

The Hidden Complexity of Memorials Related to the Kent State Shootings

On May 4th, 1970, students at Kent State University were fired at by the Ohio National Guard; 4 students died and nine were wounded. The violence followed nationwide unrest over President Nixon's decision to expand the Vietnam War into Cambodia (O'Hara 302). The details of the shootings have been represented through hundreds of inaccuracies in the past 4 decades and some details may never become clear. Most notably, the public will never know whether the 28 guardsmen fired in aggression or defense, on impulse or with foresight, following orders or acting on their own. Author John Backderf, an Ohio native and cartoonist known as Derf Backderf, undertook the role of investigating the Kent State Shootings to explore these confusions and create a graphic novel of his findings. While Backderf focuses on May 4th and the days leading up to it, another author, John Fitzgerald O'Hara¹, a professor of American Studies at Stockton University, delves into the tragedy's lasting trauma. By examining the ending of *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* (2020) by Derf Backderf through the lens of John Fitzgerald O'Hara's 2006 article "Kent State/May 4 and Postwar Memory," this essay explores contrasting approaches to memorialization in post-violence settings, public reactions to traumatic events, and the complex role of healing. Further, memorialization will be discussed in the context of physical art on Kent State's campus and elsewhere, revealing the contrasting roles of text and art in remembrance.

Before writing *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*, Backderf conducted a thorough investigation into the May 4th shootings. Along with living in Kent, he daily passed by the

¹ O'Hara has a deep history with the Kent State shootings. Not only is he married to the granddaughter of the lawyer, C.D. "Gus" Lambros, who successfully defended three of the Kent State shooters during the 1974 criminal trial, but he also analyzed the event in other articles like, "The Man Who Started the Killings at Kent State," (History News Network).

scene of the shooting, a university parking lot, connected with families tied to the event, and studied at the Kent State University and Yale University archives (Cleveland Public Library 27:35). Backderf fixated on the past to develop a novel that does justice to the events of May 4th. The majority of *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* details the days leading up to the shootings to immerse readers in the life of these university students who would be killed in the tragedy. Toward the end, however, Backderf illustrates how these students became victims of May 4th, sparing no details. Backderf reveals several times that he hopes to bring a sense of recognition to the students with this novel; by contrast to Backderf's passion for commemoration, Kent State reacted poorly to the shootings for years following May 4th, 1970, offering impacted families little to no recognition.

After May 4th, the university stayed silent, not making an official statement until 1978 (O'Hara 306). Memorials and commemorative traditions were later added such as Bruno Ast's May 4th Memorial and the annual march beginning at the Victory Bell. Bruno Ast's Memorial (see fig. 1), officially dedicated in 1990, was created during a period when Kent State remembrances turned from somber events to more high-energy gatherings focused on postwar unity (O'Hara 301). Ast highly encouraged this shift, as he said the victims, "by their sacrifice, should no longer be mourned but celebrated" (O'Hara 301). However, the controversial statement fails to recognize that these deaths were not willingly sacrificed. In fact, two of the four students who were shot, William Schroeder and Sandra Scheur, were not even involved in the protest on May 4th. Despite the university's effort to change the emotions and control the narrative associated with May 4th, Kent State alumni, family, and the public still show grief through the annual May 4th March. For example, Rich Notestine, a Kent State graduate and May 4 Task Force member is shown in Figure 2 wiping away tears while ringing the Victory

Bell in 1987, nearly two decades after the shooting.



Fig. 1. Kent State, 2006, May 4 Memorial, Photograph, Kent State Magazine, and <https://www.kent.edu/magazine/memorials-may-4>.



Fig. 2. Robin Witek, 1987, Victory Bell Ringing, Photograph, Akron Beacon Journal, and <https://www.cincinnati.com/>

These contrasting reactions to Kent State's Memorials are analyzed through John Fitzgerald O'Hara's "Kent State/May 4 and Postwar Memory" ("Postwar Memory" hereafter). O'Hara explores how societies deal with trauma and loss following violent events, especially in terms of memory and memorialization. He argues that memorials often contain an implicit element of forgetting, a way for communities to move on, which raises questions about how such events should be remembered. For O'Hara, the act of remembering is always intertwined with an element of forgetting (or "selective memory"), which allows people to heal but also risks diminishing the full truth of the events being represented.

Using "Postwar Memory" as a lens to analyze Backderf's graphic novel offers an insightful contrast into the function of memorials. In O'Hara's view, memorials do not solely function to remember, but also to assist in the process of forgetting, which is necessary for healing. As he writes, "Remembering always contains a reliable dimension of forgetting"

(O'Hara 304), a paradox that underscores the dual nature of memory work in traumatic aftermaths. Backderf's work, then, functions as a counter-memorial—something designed explicitly to prevent viewers from forgetting the details of the event itself. It is a form of commemoration that continues to engage people actively, aiming to keep the memory of May 4th alive in the public consciousness. This is particularly striking in the final chapters of the graphic novel; Backderf vividly depicts the shootings, using striking panels to convey the violence, chaos, and emotional toll on the victims (see fig. 4). These moments in Backderf's work can be contrasted with physical memorials like George Segal's *Abraham and Isaac*,² whose iconic subject of a father's willingness to sacrifice his only son stirs debates on whether the focus is on healing or representing the university's admission of guilt (see fig. 3).



Fig. 3. George Segal, *Abraham and Isaac*. 1978, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.



Fig. 4. Derf Backderf, 2006, Page 265, illustration, Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio.

Physical memorials often evoke a range of interpretations, especially when they balance the roles of remembering and forgetting. George Segal's controversial *Abraham and Isaac*

² Originally intended for Kent State University, the statue was rejected by the institution, which argued that its presence could provoke further violence. In 1979, it was placed near the Princeton University Chapel (Princeton University Archives).

sculpture, for instance, has been interpreted in multiple ways (see fig. 3). Some see it as promoting nonviolence because Abraham does not kill Isaac but sacrifices a ram instead, while others believe it reflects the tension of violence inherent in the May 4th shootings. In contrast, Backderf's graphic novel functions differently, as it does not allow for such ambiguity. Instead, it draws readers into the visceral reality of the event; his last panel depicts this as he draws rain pouring over the parking lot and washing the students' blood down the drain (see fig. 4). The novel stands as a strong counter-memorial as it recreates the moment visually, not letting a reader escape the moment of May 4th, 1970, as opposed to O'Hara's interpretation of a memorial, which offers viewers selective remembrance, allowing them to forget the rest.

Similar to Segal's memorial, Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, which bears the date May 4 1970, functions as a remembrance through its decaying structure, symbolizing the weight of time and the erosion of memory (see fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Robert Smithson, *Partially Buried Woodshed*. 1970, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

The gradual disintegration of the shed serves as a metaphor for how traumatic events can fade, despite their historical significance. In contrast, Backderf's work actively resists this erosion by recreating the raw emotional intensity of May 4th, ensuring that the memory remains vivid and undiminished. While Smithson's memorial invites viewers to reflect on the inevitability of

forgetting, Backderf's graphic novel confronts readers with images and narratives that demand remembrance, preventing time from dulling the impact of the tragedy. O'Hara continues to explore this idea of forgetting as he considers the wide range of monuments that relate to May 4th. He writes: "Taken in view with other sculptures such as the Solar Totem, the Victory Bell, and the pagoda, these monuments tell a story about how remembering haunted the act of forgetting in the period of 'denial,' and about how forgetting haunts the act of remembering in the period of 'acceptance'" (O'Hara 307). In this way, O'Hara writes about forgetting as it relates to stages of grief. A memorial, or even counter-memorial, is always be appreciated by the public, depending on the public's own stage in the grieving process. It took Kent State University, Ohio, and the nation years to begin healing from May 4th, with artists exploring how to balance remembrance and forgetting in dialogue with the changing nature of the public's grief. O'Hara explores how forgetting can be an essential part of the healing process for individuals and communities. According to his work, the process of healing often involves creating a distance from the traumatic event, which memorials can either reinforce or resist. Kent State's response in the years following the tragedy exemplified this, as the university distanced itself from the shootings for a long time. The role of activists and family members in keeping the memory alive, rather than the institution, shows how healing was initially left to those closest to the event (O'Hara 314). While O'Hara ties these stages directly to the institution's denial and the public's movement toward acceptance, Backderf's counter-memorial text challenges his readers to relive the grieving.

In contrast to O'Hara's work, Backderf's graphic novel pushes back against the notion of moving toward acceptance, as it emphasizes the need for collective remembering rather than institutional forgetting. A debate can certainly take shape over whether Backderf's choice to

represent the event in vivid detail helps or prevents public healing. Through his eyes, this book was created in order to re-acknowledge both the victims of May 4th and the circumstances that led to it. While Backderf was directly focused on private healing between families and students, he was indirectly providing a message about the dangers of history repeating if the tragedy is forgotten. The world is in a moment where innocent lives are once again being taken by institutional power, institutional power that uses violence before properly assessing situations. For example, Sean Bell was shot walking out of a club because officers incorrectly assumed he was armed. Tamir Rice was shot in a park because an officer incorrectly thought a toy gun was real. George Floyd was suffocated because an officer incorrectly decided death was fair punishment for a counterfeit bill. Backderf's counter-memorial calls forward the history of May 4th and encourages readers to consider how the world is constantly navigating the aftermath of tragedy.

Backderf's insistence on graphic recognition in *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* can be seen as a challenge to the methods of healing that *Postwar Memory* explores. While O'Hara studies forgetting, Backderf conducted immense amounts of research to make sure he did not forget anything. This can be seen in smaller details about the characters and their lives, as well as in the significant sequence of how May 4th unravels in Backderf's text. He even paid attention to explaining how the Ohio National Guard's bullets flew through the parking lot (see Fig. 6).

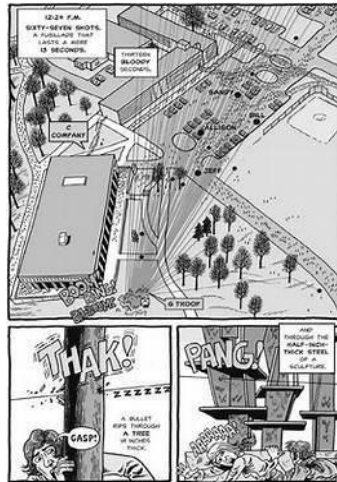


Fig.6. Derf Backderf, 2006, Page 234, illustration, Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio.



Fig. 7. Donald Drumm, *Solar Totem*. 1967, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

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Fig. 8. Donald Drumm, detail of *Solar Totem*. 1967, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio.

Along with these crucial details of May 4th, Backderf goes into depth about the students injured and killed. By starting five days before the shootings, he is able to delve into the student's personality, family, relationship with the university, and even future dreams. Alison Krause, for example, is a consistent character throughout the novel. Readers learn how she is active politically (Backderf 43), about her relationships with both her boyfriend and her mom, and her reading preferences (Backderf 32). Backderf develops her character and makes readers connect with her throughout the novel. Then, all at once, she is gone. Her life story closes with Backderf's drawing of her boyfriend holding her in his arms. "Passionate, smart, and committed, Alison wanted to save the world from itself. She is only 19 years old," Backderf writes (Backderf 238). The five days before May 4 allows Backderf to give each victim life before their death, a counter-memorial meant to make their loss present rather than past.

Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio and "Kent State/May 4 and Postwar Memory" each serve as a way to interpret the May 4th shootings. Together, these works raise critical questions about how to deal with the past and how to memorialize violent events—whether through artistic representations like Backderf's novel or through physical memorials like those at Kent State and

Princeton University. By focusing on both the historical facts and the human element of the tragedy, Backderf creates a work that bridges the gap between remembrance and healing. His novel doesn't allow the reader to forget; instead, it forces them to confront the humanity of the victims, the senselessness of the violence, and the weight of history. O'Hara's exploration of the tension between remembering and forgetting in memorials adds a layer of complexity to this analysis, suggesting that while forgetting may aid healing, it also risks erasing essential truths. The balance between these two forces—the need to heal and the need to remember—ultimately defines how communities process trauma. Through these lenses, it is apparent how art and literature contribute to the ongoing conversation about how to remember and, perhaps more importantly, why society must never fully forget those whose lives were stolen on May 4th: Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, William Schroeder, and Sandra Scheuer.

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