

Thematic reviews

Recensions thématiques

Sierra Rooney, Jennifer Wingate,
and Harriet F. Senie, eds.

Teachable Monuments: Using Public Art to Spark Dialogue and Confront Controversy

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Teachable Monuments is a field guide for productively engaging with public art and historical monuments. The chapters we collect here show how monuments can spark civic discourse and help publics contend with difficult histories and their lasting impact on the present” (3). With this opening statement, editors Sierra Rooney and Jennifer Wingate set the tone for a compelling, multifaceted approach to the challenges and complexities of monuments that mark contested histories and that serve overlapping and changing purposes. While the editors refer to the anthology as a field guide, it also serves as a set of blueprints for laying pedagogical foundations that can support the complexities of multiple histories and for framing rooms that allow for challenging discussion, debate, and conflicting points of view. Divided into three parts—Teaching Strategies (21–86), Political Strategies (87–180), and Engagement Strategies (181–264)

—the eighteen chapters in this text offer perspectives from art historians, artists, public art administrators, and teachers who have been actively grappling with the shifting landscape of monuments including historical figures, war memorials, and Confederate monuments; all within the context of the Black Lives Matter movement and a Trump-era White House. While the anthology focuses primarily on case-studies, policies, and experiences based in the United States of America, the considerations and strategies presented could easily translate to countries around the globe that are contending with a colonialist past and stumbling towards a future of truth and reconciliation. Teaching Strategies offers chapters that focus primarily on post-secondary educational models, but the section does open with Adelaide Wainwright’s reflections on her 2017–18 fourth grade class analysing the 1891 monument to preacher and

abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, created by sculptor John Quincy Adams Ward, situated in Brooklyn, New York. Through the eyes of these children and the questions they raised—“What is a monument? How is its position important? How are the materials (the medium) of the monument important? What does it say about the person/event commemorated? What does it say about the values of the people who created it?” (27)—we are asked to question our own adult assumptions about the monuments that populate our public parks, civic plazas, and avenues and intersections. *Teachable Monuments* extends numerous questions that can leave the reader with countless more questions of their own. However, the authors don’t fall into the academic loophole of saying, “I am not offering answers, rather, I am only offering questions to consider...” While the authors are offering up questions, they are also questioning—questioning pedagogy, questioning government actions (and inaction), questioning their own roles as historians, educators, advisors, and activists. The authors also offer real-world experiences, models that are tested (with successes and failures), and histories that are in the making with uncertain outcomes. We are continually reminded that monuments and memorials hold overlapping purposes, and these purposes change (sometimes evolving, sometimes degrading) with time.

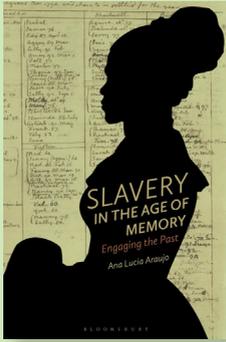
In *Political Strategies*, Chris Reitz's chapter, "Learning from Louisville: John Breckenridge Castleman, His Statue, and a Public Sphere Revisited," and Harriet Senie's chapter, "Addressing Monumental Controversies in New York City Post Charlottesville," give us a glimpse of what Senie refers to as the "public public art historian" (115), challenging the stereotype of an art historian as one who wanders the halls of libraries, galleries and museums leading tours on lost arts and civilization; or deep in the archives, white gloves on hands, scouring the past for a new view on the global influence of indigo. Both Reitz and Senie (also a co-editor of the anthology) reflect on their public roles as experts on civic advisory panels in Louisville and New York City, respectively. Senie served as a member of the Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers. The committee was tasked to develop a set of guiding principles that could be applied not just to controversial monuments, markers, and statues (though the marker for Marshal Philippe Pétain, the Dr. J. Marion Sims Monument, the equestrian statue of Theodore Roosevelt, and the Christopher Columbus Monument were forefront in the commission's deliberations), but also to city-owned public art across the metropolis. Senie unpacks the complexity of actually applying such a set of principles in a real-world context. Her analysis of the challenges confronting the Theodore Roosevelt sculpture and the uncertainty of its future at the entrance of the Museum of Natural History¹ echo similar debates about a proposed Roosevelt sculpture on the other side of the country in San Luis Obispo. In 2019, artist Paula Zima had been selected to develop a monument commemorating Roosevelt's visit to the city in 1903, when he presented a speech that the commissioners of the sculpture

believe started the environmental movement on the Central Coast of California.² The process of seeking city approval opened the door to analysis of the somewhat dated public art policy. Mayor Heidi Harmon questioned the merits of erecting a sculpture to another white male. Harmon asked, "Why would we step into lifting up individual people who are—undoubtedly, as we all are—complex, flawed, [who] have moments of genius and brilliance, but also moments where we make incredibly bad decisions?"³ Ultimately, approval was not granted for the Roosevelt sculpture, but the debate also resulted in the city council directing staff to update the public art policy to dictate there would be no more monuments to people. However, statues of concepts were acceptable.⁴ Such dramatic swings in policy are both contentious and problematic. If other cities were to adopt similar policies, there would be no Harriet Tubman monument proposed to replace the decommissioned Columbus sculpture in Newark, New Jersey.⁵ Newark mayor Ras J. Baraka's position was quite counter to Harmon's, stating, "The monument will serve as encouragement to our present and future generations, allowing them to draw inspiration from the artists who will put a modern view on Ms. Tubman's life and works."⁶ Such polarities are examined throughout *Teachable Monuments* and are highlighted in Senie's fundamental query, "Who should determine the choice of a work of public art? And, what is the relevance of artistic merit as defined by professionals in the field—or what I have come to think of, 'What's ART got to do with it?'" (120).

The last section of the anthology, *Engagement Strategies*, is devoted primarily to case studies. Charlene Garfinkle's chapter, "Charging Bull and Fearless Girl: A Dialogue," is rife with irony as the stories of two sculptures in Manhattan are positioned within rapidly changing political climates, while "Free History

Lessons: Contextualizing Confederate Monuments in North Carolina" by Matthew Champagne, Katie Schinabeck and Sarah Soleim demonstrates not only the relevance of art history in contemporary society but also what can happen when art historians hit the streets. The final chapter of the anthology is an interview with artist Kenseth Armstead by architect María Carrascal. In discussing his work, *Slaves of New York 1776*, which includes one feather for each of the 20,000 enslaved Africans in New York City during the Revolutionary War, Armstead references artist Do Ho Suh, who often uses tiny figures to support monumental forms. This recognition of the support and sacrifice of countless, usually un-named, individuals is a counter-balance to the single heroic figure. Perhaps this is why Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. remains so moving and so controversial. The naming of all those individuals, the acknowledgement of the personal sacrifice, and the resulting loss, not just of individual life, but of the loss to families, friends, and communities, brings forward the question—would I make such a sacrifice? Whether it is marching on the battlefields or marching in the streets, what moves us to act for others, for the "greater good," for something that is more important than our personal comforts and daily lives? Ultimately, what do these teachable monuments teach us about ourselves? For those brave enough to ask the questions, the answers might be equally to reaffirm our faith in each other and to question the very foundations of our collective society.

It has been a decade since Erick Doss's compelling *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*⁷ and Kirk Savage's *Monument Wars: Washington, DC, the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape*⁸ offered readers well-researched and expansive views on the troubling histories of monument-making in the USA. *Teachable Monuments* reinvigorates



Ana Lucia Araujo
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those debates at another vital cultural moment, where critical discussions about the influences and impacts of monuments and memorials on our understanding (and often misunderstanding) of American histories are needed to help us find our way through the national struggle for social justice. ¶

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1. On May 13, 2021, the removal of the sculpture was approved and there will be no replacement sculpture. Rather, more steps will be added and the entry plaza left open. See Sarah Lewin Leibold, "Removing and Replacing the Roosevelt Statue," *Ilovetheupperwestside.com*, May 14, 2021, <https://ilovetheupperwestside.com/removing-and-replacing-the-roosevelt-statue/>; and Maya Mau, "Board Takes First Steps to Remove Theodore Roosevelt Statue from Museum Entrance," *Westsiderag.com*, May 15, 2021, <https://www.westsiderag.com/2021/05/15/board-takes-first-steps-to-remove-theodore-roosevelt-statue-from-museum-entrance>.

2. Carol Tangeman, "Arts Beat: Proposed SLO monument raises questions about public art," *KCBX.org*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.kcbx.org/post/arts-beat-proposed-slo-monument-raises-questions-about-public-art>.

3. Tyler Pratt, "San Luis Obispo officials say no to public monuments of people," *KCBX.org*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.kcbx.org/post/san-luis-obispo-officials-say-no-public-monuments-people#stream/0>.

4. *Ibid.*

5. "Harriet Tubman Monument Finalists," *May 26, 2021*, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/45af9aea62184a4290d1a7d6d50e71f6>

6. *Ibid.*

7. Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

8. Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington, DC, the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

In *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past*, the Brazilian interdisciplinary historian Ana Lucia Araujo dives into a brave historical study of memory in relation to the Atlantic slave trade. Over the course of the book, the author analyses a vast range of colonial memories that deal with public and genealogical spheres from the sixteenth century onwards, as well as the impacts of racism's legacies in contemporary societies. Geographically, Araujo selects the United States, France, and England, countries that were directly involved with the Atlantic slave trade and that have tended to suppress or attenuate these legacies in official discourses, at least until recently. Brief historical case studies from Brazil and the Republic of Benin are also incorporated into her analyses. The author shows the complexity and hardship of dealing with memories of colonial slavery times, especially since histories of slavery have been always fueled by colonial distortion of facts, which has helped to maintain oppressive hegemonic structures. With that in mind, Araujo opens her research to the devastating memories handed down by the descendants of Black bondspeople to expose the falsehoods of official histories and make the point that history and memory have always been biased (16).

In the introduction, Araujo begins by reminding readers that the history of the Atlantic slave trade continues to affect Black lives today, citing the ongoing reality of racially

motivated hate crimes and killings in the United States and the consequent demands of Black communities to remove statues and rename streets that honor slave traders and pro-slavery individuals (52). Memory, when associated with the public sphere, is "conceived as a political space between the individual citizen and the state, where social agents engage in debates on a variety of public issues" (57). As the author investigates the historical arc of the Atlantic slave trade, she affirms that shared memory is built through intergenerational transmission between individuals, depending on social frameworks "such as the institutions of family and religion" (11) and ultimately enabling these frameworks to channel the common experiences that constitute shared identities, such as blackness and whiteness. In this sense, public memory is closely linked to collective memory, serving as a "political instrument to build, assert and reinforce collective identities" (12). However, public memory relies on power relations. The book presents six chapters in which a diverse array of case studies contributes to the argument that collective memory is not only racialized, but also "gendered, and shaped by the ideology of white supremacy" (16).

In the course of the first chapter, entitled "Weaving Collective Memories," the author brings to attention how the official memory of once-colonial countries is often managed by white heirs, while the descendants of slaves continue to be racialized and framed in "disadvantaged social and economic positions" (13). Black writers, artists, activists, and other allies of the Black struggle for social justice keep confronting this contaminated public history. Statues, monuments, and street names are aspects of this history and must not be seen as trivial presences in cities' landscapes, but rather as echoes of an atrocious colonial past that must be somehow revised. The author describes the trajectories of