Racism unwritten: the materiality of memory and “Southering” beyond the text

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Abstract

United States history is constructed around a set of regional 'truths' that serve different systems of white supremacy. These ‘truths,’ based upon historical narratives of the racist South and progressive North, become crystalized in both space and place through historical racial contexts becoming loci of Northern and national pride. This phenomenon leads to a type of color-blind racism based upon the temporal minimization and geographic naturalization of racism in the United States. This paper looks at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center to see how these processes unfold. It asks: Why do connections between past narratives of slavery in the United States and present national discourses about white supremacy remain unrecognized, despite the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center’s attempt to the contrary? In order to respond to this broader question, it examines the Freedom Center as a monument to Northern and national racial justice because of its inability to contextualize legacies of slavery in the present and complicate uncritical understandings of national identity. It empirically explores these questions through a material discourse analysis and as well as a virtual ethnography looking at visitor reviews. If historical and current racist systems and their many effects are not acknowledged as existing in the North, white supremacy cannot be overturned in the North and the US cannot begin the work of addressing ongoing issues of racism, racial violence, and structures of inequality.

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1. Introduction

> "[The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is] historical without being hateful, educational without being preachy."

White supremacy demands specific contextualizations of memory and space. These presentations of the past and their relationships to the present and future necessarily preclude hope for alternative racial realities and construct a comfortable white status quo. The review above, from a popular travel planning website *TripAdvisor*, allows us to see how these implicitly racist messages operate. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is a museum concerned with telling the stories of North American chattel slavery, emancipation, and global struggles against enslavement in the present. The white respondent seems to rest comfortably with the narratives being told in this museum, apparently unchallenged by the connection between slavery in the past and racism in the present.

This paper asks, why connections between past narratives of slavery in the United States and present national discourses about white supremacy remain unrecognized, despite the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center's attempt to the contrary? In answering this question, I will show how the Freedom Center helps to uphold white supremacist systems of power through its role in shaping and reaffirming American national narratives of racial justice. I draw from three bodies of literature to examine how the museum sustains and reproduces notions about where racism does and does not exist, limiting possibilities to address current racist oppression. The first discusses how the preexisting geographic imaginaries of the American South and North create distinct power relationships that discredit the South in order to construct narratives of a progressive and just North. In this paper, these imaginaries are not constructed through outward discussions of difference but through particular silences that refuse to challenge their hold on epistemologies of American national identity. The employment of

these imaginaries in such a way is complicit in the maintenance of white supremacy by assigning blame regionally and externalizing it from the United States' national responsibility. Secondly, I draw from literature on memory and memorialization to show how the Freedom Center, more than just a museum, stands as a physical monument to Northern Racial justice. Moving beyond the written word, we can begin to see how racialized discourses are written (or unwritten) into the landscape. As a site of national public memory, the Freedom Center is a space through which some narratives are illuminated while others are lost. This node of memory provides an opportunity for visitors to be challenged to change their preexisting ideas of national identity and complicity in slavery. However, it appears that the opposite is happening; visitors instead use the museum to maintain what they already believe. Finally, by analyzing the Freedom Center through the lens of Critical Race Theory, it becomes clear that despite its attempt to tell the stories of the oppressed and potential to bring them through to the present, it crystalizes white supremacy in the past. Through a process of color-blind racism, visitors appear to use already understood narratives of the South as unrepresentative of the United States, reaffirmed by the Freedom Center's role as a monument to Northern racial exceptionalism, and wash their hands of present day white supremacy.

This paper will be organized accordingly: First, I will provide a discussion of the methods used to understand the complex processes occurring in the Freedom Center. By using both a material discourse analysis and looking to visitor reviews of the museum, we can see not only how these narratives are presented but also how they are interpreted. Second, I will give an overview of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, laying out a spatial context for my analysis. Third, I use an alternative conception of the Freedom Center; more than a museum that tells history, it is a national monument to slavery and emancipation that reproduces a national identity by actively (re)constructing the past. It helps visitors to reaffirm commonly held

knowledges about what the United States supposedly stands for, racial justice, whether true or not. Fourth, I will discuss the body of literature on "internal orientalism," which draws from Edward Said's work and applies it to power relationships within countries. Specifically, I look at how this theorization has been used throughout post-Civil War history to create the American South as an internal other. Conceptualizations of the South as backwards and bigoted are a legacy of its slave owning past and Jim Crow for which it must continually atone. As a foil against this internally othered South, the North is conceived of as progressive and just, narratives pulled selectively from abolition and (supposed) history of Civil Rights. These ideas have solidified themselves in the national identity and have been used to deny the fact that "Americanness definitionally means whiteness" (Mills 1997, 58). Fifth, I will write about how "internal orientalist" logics and memorialization fuse together at the site of the Freedom Center to strengthen an American identity that (unintentionally) sustains white supremacist narratives of racial progress by not contextualizing the present in the past. By looking at visitor reviews of the Freedom Center, it becomes apparent that visitors are informed by a specific form of color-blind racism that refuses to acknowledge present racisms by explaining them away through historical and geographical justifications. I conclude with brief remarks about the effects of building a national narrative in the way that the Freedom Center does. White supremacy depends upon "an agreement to *mis*interpret the world…with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority…" (Mills 1997, 18). The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center helps to validate "white epistemic authority" by its failure to contextualize the present in the past.

The importance of understanding the geographic separation of the American South and North as an imaginary is tantamount. Because this paper seeks to uncover and question the power relations created by the constructs of a discrete North and South, I believe that it is

necessary to define more concretely the definitions of certain geographically power laden words used herein following Jansson's (2017) call. First, when using the terms American South and South, it will be understood that this is a constructed geographic region, malleable and permeable, continually changing across space and through time. For the sake of clarity, however, here it will refer to former 'slave-states.' This, likewise, applies to the terms American North and North, which will refer to former 'free-states.' Secondly, although this paper discusses at length the uneven power relationships between the South and North, it does not absolve either region of its role in the persistence of white supremacy. Inwood (2009) writes, "Throughout the history of the United States, racial formation and US collective identity has been defined by racial separation and exploitation" (88). The United States was founded upon white supremacy, and it is the endurance of white supremacy throughout the country that informs this paper.

2. Methods

In order to respond to the research question, why is there a disconnect between past instances of racism in the United States and those in the present in the interpretation of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, I employ two methodological approaches. First, I use the "Internal Orientalism" literature (Jansson 2003b, 2005), expanding upon its typical focus in order to look beyond the text, and to conduct a discourse analysis of physical manifestations of public memory. Second, I look at *TripAdvisor* reviews of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center to understand how discourse is interpreted and internalized by visitors to the museum.

Jansson provides an excellent analysis of the textual discursive practices that "Souther," from works of history (Jansson 2003b, 2004), to popular geography (Jansson 2003a), to film (Jansson 2005), to academic literature (Jansson 2017). I, however, use this paper to expand on his use of the concept of "Internal Orientalism," combining the textual with the material. In this paper, material does not refer to economic relations (i.e. the materialism of Marx) but to the physical and tangible. Michel Foucault (1972) explains that discursive formation requires one to take a statement in the form of "books, texts, accounts, registers, acts, buildings, institutions, laws, techniques, objects, customs, etc." (7) and "grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes" (28). An important nuance of this conception is that it is not only dependent upon the text but the relationship of the material ("buildings…objects") as well. Robert J.C. Young (2014) writes, "Foucault's very radical notion of discourse is primarily directed…towards a concept of the materiality of language in every dimension" (45). This approach to discourse as directly related to the material is helpful to understanding the

relationship of the construction of race and the very real, appreciable effects. Pulling from Schein (1997), I look to see how the Freedom Center is a "discourse materialized;" how the landscape comes to construct and be constructed by discourse.

Second, I draw on *TripAdvisor* reviews of the Freedom Center to understand how the discourses presented are read by visitors. I use these reviews as a kind of abbreviated travel blog (Nelson 2015), a "virtual ethnography" (Carter 2015a), whereby guests are able to publicly process what they have seen and what they take away. Instead of coding each review as some have done (Carter 2015b), I instead chose to select a number of reviews and read them in their entirety, looking for trends in the way that visitors were discussing their experiences with the museum. As of February 2018, there were 786 reviews of the Freedom Center with a mean rating of 4.5 out of 5 stars, signaling visitors have overwhelmingly positive opinions about the museum. I have chosen a sampling of the reviews (~20), in which, though perhaps not representative of all opinions, distinct trends emerged in the stories told by reviewers that are particularly telling. A benefit of the *TripAdvisor* reviews is that many of the reviewers have included the cities from where they are visiting and have thumbnail pictures included next to their review. Most reviewers were from former "free" states and appeared white from their thumbnail pictures. This is important in understanding how residents from particular regions of the country and of different racial backgrounds interpret the museum. When provided on the website, I include the home cities and race of the reviewers.

Because this paper is best situated in the disciplinary focus of white studies, uncovering and deconstructing white normativity, I focus on the reviews of white people. At the end of this paper I will attend to the reviews by non-white people as they point to alternative preexisting knowledges that informed the reviewers' approach to the museum. These alternative readings are

informative for understanding the function of white epistemology in the national narrative because they provide a foil against which to compare.

3. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center

Inside the stone and copper Freedom Center, constructed in three undulating wave-like "pavilions", there are three permanent exhibits. The first, "From Slavery to Freedom" (Fig. 1), examines slavery from kidnap in Africa to abolition. It does this through multiple rooms constructed to resemble various spaces that slaves may have encountered from a cool, dark, damp stone cavern meant to represent the cells of West African slave castles, to faux tree canopied cabin scenes with cast metal slaves stirring cauldrons of laundry and carrying sacks of cotton. The exhibit asks visitors to attempt an empathetic embodiment of the lives of enslaved people by immersing them in what might be called an "affective atmosphere" (Anderson 2009). These 'more than representational' spaces depend upon space as it is experienced by the senses to get its message across. Its effectiveness is up for debate; however, the intent is clear. At the end of the exhibit, the lighting brightens and hidden speakers in the ceiling play jubilant spirituals as if they are songs from above.



Figure 1. "From Slavery to Freedom" Exhibit

A second exhibit, "ESCAPE! Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom," again recounting the history of chattel slavery in the United States, this time focusing on abolitionists in a more 'family friendly' interactive setting (Fig 2.). Guests are invited to push buttons and pull placards to discover information about those who fought for the freedom of enslaved people in the American South. Finally, there is an exhibit that explores slavery in the 21st Century (Fig. 3). It looks at sex trafficking, child labor, and indenture across the globe with a strong focus on the Global South. "Invisible: Slavery Today" pulls visitors through a warehouse or cargo yard setting leading them to question how many of the same institutions, as well as disturbingly 'invisible' new versions, could exist in the present. Much has been written on the role of museums in the creation of national and racial narratives (Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010; Tolia-Kelly 2016; Lynch and Alberti 2010; Hanna 2008). Here, however, I want to examine the Freedom Center in a different light: as a memorial to Northern racial justice.



Figure 2. "ESCAPE! Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom" Exhibit



Figure 3. “Invisible: Slavery Today” Exhibit

4. Materiality and memory

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is a museum concerned with helping visitors to understand slavery across time, however, beyond its role as a museum, I contend that it has a second and no less important role, the construction of Northern racial exceptionalism. The museum sits upon the banks of the Ohio River in Cincinnati, Ohio facing outward toward Kentucky and the American South. The Freedom Center positions itself as "a museum of conscience, an education center, a convener of dialogue, and a beacon of light for inclusive freedom around the globe" (The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center). However, reviews from *TripAdvisor* seem to suggest that visitors pay particular attention to one of these values.

> "I also was very grateful to learn more about Ohio's prominent role in providing safe haven and freedom for slaves making their way north." (White, Los Angeles, CA)
>
> "…this was a sobering stop to consider Cincinnati's important role in the history of the Underground Railroad, as thousands of slaves escaped to freedom by crossing the Ohio River from the southern slave states." (White, Worthington, OH)
>
> "And it is right on the bank of the Ohio River where escaping slaves struggled across to freedom." (White, San Francisco, CA)
>
> "[My daughter] was very moved by the eternal light of freedom that faces Kentucky - reminding us all how many Americans had to run away and hide to gain their freedom." (Cincinnati, OH)

The reviewers clearly see the Freedom Center as a monument to freedom, more precisely, Northern freedom. The narrative of Ohio and the Ohio River as a gateway ring very clearly in these responses. This is of course complicated by the history of Northern slavery and the Fugitive Slave Acts, something the museum shows (Fig. 4) though is not being communicated or internalized clearly by the visitors.

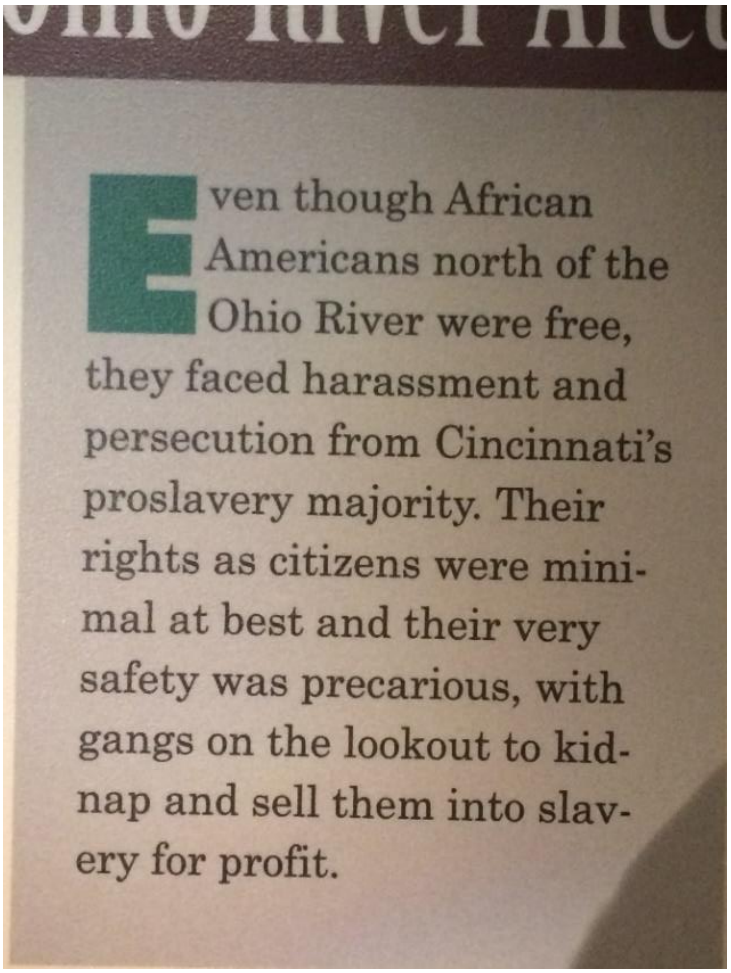


Figure 4. Museum Placard on freedom in the American North

As a museum, the National Underground Freedom Center tells a certain story through the historical narratives that are presented in the exhibits and on the placards within, however, I contend that the building itself is a monument and does not exclusively depend upon the written word. Monuments are the physical manifestation of specific collective memories in time; however, their meanings are multiple. Mitchell (2003) writes that monuments "aid in the establishment of memory, by materializing history and linking familiar landscapes, times, and selective memories in an inextricable embrace" (445). The spatialization of memory is a complex process that works in various ways to produce and reproduce meanings throughout time. More than spaces that tell neutral histories, these monuments and memorial places are dynamic and always disputed, creating new and competing histories and memories mobilized towards political, social, and economic ends (Bohland 2013). Though seemingly stationary, remembrance through physical memorial space is a process that unfurls through time not in spite of it.

Hoelscher and Alderman (2004) write, "That social groups today employ various recollections as vehicles for their constitution, or for their dissolution…points to the usability of this freighted phenomenon" (349). We can look to various cases of confederate memorialization through statue and place naming controversies (Brasher, Alderman, and Inwood 2017; Zakos 2015) and street naming rights (Alderman and Inwood 2013). More than remembering, memorial spaces also demand forgetting. As it relates to United States racial memorialization, few cases are more informative and better documented than the memory of Martin Luther King (Inwood 2009; Bruyneel 2014). At the Martin Luther King Jr National Historic Site, Inwood (2009) finds that the community surrounding the site seeks to construct a narrative of MLK as peaceful and non-violent, a memory most compatible with the liberal political hegemony. This particular memory does the injustice of forgetting the radical views on the racial order and capitalism that Dr. King actually held. In this way, MLK, who was critical of the United States throughout his

life, becomes a pillar of American democratic values in a way that obscures a more complex reality. It is through this lens that I wish to examine the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.

The Freedom Center as an institution, beyond its role as a museum, conveys powerful meaning through both its physical structure as well as its position as something "National." Where the Freedom Center is located should not be overlooked. As its website explains, "Our physical location in downtown Cincinnati is just a few steps from the banks of the Ohio River, the great natural barrier that separated the slave states of the South from the free states of the North" (Center). Almost standing itself as a first stop on the Underground Railroad, the Freedom Center is a kind of gateway marking the beginning of an abolitionist and racially just American North. If this symbolism needed any further clarification, in between the Freedom Center and the Ohio River is a representation of a winding river-like path of large stones cemented into the front plaza of the museum (Fig. 5). Adjacent to a physical marker of regional difference, a flaming torch located on the third floor of the building shines across the Ohio River, seemingly representing a beacon of hope to all of those trying to reach 'freedom' from slavery (Fig. 5). Additionally, the title of *National* Underground Railroad Freedom Center, marks this museum as an arbiter of American national identity. Taking the Freedom Center as a monument to (Northern) abolition the narratives contained within and around this building serve to construct a very specific, and certainly contestable, national narrative about the history of racism in the United States and its relationship to the present. Most importantly, the Freedom Center *upholds* common narratives of Northern racial justice. Reviewers above appear to use the museum to reaffirm an uncritical understanding of the North's role in enslaved persons' journeys to freedom. With this understanding of the Freedom Center as a self-proclaimed monument to slavery in the past and present, we can begin the task of deconstructing the narratives that are

(not) presented therein. Because the construction of monuments is complex and contestable, it is valuable to examine what messages the Freedom Center intends to express as well as what messages are being read into the memorial landscape. By taking these monuments and expanding their associated narratives beyond the local and regional, "the national scale aids in the celebration and ongoing legitimization of the state, through the conflation of collectively perceived and remembered places, with the mythic narratives of national destiny" (Mitchell 2003, 445).

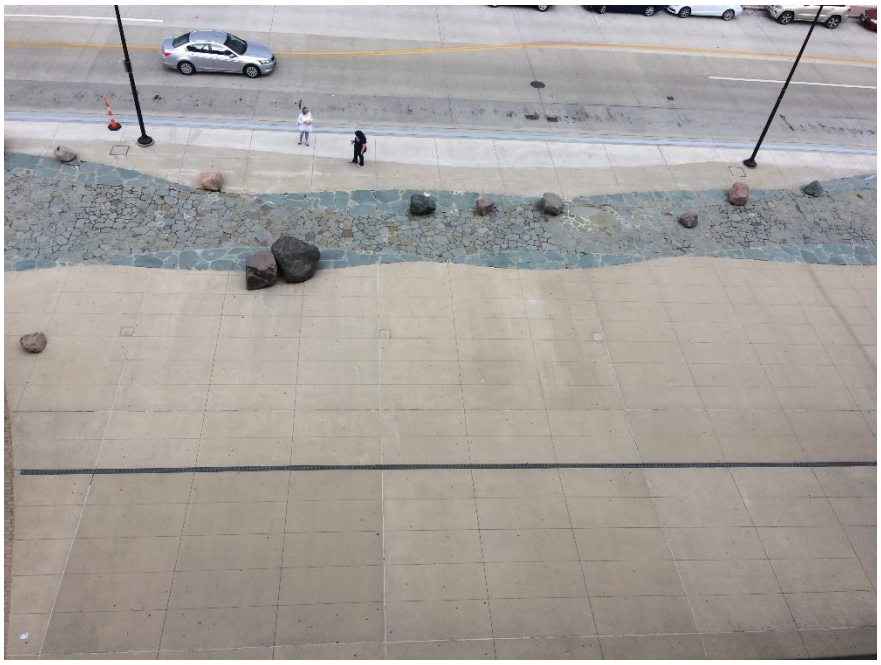


Figure 5. Walkway mimicking Ohio River



Figure 6. Flame Facing Kentucky

5. The Southern Other

The construction of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center as a monument to Northern racial exceptionalism is a contentious and political process that is enabled by a very particular understanding of regional relationships that frame the way the nation is understood; one that positions the North against the South. In much of his work, David Jansson examines the United States South through a framework based upon Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979). Said "argues that 'the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience'. In order to play this role effectively, 'the Orient' must be represented as fundamentally different from 'the Occident'; this process is commonly referred to as 'othering'(Jansson 2005, 266). The importance of this distinction between the regions is not only in the discourse of difference culturally and politically, but the power relations that this discourse of difference creates. Through an application of this theory aptly named "internal orientalism," Jansson explains the relationship between the Southern states and Northern states as one defined by an ongoing opposition between the Northern "Occident," or hegemon, and the Southern "Orient," or 'other' (Jansson 2003b). He writes that internal orientalism is composed of three points, "an identity discourse, asymmetrical political relations, and exploitative economic relations" (Jansson 2017, 135). National identity is built through the creation of an agonism between the nation and the subordinated 'other.' This is the "identity discourse." What Jansson describes as "asymmetrical political relations" might better be described as asymmetrical *power* relations, as Jansson, rightfully, explains that through this subordinating power which seeks to "remake" the 'other' into the hegemon, the 'other's' cultural, social, and political institutions are overpowered (2017, 135). Finally, "exploitative economic relations" harkens back to colonial articulations of power, whereby the hegemonic region benefits from the economic output of the 'othered' region. Like in Said's work, the Southern 'other' comes into a colonial articulation of

power with the North after having become the marker of an *a priori* difference to be overcome. In the post-Civil War era, the South rests within a contentious and conflicted space in the American landscape. It is both the conquered and once again part of the conqueror (Winders 2005). Its role as the conquered is exploited in a manner not unlike that of an imperial acquisition, where the vacuum of economic and political power and the structural shambles were exploited by the North. Ostensibly, it was positioned to gain from the reuniting of the country. However, this still is not the case. Many studies situate the American South as the conquered, still recovering from the economic and political devastation as a result of the Civil War (Winders 2005; Jansson 2004, 2007, 2010; Hall 1998; Litwack 1980; Woodward 1971; Cash 1941; Stone 1963; Domke 1996). These narratives are not innocuous. They were created through a particular power dynamic that continues to reassert itself over time.

Undoubtedly, the North has come to embody the dominant United States national identity and because of this, the South is subjected to the Northern (and therefore American) norms against which it is measured. There is a "tendency to view the South as an object of study and a special problem to be solved" (Jansson 2003b, 298). In the United States, national identity takes on very specific qualifiers. Often described through ideas like the 'American Dream,' the right to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, the ownership of property, freedom of religion, self-determination, industriousness, and exceptionalism among others, this narrative identity is placed in dialectic relationship with the American landscape. It is crystalized in national documents, the clean-cut, straight lines of the neoclassical capitol, and images of a nuclear family protected by a white-picket fence. However, this narrative does not apply to all parts of the nation. The South is seen as backwards, the South is seen as bigoted, the South is seen as racist. Internal orientalism predicates that these negative descriptors do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, they are used as national foils against which to compare the rest of the country. Southering is built upon a

foundation of difference between the American North and South. By vilifying the South through these types of stereotypical characteristics, the North, and more generally, the country as a whole, can relegate the South as a vestige of the past, one that is dominated by a "tolerant, progressive, enlightened, prosperous and cosmopolitan" North, increasingly irrelevant to the American national identity (Jansson 2005, 268). Using this framework, we can examine another theme present in reviews of the Freedom Center: the history of dehumanization of Black bodies as something that is in the past.

Some reviewers acknowledged the need to learn from this past; however, these were phrased in such a way that suggests the lessons learned would prevent something like this happening in the *future* rather than informing our struggles in the *present*.

> "We all need to know the facts. We all need to think about how humanity failed so many by not recognizing that all human beings own the right to freedom." (White, New York, NY)
>
> "To make America great AT ALL, we MUST learn from our past and not try and repeat the inhumane acts of the past." (White, Milwaukee, WI)
>
> "Looking for the history of prejudice then justice?"
>
> "And the shameful history which it represents is a sobering reminder to us all." (White, Vineland, New Jersey)
>
> "My only fear with the museum is political correctness of adding in exhibits that really are not dealing with any kind of slavery in the world but deal with a push of a political agenda or something that is being politicized and attaches buzz words to it in order to cause it to be relevant to the museum." (White, Lakeland, FL)

Although many of these reviewers appear to use the knowledge available to them in the Freedom Center, the connection of past enslavement to current forms of white supremacy are not visible enough for them to make this leap.

The national regionalized narrative is an example of the difference between what Dionne Brand (1994) calls "past/place" and "present/place" (138). There is an inextricable link between

temporality and spatiality that characterizes the American South and North. National narratives of the South frame it as racist as a result of its history as slave states and succession. The South is racist as a result of its history of Jim Crow. The South is racist as a result of its history as a stronghold of racial hate groups like the Klan (which is a revisionist history to say the least as very large clan populations are found in the North as well). The North is thought of as the locus of the abolition movement, the free states, the Underground Railroad, racial progressivity, etc. It is seen as just, liberal, and exceptional. It becomes the embodiment of true and fair American ideals and values. Northern history is unquestionably far more complex, and the complicity of Northern actors has been examined extensively. The oppression of Black people throughout the country from its inception is an undeniable truth (Litwack 1961; Sokol 2014; Robertson 1980; Sugrue 2008; Farrow, Lang, and Frank 2006). Regional distinctions, while helpful in the employ of easy and simplified explanations of the American landscape, suffer from this ease and revise existing historical accounts because of their simplicity. This turns into a Northern racial exceptionalism. Racism becomes yet another axis upon which the distinction between the American North and the American South are turned into completely different places. Established notions of where and when American slavery took place informs the way that visitors recognize how it relates to the present. Because slavery was a Southern problem, placed there by understandings of Northern racial exceptionalism as explained earlier, it is "Southered" to the past. The racist foundations upon which the institution of slavery was built cannot be contextualized in the present national narrative because the epistemic knowledge visitors filter what they see at the Freedom Center through puts those foundations necessarily in the past. Everyday Southering is produced and reproduced through the museum by visitors who are unable to pull the past into the present and see the South as also being central to the ongoing history of white supremacy. They are unable to see the "past/place" in the "present/place," or

that the "present/place" has never escaped the past. Temporality as it relates to racism is simplified and turned linear where instead "a sense of cyclical time in which all that has happened in the past and all that will happen in the future is interrelated" could be far more productive (Commander 2017, 38). For this reason, the racist legacies of slavery remain in the past, immobilized, uncomplicated, and stagnant.

When visitors do discuss the displays on slavery in the present, the highly racialized nature is left out or qualified by color-blind language.

> "I learned about slaves of all walks of life-women, children, black, white, mixed and slave trafficking in all parts of the world." (Akron, OH)
>
> "This museum has done an outstanding job of explaining slavery not only for the black history of slavery but the on going trafficking and child labor slavery all around the world." (Sun City West, AZ)
>
> "This place was not just for blacks, it is for everyone, because @ some time or another we all have been and are still slaves." (Chicago, IL)
>
> "A great museum to help understand the slave culture of early America and how the United States finally ended slavery. This is more than just an explanation of the Underground Railway. Plus it talks about institutions in the world that still foster what amounts to slavery today!" (St. Louis, MO)
>
> "We did not realize that they had a 2016 exhibit of modern day enslavement of various ethnicities."

Visitors engage in the color-blinding of narratives presented in the museum, trying to explain away the inherently racialized nature of slavery and its legacies, upholding white normativity. The exhibit on present day slavery focuses on the Global South, creating a revised narrative of slavery. This new narrative creates again Orientalizes slavery as distant and de-racialized. Slavery in the present remains an aberration of backwardness, not in the American South but in the "underdeveloped" and "unmodern" Global South, a "past/place" that the United States has triumphed over.

6. Racism (re)written

The racism taking place in the Freedom Center is subtle but nonetheless tied up in the legacy of more explicit forms of oppression. Far from white hoods and tiki torches, this paper employs a far more nuanced interpretation of white supremacy than the popular discourse. Keeping in line with current literature in geography (Bonds and Inwood 2016; Mahtani 2014; Pulido 2015), white supremacy refers to the various regimes of power that come together to create systems of racial exclusion and oppression to benefit whiteness. White supremacy takes on an active role in constructing "the structural, material, and corporeal production of white racial hegemony" (Bonds and Inwood 2016, 6). It does not only premise itself upon overt thoughts and words that preach the superiority of whiteness, but also works through the deliberate as well as unintentional oppression of certain races to the advantage of others and the exploitation of the power of whiteness to mine the resources and lives of non-white people (Pulido 2015). White supremacy is based upon the construction of whiteness as dominant through what Omi and Winant call racial formation, or "the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed and destroyed" (2015, 109). Though a construction, the material realities of racism are clear as they are built into the structures of our political, economic, and social life. Racialized meanings are continually produced and reproduced, changing forms "both a reflection of and response to the broader patterning of race in the overall social system" (Omi and Winant 2015, 125). These meanings create a racialized epistemology through which society understands itself in a kind of (white) 'commonsense' predicated upon racial fiction. Most insidiously, these logics have seemingly become disassociated from their beginnings in explicit violence upon Black bodies begun with chattel slavery and continued through the lynchings and oppression of Jim Crow.

The Freedom Center is a seemingly obvious place to examine white supremacy in America given its content. However, discussions of racism in the museum are far more fraught than may be expected. Many of the reviewers appeared to be pleased by what seemed to be the Freedom Center's non-racial approach to slavery. While race and racism are certainly discussed throughout the Freedom Center (Figs. 7, 8, 9), visitors appear to be dismissive of its importance to the story of slavery. Take for instance the following reviews:

> "Historical without being hateful, educational without being preachy." (White, Waynesborough, PA)
>
> "This place was not just for blacks, it is for everyone, because @ some time or another we all have been and are still slaves." (White, Chicago, IL).
>
> "I thought this museum would be solely about the American slave trade and Black American history. That was not the case." (White, Alexandria, VA)

Both of these reviewers seem to be relieved by either the lack of racial discomfort ("without being hateful" is reminiscent of claims of "reverse racism") or exclusion based on race ("not just for blacks"). If race was acknowledged, it was often framed in color-blind terms of the equality of all or the "human race" that attempted to show the valor of past white people or the multicultural justice of white people in the present. For example:

> "Great exhibitions and very balanced points of view which humanised not only the poor slaves but the free folk at the time also. I particularly loved the way that conflicted folk who owned slaves but knew it was horrible wrote and left histroy. (sic)" (White)
>
> "[The exhibits] lead the viewer through these years, leaving them with a greater understanding of both the past and how we are today - a nation of multiple races." (White, Dayton, OH)
>
> "This museum has done an outstanding job of explaining slavery not only for the black history of slavery but the on going trafficking and child labor slavery all around the world." (Sun City West, AZ)

These reviewers seem to see emancipation as a triumph of humanity over racism. They appear to be centered on whiteness, disregarding the primacy of anti-Black racism and reframing

it as a problem that *all* people had to deal with. This reframing reasserts the normativity of whiteness as pervasive and dominant in the national narrative (Kobayashi and Peake 2000). Over the past 50 years, racism has undergone a sea change, whereby outward racist oppression has been eschewed for less visible forms focusing on ostensibly non-racial phenomena.[1] In his instructive book *Racism Without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva writes, "whites have developed powerful explanations—which have ultimately become justifications—for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color" (2014, 2). Combining the previously discussed 'internal orientalism' and Bonilla Silva's color-blind racism, the Freedom Centers' (seemingly unlikely) role in the maintenance of white supremacy can be better understood. Bonilla-Silva examines color-blind racism through four central "frames" of which his frames of "naturalization" and "minimization" are most helpful. "Naturalization is a frame that allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences…Minimization…is a frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities" (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 76-77). Bonilla-Silva explains naturalization through the archetypal example of neighborhood segregation, where geographic patterns of living are often explained as naturally developing because people like to live with those (who look) most like them, never mind the research pointing towards exclusionary practices that continue to maintain these geographic separations (Rothstein 2017; Bonilla-Silva 2014; Omi and Winant 2015; Pulido 2000). Minimization is used to dismiss ongoing racist practices. I suggest a further reading of these frames, in tandem, to understand exactly how the Freedom Center is complicit in upholding white supremacy.

[1] An understandably contentious argument in light of the candidacy/presidency of Donald Trump.

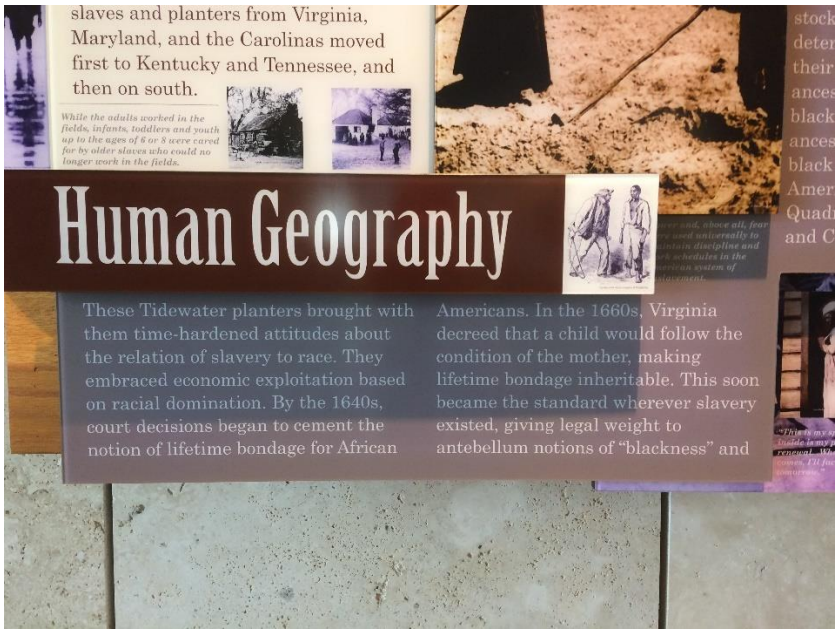


Figure 7. Museum Placard on Race and Slavery

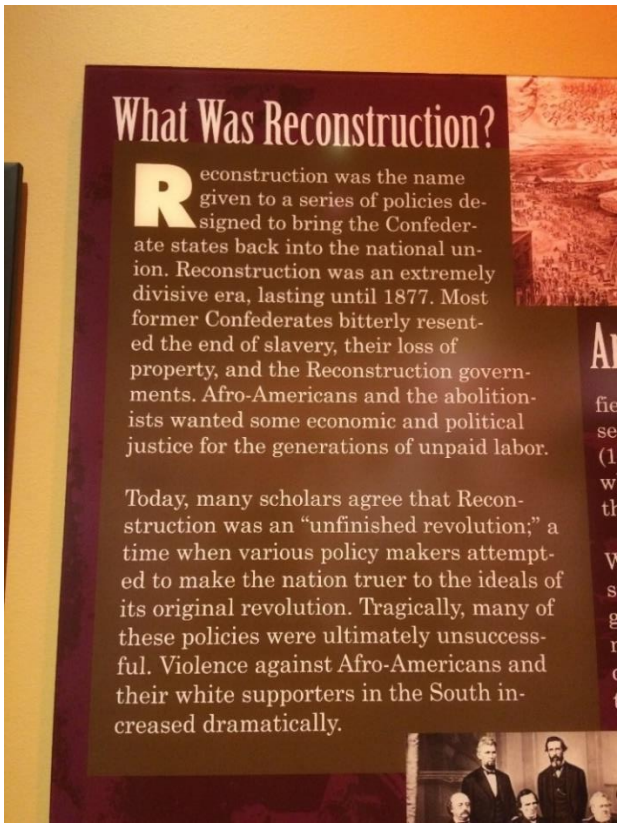
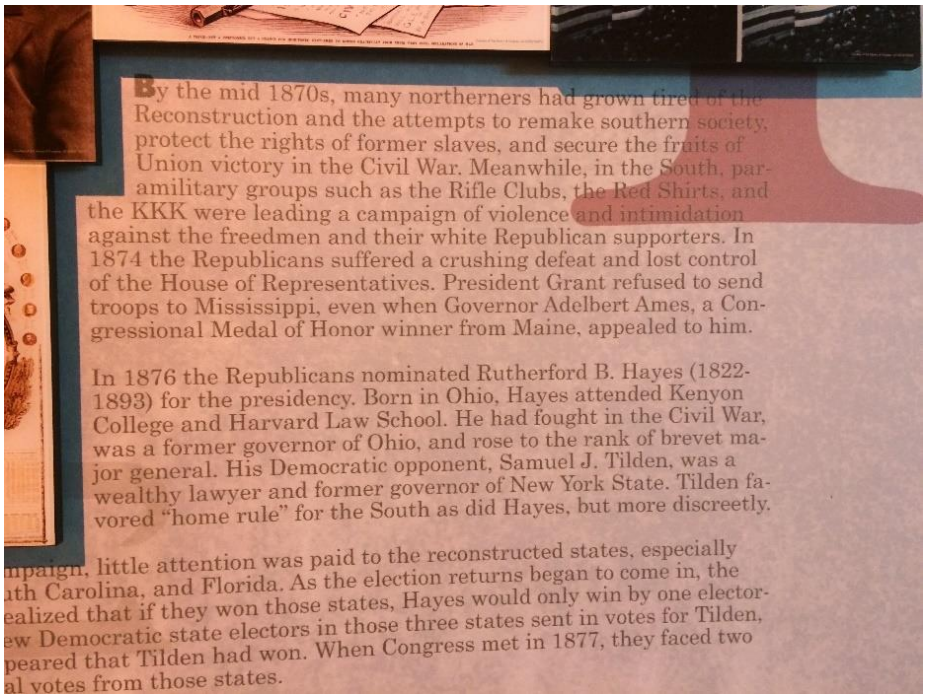


Figure 8. Museum Placard on Reconstruction



By the mid 1870s, many northerners had grown tired of the Reconstruction and the attempts to remake southern society, protect the rights of former slaves, and secure the fruits of Union victory in the Civil War. Meanwhile, in the South, paramilitary groups such as the Rifle Clubs, the Red Shirts, and the KKK were leading a campaign of violence and intimidation against the freedmen and their white Republican supporters. In 1874 the Republicans suffered a crushing defeat and lost control of the House of Representatives. President Grant refused to send troops to Mississippi, even when Governor Adelbert Ames, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner from Maine, appealed to him.

In 1876 the Republicans nominated Rutherford B. Hayes (1822-1893) for the presidency. Born in Ohio, Hayes attended Kenyon College and Harvard Law School. He had fought in the Civil War, was a former governor of Ohio, and rose to the rank of brevet major general. His Democratic opponent, Samuel J. Tilden, was a wealthy lawyer and former governor of New York State. Tilden favored "home rule" for the South as did Hayes, but more discreetly.

mpaign, little attention was paid to the reconstructed states, especially
ıth Carolina, and Florida. As the election returns began to come in, the
ealized that if they won those states, Hayes would only win by one elector-
ew Democratic state electors in those three states sent in votes for Tilden,
peared that Tilden had won. When Congress met in 1877, they faced two
al votes from those states.

Figure 9. Museum Placard Explaining White Post-Civil War Attitudes towards Black People

Using a historico-geographic understanding of the United States North and South, narratives about naturally occurring racism are implicit in our societal understandings about American regions and then minimized as no longer existing. As explained above, an ongoing tension exists in the United States between the "past/place" of the American South, continually contending with its history of slavery, and the "present/place" of the American North, constructed as necessarily forward looking and progressive (Jansson 2003b, 2010, 2017; Radford 1992; Winders 2005). These geographic imaginaries continue to flavor the ways in which we explain racist geographies, affecting discourse both temporally and geographically. The result of the manner in which we situate racism in the United States means that the white supremacist legacies that influence the present political, economic, and social environment are obscured and explained away as symptomatic of an American South that is merely a vestige of United States history. I contend that the National Underground Freedom Center represents its subject matter in very specific kind of color-blindness that neither explains nor challenges construction of the epistemology of white supremacy in which slavery was conceived and which continues to this day.

While the Freedom Center discusses race, an examination of visitor reviews seems to frame the museum instead as a material manifestation of "Southering" discourse, through which historico-geographic color-blindness takes place. Perhaps a result of its failure to contend with the immediacy of the racist legacies of chattel slavery, I make the argument in this section that the museum engages in what Omi and Winant (2015) call a "racial project" by presenting its message through a color-blind, internal orientalist narrative that cements racism spatio-temporally in the South of the past.

The Freedom Center has attempted to build a framework through which visitors can understand current racism. However, as the reviews above have shown, this framework has been

misunderstood at best and disregarded at worst. The Underground Railroad Freedom Center, by not explicitly confronting and challenging dominant narratives of Northern racial justice in and beyond the time of chattel slavery, allows for these nearly epistemic notions of the "post-racial" state and Northern racial exceptionalism to color visitors' interpretations. To understand more clearly how this works, we can turn to the term enthymeme through which Jansson analyzes "Southering's" effect on the maintenance of racism in the United States. Enthymeme is a form of argument where at least one of the assertions is hidden or implied. Jansson writes that enthymeme "can be used as a rhetorical strategy by attempting to persuade an audience by hiding important premises, some of which may be contested or controversial" (2017, 137). I, like Jansson, choose to set aside the intentionality of those employing this kind of argument, in this case the Freedom Center, because it is unimportant to the effects. The Freedom Center is vague in its presentation of how chattel slavery and the flights to freedom that many slaves undertook relates to the present. The historico-geographic contextualization that takes place in the Freedom Center is limited beyond discussions of where plantations existed or where certain stops along the Underground Railroad existed. Though it does acknowledge complicity of the North in maintaining slavery (Fig. 9), it reverts to geographic essentialism when discussing slavery's legacy (Figs. 7 & 8). Others have written about the complicated nature of using the Underground Railroad as a point of analysis as it is troubled by the possibility of reifying racial categories (McKittrick 2007). I contend that the Freedom Center falls victim to this exact critique.

The enthymematic approach to contextualization helps to uphold national narratives that position the Northern United States as having been and continually being racially just. It relegates racism to the "other" and the past instead of using history to inform the system of racist power and oppression that exist to this day. To understand the effects of this, I look to Omi and Winant's conception of the "racial project," which "is simultaneously an interpretation,

representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings…" (2015, 125). The Freedom Center is engaged both in creating identities and meanings; it plays a part in the continual (re)construction of American identity/ies as well as the forms and meanings of racial justice throughout the country. Because the preexisting categories of Northern racial justice and Southern racism are the social lens through which the United States is already understood, the Freedom Center's failure to complicate this narrative makes it complicit in the white supremacist "racial project." Unintentionally, I would argue, the Freedom Center has reified white supremacist structures by locating racism in the constructed Southern "past/place", obstructing the possibilities for addressing the clearly racist present. Memorial spaces not only help viewers to create meaning, but are affected by pre-existing knowledges that viewers bring with them. Instead of challenging these already held beliefs, it appears as though the Freedom Center is helping visitors to uphold these notions.

In a United States that is preoccupied with juridical approaches to addressing alleged wrongs, a positivist demand to show intentionality is the standard for claiming redress. As it relates to racism, I outright reject this assumption based upon the copious amount of research showing material, social, and psychological damages (Alexander 2010; Bonilla-Silva 2014; Hooks 1996, 2009; Omi and Winant 2015; Pulido 2000; Rothstein 2017). Intentionality has little to no bearing on the effects of systemic racism. Because of its pervasiveness and diffuse nature, white supremacy has the ability to function beyond outward expressions of racial animosity, as explained above.

7. Dispossession and futurity

We have seen how processes of history telling and the memorialization of identity are complicated and contestable, constrained by epistemological systems of white supremacy. Even when told by those with the best of intentions, racism, at the same time diffuse and structured, colors the way we remember the past and understand the present. Geographic imaginaries, naturalized into the spaces of the nation and the self, are the lenses through which we understand our position in the world. Though the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is meant to tell the stories of the earliest Black people in the United States, and while it has done this, it has further dispossessed Black Americans of their national identity. As we have seen, it enthymematically consigns its racial subject matter to the past and to the South, creating a linear, geographically imaginative narrative of American racial justice. However, "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (Sharpe 2016, 9). Dispossessed of Africa, later dispossessed of the American South in Jim Crow, the new color-blind national identity outlined here again dispossesses Black Americans. The North, and America, "definitionally means whiteness" (Mills 1997, 58) and yet the South is unwelcoming of Blackness due to its natural racism. Where then does Blackness belong?

An interesting disconnect occurred among some of the reviewers. Non-white reviewers (either self-described or suggested by their thumbnail pictures) seemed to approach the museum very differently than apparently white reviewers. Though many reviewers alluded to a collective history, what collective identity meant to white and non-white responders were divergent. When apparently white reviewers used collective pronouns, it seemed as if the "we" and "our history" referred to a *national* (white) collective identity.

> "Well organized and presented. Three floors organized to show our history with blacks, Indians, and globally." (White)

However, the non-white reviewers' responses centered the personal, seemingly pointing to a collective (non-white) *group* identity. For example:

> "I felt empowered and enlightened, especially as a biracial woman, visiting the Freedom Center with my father, of African decent (sic)" (Bi-racial, Greensboro, NC)

> "My grandson had a lot of questions about slavery and how it impacted our family, specifically were any of [our] ancestors 'slaves'. It was an excellent opportunity to educate him about our heritage (sic)" (Black, Charlotte, NC)

The difference between the two groups' responses points to a bifurcation of American national identity. Non-white people read their positionality into the museum as a present manifestation of the past. On the other hand, white respondents disassociate themselves from their past. It is part of their history; instrumentally, one that they were not a part of. They understand this linearly, refusing to read it into their present. The racism of the past is pulled away from the present, nonexistent in their "present/place" white identity, an identity that informs and constructs the national identity.

8. Conclusion

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is complicit in the maintenance of white supremacist structures through its inability to complicate national narratives about where racism does and does not exist. Through a complex process of national memory, power-laden discourses have shaped understandings of the racial landscape in a way that informs preexisting knowledges. The Freedom Center consciously frames itself as a monument to abolition and a space in which and through which to remember slavery. It stands as a beacon on the northern side of the Ohio River, its flame shining across the water as a symbol of the supposedly present-day and national value of freedom from oppression. This nationalized identity is internalized by (white) visitors, allowing them to read themselves into this narrative, obscuring their ongoing role in the maintenance of structural racism. Furthermore, the highly temporal and geographic nature of the story of slavery allows visitors to choose between the "past/place" of the South and the "present/place" of the North/nation. Even if visitors understand the legacies of racism, they can be easily explained away by placing them in time and in place, relegating them to an internally othered Southern geographic imaginary. It is against this construct of the South that racial progress is judged. This, I believe, points to a unique use of color-blind racism. Through geographic naturalization and historical minimization, (Northern) white visitors can learn about the horrors of the past while coming away feeling perfectly content with the white supremacist present. The take away for non-white visitors, on the other hand, is far more complex. Christina Sharpe (2016) writes, "The question for theory is how to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, the afterlife of property, how, in short, to inhabit and rapture this episteme with their, with our, knowable lives" (50). The epistemology of whiteness must be uprooted. The centrality of whiteness in the story of American slavery must be reversed in order to create more just futures. Memories and stories must be (re)created and (re)imagined with the intent of liberating

Blackness from the constraints of white supremacy. With the insights provided here, perhaps a path forward towards Toni Morrison (1987 (2004)) would call "rememory," not merely a process of remembering but of reconstructing memory, might become clearer. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is a case study in the grounding of white epistemological knowledges through its failure to contextualize Black lives as not dependent upon whiteness to be comprehensible. Because of this, the Freedom Center merely strengthens the story of white supremacy in the United States, impeding the possibility the power transform (white) national memory.

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