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Teaching Confederate Monuments as American Literature

For twelve years I taught at a small college in a small Texas town that houses the first Confederate monument erected in the state. The 1896 monument in Sherman, Texas looms large over the majority white community's county courthouse, emphasizing the pedagogical aim of Confederate monuments when they were initially constructed: "The most visible symbols of Confederate culture [were] monuments and flags, both of which were considered important to the edification of southern youth. . . . [T]he majority of monuments erected to the Confederacy were placed in public settings such as courthouse lawns or town squares, where, it was reasoned, they could be observed by children."¹ But the purpose of the monuments was not only to indoctrinate white children to their own racial supremacy but also to instill a pedagogy of racial intimidation in Black citizens. It is well documented that most Confederate monuments, like the one in Sherman, were erected decades after the Civil War when Southern states were disassembling the rights and freedoms Black Americans had gained during Reconstruction; Confederate soldier monuments personified racial terror by celebrating the Confederate causes of slavery and white supremacy. As essays in this volume detail, well before and certainly in the aftermath of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in response to the murder of George Floyd and the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, anti-racist activists on campuses such as the University of Virginia and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill brought attention to the chilling and pernicious effect campus Confederate monuments have on the educational and lived experiences of Black students and faculty.²

In “You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument,” poet and educator Caroline Randall Williams writes, “What is a monument but a standing memory? An artifact to make tangible the truth of the past.”³ Considering the original pedagogical intention of Confederate monuments and the probability that the monument in my Texas community was not going anywhere anytime soon, I started teaching the monument in my US literature courses as a means to critically examine the role of US literature in establishing and maintaining a national culture of white supremacy.⁴ In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison inventories the “black presence” that “hovers in the margins” of early and nineteenth-century US literature: “It is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and invisible mediating force.”⁵ In that sense, through racialized erasures, silences, and emphases, US literary history is an “artifact [that] make[s] tangible” the legacies of racism and slavery similarly embodied in the bronze and concrete Confederate soldier statues erected much later on courthouse grounds and college campuses throughout the nation. Much of the canonical and anthologized US literature regularly taught and studied in general education US literature survey and topics courses and even upper division courses for English majors—from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Edgar Allan Poe to Harriet Beecher Stowe—is and can be taught as a type of monument to the Confederate ideology of white supremacy. Likewise, the critiques of earlier Black writers who resisted white supremacy in their writing—such as Harriet Jacobs, William Wells Brown, and Charles W. Chesnutt—are all the more evident and pointed when students study and interact with the concrete evidence of white supremacy in their own backyard.

Historian Donald Yacovone argues that academia has historically promoted “assumptions of white priority, white domination, and white importance” in US educational institutions, from the K-12 to the college and university level.⁶ He claims that “few teachers and even fewer textbooks connect the nation’s slave past to the history of race relations” and that the white professoriate itself

has actively “avoided the subject of white supremacy” in our scholarship and especially our teaching and pedagogy.⁷ Yacovone’s words make me consider the many English education majors in my courses and how the literary studies content and methodological approaches they experience in my classes may be a model for their future Texas public school classrooms and those of surrounding Southern states. How can I provide them with the pedagogical questions, models, and content to critically examine white pedagogical supremacy in my own classes and their future classrooms? At institutions such as mine, whose mission promotes “personal growth, justice, community, and service” along with social justice values, I could ask students to consider the role of literature, literary history, and literary criticism in maintaining or resisting assumptions of white racial and cultural supremacy.⁸ And as an English professor equipped with the methodological tools of literary and cultural studies, I could provide angles into critical interpreting what Confederate monuments actually meant to Americans in their own day and now in ours.

In this chapter, I will outline a close reading assignment in which students researched the history and reception of the local Confederate monument in Sherman, Texas. This place-based assignment can be built into any number of US literature courses—surveys, topics courses, and seminars—and adapted to any community or campus with a Confederate monument. Even instructors teaching in communities without a Confederate monument could adopt this lens by having students use online resources to research some of the monuments detailed in this volume or a monument highlighted on the Southern Poverty Law Center’s interactive, online map.⁹ I then explain how I used this assignment in two different classes as a lens for identifying and critically engaging the subtext of white supremacy in the US literature many of my students will one day teach, particularly the popular novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). In another class for upper-division English majors, the Confederate monument assignment highlighted the present-day relevance and urgency of Chesnut’s critique of Confederate ideology in *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901).

Teaching Confederate monuments as US literature brought about rich class conversations and promoted students' deep thinking about US literature and literary history, but it was not without pedagogical complications. As a white professor teaching at a majority minority campus in the South, teaching the literary politics of white supremacy is fraught. The field of critical pedagogy maintains we "are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetry of power and privilege," replicated in institutions of public education, higher learning, and, despite my best efforts, even my own classroom.¹⁰ On a small campus where students take several classes from the same professor, the ability to develop rapport and trust makes it easier to raise issues of racism and white supremacy not only in the literature I teach but in the classroom itself. Over the years, students of color and white students alike have told me this assignment and approach has challenged them to think more critically about literature, systemic racism, and literature's connections to the present day. On the other hand, a handful of Black and white students have criticized me in office hours and end-of-semester evaluations for asking students to critically engage Confederate ideology; they maintain a white professor asking students to read about racial violence and white supremacy is in and of itself a form of racism. While I found such critiques disheartening, I took—and still take—them seriously, and I continue to refine my attempts at practicing an anti-racist pedagogy, realizing that "racial competence is a skill that can be learned" and that I am still learning.¹¹

Confederate Monument Research and Close Reading Assignment

Over the years, I taught several US literature topics courses and seminars that incorporated the history and context of the local Confederate monument as a pedagogical lens. These courses have included classes primarily on nineteenth-century US literature (with an emphasis on protest literature), on social reform literature, and that broadly explored the themes of literature and social justice. My institution did not offer a US literature survey course in the English department curriculum, but I imagine this assignment and approach could work especially well in a course that

emphasizes US literary history. I would usually introduce this assignment about one-third or one-half of the way through the semester, after students had read primary works that introduce the themes of white supremacy such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) or "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852) and secondary texts already cited in this essay, such as Morrison's *Playing the Dark* or Yacovone's "Textbook Racism" (2018).¹² By reading these literary and secondary sources before the assignment, students are already familiar with the concept of institutional racism and the role of academia and US literature in upholding such power structures.

I explain to students that we will research the history of the Confederate monument in our community from a social justice perspective to help us think more deeply about the relationship between white supremacy and the literature we are studying. This mini-unit includes research, close reading, and a regular class session at the nearby county courthouse where the monument is located. Most of the students at the residential institution where I taught were not from the local community, and very few of them had been to downtown Sherman, less than a mile from our campus. As much as possible, I connect this assignment to the learning outcomes of the course, such as: "students will be able to situate American literature in relevant historical, cultural, and political contexts"; "students will make connections between literary history and the present day and begin to theorize the relationship between literature and historical outcomes"; and "students will be able to comment on the value of collaboration and community in the interpretation of literature and American literary history." I also relate the assignment to the stated mission and social justice values of the College, particularly the College President's Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion. I emphasize the assignment's application of the broader methods of literary studies, such as New Historicism and reception studies, with which most of the English majors and minors in my courses are already familiar. Connecting the assignment to course goals, institutional commitments, and disciplinary

approaches helps students see the pedagogical intention and value of an assignment that will take the class away from the direct reading and study of literature for a week or two. Such transparency also makes the students more engaged with and committed to completing the assignment, and I have found most students enjoy the break from typical classroom activities.

After connecting the assignment to course goals, institutional commitments, and disciplinary conventions, I emphasize that the purpose of this assignment is overtly anti-racist, citing the myriad scholars who have established the white supremacist ideology behind the Confederate monuments. Many of these scholars are cited in this article and throughout this volume, and if I were to give this assignment again, I would assign Maria Seger's introduction to this volume along with Cassandra Jackson's essay on the Confederate monument in her childhood community, "Rewriting the Landscape: Black Communities and the Confederate Monuments They Inherited."¹³ I make it clear that although it may be appropriate in other classes and disciplines, the purpose of this assignment is not to debate issues such as the "erasure of history" or the heritage politics of the monuments but to help us think more deeply about US literature. I spend a considerable portion of the class period in which I introduce the assignment establishing the pedagogical purpose and parameters of the assignment and the scholarly voices that have already established the racist origins of the monuments in order to anticipate the concerns of students who might worry the assignment will become an opportunity to valorize the Confederacy and the skepticism of students who want to debate the removal of Confederate monuments. I also tell the students that researching the monument will also lead us into researching the violent racial history of the community and to come to me outside of class with any concerns regarding the assignment.

Due to time restraints during the semester, I structure the research component of the assignment as guided research. On the course management system, I provide scans of contemporaneous newspaper articles and excerpts from local history books about the monument

and its dedication. Depending on the course and its goals, I ask students to read the materials for small group and class discussion, or I ask them to write a brief summary for a small-group literature circle discussion. I might also lecture on or assign excerpts from books such as Karen L. Cox's *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (2003) or the Southern Poverty Law Center's "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy" website to provide a broader national context for understanding the Confederate monument in Sherman; if I were teaching this assignment again, I would assign Brook Thomas's essay in this volume on understanding monuments in the context of the failure of Reconstruction, "Complicating Today's Myth of the Myth of the Lost Cause: The Calhoun Monument, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation."¹⁴

In their research, the students find that the Confederate monument at the Grayson County Courthouse in Sherman, Texas, erected in 1896, is the oldest Confederate monument in the state and that ninety-three percent of the nation's Confederate monuments were erected after 1895, and fifty percent after 1903.¹⁵ The bronze statue of a Confederate soldier was purchased with donations raised over six years by the local United Confederate Veterans, with special support from several white women's organizations, including the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Dixie Chapter Number 35.¹⁶ In Texas and all across the South, the United Daughters of the Confederacy raised what today would be millions and millions of dollars to erect the monuments.¹⁷ The Grayson County monument was unveiled on April 21, 1897, San Jacinto Day—the day Texas won its independence from Mexico—a juxtaposition of imperial expansion and the Confederate Lost Cause, both crusades against government and sovereign powers infringing on the rights of the common man or the most holy "right of self-government," as stated in the monument's inscription. For those teaching in the Southwest like I was, Spencer R. Herrera's essay in this volume, "South by Southwest: Confederate and Conquistador Memorials Closing Borders,"

would provide excellent context on the relationship between Spanish imperial expansion and Confederate ideology.¹⁸ Similar to other monument unveilings throughout the South, Confederate battle flags and American flags were both displayed that day in Sherman, and the program included patriotic hymns; white Southerners used the ceremonies “to reclai[m] their identity as patriotic Americans” and to make Southern patriotism “synonymous with American patriotism.”¹⁹

An estimated crowd of 20,000 gathered for the monument’s unveiling in Sherman. A local newspaper reported that “Every window was filled with people; the awnings were crowded; the sidewalks were so jammed that passage through them could not be effected, and the streets were literally packing with a surging mass of humanity.”²⁰ The *Dallas News* relayed that “trainloads of Confederate Veterans [from around the state] formed into companies as their trains came in and marched to the courthouse square.”²¹ At the monument’s dedication, after the sheeting fell and the granite and bronze statue was unveiled, the air was filled with gunfire, Rebel yells, and the voices of the United Daughters of the Confederacy singing “In the Sweet Bye and Bye.” The events that day included speeches by local and state dignitaries and a parade that included “two bands, a fife and drum corps, five camps of United Confederate Veterans, students from five colleges, [and] 1,000 schoolchildren carrying wreaths.”²² My students are always stunned when they learn that among the colleges represented in the bands at the unveiling were students from my institution, Austin College, today known for its “liberal” politics, at least in contrast with the rest of the county and community—a red county in a very red state.

After discussing the students’ research in class, in the next class session, we meet at the Confederate monument in downtown Sherman so students can see the monument they’ve researched and *read* the monument in the contexts of its location in downtown Sherman. We especially spend time reading the monument’s inscription:

Sacred to the memory of our Confederate dead. True patriots, they fought for home and country, for the holy principles of self-government—the only true liberty. Their sublime self-

sacrifices and unsurpassed valor will teach future generations the lesson of high born patriotism, the devotion to duty, of exalted courage, of southern chivalry.

Many of my students recall from their medieval literature course these calls of chivalry as calls to white supremacy: “Read in the context of American medievalism and white supremacy with which it was intertwined, the Sherman monument epitaph imagines Confederate knights possessing ‘unsurpassed valor’ and ‘exalted courage’ whose dedication to protecting white women like the Daughters of the Confederacy . . . constituted ‘southern chivalry’ and justified slavery and racial hierarchy, values entombed when the Confederacy lost the Civil War.”²³ Many of my students are able to see through the rhetoric of chivalry by linking the inscription to the 1861 words of Alexander Stephens, eventual Vice President of the Confederacy: “Our new government[’s] . . . foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition.”²⁴ Visiting the monument and seeing the text of its inscription firsthand emphasizes the monument’s representation of white supremacy through its connection to the Confederate defenses of slavery and racism.

Students are shocked when they read a more recent inscription on the other side of the monument indicating the monument had been rededicated in 1996. Although most students were born well after 1996, the date is still recent enough to indicate the potency of the monument in the present day; that is, they realize that the monument is not a relic of the white supremacy of the past but of white supremacy today. But not all students are surprised by the news of the rededication. By the time we visit the courthouse, many of them had already spent hours of their own time on Google to learn more about the monument in preparation for the class visit and had come across news articles about the 1996 rededication. But in their independent research process, they also learn about another large gathering at the Grayson County Courthouse just 33 years after the original dedication, when another large crowd—a lynch mob—gathered on the same grounds. Within a few

hours, the bronze Confederate soldier would be all that remained of the civic space that he had policed day and night for over three decades.

Because I know students will find information online regarding the 1930 Sherman lynching and race riot as they research the monument, I also provide guided research on the limited information available on this topic.²⁵ While the murder of George Hughes is known and discussed privately in the community, it has been mostly suppressed; even the article about it on the highly regarded Portal to Texas History refers to the lynching euphemistically as a “riot.” On May 5, 1930, a Black farmhand named George Hughes was accused of raping a white woman whose husband, a local farmer, owed him wages. Four days later, on May 9, as jury selection for the trial began, a crowd gathered, filling the courtroom, the courthouse hallways, and spilling into the courthouse square. After being advised by the Texas Rangers that the trial could not be held in Sherman “without bloodshed,” the judge declared that the venue would be changed. But before a new location could be named, two young white men threw burning cans of gasoline into the courthouse, and a fire quickly spread. Deputies locked Hughes in the courthouse’s fireproof vault, and the judge, jury, and law enforcement left the building. Firefighters attempted to control the blaze but were held back by the mob who had cut the water hoses. By late afternoon, “only the walls of the building and the fireproof vault,” as well as the Confederate monument, remained on the courthouse grounds. By midnight, the mob had grown to 5,000, and its leaders used explosives to open the vault. Although it is believed that Hughes survived the fire, he did not survive the explosion that crushed the wall of the vault. Black businesses in downtown Sherman were burned, and the Black community literally fled Sherman in the middle of the night. The next day, the Governor declared martial law in Sherman until order could be restored. A story about the rioting lynch mob in Sherman made the front page of the *New York Times* the next day. Years later, a local historian would report, almost

with approval, that “The names of [those in the mob] who were indicted in the weeks that followed the violence . . . have been carefully excised from the newspaper files in the public library.”²⁶

I include the information in this article in my classes because it adds an important layer to understanding the white supremacist politics of Confederate monuments and the contexts of literature students will later critically examine in my classes, such as *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *The Marrow of Tradition*. The history of Hughes’s lynching helps students see how Confederate monuments allow the antebellum and the present day to “join hands without having to acknowledge each other,” resulting in what David W. Blight calls “[d]eflections and evasions, careful remembering and necessary forgetting . . . embittered and irreconcilable versions of experience . . . unresolved legacies” and a fragmented historical memory.²⁷ The Grayson County monument still stands outside the rebuilt courthouse as a prominent feature of the downtown Sherman cityscape, symbolically overlooking the community’s government, financial, religious, and social institutions. The monument’s 122-year presence at the courthouse is a reminder that “[h]istory (or its disappearance) is lived through and in civic spatiality” and of the disciplinary function of that space “to ensure a certain allocation of people in space . . . as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations.”²⁸ The shadow of the Confederate sentinel looms large over the courthouse, those who enter it, and the government functions the courthouse administers, including voting and voter registration across the street and trials at the nearby justice center. Historians note that most Confederate monuments were built when many “states were enacting Jim Crow laws to disenfranchise black Americans.”²⁹ The research and class field trip teach students that the monument, its dedication ceremony, and the later lynching are deeply intertwined events and representative of the community’s (and the nation’s) ongoing legacies of slavery, racism, and white cultural supremacy.

Reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a Confederate Monument

I recently taught Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* through the lens of Confederate monuments in a first-year seminar for students from all disciplinary backgrounds, although the class was populated primarily by students planning to major in English with an emphasis in teaching. A critical reexamination of the novel's virtues as a social justice text is timely with the 2015 publication of *Go Set a Watchman*, Lee's earlier version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which portrays the older Atticus Finch as an active member of the White Citizen's Council; Joseph Crespino's 2018 account of the relationship between Lee and her father A. C. Lee in *Atticus Finch: The Biography*; and Aaron Sorkin's critically-acclaimed 2019 Broadway adaptation of the novel.

Most of my students were taught the novel in junior high or high school as a social justice and anti-racist text with an emphasis on Atticus's maxim that: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."⁵⁰ Many students in the seminar said *To Kill a Mockingbird* was their favorite book, yet most of them seemed to understand there were themes their teachers would not or possibly were not allowed to address in class, especially related to the rape trial of Tom Robinson and the testimony of Mayella Ewell. Other students, like Scout herself, were confused by the novel's commentary (or lack of commentary) on racialized themes, particularly references to white fears of racial miscegenation, an issue rarely addressed when the novel is taught to younger readers.

Early in our discussions, I ask the class, "Does *To Kill a Mockingbird* deserve its reputation as a social justice and anti-racist novel?" It does not take long for students to notice the sidelined role of Calpurnia and the novel's use of Black characters such as Calpurnia, Zeebo, Reverend Sykes, and Tom to advance plots related to white characters and their concerns. After we finish reading the novel, we research and visit the local Confederate monument at the Grayson County Courthouse and learn about its history and the related lynching of Hughes.

When asked if the novel could be read as a Confederate monument, students first focus on the Confederate “Easter eggs” in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, such as the brief reference to slavery in the origin story of the Finch family in Chapter One, the Confederate pistol Mrs. Dubose supposedly keeps hidden under her shawl, and the school band’s performance of “Dixie” during the Maycomb County pageant in Chapter 28. But students soon turn to the Chapter 15 scene with the lynch mob at the jail as evidence of the novel’s unspoken subtext of white supremacy. Most students admit that the first time they read the novel, they did not comprehend the intentions of the mob that threatens Atticus and the children as he guards Tom at the Maycomb jail. Along with learning about the lynching event in Sherman, students also research the history of lynching in the US South and in our community, using online resources from the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. With this missing context, the significance of that scene and what is at stake for Tom, Calpurnia, and the Black citizens of Maycomb becomes clearer to students originally focused on Scout, Jem, and Atticus’s story.

We then look at the earlier conversation between Jem and Atticus after a group of white men visit the Finch family home to warn and threaten Atticus. Jem asks, “They were after you, weren’t they?” Atticus explains, “No son, those were our friends.”³¹ He also tells Jem that “Way back about nineteen-twenty there was a Klan, but it was a political organization more than anything.”³² Students research the history of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in their literature circle groups and find the KKK was indeed a political organization, one responsible for racial violence and terrorism in many Southern communities and today identified as a hate group. When Scout asks why her schoolmate’s father was in the mob at the jail, Atticus explains: “Mr. Cunningham’s basically a good man. . . . he just has his blind spots along with the rest of us.”³³ Students instantly identify these words as a version of the insidious “very fine people on both sides” rhetoric that circulated after the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville.

At some point in the discussion, I ask students if Atticus seems to support the actual political and social equality of African Americans, or rather, the fairness of the legal and justice systems. According to Atticus in his closing argument, the phrase “all men are created equal” is taken out of context by “Yankee” educators since difference based on class, experience, and character (and by extension, race) should be accepted as natural; this difference and inequality cannot be leveled through institutions such as public schools or the federal government. But, according to Atticus, “[I]n this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal.”³⁴ That is, although racial difference and inequality exist in the real world (and perhaps even should), in the courts, at least, guilt and innocence know no racial difference and will certainly come to light. Students eventually, and in some cases very reluctantly, recognize that Atticus is no social justice warrior but rather a genteel mouthpiece for white supremacy.

Although she would not have put it that way, perhaps Lee, on some level, realized this too. The character of Atticus was based on her own father, Alabama newspaper man A. C. Lee. The older Scout, Jean Louise in *Go Set a Watchman*, confronts the aging Atticus: “I remember that rape case you defended, but I missed the point. You love justice, all right. Abstract justice written down item by item like a neat brief. [That case] interfered with your orderly mind, and you had to work order out of disorder.”³⁵ As Joseph Crespino points out, “[W]e know now not only that the Atticus of *Mockingbird* was always too good to be true, but that Harper Lee knew it as well.”³⁶ If students are disillusioned by their hero’s racial politics, they are at least comforted by knowing that Lee probably was too.

I admit that asking my students “Is *To Kill a Mockingbird* a Confederate monument?” is a type of provocation, an intellectual exercise in critical rereading to hone our class discussions of literature, race, and social justice. Although I see the pedagogical benefit of framing the novel as a Confederate monument, I do wonder if this approach is a bit heavy-handed. But last semester, through the

Southern Poverty Law Center, students found the spread of Confederate monuments spiked twice after the Civil War. Not surprisingly, the first time was during the Jim Crow era, when Southern states began enacting laws to disenfranchise Black Americans. The second spike in Confederate monuments began in the late 1950s, with the advances of the early Civil Rights Movement.³⁷ The best-selling *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published in 1960 and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961, just as another round of Confederate monuments was being erected and rededicated in the South.

Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a Confederate monument provided students with an opportunity to critically reread and contend with the assumptions of white supremacy in this American classic, in their own lived experiences, and in the present day public and political sphere. Students end up liking these discussions of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, even if it means experiencing the cognitive dissonance of censuring their favorite book. That said, I'm not sure if I would teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* again. Roxanne Gay is critical of the novel:

As for the story, I can take it or leave it. Perhaps I am ambivalent because I am black. I am not the target audience. I don't need to read about a young white girl understanding the perniciousness of racism to actually understand the perniciousness of racism. I have ample firsthand experience.³⁸

In this same first-year seminar, we also read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), a novel set in the same time period as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, with precocious Black female narrator, Claudia MacTeer as the counterpart to the white Scout.³⁹ If I'd had time, I also would have included James Baldwin's short story, "Going to the Meet the Man" (1965), about a young white boy who witnesses a lynching, and its formative impact on his psychological development into a vengeful, racist sheriff.⁴⁰ The approach for reading a classic social justice novel as a Confederate monument would also work with other texts often taught in US literature courses; certainly Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and even eugenicist Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) could generate unexpected but rich analysis as literature that perpetuated and still perpetuates the ideologies of white supremacy.⁴¹

“The Present Is Woven with the Past”: Confederate Monuments in *The Marrow of Tradition*

Understanding the history and politics of the Confederate monument in Sherman also helps students more easily make the connection to how local racial politics serve as a microcosm for the national, as Chesnutt does in his 1901 novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*. Basing his novel on the 1898 race riots in Wilmington, North Carolina and the 1900 Robert Charles riots in New Orleans, Chesnutt “creat[es] a cast of characters whose past and present histories tied them directly to the social upheavals” of the aftermath of the Civil War and failure of Reconstruction.⁴² Chesnutt wrote with the aim of exposing “the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism.”⁴³ In other words, he wrote with the social responsibility of unveiling the assumptions of white cultural and racial supremacy. By the time my students read *The Marrow of Tradition* in my literature and social reform class, they are already familiar with historian Jane Dailey’s analysis that “Most of the people who were involved in erecting [Confederate] monuments were not necessarily erecting a monument to the past, [b]ut were rather erecting them toward a white supremacist future.”⁴⁴

Indeed, teaching Chesnutt’s novel through the lens of the local Confederate monument allows students to fully appreciate Chesnutt’s precept in the novel of “how inseparably the present is woven with the past, how certainly the future will be but the outcome of the present” and to more amply realize the insidious implications of white supremacy in the present day.⁴⁵ I have also taught novels such as *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Contending Forces* (1900) by Pauline Hopkins, or William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853) through the lens of the Confederate monument assignment.⁴⁶ These novels feature the experiences of Black women living with the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, and classroom discussion is further enriched by Williams’s

“You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body is a Confederate Monument” and Woolfork’s “Thomas Jefferson Is the R. Kelly of the American Enlightenment.”⁴⁷

The students’ study and close reading of the Confederate monument in Sherman makes the Confederate culture of the fictitious Wellington seem more significant to the novel’s plot and more perniciously tied to its portrayal of a culture of white supremacy. The three instigators of the race riot—General Belmont, Major Carteret, and Captain McBane—are all Confederate veterans, and Aunt Polly Ochiltree keeps her deceased husband’s Confederate pistol hidden among her treasures. Major Carteret’s emphasis on family honor and his wife Olivia’s insistence on protecting the institution of marriage and her family legacy are part of the Confederate culture of chivalry and white racial purity. Because of the students’ close reading of the Confederate monument in Sherman, they more readily comment upon the relationship between Confederate ideology and the assumptions of white supremacy in *The Marrow of Tradition*, such as when Carteret’s writes that he’s “[t]aking for his theme the unfitness of the negro to participate in government,—an unfitness due to his limited education, his lack of experience, his criminal tendencies, and more especially to his hopeless mental and physical inferiority to the white race”; or when we learn that Carteret “believed in the divine right of white men and gentlemen, as his ancestors had believed in and died for the divine right of kings”; and when Belmont raises a toast to “drink with you to ‘White Supremacy!’”⁴⁸ After their research and reading of the local Confederate monument, these words aren’t regarded as the idiosyncratic racist musing of white characters, but as a reflection of the Confederate white supremacy these characters espouse. The racist subtext of the inscription on the Grayson County Confederate monument comes into sharp focus when applied to the world of Wellington: “Their sublime self-sacrifices and unsurpassed valor will teach future generations the lesson of high born patriotism, the devotion to duty, of exalted courage, of southern chivalry.”

To that end, students also see more directly the relationship between Confederate ideology, the assumptions of white supremacy, and white racial violence. The Southern ideology of chivalry (and its attendant defense of white womanhood) inscribed on the Grayson County monument was the justification for racial violence in Sherman and also in the novel.⁴⁹ In the aftermath of his relative Polly's murder, Carteret says, "It is a murderous and fatal assault upon a woman of our race,—upon our race in the person of its womanhood, its crown and flower. If such crimes are not punished with swift and terrible directness, the whole white womanhood of the South is in danger."⁵⁰ Dr. Miller, a mixed-race doctor, warns a Black citizen that "You'll get into a quarrel with a white man, and at the end of it there'll be a lynching, or a funeral."⁵¹ And in the aftermath of the Wellington race riots, Miller "foresaw the hatreds to which this day would give birth; the long years of constraint and distrust which would still further widen the breach between two peoples whom fate had thrown together in one community."⁵² Students note the parallels between the Wilmington race riots, the Sherman lynching and riots, and the 1921 race massacre in nearby Tulsa, which many students end up researching on their own. In all three cases, a false accusation of rape by a white woman led to the devastation of the communities' burgeoning Black business district and middle class.

The relationship between the past and present Chesnutt aims to portray in the novel is more apparent in class discussions and writing assignments because students have researched the Grayson County Confederate monument and the murder of Hughes. This leads to students raising the issue of present day racial violence. In their other classes and liberal arts seminars, many students have already read *The New Jim Crow* (2010) and are able to enrich class discussions with Michelle Alexander's connections between slavery, Jim Crow, and police brutality today.⁵³ The last time I taught Chesnutt's novel—over Zoom during the 2020 pandemic—in online responses and in the Zoom chat boxes, students brought up the murder of Botham Jean by an off-duty white female police officer in nearby Dallas and the rhetoric of white womanhood brought up around her highly

publicized trial. Although I no longer teach in Sherman, teaching Black authors' critiques of white supremacy through the lens of Confederate monuments has only become more relevant due to paradigm shifts in national conversations about racism and police violence with the 2020 murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. Teaching local Confederate monuments as American literature makes the study of US literature and literary history more relevant to addressing the culture of white supremacy that students read in the headlines and experience firsthand in the community and, sadly, even in our classrooms and institutions of higher learning in general.

In his analysis of nineteenth-century public monuments, Kirk Savage writes, "Public monuments are the most conservative of commemorative forms precisely because they are meant to last, unchanged, forever. While other things come and go, are lost and forgotten, the monument is supposed to remain a fixed point, stabilizing for the physical and the cognitive landscape. Monuments attempt to mold a landscape of collective memory, to conserve what is worth remembering and discard the rest."⁵⁴ At the end of each semester, I share this quote with my students and ask them what the Grayson County Confederate monument attempts to conserve and discard. They realize, of course, the monument attempts to conserve the patriotism and Southern values of the community's Confederate veterans and their descendants. After reading US literature as Confederate monuments, students also identify the monument's subtext of hiding a legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and racial terror. The monument discards the Black American experience and history in Grayson County, the community's history of racial terror, and the life and memory of Hughes. I ask them then what US literary history, understood as a Confederate monument, similarly conserves and discards.

As a final reflection essay in all of my classes, I always ask students what they will remember from the class five, ten, or twenty years from now. They all say they will remember what they learned from visiting the Grayson County Confederate monument and how it helped them see the

relationship between US literary history and the present day. Students often mentioned that they realized how little they were taught about US slavery as students in Texas public high schools. But they are eager to take what they have learned into the world. One student wrote, “I found comfort in the knowledge that the problems of today are not of a completely unique nature, they are rather further manifestations of past issues. For example, issues concerning racism and prejudice against Black people stems from the previous history of slavery and the Jim Crow era. This course has truly shown me how important looking at past literature and authors is in beginning the conversation toward finding effective solutions to current issues.” Another student, an English Education major, wrote: “I’m determined to try and find some way to teach this material to my future students. I probably won’t hit them with everything we covered in class, but I want to at least make them aware of how racism exists in the modern world and help prepare them to face it. At least that way I can maybe help the next generation solve the issues we face today.”

When I read the words of my students, I am reminded of one of the key assumptions of critical pedagogy—that while educational processes and institutions replicate hierarchies, inequalities, and injustices, including racial prejudice, racism, and the assumptions of white supremacy, the educational experience can also transform the individual so that they, in turn, can transform the world. As bell hooks reminds us, education “is a vocation rooted in hopefulness.”⁵⁵ Yet, in this era of renewed racial inequality and re-galvanized white nationalism, I also think of the last line from *The Marrow of Tradition*: “There’s time enough, but none to spare.”⁵⁶

Notes

¹ Karen L. Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), 3, 2

² See, in this volume, Danielle Christmas, “Weaponizing Silent Sam: Heritage Politics and *The Third Revolution*,” in *Reading Confederate Monuments*, ed. Maria Seger (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi) [Insert year of publication and page numbers when paginated.]; and Lisa Woolfork, “Battle of the Billboards: White Supremacy and Memorial Culture in #Charlottesville,” in *Reading Confederate*

Monuments, ed. Maria Seger (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi) [Insert year of publication and page numbers when paginated.].

³ Caroline Randall Williams, “You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body Is a Confederate Monument,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/opinion/confederate-monuments-racism.html>.

⁴ Local activists have been working to have the Grayson County Confederate monument removed. See “Protesters Clash over Confederate Monument outside Grayson Co. Courthouse,” News12, last modified June 18, 2020, <https://www.kxii.com/2020/06/19/protesters-respond-to-petitions-remove-grayson-countys-confederate-statue-or-leave-it-be/>; and “Sherman Attorney Calls for Removal of Confederate Statue from Courthouse Lawn,” *Sherman Herald Democrat*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.heralddemocrat.com/news/20200616/sherman-attorney-calls-for-removal-of-confederate-statue-from-courthouse-lawn>.

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 46.

⁶ Donald Yacovone, “Textbook Racism: How Scholars Sustained White Supremacy,” *Chronicle Review*, April 8, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Scholars-Sustained-White/243053>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ “Mission,” Austin College, accessed September 5, 2020, <https://www.austincollege.edu/about/fast-facts/mission/>.

⁹ “Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy,” Southern Poverty Law Center, last modified August 4, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/data-projects/whose-heritage>.

¹⁰ Peter McLaren, “Critical Pedagogy: A Look at the Major Concepts,” in *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, ed. Antonia Darder, Marta P. Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres (New York: Routledge, 2009), 61.

¹¹ Ali Michael goes on to explain: “I define racial competence as having the skills and confidence to engage in healthy cross-racial relationships; to recognize and honor difference without judgement; to notice and analyze racial dynamics as they occur; to confront racism at the individual, group, and systems level . . . to ask for feedback about one’s ideas and work; and to raise race questions about oneself and one’s practice.” Michael, *Raising Race Questions: Whiteness & Inquiry in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2015), 3, 5.

¹² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written By Himself*. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written By Himself with Related Documents*, edited by David W. Blight (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 31–125; Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written By Himself with Related Documents*, edited by David W. Blight (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003), 146–71; Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*; and Yacovone, “Textbook Racism.”

¹³ Maria Seger, “Reading Confederate Monuments: An Introduction,” in *Reading Confederate Monuments*, ed. Maria Seger (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi) [Insert year of publication and page numbers when paginated.]; and Cassandra Jackson, “Rewriting the Landscape: Black Communities and the Confederate Monuments They Inherited,” in *Reading Confederate Monuments*, ed. Maria Seger (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi) [Insert year of publication and page numbers when paginated.].

¹⁴ Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*; Southern Poverty Law Center, “Whose Heritage?”; and Brook Thomas, “Complicating Today’s Myth of the Myth of the Lost Cause: The Calhoun Monument, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation,” in *Reading Confederate Monuments*, ed. Maria Seger (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi) [Insert year of publication and page numbers when paginated.].

¹⁵ The history of the Grayson County Confederate monument and the murder of George Hughes come from Graham Landrum, *Grayson County: An Illustrated History of Grayson County, Texas* (Fort Worth: University Supply & Equipment Company, 1960); and Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 50.

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- ¹⁶ Landrum, *Grayson County*, 90.
- ¹⁷ Karen L. Cox, “Roots of a Bitter Legacy: Determined Women Were the Driving Force Behind Confederate Monuments,” HistoryNet, January 2018, <https://www.historynet.com/bitter-legacy-women-confederate-monuments.htm>.
- ¹⁸ Spencer R. Herrera, “South by Southwest: Confederate and Conquistador Memorials Closing Borders,” in *Reading Confederate Monuments*, ed. Maria Seger (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi) [Insert year of publication and page numbers when paginated].
- ¹⁹ Cox, *Dixie’s Daughters*, 65.
- ²⁰ Denison Sunday *Gazetteer* qtd. in Carol Morris Little, *A Comprehensive Guide to Outdoor Sculpture in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 413.
- ²¹ Qtd. in Landrum, *Grayson County*, 91.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Thomas Blake, “Getting Medieval Post-Charlottesville: Medievalism and the Alt-Right,” in *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History: Alt/Histories*, ed. Louie Dean Valencia-García (New York: Routledge, 2020), 183.
- ²⁴ Alexander Stephens, “‘Cornerstone’ Speech,” Teaching Tolerance, accessed September 5, 2020, <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/texts/hard-history/cornerstone-speech>.
- ²⁵ The sources I provide students are Landrum, *Grayson County* and Nolan Thomas, “The Sherman Riot of 1930,” Texas State Historical Association, accessed September 5, 2020, <https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jcs06>.
- ²⁶ Landrum, *Grayson County*, 94.
- ²⁷ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 5.
- ²⁸ Simon During, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1999), 146; and Michel Foucault, “Space, Power and Knowledge,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1999), 140.
- ²⁹ Miles Park, “Confederate Statues Were Built to Further a ‘White Supremacist Future,’” National Public Radio, August 20, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544266880/confederate-statues-were-built-to-further-a-white-supremacist-future>.
- ³⁰ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 33.
- ³¹ Ibid., 166.
- ³² Ibid., 167.
- ³³ Ibid., 179.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 233.
- ³⁵ Harper Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 248.
- ³⁶ Joseph Crespino, *Atticus Finch: The Biography* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 173.
- ³⁷ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Whose Heritage?”
- ³⁸ Roxanne Gay, “Lots of People Love *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Roxane Gay Isn’t One of Them,” *New York Times*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/18/books/review/tom-santopietro-why-to-kill-a-mockingbird-matters.html>.
- ³⁹ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage, 1970).
- ⁴⁰ James Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* (New York: Dial Press, 1965).
- ⁴¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or, Life Among the Lowly* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1981); and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” in *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 179–96.
- ⁴² Nancy Bentley and Sandra Gunning, “Introduction: Cultural and Historical Background,” in *The Marrow of Tradition*, by Charles W. Chesnutt, ed. Nancy Bentley and Sandra Gunning (Boston:

Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002), 7. See also Gordon Fraser, "Circulation and Resistance: *The Marrow of Tradition* and the 1900 New Orleans Race Riot," *J19* 1, no. 2 (2013): 363–85.

⁴³ Qtd. in Bentley and Gunning, "Introduction," 3.

⁴⁴ Qtd. in Park, "Confederate Statues Were Built to Further A 'White Supremacist Future.'"

⁴⁵ Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 114.

⁴⁶ Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and William Wells Brown, *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000).

⁴⁷ Williams, "You Want a Confederate Monument?"; and Lisa Woolfork, "Thomas Jefferson Is the R. Kelly of the American Enlightenment," *Washington Post*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/02/15/thomas-jefferson-is-r-kelly-american-enlightenment/>.

⁴⁸ Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 64, 67.

⁴⁹ Maria Seger highlights the relationship between chivalry, white womanhood, and white supremacy in her essay in this volume, "Redeeming White Women in/through Lost Cause Films," in *Reading Confederate Monuments*, ed. Maria Seger (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi) [Insert year of publication and page numbers when paginated].

⁵⁰ Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 156.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 223.

⁵³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

⁵⁴ Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4.

⁵⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), iv.

⁵⁶ Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, 246.

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