Taking Down the Flag Is Just a Start: Toward the Memory-Work of Racial Reconciliation in White Supremacist America

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On 17 June 2015 Dylann Roof, a self-avowed white supremacist, walked into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church and sat down for a Bible study. After spending forty-five minutes attending the service, he pulled a Glock 41 .45 caliber handgun from his backpack and opened fire, killing nine people. Roof then fled and was ultimately arrested twenty-four hours later in North Carolina. Of the nine killed the oldest was 87 year old Susie Jackson, and the youngest was 26 year old Tywanza Sanders. After his arrest Roof claimed that he assassinated the members of Emanuel AME Church in the hopes of igniting a broader race war. Indeed, photographs later emerged and went viral of Roof engaged in racist exhibitions and hate speech in the past, in particular the flying of the controversial and insensitive Confederate battle flag. In the aftermath of the Charleston massacre, we saw renewed efforts to remove Confederate symbols from across the South’s public spaces, with South Carolina legislators finally voting to remove the flag from the state capitol grounds. In addition, the nation witnessed the grace of survivors in forgiving Roof. These were meaningful and symbolic steps that, thankfully, had the opposite effect than the one the white supremacist shooter had intended.

While it is undeniably tragic that nine innocent people had to die before political leaders realized what many African Americans have known and lived with for generations, it is also indicative of a nation that whitewashes the connections between the material realities of white supremacy and its grounding in historical memory. The Confederate flag is a highly charged reminder of legacies of racism that have long been employed by racists to intimidate the black community and to oppose those struggling for racial equality. The banner of the secessionist, pro-slavery southern government had largely faded from memory and sight in the years after the Civil War, but it reappeared not coincidentally after World War II as a symbol of...
conservative white resistance to what was then the nascent Civil Rights Movement. African Americans who famously protested segregated bussing in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 have vivid memories of being pelted with balloons filled with urine, which were thrown from cars and trucks decorated with Confederate flags. In 1959, in the wake of Brown v. Board of Education, school officials in Fairfax, Virginia named and opened a new high school after Confederate general J.E.B. Stuart (Shapiro 2015). Many communities carried out similar not-so-subtle strategies of defending white supremacy under the guise of southern heritage and pride. The landscape has retained major traces of these racist symbols and, as a result of the Charleston Massacre, these symbols are being challenged well beyond the removal of the Confederate flag.

As activists and others from across the United States recognize, challenging the legitimacy of publicly displaying Confederate flags and other symbols that legitimize the defense of slavery and white supremacy is certainly the right thing to do. Yet these calls should not be mistaken for a solution to structural inequality. In particular, while state legislators from across the South should be applauded for taking down Confederate symbols, 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. This contradictory reality—addressing the symbols of a racist heritage without challenging the foundational histories and geographies of racism—raises questions about the relationship between violence, race and memory (Tyner et al. 2014). These questions are seldom discussed in our post-Charleston Nine social world.

Recently, Karen Till has argued that progressive change requires a direct engagement with the trauma of “memory work” in which “individuals and groups may confront and take responsibility for the failures of the democratic state and its violence” (Till 2012, pg. 7). In particular, she highlights the place-based practices of local citizens, activists, educators, artists, and even performers in carrying out the physical, political, and creative work of not only remembering a violent past but re-defining who has a right to the city and how space can be reconstructed through memory to become a site of healing. The phrase of memory work is especially appropriate because it reminds us that the practice of remembering and coming to terms with racialized violence and trauma is difficult and uncomfortable work and labor that starts, rather than ends, with the taking down and de-legitimization of the Confederate battle flag.

Building from these insights, we formulate an intervention that advocates for a multi-pronged response to the Charleston massacre, a response that recognizes the important work that memory and commemorative change can do in catalyzing political consciousness rather than seeming to deflect public attention and to relieve political leaders from taking full responsibility for pursuing racial reconciliation in a white supremacist America. This insight draws from an historical materialist perspective and advances an anti-racist political praxis. We also recognize that for scholars and the broader public to enact political change in these moments of crisis it is often necessary to couple memory work with more
formal, structured political activism. One such model are Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, which in a US context often use memory and the painful historical legacies of discrimination and violence to galvanize contemporary political support for social and economic change (see: Inwood 2012a; 2012b).

THE WORK OF MEMORY

Over the past two decades, geographers have probed the intersection of memory and the making of space, noting that the social interpretation of the past is constituted in part through the construction of material sites of memory (Dwyer and Alderman 2008). As Foote (2003) asserts, the making of space and place can assist directly in the collective remembering and forgetting of histories of trauma and violence. Sites of tragedy might be obliterated or simply never commemorated because of unresolved historical and political debates over the landscape and its past, as well as public avoidance of the traumatic memories narrated through these places. In these instances, the “geography of memory” serves as both the medium for representing memory and, because of its own complex material history, the very subject of what is remembered or forgotten. As state governments throughout the nation acted to remove the vestiges of Confederate symbolism from their public grounds and spaces, we suggest that these politicians, far from addressing the material and social consequences of the histories and geographies of racism, are in fact engaging in a process of historical and geographical erasure. Erasing or simply removing those symbols perpetuates forgetting the past, and presumably moving forward (for some) without engaging in true memory-work. Loewen, for example, points out that municipal authorities across the country have traditionally avoided unflattering depictions of their city’s past, which partly explains the still incomplete and unjust way America remembers past racialized violence. Such avoidance is not necessarily limited to those on the conservative end of the political spectrum but can also include those motivated by progressive guilt; in either case the ability to truly move forward in a constructive way is hindered by not working through the contradictory legacy of racialized memories and keeps us from achieving meaningful racial reconciliation.

The growing popularity of erasing elements that commemorate the Confederacy is particularly problematic in the context of remembering racialized violence and the important consequences these highly charged memories produce in defining the terms of social identity and responsibility. As we have argued elsewhere, “how we know ourselves in the present is intimately linked to the ways we remember ourselves in the past” (Alderman and Inwood 2013, pg. 186). Consequently, while the removal of an overtly racist symbol like the Confederate flag is an important initial step, it is paramount to recognize that it is a hollow victory unless followed up with the heavy political work of bringing into the collective consciousness a more full and complete understanding of the history of violence that has long characterized (and in many respects, still characterizes) the geography of the United States. To pretend that politicians
have only recently discovered the violent connections of the battle flag is to pretend that the violent resistance to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement was the result of “a few bad apples” instead of specific configurations of economic, political and cultural power that have defined the very existence of this country from the time of first contact.

This is the dirty secret of the recent Confederate flag debate that has been lost in much of the public commentary. Namely, that political violence works until it is no longer politically feasible, and when that moment comes the broader public and in particular their elected representatives find it more politically convenient to change the subject by simply cleansing the landscape of troublesome reminders of past injustices. Officials and other elites often invoke feel-good narratives of reconciliation rather than deal with the messy and contradictory realities of white supremacy, racism and genocide. Gilmore (1998) notes that violence does its best work in memory after the fact. “Terror lives on, continuing to serve its purpose long after the violence that gave rise to it ends” (78). This is true with forgetting as well. The conscious act of forgetting by erasing and avoiding Confederate inspired symbols allows one to seemingly move on from terror and violence while also whitewashing the culpability of certain perpetrators of this historic trauma. Perhaps more destructively, this style of forgetting that releases personal and societal culpability continues to deny the very material existence of an America born from the blood and sinew of a hundred million victimized peoples.

Foundational to U.S. development and expansion was the removal of Indigenous peoples from the landscape through genocide and dispossession and the ripping of Africans from their homes and families to be shipped a thousand miles to a land of unremitting torture, work and violence. This cleansing of Confederate symbols not only does a disservice to the memories of those who have gone before us, but it makes it impossible to truly reconcile that reality—to find a path forward that takes the geographies of the marginalized, the disenfranchised and the historically despised seriously.

That is the central contradiction of memory, is it not? How to reconcile a country that produces the likes of a Dylann Roof as well as gives rise to the deep wells of love that manifest in the victims’ families that offer the killer forgiveness. We only avoid coming to terms with this contradiction by forgetting the historical geographies that made Dylann Roof possible—to put him on the outside of the national consciousness by declaring that he is not one of us and by repudiating the Confederate symbol of his hate. In this sense, although the removal of the Confederate flag is the correct thing to do and signals some sort of political reckoning on the part of government leaders, such a symbolic act is not part of the memory-work of healing or coming to terms with the legacies and geographies of white supremacy and racism that have made the United States possible. Instead it is about the purposeful forgetting and erasure of those very geographies and histories. As Till (2012, p. 7) notes, “in cities undergoing political transition, memory-work signifies more than past and ongoing resistance to the status quo or conflict-resolution approaches to land rights and other disputes,” but instead
“motivates the creation of social capital [. . . ] that offers political stability.” This is the current legacy of the removal and debate around the Confederate flag at the state grounds in Columbia.

Yet we are also well aware that there are other ways that memory and commemorative activism can be deployed so as to address fundamental tensions within communities with long historical geographies of discrimination and violence. One such approach, which has been used in other communities, is Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRC). As we have written elsewhere (Inwood 2012b), the truth movement in the United States applies notions of justice that go beyond traditional understandings of rights and memory. Through their activities, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions attempt to build multi-racial coalitions through the politics of remembering rather than forgetting or moving beyond past injustices. As well as giving citizens “an understanding of both institutions and apparatuses, an understanding of law, and also an understanding of techniques for their application with the framework determined by the state,” the TRC effort illuminates structures that perpetuate geographies of unequal access—and subsequently attempts to disrupt those processes through memory (Lefebvre 2009, p. 53). As a result, U.S. TRC movements focus primarily on the claims of survivors and community members who were and are impacted by violence.

The emphasis on socioeconomic justice and equality connects efforts at reconciliation with broader justice movements (Inwood 2012a). Put simply, for people of color in the U.S., the geographic reality of systematically denied access to public spaces in the city through violence is central to understanding the socio-spatial politics that surrounds rights claims in urban contexts. The reality of racism to a large degree helps to explain the almost fifteen year battle to remove the Confederate Battle flag from the South Carolina State House grounds. The state’s defiant refusal to admit that the flag was a racist tool of intimidation and alienation says a great deal about the long-standing injustices that have limited African Americans from bringing successful claims for truth and reconciliation to their own state capitol. Again, simply removing the flag is not enough and instead could be indicative of the erasure of painful histories rather than an effort to engage with and try to reconcile those realities with contemporary struggles for justice. By focusing on notions of rights that attempt to create multi-racial coalitions that are centered on constructing more inclusive urban spaces, Truth and Reconciliation processes can advance justice movements. This reality can facilitate progress towards more inclusive and socially just communities and can treat historic wounds—repairing justice through reaffirming a shared value-consensus in a bilateral process (Walker 2006, pg. 382) through memory-work. This tension is fundamental to understanding the work that TRCs do and in analyzing how effective they and the U.S. ultimately will be at overcoming histories and geographies of violence. How (and how much or how little) U.S. based Truth Commissions can transform public spaces of America’s racialized cities, as well as the imagination/redevelopment of these cities, is central to understanding processes of racialization and urban development in twenty-first century U.S. society. If a community like Charleston or the state
of South Carolina were truly interested in engaging with those histories and geographies then we would also have to acknowledge that this country not only routinely produces the likes of Dylann Roof, but also routinely uses racialized violence to control and contain domestic populations and foreign populations alike.

With this in mind, we suggest that what is needed in the United States is a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that critically examines the history and continuing legacies of white supremacy. Such a TRC could be held in Charleston, and with good reason, but it must be cast as a national inquiry and conversation and not fall prey to the American tendency to represent racism and racialized violence as just a “southern problem.” Most assuredly, such a commission would address the heavy presence of Confederate and other racist symbols on the US landscape. There might very well be strong recommendations from such a TRC on the need to de-value and even remove these symbols from public spaces, but such efforts should be properly contextualized within the larger history and geography of white supremacy in America rather than simply erased and forgotten and treated as an aberration of the national and southern normative experience. It is worth pointing out that there are other ways of de-legitimizing landscape symbols that do not necessarily require outright erasure—from the re-location and social-spatial marginalization of symbols to the accretion or grafting of commemorative meanings onto Confederate memorials that question and challenge their original power and legitimacy and prompt a critical remembering over simply forgetting (Dwyer 2004). There is considerable value politically and educationally by possibly juxtaposing antithetical memories against each other within the same place, prompting a relational view of the past and the contradictions, silences, and inequalities embedded in traditionally dominant symbolic tools of racism. Most importantly, while the proposed TRC would not dismiss the gravity of Confederate symbols, its broader mission would focus attention beyond iconography to uncover and work to remember the memories and legacies of trauma and racialized violence that permeate almost every space within the United States.

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