

## Activating and Deactivating Heritage Symbols

Association of Black Anthropologists

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### On the Tubman \$20 and Other Symbolic Controversies

After a long controversy between students and upper-level administration, Yale University decided not to remove the name of John C. Calhoun from their residential community building. Apparently, they only supported efforts to stop using the title “master” to address the faculty members who head these [residential communities](#). The demands to remove the name came in a long slew of incidents that occurred during 2015 which sought to eradicate poignant symbols of racism including the confederate flag and monuments to men like [Cecil B. Rhodes](#) and [Woodrow Wilson](#) who were avid supporters and facilitators of racist and imperialist policies.

Coinciding with the decision not to remove Calhoun's name, US Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew [announced](#) that ex-slave and underground railroad leader, Harriet Tubman, was elected to become the new face of the \$20 bill. She will replace Andrew Jackson, the American President and economic mogul who built his wealth and the wealth of this country on the genocidal trade in black slaves and forced removal of American Indians from the territories of the southeastern US. Somehow, however, he will remain on the back of the bill, as though 90 years of tenure on legal tender were not enough to enact his fair share of symbolic oppression. Tubman will be the first African American to be featured on US currency and the first woman since Martha Washington's \$1 [silver certificate](#) to be featured on a bill (although [Susan B. Anthony](#) and two Native American women, [Sacagawea](#) and [Pocahontas](#) have been featured on special editions of the more or less obsolete \$1 coin and the back of a \$20 bill issued for only four years during the Civil War).



Statue of Maya woman on display in central park, Valladolid, Yucatan. Photo courtesy of Tiffany Cain

surfacing of these kinds of materials in the political consciousness of Americans, however, reminds us just how powerful, how durable, materialized symbols can be. How we imagine our futures, how we seek to represent our present, both of these are bound up physically and metaphorically in the ways we mobilize our past—especially when that past is a violent one. Where I work in Quintana Roo, Mexico, racialized and gendered symbols of political authority and subversive resistance abound. The commodified image of ancient Maya men and women paint a docile and submissive picture of the territories that were conquered and reconquered throughout the past 500 years. But, these images are bound up with the monuments to Jacinto Pat, Cecilio Chi, Manuel Antonio Ay that stand in the towns of their births—all leaders of the nineteenth century Caste War of Yucatan, arguably one of the most successful indigenous revolts to have occurred in the Americas.

These statues, despite reflecting demands made by local communities, were ultimately commissioned by the state during the 1990s. What complicated history is it when the state allows, even funds, the creation of symbols that are otherwise meant to undermine it?

Throughout the process of selecting a woman for the bill (see [Women on 20s campaign](#)), stakes revealed themselves as high and responses crossed the spectrum. Activist Feminista Jones [wrote](#), “Her legacy is rooted in resisting the foundation of American capitalism. Tubman didn't respect America's economic system, so making her a symbol of it would be insulting.” But others responded with a more take-what-we-can-get sentiment. Journalist Aaron Randle [writes](#), “Unlike the current iteration prominently featuring super-predator presidential stain Andrew Jackson, a Tubman-faced \$20 isn't a vessel for scorn, mockery, and shame. This is one less Confederate flag. One less J. Edgar Hoover Building. One less Calhoun College. This is #BlackGirlMagic usurping white supremacy.”

Just a few days prior the announcement of Tubman's newfound nomination as the face of the most prominently distributed form of US currency, President Obama [announced](#) the establishment of the Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument which honors the important contributions of the National Women's Party. Unfortunately, the NWP was an organization that, while seeking gender equality, upheld racial and ethnic inequalities at the expense of black women activists like Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell.



Statue of insurrection leader, Jacinto Pat, Tihosuco, Quintana Roo. Photo courtesy of Tiffany Cain

But they can be seen as sanitized commodities in their own right. While in stark contrast to many of the monuments found across the Yucatecan Peninsula, they still uphold the wider masculinist vision of history that Mexico has so carefully crafted over the past several centuries. These are stories of great men. Ironically, women have found their place, too, on Mexican currency but only superficially ([Frida Kahlo](#), reverse of Diego Rivera's \$500 peso note).

Often, the excuse mobilized to keep monuments and other symbols that evoke past violence, like Calhoun College, active in the public eye is that they will serve some sort of educational purpose for the future. Indeed, these icons might become axes for discussion about violence and racial oppression. But, I want to ask us, who does the burden of educating fall upon? Who precisely will bear the burden of making those materialized symbols do that work? They certainly have not done that work on their own. Does relegating Andrew Jackson to the back of the bus—err, the back of the bill—actually provide fodder for growth? Is this a “leave the name but drop the *master*” moment? If being on currency is in itself meant to be understood as an honor, is it then less of an honor to relegate Jackson to the back of the bill behind a woman who stood for the exact opposite of what he stood for? If it is, that would seem to undermine the apparent honors being bestowed on the suffragists (some of whom were known racists) and civil rights activists who will be featured on the new \$5 and \$10 bills. As anthropologists, we need to be contributing to these conversations.

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