

Silent Sam Must Go

An Open Letter to University of North Carolina Chancellor Carol Folt

Dorothy Potter Snyder



Protestors surround the empty pedestal. (August 25th, 2018). © Heather Ahn Redding

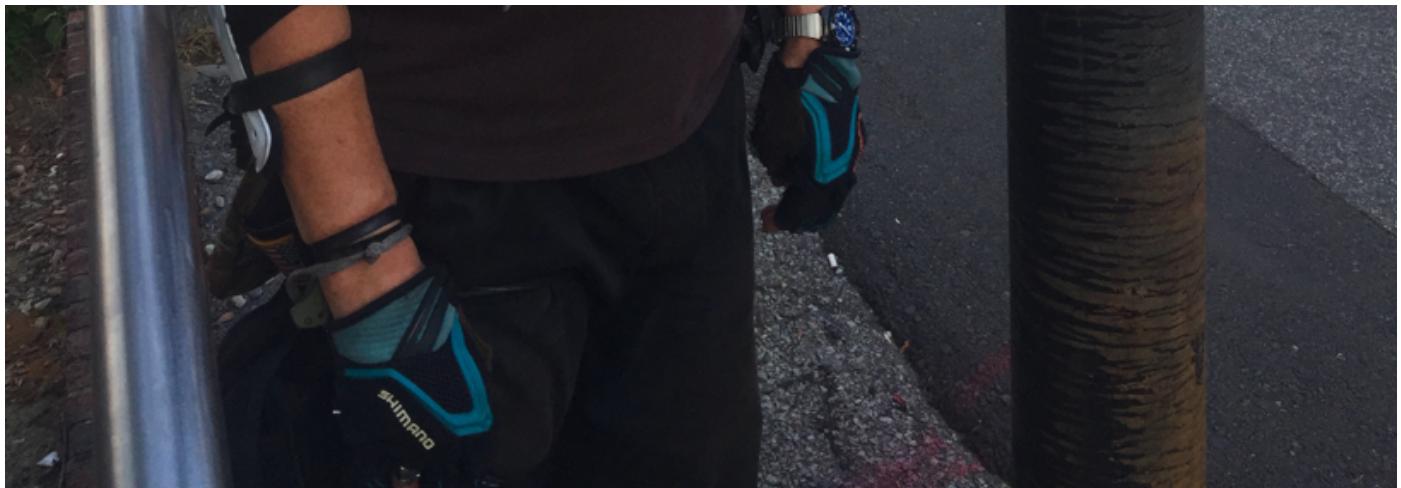
Dear Chancellor Folt,

Silent Sam is a metal statue of an armed Confederate soldier that would be artistically insignificant in almost any other context than at the front gates of North Carolina's state university system. Here, at the flagship campus in Chapel Hill, it is at the center of a hurricane.

It's time for the statue to go. In this post-Charlottesville world, you, Chancellor, the Board of Governors, the UNC Trustees, the students and this community are at a historic moment that demands urgent action.

And in case you haven't noticed, things have gotten weird. Last Thursday I walked to McCorkle Place to cover the student-led protest against a gathering of Lost-Causers who had raised Confederate flags at the pedestal, vacant since [protestors toppled Silent Sam](#) on August 20th. On the way, I ran into Mr. Roboto, a man in a homemade superhero outfit and a self-professed member of [The Xtreme Justice League](#). "I'll be here if you need me," he said. Unusual times call for extraordinary measures. Heroes, even.





Mr. Roboto, Superhero in Chapel Hill (August 30, 2018) © Dorothy Potter Snyder

You and the BOG have claimed your hands are tied by [NC General Statute 100-2.1 \(2015\)](#), a law that strictly limits the removal, relocation or alteration of “objects of remembrance”. But Governor Cooper has already given you [permission to address safety concerns](#) as you see fit; and federal law, specifically the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibits the university from maintaining a racially-hostile learning environment. More than [300 UNC faculty have signed a letter](#) demanding that you “show leadership, not bureaucratic obfuscation.” The [Chapel Hill Chamber of Commerce](#) has demanded permanent relocation of the statue.

In other words, there is broad support for the removal of Silent Sam.



Students at the barricades (August 30, 2018) © Dorothy Potter Snyder

People of color and their allies here have been patient. It has been a half-century since Martin Luther King's assassination inspired the first organized protest against this monument. But in your press conference following the August 30th protest at McCorkle place, you called for yet more forbearance while "the process works itself out." The message of people of color and their allies is simple: Tear it down and keep it down.

Your answer to them: [we'll get back to you](#) later.

It is your job to provide moral leadership and clarity now before someone is injured or killed on this campus. I and others sustained cuts and bruises when police officers rammed the crowd with bicycles. Outsiders connected to

white supremacist groups from out-of-state infiltrated the crowd, provoking conflicts with the aim of maligning the student movement. Mere barriers cannot keep the sides in this argument apart; postponing the right decision leaves space for tragedy.

Do not permit Chapel Hill to become the next Charlottesville.





A Three-Percenter displays his forearm tattoo and some attitude (August 25, 2018) © Jerry Carr

The university's war dead are remembered honorably elsewhere on campus: The [Carolina Alumni Memorial](#) and its Book of Names is free from racially-charged symbolism. But you cannot simply move Silent Sam to a less prominent location on campus. It is, and will always be, a symbol of the fight for slavery and the racist ideology that actually inspired its strategic installation at the front door of the university in 1913. Silent Sam will signal ongoing systemic racism *in any public, uncontextualized space it may occupy on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus*. Yet you engage in placating people like BOG member [Thomas Goolsby](#), as well as his millionaire political donor [Art Pope](#), whose philanthropic gifts to “[produce excellence](#)” are made in large part to promote a far-right agenda that views the struggle for racial equality as, at best, irrelevant.



Fourteen protestors have been arrested as of August 31. Former UNC chancellor's granddaughter, Margarita Sitterson, is among those charged in Silent Sam protests. © Jerry Carr

What would leadership in this moment look like?

Leadership would look like praise for the moral and physical courage demonstrated by the students who have taken action to remove the statue; invitations to their leaders to engage in discussion with you; and pardons for those who have been threatened with court dates and/or expulsion for doing what was right. But you have not given the students a hearing. You have not acknowledged that students of color are wearing nooses around their necks every day until Sam is gone for good.



Activist and Silent Sam "contextualizer", Maya Little © Jerry Carr

You have not responded to calls to pardon Maya Little, who contextualized Silent Sam with red paint and her own blood, an act that is no more destructive than the tagging of the statue by white students in decades of victory rallies after football games. When you told the press on August 31 that you will "consult widely and openly", did you mean that you will open your process to them?

Instead, you called last Thursday, August 30 a "rally", while the hate group organizers from ACTBAC called it a "memorial service" for Silent Sam and the students and their faculty and community allies called it a "dance party" to express their jubilation that the statue is, at least temporarily, gone. Your language, groping for neutrality, appears evasive and abandons this historic moment to ambiguity. Removed as you are from the front lines of this

struggle, perhaps you do not understand: online and in person students are threatened, sometimes with lynching.

Like · Reply · Message · 14m



[REDACTED] hope the dicksucker swings

Like · Reply · Message · 1m

E [REDACTED] I am all for public hangings starting with this creature.

Like · Reply · Message · 1m

2 Replies · 5 mins



[REDACTED] Take her or whatever it is down.

Like · Reply · Message · 6m



[REDACTED] GET FUCKED, SHE'S GONNA PAY
LOLOLOLOL

Like · Reply · Message · 5m



[REDACTED] They should put this bitch under the jail.



Like · Reply · Message · 1h



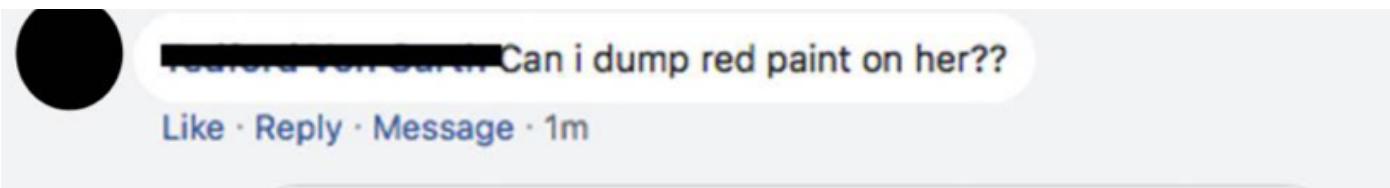
[REDACTED] Bust the bitch.

Like · Reply · Message · 2m



[REDACTED] KILL HER FAT ASS...PIGLET!

Like · Reply · Message · 1m



Online threats by local Lost-Causer groups have reached a high pitch.

Had you been there last Thursday as I was, you would have witnessed jumbo Confederate flags, some with automatic weapons stenciled on them. These flags were waved by men who made vulgar, threatening gestures at protestors. On the other side of the barricades, students and their allies outnumbered the Lost-Causers ten to one. You would have seen Black Lives Matter signs, klieg lights, glow-sticks, and students dancing to hip-hop. You would have smelled sage burning, purifying the place where hate was toppled. You would have heard them chant “Durham first, then Chapel Hill, next we go to Charlottesville!”, felt the sweltering heat and the crowd’s alarm when police used bicycles as battering rams and later pepper-spray as they chanted for the release of the detained. Being there would have informed you. But you weren’t.

I tell you this: People who have this much conviction can and will overcome anything.





Protestor stands alongside Lost-Causer at August 25th protest. © Jerry Carr

Clarity and consistency also matter, even in the Age of Trump. On August 28, you declared you would “[consider all options](#)“. Now, you tell reporters that that Silent Sam can no longer be at the gates of the University and claim to never have said otherwise. You recited the [instructions of the Board of Governors](#) to you and your team to find, by November 15th, “a location on campus to display the monument in a place of prominence, honor, visibility, availability and access.” You say you seek harmony and healing and “hope we can all appreciate that there is a big difference between commemorating fallen (sic) and people who want restoration of white rule.”

But why should dishonorable symbols enjoy places of privilege anywhere in the public plaza? Isn’t that exactly what this protest is about? UNC-Chapel Hill’s students of color and their allies do not value harmony over racial equity, nor do they fear disharmony as much as they do violent white supremacists, marginalization in their own University, and ongoing oppression in a system that is governed by some to whom black lives clearly do not matter. In a national context where it is said that “[truth is not truth](#)”, leaders must choose more courageous and accurate words than you have done.

On September 8 at 5 p.m., The New Confederate States of America are going to hold a “[prayer service for Silent Sam](#)” at McCorkle Place. I invite you to attend, and to stand with your students and their allies. Listen to them about their principled, courageous stand against white supremacy. Show them your support.

Do we have to depend on Mr. Roboto, Chancellor? Or can we get some help from you?



Multiple police forces have coordinated protest security with UNC campus police, some from as far away as Greensboro (August 30, 2018). © Dorothy Potter Snyder

Dorothy Potter Snyder is a writer, editor and literary translator who lives in Hillsborough, NC. She teaches Spanish online for the School of Undergraduate Studies.

Also for you: