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Black Activists and Racial Geographies of Memory in Post Uprising Minneapolis

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On May 20, 2022, New York Times columnist, Charles Blow published a column titled “George Floyd and the Fading Signs of Black Lives Matter.” In it, Blow described how Minneapolis’s 2020 George Floyd uprising had sparked a proliferation of protest art, including widespread graffiti and murals. Two years later, Blow wrote that this art was disappearing. If no one stepped up to preserve it, the memory would be lost, he said.

That same day, I volunteered with activist group Memorialize the Movement (MTM), as they set up “Justice For George” (J4G) 2022, a large scale exhibition of protest art, held in a park one block away from the site where Floyd was murdered. MTM works to “collect, preserve, and activate” protest art that was painted on the plywood window coverings that shop owners put up to protect their glass storefronts during the uprising. At J4G 2022, they displayed more than 50 of these murals (Memorialize 2022a). The exhibition was an immense logistical undertaking, requiring months of preparation, dozens of volunteers, and 14+ hour days for set up and take down. More than 500 visitors attended on the day of the exhibition (Memorialize 2022b).

The following weekend, I again joined MTM as they set up a (much smaller) display and information table at “Rise and Remember,” an annual commemoration of Floyd staged by the George Floyd Global Memorial at George Floyd Square – the site where Floyd was murdered.

At this event, MTM’s founder, Leesa Kelly expressed frustration with Blow’s article, which she had read in the interim. It had been published on the same weekend as her event yet had completely missed MTM’s work. His column declared a need for groups like MTM without recognizing the work that MTM was already doing. (Blow did acknowledge the work of George Floyd Global Memorial but missed the presence of other allied groups working in the Twin Cities). [Fig 1 and Fig 2].

Much of Blow’s column was indeed insightful. In 2020 and 2021, protest art commemorating Floyd had blanketed the city. In public, this art was unavoidable. By 2022, much of this art was disappearing from public view. This happened partly as shopowners took down the plywood covering their windows (which had been a primary surface for protest art). Many of these plywood murals were subsequently collected by MTM. The disappearance of protest art was also driven partly by the counter investments of Minneapolis’s growth machine development. (For instance, a series of developer sponsored street art festivals in the gentrifying LynLake neighborhood replaced protest murals with apolitical “street art,” marking the neighborhood as cool and ripe for development while evacuating its politics (see LynLake 2023)). [Fig 3].

What resulted, however, was not a complete erasure of memory, but the production of an uneven geography of memory. In some sites developers and the municipality cleared traces of the uprising and returned to business as usual. In other sites, activists worked to keep the protest and its radical demands in public view. This uneven geography of memory was heavily racialized, with public protest memory concentrated in BIPOC neighborhoods, reflecting longer histories of segregation and inequality in Minneapolis.

The work of groups like MTM confronts and challenges this racialized geography of memory. At peaks of activity, MTM has joined or organized events on an almost weekly basis, displaying its collection at sites across the city. (It has slowed its pace recently to focus on securing organizational longevity). Through this work, MTM helps to build up sites of Black memory,

while also bringing this memory into sites dominated by white capitalist development, challenging the erasure of memory at these sites.

Since 2022, I have worked closely MTM as a volunteer and allied researcher. Drawing on my observations of MTM's work, this paper analyzes the ways that Black activists' memory work engages and transforms the racial geography of the city. I show how this activist practice, while illuminating frustrating dynamics of entrenched inequality, opens sites of possibility which challenge the logics of white spatial capital.

As a white male ally working with a Black feminist organization, my analysis is, of course, partial and positional. Black and Brown activist colleagues are my guides, and I draw on and aim to contribute to their own analyses in my work. However, my analysis remains my own and draws on long term scholarly engagement with issues of public art, urban politics, and social justice. I endeavor to write in support of the movement and to produce scholarship that may contribute to justice. (Such contributions are not limited to this article but include the teaching that this scholarship may support and the ways that research for this paper included substantial participation in MTM's work).

Racial Space and Contested Memory

The production of public memory in Minneapolis builds on and confronts the uneven racial geography of the city. In Minneapolis, as in the wider United States, historic urban development produced a segregated landscape heavily invested in white supremacy. From housing segregation and redlining, to suburbanization (AKA "white flight"), to urban renewal (which bulldozed Black neighborhoods), to the aggressive policing of Black neighborhoods, to gentrification (in which incoming whites take advantage of de-valued Black property), U.S. urbanization has built white wealth and power through the exploitation and disinvestment of Black communities (Checker 2011; Gibbons 2018; Gregory 2013; Newsreel 2003; Davis 2006; Taylor 2021; Montgomery 2016; Moskowitz 2018). As a frontier town, the development of Minneapolis also built upon the ethnic cleansing and subjugation of Native Americans (Hugill 2021). (As Native Americans were pushed into concentrated, segregated poverty pockets in Minneapolis, recognition of shared experience with the city's Black community helped shape emerging native radicalism, including the formation of the militant American Indian Movement (D'Arcus 2010)).

George Lipsitz (2011) writes that white development works to create a pure or clean space, erasing signs of local history and racial violence to facilitate unfettered development and white wealth accumulation. As urban space is an ideological medium, which encodes hegemonic power relations as natural (Lefebvre 1992), U.S. urbanization has served to obfuscate inequality and erase histories of struggle (Lipsitz 2011). One result is white subjects misunderstanding familial wealth (a product of racial exploitation and unequal access to housing) as if it were evidence of personal success, leading many whites to blame Black communities for the effects of poverty and police violence, and to support further carcerality, police violence, and Black dispossession (Lipsitz 2011; Newsreel 2003; Kelley 2016).

The George Floyd protests of 2020 briefly disrupted this ideological relationship, the spectacle of the uprising forcing many whites to view and recognize the effects of structural inequality (Jackson 2022). The protests provoked a wide (if incomplete and ultimately reversed) reckoning in white institutions and communities, which briefly endeavored to remediate white privilege.

(An irony of this moment is that support for the Black Lives Matter movement and revulsion at Trump’s racist response likely contributed to the election of Joe Biden, a politician with a long record of anti-Black, pro-police, pro-prison, and pro-segregation policy. As president, Biden has fought hard against the Black Lives Matter movement, vowing to invest heavily in the police and to up the militarized capacity of the carceral state (Biden 2022). In Minneapolis, pro-police mayor Jacob Frey overrode efforts by the city council to reduce police budgets and reimagine public safety.

Within the racist geographic context of U.S. urbanism, Black people’s survival strategies, everyday lives, and activist work is spatially productive, building Black spaces and geographies that escape or challenge the racist logics of wider U.S. society (McKittrick and Woods 2007; Lipsitz 2011; Hunter et al. 2016; Reese 2019; Hawthorne 2019). Limited mobility demands the creative re-use and multi-use of space in ways that shape liberatory/revolutionary social relationships and challenge the spatial logics of white wealth and property (Lipsitz 2011; Hunter et al. 2016; Tenorio 2022). As McKittrick and Woods write, while Black spatial production responds to the constraints of white supremacy, Black geographies can build on “traditions that see place as the location of co-operation, stewardship, and social justice, rather than just sites to be dominated...” (McKittrick and Woods 2007). In this way Black geographies are potentially liberatory and can present an existential challenge to the spatial/social logics of white racial capital. Activists are sometimes able to exploit this contradiction to undermine white spatial logics or to build Black presence into white space in ways that subvert ongoing dispossession. (see Gibbons 2018; Montgomery 2016; Wright and Herman 2018).

The project of abolition, then, is always, also a geographic project, which requires undoing the spatial logics of white supremacy in order to make a more just society possible (Gilmore 2007; Gilmore 2022; Tenorio 2022). Part of this abolitionist project involves challenging the ideological impacts of white spatial production to make the violence of contemporary urban geographies visible and to hold Black memory and Black struggle in public space in ways that resist erasure. In addition to challenging white racial ideologies, Black memory work can be an important resource for Black community empowerment and political organizing (Jackson 2022).

Conflicting logics of racialized space and development intersect in the struggle over memory, as white developers work to clear Minneapolis for further development and Black activists work to entrench sites of memory as a tool towards building liberation. Historical memory, even of recent events, is not an objective fact, but a social production, built and contested by various actors through their engagement with historical material (Abu El-Haj 2002; Trouillot 2015), including urban space. Differently positioned actors may engage public history in strikingly different ways and produce competing narratives (Slyomovics 1998) or even silences (Trouillot 2015). While states often work with brute force to produce a landscape amenable to state projects, including through memorial practices (Trouillot 2015), monumentalization (Schwenkel 2009), and aggressive urban development (Montgomery 2016; Smith 1996; Harvey 2002; Peterson 2010), the affective traces of competing histories often remain (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Gordillo 2014) and can be activated through social practice (Houston 2015; Author 2020), forming a resource for resistance and activism (Harvey 2002; Montgomery 2016; Houston 2015). Official history may be further contested through the production of counter-archives (Lee 2016; Sojoyner 2021) and alternative narratives (Swedenburg 2003).

In contemporary Minneapolis, Black activist memory projects include George Floyd Square, where activists have maintained a powerful memorial dense with public art, despite ongoing

attempts by the municipality to clear or constrain the memorial (Burks, Nguyen and Frost 2020, Young 2021); sporadic graffiti and illicit protest art around the ruin of the 3rd Precinct building, burned down by protesters during the uprising, which the mayor now seeks to rebuild despite wide community opposition (Leone 2023); and various protest archives, such as the George Floyd Global Memorial (a collection of protest art and offerings left by visitors to George Floyd Square), and Memorialize the Movement (a living archive of more than 500 protest murals produced during the uprising). Through these projects, Black activists construct an alternate geography of memory, which confronts and challenges the wider racial order of Minneapolis. Keeping memory visible in public space, they prevent the cleansing of urban space for continued white development and transform urban space into a forceful demand for racial justice.

Memorialize the Movement

Memorialize the Movement is a living archive of protest art from the 2020 uprising. With a mission to “collect, preserve, and activate” this art, MTM keeps protest art visible in public spaces and aims to use the art to build upon the revolutionary energy of the uprising, continuing to work towards justice.

MTM’s collection is drawn from the plywood murals that were painted across the city on the plywood that storeowners used to protect their glass storefronts during the uprising. MTM’s founder, Leesa Kelly says that, during the turmoil of the uprising, she found comfort in the proliferation of these murals, which reminded her that she was not alone. (This is a common experience in revolutionary contexts, where protest art helps structure relations of solidarity and mutual recognition among diverse protestors (LeVine and Reynolds 2021)). When the energy of the uprising slowed, storeowners began taking down the plywood which had covered their windows, and Kelly began picking the murals out of the trash in an effort to keep this history from being discarded. Soon, Kelly’s mural collection grew beyond the storage capacity of her small apartment. She founded MTM to preserve them and began working to find ever larger storage spaces. Today, MTM has a collection of more than 500 murals, consisting of more than 1,000 individual 8’x4’ plywood panels (logistically a massive challenge to store and preserve). Together with a team of interns and a large volunteer base, Kelly regularly displays selected murals at various sites around the city and is working to ensure their long-term preservation. She says that she has had offers from museums and other archives to take the mural collection. But while Kelly recognizes the capacity and expertise which these institutions could provide, she says that it is important for the archive to remain in Black hands, so that Black people have control over how this history is represented.

Kelly explains that, as she collected the murals, she began to notice variation in the artwork. Murals painted in predominantly white neighborhoods were more passive. They memorialized Floyd and conveyed messages of peace, equality, and justice, but were less likely to express revolutionary demands. They were also more likely to have been painted by professional artists at the invitation of shopowners (often on commission), and thus tended to be aesthetically impressive. Art painted in Black areas tended to be more raw, both aesthetically and emotionally. It was more often painted as an act of vandalism during the uprising (rather than as a permission piece). It also tended to express emotions of Black fear, pain, and anger, and to contain revolutionary demands, such as calls to “fuck 12” (fuck the police) and to abolish the police.

Kelly argues that a white curator might be inattentive to these differences and might foreground the more aesthetically impressive works in ways that inadvertently erase Black anger. One reason it is important to retain Black control over the mural archive is that Black activists will have the sensitivity to recognize and preserve the revolutionary emotional content of Black creative production from the uprising. (In this, Kelly's analysis is resonant with Amahl Bishara's discussion of the ways that the remediation of graffiti on the separation wall in Palestine tends to favor images painted by international solidarity organizations and world famous artists, at the expense of radical Palestinian messages (Bishara 2012)).

MTM also navigates the complicated racial geography of Minneapolis when displaying selections from the mural collection at various events around the city, in a mix of white and Black spaces.

Displaying radical murals in white spaces is an important part of what MTM does, but it also can be an emotionally fraught experience for Kelly and her team (predominantly young women and non-binary youth of color). Displaying the murals can serve as a prompt to conversation, opening discussions about racial justice. At one especially successful event, MTM displayed a mural with the message "performative allyship will not suffice," which led several white visitors to ask what performative allyship was. This gave MTM volunteers an opportunity to have productive conversations with white liberals about the difference between saying you support equality and actually showing up for Black lives. **[Fig 4].**

At that same event, Kelly and a white event organizer had to make a run to a hardware store. (MTM displays the murals on custom-made freestanding walls, which are held together with bolts, and needed additional hardware to complete the assembly). At the hardware store, an employee had noticed Kelly's "Black Lives Matter" t-shirt and had felt compelled to accost Kelly and explain that "all lives matter." The white organizer accompanying Kelly to the hardware store intervened, calling out the employee's rudeness and racism, explaining that since Black lives face exceptional violence, it is important to affirm that Black lives, specifically, matter. Further, she promised to take her (significant) business elsewhere in the future. Later at the event, Kelly was able to point to this organizer's intervention as an example of what it means to go beyond the performative and take action to support Black people. This helped build recognition among event attendees and strengthen solidarity between the two organizations.

At these events, MTM sells merchandise and accepts donations, hoping to eventually have the funds to purchase an exhibition space of their own. This too can be an opportunity for productive conversation. For instance, MTM sells a beautiful shirt called "The Afro of Justice," (designed by intern Amira McLendon), which depicts a proud black woman whose hair is made up of revolutionary messages. White visitors occasionally ask if it is appropriate to buy and wear this image, opening conversation about representation and appropriation. (Kelly says yes, white people should wear this shirt to display their solidarity).

In other contexts, seeing the murals can be a prompt for white visitors to reflect on their experience of the uprising. Visitors have described their shock and horror at the events, discussed watching the events on television while away from home, explained how it prompted them to want to work for a more just future, pointed to sites where they had first seen protest graffiti and discussed their reaction to it, and claimed to have known Floyd personally, describing him as "kind but troubled." While these conversations are productive, speakers are rarely attentive to Kelly's own trauma from the events, often seeming to use her as a sounding board for their own

therapeutic processing of the uprising. (White people often seem to talk to Kelly in order to assure themselves that they are not part of the problem).

Sometimes, these conversations can be extremely uncomfortable, as when a white man at a Black community event used the murals as an excuse to begin talking about his own experiences as a delivery driver in the neighborhood where Floyd was killed. He explained how afraid he was of this Black neighborhood, but explained that he made friends with a Black delivery driver and feels bad for what happened in the neighborhood. Once the conversation was started, he then proceeded to make some racist jokes about his bi-racial daughter, before commenting on how sad it was that “George Floyd had to die for us, like” (to make progress as a society).

Kelly, who had been biting her tongue, could hold it in no longer and screamed, “George Floyd didn’t die for us. He was murdered!”

The man, startled, attempted to explain himself, “I mean like Martin Luther King...”

“He didn’t die for us either,” Kelly exclaimed.

The all-too-common white tendency to view Floyd (or King) as martyrs whose sacrifice somehow saves (white) U.S. society from itself, was too much for Kelly to handle. When the man left her booth, she was on the edge of tears, ruining what was otherwise a pleasant day for her.

On other occasions, simply being in white spaces can be unsettling. Kelly and some interns set up a table at an arts festival in a wealthy white neighborhood. While they had a very successful day fundraising, they also described feeling strongly out of place. Many festival goers stared at them with hostility and refused to interact. Even those who gave money rarely engaged in conversation. Kelly and the interns felt so uncomfortable that they decided to leave early, despite the fundraising opportunity. “I’m never going back there,” Kelly exclaimed after the festival.

At a block party organized by an allied white-led organization which Kelly wants to continue to work with, Kelly and the MTM interns again felt highly self-conscious of their presence in a white social space. One thing which was especially difficult to handle was the rowdy play of children who played football and tag, running around the murals, which made the team concerned that the murals might be damaged. While attempting to direct the children to play in a different area, interns spoke about their anxiety with how they would be seen, as women of color scolding white kids. They also were unsure about how to navigate the messy politics of asking apparently unconcerned parents to reign in their kids.

These dynamics made the whole event high anxiety. When a nearby group of white partiers began singing camp songs, dancing goofily and broke out laughing, the MTM team exchanged sideways glances. Kelly captured the mood, muttering “White people, am I right?!” under her breath as the group moved away.

While not a particularly hostile event, this block party still highlights the challenges of doing Black memory work in white space, and the ways that white norms can alienate Black activists, even in supposedly friendly spaces.

Additionally, negotiations with white led organizations for the staging of these events can reveal uncomfortable power dynamics. I worked with Kelly to coordinate a talk and exhibition at [anonymized for review] College, where I teach, as part of [the College’s] “Humanities in Focus: Art and Democracy” initiative. Kelly was pleased with the exhibition, the reception she received,

her experience working with [the College's] exhibition staff, and with [the College's] ability to dedicate cash and resources to supporting MTM. However, when she arrived on campus she was frustrated to see posters advertising the event as a display of "Minneapolis Protest Murals" without naming her or MTM. Kelly felt that in this way, [the College], a primarily white institution with legacies of exclusion, was able to build its reputation by taking credit for the work done by Kelly, a Black woman. This was especially frustrating at a time when MTM was struggling to remain sustainable and Kelly was working to raise public awareness and support for her organization. (From my perspective, as a white male academic, who has been working with MTM, there is a real concern with the way that white allies can build their own reputations and careers on the back of Black activist work, and so it is important to build these relationships in ways that ensure white allies give something back).

To open this exhibition, Kelly gave a talk about her work, in which she spoke at length about the importance of retaining Black community control over this archive of murals. She talked about the challenges of being a Black organization in the predominantly white field of art preservation and discussed the intentionality with which she built her team of interns – at that time all women or non-binary youth of color. Then Kelly paused. "But I don't want to look like a hypocrite. Some of you must be thinking, 'okay, that makes sense, but then what are you doing here, at [College name anonymized for review]?!' I know that this is a white institution. And the truth is we have to make compromises. We don't have the resources to do it all ourselves right now. And so we are committed to working with allied organizations, provided it is done in the right way. It has to be an organization that shares our values, and it has to be an organization that lets us take the lead and retain control over how this is presented."

To be quite honest, while [College name anonymized for review] was prompted by the George Floyd uprising to improve its support of Black students and faculty, and while the school has taken steps to address structural racism on campus, I am not sure how fully it embodies the radical abolitionism and call for racial justice that is at the center of MTM's work. However, Kelly's point makes sense. In order to do its work, MTM frequently has to collaborate with white organizations, and so Kelly has to evaluate which organizations does she want to partner with. Which seem most inclined to work with Kelly towards building justice?

When Kelly was invited to display at Franconia Sculpture Park, a public garden in a rural area about an hour north of Minneapolis, she was skeptical at first. But when she visited the institution, she saw that several of their sculptures addressed themes of racial justice. A set of wooden benches around the institution grounds were engraved with names of Black people who had been murdered by police. Another prominent sculpture recreated the sign from the Lorraine Motel, the site in Memphis where Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968. This helped convince Kelly that the administrators at Franconia had a longer commitment to racial justice and were willing to do the work. As she toured the grounds, she began to imagine how an exhibition of MTM murals could fit in this space. She talked to administrators about running shuttle busses from Minneapolis for the exhibition, so that Black people from the cities would be more able to attend. Through this, she gained comfort in the idea of displaying at Franconia.

On another occasion, she was invited to display in a social justice festival, "The Festival for Change," organized by Roseville Lutheran Church. (Roseville is a white suburb just outside Minneapolis). When they first met to discuss the festival, church leaders mentioned a plan to let Roseville police have a booth at the festival. Kelly objected strongly, explaining that she could not participate in a festival that cooperated with police (for fear this would help legitimize police

violence). As she explained her position, church leaders agreed to do the festival without a police presence. For Kelly, this highlighted how even well-meaning groups often have a lot of learning and reflection to do. Ultimately, the event at Roseville turned out to be one of Kelly's favorite events, as the church goers were eager to engage and talk and learn about how to work on themselves.

Sometimes, despite these negotiations, collaboration with white organizations could prove highly frustrating. One arts organization arranged for Kelly to display murals in their gallery and promised an exciting opening, with DJs and catered food, but when the time for the event came, the gallery did not deliver. They had scheduled a competing event and seemed to ignore MTM. Staffers and visitors seemed to hurry through MTM's exhibition, often scowling at Kelly and the intern team. Kelly was made to feel very unwelcome, and vowed never to work with this organization again.

On another occasion, Kelly was approached by an urban planning firm which, like many other corporations during the uprising, had begun to reflect on the historic connections between urban planning and racial exclusion and had hired a DEI consultant to explore ways that the firm could position itself as part of the solution. This organization told Kelly that they wanted to support MTM in a mutually beneficial way. They asked Kelly to display a few murals in their workspace, and offered to pay Kelly to use the space to host community events, workshops, and fundraisers. Kelly felt good about the initial interactions, but a few months after their initial conversation and handshake agreement to work together, the planning firm began to balk at the details they had already agreed to—they asked why they were paying Kelly so much when she would benefit from the exposure that they provide. They also decided that they would not let her host community events on weekends, because that was outside the normal business hours of the firm, and the firms' partners didn't see how they benefitted from MTM using the space when they weren't there. Ultimately Kelly walked away from the partnership, which was hard because a significant amount of money was involved and MTM needed the support, but it felt too much like this organization was trying to take advantage of her, to launder their own reputation at her expense.

While displaying at these institutions can be a good experience, and while it provides opportunities to talk with and educate white people about racial justice—one of MTM's goals—such engagements are also always stressful and fraught.

Black Memory

Of course, while activists might find it important to work with white people or in white spaces, activists' work at other times may target Black audiences. In Black hands, the memory of the uprising can be a source of Black empowerment.

One of MTM's signature activities is its "Paint to Express" workshop series. At these workshops, targeted towards BIPOC audiences, Kelly uses the murals as a provocation. She hands out small 1' x 1' plywood squares and invites participants to paint their own small murals on subjects of their own choosing.

For an early Paint to Express, Kelly collaborated with The Black and Brown Girl Scouts of River Valley, organizing an event specifically for Black and brown youth. In Kelly's eyes, this was one of the most important and impactful events in MTM's short history. People rarely listen to these

youth, she says, and they have had limited opportunities to process the fear, sadness, hope, and anger that they felt during the uprising. This Paint to Express workshop opened a space where these youth could share and process these emotions. Painting small murals, such as one which read “Please Stop Killing Us,” spurred further discussion among the youth and organizers of their experiences of the uprising period. Kelly found the discussion tough and heartbreaking, but also rewarding and healing.

Kelly often talks about the importance of using the murals to make space for Black healing. At many events she has masseurs, therapists, and others on hand to do healing work for participants. Kelly says that she still struggles with the trauma she experienced during the uprising. While the uprising was an empowering moment, it was also a shocking, continuous reminder of the disposability of Black life in America. As Kelly grew more involved in Black Lives Matter activism, she also began to fear police reprisals. Like other activists, she prepared for contingencies and had a plan to flee the state if necessary. The high stress disrupted her sleep and diet and she struggled with depression. While white activists were certainly assaulted and injured during the uprising, the degree of state terror felt by Kelly was a distinctly Black experience, not widely shared among white allies, in her view. As such, there are distinct Black community needs for healing.

Paint to Express workshops create a space where Black and brown people can come together and process this tremendous experience without accommodating white feelings and mediation.

At these workshops, there is no set agenda, and conversation can be quite free-flowing. At one event I attended, conversation shifted from discussion of how people found the event, to a discussion of what made people feel safe (as Black and brown individuals in a white society), to a discussion of what people were painting and the importance of Black representation in artwork, to a discussion of Black representation in Hollywood. Participants talked about recent Black-led films, such as Black Panther and The Woman King, discussing how good it felt to see films that were not dominated by white actors. During this conversation, one participant turned to me and asked “does this bother you, hearing us talk about white people like this?” (I was the only white person in the workshop, although there were others in the room).

The question was not an apologetic offer to change the subject, but rather reflected genuine curiosity and a recognition that I was, perhaps, out of place. In her question, this participant both registered her surprise in recognizing that this was a space where white feelings did not need to be considered and further asserted Black and Brown authority over the room. Recognizing how often Black people self censor for white comfort, she also recognized that she did not have to do that here. The structure of MTM’s Paint to Express workshops play an important role in shaping Black spaces of this kind and making space within them for Black and Brown participants to claim their own authority.

Paint to Express workshops also present important opportunities to build alliances with activist organizations. Hosting events in collaboration with established activist organizations like the East Side Freedom Library or new ones like Atlas Defense (a violence prevention and community defense training organization), MTM helps build and maintain a network of activist organizations in the Twin Cities.

Another of MTM’s signature events is its annual Justice For George exhibition (J4G). J4G commemorates the uprising with a large-scale public display of artwork from MTM’s collection. In 2021 and 2022, MTM held J4G in a neighborhood park one block off George Floyd Square,

using freestanding 16-foot frames to display dozens of larger murals from MTM's collection. **[Figs 5a-5f]**

The 2022 exhibition included 80 murals consisting of more than 200 individual pieces of plywood. Kelly selected murals collected from a range of neighborhoods across Minneapolis to showcase the breadth and depth of MTM's collection.

The exhibition was accompanied by a slate of performers and speakers, live mural painting, workshops, and informational tables set up by activists and Black entrepreneurs. The exhibition also included a healing space, masseurs, and resources for therapy. Distributing funds to Black artists, activists, entrepreneurs and healers who participate in J4G is a tangible contribution that MTM makes to justice work. But, further, the contributions of these participants help cultivate an intimate Black space of healing and validation.

For Kelly, it is important to assert that J4G is an event for Black community. While white people are welcome to attend, they are not the intended audience. Kelly takes care to curate the space as a Black space, dedicated to building Black community power and resilience. In addition to its location, just off George Floyd Square, in a cultural hub of Black Minneapolis, Kelly posts a notice at the entrance to J4G, declaring this a Black event and a Black space. **[Fig 6]**

For many attendees this event and the space that it holds is profoundly meaningful. As I staffed the entrance at the 2022 J4G, some of the visitors stopped to talk with me about their own experiences of police violence, highlighting how the exhibition reminded them that they were not alone and held out hope for a better future. Event speakers discussed the importance of holding open a space where Black political community could come together. Others described this event as a continuation of the uprising.

Yet, Kelly was not satisfied with the 2021 and 2022 editions of J4G. As MTM surveyed visitors and participants, a common complaint was that while MTM took pains to curate a Black space, the exhibition was still too white. (Indeed a large portion of the audience did appear to be white visitors). Kelly rethought the exhibition and decided to hold future editions in a smaller, more intimate space, where she has more control, in order to create space for Black activist conversation and healing. "So much has happened and we still haven't had time to heal," Kelly said.

George Floyd Square

The most notable site of Black memory in Minneapolis is George Floyd Square, located at the intersection of 38th and Chicago, where Floyd was murdered by police. After the killing, activists and neighbors seized the intersection, barricading it off from traffic and declaring George Floyd Square a police free autonomous zone (Burks, Nguyen and Frost 2020). During the uprising, artists, activists, and protesters converged on the square, helping to develop it into a prominent, public memorial. Activists claimed an abandoned gas station at the intersection and renamed it "People's Way," using the station as a gathering space, resource center, and site to post a list of demands for racial justice (see Justice Resolution 2020). Many artists also built out the site, contributing works that honored Floyd's life, the uprising, and associated demands for justice. Notable works include Jordan Powell-Karis's large metal sculpture of a Black power fist, placed at the center of the intersection; A list of names honoring people murdered by police, painted by Mari Mansfield along a full block Chicago Avenue; a mock graveyard, The "Say Their Names

Cemetery”, installed by Anna Barber and Connor Wright in an adjacent green space, again honoring the victims of police violence; and several important murals. (For a virtual tour of the site, visit Taahir n.d.). 3 years later, George Floyd Square has one of the densest concentrations of public art anywhere in the city and stands as a powerful memorial to Floyd and other victims of American policing.

The art here, notably serves a distinct purpose from public art in Minneapolis sponsored by the municipality or business interests(which mainly aims to drive development (see the Lyn-Lake Street Art Series or Minneapolis’s Cultural Districts (City of Minneapolis 2023a, 2023b, LynLake 2023)) Here, the art helps to mark out a distinct, autonomous site of memory and activism, supporting a radical demand that challenges the status quo operation of Minneapolis’s development and governance. **[Fig 7a-7c]**

George Floyd Square plays many roles. It is a memorial. It is a center of political organizing and Black Power (in a city governed by carceral, anti-Black logics), and it is also an important site of joy and celebration. The square hosts frequent events, including impromptu children’s activities and dances. It also stages an annual “Rise and Remember” event on the anniversary of Floyd’s murder. Rise and Remember has the feel of a large block party or small festival, with musical performances, speakers, community vendors, food, and activist tables. While commemorating a tragedy, Rise and Remember is also a celebration of Black community resilience, an opportunity for neighbors and allies from across the city to gather and take pride in their strength.

From the outset, the existence of George Floyd Square has been challenged by the municipality (Georgiades 2020). The municipality has sought to clear the blockade, reopen the intersection to traffic, and reduce or remove the memorial. George Floyd Square has also been challenged by the press. As part of a wider press reaction against the successes of the movement, the Minneapolis Star-Tribune ran articles describing the site as dangerous and questioning the economic cost of the memorial for local businesses (Du 2021, Williams 2022). However, the square retains significant community support and the municipality’s ability to dismantle George Floyd Square has been limited by community opposition.

In March 2021, the city used a deceitful survey to manufacture the appearance of popular support for reopening the intersection (Young 2021). Mailed to nearby residents, the survey asked participants to choose a preferred method of removing or reducing the memorial in order to reopen the intersection to traffic. It did not ask whether neighbors wanted it reopened and it did not include an option to keep the memorial closed to traffic as is (Minneapolis Public Works n.d.). Responses had low participation and “significantly underrepresented” Black and Latino community members (in a largely Black neighborhood) (Minneapolis n.d.). Nevertheless 16% of respondents wrote in that they wanted to keep the intersection closed indefinitely or until the city met activist demands (Minneapolis Public Works n.d.).

While the city was able to force open the intersection to traffic, activists maintain a large memorial at the site and brag that 3 years later, George Floyd Square still stands. Financial settlements between the city and Floyd’s family provide funding which may help keep George Floyd Square open indefinitely. The city has been pressured to arrange a transfer of ownership putting George Floyd Global Memorial in legal control of the People’s Way gas station at the Square. Floyd’s family, further, has used its settlement funds to establish an endowment supporting other activists working for racial justice in Minneapolis, such as MTM.

The municipality's duplicity in this case prepared activists for a similarly duplicitous survey regarding the future of the 3rd Precinct building, which protesters had burned down during the uprising. In this case, the municipality asked how (not whether) the 3rd precinct should be rebuilt (Sirdar and Georgiades 2023, Leone 2023). However, this time, the community was prepared and neighbors turned out in large numbers to the city's "listening sessions" where they shared stories of police abuse, demanded an option to keep the precinct closed, and shouted down moderators who refused to listen to the community. Protestors were ultimately successful in blocking the reopening of the 3rd Precinct (Sirdar and Georgiades 2023).

These struggles highlight the importance of George Floyd Square and the destroyed 3rd Precinct building as sites of alternative memory which challenge the anti-Black development logics of Minneapolis's growth machine. [Figs 8, 9, 10, 11]

Conclusion

In the work of MTM and other activist groups, the production of radical memory cuts across the wider racial geography of Minneapolis. Building Black memory into white spaces MTM confronts wider exclusions and erasures, and creates opportunities to challenge white practices and attitudes, opening new forms of solidarity and support. Yet the way that many whites appropriate or attempt to control MTM's memory work means that Kelly and her team expend significant energy defending their authority to narrate their own history.

At the same time, Black sites of memory are an important resource for Black community organizing, power, and resilience. Cultivating and preserving these sites is an important part of Black activist work. As these sites undercut the white spatial logics of Minneapolis's contemporary development, they are challenged and attacked by the state, which works to clear the landscape of memory, to pave the way for continued growth and carceral removal.

In both cases, MTM's work highlights the importance of keeping Black memory in Black hands. In MTM's hands, this archive of protest art is not merely an object of interest to be studied and displayed. It is a tool with which they build towards justice and rework wider structures of inequality within the racial geography of Minneapolis.

Kelly often speaks on the importance of preserving Black control of Black memory. When major white-led institutions approached her, seeking to acquire and preserve MTM's collection, Kelly refused. Despite the logistical challenges of keeping an independent organization operational, Kelly insists that MTM maintains a "living" archive, where the murals continue to do justice work and says that white led institutions would not keep these murals living. She says that mainstream white institutions would at once sensationalize and depoliticize the collection while cutting the murals off from the community that produced and sustains them.

Looking at the work she does, it is easy to understand her point. In a museum setting, these murals would be reduced to harmless objects of interest. At MTM, they are building blocks, a starting point from which Kelly and her team can construct an empowering, emancipatory future. [Fig 12]

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For Peer Review



Fig 1: During the 2020 uprising, plywood panels used to protect business windows were covered with protest art.

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 2: MTM collects plywood murals when they come down from storefront windows and redisplayes these murals at events like their annual "Justice For George" exhibition. (This photo from J4G 2021, held in Phelps Field Park, just off George Floyd Square).

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 3: Municipal and commercial investments in public art, such as the graffiti style murals of the LynLake Street art series, seen here, help erase Minneapolis's landscape of protest art, replacing it with a cool-looking but politically empty aesthetic, conducive to continued gentrification.

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 4: Performative Allyship Will Not Suffice, Demand Justice, displayed at J4G 2022

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 5a

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 5b

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 5c

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 5d

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 5e

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 5f

Figs 5a-5f: Selected murals from J4G 2021 highlight the breadth of MTM’s Collection

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)

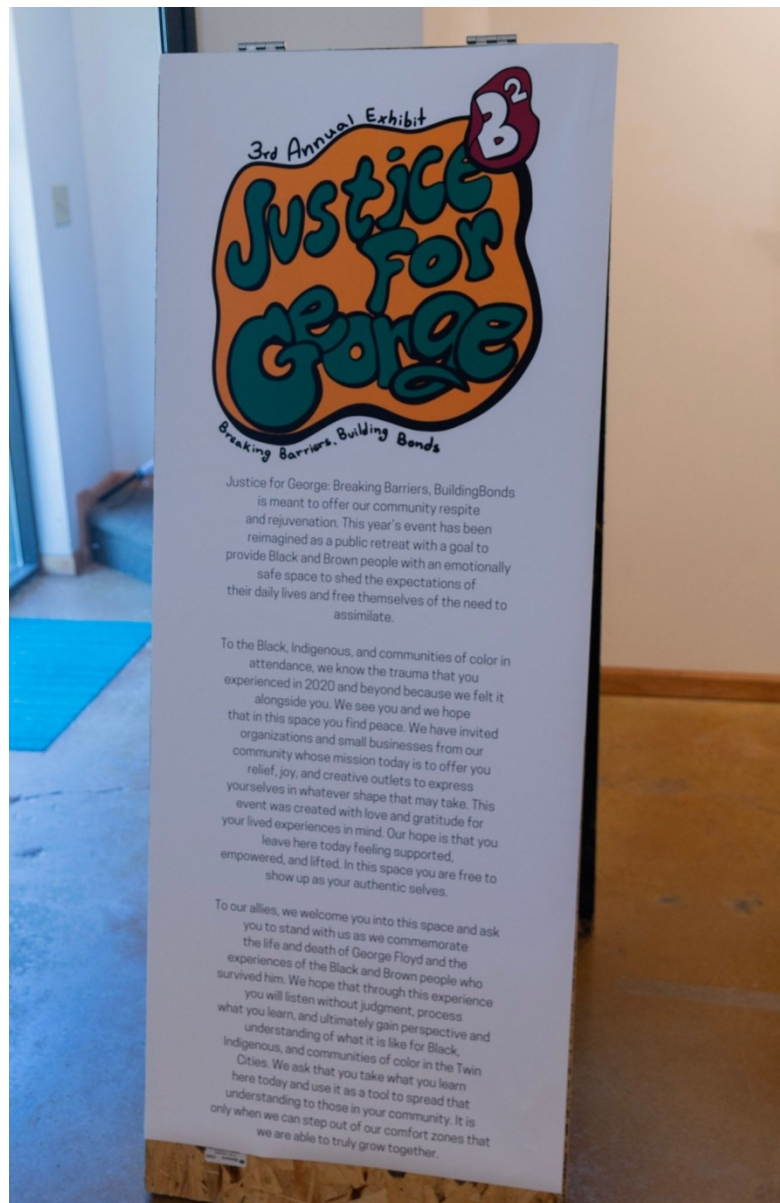


Fig 6: MTM's vibe check, posted at many of their events (here at the entrance of J4G 2023), defines the event space as a site of Black and Brown community activity, reminding allies that they are welcome but play a supporting role in this space. Photo courtesy MTM

473x722mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 7a

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 7b

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)

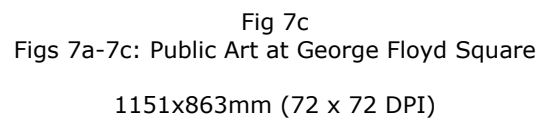




Fig 8: "Riots Work." Graffiti in front of the ruin of Minneapolis's 3rd Precinct Building. (This photo was taken in July 2023, and within a week of this photograph, the graffiti had already been erased).

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 9: Extensive graffiti erasure on the concrete barrier in front of the ruined 3rd precinct building shows the ongoing struggle over public memory at this site.

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 10: A Black Lives Matter Flag flies over a church facing the ruined 3rd precinct building.

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 11: Wheatpasted flyers near the site of the ruined 3rd Precinct building. The flyer on the right challenges municipal efforts to rebuild the 3rd Precinct. Community members were eventually successful in blocking the mayor’s plan to rebuild the precinct.

1151x863mm (72 x 72 DPI)



Fig 12: MTM team members and volunteers pose in front of a selection of small murals painted by Paint to Express workshop participants. Exhibit at J4G 2023. Photo courtesy MTM.

256x341mm (300 x 300 DPI)