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# “Caught between Southern Pride and Southern Blame”: Brad Paisley’s “Accidental Racist”

## **Abstract**

An ongoing and rather controversial debate in the Civil War world is that over the rightful placement of the Confederate battle flag in American memory. Being such a provocative symbol both in terms of history and race relations, its ‘true’ meaning and ‘true’ symbolism are constantly in flux. With recent disputes on the removal of the Confederate flag from Robert E. Lee’s tomb at Washington and Lee University making their way into the mainstream news, the complicated meaning of the rebel symbol and where it belongs in American memory have earned their places at the forefront of the national consciousness. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Brad Paisley, Racism, LL Cool J, Country Music

## **Disciplines**

African American Studies | Cultural History | Ethnomusicology | History | Race and Ethnicity | Social History | United States History

## **Comments**

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

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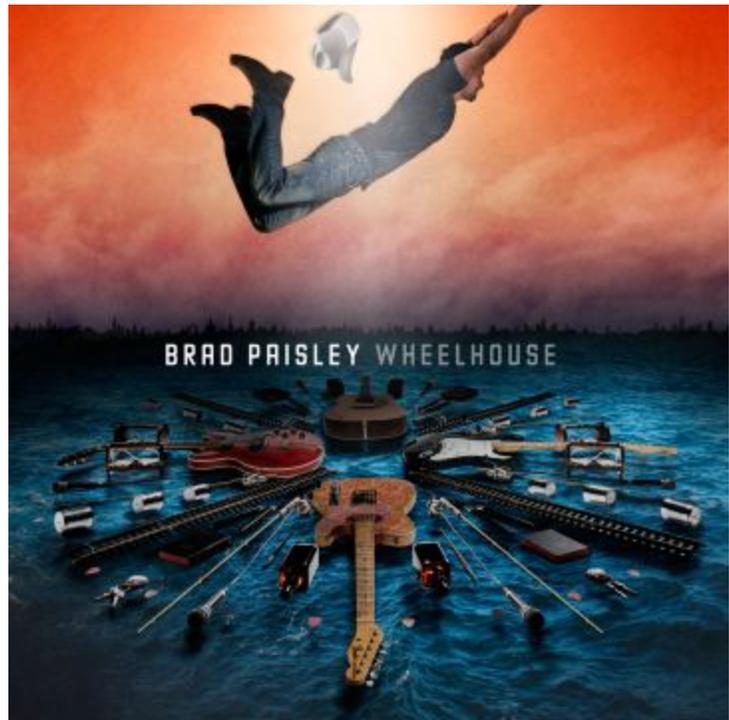
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### “Caught between Southern Pride and Southern Blame”: Brad Paisley’s “Accidental Racist”

February 2, 2015

by Brianna Kirk '15

An ongoing and rather controversial debate in the Civil War world is that over the rightful placement of the Confederate battle flag in American memory. Being such a provocative symbol both in terms of history and race relations, its ‘true’ meaning and ‘true’ symbolism are constantly in flux. With recent disputes on the removal of the Confederate flag from Robert E. Lee’s tomb at Washington and Lee University making their way into the mainstream news, the complicated meaning of the rebel symbol and where it belongs in American memory have earned their places at the forefront of the national consciousness.



Brad Paisley's 2013 album *Wheelhouse*.  
[bradpaisley.com](http://bradpaisley.com)

Brad Paisley worked the issue even further into the public arena with the release of the song “Accidental Racist” on his 2013 album *Wheelhouse*. Set toward the end of the album, the country song with a little flavor of rap features LL Cool J as a guest artist. Immediately after its release, the song drew criticism both from white and black Americans about its aims and the intended meaning behind its unusual yet distinctive lyrics.

The song acts as a reflection on the interaction between a white Southern man and an African-American Starbucks employee. Dressed in a Lynyrd Skynyrd shirt sporting the unmistakable Southern Cross, the white customer meditates upon his interaction with the black man after placing a drink order, dubbing the obvious tension the “elephant in the corner of the South.” The lyrics become a stream of consciousness for the white man’s thoughts as he ruminates over the turbulent history of the South, trying to determine how he can at the same time be proud of where he is from but not everything the South has done.

“Our generation didn’t start this nation,” Paisley sings, noting that current Americans cannot re-write the sins of the past but rather have to learn how to acknowledge that they happened and work toward moving past them. Reconstruction sought to ‘fix’ the nation staggering away from the battlefields of war, but met with little, if any, success. The struggles and decisive issues that America faced in the wake of the Civil War are still prevalent today, the legacy of which is still undergoing debates.

LL Cool J adds an African-American voice to the issue of Civil War memory in Paisley’s song. “Now my chains are gold but I’m still misunderstood,” he states, continuing that he is “dodgin’ invisible white hoods.” Seeing a white man with a white cowboy hat and a Skynyrd shirt evokes a sense of white supremacy that has become associated with the South, creating this ‘accidental racism’ that despite not intentionally meaning to offend, does in actuality.



Brad Paisley (left) and LL Cool J (right).  
Photo credit ABC News.

The remainder of the song, in my opinion, sports the most controversial lyrics, containing lines like “If you don’t judge my gold chains, I’ll forget the iron chains” and “Let bygones be bygones,” all sung by LL Cool J. Paisley ends by singing “I just want to make things right” and cure this problem of accidental racism that he has identified.

I first heard this song in my African-American history course when it was released two years ago, and it still evokes the same response in me today as it did then. I still wince when the two artists switch off lines at the end, and still

chuckle when LL Cool J says that he won’t judge the red flag if no one judges his do-rag. It was the sheer brashness of the words used that makes the song so challenging to like. But after listening to the song many—and I mean *many*—times in the process of writing this blog, I’ve come to have a new appreciation for it. Yes, it has provocative lyrics and will never be a chart-topping hit, but it does what I think Brad Paisley and LL Cool J set out to do—to make people uncomfortable enough to jump-start conversations about the placement of Civil War memory and racism in the United States.

The problem Paisley and LL Cool J wrestled with was how a Southerner can simultaneously be proud of where they are from while still being sympathetic to and understanding of the fact that the South has a dark past. Paisley grapples with this difficulty of Civil War memory in America and that mistakes made by “a bunch of folks long before we came” are still present in society today. His generation did not fight the Civil War, nor cause it, and cannot change how history 150 years ago unfolded. How can one from the South effectively balance being proud of their Southern heritage with the knowledge that the South is often seen in light of the Confederacy, and therefore linked to hatred? Is something like that even possible? It is a tough thing to be proud of one’s history when it is blemished with ugly things like slavery and racism. The exact course of how to do just that is not addressed by this country/rap duo, but instead left up to the

American people to be accomplished, something that Brad Paisley and LL Cool J left, maybe, to be 'accidental.'

<http://gettysburgcompiler.com/2015/02/02/caught-between-southern-pride-and-southern-blame-brad-paisleys-accidental-racist/>