

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

The Creative Terrain of Numbe Whageh: Creating Memory, Leading to Center

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8476270r>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 31(3)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

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**Publication Date**

2007-06-01

**DOI**

10.17953

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## The Creative Terrain of *Numbe Whageh*: Creating Memory, Leading to Center

**KATHY FREISE**

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This article explores ways of creating public art, ways of looking, and ways of remembering. It focuses on how one work in Albuquerque, New Mexico, twines around these three notions and produces new ways of thinking about each. My perspective is that the best public art shapes the ways in which people examine themselves, their lives, and their worlds. It opens up critical, rational spaces that ask viewers to critique themselves and their thinking. It is also capable of social and personal intervention, inspiration, and transformation.

For these reasons, I focus on one component within a larger work of public art. The piece actively presents an opportunity to rethink the world around it. By extension, it also presents the opportunity to rethink one's self. It offers little prescription for looking and instead encourages the imaginative by engaging the senses. I offer here neither a detailed chronology nor a complete art historical record. Rather, I examine the speculative and theoretical contours and possibilities within the piece. I engage with establishing memory as a kind of artistic language that may activate crucial new understandings of potentially painful narratives.

The work of art under consideration here is *Numbe Whageh* by Nora Naranjo-Morse (Tewa of Santa Clara Pueblo). It is the first monumental piece of public art by a female Native artist and is part of the city of Albuquerque's Cuatrocenenario Memorial, installed at the Albuquerque Museum in 2005. However, the memorial had generated controversy for years before its installation, with the planning process reflecting the polarized standoff over history and space implicit today in issues of representation and public memorials.

The Cuatrocenenario Memorial marks the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Spanish conquistador don Juan de Oñate in what is now New Mexico. The memorial comprises two linked segments, *La Jornada* (The

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Journey) and *Numbe Whageh* (Our Center Place). *La Jornada* focuses on Oñate and on the settlers and livestock accompanying him; it is a group of figures rendered in bronze created by Reynaldo “Sonny” Rivera, a Hispanic artist, and Betty Sabo, a Euro-American artist. *Numbe Whageh* is a landscape treatment designed to represent the American Indian perspective on Oñate’s arrival.

The two segments stand side by side, markedly different from one another, not only in terms of their literal presentation but also in terms of their psychic overtones and how they approach memory. Together, they map what visual culture scholar Irit Rogoff terms “the haunting that is the ongoing reality of co-inhabited spaces in which one presence is always at the expense of the other.”<sup>1</sup> To some degree, both segments of the contradictory piece draw on mythical ideals of the cultural groups they represent in that they also point to the tension of the past that seeps into the present and to the instability inherent in the act of memorializing and in memory. I suggest that the memorial both limits and expands cultural boundaries, with *La Jornada* limiting perception by counting on a form of remembering linked to historical identification and recognition, and with *Numbe Whageh* potentially transforming perceptions, because it presents an American Indian cultural point of view and asks viewers to participate within it. By considering *Numbe Whageh* in terms of its role as a memorial, function as a tourist destination, and place within the history of environmentally based public art, I argue that it presents viewers with an opportunity to arrive at new understandings not only of the piece’s cultural geography and history but also of themselves.

### CONTROVERSY AND COMPETING VISUAL NARRATIVES

The Cuatrocenenario Memorial dominates the northeast corner of the Albuquerque Museum’s sculpture garden. The question of how and whether to create such a memorial moved through several variations throughout the course of eight years. The issue of how to interpret historical figures publicly has gained regular attention lately—disputes about Thomas Jefferson, Christopher Columbus, and Kit Carson are cases in point—but the Oñate memorial dispute certainly is among the most intense because it focused largely on Oñate’s mistreatment of members of Ácoma Pueblo. There is mostly agreement about the general sequence of events. When Ácoma Pueblo was slow to yield cornmeal to a Spanish reconnaissance party, a skirmish erupted in which thirteen Spaniards were killed. Oñate dispatched seventy soldiers to lay siege to Ácoma, located defensively atop a 350-foot-high mesa. The battle lasted three days; one Spaniard and approximately eight hundred Ácomas died. After that battle on 1 January 1599, Oñate sentenced between five and six hundred Ácomas to punishment and slavery—the nature of that punishment, which included chopping off one foot each of twenty-four men, figured critically in the debate about the memorial. In time, Oñate was tried in Spain for these and other abuses of power.<sup>2</sup>

In 1997, Albuquerque’s Oñate Cuarto Centenario Memorial Project Planning Committee proposed the memorial. The committee was responsible



**FIGURE 1.** *City of Albuquerque Cuartocentenario Memorial at the Albuquerque Museum. Numbe Whageh (Our Center Place) is in the foreground; La Jornada (The Journey) is in the background. Photo by the author.*

for creating a year of commemorative activities centered around the four hundredth anniversary of Oñate's 1598 arrival in the area that later became New Mexico. When controversy erupted and the project was taken over by the Albuquerque Arts Board, which originally had been designated as the entity to which the Planning Committee would report, the project's focus was expanded from Oñate alone to include the accompanying settlers and the American Indian presence. Three artists—Reynaldo “Sonny” Rivera, Betty Sabo, and Nora Naranjo-Morse—were commissioned to create the piece, a monumental work of public art that is a comment on history and on the present. The artists were asked to reflect on the ways in which history passes over the contemporary landscape. Their piece was to put some shape to the meetings between people and places and to how the world endures history. The resulting memorial is heavily marked with political and symbolic significance in that it attempts to balance both the stability of the past and the unpredictable future. After multiple design variations, the Cuartocentenario Memorial was approved in March 2000, at a cost of six hundred thousand dollars.

At 33,500 square feet, the memorial can hardly be missed by visitors to Albuquerque's Old Town and certainly cannot be overlooked by Albuquerque Museum visitors. Installed at the intersection of Mountain Road and Nineteenth Street, the two segments of the work run generally parallel to one another, the figurative group standing east of the landscape segment (see fig. 1). Although the segments are proximate to one another, they could hardly be less similar in how they appear and in how they present the

narratives on which they comment. *La Jornada* is set on a slightly hilly, desert-like berm, the soil punctuated with boulders and native southwestern plants. It is seventy-five-feet long and includes eighteen life-size bronze figures and assorted livestock and animals. The work gradually increases in height. At the southern end, two bent figures push an oxcart, and at the opposite end of the tableau Oñate stands on a berm six feet above the ground, his hand outstretched. At Oñate's side are two conquistadors, a friar, and a Native guide, included to represent the cooperation from Pueblos, forced or otherwise, that the group received along the way.

Three additional small groups make up the figurative segment. Near the front group is a man carrying a lamb on his shoulders and, on a donkey, a woman with a child; the allusion to Joseph and Mary here cannot be missed. Two rams and three ewes flank them. A group of two women and three children is beside them. The women are of indeterminate childbearing and child-rearing ages, and they care for an infant, a boy of about three years of age, and a girl perhaps five or six years old. Next, a horseman herds four long-horns. A conquistador, also mounted on a powerful horse, has a rope attached to his saddle, which is helping pull the *carreta* from sinking ground. Two men push the cart from the rear, and a teenage boy serves as ox drover. The bronzes, both people and animals, are realistic and highly detailed; the only exceptions are the sheep's faces, which have a cartoon quality. Artist Reynaldo Rivera commented that he kept education in mind as he helped design the memorial. "It's got to come out in the open that they [the Spanish] were not destructive people. I want it to show their contributions, the enormous contributions of the horses and cattle and sheep, the livestock. They came with intentions to settle, which they did. They brought the fruit trees, the irrigation, the mining, the silver smithing, Christianity. . . . I want that brought out. To me, that's very important, those things we're still using today."<sup>3</sup>

A waist-high retaining wall runs along one side of the figurative group. It is lined with bronze plaques inscribed with the names of the approximately five hundred families who accompanied Oñate from Chihuahua, Mexico. These names started to reshape New Mexico history in the sixteenth century and remain prominent today. Because of their placement, they are also the names that stand between one culture and another. The wall clearly separates the two memorial segments and thus is also an impediment to considering them as part of the same effort. An unpaved small plaza runs alongside the wall and into the landscape segment, though the segments are not obviously linked. With no interpretive signage to indicate any relationship between the landscape *Numbe Whageh* and the bronze *La Jornada*, visitors to the memorial must use their imaginations to connect the two segments or at least to recognize that they are in any way associated with one another.

*Numbe Whageh* means "our center place" in Tewa. The work's main design component is a descending spiral walkway of crushed rock within the type of undulating landscape that is found throughout northern New Mexico. The piece, sixty feet in diameter, is planted with indigenous plants and trees, including rosemary, honey locust, one-seed juniper, cactus, piñon, yucca, sage, and orange globe mallow. Stones and boulders are scattered throughout; four

of them were donated from the Hopi, Santa Clara, Ácoma, and Taos Pueblos of New Mexico, and they include signatures, marks, and pictorial symbols significant to Pueblo people. The walkway winds down to a mound of stones, where a small stream of water creeps out from under one stone and flows across a large boulder.

Visitors can take the spiral walkway, which came to be called *The Environment* during the planning process, or they may use a stepped pathway of red volcanic rock that winds up its western edge to exit the piece. A visitor at the top of this incline stands at approximately the same height as the Oñate figure to the east. Naranjo-Morse says that in creating *Numbe Whageh*, she tried to ponder the moment when the indigenous cultures first converged with the Spanish settlers: “I thought of the water in the reflective pond, looking down at yourself, and then thinking how maybe my great-great-grandmother was getting water and looked up and saw something that was going to change her forever.”<sup>4</sup> In a 2005 video, *Numbe Whageh: Our Center Place*, Naranjo-Morse speaks about approaching the piece from an historical land-based perspective: “Native people adhere to the land; where I come from . . . [this] environment is a living place. It represents who we are, then and now.” She notes that descending into the center of *Numbe Whageh* is like descending into “the womb of us, the place that is our center, spiritually and culturally” (see fig. 2).



**FIGURE 2.** *The eastern slope of Numbe Whageh, facing the Albuquerque Museum, with desert marigolds in bloom. Photo by the author.*



As viewers ascend to sidewalk level from the spiral's center, they are no longer enveloped within natural markers but immediately see streets, sidewalks, and traffic. "The visual dialogue of that is really powerful, and it says something about who we are as Native people and about what our ancestors said was important—the land, the resources. So when you come out of this environment . . . you are struck with this visual contradiction, and I think in that way we not only learn about where we came from but we also can remember some of the things that were left to us to remember by our people," says Naranjo-Morse.<sup>5</sup> Here, she is speaking about Native and non-Native cultures and about the ways in which remembering can play into viewers' experiences of *Numbe Whageh*. Certainly, the dominant point of view is Pueblo, but when Naranjo-Morse points out that "it's a monument to the culture as a whole," she is speaking about the larger culture, not just Pueblo or Native culture. Recall that *Numbe Whageh* is part of a memorial, which relies on memory as its foundation.

The visual opposition between *Numbe Whageh* and *La Jornada* is striking, but even more striking are the psychic connotations of each segment. The bronze figurative group is not interested in examining contradictions about the ways in which society represents itself. Instead, it is fixed within a traditional geography, one of permanent presence, suggesting naturalized belonging. It marks a form of cultural heritage and presents a past that continues to promote civic aspirations and serve social stability. By offering a moment in history as both safe and finished, the figurative group is sanitized in the way that publicly sanctioned art frequently is. It functions more or less as traditional monuments have functioned in America, its static presence celebrating a defined set of ideals and triumphs (see fig. 3).

Visitors to *La Jornada* often climb on the piece to walk among the bronzes. They might be imagining the feel of life in 1598 and thinking about the lack of material comfort, the ways people dressed, or the terrain. Their interpretation is necessarily based on a continuum of then and now, a comparison of their present and the past they imagine. Figurative representations such as *La Jornada* tend to lock interpretive possibilities into time, which also locks in the overarching meaning. Nevertheless, this approach meets a distinctive need within material forms of remembering. Human figures translate an event in a way that more abstract approaches may not. Human forms provide a comfortably familiar point of entry and interaction, which is why Holocaust memorials, for instance, tend to incorporate figurative elements. The figures in *La Jornada* are presented as moving through, even struggling on, a landscape. They are easily recognizable; they look correct. Such easy identification implies that the figures in *La Jornada* belong on the land through which they move (or, more specifically, that the land belongs to them). The segment neither questions the figures' presence nor does it interrogate the assumptions that accompany them. It provides no opening for reflection on the potential problems associated with settlement.

*La Jornada* celebrates an unquestioned notion of discovery, which is underscored in the bronze plaques. The wall on which the plaques are mounted is designated "The Wall of Spanish Ancestral Heritage" (see fig. 4).



**FIGURE 3.** A life-size bronze figure of don Juan de la Oñate (far right) stands at the front of La Jornada, facing north. A Pueblo guide, conquistadors, and a friar are behind him. Bronze figures representing the settlers and livestock who accompanied him are at left. Photo by the author.



**FIGURE 4.** La Jornada's Wall of Spanish Ancestral Heritage, with bronze plaques inscribed with the names of the approximately five hundred families who accompanied Oñate into what is now New Mexico. Photo by the author.



Plaques also list city council members and major donors to the project. It is common to see people taking time to read each of the plaques naming the original settlers, presumably searching out their ancestral names. The search is a form of guided interaction with the sculpture that provides meaning and connection. Yet what experience do viewers whose names do not appear on the plaques have with this segment of the memorial? Their visits may be clouded by a sense of exclusion. Any feeling of exclusion may be heightened because viewers are given no information about the negative aspects of the journey portrayed, other than its being “arduous.” They do not hear about loss of rations and death. Nor do they hear of the colonizing actions taken on behalf of the expedition, such as the violence against Ácomas. The prevailing sense that the bronze group conveys to a viewer is triumphant—a summary of arrival and what followed that communicates inevitability. These bodies represent a particular form of taking territory, of colonizing public space.

*Numbe Whageh*, although also conceived to suit a particular point of view, does not contrive time in a way that is so fixed on the past-present continuum. It



**FIGURE 5.** *The spiral shape of Numbe Whageh is evident when viewed from the work's highest point, facing southeast. The image was taken in early spring, when the relative absence of foliage emphasizes the contours of the work, which echoes landscapes found in northern New Mexico. Photo by the author.*

configures time in a spiral, opening up the possibility of dislocation and introducing the chance of breaking free from past patterns and assumptions (see fig. 5). It includes the same kind of reflective thinking that the bronze figures engender: What took place here? But the suggestibility of its materials and its design insists on another question as well: What might take place in the future? The spiral path descends to the heart of the piece, the source of the name *Numbe Whageh*. The center place is a stream, an opening, a womb, both physical and spiritual. And like the multiple interpretations of the words *numbe whageh*, the story that the piece tells is not linear. Rather, the work immediately gives a sense that something is different about the way it is telling history. Viewers have to participate with this segment of the memorial in a different way than they participate with the figurative segment. They can literally get inside of it, walk the slope, and smell and touch the plants. They do not need to stand removed from the story. With the monumental spiral quietly moving to a center, Naranjo-Morse

has created a piece that literally walks viewers into a spot where memory can be activated. This is important because the most effective public memorials do not present a narrative as though it is complete. *Numbe Whageh* thus has potential to stand out as an important public work of art.

#### PUBLIC MEMORIALS AND NARRATIVE POSSIBILITIES

In general, public monuments are raised to heroes and heroines; they deal with great achievements and noble ideas. They are large in public consciousness and reflect some dominant framework of values. They can help establish critical historical understanding, but they can also limit it. In addition, monuments have a complicated relationship with time. They traditionally present the past or some simulation of it and are created, as cultural theorist Malcolm Miles notes, “to impress contemporary publics with the relation of history to those who hold power and the durability of that relation expressed in stone or bronze.”<sup>6</sup> Traditional monuments, such as the Oñate figurative group, present an idealized, calm historical continuity, and such a perception provides them their value to particular interest groups. Pieces such as *Numbe Whageh*, in contrast, open the possibility of more fluid, dynamic interpretation.

The terms *memorial* and *monument* tend to be used interchangeably. Certainly, that is the case with the Cuartocentenario piece, which is formally called a memorial. However, distinctions between monuments and memorials remain and are based on intent. Art historian and critic Arthur Danto elaborates: “We erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget. Thus, we have the Washington Monument but the Lincoln Memorial. Monuments commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings. Memorials ritualize remembrance and mark the reality of ends. . . . Monuments make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life. The memorial is a special precinct, excluded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead. With monuments, we honor ourselves.”<sup>7</sup> What Danto’s statement underscores is that as intention varies so do codes of remembrance. This distinction points to another significant difference in representation within the Cuartocentenario Memorial. It splits into competing halves, which means it functions simultaneously as a monument and as a memorial—*La Jornada* serving as monument and *Numbe Whageh* as memorial.

In general, monuments are built to mark victories rather than defeats. The figures in *La Jornada* are victors in surviving their journey, but their victory over any people who resisted them—the Ácomas, for instance—is also implied. Memorials also remember the dead, often those who have been defeated. *Numbe Whageh* is a remembrance of the Ácomas, of centuries past when the land was untouched by colonization, by museums, by public art projects. Monuments signal a set of values; memorials summon those who died for or at the hands of those values—embodying grief, loss, and tribute. According to philosopher Charles Griswold, memorials are “a species of pedagogy . . . [that] . . . seeks to instruct posterity about the past and, in so doing, necessarily reaches a decision about what is worth recovering.”<sup>8</sup> This

instruction is one means by which *Numbe Whageh* serves as a comment on both the past and the future. In the *Numbe Whageh* video, Naranjo-Morse gets at this notion of a piece that does not remain a static symbol but rather acknowledges the past and prepares to move into a productive future. She notes that “Lee Jenkins of Hopi says, ‘We are all in this together.’ I think that really talks to the idea of moving on. Because now we have this environment and what do we do with it? What do we do with it? All of us.”<sup>9</sup> Her statement reiterates the narrative possibilities within *Numbe Whageh*. When a memorial performs effectively, as I believe this one does, viewers are called to look within themselves for creative possibilities, to consider the actions and motives for memory within its space. They may recall the dead and realize some kind of responsibility for the living. At such moments, viewers are engaging actively with a piece of public art, inserting themselves into a space that initially may seem off-limits or complete. This engagement is an act of embodying memory rather than sealing it off or displacing it. It emphasizes the notion that an effective piece of art presents viewers with an opportunity to move closer not only to those remembered within it but also to themselves through self-awareness. At some level, a memorial should not only encompass simply an event from centuries past but also offer a kind of resonance for the present.

To engage with a piece, to allow its possibilities to emerge, is to resist abdicating responsibility to the piece. Engagement assumes that the remembering represented by a memorial is not automatically completed within the piece. It means being willing to dip into the possibilities that a piece of art offers. A monument or a memorial is an active text, Rachel Blau DuPlessis comments, ground that “can never be cleared of the prior. It saturates us—political powers, social places, duties, infusion of norms, irruptions of protest . . . it is full, fused and jostling, an active ‘stage for struggle.’”<sup>10</sup> Such activity is the best case, perhaps, for how pieces of public art might function (as *Numbe Whageh* does), acting as vibrant fields that lead to a more thoughtful, involved perspective.

### CONSIDERING TOURISM AND ECONOMICS

The placement of the Cuartocentenario Memorial at the Albuquerque Museum also has several implications. The museum is central to tourism in Albuquerque in that it is located near the northern edge of historic Old Town. Many of the visitors who will see the memorial are undoubtedly tourists, which is by design, because museums are a critical part of the economic equation for a city or for a region. Art critic Lucy Lippard suggests that museums “are the ambulatory counterpart of armchair tours through the exotic.”<sup>11</sup> They are designed to give a quick take on any number of topics and are carefully selected samplings of experiences. Placement of a piece such as this memorial at the city’s museum suggests not just ownership, but to some extent endorsement, of the notions presented within it. Such placement or endorsement does not mean that the story told is a complete one. Most likely, visitors to the Albuquerque Museum will not hear the story of how the memorial came into existence or about realities of identity so potent in contemporary Native and

Hispanic lives that fueled the arguments about it. They will not hear about the social issues embedded in the *Numbe Whageh* spiral. I do not offer these statements as a criticism of the museum or of the memorial. Instead, I am concerned about the way in which a piece of installed art naturally takes on a fixedness that can easily convert into what is assumed to be a finished story.

Any piece of public art is limited by its placement and by the permutations that informed its creation, especially a piece of art that emerges from a public sponsor-underwriter process. None of the three artists who created the Cuartocentenario Memorial had unlimited space, an unlimited budget, or unlimited artistic authority. They worked within certain agendas and certain myths. But, ironically, situated next to Old Town, where souvenirs of Indianness can be appallingly out of date and context, *Numbe Whageh* may be one of the more reliable interpretations of Native life that visitors encounter. Although it is true that any memorial may cheapen and trivialize the events memorialized, what remains is the fact that the piece is permanent and will be seen by thousands of visitors each year. Such visits by tourists compose a large portion of the reason why the piece exists. Installed just two years ago, the memorial cannot yet be assessed for its long-term impacts. Those visitors who have experienced the piece already carry a different perception with them than those visitors who will see it in the future. This variation in experience is due in part to the bronze plaques not being placed on the work until early 2007 and to the absence of interpretive materials at the site that are related to *Numbe Whageh*. It is also due to the piece's inherent changeability, which I explore at some length later in this article. What cannot be doubted are that narratives surrounding contemporary identity will continue to evolve and that the timeless design of *Numbe Whageh* will permit it to respond to those evolutions with quiet, focused comment.

Tourism can produce hasty, not necessarily engaged viewings, but I prefer to assume that tourists are capable of and interested in discerning the layers of meaning that a piece of art presents. Lippard notes: "The compulsion to travel—to look, to perceive, to absorb and perhaps even to understand something that will alter one's preconception—is deeply engrained in Western culture. But must cultural tourism be a downer? Are tourists only interested in the sensational, the spectacular, and the superficial? Or are some of us seeking something else, something undefinable called 'cultural authenticity'—our own as well as that of 'the other'? Would we know it if we fell on it? If we fall on it are we likely to disrespect it?"<sup>12</sup> These questions are potent, and the answer to each depends on the individual and the situation. In response to the claim that some viewers do seek authentication of themselves and of others—if that is possible—I would suggest that *Numbe Whageh* provides the setting in which they may be able to do so. It accommodates and encourages curiosity, which in the best circumstances leads to a comprehension that deepens into meaningful understanding.

Anyone who sees the Cuartocentenario Memorial would ideally also travel east across Albuquerque to the National Hispanic Cultural Center and an hour west to Ácoma Pueblo. They would hear multiple versions of what took place on that first day of a new year some four hundred years ago, and they

would perhaps understand how different versions of the same story can be, and can continue to be, told. Lippard, again, notes that the most affecting monuments are invisible, wherein visitors complete the blanks of what took place at a site with their own experiences and imagery. But, writing of the site of the Sand Creek massacre, she also asks: “What if a truly cathartic performance were socially acceptable at these sites? What if one could go to Sand Creek . . . and scream, tear one’s hair, run down the riverbed where women and children were shot down as they fled, cry out their names and our belated, useless sorrow?”<sup>13</sup> Although *Numbe Whageh* is not an invisible monument or memorial, it is a piece that resists quick interpretation and encourages viewers to fill in its blanks with their own lives, their own questions.

### PLACEMENT IN PUBLIC ART PRACTICE

It is worthwhile to consider where *Numbe Whageh* falls within larger public art traditions, which help dictate how the piece may be received in the future. It may initially be tempting to associate this work with the earthworks that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as artists entered the landscape rather than painting or sculpting it. These artists engaged the land, immersing themselves and building often-monumental artworks on or within it. The names that continue to be associated with such works include Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter De Maria, who are predecessors to the artists whose work now stands at the Albuquerque Museum. Those artists, however, created massive works in remote or removed locations—jetties, trenches, and walls—that they insisted were about art and not about the landscape. At the time, these artists were determined to put distance between themselves and the modernist movement that determined much of the art world’s focus.

As art critic Harriet Senie notes, “Located in remote and unpopulated areas, earthworks are certainly not public art either in terms of access, amenity, or understandability. However, their focus on a nonurban environment and incorporation of a site into the work of art as part of its content were concepts easily transferred to the predominantly urban realm of public art.”<sup>14</sup> Clearly, Naranjo-Morse’s work, situated in the midst of an urban environment, does not share the characteristics of separateness so vital to the founding pieces of earthworks. It is highly visible, highly public art because of where it is placed and how it was funded. Like traditional earthworks pieces, however, it places an emphatic stress on the vitality of land and its role in mapping spatial and temporal connections to both land and history.

*Numbe Whageh* also shares links to the ensuing generation of public art, which is perhaps most accurately called *environmental art* and which is still influential today. Environmental art incorporates natural elements such as stones, water, and greenery into urban spaces, embellishing plazas, parks, and corporate common areas. Its focus emerged, notes John Beardsley, as a response to “a preponderance of monumental, abstract, freestanding sculptures.”<sup>15</sup> As environmental art developed, public-art sponsors starting working with artists such as Isamu Noguchi and Nancy Holt to revision public spaces, using natural forms, materials, and shapes. The trajectory significantly changed



the face of public sculpture as public works of art started to include organic elements to bridge time, feeling, and experience. *Numbe Whageh* shares that approach. Like environmental artworks, it went through a detailed approval process and is funded by a government-sanctioned program; its owner is the city of Albuquerque. It was built on and for a specific site, drawing its form in part from its surroundings. In this case, however, the work is referential largely because of what does *not* surround it: land that no longer exists in that specific location. Land similar to that which Naranjo-Morse has created in the spiral did exist on or near the site at one time; her sculpture is more managed, more carefully populated with indigenous vegetation, than any random plot of New Mexico high desert. The piece is haunted with echoes of that which is no longer, returning to my earlier point that *Numbe Whageh* insists that visitors actively wonder about the history preceding the piece. The work is also physically enveloped in indicators of contemporary urban life, such as sidewalks, traffic signals, and the museum building. It also references the figurative bronze, *La Jornada*, next to it. *Numbe Whageh* would maintain much of its potency were it not proximate to the figurative representation of colonization. However, because the large group of figures stands so close, a comparative interpretation emerges. Naranjo-Morse's landscape not only suggests that which no longer exists but also points to a factor in the change that took place. In a sense, then, the figurative group activates Naranjo-Morse's landscape, moving it into additional interpretation and underscoring meaning that gathers around and resounds with remembering.

Land that looks very much like Naranjo-Morse's sculpture begins just a mile or two away, at the western edge of Albuquerque, and can be found throughout northern New Mexico. It is impossible to look at *Numbe Whageh* and not understand that Naranjo-Morse is commenting not only on the past but also on the future. The land, as it has been condensed into a spiral form, is disappearing. The land, as visitors walk the approximately fifty steps into the center of the piece, may not exist next time they return to visit this piece of art. Certainly, the piece will not exist in precisely the same form, which contributes to its shifting interpretive qualities. The plants will have grown or died. The stones on the path will have moved. The water will flow differently. The changeable nature of the piece thus provides what I believe is its most potent resonance, a point to which I will return momentarily.

Although *Numbe Whageh* shares much with environmental art, it dovetails more closely still with more recent works that assert the artist's personal identification with the earth, presenting him or her as environmental activist and social critic. Beardsley calls such work *green art* and positions it as one of the most significant trends in late-twentieth-century sculpture.<sup>16</sup> It is art that involves "ecological intervention, horticulture, or the evocation of ancient ritual" and frequently presents the artist as instrumental in advancing the debate about how aesthetics play a part in sustaining and preserving land.<sup>17</sup> At times, green art is placed in settings such as forests, deserts, or fields, echoing its earthworks ancestry, but it is also placed in highly public spots, such as city parks, waste-remediation sites, museums, and sculpture gardens. These works are sometimes temporary but frequently permanent. They often point to a

consideration of what artist Karen McCoy describes as “a process of remembering, imagining, and contemplating historical and present-day uses of the land,” in which historical and cultural references intertwine with expressions of environmental concern.<sup>18</sup> Artists who create green art are determined to reconnect viewers with their surroundings; for example, Meg Webster creates planted pieces that resemble botanical gardens, and Stan Herd plants fields of wheat, grass, and other vegetation to grow in various shapes and images. Maya Lin, since the creation of her well-known Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the Washington, DC mall, has worked in various forms that stress the dynamics of the natural world. These works and the processes behind them tend to straddle the lines between artist and landscape architect. The Albuquerque sculpture most solidly aligns with these green art practices, and it is interesting to note that Naranjo-Morse collaborated with a landscape architect to create *Numbe Whageh*. It is not imperative that the work be forced into any category, however, and the memorial is new enough that attempting to do so is an attempt to coerce time and history improperly. However, because *Numbe Whageh* is a monumental work by a Native woman, I believe it is important to consider the various traditions within and against which it stands.

Like some other works I have mentioned here, the piece insists that viewers participate in it by using their senses: sight, touch, smell, and hearing. They can hear the crunch of rocks as they descend into the spiral. They can look, carefully, for carved symbols on the boulders. They can smell or brush up against the plants as they pass by. This, then, is a piece that invites and rewards participation. It is a piece about connections. It speaks of repairing connections between viewers and the land. It speaks of the relationship that viewers may or may not have with the histories of the landscape and figurative segments, and it delves into considering the necessary reconciliations between the two.

### MEMORY AND EMPATHETIC LOOKING

Because *Numbe Whageh* is organic and changeable, it offers the opportunity for viewers to experience a way of looking and seeing that static pieces of art may not offer. When a piece of art changes, it combines with the impossibility of a viewer's seeing any piece exactly the same way more than once. That impossibility exponentially expands the possibilities of resonating—and of remembering and forgetting—for any art piece. What I am getting at is how the piece interrogates recognition. Cultural theorist Mike Page outlines the act of recognition, suggesting “one can never perceive even something as paradigmatically familiar as the back of one's hand in exactly the same way twice. A change in aspect, a subtle change in lighting, goose pimples, worsening myopia, and retinal ‘noise’—all will conspire to differentiate the two experiences. And to sharpen the comparison with Heraclitus's river, the brain that perceives the hand a second time will be slightly different from that which did so the first time.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, everything that we see is to some extent unfamiliar, loaded with possibilities and, in tandem, with fears. But human nature or practice

intervenes with the will to recognize, wading into the comfort of the familiar. Recognition then proceeds by generalizing from similarities between the item to be recognized and those items from our past experience, suggests Page. “The similarity might be visual (e.g. of colour) or spatial (e.g. of shape) or it might be of smell, sound or feel—we might even choose deliberately to bias our notion of similarity towards one sensory dimension and away from others. Whatever our choice, our perceptions and cognitions are driven by similarity and thence on generalization from our past experience.”<sup>20</sup>

Page is writing explicitly about memory here, pointing to the ways in which a personal identification with a piece of art, an alignment with similarity, emerges within a glance. Looking at this piece of landscape at the Albuquerque Museum, viewers may instantly move psychically from having some abstract sense of the land to recalling a visit to a particularly gorgeous landscape, and then to wondering about whether they will ever again see the land on which they were born. Multiply these quick leaps of the mind and memory by the ways in which *Numbe Whageh* will have changed between visits or by how the piece looks in daytime versus night, and the implications of the piece’s importance in involving viewers seem obvious. The piece becomes a memorial to each viewer’s experience, even that which may have been believed lost. In each visit, in each glance, lies the haunting of memory.

Every piece of art is referential, and so is every look. Historical and cultural practices surround every aspect of a piece of art: the tradition from which a piece emerges, the development of its materials, the politics of the space in which it appears, the webs of association that each viewer brings to a look. This perpetual motion carried to and within a work presents the imprecision of and the opportunities within looking, mining the possibilities of seeing a work in repeatedly new ways. *Numbe Whageh* capitalizes on these possibilities and extends them in another critical way, outlined earlier by Lee Jenkins of Hopi: “We are all in this together.”

One person stands before a sculpture in a public space: public or private experience? At some level, a sculpture is placed in a public spot so it can be appreciated, not at once by a mass of people looking at it, but by the sum of innumerable individual experiences. Looking is not a collective experience but rather a bundle of private experiences wrought from stems of emotions and senses. The act of looking, then, is what can activate some new sense of understanding, even empathy, as an individual’s glance is multiplied by the experience of dozens or thousands of others who have also seen a piece of public art. Add politics or positioning to the equation, and what was previously a single look becomes loaded with connotations. “A strange sense of solidarity between all the players on the world’s stage becomes inescapable,” cultural critic Mieke Bal writes. “Cultural memory is activated here, not individual memory.”<sup>21</sup> This activation of some sense of empathy—about pain, belief, territory—is what distinguishes one piece of art from another and what, I believe, makes *Numbe Whageh* stand out as a significant piece of public art. This work presents a shared space in which to remember; this space is precisely the kind that Holocaust scholar James E. Young references when he writes that “every group in America may eventually come to recall its past in

light of another group's historical memory, each coming to know more about their compatriots' experiences in light of their own remembered past."<sup>22</sup> Such empathetic looking holds the key to surviving the turmoil of contemporary identities, and this memorial quietly insists on it.

Perhaps the most important movement within which *Numbe Whageh* falls is one where people turn to art to experience some sense of community, some sense that extends past the concrete and asphalt boundaries that enwrap the piece. As Beardsley puts it,

People care deeply about the character of their public spaces. They seem eager for an experience of communality that goes beyond the exchange of money for goods in the suburban shopping mall that has lately passed for public life in America. They want a public landscape on which they can meet, one that satisfies the requirements of function and the appetite for visual splendor, but one that also triggers the memory and fires the imagination, one, moreover, that suggests some common culture in a society that has not yet entirely resolved the matter of how to be a whole while still being respectful of all the parts.<sup>23</sup>

I believe that people can meet on or within *Numbe Whageh* for the kind of communal experience outlined in Beardsley's statement, even if only psychically. This piece bridges the difficult territory between the individual and the group, the part and the whole. It cannot do so, however, without involvement from viewers—the kind of movement through looking that can result in new understanding, which I have attempted to outline here. The piece acts as a guide within the complicated positions of location and identity today. It presents a creative terrain that helps illuminate details about living together in disputed territory. It does so by filtering through the imaginative, leading us along in negotiating an ever-hybrid existence that requires perpetual movement between personal and collective interests.

### THE PROMISE OF FLOODING

The Cuatrocenario Memorial—both Naranjo-Morse's landscape and the figurative segment—maps remembering and marks surviving. It maps what Irit Rogoff calls the "haunting that is the ongoing reality of co-inhabited spaces in which one presence is always at the expense of the other."<sup>24</sup> The question, posed by Rogoff, then becomes: "How can the doubly inhabited terrains with their often conflicting histories and claims be mapped so that one does not dominate and erase the other, does not become the singular history of the place?"<sup>25</sup> This memorial does map such a double consciousness. This outcome is perhaps the best and most that can be asked of the memorial, which started with an attempt to elide the Native presence (recall that the original proposal included only Oñate). The completed work no longer attempts such an exclusive position. Instead it presents two segments that mirror the ways in which any notion of a collective, unified narrative about

how people live together in this time and place has been disrupted. The two segments are set into a kind of permanent negotiation with one another, a lasting reflection of contemporary identity struggles.

In “The Site of Memory,” author Toni Morrison invokes the potent language of cartography to explore the idea of territories changing and the work of remembering, both notions that ultimately ground the memorial: “You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. ‘Floods’ is the word they use, but in fact it’s not flooding, it’s remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were . . . and a rush of the imagination is our ‘flooding.’”<sup>26</sup>

The land that Naranjo-Morse has (re-)created on the Albuquerque Museum site is like the Mississippi River water. The land remembers. Naranjo-Morse has opened up the possibility of floods of imagination for viewers, leading them back to their own center place. Even as they travel the piece, it enlists them in the very meaning of *land*: to hold in place, to ground. At the start of the *Numbe Whageh* video, Ed Ladd of Zuñi Pueblo summarizes precisely this idea: “They weren’t traveling because there were droughts or there was pestilence. They were traveling because they were looking . . . searching for the center place. Each one, until they found their own center place.”<sup>27</sup>

## NOTES

Portions of this article appear in the chapter “Contesting Oñate: Sculpting the Shape of Memory,” in *Expressing New Mexico: Nuevomexicano Creativity, Ritual, and Memory*, ed. Phillip B. Gonzales (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007).

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