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Hot Topic Paper

A group of students at the University of South Carolina were tired of waiting; frustrated by the state legislature's failure to act, they called a press conference on the cool morning of February 17, 2021, to announce that they would wait no longer. They declared the Thomas Cooper Library would now be known as the Willie L. Harriford Library. This group of Black students decided representation matters in the cultural landscape. Dyrek Hamilton stated that this was, "not a cry for help, nor a request for sympathy, but instead a demand for change" (Duprile, 2021). This is the latest instance of libraries being called on to face the institutionalized racism found, literally written in stone, upon their facades. In October 2020, the Charlotte, North Carolina public library renamed a branch that was named for a former governor who advocated white supremacist ideologies. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Library CEO Lee Keesler expressed, "As a trusted institution, we are committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone in our community" (Jackson, 2020). In June 2020, Louisiana State University (LSU) announced it would rename the Middleton Library, removing its association with the former LSU president who fought against desegregation at the university. LSU interim President Tom Galligan remarked that; "Any student, or particularly a student of color, that has to go into any building which bears the name of someone not identified with progress and with racist traditions is to inhibit their education" (Kubena, 2020).

So, what's in a name? An idiom posing an age-old question. A name can be arbitrary, a label that does not align with the intrinsic qualities of an organization. However, a name within the cultural landscape has a deep meaning-making function that usually privileges those with

power at the expense of those without. Alderman (2008) suggests in “Place, Naming and the Interpretation of Cultural Landscapes” that naming, as a cultural practice, “serves as a powerful vehicle for promoting identification with the past and locating oneself within wider networks of memory” (p. 195). Alderman posits that commemoration within the cultural landscape has used power and politics in place naming, that these names evoke indelible images and connotations that directly contribute to an individual’s sense of place with geography, history, and society. This is why what places are named has been a part of the national conversation on social justice and racial equality that was sparked during the summer of 2020, set in motion by the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, Ahmaud Arbery, and numerous other Black Americans. Galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) have not been exempt from this conversation, nor should they be, given the core values the professions purport. The American Library Association (ALA, 2019) places access, democracy, diversity, education, public good, and social responsibility as core tenants of librarianship. The discussion on what is commemorated in the cultural landscape speaks to each of these values. With the landscape having forfeited its neutrality long ago, libraries cannot be neutral in this discourse.

To dive deeper into the importance of place naming, it is important to understand how the naming of place reflects the larger societal understanding of who has the authority to define, interpret, and represent our collective pasts. Azaryhu (1996) suggests that place naming ascribes certain versions of history with the appearance of being the natural order of things; having been achieved by inscribing ideological messages into everyday life. Since the landscape is a human-shaped environment, it teaches a power dynamic to the public (Clowney, 2013, as cited by Ferguson, p. 47). Alderman (2008) adds that place naming brings distinction and status

to the landscape, along with the associated people, via an exclusive historical representation, which can serve as “symbolic violence or marginalization for stakeholders who remember the past differently” (p. 197). However, as the current climate of racial and social justice reckoning is demonstrating, this is not a one-way street; place naming can be appropriated in what Alderman (2008) refers to as symbolic resistance. Marginalized communities are claiming their right to have a voice in what is inscribed into the landscape. Symbolic resistance has begun to accelerate over the past year, with the students in South Carolina serving as shining examples.

So how can GLAMs contribute to symbolic resistance and serve as allies to marginalized communities in correcting dictated discriminatory memory structures? Jensen (2016) remarks that memory is a defining fundamental feature that citizens utilize in determining their role and identities within a democracy; and that libraries, as memory institutions, have an important role in the individualistic or community-based models of engaging with history. This can be accomplished by assuming accountability in the discussion of history, memory, and knowledge. Add to this Jensen’s assertion that the concept of state-sponsored commemoration is being “undermined by a radical change in the way in which the individual relates to the state. The acts of a state are no longer readily accepted as an expression of our identity” (p. 117). I alluded to the idea that a name can be an arbitrary designation, one that does not align with the intrinsic qualities of an organization. We may enter into employment at a library that already has a name, one placed upon the landscape by an arcane power structure. It is our professional obligation to recognize the barriers to access that exists and to dismantle them.

My own academic library is faced with this conundrum with our organization being named after the matriarch of a historically powerful political family that consisted of the chief

justice of the Georgia Supreme Court and produced a governor for the State of Georgia, both of whom were known allies to white supremacy; the son going on to serve as a U.S. Senator and being a chief architect of the Southern Manifesto. In June 2020, the Georgia Board of Regents and the University System of Georgia (USG) announced a system-wide review of the names of buildings on all USG campuses. The announcement stating, that the, "...USG's mission is knowledge, and this action today is a step toward addressing how communities understand the history and context involving our campuses" (USG, 2020). No results have been published yet. It is our hope that our facility will be addressed, however, it is not a given. We have begun the process of rebranding in order to disassociate ourselves from our current namesake, foster conversations, and provide contextual understanding to our stakeholders on what Clowney refers to as the reinforced racial hierarches buried in the landscape (Clowney, 2013, as cited by Ferguson, p. 47). Brasher et al. (2017) notes that even though universities function as public spaces, the ability to express oneself has been susceptible to control, contest, and inequality, and calls on institutions of higher education to acknowledge the role they have played in the racialization of the landscape, that the moral authority provided them has enforced racial hierarchies and created "wounded places" that have normalized violence (pp. 292-294).

The fact of the matter is: names matter. When buildings of an institution of higher education or a library bear the names of individuals tied to the complex history of white supremacy, carved in stone, it serves to amplify and solidify the permanence of systemic racism. The continued presence of the names commemorating individuals that represent the ingrained ideology of white supremacy stand as unresolved racial microaggressions that contradict and discredit the library's supposed ideals of access, democracy, diversity, education,

public good, and social responsibility. There must come a reckoning with these names before a reconciliation can be achieved. I hope the long-held symbolic debate that has played out in the cultural landscape continues to gain conscious recognition, understanding, and resistance that will lead to a new debate redressing these injustices. GLAM professionals will play an important role in the memory work that is needed to facilitate this societal change.

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