

Heritage or Hate: A Discourse Analysis of Confederate Statues

Sarah E. Cribbs, PhD, Ruby Rim

¹*Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology, Randolph-Macon College, United States*

²*Sociology Student, Randolph-Macon College, United States*

Corresponding author: Sarah E. Cribbs, PhD

ABSTRACT: Across the country, Confederate monuments dot the American landscape. In response, people debate what should happen to these Confederate symbols in an era that is simultaneously defined by race consciousness (e.g., Black Lives Matter Movement) and the larger prevailing ideology of the colorblindness. Richmond, Virginia is no exception. This study analyzed the 1,133 voluntary online submissions made to the Monument Avenue Commission by Richmond area residents and found that leavers utilized more racial colorblindness to justify leaving the monuments in place, while removers engaged in a more race conscious discourse. While race shapes the conditions in which people of color live and are treated, racial colorblindness ignores these lived experiences. Thus, when leavers utilize frames of racial colorblindness, the relevance and transcendence of race is mitigated. When racial colorblindness is used in policy-making processes, the decisions made continue to ignore and enlarge the discrepancy in life chances of people of color.

KEYWORDS: *colorblind, confederate, group position, monuments, race*

I. INTRODUCTION

On June 17, 2015, a white supremacist male entered Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina and murdered nine innocent black parishioners. The nine victims were described by their family and community members as “gentle and deeply religious;” three of the parishioners were over the age of 70, and four were pastors (Pérez-Peña, 2017). The confessed killer indicated his long-planned effort was an attempted “race war,” in order to rectify “black corruption and takeover of the United States” and the “epidemic of black-on-white crime” (Pérez-Peña, 2017). The attacker posted photos of himself at Confederate heritage sites and slavery museums onto a website with various Confederate flags and symbols, and posted an online Manifesto that detailed his criticism of black people as inferior and the cowardice of white flight (Robles, 2015). Emanuel A.M.E., a place of sanctuary and one of the oldest black congregations in the South, lies in the capitol of the slave trade in the United States and “cradle of the Confederacy” (Pérez-Peña, 2017). The attack on this particular house of worship was a deliberate tactic fueled by the racial animus (Pérez-Peña, 2017). The self-avowed white supremacy of the killer, coupled with his penchant for posing with confederate symbols, reignited national debates on the confederate flag and other confederate symbols.

Twelve days after the murders at Emmanuel A.M.E. Church, Brie Newsom climbed up a 30-foot flagpole located in South Carolina’s capitol and took down the Confederate flag (Botelho and Grinberg, 2015). Newsom directly challenged the white supremacy of the Charleston killer by removing an emblem that re-sparked a national debate about southern heritage and race-based slavery, just hours before a scheduled pro-flag rally. Newsom’s individual action – in no small part a reaction to the massacre at Emanuel A.M.E. church – represents a rejection of symbols of white supremacy and reflects larger societal-wide reactions across the country. For example, on December 17, 2015, New Orleans City Council declared the city’s four Confederate Monuments – of Gen. Robert E. Lee, Liberty Place, Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard, and President Jefferson Davis – as a public nuisance, and issued for their removal (Wendland, 2017). This decision sparked heated protests and gatherings among supporters and non-supporters, some which resulted in arrests. Statue supporters perceived these monuments as an integral part of Louisiana’s identity and culture, but in a city where sixty-percent of the residents are African-American, many viewed the monuments as “an offensive celebration of the Confederacy and the system of slavery it fought to preserve” (Wendland, 2017).

These national tensions culminated at an event led by white supremacists and nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia. On August 11, 2017, a group of 250 mostly young white males marched onto University of Virginia’s

Nameless Field, carrying torches and chanting “blood and soil” and “Jews will not replace us” to start off the Unite the Right rally (Green, 2017). The tension and violence between the rallyists, students, and community members carried onto the next day. This time, armed with weapons, tensions between rallygoers and counter protestors quickly became violent and led to injuries on both sides and the death of Heather Heyer, 32, by the intentional attack of a rallygoer (Heim, 2017). On August 8, 2018, one year after this event, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam declared a state of emergency in anticipation for the Charlottesville rally anniversary (Moomaw, 2018). As last year’s event quickly became violent and chaotic, officials wanted to allocate enough resources to state and local officials to prevent another outbreak of violence. Col. Gary T. Settle, the Virginia State Police Superintendent, plans for his agency to be “very firm” in responding to violence and legal activity, placing public safety as their top priority for the upcoming weekend (Moomaw, 2018).

The 2015-2018 national events surrounding various confederate symbols and statues happened concurrent to the Black Lives Matter movement. The Black Lives Matter movement is arguably the largest mass mobilization effort of people since the Civil Rights movement, spanning the entire globe and including people from all racial backgrounds. The national events –centered on confederate symbols, white nationalism, and Black Lives Matter – are also embedded in a culture with the prevailing racial ideology of colorblindness.

The debates surrounding Confederate monuments provides the opportunity to examine what Confederate symbols represent for different people and how the prevailing racial ideology influences opinions on what should happen to existing statues. Thus, this paper asks, in what ways does colorblind racism permeate the discourse surrounding the monuments in Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia? In this era of paradoxical racial colorblindness and race consciousness, how do people understand and react to Confederate monuments? What do those reactions tell us about current race relations?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Racial Colorblindness

In this post-civil rights era, where race-based discrimination is illegal, allegations of racism and racial discrimination are taken seriously and the general public largely eschewed the label of racist. While the labels are now considered taboo, the practice of racial discrimination persists (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2017). What has emerged, however, is the practice of “backstage racism,” where discrimination is practiced behind closed doors (Picca and Feagan, 2007:16). This practice led many to believe that we live in a post-racial society where racial discrimination no longer exists. In other words, the prevailing colorblind racial ideology suggests that racists are a select few individuals “bad apples” who engage in explicit or overt racism (Frankenberg, 2014:147). Many, namely white people, in positions of power do not identify as racists or as participants in a prejudicial system because they do not fit the model of a Jim Crow era racist; in fact, they believe taking on a “tolerant” or “ambivalent” standpoint negates the role their social standing plays (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000:57). This individualistic internalization of “post-racial” values led many to believe that racial attitudes improved exponentially since the 1960s. This era of racial colorblindness obscures the consequences of race and lends itself to the idea that discrimination based on race is singular, confined, and rare, rather than systematic and structural.

Race scholars widely documented a change in racial ideology from explicitly overt “Jim Crow” style racism to an era of racial colorblindness (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Bobo, 1999). The days of explicit racial discourse were largely replaced by a “softer and gentler” version of racism, where race is hidden with coded words and phrases (Bonilla-Silva, 2018), and “white privilege since the 1960s is maintained in a new fashion, in covert, institutional, and apparently nonracial ways” (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000:52).

While American racial discourse largely reflects this turn toward racial colorblindness, the belief that racist practices are no longer alive leads to the undermining, discrediting, and marginalization of people of colors’ experiences of discrimination in America as products of the past (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Researchers (DiAngelo, 2018; Anderson, 2016; Schedler, 2001) continuously note people of color are disproportionately burdened with the responsibilities of identifying and calling out race-based discrimination concomitant to white people consciously or unconsciously reaping the benefits of their “power hierarchy” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018:10; van Dijk, 1993:255) while maintaining that race-based power structures do not exist post-Civil Rights. Thus, while the overt racism has largely been replaced by the more covert form of colorblind racism, the structural consequences of racism – covert or overt – remain the same. Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) state that these consequences “situate the racial attitudes of whites as part of a larger racial ideology that functions to preserve the contemporary racial order” (p.51). And so, colorblind racism allows racist structures and institutions to exist as methods of perpetuating racial inequality all while shielding the overt racialized discourse.

Discourse analysis reveals the semantic moves of racial colorblindness today – depicting the ways in which race remains a taboo, yet a forefront in shaping attitudes and behaviors (Frankenberg, 2014). As mentioned, the shift towards colorblind racism pressures white people to not discuss race or the continued consequences of race on life chances: many believe that because racial discrimination is illegal that merely noticing race subjects one to the label of racist (Frankenberg, 2014). The belief that racism no longer exists post-civil rights leads the white majority to brush off minorities' complaints about their experiences and discrimination as “complaints” or “excuses” for mediocrity (Bonilla-Silva, 2018:1). Researchers found that white people's belief in a post-racial America led to increased resentment between whites and people of color, especially when confronted with stories of racial discrimination (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

The combined misunderstanding and resentment during the shift in racial discourse highlights the discrepancy between the abstract perceptions and actual behaviors of white people. Although white people tend to vocally support policies on social integration, such as interracial marriages, they support neither the idea of interracial friendships and romantic partners in their own lives, nor restitutive policies on affirmative action, busing, and integration (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000:55). The colorblind discourse born from the Civil Rights era led many white people to “not perceive discrimination to be a central factor shaping blacks' life chances” because it is not their reality (Bonilla-Silva, 2018:7). Far from erasing racism, the avoidance of direct racial discourse pressured “overt discussions of racial issues” to become “taboo,” creating a blanket to muffle the effects of hundreds of years of slavery, and social, economic, and political inequality, all under the guise of legal equality (Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000:52). Therefore, any form of preferential treatment towards groups of color are read as unjust and unfair in the face of true “equality.” This understanding of preferential treatment combined with the myth of meritocracy and strong belief in the American creed (Merton, 1976), created a culture of white racial resentment and “white rage” toward minority groups (Anderson, 2017).

1.2 Group Position

Despite the idea embedded within colorblind racism that racism occurs solely on individual levels or isolated incidents, racial colorblindness in racial discourse often emerges as interactions between group positions, or friction between group dynamics (van Dijk, 1993; Blumer, 1958). Discourse analysis reveals that race prejudice is often a protective device towards one's sense of group position. Rather than individual experience, race prejudice unfolds as a collective process by which racial identification is constructed of the idea of oneself in relation to other identified groups. In other words, individuals gain an understanding of themselves as the “us” group only in relation to the “other” group. Blumer (1958) identified four types of feelings indominant group race prejudice: the feeling of superiority of their own group, the feeling that the subordinate group is intrinsically different, a sense of proprietary claim to certain privileges and advantages, and a fear or suspicion towards the subordinate race (p.4). The power of the dominant group allows them to define the subordinate group and the relation between them. These ideologies of the ethnic “out-groups” by the “in-group” community create public definitions that become an integral part of race discourse and understanding subsequent developments (Merton, 2010; Blumer, 1958).

1.3 Monument Avenue

This paper explores how Confederate symbols simultaneously become imbued with and divorced from racialized meaning by examining the discourse surrounding the monuments in Richmond, Virginia. Confederate monuments across the country, including most on Monument Avenue, were erected primarily during the Jim Crow Era (Parks, 2017), an era largely defined by overt racial discrimination and legal subordination of people of color. Although some people read Confederate symbols as heroic and righteous markers of American history (Martinez, Richardson, and McNinch-Su, 2000), for many, it is simultaneously a dark reminder of the nation's past treatment of people of color, and a symbol of the nation's current state of race relations. How do we understand this discourse in this particular moment in time, a supposed post-racial society that simultaneously produced the Black Lives Matter Movement? Ultimately, this research lies at the intersection of a larger American racial ideology of colorblindness and a resurgence of the movement toward black liberation, and concomitant movement toward white nationalism, by examining how individuals frame their response to the Confederate statues on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia.

III. METHODS

Data for this study come from the publicly available online submissions to the Monument Avenue Commission (“Commission”), a commission formed by Mayor Levar M. Stoney to determine what to do with the Confederate monuments located on historic Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia. Public spaces that maintain Confederate symbols across the United States have been widely debated, and, as previously noted, the issue rose to greater contention following the Unite the Right rally in nearby Charlottesville, Virginia. The

Commission data was used because the Commission was entrusted with receiving information from the public through community forums and online submissions in order to provide a recommendation on the monuments to the Mayor. The Commission emphasized its guiding principles in the decision-making process, including “a transparent process, comprehensive historical narrative, importance of public art, change is inevitable,” and “partnerships are vital,” making it a comprehensive and ideal collection of the public’s data (Monument Avenue Commission, 2018:7). The study consisted of the 1,133 voluntary on-line submissions to the Monument Avenue Commission between August 2017 and May 2018. In each submission, submitters had the option to indicate their ideal recommendation(s) for the monuments – keep, remove, add context, add monuments, and relocate – and were required to submit their name, email address, Richmond home or work address, subject, as well as a brief message to talk about their recommendation. The original submission form did not include the option of relocating the monuments until mid-fall 2018 (following the events in Charlottesville, VA).

To interpret these submissions, an open-coding process, which involved identifying concepts from raw data and later grouping them into conceptual categories, was used. Using the Qualitative Data Analysis method (Khandkar, 2018; Böhm, 2004; Seidel, 1998), data were not approached with a coding schema in place. Rather, codes were pulled from the data line-by-line in order to organically identify and build concepts rather than developing codes that fit a certain framework. This involved labelling groups of data into distinct concepts in “in vivo style” (Khandkar, 2018; Böhm, 2004). In other words, we identified words and ideas people used in their submissions, placed them into distinct concepts, labelled those concepts into constructed codes, and attributed coding “memos” to describe those concepts (Böhm, 2004; Seidel, 1998). Once the open-coding process was complete, data was narrowed down into main concepts and frameworks. Open-coding can have its drawbacks: it tends to be non-linear, recursive, and tedious. Despite being a time-consuming strategy, this thorough method allows researchers to build a “descriptive, multi-dimensional preliminary framework for later analysis” (Khandkar, 2018:9).

Coding focused on two questions: In this era of paradoxical racial colorblindness and race consciousness, how do people understand and react to Confederate monuments? What do their reactions tell us about current race relations? Past research suggests people understand these monuments in highly racialized ways (Leib, 2004; Schedler, 2001), therefore we hypothesize that suggestions about what to do with the monuments were cloaked in colorblind racial discourse (both direct and indirect), especially when the decision was to keep the monuments.

The data from this study are voluntary, suggestive, and limited. The first limitation centers around the awareness and willingness of people to self-report their suggestions to the Commission. It is likely that individuals who submitted comments are stronger in their beliefs (both political and social) which motivate them to submit comments. The second is the physical barriers in making a submission – a proximity to Monument Avenue, a computer, internet access, awareness of the organization, and time are all requirements when it comes to making a submission. Thus, the data are likely skewed toward economically advantaged people with access to the internet. Finally, the data does not include any racial identification, making it impossible to know how one’s racial identity might influence feelings on the monuments.

While these limitations exist, the on-line submissions also provide an avenue for exploring what individuals are willing to say in a more private setting, unlike the public forums. As previous research found, online forums give people a level of anonymity, which allows people to feel comfortable in engaging in a “race-talk” that is more indicative of the ways the “outlawed” sentiments of racial ideology, such as racial stereotyping, continue to exist (Loke, 2012:238). Public forums, such as online comments, can reveal the ways “intolerant” racial ideology is produced in private spaces and reproduced in public spaces in a discursive manner. Public forums reveal comments that use “safe terms,” such as “ghetto, slum, the poor,” as a means of studying racial discourse: terms that are seemingly unrelated to racial groups but inherently racialized, depicting the ways in which racism is “deeply imbedded in spoken and written English” (Loke, 2012:239). Despite being a public forum, the nature of the Commission’s website yielded a majority of people that provided their full “real” names. The Commission’s data also provides an opportunity to examine discourse through the lens of race without knowing the respondent’s racial identification. Thus, the results of the data are without assumptions of racial identity, unless noted by respondents.

IV. RESULTS

The options for the monuments provided by the Monument Avenue Commission included: keep, remove, add context, add monuments, and relocate. The two “extreme” ends of the options – keep or removal – were analyzed in this paper. Thus, those who wished to remove the monuments are referred to as “removers” and

those who wish the monuments to be left as “keepers.” We focused on the two extreme ends of the opinions because they tended to 1) not overlap with each other (either/or), and 2) portrayed “opposite” main arguments. We analyzed the justifications within these two opposite and seemingly irreconcilable opinions to see how their discourse was infused with racial understandings and how consistent these understandings were among each group.

The dominant themes within both the keepers’ and removers’ discourse indicated varying levels of race consciousness and race colorblindness. Suggestions about what to do with the monuments were cloaked in colorblind racial discourse, especially among people who wanted the monuments left in place (“keepers”). Race colorblindness was more prominent among keepers. Among removers, however, race consciousness tended to be the dominant theme (see table below). The options of “keep” and “remove” also tended to overlap with the “add context” and “add monument” decisions, with the “keep” option being the dominant selection overall.

TABLE 1.0 Racial Ideology by Monument Recommendation

Racial Ideology	Monument Recommendation	
	Removers	Keepers
Consciousness	✓	×
Colorblind	×	✓

1.1 Removers

1.1.1 Racial consciousness

Removers more frequently engaged in race conscious discourse than their “keeper” counterparts. Race conscious discourse is typified by the inclusion of the historical, social, economic, and political consequences of the statues. Race consciousness in discourse is exemplified by the ability to understand the position of one’s race group within the context of other race groups (Peller, 1990:761). Respondents tended to justify their explanations through one or more of the aforementioned consequences. For example, Leslie explicitly roots the monuments historically and contemporarily in white supremacy. Leslie states:

The monuments should be removed immediately because they are offensive to many Virginians, including many members of marginalized communities and all those who objects to commemorating men who instigated and led a war to preserve slavery. Let's not forget that Robert E. Lee and his ilk led Virginians to their slaughter to protect their own narrow economic interests. Those who argue that the statues commemorate confederate soldiers who lost their lives in the civil war are missing the point -- these statues do not commemorate the rank-and-file but rather the worst of the Virginia planter class. Furthermore, these are not war memorials and they should not be treated as such. They were constructed decades after the conflict by white supremacists to legitimize segregation and justify the violence being inflicted on the Black community in the era of Jim Crow. Today, unsurprisingly, it is again white supremacists/white nationalists/fascists who most loudly call for the statues' preservation. And, as we saw in Charlottesville in August, they are actually using the statues as a justification for instigating violence on Virginians. As long as the statues remain, the possibility that these racists will show up in Richmond and assault our people remains. Don't let aggressive, dangerous, and privileged white supremacists intimidate you into preserving them. Get rid of them.

Leslie questions the heroism of Confederate soldiers and identifies that the monuments were put up during a racialized era in order to justify and “legitimize segregation” between the races. To keep the Confederate symbols would be verifying to people of color and the greater community that the feelings of “white supremacy” are still held valuable to the race class in power. She calls for a need for change – that leaving the monuments stir familiar and historical racial tensions, as portrayed by the rally in Charlottesville, which is again initiated by “white supremacists” or “racists.” Leslie applies her race consciousness to both history and current events to argue the statues are inherently racist, symbolize racist values, and perpetuate racist thinking, and need to be removed.

Leslie’s explicitness with race and identification of racial tensions between black and white communities exemplifies her race consciousness. However, race does not have to be specifically mentioned in discourse to be considered race conscious. Race consciousness can take on a similar tone to colorblindness when explicit racial references are removed. For example, John argued that the “social consequences” of the monuments call for its removal:

The city cannot afford to have these statues on public property. It sends a terrible message to residents. The Monument Avenue statues portray the Confederacy as heroic. We must ask ourselves how this affects people psychologically. The most disadvantaged residents already have a hard time believing that society cares about them, how do you reach out to them with a straight face when you use their tax money to heroicize Confederate soldiers?

Removers like John tended to be more race conscious than their keeper counterparts. John's analysis of the way Confederate history shapes contemporary race relations indicated his awareness of the role of race in understanding the Confederate symbols. John seemingly implied a distaste towards the history of the Confederacy being upheld as "heroic" on Monument Avenue, as well as an awareness of how that history affects the livelihood of the "most disadvantaged residents." His reference to the "residents" is contextualized in his argument that Confederate supporters are celebrated as "heroic" despite their historic and contemporary discriminations towards black citizens, indicating an awareness of the consequences of a white Confederate legacy. The reference to the economic, political, and social consequences of the racialized history towards the black community, as well as an understanding as to why race still shapes the way black people are treated today depicts a consciousness towards the effect of race in one's life chances. John believes that the "terrible message" left by the monuments affects all people. John observes that the "terrible message" sent by the monuments is indicative of a bigger social problem – maintaining monuments, at the expense of tax payers, while not investing in "the most disadvantaged." John's comment likely reflects a larger Richmond-area argument which suggests the city should invest in the struggling public-school system rather than the removal of monuments. However, as John alluded, the maintenance of the statues requires public investment and costs residents both financially and psychologically.

Other removers also maintained a distaste for sanitizing history. Julia emphasized the need to acknowledge the history of the Confederacy when it comes to honoring southern heroes:

I don't think it's really possible to contextualize having monuments for people who took up arms *against the United States* to defend their right to own human beings. The idea that this fact should be some kind of footnote when we remember these "great men" is insulting to me, and to many others. It is a crucial fact in the legacies of these men, whether they themselves owned slaves or not, whether they fought in defense of their own holdings or out of loyalty to a state. It is wrong to honor these men. Removing the monuments will not "erase history," nor is it a rejection of southern identity. It only erases the myth of Confederate greatness, and rejects the valorization of the aggressors in the bloodiest war in American history.

Julia, like many removers, rejects the idea that Confederate soldiers should be heroicized as "great men" – especially because this form of valorization tended to disregard the legacies of slavery as "footnotes," minimizing its effects on contemporary society and race relations. Julia argues that removing the monuments will not erase "history," but remove the "myth of Confederate greatness" in a society that tends to overlook that preserving racial hierarchies played a key role and motivation in the war. Thus, Julia's argument is explicitly rooted in a race conscious understanding – both historical and contemporary.

1.1.2 Race colorblindness.

As already noted, colorblindness was limited among removers. The lack of colorblindness makes sense because the arguments for removal emphasized the need for race consciousness in understanding the racialized history of the Confederacy, as well as making political decisions based on understanding the resulting social and political conditions people of color experience due to the glorification of those symbols.

1.2 Keepers

1.2.1 Racial consciousness.

As previously noted, race consciousness was rare among keepers. When keepers utilized a seemingly race conscious perspective, their comments focused on either the perceived racial slight against white people (e.g., that removing the monuments was an example of "reverse racism") or a rejection or minimization of the continued effects of racism on people's daily lives. The lack of race consciousness aligns with the arguments for keeping the monuments in place since those justifications emphasized the minimization of racism and need for colorblind discourse. Ignoring race is the only way to create an argument that undermines or ignores the racialized history of the Confederacy and develop new ways to justify keeping the monuments through different avenues, such as history, economics, and politics.

1.2.2 Race colorblindness.

Keepers predominantly utilized race colorblind discourse to discuss the monuments. When the discourse is colorblind, people use semantic strategies to avoid sounding “racist.” Semantic moves worked among keepers primarily by avoiding race, emphasizing the need to honor southern history, redirecting the motivations of the Confederacy, and the practice of othering people. For example, Yolanda said,

My Great grand father fought for the Confederate Army. He was captured and was imprisoned in Maryland. He did not fight for slavery but because an enemy army invaded his Homeland. He was a share cropper. If you are going to remove monuments from Monument AV. Then take them all including Arthur Ashe. Make a No Monument AV. Do not favor one or another group.

Keepers like Yolanda often used personal family history to justify keeping the monuments. This semantic move focused on using personal relationship anecdotes to invoke a connection with confederate symbols while avoiding race. Placing the focus on honoring fallen, or in this case captured, soldiers as heroes erases aspects of Confederate history by denying the role slavery played in the war. Thus, for keepers like Yolanda, the statues honor valiant members of their family, not slave-owners trying to maintain a system of oppression. Yolanda succeeded in not explicitly mentioning race but her awareness of race was depicted through their justification of their relations not fighting for “slavery,” and yet felt that the removal of white historical monuments calls for the removal of the Arthur Ashe monument, a monument erected to honor a black Richmond-native tennis player who consistently faced and successfully challenged racial segregation in tennis. Yolanda’s wish to “not favor one or another group” is indirectly signifying the need to balance the power between black and white people. Despite not explicitly mentioning race, Yolanda’s response typifies Blumer’s sense of group position. Her group, linked to the confederacy, has some propriety claim to erect monuments to her ancestors on public land. If her group’s monument is removed, then all monuments must also be removed. In many ways, Yolanda’s statement suggests whiteness (and white statues) as normative and universal while a statue to a black Richmond-native as favoritism toward one race group.

This discursive strategy was used to “balance black and white” or to “add context” by adding prominent black figures. It is to symbolically balance the racial imbalance. However, this strategy is to create the illusion of equality – white people maintain the power imbalance and black people get a black statue. Adding black monuments changes nothing for black people – the statues would then symbolize the current race imbalance: white people maintain a power privilege and black people are still disadvantaged and socially marginalized. It also sends the message that the values symbolized by the statues can continue to exist and black people still have to exist within that disadvantaged arena, as the erection of black monuments creates the illusion of equality. This method of abstract liberalism creates an even bigger divide within race groups and takes the focus away from the implications of the existing white statues. For example, Shannan said,

This is our history. People come here to see and study America's history. The monuments honor men who fought for states' rights. I was never taught that the Confederacy was about fighting for slavery, but rather fighting for state's rights, and I've never understood how people have come to the belief today that it was about slavery. I don't believe in slavery, nor do I believe that anybody today would ever advocate for such an atrocity. Regardless of whether my understanding of the Confederacy is right or wrong - I think it depends on who's teaching the history – I don't believe you can judge yesterday by today's standards or norms or try to change or whitewash our history. I believe these people had to have been brave, were fighting for what they thought was right at that time, and we shouldn't try to take away from or change history. My hope for Monument Avenue is that it continue[s] to represent history, retain its beauty, and certainly not get too cluttered. I do believe in honoring great people, and that all people are created equally and deserve equal respect and kindness. Just please keep our historic neighborhood historic, and with a historic focus that's in keeping with the period.

Keepers like Shannan often engaged in colorblind semantics to divert attention to what people “should” be doing and ignoring other parts of the conversation – such as structural racism. The emphasis on honoring heroes and southern pride redirects the conversation away from race and slavery. By focusing the discourse on history and arguing that the Confederacy was “not about fighting for slavery,” shifts the focus from the contemporary consequences of the monuments and makes current issues seem trivial compared to the valor and honor of the heroes. This tactic minimizes the effects of racism in contemporary society. Shannan explicitly states that she does not “believe in slavery” without mentioning race to take away from the fact that her ideal choice for the monuments is inherently rooted in a racialized history. Interestingly, Shannan states that Monument Avenue should be honored “with a historic focus that's in keeping with the period,” but at the same time “I don't believe you can judge yesterday by today's standards or norms, or try to change or whitewash our history.” But

historical context depicts that the values being upheld are racist, while today's values are a rejection of outmoded racist beliefs. The historic focus of the monuments is race discrimination, which in the context of the BLM, does "keep[] with the period." By not "judg[ing] yesterday" by today's standards of racial equality and justice, it is to indirectly accept the values of that time. To not judge the monuments with a contemporary lens is to minimize the effects of historical and current racism and ironically, if the goal of the monuments is to honor war heroes, the honoring of white Confederate soldiers and the lack of celebration of black leaders who fought against the Confederacy is inherently biased based on race.

This semantic strategy minimizes the representation and salience of racism and directs shame onto people who attempt to take away from the heroism of white ancestors, making it a nationalistic pride issue rather than a "how do these monuments affect us today" issue. Shannan's argument denounces people who try to "change history," but history is being shaped by the political decision we choose to make today – how we redefine what these statues mean to the people in today's society. Shannan's avoidance of the reality of slavery and reluctance to talk about race is indicative of a race-based threat to group hierarchy – if a white hero is taken down for a black cause, the implied concern is – where does it end?

These discursive methods intend to humanize the confederate leaders as people with the best interests in mind: state succession and independence. But in the process of focusing on the goals of her heroes, Shannan overlooks the history of race-based oppression. The contemporary consequences of these monuments are that these heroes represent something very different for her than the decedents of enslaved people. Debra echoes this selective engagement; she acknowledges the differences in racial attitudes towards the Confederate monuments between groups of people, but does not contextualize why. As Debra notes,

Leave the monuments alone. You can not judge one era by the standards of a different era. Please do not try to 'sanitize' our southern heritage. Please do not surrender to the PC terrorists NAACP and SPLC.

Contrary to the removers' wish to contextualize the monuments in society's current standards and move forward, keepers like Debra wished to maintain the "standards" and values of the previous era. The resistance against "sanitize[ing]" southern heritage depicts a wish to maintain the values of the previous era. Debra's discourse clearly references an outgroup – the NAACP and SPLC, known black activist groups – as "PC terrorists." Thus, for Debra, she does not explicitly mention race but does mention organizations working toward racial justice. Her comment is characteristic of Blumer (1958)'s group position. This group, the NAACP and SPLC, are different from the "us" group and are threatening. Minimizing the experiences of black Americans down to a wish for "political correctness" avoids talking about the real and tangible effects race has for people of color. Thus, group position factors into a submitter's tendency towards practicing race colorblind discourse.

V. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the 1,133 submissions to the Monument Avenue Commission highlighted that most respondents recommended leaving the monuments in place, while justifying their positions through the use of racial colorblindness. Among the minority of respondents who wanted the statues removed, most used race conscious discourse to justify their decision. These two groups – keepers and removers – utilized opposite discourses and had different definitions of history, confederate leaders, and perceptions of race relations. Based on the perceived security of their group position, the responses and willingness to notice race were framed very differently. The discourse was predominantly shaped by the drive to sanitize and defend history rather than to contemplate the implications of the monuments' existence.

Keepers use various colorblind semantic strategies in order to justify keeping the statues, which include references to family legacy, honoring history (or historical heroes), and southern heritage. Despite the avoidance of explicitly mentioning race in the process of using semantics, keepers often imbued racialized meaning by connecting a historical or familial connection via their race group, othering groups who were not white (or pro-remove), and tactics to balance a racial equilibrium. Each of these strategies avoid direct connections to race, with the exception that they believe the cause of the Civil War was not the enslavement of black people.

Removers, on the other hand, justified their reasons for removing statues in context to the enslavement of black people. Removers, rather than avoiding naming race, utilized a race conscious perspective – race relations were often explicitly mentioned to point out the imbalance of power and need to rectify past wrongs. In general, removers justified removing the statues through an understanding of racialized history, its implications to

current society, and how the removal of the statues would help society progress and move forward. Thus, removers and keepers view the cause of the Civil War from opposing viewpoints.

As previously noted, the Commission recently finalized their yearlong study. In the report, they proposed the consideration of removing the Jefferson Davis monument because he is most “unabashedly Lost Cause in design and sentiment” (Monument Avenue Commission, 2018:33). This leaves four other Confederate monuments and the Arthur Ashe monument in place. As a reminder, the Commission’s decision is happening in a society that is simultaneously wrestling with colorblind ideology during two highly visible and mobilized race-based movements.

Following the Commission’s decision, the Lee statue was vandalized with red paint and the tag “BLM,” echoing similar vandalism to the Jefferson Davis statue in 2015. The tagging of Confederate monuments with BLM juxtaposes two congruent social movements in the United States: Unite the Right and Black Lives Matter. The recent vandalism of the Lee statue happened as Virginia approached the one-year anniversary of the Unite the Right rally. In anticipation of the 2018 Unite the Right rally, Virginia’s Governor Ralph Northam called a state of emergency preceding the weekend’s events.

Both the Unite the Right rally and the tagging of the Robert E. Lee statue showcase the highly racialized meanings attached to confederate monuments. While one side views confederate statues as symbolic of white nationalist pride worthy of rallying around, the other vandalizes them for these same meanings. Thus, while “keepers,” and much of the general public, predominantly avoid overt racial explanations, confederate symbols evoke explicitly racial reactions. When a monument is taken down based on comparisons of blatant racist representations, the remaining monuments may be read as acceptable and palatable as long as they are cloaked in colorblindness and historical significance. If we are utilizing these colorblind approaches to decision making processes, whose voice gets left out? If race doesn’t matter when we are talking about monuments erected state-sanctioned racial violence, then when does it?

If the vast majority of people tasked with the responsibility for deciding what should happen to monuments like those erected on Monument Avenue rely on racial colorblindness or primarily hear rhetoric deeply rooted in racial avoidance, then certain voices will likely get left out in the political decision-making process. The Commission identified that their mission was to make a recommendation to the Mayor based on the submitter’s responses as well as a panel of experts. However, the Commission also acknowledges that 75-80% of attendees at all the public meetings or work sessions were white and faced a disproportionately white Commission (Monument Avenue Commission, 2018:11). If we know that leanings towards Confederate monuments are based on one’s racial group position, and majority of the deciding members were white, what does that mean for Richmond, and other cities that are making these decisions? How do we interpret information coming from mostly white people (e.g., attendees and Commission members) in a city where 60% of the residents are people of color (U.S. Census, 2010)?

By making decisions based on people who dominate the discourse creates a very particular and narrow view of history, and one that seems inseparable from our personal and political leanings. Despite the fact that people tend to avoid the implications of race surrounding the Confederate monuments, the Confederate symbols across the country are symbolic of racially charged sentiments. The 2017 events in Charlottesville are indicative of a larger resurgence of a backlash movement, resisting against race equality, and insisting on clear racial hierarchies. Although the decisions for the monuments in Richmond were separated from race, there is no denying that Confederate symbols across the country continue to represent, for many, the historical and current racial divides.

This research explored the implications of using colorblind discourse, its contribution to a colorblind society, in an era where race matters and shapes our lived experiences. The goal was not to generate solutions, but highlight that it requires a tremendous amount of discursive maneuvering to avoid talking about race and race-based history with statues that many others read as racially symbolic. Despite the dominant themes of colorblindness surrounding the discourse of Monument Avenue, current events show us that we have the same race problems we had one year ago, and years before. Race continues to shape people’s perceptions and life experiences. Thus, when we refuse to talk about race, we see that it does not solve the race problems in our society, but exacerbates them.

VI. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Collaboration between the co-authors would not have been possible without the generous support of the Shapiro Undergraduate Research Fellowship at Randolph-Macon College.

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