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## Heritage, Not Hate: The Mississippi State Flag as a Conduit of Colorblind Racism

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“HERITAGE, NOT HATE”: THE MISSISSIPPI STATE FLAG AS A CONDUIT OF  
COLORBLIND RACISM

by  
Jenna Bailey

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
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Approved by:

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which students at the University of Mississippi employ colorblind racism in their justifications for keeping Mississippi state flag. Arguments have been made that the state flag is about history and heritage, not hate. It is this history that has led to two different meanings being associated with the flag: one about heritage and one about hate. Through an online, self-administered survey, the goal is to assess students' levels of colorblind racism and observe the arguments used in an open-ended question about their attitudes on the flag. This qualitative data suggests that not only are students deploying colorblind racism in their arguments, but they are using common themes and frameworks seen throughout studies of colorblind racism within their support for the state flag. This study has concluded that in order to create a more inclusive environment on campus, students in support of the flag need to understand and recognize the role they play in diminishing and minimizing the feelings and opinions of those who disagree with them on the issue.

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## I. The University of Mississippi and Its State Flag Issue

In Fall 2015, The University of Mississippi was embroiled in a profound debate about what to do about the Mississippi state flag and its confederate iconography. The chants of students in the circle still echo in many individuals' minds: "Take it down ASB! All symbols of white supremacy!" To many, the flag represented their southern heritage and history, but to the others it served as a symbol of hate and oppression. While the university continued to discuss the decision on taking down the state flag, controversy continued to surround the campus as not only students began to protest, but also, members of the community became involved. When ASB came to the decision to discontinue flying the Mississippi state flag on campus, and Chancellor Dan Jones signed off on the decision, there were many different reactions to this progressive step. This created a strong divide between University students, staff and faculty, and members of the community about what the confederate symbol and state flag truly stood for. My study aims to gain a better understanding of this divide by examining ways in which students on campus convey their support or disapproval of the state flag.

This was not the first time this campus has had controversy over changing old, oppressive traditions. The decision of changing the school's mascot from Colonel Reb to the Rebel Black Bear still leaves a sour taste in the mouths of many Oxford natives and alumni. Another example of this controversial debate was seen when the confederate flag stopped waving at football games. Without infringing upon the First Amendment rights of football spectators, Chancellor Robert Khayat created a rule that banned pointed

objects from the stadium and limited the size of flags and signs allowed inside the stadium, which meant that flags without a stick to hold them up became useless (Carlton 2013). This was a way to get around the First Amendment while still creating an environment that was more inclusive to the University as a whole (Carlton). Even this past year, the University has set a precedent of aiming for a more inclusive environment by prohibiting the band from playing the non-official anthem of the Confederacy, “Dixie”, at football games, in the Grove, or anywhere else. The confederate flag was also used as a symbolic form of speech. A 1956 Georgia state flag, with its confederate symbol largely displayed, along with a noose, was hung on the statue of James Meredith on the campus of The University of Mississippi in 2014 in order to convey the message of white supremacy and black oppression (CBS News & AP 2015). This was clearly an example of overt racism, but the use of the confederate symbol was calculative because it communicated its intended message, just like the noose. The flag represented more than just the confederacy and states’ rights, it was a threat to one of the foundations of this university, inclusion. Because of the way in which history and groups have used the flag and its symbolic meaning, many individuals refuse to support a flag that not only symbolizes such horrific beliefs and ideas, but also excludes a large portion of the state. Although many people do not claim to share these discriminatory opinions, there are still many in the state of Mississippi that do. Support for the state flag and its symbol is much more complex than we tend to think.

When the noises of individuals explaining their support for the state flag and confederate symbol began to stir up, heritage and history were major reasons that were brought up. These beliefs stemmed all the way from direct relations to members who



fought for the Confederacy, to individuals who grew up with positive perceptions of the flag. Many would bring up the fact that their ancestors fought for the Confederacy which is why they believe in the flag and the symbol because their loved ones died for a cause they believed in. Other students and community members do not associate the flag with the Civil War at all, but more with the history of the state and its connection to Mississippi and the south. Nonetheless, there are those individuals who still overtly believe the flag is used as a symbol of white supremacy. This was seen on campus during the Fall of 2015 when members of the Klu Klux Klan came to campus to demonstrate their support for the flag and disapproval of the idea it could be taken away (Kirkland 2015). This demonstration was overtly racist in nature. The Klan members were clearly agreeing with those who told them they were racist. However, there are many other ways in which racism and inequality continues to persist, and it is through a much more covert and subtle rhetoric. Covert racism is a major reason why the symbolic meaning behind the confederate iconography is continually seen as a negative symbol to many groups.

A way in which these covertly racist beliefs are perpetuated is by the argument of people in society that race is not an issue in our society because everyone is equal. This idea is comes from society's new form of racism called colorblind racism, "[explanations] for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate [whites] from any responsibility for the status of people of color" (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 2). This ideology is a way for whites to "rationalize minorities' contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations" (2). When individuals use the argument that the flag has nothing to do with race, colorblind rhetoric becomes extremely crucial in understanding why people believe that race is not

the issue at hand. By ignoring race as a factor in why Mississippi should eliminate the confederate symbol from the state flag, it shows how society is refusing to acknowledge people's feelings of oppression, which further perpetuates and allows it to continue.

In my research, I will be investigating ways in which students deploy colorblind racism in justifying their support for the Mississippi state flag. I am hypothesizing that majority of students will use a combination of colorblind racist frameworks throughout their arguments to keep the flag. I will be testing these ideas through a mixed methods approach of both surveying the attitudes of freshmen and seniors about the flag and confederate iconography more generally, and also allowing for some open-ended questions about the flag in order to examine closer what the meanings behind "heritage not hate" and other rhetoric used to rationalize support for the flag. The intention of my work is to explain how certain rhetoric used by proponents of the confederate symbol correlate, and in some cases even extend beyond, the idea of colorblind racism. It is my goal to prove how although overt racism may not be the leading belief in association with the confederate symbol, it does not mean that covert racism does not exist and continues to affect individuals on the campus of the University of Mississippi. My hope is for this paper to help individuals and groups on this campus understand what the meaning of the state flag is to our entire community, not just certain individuals who have sculpted a story based on a very one-sided history.

## II. Whose History Is It Anyway?

The state flag is more than just a piece of fabric. No matter how people feel about it and its confederate emblem, it represents something more to them. Whether it be history, oppression, state pride, or discrimination, the flag is a symbol for something bigger than itself. Symbols have an important function within our society. According to Herbert Blumer, there are three premises to the nature of symbolic interaction. The first is that people act towards things based on the meaning they have for those things (Blumer 1969, 2). The second is that those meanings come from the interactions people have with those around them (2). Lastly, the third premise is that these meanings are managed and changed through an interpretive process that one uses to make sense of things and use objects that are within their social world (2). Another very important insight Blumer also discusses is, “The meaning emanates, so to speak, from the thing and as such there is no process involved in its formation; all that is necessary is to recognize the meaning that is there in the thing” (4). What he means by this is that it is important to focus on the meaning itself, and less on how the meaning was created. While the creation of the meaning is important contextually, people will hold meanings to things without regard to where they came from. The meaning behind an object can tell us so much more about the object itself, rather than just what the object actually is.

Another important factor Blumer brings up is about the elements of a meaning. He states, “The meaning of a thing is but the expression of the given psychological elements that are brought into play in connection with the perception of the thing; thus one seeks to explain the meaning of a thing by isolating the particular psychological elements that

produce the meaning” (4). The way one comes to find meaning behind an object is through their psychological and social factors that influence perceptions and meanings behind different objects. Blumer’s work is crucial to understand when explaining why the flag is such a controversial topic. So many people have differing views on what it means to them. People are not only taught to feel a certain way about the flag through their families, peers, schools, media, and more, but they also attach their psychological elements to that meaning as well. Symbols can have such differing meanings because of the fact that people associate different elements with it. This one of the main reasons why the flag debate is so heated. Everyone was socialized to have a different understanding and meaning of the confederate emblem. In the case of the flag, there are two, main diverging meanings within two very large groups: those in support of the flag that do not believe it stands for hate, and those who oppose it and believe it represents a long history of oppression and discrimination. But one may ask, how do people form different meanings of the same symbol? This is a complex and historical question.

The Civil War: a divisive and tumultuous time for the United States of America. Eleven southern states chose to succeed from the Union and form the Confederate States of America. This was triggered by the election of Abraham Lincoln, a Republican president that wanted to abolish slavery. The southern states in that made up the Confederacy did not want slavery abolished because it would not only destroy their economy, but it would also threaten their “civilization” if blacks were no longer slaves but rather, equal citizens (Du Bois 1935, 50). Let it be clear, the Confederacy, and specifically Mississippi’s role in it, was completely and unconditionally created on the issue of slavery. Within the Mississippi Declaration of Secession, it states, “Our position

is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery-- the greatest material interest of the world. Its labor supplies the product which constitutes by far the largest and most important portions of commerce of the earth" (Civil War Trust). Along with a lengthy list of reasons as to why they were seceding, one of them explained how they were so troubled by the idea of slaves being equal citizens of the United States. The specific wording was, "[The Union] advocates negro equality, socially and politically, and promotes insurrection and incendiarism in our midst" (Civil War Trust). The Civil War was initiated because of slavery, and it is indisputable that the entire Confederacy supported the institution wholly.

During the war, both the Confederacy and the Union, were having trouble identifying a difference between their armies which is how the unofficial Confederate Battle Flag was created (Coski 2009). This flag was never the official symbol of the Confederacy, but it is the most commonly used visual association. This is in part because of how the battle flag was later used throughout society. The flag became popular during the early twentieth century among college football games and within campus fraternities. It was used by southern schools during sporting events against northern schools often (Martinez, Richardson, & McNinch-Su 2000). By 1943, the Klu Klux Klan began using the confederate battle flag as a part of their rituals (2000). The point in time when people began to associate the flag with modern politics and ideology was during the 1948 election, during the Dixiecrat movement (2000). The Dixiecrat movement began with Alabama and Mississippi state delegates protesting the civil rights platform that had been created. They refused to attend the Democratic national convention that year which led to supporters using the flag as a symbol of the movement and states' rights. Again, the

confederate battle flag was used during the 1940's through the 1960's as a representation of white supremacy and black oppression. Confederate flags would hang from street to street in the south as a way to remind all residents that they did not support integration or the Civil Rights Movement as a whole (2000). The flag even holds a specific context at the University of Mississippi. During the Dixiecrat movement, students at the university created a massive battle flag which then became the unofficial symbol of Ole Miss for dozens of years after (2000). The flag has impacted both the state and this university for decades.

In 1894, the current Mississippi state flag replaced the Magnolia flag and a new one was adopted, with three stripes: red, white, and blue, and the battle flag emblem in the top left corner (Young 2010). This flag is still the flag that represents the state of Mississippi today, confederate symbol and all. Beginning with its representation of the Confederacy and support for slavery, to its revived use in the south to remind everyone of their opposition to the Civil Rights Movement, the battle flag has been associated with very dark periods of history. Although the Civil War ended over one hundred years ago, an emblem that was used to represent the Confederacy and its endorsement of slavery continues to fly over the entire state of Mississippi, serving as a constant reminder to lifelong Mississippians, new residents, and guests of the state that the ghosts of the past are still very present. Slavery has ended, Jim Crow laws have been abolished, and all should be well: but is it? We have reached a new period of time where inequality and discrimination still exists, but how is that possible if our society is now so equal and inclusive?

All of this historical context leads to contemporary society, where there is a new racial order, or a new form of racism. The transition from slavery, to Jim Crow laws, to this new racial order, all have one thing in common. They have all reproduced a system of White rule (Bonilla-Silva 2015, 11). Throughout all of these types of racial oppression and discrimination, Whites have always remained in power. What we see today is different from the Jim Crow time period, but the results remain the same: minorities remain disadvantaged, separate, and unequal (2015). This “new racism” can be referred to as Colorblind Racism (Neville, Lily, Lee, Duran, & Browne 2000, Lewis 2004, Bonilla Silva 2014, Bonilla-Silva & Diedrich 2011, Bonilla-Silva 2015). The basis for this form of racism lies within the way in which Whites rationalize the inequality that continues to persist, even in such a proclaimed egalitarian society, through multiple frameworks (Neville et al. 2000, Bonilla-Silva 2015, Bonilla-Silva 2014, Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich 2011). Whites’ rhetoric concerning racial issues in contemporary America are ones that involve denial that race should be or is a factor in determining life chances and opportunities (Neville et al. 2000).

This inequality is reinforced through covert, subtle attitudes that, on the surface, can seem almost non-racial, but they are just perpetuating the systematic renewal of white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva 2015). There are many ways in which plenty of scholars have identified how colorblind racism manifests. Some of these frameworks consist of abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Abstract liberalism is a tactic that Whites use to rationalize their opposition to any racial inequality. By appearing “reasonable” or even “moral” in their opposition, they are able to refute inequality while creating a democratic approach that excuses their opposition

(76). They claim that because we live in a liberal democracy, the government should have little to no part in making decisions for the masses. People need to reach any form of social change through a democratic process where the people are the ones who came to that decision (82). Although this may seem like a reasonable argument in a logical sense, it's subtle intent can be seen when looked at closer. Whites want to retain their position and power in society, so by keeping things the way they are, they remain in the dominant position, keeping those in the subordinate position where they have always been. When it comes to common arguments used in favor of keeping the Mississippi state flag, many people will claim that the state voted on this matter already, and the people have spoken. They state the flag should remain the same because of the democratic process the people came to. This framework can be extremely harmful to those who do not belong to the majority group because it completely discounts their opinions and attitudes. An article from the online edition of the Daily Mississippian (The DM) quoted an Oxford resident commenting on the city of Oxford's decision to take the state flag down from public buildings saying, "As a municipality, the city of Oxford is not just showing disrespect, but it's showing contempt for the political and legal process that establishes and changes public policy in this state" (Jansen 2015). This is an example of using abstract liberalism as a defense to keep the flag because the individual is claiming that taking down the flag is threatening the democratic process even though it was ultimately the mayor's decision, a mayor who was elected by the people of Oxford.

Another common framework that colorblind racism employs is naturalization. This frame allows Whites to explain racial differences or inequality as natural occurrences (Bonilla Silva 2014, 76). A common maneuver for those who have high levels of



colorblind racism is to state, “that's the way it is” (84). This stance is a way for people to rationalize the state of inequality in America by explaining how it has always been this way, and it is unlikely to change. When it comes to the state flag with the confederate emblem, proponents of the flag will argue that it is part of history in which we cannot change. They believe changing the state flag is an attempt to erase history, which is not the intent of confederate flag opponents. Another article from The DM written by a student who supports keeping the flag stated, “Defying his opportunity to show leadership and extol the virtues of the University Creed, Interim Chancellor Morris Stocks instead decided to further divide the university while ignoring the traditions and unifying associations of Ole Miss. So be it. If the university wishes to have nothing to do with its history and proud Confederate heritage, then why stop at the state flag?” (Soper 2016). This quote provides a gleaming example of naturalization because it employs the defense of the flag being a part of tradition and history as it has always been. It is of little concern what the flag represents to others because the flag has always been a part of southern heritage and should remain so.

Cultural racism is another framework used in colorblind rhetoric. People will argue that the position of minorities in society is based on their culture; it is not white people's fault they are like that. Arguments used in this framework tend to blame the victim. They will say that minorities do not hold the same values and beliefs, have loose family organization, or lack effort or motivation (Bonilla Silva 2014, 87-88). Inequitable opportunity is not because of discrimination, it is their own fault for their status in society. This is used in the flag debate by someone who says that this is just another opportunity for blacks to complain about something. Others will claim that those

offended by the flag are just seeking attention or are too hypersensitive to a piece of fabric. They are inclined to make everything about race. This framework is harmful because it puts the blame on minorities for things they cannot control, and makes excuses for whites to not do anything to help them. An example of this framework can be seen in another article from The DM when a student was quoted stating, ““It is unfortunate that some ASB senators, Ole Miss chapter of the NAACP and the liberal biased media have drawn attention to Ole Miss and the State of Mississippi flag again”” (Ferguson 2015). By stating that it is unfortunate that groups such as the NAACP are bringing up the flag again, it is putting the blame on a group that has had such a positive impact on this campus. It is a way to fault groups that constantly defend those suffering injustices in order to make them seem like the villains of the matter.

One of the most used and important frameworks to colorblind racism is the minimization of racism or race. What this suggests is that discrimination is no longer a factor for minorities and their life chances (Bonilla Silva 2014, 77). Here, the rhetoric used tends to be used as a way to minimize any form of discrimination as all-out racist behavior, or it does not have anything to do with race at all. Overt racism has been on a decline in America, however, even though it is declining, inequality still persists (77). Minimization is employed by whites telling minorities that they are being too sensitive and the race card is overplayed because we live in a society where everyone has a *legally* equal opportunity to succeed in life (77). This framework tends to be used often when supporters of the state flag make their arguments. People will say there is no need to be upset about a piece of fabric when there are bigger issues to be concerned about. If people have such a big problem with the flag, they need to get over it because it is not an

overtly racist issue. Other rhetoric will state that the views of the minority should not outweigh those of the majority. They are not meaning minority races, more the smaller portion of people opposed to the state flag. This minimizes the feelings and opinions of minorities, and it perpetuates discrimination by ignoring how they feel over and over again. A prime example of this framework in use was found in different DM article where a student said, ““What’s a flagship University if you don’t fly its flag? So, I don’t support any ideology of the flag. I support the state flag that was voted on by the taxpayers of Mississippi”” (Bennett 2015). Through the minimization framework, this quote displays how the flag represents the state of Mississippi to them, not oppression, segregation, or discrimination. Because their meaning has nothing to do with race, they minimize the negative meaning that others associate with the flag.

It is important to understand that these frameworks are not usually used individually, but they are combined together to create a covertly racist discourse that subtly maintains systematic inequality (Bonilla Silva 2014, 78). An example of this, seen in an article from The DM that was written by a student, said:

In tearing down the state flag in the name of adherence to the UM Creed, they commit the most egregious violations: rejecting civility and fairness by falsely calling whole groups of people or things racist, denying peoples’ dignity by ridiculing their heritage and destroying communities through their divisionary tactics. All of this done to further a larger liberal agenda, each step an experiment into how far they can push decent people to buy into their particular brand of lunacy (Soper 2016).

Within this one statement, three frameworks were deployed: minimization, naturalization, and abstract liberalism. Minimization was seen when they stated that it is wrong to call

groups racist when they are not being overtly racist by supporting the state flag.

Naturalization was used in describing the flag as heritage. Lastly, abstract liberalism was operationalized in the part where they claimed that taking the flag down was “rejecting civility and fairness” of the people who support the flag. These combined frameworks also hold emotional tones when they are used. They can range from sympathy to total disgust and outrage towards all types of minorities (Bonilla Silva 2014, 78). Although my data was collected through an on-line survey instrument, there are certain tones within the open-ended responses that reflect the emotional tones Bonilla-Silva heard when interviewing people for his work. In the quote above, it is obvious that when reading the tone of the statement, the student was very passionate and upset about the situation. When these frameworks are combined, it becomes even more harmful because it allows for whites to navigate around racial issues with no consequence, and it comes at the expense of minority groups.

Lastly, colorblind racism has a specific style that is practiced by those that consider themselves “colorblind.” This style is consistent with all those that tend to be covertly discriminatory. For example, instead of using the racial slur “nigger,” people can be extremely hesitant when it comes to referring to blacks (103). People feel like they have to tip-toe around terms like “colored people” or “blacks” or “African Americans.” These examples of this coded language are what whites use in public, but it does not mean that they do not use racial slurs in private (104). An example of this style of language can be seen in an argument about the state flag as well. In The DM, the student author stated, “Hateful agitators, despite apparently being ‘oppressed’ to the point of tears, terror, and rally by inanimate objects, voluntarily chose to attend this school” (Soper 2016). The

wording, “hateful agitators,” is a way to tip-toe around stating what everyone who reads that sentence thinks it means: blacks. The surreptitious phrase is used because the article is on a public forum, which means whites have to be careful when referring to blacks and use a coded language. Other styles used include the phrases, “I am not prejudice, but...” and “Some of my best friends are...” These phrases are used as a buffer before someone says something that could be construed as racist (Bonilla Silva 2014, 105). Evidence of this can be seen in yet another article in The DM when a student said, “I am surely no racist, but I am a proud Southerner” (Lanagan 2016). This sentence was in reference to the flag being taken down and the band no longer playing the song ‘Dixie’ at football games. In setting up the sentence by having to prove that they are not a racist, sets tone that what they are about to say may be interpreted as racist. Being a proud southerner does not equate to being racist, but when it is in the context of being proud of a flag that has represented hate and injustice for over one hundred years, it can be interpreted by many as a form of racism.

People will also dismiss inequality and racial issues as being about anything but race. Whites use this style of rhetoric as a way to excuse their racial undertones of their “colorblindness” (Bonilla Silva 2014, 110). Claiming that anything involving a racial matter has nothing to do with race is both contradictory and counterintuitive. By denying that race is a factor in minorities' lives, it not only hurts the efforts and successes of those that have been fighting for equality, but it continues to make their problems seem meaningless or irrelevant. One last common rhetoric used in colorblind racism is rhetorical incoherence. This is a very natural part of speech, but when it is used when asking people about racial matters, it increases noticeably (116). When students on

campus were asked about their feelings on the state flag being removed, The DM reported one of them stating, ““I think taking it like that way probably wasn’t the best approach, but it is what it is”” (Bennett & Cobbert 2015). The ambiguity in the phrase ‘it is what it is,’ is a way for someone who does not agree with a racial matter to not say anything they truly mean in order to not offend anyone. This style is obscure enough to not upset anyone, but it does not give a clear understanding of how someone really feels about the issue. Overt racism is unacceptable, for the most part, in our society which is why people tend to be extremely vague when it comes to taking a stance on racial topics (Bonilla Silva 2014, 116). All of these specific styles and nuances can be seen in the context of the Mississippi state flag conversation. They are almost second nature to many people when discussing the ramifications of such a controversial symbol.

Colorblind racism is extremely complex and has many components to it, but it is clear that the usage of colorblind tactics are fluid and intertwined. Throughout my work, there will be a central theme: colorblind racism revolves around the denial of race impacting minorities’ lives. With that in mind, I am going to explore the different techniques employed in support for the Mississippi state flag with its confederate emblem. Many of these frameworks and styles are used by students on this campus when it comes to their attitudes on the state flag. It is important to keep in mind that with the true history of the state flag and the symbolism it holds to different people, attitudes can range in a variety of ways. Some feel as strongly as they possibly can from one end of the spectrum to the other, and others feel indifferent towards it. This has little to do with who is or is not colorblind racist, but it is more about recognizing that some attitudes in support for the flag can be negatively colorblind at the expense of those that do not approve of the

confederate symbol. These attitudes and opinions concerning the flag are as diverse as the people who hold them, and I hope to provide some meaning behind supporting or opposing the Mississippi state flag.

### III. Measuring the Complexity of Attitudes

After witnessing the tumultuous controversy concerning the state flag on campus during the fall semester of my junior year, I knew that studying the confederate emblem and its deeper meaning would be beneficial to the entire community to which I belong. Studying the university specifically would shed light on the complexity of attitudes that students hold, in hopes of helping produce a stronger understanding and acceptance among students and the rest of the surrounding community. Within this complexity of attitudes, there seemed to be two distinct interpretations of the flag: those who support it and its confederate symbol and those that do not. Because of these two polar meanings, I wanted to explore the justifications used in support for the state flag, and observe whether or not colorblind racism was employed in arguments in favor of keeping it. Also, this university has had a historical and direct connection to the confederate emblem, which is another motivation for choosing this topic. The University of Mississippi, as many say, is the flagship university. Many of its actions are impactful and influential to the entire state of Mississippi. Its decisions hold much significance, and they can initiate change and activism within the state because of its leadership and reputation. My hopes with this study is that I want to open up a productive dialogue between students, faculty, and staff in order to produce a discussion on a topic that many hold passionate and unwavering views on. Through this discussion, my goal is that for those who support the flag to better understand why it is hurtful and oppressive to other groups on this campus.



### Research Design:

This study is trying to answer the question of whether or not colorblind racism and support for the Mississippi state flag and its confederate emblem are related. The research design was an online, self-administered survey that collected information on individual demographics, level of colorblind racism, and attitudes towards the state flag. By surveying students, it was the most efficient way to measure their attitudes and demographics with the least amount of bias. The anonymity of the survey served to allow students to answer the questions and statements honestly without risk of being identified. This topic can be contentious to some individuals, and allowing for more honest answers was the best way to determine truthful attitudes and opinions.

### Research Questions:

My research questions were created as a way to examine how colorblind racism plays a role in students' justifications in support for the Mississippi state flag.

1. *To what extent do individuals deploy colorblind racism in justifying their support of the Mississippi state flag?*
2. *What are the most common colorblind racist frameworks employed by individuals who support the flag?*
3. *Outside of colorblind racism, what are the common themes for justifying support?*

### Participants:

Through a simple random sample, I obtained a random list of 1,000 freshmen and 1,000 seniors who were full-time students at the University of Mississippi, who attend

class at the Oxford campus. Once the survey was distributed, I received a total of 498 responses. The total amount of respondents reflected the University of Mississippi 2014-2015 campus averages very closely. There was a close to even amount of freshmen and senior respondents. The amount of freshmen was 50.89% ( $n = 228$ ), and 49.11% ( $n = 220$ ) were seniors. The demographics of respondents were very similar to the university's. For freshmen at the university during the 2014-2015 academic year on the Oxford main campus, 78.51% were White, 12.94% were Black or African American, 4.10% were Asian, 4.04% were Hispanic or Latino, 0.32% were American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 0.10% were Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. This is compared to freshmen respondents where 86.84% were White, 9.65% were Black or African American, 2.63% were Asian, 3.95% were Hispanic or Latino, 1.32% were American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 0.00% were Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. University senior demographics were 78.68% White, 15.24% Black or African American, 2.76% Asian, 3.07% Hispanic or Latino, 0.20% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 0.06% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. The averages of respondents was considerably close to that of the university's. This tells us that this sample is fairly representative of the entire campus of the University of Mississippi. Although there were a slightly larger amount of white students compared to the university, this can happen on a predominantly white campus.

Classification	Race/Ethnicity of Full-Time Students at the University	
	Full-Time	Grand Total
<b>Freshman</b>	<b>58.37%</b>	<b>58.37%</b>
American Indian or Alaskan Nat	0.32%	0.32%
Asian	4.10%	4.10%
Black or African American	12.94%	12.94%
Hispanic or Latino	4.04%	4.04%
Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific	0.10%	0.10%
White	78.51%	78.51%
<b>Senior</b>	<b>41.63%</b>	<b>41.63%</b>
American Indian or Alaskan Nat	0.20%	0.20%
Asian	2.76%	2.76%
Black or African American	15.24%	15.24%
Hispanic or Latino	3.07%	3.07%
Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific	0.06%	0.06%
White	78.68%	78.68%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

(The University of Mississippi Enrollment Data Trends 2014-2015)

Classification	Race/Ethnicity of Sample Group	
	Full-Time	Grand Total
<b>Freshman</b>	<b>50.89%</b>	<b>50.89%</b>
American Indian or Alaskan Nat	1.32%	1.32%
Asian	2.63%	2.63%
Black or African American	9.65%	9.65%
Hispanic or Latino	3.95%	3.95%
Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific	0.00%	0.00%
White	86.84%	86.84%
<b>Senior</b>	<b>49.11%</b>	<b>49.11%</b>
American Indian or Alaskan Nat	2.27%	2.27%
Asian	0.91%	0.91%
Black or African American	12.73%	12.73%
Hispanic or Latino	5.02%	5.02%
Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific	0.91%	0.91%
White	82.27%	82.27%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

#### Measures and Procedure:

Within my survey, there were three parts that respondents completed. One part was demographic questions. This included items such as participants gender, race and

ethnicity, classification, hometown state, and more. These demographic questions were dispersed throughout the survey in order to increase the response rate to other sections, with the most important questions towards the beginning and the less important, but still useful, questions throughout. I did this because if respondents did not complete the survey in whole, there would at least be some relevant data to use. The second part of the survey was a scale called the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (Neville et al. 2000). The CoBRA Scale is a well-vetted, reliable scale that measures one's level of colorblind racism. It lists several statements concerning race, and one responds on a scale from one to seven, one being do not agree at all to seven being strongly agree. An example of a statement from the scale is, "White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of their skin" (Neville et al. 2000). Respondents would then rank, on a scale from one to seven, how much they agreed with that statement. The CoBRA Scale has been used throughout many scholar's work concerning the issue of colorblind racism, and it has been reliable and results can be generalized consistently (Neville et al. 2000, Lewis et al. 2012, Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich 2011).

The third part of the survey entails questions concerning the Mississippi state flag. These questions range from whether or not respondents believe Mississippi should change or keep the flag, their level of agreement on statements about the flag, and additional feelings they would like to share about the flag. The level of agreement questions are structured similar to the CoBRA Scale. First, respondents are asked about whether the flag should be kept, changed, unsure, or do not know. Next, they are given multiple sections on level of agreement statements. The first section involved statements about the flag representing history, southern heritage, if the University was right in its

decision on taking the flag down, and such. The second section stated more negative sides to the flag debate like, if the flag represented racial discrimination and oppression, white supremacy, and if changing it would create a more inclusive environment. The order of these questions was intentional because I assumed that having statements that were in support for the flag first would generate more sincere answers. This was assumed because I did not want the statements about opposing the flag to alter the perception of the survey as a whole.

The last part of the flag section was an open-ended question that asked, “What are some additional feelings you hold concerning the Mississippi state flag and its confederate emblem?” This question allowed respondents to type in an answer about anything they felt they wanted to say about the flag. Through this question, I received the bulk of my qualitative findings. I coded these responses into ten categories. I used the frameworks from Bonilla-Silva’s work on colorblind racism for the majority of the responses (2014). The categories of responses consisted of abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, combination of the frameworks, overt racism, unspecific support for the flag, do not support the flag, unsure of how they feel, and do not care either way. This allowed me to be able to observe which frameworks of colorblind racism or other common themes were being used in justifying keeping the state flag the same. I was then able to analyze the techniques and framework used by students to justify their support for the state flag, which speaks to my research questions. By coding these into separate categories, I will be building on past research of colorblind racism frameworks, while testing its relevance to a different situation, like arguments for keeping the state flag with its confederate emblem. This process of building and testing both generates

support for my work, and it allows for current literature to be tested and applied to other topics within the social world.

#### IV. Heritage Can Be Hate

After analyzing all of the results I received from respondents, there were many different findings that proved to be quite compelling concerning the relationship between who is supporting the state flag remaining the same and the ways in which they are justifying these opinions. First, I wanted to find out the reliability of my survey instrument. I broke up the questions on the flag attitudes scale from the survey into two categories: “heritage, not hate” and “hate, not heritage.” This meant that questions involving supporting the flag and believing it does not represent hate fell into the first category, and questions suggesting that the flag does represent hate, fell into the second category. After creating these two groups, I tested the reliability of these groups and received a Cronbach Alpha score of .919 for the group “heritage, not hate” and a score of .961 for the group of “hate, not heritage.” These scores proved that the survey was reliable, and respondents were answering the questions in similar ways (Lehman, O’Rourke, Hatcher, & Stepanski 2013, 168).

There was a stark difference between who wanted to keep the flag and who did not. I cross-compared race with question on whether or not Mississippi should keep or change the state flag, and the results I saw were concrete. There were 60.90% (n = 190) of White respondents that felt the flag should stay the same, and 30.45% (n = 95) thought it should change. For Black or African American respondents, only 11.76% (n = 4) thought it should be kept the same, and an overwhelming 85.29% (n = 29) felt it should change. These results point to a strong difference between races when it comes to



attitudes on the state flag. The overall sample also represents how people's level of agreement or disagreement on the flag is consistent. There are two different meanings being attached to it by two different groups, and these results help prove that. It provides evidence for the claim that symbols can have different meanings, specifically, the Mississippi state flag has two groups that hold conflicting feelings (Blumer 1969).

<b>Responses in Open-Ended Question</b>	
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
White	178
Black or African American	15
American Indian or Alaskan Native	5
Asian	5
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	2
Hispanic or Latino	8

Colorblind racism frameworks were used by many respondents in the open-ended question asking about additional feelings towards the state flag. There were 202 responses to this question total. The table above totals out to 213 responses, but some individuals identified as more than one race which is why there are more than 202. There was an extreme amount of white respondents. Almost the entire sample was white. This was helpful when using the colorblind racism framework. There were Out of 202 responses, 129 were in support of the state flag. Within the proponents of the flag, 20.9% (n = 27) used the abstract liberalism framework alone, 19.4% (n = 25) used the

naturalization framework alone, 0.8% (n = 1) used the cultural racism framework alone, and 16.2% (n = 21) used the minimization framework alone. A total of 34.1% (n = 44) of respondents used some combination of frameworks in their justifications. There were 1.5% (n = 2) of respondents that used overt racism, and 7.0% (n = 9) held unspecific responses in support of the flag. The other categories included 63 responses that did not support the state flag, 6 were unsure, and 4 did not care either way.

Throughout the qualitative results, the main theme observed was by far the use of colorblind racism frameworks. There were some over racist arguments and some ambiguous support for the flag, but other than that, the majority of responses fell into one of the five framework categories. Many of the arguments made involved the framework of abstract liberalism. This framework was deployed by proponents when they would claim that the flag should fly on campus because the university is a state funded school. This was rationalized by asserting that Mississippi residents have voted on this matter previously, where they decided to keep the flag as it is. They also claim that since these residents pay taxes that fund the university, it is disrespectful to not fly the flag on a campus that residents, that have voted in support of the flag, pay state taxes towards. Examples of these responses are, “It should be flown on any piece of property that receives state funding,” “They state flag should be flown over public institutions, of which Ole Miss is one, regardless of what it displays. If the people due not agree with what that flag represents, it should be voted on democratically by the people. The solution is not to circumvent democracy by having a small group of actors remove it, which to all outward appearances is contrary to the will of the majority. Democracy as we know it in the country is majority rule with minority rights, not the other way around,”

and “The people of the state have already expressed their desire to keep our flag as is. College campuses who receive money from these citizens have shown that they don't care about these citizens through their hissy fits.” This type of justification is harmful to groups that feel the flag is a symbol of hate and oppression for several reasons. Arguing that the state voted on the matter is becoming more and more irrelevant because this vote took place in 2001, which was sixteen years ago. Also, by equating the responsibility the university has to its students is the same as its responsibility to members of the state pay taxes is misguided. The university is responsible to protect the lives and concerns of its students above all. Placing the opinions of those who oppose the flag on campus for fear of what the flag represents below tax-paying residents of state is inadmissible. The university made the decision based on the anxieties its students were feeling.

Naturalization was used in many responses as well. This framework was used through the claims that the flag represents history or heritage, as it always has, and we cannot erase history by eliminating the confederate emblem from the state flag. For example, respondents said, “I feel that taking the confederate emblem off the state flag is an attempt to erase very important history,” and “The confederate emblem is a representation of people who fought for what they believe in and removing it from the flag discredits their service for the area we live in.” When these claims are made, it ignores the fact that just because it is a part of history does not mean it needs to be represented on the state flag. It eliminates half of history by only focusing on one side of it. When people argue that no one should be offended by the confederate emblem on the state flag because it represents history, not hate, it is amiss because they are forgetting about major parts of history. If it does represent history, it must also represent the history

of what flag was created and used for. The Confederacy supported slavery, and the Dixiecrats opposed integration and the Civil Rights Movement. The history argument for flag proponents contradicts itself because if the flag is about history, it is also about hate because that is what the flag flew for.

Another major framework that was employed was minimization. This framework played on the arguments where respondents would dismiss the flag having anything to do with race, or state that those who were offended by the flag were wrong for feeling so. Minimization works through these types of arguments by denying that race is an issue concerning the state flag, and it diminishes the opinions of those that feel the flag is a representation of hate. It minimizes the opinions of others by claiming that there are bigger issues of discrimination and racism to face than dealing with an emblem on a “piece of fabric.” Examples from respondents include, “It's just a flag. People are dying from hunger on a daily basis and yet people care more about a piece of fabric waving in the air,” “It does not represent white supremacy to me. It just represents to me the flag they used during the civil war, and changing a flag or anything else will not stop racism or make people include more people in things. If everything like racism would stop being brought up in the news every five seconds then it would stop being such a big problem,” and “I believe that removing the flag entirely disregards the symbols and issues that it represents and alienates those that acknowledge and appreciate those that fought, successfully or not, for our culture. I entertain the idea that it holds negative connotations to certain individuals, but I believe this to be a misconstrued perception.” By curtailing their feelings, it can make opponents of the flag feel undervalued or insignificant. In downplaying the flag’s meaning to certain groups, it again puts those that disagree in a

position where their feelings are trivial or pointless. Minorities have been ignored and mistreated for years, and when whites use this type of language to support the flag, it continues the legacy of inequality by not considering the feelings that minorities have had for so long and are just now speaking out about them. Minimizing their feelings both ignores and silences them, and it treats them like they are incorrect for feeling the way they do. It is obvious that the impact minimization has is extremely harmful and negative.

The responses students wrote held very high levels of colorblind racism. Although there were many that used the frameworks individually, the bulk of responses combined the frameworks together. When they were combined, there were many different combinations used. These combinations proved what Bonilla-Silva discussed about how Whites are more likely to use these frameworks together as a coded language to deny the fact that race plays a crucial role in the everyday lives of minorities (2014). Even though not many used cultural racism as an individual framework, there were plenty of times it was used in combination with other frameworks. This specific framework would be used when respondents would say that it is not surprising that liberals or "certain people" are offended by the flag. One respondent said, "Liberals need to go back where they came from and quit whining. The state flag will always fly at my house." This type of cultural racism points out that whites are afraid of liberals trying to decenter whiteness. Liberal policies tend to support minority rights, and some whites can oppose these policies because they are not benefitting them (Kymlicka 1995, Hitchcock & Flint 2015). Because liberals pose a threat to systematic white power, respondents that claim liberals are offended by everything and are always "playing the race card," are trying to prevent whiteness from being decentered. Cultural racism is a part of this because it used to

blame all liberals for being too sensitive and turning everything into a racial issue. When this frame is combined with any other frame, it can further put the blame on minorities for speaking up about inequality.

All of the frameworks were used in several different combinations with each other. When these frameworks are combined, they are extremely detrimental to solving the issue of the state flag. For example, “It is good to remember and see where we come from and how much we have grown since this flag first flew. More free blacks/African Americans fought on the confederate side, the war was not all about race and slavery but more so about the south being oppressed, however they seldom teach that in schools anymore. Being from the beautiful state of Mississippi I believe we should keep the flag, the changing or forgetting of history is causing race to be more of an issue,” “The 'Stars and Bars' in the corner of the Mississippi state flag is an important part of American History. We cannot simply destroy every symbol from an era simply because a minority of the populace believes that it is a symbol of hate. The state flag is a part of Mississippi heritage, and since Ole Miss is a state funded school (no matter that the state gives a small percentage of our budget), so the flag should remain displayed on campus,” “The state flag should stay as it is. The state voted on the flag and the popular vote wanted to keep it. The majority want the flag to fly on campus and want it to stay the way it is. If it is changed, that is not promoting inclusion it is only coddling the needs of the minority. The confederate flag has nothing to do with racism nor did its use in the civil war, which was not fought over slavery but rather state rights,” and “ The flag was only ever meant to represent MS history. The people who began to take issue with the flag are the ones who transformed it into a symbol of hate. Something needs to be done about the racial

issues in this country, but taking issue with a piece of fabric was a well-intended step in the WRONG direction. Anyone who believes that changing a flag will help the racism problem in this country clearly doesn't understand the depth of the issue. We should learn from our history, not disown it.” It increases the rationalization of denying the feelings and perceptions of those who are offended by it. It both minimizes and blames victims for how they feel and excuses people for supporting a divisive symbol. When whites’ arguments are formed in these combinations of frameworks, minorities have a little chance of being heard or taken seriously.

One of the most frequently used combinations of frameworks was when naturalization was used with minimization. For example, multiple respondents employed the saying “Heritage, not hate” in their arguments for the state flag. Naturalization takes place when people say that the flag represents heritage or history, claiming it has always been that way and cannot be changed (Bonilla-Silva 2014). It is then combined with minimization because they claim that the flag does not represent hate or racism. It minimizes the the fact that because it is not overtly racist to them that it does not equate to racism at all, and people should recognize that (2014). This phrase is very commonly used throughout the south when rationalizing the confederate emblem on the state flag. I was not surprised to see it used as responses when students were asked about their opinions on the flag. However, it is crucial to understand what that phrase is interpreted as. By not only denying that the flag has anything to do with race, but also refusing to recognize that the history of Mississippi is deeply intertwined with slavery, segregation, oppression, and discrimination, it fails to understand the impact a symbol can have on minority groups. This creates a fine line between whose history people are describing.

Claiming the state flag is a part of history in which cannot and will not be erased leads down a slippery slope. When naturalization takes place in proponents arguments in support for the state flag, it is choosing which history gets remembered and honored. Flag proponents state that their ancestors fought in the Civil War or that this is their history, and that is why the flag should remain, to honor them. However, there were other groups' histories that occurred during the same time, and it completely forgets to acknowledge how the flag affected that side of history. There are always two sides of history, and whites have to come to the realization that they cannot deny this fact any longer. Denying that race plays a role in the state flag is concrete evidence of colorblind racism playing out in the form of support for the flag. Colorblind racist frameworks are commonly used, both individually and together, as a way to rationalize that the state flag is representative of the state and not a symbol of hate, while also perpetuating a system of inequality that benefits them and hurts those who oppose them.



## V. What To Do About the Mississippi State Flag

There were some limitations throughout the study. One of the main constraints was time. If I was able to have more time, I would have held in-depth interviews in order to further examine the meaning behind “heritage, not hate” and other justifications. This would have allowed me to investigate not only the frameworks of their arguments, but also be able to understand in more detail why students hold those attitudes and opinions. Future research through interviews on this subject could provide these extra details on the underlying meanings behind proponents justifications for the state flag. Another constraint to my work was the fact that not every student that completed the survey answered the open-ended question about additional feelings on the flag at the end. This could have given me an even stronger amount of evidence to my findings that the most common theme used in justifications was some combination of Bonilla-Silva’s frameworks for colorblind racism (2014).

Also, if time permitted so, I would have focused on the quantitative findings more in-depth. In the future, my advisor, Dr. James M. Thomas, and I plan on studying the answers respondents gave in the COBRAS section of the survey to compare those that have high levels of colorblind racism within the scale to their amount of support for the Mississippi state flag. These will also be compared between freshmen and seniors to see if there a correlation between being on a diverse campus for three or more years and having lower levels of colorblind racism. We will try to observe if seniors have lower levels of colorblind racism, they will in turn have less support for the Mississippi state

flag. This future research would provide more evidence behind my findings that colorblind racism is connected to support for the state flag and its confederate emblem.

Throughout the study, my goal was to determine if individuals deployed colorblind racism in their justifications for supporting the state flag. This was clearly seen in the results of the survey. The majority of respondents that gave additional thoughts and feelings on their support for the flag in the open-ended question used some form of colorblind racism framework or style. The frameworks employed were abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, minimization, or a combination of these four. The most common frameworks were abstract liberalism, naturalization, and minimization, but the largest amount of responses found was people using these frames combined together. These combinations are a common way to defend supporting the flag. An extremely common phrase, “heritage, not hate,” was a perfect example of how these frameworks work together to continue a system of inequality, where whites remain in power at the expense of minorities.

There were not many other common themes found in respondents arguments for the flag. This proved even further how critical the study of colorblind racism is. Since most of the respondents used some form of this new racial order, it provided compelling evidence in the claim that colorblind racism is used daily to justify supporting the confederate emblem on the Mississippi state flag. Studying colorblind racism can provide much clarity to the issue of inequality and racial matters. People can become defensive when it comes to discussing racial matters, but there is little need for this if the topic of colorblind racism is understood. Through the realization that race is still a factor in society, there may be a chance that proponents of the state flag can listen and recognize

that those who feel the flag is representative of hate and oppression feel that way for a reason.

I hope that this study can open a productive dialogue between groups of supporters and opponents of the flag. This would benefit not only the campus of the University of Mississippi in creating a more inclusive and accepting environment, but it could be the foundation to the state of Mississippi becoming more understanding of all viewpoints when it comes to the state flag. It is more than just tolerance, however. There must be acceptance between individuals that this divisive symbol means something else to different groups. Once acceptance occurs, then progress can arise. I want my study to begin a constructive and effective discussion between students on and off campus in order to create a more safe and considerate place. Once these conversations take place, I also hope my study can shed light on the fact that there is a reason people do not support the flag, and there is also a reason why some arguments in support for it are harmful to others around them. Overall, in order to make strides to end inequality and discrimination, there must be an understanding that colorblind racism exists and come to terms with ways in which it can be remedied.

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