Interview: Kali Holloway- Senior Director, Make It Right Project (Independent Media Institute)

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This page features an interview by H-Slavery editor Alex Tabor (Carnegie Mellon University) with Kali Holloway, Senior Director of the Make It Right Project—an Independent Media Institute initiative to “do more than just ‘raise awareness’ or ‘start a national conversation’” about Confederate monuments and statues that instead “aims to genuinely move the needle, creating measurable, visible change.” Ms. Holloway is currently a Senior Writer at the Independent Media Institute and the co-curator of the Theater of the Resist at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; she has contributed to several HBO and PBS documentary films and her writing has appeared in the Guardian, TIME, and The Huffington Post, among several other outlets.

Visit here to learn more about Kali Holloway and the work of the Independent Media Institute or Make It Right Project.

How does the Make It Right Project relate to other initiatives hosted by the Independent Media Institute (IMI)?

Great question. At the time of the Independent Media Institute’s founding in 1987, there was a clear and pressing need for greater public access to, and elevation of, progressive journalism that covered news often overlooked by mainstream outlets, and which engaged perspectives ignored by the corporate press. In the decades since, that need has grown exponentially. We’re at a point of staggering hyper-partisanship and disinformation in conservative media, and ever-increasing corporatism within mainstream media overall, both factors that have had devastating consequences on the political, social and cultural shape of this country. IMI’s approach to addressing those issues is essentially holistic. We serve as a platform—a clearinghouse of sorts—for independent journalism dedicated to addressing systemic issues across the board via projects/verticals dedicated to topics from voting rights, to education, to the economy, to climate/environment. The Make It Right Project’s journalistic output is part of IMI’s larger effort to produce crucial media that then appears in over a dozen major progressive and independent outlets in the U.S. IMI’s collective journalistic output shows how none of these issues are siloed—and IMI’s coverage of those topics illuminates their interrelatedness. We think of IMI’s work, which touches on so many areas, as offering a broad vision look at the critical issues we’re facing on every front and where they intersect, with incisive ideas on how to address them and create substantive social change.
How does the Make It Right Project differ from other initiatives that seek to draw attention to Confederate monuments and inform different audiences about their history and meaning?

We frequently work in collaboration and coalition with other groups around the country that are either singularly dedicated to removing Confederate markers—and we also partner with organizations whose mission stretches beyond, but also includes, the removal of Confederate memorials. The latter includes local chapters of groups like Black Lives Matter, NAACP, DSA, the Women’s March and SURJ; the former describes partners such as local divisions of Take Em Down, Chapel Hill’s Move Silent Sam, and De-Confederate Austin. One slight difference between us and some of our collaborators is that, while we endorse every good-faith effort to take down tributes to the Confederacy—in whatever form those tributes take, including roads, schools, building and city names—Make It Right is focused specifically on the removal of monuments and statues. We also place an emphasis on journalism and media as a means of public outreach and engagement, a focus informed both by the fact that I come to this work as a journalist and IMI’s background is in independent media. That said, we are always more than happy to bolster the work of like-minded groups with differing targets.

What experiences or influences shaped your mixed-media approach to thinking about contested history and meaning-making, both in the historical context of Confederate monuments but more broadly in the lives of contemporary historical actors?

A few things. In the summer of 2017, I co-curated a performance and film series called *Theater of the Resist* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The series was specifically about pushing back against an increasingly visible tide of overt and not infrequently violent racism, misogyny, xenophobia and other forms of exclusion and erasure. The feedback from the series was astounding and really drove home for me the power and resonance of art. I’d previously worked as an outreach director for social change documentary films focused on issues such as marriage equality and public education, and so I’d already had a firsthand opportunity to see how audience opinions were moved by film. I mean literally—we’d poll audiences before and after screenings and see real movement on issues. As a journalist and writer, again and again I’d been struck by people—both friends and strangers—who reached out to me to tell me about the way a piece I’d written had changed or at least challenged their thinking, or even helped them do the same to, say, a relative with whom they’d had a political disagreement. And I myself had been moved by art I’d seen in the lead up to and months following the launch of the Make It Right Project: Marcus Amaker’s poetry, Titus Kaphar’s sculptures, Mic’s Black Monuments Project, Pablo Pachioli’s “Madre Luz” statue, John Sims’s work using the Confederate flag, Hank Willis Thomas’s work. And of course Maya Little’s “Silent Sam” art protest, which consisted of her pouring a mix of red paint and her own blood over that Confederate statue as the racist words of Julian Carr blared...
in the background. That one bit of arts activism—that singular protest—did such a huge amount to convey what “Silent Sam” truly meant to so many of us, the hideous message it conveyed, the bloody racist history in which that statue was steeped. Each of those projects and actions—and course others; I can’t cite them all here—not only added context to our collective understanding of Confederate markers and icons but challenged viewers to grapple with the history of those objects, and their enduring impact. They connected the past with today, drawing a direct line from Confederate monuments to racial inequities today. They have been hugely important in adding the groundswell of opposition to these racist and white supremacist monuments. And with all of that in mind, it felt obvious that art should be a centerpiece of our work, because it is often effective when other means leave people glassy-eyed.

Following news coverage of contests over the placement and provenance of Confederate monuments across the United States, legal suits are almost ubiquitously supporting their retention as historical monuments or war memorials. In what ways does developing new means of engaging audiences with the meaning and implications of Confederate monuments—like the Charleston Reconstructed app’s use of “narrative film techniques and augmented reality”—offer new insights to challenging legislative entrenchment?

You’re right that neo-Confederate groups—the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans—frequently turn to the courts in their efforts to keep racist monuments standing, or at the very least, to forestall their removal. Antiracist activists meeting this weaponization of the courts with their own legal tools, but there is also widespread recognition that the battle to remove Confederate statuary requires thinking creatively to develop new and innovative responses. Charleston Reconstructed is an excellent example. The creators recognized that pro-Confederate-monument arguments often rely on ahistorical obfuscations of history, “Lost Cause” mythologizing and—not infrequently—outright historical lies. By creating an immersive project that lets people hear directly from historians, activists, and people who have lived in the shadow of Charleston’s Confederate statues, the team behind Charleston Reconstructed has effectively created a tool that gives people access to the true intent of those who erected Confederate monuments, and the detrimental impact those statues continue to make on Charleston’s public spaces and those who move through them. In real-time, people standing in Marion Square, where the John C. Calhoun monument is located, can see a “digitally reimagined” space that’s no longer raced as “white” or dedicated to an outspoken defender of slavery. They can consider what it would mean to truly reckon with Charleston’s past and the legacy of slavery and racist violence and terror. It’s a visionary approach that will likely affect other artists, thinkers and makers—including Make It Right—in the work of truth-telling about these markers. And more broadly, other works that address these issues in creative ways—from
Kehinde Wiley’s *Rumors of War* sculpture to Make It Right’s billboards addressing the problems with these statues—help adjust the white supremacist gaze that for too long has defined our understanding of not just history, racist statuary, and every aspect of American life. The success of these projects in challenging long-held false narratives reaffirms how powerful new media, press, art, first-person narratives and testimonials are in connecting with people with previously hidden and suppressed truths. As there are new developments in technology, etc., I expect more inventive versions of these efforts will continue to appear.

**How has the Make It Right Project expanded its horizons—whether geographic, stylistic, or related to historical presentation and engagement with diverse audiences—and how have these developments affected the Project’s approaches to addressing Confederate monuments and their history in contested spaces?**

Flexibility was one immediate way we grew when the project launched. One of the first lessons we learned was that the political, legal and cultural landscape in every place where Confederate monuments exist varies. Consequently, there’s no one-size-fits-all approach to working toward removal, and different strategies resonate differently in different places. (And there’s a need to consider new, untested methods, because nothing is surefire, or else the statue would already have come down.) What’s more, there are activists already there doing the work on the ground, but the activist infrastructure varies wildly from town to town. So I think we expanded our ideas on how to work and collaborate in each place based on that.

In terms of our expansion geographically, that’s pretty much happened organically. Some of our partners have referred other activists and organizations to us, and others have discovered us on their own and reached out for support. We’ve worked with partners beyond our 10 target areas in several places, and recently have seen an uptick in queries from people requesting our help with their own hometown Confederate markers. In just one example, we worked with activists in West Virginia who were trying to take down a Confederate marker near (our targeted) Heyward Shepherd monument in Harper’s Ferry, providing various kinds of protest paraphernalia. They were ultimately successful.

Thank you for sharing with H-Net!