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Another way to atone for past sins at Faneuil Hall

By **Renée Graham**, July 21, 2018

FORMER BOSTON Red Sox owner Tom Yawkey was racist. Edward Devotion, an 18th-century land owner, was also a slave owner.

Yawkey's name has been removed from [a Boston street](#) near Fenway Park. Devotion's has been taken off [the Brookline school](#) once [attended](#) by President John F. Kennedy. It's a part of how Massachusetts is slowly coming to grips with its own racist past.

Peter Faneuil, who bequeathed to the city in 1742 the grand hall that bears his name, belongs on that dubious list. He amassed much of his fortune trafficking black men,

women, and children. Yet visual artist Steve Locke doesn't want Faneuil's name removed from one of Boston's most popular tourist attractions. He'd rather educate visitors and provoke discussions about how Faneuil Hall was bankrolled by the blood, sweat, and tears of a stolen people.

"I mean, we can change the name, and that's fine," said Locke, chosen in January as one of the city's annual artists-in-residence. "But then we would lose the fact that this edifice, the 'Cradle of Liberty,' was built by slavers. People were turned from subjects into objects on this spot. We took away their humanity. Let's keep the name, and talk about who Peter Faneuil really was."

For the site, Locke has proposed a ground-level installation called "Auction Block Memorial at Faneuil Hall: A Site Dedicated to Those Enslaved Africans and African-Americans Whose Kidnapping and Sale Here Took Place and Whose Labor and Trafficking Through the Triangular Trade Financed the Building of Faneuil Hall."

Designed to suggest an auction block, the installation would be embedded in the surrounding brick. A small bronze plate would represent an auctioneer; a larger one would commemorate those sold into slavery. The latter plate would measure 10 feet by 16 feet and feature a map of the triangular trade, which transported enslaved people, goods, and cash crops between West Africa, the Caribbean, and American colonies. That plate would be heated to 98.6 degrees — the typical human body temperature — to evoke those bought and sold into slavery on nearby Merchants Row, Locke said.

While he waits for approval by the city's Edward Ingersoll Browne Fund for public art, Locke already has the support of Mayor Martin Walsh — who opposed an effort to rename Faneuil Hall. During a recent appearance on Boston Public Radio, Walsh said, "I commend Steve, because he's raising the conversation through art."

History has been called an argument without end. That argument is rarely more cacophonous than when we wrestle with America's birth defects: racism and white supremacy.

From universities to public parks, tributes to historical figures steeped in slavery or segregation are being removed or replaced. As painful as it is to live among such monuments, their removal risks dampening discussions about these figures' role in our troubling history — and what it says about those who chose to honor them. That's certainly the case with Confederate memorials erected nearly a century after the South lost the Civil War.

"They were built as warnings to black people. I say take them down or leave them up —either is fine," Locke said. "But if you leave them, you'd better make something that says, 'We put this statue of Robert E. Lee here in 1960 to protest civil rights; we did it as a way to shore up white supremacy, and to intimidate our citizens of color. So the presence of this object is a monument to our shame.' Put that on a plaque in front of it. That tells you what that thing is. It's not a statue of Robert E. Lee. It's a Klan rallying point."

Last month, Locke unveiled his recent work, "Three Deliberate Grays for Freddie," in memory of Freddie Gray, a young African-American man who died in 2015 after suffering a severe spinal injury while in Baltimore police custody. When it was installed on an outside wall of the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum, Locke spoke of Gray's death as "unfinished business." That term also applies to this nation's refusal to acknowledge, in full, the long shadows of a past that still stalks us today.

That's why Faneuil's name should remain. If Locke's work is approved (a decision is expected next month) and becomes part of Faneuil Hall, he hopes people engage it both intellectually and physically. He imagines some, especially black people, will remove their shoes and stand on its heated plate. Like the history it commemorates, it's intended to be felt as well as seen.

"I know black people will cry, and I know white people will feel a tremendous amount of shame, and they'll cry," Locke said. "No one shed tears for those [enslaved] people, and it's time to shed tears for them, and feel the warmth of their presence, even if they can't be here."