

Historical Forgetting: A Comparative Historical Analysis of the Haitian Revolution and the
Charlotte Whipping Post

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Humanities 104: Connections and Conflicts II

April 25, 2020

Everyone in the world has their own conceptual scheme, their own way of categorizing their experiences and seeing the world. They influence how people see themselves and behave towards others. These conceptual schemes can also be classified as ideologies. While individuals have their own unique ways of seeing the world, they are still subject to the dominant ideologies of their respective societies. Dominant ideologies “reproduce, maintain, and justify the status quo and hierarchical power relations within a people.”¹

As a modern example, meritocracy remains a dominant ideology in the United States, one that American media like books, movies, and TV shows constantly reproduce. Meritocracy asserts that one can accomplish anything with enough hard work; therefore, every successful person has worked hard to achieve their position. However, that is not actually the case. Many successful people are successful because they were born into wealth, or happened to be well connected. Alternatively, hard work is not always enough to be successful, especially for people in poverty or other marginalized groups who face many more obstacles.

Meritocracy as a dominant ideology preserves the status quo by justifying the positions of those in power and minimizing the obstacles disenfranchised groups face. Society instead holds these groups responsible for their own marginalization, calling them “lazy.” Granted, it is possible for members of these groups to work hard and become successful, although it is considerably more difficult. If everyone in the U.S. decided to reject meritocratic ideology, power structures would shift, and those in power would be called into question.

Racism was a dominant American ideology through the lifespan of both the Charlotte whipping post (pre-1775-1867) and the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). Slavery was alive and

¹ Rona Tamiko Halualani, *Intercultural Communication: A Critical Perspective* (San Diego: Cognella, 2017), 76.

well, and Southern plantations economically benefitted the North and the South. Hegemonic racism kept this system functional. However, both the Haitian Revolution and the Charlotte whipping post contradicted this ideology of racism, albeit in different ways. In this paper, I will examine the historical forgetting of this revolution and whipping post in an attempt to discover the reason for this forgetting.

The Haitian Revolution

The beginnings of the Haitian Revolution were influenced by principals of the recent American and French Revolutions, as well as the marronage practice, where slaves would escape plantations to refuges in the mountains; for 6 years, François Mackandal, a maroon slave, led several successful revolt until his execution in 1758.² The Declaration of Independence's "all men" article in particular generated discussion by planters which eventually reached the ears of their slaves. In 1791, slave and voodoo priest Boukman spearheaded a plan to end slavery through mass extermination and overthrow of slave masters, beginning the Revolution. By 1792, most Northern plantations had been overthrown. France sent multiple civil commissions, but all ultimately failed due to a variety of factors including the slaves' alliance with the Spanish Empire on the Eastern part of Saint Dominique and conflict between France and England.³ As the British began to capture parts of Saint Dominique, ex-slave General Toussaint L'Ouverture arose to help France drive Spanish and British forces out of Saint Dominique. He used this assistance as leverage to pressure France into an official abolishment of slavery in 1794.

² Jean Max Charles, "The Slave Revolt That Changed the World and the Conspiracy Against It: The Haitian Revolution and the Birth of Scientific Racism," *Journal of Black Studies* (2020): 279, 0021934720905128.

³ Charles, "The Slave Revolt," 279-281.

However, when Napoleon Bonaparte took power in 1802, he attempted to forcefully reestablish slavery on Saint Dominique. The slave army defeated the French army, and official declared Saint Dominique's independence in 1804. This resulted in the first Black Republic in the world, Haiti.⁴

Despite the Haitian Revolution's unprecedented events and outcome, however, its visibility remained relatively low and closely monitored. While the revolution was taking place, South Carolina, Kentucky, North Carolina, Georgia, and Maryland passed laws restricting the slave trade, especially the import of West Indian slaves, to prevent the spread of news.⁵ In the year following the revolution, France partnered with England, Spain, and the United States to impose quarantine through diplomatic isolation on Haiti.⁶ Other methods of silencing included other nations' refusals to recognize Haiti as independent, and its indemnity to France; it took almost the entire 19th century for Haiti to pay it off, resulting in near bankruptcy.⁷ These economic facts are significant in Western definitions of revolution. From a Western perspective, Haiti went from a rich colony to one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere.⁸ Therefore, the Haitian Revolution was considered a failure by Western scholarship, which proved to be another powerful silencer. This lack of knowledge persists today; as Shoecraft mentions, if you approach random Americans on the street, it is unlikely that they will know of the Haitian Revolution unless they are black.⁹

⁴ Charles, 281.

⁵ Ashleigh P. Shoecraft, "'A Single Finger Can't Eat Okra': The Importance of Remembering the Haitian Revolution in United States History," (2012): 45-46.

⁶ Charles, 285.

⁷ Charles, 291.

⁸ Thomas Reinhardt, "200 Years of forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian revolution," *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 4 (2005): 253.

⁹ Shoecraft, "A Single Finger," 9.

Scholars tend to agree on the overall causes for this silencing in the United States: the sheer unthinkable nature of the Haitian Revolution within the conceptual schemes of the time, and the fear of contagion. As Reinhardt states in *200 Years of Forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian Revolution*, the confines of what is reasonable, right, and thinkable are defined by paradigms and worldviews; “for Western historiography in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a revolution by Blacks definitely was something that could not be.”¹⁰

Since the events of the Haitian Revolution were unthinkable, Americans naturally attempted to acclimate its events into their conceptual schemes. Therefore, the true nature of the Revolution was smothered by narratives of Spanish, French, or abolitionist involvement, since a revolution orchestrated and executed by blacks was impossible to Americans.¹¹ Southern planters took particular interest in the Haitian Revolution; they feared it would prove prophetic of their own situation and that their own slaves would revolt if they heard of it.¹² This would threaten the profitable plantation system that benefitted both the South and the North.¹³ Scholars began to latch on to “scientific racism,” and attempted to use Haiti as an example of how blacks were incapable of self-government.¹⁴ The Haitian Revolution also disrupted American nationalism by threatening American exceptionalism; if the institution of slavery was proven immoral and unnecessary, how would Americans justify their republic which was invested in maintaining it?¹⁵

The Whipping Post

¹⁰ Reinhardt, “200 Years of forgetting,” 250.

¹¹ Shoecroft, 39-40.

¹² Shoecroft, 14.

¹³ Shoecroft, 45.

¹⁴ Charles, 285-287.

¹⁵ Shoecroft, 14.

The most recent reference to the Charlotte whipping post I could find occurs in *The History of Mecklenburg County 1740-1900 (North Carolina)* by J.B. Alexander, published in 1902. Alexander laments the destruction of the post as part of the Reconstruction; “we cannot say when the old jail, at the corner of Tryon and Sixth streets, was built, but it served the purpose for many years, with stocks and whipping post in the yard, where every one who wanted could see.”¹⁶ The stress on publicity was not uncommon; whipping posts often stood in public squares, and constituted a more common punishment than jail, which was most often used to hold people awaiting sentence. The *Western Democrat*, a Charlotte newspaper running from 1852 to 1870, made frequent references to the whippings occurring at the post. The 1864 issue contained the following statute:

...if any white person, or free person of color, shall offend against any of the before recited provisions of this act, he or she shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction or submission either before the courts of pleas and quarter sessions, or the superior courts of law for the county in which such offence shall have been committed, shall, if a white person, be fined or imprisoned, or both, at the discretion of the court; and if a free person of color, shall be fined at the discretion of the court not exceeding twenty dollars, and whipped at the public whipping post on the bare back not exceeding thirty-nine lashes; and if any slave shall offend as before mentioned, and be convicted before any justice of the peace of the county in which the offence shall have been committed, he or she shall be ordered by such justice of the peace to receive thirty-nine lashes on his or her bare back, to be inflicted by such person as may be appointed to act as the officer in the case, and that the master or owner of such slave shall pay all costs expended or incurred in the case.¹⁷

As the above statute expresses, black people took the brunt of the punishment at this whipping post. This, too, was not uncommon. As Lawrence M. Friedman’s *Notes Toward a History of*

¹⁶ J. B. Alexander, *The History of Mecklenburg County, NC, 1740-1900* (Westminster: Heritage books Inc, 2008), 23.

¹⁷ William J. Yates, “Ordinances of the Town of Charlotte.” *The Western Democrat*, April 18, 1859, 3.

American Justice describes, laborers, indentured servants, and slaves were considered the lowest of the low.¹⁸ As the bottom of the social pyramid, these groups bore the brunt of colonial social control and the harshest punishments, which included whipping. The purpose of this treatment was to “maintain control over a work force on whose labor and obedience the community depended.”¹⁹

The Charlotte whipping post stood from an indeterminate date before 1775 up until the start of the Reconstruction, when that form of corporal punishment was outlawed by Northern intervention. Given its long history, and the fact that the land once belonged to revolutionary war hero Thomas Polk, it is reasonable to find its lack of commemoration odd.²⁰

Plenty of literature exists on the commemoration of similar Southern artifacts, however. In *Remembering and Forgetting: Slavery, Secession, and the Civil War*, Rubin reviews literature with different narratives on Civil War remembrance. Various Southern cities create their own “usable pasts,” especially in the tourism context. Southern cities push the “New South” narrative, taking advantage of Civil War nostalgia while minimizing its more unsightly aspects to attract visitors and bring in revenue.²¹ These cities also make use of “dark tourism” such as haunted tours, which are often racialized. Hauntings allow tourists to interact with the racial aspects of the South’s past without having to address persistent racist structures.²² *Resolving the Paradox of Our Lynching Fixation: Reconsidering Racialized Violence in the American South after Slavery*

¹⁸ Lawrence M. Friedman, “Notes toward a history of American justice,” *Buff. L. Rev.* 24 (1974): 114.

¹⁹ Friedman, “Notes toward a history,” 114.

²⁰ Brent Holcomb, *Mecklenburg County Deed Abstracts, 1763-1779* (Southern Historical Press, 1979), 208.

²¹ Anne Sarah Rubin, “Remembering and Forgetting: Slavery, Secession, and the Civil War,” *Reviews in American History* 45, no. 1 (2017): 79.

²² Rubin, “Remembering and Forgetting,” 81.

focuses on the commemoration of racial violence, specifically lynching. In this article, Williams calls out white Americans's obsession with the spectacle of lynching, and defends the importance of addressing the circumstances and role of the victims of these acts. Williams asserts that "only from this perspective is it possible to comprehend the realities of white supremacist violence and the ramifications for its victims, essential precursors before healing on the personal, racial, or national levels can occur."²³

Discussion

The case studies of the Haitian Revolution and the Charlotte whipping post are worth comparing for a number of reasons. Most obviously, the two both correspond with a context of racism and slavery, as well as an overlap in time-frame; the Charlotte whipping post stood from pre-1775 up to 1867, and the Haitian Revolution occurred from 1791 to 1804. The issue I am most concerned with, however, is historical silencing, which occurs in both cases. The Haitian Revolution is infamously under-taught in Western education, and the Charlotte whipping post is not acknowledged in any modern sources.

In *Unthinkable History*, Trouillot describes formulas of banalization, which in the context of the revolution, try to strip its events of their revolutionary context.²⁴ This marks an attempt to silence history because it does not align with conceptual schemes regarding race and revolution. I believe the same forms of banalization are at play with the Charlotte whipping post, but rather

²³ Kidada E. Williams, "Resolving the paradox of our lynching fixation: Reconsidering racialized violence in the American South after slavery," *American Nineteenth Century History* 6, no. 3 (2005): 324.

²⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "An unthinkable history: the Haitian Revolution as a non-event," In *Haitian History* (Routledge, 2012), 96.

than being emptied of revolutionary contexts, the events that occurred at the whipping post are emptied of their contexts within racist power structures. The same process has occurred with many Southern cities, as explained in *Remembering and Forgetting: Slavery, Secession, and the Civil War*. The South pushes “New South” ideals by minimizing past injustices while profiting off nostalgia and tourism. The whippings that took place in Charlotte are reported in newspapers as uncritically and casually as the weather. In this way, the events of the revolution and the punishments at the whipping post become banal, and thus, not worthy of remembrance.

Resolving the Paradox of Our Lynching Fixation also addresses this banality; it is important to remember the victims and circumstances of racialized violence, lest it becomes mere background noise. Perhaps this is part of the reason the Charlotte whipping post was not commemorated after its destruction; it was simply common.

Preconceived conceptual schemes can be very powerful, and one’s worldview can hold more perceptual sway than facts. Often unconsciously, people adjust new facts to fit the world of possibilities contained within their worldviews. The Haitian Revolution caused an influx of conspiracy theories and scientific racism; Americans and Europeans were unable to believe that such a coordinated effort could have been organized by black slaves. This model also applies to the whipping post; people most likely didn’t object to the punishments inflicted on black slaves and freedmen because they fit their preconceived notions of black inferiority.

Western historiographies are guided by national, if not nationalist, interests.²⁵ The Haitian Revolution was silenced historically because Europe and the Americas feared the disruption of the institution of slavery, and later in American history because it became a blemish on the US’s

²⁵ Trouillot, “An unthinkable history,” 98.

progressive self-image. It is not unreasonable to assume that the silencing of the Charlotte whipping post is part of a larger agenda. The idea that the Charlotte whipping post where black people were subjected to violence existed at all threatens the idea of Charlotte as a progressive city. Events that conflict with broadly held ideologies or beliefs are commonly erased, glossed over, or silenced.

However, I would argue that the Charlotte whipping post's erasure is more about banality. As I stated earlier, people most likely didn't object to the punishments inflicted on black slaves and freedmen because they fit their preconceived notions of black inferiority. The whipping of black people anywhere in the South during this period was, quite frankly, common. Pick up any North Carolina newspaper from the 1800s and you will most likely see a column on recent whippings or other punishments. Imagine you live in a small town, and one day the local gas station gets torn down. This gas station has been there as long as you can remember, as long as your parents and even their parents can remember. Yet, is there a push to have it memorialized in some way? Probably not. People may be a little upset about it, but at the end of the day, nothing particularly extraordinary happened there. It was just another gas station. It was just another whipping post. It may not have meant something then, but it can mean something now.

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