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The Fight for Historical Representation and Accuracy: **Statues of the Confederacy**

“Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.”

(George Orwell, *1984*)

“History,” or what we understand the term to mean (that is, our understanding of past events), is not as linear and unambiguous as we insist. On the contrary, historical record, at least that found in textbooks, outlines the views of those scholars whose analyses are generally accepted. As Napoleon Bonaparte observed, “History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon.” (Kennedy) However, history is anything but a single record of events that is generally “agree[d] upon,” for these events are understood distinctively by the diverse groups of people who experience them. For example, the legacy of the American Civil War represents identity and pride for some groups of people, but oppression and racism for others. The South still bears witness to this strife, the marks of this ideological divide that did not end in 1865, but rather flourished into the twentieth century. Indeed, monuments that celebrate the leaders of the Confederate rebellion stand today all over the U.S. southeast and beyond. Statues and other public iconography uphold ideologies and communicate social stratifications through the representation of a culture’s history. Thus, a discussion on historical representation is

not complete without a critical analysis of a nation's public emblems. Do they testify to the multidimensionality and diversity of American history, while demonstrating historically-accurate events? The answers to this significant question will touch on such ubiquitous factors as public consciousness and intercultural communication, and encourage reflection on representation and what that means within the context of history. So, within the context of history, where did these Confederate monuments come from, and what do they represent?

In the United States, public symbols of the Confederacy number at least 1,500, and of those, seven hundred are monuments, memorializing Confederate generals and leaders. (SPLC) To contextualize, and to put to rest a persistent fabrication of causal factors, the Civil War began when the South seceded from the Union, for reasons that were clearly outlined by the Rebellion's leaders: the United States stood in direct opposition to the Confederacy's foundational economic and moral backbone, the enslavement of the African. (Martinez) Indeed, Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederate States, proclaimed the righteous cause of his newly-formed country: "Our new government is founded upon ... the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural and moral condition." (Stephens) He goes on to explain the widely-accepted scientific evidence of the inherent superiority of whites, a "great physical, philosophical, and moral truth" that the North "ignorantly" denied. (Stephens) Yes, because one-word explanations rarely capture the comprehensive reasons that a war spanning four years was fought, historical record elaborates on the complex web of economic, political, and religious justifications for which the South chose to withdraw from the Union, including the sovereign rights of states. (Martinez) However, evidenced by individual state's declarations of secession and political speeches, the central

rationale for declaring war on the U.S. was the preservation of the Southerners' perceived right to own slaves. (Earle)

To return to an earlier question, Confederate statues celebrate a governance formed in order that slavery might continue. However, critics of the removal of these controversial monuments argue that they represent Southern heritage and that their toppling would effectively erase history. (Scott) The first point, the argument that these effigies honor culture of "Old Dixie," is an emotional plea to be remembered, and to remember. The need to connect with the glorious history of one's people, and the inclination to cling to fond memories and positive associations, characterizes the human experience. However, this is where the argument breaks down. These monuments were not built to celebrate positive aspects of Southern culture, such features as hospitality and prosperity. On the contrary, they were constructed to honor the Confederacy and the ideals for which it was founded. Within one year of surrender, former Confederate states began planting monuments and christening landmarks, and have done so through the twenty-first century. (SPLC) Moreover, surges in the appearance of these public symbols corresponded with Jim Crow laws (in the early 1900s) and the civil rights movement (of the 1950s and 1960s), conspicuous attempts to keep the black population in positions of economic and political inferiority and subjugation. (SPLC) The second argument that decries the removal of these statues insists that doing so erases history. On the contrary, to leave up monuments that celebrate the lives and actions of oppressive, bigoted governments and other regimes whitewashes history and portrays a one-sided narrative. This is erasing facts. This is systemic racism, an act that reminds a group of people daily that their lives and stories do not matter. (Schmidt) For all marginalized groups, representation and regaining a voice in the historical narrative dismantle this ubiquitous oppression.

So is the controversy surrounding statues worth consideration? Absolutely and unequivocally, yes; the monuments we erect are important. They are important because, as stated, representation is important. It influences our sense of identity, history, dignity, worldview, and other ubiquitous factors, both individually and collectively. And to experience a landscape (figuratively as in media and literally as in public art) devoid of realistic portrayal of people that look like you threatens your self-worth and sense of autonomy, a phenomenon called symbolic annihilation. (Caswell) For marginalized groups of people living in areas imbued with symbols of the dominant culture and its history and values, the lack of representation is psychologically damaging, crippling confidence and self-efficacy, that is, one's perceived ability to successfully carry out plans. (Levi) The influence of representation on the individual, her community, and the broader collective consciousness comprise the three levels of interconnected communication – the micro, meso, and macro - that inform our worldviews and self-worth. (Anderson) Through this lens of understanding, representation, or lack thereof, shapes self-value, collective awareness, and cultural assumptions. Thus, to develop a more comprehensive and just appreciation of the interconnected, multicultural American society, visual portrayals of people of different races, genders, sexual orientations, ages, abilities, religions, languages, and values become a mode of social justice. From this perspective, the choice of monument and location becomes vastly important.

Statues are used to visually portray a narrative, with strong significance and meaning attached to them and their construction. In short, statues communicate ideologies and ideals, and support these structures of power. Monuments are far from neutral; they perpetuate hierarchies across society, stratifying people based on race, gender, sex, and socioeconomic status, to name just a few socially-constructed delineations. They tell history, as it is remembered by the

dominant culture of the time. Cultures can be understood through the public art they create and display. Monuments celebrate certain worldviews and moralities, and refute others. Thus, through the statues a nation erects and defends, cultural norms are solidified and exemplified, leaving the marginalized of society unrepresented, their voices and histories quashed. The statue is a culture's values embodied in stone and metal.

So what are some of the more controversial Confederate monuments still up today (for scores have been removed since the Charleston Church Shooting which left nine black parishioners dead from a single white gunman)? (SPLC) As of September 2017, ten monuments of the president of the former Confederate States, Jefferson Davis, stand across the United States. (Caine) Davis, a slave-owner, lost popularity after the South fell to the Union, but regained favor after writing *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, a nationalistic, disputed account of the war, framing the Confederate "cause" as heroic and just. (Von Drehle) The Confederate leader was also honored by the christening of a highway that runs from Virginia, through New Mexico, to California, a political feat accomplished by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), a Confederate "lost cause" organization that was established in 1894. (Hague, Bailey) The UDC worked to memorialize the South's ideals, including white supremacy, through the construction of monuments and the publication of history textbooks for public schools. (Bailey) Other monuments glorified soldiers who died for the Confederate cause and whose bravery and resilience perpetuated the myth of the holy, blameless fight. (Gordon) This propaganda and revisionist support extended to such infamous and controversial figures as Nathan Bedford Forrest, a popular Southern general and Ku Klux Klan founder. (Willis) The UDC portrayed Forrest as a formidable and brilliant military strategist and captain, history books lauding his accomplishments and several statues memorializing his victories. (Cain, Bailey) However,

Forrest is also known for the massacre of hundreds of African American Union troops that had surrendered at Fort Pillow in Tennessee; the event invoked comparisons to Hitler's regime for the brutality and mercilessness of the race-based act. (Willis) Forrest's and other monuments stand today as testaments to the deeply racist and bloody history of the Confederacy.

Statues have always been politically charged, as they honor the people and ideologies they portray. So what does a nation do when those ideologies do not represent its values anymore? As we have seen in the past few examples, statues signify static ideas in a shifting, evolving world. As attitudes and policies change, we must be equipped to make changes to the representation our communities are immersed in. We must be willing to consider that the monuments that our ancestors erected may be rooted in hegemony and intolerance. Are these the values we want to pass on to the next generation?

So do we just remove these statues? Does that solve the problems that this controversy illuminated? Racism, underrepresentation, miscommunication, clash of values and cultures – these will remain after Robert E. Lee is expunged from positions of power and honor across our country. Some groups, such as the Atlanta History Center, suggest leaving the statues standing and adding historical context with plaques that narrate the convoluted past of the figures depicted. (Grinberg) Others, including Anne Rubin, author of *Through the Heart of Dixie: Sherman's March and American Memory*, argue for the relocation of these Confederate monuments to museums, to ensure that the history and its lessons are not lost for future generations. (Grinberg) And still others, primarily protestors, have resorted to tearing them down, demolishing stone and metal that has represented white supremacy. (Cain) In order to promote racial healing, equal and unbiased representation, and equitable power dynamics, the goal of such social movements should be reconciliation. An understanding of history and

denouncement of oppressive actions and policies are vital in this work. But they are not the end goal. Instead, reconciliation, a way forward for everybody, is the heart of justice, and is achieved through what communications professor and author Kathryn Sorrells calls intercultural praxis. First is education, understanding the historical and cultural significance of the issue. Second is introspection, a consideration of our role in the current injustice. And third is action, taking steps to dismantle hegemony and discrimination. (Sorrells)

These tools can initiate the conversation about what to do next with Confederate memorials all over the country. Reconciliation, through intercultural praxis, has the power to guide us toward just results. Referring to the three options outlined in the last paragraph, what are the goals of each of the endeavors? Do they intend “liberty and justice for all?” In the first argument, statues are left in their prominent public locations; explanations of their controversial histories are added. Proponents of this idea anticipate provocative conversation about a past that should instruct and inform present and future matters. (Grinberg) With extensive visual reconstruction, the prevailing Confederate mis -truths and -deeds might be reframed to convey a past whose sins affect our communities even today. However, the African American community, particularly the segment of this population that inhabits the South, lives under the shadow of racial prejudice that has dogged this demographic from the time of slavery, through Jim Crow and the horror of lynchings, to the present day. The tangible reminders of oppression and hatred standing in town squares, etched on street signs, and inscribed across school buildings sabotage efforts of healing and reconciliation. The inequality that slavery wrought on Blacks did not end after the Civil War concluded; did not end after Martin Luther King, Jr., marched on Washington; has not ended today. Indeed, African Americans experience higher rates of unemployment, imprisonment, and

poverty than their White neighbors. (Borum) They live in a world that denies their equality and humanity. To leave Confederate statues up is to thwart efforts to move forward.

Instead, perhaps cities remove the statues and place them in museums, with ample historical context of the events leading up to the Civil War, the bloody history of slavery, the racism and prejudice of the Jim Crow era, the narrative of the Civil Rights movement, and the struggle for justice in the post-Ferguson present. This move preserves the lessons to be learned here. If statues are demolished, do we lose tools of edification? The director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, Lonnie Bunch III, warned in reference to the destruction of these Confederate emblems, "I am loathe to erase history." (Cohen) Perhaps he is right. Remove the monuments from their public display in places of honor and power, without historical context, and relocate them to a museum. Critics cite cost as an encumbrance to the move, but Kevin Waite, Assistant Professor of History at Durham University, has considered this obstacle and suggests organizing an outdoor museum. (Waite) Removing statues that commemorate the Civil War and its fight to perpetuate the institution of slavery considers historical context and present-day injustice. The next step in the reconciliation process prompts communities to address the underrepresentation of marginalized groups, peoples historically denied rights through conquest, assimilation, and whitewashing. To fully heal and integrate communities, the histories of the non-dominant group must be heard. Cultural representation is a site of contested meaning, and communication emboldens and potentiates subversive and radical re-interpretation, re-portrayal, and re-claiming of identity. (Sorrells) A natural outcome of this retelling of history might be replacing the Confederacy's statues with African American historical figures that represent inclusivity, tolerance, courage, and humility.

The process toward such arbitration will be difficult, fraught with disagreement and misunderstanding, but this is the path of justice.

Influential literary critic George Bernard Shaw articulated, “If history repeats itself, and the unexpected always happens, how incapable must Man be of learning from experience.” (English) Critical thinking catalyzes thoughtful interplay between historical record and reader. But we do not teach a rational, solutions-focused analysis of history; instead, we absorb “historical fact” as information consumers. In the conflict over the Confederate monuments, historical record was argued over, defended, set straight, and criticized again. The nature of the argument itself illuminated a specious assumption about history, that the record of the past is objective and linear. As historical and education writer Michael Conway asserts, history is erroneously portrayed as “a set narrative - a single, standardized chronicle...and uniform collective story, which is akin to saying everyone remembers events the same.” (Conway) Instead of teaching and learning history from this consumeristic point of view, the reader must question the epistemology of the study of history itself: how do we know what we know about history? Historical scholars sift through records, accounts, interviews, illustrations, reports, and other sources to analyze a historical incident. However, even the most thorough, educated, and unbiased experts will draw different conclusions about the same event. These conclusions are the basis for “history,” as published and disseminated. Thus, the critical reader should examine history from multiple sources, an approach to inquiry known as historiography. (Conway) This kind of analytical thinking builds discernment and accepts contested meaning in historical studies. It also equips students to recognize specious one-sided narratives and appreciate the complexity of human nature. Historiography focuses on the debate among scholars surrounding a particular historical topic and provides a framework of diverse analyses with the purpose of examining the divergent

nature of historical study. With this tool, we become more educated and effective advocates for equality, justice, and reconciliation.

The Confederate monument controversy interweaves centuries-old injustices, bigotry, and racial division. The abstract concepts of representation, nationalism, and historical accuracy take form within the tangible realm, in granite and bronze, underscoring our nation's deep schism over what it means to be human. America has stood for justice and freedom across the world; it has also condoned violent and inhumane acts toward those not considered citizens. If we as a nation are to heal, we must name the injustices and make reparations. The next stride toward reconciliation directs toward, not away from, the conflict over Confederate statues. Mark Twain observed, "The very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice." (Twain) Let's hand the pen over to those who have never held it. New perspective creates a broader perspective, and the past has more to tell us.

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