USAbroad – Journal of American History and Politics. Vol. 8 (2025)
ISSN 2611-2752

My Life as Historian of Public Memories

Performative Power of Pageants, Exhibits, and Monuments in the Public Space

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Published: May 14, 2025

Abstract

This reflective essay traces Alessandra Lorini's forty-year journey as a public historian, focusing on how conflicts of race, class, and gender have been performed and contested in U.S. public spaces through monuments and commemorative practices. Drawing on interdisciplinary research and personal experience, Lorini explores the symbolic power of monuments—including those in New York, Havana, and Montgomery—from the 19th century to the present, situating them within the long durée of the "culture wars" debates.

Keywords: Monuments; Public Rituals; 19th Century; Slavery; Culture Wars.

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Alessandra Lorini is an independent scholar. A cultural historian, she received her PhD from Columbia University in 1991 and she taught for many years at the University of Florence. She is the author of several monographs and articles, including Rituals of Race: American Public and the Search for Racial Democracy (Virginia University Press, 1999), L'Impero della libertà e l'isola strategica. Gli Stati Uniti e Cuba tra Otto e Novecento (Liguori, 2008) and Le statue bugiarde. Immaginari razziali e coloniali nell'America contemporanea (Carocci, 2023).

> *One could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist while Negroes were lynched, murdered and starved....Stepping...out of my ivory tower of statistics and investigation, I sought with bare hands to lift the earth and put it in the path in which I conceived it ought to go.*
>
> W.E.B. Du Bois (1906)

1 When did I become a public historian?

In the 1980s I was a graduate student at Columbia University and public history, as a discipline, was very young. A few years before at the University of Essex, England, I studied the pioneering experience of Raphael Samuel's history "from the bottom up," and participated in a session of *Theatres of Memories* at Ruskin College, Oxford. These were public forums where intellectuals and union members discussed how to face Margaret Thatcher's anti-labor policies. History was made public to democratize society by using new oral and literary sources to involve working people in retrieving their personal and collective memories. In the same years the University of California at Santa Barbara introduced a new curriculum in public history to create a new profession. Because of my Italian undergraduate background in Sociology and history of international labor movement, and a few years spent at the Federazione Lavoratori Metalmeccanici to develop the "150-hour classes for workers" in high school and universities, I found Raphael Samuel's experience quite attractive.[1]

Thanks to a Fulbright Fellowship I went to the States to continue my graduate studies with Herbert Gutman under whose guidance I wrote a research paper on the New York Playground Movement and the Americanization of the children of immigrants. From that research on I explored political and cultural events of the Progressive Era (roughly 1900-1920), focusing on class, racial, and gender conflicts in the public space of major American cities. Continuing my graduate studies at Columbia University, in 1982 I became part of Eric Foner's "first generation" of graduate students.[2] While my Italian union experience was not highly regarded in Italian academic circles, it became a plus for my advance-standing admission to the history doctoral program at Columbia University. Since the beginning I was taught that reaching out to a broad audience was part of the responsibilities of a professional historian.[3]

Over the years I studied how progressive reformers staged historical pageants and festivals; the popularization of racial science in the exhibits of indigenous people at the New York American Museum of Natural History (AMNH); the spectacular Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1892-93 anticipating the new "American century" as the "Empire of Benevolence" that the war of 1898 brought to life; conflicting narratives of the American intervention in Cuba as an act of generosity in defense of human rights and of reunification of the United States after Civil War and Reconstruction; Cuban exiles in New York celebrating with public parades and festivities their desire of a full Cuban independence; the first U.S. occupation of Cuba (1898-1902) and its racialization of Cuban society according to the U.S. southern segregation rules; the "Lost Cause" myth in the U.S. South that made racial apartheid acceptable to northern public opinion. These have been my major research and writing trails for over forty years of which my recent book *Le statue bugiarde* is a synthesis.[4]

2 How to Connect the Academy to the Real World and Avoid Presentism

In April 1985 Columbia University students led by the Coalition for a Free South Africa blocked the administrative building of Hamilton Hall, and won the first successful divesture campaign from cor-

1. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso Books, 1994).

2. In 2005 many of us reunited in a conference celebrating Eric Foner's scholarship and teaching. Manisha Sinha, Penny von Eschen, eds., *Contested Democracy: Freedom, Race, and Power in American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

3. The first book I published in Italy *Ingegneria umana e scienze sociali negli Stati Uniti, 1890-1920* (Firenze: D'Anna, 1980) was an early attempt to study the *social survey* and the *settlement* as methods of creating social knowledge by involving immigrant communities in the public space.

4. Alessandra Lorini, *Le statue bugiarde: Immaginari razziali e coloniali nell'America contemporanea* (Roma: Carocci, 2023).

porations profiting from racial apartheid in South Africa. Renaming the building "Mandela Forum," this multiracial organization made of students, faculty and staff opposing apartheid ended on April 25 with a march into Harlem.[5] I was then studying for my comprehensive oral exams, I had just read W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), discussed in a seminar Frederick Douglass' speeches and autobiographies, and Ida Wells Barnett's anti-lynching campaign of the early 1890's. I participated in many campus events, listened to African-American students and several faculty who made clear the connection between the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa and the transnational history of white racial supremacy and colonialism. Those events led me to focus on African-American cultural history as the field of my doctoral dissertation. My historical research would go beyond the academic "ivory tower" by using a variety of sources and an interdisciplinary approach to retrieve events and figures that mainstream historical narrative had cancelled.

W.E.B. Du Bois, who was a marginal academic figure in his life time – what are now considered his path-breaking works were then hardly reviewed – was a towering intellectual. The first African-American social scientist to earn a Ph.D from Harvard, after witnessing the bloody racial riot in Atlanta in 1906, Du Bois decided to leave the "ivory tower" of Atlanta University – then for "colored people" – where he taught but was not allowed, as a Black American scholar, to enter the city's public library. In 1910 Professor Du Bois resigned from Atlanta University and moved to New York to take the direction of *The Crisis*, then the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He felt the magazine could be the intellectual tool he needed to make social science an active weapon in the struggle for racial equality by asserting from its pages the centrality of the "Negro question" to American democracy.[6] In Du Bois' view militant history and social science would show that racial inequality was not the product of inborn antipathy between white and dark races, as mainstream social scientists held, but the outcome of a social system of class and caste. It was a critical time, which passively witnessed the lynching of hundreds of colored people, that needed the formation of a strong political interracial alliances beyond party lines to put an end to segregation in public spaces. Thus, Du Bois left the academic ivory tower to reach a larger public. In a way, he was a public historian answering the needs of the present by promoting public historical knowledge on racial discrimination and crimes for a large public. He was also an interdisciplinary social scientist as his early historical works, social investigations, novels and poems indicate.[7]

Du Bois is a central figure of my book *Rituals of Race* which is based on extensive remake of my doctoral dissertation. It is a public history monograph for today standards discussing how conflicts of race, class and gender were performed in the public space. In the last chapter, entitled "Pageants of American Racial Democracy," I explored, among others, W.E.B. Du Bois' pageant *The Star of Ethiopia* as a rich Afro-centric text he wrote to be performed for the first time at the National Emancipation Exposition in New York in 1913, for the 50th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. The enthusiastic response of a very large crowd repaid Du Bois for numerous attacks even from African Americans, which were instrumentally made public by supporters of Black politician Booker T. Washington. [8] A form of mass theater, the pageant re-enacted the history of the "African race," involving hundreds of school children, teachers, dancers, and actors. By combining the history of Americans of African descent with the "double-consciousness" he had brilliantly explored in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois anticipated an aesthetic of "Negro" ancient past, which will be one of the major themes of the "Harlem Renaissance" of the 1920s. He did so by using the symbolic allegories of progressive American pageantry, his Harvard and European cultural backgrounds, and his rejection of social scientists' racial theories that major American universities accepted as pure science. Du Bois' pageant, like most historical pageants staged at that time, emphasized continuities between past and present in order to make history intelligible to contemporary audiences. In this pageant he created an illusion of a structured African past construed around the idea of "gifts" of the "Negro race" to the world that

5. Johanna Lee, "Mandela Hall: A History of the 1985 Divest Protests," *Columbia Spectator*, vol. XX, 10, April 13 (2016).

6. David L. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Holt, 1993), 386-87.

7. Alessandra Lorini, *Rituals of Race: American Public Culture and the Search for Racial Democracy* (Charlottesville, VA: Virginia University Press, 1999), 76, 142.

8. Ibid., 219-25.

made African-American history coherently develop into an allegorical uplifting of a racial group.[9]

Figure 1. *W. E. B. Du Bois, Atlanta University, 1909. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries*, http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-i0393

In Du Bois' view, his pageant offered a counter-narrative of historical memories to the powerful silent movie *The Birth of a Nation*, by David W. Griffith. A monumental appeal to a mass public, *Birth* gave the resurrected Ku Klux Klan a usable racist version of the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The first block-buster movie merged melodrama, stirring actions, and the new close-up technique with the use of pageantry's abstract symbolism, allegorical themes, and historical *tableaux vivantes*.[10] This colossal movie had an enormous success in spreading racist mythmaking like the "Lost Cause" as objective truth.

African-American activist Ida Wells was another visionary figure I analyzed in *Rituals of Race*. She used the spectacular setting of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, which glorified the United States as the incarnation of the idea of modernity and a new world power, to stage her anti-lynching crusade as a disturbing counter-narrative of the unpunished crime of lynching. Returning from a successful anti-lynching campaign in England, Wells joined the old leader Frederick Douglass, who was then the American consul of the Black republic of Haiti, at the Haitian building. From there Wells delivered to astonished fair visitors a booklet entitled *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*.

9. The gift of welding Iron, of civilization of the valley of the Nile river, the gift of faith, of humiliation, of struggle toward freedom, and the gift of hope. Ibid., 221-23.

10. Ibid., 226-36.

Figure 2. The Pageant "Star of Ethiopia" in Philadelphia, *The New York Public Library Digital Collections*, New York, 1916-08, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/acbf7f60-cf52-013c-ed26-0242ac110004

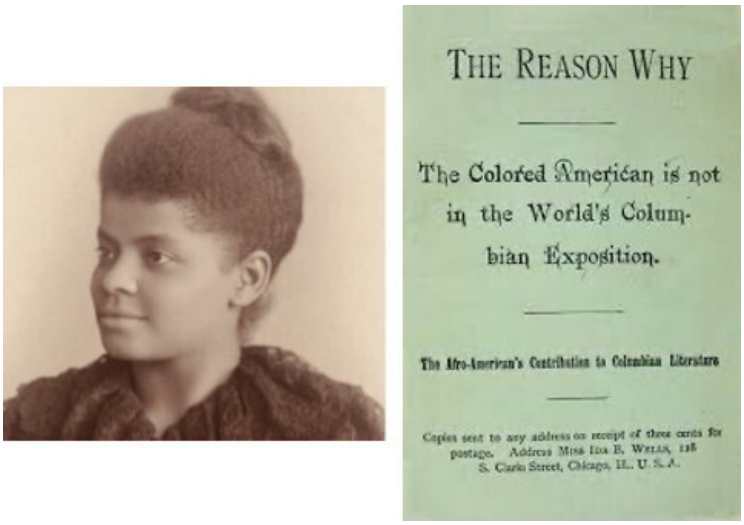

Figure 3-4. da Bell Wells-Barnett, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, c. 1893, https://www.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2009.36

There were divisions among African-American organizations on the opportunity to use the fair ground as a stage to show the gruesome data and stories of lynchings instead of celebrating "Negro advancements" from the end of slavery. The booklet, with an introduction of Frederick Douglass, offered millions of fair visitors a documented account that Black people had gained freedom with the Civil war and Reconstruction, but lost all their rights and human dignity with the re-establishment of white supremacy in the South where the mythical narration of the "Lost Cause" had become the national memory supporting the regime of racial segregation. Relying on her book *Southern Horrors*, she had just promoted in England, Wells produced an extraordinary amount of data on lynching and examples drawn from the national press, with detailed accounts of mobs killing black men accused often with no evidence of harassing white women, and burning their naked bodies in big fires.[11] She explained that during the first years of freedom Black men were lynched by masked mobs while exercising their right to vote. As that cause made lynching unpopular in Northern public opinion, a new reason was given to justify the growing practice in the following decade. Thus, Black men were charged with assaulting white women, lynchers no longer wore masks, and mobs acted in daylight in the presence of sheriffs, policemen, and state officials.

The incensed debate that Ida Wells' anti-lynching crusade provoked in American public culture in the early twentieth century, resurfaced almost a century later thanks to the courageous exhibit *Without Sanctuary* opening at the New York Historical Society in 2000. The American public passionately discussed and split over the horrific lynching photos taken during the period 1890-1930 that retrieved an otherwise cancelled historical memory. In a few months the expensive catalogue was sold out and reprinted several times, and the debate became viral in a web forum.

I visited that exhibit in New York following the suggestion of the great historian and friend Leon Litwack. He had written the catalogue introduction of *Without Sanctuary* that photographer James Allen had set up. The latter found thousands of postcards of lynching scenes scattered in cellars, lofts, and family albums of southern homes. Although I was familiar with images of lynchings, as they often appeared in the pages of Du Bois' magazine *The Crisis*, I had not realized the entity of the atrocious business of commodify lynching by turning this collective crime into a profitable postcard mass market.[12] I also realized that the postcard photographer's artistic product played an important role in making lynching aseptic and legitimate. Looking at these photo-postcards, my attention focused on the festive atmosphere that a crowd of men, women and children showed in front of a human being who had been tortured, killed and burned. Lynchers were "common people" who after murdering their victim went back to their daily routine. Those horrific images convinced me of the symbolic density of lynching as a collective ritual of political and economic relations and of racial and gender tensions that created multifaceted metaphors. According to Ida Wells the accusation of "rape" of a white woman symbolized all things whites felt were "out of place" in post- Civil War society.

I visited that exhibit more than a century after Ida Wells' analysis, and thought it was still an insightful piece of historical memory. Lynching was a form of collective violence and a public ritual of racial hatred that unified a community in which hidden sexual fears, a rigid concept of honor, and a fundamentalist morality helped to face the effects of a critical economic and political crisis. It was not an incident on the "color line," as slavery was not an aberration in an otherwise progressive American history. *Without Sanctuary* made clear that lynching was a "normal" action in the public space that a whole community performed.

As remembering is more disturbing than forgetting, I wanted to know how the visitors of the exhibit interpreted those photographs. I studied hundreds of reviews and interviews in the *Without Sanctuary* website forum and analyzed them in an article I published in 2002.[13] The exhibit was censored and rejected in several southern states, the same ones where up to 2015 the Confederate flag wove in front or on public buildings. The dramatic debate over *Without Sanctuary* showed the exis-

11. Ibid., 43-45.

12. James Allen, Hilton Als, John Lewis, Leon F. Litwack, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Hong Kong: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000).

13. Alessandra Lorini, "'Cartoline dall'inferno'. Storia e memoria pubblica dei linciaggi negli Stati Uniti," *Passato e presente*, 20 (2002): 119-138, reprinted in Lorini, *C'era una volta l'America: Saggi sul disincanto della modernità* (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2019), 221-246.

tence of a strong connection between an unbearable past, a collective amnesia and the selection from the past of conflicting memories that challenged the very idea of "common history." Similar conflicting memories continues to resurface after the 2015 massacre of Charleston, SC, the 2017 "Alt-right" rally in Charlottesville, VA, and the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 following the killing of George Floyd by the Minnesota police.[14]

On a hill near downtown Montgomery, Alabama, one of the most important centers of the slave trade in the country, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice dedicated to victims of white supremacist violence in the United States was inaugurated in April 2018. According to its director Bryan Stevenson, a Black prolific author of books that have become bestsellers and documentaries, one cannot understand what is happening today without recognizing the damage caused by those who allowed white supremacy to be restored after Reconstruction. Stevenson thoroughly collected data on the victims of lynchings for the period 1877-1950 as acts of racial terrorism. This memorial commemorates one by one the 4,400 victims who went unnoticed in mainstream historical narrative.[15] Connecting past, present and future, the memorial reveals how the "myth" of racial inferiority evolved over time by showing eight-hundred iridescent steel steles hanging from the ceiling like stalactites, each representing a county where lynchings took place. The stelae are engraved with the names of the victims, which visitors discover by looking higher and higher, evoking the image of a "body hanging from a tree" of the "sweet South" in Billie Holiday's famous song *Strange Fruits*.

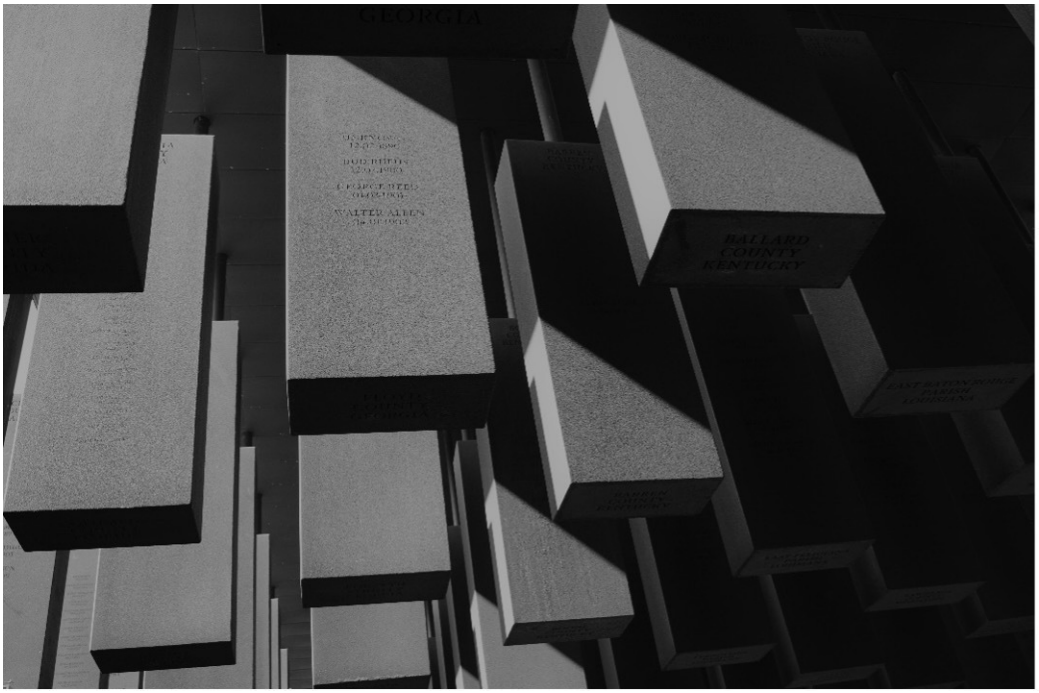

Figure 5. Commemorative staele of individuals and places where they were lynched, National Memorial of Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama. Photo by Pietro Rossi (August 2022)

The stelae are an effective antidote to the macabre sensationalism of spectacularized violence. The victims' names and details of their lives, including often trivial accusations for which they were lynched, help to restore their dignity. The images of lynchings, showing crowds of smiling white men, women and children participating in the macabre ritual of a "Negro barbecue," and turned into postcards, are placed next to today's juvenile Black prisoners. Visitors learn from a narrative that does not have any consolatory intention, the political, economic and social effects of racism, that slavery

14. Lorini, *Le statue bugiarde*, 114-118.

15. The museum, inspired by the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg in South Africa and the Holocaust Mahnmal in Berlin, offers a counter-narrative of fundamental moments of African-American history. Lorini, *Le statue bugiarde*, 121.

did not end with the Civil War, that the ideology of white supremacy continued to manifest itself in lynchings, forced labor, racial segregation of the Jim Crow regime, in the suppression of voting rights, in mass incarceration, in brutal police violence. A narrative of a country carrying the burden of a public memory that has distorted history and removed slavery.

3 Performing Power in the Public Space: Monuments to the Victims of the U.S.S. Maine in New York and Havana

The 57-foot-high *Monument to the Victims of the U.S.S. Maine* dominates the intersection of 59th Street and Central Park West in Manhattan.

Figure 6. Library of Congress, Bain News Service, Publisher. *MAINE Monument*., 1913 MY 27 date created or published later by Bain. https://www.loc.gov/item/2014692356/.

Although I daily passed by that monument during my graduate student years, I became aware of its complex meaning only after studying the Spanish-American War. The centennial of 1998 produced a rich scholarship that made that war central to the history of American empire by emphasizing the special relationship between the United States and Cuba. This gigantic monument honors the 266 victims of the *U.S.S Maine*, the American warship that exploded in the Havana harbor, Cuba, on February 15, 1898. Inaugurated in 1913, its story reveals the conflicting "intimacy" existing between the U.S. and Cuba since the late 18th century. Inspired by Louis Pérez Jr.'s path-breaking works, a rich American, Cuban, and Spanish scholarship has continued to explore this relation.[16] New works have profoundly revised the Cold War consensus historiography by turning what textbooks usually treated in a page or two into a major event of American history, marking the end of the Spanish Empire in the New World, and the beginning of the U.S. "Benevolent Empire."

I became interested in how 1898 was commemorated during the "American century" and the symbolic representations of the American victory over Spain. U.S. commemorations gave no agency to Cubans who had fought against the Spanish well before the 1898 brief American "Splendid Little War."

16. Works are too many to be cited here: from Louis Pérez Jr., *The War of 1898, The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina University Press, 1998) to Ada Ferrer, *Cuba: An American History* (New York: Scribner, 2022).

Figure 7. *Library of Congress, Cuba Libre*, ca. 1898, https://www.loc.gov/item/2005688946

Publicly justified for defending Cuban human rights from Spanish cruelty, the U.S. military intervention actually blocked a real independence of the island. As the movement of Cuban independence begun in the community of exiles in the United States, I focused on the Cuban community living in Manhattan in the second half of the nineteenth century. In *L'impero della libertà e l'isola strategica* I analyzed their public events, symbols, parades and ceremonies, and their class, racial and gender conflicts emerging in the ways the exiles entered the American public space.[17] I also delved into how Americans profoundly changed Cuba's public space during their first occupation from 1898 to 1902. They erected monuments and public buildings, changed sports (they introduced baseball), the educational system and festivities, they rewrote historical texts creating new national heroes and cultural identities.

The complex post-Reconstruction views of racial reconciliation I had discussed in *Rituals of Race* helped me to understand the transnational political culture of a North-American city like New York, the public space of groups of German, Italian, and other European socialists, anarchists, exiles of the 1848 revolutions, and Latin American anticolonial intellectuals. Leader of Cuba Libre Josè Martí, who arrived in New York in 1880 charged with conspiracy against the Spanish government, witnessed the powerful ideology of "national reconciliation" of the late 19th century, discussed the pervasive myth of the "Lost Cause," which gave the South respect for military courage while accepting racial segregation under the assumption that slavery had not been a bad form of control of an inferior race after all. An eloquent and charismatic speaker, writer, political leader, and an extraordinary chronicler, Martí offered first-hand information and precocious insights into the intersection of U.S. white supremacy, expansionist ideology, and the material culture of the Gilded Age to Latin American newspapers of Argentina, Honduras, Uruguay, and Mexico. Aware of North-American horrific racial and ethnic relations, Martí wrote the best description available of the ferocious lynching of eleven Sicilians in New Orleans in 1891.[18] The year 1892, when Martí founded the Partido Revolucionario Cubano in Florida and New York to promote the final insurrection in Cuba, also witnessed the opening ceremonies of the

17. Lorini, *L'impero della libertà e l'isola strategica: Gli Stati Uniti e Cuba tra Otto e Novecento* (Napoli: Liguori, 2007).

18. Accused of murdering the local police chief, the Sicilians were found unguilty by a jury. Esther Allen, ed., "The Lynching of the Italians," in *José Marti: Selected Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002) 296-303.

Chicago World's Columbian Exposition and the unveiling of the Columbus monument in Columbus Circle, Manhattan, which the Italian-American community erected as a response to the abominable New Orleans lynching.[19] Martí died in Cuba in 1895 at the age of 42, apparently riding a horse under the Spanish fire although his fragility, health, and complete lack of military experience made him a most unsuitable soldier. His death turned the intellectual political activist into an "apostle" embodying the best Cuban national virtues, and a symbol of personal integrity and patriotic love. An equestrian statue in Central Park immortalizes that moment.

Figure 8. José Martí Equestrian Monument, Central Park (1965). Photo by Alvaro Masseini (2010)

Sculpted by Ann Hyatt and inaugurated in 1965 as a gift to Cuban people, the statue created tensions between factions of pro and anti-Castro Cubans. From the mythical leader of Cuba Libre that the newly formed semi-independent republic of 1902 appropriated and used for internal political battles, Martí became the "apostle" of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 that hundreds of busts and statues commemorate in the Cuban public space. But he was also revered by the Cuban diaspora in Miami, Florida. That was a different Martí bringing a usable anti-Castro revolutionary past.[20]

Let us move back to May 30, 1913, Central Park, the day of unveiling the *Monument to the Victims of the U.S.S. Maine*. The dominant sculpture is "Columbia Triumphant" holding laurus twigs and fasces symbolizing continuity with the Roman Empire. The work of architect Harold Van Buren and Italian sculptor Attilio Piccirilli, the top statuary group was crafted out of bronze cannons taken from the ship itself. The allegorical marble statues of Peace, Courage, Fortitude that Columbia dominates from above, are behind the figure of a boy symbolizing the young nation of Cuba. Former president Taft gave the inaugural speech in which he made clear that for the United States Cuba was like "a foster child," that it was the creation of a new nation "through our disinterested aid and sacrifice" and, most importantly, that the monument celebrated the expansion of the United States "into a wider sphere of

19. Lorini, *Le statue bugiarde*, 64-68.

20. Lillian Guerra, *The Myth of José Martí: Conflicting Nationalisms in Early Twentieth -Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina University Press, 2005).

world usefulness and greater responsibility among the nations than ever in its history."[21] At that time American public opinion was divided over the meaning of the new American empire in the aftermath of 1898 victory over Spain. Was it conceivable that the United States, the first republic to be born in the New World, could declare itself the heir of the British Empire? How to interpret the fact that the entire cost of the monument, $170,000, according the *New York Times*, had been raised "among the poor and plain people of almost every State of the Union," apparently more than a million of donations, and that large crowds witnessed the huge memorial parade and other celebrations all over the city?[22]

If we leave the Central Park gigantic memorial to the victims of the *U.S.S. Maine* and ideally move to the Malecón of Havana, Cuba, we find two high columns holding an empty platform on their top. It is a monument to the victims of the *U.S.S. Maine* I saw during my first trip to Cuba in 2000 while visiting the Universidad de La Habana.[23] The story of the Malecón monument reveals the asymmetrical power relation between the United States and Cuba that I explored during several research trips in Havana. Building on a rich scholarship, I found that the sinking of the *U.S.S. Maine*, the intervention of the United States in the ongoing war between Cuba and Spain, and the birth of the Cuban republic were still strenuously debated in conflicting political interpretations of Cuban public memory, creating several politically usable pasts. One interpretation sees a young nation born thanks to the noble gesture of a powerful neighbor, the United States, ending the Spanish colonial domination. Another narrative of the events condemns the U.S. intervention that established neocolonial ties with Cuba, preventing full independence. These two conflicting narratives have never disappeared and turned into a rhetoric of Uncle Sam's generosity versus a nationalist rhetoric denouncing American imperialism. The monument to the victims of the *Maine*, inaugurated on the Malecón on March 8, 1925, shows both rhetorics. Initially representing the "fraternal friendship" between the two nations, after the Revolution of 1959 it became the symbol of American imperialism.

At the time of its inauguration in 1925, the Malecón monument was made of two twin marble columns and a large bronze eagle with open wings on the top as a clear imperial symbol. The granitic base was adorned with cannons and chains taken from the ship remains. The following year a devastating hurricane hit Havana, destroying columns and eagle. Within a few years the monument was restored, with an even larger eagle on the top. In 1928 its surrounding area became the "Plaza del *Maine*," with gardens decorated with the busts of former U.S. president William McKinley who declared war in 1898, and Theodore Roosevelt whose heroic image leading the charge of his regiment "Rough Riders" at San Juan Hill, Cuba, opened his path to the White House.[24] In 1928 the Cuban president Gerardo Machado inaugurated the plaza to honor the sixth international conference of American States that Cuba hosted and the visit of President Calvin Coolidge, the only American president to visit Cuba before Barack Obama's historical visit in March 2016. The latter created hopes of establishing normal relations between the two countries before they got even worse during the presidency of Donald Trump, and then remained unchanged under the Biden administration.

21. Donald Martin Reynolds, *Monuments and Masterpieces: Histories and Views of Public Sculptures in New York Cities* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 350.

22. "Unveil Memorial to *Maine* Heroes, *The New York Times*, May 31, 1913, 3.

23. I met Cuban historian Marial Iglesias Utset who had just finished her doctoral dissertation on the transformation of Cuba under the first military occupation, 1898-1902, and who generously helped me in my archival research on the cultural and symbolic relations between the United States and Cuba during that period. Her dissertation became an important book: Marial Iglesias Utset, *A Cultural History of Cuba During the U.S. Occupation, 1898-1902* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina University Press, 2011).

24. Lorini, *L'impero della libertà*, 95-116. All sculptures, including a bust of general Leonard Wood who governed Cuba in the period 1898-1902, were by Gutzom Borglum the genial and bizarre sculptor who began the gigantic Stone Mounting Confederate bas-relief in Atlanta in 1915, and almost finished Mount Rushmore in South Dakota in 1925. Lorini, *Le statue bugiarde*, 50-57.

Figure 9. Digital Library of Georgia, *Monument to the Victims of the USS Maine, Havana, Cuba*, Moultrie-Colquitt County Library System. 1915/1930, cartolina, https://dlg.usg.edu/record/zgz_epogpc_mccls-pstcrd-294?canvas=0&x=3638&y=2387&w=13274

In the 1930s Cubans associated the *Maine* Havana monument to both U.S. political, economic, and cultural presence in Cuba and the dictator Machado, who was also known as "the tropical Mussolini."[25] The symbol of imperialism and of a public memory of Machado and Batista dictatorships, after the breaking of U.S.-Cuba diplomatic relationships in January 1961, and the U.S. backed invasion of the Bay of Pigs in April, on May 1, 1961, a government crane took down the American eagle.

Figure 10. The monument to the victims of the U.S.S. Maine in La Habana in recent times. Photo by Alessandra Lorini (2006)

Thus, this monument witnesses the profound conflicts between the two countries. The original sober script of 1925 on the front of the monument—*To the victims of the Maine. The people of Cuba*—since 1961 reads: *To the victims of the Maine who were sacrificed to a voracious imperialism in its eagerness to seize the island of Cuba.*

4 The past in the present

I began to study the story of Confederate monuments after the Charlottesville deadly rally of the Alt-Right of August 2017, which followed the young white suprematist Dylann Roof's massacre of nine African Americans at the AME Church in Charleston, SC, in June 2015 and the intense public debate on removing Confederate flags and other symbols from public buildings. Many white suprematists, feeling close to the new president Donald Trump, came out of the web sites and joined the rally in Charlottesville to protect the equestrian statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee from a possible removal. This event stirred my interest in Confederate monuments, which were erected in the period

25. Lorini, "Revering and Contesting Machado in the Shadow of the Platt Amendment: Cuban Nationalism and Anti-Imperialism in the 1920s," in Alessandra Lorini, Duccio Basosi, eds., *Cuba in the World, the World in Cuba: Essays on History, Politics, and Culture* (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2009), 109-124.

1890-1925 when racial segregation was well established in the South, and also during the Civil Right era that dismantled that regime. Far from commemorating "heritage" or "Southern culture," these monuments silently performed racial power in the public space until someone forced them to tell their true stories. In 2018 I visited several Lee's monuments in Virginia and the Confederate general's statue at the National Statuary Hall Collection in the Capitol Building of Washington, DC, where his bronze stood as one of the two representative heroes of his state (the other is George Washington). American public opinion finally realized that thirteen marble or bronze statues of Confederate figures were still performing their power on three-four million yearly visitors of that statuary collection.[26] During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 many Confederated monuments were defaced, toppled, or removed by authorities. A few southern states took the decision to remove their Confederate statues in the National Statuary Hall Collection – as Virginia did with General Lee in December 2020 – to replace them with those of activists of the Civil Rights Movement.

Since 2017 other public monuments have been contested, toppled or removed and have finally told their true stories. It happened with several New York monuments. In my familiar public art landscape of my graduate student days, American Indian activists questioned both the Columbus monument towering Columbus Circle and the Theodore Roosevelt Equestrian Monument at the entrance of the AMNH as racist glorifications of colonization. I studied these two monuments and they told me their true stories. As other contested monuments, they say more about existing racial and colonial perceptions at the moment of their inauguration than historical characters or events they represent. Far from being "history" they glorify the narrative chosen by those who wanted to erect them to dominate the public space.

The main questions for historian of public monuments are to be found in the 2018 final report of the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Arts, Monument and Markers the then mayor of New York Bill De Blasio appointed in 2017. Written by experts of public art, history, cultural heritage and public education this report sets out the guidelines to keep alive the public debate on the legacy of racism, colonialism, social inequalities, the performative power of monuments in the public space and how to include marginal historical narratives evoking slavery and expropriation of indigenous lands. For each controversial public monument the Commission recommended to retrieve the history of the person or event it commemorates, who commissioned and financed that monument, who was the chosen artist, the public space where the monument was erected, and the inauguration ceremonies.[27]

The current debate on public monuments is a new chapter of the early 1990s "culture wars" following the violent Los Angeles riots.[28] The teaching of history became the ground of an incensed public debate over the National Standards curriculum which tried to remove all attempts made in the 1970s to make history more inclusive of women, ethnic and racial minorities. According to conservatives, history should promote patriotism by emphasizing the moral virtues of the Founding Fathers, avoiding any question on the perfect American exceptionalism paradigm and the myth of the American Dream, and canceling any subject like slavery and the cruelty of western colonization. When seriously investigated these subjects make white people and the Founding Fathers full of imperfections. That is good historical research, but conservatives want hagiography, not history.

Another chapter of "culture wars" opened in 2019 when the *New York Time Magazine* published the "1619 Project," which made the arrival of the first enslaved people the founding event of American society.[29] This counter-narrative seemed to obscure the founding event of 1776, to which the then president Trump responded by creating a commission whose report, again, confounded history teaching with patriotism and hagiography.[30]

In the aftermath of the BLM protests of 2020, an incendiary debate occurred on toppled monuments. Conservatives thought that (their) history was cancelled, not the particular narrative selected by

26. Lorini, *Le statue bugiarde*, 15-33.

27. Ibid., 96-97.

28. After the LA police unjustified beating of Rodney King, riots occurred in LA metropolitan area in April-May, 1992. 63 people were killed.

29. Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: Random House, 2021).

30. A President Biden's executive order dissolved the *1776 Commission*.

those who erected them. A study of 2021 undertaken with the Mellon Foundation support confirmed that American commemorative landscape disproportionally glorifies a limited few, mostly white and male, while overlooking many individuals and events that have shaped American society and yet do not have any historical recognition. The Mellon Foundation has produced new initiatives including support to the Bureau of Indian Affairs to establish an oral history project to collect the memories of indigenous survivors of the Federal Indian boarding school system.[31]

The current major problem is that the future of federal agencies collaborating with the Mellon Foundation is rather uncertain under the upcoming Administration taking power on January 20, 2025. They will probably be dismantled as government bureaucracy by the new Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), if the new entity is approved. This will be part of *Project 2025*'s attempt to make history patriotic by venerating the Founding Fathers and erasing divisive subjects like slavery, segregation, and cruel western colonization. Should this happen public historians will struggle again in the educational system explaining the difference between history and glorification of usable pasts, and imagining a more inclusive public space.

I would like to end this brief account of my experience as a historian of public memories by encouraging more Italian Americanists to join the Associazione Italiana di Public History (AIPH) and present papers at its annual conferences.[32] In the United States of the new Trump administration there will be a quite radical public abuse of history and collective memories through attempts to rewrite the past according to a new political agenda erasing rights of women, racial and ethnic minorities, all programs of DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion), and censoring "divisive" subjects such as the history of slavery, racism, immigration, gender issues, and labor conflicts. The use of a public history approach to the study of these subjects addressed to a large Italian audience (media, schools, museums, associations of the civil society) can offer grounded historical explanations of the quite possible traumatic changes of the Trump era and their impact on European and non-European societies.

31. Mellon Foundation, *The Monuments Project: Our Commemorative Landscape* (mellon.org/article/the-monuments-project/); *Mellon Foundation Announces Five New Proposals Funded through the Monuments Project*, February 9, 2021 (mellon.org/news/).

32. The AIPH held its first annual conference in 2017 (https://aiph.hypotheses.org). I participated in the second annual conference held in Pisa in June 2018 with a paper on Confederate monuments, and in the third hosted in Santa Maria Capua Vetere in June 2019 with a paper on the National Statuary Hall Collection in Washington, DC. As I remember I was the only Americanist in the multiple sessions of those two conferences, with the exception of a paper presented in Pisa by the historian of Sicilian emigration Claudio Staiti on the Columbus Monument in New York City. The two papers I gave became the basis of my book *Le statue bugiarde* (cit.) which came out in January 2023. During the same year the Italian Americanist Arnaldo Testi published *I fastidi della storia: Quale America raccontano i monumenti* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2023) and presented a paper on this subject at the AIPH conference of 2024. The history of public space has become a crucial theme for the AIPH. See: Serge Noiret, "Spazio pubblico e memorie nelle pratiche della Public History," *Rivista di diritti comparati* 1 (2024): 21-45. On the history of public history in Italy: Aurora Savelli, "La Public history dalle origini alla costituzione dell'Associazione Italiana di Public History," *Sapere pedagogico e pratiche educative* 3 (2019): 9-22; on conflicting definitions of public history: Roberto Ibba, "Fare pace con la storia. La Public History come campo di mediazione tra falsi, invenzioni, fake news, uso politico e costruzioni identitarie," in Gianluca Borzoni, Barbara Onnis, Christian Rossi, eds., *Momenti di storia internazionale del Novecento* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2021), 142-161; also see: National Council on Public History, *How Do We Define Public History?*, (ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field).