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Teaching racial rhetorical criticism: Racial reckoning on campus

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This unit teaches students how to perform racial rhetorical criticism and positions them to engage in discussions of race through experiential learning, namely through exploring the links between rhetoric, public memory, and campus history projects.

Courses: *Rhetorical Criticism, Rhetorical Theory, Communication Theory.*

Objective: *Students will gain a better appreciation of racial rhetorical criticism as a research method through an analysis of campus architecture.*

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Introduction and rationale

Teaching the relevancy of rhetorical theory and criticism within the current structure of higher education can be challenging for rhetoric instructors. Perhaps now, more than ever, rhetoric teachers must demonstrate the merit of a robust rhetorical education. One area teachers of rhetoric should consider ascertaining relevancy in today’s academic climate is a pedagogy that deals with “the rhetoric of place” and its association with race, geography, and public memory. Recognizing the constitutive power and rhetorical performance of place or “place-as-rhetoric” is essential to understanding the symbolic and material consequences regarding the racial reckoning of such a phenomenon. That is, places are not simply backdrops in which rhetorical transactions occur; they are, as Endres and Senda-Cook (2011) would say, “imbued with meaning and consequences” (p. 260) for its inhabitants. The meaning and consequences of place are drawn from the narratives expressed by the dominant order and often ignore pertinent social issues such as race (Milstein et al., 2011). To that end, students often enter higher education institutions with little to no regard for how the rhetorical performances (embodied, dialogues, and place) work together to make up the meaning of places and spaces they participate in. For instance, contemporary social movements such as #blacklivesmatters have utilized specific places or spaces to protest to draw the public’s attention to their cause(s). This occurrence was witnessed in 2016 in Memphis, Tennessee, when #BLM protestors shut down the Hernando De Soto (I-40) bridge, a major interstate highway that connects Arkansas and Tennessee (Johnson, 2020). Instead of protesting in impoverished areas of the city (perhaps

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where the public is less likely to pay attention), #BLM activists in Memphis used “place-as-rhetoric” (i.e. the bridge) to disrupt the status quo.

This occurrence draws attention to Leff’s beckoning for rhetoricians to blend theory with pedagogical practices, offering an innovative curriculum and basing learning within the lived communal experiences (de Velasco et al., 2016). As scholars of color, we make a similar call for teachers of rhetoric to (re)emphasize a balanced approach between theory and practice by designing rhetoric courses that include experiential learning, specifically using place-as-rhetoric to engage in discussions of race. While other scholars have demonstrated pedagogical activities that deal with rhetoric and campus architecture, public memory, and higher education (Bagley, 2023; Greer & Grobman, 2016; Kretsinger-Harries, 2021; Smith, 2016), in this essay, we fruitfully contribute to this literature by proposing a rhetorical unit for supporting students in thinking about the intersections of place, architecture, race, geography, and public memory. To accentuate our proposal, we utilize a large Southern Research University as a case study. We contend that a robust understanding of this intersection helps students comprehend the structural and ideological challenges of the neoliberal economy and provide a functional understanding of the materiality of rhetoric.

Acknowledging one’s positionality is critical for these kinds of activities (Ghazal Aswad, 2021). For instructors who do not have extensive lived experience or subject matter expertise, we recommend educating yourself on issues of race, particularly the specific campus and surrounding community’s history of race. Next, recognize how your positionality influences your interpretations of racial histories and racial dynamics on campus, and how it might inform your pedagogy. While conducting this activity, it is essential that the notion of embracing “uncomfortable” conversations about race be discussed, as the main objective is to gain a basis for understanding, *not* consensus. Finally, it is crucial to blend discussions of race in the curriculum throughout the semester rather than have a particular week or section on race. This can prevent students from being bombarded all at once by discussing racial issues and avoids tokenism. In other words, students should be primed prior to engaging in this activity to prepare students for the exercise.

Noteworthy, it is also *critical* that instructors utilize a trauma-informed pedagogical approach to this activity, given the nature of institutions’ respective racial histories, which may be triggering for some students. A trauma-informed pedagogical approach is grounded in these key values: “physical, emotional, social, and academic respect; trustworthiness and transparency; support and connection; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice and choice; social justice; and resilience, growth and change” (Tsui et al., 2023, p. 2). Equally important, instructors ought not to take a race-neutral approach (Edwin & Daniels, 2022) but instead should “(a) acknowledge[e] the centrality of race and racism, (b) challeng[e] dominant perspectives, (c) valu[e] experiential knowledge, and (d) [have a commitment]to social justice” (McAdoo et al., 2023, p. 8).

The activity

Stage 1: Understanding rhetorical methods

Racial Reckoning on Campus is a three-class-period activity where instructors encourage students to practice racial rhetorical criticism. Racial rhetorical criticism is a specific

rhetorical method created by Lisa Flores that is “concerned with politics and publics, with cultural discourses and social meanings, with rhetors and audiences ... [with emphasis on] meanings and matters, in judgment and evaluation” (Flores, 2016, p. 6). This perspective informs the approach to the activity posed below. This method is best taught in a mid-level to upper-division undergraduate course on rhetoric criticism but would also be well suited for courses such as Visual Rhetoric or Communication and Race.

Although focused on racial rhetorical criticism, the activity is most appropriate after all the methods are covered toward the second half of the semester, as it brings to the fore how several methods come together to inform the study of various artifacts. In particular, the activity should come after students have taken visual and ideological criticism units, focusing on these methods’ historical emergence, contemporary relevance, and procedures. Before class, students are assigned the relevant chapters from Kornfield’s (2021) *Contemporary Rhetorical Criticism* textbook. This includes a visual rhetorical criticism unit on rhetoric’s communicative, influential, and persuasive nature through visual languages, such as logos, pictures, statues, movies, music videos, font styles, images, and so on. Students come to understand how reading visual rhetoric is informed by cultural practices of seeing, shaping what types of visual stimuli capture our gaze, how we look at things, and how we interpret what we see. Students should have already taken an ideological rhetorical criticism unit, exposing them to the method of critiquing texts for the dominant ideology they express while silencing opposing ideologies. Prevalent ideologies in our society, such as racism, respectability politics, nationalism, the American dream, patriotism, moral exceptionalism, and so on, are debated.

These units should include real-world activities of how we might apply visual and/or ideological rhetorical criticism in conjunction with one another. Instructors might consider various historical and/or contemporary examples to consider how race, as an ideology, circulates through symbols. For instance, one historical example is the Iwo Jima memorial and its various iterations in popular culture. A more contemporary example that resonates with students is the Nike “Dream Crazy” ad with Colin Kaepernick. Both these class examples probe how nationalism (as a state ideology) is deciphered in the symbolism of the national anthem, the flag, and/or “kneeling,” in conversation with the broader context of racial exigencies and social justice imperatives. Students come to see how various prevalent ideologies, such as racism and nationalism, have animating power in the United States. Class discussions ensue on how nationalist ideologies are complicated by racism, colonialism, democracy, dissent, and so on.

Stage 2: Preparing to tour—The racial and architectural histories of campus

In the first class of the activity, students are directed to think about how racial rhetorical criticism, as an example of ideological rhetorical criticism, might be applied to local spaces on their own campus and/or city. The instructor gives a lecture which lasts around 30–45 minutes. First, we recommend discussing the racial and historical backdrop of the campus, which, like many universities in the United States, was built using enslaved laborers and/or witnessed histories of racial segregation and discrimination. Instructors should touch on the broader histories of race, slavery, and the American

academy before they expand on the local racial dynamics of the campus and/or city in question (see Wilder, 2013). This discussion might also explore how personal, collective, and public memory intersect and, at times, overlap.

The instructor then provides campus history information that would likely dictate what sites are feasible to utilize. For example, at the University of Alabama, one of the campus sites that has undergone naming, un-naming, and renaming in recent years is English Hall (previously Morgan Hall). English Hall was named for Senator John Morgan, a Confederate general who was also a slave trader and slave owner who worked to extend Jim Crow segregation and was in the leadership of the Ku Klux Klan. He was also critical to the university, rebuilding its campus after the American Civil War. A plaque in his honor has been the object of protest by student groups for a long time, and after the murder of George Floyd, the university agreed to put a contextualization note in the foyer. Another site is Hood-Malone Plaza and Autherine Lucy Clock Tower, which were built by the university with the intention of honoring the first African American students on campus. The plaza is located outside the (in)famous site where Governor George Wallace physically blocked the entrance to Foster Auditorium on Alabama's campus to defy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, sent on behalf of the Kennedy administration to force the university to accept court-ordered desegregation. After Wallace refused to move, President Kennedy sent the Alabama National Guard. Wallace receded, allowing Vivian Malone and James Hood to enter and become the first African American to enroll at the state's flagship university. The event was a turning point toward racial equality in the university and in the state. Students are shown black-and-white footage of the event. For campuses that do not have many physical plaques or memorials, the instructor might want to consider other sites outside of the campus in their town or city. Consideration much also be given to accessibility so that all students may participate. Alternative options may also be considered for those with accessibility issues, such as the utilization of Google Earth or a video recording of the site.

This lecture is meant to situate students in the history of the campus, giving them just enough information to prepare them for touring the campus sites. In the remaining class time, students are divided into groups of around five to seven students, depending on the class size. The instructor assigns each group a site (some groups may have the same site). Students are instructed to share each other's contact information and plan for meeting at the site in the next class. They are also given a printed handout with prompts for their site visit. They use this time to work with their group on initial research about their allocated site, its location on campus (using Google Maps or the campus map on the university website), and architectural history. It is also an opportunity for students to ask any questions they may have about the activity.

Stage 3: Touring campus sites

In the second class of the activity, students meet with their group on the next class day and peruse the memory site at their own pace. They are directed to use all five of their senses when walking through and around the site. Students are advised to use half the class time to tour the site (while taking notes and photographs) and the other half to work as a group to collect their thoughts and impressions. The handout, which builds on a handout from Smith (2016), includes the following directions:

- (1) Go to your building. View the exterior from all sides. Describe the space and note anything you find rhetorically interesting. Consider the decoration, the informational plaques, and the physicality of the ways the history of the building and its racial histories are remembered. Later, go inside the building and pay attention to how the space orients you, how it is used, and how it was intended to be used. This is the *descriptive stage* of the activity.
- (2) Think about our campus racial history lecture and *interpret* what you noted above:
 - a. How do you see the racial history of the building reflected in its physical markings (i.e. the colors, words, contrast, and emphasis used in the visual and verbal rhetoric of the building)? What specific physical features and historical markers do you find interesting? Why?
 - b. More specifically, how are the racial histories of these buildings communicated?
 - c. Who is the audience of these buildings? What message is being put forth and for whom? Is it successful or could they have done a “better” job?
- (3) Once you have thoroughly looked at your site, gather as a group to share your impressions. In doing so, *assess* how the site, as a site of public memory, communicates the racial history of the university.

Debriefing

In the final class for the activity, students come back as a group to report on their findings. Each student in the group is expected to present. After each group presents their findings, the instructor encourages a discussion and evaluation of each group’s findings. The students unravel the various ways in which the university as an academic institution communicates the memories of these sites on campus and the ideologies embedded in rhetorical artifacts. The discussion often shifts to the ways in which the university contextualizes and/or assigns responsibility for certain historical events through plaques, statues, or historical markers. For example, students might deliberate how the location of certain buildings communicates importance (e.g. whether in a hidden low-traffic area or highly visible and accessible location), the stylistic tokens and language used in the blurb on plaques (e.g. some plaques applaud the bravery of the Black students who paved the way for other minorities to enroll on campus, while not addressing the role of the institution or the state in preventing enrollments of these students), or even the structural materials and architectural features of historical markers (e.g. some plaques were made of Plexi glass with very small writing which could not be easily read) influence people’s experience of the site and how race-related historical events are understood. These are just examples, of course, and discussions might differ across campuses. Overall, the activity helps students think about the intersections of power, race, and rhetoric and is generative in thinking about the material rhetorics of place and memory, and how we inhabit and navigate historied spaces in our everyday lives.

In the last 10 minutes, the instructor debriefs the class with the deliberately provocative question: How should we remember problematic racial histories, and how can we best contextualize and/or remember them for future generations? The students share their opinions on how institutions of higher education might

reckon with (and take accountability for) histories of white supremacy and racial violence. The activity is an excellent pedagogical resource that helps students grasp how rhetorical criticism can guide our understanding of complex racial histories in society.

Appraisal

This activity is perfect as a closure activity for the class, bringing together all the skills that students have built throughout the semester and building momentum for students' final projects. The pragmatic nature of the activity enhances students' cultural understanding of how race is communicated and how rhetorics of place advance various ideologies and points of view. Students learn the value of rhetorical criticism as a method for reckoning with racial politics and other social justice issues in our current time. These issues are carved out of the very places we inhabit, which ultimately have both symbolic and material consequences for their constituents.

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