

Teaching the Civic Deliberations over Monument Removals

JOINT ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

Joint Essay: 1500 words, MLA format, Works Cited. Two peer workshops required. One group draft conference with Dr. Lowe or Dr. Swiencicki.

The purpose of this assignment:

Should a confederate monument be displayed in a city park? Should a college dormitory be named after its donor who was a slaveholder? These are questions that communities across the U.S. are asking of themselves. Such questions get at the heart of how we understand our past, how we represent it in the present, and how we use symbols to assert our communal beliefs, values, history, and aspirations.

For this essay, please identify what principles might help guide the conversations that communities have about their contested public symbols. To do this, use the readings from both our first-year learning community courses (rhetoric and philosophy), as well as the cases we have studied of cities that have made decisions about their public monuments, murals, and street names.

The learning goal:

This assignment helps you recognize, assess, and respond to the multiple standpoints that make up a given social justice problem. Social justice outcomes are often achieved by participating in tough deliberations in which competing outcomes are at play. When community members deliberate about what to do with, for example, a confederate monument in their town square, they each do so with different assumptions about what is good, true, and just for their community. Learning to identify these underlying value assumptions can help you understand how ideas align and prevail, or diverge and lose force. They help us see places of incommensurability in deliberation, or when points of comparison and compromise are not yet possible. And they help us see where to direct our energy in building bridges among differing perspectives toward the goals of equity, inclusion. Understanding the perspectival nature of reality means we can become more aware, ethical users of language, and work more intentionally toward social justice.

Why you are prepared to do this:

Your training in our two, linked courses (rhetoric and philosophy) prepares you to identify and examine social justice actions. In our rhetoric class, you have been studying the ways that symbols (words, images and artifacts) reflect and create beliefs and values, and are

representative of larger ideologies. In our philosophy class you have been studying the work of American pragmatist, feminist, and progressive thinkers who engage questions of social justice relating to structural inequality, power and privilege, and potentials for identification and empathy across differences.

Your audience:

The audience for this essay is your learning community professors and classmates. Assume that we have read all the relevant sources on your Works Cited page. Use “I” in your essay and draw on relevant classroom discussions, your analysis of the charts, and the theories we have read to support your argument.

Your essay will be evaluated on how well it:

Identifies what communities might consider when deliberating about their contested public symbols; supports those claims with analysis of the language and ideologies of stakeholder perspectives from the rhetoric class; supports those claims with theories from your philosophy course; reflects on what you have learned about your own ethical investments in these issues; and organizes and connects the above elements, and attends to the style and craft of writing.

SCAFFOLDING ACTIVITIES BUILDING TO JOINT ESSAY

1) Gateway Activity: “The Life of Washington” Mural

This mural is titled “The Life of Washington,” (see one of the thirteen panels of the mural below) and it hangs in the front hallway of the George Washington High School in San Francisco, CA.

Editor note: The image used in the author's assignment is not included here as *Prompt* does not have a copyright license to it, and it’s not clear that the use here would be a fair use under U.S. Copyright law. Detailed images of the mural, and in particular, the [image the authors included in the assignment](#), are available in Cherny (2019).

It was painted by artist and member of the Communist party, Victor Arnautoff, as part of the Depression-era public works project in 1935, and is one of thirteen other murals that line the entryway and first floor of the school. In small groups, study and discuss this mural using some of the following questions:

§ Did your town, school, or neighborhood have controversial public symbols? What did you learn from observing or participating in discussions about them? How were conflicts resolved? Were the outcomes socially just, in your view?

§ What argument does the mural seem to be making about Washington? About power and nation-building?

§ Imagine how different groups in the community would experience this mural. Brainstorm a list of groups and imagine their arguments about this mural, and where those arguments come from.

§ We will watch two, 10-minute news segments which feature the school board’s decision to remove these murals, and we will discuss whose perspectives prevailed in the deliberations.

§ What in your personal experience informs your feelings about what should be done, if anything, with this mural?

§ Is it socially just to allow “Life of Washington” to remain? What research would you need to do to be able to answer that question?

2) Charting Philosophical & Rhetorical Perspectives

Charting Social Justice Concepts					
	Key words, phrases, and concepts that help us think about public memory and racism	Define key words, phrases and concepts	Quotes that support the definitions offered (Include page numbers)	Implications of these concepts for understanding social justice and public memory	Apply these insights to one of our cases to help assess the deliberations
ERIN GENIA					

JANE ADDAMS					
CHRISTINA SHARPE					
GEORGE HERBERT MEAD					
MARIA LUGONES					

3) Charting Diverse Perspectives

Charting Diverse Perspectives

<p>Prevailing Perspectives (Driving question?)</p> <p>What should be done with public symbols that have a racist past?</p>	<p>Symbolic Action</p> <p>What do those who take up this position think about the connection between symbols and community identity?</p> <p>(Include case name, perspective, page number, etc.)</p>	<p>Rhetoric</p> <p>What words and phrases do they use to represent their position? What persuasive strategies do they employ?</p> <p>(Include case name, perspective, page number, etc.)</p>	<p>Ideology</p> <p>What are the prevailing ideologies reflected in their language and approach to symbolic meaning?</p> <p>(Include case name, perspective, page number, etc.)</p>	<p>Value</p> <p>Who/what matters most to those who take up this position? What is the underlying assumption about justice in their position?</p> <p>(Include case name, perspective, page number, etc.)</p>
<p>REMOVE</p> <p>monument removal and elimination</p>				
<p>REMOVE +</p> <p>remove to new, improved educational context</p>				
<p>REMAIN</p> <p>monument remaining in place, as is</p>				

<p>REMAIN +</p> <p>monument remaining in place with new, educational/descriptive context</p>				
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4) In-class brainstorm activity: Identifying your conclusions and observations

We have examined how San Francisco’s George Washington High School community has grappled with their controversial mural. We have also briefly examined cases from your home town, and elsewhere in the U.S. (New Orleans, LA, and Charlotte, SC). This is a case study method, where we examine how a similar problem is deliberated across different contexts. It helps us compare and contrast perspectives within each case, and then compare those perspectives and outcomes across different cases. We can then recognize patterns in deliberations that stall social justice outcomes, as well as discussions, practices, and arguments that develop and create social justice outcomes.

We have worked in small groups and completed presentations on two charts—one that helps us compare the rhetoric of different perspectives on monument removal, and one that uses feminist pragmatist and antiracist philosophies to assess different perspectives on monument removal. Examine these charts and see what patterns, insights, and trends emerge in the ways different perspectives approach the issue of racism and public symbols. What lessons can we learn from the patterns, trends, and insights you have charted?

Your charts will likely reveal your sympathies: With which perspective do you align yourself? Where do you find your sympathies diverging from a particular group or decision? Identify the arguments, actions, and assumptions made about public memory that you feel should serve as a guide to how communities should deliberate and make decisions about the symbols they display and care for.

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5) Post- Essay Completion Reflective Memo

250 words, to be completed in-class before essay is submitted

What are you learning about how your beliefs and values shape what you think is socially just? In what ways might awareness of these things impact your understanding of your own beliefs

[This file is supplemental material to Swiencicki & Lowe, *Writing as Memory Work: Teaching the Civic Deliberations over Monument Removals*, prompt 6.1 (2021), doi: 10.31719/pjaw.v6i1.86]

and values? What are you learning about the aim of social justice in community problem-solving?