

“I feel like I’m going extinct:” Conversations about the Confederacy in South Central Virginia

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Keywords: Confederate flag, identity, marginalization

Abstract: Summer 2015 was a time of renewed attention to the persistence and prominence of the Confederate (or rebel) flag in the southern United States. As national attention to the flag increased, I was undertaking eight weeks of preliminary fieldwork in a Virginia town named for general JEB Stuart. This paper examines the conversations surrounding the flag and other Confederate symbols that took place in person and in an online group for county residents. In it, I examine how flag supporters draw on their feelings of cultural and economic marginalization to resist the flag’s removal. While racism undergirds some of the arguments, I aim to open a conversation about how the flag is symbolically linked to old-fashioned ways of life—and its removal conflated with a threat to that way of life. For scholars and activists in favor of the flag’s removal, this work questions if and how we can remove an oppressive symbol without exacerbating some rural southerners’ sense of marginalization.