

“The Light of Truth:” Acknowledging the Legacy of Lynching

“The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.” Ida B. Wells

Overview

Monuments and memorials are powerful symbols of our collective memory, and who/what societies choose to acknowledge and remember in such spaces can say a lot about our past and present. In this project, after exploring the [A Red Record](#) website, students will choose an individual off of the [A Red Record](#) site and (individually or in small groups) create some form of memorialization of the person’s life, the circumstances of their death, and the historical context of lynching that needs to be considered today.

Essential/Compelling Questions

- What is the purpose of public commemorations such as monuments/memorials?
- How are decisions made regarding who and/or what is honored public commemorations?
- If the purpose of commemorations such as memorials and monuments is collective memory, what topics, themes and groups of people are less prevalently remembered/honored?
- Why are public commemorations of the racial violence against African Americans’ that took place during the post-slavery era an important part of facing and reconciling with America’s past?

Grades

8-12

Materials

- Projector and internet access
- Quotes from EJI’s [“Lynching in America,”](#) attached
- Designing a Lynching Memorial, project assignment attached
- Art supplies

Duration

35+ minutes for introductory lesson and project set up; completion time for memorial project, as well as student presentations of final products and a culminating discussion will vary by class

Preparation

- Students should have a comprehensive understanding regarding the history of lynching before engaging in this project.
- While this activity deals with sensitive topics of race and violence, it is important for students to explore such “hard history” to ensure they understand the implications of our past and are empowered to address the challenges of the present. In order to study such topics effectively and safely, teachers must have established a safe classroom community with clear expectations of respect, open-mindedness, and civil conversation. See [Carolina K-12’s “Activities” section of the Database of K-12 Resources](#) for ways to ensure a classroom environment conducive to the effective exploration of sensitive and controversial issues. Teachers should also consult Carolina K-12’s [“Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom.”](#)
- This procedure specifically involves examining monuments and memorials. Ensure students are prepared for the various symbols they will encounter. For instance, if a Confederate monument is chosen as one of the samples to be critiqued, it is imperative students are very clear on your reasons for exposing them to these symbols, as they can be interpreted in very different ways.

Procedure

Considering Public Commemorations

1. As a warm-up, ask students to identify a public commemoration (memorial, monument, signage, fountain, etc.) that they have seen, either in their own hometown or somewhere they have visited. Students should take 3-4 minutes to jot down a description of the monument/memorial, and/or sketch out visually what they remember about it. After students have had ample time to think, ask volunteers to share their thoughts, ensuring the class hones in on details such as where such commemorations are found, what the purpose appears to be, etc. Finally, ask students to consider what they think the ultimate purpose of monuments/memorials are.
2. Next, have students get into 6-8 groups, depending on the class size, and provide each group with one pre-selected commemoration image posted on a piece of chart paper. (If there are monuments/memorials close by your school, try and include at least one if not more.) Do not include any information other than the year the selected monuments/memorials were created/unveiled and where it is located. (Teachers should determine whether they want to discuss monuments and memorials broadly, including samples from various wars and time periods, or if they want to maintain a focus on the same years lynchings occurred. If the latter option is chosen, teachers can find numerous monument/memorial samples via [Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina](#). Teachers should make sure students are prepared for and understand the instructional goals for viewing Confederate monuments prior to introducing any such imagery.) Tell students that they should each discuss what they see, both verbally and by writing around the chart paper, their thoughts to:
 - What do you first see/notice? What most stands out?
 - What is your first reaction to what you see? How does it make you feel and why?
 - What is the purpose? What message do you think the artist/creator was sending? Who was/is the intended audience and why? How do you think this was MEANT to make you feel and why?
 - Does this carry the same message today as it would have had the year this was created? Explain.
 - Does this tell the entire story? What might be/is left out?
 - What tactics did the artist use to illustrate/tell this particular story/message? Why do you think these particular materials and this particular design was selected? Why do you think this specific location chosen?
3. After around 5-8 minutes of group discussion, bring students back together and while projecting the images each group just examined, allow groups to report out on their observations.

Who/What is Commemorated and Why?

4. Transition students to considering the purpose of public commemorations such as monuments and memorials. While many of us pass by these displays as familiar components of our town or tourist location's landscapes, they merit turning a critical eye towards. Discuss:
 - What is the purpose of public commemorations such as monuments/memorials? Why are they (or how can they be) important to a community? (reminders of our past, public displays of our priorities as a society, etc.)
 - How are decisions made, and who participates in the decision making, regarding who and/or what is honored public commemorations?
 - How often do you actually take the time to critically examine a monument, statue, memorial, etc. when you encounter one and why do you think this is the case?
 - What time period, topic, theme, etc. to you feel most memorials address?
 - Teachers might want to project the [Commemorative Landscapes](#) homepage, and focus on the "Subjects" feature on the left, which provides a curated list of monuments by their subject matter, with the most popular topics listed first. For instance, of the over 650 memorials, the most popular memorial/monument topic is the Civil War at 234.
 - Why do you think so many NC monuments address the Civil War in some way?
 - Why are some monuments/memorials controversial?

- Students may launch into a discussion of the Confederate Monument debate, which gained traction in the news in 2017//2018. The purpose of this lesson is not to focus on the Confederate Monument debate, but this is certainly a topic of conversation worth exploring for classrooms that have been prepared and trained to properly have controversial issues discussions. It is recommended that if you choose to do so, that you have students ground their discussion in specific texts, however, to make the conversation more constructive. For example, teachers might consider leading a “Civil Conversation” around the issue. This format for respectful, small group discussion is available [here](#). (While the description discusses having the discussion at a library, this activity is also transferable to the classroom. Teachers can pick up with Step 5. Teachers may also want to consider updating the readings from the 2018 readings that are provided.)
 - If this list of monuments/memorials were our only window to the past, in what ways would our understanding of our history be incomplete? If the purpose of commemorations such as memorials and monuments is collective memory, what topics/themes are missing and/or are being forgotten and why?
5. In pairs or small groups, provide students with one of the attached quotations from [Chapter VI, Trauma & the Legacy of Lynching](#) and have them take 5-8 minutes to read and discuss, focusing on what point they feel the excerpt is making regarding monuments/memorials/public commemorations and why it’s important to acknowledge the hard history of racial violence and lynching. Teachers can project each quote for the class and have each group summarize their thoughts. Transition by asking:
- We have been examining the difficult history of white supremacy and lynching, which took thousands of lives. How many memorials are there that focus on these topics?

The National Memorial for Peace & Justice

6. Let students know that until the [National Memorial for Peace and Justice](#) was finished in 2018, there was no national monument in the US to acknowledge the practice of lynching and its lasting legacy. Ask students to share if they know anything about the Memorial and/or have visited it. Project image(s) of the Memorial and explain that opening to the public on April 26, 2018, this is “the nation’s first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved black people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumptions of guilt and police violence.” (Additional information to share/discuss with students can be accessed [here](#). Teachers may want to share the EJI’s brief 2 min. video about why they built the memorial [here](#). Teachers should screen the video first however, since it does contain images that imply violent lynchings. Teachers should also be prepared to discuss convict leasing with students, since it is also mentioned in the video.)
7. Thanks to work done by organizations like EJI, monuments to individual victims are starting to spring up, as well. But there is more work to be done. Provide the attached “Design a Lynching Memorial” handout to students and explain the project.
- Teachers should consider the age level of students as well as the unique aspects of their own community when determining any additional parameters to provide for the project. In addition to consulting “[Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom](#),” teachers may want to explicitly note what types of symbols or imagery should not be utilized in student work (i.e., encourage students to refrain from graphic imagery or common hate symbols, and rather utilize more metaphorical/artistic symbolism.)
 - Teachers should also predetermine whether to have students work on this individually, or in partners/groups, as well as how much class time and/or homework time to provide for completion.
 - Let students know ahead of time when and how they will be presenting their work. For example, teachers might consider having students set up the components of their final project around the classroom, or in a more spacious area such as the library/media center. Allow students to examine each other’s work in “gallery walk” fashion, while also responding to what they see in writing. (For

example, students might fill out a chart with observations and questions for each memorial they review, or a large piece of chart paper can be placed by each memorial where students write feedback and questions.

- Regardless of how final products are shared, ensure the class has ample time to debrief the project and the study of lynching overall. Sample culminating questions include:
 - Why are public commemorations of the racial violence against African Americans' that took place during the post-slavery era an important part of facing and reconciling with America's past?
 - Even though this is hard history to study and comprehend, why is it nonetheless critical that we do so?
 - How can the history of lynching help us understand and respond to present-day issues of racial injustice? How does ignorance of the history of lynching make us susceptible to misunderstanding the present?
 - Activist Ida B. Wells said, "The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them." What does this quote mean to you in regard to what we have learned and discussed throughout our study of lynching?

Quotes from EJI's "[Lynching in America](#)"

“Very few public commemorations of African Americans’ suffering during the post-slavery era exist today. Formal remembrances of national racial history tend to celebrate the civil rights movement’s victories, focusing on individual achievements and success stories rather than reflecting on the deeply-rooted, violent resistance that upheld the racial caste system for so long. Honoring civil rights activists and embracing their successes is appropriate and due, but when they are not accompanied by meaningful engagement with the difficult history of systematic violence perpetrated against black Americans for decades after slavery, such celebrations risk painting an incomplete and distorted picture.”

DISCUSS: What point is this excerpt making regarding monuments/memorials/public commemorations and the importance of recognizing the hard history of racial violence and lynching?

“Of the 4,084 Southern lynchings documented in [the Equal Justice Initiative’s lynching] report, the overwhelming majority took place on sites that remain unmarked and unrecognized. In contrast, the landscape of the South is cluttered with plaques, statues, and monuments that record, celebrate, and lionize generations of American defenders of white supremacy, including countless leaders of the Confederate war effort and white public officials and private citizens who perpetrated violent crimes against black citizens during the era of racial terror. Many of these monuments, markers, and memorials have been erected in just the last sixty years. In this context, the absence of a prominent public memorial acknowledging racial terrorism is a powerful statement about our failure to value the African Americans who were killed or gravely wounded in this brutal campaign of racial violence.”

DISCUSS: What point is this excerpt making regarding monuments/memorials/public commemorations and the importance of recognizing the hard history of racial violence and lynching?

“President Jimmy Carter, commenting on the United States Holocaust Memorial, observed that “because we are humane people, concerned with the human rights of all peoples, we feel compelled to study the systematic destruction of the Jews so that we may seek to learn how to prevent such enormities from occurring in the future.” The effort to create a Holocaust Memorial in Berlin reflected the sense that, in the face of Germany’s devastating history, “a deliberate act of remembrance” was necessary—“a strong statement that memory must be created for the next generation, not only preserved.” A national commemoration of the atrocities inflicted on African Americans during decades of racial terrorism would be an important step towards establishing trust between the survivors of racial terrorism and the governments and legal systems that failed to protect them. Meaningful public accountability is critical to bring the cycle of racial violence to a close.”

DISCUSS: What point is this excerpt making regarding monuments/memorials/public commemorations and the importance of recognizing the hard history of racial violence and lynching?

“Creating a formal space to memorialize mass violence can help to establish trust between communities and build faith in government institutions. Only by telling the truth about the age of racial terror and collectively reflecting on this period and its legacy can we hope that our present-day conversations about racial exclusion and inequality — and any policies designed to address these issues — will be accurate, thoughtful, and informed.”

DISCUSS: What point is this excerpt making regarding monuments/memorials/public commemorations and the importance of recognizing the hard history of racial violence and lynching?

“Erecting monuments and memorials to commemorate lynching can begin to correct our distorted national narrative about this period of racial terror in American history while directly addressing the harms borne by the African American community, particularly survivors who lived through the lynching era. Scholars who have studied the impact of human rights abuses emphasize that speaking out about victimization can have a significant healing impact on survivors of genocide, mass violence, and other harms. Continued silence about lynchings ‘compounds victimization’ and tells victims and the nation as a whole that ‘their pain does not matter.’ Publicly acknowledging lynchings can link instances of individual loss and harm to a broader system of abuse and mass violence and empower affected individuals ‘to move beyond trauma, hopelessness, numbness, and preoccupation with loss and injury.’”

DISCUSS: What point is this excerpt making regarding monuments/memorials/public commemorations and the importance of recognizing the hard history of racial violence and lynching?

“Public commemoration plays a significant role in prompting community-wide reconciliation. Formalizing a space for memory, reflection, and grieving can help victims ‘move beyond anger and a sense of powerlessness.’ Memorials are known to help reconcile complicated and divisive national events. The Vietnam War Memorial, for example, is a powerful space for Americans and others to appreciate the historical context in which the war was fought and to grapple with the harm and death it caused.”

DISCUSS: What point is this excerpt making regarding monuments/memorials/public commemorations and the importance of recognizing the hard history of racial violence and lynching?

“The importance of collective memory is the thread that connects national efforts to recover from human rights crises in countries and communities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One key lesson has emerged: survivors, witnesses, and all members of the affected community need to know that society has acknowledged what happened to the victims. Through a criminal tribunal, truth commission, or reparations project, suffering must be engaged, heard, recognized, and remembered before a society can recover from mass violence. Commemorating lynching through memorials and monuments that encourage and create space for the ‘restorative power of truth-telling’ is essential if we are to ‘help society heal [its] sickness and place trauma in the past.’”

DISCUSS: What point is this excerpt making regarding monuments/memorials/public commemorations and the importance of recognizing the hard history of racial violence and lynching?

Group Members: _____

Design a Lynching Memorial

Based on your review of the [A Red Record](#) website, you will brainstorm and design a memorial that addresses lynching in North Carolina. Your product might be in memory of one particular victim that you read about or it might seek to call attention to the history of lynching in North Carolina more broadly. When conceptualizing your memorial, consider what your goal and purpose is. What message do you want to convey regarding the history of lynching and its lingering impacts on today's world? Who is your intended audience and how can you most effectively impact them with your design?

Steps for completion:

- 1. Brainstorm:** Brainstorm ideas for your memorial, its purpose and its location.
 - What is your memorial's purpose? What message do you want the memorial to convey and why is this important?
 - Who is the audience for the memorial? What do you want them to do, think, feel, consider, etc. when visiting? How do you want people to be impacted by your work?
 - How will your memorial's design communicate your ideas? What specific materials, images, words/phrases/quotes, etc. will it include? Will it be literal or abstract? Where will it be located and why? (What is significant about this location in particular?) Will there be components other than just what a visitor views and/or reads (i.e., music)?
 - Why is it critical that we face this aspect of our shared past today?
- 2. Design:** Review your research and ideas to design your memorial. **Your final project must include:**
 - **Blueprint** – a sketch of the memorial, showing what the memorial would look like with an unlimited budget and resources; the blueprint should be labeled to explain any necessary components of the diagram
 - **Artistic Rendering** – a colorful drawing, 3-D representation, computer rendered design, or model of the memorial that provides a sense of what the final product would look like once completed and installed
 - **Narration/Artist's Statement** – Write a one-page overview and description of the memorial, explaining the purpose of it and why it is important to publicly acknowledge this difficult history. You can be creative in the voice you use for the written component. For instance, it might be written as if it would be narration shared at the memorial site itself (i.e., upon pushing a button for verbal information), it could be written as text that might be found on a sign at the memorial, it can be an artist's statement discussing your choices and inspiration, etc.

Due Date: _____

What questions do you have about this assignment?