

Local Landmark Analysis Essay

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Author Biography

Courtney George is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Columbus State University in Columbus, Georgia. She teaches courses in American literature, southern studies, and First Year Composition, and she was CSU's Teaching Excellence Award Winner for 2017-2018. Dr. George's early published research focuses on southern women writers, while her most recent work focuses on portrayals of Hurricane Katrina in literature, film, television, and music.

Context

In an American literature course, I veer away from analysis of solely literary texts. I want to ask broader questions about how we construct history—whether in literature or in monuments: how do we tell stories about our local landscapes? How do we memorialize the events that once occurred in the places where we now take up residence? What is at stake in how we tell these stories?

Significantly, the debates surrounding symbols, memorials, and monuments have reached a crisis point in recent years, particularly in the southeastern region of the United States, and often specifically centering on how we remember ante- and post-bellum Civil War society. Two contemporary examples represent a culmination in such debates: activist Bree Newsome's removal of South Carolina's Confederate battle flag from the state house in 2015, and the explosive violence that occurred after Neo-Nazi groups gathered at a statue of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. In Georgia, we might remember the challenges to and eventual changes to our state flag, which once incorporated an image of the Confederate battle flag and now incorporates the first national flag of the Confederacy. These debates, contestations, and changes relate to extant legacies of slavery, the Civil War, Jim Crow, and systemic racism and violence, but they also reveal much more about how we construct narratives, historical or otherwise.

In *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2010), poet Natasha Trethewey describes the power dynamics present in man-made monuments, symbols, and memorials:

Never neutral, they tend to represent the narratives and memories of those citizens with the political power and money to construct them. Everywhere such monuments prescribe a particular narrative on the landscape while—often—at the same time subjugating or erasing others, telling only part of the story (55).

Inspired by Trethewey's own meditations, and especially considering the debates about symbols and monuments in the American South, I asked students to locate, meditate, and write about landmarks in their community.

Goals

Students were to seek out and analyze a local landmark in a short two-page narrative essay. For these purposes, the landmark must reflect on local history, which includes historical markers, historical buildings, museum exhibits, and other memorials and monuments. I restricted students' choices to the surrounding area to encourage them to interact with places they encountered daily. *The Historical Landmark Database*, a web-based location search tool, was used as a starting place.

I had several main goals for students:

- To consider how history and narrative are enacted on local landscapes and related to other regional, national, and global narratives;
- To transfer and apply critical thinking to real-world contexts; and
- To combine analytical skills and emotional reflections and connect critical thinking with human emotion.

Structure of the Activity

I asked students to spend some time in the physical space and photograph the landmark. In their narratives, they should use critical thinking skills to analyze the landmark and also respond with their affective reactions and reflections. Along with the goals listed above, the following questions worked as the main assessment tool for the essays.

- What is the landmark meant to represent?
- Within what kind of space or place is it situated?
- Who sponsored the landmark, and when? Who do you think their target audience is/was?
- What information is provided? (Use specifics/quotes)
- What did you learn from the landmark?
- What important context might be missing?
- Describe your emotional response to the landmark and the space.

I assigned this essay in the context of an upper-level American literature course, but it translates to other courses and disciplines. The assignment offers students the opportunity to learn about the local environment, which may be new to incoming students. The real-world aspects could be expanded to include a web-based map of the landmarks with links to students' photos and writing. Students also expressed that they would have enjoyed a related group activity, where we traveled to a monument or museum to discuss our responses together. Students' responses—whether in individual essays or in group conversations—might also be paired with further action outside of the classroom to promote social change or in conjunction with a service-learning requirement.

Student Responses

Students remarked on their enjoyment of this assignment in course evaluations, and the overall class average was 89%. The following essay excerpts show how this exercise fostered an application of critical thinking and emotional reflections in the context of local, regional, national, and global narratives.



“... the historical marker...reminded me of Blind Tom’s obscurity in society as a whole. This little moment got at a deeper point about the South, the rich history it contains, and the secrets hidden beneath what we do know within history. Because Blind Tom was a slave—and a blind slave at that—he did not have license to go and make his own decisions.”

(photo and excerpt used with permission from Hannah Coiner)



“[The house] is described as ‘comfortable,’ and reveals that some slaves were fortunate ‘to [work] in affluent homes as cooks and domestic servants. Trained as seamstresses, dressmakers, cooks, butlers, and coachmen, many were skilled craftsmen...The furnishings...give an idea of what a relatively comfortable dwelling would have looked like.’ If [this was] anyone’s first encounter with slave conditions, he or she would leave blissfully unaware of a realistic portrayal of a slave home..., not knowing that this recreation is meant to make him or her feel more comfortable. Who was this comfortable for? The slave, or the people endorsing the display?”

(photo and excerpt used with permission from Jasmien Dickerson)



“It’s very surreal to think that this bridge, one that I’ve crossed nearly every day for the past three years, was once the center of a literal warzone, and not really even all that long ago in the grand scheme of things...these kinds of reflections put into perspective the unprecedented nature of the Civil War as a whole, one that’s perhaps all too easy to become desensitized or hardened to based on how we’re often taught about it. This was not some faceless, foreign war sparked by some bout of international politics too complex for most of those fighting it to follow. It was a homegrown conflict that pit neighbor against neighbor, and they knew why it was happening. But, craziest of all, it happened here.”

(photo and excerpt used with permission from Alex Proft)



“...All the advertisement of the confederacy did not transfer over to the actual cemetery...I did not see one confederate flag throughout the entire cemetery. I was beside myself about this because I was convinced that I would be surrounded by rebel flags both engraved and waving. The only flag that flew was the American flag. I think being unified under one flag fosters a positive environment.”

(photo and excerpt used with permission from Kandis Tate)



“... This marker could get one questioning just how “historic” Christopher Columbus’s voyages were...; however, there is that sect that features that strong, nationalistic ideology (which likely stems from indoctrination) that does not allow anyone to question anything about the country – they argue against anything that disparages America or shows a little bit of criticism, so then again, this marker could just reinforce those ideas.”



(photos and excerpt used with permission from Jasmine Phillips)

References

Trethewey, Natasha (2010). *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. The University of Georgia Press.