

A. VAN JORDAN'S "QUESTION":  
DECONSTRUCTING THE CONFEDERATE  
FLAG

by  
Koki ARAGA

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelors of Arts  
in British and American Cultural Studies

at

Kansai University

Osaka, January 2018

Adviser: Professor Raphaël Lambert

## **A. Van Jordan's "Question": Deconstructing the Confederate Flag**

**Koki Araga**

In 2016, the presidential election of the United States of America saw the return of white nationalism and the resurgence of the Confederate flags in public places. Originally, the Confederate battle flag was used during the Civil War, and it has remained a symbol of the South ever since. The display of the Confederate flag, especially in the South, has been the center of a controversy opposing those who argue that it is a reminder of a shameful past characterized by racial segregation and violence, and those who see in it a mere reminder of Southern identity and a way of paying tribute to the ancestors who lost their lives defending the Confederacy. The Confederate flag is loaded with meaning, and it is difficult to determine whether it is used in a candid way in the name of regional pride or in a biased way in the name of white supremacy. A. Van Jordan's poem "Question" (2001), which features an encounter between an African American man and a young dreadlocked white Southerner with a tattoo of the Confederate flag on his arm, tackles this divisive issue of the meaning of the Confederate flag. "Question," as the first part of this essay shows, does not seem to choose a side as it presents the Confederate flag as both a reminder of a horrible past for African Americans and a neutral marker of identity for Southern whites. However, what comes across as reluctance to engage with the flag issue may also be, as the second part argues, a discursive strategy acknowledging the complicated relationship of both the white and black communities with the Confederate flag. Accordingly, Jordan keeps his description of the encounter between the black man and the white boy unclear, thus compelling his reader to ask themselves questions. Ultimately, this essay explores how the poem effectively articulates both the

complexity of the Confederate flag and the relationship between white Southerners and African Americans.

### **Part 1: The Conflicting Meanings of the Flag in the Poem**

A. Van Jordan's poem "Question" features two characters, a white teen and a black man. While descriptions of both characters are sparse and unspecific, the former is immediately identified as a Southerner since he has "a Confederate flag tattoo on his arm" (2). A tattoo is a body modification, which, once inserted under the skin, will never be removed completely. The purpose of having a tattoo is often a fashion statement; but it can be much more than that: a tattoo cannot be removed, and more than clothes, it is meant to assert one's identity. Thus, wherever the white teen goes, the Confederate flag always identifies him as a white Southerner.

The use of the Confederate flag as a symbol of Southern identity is a common sight today in the South. Lynyrd Skynyrd, an American rock band that often sings about the South, is an example of such identification. In the past, the band used the flag to express who they are and where they are from, and they would often perform with displaying the Confederate flag at their concerts. Using the Confederate flag to promote Southern identity is popular among Southern bands. Two sociologists, Jason T. Eastman and Douglas P. Schrock analyzed lyrics of more than six hundred songs by Southern-rock artists who use the flag in their performance. In their analysis, they reveal that there are "only four instances in which non-whites are mentioned" (210), and they are not to express the white superiority. In this sense, displaying the Confederate flag does not mean to express racism but the Southern identity, although many people may feel showing the Confederate flag directly connects one's racist attitude.

However, Eastman and Schrock's interviews with Southern-rock artists also show the artists' awareness of the flag's racial background. They interviewed dozens of Southern-rock artists and found out that Southern-rock artists are "well-aware that the Confederate flag symbolizes racial bigotry, and yet choose to display it nonetheless" (210). The Southern-rock artists, thus believe that even though they know what the flag means to African Americans, they believe that, "their own interpretations of the flag and their own feelings of pride as Southern white men are more important than the views and feelings of African Americans" (210-211). This tendency shows a social structure characterized by white supremacy. Nevertheless, the Southern-rock artists also express their ambivalent feelings towards the interpretation of the flag. Indeed, in a *CNN* interview, members of Lynyrd Skynyrd explain that they stopped using the flag in their concerts because white supremacists "kidnapped" ("Face to Face") the flag and used it to express their ideology. The Southern musicians also struggle with the racial meaning, which always comes to some people's mind when they see the flag.

While the black man in "Question" focuses on the white teen's tattoo and its negative connotations, the white teen challenges the black man's initial impression that the teen is a white supremacist through his way of speaking. Due to the tremendous impact of hip-hop music on mainstream culture African American vernacular and slang have become popular among young people. Accordingly, the white teen in the poem greets the black man with a very colloquial and African American "what up brother?" (1). In the United States, white and black cultural cross-pollination is nothing new, but the rise of hip-hop music in the early 1970s has given it a boost. Cecilia A. Cutler, in her study of the influence of African American vernacular on white teenagers, notes that hip-hop is "a multi-cultural lifestyle rather than a symbol of ethnic group of identity" (435). In other words, white teenagers' identification with hip-hop culture is a

striking example of the assimilation of African American culture in mainstream American culture. Thus, in a sense, the way that the white teen approaches the black man shows the societal elements of today's American Culture. However, given the fact that the teen also has a Confederate Flag tattoo, the black man would also wonder if he has such a racist ideology and approaches him in a humiliating way.

In addition to his way of speaking, the white teen has appropriated other elements of African American culture: he wears dreadlocks—a hairstyle that is not only a fashion statement but also a form of self-expression. Dreadlocks in the United States became popular with Bob Marley's reggae music and culture in the 1970s, and from the hippie to the New Age generation, they have been a symbol of counterculture. Also, some African Americans consider that dreadlocks are used to show their African identity because dreadlocks can be seen in many African cultures. Unlike tattoos, dreadlocks are not a form of body modification, but they play a similar role, and for this white Southern youth to wear them is a clear example of cultural appropriation.

The meaning of the flag, whether it refers to heritage or racism, is always controversial, and it is what the black man is facing at the moment in the poem. However, one other possibility should be concerned: the white teen's ignorance. Since the white teen somehow mixes the flag with African American characteristics, it may be assumed that he does not mean to use the flag as a symbol of racial superiority. In fact, the white teen might not even care or know about the controversy. To him, the tattoo, the black vernacular, and the dreadlocks may not be much more than the candid expression of his youth, and the meaning of those cultural markers may not mean anything at all. Nevertheless, no matter how the white teen thinks about the flag, it is a big concern for the black man to see the Confederate flag on a white person's arm.

The second protagonist of “Question,” the black man, is given few characteristics. His description, unlike that of the white teen, is rather vague in the first stanza. For instance, the narrator observes that the black man “may teach college or fix cars” (4). Regarding social status and level of education, teaching in college and fixing cars are excessively different; it is not impossible but unlikely to be a professor and a mechanic at the same time. The possible reason for this vagueness is twofold. First, it emphasizes the white teen’s bizarre appearance. The first stanza illustrates the white teen’s appearance more than it does the black man’s. The poem leads the reader to focusing on the white teen and the issue. Second, the description of the narrator here, suggests that the black man’s occupation could be anything. In other words, since only the description of the black man is that he is black, this black man could be any other black man (or woman), which suggests that his reaction to the white boy stands for the reaction of all members of the black community. As a result, the whole experience has become a communal rather than a personal experience. Intentionally or not, it leads one to think of African Americans as a monolith rather than a community made of distinct individuals who do not necessarily share the same opinion on every topic (including the one presented in the poem).

In the second stanza, “Question” describes the specific location of the encounter, which represents the controversy. The locus of the controversy surrounding the Confederate flag has always been the South. In the North, the display of the flag is much less common than it is in the South. It may be somewhat taboo: it is largely acknowledged as a symbol of racism in the other part of the United States. As a matter of fact, it is the “first year in the south” (2) for the black man who used to live somewhere in the North or West. His encounter with the Confederate flag is a rite of passage, the sudden exposure of a non-Southern Black to white Southern culture. These

facts make the encounter a summary of the Confederate flag controversy: unlike white people who are divided on the issue of the flag, African American people living anywhere in the country share the same feeling about the flag. The two main characters of “Question” are not described in many specific details. The white teen represents any white Southern youth as influenced by African-American culture, while the black man represents any African-American individual moving to the South. Therefore, the white teen and the black man embody the two sides of the Confederate flag controversy in the South. While the white teen seems indifferent or unable to grasp the historical, cultural and political meaning of his tattoo, the black man sees the tattoo for what it is to most black people: the expression of enduring racism.

Despite the vague explanation of the black man in the first stanza, “Question” tells the reader more about him in the second stanza. As previously argued, the Confederate flag reminds African-Americans about the history of discrimination in the South. In the poem, before coming to the South, the black man “always expected love and hate to speak clearer” (2). By “Love and hate” (2), he means that he thought that it is simply distinguishable between those who welcome and reject him. He then questions the “dreadlocks and [the] Confederate flag” (2), creating a parallel structure with “love and hate” (2). From the black man’s perspective, the combination of dreadlocks and the Confederate flag is inconceivable: dreadlocks signify unity, whereas the Confederate flag symbolizes xenophobia.

It is not only African Americans arguing that the Confederate flag is used to express white privilege in the South. There are many hate crimes committed by white supremacists associating with the Confederate flag. They indeed fly the Confederate flag to symbolize their behavior. This connection between the flag and white supremacist ideology has been fiercely debated since the recent massacre by Dylan

Roof, a young white supremacist, of black churchgoers in South Carolina; a state where many enthusiastic white Southerners venerate the flag as an icon of the South.<sup>1</sup> What brought this incident into a huge debate, as John Cassidy, a writer at *The New Yorker*, notes, was that a picture of Dylan Roof posing with a handgun and the Confederate flag was shown all over the media after the shooting. The picture shocked everyone and brought the Confederate flag to the center of a huge movement to stop state governments from using the flag. According to the article, published June 24, 2015, several days after the shooting, “a movement has arisen across the South to ban the display of the flag in public places.” This mass shooting took the Confederate flag into a political discussion in the Southern states. Cassidy positively looks at the movement and is rather concerned about the accessibility of gun, referring to both the flag and gun as a symbol of “hatred and violence.” In other words, Cassidy suggests that the Confederate flag is as hateful and violent as guns. Dylan Roof’s hate crime reestablished the racist meaning of the flag and brought a massive debate if it is legitimate to keep displaying the flag publicly.

The poem also describes the black man’s thought towards the flag. It shows a contradicted display of the flag. The flag was originally used by the Confederacy, where slavery was legal and essential for the Southern economy. However, as the poem portrays, the flag is located at a place where it should not be. In the fifth stanza, the black man remembers when he saw the largest flag in Ohio, “where slaves escaped to find freedom” (5). In antebellum America, the Ohio River was the border between slave states and free states, and thus, for runaways, to reach Ohio was to reach freedom. Especially, since Ohio faced the South, it was a key state for the Underground Railroad, a network supporting the slaves to flee to the North. Furthermore, as Stanley Harrold argues, the Underground Railroad was the result of “relatively well organized biracial



efforts” (210) as both black and white abolitionists took part in it. Therefore, the black man’s remark of Ohio represents the unity of black and white people. Then, his question, “a Confederate flag?” (5), tells that the locus of the flag contradicts this solidarity.

The poem describes what the flag has meant throughout history. Originally, the Confederate States of America (CSA) had three national flags. However, the design, “based on the St Andrews Cross, was central to a wide array of battle flags” (Webster and Leib, 276), and thus the Confederate battle flag is most widely associated with the CSA. Indeed, after the black man wonders about the strange combination, at least for him, that is displaying the Confederate flag in one of the key states for fugitive slaves, the poem explains the flag, calling it “the flag of secession, of blood and bone, of black against white, of homeland fighting homeland” (5). It refers to the country divided into the Union and the Confederacy during and after the Civil War. In 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union, followed by seven Southern states having withdrawn from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America by February 1861 (Williams and Farrar, 257). One of the main issues of the Civil War was whether or not slavery should be abolished, which brought the “bloodiest war in US history” (Williams and Farrar, 257).<sup>2</sup> Although the Union defeated the Confederacy, the war split the country and the people geographically. The flag was flown among such hatred between the North and the South.

Additionally, the poem describes the flag as the symbol of racial divide. The relations between white and black people have always been thought as unreachable, especially by white supremacists. This racialization continues during the Reconstruction era in the South, where the Confederate flags were still flown, and continue to be flown even today. The poem, for instance, describes it as “the flag...of

black against white” (5). In the American South, slave owners used an array of strategies to keep slaves obedient, and with those strategies arose an ideology of dehumanization according to which being black was inferior to being white. However, the words, “black against white” (5) can be suited to show that African Americans were not necessarily enslaved and discriminated against passively. Indeed, there were many rebellions during the era of slavery, which demonstrates that relations between black and white people were so bad that black people felt a need to initiate conflict. It could be argued that many of these feelings still exist today. Furthermore, the flag’s image, which demolishes the unity of inter-racial relations, is discussed in the sixth stanza.

In the sixth stanza, the poem emphasizes “unity” (6). Although the sentence continues from the former stanza explaining the Confederate flag, as the poem says, “the flag of...fear of unity” (5), the word “of unity” (6) is placed in the next stanza. This creates three possible interpretations; it symbolizes the fear that African Americans have seen through over the history of discrimination; it can also refer to division of black and white as mentioned in the former chapter; and finally, it could be read as if it were the flag of unity that can be seen from the white Southerners’ point of view.

These three different interpretations of the flag are further displayed in the sixth stanza. First, it should be mentioned that “the unity” (6) may refer to various sorts of unity in this stanza because it does not clarify what kind of unity it is; this could, therefore, refer to the unity of black people, white people, white Southerners, or Americans as a whole. For example, the line, “the belief that blacks lacked spirit and heart” (6), should mean an ideology held by slaveholders to justify the enslavement of black people by white supremacists. However, it could have different meanings depending on the interpretation of the former lines; on the one hand, if the reader

regards the former line as “the flag... of unity,” this can be the basic ideology for Southerners. From their point of view, the flag commonly flown in the South is the icon for them to unite as one. On the other hand, for the reader regarding the line as “the flag...of fear of unity,” this ideology turns to a tragic piece of history that divides black and white people along racial lines. It would never be possible to solve the division if the flag associated with such an ideology remained between the races. Therefore, the stanza suggests different meanings for different races.

Politicians have also held controversial views toward the Confederate flag. These views have been witnessed through treatments of the flag by the local governments of the Southern states. The state of South Carolina is one of the Southern states where the display of the Confederate flag in public has been discussed by politicians for decades. The views of the flag represent how the interpretation of the flag has been conflicted and changing in the politics of South Carolina. In 1962, the flag was placed on the top of the statehouse to protest the Civil Right Movement. Ever since, the flag has been one of the major issues discussed in South Carolina. Laura R. Woliver, Angela D. Ledford, and Chris J. Dolan analyze the local media coverage of the Confederate flag controversy and point out that indeed, the number of articles related to the issue published in 1962 was the “second highest over the 38 years” (720), although some politicians argue that the flag controversy has never really been an issue until 1999 and 2000. They also claim that increases in the number of articles in 1994 and 1998, when state-level elections were held, show evidence that “journalists and/or candidates for elected office raised the issue in campaigns” (721). In other words, regardless of which side they stood for, the flag issues were meaningful for politicians to encourage their voters. In 2000, the year when the highest number of articles related to the issue was published in 38 years (Woliver, Ledford, and Dolan, 270), South

Carolina legislature made a certain decision, that is to relocate the flag flown at the state Capitol, which revealed the complexity of the issue.

In 2000—a year before the *Callaloo* special issue on the Confederate flag controversy in which “Questions” appeared—the flag was one of the most discussed issues in the South. Particularly, a decision by the legislature of South Carolina was remarkable: they voted for a bill to remove the flag from the top of the state Capitol. A business boycott by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) effectively and strongly encouraged lawmakers to pass the bill. However, because of pressure from pro-Confederate flag organizations, lawmakers passed a compromised proposal to move the flag to a pole in front of the statehouse, despite the NAACP’s wish to remove the flag completely. The decision to finally keep the flag in a public place is the background to the 2001 *Callaloo* special issue. Charles Henry Rowel, the editor, revealed that he decided to make it about the Confederate flag controversy after a talk in South Carolina about the flag by several writers and scholars (vi), which was held after the compromise. Indeed, the Confederate flag controversy was the major political issue in South Carolina in 2000.

In addition to the increase of the debate about the flag at the local level, it was also a newsworthy issue at the national level. Around the year, the Confederate flag was in the center of voters’ mind. During the 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush defeated John McCain in the South Carolina primary election partly because he defended “the flying of the Confederate flag on the grounds of states’ rights” (Blumenthal). Indeed, Vinson and Moore point out that “the *Times* mentioned Confederate flag in nearly one-third of its articles” (401). Although they explain the disconnection between the media coverage and the messages from the candidates

during the campaign, it is true that people had an interest in the issue of the Confederate flag.

Fifteen years later, the compromise in South Carolina, the flag, again, became the center of local politics. The statehouse of South Carolina passed a bill to remove the Confederate flag from the pole in front of the state capital, which had moved from the top of the statehouse. It was three months after the mass shooting in Charleston, which was recognized as a hate crime. Although the state senators quickly passed the bill to remove the flag, Davidson, a writer for the *New Yorker*, reports that some of the senators, who oppose removing the flag, attempted to delay the process (3). The process to pass the resolution shows the continuity of the controversy among the legislators today as some representatives commented their favor in seeing the flag as a part of the Southern culture<sup>3</sup>. Even after the massacre in Charleston, which many people thought the connection between hatred and the flag, the Confederate flag controversy remains in the South.

## **Part 2: Redefining the Flag in “Question”**

In “Question,” Jordan keeps the story unclear as if it were for the reader to interpret the poem by him or herself. This helps him or her to rethink about the flag’s meaning. One of his ways is to use various narrator’s points of view, which guide the reader to interact in different ways with the poem. The first, tenth, and eleventh stanzas are narrated by the objective third person. This type of narrator neither knows nor expresses characters’ internal thoughts and feelings but sticks with telling the facts of the story. This is described as a “fly on the wall.” Starting with the question, “What up, brother?” the story is introduced by describing the situation and what the white teen and the black man look like. Verbs and modals used in the stanzas such as “seems” and

“may” prove that the narrator does not tell anything other than what the characters look like. Also, the tenth and eleventh stanzas have the same features; there is no more information than the characters reveal. The narrator only expresses the moment that the white teen asks the question and the black man responds to it. The start and end of this story just stick with telling what happens.

Although the narrator’s viewpoint is objective and neutral in the first stanza, it is changed from the second stanza. The narrator starts to describe the black man’s feeling and thoughts but still does not display the white teen’s thoughts. Here, the poet is using the subjective third person or the limited third person. The poem is mainly narrated this way. Thus, the narrator knows about a single character’s thoughts and tells the story through the character’s point of view. As seen through the second or third stanza, for instance, the narrator tells the story as if it were seen from the side or even inside of the black man; there are some questions that the black man has but does not say to the white teen. Moreover, the narrator mentions the black man’s past or his thoughts as well. These are the things that only the black man knows, and that means the narrator is no longer an objective person who looks at the story from the sky but a subjective narrator representing in the black man’s view.

As previously stated, the story is mainly told by the subjective third person, but it seems that there is one more point of view, the narrator as a character. Even though the narrator never appears in the interaction between the black man and the white teen, some parts of the poem seem to express not only the black man’s thoughts but also the narrator’s. For example, in a sentence starting from the middle of the fifth stanza, “A flag of secession...something worth pride in his white mind?” there is no way of identifying who the narrator is. Indeed, “the black” appears, at the end of the seventh stanza, but it is a part of the sentence continuing to the next stanza, so it is technically

not the words of the seventh stanza. Therefore, even though it looks like the narrator describes the black man revealing his point of view about the Confederate flag, it could be said that it is the narrator's thoughts as if he or she commented on the interaction.

To sum up, the poem uses three types of narrative point of view: the objective third person, the subjective third person, and the commentator. Each narrative point of view has different roles. Changing of the narrative types makes one moment of interaction a deep story and helps the reader to think about the questions and the interaction between the black man and the white teen. The role of the first stanza is to introduce the story and to establish a connection with the reader. The first stanza is told as if the narrator observed the moment. It gives the reader little, but enough information about what is going on in the story. If the reader is familiar with the topic of the poem, it is very easy to identify the theme of the poem. This works as a prologue to the story very well. Moreover, since the narrator tells the story as if it were just happening right now, it sounds real, and the reader can feel a strong and deep connection with the story. The narrator earns reliability, because the narrator acts as an observer and describes both the black man and the white teen equally in the stanza. Therefore, the reader would not have any bias. The reader is led into the story without standing on sides, and the narrative point of view can change the attitude in the next stanza with keeping reliability as an observer.

From the next stanza, "Question" drags the reader into the story. The narrator describes the story more from the black man's point of view from the second stanza. For instance, the second stanza reveals that the black man is not from the South; and it also tells us about what he expected moving South. These facts should be known only by the black man himself, and thus disclosing the information can earn him empathy from the reader. Moreover, the narrator never gives any information about the white

teen except his appearance so that the reader can only see the story from the black man's point of view. As a result, the reader is drawn into the black man's situation and are thus encouraged to identify with him. The reader will then think about the white teen in the same way as the black man does.

In addition to creating a bond of empathy between the reader and the black man, the commentator works to give the reader a strong message of the poem. The narrator describes many thoughts towards the Confederate flag as though the narrator supported the black man's point of view. In the fifth to the seventh stanza, the narrator describing the flag's meaning by mentioning words such as "secession," "the belief that blacks lacked spirit and heart," and "fear of shackle and whip," which is about the history of the slavery and the Civil War. This creates a connection between such facts and the flag, and it can influence the reader's way of thinking so that he or she would think more deeply about the flag in a same way that the black man does.

The last two stanzas are back to the narrator of the first stanza, but it confronts the reader with more questions. After describing the moment by the different types of the narrator, the objective narrator repeats the situation again from a neutral position, so the reader is put back in the "fly-upon-the-wall" point of view. Therefore, the reader can see not only what the white teen is about but also what the black man is about. The black man then leaves one question hanging at the end of the story. Since the reader is no longer looking at the situation from the black man's point of view, he or she has to think about his question too. Even though the reader has thought about the white teen and the Confederate flag from the black man's point of view, at the end of the story, the narrator makes the reader look at the moment from a neutral position again and reflect on the meaning of the interaction.



In addition to different types of narrators, Jordan uses many caesurae in “Question.” It is often used to make poems resemble natural speech. By following a caesura, the reader can determine when to stress words and where to focus. However, in “Question,” caesurae do not only help the reader focus on stressed words but also create confusion. In the third stanza, for example, the line is divided when it says “North” at the end of the stanza, and the line continues to the fourth stanza starting with “Carolina.” This caesura helps the reader focus on “Carolina,” which is the location of the story, and a state where the Confederate flag is one of the most debated issues. When the reader reaches the word “North,” he or she probably comes up with an image of the North where most people think that the flag has racist connotations. But if the encounter between both protagonists took place in the North, the reader would undoubtedly consider the white teen a racist. However, the encounter takes place in North Carolina, where many people believe that the flag is not a symbol of racism but of Southern pride. Therefore, as the reader reads the fourth stanza, he or she may rethink whether or not the teen should really be considered a racist.

Another instance of the confusion is in the seventh stanza. There is a caesura that breaks a line starting from “the black wonders” (7), which continues to the next stanza. This caesura also has two roles. First, it makes the reader focus on the word “dreadlocks” in the eighth stanza, and second, it makes the subject of the sentence in the fifth to seventh stanza unclear. The subject of the line, starting from “A flag of secession” (5) is ambiguous. It might be a comment by the black man or by the narrator as a commentator. This confusion compels the reader to think about whom the line refers to. This question should be clarified because, undoubtedly, the white teen and the black man have different attitudes toward the Confederate flag. However, in the seventh stanza, this entire line addresses to the white teen, and thus from this point, it is

possible to say that the black man is the one narrating the story in a third person. By narrating the story from the third person's point of view, he can keep distance from the issue and keep a neutral position. In addition, a caesura in the beginning of the sixth stanza leads the reader to focus on the word "unity." This caesura also brings a moment of confusion because the reader might not notice its continuity unless they notice the missing punctuation after the word "fear" (5). Therefore, the line can gather the reader's concentration. They successfully compel the reader to use more effort to read the line, which sends the message that displaying the flag never brings a unity to the nation.

Even though the reader can interpret the sixth stanza in various ways, "Question" instead focuses on the flag as the divisive tool that brings "fear of unity." In the traditional flag controversy, those who favor flying the Confederate flag have a positive expression towards the flag and identify them as the Southerners by displaying it. They pay tribute to their history. Nevertheless, the poem explains that the flag represents not only slavery but also the history of the Southerners, which, unlike their proudness, separates the country and led them to the bloody fight of the Civil War. The former half of the line in the sixth stanza addresses fear and hatred among slaves, and the latter half of the line is about the struggle and suffering in the Civil War and its aftermath. The poem, for instance, says "hatred...turned lovers into soldiers" (6). It is obvious that the Civil War divided the nation, and thus people had to kill their own fellow citizens. It could be said that the War was to defend their land, and therefore it should be praised. However, the poem sees the war rather as a tragedy than a heritage. It attempts to redefine the meaning of the war, which the Confederate flag partly represents. The poem shows how the flag divided the United States and its people along racial lines.

What “Question” means by “fear of unity” is about the fear among not only different races, but also people in the United States as a whole. To understand this meaning, it is necessary to see the original role of the Confederate flag. According to a historian, Robert E. Bonner, the creation of an array of Confederate flags, including the battle flag, was to establish patriotism or nationalism among the Confederacy. In the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh stanza, “Question” brings up the notion that the “flag... turned lovers into soldiers, into wielders of guns and bayonets.” It suggests that the flag was associated with nationalism during the Civil War, and this ideology bought Southern people to war. This gives the idea that what white Southerners believes about the flag, heritage and tribute to their ancestors, is not the purpose of the flag, originally but one of the strategic tools to make people fight against the people in the same country.

Despite its racial meaning claimed by the majority of people, many pro-Confederate flag groups attempt to separate the flag from its racist connotations. Gerald R. Webster and Jonathan R. Leib point out that, “while some concede that the battle flag has been blatantly employed as a racist symbol by such hate groups as the Klan,” a majority of the Southerners, who favor the flag, “argue the actions of these groups should not be allowed to taint the battle flag’s meaning to them— that of a treasured symbol of heritage and sacrifice” (275-276). Indeed, Laura R. Woliver et al. observed two major pro-Confederate flag groups, the South Carolina chapter of the Council of Conservative Citizens and the League of the South when flying the Confederate flag on top of the South Carolina Capitol was questioned. They denied the KKK and other racist organizations, which were also active in the pro-flag movement:

Although the KKK and individual racists were active in the pro-flag camp, the CCC and the League did not publicly welcome their presence and saw their efforts as counterproductive because they focused on race and downplayed Southern heritage and culture. (715)

These groups claimed a separation of the flag from a racist meaning. Indeed, the use of the flag by white supremacists is relatively recent. According to Timothy Messer-Kruse, “the popularity [of the Confederate flag] among whites jumped suddenly as a means of voicing opposition to the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s” (87). Therefore, it is true that the flag was appropriated by supremacists and used as to express their ideology. Thus, that they claim to separate the racist meaning from the flag is plausible for them and necessary to justify flying the flag. However, “Question” brings a counter-argument.

Despite those pro-flag people’s attempt to separate the flag from its racial meaning, many anti-flag people deny this argument. Indeed, in the fifth to seventh stanza, “Question” describes that the flag is held for “all its pain” (7) , as mentioned above. It suggests that even the heritage symbolizes racial hatred. At the beginning of the poem, the black man expresses his confusion towards the white teen because of his appearance, having both dreadlocks and a Confederate flag tattoo. For the white teen, the flag may represent his pride as a Southerner, not hate, and the dreadlocks express his closeness to black people. However, for the black man, the flag and its painful meaning are undoubtedly inseparable. Therefore, the line concludes its argument of the flag, which divide the people of the nation, by expressing a question, “something worth pride in his white mind?” This expression is to question to such an argument by the Southerners, who favor flying the flag and try to separate the flag from racism.

Finally, in addition to defining the flag’s meaning, the series of interaction between the white teen and black man in “Question” can represent an interaction of two different races because it could also be described as the white teen’s attempt to overcome the division between two races. In the eighth to ninth stanza, the black man wonders if the white teen can be “a minority in his own country” (8) by having

dreadlocks. The black community, which represents about 11 percent of the entire population, is a minority in the United States. If there were no description of whiteness and the Confederate flag tattoo, it could be possible to identify the teen as a black individual. The black man, thus, ponders if he can feel solidarity with the white teen. This can be also examined from a capitalized word, “brother” (10) stressing that the black man particularly expresses his uncertainty towards the white teen. This shows that the black man is puzzled to answer to the white teen’s offer.

As a response to the white teen’s question however, the black man says nothing. So far, the poem shows various possibilities of interpretations of the white teen with dreadlocks and a Confederate flag tattoo. After considering all factors, however, the black man “decides to say nothing” (10). This is partly because he cannot determine the white teen’s attitude: whether he is a racist or not. Meanwhile and more plausibly, he refuses to acknowledge the idea of solidarity. Indeed, in the ninth to tenth stanza, he says that, “nothing remains as clear as the laughing wind that brushes his face when he hears brother slip from between the teeth of a contemporary confederate.” In other words, for the black man, addressing him in this fashion is not worth his consideration. The Confederate flag creates division, and that division makes it impossible for people to unite. Therefore, the black man decided not to answer the white teen’s greeting but to question back it to him.

Instead of answering to the white teen, the black man asks a question back without words. In the last two stanzas, the poem shows that the black man says not one word to the white teen but “stands and stares into [the white teen’s] blue eyes, as if he were the one who asked the question.” Instead of judging the white teen, the black man throws him a question to think what his appearance means. Moreover, the poem figuratively explains the black man’s answer. The poem says the black man “stands and

stares” at him as if he were “a sphinx” (11). A sphinx is to ask difficult riddles to travelers who wish to pass a road. It is, thus, a metaphor of the difficulty in overcoming this division. This last question also asks the reader to think the meaning of the way that the black man responds to the teen. Since it is uncertain the meaning of the black man’s action, saying nothing but staring at the teen, it stirs up the reader’s imagination to understand the interaction and the meaning of the Confederate flag in the mind of these two men. Thus, the reader cannot help thinking of this black man’s “question” (11).

The Confederate flag controversy is one of the most difficult issues to solve in the contemporary South. This issue even makes one suspicious of the unity of American people. Both Southerners and African Americans hold conflicted opinions towards the flag. Southerners wave the flag to express Southern pride, and African Americans condemn the flag for its racist meaning. Jordan’s attempt to tackle the issue in “Question” makes it clear that this conflict between the white Southerners and African Americans living in the South makes it impossible or at least difficult for them to put aside their differences and fraternize. Abraham Lincoln famously called for Americans to unite, pointing out that the nation was divided because of slavery<sup>4</sup>. However, as long as this issue remains, there is a racial divide. Rather, the poem brings the idea of unity and racial harmony ultimately. Although even the flag was appropriated by white supremacists to express their ideology, no matter how the Southerners try to erase the flag’s racial meaning, it is nearly impossible for African Americans to do so. The history of suffering, struggle, and hate, is always in their mind when they see the flag. Thus, one would say the flag has always symbolized white privilege. It is tough to say that the flag is a heritage, not hate anymore. Indeed, the

massacre at Emanuel AME in Charleston, South Carolina left a vivid image of hate. South Carolina's decision to remove the flag from the Capitol building was a response to this incident and the flag's racist connotations. However, it might just have a temporal meaning. Since the beginning of the Trump administration, the flag has often been displayed on the occasion of public hate speeches, which makes it yet harder to simply express Southern pride. Furthermore, the recent incident in Charlottesville<sup>5</sup>, which resulted in a death of one young white woman, revealed that the controversy of Confederate symbols divides the people of the country in general. Such incidents prove that the Confederate flag controversy divides not only black and white but also white and white as "Question" portrays. As the black man acts in the end, people have to recognize the controversy and rethink what this flag really means to the country.

### Notes

1. According to the *New York Times*, on June 18, 2015, Dylan Roof shot and killed nine African Americans at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Charleston, South Carolina during their Bible study. In 2017, the Federal District Court sentenced Roof to death.
2. According to *Civil War Trust*, a nonprofit organization working for the preservation of battlegrounds in the US, about 620,000 people died in the Civil War. In a contrary, about 405,000 Americans died in the World War II.
3. For instance, Representative J. Gary Simrill, a Republican from York County, commented on *New York Times* that some people were trying to "go beyond the flag" and "remove vestiges of what the South was, to remove history, almost cultural genocide." (Fausset and Blinder)
4. In a speech for the Republican Convention in Illinois, Abraham Lincoln said that slavery created a conflict in the US. He paraphrased a passage from the Bible and said, "a house divided against itself cannot stand," referring to the conflict in the US.
5. On August 12, 2017, white nationalists gathered for Unite the Right rally to protest against the city council's decision to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee from Emancipation Park, which was also renamed from Lee Park by the council. *New York Times* reported that "a car plowed in to a group of counter-protesters" of the rally. (Astor, Caron, and Victor)

## Works Cited

- Astor, Maggie, Christina Caron, and Daniel Victor. "A Guide to the Charlottesville Aftermath." *The New York Times*. 13 Aug. 2017. Web.
- Blumenthal, Sidney. "The Star-Spangled Banner in South Carolina." *The Atlantic*. 24 June 2015. Web.
- Bonner, Robert E. "Flag Culture and the Consolidation of Confederate Nationalism." *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2002, pp. 293–332. Print.
- Cassidy, John. "Flags and Guns: Change versus Inertia." *The New Yorker*. 24 June 2015. Web.
- "Civil War Facts." *Civil War Trust*. Civil War Trust, n.d. 25 Feb. 2017. Web
- Cutler, Cecilia A. "Yorkville Crossing: White Teens, Hip Hop and African American English." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3.4 (1999): 428-42. Print.
- Davidson, Amy. "Lowering the Battle Flag." *The New Yorker*. 10 July 2015. Web.
- Eastman, Jason T., and Douglas P. Schrock. "Southern Rock Musicians' Construction of White Trash." *Race, Gender & Class*, vol. 15, no. 1/2, 2008, 205–219. Print.
- "Face to Face: Lynyrd Skynyrd talks Southern roots." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 09 Sept. 2012. Web. 15 June 2017.
- Fausset, Richard, and Alan Blinder. "Oratory on Confederate Flag in South Carolina Legislature Shows Deep Divisions." *The New York Times*. 08 July 2015. Web.
- Harrold, Stanley. "Slave Rebels and Black Abolitionists" *A Companion to African American History*. Ed. Alton Hornsby. Malden: Blackwell, 2008. 257-270. Print.
- "House Divided Speech." Abraham Lincoln Online. N.p., n.d. Web.
- Jordan, Van A. "Question." *Callaloo* Vol. 24 No. 1 Winter, 2001: 102-103. Print
- Messer-Kruse, Timothy. *Race Relations in the United States, 1980-2000*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008. Print.
- Rowell, Charles Henry. "On This I Stand: Notes from the Editor." *Callaloo*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2001, pp. vi-xii. Print
- Sack, Kevin, and Alan Blinder. "Anguish, Rage and Mercy as Dylann Roof Is Sentenced to Death" *The New York Times*. 11 Jan. 2017. Web.



- Vinson, C. Danielle, and William V. Moore. "The Campaign Disconnect: Media Coverage of the 2000 South Carolina Presidential Primary." *Political Communication* 24.4. 2007: 393-413. Print.
- Webster, Gerald R., and Jonathan I. Leib. "Whose South is it anyway? Race and the Confederate battle flag in South Carolina." *Political Geography* 20.3 2001: 271-99. Print.
- Williams III, Oscar R., and Hayward, "Woody" Farrar. "African Americans and the American Civil War." *A Companion to African American History*. Ed. Alton Hornsby. Malden: Blackwell, 2008. 257-270. Print.
- Woliver, Laura R., Angela D. Ledford, and Chris J. Dolan. "The South Carolina Confederate Flag: The Politics of Race and Citizenship." *Politics & Policy* 29.4 2001: 708-30. Print.

## Summary

本論文では、A. ヴァン・ジョーダンの“Question”をもとに、現代のアメリカ、特に南部における、南部連合軍旗にまつわる論争、そしてそこから見える南部黒人と白人の関係性について考察する。南部連合軍旗は南北戦争の間に南部側によって使われ、それ以降、南部アメリカを象徴する旗として戦後より現代に残ってきた。しかしながら、公共の場で連合旗を掲げることは、特に南部において、奴隷制を掲げていた人種差別的で暴力的な過去を賞賛していることであると主張する人々と南部連合を守ろうと戦った祖先へ敬意を示し、南部人のアイデンティティを象徴することであると主張する人々との間で大きな論争となっている。確かに、連合旗は多種多様な意味を持つため、その意味、つまり地域の誇りを表すものなのか白人至上主義を擁護するものなのかという異なる解釈を一つに決定することは困難である。ジョーダンの詩、“Question”は、黒人男性とドレッドヘアに連合旗のタトゥーを腕に持つ十代の白人青年との一瞬の遭遇を描く物語詩である。ジョーダンはこの二人の道端での遭遇のなかで連合旗の意味を巡る論争に焦点をあてている。

第一章では、この詩の登場人物や詩句に表象されている連合旗論争の双方の主張について考察する。この詩に登場する白人青年の風貌、話し方はさまざまな解釈をすることができる。連合旗のタトゥーをすることは彼がどこに行こうともその旗を掲げるということであり、そこになんらかの主張、つまり南部人としての誇りというものが含まれていることを推察することができる。実際、南部のミュージシャンたちは、彼らのコンサートで連合旗を掲げながら「古き良き南部」と言った、郷愁的な歌を歌うといったことが見られる。しかしながら、その一方で白人青年はいわゆる黒人英語で黒人男性に話しかけ、髪型はドレッドという黒人文化を取り入れた風貌をしている。それを目撃した黒人男性は困惑を覚える。なぜなら連合旗が人種差別を擁護していると考えられる人々からすればこの白人青年の風貌と話し方は相容れないものであるからだ。確かに、若者の間でこうした黒人文化が広く受け入れられていることは事実である。そのためこの白人青年が旗そしてドレッドヘアが持つ政治的意味を考えずに単なるファッションとして身につけているということも考えられる。しかしながら、それを目撃した黒人男性側から見ると、この青年は無知で、彼の風貌は文化盗用であると考えられることもできる。またこの詩中で、黒人男性はこの一瞬の遭遇の中で連合旗に対する考えを明らかにし、奴隷制に苦しんだ黒人たちにとってこの旗は差別、白人至上主義を強化するものであると見ていることが分かる。この二人の遭遇からは、連合旗に対する対立する主張を概観することが可能である。また第一章では、この論争が政治の場でどのように取り扱われているかについても言及している。1962年にサウスカロライナ州の議事堂に設置された連合旗が2000年議事堂前のポールに移され2015年のヘイトクライム後に撤廃される一連の流れの中で、この論争を巡り多くの市民団体や議員間での対立があった。本論はこうした政治の場での論争にも触れることで、この問題の根深さについても言及する。

第二章ではジョーダンがこの詩で明らかにしようとする複雑化している論争、そしてこの論争にみられるアメリカの人々の関係性について考察する。この詩の前半部では、一見すると両者の意見を中立的に叙述しているように見られる。

しかしながら、この中立性は、連合旗論争が持つ複雑化した問題へのアプローチの方法であると捉えることができる。この論争の複雑化とはつまり、二つの対立する主張を持つ人々がひとつの意味を頑なに誇示している訳ではないということである。実際、2000年に起きたサウスカロライナ州議会での論争の中で旗の維持を主張するいくつかの団体は連合旗のもつ差別的意味を認識しつつもそれを切り放そうという試みが見られた。このように旗を掲げることが直接白人至上主義の露骨な擁護に繋がっている訳ではないという側面がこの論争にはあるのだ。その一方で、ジョーダンが詩の中の文章を二つの節で区切ったり、異なる語り手を使用したりすることによって二人の遭遇がどのような意味を持つのかを曖昧にし、多様に捉えることができるようにしている。こうすることにより、この詩の読者たちにもこの遭遇が持つ意味、さらには連合旗の意味についても考えさせようとしている。そうした多様な解釈の中でことさら際立つのはこの連合旗論争が、本来「団結」や「調和」によって成り立つアメリカ合衆国をさまざまなレベルで分断していることである。それは人種間の分断でもあり、南部白人と彼らの主張に疑問を持つ白人間での分断、さらに歴史的に見れば、南北戦争で本来同じ国民であったはずの人々が戦争をしたという国そのものの分断ともとらえることができるのである。