

Guest Editor's Introduction

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This issue of the *Indiana Magazine of History* features essays that emerged from the “Art, Race, Space” symposium held at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) in January 2013. Scholars and members of the public gathered to interpret and discuss an incident in Indiana’s very recent past—the controversy over artist Fred Wilson’s proposed public sculpture, *E Pluribus Unum*. For some readers, this incident may appear entirely too recent to be the subject of historical investigation. Further, public art controversy is hardly unusual. Cancellation of public art, however, is rare in the United States; as Bridget Cooks notes in her essay in this issue, the termination of Wilson’s commission may be one of the few such incidents in the country.¹ Much of this particular controversy turned on interpretations of the past, particularly on what should be remembered and what should be forgotten about slavery. Many of those who participated in the symposium argued that the issues which were passionately discussed in the course of the controversy—including

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¹Bridget R. Cooks, “Activism and Preservation: Fred Wilson’s *E Pluribus Unum*,” 25-31; Erika Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities* (Washington, D.C., 1995); Caroline Levine, *Provoking Democracy: Why We Need the Arts* (Malden, Mass., 2007).

democracy, race, and representation—were not only deeply grounded in the past, but too important for historians and other scholars to ignore.²

The outlines of the *E Pluribus Unum* controversy may be familiar to readers of this journal but can be briefly summarized.³ In 2007, Fred Wilson was among a group of artists who accepted a commission to contribute a work of art for the proposed Indianapolis Cultural Trail, an eight-mile pedestrian-and-bicycle route through downtown Indianapolis into some of its surrounding neighborhoods. The Central Indiana Community Foundation (CICF), the sponsoring agency for the Cultural Trail, intended public art to be an important feature of the route. The New York-based Wilson, who is black and of multiracial descent, is an internationally renowned conceptual artist who represented the United States at the 2003 Venice Biennale and received a “genius grant” from the MacArthur Foundation. In his work he often rearranges, repurposes, or juxtaposes objects to create new installations. His influential installations, particularly *Mining the Museum* (1992-1993), explore how museums and other cultural institutions classify objects and cultures. Much of Wilson’s work encourages viewers to question received ideas about the past, gender, race, and inequality.⁴

Wilson’s proposal for the Indianapolis Cultural Trail focused on an overlooked figure on the city’s Indiana Soldiers and Sailors Monument—its sole representation of an African American. This man sits awkwardly among the many figures in the “Peace” sculptural group that adorns the west side of the monument’s base. He braces himself with his left hand, while lifting his right hand toward an allegorical figure of a woman, who stands to his right and gazes steadily ahead. His right hand also grasps broken manacles, symbolizing vanquished slavery and marking him as an emancipated slave. This bare-chested, barefoot African American man

²For issues involved in researching the recent past, see Claire Bond Potter and Renee C. Romano, eds., *Doing Recent History: On Privacy, Copyright, Video Games, Institutional Review Boards, Activist Scholarship and History That Talks Back* (Athens, Ga., 2012).

³In December 2012, this journal published an interview with Fred Wilson about the controversy. Modupe Labode, “Unsafe Ideas, Public Art, and *E Pluribus Unum*: An Interview with Fred Wilson,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 108 (December 2012), 383-401.

⁴For Fred Wilson’s work, see Doro Globus, ed., *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader* (London, 2011); “Fred Wilson: Material Museology” in Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), 64-119.

is typical of the representations of freed slaves in monumental sculpture from the end of the Civil War through the early twentieth century.⁵

Wilson's *E Pluribus Unum* referenced and repurposed the freedman on the monument with significant alterations. Like the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, the work would be made from Indiana limestone. In Wilson's rendering, the figure of the freedman rested on a tilted base, his body now appearing strong yet relaxed. The man's gaze followed his extended right arm, which held a flag representing the African Diaspora. The work's title—*E Pluribus Unum* ("Out of Many, One")—comes from the motto of the United States, which is also reproduced on the original monument, on a shield that the allegorical figure props up with her left hand, directly behind the freedman. Wilson chose to place his artwork in a particular place along the trail: on the south side of the City-County Building, within walking distance of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument. In his artist's statement, Wilson noted that this site would "[bring] African Americans of Indianapolis to the center of the city as full partners. As the flag reveals, it connects African Americans with the rest of the world, as well."⁶

Wilson visited Indianapolis several times during 2009 and 2010 to meet with the public, explain his approach to art, and discuss *E Pluribus Unum*. In these meetings, the artist described how the freedman on the monument had attracted his attention during his first visit to Indianapolis. He noticed how few images of African Americans existed in the city's collection of public art and monuments and stated his hope that *E Pluribus Unum* would raise questions about how African Americans were represented in the city's monuments, and, by extension, the city's history.⁷

On September 20, 2010, the *Indianapolis Recorder*, the city's largest African American newspaper, published a letter written by Leroy Robinson. Robinson's critique of Wilson's proposal alerted many readers to the growing opposition, especially among the city's African American residents, to

⁵Kirk Savage argues that the common representation of the "crouching slave" reinforced an interpretation of history that described slavery as a gift from the Union soldiers to slaves, rendering invisible the struggle for freedom by African Americans and their allies. See Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J., 1997). For the invisibility of the original figure of the freedman, see Jennifer Geigel Mikulay, *Art 21 Blog*, February 22, 2011, <http://blog.art21.org/2011/02/22/speaking-of-influence-a-monument%E2%80%99s-invisible-man/#.UwYgP873s40>.

⁶Fred Wilson, "E Pluribus Unum," n.d., in the author's possession.

⁷David Lindquist, "Artist hopes his work will spur questions," *Indianapolis Star*, April 13, 2010.



West face of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, Indianapolis, Indiana. The allegorical figure of Peace dominates the crouching freedman who served as the inspiration for Fred Wilson's *E Pluribus Unum*.

Courtesy, Detroit Publishing Company Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

E Pluribus Unum.⁸ Many opponents characterized the work as a “slave sculpture” which would be misunderstood as supporting slavery. Others interpreted the placement of *E Pluribus Unum*, in front of a municipal building that held courts and was located near the city’s jail complex, as

⁸Leroy Robinson, “Sculpture is Appalling,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, September 20, 2010.



E Pluribus Unum (2009), proposed design and installation. Wilson re-imagined the freedman facing forward and holding a flag representing the African Diaspora.

Courtesy, Fred Wilson

mocking the many African Americans entangled in the judicial system. Some critics, who agreed with Wilson that there were few representations of African Americans in the city's monuments and artwork, preferred a straightforward, celebratory portrayal of African Americans to *E Pluribus Unum*'s ambiguity. Many of the most outspoken opponents of the statue formed an organization called Citizens Against the Slave Image (CASI). In a public statement, the group asserted that they did not oppose public art or Fred Wilson; rather, they believed that the work should be placed in a museum, where more nuanced interpretation was possible and where those who found the piece offensive could avoid it. Many critics also took exception to the process by which the art had been commissioned, and asserted that the CICF should have consulted African Americans earlier in the process.⁹

⁹Dan Shadwell, "Critics of Downtown Sculpture Say Statue Looks 'Ape-ish,'" [http://fox 59.com](http://fox59.com), September 24, 2010; Amos Brown III, "Raging Emotions and Passions Over Black Images on Cultural Trail," *Indianapolis Recorder*, September 30, 2010; Michael Saahir, "Do We Want Another Slave Image in Downtown Indianapolis?" October 7, 2010, flier, in author's possession; Amy Bartner, "Artist's Image Has Its Critics," *Indianapolis Star*, October 17, 2010.

At a public meeting in October 2010, numerous opponents of the work peppered Wilson with questions about *E Pluribus Unum*. The vocal, often strident, protest effectively supplanted the meeting's agenda. The next day, apparently in response to the audience's anger, the foundation announced that it was suspending Wilson's work.¹⁰ From October 2010 through July 2011, protests against *E Pluribus Unum* continued in the form of an online petition, a public rally, emails, and letters to the editor.¹¹ In January 2011, the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation recognized the significance of the project with one of its competitive awards, and some advocates took to the media to support Wilson's proposal.¹² In October and November, the CICF held several meetings to solicit public opinion about *E Pluribus Unum* and in December, based on the input gathered at those meetings, terminated Wilson's commission.¹³

Many who observed or were involved in the drawn-out discussions over *E Pluribus Unum* felt that there had been little opportunity to engage

¹⁰Amy Bartner, "Sculptor, Crowd Face Off at Meeting," *Indianapolis Star*, October 20, 2010; Jessica Williams-Gibson, "Blindsided: Public Backlash about *E Pluribus Unum*," *Indianapolis Recorder*, October 22, 2010; David Hoppe, "Fred Wilson's *E Pluribus Unum*: Art Worth Arguing About," *Nuvo* (Indianapolis), October 29, 2010.

¹¹Tyler Green covered the ongoing developments in his blog, *Modern Arts Notes*. See, for example, "The Very Public Debate Over Fred Wilson's Indy Statue," October 27, 2010, <http://blogs.artinfo.com/modernartnotes/2010/10/fred-wilsons-indy-sculpture-and>. See also the online petition sponsored by "One Slave is Enough": <http://Islave-enough.wix.com/inindy>; "Not Another Slave Monument in Indy," *Indianapolis Recorder*, February 24, 2011; Erika Smith, "Sculpture is Starting a Conversation that's Long Overdue," *Indianapolis Star*, May 26, 2011; Heather Gillers, "Group Scraps Downtown Site for Statue Depicting Free Slave," *Indianapolis Star*, July 29, 2011; Michael Saahir and Donna Stokes-Lucas, "Sculpture Doesn't Belong on Public Property," *Indianapolis Star*, August 7, 2011.

¹²"Supporting New Artistic Works in Chicago, Indianapolis, and Minneapolis," Joyce Foundation Newsletter, Winter 2011, <http://www.joycefdn.org/newsletters/supporting-new-artistic-works-in-chicago-indianapolis-and-minneapolis/>; David Lindquist, "Public May Decide Fate of Proposed Sculpture for Cultural Trail," *Indianapolis Business Journal*, January 25, 2011; Maxwell Anderson, "Sculpture Can Foster Dialogue About Race," *Indianapolis Star*, August 3, 2011; Amos Brown, "Supporters Of Controversial Statue Downtown Tell Their Side On AWA," August 30, 2011 <http://praiseindy.com/1473352/supporters-of-controversial-statue-downtown-tell-their-side-on-awa/>.

¹³Kathleen McLaughlin, "Cultural Trail Leaders Cancel Plans for Controversial Statue," *Indianapolis Business Journal*, December 13, 2011. Wilson has consistently stated that because the work was site specific, he has no plans to recreate *E Pluribus Unum* elsewhere. In January 2013, two civic groups, the Arts Council of Indianapolis and the Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee, in cooperation with an ad hoc "Cultural Arts Committee," announced plans to commission an "African American artwork" for the Indianapolis Cultural Trail. Although official statements do not refer to Fred Wilson and *E Pluribus Unum*, other articles interpret this art competition as a direct response to concerns raised in the controversy. See "African American Art on the Cultural Trail," Arts Council of Indianapolis, October 2013, <http://www.indyarts.org/art-on-the-trail/>; Jessica Key, "Replaced," *Indianapolis Recorder*, October 31, 2013.

the urgent questions about civic life, representation, and race raised in the controversy. What obligations do the businesses and non-profit organizations that intervene in civic space—using means such as public art—have to the larger public? What does the argument over the representation of a slave (or more accurately, an emancipated slave) reveal about the legacy of slavery in contemporary life? How should protesters' assertion that African Americans lacked political and cultural power in Indianapolis be understood, especially in a nation that had elected Barack Obama to the presidency? Why would the artwork of Fred Wilson, an artist who has consistently critiqued racism in America, become the locus of such vexed disagreement about the nation's racial past?

A group of humanities scholars at IUPUI looked for an opportunity to initiate a focused discussion with members of the community about questions raised by *E Pluribus Unum*. They believed that an interdisciplinary, humanities-based approach could provide tools with which to discuss these volatile issues. "Art, Race, Space," the daylong symposium they convened in January 2013, focused on the intersection of public art and memorials, race, and civic space.¹⁴ The symposium format was designed to create numerous opportunities for the exchange of ideas, including scholars' presentation of their prepared remarks, question-and-answer sessions, facilitated dialogue among the speakers and audiences, and less structured small discussion groups.¹⁵

The symposium began with a discussion of the immediate context of *E Pluribus Unum*. Fred Wilson spoke first, making his first public appearance in Indianapolis since October 2010. Mindy Taylor Ross, the curator of the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, outlined the process by which Wilson was commissioned and *E Pluribus Unum* introduced to the public.

¹⁴The symposium planners included IUPUI professors Elizabeth Kryder-Reid, Paul Mullins, Laura Holzman, Owen Dwyer, and me. In addition to planning the symposium, I also served as one of the event's moderators. The symposium was funded by a grant from the IUPUI Arts and Humanities Institute.

¹⁵Erika Smith, "Being Part of the Process May Come at a Price for Art," *Indianapolis Star*, January 26, 2013; Paul Mullins, "Flies in the Milk: Visibility and the African-American Material World," *Archaeology and Material Culture* blog, January 20, 2013, <http://paulmullins.wordpress.com/2013/01/20/flies-in-the-milk-visibility-and-the-african-american-material-world/>. For a more detailed discussion of the symposium, see Modupe Labode, Laura Holzman, and Elizabeth Kryder-Reid, "Hybrid Discourse: Exploring Art, Race, and Space in Indianapolis," in *Public: A Journal of Imagining America* 1, no. 1&2 (2013) <http://public.imaginingamerica.org/blog/article/hybrid-discourse-exploring-art-race-and-space-in-indianapolis/>. Videos of many of the symposium sessions are available through the "Art, Race, Space" symposium website: <http://liberalarts.iupui.edu/artracespace/>.

Amos Brown, an Indianapolis-based journalist who regularly reported on the controversy on his daily radio show and weekly *Indianapolis Recorder* column, summarized the attitudes of many who opposed *E Pluribus Unum* as, “Don’t hate the player; hate the game”—that is, many critics were angry not at Wilson, but at the process by which his art had been selected.¹⁶ The remaining speakers from various disciplines—including art history, archaeology, visual culture, and history—brought their expertise as to how the experiences and memories of race are represented in art, history, and the landscape.¹⁷

The essays in this issue represent a range of the presenters’ approaches to this controversy. Fred Wilson does not directly refer to his Indianapolis experience in his presentation, “Inspirations.” Instead, he leads the reader through a tour of monuments and works of public art that have intrigued him and concludes by discussing the process by which he created his own installations *Liberty/Liberté* (2011) and *Life’s Link* (2012). Wilson effectively provides the audience with a unique perspective on how he sees himself (and his work) in an ongoing conversation about historical memory, art history, and contemporary society. Bridget Cooks’s essay considers the tensions in African American activism as demonstrated in Wilson’s proposed work and the protesters’ rhetoric and actions. She analyzes the burden of representation placed on artworks about African Americans, which often leads to volatile conflicts. Renée Ater and Erika Doss analyze efforts by two different American communities to commemorate aspects of African American history, providing a larger context in which to understand the *E Pluribus Unum* controversy. Ater describes how citizens in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, debated the fate of a representative statue of Martin Luther King Jr. The convoluted arguments over the statue were never only about aesthetics, she concludes, but were enmeshed in the town’s history and contemporary racial politics. Doss focuses on the process by which

¹⁶For Mindy Taylor Ross, see minutes 1:00-16:55; for Amos Brown, see minutes 18:15-34:02 of the symposium video. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAOXpLRQH38&list=PLaB-5LB3XNNbykHHp-ED_QW44g_KnsX4E&index=1.

¹⁷The invited scholars were: Renée Ater, associate professor of art history, University of Maryland; Bridget Cooks, associate professor of art history and African American Studies, University of California, Irvine; Erika Doss, professor of American Studies, University of Notre Dame; Paul Mullins, professor of anthropology, IUPUI; Richard Pierce, professor of history and Africana Studies, University of Notre Dame; and Dell Upton, professor of art history, University of California, Los Angeles. Pierce’s comments at the “Art, Race, Space” symposium have been published. See Richard Pierce, “We’ve Been Trying to Tell You’: African American Protest in Indianapolis,” *Traces* (Summer 2013), 32-39.

citizens of Duluth, Minnesota, came to recognize and make public a terrible incident in 1920, when a white mob lynched three African Americans. Nearly nine decades later, community members created a memorial to acknowledge the victims, a process that only years earlier would have been hard to imagine. Geographers Owen Dwyer and Matthew McCourt wrote their photo essay on the Indianapolis Cultural Trail for this issue. Using data including census statistics and observation of trail users, they analyze how the trail reveals and conceals the city's history and future aspirations as it cuts through the center of Indianapolis.

These essays reveal that thinking seriously about the *E Pluribus Unum* controversy provides important insights—some inspirational, some painful—into the central roles that race, representation, and history play in both our shared past and today's society. The writers reveal the interactions between the aspects of this controversy that are particular to Indianapolis or Indiana, and the factors that are national, or even global, in scope. I hope that these essays will not only encourage other scholars to investigate similar issues, but also help citizens interested in understanding the role of the past as they strive to create a more equitable society.

