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A Letter to the Class of 2220



When I was a senior at the College, this view would be on my walk to and from school. I passed it every day, multiple times a day, and at the beginning of my senior year in 2019, I knew the church held significance because it was at this church, in 2015, where a white supremacist came and killed nine people. Most everyone who lived in Charleston, or even the country, at that time knew of this shooting. It was an absolute tragedy -- nine kids shot and killed while their heads were bowed in prayer, just because they were black and just because a kid had a loophole to get a gun.



KNOW THEIR NAMES



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Again, at the beginning of the year I would walk past this church and remember that shooting and honor those kids. It would humble me as I remembered that Charleston itself had a bloody history, being a port city where 80% of slaves came through. However, it was not until my “Black Religion and Black Nationalism from Slave Rebellions to Black Lives Matter” class that I truly understood the significance of this church and this city, especially within the context of the black experience.

In 1822, 198 years ago from me and around 400 years ago for y’all (I really hope that this word is still in the Southern vernacular), a man named Denmark Vesey planned to destroy Charleston. Vesey, an emancipated slave, freed himself and was a leader and preacher of an African Church. By the time Vesey had become a preacher, the laws had changed prohibiting slave owners from freeing enslaved Africans. Vesey formed a plot, alongside enslaved and freed peoples, to stand up and revolt. I would later understand that Vesey could be defined as a black nationalist, even though that term was not around back then. His goals paralleled, to an extent, those of Martin Delaney, Marcus Garvey, and Malcolm X. Ultimately, his plot was foiled and he

1 "The Charleston Church Massacre (2015) - BlackPast." 30 Sep. 2017, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/charleston-church-massacre-2015/>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2020.

2 "Events to Honor the Emanuel Nine - Elliott Summey for County" 16 Jun. 2016, <https://elliottsummey.com/events-honor-emanuel-nine/>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2020.

and his fellow conspirators were hung and the church was burned. However, after emancipation happened in 1865, the congregation reassembled, and Vesey's son helped build this new church which they named Emmanuel, or more well known today (in 2020) as Mother Emmanuel, or Emmanuel AME church -- the same church where the Emmanuel Nine shooting happened (Demby³).

I had no idea that this church held such significance in the black community, and I had no idea that when a white supremacist chose that church to shoot down, that it was a church that was born out of tragedy, which just makes the whole thing sickly ironic and cruel. In fact, author



Gene Demby highlights another key moment of cruelty that connects past to present. Hampton Park here is, or hopefully was by the time y'all are reading this, named after a white supremacist from the Civil War. In that same park stands a statue of Denmark Vesey. A CofC professor recalls

standing in that park with the Reverend that was murdered in Emanuel AME in 2015. They stood and talked in a park named after a white supremacist that also housed a statue of an African American leader and Reverend Pinckney spoke of forgiveness and healing. He then was shot and killed by the same evil that he tried to extend reconciliation to (Demby³). As Demby states, "It was a surreal confluence of histories in a city that remains deeply invested in the work of

³ "Dylann Roof conviction adds to Charleston's knotted mix of" 16 Dec. 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/12/16/505697999/the-charleston-story-a-knotted-mix-of-race-grace-and-injustice>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2020.

unremembering2.” This is the city that I went to school in; this is the city that y’all are currently located in.⁴

This place has much more history than that story and goes much farther back than the 2000s. For example, there was, and hopefully still is, an Old Slave Mart Museum located on Chalmer Street that reveals the history of Charleston. The building itself was used as an auction site, making the building itself an artifact. It was constructed so that it would blend in and so that auctions could take place without “disrupting the peace.”

It was there that I learned that in 1860, 57% of South Carolina’s residents were enslaved blacks. I learned that those cobblestones streets that I have no doubt they’ve spent time and money trying to preserve were home to auctions where they would sell enslaved



Africans. I learned that William Aiken made his fame and fortune off the blood, sweat, and tears of slaves -- 1,843 to be exact⁵. The scholarship group that I am a part of -- the one that pays my tuition -- is named after that man.⁶

I tell you all of this because you’re supposed to understand what I learned in this course. Well, these are some of the key things I learned about the true history, that for us was pretty hidden, of Charleston. However, what I actually learned in this course, and what I hope you are

⁴ "File:Denmark Vesey Monument - Hampton Park - Wikimedia" 29 Sep. 2018, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Denmark_Vesey_Monument_-_Hampton_Park_-_Charleston_SC_02.jpg. Accessed 22 Apr. 2020.

⁵ "Old Slave Mart Museum - Free information, pictures and" <http://www.oldslavemartmuseum.com/>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2020.

⁶ "Old Slave Mart (U.S. National Park Service)." 22 Feb. 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/places/old-slave-mart.htm>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2020.

beginning to see, is that history is a powerful connector. It links the past and present to ways that I finally can see now, that it is beyond important to critically analyze the world we live in because it may not be that different from the past.

It's also beyond critical to understand the past. It helps explain the present and can help us transform the future. For you all, the Dylan Roof shooting would have been as long ago for you as the Denmark Vesey plot is for me. I hope and pray that that history wasn't as distant for you as it was for me. If it was, I hope this letter helps you draw connections from the past in the same way this course did for me.

I'm envisioning a world in which y'all would know about that 2015 shooting. Moreover, I'm envisioning a world in which if you do know about the shooting, you know the names of the victims that were tragically killed, not the name of the white supremacist that took mothers, sons, and wives away from countless families. I'm envisioning a world in which your education system properly teaches you about the cruel and tragic history that is our nation's founding, a history that unfortunately leads up to 2020 -- the year I'm writing this. The year in which black people are disproportionately dying from the current pandemic we're living in, COVID-19. No, the United States doesn't have massive plantations that hold hundreds of slaves anymore. Yes, we still systematically oppress black people. We haven't changed all that much.

If you didn't know this story, you do now. And I hope it infuriates you. I hope that you're angry, especially because you can see connections between what's going on in your world today and what the past held. I can confidently say that 200 years from now in 2220, you all will still have racist systems in place. From my experience and education, I'm well aware that 400 years wasn't enough to end racism in this country, and 200 years won't be enough either.

I do hope that the institution you're in has more diversity than it did when I was there. I hope you can look around at each other and see people who do *and* don't look like you, who



Figure 1: Pictured Elizabeth Warren (left) Kamala Harris (right) actively destroying the patriarchy.

These are some of the coolest women of my time.

don't look like each other, and encompass the diversity and inclusion that we strived for, but never got to. I hope with my entire soul that you all have seen a woman president, a black woman on the Supreme Court, and that you can't to heavy firearms. I hope that you all

feel safe in this city and school, which I hold so dear, even in spite of its cruel history.

Finally, this is a letter to the class of 2220, the senior class. I hope that you all take this information and the information you learned during undergrad and go do something with it. I place that burden on you because the last big thing I took away from this course is that it's going to be the young generation, the activist generation, that makes a difference. I was lucky enough to sit in a room with a professor and peers so brilliant and engaged that, in the midst of learning about tragedy, I felt hope. I have no doubt that many of you feel the same looking around the room. Let yourself be infuriated and subsequently empowered by the social injustices that happen around you and let yourself be inspired by the people around you. Take what you know and try and make a difference in this world; I know there's still work to be done. I, like some of you, am also graduating, and while I said earlier that I know racism hasn't been eradicated yet, I

plan on fighting like hell to accomplish that. ⁷ In the words -- kind of -- of Patrisse Khan-Cullors, co-founder of BLM (Yes, this was during my time and yes, I am very aware of how incredible that is that I live in the same world as this woman), “we, the people...[we are] stardust” (Khan-Cullors & Bendeles).



⁷ "Elizabeth Warren has been slowly but surely eating Kamala" 9 Oct. 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/elizabeth-warren-is-slowly-but-surely-eating-kamala-harris-base-2019-10>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2020.

⁸ "When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir" <https://www.amazon.com/When-They-Call-You-Terrorist-ebook/dp/B071ZT28ZE>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2020.