

Using Civil War Monuments as a Catalyst for Race Discussions in Secondary History Classrooms

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THERE ARE FEW TOPICS more engaging, polarizing, controversial, and relevant than the issue of race relations in the United States. Whether it is debating San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick's decision to kneel during the national anthem, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, All Lives Matter; the topic of race has generated more discussion and controversy in the public sphere than it has for quite some time. The phenomenon of social media has certainly added additional awareness to race discussions, as politicians, leaders, celebrities, and general citizens now have a platform to share their opinions on any and every topic with people all over the world. Based on the continually contentious and sometimes violent disagreements taking place on racially charged topics, it remains clear that much work needs to be done on developing and promoting rationale civic discourse among citizens when discussing controversial topics such as race.

As race and racism are enduring issues of importance and popularity, it seems fitting to explore the topic through one of the more engaging and divisive eras in U.S. history; the Civil War. The Civil War is one of the most intriguing and relevant topics discussed

during the course of many U.S. history classes. National and state standards have consistently reflected this level of importance by the number of standards or benchmarks directly related to the Civil War. In the era of high-stakes testing, social studies curriculum is becoming increasingly concerned with quantity of material covered over quality. This time constraint forces U.S. History teachers to cover a vast amount of material in a relatively small period of time. Teachers routinely must decide what material to cover in class, the depth of coverage, or worst of all, what to exempt from their instruction. These issues will continue to be major problems for teachers in the future, as state standards and district/school curriculums are constantly reformed, revised, or rewritten over time. With an increase in material and a decrease in time to cover it all, history teachers certainly need to consider ways to make every topic engaging and relevant to contemporary students. The purpose of this article is to provide secondary history teachers with a rationale and example lessons for using Civil War monuments to discuss the perennially important issue of race and racism from both a historical and contemporary perspective.

Discussions of Race in the Social Studies Classroom

When you don't see my race, you don't see me. And if that's the case, it's like I don't matter, or I'm invisible.

– Middle School Student¹

In the simple yet poignant quote above, a middle school student describes his feelings and experience with how race was addressed within his school, particularly in social studies classes. This is the voice of many individuals who often feel silenced in the classroom, as they experience history instruction that perpetuates a master narrative of white accomplishment and domination.² As the K-12 student population continues to diversify, it is important for social studies teachers to provide multiple perspectives throughout history instruction, including diverse racial perspectives.

The National Council for the Social Studies states that a “primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a *culturally diverse* [italics added], democratic society in an interdependent

world.”³ If the purpose of social studies is to prepare citizenry that is working towards the public good of all citizens, then young people must delve into the struggles of the past that continue to have an impactful legacy in current society. Race is often avoided within social studies instruction because teachers exhibit a colorblind ideology, fear controversy in the classroom, and/or do not feel equipped to develop and to facilitate discussions of race within lessons.⁴ This article will examine how Civil War national monuments can be presented as a way for secondary social studies teachers to discuss issues of race as they pertain to the Civil War in U.S. history.

Monuments and Historic Sites Representing Racial Struggle

There has been a rise in media coverage portraying racism in our country. Examples of individual and institutional racism have been reported, which forces citizens to recognize that the United States is not a post-racial society. One act of individual violent racism took place in the summer of 2015 with the mass church shooting in Charleston, South Carolina. The shooter, a white male, specifically went to a historically black church “to shoot black people.”⁵ During the investigation, law enforcement discovered the shooter’s fascination with hate groups and the use of the Confederate flag as a symbol of his beliefs. After this horrific event, a public debate ensued over the official display of the Confederate flag at South Carolina’s state capitol building.

The Confederate flag has varied connotative meanings to citizens throughout the country. Some Southerners view the flag as a symbol to honor their ancestors’ fight for the liberty of states’ rights. This interpretation of the flag symbolizes a singular narrative of the South that works to purify its past and to create a collective, cultural pride in the present South.⁶ In contrast, many citizens recognize the Confederate flag as a symbol that perpetuates white domination and represents a history that promoted hierarchy among human beings based upon race. The Confederate flag was originally designed as the battle flag for the Confederacy.⁷ After Reconstruction, there was a dormant period where the flag was not a dominant symbol in the South. Then, during the Civil Rights Movement, some Southern state governments began to redesign their state flags to include part of the Confederate flag as a direct way to oppose the forced deconstruction

Analysis of Monuments and Memorials

1. When was this monument created? How did that time differ from ours? How did it differ from the time of the event or person being commemorated?
2. Who sponsored or advocated for the creation of this monument? What was their position in society when this occurred?
3. Was there a motive to portray one racial group as dominant or subordinate? What evidence do you have to support your claim?
4. Who is the intended audience of this monument? What are the sponsors trying to tell us through this monument?
5. Did the monument have government support? Why or Why not?
6. Who is left out of this monument? What points of view go largely unheard? How would the story differ if a different group told it? Another race?
7. Are there problematic (insulting, degrading) words or symbols on this monument?
8. How is the site used today? Does it still have traditional rituals connecting it to the public? Is it ignored? Why?
9. Is the presentation accurate? What actually happened? What historical sources tell of the event, people, or period commemorated at the site?
10. How does this site fit with others that treat the same era? Or subject? What other people lived and events happened during then but are not commemorated? Why?

* Note: Questions based on the work of James W. Loewen, *Lies Across America: What Our Historic Sites Get Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 459.

Figure 1: Analysis of Monuments and Memorials Handout

of the Jim Crow laws by the federal government.⁸ In addition, at this time, hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan adopted the Confederate flag as a rallying symbol. Similar to the Confederate flag, close investigation of national monuments provides an interesting avenue to explore and to discuss how race has functioned in our past and how it continues to be woven into the decisions of our institutions today.

The exploration of national monuments and memorials also provides opportunity to incorporate aspects of race into the social studies curriculum that is habitually absent. Textbooks often sanitize historical events in such a way that students are not educated on the intensity and diverse experiences of an event. A recent social studies textbook analysis study explored how violence to African Americans was portrayed.⁹ The researchers found that compared to earlier textbook editions, there was more coverage about the violence towards African Americans throughout U.S. history, yet the portrayal was limited to viewing violence as an individual act instead of showing how systemic this practice was within our nation's institutions. As students examine particular monuments and memorials, they are encouraged to ask critical questions that focus upon the power differentials historically surrounding the event or person being honored, as well as how the monument was received during the time of planning and construction (**Figure 1**). The focus on monuments requires students to move beyond a study of an individual, as it invites them to investigate the systems and mindsets that encouraged history to be remembered and honored in a particular way.

Monuments to Examine Racial Tensions

This section will highlight several Civil War monuments and memorials that can be utilized as a catalyst to discuss race and promote critical thinking among students. The authors have chosen to cover a few monuments in detail so educators can get a sense of the types of information needed in order to facilitate meaningful discussions about historic structures. While this list and the subsequent information provided is certainly not intended to be exhaustive, it should provide readers with a solid foundation needed to begin thoughtful dialogue about race utilizing Civil War monuments and memorials:

Commissioned: This section provides readers with insight into the origins of each monument in terms of who was responsible for proposing the construction of the monument.

Completed: The completion date of each monument is provided to show how long, or how quickly, a monument can be constructed. There are several factors that often play into the length of time it takes to complete a monument, including funding, size, public support or concern, location (public or private space), etc.

Funding: The funding source of each monument or memorial is unique and should be a part of any analysis or discussion, especially if taxpayer money was involved in the construction or maintenance of the project. Additionally, private donors or organizations can often provide funding, which should also be disclosed in an effort to further understand the motivation behind the structure being built.

Location: This section identifies the location of each monument and discloses if the monument has ever been relocated for any reason.

Designer/Sculptor: This section addresses the person (or group) charged with the task of creating and/or designing the monument.

Design: This section describes the monument's design.

Inscription: Many monuments and memorials are created with inscriptions to provide additional information to visitors about the person or event being commemorated. These inscriptions can offer valuable insights into issues surrounding power, authority, audience, and meaning.

Commemoration: This section covers the more neutral or positive interpretation of the monument or memorial that was likely intended by the people responsible for constructing the monument.

Racial Controversy: This section addresses instances of racial tensions and controversies surrounding each Civil War monument or memorial. Readers are encouraged to consider how each of these monuments and their unique perspectives could be used to facilitate meaningful discussions about race and racism during the era being depicted and in contemporary society based on multiple viewpoints.

“Faithful Slaves” Monument

Commissioned: Captain Samuel W. White, a Confederate veteran, donated the land for Confederate Park, and the “Faithful Slaves” Monument was erected in 1895 with permission from the Jefferson Davis Memorial Association.

Completed: Dedicated in 1896

Funding: Captain White

Location: Confederate Park in Fort Mill, South Carolina

Designer/Sculptor: N/A

Design: At the base of a marble obelisk, there are two carvings. One depicts a black female slave holding a white baby on the front steps of a plantation home. The other portrays a black male slave resting under a tree. On the back side of the monument, there is a list of the names of ten slaves who supported the Confederacy.

Inscription: “1860 – Dedicated to the faithful slaves – who, loyal to a sacred trust, toiled for the support of the army, with matchless devotion, and with sterling fidelity guarded our defenceless homes, women and children, during the struggle for the principles of our ‘Confederate States of America’. – 1865”

Commemoration: This monument is quite unique because it is one of the first monuments in the country dedicated to African American slaves that remained loyal to the Confederacy.

Racial Controversy: The monument tries to portray an image of slavery that does not focus on its brutality. Instead, it tries to paint a picture of loyalty between slaves and their masters, reminiscent of a family atmosphere. This is an example of how some people desire to mystify and sanitize the legacy of the Confederacy as solely a fight for states’ rights.

Nathan Bedford Forrest Monument (removed December 20, 2017)

Commissioned: The Forrest Monument Association commissioned and dedicated the Nathan Bedford Forrest Monument to the City of Memphis. At the time, the City Council was urged to accept the monument by Confederate and Monument Societies.



Figure 2: “Faithful Slaves” Monument in Fort Mill, South Carolina. Photograph by Michael Sean Nix, November 25, 2009, from the Historical Marker Database.



Figure 3: Nathan Bedford Forrest Monument, formerly in Memphis, Tennessee. Photograph by Ken Smith, February 3, 2009, from the Historical Marker Database.

Completed: Dedicated on May 16, 1905

Funding: Forrest Monument Association

Location: Bedford Forrest Park in Memphis, Tennessee. In 2013, the city of Memphis renamed the park Health Sciences Park. In the summer of 2015, the city passed a resolution to remove the monument from the public site. The monument was removed from the park on December 20, 2017 (see more in Lesson 3 below).

Designer/Sculptor: Charles H. Niehaus

Design: Bronze statue of Forrest in Confederate States Army uniform mounted on a horse, set over the graves of Forrest and his wife.

Inscription: “Those hoof beats die not upon Fame’s crimson sod.
But will ring through her song and her story: He fought like a
Titan and struck like a god. And his dust is our ashes of glory. —
Virginia Frazer Boyle”

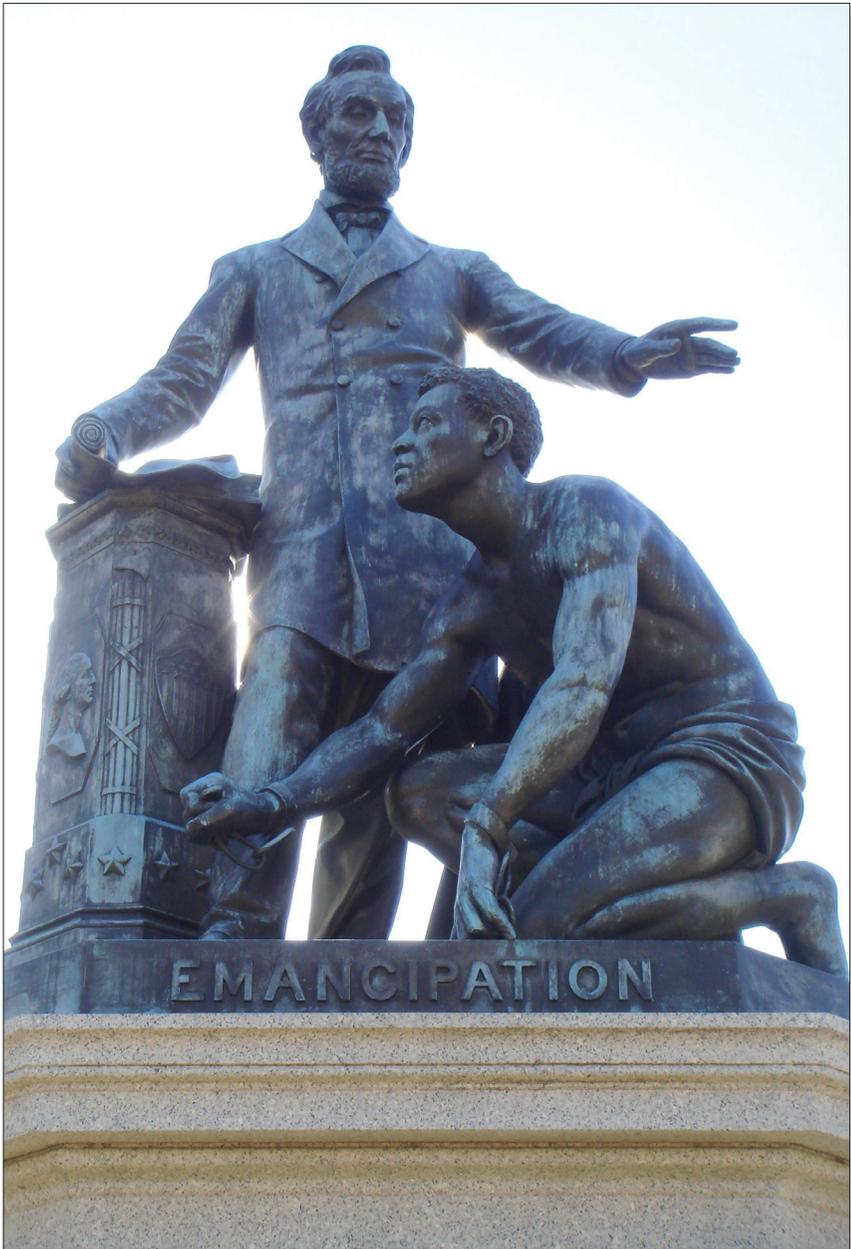


Figure 4: Freedmen's Memorial in Washington, D.C. Photograph by J. J. Prats, April 21, 2007, from the Historical Marker Database.

“1904 – Erected by his countrymen in honor of the military genius of Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest. – Confederate States Army. – 1861-1865.”

Commemoration: The groups supporting the commission of the statue focus upon the military honors of Forrest, a Confederate cavalry general. There are numerous plaques and monuments of Forrest in Tennessee and other Southern states.

Racial Controversy: In addition to Forrest’s Confederate General status, he was a former slave trader before the Civil War. During the war, he was known for his brutality in the slaughter of Union African American soldiers. Once the war was over, Forrest became the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

Freedmen’s Memorial

Commissioned: The Western Sanitary Commission, based in St. Louis, commissioned the memorial. They were an all-white group who chose the designer and monitored the memorial’s progress.

Completed: Dedicated on April 14, 1876

Funding: The Freedmen’s Memorial, also known as the Emancipation Memorial, was solely funded by freed slaves, many of whom were African American Union veterans.

Location: Lincoln Park in Washington D.C.

Designer/Sculptor: Thomas Ball

Design: Bronze sculpture of Lincoln standing tall with his arms spread and a shirtless black slave kneeling in front of him. The black male has shackles that are open, and Lincoln’s right hand is resting on the Emancipation Proclamation, while his left hand hovers over the other man.

Inscription: “Freedom’s Memorial – In grateful memory of Abraham Lincoln – This monument was erected by the Western Sanitary Commission of Saint Louis, MO: With funds contributed solely by emancipated citizens of the United States declared free by his proclamation January 1st A.D. 1863. – The first contribution of five dollars was made by Charlotte Scott, a freed woman of Virginia being her first earnings in freedom and consecrated by



Figure 5: Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia. Photograph by J. Makali Bruton, February 7, 2015, from the Historical Marker Database.

her suggestion and request on the day she heard of President Lincoln’s death to build a monument to his memory.”

“And upon this act – sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution upon military necessity – I invoke the considerate judgement of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God – A. Lincoln, Emancipation Proclamation, Jany. 1, 1863 – Western Sanitary Commission, James E. Yeatman, President. C. S. Greeley, Treas: Geo. Partridge. Dr. J. B. Johnson. Wm. C. Eliot.”

Commemoration: The African Americans who raised funds for the monument wanted to honor President Lincoln and his work in the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation providing them freedom.

Racial Controversy: The design of the sculpture portrays a dominating image of Lincoln, the white president, standing prominently over the crouched-down position of the unnamed black slave. The image seems to narrate the story of the good, white president who made freedom possible for the helpless slaves, without portraying the perseverance and bravery of the slaves' role in gaining freedom.

Robert E. Lee Monument

Commissioned: In 1888, the city of Richmond, Virginia received its first proposal to create an avenue honoring Confederate heroes. The Robert E. Lee Monument was the first to be erected by the Lee Monument Association (the information below is specific to the Lee Monument).

Completed: 1890 for Robert E. Lee (followed by 1907 for James Ewell Brown Stuart and Jefferson Davis; 1919 for Stonewall Jackson; 1929 for Matthew Fontaine Maury; 1996 for Arthur Ashe)

Funding: Lee Monument Association

Location: Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia

Designer/Sculptor: Jean Antoine Mercié (statue); Paul Pujot (pedestal)

Design: Bronze statue of Lee in Confederate States Army uniform mounted on a horse, measuring twenty-one feet high and twelve tons on a forty-foot high granite pedestal.

Inscription: Bronze plaque simply reads "LEE"

Commemoration: Richmond was a capital of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Some Southern heritage groups/societies desired to remember and honor those who they felt fought courageously for states' rights during the war.

Racial Controversy: The main purpose of Monument Avenue is to honor solely Confederate heroes of the Civil War. Similar to other monuments mentioned above, this commemoration tells a story of the Confederacy as a fight for states' rights and diminishes a main purpose of the Civil War, which was to retain the right to own slaves. Monument Avenue has been celebrated in Richmond, often being used as a parade route for the city.

Teaching Strategies

The following list of activities is designed for history teachers in grades 6-12 focusing specifically on the Civil War and controversial contemporary issues. The lessons are designed for fifty-minute or seventy-five-minute class periods and encourage a variety of primary and secondary sources. Additionally, this mini unit could serve as a great introduction to the Civil War by highlighting the lasting legacy of this conflict and how the memory surrounding monuments and memorials has changed from the past to the present. We encourage teachers to strongly consider the use of Civil War monuments to discuss issues of race because many of these structures still elicit strong feelings and conflicts today, which will help students make the ever important connections between historical events and their daily lives.

Lesson 1: Remembering the Past Through Visuals (50 minutes)

Introduction

Begin the lesson by showing the introductory video clip (<<http://teachinghistory.org/best-practices/using-primary-sources/24079>>) about analyzing monuments and memorials by James Percoco. Using this clip as an introduction, facilitate an opening discussion about why we must interpret monuments and how these important structures usually tell a story from only one perspective. Before the lesson, create artifact bags with photographs of the monuments and printed inscriptions that are found on each monument.

Activity

1. Provide an artifact bag to groups of three to five students.
2. Have students view one monument at a time. Students should write down only what they see (positions of people, objects, etc.).
3. Have students write down what questions they have about the monument.
4. Groups should name each monument and write a caption for the monument based upon their observations.
5. Conclude with a discussion asking the following questions:

- Given the context, what story do you think the designer/sculptor is trying to tell?
- Why do you think s/he wanted to tell that story? That perspective?
- How is race a part of the story?

Lesson 2: Analyzing Monuments (50 minutes)

Introduction

Begin lesson by showing the students the video clip of monument expert Judith Dupre (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsK_Ga4fyGQ>). Have students individually write down their thoughts about the function of monuments and what events or people are worth commemorating.

Activity

1. Provide handouts or post the “Analysis of Monuments and Memorials” handout (see **Figure 1**).
2. In groups of three to five, have students answer the questions for each one of the monuments described above.
3. Each group will need a computer to research and find this information online. If class computers are not available (or to save class time), provide copies of the information for each of the monuments in this paper. Also, allow students to look for enriching or enhancement information by browsing the various primary and secondary resources on the Internet.
4. If students do not finish answering the questions before the end of the class period, allow them to complete the assignment at home. Tell students they will need this handout completed for the assignment in class tomorrow and for their project.

Lesson 3: Fighting Against Institutional Racism (50 minutes)

Introduction

Begin lesson by showing the Memphis local news report about the removal of the Forrest Monument from Health Sciences Park (<<http://www.localmemphis.com/news/local-news/activists-want-confederate-statues-removed-in-memphis/790617867>>).

Activity

1. Have students explain the two disputing arguments about the removal of the Forrest Monument.
2. Define individual and institutional racism with students. Facilitate a discussion with students about how they would label this controversy over the Forrest Monument. Through questioning, have students form opinions about whether they feel the Historic Preservation law in Tennessee (passed in 2013) is an example of institutional racism.
3. Have students choose one of the following monuments (or another Civil War monument/memorial that you share with students).
 - “Faithful Slaves” Monument
 - Freedmen’s Memorial
 - Richmond’s Monument Avenue

Students should pretend there is a current local controversy on the removal of one of the statues, and they should write persuasive letters to the local government supporting their opinion of whether or not to remove the monument/memorial.

*Lesson 4: New Stories to be Told (90 minutes or 2-day lesson)**Introduction*

Begin lesson by showing the students a clip from the film, *Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision* (1994). When creating monuments, who has the authority over design? The artists, financiers, people being commemorated, etc.?

Activity

1. Assign each group one of the monuments described above. Have groups review their “Analysis of Monuments and Memorials” handout (see **Figure 1**) responses together and discuss why their monument is controversial. Groups should discuss whose perspectives are missing in the monuments.
2. Explain to groups that they have been selected to design a new monument that will be placed in close proximity to their assigned monument. Their proposed monument design should tell the story/perspective of those whose voices were silenced or marginalized in the original monument.

3. Allow students 20-30 mins. to design their new proposed monument.
4. Allow each group 5-10 mins. to present.
5. Students in the audience will be members of the Commission Committee, whose job is to decide whether or not to approve the newly proposed monuments. Students will write a brief statement justifying their vote. This activity is mandatory and should be taken up for a grade.
6. After students present in their groups, have them compose individual group evaluations, detailing every student's role and how well they worked together. This should also be collected as part of their grade.

Conclusion

Discussing controversial issues, such as racism and discrimination, continues to be a vitally important, but extremely difficult component of any history teacher's classroom instruction. Oftentimes, if teachers feel uncomfortable about addressing a particular topic, they simply avoid discussing it in class for a variety of reasons (fear of getting in trouble with parents or administrators, inappropriate student comments, etc.). While we certainly respect teacher's feelings of self-preservation, the enduring importance of race relations in the U.S. simply must be included in any contemporary history classroom. The goal of this paper is to provide secondary history teachers not only with a rationale for why race should be included in the curriculum, but also a practical example of *how* meaningful race discussions can be facilitated utilizing Civil War monuments. To be sure, there are a variety of ways that history teachers could incorporate race into the curriculum, but the underlying racial tensions associated with the Civil War and the enduring legacy of Confederate monuments even today make the infusion of these topics both practical and explicit. By exploring racism and discrimination through Civil War monuments, teachers are providing students with a safe space to examine and analyze racial tensions from a historical perspective in an effort to promote connections to many contemporary race problems in the United States. After all, the students of today are the citizens of tomorrow, so any hope of a future nation that can discuss controversial or divisive issues rationally and thoughtfully depends on the ability of people to respectfully engage in meaningful conversations.

Notes

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6. Margaret D. Bauer, "On Flags and Fraternities: Lessons on Cultural Memory and Historical Amnesia in Charles Chesnut's 'Po' Sandy,'" *The Southern Literary Journal* 40, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 70-86.
7. Christine Graf, "The Confederate Flag: A Flag of Many Meanings," *Faces: People, Places, and Cultures* 28, no. 8 (April 2007): 22.
8. *Ibid.*; Mae Henderson, "For Which It Stands," *Callaloo* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 85-90.
9. Keffrelyn D. Brown and Anthony L. Brown, "Silenced Memories: An Examination of the Sociocultural Knowledge on Race and Racial Violence in Official School Curriculum," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 43, no. 2 (2010): 139-154.