

The Politics of Commemoration - Introduction and Rationale

A lot of pieces factored into my decision to submit this lesson plan on “The Politics of Commemoration” instead of any number of more earth-shaking ones. I plan to base my entire Foundations of Writing class at Salem State University this fall on what I learned about the immeasurable courage evidenced throughout the Civil Rights Movement, focusing on my new heroes: Fannie Lou Hamer, Maggie Daly Crawford, Georgene Clark, James Meredith, Charles McLaurin, and others. For my Climate Fiction class, I can’t wait to incorporate a close examination of what flooding can do (physically, culturally, politically) to a specific community. But, in the interest of time, I humbly submit this smaller and more specific set of student challenges that I hope to use as examples of the politics of place.

What I’ve shared with you here is a small piece of a larger study of the Delta, which we will explore as a microcosm of the culture and politics of the United States. This piece will come after an overview of the Delta and before diving into deeper studies and conversations around oppression, resistance, and changemaking. We will start with an examination of three named entities at Delta State. This will be followed by a field trip study of buildings, statues, and commemorative plaques at our own Salem State University. Students will be tasked with researching one of these entities and presenting their findings to the class. Next, we will look at some named entities in Boston, and students will research one in their own hometown (they come from all over Massachusetts and beyond). These experiences and activities will be part of the research unit. Later, in the argument unit, we will circle back to controversial commemorations by examining the Confederate statue in front of the Tallahatchie County Courthouse in Sumner. Students will engage in debate: Should historic statues be taken down? Using points from the debate, students will frame an argument paper.

I intend to use what I learned this week, along with a broader selection of references to the Civil Rights Movement, to frame the Foundations in Writing class this fall. The class is centered around a multi-genre project, where students pick a topic and focus on it throughout the term, learning how to write in a variety of genres while building and deepening knowledge of a topic they are actually interested in. I plan to use what I’ve learned about the Mississippi Delta as my topic of choice to model the different writing strategies for each new unit. In doing so, I will be cleverly sneaking in all kinds of information about this historically essential place most of them have never heard of.

This lesson plan is a work in progress, a draft. Have mercy.

Thank you for the opportunity, for the incredible experience, for the lessons in teaching and pedagogy, and for the close look at what it actually means to make change in a terrifying world.

Maile Black

The Politics of Commemoration

Day One

In the Mississippi Delta, entities are recognized, honored, and memorialized through statues, signposts, and at institutions such as Delta State University and others, the naming of buildings.



In May 2014, legendary Lady Statesmen basketball coach Margaret Wade was memorialized with a statue in front of Walter Sillers Coliseum.



Walter Sillers Jr., Mississippi Delta planter, attorney, state legislator, and segregationist, was born in Rosedale, Mississippi, in Bolivar County, on April 13, 1888.



The Delta State Laundry was named for Ms. Odealier J. Morgan on November 7, 2003 representing the first time a Delta State building has been named after an African American and an hourly employee.

Salem State University also has named buildings. Your first task is to 1) recognize that, and 2) do a little research.

1. Look over the campus map.
2. Field trip! Let's walk around and introduce ourselves to the buildings, statues, and commemorative plaques right here on campus.
3. Pick your favorite building, statue, or commemorative plaque.
4. Go home and do some research. Answer as many of the following questions as you can:
 - a. For whom is this entity named?
 - b. Why was this person commemorated?
 - c. In your opinion, was this a good reason to commemorate this individual? Would you have agreed to recognize this individual in this way?
 - d. Is this recognition enough? Should the individual have been more prominently recognized?

Day Two

Share what you learned about your entity's namesake.

Look at Boston, a deeply complicated and historic city. Slideshow: "[Revisiting history vs. removing it: Boston historians weigh in on controversial statues.](#)"

Discuss.

Task #2: What is going on with buildings, statues, and commemorative plaques in your own hometown?

1. Look around your hometown. First, do a little internet research. Then, if you can, get out there and walk around.
2. Choose an entity **that interests you** in your hometown that commemorates a specific individual. Take some photos (or pull some off the internet).
3. Answer the following questions.
 - a. For whom is this entity named?
 - b. Why was this person commemorated?
 - c. In your opinion, was this a good reason to commemorate this individual? Would you have agreed to recognize this individual in this way?
 - d. Is this recognition enough? Should the individual have been more prominently recognized?
4. Using the order of questions as an organizing template, write up your findings and include photos.
5. Submit.

Day Three

Discuss Emmett Till murder and trial, the venue, and the Confederate statue out front.

Debate: What should we do with controversial commemorations? Should historic statues be taken down?



Task #3: Write an argument paper based on your position in the debate.

Some Resources

Walter Sillers in Delta Business Journal, 2010

<https://deltastate.edu/PDFFiles/Alumni/Walter%20Sillers.pdf>

Odeallier J. Morgan Laundry

<https://www.deltastate.edu/about-dsu/campus-map/odeallier-morgan-laundry/>

Legend Honored with Statue, May 2, 2014

<https://www.deltastate.edu/news-and-events/2014/05/legend-honored-with-statue/>

The Politics of Naming: A Personal Reflection, Valerie Alia 2007

<https://ans-names.pitt.edu/ans/article/download/1819/1818/3640>

Reports: "The Cultural Politics of Naming and Commemoration," Manning Zhang (Brandeis University)

<https://asaculturesection.org/2021/08/06/reports-the-cultural-politics-of-naming-and-commemoration/>

"[Revisiting history vs. removing it: Boston historians weigh in on controversial statues](#)," Caroline Enos, Emily Devlin, and Kayla Dalton, March 23, 2021

Should Historic Statues be Taken Down?

<https://www.procon.org/headlines/historic-statue-removal-top-3-pros-cons/>