



(DON'T)
LOOK AWAY,
DIXIELAND:

Placing Confederate Monuments in Historical Context and How Ole Miss is Struggling to do the Same

ABSTRACT

The controversy over the meaning and placement of Confederate monuments in public spaces, especially south of the Mason-Dixon Line, has caused many to reconsider the implications of honoring those who fought for a cause that enslaved millions of people over two centuries. Actions need to be taken by public officials and guided by public historians that balances the deep heritage and pride of the South with the vulgarity and ugliness of slavery. But this country is not the only one that has had to deal with the black eye of Lost Causes. Placing this struggle within a broader historical context may shed light on how best to confront an embarrassing past. Doing so will allow old wounds to finally begin healing, not only at the University of Mississippi – the subject of this case study – but also everywhere “down south in Dixie.”

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Shattering paradigms seems to be the rule of the day. Recent events have brought certain social issues to center stage as the nation is held captive in a contentious, deeply divided White House race, strained relations between the black community and police forces, and fluid gender identity issues, creating a need for reassessment of definitions and social priorities.

Among these often bellicose dialogues is the dispute over the removal of Confederate monuments that honor and remember local heroes of the South's failed attempt to secede from the Union during the American Civil War. Unfortunately, more than 150 years later, the communities where these 21st century cultural battles occur are not all bloodless. The horrific attack on a Charleston, SC church by a disturbed white supremacist sparked a nationwide uprising against the Confederate Battle Flag because it appeared in a photo with the killer prior to his racially-motivated shooting.

The ensuing arguments, conflicts, and political grandstanding are typically driven by racial polarity that often lacks nuanced, tactful debate.¹ Mostly, the battle flag controversy involves communities of the eleven southern tier states that formed the Confederate States of America (CSA) in the early 1860s, but also includes those border States that harbored southern sympathies for the CSA's efforts. But the dispute also reaches into the halls of academia, around northern dinner tables, and all across the fruited plain. At the heart of the discussion is majority rules versus minority rights. Placing this within a larger context is helpful in understanding the evolution and possible direction of this kind of controversy. Public historians find themselves in the middle of these issues, having to decide how best to represent a history built on underpinnings of various layers of perspective. Proceeding confidently into the future is

¹ Adriana Diaz, "In wake of Charleston shooting, Confederate flag debate renewed," CBS News, June 21, 2015, accessed April 23, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/charleston-shooting-confederate-flag-debate-renewed/>.

dependent upon how well the past is studied, understood, and explained by those in positions to do so.

Context

It is imperative to first accept that the controversy of shifting symbolism is not exclusive to the United States. The people of 2016 may not realize that Nazi symbols continue to be used and discussed in other parts of the world – including Israel – and that the black majority of South Africa is still dealing with the after-effects of apartheid more than 20 years after it ended.

Since the swastika was a symbol that existed more than 3000 years before being adopted for use by the National Socialist German Workers' Party in the 1930's, it, like, many other symbols, has a multi-layered history and numerous meanings. The latest and most notable, however, is tied to the Nazis and the atrocities committed against Europe's Jewry before and during World War II. Regarding the Nazi flag, many countries have taken legal measures to ban the public display of the symbol that flew over the killings of more than six million Jews. Germany, the eye of the Nazi storm, now has laws that forbid the public use of any Nazi symbol.² Israel, paradoxically, runs counter to what one would suspect – that they would have the strictest laws pertaining to the exhibition of Nazi symbols. Despite the fact that the country has more than 200,000 Holocaust survivors, they have no legislation on their books that forbids the display of such a torturous reminder. Only recently has the Israeli government taken action to ban the use of the hate symbol due to an increase in Anti-Semitic behavior.³ Certainly, one cannot argue the horrific actions done under the colors of the now infamous symbol. But if the offending country completely bans it and the country most negatively affected by it does not,

² Joshua Keating, "Germany Banned Its Ugly Historic Symbols. Should We Do That Too?" Slate, June 24, 2015, accessed April 24, 2016, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2015/06/24/germany_banned_its_ugly_historic_symbols_should_we_do_that_too.html.

³ Allyn Fisher-ilan, "Israel Moves to Outlaw Use of Nazi Symbols," Reuters, January 11, 2012, accessed April 24, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-nazis-idUSTRE80A1O420120111>.

how does its exclusion rectify the past atrocities? In fact, some argue that by its outright ban, it actually places it back in the limelight, making its use all the more alluring and exciting. Slate writer Joshua Keating opines, "... the law hasn't stopped the surreptitious use of the swastika and the Hitler salute by far-right groups. Its taboo status may even enhance its appeal, with the symbol of an authoritarian state ironically transformed into a symbol of rebellion against state authority."⁴ Is it possible the epitomic emblem of hate could actually hide in plain sight?

South Africa, too, has had its share of controversy over monuments that honor the men who set the stage for apartheid in the early 20th century, and those who enforced the legal segregation of native blacks from the colonizing Dutch and British whites. Most notably, the statue of Cecil Rhodes, a prominent British businessman in South African history, was removed from its featured placement at the University of Cape Town. Rhodes, whose name is still known throughout the world because of his philanthropy (Rhodes Scholars Program) and international business success (DeBeers diamond mining), was a man of contradiction. Despite his extensive financial benevolence and entrepreneurial prowess, his political influence set up the conditions for apartheid through land annexation and racist policies that were adopted to limit black voter participation.⁵ Students have protested the statue for years, and have the support of many agencies and associations fighting the long-held racist beliefs that have paralyzed the country for decades. Julius Malema, leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters believes that, "It is that statue that continues to inspire [white people] to think that they are a superior race."⁶ Joyous refrains rang out from the crowd as the statue was lifted into the air by a crane, but does its removal have

⁴ Joshua Keating, "Germany Banned Its Ugly Historic Symbols. Should We Do That Too?"

⁵ Justin Parkinson, "Why is Cecil Rhodes Such a Controversial Figure?" BBC, April 1, 2015, accessed April 24, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32131829>.

⁶ Ibid.

a hand in ending the racial strife predominant across South Africa? Is there another way of handling the checkered past of a country with such a multi-layered, proud history?

There are many who see a different aspect to the controversy over monument imaging. Opinions vary on the removal of British and Afrikaner monuments that herald back to the years of apartheid. One person commented, “Of course what happened was terrible. The blacks were so horribly mistreated ... like animals... But you can’t erase the history by simply removing a statue. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) helped me and many others deal with the guilt and shame of apartheid. That’s an important part of the story too. The entire, complex story must be told.”⁷ An example is the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, South Africa, a colossal shrine to the Boer (Dutch heritage) pioneers who settled the interior of the country from the Cape region. The massive granite structure was built a century later to commemorate the unlikely Boer victory against overwhelming Zulu forces in 1838.⁸ About the monument, those on the political right state, “It is part of our heritage, and we will see that it stays like that.”⁹ However, re-education is what is happening in Pretoria. The former monument to white supremacy over blacks has been reimaged to represent a part of South African history, as seen through the eyes of the natives. The chief executive officer of the Monument, Gert Opperman, has expanded its role to one of education and entertainment for locals and tourists alike. “[He] has worked furiously to demythologise the site and turn it from a shrine into a more mundane museum of Afrikaner culture and history, ‘a professional, hospitable organisation that welcomes everybody...’ He hired black guides to give tours in local African languages. He began busing in

⁷ Telephone interview, interview by author, April 23, 2016. The name of the interviewee is withheld by mutual agreement.

⁸ Staff writer, “Voortrekker Monument Changes with the Times,” IOL, May 7, 2003, accessed April 24, 2016, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/voortrekker-monument-changes-with-the-times-105986>.

⁹ Ibid.

school children, many from predominantly black schools. He presented jazz concerts where solemn religious services were once held.”¹⁰

These examples represent various methods of dealing with an embarrassing and vile history. Which technique is most effective can only be determined by the community facing the issue. As with most things, local control is the best control. Blanket policies rarely work well, and in the case of monuments, that is especially true, regardless of country or region. If memorialization is the currency, then interpretation and historical fact occupy opposite sides of the coin. How these issues are tackled speaks to the creativity and efforts of public policy and historian professionals at the local and national levels.

Literature Review

It is often (and rightly) said that the history books are written by the victors. After all, when it comes to grand conflicts, those who are described as the “losers” do not get to explain their perspectives to the “winners.” Countless examples throughout history can be found where this is the case. Michel-Rolph Trouillot states in his book, “Silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituent parts missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded. There is no perfect closure of any event, however one chooses to define the boundaries of that event.”¹¹ While this applies to large scale happenings, this can also be found on the micro level – that of the family or individual unit. As a family member writes in his journal, through the act of conscious self-censorship or inadvertent omission, some parts of the day are left out in favor of others. Decades later, when grandchildren are reading through their recently passed grandfather’s journal entries, they might wonder what else occurred during the typical “day in the life” of granddad beyond weather observances and

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 49.

the fluctuating price of gas and eggs. He opted, in his writings, to omit the stimulating conversation with Stan the barber or the bloody knuckles earned while adjusting the timing on Grammy's Buick. If self-censorship precludes benign emotional daily entries, what of the entries of a hard-fought battle between Native Americans and an over-zealous US Cavalry officer, hell-bent on proving a point on the Colorado Plains?

Such is the struggle confronted by Ari Kelman in his extensively researched work, "A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek." He recounts the larger issue of contradictory collective memory, as well as the intimate nature of native memorialization at one of the sites marking a dark chapter in US history. In the pre-dawn hours of November 29, 1864, a regiment of Colorado volunteer militia attacked a Native American encampment, resulting in the deaths of over 150 Natives, most of whom were women, children, and the elderly. Kelman writes of the event, "... so much uncertainty shrouds Sand Creek that seeking an unchallenged story of the massacre may not be merely futile, but also counterproductive."¹²

The very definitions of concepts vary from culture to culture, and this is especially true between the dominant White population versus the much smaller Native American tribes scattered across the United States. For example, Kelman explains the importance to the National Park Service (NPS) in locating the actual site of the massacre. The Natives, on the other hand, already "knew" where it occurred based on generations of oral histories and rituals performed at the prescribed location. The NPS, however, "...insisted that as a precondition of memorialization they must first 'find Sand Creek.' And when the NPS's site search relied on methods and reached conclusions that three of the four affected tribes rejected, the outraged Arapahos and Cheyennes believed the NPS had dispossessed them of their memories while threatening their

Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 8.

cultural sovereignty.”¹³ The Natives did not need the geographic location to memorialize the site where scores of their ancestors had been murdered. Their definition of “place” was vastly different than that of the governing body in charge of national monument-making.

One of the early players in the controversy – Patty Limerick – later became involved in an organization that was, “...committed to the civil, respectful, and problem-solving exploration of important and often contentious public issues.” Kelman went on to describe her dedication to “...bridging the gap between academics and the general public and to demonstrating the benefits of applying historical perspective to contemporary dilemmas and conflicts.”¹⁴ This kind of professional mediator is what is needed when confronting any historical event, especially those that deal with incongruous definitions of “place,” “community,” and “heritage.”

One never needs to look far to find an opinion on any subject. Even the term, “community” has shifted in the last decade or two. Where it used to simply mean, “neighborhood” or “town,” it now literally includes the entire world, thanks to the Internet and social media. Because of this growth of community, more definitions, more value judgments, wider views are attained that was otherwise not possible. For example, Freeman Tilden’s timeless book, “*Interpreting Our Heritage*,” broke onto the scene over 50 years ago, greatly expanding the definition of the term, “Interpretation.”¹⁵ However, throughout the text, nothing is mentioned as to what “heritage” he refers, and most importantly, when discussing interpretation at national parks around the country, what group belongs to “Our” heritage? Of course, being written in the 1950s, the dominant heritage was that of the Anglo-Saxon, Christian, middle-class man, and little thought was given to those of a minority heritage, i.e. Native Americans, Hispanics, African-Americans, women, etc.... Did Tilden think that perhaps those groups might

¹³ Ibid, 20.

¹⁴ Ibid, 268-269.

¹⁵ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1957).

feel excluded from the cultural club to which he belonged? It is likely it never crossed his mind, but in today's fast-paced, global society, such considerations must be made. This ties back to the shifting definitions of key terms that must be negotiated like quicksand. Once a professional gets trapped in an archaic definition of a culturally sensitive word, the more he struggles to free himself, the faster he (and his credibility) sink into the inescapable quagmire of political correctness and demographic appeasement. How then, does the public historian deal with such a controversial issue as the Confederate monument controversy?

Case Study

No incident has galvanized the movement against all Confederate symbols and monuments than the tragic shooting in a Charleston, SC church on June 17, 2015. Prior to this watershed event, once-marginalized groups struggled for footing on the slippery slope of "revisionist history," but with the racially motivated slaying of black church members and seemingly constant clashes between police departments and young black men, the crusade quickly gained traction and became more mainstream. Localized battles of Confederate monuments and statues became national foci, forcing municipal, county, and state governments to take a hard look at the way in which these symbols are interpreted by non-white groups in society.

The University of Mississippi (UM), or "Ole Miss," deep in the heart of "Dixie," is also at the heart of the controversy. Sitting in one of the most prominent locations on campus – in front of the Lyceum, the first academic building on campus – is a towering statue of a Confederate soldier standing atop a pedestal, with his hand raised to his brow, an ever-present sentry, guarding his homeland. The statue was erected in 1906 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) as a tribute to the men who fought and died for the cause. The monument has also taken on a multilayered meaning. In 1962, when James Meredith – a young African-

American – wanted to be admitted to the school, an angry mob formed at the base of the statue to prevent his admission. However, it is also where a local pastor addressed the mob and insisted they disperse.¹⁶ Riots ensued, and Ole Miss became one of many locations that struggled with civil rights for blacks in a region deeply rooted in racism. The statue became symbolic of both sides of the more contemporary conflict: those who did not want to surrender the traditional ways of segregation, and those who believed it was time to embrace and move forward with equal rights, regardless of skin color. The campus has not been without racial tension since the civil rights movement, however. In 2014, conflict was sparked when a white student placed a noose around the neck of the statue of James Meredith, which stands as a tribute to the integration of blacks in the all-white university in 1962.¹⁷

Focus on the many campus Confederate iconography has been steadfast, leading to the removal of some, including the Mississippi state flag due to its bearing of the Confederate battle flag's image, as well as the mascot, "Colonel Reb," a representation of a white, bearded southern soldier dressed in his iconic grey uniform.¹⁸ Some emblems escaped removal, such as building names and the Confederate soldier monument, and would instead receive plaques— a type of counter-memorialization. "Ed Ayers, president of the University of Richmond, is a noted historian and writer who has argued that southern cities and universities should acknowledge the wrongs of slavery and of opposition to the civil rights movement — not by trying to erase the

¹⁶ Jerry Mitchell, "Ole Miss History Profs Say Confederate Sign Must Go," *Clarion – Ledger*, April 12, 2016, accessed April 30, 2016, www.clarionledger.com/staff/12609.jerry-mitchell/.

¹⁷ Susan Svrluga, "Former Ole Miss Student Pleads Guilty to Hanging Noose Around Statue Honoring the First Black Student," *Washington Post*, March 24, 2016, accessed May 7, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/03/24/former-ole-miss-student-pleads-guilty-to-hanging-noose-around-statue-honoring-the-first-black-student/.

¹⁸ Carimah Townes, "After Students Vote to Take It Down, Ole Miss Will No Longer Fly State Flag," *ThinkProgress*, October 26, 2015, accessed May 7, 2016, <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2015/10/26/3716091/ole-miss-will-no-longer-fly-flag-with-confederate-symbol/>.

symbols of that dark past, but by placing them in historical context.”¹⁹ However, when the plaque was placed in March 2016, opposition immediately arose, predominately from the institution’s history department. One professor “...expressed surprise that the university’s committee that came up with the text failed to seek out the help of the History Department.... ‘Not only are we historians...we have special expertise, professors that work on the Confederacy and Jim Crow.’”²⁰ The history department drafted an alternative that better encompassed the historical context and perspective, including the fact that slavery was a central part of the South’s secession and submitted it to the Chancellor. Other groups, like the NAACP, UM graduate students, and many nationally-known historians also petitioned the administration to make the plaque contextually accurate.²¹ In a rapid turn of events, the UM administration released a statement that “[a] committee has been formed at the University of Mississippi in response to those critical of the recent installation of a plaque near the Confederate statue at Lyceum Circle, and it will process input from the community.”²²

Clearly, the Ole Miss officialdom saw it important enough to address the antiquated symbols and names affiliated with the Civil War. Placing explanatory plaques near controversial monuments is one method of dealing with the multiple perspectives that are so often ignored by the authors of historic events. However, the *faux pas* came when the original committee assigned to create the plaques for the statue and several buildings was comprised of “...the Faculty Senate, Staff Council ..., Black Student Union, Alumni Association, Black Alumni Association

¹⁹ Andy Knef, “Chancellor Jones Announces Plan for Leadership on Race Issues and Diversity,” *New Media Lab LLC*, (blog), August 1, 2014, accessed May 7, 2016, <http://hottytoddy.com/2014/08/01/chancellor-jones-announces-plan-for-leadership-on-race-issues-and-diversity/>.

²⁰ Jerry Mitchell, “Ole Miss History Profs Say Confederate Sign Must Go,” *The Clarion – Ledger*.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Rob Sigler, “Plaque on UM Confederate Statue to Undergo Revision?” *Oxford Eagle*, March 30, 2016, accessed May 7, 2016, www.oxfordeagle.com/2016/03/30/plaque-on-um-confederate-statue-to-undergo-revision/.

... , and the Center for Inclusion & Cross Cultural Engagement.”²³ While these members must have been highly engaged in the process and strove for the most appropriate language and wording, no historian was named to the committee. Therefore, no accurate articulation of historical events placed in their context was possible. Only through years of rigorous scholarship and research can individuals become attuned to the nuances of a specific time period. It appears that the attempt to be politically correct caused an overcorrection, and the result was a waste of time and money, but more importantly, a depletion of trust and faith that those in power can get to the heart of the matter succinctly and truthfully.

Best Practices

What then, could the UM administration have done to address the wrongs of the university’s past and bring lasting comfort to those surrounded by old but persistent symbols of racism and oppression? It’s a two-part answer. First, *don’t look away; face the past*. Germany, since the end of the Cold War and reunification, has become a shining example of dealing with such an ugly history. Writing for the Israeli newspaper, Haaretz, Khaled Diab avers about Berlin, “In no other capital city ...are the crimes of the past so unblinkingly, unflinchingly and honestly on display. In fact, to the outside visitor, Berlin can resemble an open-air museum of historic horror, terror, death and destruction.” He goes on to describe the Holocaust museum, Jewish history museums, and archives of the Stasi, Gestapo, and the Nazi secret police offering full disclosure of the heinous crimes committed under the Nazi and Communist regimes.²⁴ Revealing the ugliness and darkness of a nation’s past is not a demonstration of weakness, but one of

²³ University of Mississippi, “Action Plan on Consultant Reports and Update on the Work of the Sensitivity and Respect Committee,” Chancellor Dan Jones, August 1, 2014, 3, accessed May 7, 2016, <http://chancellor.olemiss.edu/wpcontent/uploads/sites/17/2013/08/2014ActionPlanonConsultantReportsandUpdateontheWorkoftheSensitivityandRespectCommittee.pdf>.

²⁴ Khaled Diab, “Truth and Reconciliation: Germany as Role Model,” Haaretz, April 7, 2013, accessed May 2, 2016, www.haaretz.com/opinion/truth-and-reconciliation-germany-as-role-model.premium-1.514052.

strength. This has led to the immigration of thousands of Jews – a prospect unthinkable only a few decades ago.

Merely lifting the veil to reveal the scars is not enough. The second part is *the formal apology of a government to its people*. Of course, Ole Miss cannot speak on behalf of the U.S. government regarding race relations since the birth of the nation. However, it could set the precedent of being the first institution or authoritative entity to accept full responsibility for the treatment of African-Americans since the inception of UM in 1844.

No country is more intimately familiar with destructive black-white relations than South Africa and its (fairly) recent abolishment of apartheid. Once the government of National Unity was established, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was formed to help the citizens deal with what happened under apartheid. The TRC formed multiple subcommittees that were charged with addressing the wrongdoings of the government on several levels, i.e. Amnesty, Reparations, and Human Rights violations.²⁵ Although many problems of apartheid still haunt the country, this formal admission of guilt and attempts to rectify some of the wrongs committed in an official capacity have helped to heal some deep wounds between the government and her people, as well as between the races and ethnicities of such a diverse populace.

Again, this honest and sincere act of contrition alone would not solve the racial divide that exists, but combined with boldly facing the past, the U.S. might follow the example set by Germany and South Africa.

As a way of incorporating the average South African citizen into this national healing, the government offered a “Register of Reconciliation,” where everyday people could write messages

²⁵ South African Department of Justice, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/>.

to their compatriots. This entry, being one of many, is honest and poignant and is an example for which all nations should strive to attain for its people:

Tuesday, December 16, 1997 at 14:41:56

I reach out to my fellow South Africans and say I am sorry for what I did and did not do. I fully commit myself to reconciliation, maintaining human rights and personal dignity, and supporting (and defending) our new constitution.

I also pray that together we can build a monument, celebrating the human spirit, based on mutual trust and respect.

I love you South Africa!!!

Smook van Niekerk, Sandton, SA²⁶

Would these two practices heal all cultural wounds in the U.S.? No. But continuing to send the mixed messages of honoring those who fought for slavery while trying to rationalize that history to descendants of the enslaved is no solution at all. Though democracy is based on majority rules, perhaps this country would be better served if greater compassion was extended to the minority' perspective – that might allow the beginning of a nuanced, tactful discussion.

²⁶ South African Department of Justice, Register of Reconciliation, accessed May 3, 2016, 2, www.justice.gov.za/trc/ror/page02.htm.

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