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Articles

“You Call It Honor, We Call It Dishonor.” Counterstorytelling & Confederate Monuments in Isle of Wight County, Virginia

Brooke Covington, Chief Rosa Holmes Turner, and Julianne Bieron

Abstract

This essay considers how everyday citizens use counterstorytelling as a persuasive tactic in sites of ordinary democracy like public hearings. Specifically, we examine the counterstories and stock stories shared during a public hearing held in Isle of Wight County, Virginia to determine the future of a confederate monument that stood in front of the county’s courthouse. By focusing closely on one particular counterstory, this essay considers counterstorytelling as a form of racial countermemory that challenges dominant narratives by centralizing social justice and anti-racism. The authors aim to contribute to understandings of storytelling and its role within sites of participatory democracy, particularly concerning debates over contested memory objects.

Keywords: counterstory, community, narrative, critical race theory, anti-racism, rhetoric, social justice

Introduction

Our research examines how monuments and memorials shape the public’s memory of our shared past. More specifically, we examine one case study: the local confederate monument that stood in front of Isle of Wight County’s courthouse from 1905 to 2021 and the controversy that ensued during deliberations concerning whether or not to relocate the monument. In light of this case, we ask: How do ordinary citizens use storytelling to support their interpretations of confederate monuments, and in turn, how do these memory objects shape the collective identity of the community? To engage these research questions, we examine the narratives used by citizens at the public hearing to support their position on what should happen to the monument (if anything). Our analysis is informed by critical race theory and its interdisciplinary method(ology) of “counterstorytelling,” which highlights the dominant (stock) stories that organize our culture and the marginalized stories that run counter to those dominant interpretations. By focusing closely on one *coun-*

terstory told by Chief Rosa Holmes Turner, we demonstrate how counterstorytelling functions as a rhetorical strategy in efforts to displace confederate monuments. This research offers lessons to storytellers hoping to disrupt, disturb, and challenge master narratives propagated about the confederacy and the remaining relics of white supremacy within our country's memorial landscape. Moreover, by sharing this work among three co-authors (a local counterstoryteller, an undergraduate student, and an assistant professor), we model the type of collaborative work we call for.

Who We Are

In preparing this manuscript, the authors take seriously the impetus set forth by critical race theorists and counterstorytellers to disrupt traditional research paradigms, challenge dominant ideologies, and centralize the embodied and experiential knowledges of people of color (Delgado, Solórzano & Yosso, Martinez, and Faison & Condon). In this effort, we join scholars who are insistent on the importance of documenting the persistence of racism and acknowledging the ways in which a hegemonic culture of whiteness infects our personal and professional lives.

Rosa joins this project as Chief of the Warraskoyack Tribe at Mathomank (Mathomauk) Village—she is also a Native-born resident of Isle of Wight County and a descendant of countless trailblazing ancestors who helped to shape Isle of Wight County and America's history for centuries. Rosa was raised on the Rushmere Reservation, once known as the Warraskoyack Shire but now called Isle of Wight County, which is located on the James River and historic Lawne's Creek tributary (named for Sir Christopher Lawne, an early settler and colonizer of the Virginia Company, who arrived on the *Marigold* in May 1618). Rosa grew up on the oral storytelling and documented accounts of her ancestors and pioneers who inhabited the historic Mathomank (Mathomauk) Village, including historical figures like John White (1593), Captain John Smith, (1607, 1608, 1610, 1611), and Indian Interpreters Reverend Thomas Baylye (1603-1681), John King (1600-1670), Robert Poole (1565-1622) and Thomas Hughes (1620). Deep knowledge of her ancestral past has enabled her to speak from a position of strength and authority about the systemic racism she's faced in her lifetime. As a person of color, Rosa witnesses both the short- and long-term effects of white colonization and the erasure of her people's histories, which has supported and fueled a form of paper genocide that nearly eradicated BIPOC histories from official archives, libraries, and textbooks for centuries. Historical events like the Discourse of Western Planting (Richard Hakluyt, 1593), the Indian Massacre (1622), the Articles of Peace (Powhatan Indian Treaty, 1646), the Act of Cohabitation (1688-90), the Virginia Emancipation Act, (Manumission, 1772), the War of 1812, the American Civil War (1861-1863), the Racial Integrity Act (1924 Walter Plecker), the Prohibition Act (1932-38), Jim Crow, the Isle of Wight Annexation of Rushmere to Smithfield (1970-72), the Virginia Marine Commission Jim Crow Policy Practices (1950-Present), and all other War eras have significantly imposed majoritarian narratives on people of color in Isle of Wight County for generations, resulting in defamation of character, enslavement, economic hardship, false imprisonment, loss of land, harsh and inhu-

mane punishment, gentrification, vilification, and intentionally nullifying the importance of the Black and Indigenous histories that help shape her county and the United States of America. Rosa contends that the Civil War Era and the concerted efforts of all who idolize the confederate monuments to this failed chapter in America's history enforces and even encourages the degradation of society.

Rosa has been an advocate for the disenfranchised citizens of Isle of Wight and surrounding localities for over two decades as the founder of Rushmere Community Development Corporation. As heated national, state, and local debates regarding confederate statues, public monuments, and memorials intensified, Rosa knew the spirits of the ancestors were calling for justice through her, and she could no longer keep silent. Rosa counted the cost of her silence and chose to answer the clarion call to stand up as a person of color in leadership and to speak truth to power during the Isle of Wight County public hearing. The "Lost Cause" rhetoric has gone on long enough. After being contacted by Brooke to work on this project, Rosa again chose not to be silent.

Brooke Covington comes to this research as a straight, cisgendered, white woman who had the privilege of earning a PhD in Rhetoric and Writing Studies, which caters to her long-held interest in the rhetorics of public monuments and memorials. Born and raised in Richmond, Virginia, Brooke grew up next to monuments, streets, bridges, schools, and entire communities named after confederate soldiers and supporters. As a descendant of the confederate south, Brooke tries to reckon with her troubling ancestral past by challenging Lost Cause narratives and amplifying the marginalized stories that have gone unheard for too long. While Brooke recognizes that her whiteness enables her to practice a form of "privileged resistance" (O'Brien), she nevertheless agrees with Jill Reglin that "the need is critical for white women to talk out loud about social and racial injustice, as far as we are able to understand it" (121). Her work in Isle of Wight County began in August of 2020 when she moved to Newport News, Virginia (about 20 miles from Isle of Wight) and quickly learned of many confederate monument controversies unfolding across the Tidewater region. She began tracing these controversies and the tactics used by ordinary citizens to argue for or against the displacement of confederate memory objects, which eventually led to a research partnership with her student, Julianne.

Julianne Bieron entered the project first as a student interested in pursuing rhetorical analysis more intentionally as an undergraduate researcher. Brooke and Julianne applied for a summer fellowship opportunity to support undergraduate research projects and theirs focused exclusively on the confederate monument controversy in Isle of Wight County. Julianne grew up in Springfield, Virginia outside of Washington, DC. After living part-time in the Tidewater area of Virginia since 2016, she relocated full time in 2020 in the midst of the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. As a white woman living in a primarily Black community, she embarked on this research project to use her platform as a student of writing to support the voices of people of color in the Tidewater region.

Isle of Wight County, Virginia

The counterstory we later highlight was shared by Chief Rosa Holmes Turner on September 3, 2020 at a public hearing in Isle of Wight County, Virginia—a small rural county of approximately 39,000 residents located in the southeastern region of Virginia. According to 2020 U.S. Census data, the county demographics are 72.6% white, 23% Black, 4.7% Hispanic or Latinx, 2.8% two or more races, and 1.1% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau). Before sharing Rosa’s story, the authors want to provide a little background on the Isle of Wight County confederate monument and the controversy faced by its residents.

Thanks to the fundraising efforts of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the “Monument to the Confederate Dead” was erected in front of the Isle of Wight County courthouse on Memorial Day on May 30, 1905. According to the curators at the Isle of Wight County Museum, the statue itself was one of many mass-produced war memorials circulating at this time (England and Holtzclaw). Its features include a quadrangle staff situated on a hexagonal pedestal with inscriptions. On top of the pedestal is an unidentified confederate soldier, often called “Johnny Reb,” wearing Confederate States of America military garb and holding a gun. Each of the six inscriptions is described in Appendix A.

Public concern over the presence of the monument in front of the courthouse reached a boiling point during the summer of 2020 as citizens witnessed a surge of racial reckoning in the U.S. The murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of law enforcement officers led to a wave of Black Lives Matter protests across the nation, including in Isle of Wight County. Protestors and advocates lobbied for the systematic removal of confederate monuments from public spaces. Thanks to such efforts, state protections concerning memorials for war veterans in the state of Virginia were overturned in the summer of 2020.

Prior to July 1, 2020, the Code of Virginia (§15.2-1812) prohibited local authorities or individuals from removing, damaging, or defacing an established war memorial. After July 1, 2020, Virginia localities were granted the ability to erect, remove, relocate, contextualize, or cover any publicly owned monument. Like many other locales in the state of Virginia, Isle of Wight County found itself reconsidering the protection it once afforded the confederate monument that stood in front of its county courthouse. Pressure from local citizens in Isle of Wight County forced the county’s Board of Supervisors to act—on July 16, 2020, Supervisor Rudolph Jefferson (the only person of color on the Board) proposed holding a public hearing to determine what (if anything) should be done with the monument. The public hearing was approved with a 4 - 1 vote and scheduled for a special session on September 3, 2020.

Isle of Wight County residents were invited to attend the in-person public hearing on September 3, 2020 or to submit email comments to the Board of Supervisors. Those present at the public hearing were asked to abide by specific guidelines when sharing their comments. Each citizen was asked to begin their comments by clearly stating their name, address, and electoral district of residence.¹ The Chair of the Board was emphatic that “the public hearing shall not serve as a form of debate with the Board or individual members of the Board,” though citizens were asked to direct

their comments only to the Board members, not the audience or the media. Each citizen was allotted 4 minutes to give comments, while any speaker who represented a group of 10 or more individuals was allotted 6 minutes to speak on behalf of the group.

Of those present at the public hearing, 48 people spoke, 21 in favor of removing the statue, and 27 against removal. Of the 147 unique citizen comments submitted via email to the Board of Supervisors, 42 were pro-removal and 105 were anti-removal. If the decision had been made solely based on numbers, it is likely that the confederate monument would still be standing at the county courthouse today. However, many of the comments (or, as we argue, the counterstories) offered by those in support of removing the monument persuaded the Board of Supervisors to take a different route.

By the end of the 4-hour long public hearing, the Board of Supervisors decided to forego a formal vote. Convinced that the most appropriate path forward was either relocation or contextualization (which involves adding informational signage, other statues, or educational materials to explain the history surrounding the monument), the Board instead created a Monument Taskforce of eight residents who were tasked with providing the Board recommendations for relocation and contextualization ideas. Though the Taskforce was unable to reach consensus, their recommendations to the Board ultimately resulted in the monument's relocation to private property owned by a local resident but granted to Isle of Wight County through an easement. County taxpayers paid \$32,500 to remove and relocate the monument in April of 2021.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the public hearing was live streamed via Facebook Live—which is how two of the authors—Brooke and Julianne—engaged with the public hearing. Rosa was present at the public hearing and spoke, in addition to emailing her story and photographs to the Board of Supervisors (see Appendix B for a full transcript of Rosa's testimony comments). In the next section, we more fully introduce critical race theory and its interdisciplinary method(ology) of counterstorytelling. From there, Rosa shares her emailed public hearing comments, and together, we explore how Rosa's comments function as a form of counterstorytelling.

Critical Race Theory & Counterstorytelling

We turn to critical race theory and its method(ology) of counterstorytelling to help us understand how narratives from the public hearing challenged the dominant ideologies and confederate rhetoric circulating in Isle of Wight about the monument and its function. Critical race theory emerged from critical legal studies—a movement in the 1970s that emphasized the role of racism in American law and sought reforms based on the premise that all legal interpretation is political and therefore never objective or neutral. Critical race theory aptly assumes if racism and oppression are present in American politics, then it is most certainly embedded in our legal system and beyond. Critical race theorists have thus pushed to expand this lens to move beyond law and policy by examining how power, racism, and hegemonic whiteness function across social institutions (including areas like education, healthcare, commerce, and

technology). According to rhetoric and writing studies scholar Aja Y. Martinez, critical race theory “argues that ignoring racial difference maintains and perpetuates the status quo with all of its deeply institutionalized injustices to racial minorities and insists dismissing the importance of race is a way to guarantee that institutionalized and systematic racism continues and even prospers” (2022). Critical race theory is thus an effort to challenge the status quo by situating the experiences of people of color as central to understandings of racism and whiteness.

But, catering to an intersectional perspective, critical race theory acknowledges that racism is intertwined with other forms of oppression, and thus “works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of opposing or eliminating other forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin” (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 25). And while scholars have identified several key tenets of critical race theory, we draw primarily from Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso who have identified five key characteristics that constitute basic principles of thought concerning critical race theory. According to Solórzano and Yosso, critical race theory:

1. Situates race and racism as central to other forms of subordination.
2. Challenges dominant ideology, particularly concerning majoritarian narratives about objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity.
3. Is committed to social justice and the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty and the empowering of subordinated minority groups.
4. Recognizes the experiential and embodied knowledge of people of color as legitimate and critical to understanding racism and “challenges traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color” (26).
5. Emphasizes a transdisciplinary perspective that builds on knowledge across disciplines and insists on analyzing race, racism, and whiteness within historical and contemporary contexts.

These five themes have been picked up by several critical race theory scholars and represent a challenge to dominant modes of scholarship and knowledge creation that reify hegemonic whiteness (see Martinez, 2016, 2020; Delgado, 1989; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). We share these five tenets in particular because they are central to our methodology of *counterstorytelling*.

One of the method(ologie)s to emerge from critical race theory is known as counterstorytelling. Critical race counterstory recognizes that the dominant group in society justifies its position and maintains its dominance through the sharing (and naturalization) of dominant narratives or “stock” stories. Stock stories are dangerous in the sense that the stories dominant groups often tell about American “progress” or “merit” or “neutrality” become so naturalized that they do not appear like stories at all. Once naturalized, stock stories may simply be accepted as truth. *Counterstories* are those stories told by minoritized groups to counter the accepted stock narratives.

How can you recognize a counterstory? Solórzano and Yosso argue that “a story becomes a counterstory when it begins to incorporate the five elements of critical race theory” (2002, 39).

Of course, counterstories can be put towards many different ends—but one of the early pioneers of counterstorytelling, Richard Delgado, reminds us that:

Counterstories can quicken and engage conscience. Their graphic quality can stir imagination in ways in which more conventional discourse cannot. But stories and counterstories can serve an equally important destructive function. They can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power. They are the other half—the destructive half—of the creative dialectic. (2415)

Counterstorytelling is thus both a method *and* methodology—it can be the research tool (the instrument used to collect data) and/or the rationale and approach guiding the research process (the lens through which the data analysis occurs). Important for our purposes, “counterstorytelling recognizes that the experiential and embodied knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well-disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices” (Martinez 69). Thus, we bring this critical lens to the counterstories and stock stories shared at the public hearing in Isle of Wight County on September 3, 2020. Recognizing that Brooke and Julianne could not possibly understand the experiential or embodied knowledge shared by Rosa in her comments, the duo invited Rosa to join them as a co-author, co-creator, and co-researcher in hopes that we all might take seriously the challenge to disrupt traditional approaches to scholarly research; to privilege counterstorytelling in messy, emotional, and complicated real-world contexts; and to bear witness to the transformative power of storytelling as a tool of social justice and anti-racism.

Rosa's Counterstory

To avoid sterilizing the power of Rosa's counterstory, we quote her public hearing commentary in full—doing so is also an effort to avoid white-washing the narrative by forcing it into the linguistic code required of certain genres in academia. We chose to foreground Rosa's emailed comments, rather than her spoken testimony, because she directs the Board of Supervisors to her emailed comments in her public hearing testimony (Rosa's full public hearing testimony appears in Appendix B). The following is a direct transcript of the message Rosa sent to the Board of Supervisors (“Written Comments”):

Dear Board of Supervisors,

My family ancestors have been documented in this County for more than 12,000 years and today, I lift my voice to be heard on behalf of those I represent. I ask that the Isle of Wight County Board of Supervisors vote to remove

the Confederate Statue from the Isle of Wight County complex on Monument Circle.

On 8/ 15/ 2020, as the Confederate monument was being removed from the public grounds at the Surry County Circuit Court House, I saw it as a victory and first step, to apologize for the inhumane treatment my Great -great Grandmother, Elizabeth Bailey-Howlett, (1837-1932), endured under the hands of a Confederate Soldier. Seated in the picture dressed in black, a FPOC (Free Person of Color), she was raped by a Confederate Soldier during the Civil war and left to die. By the grace of God, a Union Soldier rescued her and her family, thus allowing her legacy and future generations, like me, to be born.

My Big Daddy, (Grandfather), the late Pastor Harvey P. Johnson, was made to clear the ground where this statue sat, knowing that his wife 's grandmother had been raped and brutalized by a Confederate Soldier. He was paid \$0.10 for performing his work assignment.

It's a bittersweet moment for me and my family. I pray that my Great -Great Grandmother's story and many others who endured the painful injustice inflicted on them during the Civil War era, as well as, any other era that focused on preserving slavery and oppression of another human race for their own selfish economic gain, should be told in the Local Government Chambers, Virginia General Assembly, United States Congress and Senate, and across this Nation.

Surry and Isle of Wight County are like Siamese twins that were separated at one point at their Lawnes Creek Vain. Just because they were separated does not mean they're not still connected. Twins always feel the hurt, joy, and pain of each other.

My Great -Great-Great Grandfather, John K. Claggett, was a staunch Confederate and a brutally hateful taskmaster, as our family's Oral history have shown. However, my Great -Great Grandfather, John C. Claggett, loved my Great Grandfather the late Robert W. Claggett, (1886 -1965), from his mixed-race intermarriage to Margaret Haskett , as well as, the rest of his children, Charles M., John H, Evelina, Queen Anne, and Sarah.

No one has ever glorified the person or unit who lost the war or came in 2nd place. No Isle of Wight County citizen should have to pay perpetually for a population who chose to uphold the right to enslave a people as if it was their God given right to do so.

My ancestors Thomas Hughes, Robert Claggett, Samuel Arthur Holmes, William Holmes, all served this Country and fought for freedom, not for the right to celebrate and preserve slavery throughout this County.

So Isle of Wight County, Board of Supervisors, please follow suit with your Siamese twin Surry County, and vote to take down your Confederate monument effective immediately.

It's time for our communities to heal from what is a constant reminder that our family members were beaten, enslaved, raped, tortured, and murdered, at the hands of many Confederate soldiers, whose descendants are still wreaking havoc over our children and family members today through Systemic Racism and Economic Disparity.

Sincerely,
Rosa Holmes Turner, Rushmere, Virginia
Chief of the Mathomank Village Tribe

Counterstory Analysis

In the following sections, we demonstrate how Rosa's counterstory confronts many of the features of the stock stories that were circulating at the public hearing. We focus our analysis on Solórzano and Yosso's five central tenets of critical race theory to draw the reader's attention to specific counterstorytelling persuasive tactics. Such rhetorical tactics are worthy of consideration, since it is through these counter-narratives that citizens of Isle of Wight County were able to convince the Board of Supervisors to act—and to act in a way that prioritized social justice and anti-racism, even though such actions largely went against the majority opinion.

Rosa begins her counterstory by directly asking the Board of Supervisors “to remove the Confederate Statue from the Isle of Wight County complex on Monument Circle.” She continues, arguing that taking down the monument would be a way “to apologize for the inhumane treatment [of] my Great-great Grandmother, Elizabeth Bailey-Howlett (1837-1932)... [who] was raped by a Confederate Soldier during the Civil war and left to die. By the grace of God, a Union Soldier rescued her and her family, thus allowing her legacy and future generations, like me, to be born” (“Written Comments” para. 3). Unlike stock stories that often invite listeners to adopt the perspective of the oppressor, this counterstory invites listeners to adopt the perspective of those living with oppression. Here, we see Rosa inviting the listener to adopt the perspective of Elizabeth Bailey-Howlett—to bear witness to all the horror and trauma she experienced under the hands of the confederacy. By drawing from her great-great grandmother's experiential knowledge concerning confederate soldiers, Rosa is able to call into question stock stories that frame confederate soldiers as genteel heroes or even mere foot soldiers, protecting their lands and their state's rights.

In several ways, Rosa's testimony presents a case study in counterstory as a form of *racial countermemory*, as April O'Brien and James Chase Sanchez have theorized. According to O'Brien and Sanchez, racial countermemory is a marginalized form of remembering that “looks to identify, analyze, and refute dominant racial narratives and replace them with narratives that have either been forgotten or suppressed” (10). By sharing the counterstory of her great-great grandmother, Elizabeth Bailey-Howl-

ett, Rosa presents a racial countermemory that refutes hegemonic Southern narratives of confederate soldiers as genteel defenders of the South and challenges the selective amnesia embedded in dominant historical narratives about the Confederacy. In this sense, her counterstory—as a form of racial countermemory, “disrupts and deconstructs [dominant historical narratives] by presenting a competing narrative of the same evidence, augmenting the narrative already in place with additional information, [and] telling the story from the perspective of a marginalized group” (O’Brien & Sanchez p. 9). Instead, Rosa demonstrates, through the embodied experiences of Elizabeth Bailey-Howlett, that these racial countermemories have been minimized, elided, and suppressed from Lost Cause ideologies in order to present confederate supporters as blameless in their so-called defense of the south.

Many stock storytellers leverage what Stephen Monroe dubs “confederate rhetoric,” which appeals to the perspectives of the dominant group—in this case, white confederate ancestors. According to Monroe, “confederate rhetoric has played a formative role in creating and re-creating southern identities across time, slowed progress toward racial harmony, and reinforced racial barriers built by previous generations... it has performed this work while often obfuscating its purpose and protecting its existence” (5). These stock storytellers call on the Board of Supervisors “to stand up. Stand up for the over 100 men who died, did not return home from that war. Stand up for the thousands of descendants that they have here in this county, along with the 700 more people who served in that war” (“Special Meeting” Speaker 18). Such narratives are emblematic of the “magical thinking of the Lost Cause advocates, who emphasize[e] the fact of the fighting, not its purpose or its consequence” (O’Neill 58). This stock storyteller only considers the perspective of the oppressive white majority; thereby ignoring and avoiding any responsibility to the nearly 4 million enslaved peoples whose freedom was at stake in this war. Instead, the implicit—and at times, explicit—argument made by these stock storytellers is that the “heroic” experiences of white confederate ancestors matter more than the experiences of BIPOC communities and their ancestors. Monroe explains that this is precisely how confederate rhetoric works:

When white people defend or tolerate Old South words or symbols... they are in effect asserting cultural dominance over the parameters of public memory... such rhetorical ploys are nothing more than silencing methods... to shame, shun, and marginalize those in the Black minority—and their allies—who dare to forward public memories divergent from accepted, traditional, and white orthodoxies. (14–15).

For over 150 years, the Lost Cause has been built and sustained by these narratives, but counterstorytellers like Rosa commit to social justice by centralizing the often unheard stories of their ancestors, by elevating those stories that exist outside dominant narratives.

Rosa continues her story, describing her grandfather, “the late Pastor Harvey P. Johnson [who] was made to clear the ground where this statue sat, knowing that his wife’s grandmother had been raped and brutalized by a confederate soldier” (“Written Comments” para. 4). This feature of Rosa’s counterstory challenges stock storytellers

who avoid responsibility for racism by foregrounding arguments about racial progress in the US. For example, one stock storyteller acknowledges that the monument was raised “at a time of Jim Crow and segregation, but America worked past that. We ended slavery. We have the civil rights movement that made great gains in the 1960s... the progress Black Americans have made in 150 years is remarkable” (“Special Meeting” Speaker 14). Though this stock storyteller does acknowledge the fact that the monument was raised during the height of the Jim Crow era, he fails to consider how or even why this monument might have functioned as a segregationist scare tactic positioned directly in front of the county courthouse. Instead, the teller opts to focus on the “great gains” made since segregation, thus situating race as a non-issue in America. Such racial progress narratives are comforting stock stories told by the dominant group to protect their privileged position and to avoid their own complacency within systems of injustice. Counterstories like Rosa’s disrupt such comforting stock stories by highlighting the timelessness of racism and, in this case, pointing to the consistent racial injustices experienced across generations within Rosa’s family.

In each of these examples, Rosa exhibits a key feature of critical race counterstory in that she draws from the experiential and embodied knowledges of her ancestors. She continues to practice this feature of counterstorytelling, even when it requires acknowledging her great-great-great grandfather, John K. Claggett, who “was a staunch Confederate and a brutally hateful taskmaster, as our family’s Oral history have shown” (“Written Comments” para. 7). She continues, describing her “Great-Great Grandfather, John C. Claggett, [who] loved my Great Grandfather the late Robert W. Claggett, (1886-1965), [who was born] from his [John C’s] mixed-race intermarriage to Margaret Haskett, as well as, the rest of his children, Charles M., John H, Evelina, Queen Anne, and Sarah” (“Written Comments” para. 7). In other words, Rosa’s ancestral line in the 19th century includes *both* a Confederate taskmaster and an interracial marriage. What’s significant here is that Rosa rejects stock stories that situate the importance of familial legacy or “heritage” before social justice by calling attention to her complex racial ancestry. Unlike “confederate rhetoric [which] has perpetuated the [over]simplification of racial categories of the US South” (Monroe 7), Rosa’s experiential and embodied knowledge as a descendent of both white and Black southern ancestors disrupts the artificial Black/white binary promoted by confederate rhetoric. As Monroe explains, dominant narratives that emerge from the US South have consistently defined race in a binarism where a person is either white or Black. And this “false binary of race is one of the cornerstones of the South’s comprehensive system to privilege white people and oppress Black people” (7). The hyperfocus on racial binaries serves to protect and unify white southerners by preserving racial divisions and (re)enforcing the racial order of the Old South. And yet, Rosa’s very existence shatters the artificial Black/white binary confederate rhetoric so desperately aims to protect as a means of defending a (false) sense of white racial superiority.

In fact, Rosa models a way to acknowledge and reckon with ancestors who have upsetting or even intolerable histories. Such acknowledgement is in direct contrast to the confederate rhetoric promoted by stock storytellers who glorify ambiguous notions of “heritage” without critical or intentional consideration as to what that heri-

tage might actually include. Indeed, defenses of confederate memory objects that appeal to “heritage not hate” rely on remembering by forgetting. Connor Towne O’Neill explains that “[t]his is what ideology does. We don’t adapt our views based on the facts at hand, we assemble facts based on our ideology. We remember what we like. And white Americans are well practiced in this magical thinking, this selective memory” (115). Defenses like “heritage not hate” are vital fortifications in the defense of Isle of Wight as an island of and for whites. For example, one stock storyteller argued: “...that [the] monument is the closest thing to a tombstone those men will ever have... Now, people would have me disinherit or dishonor my great-great grandfather. I will not do that. I think he was a good man because his descendants were good people and I emulate some of their traits” (“Special Meeting” Speaker 18). Many of the Isle of Wight County citizens who spoke in favor of leaving the monument in front of the courthouse did so from this perspective—arguing that to remove the statue would be a dishonor to their noble confederate ancestors. Rosa—a descendant of a confederate taskmaster herself—thus embodies a direct challenge to perceptions of the confederacy and those who descended from its supporters. Indeed, Rosa invites listeners to consider whether ancestors with racist histories are deserving of honor.

Rosa is even more targeted in her spoken testimony to the Board, telling audiences, “My great-great grandfather John C. Claggett inter-married his black wife Margaret Haskett and they fought against the Confederacy, because they fought on the Union side” (2:43 - 2:44). This part of Rosa’s story counters one of the main arguments made by stock storytellers, namely that the purpose of the monument was “only to commemorate soldiers that were [sic] sent by their government to fight a war, and were killed and buried on battlefields never to return” (“Special Meeting” Speaker 20). Many stock narratives attempt to present confederate soldiers as blameless men who were drafted and had little choice about which side to fight on. This pseudo-neutrality is called into question by Rosa’s racial countermemory of her great-great grandfather, John C. Claggett, and great-great grandmother, Margaret Haskett, who both lived in the South but made the choice to fight in support of the Union and against the preservation of slavery.

Finally, this passage is also worth noting because Rosa purposefully draws the listener’s attention to her family’s oral histories—histories that have not been captured in any official capacity as a central part of the County’s shared past. Similar to earlier passages, such a move is an intentional foregrounding of social justice, race, and the experiences of people of color. “Thomas Hughes, Robert Claggett, Samuel Arthur Holmes, William Holmes”—by saying their names, Rosa gives listeners a different set of historical figures, her family members, to draw histories from. Rather than prioritizing dominant stories about Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, or even Abraham Lincoln in these debates, Rosa draws our attention to the lived realities of those who actually lived in Isle of Wight County before, during, and after the monument’s residency at the courthouse.

Rosa ends her counterstory with one impassioned call:

It’s time for our communities to heal from what is a constant reminder that our family members were beaten, enslaved, raped, tortured, and murdered,

at the hands of many Confederate soldiers, whose descendants are still wreaking havoc over our children and family members today through Systemic Racism and Economic Disparity. (“Written Comments” para. 11)

This part of Rosa’s counterstory is worth repeating because it features several of the key tenets of counterstorytelling. First, it demonstrates Rosa’s unyielding commitment to social justice for those who were “beaten, enslaved, raped, tortured, and murdered at the hands of many Confederate soldiers” (“Written Comments” para. 11). Second, her appeal to the continued racism experienced by her ancestor’s descendants, their family members, and their children is a direct challenge to racial progress narratives that attempt to present racism as a thing of the past from which we (Americans) have progressed beyond. But perhaps most importantly, Rosa’s comment draws the listener’s attention to the generational effects of racism and whiteness in the U.S. By doing so, Rosa’s counterstory effectively situates issues of race and racism as not only central but *timeless*. This counterstorytelling persuasive tactic is in keeping with the principles of countermemory, since “countermemory is a way to link the past and the present instead of disassociating the present moment from the concerns of the past” (O’Brien & Sanchez p. 10). As Stephen Legg explains, countermemory reminds us of “the presentness of the past” (p. 186). While several stock storytellers situate racism within a context of bounded time (as a thing of the past), Rosa’s comment challenges the listener to acknowledge the ongoing “presentness” of systemic injustices generated by racism and white supremacy since this country’s founding.

Finally, we want to end our commentary by drawing the reader’s attention to the middle of Rosa’s testimony, where she writes, “...my Great-Great Grandmother’s story and many others... should be told in the Local Government Chambers, Virginia General Assembly, United States Congress and Senate, and across this Nation” (“Written Comments” para. 5). Here, Rosa advocates for the transformative power of counterstorytelling as a form of racial countermemory and a tactic of resistance in sites of ordinary democracy. Indeed, this is a direct call to elevate the stories of those who exist outside of the dominant narrative—and this is a call we extend to our readers: *Listen to the counterstories. Tell the counterstories.*

Conclusion

This case study—and our collaborative analysis of it—contributes key insights across the fields of public memory studies, rhetorical studies, and critical race theory. We begin first by stressing what this article models: researchers need to actively center the situated knowledges of community actors in theories of counterstorytelling (and their practical applications). The same is true for scholarship that emerges from public memory studies since much of this work does not center community voices or community-based research methodologies like critical race theory’s counterstorytelling. The analysis of this case study—collaboratively produced by 3 differently situated co-authors (an undergraduate student, and community member, and a faculty member)—models equitable research practices both within academia and the community. Our approach provides greater nuance in perspective and analysis than any one of us

could provide alone. We are champions of this intentional work and advocate for other researchers to adopt similar approaches.

This piece also demonstrates that collaborative, reciprocal, community-based scholarship like ours plays a significant role in reshaping the way we think about and talk about race and public memory. Indeed, Rosa's counterstory as a racial counter-memory "exposes the fallacy of White America and compels [audiences] to grapple with a country built on inequality and injustice" (O'Brien & Sanchez p. 14). Such counterstorytelling "ask[s] us to contemplate our own lives, our own understandings of history, our own memories" (O'Brien & Sanchez p. 22). These counter-memories and the curiosities they stir are vital to equitable and inclusive public memory/scapes.

In small rural communities like Isle of Wight County, the confederacy is so deeply embedded in the collective memory of some local residents that to attack it is to attack their history, their home, them. And yet we hope those reading whose ideologies align more closely with confederate stock stories are still open to hearing Rosa's counterstory—to reckon with and acknowledge her and her ancestors' histories. Those who remain closed to such counterstories are missing an important opportunity to practice what Bradford Vivian calls "commonplace witnessing" across ideological divides, to join friend and foe in bearing witness to historical tragedies or injustices in ways that can be therapeutic and reconciliatory for all.

This point leads to the next practical implication of this study: we, the authors, actively seek to change the national conversation regarding confederate monuments and critical race theory. We purposefully defined and applied critical race theory to a confederate monument within an open-access publication that is accessible to the general public and inclusive of academic and community perspectives. In doing so, we aim to disrupt baseless attacks against critical race theory as "racist" or "unpatriotic" or teaching white children to hate themselves. Instead, critical race theory is an effort to draw attention to the ways in which systemic racism has and continues to infect all aspects of society, including education, healthcare, law, housing, voting, memory, and every other aspect of American society. This article demonstrates how to practice "commonplace witnessing" of historical tragedies and injustices; how to promote a more inclusive, more equitable public memory; and how to face the lie of white supremacy through which America birthed and built a nation. Those who reject critical race theory without close and careful study of its tenets are avoiding cross-racial solidarity and progress in favor of the status quo—a state that has never been kind, much less inclusive or equitable to minoritized groups.

Beyond the methodological and practical implications of this case study, Rosa's counterstory also situates storytelling as a viable form of racial counter-memory within the field of public memory studies, and counterstories such as these require greater attention from public memory scholars, especially due to the paper genocide Rosa describes in her introductory positionality remarks. Researchers who study objects of public memory must look beyond the statues and the archives to inform their analyses. A particularly apt place to locate counterstories that function as discursive and embodied racial counter-memories include sites of active democratic deliberation, like public hearings.

In light of stock storytellers who claim that “many of us have never thought a day in our lives about confederate statues until the media put our focus on them” (“Special Meeting” Speaker 25), Rosa’s counterstory is an important rejection of such thinking. Her comments make clear to listeners that if you “have never thought a day in [your life] about confederate statues,” then you are likely a member of the white privileged majority. Such thinking is made even more apparent in whose perspective is included and excluded in pronouns such as “we” and “us” and “our” (regardless of whether these pronouns are used in a small town public hearing or an academic text). In other words, the constitutive power of rhetoric and the strategic use of pronouns enforce and enact racism and whiteness through whose perspective is included and whose is erased.

What this close exploration of Rosa’s counterstory reveals is that counterstories are persuasive tools used by ordinary people to support their social justice aims. And while in this case, the transformative potential of storytelling led to the end of a confederate monument’s 115-year residency in front of a county courthouse, in states like California, BIPOC families are tapping into the transformative power of counterstorytelling to argue for the return of ancestral lands stolen during moments of racial terrorism in the US. Indeed, a few months after Isle of Wight County displaced its confederate monument, California lawmakers voted unanimously to return ancestral homelands that were taken from the Bruce family nearly 100 years ago, after their ancestors were run out of the area by Ku Klux Klan members and white neighbors. The reclamation of Bruce’s Beach is inspiring other counterstorytellers across the US to argue for the reclamation of ancestral homelands lost to white supremacy and hatred.

It’s stories like these that gives us hope. Perhaps Richard Delgado says it best when he writes, “Stories humanize us. They emphasize our differences in ways that can ultimately bring us closer together. They allow us to see how the world looks from behind someone else’s spectacles. They challenge us to wipe off our own lenses and ask, ‘Could I have been overlooking something all along?’” (2440). To unpack the full potential of counterstorytelling as a transformative critical race method(ology), rhetoricians must attune to the complex and textured narratives that everyday counterstorytellers craft to support their persuasive ends, particularly within democratic contexts, like public hearings.

But to do this work well, academicians must not only expand what counts as research, but also look to different types of authors whose situated knowledges can (and should) be brought into the conversation. In fact, the hierarchy of who/what matters or who/what counts in scholarly research is in and of itself a stock narrative that researchers must reject, particularly when conducting research situated within communities. Rhetoricians who take seriously the challenge to study public counterstories as a form of racial countermemory must be willing to do this work alongside counterstorytellers in reciprocal and respectful ways. Otherwise, scholars risk colonizing the very narratives they/we hope to amplify. In her chapter from *Counterstories from the Writing Center*, Talisha Haltiwanger Morrison warns against this temptation to colonize. She notes that although advocacy for anti-racism in the academy is growing, there continues to exist “white scholars [who] are interested in speaking about rac-

ism, [who] have not made significant efforts to draw in the voices of those most affected by it” (Morrison 41). By actively including Rosa’s voice and mind—to be guided by her perspectives and her stories—we try to co-create knowledge, build trust, and practice reciprocity. Our voices are louder together.

Here, we have tried to demonstrate the ways in which counterstorytelling functions in places of ordinary democracy, but there is more work to be done. Future research on the persuasive tactics employed during public hearings and other forms of deliberative democracy can be enriched by a focus on counterstorytelling. Theories of counterstorytelling also provide a useful framework for those who study public memory and the ways in which stock/counternarratives contribute to shared understandings of our collective pasts. In addition to more work that examines counterstorytelling as a form of racial countermemory, researchers should also consider examining white resistance to counterstories and racial countermemories that recast confederate symbols and challenge hegemonic Southern narratives.

One specific area we’d like to explore in future research concerns the embodied dimension of counterstorytelling. How does counterstorytelling function as an embodied performance of social justice in sites of ordinary democracy? How are counterstorytelling performances impacted by codes of decorum (or even intentional indecorum), style, body language, clothing and accessories, among others? These lines of inquiry will help expand understandings of counterstorytelling and its ability to imagine a world otherwise. Nevertheless, we urge scholars to consider how to incorporate diverse perspectives into their counterstorytelling work—to draw from those (counter)storytellers who exist beyond the ivory tower and therefore grapple differently with the social, cultural, and economic effects of race, racism, and whiteness each day.

Notes

1. One of the anti-removal emails collected by the Isle of Wight Board of Supervisors was sent by a citizen present at the public hearing. He expressed his fear of retaliation against his family if he provided his address. The 22nd speaker at the public hearing, a Black citizen of Isle of Wight in favor of removal, also acknowledged the dangers minority people could face by providing their home addresses, but stated that it was worth the risk.

Appendix A. Inscriptions on the Monument

Side #1:

ISLE OF WIGHT'S LOVING/
TRIBUTE,
TO HER HEROES OF/
1861 TO 1865./
"THEY BRAVELY
FOUGHT,
THEY BRAVELY FELL,
THEY WORE THE GRAY,
THEY WORE IT WELL."

Side #2

BRIGHT WERE THE LIVES/
THEY GAVE FOR US,
THE LAND THEY STRUG-
GLED TO SAVE FOR US,
WILL NOT FORGET/
ITS WARRIORS YET,
WHO SLEEP IN SO MANY/
GRAVES FOR US./

Side #3

THEY BLEED - WE WEEP/
WE LIVE- THEY SLEEP.

Side #4:

"THERE IS A TRUE GLORY/
AND A TRUE HONOR/
THE GLORY OF DUTY
DONE/
THE HONOR OF THE IN-
TEGRITY/
OF PRINCIPLE"

Side #5

"GLORIOUS IS HIS FATE,
AND ENVIED IS HIS LOT,
WHO FOR HIS COUNTRY/
FIGHTS AND FOR IT DIES."

Side #6

DEDICATED MAY 30, 1905

[Features an etching of an American flag crossed with a Confederate States of America flag]

Appendix B. Chief Rosa Holmes Turner Public Hearing Testimony

2:42:24 Rosa Holmes Turner. [ADDRESS REDACTED]. Hardy district. Rushmere was named in 1582, 35 years before Captain John Smith got here. So I just want to talk to you about my ancestors and my history with the confederacy. My ancestors have documented over 12,000 years here in Rushmere, and also in Isle of Wight County. And I just want to go through just some things. You all have a written document and I already told Mr Jones that I won't go through the whole document, and I will add one more document to that, but I just want to highlight some things.

2:43:01 First of all when you talk about the statue, yes I want you to vote to remove it from off of the government grounds where my taxes help pay for. So yes I do want you to move that. One of the reasons why is because when I see the Confederate statue and you have a picture... because this country and this state worked very hard to find individuals between 1800 and when photography and audio came to point, they wanted to make sure that they could preserve the history and those that have been enslaved and those that were attacked by the Confederacy.

2:43:38 You have a picture in your file, and is my great great grandmother, which is Elizabeth Bailey Howlett, who was raped by a Confederate soldier during the war. She was raped and left and her family were left for dead and it was a Union soldier that rescued her and her family so that I'm here to talk to you today on her behalf.

2:43:59 I want the statue removed off my property. The other thing I want you to know, I'm a blended remnant of Isle of Wight County. Not just the Native American, the Black American, but also my great great grandfather, my great great great grandfather, John K. Claggett was a Confederate taskmaster in Rushmere, Virginia. Very hard taskmaster in Rushmere, Virginia. With my great great grandfather John C. Claggett inter-married his black wife Margaret Haskett and they fought against the Confederacy, because they fought on the Union side.

2:44:42 And when we look at even not just the statue, that I want you all to remove off our our county property that our taxes pay for, I also want you to look at renaming Fort Huger the street. We've already given you Fort Huger the fort that was consumed within hours by the Union. Not just by the ironclad ships that were out in the water, but by the soldiers that my ancestors allowed, the foot soldiers for the Union, to march across their land in Rushmere to consume that Fort Huger. So your Honor, um, General Huger but we honor Thomas Hughes and others that fought to make sure that our people stayed safe.

2:45:23 Yes it's about ending slavery. Yes it's about oppression. Yes it stands for everything that you say. And I- I just want you to know that that it stands for that, not only that my Big Daddy, as we call it, Reverend Harvey Johnson was paid 10 cents to clear the land with some of these Confederate statues go and stand right now. The one in Surry County was moved. He told us the story of him having to clean that land that

he knew that is great- that his grandmother-in-law had been raped by a confederate soldier.

2:45:56 So you call it honor, we call it dishonor. [overlapping applause] We call it unrepented dishonor because you never apologized. This county and everything else. Again we want to talk about the history that's documented for the Confederacy, the Confederate soldiers, well our Black free men of color helped build Fort Huger this county didn't even want to ever even pay. Virginia didn't want to pay them for the work that they did to do Fort Huger and it had to be somebody from Isle of Wight county that sent a letter to ask "what you want us to do with them? Do you want us to pay them or what?"

2:46:31 Again oppression because you think it's for us to work for free on the properties that we have here that we pay taxes for and that we can't even get paid for the work that we do. Remove the statue off of our property that we pay to maintain in public works. Remove it from our other thing I want you to know-

[Off-screen, Board of Supervisor] Please bring yours to a conclusion.

[Rosa con't] Yes I will. I'll bring it to close. Finally, I just want you to know that we, we support that you remove the statue in an honorable way. Put it somewhere where they can reference and honor their, their soldiers and their fallen soldiers. But when we erect statues that we want to erect we assure you it's going to be on private property that we pay for with our own money, and not with the taxes that we ask this county to pay for. Thank you for your time.

[Applause]

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Chief Rosa Holmes Turner was born in Rushmere, Virginia, where she is now Chief of the Warraskoyack Tribe at Mathomank (Mathomauk) Village. Rosa earned a Bachelor of Science Degree in Design Technology & Industrial Management from Norfolk State University and an Executive Master's Certification in Global Business Leadership and Public Administration from Duke University Fuqua School of Business. She is currently pursuing a Master of Theology degree at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology from Virginia Union University. She has served over 20 years in community development and outreach, both locally and nationally, through her non-profit, Rushmere Community Develop Corporation. Rosa became a licensed preacher in April 2022 at First Gravel Hill Baptist Church, under the leadership of Reverend Alexander Bracey, III. She is the author of two books, *The Remnant Story of the Warraskoyack Indians* and *Get Your House in Order, No More Chicken Dinner Funerals*.

Julianne Bieron graduated from the Honors Program at Christopher Newport University in December 2022 with a degree in English, concentrated in Writing. While at CNU, Julianne focused her research on topics that combined storytelling and social justice, including research on both Tolkien and Fan studies. She currently works in the excess and surplus insurance industry while continuing to produce creative writing with a focus on disability advocacy.