low}’s profound insight to understanding the memorial. The nine-foot tall, full-length figure leans forward creating a diagonal axis with the base of the sculpture. The diagonal emphasis produces a momentum, which visually unearths the roots behind her. In effect, Tubman uproots the oppression as she navigates the space between freedom and bondage as a

\textsuperscript{16} Powell, 21-23.
conductor of the Underground Railroad. Saar uses roots in several of her sculptures of the human form. The tree roots emerge from her figures like mutant appendages, organically uniting them with the earth. In *Sweet Magnolia* (1994), the tree roots represent transition from dark to light or from North to South.\(^\text{17}\) The portion of the sculpture underground rises, and gives way to the figure above ground, which is also a metaphorical representation of familial roots, lineages, and cultural histories. In *Swing Low*, the roots figure similarly. Saar asserts that the roots emerging from Tubman’s skirt, coupled with the visually compelling forward momentum, signify her role in uprooting slavery and transitioning to freedom.\(^\text{18}\) Additionally, the element on the front of her skirt resembling a cow pusher is present to push aside any barriers to her efforts.\(^\text{19}\)

Saar contends that in *Swing Low*, Tubman is not only a conductor in the Underground Railroad, but the actual vehicle.\(^\text{20}\) Tubman’s bent arms and legs are caught in a moment of action re-emphasizes the theme of movement. The active stance, along with the cattle pusher in her skirt, evokes similar metaphors about mobility and crossroads as those present in *Hear the Lone Whistle Moan*. Saar further underscores the personification of Tubman as a train with the naming of the memorial. “Swing Low” is a song rooted in African American Christian traditions, but it was also a


\(^\text{18}\) Dwyer’s concept, symbolic accretion, exposes rootedness from a post-bellum vantage point. Blacks uprooted themselves from a Southern agricultural economy to a Northern industrial and altered Harlem’s demographics and history during the Great Migration.


secret call for slaves attempting to escape slavery. When slaves heard the song, they understood that they would meet at a predetermined location to escape. The chorus, “Swing low, sweet chariot/ Coming for to carry me home,” is a reflection of hope and faith that someone (the chariot) would arrive and take them to a place where they would be free.

Saar also used the lyrics of “Go Down Moses,” another African American spiritual, on the stone base of the memorial, noting that it was Tubman’s favorite song. In Tubman’s 1886 biography, Sarah Bradford relayed the lyrics that became an anthem for the journey, summoning slaves and notifying workers on the Underground Railroad of itinerant passengers:

Oh go down, Moses,
Way down into Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

Oh Pharaoh said he would go cross,
Let my people go,
And don't get lost in de [sic] wilderness,
Let my people go.

Oh go down, Moses,
Way down into Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

You may hinder me here, but you can't up dere [sic],
Let my people go,
He sits in de Hebben [sic] and answers prayer,
Let my people go!

Oh go down, Moses,
Way down into Egypt's land,

\[21\text{ Ibid, n.p.}\]
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.²²

The song’s refrain signifies a spiritual imperative for Tubman’s mission and reinforces her alias, which was Moses. Her role as a guide to fugitive slaves aligned her with the Old Testament patriarch who led the Israelites’ exodus out of Egyptian bondage. Metaphorically, Tubman is Moses, the African American slaves are the Israelites, and Northern States and Canada represent the Promised Land. Saar invokes references to Biblical history and spirituals to create meaning for a contemporary audience. These elements also achieve a theme of mobility, bravery, self-determination, and persistence that does not end with the Emancipation Proclamation, but continues in the present day.

In *Swing Low*, Tubman is the vehicle for change and social mobility, but Saar does not abandon the story of the slaves that Tubman guided to freedom. With bas-relief faces in the skirt, she creates a visual narrative that represents those whose names elude written historical accounts. In addition to faces, the memorial incorporates items that represent signs of an arduous journey, like the prints of worn shoes, as well as things left behind, like broken chains. Moreover, the faces represent slaves who endured slavery and never escaped but died in slavery or waited for emancipation. In *The Witch’s Flight*, Kara Keeling asserts that blacks maintained a “common sense” regarding survival, “because some of those slaves survived as slaves, black common sense contains not only an account of black rebellions and resistance to slavery but also a record of the slaves’ survival achieved precisely by consenting to aspects of their

enslavement.” Saar does not insist on obliterating that aspect of common sense in order to represent a monolithic story about overcoming slavery and oppression that promotes one central hero.

Instead, Saar’s portrayals of unnamed slaves honor those who survived slavery by living through it. *Swing Low* acknowledges the importance of both strategic reactions to slavery. That is, the unidentified faces in the skirt are symbolically as important as the face on the central figure in the memorial. *Swing Low* fulfills the typical mode of memorial that stipulates the inclusion of figural sculpture. However, Saar constructs the figure in a way that acknowledges the unknown – the subaltern voices that history never chronicled in books.

Saar’s method of unearthing subaltern voices is necessary in an African American memorial, essentially because of the prohibition of literacy and the purposeful severing of family ties that blacks endured during slavery. Under such conditions, the memorial must function like a recovery project through archives such as cargo records of slave ships and property records of slaveholders. African American *people* did not exist, only *chattel*. As a result, the *known* and codified figures in African American history come to fore as synecdochal constructions that necessarily stand in for masses of African Americans lost in history and memory. Saar’s multifaceted methods of representation reconcile the complications of memorializing a singular hero versus a group.

Through her own representations and displays of African American cultural artifacts throughout *Swing Low*’s composition, Saar conveys a meta-narrative in response to nineteenth-century memorials about slavery and their failure to display the

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agency of blacks. The name of the memorial and the inscription of “Go Down Moses” reveal African American survival systems, like religion. Although the faces on the skirt remain anonymous, Saar gives them a voice and outward displays of agency in the objects and the songs that slaves hid in plain sight during the nineteenth-century.

Saar did not abandon her central artistic modes in creating a memorial of bronze. Instead of embedding found objects, she scatters images of jettisoned objects over the skirt in bas-relief. The objects are examples of things that slaves would have used or carried for their journey. Unlike Lewis’s *Forever Free*, the locks and chains in *Swing Low* are broken, jettisoned, scattered, and removed from the slaves’ wrists. Additionally, Saar gathers elements from the surrounding landscape that reflect the geographic passages that Tubman made, providing a setting that transcends the limitations of place through static visual narrative conveyed in typical figural sculpture. *Swing Low* represents a survival of “common sense” in Keeling’s terms, and it displays an enduring culture that survived despite slavery and the Middle Passage. The underlying narrative of *Swing Low* portrays a legacy that the locomotive-like figure carries into the future. Most significantly, the narrative includes slavery and the transition out of it. Saar does not memorialize the black body into perpetual servitude. Instead Saar depicts Tubman’s figure pulling at roots as she pushes forward using the history of slavery as a symbol of perseverance through hardship, which serves as a useful metaphor for a Harlem neighborhood in the process of revitalization.
CHAPTER 3
THE CAPITOL: ARTIS LANE’S SOJOURNER TRUTH BUST

Imbuing another sacred place in the American landscape with a nuanced legacy of slavery is a portrait bust of Sojourner Truth in the United States Capitol, by Artis Lane.¹ The Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton and First Lady Michelle Obama among other dignitaries unveiled Sojourner Truth with a tremendous ceremony at the Capitol Visitor Center’s Emancipation Hall. The portrait bust is the first sculpture of an African American woman to inhabit the Capitol, and its inception was fraught with debates about how and where Americans should remember the suffragist and abolitionist.²

While a slave history seems to meet the urban crossroads without much contestation, a similar history at the nation’s Capitol incurred opposition. Swing Low used the history of slavery as a demonstration of blacks’ determination through adversity, which became a useful metaphor for a current community. However, the history of slavery within the Capitol, a politically sacred place, created potential contradictions between the United States’s political ideology of liberty and its past sanctioning of human bondage.

While there are no mandates on racial representation in the Capitol, history reflects the efforts of nineteenth-century statesmen to exclude themes of slavery in its art collection, because of how it could taint the perception of America as a bastion of liberty.

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Barbara Wolanin, curator of the Capitol, for graciously allowing me access to the archives related to Sojourner Truth. The only other sculpture of an African American in the Capitol is a bronze bust by John Wilson of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1985) in the Rotunda. Congress recently commissioned a sculpture of Rosa Parks for the Capitol.

² The debate began with the placement of Portrait Monument (1920), by Adelaide Johnson into the Capitol Rotunda in 1996. The marble sculpture, which bears the likenesses of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony, acknowledges the suffragist cause and the eventual passing of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave white women the right to vote. Members of the National Congress of Black Women (NCBW), led by C. Dolores Tucker, took umbrage at the exclusion of Sojourner Truth. Subsequently, legislation passed to include a sculpture of Truth in the Capitol, which was funded by the NCBW.
liberty and justice. As discussed earlier, Crawford’s *Freedom* serves as a prime example. However, *Sojourner Truth* and *Freedom* are important counterparts within the Capitol; the former represents the past and the latter representing the future, and a trajectory of historical inclusion.

The bust portrait of *Sojourner Truth* is over life-size in scale and made of black-patina bronze. The surface is smooth and polished, displaying fine details and attention to various textures, such as hair, knitted fabrics, and skin. Lane used Truth’s extant carte-de-visite, or calling cards, as the inspiration for her deft depiction. She idealizes Truth’s depiction, noting that she sat for her carte-de-visite portraits late in her life, after slavery and inhumane living conditions had ravaged her tall and slender frame. As a result, Lane garnered inspiration from the svelte physique of tennis star Venus Williams. Lane imagined that Truth’s body had a similar build and proportions before an arthritic condition caused her to rely on canes to support her frame.\(^3\)

In the sculpture, Truth stares straight ahead with a gaze that interacts with and engages the audience. The bonnet on her head is characteristic of the period, and it reveals the front portion of Truth’s coiffed hair. Lane commits a sensitive rendering of Truth’s physiognomy through the curved fullness of her mouth, the crest of her cheekbones, and the arc of her nostrils. Truth’s expression bears a *Mona Lisa* (Leonardo, c. 1603-1605) like ambiguity. While the corners of her mouth turn upward, Truth does not wear a grin, but a peaceful and dignified expression. Truth’s graceful face leads into a long neck, which the mock-neck collar of her blouse partially obscures. Lane truncated the bust’s arms at the shoulders, placing the bodily emphasis on the

\(^3\) Artis Lane, interview by author, telephone conversation, October 20, 2009. I would also like to thank Ms. Artis Lane for providing me with great insight into her artistic vision for *Sojourner Truth*. 

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fringed shawl, which Truth wears in several of her carte-de-visite portraits. The bust ends under the bosom, with a tapered waist. Although Lane took creative liberties when sculpting with the portrait bust, she essentially remained faithful to the images Truth orchestrated.

Truth had a self-conscious awareness of how others manipulated her image for monetary gain. Therefore, she began to commission small carte-de-visite portraits that would visually situate her as a middle-class matron in the eyes of her audience. Using elegant clothing, hairstyles, backgrounds, and props, such as books and knitting needles, she was able to achieve her goal.\(^4\) The carte-de-visite portraits were a direct reaction to “The Libyan Sibyl” an article by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896), author of the famous anti-slavery tome *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Stowe wrote the article as a way to buttress the extravagant lifestyle that she afforded with the commercial success of her earlier novel.\(^5\) Stowe’s article purposefully ascribed erroneous attributes to Truth, such as a Southern dialect. The attribution is rather absurd considering Truth’s first language was Dutch. The New York native learned English later, but never rid herself of the Dutch accent.\(^6\) However, Stowe was trying to appeal to a popular audience who could readily conflate the South via dialect with slavery. Truth’s speech and deportment contradicted the stereotype that Stowe wished to exploit.

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6 Painter, 7.
Stowe’s verbal description of Truth inspired an allegorical sculpture by expatriate artist William Wetmore Story (1819-1895). Stowe wrote: “The history of Sojourner Truth worked in his mind and led him into the deeper recesses of the African nature, those unexplored depths of being and feeling, mighty and dark as the gigantic depths of tropical forests, mysterious as the hidden rivers and mines of that burning continent whose life-history is yet to be.”

*Libyan Sibyl* (1860-1868) depicts a Neo-classically rendered seated female figure draped with a cloth on the lower-half of her body; the upper-half remains uncovered, which exposes her breasts. Although the physical attributes of the sculpture belie the conjured African allegory and its association with Truth, the name Libya became an allegory for all of Africa and its descendants. The sculpture and article assigned features to Truth that would align with the prevailing colonial nineteenth-century discourse of Africa as an exotic, untamed, and sexualized place. Ironically, both Stowe and Story hoped “to see the day when … the *Libyan Sibyl* shall adorn the Capitol at Washington.” However, their hopes never materialized and nearly one hundred fifty years later, a bust inspired by Truth’s self-imaging now occupies the Capitol.

*Libyan Sibyl* was a flattering and complementary point of view for Story and Stowe. They occupied a specific social class in which they would appreciate such a neoclassical representation. To be sure, the body of the *Libyan Sibyl* is an elegant and beautiful rendering of an allegorical body. In contrast to other nineteenth-century sculptures that referenced slavery, the *Libyan Sibyl* is unique in that the body the figure does not kneel, but it reclines. The body is not laboring but resting in contemplation.

7 Stowe, 480-481.
8 Ibid, 481.
She does not wear shackles or chains as restraints. The only chains on her body hold an adornment – the Star of David.

Neoclassicism prevailed among audiences in the nineteenth-century United States. Sculptures like the *Libyan Sibyl* were often laudatory allegorical associations to contemporary subjects, which honored the actual subject. Neoclassicism relied upon allegory and mythology to justify nudity for a Puritanical audience in the United States. Nudity in reference to the black body during the nineteenth century was a symbol of the commodified body. In various stated of undress, slaves stood on platforms as potential buyers inspected the slaves’ body parts to ensure that their purchases would bring them the most profit. In this instance, the body on the platform is a gross instance of dehumanization. In parallel, Story’s *Libyan Sybil* also commodifies the black body in marble on a pedestal and assigns it Sojourner Truth’s identity. Truth was no more than a commodity for Story and Stowe as both artists had plans for the literary and sculptural trope that would give them both financial gains. Story desired that the sculpture adorn the Capitol, which would boost his career and provide remuneration.

Harriet Beecher Stowe also stood to gain profit for her creation of Truth in her *Atlantic Monthly* article. She used her previous success in writing about slavery in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and created another slave fiction gleaned from her own racial stereotypes of and an interview with Sojourner Truth. The visual and literary culture of slavery was as much of a commodity as the actual slave body. Story and Stowe harvested from an abundant crop that would satiate the demand of ravenous consumers – abolitionists and sympathizing Northerners. In turn, Truth felt an
imperative to wrest her public image from fictionalized accounts, similar to the way she took possession of her physical body from her “owners” in Upstate New York. The sculpture and article negate Truth’s story, which was the very type of usurpation of her identity and person that made her so anxious about self-representation. Stowe took tremendous liberties when she wrote her article, “Sojourner Truth, the Libyan Sibyl” for *Atlantic Monthly* in 1860. Painter explains: “…Stowe made mistakes, some careless, some contrived: She wrote, for instance, that Truth had come from Africa, and, even though Truth was very much alive and active in Washington, D.C., at the time, that she was dead. (Truth did not die until 1883.) For all her misstatements, Stowe provided Truth with the identity that would cling to her until late in the nineteenth century.”

The *Libyan Sybil* fits a classist association with a national issue that skirts the boundaries of slavery’s discourse without actually touching the issue. Michelangelo’s *Libyan Sybil* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is the most famous example of the mythological character. Michelangelo illustrates the prophetess mourning for humanity after it has turned away from reason and collapsed into a state of ignorance. In its most simple comparison, Michelangelo’s *Sybil* and Story’s *Libyan Sybil* both mourn the decay of society due to ignorance. The actual myth of Sibyl in reference to Truth explains why depicting Africa as a half-clothed, reclining figure turning her back on a book does not fit Truth. Mere contemplation and mourning did not end slavery. Truth was very much an active part of agitating for abolition. A major component of her sojourns involved speaking and selling books that would persuade audiences to reject slavery. Unlike Stowe and Story whose motivation was built on commercial gain, there was substance

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9 Painter, 447.
behind the image or in Truth’s own words: “I sell the shadow to support the substance.”
For Truth, the knowledge was in the book, and she was responsible for disseminating it.
Story and Stowe’s characterization of Truth as the *Libyan Sybil* depends on her turning
her back on her own truth. Therefore, Truth had to control the truths (or falsities in
Stowe’s case). In several of her calling cards, she ensures that books are among the
props included in her portrait. Rather than passively mourning a society, she actively
declares social and religious truths. Hence her adopted name: Sojourner Truth.

In order to ascertain Truth’s anxiety about naming and identity, a closer
examination of her biography is necessary. Before there was an abolitionist and
suffragist that we now know as Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), a woman named Isabella
walked away from slavery after her owner broke his promise to free her in 1826. Her
original owners initially separated Isabella from her parents at the age of nine, and by
the time she was free in 1826, five different families had enslaved Isabella in upstate
New York. Her mother taught her “The Lord’s Prayer” in Dutch, which Isabella recalled
as spiritual sustenance throughout the earlier part of her life. Abject hardship and
abuse compelled Isabella to call upon her limited knowledge of God and seek a greater
understanding of spiritual matters.\(^\text{10}\)

Her quest for spiritual knowledge led her to the Matthias Kingdom. Although the
group later revealed itself to be a religious cult founded by a corrupt leader, Isabella’s
time with the Matthias Kingdom, helped her to discover her own capacity and fervor for
preaching. After the dismantling of the Matthias Kingdom and a brief stay in New York
City, Isabella changed her name to Sojourner Truth on the day of Pentecost in June

\(^{10}\) Olive Gilbert and Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, (Boston: Printed for the Author, 1850)
1843.\textsuperscript{11} Her new name identified her as a preacher of truth who was on an odyssey through her mortal life to get to heaven. Truth travelled, sermonized, and sold copies of her biography and calling cards until the 1870s.\textsuperscript{12} She used her voice to advocate for the full rights of all American citizens. Truth’s life exhibits a dramatic transformation from a woman born without legal rights and treated as chattel into a self-possessed woman, empowered through her awareness of Pentecostal Christian faith. Her conversion and her freedom were her treasured possessions; thus, Story and Stowe’s manipulation of Truth’s identity resulted in an ideological enslavement. Truth was fervent about protecting all manners of her personal freedom.

A legacy of political activism and engagement with abolition and women’s rights is the legacy that Artis Lane recalled as she produced the portrait bust of Sojourner Truth. Her familial descent echoes and enriches the meaning of Truth’s portrait bust. She is a descendant of Abraham Doras Shadd (1801-1882) a free black shoemaker. Shadd committed his life to the abolitionist cause, serving on the board of managers in William Lloyd Garrison’s American Anti-Slavery Society. The first of his thirteen children, Mary Ann Shadd (Cary) (1823-1891) followed her father’s example; she was an outspoken activist, educator, and founder of a newspaper, \textit{Provincial Freeman}. After the implementation of The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Shadds emigrated from the United States to Canada West (now Ontario) and continued to educate and advocate for the equality of blacks and women.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Painter, \textit{Sojourner Truth}, 73.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 4.
In 1927, Artis Shreve Lane was born in North Buxton, Ontario, Canada, which was one of the towns founded by blacks that fled to Canada after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law. At a young age, Lane's family recognized her artistic talent, when she began sculpting the clay in her yard into the images of her schoolmates and dolls. Lane describes herself as a focused and serious youngster. With that focus, she received several accolades for her sculptures and earned entry to the Ontario College of Art and the University of Toronto. She married soon after, and then transferred to The Cranbrook Academy in Michigan to be near her husband, who was then Bill Lane. In Michigan, she secured important commissions to paint local political figures.

Lane eventually divorced and moved to Los Angeles, California, where she continued her education at UCLA, and she continued to work as a portrait artist. Although Lane does not like this portion of her career to be emphasized, it is a crucial body of work in American art. She has painted notable figures in American cultural, historical, and political life, and her portrait bronzes and paintings are important documents to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her bronze portrait of Rosa Parks (1991) is in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, and she fashioned a Congressional Medal of Honor with Parks’s likeness in 1999. Despite the importance of her portraits, Lane prefers to emphasize her sculptures that examine the transcendent qualities of the human experience.

Artis Lane shaped Truth’s likeness in bronze with knowledge of Truth’s belief in the transformative power of the divine, which is a theme that suffuses her oeuvre. Lane, a follower of Christian Science, emphasizes the idea of the spiritual journey in her work.

14 The list of notables includes Oprah Winfrey, Stevie Wonder, Earvin “Magic” Johnson, Quincy Jones, Ronald Reagan, Barbara Bush, and Hilary Rodham Clinton.
She believes in the “concept of the Universal Mind, an intangible, unbounded life energy...that underlies all objective experience”\textsuperscript{15} For *Emerging Woman* (1990), Lane casted two identical, standing, nude, female figures. The bodies in both sculptures are muscular, and the poses emphasize the taut physiques. Their hands rest on their hips, and their arms press back, bent at the elbows. In each sculpture weight rests on one leg; the other leg is bent, and the foot rests on the opposite calf, reminiscent of a yogic standing tree pose. Citing El Greco’s mannerist lengthening of the body among her multifarious influences, Lane intends the body to demonstrate elongation and elegance that are characteristic of all of Lane’s human figures. One of the bronze sculptures in the *Emerging Woman* pair remains in the transitional form of the casting process, with shards of ceramic obscuring the bronze. The other sculpture in the pair possesses the polished surface and attention to detail that is characteristic of Lane’s work. The dichotomous pair of sculptures represents a spiritual transition from the flawed to the ideal being. The *Emerging Into Spirit* Series is an artistic embodiment of a spiritual journey and destination. Because of her family history and her artistic sensitivity to humanity’s spiritual journey, Lane conceived a portrait bust of physical and metaphysical importance.

\textsuperscript{15} Marlena Donohue, “Essay: Artis Lane,” Artis Lane, http://artislane.com/essay/essay.html (accessed May 22, 2009). “Biography,” Artis Lane, http://artislane.com/bio/bio.html (accessed May 22, 2009). Lane, interview. Seeking a way to convey the idea of the human essence in her art despite the physicality of her primary material, bronze, Lane reached an artistic revelation as she observed a sculpture in its transformative stages. Their unrefined state impressed her as they were still enrobed in the outer ceramic coating that covers the bronze in the casting process. The unrefined bronzes revealed a metaphor for the human process of spiritual awakening. The outcome of Lane’s experience was the series *Emerging Into Spirit*. The sculptures function like religious medieval diptychs, which are two hinged panels that convey a biblical narrative for private devotion. Although in three-dimensional form, Lane’s *Emerging* figures function in a like manner. She forgoes the physical hinge that typically connects two images in a diptych for an ideological connection that the viewer must arrive at through contemplation.
Lane’s conception of Truth’s portrait captures the beauty and veracity of the human form, as well as the spiritual journey that made her a national icon worthy of representation in the Capitol. The sculpture is a beautiful likeness and powerful image, but she would like to extend the truncated arms and display more of the body, accentuating Truth’s height. Eventually, she hopes to recast Truth’s portrait to reflect the physical height discussed in Truth’s biography and evident in her carte-de-visite.\footnote{Lane, interview.}

Lane’s portrait bust of Sojourner Truth stands in stark contrast to \textit{Freedom}, Thomas Crawford’s syncretic allegory that presides over the Capitol’s dome and Emancipation Hall. Lane provides a representation of a woman transformed from the bonds of slavery. Truth’s bust portrait ended the exclusion of the history of slavery from the Capitol’s commemorating history. \textit{Freedom} provides a fruitful juxtaposition between the past and the future of America’s racial politics. As First Lady Michelle Obama remarked at \textit{Sojourner Truth’s} unveiling:

\begin{quote}
I hope that Sojourner Truth would be proud to see me, a descendant of slaves, serving as the First Lady of the United States of America...The power of this bust will not just be in the metal that delineates Sojourner Truth’s face; it will also be in the message that defines her legacy. Forevermore, in the halls of one of our country’s greatest monuments of liberty and equality, justice and freedom, Sojourner’s Truth story will be told again and again.\footnote{Michelle Obama, Remarks, “The Sojourner Truth Bust Unveiling.” The White House, Office of the First Lady (April 28, 2009) \url{http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-First-Lady-at-the-Sojourner-Truth-Bust-Unveiling/} (accessed June 26, 2010).}
\end{quote}

Indeed, the bust provides a significant narrative within the Capitol that reflects the nation’s progress in projecting a more inclusive national heritage.
CHAPTER 4
WHERE THE CORNER MEETS THE CAPITOL: CONTRAST AND COMPARISON

Comparison of Sojourner Truth and Swing Low

Artis Lane and Alison Saar confronted issues of racial representation as they depicted nineteenth-century black women through the lens of the twenty-first century. The emergence of pseudoscientific research in the nineteenth-century sought to prove that blacks were mentally and physically inferior to whites. Photographic “evidence” obtained in the course of these pseudoscientific studies became the basis for caricatures, advertisements, and ultimately fine art.¹ The pseudoscientific research attempted to differentiate races as different species, and through classification and hierarchization, these studies promoted the notion of European superiority.

Scientists also attached morality and intelligence to physiognomy in the nineteenth century. Studies in phrenology maintained that blacks possessed an inherently corrupted character and inferior intellect, due to their race. Comparative biology was also a burgeoning field in the nineteenth century. Consequently, the black female body became visually synonymous to the body of the prostitute, mainly because of a Eurocentric perception of African features.² The race prejudice that had rationalized the existence of chattel slavery and tainted visual treatments of the black body in nineteenth-century sculpture, dissolved in the hands of black female artists. Lane and Saar’s artistic processes subvert the nineteenth-century perception of the black female body as enslaved, and that ideological subversion connects Saar’s representation of

Harriet Tubman on a Harlem corner and Lane’s depiction of Sojourner Truth in the Capitol.

Even in her own lifetime, Sojourner Truth was active in projecting a visual identity in the American public that contradicted the prevailing attitudes about blackness in American culture. Images that Truth did not self-fashion often aligned her with prevailing racial stereotypes. William Wetmore Story and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s depictions of Truth as a Libyan Sibyl sought to exoticize Truth and appeal to their audiences for their own monetary and occupational gains. Lane reflects Truth’s subversion of nineteenth-century racial stereotypes of the black body in her twenty-first century depiction.

The bust is also markedly different from the frontispiece in Truth’s biography. Painter notes that although the frontispiece was allegedly based upon a photograph, it was not; the unknown artist created the image from memory or imagination. The headscarf that the portrait of Truth wears in the frontispiece serves a different function than the bonnets that Truth wore in her calling cards. The scarf identifies her as a servant within a domestic space or a field hand, while the bonnet situates her as a middle-class matron. Lane did not seek The Libyan Sibyl or the frontispiece print in Truth’s Narrative as inspiration for the portrait bust. As a result, Lane avoided the nineteenth-century stereotypes. Lane used extant calling cards as a model for the portrait bust. In addition, her knowledge of her own family history, which included women who occupied a similar class and social station in the nineteenth century, further


5 Ibid, 198.
informed her representation of Truth’s wardrobe. Lane’s emphasis on the extant archives about Truth destabilizes nineteenth-century notions of race and social status.

By beginning her artistic process similarly to Lane’s archival methods, Saar avoided nineteenth-century stereotypes by modeling *Swing Low* from extant images of Harriet Tubman. However, Saar used photographs as one point of departure, and she later inserted several conceptual elements of Tubman’s biography to create a hybrid image that becomes more of a narrative than a mimetic portrait. She included elements from the frontispiece in *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, and altered it in meaningful ways.\(^6\) Saar notes that she removed the gun because she believed that Tubman’s cultural legacy was more powerful and meaningful to the community in Harlem. Moreover, the implication of an armed woman in an urban area has much different tones than it did when Tubman was serving in the Union Army during the Civil War.\(^7\) Saar’s decision to forgo the gun, while using several other elements from the frontispiece, marks the difference between militant self-determination and meaningless gun violence that has plagued urban neighborhoods for decades. However, because of the reference to the train, and the narrative to which it alludes, Saar still evokes the message of progression and self-determination in *Swing Low*.

The solemn expressions in *Swing Low* and the Sojourner Truth bust also belie nineteenth-century stereotypes. In the nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, one of the most pervading features of caricatures of blacks is the wide, persistent grin. While a smile may seem innocuous on the surface, it is a marker of subservience to the

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7 Elizabeth Ross, PhD (School of Art and Art History, University of Florida), conversation with the author, April 14, 2010.
Eurocentric project of chattel slavery and dehumanization. Moreover, the smile is a performative tool, or mask, that “grins and lies” and hides “torn and bleeding hearts,” as poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar laments.⁸

The smile was also a mark of humiliation that Toni Morrison used as a metaphor in her neo-slave narrative, Beloved.⁹ The protagonist, Sethe, remembers her mother in a bit, a device designed to control horses and facilitate human torture during slavery. The bit’s design was intended for a horse; thus, its frequent use upon Sethe’s mother forced her to have a permanent grin. Sethe’s recollection of her mother surfaced when she prostituted herself to buy her daughter’s headstone. Before her economic situation collapsed enough to drive her to permanent prostitution, Sethe got a job as a cook, which left her able to smile on her own.¹⁰ The smile, which she noticed the other prostitutes bearing, was the coping mechanism she adopted to mask her humiliation. In nineteenth-century slave culture, torture, pain, and humiliation intertwine with smiling as a survival mechanism. Consequently, Saar and Lane’s use of solemn expressions is a counteractive strategy to the painful nineteenth century legacy.

The clothing is another way in which the artists maintained autonomy from the stereotypes of the nineteenth-century. Both artists drew inspiration from their subject’s clothing in extant images. They embody the women’s “reality” in ways that reflect their research and attention to their subjects.

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The gazes of both sculptures are also an important element to contemplate when considering similarities between the sculptures of Tubman and Truth. The gazes in both sculptures are intently focused and aware in ways that engage the audience. The sculptures' scales and upright stances encourage viewers to look up at rather than down upon the women. The gazes in *Sojourner Truth* and *Swing Low* create an interactive space that calls nineteenth-century persistence of representing the black body into question.

Both artists also consciously decided to use bronze. Initially, the sponsoring organization, NCBW, desired that Lane work on the existing white marble sculpture *Portrait Monument* (1909) by Adelaide Johnson, to align her with a suffragist history. Previous scholarship has outlined the complications of using white marble to depict African American subjects. African American subjects depicted in marble often elicit dogmatic ideological assumptions concerning racial purity and cultural ethnocentrism. Lane uses bronze as her primary material throughout her oeuvre, and she wanted to use it in Truth’s bust, because it served as an important racial signifier to identify the first sculpture of an African American woman in the Capitol. Moreover, Lane objected to the artistic and creative limitations of working on a completed sculpture of another artist, as well as on the moral grounds of such a proposition. Additionally, Lane and the Capitol curator believed that someone of Truth’s stature needed a sculpture of her own.

Saar’s use of bronze reflects her use of found metal that she has employed throughout her entire body of work. Saar’s process ensures that the patina emphasizes

the artifacts in the skirt, which alludes to the presence of found object in a new sculpture.

_Swing Low_ and _Sojourner Truth_ speak to their respective environments on the corner and in the Capitol. The reclamation of the voice is an important aspect of subverting a patronizing aesthetic in the nineteenth century. bell hooks acknowledges the ability to speak as a crucial aspect to projects such as Saar and Lane’s, which re-present a once enslaved body as free:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of ‘talking back,’ that is not mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject –the liberated voice.\(^{12}\)

Saar has an artistic background in outdoor sculptures. Therefore, her sculptures speak with an outside voice. That is, she uses an approach that engages several senses, while acknowledging various histories. The surroundings contribute to the overall theme of _Swing Low_. It conveys a sense of sound and movement that one would expect in an urban landscape.

On the other hand, _Sojourner Truth_ can be described as speaking with an inside voice. Lane tailored the bust’s composition to the Capitol’s environment and the solemnity it commands. Lane is familiar with this mode of representation, because she has portrayed countless dignitaries for federal and royal spaces. Her sensitivity to her subjects’ social stations imbues Truth with a regal, confident air. The bust and _Swing

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Low intersect in their intentions to belie a nineteenth-century history, while simultaneously honoring their surroundings.

**Contrast between *Swing Low* and *Sojourner Truth* of the Twenty-First Century and Emancipation Sculpture of the Nineteenth-Century**

Stagnant racial attitudes and a reluctance to change ideology in the face of the momentous events influenced Emancipation sculpture of the nineteenth-century. Saar and Lane’s sculptures acknowledge ideological change with artistic conventions that deny an enslaved status on the black body.

The masked racial tensions and allusions to slavery in *Freedom* foreshadow the denial of blacks’ access to the benefits of American citizenship. Jefferson Davis’s input into Crawford’s use of iconography ensured that viewers could not confuse *Freedom* for a sculpture about abolition or emancipation. Inherently conflicted as a slaveholder, Davis had an economic agenda that kept him from acknowledging that blacks could be citizens. If his “property” became citizens, his unpaid source of labor would cease to exist. Therefore, *Freedom* had to represent the plight of white Americans, without ambiguity. The anonymity of the slaves in *Forever Free* maintains the denial of identity and personhood. The bust of Sojourner Truth serves as a productive counterpart to *Freedom* in Emancipation Hall.\(^\text{13}\) The addition of the bust undermines Davis’s blatant desire to conceal race and the history of slavery within the nation’s narrative, and displays the contributions of black citizens of the United States.

*Emancipation Group* and *Forever Free* reflect one of the most troubling aspects of nineteenth-century sculptures concerning slavery and Emancipation in that they

\(^{13}\) A plaster cast of *Freedom* stands in Emancipation Hall, adjacent to the bronze portrait bust of Sojourner Truth.
represent the black body as inherently enslaved. At its unveiling in 1876, the keynote speaker, Frederick Douglas commented that *Emancipation Group* “showed the Negro on his knees when a more manly attitude would have been indicative of freedom.” In representing the chained, kneeling body, the sculptures maintain an inferior status of blacks within the memorial landscape and in neo-classical sculpture. In both sculptures, a man offers his chains to a source that will release him from bondage. The issue at stake in these depictions is the public perpetuation of the fallacy of blacks’ passivity in their Emancipation.

The anonymity and lack of clothing of the slaves depicted in *Forever Free* contribute to the debased status of the black body in nineteenth-century sculpture. *Forever Free* also leaves the bodies chained and shackled. The chains subtly allude to a continued racial caste through Jim Crow laws. *Forever Free* denies the potential social progress of Emancipation by continuing to represent a chained slave, rather than developing a new visual vocabulary for race that did not equate blackness with slavery. By denying the slaves an individual identity, and social marking of clothing, Lewis perpetuated a lack of subjectivity and promoted blacks as objects.

*Emancipation Group* also conveys issues of identity in terms of the black model, and the figure’s lack of clothing. Ball portrays the kneeling slave beside a whipping post, wearing a loincloth, which leaves the majority of his body uncovered. The figure’s hand reaches to grasp the chains. Classical sculpture typically focuses on the idealized


15 Judith Wilson and Kirsten Buick offer feminist readings of *Forever Free*, in which the chained, kneeling female figure in reference to the chained, standing male represents the adoption of American gender mores that would continue the oppression of black women.
human form as a site of moral contemplation, but the slave’s kneeling position in
contrast to Lincoln's clothed body and upright position are incongruous. The body’s
kneeling and supplicant posture only underscores a continued reliance on the
intellectual capital and guidance of a master rather than self-determination.
Additionally, Ball expressed discomfort concerning the use of a black model: he “was
not good enough to compensate for the unpleasantness of being obliged to conduct him
through our apartments.” Ball eventually used his own body as a model for
Emancipation Group. The face of a fugitive slave becoming the model was a
coincidence rather than a purposeful attempt to identify the man depicted, because Ball
did not know that Archer Alexander was a fugitive slave Because of the dress and
positioning of the bodies in Emancipation Group, Ball visually represents a racial and
social hierarchy.

The twentieth-century examples of sculpture forgo the emphasis of the body as a
tool. That is, the slave body ceases to represent a lower function of unrewarded toil and
forced labor. The clothed, shod body replaces the semi-nude, barefoot body that belies
any potential agency in society beyond the use of the physical body. Swing Low and
Sojourner Truth refer to actual historical figures, and their clothing functions as an

16 Thomas Ball, My Three Score Years and Ten (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891), 253, quoted in
Nelson, 36.

17 Thomas Ball's original name for the sculpture was Lincoln and a Kneeling Slave. After ex-slaves
collected funds to raise a statue in Lincoln's honor, Ball's role in the sculpture becoming a memorial was
enlarging his original half, life-sized sculpture to nine feet; Murray, 26-32. Ball used a photograph of
Archer Alexander, a fugitive slave, as the facial model for the slave in the sculpture. I would like to thank
Dr. Craig Friend (North Carolina State University, Raleigh) for addressing the significance of the model at
Alexander, from Slavery to Freedom March 30, 1863, (Boston: Cupples, Upham and Company, 1885),
http://books.google.com/books?id=c7pEAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=%22The+Life+of+Archer+A
nder+from+Slavery+to+Freedom%22&source=gbs_similarbooks_s&cad=1#v=onepage&q&f=false
(accessed June 18, 2010).
important marker of their roles and social statuses. Truth ascended from slavery to become an orator and a middle-class matron. She wore her carefully coifed hair under a bonnet and a shawl around her shoulders. Tubman was an active figure in the Underground Railroad, and Saar made visual references to her role throughout the sculpture. In both sculptures, chains and shackles remain broken and separate from the body. Clothing and identity function dually to signify the social status of African Americans in sculpture concerning slavery and Emancipation.

As much as the sculptures of the nineteenth century attempts to maintain the status quo, and the sculpture of the twenty-first century seeks to progress the master narrative of slavery and Emancipation. Sojourner Truth and Swing Low reflect a future for blacks within American society, while Emancipation sculpture of the nineteenth-century reflects the desired stasis of American racial customs. Swing Low and Sojourner Truth offer timely and effective additions to the memorial landscape and American sculpture. Saar and Lane deny idealization and neoclassicism for styles and materials that denote racial specificity, while still acknowledging the European origins of heroic sculptures with the heights and stances. Moreover, their styles incorporate aspects of African American culture that acknowledge an American art form that is no longer self-conscious about racial and cultural purity. Swing Low and Sojourner Truth are an amalgamation of influences that reflect the hybrid nature of American culture, thus creating a new visual iconography that reflects blacks’ agency in their Emancipation.
CHAPTER 5
FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT IN SLAVERY AND EMANCIPATION’S COMMEMORATIVE SCULPTURE AND THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSGRESSING NINETEENTH-CENTURY RACIAL DOGMA

So, dear brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, we are children of the free woman.

--Galatians 4:31 (New Living Translation)

American Africanisms in the Nineteenth-Century Commemorative Landscape of Emancipation and Slavery

Slavery, as I discussed earlier, yielded a strange form of representation of the black body in the nineteenth-century American commemorative landscape. Toni Morrison writes that artists “tell other stories, fight secret wars, (and) limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their” medium.¹ That is to say, the artists’ works become subliminal conveyors of philosophies, narratives, and political beliefs. Morrison goes on to describe a peculiar form of American Africanisms that exist in American cultural production. American Africanisms produce a self-conscious presence and simultaneous masking or an invisible juxtaposition, in which the black body becomes the ideological buttress for the white body politic that is present. The prevailing narrative associated with the politics of the white body in the nineteenth-century was the guarantee of personal liberties and rights. Morrison proposes, “Nothing highlighted freedom—if it did not in fact create it—like slavery.”² That is to say, the African and African American presence in the United States gave rise to the ideals that ensured the freedom of white citizens.

² Ibid, 38.
American Africanisms insisted that the “black body (maintain) a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” through imposed invisibility.\textsuperscript{3} As the country approached Civil War, the self-conscious desire to mask blackness and slavery became an unfettered anxiety, which is evident in the multiple revisions of Crawford’s \textit{Freedom}. Jefferson Davis requested that Crawford remove any signs of potential abolitionist sympathies because “American Liberty is original and not the liberty of the freed slave.”\textsuperscript{4} Davis disavowed that his ownership of slaves was a denial of liberty. This is an obvious paradox, but it is unlikely that it affected his beliefs. The structure of slavery was such that Davis maintained a belief in racial superiority that justified slavery, because in his eyes blacks were not sufficiently human and therefore rightfully born enslaved.

When the black body was present, like in \textit{Emancipation Group}, it conveyed silence and acquiescence to its lack of authority. The slave depicted had no sign of a future or a legacy, besides eternal servitude. The figure seems like a peripheral consequence to Emancipation. Moreover, the supplicant posture, chains, and bodily focus allude to the continued expectation of labor from African Americans. The expectation is apparent in Lincoln’s 1863 document, which states: “I recommend to them that, in all cases allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.”\textsuperscript{5} He also gives blacks permission to defend themselves when necessary and to join the armed services. However, without the rights of citizenship, which occurred in 1868 with the ratification of the fourteenth amendment,

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\textsuperscript{3} Ibid, 10. \\
\textsuperscript{4} Fryd, \textit{Art and Empire}, 188. \\
\textsuperscript{5} Abraham Lincoln, “The Emancipation Proclamation,” January 1, 1863.
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blacks were still subject to exploitation.\(^6\) The focus of Lincoln’s 1863 directives to blacks is the laboring black body, which was legally free, but not guaranteed the rights of American citizens.

The kneeling and submissive posture reflected a reliance on paternalism that is also apparent in *Forever Free*, as the woman kneels and the man stands, gazing toward some external source of authority. That paternalism contradicts the active contributions of black soldiers, abolitionists, and others towards Emancipation. The legacy of paternalism in these sculptures marginalizes the voice of African Americans and makes their contributions peripheral, and their trajectory hopeless outside of the paternal presence.

Nevertheless, paternalism had its cruel limits. At the unveiling of Ball’s *Emancipation Group*, Frederick Douglass remarked that the status of African Americans was “at best only (as) step-children; children by adoption, children by force of circumstances and necessity.”\(^7\) Douglass provided scathing criticism of Lincoln’s political intentions, because he believed Lincoln harbored prejudice and his intentions were never in the interest of helping slaves. Although it was a well-intentioned gift from freedmen and women, Douglass referred to the memorial as offering to allay accusations that blacks were ungrateful for their freedom.\(^8\)

The legacy of a benign Liberator and passive slaves has much at stake in the commemorative landscape of slavery and Emancipation in the United States. The

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\(^6\) U.S. Constitution, amend. 14, sec. 1-2. Even after the ratification of the fourteenth amendment, de facto racism prevailed until *Plessy v. Ferguson* (163 U.S. 537; 1896), made segregation constitutional.

\(^7\) Douglass, “Oration,” 5.

\(^8\) Ibid, 15.
nineteenth-century projection of Lincoln benevolently and deliberately freeing slaves
distorts the narrative of Emancipation and silences the voices of those who were agent
in their own freedom and resistance against the inhumanity of slavery. Lincoln’s decree
played an important role, but it is not the entire story. The Emancipation Proclamation is
only a thread within an intricate tapestry of this aspect of American history.

The Oppositional Aesthetic

African Americans faced the difficult task of claiming their lives. The process of
acclimating oneself to freedom after being someone’s property was potentially
destabilizing. Morrison addresses this issue of the displaced body through Sethe, the
protagonist in Beloved, who says that she had to claim herself bit by bit because,
“freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.”9 In a
clearing, within a forest Sethe was able to reclaim her ravaged and tortured body,
listening to sermons by her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. In each meeting, Baby Suggs
told her congregation to love themselves; in each beseeching statement, she addressed
a different body part. Of the hands she said, “And O my people they do not love your
hands. Those they only use, tie, chop off, and leave empty. Love your hands! Love
them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together.”10 With
each revelation of her body as her own, Sethe came closer to claiming her freed self.

In Tubman’s biography, Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman, she conveys her
revelation of freedom by observing her hands. When she had safely crossed the border
into the free state of Pennsylvania she said, “I looked at my hands to see if I was the

9 Morrison, Beloved, 112.
10 Ibid, 103-104.
same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven.”

Tubman had to examine her hands, her appendages that were once the property of another person, to see if they were the same. In a transcendent moment, Tubman was able to recognize that her body was different, even though it looked the same. The heavenly, golden glow was her revelation of freedom.

The importance of *Swing Low* and *Sojourner Truth* is that they convey a complex narrative of transformation and the embodiment of freedom—mentally, physically, and spiritually. Saar and Lane’s representations deny the paternalism so prevalent in nineteenth-century commemorative sculpture concerning Emancipation and slavery. Both yield an oppositional aesthetic that is imperative to disturbing the master(’s) narrative.

In three crucial ways, the current memorial landscape seeks to oppose the nineteenth-century aesthetic of slavery. First, it ceases to represent an enslaved black body. In *Forever Free* and *Emancipation Group*, the chains persist. The audience is less likely to interpret the figures in *Swing Low* and *Sojourner Truth* as slaves, because they lack a posture of supplication. Blackness in the twenty-first century is less likely to represent a coded language, or American Africanism, for slave. The artists represented moments in their subjects’ lives that reflect their self-fashioned identities: Tubman returning South to aid fugitive slaves and Truth posing in images that she orchestrated to take authority over her public persona.

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Second, the artists infuse their subjects with a voice that is absent in nineteenth-century depictions of the black body. The voice is especially apparent in *Swing Low*, as spirituals play an integral role in the sculpture. In his narrative, Frederick Douglass contends that in spirituals “every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.”\(^\text{12}\) The spirituals represent opposition to slavery, though coded in religious piety, which supplants the myth of black passivity in the abolitionist cause. The songs in *Swing Low* incite possibilities of freedom. More importantly, they convey the slaves’ intention of having a future without slavery.

Third, the figures in *Swing Low* and *Sojourner Truth* look back; they engage viewers with their gazes. In doing so, they reclaim space within the commemorative landscape. As bell hooks explains, the gaze upsets the “politics of slavery, of racialized power relations…that (denied) the slaves…the right to gaze.”\(^\text{13}\) The function of the gaze is two-fold in *Swing Low* and *Sojourner Truth*. It restores the black subjects’ agency in the social realm, as people rather than objects. Moreover, the gaze represents the subjects’ ability to imagine and seek their destinies.

Bit by bit, contemporary artists have created an aesthetic in which the subjects depicted claim their freed selves, in opposition to the nineteenth-century representation of the slave in a perpetually enslaved state. Artis Lane and Alison Saar represent Truth and Tubman’s bodies, actions, voices, and gazes in ways that nineteenth-century representations neglected. As a result, contemporary sculpture has altered the narrative

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that nineteenth-century artists projected in the commemorative landscape of Emancipation and slavery for all of posterity.
If I could redo my thesis project, I would approach it with a very different methodology. For the most part my thesis was an independent project until Professor Elizabeth Ross graciously stepped in to help me complete my project. Her vast insight and knowledge base enriched my thesis dramatically. With her guidance, I found a voice of academic authority, and discovered value and potential in a project that had become the bane of my scholarly existence.

Ultimately, I did not intend to make stark contrasts between nineteenth and twentieth century cultural ideologies that surfaced in visual arts across two centuries. Such an examination would be imperceptive and unviable. On the contrary, my intention was to add a new argument to the discussions and controversies previously (and brilliantly) parsed out by Murray, Fryd, Savage, Nelson, and Senie. I intended to provide discussions of two important contemporary sculptural monuments with slavery as their subjects

At my thesis defense, I received valuable feedback. Professor Victoria Rovine remarked that this study would have greatly benefitted from curtailing the discussion of nineteenth-century sculptural monuments and providing additional contemporary artists’ articulations of slavery in monuments and memorials. Professor Robin Poynor identified my tendency to view cultural symbols dogmatically and suggested that my argument explore various possibilities within different contexts. In hindsight, I fully realize that such discussions are imperative. This epilogue is not a disclaimer; nor is it an apology. On the contrary, it is the beginning of a self-dialogue and a meditation on my process as I complete my dissertation.
APPENDIX B
List Of Artworks Cited

Chapter One: Introduction


Chapter Two: The Corner


Chapter Three: The Capitol


———. *Woman*. 1989. Bronze with black patina. 32 ¼” x 15” x 10”. California African American Museum


Chapter Four: Where the Corner Meets the Capitol


APPENDIX B
DISCOGRAPHY


LIST OF REFERENCES


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth Carmel Hamilton earned her Master of Arts in art history from the University of Florida in the summer of 2013, as a McKnight Doctoral Fellow en route to her PhD. She completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts, with a focus on drawing and painting, at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. Currently, she is continuing her coursework in art history towards her PhD, where her research interests include postmodern articulations of blackness and notions of racial authenticity in the arts and visual culture of the African Diaspora in Europe and North America.