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In Minnesota, Listening to Native Perspectives on Memorializing the Dakota War

The outcry over Sam Durant's sculpture at the Walker Art Center has provoked reflections on past memorials for the US–Dakota War, and how Dakota Nation voices continue to be ignored.

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June 16, 2017



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, “Building Minnesota” (1990) (photo courtesy of the artist)

MINNEAPOLIS — In 1990, Cheyenne and Arapaho artist Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds installed a public installation along the Mississippi River on the east side of Downtown Minneapolis called “Building Minnesota,” which recognized the Dakota men who were hung by the United States Government at the end of the US–Dakota War of 1862. Each of the white, metal signs contained one of the names of the men hung in the largest mass execution in the country’s history, known as the Dakota 38 + 2, including the two additional warriors who were hung later under the order of Andrew Johnson. The signs also each contain the phrase “Death by Hanging,” and the name of Abraham Lincoln, who signed the order for the execution, as well as two with Andrew Johnson’s name.

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Not everyone loved the piece. Heap of Birds says that he received criticism because of the negative portrayal of Abraham Lincoln. “They thought it was a betrayal,” he said in a recent interview with Hyperallergic.

On the other hand, a remarkable phenomenon happened. After the piece went up, offerings on the artwork began to appear — sweat lodge ties, peace flags, eagle feathers, and other remembrances. “That showed how much people cared, and that they saw it as a religious, or a medicine place,” Heap of Birds said. The installation became more than a piece of art, but rather a place of healing and remembrance.



One of the ceremonial elders who performed the blessing to install the “Building Minnesota” sculpture in 1990 (image courtesy Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds)

“Building Minnesota” was a part of Heap of Birds’s 1990 exhibition, *Claim Your Color*, at the Walker Art Center. Twenty-seven years later, the Walker would again invoke the Dakota 38 + 2, but this time inspiring anger from the Native and Dakota communities.

This past May, Dakota people, the Native community, as well as local leaders decried the Walker’s decision to install Sam Durant’s “Scaffold” sculpture evoking the Dakota hangings in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden. Prior to the protests, the Walker’s director, Olga Viso, had written a proactive letter saying she had not anticipated how the work would be received by Native audiences. When protests grew, both the artist and director wrote open letters apologizing for installing the piece, with Viso’s letter echoing Durant’s own assertion that “Scaffold” was not intended as a monument.” Durant wrote that the piece “warns against forgetting the past,” and went on to say he had hoped that it would open dialogue and exchange, not only about the past but the future. Viso added that “Scaffold” “invokes white,

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governmental power structures that have controlled and subjugated nations and peoples, especially communities of color, throughout the history of the US.”

There’s no doubt that the piece “opened dialogue” and invoked critique of white power structures. The main white power structure criticized in this situation, however, was the Walker Art Center itself.



A view of the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden with Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen’s “Spoonbridge and Cherry” (1985–88) at right and Sam Durant’s “Scaffold” (2012) at left (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Durant’s piece perhaps acted as a kind of anti-monument, particularly in its setting at the Sculpture Garden in dialogue with Katharina Fritsch’s “Hahn/Cock,” which playfully mocks war monuments, as well as Claes Oldenburg’s “Spoonbridge and Cherry,” its own kind of tongue-in-cheek commentary on traditional monuments.

In “Scaffold,” Durant invoked seven different public executions in US history, including the Dakota 38 + 2, to make commentary about capital punishment. Rather than giving these traumatic events their own weight and remembrance, the artwork was a tool for speaking about a broader political issue.

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Protest signs on the fence near Sam Durant's "Scaffold" (2012) in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden

Sam Wounded Knee, a Dakota man who joined others in occupying the sidewalk near the sculpture in protest, calling for its dismantlement, said the artist and the Walker should have asked permission from the Dakota community first, before referencing such a painful history. "Maybe they could have worked with us," he said. "Yes, we want people to know our history here, but they need to come ask us first, and this is disrespectful. We wouldn't have approved of this."

When the Walker announced that the sculpture would be dismantled in May, the website indicated that the sculpture would be burned in the Fort Snelling area, where the concentration camp was located.

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Dakota workers from Straight Line Construction dismantling Sam Durant’s “Scaffold” in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden last weekend (photo by Sheila Regan/Hyperallergic)

However, Stephanie Hope Smith, the mediator who has been facilitating meetings between the Walker and the Dakota elders, recently indicated on her blog that the elders may decide not to burn the wood, and need more time to decide. Their next meeting is at the end of June.

Both of the public art pieces that the Walker presented in 1990 and 2017 referencing the Dakota 38 + 2 illustrated the need for remembrance of Minnesota’s awful history, which, to this day, festers like a wound both for the Dakota people and for the descendants of the white people who stole the Dakota people’s land and starved them, which caused the war. The atrocities done to the Dakota people in the war’s aftermath, besides the mass execution, included forcing thousands of them into a concentration camp in Fort Snelling, where over 100 died, and banishment from the state. (For more on this history, see the Minnesota Historical Society’s US–Dakota War [website](#).)

The historic trauma that Dakota, along with other Native American groups, experience isn’t something that lives in the abstract. They continue to pay for wrongs done to them over centuries, and experience massive disparities in sectors across the board, including health, education, poverty, and employment.

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Edgar Heap of Birds learned about the Dakota War when he was introduced to a song called “Water in the Rain,” a collaboration between folk singer Larry Long, Heap of Bird’s cousin, Mitch Walking Elk, who is part Dakota and part Arapaho, as well as Dakota elder and spiritual leader Amos Owen, who reads the names of the 38 on the song track.

“They gave me the music to listen to,” Heap of Birds said. “I knew Larry Long already and my cousin is Mitch Walking Elk, but I actually had a phone call with Amos. He talked to me about the names, and encouraged me to do the piece.”



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, “Building Minnesota” (1990) (detail) (photo courtesy of the artist)

At the time, Heap of Birds had planned to come to the Walker for his traveling exhibition of prints, *Claim Your Color*. Then, after he heard the song, and after Mitch Walking Elk gave him a

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large piece of pipestone — which Heap of Birds then shared with ceremonial priests of his own Chayenne tribe to make prayer pipes — he knew that he had to make his own offering back to the Dakota community, so he asked the Walker to add the public piece to his agenda, and the Walker agreed.

“It’s got to be that kind of locked-in, religious experience,” Heap of Birds said. “For me, to try to rise up and address that problem of the whole history of Mankato — it’s not art or a museum. It’s way beyond that, and if it’s not, then don’t bother. If you don’t have that, you probably shouldn’t bother with it.”

For the piece, Heap of Birds drew from Lincoln’s letter that spells out the names of the people who were ordered to be killed. (Originally 303 were sentenced to be hanged, most of whom Lincoln pardoned.) “You’ve got to have names to bring back to living people, so they can mourn for them and maybe heal themselves. And have a remembrance.”

Public art, Heap of Birds said, is an exchange with the public. Currently at the Walker, he recognizes a level of engagement happening between the museum, the artist, and the Dakota community, but considers it too late. “You do that in the beginning,” he said.

In addition, Heap of Birds says that there doesn’t just have to be one memorial. “There can be multiple memorials, from multiple vantage points,” he said.

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Death spot of Little Crow, marker erected 1929 (photo by Sheila Regan/Hyperallergic)

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Minnesota has its own memorials for the Dakota War, but some of the older ones especially are quite problematic. These markers paint the settlers who fought the Dakota as brave victims who defended themselves, without discussion of the broken treaties and ill treatment the Dakota endured which prompted the war; neither is there any mention of the mass execution, internment, and forced removal that followed.

One historical marker, erected in 1929 at the spot where Chief Little Crow (who escaped the hanging) was shot, glorifies the chief's killer: "Chief Little Crow, leader of the Sioux Indian outbreak in 1862, was shot and killed about 330 feet from this point by Nathan Lamson and his son Chauncey July 3, 1863." The marker does not mention that Little Crow's body was mutilated, that his scalp was donated to the Minnesota Historical Society and put on display at the State Capitol. He would not be buried until 1971.



Fort Snelling: "Wokiksuye K'a Woyuonihan (Remembering and Honoring)" (photo by Sheila Regan/Hyperallergic)

In recent history, efforts have been made to tell a more balanced story, one that shares the Dakota perspective. In 1987, the Dakota community erected a monument in Fort Snelling Park in memory of the concentration camp that was once there. The wooden structure is made up of large logs of wood that fan out towards the sky from a circular enclosure. The top of the structure reads "Wokiksuye K'a Woyuonihan," which means "remembering and honoring." In the center is a circular plaque made of pipestone, placed there by Dakota elder Amos Owen of the Prairie Island Indian Community, which lists all of the bands that were interned at the site.

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Thomas Miller, "Winter Warrior" (1987) (photo by Sheila Regan/Hyperallergic)

Another memorial sits at the actual hanging site in Mankato, containing memorial objects that have amassed over the years. First, in 1987, the Minnesota Historical Society and the Blue Earth County Historical Society, in collaboration with Dakota leaders, erected the statue "Winter Warrior" by Mankato-based artist Thomas Miller, featuring a Dakota warrior figure, to coincide with the "Year of Reconciliation" proclaimed by Governor Rudy Perpich. Ten years later, Reconciliation Park was established across the street, along with a second statute by Miller of a buffalo. Then, in 2012, for the sesquicentennial of the war, another monument was added to the park, evoking a scroll with a list of all the names of the men who were killed.

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Martin Bernard (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) and Linda Bernard, "Dakota 38 Memorial" (2012), includes poem by Katherine Hughes and prayer by Eli Taylor (photo by Sheila



Regan/Hyperallergic) Thomas Miller, "Buffalo" (1997) (photo by Sheila Regan/Hyperallergic)

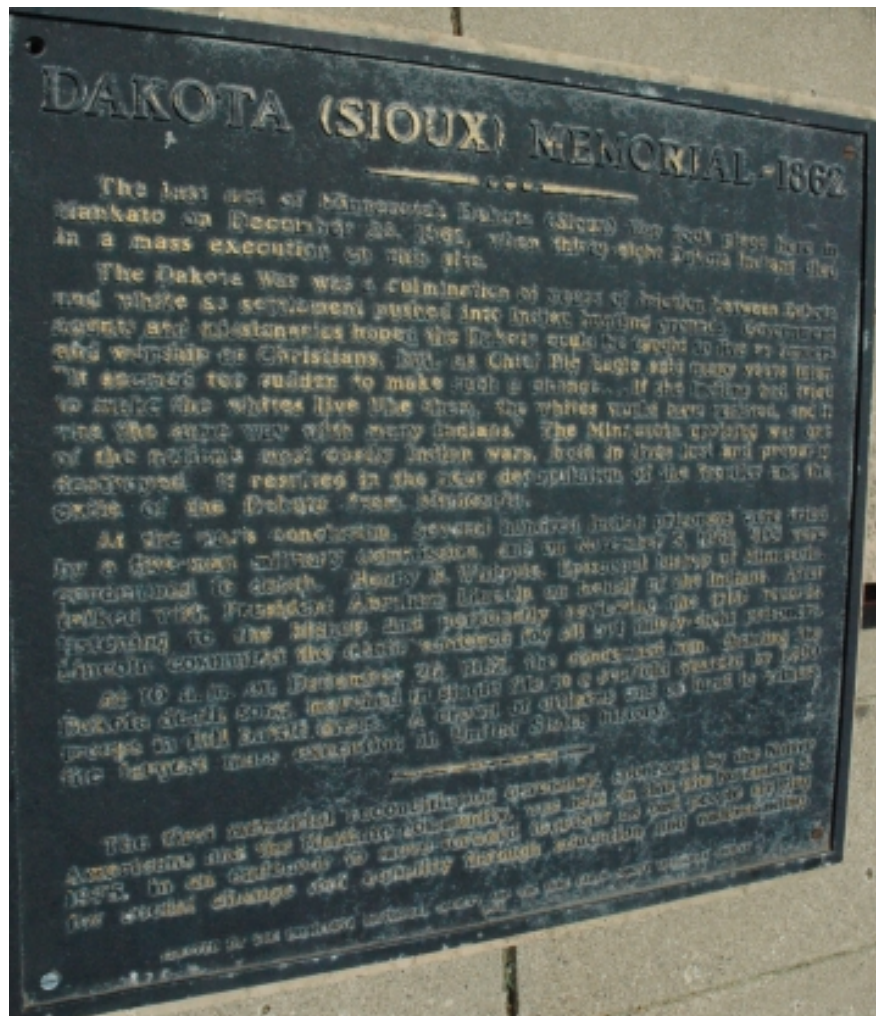
Seth Eastman, a descendent of Little Thunder, one of the 38 executed in Mankato, participates in a group horseback ride to Mankato every year from Lower Brewel, South Dakota — a total of 330 miles. He found out about the annual ride from friends, and decided

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to participate in 2012, as a way to give back in some way. As the years have progressed, Eastman has learned more about the history of his people, and shares his knowledge with other riders who are willing to listen.

For Eastman, it's not the memorial structures that hold the most power, but the site of the execution itself. "Just being in that area is really overwhelming," he said. "I don't know if people really understand what we feel as descendants of Dakota people. A lot of us descend from people who were killed and trophy hunted, who were executed by hanging."

Eastman lives in Sisseton, South Dakota, where his ancestors were taken when they were banished from the state of Minnesota. "I'm still exiled, as you would say," he said.



Plaque recognizing the first Reconciliation Ceremony between the Native American and Mankato Community on November 1, 1975, on the Blue Earth County Library grounds (photo by Sheila Regan/Hyperallergic)

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Of the Mankato monuments, he said, “It’s something that we are coming back to. I hate to say a shrine, because we don’t have such things like that. But it’s a place, that we can come back to to remember, to do what we need to do.”

Eastman hopes monuments like the ones in Mankato can be educational tools. While the younger Dakota generations have learned the real history of the Dakota in tribal schools, public schools are a different story. He shared the story of one public school at the border of Minnesota, where a man dressed as Abraham Lincoln talked to the students and answered their questions.

“One of my nephews asked the question, ‘Why did you hang the 38?’ This man went on to tell him, ‘Oh, I only hung the bad Indians. The ones that killed and raped.’ Telling kids this, that we’re bad, it’s the same as how we’ve been portrayed in the media. That struck my core.”

For Eastman, the value of having monuments is that they can help with healing. “We are trying to move forward in a good way. We are trying to heal,” he said. “For us, the Dakota, but for all people — non-Dakota people, settler descendants — they too have that historical trauma as well. How can we all as a people move forward and have this as an educational thing? How can they reach out to people to be part of the healing process?”

While the scrolls at Mankato and Edgar Heap of Birds’s memorial are examples of memorials of the Dakota 38 that have provided meaning and healing for some in the Dakota community, there’s a clear need for mainstream institutions to create room for Dakota artists and voices to tell their own version of the story.

Dakota artist and curator Graci Horne, who helped organize a group of Dakota elders to protest “Scaffold,” attests that Dakota artists have already been telling their story, but too often, it falls on deaf ears. “Countless artists have done their own pieces that reflect the events of 1862,” she said. “The elders have put forth a documentary depicting what happened. There have been countless talks put on by elders regarding this and nobody listens.” Horne says it’s time for Native people to be given a platform to share their own version of events. “We have non-Native representation to represent our history,” she said. “That’s not right. We need more native people to represent our stuff.”

Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds will speak at the Walker Art Center (725 Vineland Pl, Minneapolis) at 2pm on Saturday, June 24 in conjunction with the exhibition Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World.