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Studies in Literature & Nation

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Studies in Literature

The title of this class is 'Studies in Literature and Nation,' and throughout the semester, we read stories, both fiction and non-fiction. The themes of stories include the pains, the struggles, the eradication of cultures by those who believed it was for the betterment of those that did not look like them, act like them, pray to the same God as them, or just plain looked and were different from them. Was it for a higher cause, as history has taught us . . . absolutely! Usually, money and power by a higher authority.

I suppose we can call this "great timing" or at least ironic of all the events that are happening in our country: from our own identity crisis, the tearing down of statues, Black Lives Matter, the controversy of the Confederate flag, the word 'Plantation' and its meaning and symbolism, and whether the word should be eliminated from our state title. I say great timing for these events since they all seem to have culminated during the last six weeks of the semester. The stories read during the semester have blended with the stories presented 24/7 on every news channel to give you the added dimension of what the authors were saying.

The story that really struck a chord with me was Tommy Orange's *There There*. As mentioned in past discussion board threads, I am a distant relative of the Pequots and know a lot of the history of this region in respect to the Wampanoags, especially King Phillip and his execution in my backyard in Bristol. I have decided to take the information from this semester

and look into another controversy happening at this very moment across the border in Massachusetts, and that is the state emblem of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as well as the banning the use/representation of Native Americans as school mascots, emblems, etc.

According to the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, the original seal was designed in 1629 for the trading company known as the Massachusetts Bay Colony, with a Native American man holding a bow and saying, "Come over and help us." This image was clearly an effort to justify the company's mission of colonizing the New World and financially benefiting from it. In 1692, the seal was changed to reflect Massachusetts' colony days under the British Empire, using a royal coat of arms of England. The third seal was created in 1775, with its centerpiece of an upright soldier holding a sword and a copy of the Magna Carta in Latin in which the state is rebelling against the English. Today, as described by *Wikipedia*, "the flag of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts displays, on both sides, the state coat of arms centered on a white field. The shield depicts an Algonquian Native American with bow and arrow; the arrow is pointed downward, signifying peace. A white star with five points appears next to the figure's head, signifying Massachusetts as a U.S. state. A blue ribbon surrounds the shield, bearing the state motto *Ense Petit Placidam, Sub Libertate Quietem* ("By the Sword We Seek Peace, But Peace Only Under Liberty"). Above the shield is the state military crest: the bent arm holding a broadsword aloft. The sword has its blade up, to remind that it was through the American Revolution that liberty was won. The sword itself is a copy of one belonging to Myles Standish and signifies the philosophy that one would rather lose their right arm than "live under tyranny."



Perspectives: Native American

Elizabeth James-Perry, an artist in the Aquinnah Wampanoag tribe, reported to the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* that she sees hostility toward Native Americans as the central theme of the current state seal — and the momentum to change it as a good thing. “As an indigenous person and visual artist, the seal is deeply offensive in its imagery and has been for countless generations of tribal members.” While she understands the image of the Algonquian man is supposed to represent peace, the seal doesn’t portray equality, she says, in that certain parts of the seal are ascendant over other parts, such as an arm holding a sword above the figure. “I liken it to a flag depicting an African-American with an arm holding a whip above it — horrific imagery capturing horrific intent that is not condoned in free democratic America,” James-Perry said. Sentiment is felt by many in the Mashpee Wampanoags believing the flag reflects the ongoing genocide of native people that has been happening in Massachusetts and the New England area since the 1630s and feeling that the emblem and flag celebrates colonial exploitation and dissemination of native people. Other first nation groups in the state

have long argued that the Massachusetts flag is an outdated symbol of violence and oppression that, just like Confederate monuments, should be removed from all state property for it is not in tune with contemporary views.

Perspective: Critics

Critics believe that many people consider the argument irrelevant or a misunderstanding of what the imagery represents. The bent arm with the sword was not intended to be threatening to Native Americans, but a typical heraldic representation found on many coats of arms. While the state motto is about taking up arms – “By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty” – it is an expression of freedom unrelated to how poorly the Native American population was treated. As of last week, the *Boston Globe* reported that the Massachusetts Senate unanimously approved legislation creating a special commission to review the state seal and motto. The bill still needs House approval, but Native American groups praised the vote. Members of the commission would include Massachusetts tribe members as well as representatives for the state commission on Indian affairs, the state historical commission and the state cultural council, among other agencies. The commission will be submitting its report to lawmakers by October 2021.

Conclusion

In the novel *There There*, Orange writes, “Only those who have lost as much as we have seen the particularly nasty slice of smile on someone who thinks they’re winning when they say ‘Get over it’” (137). To a certain degree, this is how Native Americans have felt with Massachusetts’ decision to keep the emblem for so long: A constant reminder of the pain and anguish waving in their face, while the majority of “We the People” pawn it off and say, “get over it”. Is it only right that we allow Native Americans to re-identify themselves and their

Contact Zones. But then again, who are ‘we’ to determine that, are we still isolating them as a people? When I stated earlier “for it is not in tune with contemporary views,” are we becoming more sympathetic to our own treatment of cultures and races within our own history? I believe we are merely in the infancy stage for this debate has a long road ahead of itself.

Works Cited

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