

The Shrillness of Silent Sam

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The Confederate soldier monument known as Silent Sam stood facing north from the “front door” of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for 105 years, from its dedication in 1913 to its toppling in 2018. Silent Sam was a prominent rallying point magnified by the fact that its coordinates aligned with a central axis of power that bisected both the campus’s two main quads, transecting the apices of South Building (offices of the Deans and Chancellor), Wilson Library, and the Bell Tower. The monument was designed as a public pedagogy – an object lesson of white supremacy – but the lessons it teaches as a symbol of the long nineteenth century have changed in response to shifting attitudes towards race, power, and memory, reflected in part by UNC’s diversifying student body. The forces that culminated in its removal were initiated by and propagated through protest and activism, especially by the University’s students and staff of color.

As a Yankee interloper taking up teaching in Chapel Hill in 2000, I was troubled by the persistence of Confederate nationalism and realized that it required a counter-pedagogy to resist its ideological impositions. I was provoked by Professor Gerald Horne’s call in 2000 to relegate the statue to a museum as an expression of “slavery denial,” and later, his [challenge](#) to those trumpeting its preservation as “history” that they demand the corresponding return of the statues of Saddam Hussein pulled down by the U.S. military after its invasion of Iraq. The notoriety of Silent Sam and its presence in the midst of campus provided a revealing locus for students to learn about the workings of power and resistance. A critical analysis of

Silent Sam has been a focus in many of my courses, including “Myth and History in American Memory,” that has developed over the years into one of our introductory courses for majors in American Studies. At the C19 conference in Chapel Hill in 2014 I organized a panel in the quad that explored the complex history and interplay of monuments on UNC’s campus. is an awareness not of what a piece of media seems to emanate on its own, but of all of the various sensations and sidelong that might have situated its effect on the person interacting with it. How would it have felt to exist within this past moment, not as if within a “historical narrative,” but as a body in a specific present-tense space overflowing with the push and pull of associations and interruptions, sense and apparent nonsense? Developing this “feel” invites a set of challenging asymmetries into our engagement with the page—failures of fit that are at the heart of reading “critically,” rather than in a comfortable habit of assumption with regard to the past.

“Teaching about Silent Sam urges students to take up their books and not be beguiled by the siren song of those who might be threatened by what they might learn.”

One lesson taught by Silent Sam is its tragic commemoration of the susceptibilities of the young to the allurements of patriotic fervor. The monument is ostensibly a memorial to students and alumni of UNC who were killed in the Civil War. When the states of the south seceded from the nation, only three universities in the United States had more students than UNC. By the end of the war, only a dozen students were actively enrolled as most had eagerly volunteered and freshmen and sophomores had been conscripted to fight. 321 of the 1026 students and alumni who fought in the war laid down their lives doing what they considered to be their duty to the short-lived Confederacy and its cornerstone of slavery. This mass death of collegians, killed – [as Herman Melville wrote](#) – “in their flush of bloom,” exemplifies parochial nationalism and the devotion of those, according to Benedict Anderson, “not so much to kill, but willingly to die for such limited imaginings....”



Figure 1. Silent Sam Bites the Dust, August 20, 2018. Reuters/Jonathan Drake



Figure 2. [“Unveiling of the Confederate Monument, June 2, 1913”](#) in Orange County, North Carolina Postcard Collection (P052), North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, Wilson Library, UNC-Chapel Hill.

Another important lesson taught by Silent Sam is that a site of memory often reveals more about the moment of its production than of the event it purportedly commemorates. When the “Boy Soldier” monument was conceived in 1908, a coercive resurgence of white power had unjustly compromised the rights of African Americans enacted after the end of the Civil War. The statue stood to celebrate the disenfranchisement and segregation of these citizens. Silent Sam professed in public the treasonous lesson that students and society should see it as their duty to resurrect and resume the racist rebellion against American constitutional equality. The “Soldier Monument” was “erected under the auspices” of the burgeoning United Daughters of the Confederacy, “aided by the Alumni,” and was dedicated at commencement in June of 1913.

The South’s weakness is ironically measured by how long it took to raise the funds and the fact that it could not muster its own molten Confederate soldier. Silent Sam was the creation of a Canadian sculptor, modeled after a Bostonian named Harold Langlois and smelted in a Rhode Island foundry. Its dedication ceremony was one month before the 50th anniversary of Gettysburg at which segregationist Virginia President [Woodrow Wilson enunciated](#) the racial betrayal of reconciliation between the Blue and the Gray, forgetting emancipation in the claim that “We have found one another again as brothers and comrades... generous friends rather... now grasping hands and smiling into each other’s eyes.”

The plaque on one flank of Silent Sam’s pedestal inscribes this Lost Cause ideology: “To the Sons of the University who entered the War of 1861-65 in answer to the call of their country and whose lives taught the lesson of their great commander that duty is the sublimest word in the English language.” Devious slippage is seen both in the commemoration of “their country” in 1913 – with C.S.A. inscribed above on his canteen – and in the universalizing of the “great commander” into a moral authority that transcends Robert E. Lee, despite the fact that the slogan ascribed to him was based on a forgery as well as expressed with poor grammar [i].

The racist violence for which Silent Sam stood is indexed in the words uttered by industrialist and UNC Trustee, Julian Carr, [at its dedication](#), that were rediscovered by historian (then graduate student) Adam Dombay when [researching Silent Sam](#) between 2009 and 2011. Carr sidelines the sacrifice of the dead students long in their graves to celebrate instead the “courage and steadfastness” of the living veterans who “saved the very life of the Anglo Saxon race...[w]hen ‘the bottom rail was on top’ all over the Southern states.” Carr gloats about an act of brutality that he called “a pleasant duty” that he perpetuated in front of Union soldiers in

1865: “I horsewhipped a Negro wench until her skirts hung in shreds, because upon the streets of this quiet village she had publically insulted and maligned a Southern lady.” This horrifying anecdote has been mobilized in recent years as evidence of the white supremacist intentions of the monument. A vernacular counter-monument to the unnamed black woman was anonymously raised in February 2019 across from the Post Office on Franklin Street in front of Silent Sam but was soon removed by town authorities [ii].

Silent Sam also teaches important lessons about the power and perseverance of resistance against the injustices for which it stands. The monument has been the cause and site for [a long history of protest](#) since the 1960s, especially after UNC’s doors began to be opened to students of color and women. These include responses to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the beating of Rodney King; a memorial to James Cates, a black man killed in the heart of campus by a white motorcycle gang; and demands for justice by the Black Student Movement and the Housekeepers Association. In March of 2019, Charlotte Fryar completed an entirely online American Studies dissertation, [“Rethinking the University of the People,”](#) which outlines a process of reclamation by mapping black freedom striving against white supremacy on campus at UNC since the 1950s, replete with archival documents and oral history interviews.

Protests during my time at UNC have demanded counter-memorials and/or contextualization. Critics argued that Silent Sam’s white power might be challenged by a counter-monument celebrating an African American such as Abraham Galloway, George Horton Moses, Pauli Murray, or Zora Neale Hurston [iii]. [The Real Silent Sam Coalition \(RSSC\)](#) wrote to UNC’s Chancellor in 2012: “The absence of information about the context in which the statue was erected contributes to a problematic social amnesia regarding our past, its ramifications in the present, and its lessons for the future.”

An assignment on Silent Sam in a 2013 course on “Approaches to Southern Studies” asked students to propose a plaque for the fourth, empty side of the monument that “addresses the meanings of the monument in the twenty-first century.” Here is one example of succinct distillation that attempted to register the monument’s changing resonances:

This monument serves as a somber reminder of a dark era in North Carolina history. / May we never forget the horrors of the war / and never let us forget the cruel injustices of slavery and institutional

racism. / The battle for equality and justice is not over and many continue to be silenced.

Such calls for contextualization became less tenable and transformed into more concerted demands for the removal of the statue after the rise of white nationalist power following the Charleston killings in July of 2015. These demands became more pronounced after the Charlottesville riots of August 2017 that were followed by the pulling down of a Confederate monument in front of the court house in nearby Durham, North Carolina. The legal path to resolution was stymied by a 2015 North Carolina law that permitted relocation only with the approval of the North Carolina Historical Commission and only then to an alternative site with an equivalent “prominence, honor, visibility, availability, and access,” explicitly rejecting a museum or cemetery as a resting place.



Figures 3-4. Vernacular Memorial to “the Negro Wench...We Fight in Her Name,” February 14, 2019. Tim Marr.

The public crisis of what to do with Silent Sam to defuse its danger as a rallying point magnified the psychic cost of its symbolism, especially for people of color. On August 20, 2018, protestors pulled down Silent Sam and its pedestals and base were removed by Chancellor Carol Folt on January 14, 2019, the day she announced her resignation. Part of our American Studies Department [statement](#) after the toppling states “The history of racism and power in the U.S. South demonstrates that democratic protest is necessary to confront the injustice of laws that must be changed.”

The fate of the statue is uncertain at this time. Though it has been hidden from display on campus, a proposal for its final disposition will be presented to the Board of Governors of the UNC System on May 20, 2019. At the dedication that statue that came to be known as Silent Sam, Governor Locke Craig asserted that “The soul of the beholder will determine the revelation of its meaning.” A critical pedagogy teaches students that their deeper duty is to behold the power of ideology in history so that they can assess more deeply the social paradigms in which we are enmeshed. One of the plaques on Silent Sam features a female figure, robed and holding a sword, with her other hand on the shoulder of a white, male student. As he looks up at her, one of the books on his lap has fallen on the ground. Teaching about Silent Sam urges students to take up their books and not be beguiled by the siren song of those who might be threatened by what they might learn. When political forces interfere with the work of education the university is forced to expend its energies to protect its intellectual and inclusive mission. This labor is unfairly borne by those whose freedom is most threatened, who must stand in to challenge the complicity of leaders too complacent or constrained to act. That burden detracts from their focus on classroom studies, yet such a struggle delivers its own profound educational lesson.



Figure 5. Elaine Massey at the Confederate Monument on MLK Day, 1997
Photograph in the John Kenyon Chapman Papers #05441,
Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library,
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



Figure 6. Brass relief on Silent Sam, [Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina, Documenting the American South](#), University of North Carolina Libraries.

END NOTES

[1]Sean Hueston, “The Most Famous Thing Robert E. Lee Never Said: Duty, Forgery and Cultural Amnesia,” *Journal of American Studies* 48, No. 4 (November 2014).

[2]This act of hate is [part of the evidence](#) that led Duke University in 2018 to remove Carr’s name from the building housing the History Department, despite his donation of 62 acres of land upon which part of the campus was established. The town contiguous to Chapel Hill is named Carrboro. It also raises issues of gender that correspond with the feminization of the figure of duty represented by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and legend behind the name Silent Sam: that the soldier would only fire his weapon should a virgin pass by.

[3]The Unsung Founders Memorial, completed in 2005, reads “The Class of 2002 honors the University’s unsung founders – the people of color bond and free – who helped build the Carolina that we cherish today.” For an account of the problems with this counter-memorial, see an article by Timothy J. McMillan, who led [Black and Blue tours](#) on campus, “Remembering Forgetting: A Monument to Erasure at the University of North Carolina,” *Silence, Screen and Spectacle: Rethinking Social Memory in the Age of Information*, Ed. Lindsay A. Freeman, Benjamin Nienass, and Rachel Daniell, Berghahn Books: New York, New York, 2004, 137-162.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy Marr is a professor in the Department of American Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Dr. Marr became interested in the history of how Americans viewed the difference of Islam while teaching *Moby-Dick* in Pakistan during the Russian phase of the war in Afghanistan. American engagements with Muslims and the life and writings of Herman Melville have remained central fascinations for his intellectual inquiry. His book *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (Cambridge 2006) explores how Islamic orientalism became an important transnational resource for early American global imaginings. In 2011 an Arabic translation was published by Kalima Foundation in Abu Dhabi. In 2008 he edited the first version of Peter Markoe's *The Algerine Spy* in Pennsylvania to be published in 221 years. He is presently writing a relational history that explores the century-long enterprise of military conflict, imperial governance, industrial development, and intercultural education between US Americans and the Muslim Moros of the southern Philippines. He is a co-editor of *Ungraspable Phantom: Essays on Moby-Dick* (Kent State 2006, paperback 2010) and has published on Melville in *The Historical Guide to Herman Melville*, *Melville and Women*, *Melville "Among the Nations,"* *The New Cambridge Companion to Herman Melville*, and in the journal *Leviathan*. He serves as an executive member of the Melville Society Cultural Project and a co-editor of the History Research Group for the Melville Electronic Library.

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