11

Negotiating the Symbolic

A Systematic Approach to Reconcile Symbolic Divides

DANIEL L. SHAPIRO AND VANESSA LIU

Years back, Professor Roger Fisher delivered a lecture about the Harvard Negotiation Project's advisory role in the historic negotiations that resolved the longstanding border conflict between Ecuador and Peru. The dispute had revolved primarily around a small piece of land – known as Tiwintza to the Ecuadorians and Tiwinza to the Peruvians – that held important historic and emotional meaning to each side. Upon learning that the land was in an area of the Amazonian jungle bereft of inhabitants and oil reservoirs, a puzzled student raised his hand and asked, "Why, then, were they fighting over the land? It's *just* a symbol!" Professor Fisher looked back at the student and replied, "You are right, it is a symbol. But I would scratch the word 'just'."

Symbols matter. People sacrifice their lives for a flag, a monument, or sacred land – yet it is not the object unto itself that drives their sacrifice. A symbol is a psychological stamp – a mental and emotional representation of our stance on an issue – that ties us to a fixed identity narrative. To threaten the symbol is to threaten our identity, which raises the question: How can we negotiate a solution to conflicts over deeply meaningful symbols?

These disputes – which we call *symbol conflicts* – are typically dealt with through brute force or political advocacy, providing a "solution" that serves one side's interests but fails to reconcile the underlying divide. *Brute force* uses muscle power and military might to strongarm the other's compliance: The Ecuadorian and Peruvian militaries fought many wars over the land, but each side's victory stoked the other to return to battle. *Political advocacy* is the act of campaigning for a policy. While activists may successfully persuade a politician to change position on a law, such actions are likely to provoke the political opposition to fight

The authors contributed equally to this article.

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harder for a reversal of that position. In short, the use of raw power and political advocacy fails to reconcile deeper relational gaps and, conversely, may intensify the conflict.

Drawing on our research and international consultation in large-scale conflicts across the continents, we offer an alternative approach to negotiate when symbols are at the heart of the matter. First, we examine two very different types of symbol conflicts – the Macedonia Naming Dispute and Confederate Statues controversy – to illuminate the complexities of resolving these types of situations. While symbols can be lightning rods for violence, we chose the Macedonia Naming Dispute as a case study of how to handle a symbol conflict in a way that avoids mass brutality; lessons on prevention are crucial to avert future atrocity. We chose the Confederate Statues controversy case to explore the role of symbols in helping societies come to terms with historical atrocity. Second, we present a conceptual framework from which to understand the symbolic dimensions of negotiation and how to use symbolism productively. Third, we propose a practical method to address symbol conflicts. Finally, we return to our two case examples and offer insights on how to resolve them via the proposed method.

11.1 The Problem: Conflict over Symbols

Conflict over symbols can seem non-negotiable, because each side claims sole rights to the symbol. Consider the following disparate examples and contemplate what advice you would offer to move the parties toward reconciliation.

What's in a name? When it comes to sociopolitical identity, there is perhaps nothing more defining than a name. It gives immediate context to how we want to present ourselves in the world, and how the world should interact with us. For nations, a name is not only a reflection of their people's identity but also their sense of security. Leaders use names as emotional triggers to invoke pride and rally support. So, when "Macedonian" Yugoslavia declared independence in 1991 during the breakup of Yugoslavia – naming itself "the Republic of Macedonia" – this was met with fierce resistance from Greece, whose northern region had long been called Macedonia and whose citizens refer to themselves as Macedonians.

For Greece, the newly formed neighbor to the north presented a threat to their national security simply by how they named themselves. As

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explained by Matthew Nimetz, the United Nations mediator in the dispute, "Greeks viewed Macedonianism as a conceptual unity that could not be shared. If the northern neighbor was to gain recognition as 'Macedonia' and its people as 'Macedonians,' then the name and identity would be lost to the Greek side through what they perceived as wrongful appropriation by the northern neighbor" (Nimetz 2020, 210). For the new nation, they too identified themselves as Macedonian, as previous generations had, and in fact had been known as the Socialist Republic of Macedonia since World War II. Being Macedonian was at the core of their identity as well, and they felt it was their right to determine their own name. The Macedonia Naming Dispute was not a simple semantic dispute; it got to the heart of the symbolic significance of the name. How should this situation be untangled to promote sustainable reconciliation?

Erasing history or pain? In the American south, more than 1,700 Confederate symbols – monuments, place names, and other images – mark the landscape in towns and cities, erected after the Civil War ended in 1865 (Southern Poverty Law Center 2020). A number of white Southerners view statues of Confederate military leaders as preservation of their heritage, a source of pride and remembrances of a valiant effort to defend their region from Northern oppression. State laws protect a number of these monuments. Supporters view removal of the monuments as an erasure of history. But for other citizens, these symbols represent systemic, ongoing racism and white supremacy, a painful reminder of slavery and segregation. Many of these statues were in fact erected well after the Civil War during two key periods – the 1920s in the era of Jim Crow laws and in the 1950s and 1960s during the civil rights movement – to further segregation and black disenfranchisement (Southern Poverty Law Center 2020). Former New Orleans mayor Mitch Landrieu noted, "These statues are not just stone and metal. They are not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments purposefully celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, and the terror that it actually stood for" (Landrieu 2017). As grassroots efforts to remove these symbols increase in the wake of racial struggles and protests, residents in southern communities are clashing over the meaning of these symbols and what to do with them. How should these opposing parties deal with this conflict?

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11.2 Relational Identity Theory: A Conceptual Framework to Navigate Symbols

Disputes over symbols are as prevalent in larger societal situations as they are in family living rooms – for instance, during the COVID-19 global pandemic, the wearing of face masks became a political symbol that polarized societies and had serious implications on how to handle the crisis. As visible markers of a divide, symbols can easily trigger an "us-versus-them" reaction that makes negotiation seem futile. In this section, we examine the essential features of symbols and present Relational Identity Theory, a conceptual framework that serves as the foundation of a strategy for resolving these conflicts.

Symbols are people, places, or things ("objects") that represent an idea "by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance" (Merriam-Webster 2020). They have been used for thousands of years to enable people to communicate – language itself is a symbolic medium – but what these markers signify does not come automatically. A symbol's meaning is constructed over time within a social system and its deep emotional charge is rooted in its connection to identity (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). If a student curses softly at us in a language we do not speak, we may think little of it; but should the individual say those same words in our primary language, we will feel concerned. We are part of the sociopolitical system and recognize the emotional potency of those words.

The process of turning a person, place, or thing into a symbol requires us to psychologically inject aspects of our identity into that object. We *create* the symbol by projecting meaning onto it. In turn, we infuse that object and its meaning into our identity, defining the symbol that defines us (Cooley 1902). The more society embraces that symbol, the deeper its collective emotional significance. The symbol comes to define the identity of the people. Thus, to better understand how to negotiate symbols, we need to understand the complex landscape of identity in situations of conflict (Ross 2007).

Relational Identity Theory (RIT) provides a conceptual framework from which to understand the symbolic dimensions of negotiation and how to use symbolism productively (Shapiro 2010, 2017). RIT differentiates between two major types of identity: Core identity and relational identity. *Core identity* is the spectrum of characteristics that define who we are as a person or member of a group. This aspect of identity is relatively fixed and includes our beliefs, rituals, allegiances, values, and

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emotionally meaningful experiences – those intense events in our lives that define who we are. To understand the symbol's meaning, we must uncover the *core identity narrative* infused into the object: What beliefs, rituals, allegiances, values, and emotionally charged experiences define the symbol? The power of a national flag or coat of arms resides in the story it represents.

Relational identity is the spectrum of characteristics that define who we are in relation to another person or group (Shapiro 2017). This aspect of identity can easily change as we interact with others, providing a powerful mechanism to negotiate seemingly intractable symbol conflicts. In the immediate aftermath of mass atrocity, for example, a group who had storied themselves as "heroes" may now be viewed as "perpetrators." Their core beliefs and values may remain fixed, but the characteristics defining their relationship to other groups alters. Ideally, it is best to help opposing parties break free of *us versus them* polarities *before* mass violence erupts, thus constructing relational identities that foster peaceful coexistence.

There are two major levers to transform relational identity: affiliation and autonomy. *Affiliation* refers to the emotional connection between individuals or groups (Shapiro 2010). We feel closer or more distant to people depending on how we treat them and how they treat us. For instance, if disputants listen respectfully to each other, they are likely to view each other more favorably and may be more inclined to listen to each other's stories (Deutsch 2006). Conversely, if disputants disparage each other, strong resentment can arise and be particularly difficult to unseat in the context of multigenerational conflict and in the wake of mass harm. Symbols become powerful tools for building affiliation – and rejecting outsiders. Leaders often mobilize supporters by imbuing a story of group pride or trauma into a flag, geographical location, or other object. The group affiliates around the symbol and gains cohesion through shared disaffiliation with the other side.

Autonomy is the freedom to make decisions without imposition from others, and crossing that line can lead to serious conflict (Shapiro 2017). In the context of war and mass atrocity, parties in conflict tend to perceive the bounds of their autonomy through partisan narratives: Perpetrators of violence view their actions as justified assertions of autonomy while victims of violence experience those same actions as violations of their humanity. The bounds of autonomy are open to interpretation and those who justify violence with claims of oppression may find themselves storied as the oppressor in the aftermath. A deep

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understanding of the symbolic dimensions of conflict can help to interrupt this on-going cycle in which identities are simply swapped but rarely transformed.

Relational identity is more malleable than core identity and can be a powerful mechanism to resolve conflicts around symbols. The key is for parties to shift their relational mindset. If parties have a *negative relational identity*, they (1) see their affiliation as adversarial and (2) view their autonomy as being imposed upon. If parties have a *positive relational identity*, they (1) see their affiliation as partners and (2) feel greater autonomy to express their views. The more parties can move toward a positive relational identity, the more they can constructively negotiate symbol conflict.

11.3 Addressing Symbol Conflicts

There are multiple approaches to deal with politically sensitive issues like statues. One approach is political advocacy, through which political groups seek to influence political decisions within a political system. Another approach is to work toward reconciliation through mutual understanding. That is what we are exploring in this paper. Political advocacy may make political change, but the durability of that change is uncertain, because political advocacy tends to exacerbate polarization. As one side fights for their beliefs, the other side takes up arms to fight back. Advocates may succeed in pressuring a political system to remove a statue, but opponents now are likely to work even harder to get that statue back. If a society seeks harmonious coexistence – whether in the aftermath of mass atrocity or at the precipice of emergent violence – governmental and non-governmental institutions would be wise to convene opposing parties to engage in civil discourse. The purpose would be to understand each other's core identity narratives and envision ways to satisfy shared and non-competing concerns, while still committing to political advocacy to address incompatible differences.

We are not suggesting that political advocacy is "bad" or should be sidelined. To the contrary, we believe in the crucial importance of political advocacy. But it can be helpful to "fit the forum to the fuss" (Sander and Goldberg 1994). Political advocacy has its time and place, as do alternative methods such as that which we are proposing to address symbolic conflict. These methods are not mutually exclusive. Parties with differing views on statue removal may engage in dialogue to understand each other's identity narratives and *still* politically advocate for their

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political positions. But they now do so with a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of stakeholder interests, needs, and concerns at stake, thus approaching the issue with a civic mindset (Shapiro 2021).

There are four steps to reconcile differences in a symbol conflict:

1. *Look for conflict over symbols.* Some symbols are self-evident – everyone fighting over a statue recognizes the issue is not about the raw material itself – but symbolic issues are often veiled. Israelis and Palestinians have spent decades negotiating technical aspects of Jerusalem: Who owns it, what should be its geographic bounds, and who should have what types of political, military, and economic control over what parts? Such issues are crucial to determine in a final agreement. But negotiators must also recognize that Jerusalem has extraordinary symbolic meaning for all involved. The word "Jerusalem" will conjure up specific sentiments and different images for the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. Treating the negotiation as a purely technical issue ignores these deeper symbolic drivers of conflict.

   Parties should recognize that time and space can comprise the contours of a symbol. A municipal government may engage in contentious debate over whether businesses should be closed during a religious holiday – a conflict over "cathedrals in time" (Heschel 1951). Bombing an empty warehouse may lead an enemy to retaliate, but bombing a hospital, school, or other "sanctuary of identity" is likely to stir moral outrage and international fury (Shapiro 2017).
2. *Unpack the significance of the symbol.* A symbol is a *narrative envoy*: it is there to deliver a message, a value, a memory. The challenge is to translate the symbol into story, to find out what the symbol represents. Imagine a box filled with photographs of your childhood. When you see the box in your room, you immediately think about memories of your youth. The box becomes a symbol of that time in your life. Every time you see the box, you "see" your childhood. Unpacking the significance of a symbol is, metaphorically, the act of opening the box – the symbol – to discover the emotionally meaningful experiences and collective stories that give meaning to the container.

   The meaning ascribed to a symbol can change over time and across geographic locations. The American flag means something very different to an Olympic gold medalist waving it in front of a roaring crowd than to citizens pinning one on their lawn on the days after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on New York City's Twin Towers.

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Symbolic meaning shifts as contexts change, and consensus on the significance of an object can evolve.

A facilitator can help disputing parties translate symbol into story. The goal is to make explicit the unsaid narrative wrapped up in the object itself. Illustrative questions to explore include:

- What makes this symbol important to you?
- What images come to mind when you think of this symbol?
- What leaders and groups refer to this symbol? What messages do they attach to it?
- What personal or collective memories do you associate with this symbol?
- What story comes to mind when you think of this symbol?
- What is your understanding of how and when this object took on its symbolic meaning?
- What does that story mean to you, personally?

The aim of these questions is to discover each party's *mythos of identity*, the core narrative defining who one is in relation to the other side (Shapiro 2017). In that narrative, each side may view themselves as victim, scapegoat, the righteous one, or sole arbiter of truth and divine wisdom – roles that automatically paint the other as aggressor, wrongful accuser, thief, or deceiver. The mythos frames the relationship and provides its emotional character. The challenge is to unpack the emotional significance of that emotional blueprint *for both sides*. Understanding each side's mythos sheds light on core motivations, fears, and wishes from which to craft a mutually acceptable path forward.

The mythos of identity weaves present and past into a cohesive narrative of social identity. Through this narrative, groups convey their heroic moments and tragic ones, which Vamik Volkan (2021) calls *chosen glories* and *chosen traumas*. Symbols anchor these moments. They become objectified representations of aspects of the group's identity. If we were the victim or hero, we assume the other group must have been the perpetrator – and we incorporate that mythos into our symbol. Intergroup relations become frozen. But groups do not like being storied as a perpetrator, symbolically or otherwise. By unearthing the mythos of identity in its fullness, narratives can be thawed, nuanced, and complexified.

3. *Bear witness to each side's emotional experience*. Key to reconciling a symbol conflict is to *bear witness* to each other's actual losses and

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emotional pain, no matter how hard that reality is to accept (Shapiro 2017). This does not mean we need to acquiesce to the other side's political demands or convert to their belief system, but instead that we work to understand and acknowledge their suffering (Shapiro 2017). When a symbol comes under attack, we crave recognition of the associated mythos and its personal importance, because acknowledgment affirms our identity and provides a forum to contextualize losses.

A major source of emotional pain comes through loss – the dismantling of a valued statue, the forced removal from one's home, the death of a loved one. If we do not talk about that loss and have others bear witness to it, we may feel an attack on our autonomy, which can emotionally compel us to strike back or act out in some other manner. Bearing witness can help us come to terms with the loss – literally putting words to the situation and mourning the fact that what once was, is no more. During the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dan's 15-year-old son, Noah, felt depressed and isolated. The two talked about it, and Noah realized that the pandemic symbolized the loss of interaction with friends, the closure of school, and the shuttering of his gym. But he later noted that *verbalizing* those feelings and having Dan bear witness to that loss was empowering – inspiring him to use his time more productively by writing a book on his experiences in the pandemic. It is this same concept that produces the power of psychotherapy and other forms of social healing.

Acknowledging emotional pain comes through asking open-ended questions, listening non-judgmentally, and learning about the feelings experienced in conjunction with that narrative. What emotions does the conflict over the symbol awaken in them and why? What emotions are embedded in the narrative? It is important to listen especially carefully for emotional themes that animate their narrative – fear of a world that excludes them; longing for greater connection or more autonomy; shame at being negatively exposed by others; guilt for acting in ways outside the bounds of personal standards of conduct; and quashed pride.

The process of bearing witness can take many forms. There can be a formal town hall, dialogue program, legislative hearing, or neighborhood conversation. Media can produce documentaries, television series, and movies showcasing the emotional experiences of groups. Leaders can voice the stories of everyday citizens on each side of the conflict. Bearing witness can occur in informal and formal contexts

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and in public and private settings. The purpose of this process is not to change people's politics but to help them understand each other's motivations.

Because relational identities feel threatened in a symbol conflict, it is important to surface the ways in which each party's sense of autonomy and affiliation is at stake. In terms of autonomy, parties may feel that the other side is imposing on their freedom to think, feel, do, or be as they would like. People are sensitive to seemingly illegitimate constraints on them, which can lead to backlash. In terms of affiliation, people may feel excluded, emotionally distanced, or treated as an adversary. In the United States, the combination of centralized power and a diverse population creates inevitable feelings of exclusion from various interest groups. Uncovering these types of emotional concerns is essential to create a mutually viable solution to the symbol conflict.

4. *Collaboratively problem solve.* This final step in the process focuses parties on creation of an outcome that addresses each side's needs for autonomy and affiliation. The challenge is to invent an option that respects each group's core identity narrative to the extent possible (Nelson 2001; Winslade and Monk 2000). This task may sound impossible and probably will be *if* parties dive into problem solving without first spending sufficient time surfacing each other's mythos of identity and bearing witness to pain.

   In our international facilitation work, we guide disputants through several aspects of collaborative problem solving. First, parties invent a wide range of creative options to address their conflict. We ensure that they separate the process of developing options from the process of deciding between them, promoting creating thinking unencumbered by the judgmental mind. To encourage innovative thinking, we invite participants to brainstorm options through the perspectives of varied professions (Fisher et al. 2010). What ideas would occur to an economist, architect, psychologist, social worker, architect, artist, banker, small business owner, lawyer, civil rights activist, skilled tradesperson, physician, politician, peacemaker, chef, comedian, technology specialist, entrepreneur, or youth? Second, parties nominate options that best address each side's underlying motivations. Third, the group decides consensually on a single solution and further refines it to account for each stakeholder's legitimate interests to the extent possible. The final step is for the group to implement the solution.

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Few symbol conflicts can be resolved to everyone's full satisfaction. For those conflicts for which no mutually amenable option seems to exist, work harder. Think outside the box. Put yourself into the other's shoes to discover underlying motivations. Keep brainstorming. And remember your walk-away alternative – political action – which can come in the form of a protest, legal case, march, rally, political campaign, referendum, or lobbying for policy change. If dialogue fails to achieve a material solution, the process is not in vain. Each side has learned more about their own values and those of the other side and has gained a nuanced understanding of the symbolic issue at stake. In short, engaging in the reconciliation process prepares parties for peace *and* political action. At a societal level, this means that political advocacy will be more nuanced, based on the merits, and better able to account for diverse perspectives. Given that symbol conflicts are complicated, the passage of time can present new opportunities to resolve the conflict from a more informed starting point. The reconciliation process can be a win even if it initially fails.

Morality plays a role in this process. There are times when a party's fundamental story may conflict with basic human rights and standards of intercommunal coexistence. Should one seek to problem solve symbolic issues with a neo-Nazi? It depends on one's purpose. If the goal is pure justice, legal or political remedies may be the best route to go. But if society seeks to heal emotionally charged differences around a contentious political symbol, dialogue can be an important route to go – with one caveat: Any negotiated outcome must align with a mutually agreed upon framework of basic standards of human dignity and prosocial norms (Hicks 2011). Without this moral foundation, any agreement is a house of cards.

11.4 Symbol Conflicts: Revisited

We now move from theory to practice – revisiting the two symbol conflicts presented at the beginning of this paper and showing how the elements of our method can help to address complex symbol conflicts. We presented our method as a set of "steps," but the following examples underscore our conviction that resolution of symbol conflicts is a nonlinear, dynamic process in which certain steps take on more importance than others at varying points in time.

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11.4.1 Macedonia Naming Dispute

For several years after the former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia gained independence, its relations with Greece were strained. The Greek government persuaded the European Community to adopt a declaration laying out conditions for recognizing the country, including a ban on "territorial claims towards a neighboring Community State and . . . no hostile propaganda activities . . . including the use of a denomination that implies territorial claims" (Declaration on Yugoslavia, Extraordinary EPC Ministerial Meeting, Brussels, December 16, 1991). When the new state sought recognition by the United Nations, Greece persuaded members of the UN Security Council that recognizing the country as "the Republic of Macedonia" would increase tensions and be a threat to stability in the region. Subsequently, the UN admitted the new country as the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" and agreed that a process would ensue to settle the name dispute.

Thus began a negotiation that lasted for twenty-three years. At the core of the dispute was the sense that an agreement would represent a losing proposition to at least one of the sides. Greece perceived the new state as challenging their autonomy and threatening their security by claiming the Macedonian name. At the same time, the new state desired to do what every other state has done by choosing their own name, and perceived Greece's refusal to accept their name as a challenge to their autonomy. This appeared to be a classic zero-sum conflict over core identity – with only one victor.

The mediation team took action in ways consistent with Relational Identity Theory. They spent substantial time unpacking the significance of the name as a symbol and searching for a path that fostered affiliation between the two states while respecting each government's autonomy to determine its own historical and cultural identity. They were able to achieve this by focusing not on who "owns" Macedonian culture and history (core identity) but on the geographical relationship between the two states (relational identity). Matthew Nimetz, the United Nations appointed mediator, said to the Skopje leaders,

> Let us talk about geography, not identity. In its resolutions, the UN Security Council was not trying to change the identity of your people . . . Macedonia is a geographic concept, and it is a large area . . . This large region was for centuries under Ottoman rule. And it was divided in 1912–1913 in the Balkan Wars . . . While your territory is a

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> part of that Macedonian region, it is only a part . . . Thus, it's not so far-fetched to introduce a modifier to your name to more accurately reflect the geographic reality.
>
> (Nimetz 2020, 211)

To the Athens leadership, he said,

> Let us talk about geography, not identity. No one is trying to take your Macedonian identity away from you . . . We all agree that Macedonia is a geographic concept and that the Ottoman Macedonian region was divided in 1912–1913 . . . Greece won the largest part by far . . . And your northern neighbor was geographically a part of that division of the Ottoman Macedonian territory . . . So assuming we can agree that the name Republic of Macedonia is too expansive to be appropriate from a geographic point of view, can't we consider introducing a geographic modifier that clarifies the geographic separation between Greek Macedonia and your northern neighbor?
>
> (Nimetz 2020, 211)

Through the conflict resolution process, parties came to better understand each other's mythos of identity – which was crucial in the negotiations. In fact, this was a critical component in the resulting 2018 Prespa Agreement, where the final name, the Republic of North Macedonia, was finally agreed upon. Article 7 of the agreement lays out the understanding that the terms "Macedonia" and "Macedonian" refer to a different historical context and heritage for each party. The agreement notes that, for Greece, these terms refer not only to the area and people of the northern region of Greece, but also to "their attributes, as well as the Hellenic civilization, history, culture and heritage of that region from antiquity to present day" (Prespa Agreement, 2018, Section 7.2). For the Republic of North Macedonia, usage of the terms refer to territory, language, and people distinct from Greece. Moreover, the agreement further stated that the official language of the new state, the Macedonian language, "is within the group of South Slavic languages," and this language and other attributes "are not related to the ancient Hellenic civilization, history, culture and heritage of the northern region" of Greece (Prespa Agreement, 2018, Section 7.4).

By explicitly recognizing the historical context surrounding the dispute and unpacking the significance of the name for each, both parties shifted their relational identity from negative to positive. The nuanced agreement allowed each side to recognize their cultural and historical autonomy while creating space for constructive affiliation with their neighbor.

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The cordial relationship between the two parties during the course of the dispute also contributed to the ability of both parties to come to an agreement. As noted by Nimetz, during the course of the conflict, scores of citizens from each country vacationed in the other; Greek businesses invested in the new country; and there was a desire on both sides to move forward to a stronger relationship. These constructive connections cultivated affiliation and undoubtedly had a great impact on the ability of both sides to accept the agreement.

11.4.2 Confederate Statues

In courtrooms, state legislatures, and city councils across the United States, the controversy over Confederate symbols gained significant momentum after George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police in late May 2020. By August 2020, forty-three Confederate statues had been removed or replaced, and an additional sixteen schools, parks, and other locations were renamed (Southern Poverty Law Center 2020). Some of the monuments were forcibly removed during protests; others were taken down by local governments or institutions. To date, efforts to remove Confederate statues have been difficult due to the legal complexities at the federal, state, and local levels, and the significant public tensions on both sides. Contrary to the Macedonian situation, where there was a centralized process to resolve the name dispute, there is no single plan or process to figure out what to do with the landmarks. Moreover, given that statue removals have been mainly the result of forced actions or one-sided political advocacy, relational tensions have further inflamed.

Our method for addressing symbol conflict can be applied at the grassroots level. To start, everyone must become aware of the symbol at the core of the disagreement. This is readily apparent to communities disputing Confederate statues. Next, unpacking the significance of the symbol can be done through many platforms. Communities may organize dialogue sessions led by professional facilitators who can help parties surface the personal importance of the symbol and who can ensure people listen to each other without judgment and feel heard for their emotional experience. A single session is rarely enough. In the experience of the authors, running at least four-to-five facilitated sessions with the same small group is sufficient to build trust and promote honest, deep conversation. The goal is to discover each side's mythos of identity – coming to understand the fundamental stories, memories, and images driving each side's emotions around the symbol (Kelman 2005).

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There are rich examples of grassroots efforts to surface the emotional pain of enslavement and the role Confederate statues play in prolonging the wounds. For instance, schools and universities have organized ceremonies to commemorate slaves. Upon the discovery of over sixty-seven unmarked graves of slaves at its cemetery, the University of Virginia organized a memorial to recognize the historical role of slavery at the institution (Bromley 2014).

Legislative hearings have also provided a forum for parties to bear witness to each other's emotional experience. During a March 2020 debate over a Virginia House bill regarding the removal of Confederate statues, Virginia State Senators shared their emotional experience regarding the symbols. State Senator Mamie E. Locke choked back tears and could not continue after explaining that the statues "were erected as symbols of hatred. They were erected as symbols of Jim Crow." Her colleague, State Senator Jennifer L. McClellan, commented, "I think you all are witnessing the pain that some of these monuments inflicted on Virginia's black community. When you don't talk about trauma, it doesn't go away. It simmers until it can't be held back anymore" (Vozzella 2020). Indeed, the legislators were bearing witness to each other's emotional experience and, in doing so, charted a way forward. Senator Chap Petersen, whose ancestors had fought in the Confederacy, had initially been convinced to vote against the bill but voted to support it after hearing Locke and others speak: "We're coming to grips with a history, and I have my own opinions on it. But the bottom line is, this is part of a journey. And we're going to take a step on this journey. And we're going to hold hands on this journey as brothers and sisters" (Vozzella 2020). Regardless of the policy outcome, bearing witness prior to decision making is crucial to work through symbol conflict.

The last part of the method involves brainstorming approaches to deal with the symbol conflict in ways that respect each side's concerns for affiliation and autonomy. There are countless creative ways to deal with the issue of a statue such as keeping it in place, removing it, replacing it, moving the statue to a history museum, enlisting artists to create visual representations of the complex history, erecting counter monuments, or promoting dialogue groups and educational curricula to engage society in discussions around the significance of the symbol. The most important part of this process is engagement.

Even groups who symbolically represent antithetical conceptions of race relations still may benefit from exploring racial narratives. For example, the nonprofit organization called Coming to the Table seeks

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to heal the wounds of slavery through a restorative approach involving uncovering history, making connections, working toward healing, and taking action. This group convenes what they call "family reunions" that bring together descendants of some of the largest slave owners in the South with descendants of those who were enslaved. Their goal is to create meaningful relationships and an environment where healing can occur, overcoming the deep intergenerational alienation and trauma reportedly felt on both sides of the racial divide.

In symbol conflicts, there will always be some people who are dissatisfied with the outcome – there are still individuals who grieve the end of the Swastika and abolition of slavery – but solutions will be more likely to stick if core identity narratives are mutually understood and acknowledged to the extent appropriate and possible.

11.5 Summary

Symbol conflicts may be non-negotiable if approached as a fixed-sum negotiation – either the statue stays up or falls down – but Relational Identity Theory opens a more constructive way forward. Parties focus not on the symbol itself but on its underlying emotional significance, creating an environment for collaborative problem solving that addresses each side's concerns for autonomy and affiliation. Two complex symbol conflicts – the Macedonia Naming Dispute and Confederate Statues controversy – highlight the utility of this approach. The results of this study suggest that, while symbols can be the source of division, a restorative approach can reshape our relations and present a path to reconciliation.

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