

Rebecca Jackson, PhD
Plenary 2: Friday at 830AM

Confederacy Now, Confederacy Always: White Power Future-Pasts and/as Performative Time

SLIDE 1:

Good morning, how are you? I am frightened and intimidated to be here. First, I am intimidated to present amongst such esteemed panelists all of whom work at prestigious institutions and perform stellar research. I am humbled and honored to be included in this group. Secondly, I am frightened today because I am making myself vulnerable to you. In this presentation, I will share snippets from my upbringing in a white nationalist family. I was raised to support the Confederate cause, indoctrinated into holding beliefs that my white skin is superior to others and that my role as a woman is to become a submissive wife and a dutiful mother. Much to my parents and grandparents' chagrin, I became neither — instead, I grew into a proud lesbian and academic who dedicates her research to understanding how I co-perform legacies and subversions of white power in my white body. I am able to do this because of scholars like D. Soyini Madison, John Fletcher, and Sandra Richards whose work exemplifies vulnerability, deep empathy, and the courage to confront problematic ancestors.

My name is Rebecca Jackson, and last year I graduated with a PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Georgia. My dissertation examines the body-to-body transmission and subversions of American white supremacy in the post-Civil War United States.

In this presentation, I explore Confederate performative time and Confederate performative monuments. I surmise that white power future-pasts anticipate and inform American identities, including many of those who elected President-elect Donald Trump. I present the Confederacy now and I demonstrate the persistence of Confederate values reverberating in the practices of American Christian nationalism for the future.

SLIDE 2:

In April 2021, I co-performed the Confederate Memorial Day celebration at Beauvoir Historic House and Jefferson Davis Presidential Library in Biloxi, Mississippi. This landmark is owned and operated by the Sons of Confederate Veterans—a legacy group established in 1896.

Beauvoir serves as a focal point for Confederate heritage, attracting individuals and groups who seek Southern heritage and who rearticulate Confederate ideologies in the present, contemporary United States.

SLIDE 3:

This is a picture of the Jefferson Davis Presidential Library owned and operated by the

Mississippi Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. The SCV organizes many of the Confederate events in the U.S. via their state and local chapters throughout the country.

SLIDE 4:

Through such events, the SCV not only preserves Confederate history but also perpetuates its cultural significance, embedding Confederate narratives within the framework of American public memory and American Christian nationalism.

SLIDE 5:

I analyze co-performances of Confederate heritage as living, performative monuments to white power and I argue that Confederate performative time is not only a citational performance of white power beliefs from the past — but is also crucial to the perpetuation of American Christian nationalism today. To this end, I examine five recurring themes within these commemorations: American divinity, perceived religio-cultural wars, aspirational whiteness, the racial injustice perception gap, and a divinely ordered sexuality steeped in compulsory heterosexuality and chivalry. By examining these themes, I argue that Confederate heritage celebrations are not merely nostalgic but serve as performative monuments that embody and extend white supremacy into present and future American bodies. Confederate performative time, as I define it, allows past Confederate values to remain active in present cultural identities.

SLIDE 6: Video slide: Dylan Mears, “We are the living stones...”

This is an excerpt of the Executive President of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, Dylan Mears’s welcoming address.

By framing the audience as “the living stones, the living monuments,” he authenticates those in attendance as embodied extensions of Confederate history and ideology. This wasn’t just a speech; it was a performative utterance that transformed the attendees into symbols of Confederate continuity. This concept of Confederate performative time is essential for understanding how these values are rearticulated as ongoing beliefs, particularly in American Christian nationalism today and for the future.

SLIDE 7:

Performative time is a way in which events from the past can simultaneously inform the present and anticipate the future.

Davis's theory applies directly to Confederate commemorations, where each act of commemoration revitalizes Confederate ideologies in contemporary contexts.

Confederate commemorations become “future-pasts”—they honor Confederate ancestors while anticipating that these values will be carried forward.

Mears’s invocation of the audience as “living stones” exemplifies this layering, transforming the spectators into participants who are tasked with sustaining the Confederate legacy.

SLIDE 8:

Rebecca Schneider’s concept of “performance remains” challenges the traditional notion that performances disappear once they conclude.

Confederate commemorations, as Schneider argues, act as a “living archive” by preserving memory through the body.

SLIDE 9:

Example: Schneider’s theory is illustrated by the young girl laying a wreath at the Confederate Memorial Day celebration. She is dressed in Confederate mourning attire, notice the black antebellum dress, gloves, and bonnet—She is dressed to both lament and honor fallen Confederate soldiers. This is both a reenactment and a cultural heritage performance in the present. The young girl is embodying a ritual of honoring Confederate soldiers that has persisted since the United Daughters of the Confederacy’s first memory practices in 1866. Through her physical participation, the memory and meaning of Confederate future-pasts are inscribed onto her young body, ensuring that these beliefs are perpetuated across generations. This embodiment demonstrates how cultural heritage performances refuse to vanish; rather, they “reappear” in each new generation, maintaining ideological continuity.

SLIDE 10:

Now that I’ve defined Confederate performative time and its performative monuments as well as shared an example of Confederate performance remains, I want to touch back to the vulnerability I mentioned in the introduction.

I carry a Strange nostalgia that allows me to participate in both the transmission and subversion of white power future-pasts. And this Strange nostalgia views the Confederacy through a romanticized lens, detaching it from the realities of slavery and oppression.

These distortions form a selective, public memory that reinforces white power ideologies while erasing the atrocities tied to Confederate policies and history.

SLIDE 11: Singing Dixie video

I explicitly experienced this distortion at the Confederate Memorial Day celebration during an audience sing-a-long of *Dixie*. I was shocked by the patriotic stirrings I experienced singing this song with the other participants at Beauvoir. My irrational self experienced a swell of pride, belonging, and patriotism as I sang *Dixie* in a group comprised largely of white supremacists. My queer self felt ashamed that I was so easily swept up by the pomp and circumstance. I co-performed the song and experienced the Confederate patriotism engendered from the ceremony, and I experienced these feelings alongside my own disgust for having them.

SLIDE 12:

Co-performative witnessing emphasizes shared vulnerability and empathy.

My experience involved acknowledging my own nostalgia and heritage while critically reflecting on these inherited beliefs. Like Sandra Richards, I hear my ancestors knocking on the door, wanting to be let in, and I accept them. Like John Fletcher, I practice a deep empathy—I love my ancestors, I love my grandma, I love my father — both inculcated me into white nationalism. I both love my ancestors and I reject their values. And I dedicate my career to understanding how I transmit white power — and — in doing so — I subvert my white nationalist upbringing by sharing this research with you.

SLIDE 13:

So, now that I've shared my argument and methodology, I want to share the five themes of Confederate performative time. These themes also form the ideological backbone of American Christian nationalism:

American Divinity presents the idea that the United States is God's chosen nation—a theme deeply embedded in American Christian nationalism.

Perceived Religio-Cultural War suggests that attendees at the Confederate Memorial Day celebration see themselves as embattled defenders of traditional values in a secular, antagonistic world.

Aspirational Whiteness idealizes whiteness as a lifestyle and aesthetic aspiration. Aspirational witness is a code of conduct that permeates Southern, Christian values.

The Racial Injustice Perception Gap highlights conflicting views on race in the United State. This theme dismisses systemic injustices experienced by non-Whites and especially Black Americans.

Compulsory heterosexuality invoked through pre-ordained, biblical gender roles. The mating rituals of this sexuality are based on a mutated concept of 11th century European chivalry and Christian stewardship.

By identifying these five themes, I hope you see how Confederate Performative time invokes and perpetuates American Christian nationalist beliefs today and for the future.

SLIDE 14:

The Keynote speaker at the Confederate Memorial Day celebration was Susan Lee — her bio in the event's program states she is descended from five great Confederate war heroes.

Lee invokes God's design for humanity and a religio-cultural war when she says:

This is spiritual warfare. This is not about Confederacy. This is not about a war.

This is about wanting to take people who are still spiritual, Christian,

Judeo-Christian people and make them sit down and be quiet. And the first thing

they could come after was our Confederate heritage. And, folks, guess what? We

know how this ends because we've read *The Book*, and we read it to the end.

And we win. So the third reason we should be here is because we know we're

going to win in the end, and this is what it's all about.

SLIDE 15:

Susan Lee's address reinforces Confederate ideology as a spiritual mission. She frames the Confederate cause as morally righteous, aligning it with American Christian nationalist values.

Lee expresses the Racial Injustice Perception Gap that allows attendees to view themselves as victims, deflecting attention from systemic inequalities.

Lee describes Confederate Americans as engaged in a "spiritual war" to uphold Christian and Confederate legacies, suggesting that this "war" is ordained by God. American divinity and religio-cultural war rhetoric echoes in her speech reinforcing a moral urgency that also casts attendees as defenders of a righteous cause.

Her speech is a powerful example of **Confederate performative time**—because

further along in her speech, Lee connects the righteousness of the Confederate

cause to 1776 as well as 1861, and 2021, thus, urging attendees to view

themselves as part of an ongoing historical struggle.

This is significant because Lee's speech both memorializes her Confederate ancestors and it also mobilizes the audience to actively defend these beliefs against perceived secular threats.

SLIDE 16:

At first glance, this photo appears to show four women and the young girl who I mentioned early. You will notice that the women have their wrists covered — this is a performance remain of their ancestors' sexuality. It is customary for antebellum women in the U.S. South to cover their wrists and ankles. It was believed that a woman's purity would be comprised if her ankles and/or wrists came into public view. An antebellum white man would be obligated to court and marry a white woman if he saw her exposed wrists and ankles.

Like Derrick Bell, I believe in the permanence of racism in the U.S. - this permanence illustrates how white supremacy adapts to new social contexts, maintaining its influence. Bell's theory helps us understand how commemorations like the one in Biloxi are not simply about nostalgia or heritage but are active efforts to sustain racial hierarchies in contemporary America.

SLIDE 17:

The Confederate Memorial Day celebration at Beauvoir acts as a performative monument, where attendees co-create a Confederate heritage.

Confederate performative time exemplifies white supremacy's adaptability, wherein Confederate ideologies are subtly embedded into the national consciousness. We have seen this most recently in Donald Trump's political rallies in which Hitler was praised and Puerto Rico deemed garbage

SLIDE 18:

Today, I have made myself vulnerable to you in sharing my white nationalist upbringing

and I argued that Confederate performative time demonstrates how the legacy of white supremacy in the U.S. is not confined to history but lives on in American identities. Many of whom proudly voted for President-elect Donald Trump

I hope I have convinced you today that we are living in a white power future-past; I believe that we are all co-performing legacies and subversions of white supremacy in the United States. I co-perform these hateful legacies and I uncover new legacies in my research almost weekly. And I dedicate myself to understand them and subvert them in my research.

I urge you to think about Confederate performative time as organized, popular, and motivated by spiritual morality.

SLIDE 19:

The Confederacy may have lost the Civil War but it undoubtedly won the culture war and its public memory is romanticized and revered in acts of Commemoration and American Christian nationalism today proving that The Confederacy is now, The Confederacy is Always.