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10-27-2011

"Sit Down Together at a Table of Brotherhood": Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial

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Rudy, John M., "'Sit Down Together at a Table of Brotherhood': Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial" (2011). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 171.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/171>

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"Sit Down Together at a Table of Brotherhood": Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial

Abstract

As we walked along the tidal basin back toward the Smithsonian Metro Station, I began to cry. Just a few tears, here and there, welled in my eyes. It wasn't the monument or the quotes. It wasn't the deep feelings I had looking at his face. It was overhearing a simple conversation. Two 30-something black women in a group of tourists were talking to one another about photos.

"You need to get your picture taken, girl," one asks the other.

"Why?" she responds, "I've got plenty of pictures."

"To prove you were here," the first woman responds. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Black History, Civil Rights, memorialization, NPS, Relevance, Visitors, Washington D.C.

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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"Sit Down Together at a Table of Brotherhood": Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2011



The Stone of Hope: a kind King

The woman pushed the gentleman in a wheelchair, both looking up reverently at King's face as they moved forward. His black hand rested on her white skin perched gently above his shoulder.

As we walked along the tidal basin back toward the Smithsonian Metro Station, I began to cry. Just a few tears, here and there, welled in my eyes. It wasn't the monument or the quotes. It wasn't the deep feelings I had looking at his face. It was overhearing a simple conversation. Two 30-something black women in a group of tourists were talking to one another about photos.

"You need to get your picture taken, girl," one asks the other.

"Why?" she responds, "I've got plenty of pictures."

"To prove you were here," the first woman responds.

That hit me. This place was special and meaningful, far above the power of even its creators to see. The very act of visiting the huge stone monolith needed to be documented and shared with those at home, like evidence of a hajj to a sacred spot where all yearn to stand.

During our visit we walked past an older couple, old enough to have been dating as King embarked on his final campaign for the sanitation workers of Memphis in '68.

In front of the monument a huge crowd gathered. Many were black, many were white. Everyone seemed enthusiastic to be there. They were elated just to be standing on that spot. Above the crowd arms reached, holding aloft smart phones and cameras.

Along the walls behind King, next to quotes about strength and weakness, about war and peace, about violence and justice, families posed to have their photos taken. Others studied the quotes, pondering for long minutes. Along the pathways, lining every inch of curb, groups sat. They were talking.

Stepping into the Lincoln Memorial is often like a walking into a wall of silence. Crossing the plain of the columns on the east front, the air becomes deathly still in reverence to Lincoln's gaze. But walking onto the plaza surrounding King's feet, a low murmur permeates the scene. It is not irreverent. It is simply people being people. Some I overheard discussing King or their lives or the meaning of the place. Others were planning where to eat dinner or hashing out the best route to their next stop. Some were simply taking a moment to sit a breathe, looking across the tidal basin toward the white dome in the distance. But everyone was *using* the park, not simply soaking it up as a static visual landscape to be consumed. They were active participants in the place.

Walking around the site, my girlfriend Jess noticed something I missed. "Look at all the disposable cameras," she remarked. She was right. There were so many people not with the latest Nikon or Kodak camera slung around their neck, or an iPhone snapping quick shots of King, but with \$5 and \$10 disposable film cameras. "Those people aren't here 'cause they want to be," Jess mused, "they're here because they need to be. They saved money for the Greyhound down from where ever because they *had* to see this. It is a need, not a want."



Not Diversity: Only A Manifestation of America

the Federal center of the city are predominately black. The crowds on The Mall and in the Smithsonian museums (not to mention the representatives in the hallowed halls on The Hill) are predominately white. Stepping out of Smithsonian Metro Station onto the Mall or walking the few blocks down while waiting for a pull time at NARA, l'Enfant's "grand avenue" feels too lily white for a



A Family and a King quote

All around us, people were there because they each knew they *had* to be. This diverse crowd was wonderfully unlike anything I've experienced in a National Park before. The crowd didn't feel artificial like it usually does when I visit Civil War parks, with the visitors around me being very white and typically old. It didn't feel like the Martin Luther King Jr. home in Atlanta, where I felt what I can only describe as the good kind of discomfort of being the only white person in the entire park on the first day of my two-day visit. Comedian Stephen Colbert has called Washington, D.C., "the chocolate city with a marshmallow center." The neighborhoods ringing The Mall and

city with such rich diversity teeming in every street to the north and east.

But at the King memorial, it doesn't feel artificial. It doesn't feel like I'm alone and different. It doesn't feel like anyone is missing. The only thing surrounding me at the King Memorial this past Saturday was what defines America: ordinary people of every stripe and any color.

The most amazing thing, though, is looking beyond King's gaze. Across the tidal basin lies the Jefferson Memorial. On one side of the water stands the author of the immortal, "promissory note," that men are entitled to, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." On the other side, just a stone's throw and two centuries away, stands the man who made it his life's goal to see that the, "promissory note," would be cashed for a race of men yearning to breathe free.

