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Confederate Exceptionalism: Civil War Myth and Memory in the Twenty-First Century

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Introduction

History, the Museum, and Confederate Exceptionalism

On October 7, 2006, Richmond, Virginia's American Civil War Center at Historic Tredegar became home to *In the Cause of Liberty,* the first museum exhibit aimed at telling the story of the Civil War from the perspectives of three central stakeholders: Unionists, Confederates, and African Americans.[1] The exhibit's opening was publicly lauded by Richmond's newspaper of record, dubbed "a fresh telling of the story of the war" and a "truly inclusive story."[2] An effort to frame the divisive American Civil War as "a shared national heritage,"[3] the American Civil War Center was praised as having "the potential to become one of the foremost destinations for patriots eager to understand a beloved homeland's past."[4]

Little more than a decade later, in the hours following the announcement of Donald J. Trump's election to the US presidency, the words "Your Vote Was a Hate Crime" were emblazoned in red spray-painted letters on Richmond's monuments to Jefferson Davis and Matthew Fontaine Maury on the famed Monument Avenue, located in the heart of the city's historic Fan district. Ten months after the graffiti in Richmond had been cleaned—erased from the landscape—a gathering of white nationalists, including hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazi movement—convened in nearby Charlottesville to protest the removal of the city's Lee monument specifically and Confederate monuments across the country more broadly. The violence culminated in the death of one counterprotester, Heather Heyer, who was mowed down by white supremacist James Alex Fields in an act of terrorism, and the wounding of several others. Fields, an Ohio native, was known for idolizing Adolf Hitler and, on the day of the Unite the Right rally, was photographed holding a shield bearing the emblem of Vanguard America, a hate group identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC).[5]

At first glance, these dramatic, historic flashpoints might seem to offer a contemporary declension narrative—evidence of a shift from celebrated attempts at reconciliation to violent racial division. In several ways, this declension story is not an inaccurate one. Once lurking in the shadows, white supremacists are now in plain view. As Matt Thompson

wrote for the *Atlantic* in the wake of the August 2017 violence in Charlottesville, "*We used to whisper these thoughts,* the new white supremacists suggest. *But now we can say them out loud.*"[6] Neo-Nazis need no longer hide their faces. They proudly embrace the Confederate battle flag, much like Dylann Roof had in photographs uncovered following the June 17, 2015, massacre at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

The visibility of white supremacists in twenty-first-century America owes much to a climate fostered by a president who, instead of openly condemning acts of terrorism as occurred in Charlottesville, called for the necessity of placing blame on "many sides." Yet it does not wholly explain the complicated relationship between members of Confederate heritage groups and discourses surrounding race and racism in the United States. How is it that so-called neo-Confederates can distance themselves from the actions of Roof and other white supremacists, dubbed "horrific" and "cold-hearted" by leaders of the Sons of Confederate Veterans,[7] while also clinging to the symbols and narratives that tether the Confederacy to histories of racism and oppression in the United States?

This book answers this question through an exploration of the varied objects, rituals, and people who have contributed to the central myth that has fostered and facilitated this distancing: the myth of Confederate exceptionalism.[8] Fusing elements of Lost Cause ideology and American exceptionalism, the myth of Confederate exceptionalism nostalgically re-members "the South" through an amalgam of embodied and textual prac-tices that alternately embrace and revise the Confederacy's racial history. Rather than simply invoking the Lost Cause's casting of the "faithful slave" as evidence of the benign nature of the institution of slavery[9] or American exceptionalism's concept of the "melting pot"as evidence of the triumph of multicultural assimilation, the myth of Confederate exceptionalism ap-propriates these historic ideologies in the twenty-first century, rearticulat-ing them through discourses of racial neoliberalism. By attempting to "suppress . . . 'race' as a legitimate topic or term of public discourse and public policy,"[10] the myth of Confederate exceptionalism enables contem-porary neo-Confederates to deny charges of the Confederacy's racism by clinging, as communication scholars Lisa Flores and Christy-Dale Sims summarize, to "frames of neutrality, objectivity, and distance that associate inappropriate emotional intensity with raced bodies and race conscious-ness."[11] Such a move renders race a "threat," as critical race theorist David Theo Goldberg has argued, giving way to antiracialism.[12]