

"Wrong Race, Wrong Colour, Wrong Class": The Public Controversy about Laura Facey Cooper's Emancipation Monument in Jamaica.

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My paper will examine the controversy around the recently unveiled Emancipation monument in Jamaica, Laura Facey Cooper's *Redemption Song* (2003). This monument was commissioned to adorn the ceremonial entrance of the new Emancipation Park in New Kingston, which opened in August 2002 during the 40th anniversary of Jamaican independence celebrations. Many concerns have been raised in this media-driven controversy but the chief criticisms are: that the complete nudity of the rather well-endowed male and female figures at the center of the monument constitutes an assault to public decency and a national embarrassment; that its iconography, particularly the apparent passivity of the figures, does not adequately represent the meaning of Emancipation to the Afro-Jamaican majority; that there was insufficient public consultation in the selection and design of the monument, which was based on a publicized but short-notice competition; and, finally, that the identity of the artist, a light-skinned member of a wealthy and influential local family, is irreconcilable with the subject and purpose of the monument. Defenders of the monument, in contrast, have generally invoked the need for greater open-mindedness and aesthetic sophistication, which has in turn led to renewed accusations of elitism and Eurocentrism. There have been calls (and threats) to have the monument removed or altered but the Jamaican government has expressed its support for the monument and its intention to keep it in place.

Almost all public monument commissions in postcolonial Jamaica have been controversial – most notoriously when Christopher Gonzales' Bob Marley monument had to be hastily removed to the safety of the National Gallery of Jamaica because of the hostile public response at the unveiling in 1983 – but the level of public involvement in and duration of the current polemic is unprecedented. While this can be partly explained by changes in media

access, it raises urgent questions about the growing dissonance between the norms and standards of the cultural establishment and public opinion in Jamaica and the continued relevance of conventional understandings of a national Jamaican culture. This can, in turn, not be understood without considering the current climate of deep public discontent in Jamaica, in which the legitimacy of the current sociopolitical order has been fundamentally questioned.

My paper will examine the Redemption monument controversy against the background of this sociopolitical and cultural crisis. It will be mainly based on the commentaries, cartoons, news releases and letters that have appeared in the local press since the start of August 2003, along with interviews with the artist and selection committee members. I will start my presentation with a brief account of the commission procedure and the circumstances of the monument's production and installation (which is as yet incomplete). This will be followed by a critical review of the controversy, especially the manner in which it has unfolded in the media and via other channels (such as the daily gatherings of spectators in Emancipation Park) and the contrasting positions taken by different individual and collective stakeholders. The Emancipation monument controversy will be compared with controversies about other monuments and public art commissions in Jamaica and elsewhere, such as monuments related to slave rebellions and emancipation elsewhere in the Caribbean and Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C.

Two related questions will receive special attention in my presentation, since these have wider implications for Caribbean art history and criticism. The first one is how national and other collective iconographies are negotiated in countries such as Jamaica, at a time when conventional notions of postcolonial nationhood and governance have lost their legitimacy, and whether there are viable alternatives to address the obvious public desire for collective memorialization and identification that pervades the current debate. Second, I will ask who speaks for whom in the Emancipation monument controversy and this will not only be applied to the monument itself but also to its reception. I will pay special attention to how popular opinion is

construed and invoked by the "holders of speech" who have led the polemic in the media and what could be done to encourage the more truly inclusive debate this issue requires. In doing so, I will stress the need for more open and self-reflexive discussion about the implications of race, ethnicity, gender, class and ideological affiliation in the development of art and its public reception in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean.