

What to Do When Your Heritage is Hateful

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If one pays attention to the old Confederate battle flag (and since the horrific shooting rampage in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015, it's been hard not to notice), one will eventually see it paired on bumper stickers and T-shirts with the words "Heritage, Not Hate." This combination is a way for some white folks—often Southern, but not always—to explain their affinity for the Stars-and-Bars, not necessarily as a vestige of antebellum or Jim-Crow-era racism but as a way of celebrating redneck culture, "Southern-ness," and/or nonconformity. While there's nothing wrong with people celebrating what they interpret as their tradition, inheritance, or homeland, what does one do when that heritage is less than fully inclusive, even antagonistic toward another group?

In a National Public Radio piece aired on July 14, 2015, Gene Demby describe the "awkward mental gymnastics" involved in certain cultural preferences. A person's musical tastes might run toward gangsta rap or outlaw country, for example, both of which can be misogynistic and reactionary, but the listener might paradoxically consider himself to be a supporter of women's rights. Such inherent contradiction might seem hypocritical to some, but there is a certain elasticity of symbols, as cyphers meaning different things to different people. For some, the Confederate flag is a sign of racial Neanderthalism, the trademark of unreconstructed segregationists and rednecks. For others, the flag is a happy reminder of Tom Petty's 1985 "Southern Accents" tour. Who is correct? Whose interpretation wins?

Such questions are not particular to Southern history or Confederate heritage. If the past is what happened, and history consists of selective attempts to describe what happened, then heritage, as J. E. Tunbridge and Gregory John Ashworth have argued, is a contemporary product shaped from history. Because it draws boundaries (between ours and theirs, mine and yours), all heritage is "dissonant," open to discord and disagreements; as such it is never fully inclusive or representative of all people.² In light of the dissonance of heritage, it is possible that the Confederate flag is both a symbol of white supremacy and a relatively benign badge of regional and cultural pride. Perhaps we can acknowledge that not everyone who slaps a Confederate flag sticker on his truck or listens to Lynyrd Skynyrd is a racist, no more than we would argue that everyone who wears a hoodie or listens to 50 Cent is a thug. A USA Today/Suffolk University poll released in July 2015 found Americans evenly divided: 42 percent of respondents

said the Confederate flag was not racist but rather a symbol of Southern history and heritage, with another 42 percent saying the flag was racist and should be removed from state flags and official locations, with unsurprisingly differences reported by people according to race and region.³

All who display it—whether deliberately provocative, willfully ignorant, or blithely oblivious—do so with pride. But none of these positions absolves us from the implications of the symbols with which we choose to identify or inoculates us from the associations that others attach to those symbols. And certain images are laden with symbolic meaning, inescapably and unavoidably, apart from whatever meaning each of us individually ascribes to those images.

To illustrate, there were 173 pro-flag demonstrations in the two months after the Charleston attack—averaging out to just under three rallies per day.⁴ These demonstrations typically featured good ol' boys (and girls) proudly displaying Confederate flags from their trucks and cars. While some of these demonstrators may have meant no offense, they must have realized the historical antecedents of such protests. In the twentieth century, public displays of Confederate patriotism usually came in two flavors: 1) parades by groups such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and 2) Ku Klux Klan rallies. The latter were especially terrifying: shadowy, nocturnal gatherings of hooded nightriders who burned crosses and hanged persons of color in effigy. They were staged dress-rehearsals for lynchings.

To rally around the Confederate flag in the wake of the June 17th Charleston shooting—in which nine African-American church-goers were shot to death by a violent, Confederate-flag-waving racist—is akin to the National Rifle Association holding its 1999 national convention in Denver ten days after the Columbine High School massacre in the Denver suburb of Littleton. Yes, of course they had the right to do so, but the timing could not have been worse; as the old British saying goes, just because you can doesn't mean you should. A better comparison might even be to a neo-Nazi rally, replete with swastikas, in the aftermath of an anti-Semitic attack that specifically targeted Jews. As numerous Black commentators have made clear, their objection is not a matter of vague discomfort, but rather one of terror, based on real-life experiences and the lived inheritance of precarious survival in a violently racist society. That is, displays of the Confederate flag are not simply insensitive or ill-considered choices: they are direct threats, proclamations of hatred, invocations of a bloody history and, as the Charleston shooting made clear, a bloody present.

It is a dogged unawareness that ignores how the Confederate flag was weaponized during the Civil Rights Movement as white opponents asserted their rights and resistance in the face of boycotts, marches, school desegre-

gations, and other black protests in the 1950s and 1960s. African-American activists recall memories of being terrorized and intimidated by Confederate symbols—not only flags but also names, parades, and ephemera rescued from the dustbin of history specifically for the purpose of countering Civil Rights progress. The Georgia state flag, for example, did not always consist mainly of the Stars-and-Bars: the familiar version featuring a Confederate battle flag was designed by John Sammons Bell (a World War II veteran and attorney who was an outspoken supporter of segregation), adopted in 1956 at the height of “massive resistance” to the changes wrought by *Brown v. Board of Education*, and defiantly flown until 2001. Observers might ask which version of Southern heritage—the truculence of the Old South or the newfound race-baiting of the New South—is more often celebrated by contemporary flag-wavers; regardless, both versions allude to white supremacy, with its overtones of racially oppressive violence.

It is these overtones that create the most anxiety in those mindful of the power of symbols. “[T]he potency of symbols rests not simply in their ability to represent,” says Rebecca Klatch, “but in their ability to instigate action.” In her analysis of political symbolism and symbolic action, she has noted how symbols create “badges of identity” which define group boundaries, maintain a sense of togetherness, and “weld commitment to a cause”; they are “vital in creating harmony out of individual interest” as they aid in manufacturing consent. In their multivalent meanings, they can unify one group while alienating others from that group. They can also act as weapons or “means of domination” that legitimate the distribution of power and further divisions in society.⁵

When commissioners in Marion County, Florida, voted on July 7, 2015, less than a month after mass shooting in Charlotte, to fly the Confederate flag over the county’s government complex, author Jeff Klinkenberg—who has written widely on Florida history—questioned that symbolic action in a Facebook post two days later. “Why don’t we celebrate our stunning landscapes, our neighborliness, our food, our literature, our loyalty to family and our self-reliance?” he wrote. “Why a flag that represents our racist past, and, I guess, our racist present?” While folks in Marion may not see themselves as championing backwardness and hate, they also may not appreciate—or seemingly care—how upsetting that flag can be to non-whites (and many non-Southerners, too). Why flaunt a symbol that you know is offensive?

Of course, some people likely display the flag expressly because it is offensive, as a form of conservative recalcitrance in light of the belief that their place of power in the social hierarchy is being challenged. But what if that recalcitrance were subverted through cooptation and reinterpretation by those the symbol was meant to marginalize? I remember hearing an Afri-

can-American high-school student explain in 1988 (yes, this same debate has been going on for a long time) why he felt the state of Georgia should keep its Bell-designed flag: it served, he argued, to remind Georgians of all races and ethnicities of the region's conflicted past, and it is important to be mindful of history, he continued, even when such memories are painful.

If there is an argument to be made for flying the Confederate flag across the Deep South expressly because of its negative connotations, then there is also a distinction between remembering and valorizing the past. One can remember, interpret, and critique the past without making a flag an officially sanctioned symbol for all people. As Klinkenberg notes, there are so many things about the South to love: the famous hospitality, the relaxed pace, the natural beauty, and so on. There are points of shame, too, including the region's foul history of slavery, lynchings, and racial terrorism. Why draw attention to the latter when one can be proud of the former? Those rallying around the Confederate flag might easily find another aspect of Southern heritage to celebrate—there are many—and they could try using the U.S. flag, a symbol around which more Americans might find a way to unite, when they do.

Can we determine appropriate symbols for others? No—but we can help them understand what their choice of symbols means to others besides themselves; as Hugh Dalziel Duncan has written, “Who has the right to use what symbols, when, where, how, and for what purpose is not an individual matter but a matter of group legitimation.”⁶ When Marion County commissioners chose to hoist the Stars-and-Bars again, in a throwback to a less tolerant age, they engaged in a pernicious kind of political symbolism, a display that officially sanctioned a now divisive symbol. In today's Trumpian dystopia, people in Marion might not see that act as perpetuating hate, but it most assuredly perpetuates a racist view of the South (and to whom it belongs and matters most), even if they are not aware of it.

Shortly after 10:00 a.m. on Friday, July 10, 2015—three days after Marion County officials had voted to raise the Confederate flag over Florida once again—uniformed highway patrol officers lowered the Confederate battle flag on the grounds of the South Carolina State Capitol. Raised atop the capitol dome in 1961 to commemorate the centennial of the Civil War, it had flown for 54 years beneath the U.S. flag and the state's palmetto flag. Controversy over the flag influenced lawmakers in 2000 to pass the Heritage Act, which moved the flag from atop the dome to a pole next to a soldiers' monument on the Capitol grounds. Ironically, it took the Charleston shooter to bring down the flag completely, as South Carolinians engaged in what Karen Till has termed “memory work” to rehabilitate traumatized public space and make heritage more inclusive.⁷

But where do such efforts end? It should be clear that removing the

Stars-and-Bars from government properties across the South, as happened in the summer of 2015, was the right, long overdue, thing to do. Whether expunging all traces of the Confederacy from the South—monuments, memorials, equestrian statues, grave markers, plaques, and so on—would be productive is open to debate. Spuriously connected to the antebellum South, many were anachronistically erected during periods of racial strife (at the turn of the twentieth century, just after *Plessy v. Ferguson*, for example, and during the Civil Rights era), as David Graham has noted. Those on public sites maintained by tax dollars might be relocated to museums or other educational settings; however, many of them were privately built, so numerous that it might be impossible to remove them all. The Southern Poverty Law Center has counted more than 1500 in 31 states.⁸

Practicalities aside, removing Confederate symbols may be neither desirable nor sufficient. As Joshua Inwood and Derek Alderman have argued, taking down the Confederate flag should not be substituted for solving structural inequality. That is, simply removing the flag is a kind of historical and geographical erasure that fails to engage in genuine memory-work. “[W]hile state legislators from across the South should be applauded for taking down Confederate symbols,” they write, “that is not the same thing as addressing the deeply entrenched social and spatial conditions that allow white supremacy to permeate not just the Charleston AME church but wider swaths of American life.”⁹ Reconsidering Confederate symbology therefore represents a beginning, not an end, in the difficult work of reconciliation.

All heritage is someone’s heritage and therefore logically not someone else’s—where there is inheritance there is disinheritance—but the degree to which heritage can be inclusive can and ought to be maximized along utilitarian lines. If the dissonance of heritage is inevitable, then it can also be mediated. Whether they remain in public view or not, Confederate symbols can still stimulate new dialogue about the extreme violence to which they have long, tangled, blood-stained cords of connection. They can become part of the process of unifying and healing, part of the memory-work needed to come to terms with white supremacy and the legacy of racism. This memory-work necessitates listening to the concerns of activists, namely #blacklivesmatter; finding unifying rather than divisive aspects of culture to celebrate; and figuring out how to stop mass shootings and rampage killings—which, after all, is the reason we started talking about the Confederate flag again in the first place.

NOTES

1. The author is Professor of American Studies and Co-Director of the Kenan Social Engagement Program at the Wilkes Honors College of Florida Atlantic University. He has written four books: *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), *Burning Faith: Church Arson in the American South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), *Reload: Rethinking Violence in American Life* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010), and *The Long Sixties: America, 1955-1973* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

2. J. E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), 3, 20-21. At worst heritage can be a “euphemistic cloak for ethnic or racial exclusivism,” according to the authors (3).

3. See Michael E. Miller, “Can We All Agree that the Confederate Flag is Racist? Apparently Not, According to Poll,” *Washington Post* (July 1, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/07/01/can-we-all-agree-that-the-confederate-flag-is-racist-apparently-not-according-to-poll/>. Responses varied widely according to race. Only one third of white respondents considered the flag racist, with half saying it symbolized Southern heritage, nothing more. More than 75 percent of African Americans, however, responded that the flag was racist and should be stripped from public spaces. Only one in 10 black respondents thought the Confederate flag represented Southern heritage. Opinions also varied based on region, with Southerners more likely to view the controversial flag as not racist. Forty-nine percent of Southerners said the Confederate battle flag is not racist, compared to 34 percent who said it is. More Americans in the Northeast and West considered the Confederate flag racist than not — by 12 and 13 percentage point margins, respectively. Meanwhile, those in the Midwest were effectively split on the subject: 44 percent said it was racist while 42 percent did not.

4. Christopher Ingraham, “All 173 Confederate Flag Rallies since the Charleston Massacre, Mapped,” *Washington Post* (August 17, 2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/08/17/all-173-confederate-flag-rallies-since-the-charleston-massacre-mapped/>.

5. Rebecca E. Klatch, “Of Meanings & Masters: Political Symbolism & Symbolic Action,” *Polity* 21, no. 1 (Autumn 1988): 137-154.

6. Duncan, quoted in Klatch, 149.

7. Till, quoted in Joshua F.J. Inwood and Derek Alderman, “Taking Down the Flag Is Just a Start: Toward the Memory-Work of Racial

Reconciliation in White Supremacist America,” *Southeastern Geographer* 56, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 9-15.

8. David A. Graham, “The Stubborn Persistence of Confederate Monuments,” *The Atlantic* (April 26, 2016), <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/04/the-stubborn-persistence-of-confederate-monuments/479751/>; see also the SPLC report *Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy*, https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/whoseheritage_splc.pdf.

9. Inwood and Alderman, “Taking Down the Flag,” 10.

