

University of Michigan

Presidential Bicentennial Colloquium on the Future University Community

Stumbling Stones: A Public Art Installation

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How, this project asks, will the University of Michigan's past shape the future of the university community?

Marking the start of Michigan's third century, we might ask what influence our past will have on our future. How might the experience of the community during the university's first two hundred years shape the century to come? You are likely familiar with philosopher George Santayana's oft-quoted "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." In this view, memory and a confrontation with the past are safeguards against future blunders, pitfalls, and even grievous errors. Novelist William Faulkner wrote in *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Faulkner's sense was that without atonement for past wrongs there was no chance for redemption. L.P. Hartley opened his novel *The Go Between* with a line that is a favorite of historians: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." Hartley did not mean simply that the past is difficult to explain. His notion of a "foreign country" reminds us that the past is never a blue print or a guide to the future, even as we may draw careful lessons from it. There is something ominous in George Orwell's line from *1984*, "He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past." Orwell understood the power and responsibility embedded in acts of commemoration such as a bicentennial. We need not shy away from the opportunity that 2017 presents to recall our community's past at the University of Michigan. Orwell would, however, implore us to use the power of memory with critical insight and with care.

American universities are epicenters where pasts meet futures, with students oftentimes making plain that how to set out the terms of a community is no simple equation. In 2015-16, disputes over the definition of community rocked campuses. At the University of Texas, a statute of Confederate President Jefferson Davis was moved indoors from its decades-old spot on that campus. The prominent memorialization of Davis was perceived as a barrier to the success and well being of the campus community of the future. The Harvard Law School shield came under fire and was changed. The bundles of grain that had long adorned that emblem carried slavery and the uncompensated labor of black Americans into the school's present. The community determined that the bundles of grain had to go. Still, one committee member – a historian of slavery – dissented, arguing that signs of this troubled past should in plain view. At Washington & Lee University, leaders agreed to remove all officially placed Confederate flags from school grounds. Counter-demonstrators appeared at the school's front gates, reminding us how debates about the university community are linked to broader contests over history and memory. At Yale, students demanded that the name of a 19th century slaveholder and pro-slavery ideologue be stripped from Calhoun College. Yale concluded to retain the honor it had bestowed upon John C. Calhoun, while adding two new sites of memory that broadened the sense of the campus community, naming buildings for 18th century statesman Benjamin Franklin and 20th century civil rights lawyer and activist Pauli Murray.

Our bicentennial provides the University of Michigan with an opportunity to answer questions about the past and present of the university community. Three ideas will guide our exploration: stumbling blocks, reckoning, and aspiration. The stumbling stone has an origin in the everyday use of the phrase: it is a metaphor conjures small obstacles that are unanticipated and briefly throw us off track. We stumble, usually to regain our stride and move forward. Stumbling as metaphor suggests the place of happenstance in the construction of a community: is the route too rough, uneven, or are obstacles strewn such that we might look for another way? Perhaps when we stumble, we notice the bumps, the complexity, or the signs that we were moving too hastily, without sufficient care. Why is this obstacle here and what is it trying to tell me, we might ask. Artist Gunter Demnig used the phrase in this last sense when he

installed thousands of “stumble stones” in his native Germany. Demnig replaced ordinary paving stones with brass markers of the same size, each engraved with a name and a story about someone who perished in the holocaust. The stumbling stone fuses history and memory with daily life. As German’s stumble upon or over the stones, they are diverted long enough to recall the past and contemplate its role in the present.

The notion of reckoning presses us to resolve those memories upon which we stumble. To recall the past, to memorialize and make it concrete is only a first step in a project of community building. What happens when we encounter difficult memories? How do approach a past that is unresolved or a history that has divergent meanings for members of our community? Reckoning is the process by which we move beyond recollection toward an accounting. It is an admission, an acknowledgement, and an unvarnished encounter with past moments in which we erred, failed, or fell short of our ideals. Reckoning does not imply retribution. Instead, it calls upon us to look forthrightly at the past rather than looking away, obscuring, or otherwise concealing that which has trouble our efforts at community.

Aspiration is the end point of this project. We have stumbled upon our past. We have pulled back the curtain to see it for what it was. How then can that past serve us as a community? What lessons might they hold for the present? This project finally asks us to redefine our community, recalibrate our goals, and set out new aspirations that are informed by the past. What new structures, practices, or principles will we need for the third century. How will our community confront future stumbling blocks that threaten to impede our path over the next one hundred years? Who and what do we aspire to be as a community? Aspiration is a promise, a commitment, and pledge to future generations at the University of Michigan. It is the embodiment of our capacity as a community to learn from our past.

In 2016, we are hearing noises from within our community that suggest the campus is paved with stumbling blocks. The naming of a new student multicultural center has led students, staff, and faculty to ask how to remember a past built through student activism, pave a way for a diverse spectrum of

students into the future, while also paying tribute to those whose financial gifts support campus growth and development. We are learning the stories behind building names such as that of C.C. Little. How should we regard an honor bestowed upon President Little whose promotion of the pseudo-science of eugenics is widely discredited today? We are stumbling over how our campus should reflect its values, past and present.

We are stumbling over how to understand the role that these memories play in the future of our community. The bicentennial provides an opportunity to examine these and other sites of memory, asks how to reckon with them and then define community aspirations going forward.