


 silence

Diversity Gazette

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The Heritage of Silence

by Jennifer Henderson

Hi, Maureen! I am from North Carolina, and most decidedly so. (If you are just joining this conversation, go [here](#) to read last month's installment of the *Diversity Gazette*.) I am part of the ever-shrinking native population. In fact, I am a twelfth generation North Carolinian, my direct forebears having moved to the coastal plain in the second decade of the eighteenth century. I grew up in Jones County and have lived in the Triangle area since I was a first-year undergraduate.

Ok, I realize this may not sound so exciting. One marketing blog I found claims that I only have seven seconds to get your attention before you decide whether to move on to more scintillating content.¹ We, the guest authors of the *Gazette*, can't currently count on having you as a captive audience in the lavatory, so I'll have to step up my game to keep you engaged. Do I still have you? I may not after

I tell you that I will shortly discuss the impact the Silent Sam controversy has had for me. Wait! Don't click away just yet! I know this may have been a bit of a wearying topic the last few years but hear me out.

When Alecia first asked me to write this issue, I struggled a bit for ideas and inspiration. I browsed the archive of previous topics but soon realized taking up the conversation that Maureen initiated was the perfect place to start. Maureen, we are actually not so different. I did not have much experience with diversity growing up either—not because it didn't exist, but because I was in an environment that did not value it. Sadly, the adults in my life felt it was their responsibility to shield me from it as much as possible. The public schools in Jones County were not integrated until the early 1970s. My parents' response to integration was to immediately disenroll my brother

and me and send us to a private Christian school. I vividly remember thinking on my first day of second grade, "Wow. No black people in my class. Maybe that's what God wants." And although there were many African American children in my hometown, I was not allowed to play with them, and white and black people went to separate churches. How could an eight-year-old believe anything other than that this de facto segregation was divinely mandated?

Over the years I began to question that assumption. In high school I decided that I wanted to attend the countywide public high school. I felt it was time to learn about and be a part of my geographical community, and that meant having classmates and making friends with people who were black. But the segregation I was subconsciously seeking to step out of was unfortunately also reinforced by

¹ Lindsey Bowshier, "You Have 7 Seconds: Grab Website Visitor's Attention in Moments," Tribute

Media, January 4, 2020, [https://www.tributemedia.com/blog/you-have-7-seconds-what-a-visitor-](https://www.tributemedia.com/blog/you-have-7-seconds-what-a-visitor-should-know-about-your-website-within-moments)

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more secular norms and expectations. Although my senior class was more than 50 percent black, the diversity I sought still eluded me. The lunchroom, extracurriculars like sports and prom, and outings among friends remained divided along racial lines; the white students associated with other whites, and the black students formed their own social groups.

“Heritage Not Hate” read a familiar bumper sticker emblazoned with the Confederate flag. Even then, I am ashamed to say, I was convinced of the ingenuousness of this sentiment.

Would I encounter a different environment in college? I was excited to be attending UNC Chapel Hill, which was both esteemed and vilified for its liberal atmosphere. I soon got caught up in my studies and social life and failed to recognize that only about 8 percent of my first-year classmates were African American.² Who or what was Silent Sam in those days? The butt of jokes about the origin of his moniker. Whatever else he was about wasn’t my issue. After graduation I got a job in the Undergraduate Library and as of October 1, have been employed with the University for 30 years. Today, African American students make up about 8 percent of the UNC Chapel Hill student body,³ nearly the same

as in 1984, when I was a first-year student.

It’s difficult to see a different perspective when so much of your world looks like you. And so my epiphany about how hurtful Confederate symbols are to African American co-workers, friends, and neighbors was embarrassingly recent. About 15 years ago, I read an article comparing these symbols and statues with swastikas and other Nazi paraphernalia, and the proverbial lightbulb went on. I have always been horrified to see neo-Nazi and white nationalist propaganda and felt it was cruelly offensive and inappropriate in any context. Why hadn’t I felt the same about symbols commemorating the old Confederacy? Was it because I had grown up with them and become inured to them, having seen them casually, and even proudly, displayed my entire life? It was then I realized that a Confederate flag must have the same demoralizing and frightening effect on black people that the display of a swastika has on Jewish people.

For hundreds of years African Americans have endured their own Holocaust, from being kidnapped and sold into slavery in a foreign land, to suffering through decades of humiliating segregation in the Jim Crow south, to being racially profiled and victimized by police brutality. When the controversy about the

disposition of Silent Sam erupted on our campus, I had just that minutest glimpse of what it could mean for others whose experience I knew nothing about, the experience I was really only subconsciously seeking as a high school student. Sam was no longer silent for me. I knew that this statue had no place at UNC. And though this native North Carolinian still operates from a position of white privilege that makes it difficult to completely grasp the struggles my black neighbors endure on a daily basis, I look forward to growing in the effort. The place you come from does not have to be the place you are destined to remain.

² Nicholas Graham, “Historic African American Enrollment at UNC,” *History on the Hill*, April 21, 2016, <https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/hill/index.php/2016/04/21/historic-african-american-enrollment-at-unc/>.

³ “Analytic Reports: Student Characteristics,” Office of Institutional

Research and Assessment, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://oira.unc.edu/reports/>.