Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage

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Reclaiming the past as a matter of social justice: African American heritage, representation and identity in the United States

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The argument that the Confederate flag and other displays represent ‘heritage, not hate’ ignores the near-universal heritage of African Americans whose ancestors were enslaved by the millions in the South. It trivializes their pain, their history and their concerns about racism – whether it’s the racism of the past or that of today. And it conceals the true history of the Confederate States of America and the seven decades of Jim Crow segregation and oppression that followed the Reconstruction era.

(Excerpt from Southern Poverty Law Center’s ‘Whose heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy’, 2019, p. 7)

In 2015 the despicable acts of a self-proclaimed white supremacist brought to the forefront the critical role that cultural heritage plays in the formation of identity, and the ways in which heritage can be used both to exclude or empower. On 17 June Dylann Roof entered the historic Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina and murdered nine African Americans (Epatko, 2015). Investigations by authorities found photographs of Roof holding a Confederate flag while displaying other symbols of white supremacy. Investigators identified a website belonging to Roof and described it as a ‘white supremacist broadside’. The website, in addition to outlining his racist manifesto, included a collection of 60 photographs of Roof posing at dozens of different Confederate heritage sites or slavery museums across the country (Robles, 2015). As reported
by the *Washington Post*, Roof’s reason for targeting Charleston was ‘because it is [the] most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to whites in the country’ (*Washington Post*, 2015).

Over the past several years, communities have increasingly begun to speak out against the violence and racism that continue to be perpetrated against black Americans, spurring the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement and demonstrations across the country. As part of this process, people have begun to take note of and to question both the abundance and appropriateness of public symbols honouring the former Confederate States of America (the Confederacy). Confederate symbols and representations can be found across the United States in varying forms including monuments, national parks, historic sites, street names, school names and flags. Roof’s intentional use of cultural heritage associated with the Confederacy, white supremacy and slavery galvanised communities to campaign for the removal of such symbols, particularly those found in public spaces. Some of these campaigns have been successful, resulting in the removal of prominent public representations of the Confederacy. Other attempts to remove Confederate symbols from public spaces have been met with strong, sometimes violent opposition.

One of the more notable public displays celebrating the Confederacy – removed in response to the public outcry resulting from the Charleston murders – was the Confederate flag that had adorned the grounds of South Carolina’s statehouse for 54 years (McCrummen and Izadi, 2015). In 2015 the New Orleans City Council voted to remove four monuments associated with the Confederacy. Three of the monuments venerated Civil War figures who had fought for the South during the Civil War. The fourth was a memorial honouring the members of the White League who led an insurrection, known as the Battle of Liberty Place, against Reconstruction leadership after the end of the Civil War (Chadwick 2018). In both instances the campaigns to remove these symbols were met with opposition, legal battles and protests.

On 11 and 12 August 2017 opposition in Charlottesville, Virginia reached a tipping point, culminating in the largest demonstration of white nationalists in recent history. At the heart of the dispute was a statue memorialising General Robert E. Lee; it had stood since 1924 in the formerly named Robert E. Lee Park. In 2012 city council members raised questions regarding the appropriateness of the statue and debates over its presence ensued for the next four years. In February 2016 the monument’s fate appeared to have been finally decided when the city council voted for its removal. But the following month saw opponents of the proposed removal sue the city and the statue remain in place. In June the park in which the statue stands was renamed Emancipation Park.
Tensions continued to rise, however, and in August 2017 white nationalists held a ‘Unite the Right’ rally to oppose the statue’s removal. The violence that unfolded left dozens injured and one counter-protester dead. Since the protests the city council voted to cover the statue with a black shroud, but several months later a judge ruled for the shroud’s removal. The park was renamed again, changing it from the short-lived Emancipation Park to Market Street Park. At the time of writing, the statue still remains in place (Fortin 2017).

Whose heritage, whose narrative?

These circumstances have propelled ideas about cultural heritage into the public consciousness. People have begun to question the country’s ‘authorized heritage’ and to demand change. For generations, historic preservation in the United States has been governed by the dominant social and cultural group – white and predominantly male citizens. A 2011 internal marketing survey, conducted by Edge Research on behalf of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (National Trust), determined that the demographics of its ‘preservation leaders’ were 93 per cent white, 2 per cent black, 1 per cent Latino and 2 per cent Asian or Pacific Islander (National Trust 2011). Not surprisingly, the cultural heritage of the country overwhelming reflects the dominant culture (Kaufman 2009). In a 2015 speech at The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change Stephanie Meeks, the President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Trust, confirmed that out of the 86,000 listings on the National Register of Historic Places only 8 per cent represent ‘women and racially and ethnically diverse places.’ Similarly, only 3 per cent of the country’s 2500 National Landmarks represent these same groups (Meeks, 2015).

In 2016 the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) published results from a nationwide survey which identified and catalogued public symbols of the Confederacy; this was followed by an updated version in June 2018. The 2018 survey identified 1740 Confederate monuments, place names and other symbols across the nation. These include 772 monuments, 105 public schools named for Confederate icons, 80 counties and cities named for Confederate leaders, 9 observed state holidays in 5 states and 10 US military bases. Data for the report was collected from federal, state and private sources, including the National Register for Historic Places (National Register), the National Park Service, the Smithsonian Art Inventory, Sons of Confederate Veterans and Daughters of the Confederacy (SPLC 2016 and 2018).
The study did not include local, state or nationally listed historic sites or parks. Further, the study deliberately excluded 2600 markers, battlefields, museums, cemeteries and other sites of historical significance. It is important to note the distinction made in determining the kinds of symbols that were included in the results. The study specifically focused on Confederate symbols which were commemorative or honorific in nature, rather than those which mark, represent or interpret actual historical events or places.

As the SPLC report demonstrates, symbols associated with the Confederacy are predominant in Southern states. Nonetheless, as the report revealed, Northern states such as Massachusetts, a state recognised as a stalwart of Union ideals and abolitionist sentiments, also have memorials to the Confederacy. The vast majority, however, exist in 14 of the 50 United States. All of these 14 states were former slave-holding states, and 11 of them seceded to form the short-lived nation of the Confederate States.

The most conspicuous of all of these sites is that of Stone Mountain. This enormous stone carving depicts three icons of the Confederacy: Confederate President Jefferson Davis, General Robert E. Lee and General Thomas ‘Stonewall’ Jackson. The relief is the key attraction of Stone Mountain Park, a 3200-acre state park on the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia and the site of the re-founding of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915. The project, initially organised and funded by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, was begun in 1923 and completed in 1972 (Stone Mountain Park 2018). The resulting sculpture is 400 feet high and spans three acres of the mountain. It is larger than the famous depictions of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln on Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

The sheer scale of representations that honour and revere the idea of the Confederacy serve to demonstrate who has controlled the heritage narrative in the United States. As stated in 2017 by the then-Mayor Mitch Landrieu, during the controversy over the removal of New Orleans’s confederate statues, the purpose of such heritage ‘had one goal – through monuments and through other means – to rewrite history to hide the truth, which is that the Confederacy was on the wrong side of humanity’ (Landrieu 2017).

Equally, the lack of representation of African American cultural heritage provides further evidence of how overwhelmingly imbalanced and skewed that narrative still is. As Hale and Chase point out in their 2015 CNN article, ‘Where are America’s memorials to pain of slavery, black resistance?’, the United States as a nation has yet to account for or reconcile its difficult and painful history of slavery and oppression.
Empty spaces, missing heritages

Though memorials and historic sites related to the Confederacy abound, there are significantly fewer public spaces, historic sites, memorials or other forms of authorised heritage remembering slavery, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights movements or honouring significant achievements of black Americans – before or after the emancipation of slaves in 1863. As noted above, less than 8 per cent of the 86,000 sites included on the National Register of Historic Places represent African American and other minority heritage. This is true even in places where establishing a monument, memorial or historic site to represent African American history and heritage would seem self-evident.

Sullivan’s Island off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina is a prime example. It is estimated that 40 per cent of all slaves brought to America entered via Charleston. Prior to entering the City of Charleston, slave ships would dock at Sullivan’s Island and force their human cargo to disembark for a period of quarantine. Between 1707 and 1799 the island served as a quarantine station. Here slaves were forced to reside in the ‘pest houses’ until it was determined that those in captivity were well enough to be moved to Charleston and sold at auction (National Park Service, 2018b). For nearly 200 years not a single marker or plaque existed that indicated the island’s prominent role in the slave trade. Even today there is little present that denotes or communicates the dark and difficult history of the island. In 1990 the National Park Service posted a solitary sign which relates, in 223 words, the island’s link to the slave trade. Disturbed by this lack of acknowledgement, the Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison held a memorial in 2008 to oversee the dedication of a bench on the island.

Given the historical significance of the island and the hundreds of thousands of lives and generations impacted by the place, this dearth of heritage representation is glaringly conspicuous. Perhaps even more striking is the abundance of ‘white’ heritage that is represented on Sullivan’s Island. The Fort Moultrie historic site and museum – an active military fort during the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars – are prominent features of the island. The National Park Service website provides detailed information about the fort, the museum and the military history of the island. Conversely, not a single mention is made of the island’s association with the slave trade on the National Park Service website (National Park Service 2018c).

The lack of representation of African American heritage as part of America’s heritage landscape is a direct assault on the identity and collective memory of African Americans, both as individuals and as part of
America’s history. Through heritage, people communicate the stories of their past in the present. When those representations are missing, this impacts the conceptions of self as well as that of personal and group identity. In an interview with the BBC (Gunter and Hughes, 9 August 2018) covering the anniversary of the Charlottesville riots Zyahna Bryant, the young activist who petitioned for the removal of the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, reflected that:

[F]or me, it’s hard because there are no statues in Charlottesville that depict African American heroes. And so for that reason alone, black people have nothing to look up to in our public spaces. We are not represented.

Not only does the omission of African American heritage have tremendous consequences for African American citizens, but it equally impacts the collective memory of American society as a whole. At best it perpetuates an incomplete and inaccurate depiction of the American historic narrative. At worst it promotes destructive racist narratives, including a false mythology of the ‘lost cause’; it also perpetuates the hegemonic ‘white’ heritage which does not account for or represent the country’s myriad cultural and ethnic groups or its dynamic, and often times difficult, past.6

At the nexus of heritage and identity

Cultural heritage has the power to evoke intense emotions. As evidenced by ongoing disputes over representations of the Confederacy, cultural heritage can be contentious at best and deadly in the extreme. In order to understand why these forms of heritage are so controversial it is necessary to acknowledge the fundamental link between cultural heritage and identity, and to appreciate the reflexive relationship between them.

Heritage is used as a means by which to confirm and communicate identity, just as one’s identity influences what is recognised as heritage. Heritage allows individuals in the present to connect with the past. This process contributes to understanding oneself and forming one’s identity. Historic sites, memorials and other forms of cultural heritage remind individuals and communities of who they are and where they have come from. If that heritage is missing, or is misrepresented, this can have profound impacts on the collective memory and society in the present.

It is important to clarify here what is meant by heritage. The international definition of cultural heritage as put forth by United Nations
Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines cultural heritage as ‘the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations’. The United States National Park Service describes heritage as the ‘physical heritage of living societies, including their buildings, structures, sites, and communities’. This includes landscapes shaped by societies and material culture such as artefacts, archives and other tangible remains. It also includes intangible heritage, for example stories, songs and celebrations, and other cultural practices and traditions (National Park Service 2002). Such definitions of cultural heritage are useful, particularly in contexts concerning the identification and management of cultural heritage. They do not, however, strike at the conceptual essence of heritage and why some things are chosen to be recognised as heritage and others are not.

Cultural heritage, intangible and tangible, is a representation of the past. It consists of objects, buildings, statues or sites to which individuals and communities in the present ascribe meaning and significance. The act of endowing these representations of the past with meaning is to impose present-day extant beliefs, ideologies or norms (socio-economic, political or cultural) onto them. Simply put, their meaning is determined by the concerns of the present. In most instances, those objects which are deemed to be heritage hold little or no intrinsic value in themselves. Value and meaning are ascribed to the heritage – object, site, or practice – by the individual or society in which it exists.

Each individual, then, views that heritage through a ‘series of lenses’ (Graham and Howard 2008). These lenses include aspects of self, such as nationality, religion, ethnicity, class, wealth, gender and personal history. Therefore, the selection of, and meaning attributed to, heritage is determined by the identity of those individuals bestowing that meaning. A person or community chooses to recognise something as heritage – to protect it, interpret it, share its history – because of the narrative they wish to recognise and associate themselves with in the present. Whether this is a conscious or unconscious decision, heritage is only heritage because society chooses to acknowledge it as such. Heritage is therefore changeable – in form, interpretation, inclusion or exclusion – and it does alter, as society changes. Since heritage derives its meaning and significance from the interpretation of the past in the present. The essence of heritage is thus dependent upon the identity of those who determine it to be heritage (Ashworth et al. 2007).

Identity is formed through a process of defining and differentiating oneself with and from others. It is expressed through establishing or
associating oneself with communal groups. Simultaneously, this process creates an awareness of ‘the other’ – those outside the communal group (Littler 2008). Language, religion, ethnicity, nationalism, place origins and interpretations of the past all contribute to the formulation of identity (Ashworth et al. 2007). One of the most powerful means by which to define or confirm identity is through cultural heritage. Indeed, heritage plays a key role in the formation of collective memory, sense of place and establishing a link to the past. By controlling the heritage narrative – what is recognised, and what is not recognised as heritage – it is possible to influence and even control the collective sense of identity and memory.

Through the process of heritagisation, therefore, one can assert power over others, exclude others and manipulate understandings of the past in the present. As Graham and Howard point out, ‘[h]eritage is used to construct narratives of inclusion and exclusion that define communities and the ways in which these latter are rendered specific and differentiated’ (Graham and Howard 2008).

It is this intrinsic relationship between heritage and identity which ungirds the controversy over representations of Confederate heritage today. The celebration of the Confederacy, promulgation of the ‘lost cause’ and glossing over or even erasing of difficult histories serves as a means by which white identity and dominance can be consolidated and reinforced. This is particularly true in Southern states, where the mythology of the ‘lost cause’ is accepted by many as historical fact and the effects of the institution of slavery and the loss of the Civil War still haunt the collective memory. For generations the erection of Confederate monuments and the ongoing fight to ensure their existence has served as a key tool in the process of identity making for many. The removal of these symbols is therefore viewed, rightly or wrongly, as a challenge to that identity.

Equally, the lack of representation of African American heritage, and the omission of non-white heritage in the heritage landscape of the United States, serves to undermine the identity and power of marginalised groups. For generations, the authorised heritage in the United States has been governed by the dominant group and the heritage of the country’s non-white population has been overlooked or diminished. As Kaufman recognises, ‘[d]ominant groups have strong narratives and lots of historic sites to reinforce them. Marginalised groups have weak narratives – narratives of subjugation, of not belonging’ (Kaufman 2009). The dominance of white identity has ensured that the African American heritage has been underrepresented in – and, in some cases, completely absent from – the cultural heritage landscape of the United States.
Heritage as social justice

As demonstrated above, the complex relationship between heritage and identity imbues heritage with profound power. Heritage can be used to exclude or oppress certain groups and to assert the identity of others. Concomitantly, heritage has the potential to empower. Changing how and what is recognised as heritage gives a voice to those previously ignored while creating a more inclusive and accurate representation of the past in the present. By including those previously excluded in the process of heritage making, and by diversifying the identities of those making those decisions, the heritage landscape will necessarily reflect that change. As Johnston and Marwood aptly state, ‘heritage can be both a condition of social action as well as a form of social action’ (Johnston and Marwood 2017). Heritage can be used as a tool for social justice.

Across the country, communities and organisations are using heritage as a means by which to reclaim their historical narrative. In 2015 the Chief Executive Officer of the National Trust declared the need for a ‘more inclusive history, and a preservation movement that looks like America’ (National Trust 2011). In 2017 the National Trust announced the launch of the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund (AACHAF), a $25 million funding initiative to ‘transform our nation’s cultural landscape’. The fund is dedicated to identifying and promoting overlooked contributions of African Americans by funding the protection and restoration of African American historical sites. Brent Leggs, the director for the AACHAF, has acknowledged the critical role of heritage in a new form of justice, equity and activism (Paynter 2018). With 830 proposals for funding received by the AACHAF in its first year, from 42 states, the relevance of this initiative is clear. The AACHAF has the potential to instate the missing narratives and help to affirm the identity and collective memories of black Americans as well as other underrepresented and minority groups. The designation of cultural heritage sites can serve to strengthen the sense of belonging experienced by underrepresented communities and individuals, while also confirming and acknowledging their status as equal citizens.

Another major step towards righting the wrongs of the omission of African Americans from the historical narrative is by acknowledging the darker side of America’s story through recognising difficult heritage. In April 2018 the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration opened in Montgomery, Alabama. The Memorial and the Museum project are part of the efforts of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), an organisation dedicated to:
... ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, to challenging racial and economic injustice, and to protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable people in American society.

(EJI 2018)

The idea was born during an EJI initiative to document the number of racial terror lynchings in the American South. This initiative, which resulted in a publication, inspired the EJI to embark on a project to memorialise this history. The underlying motivation for both the Memorial and Museum is based on the premise that ‘publicly confronting the truth about our history is the first step towards recovery and reconciliation’. The EJI clearly identifies the link between racial inequality and injustice in the United States and the need for the country not only to acknowledge the legacy of slavery, lynching and racial segregation, but also the lack of physical representation through memorials.

Both the National Trust and the EJI are doing significant work at the national level to recognise and reconcile the omission of African American heritage. For effective change to take place, however, changes must also occur at the local level. For example, the city of New Orleans has extensive cultural heritage honouring its white forefathers, founders and Confederate ‘heroes’, but only limited representations of the city’s historically majority black population. Over the past few years communities, organisations and businesses have been using heritage as a tool for social action to reinstate, acknowledge and preserve sites of African American heritage.

The Preservation Research Center of New Orleans (PRCNO) is working to empower underrepresented communities to become active stakeholders in the practice of heritage in their city. The mission of the PRCNO is ‘to promote the preservation, restoration, and revitalisation of New Orleans’ historic architecture and neighborhoods’. Under the current leadership of Danielle Del Sol, the organisation is working to make preservation and heritage more accessible to those people who have traditionally been excluded from the process of heritage making, and whose heritage has been absent from the heritage landscape.

Through PRCNO’s publication *Preservation in Print*, the organisation promotes preservation initiatives being led by African Americans, Asian-Americans, women, the LGBT community and the many other groups that comprise New Orleans. According to Del Sol, ‘the magazine showcases the diversity of the preservation movement and affirms the value we place on all residents’ history, stories and self-directed futures’ (Del Sol 2017). For example, Straight University – one of the first of three
African American universities constructed after the Civil War between 1866–71 – had all but disappeared from the collective memory. A dilapidated and unused building, the PRCNO identified the building and has been working to rehabilitate and preserve it. Also featured in *Preservation in Print* were several other projects including the Pythian Building, the Rosette Rochon House and Le Musee de Free People of Color.

Just outside New Orleans itself, a number of historic plantation houses are also taking steps towards presenting more accurate histories of the people who lived and worked in such places. Traditionally, such historic homes provide little to no interpretation or recognition of the slave populations who ran these estates, portraying only a whitewashed history of lost grandeur and gentility (Del Sol 2017). At Laura and Whitney Plantations researchers, museum professionals and the plantation owners have conducted extensive historic and archaeological research to uncover the pasts of the slaves who lived and worked on these properties. The house at Laura Plantation now includes a full exhibition on the history of slavery at the plantation, along with a restored slave cabin. At Whitney Plantation the owner has turned the historic buildings, artefacts and art into a museum that shows the history of slavery on the plantation (Maloney 2016).

**Conclusion**

Through heritage – historic sites, preservation efforts, memorials and museums – communities are fighting for social justice to establish their identity and secure acknowledgement of their relevance to the present. As Del Sol has observed, ‘By rebuilding cultural identities and strengthening the narratives that people are able to tell about themselves, their families and their communities, we shift from injustice to empowerment’ (Del Sol, 2017). As evidenced by the controversy over the removal of Confederate symbols, heritage is critical to the process of identity formation. African American heritage has been overlooked or deliberately ignored as a way to assert dominance over non-white Americans.

The incompleteness and misrepresentation of America’s historical narrative through heritage must be challenged. To do so, it is crucial to question whose heritage has been – and is still being – represented and why. The institutions that determine what is, and is not, recognised as heritage have been, and continue to be, controlled by the dominant majority. However, this white bubble has been punctured, and communities and heritage professionals alike are calling for a democratisation
of heritage. And why should there not be? If heritage is representative of our collective identities, then it can no longer be restricted to the homogenous and hegemonic narratives of the past. Heritage must reflect the heterogeneity which is the essence of the modern United States.

Notes

1. The American Civil War (1861–65) was a war between the United States, the Union Army and 11 Southern States that seceded from the Union to form the Confederate States of America. The war was the culmination of decades of controversy and friction over the existence and future of slavery in the United States (Weber and Hassler 2018a).
3. In 1963 the now defunct chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy erected a memorial honouring 13 Confederate soldiers who died while being held as prisoners of war at Fort Warren on Georges Island, Boston Harbor Islands. In 2017 the memorial was removed from view (Reilly 2017).
5. The United Daughters of the Confederacy is a nonprofit, hereditary organisation established in 1894 in Nashville Tennessee. Their mission ‘is dedicated to the purpose of honoring the memory of its Confederate ancestors; protecting, preserving and marking the places made historic by Confederate valor; collecting and preserving the material for a truthful history of the War Between the States . . .’ They are acknowledged by most historians as promoting the myth of the ‘lost cause’ and inaccurate historical interpretations of the Confederacy and the Civil War (Cox 2003; United Daughters of the Confederacy 2018).
6. The ‘lost cause’ is the false historical interpretation of the American Civil War (1861–5) coined by Edward Pollard in 1866 and promulgated by white Southerners. It attributes the primary causes of the war to the fight for states’ rights and the constitutionality of secession. Further, this interpretation typically denies the idea that slavery was a key factor. It romanticises ideas of the ‘Old South’ and portrays Confederate soldiers as heroic and saintly. This interpretation has little academic support and is generally referred to as myth or legend by historians (see Janney 2016).

References


