

Episode 4 - Nonlinear Progress

TRIGGER WARNING: The following episode contains information and news clips about the 2017 Unite the Right rally, as well as news clips about racially motivated violent acts that some listeners may find traumatizing.

[Podcast theme song “The Duel” begins]

Welcome to the last episode of Memory Marks, a student produced podcast about the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers and the legacy of slavery at UVA. I’m your host, Shakeel Panjwani, and in this episode we’ll be examining Charlottesville’s and UVA’s nonlinear progress in addressing racial injustices and inequities.

[Podcast theme song “The Duel” fades]

What does it mean for Charlottesville, for UVA, to be the site of the Unite the Right rally and also the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers?

The building of the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers, or MEL, was a part of a student-led effort at UVA that began over 10 years ago to acknowledge the estimated 4,000 enslaved laborers who built and maintained the campus.

Since then, UVA has been taking some important steps to be more openminded about its history of slavery and to recognize the enslaved laborers, including a symposium in 2014 called “Universities Confronting Slavery,” and the creation of “The President’s Commission on Slavery and the University”.

However, in the midst of all the progress, in August 2017, the Unite the Right rally descended upon Charlottesville.

[News clips on the Unite the Right]

White supremacists terrorized the city of Charlottesville, including the UVA community. In a torchlit march through the center of UVA’s campus, White supremacists chanted, “White lives matter,” and “Jews will not replace us” as a response to the City Council’s decision to remove the statue of Robert E. Lee, a confederate general. A car plowed into a crowd of people, injuring 19 and killing Heather Heyer, a young woman who was there to protest this horrific display of White nationalism.

Unite the Right was the largest and most violent public assembly of White supremacists in decades, and it left a deep impact on the Charlottesville community. Many no longer felt welcome. Many no longer felt safe. Even today, some are still suffering from the emotional and physical distress. In a recent civil trial against the organizers of Unite the Right, several UVA students spoke out.

Natalie Romero, a class of 2020 alumna who survived a fractured skull in the violent outburst, leading to a litany of vision and mobility issues, said during her testimony, “This is completely knocking me off my path, you know?”

Diane D’Costa, a Class of 2018 alumna who had just moved into a Lawn room, expressed her terror when seeing protesters with torches marching by her room. Diane had this to say about the protest “It was terrifying. I was scared for my life. My chest tightening up. There was ringing in my ears. I was kind of in shock with what was happening.”

In addition to those who experienced the event directly, terror also spread amongst incoming students. Sarita Mehta, the current student member of the Board of Visitors, had this to say about the event:

Sarita Mehta: “Charlottesville is inexplicably bound with what was happening on August 11th ... I will often get questions ... from my cousins or more distant relatives on how does it feel like to go to a university has such a history of racism and in the near past as a student of color.”

[Music: “Labrynth” plays]

The Unite the Right rally revealed something that cannot be denied: racism still exists and continues to be a pervasive and undeniable part of American life.

But why was Charlottesville the epicenter of this kind of racial violence?

To answer this question, let’s take a step back to examine the entrenched racist beliefs that have loomed over the city for hundreds of years, with little acknowledgment until recently.

The city of Charlottesville, centered between the capital of the United States and the previous capital of the Confederacy, has deep roots in slavery and White supremacy, which is one of the reasons why it has been a magnet for present-day White Supremacist activity.

In an article called “This Class of Persons,” Professor Lisa Woolfork describes the various ways White supremacy and racist beliefs are intertwined with the university’s history. She writes,

“the same white supremacy that anchored the university in Charlottesville in 1818 because of the region’s proximity to the “white population,” the same white supremacy that linked education to white racial progress, that fueled a widespread model of white racial mastery on campus, that

promoted pro-white policies (racial integrity laws) and practices (eugenics as “science” or “medicine”) is the same white supremacy that the neo-Confederates, Nazis, and other racists marched on Grounds to support”.

[Music: “Webbed” plays]

Despite often being cited as a “progressive college town,” Charlottesville is clearly still grappling with its long history of White supremacy. The brazen public displays of racism that have taken place in recent years have resulted in some positive changes.

Four years after the Unite the Right rally, the statue of Robert E. Lee was finally taken down— thanks in large part to Zyahna Bryant, a current UVA student who was a ninth grader in Charlottesville when she started a petition calling on the city to remove the statue and rename the park. More confederate statues were taken down afterwards.

There have been other signs of progress as well. Just this year the individuals who planned the Unite the Right rally were held accountable for their actions in a civil trial. There have also been changes to UVA’s campus that aim to acknowledge and educate people about its dark history. Here’s Sarita once again:

Sarita Mehta: “There’s been a lot of work done to...create the QR codes around each of the monuments and...specific sites on grounds that ‘talk to’ the history of slavery at UVA..to contextualize things and educate ‘students’ ... There’s a tour now for first years... and prospective students that details the history of enslaved labor at the University... Over the summer, they ...voted on removing the whispering wall and....rebuilding it in a different way and...contextualizing it.”

Some perspectives, like Sarita’s, give a more positive view of the work UVA has done. However,

Deric Childress, the president of UVA’s Black Student Association, emphasized that despite all the improvements UVA has made, they are not enough. Here’s what Deric had to say about the actions taken by UVA: “Those are just a few steps I think the university can most definitely take, but they are not taking those steps properly because they are very performative. Performative lacks productivity.”

Deric would like to see UVA take more concrete action: “alongside getting all the confederate statues and flags taken off for any types of representation that is confederate like, alongside increasing the amount of Black faculty and staff in the community, but also increasing the amount of Black students that are enrolled and accepted to the university.”

[Music: “Space-Choir” plays]

Though change has been slow in Charlottesville and at UVA, the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers is an important symbol that acknowledges a painful history and honors those individuals who were oppressed by the university and the larger system of White supremacy. But it is also crucial to recognize that this pain and injustice is not simply something that remains located in the past. It is very much alive in the present.

[Headlines about the current racial injustice events in the U.S.:

Headline 1: A 26 year old woman shot dead by police. Her name is Breonna Taylor.

Headline 2: Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager was shot down by a White neighborhood watchman who claimed self-defense and has not at this point been arrested.

Headline 3: A police fatally shooting two Black men. When you watch the video, did nothing to warn them of losing their lives.

Headline 4: Images approaching from rioters storming the Capitol last week showed some carrying confederate flags. During the Civil War, the flags were the official symbol for the Confederate States, but more than a century and half later, it represents rebellion and for many, racism.

Headline 5: Familiar signs now carry a new name. Rashard Brooks, the 27 year old, shot and killed Friday night by an Atlanta police officer.

Headline 6: An officer later identified as Derrick Chaven places his knee on Floyd’s neck as Floyd tells the officers he can’t breath. Bystanders plead for his life. After approximately three minutes, Floyd becomes unresponsive. Officer Chaven continues to keep his knee on Floyd’s neck until paramedics arrive approximately five minutes later.]

The presence of the MEL is a constant reminder that the pain of the past is still with us. As Sarita put it during our interview: the Memorial is “a permanent, very much significant piece of the landscape...[a] *wound* in the Earth”.

The MEL reminds us that we are permanently marked by our history. It is a place to honor the enslaved workers, to grieve and reflect on the past. But it is also a call to action. The thousands of blank memory marks on the memorial serve as a visual representation of the work that lies ahead of us; it reminds us that we need to keep pushing and fighting for change, for justice, and for equity if we want a better future.

[Theme song “The Dual” starts]

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full list of audio and textual sources used in the production of this podcast can be found in the transcript associated with this episode.

Thanks for listening.

[Theme song “The Dual” fade out]

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