

Lesson Plan & Assignment: Sensory Auto-Ethnographies
Speech in American Culture, Fall 2015, Updated Spring 2018, M. Ritchie

Assignment Length: One class period, written work outside of class

Overview

The field of rhetoric is waking up to its senses, according to Debbie Hawhee's essay "Rhetoric's Sensorium." Rhetoric is *bodily*; we experience influence, identity, and linguistic habits in our daily lives at a non-conscious level. This lesson plan and subsequent assignment task students with accessing some of the bodily knowledge that rhetorical artifacts provide for us, by writing a sensory auto-ethnography of statues on the University of Texas at Austin campus. These can include Robert E. Lee, any of the supporting six Confederate generals, George Washington, Woodrow Wilson, Barbara Jordan, Martin Luther King, Jr., and/or Cesar Chavez. Students may choose one statue or a combination of many to figure into their works. Three of these orators you have already read in this course ("Speech in American Culture").

There has been a lot of recent controversy about these statues, as they have sparked a campus-wide debate about university space, freedom of expression, and respecting minority students on campus. As a way to map these controversies, students are asked to think about them *first* at the level of feeling. In other words, we are dealing with how *feelings* and *sensations* can act as evidence.

Learning Objectives

1. Learn the method of auto-ethnography and how it relates to rhetoric in its capacity for *vivid description*
2. Generate data through written field notes outside
3. Create two auto-ethnographies: one short in class, one lengthier outside of class

Instructor Preparation

1. Read "Casino Light" by Joey Russo in *Capacious* (*Updated Spring 2018)
2. Research other examples of auto-ethnographies to show students
3. Be able to provide a short overview about the statue controversy on campus, keeping in mind that that ethnography is meant to draw out their feelings on the ground rather than having an instructor explain how to feel

Student Preparation

1. Read "Casino Light" by Joey Russo in *Capacious* (*Updated Spring 2018). Focus on the *aims* of ethnography. What should it do?
2. Bring a writing device to class, either paper and pen/pencil or a laptop computer

Lesson Plan

The assignment is about *describing*, through vivid details, *an impasse of rhetoric*: it is both impersonal and personal, meaning constrained by collective culture, society, and norms, while also implicating the deepest, most meaningful parts of our identities. Rhetoric is not confined to speeches. The auto-ethnography should draw out how a researcher feels about the statues, which connects to these larger contexts. As numerous rhetoricians who study memorials and

monuments (like Carole Blaire, Greg Dickinson, and Brian Ott's *Places of Public Memory*) attest, space/place and material structures are rhetorical.

In class, students will be introduced to the concept of auto-ethnography and begin to write brief (300-400 word) auto-ethnographies in class, on a topic of instructor's choice. It can be about the room they are in, a coffee shop on campus they go to, etc. Or, instructors can have students briefly go outside to find a place to begin writing an ethnography, as long as it does not implicate the statues yet. Students will then, outside of class, engage in writing about their experiences with statues on UT campus in a 2-page, double-spaced essay. For this, students may find it useful to engage the statues, to be around them, get a feel for the space they occupy. **Please note:** if students are uncomfortable being around some of the statues, you need not go near them. That distance *is* part of an auto-ethnography. One of the potential findings of our ethnographies might be the relations of closeness/distance that different students have to these artifacts.

Accessibility

Students may feel differently about the statues, so instructors are encouraged to respect students' personal space. The assignment requires note-taking outside of class, so students should have access to writing devices and paper.

Assessment

This assignment is worth 20 points of overall participation. Instructors should assess the written auto-ethnographies on the basis of detail of data in field notes, creativity, the extent to which it accomplishes the descriptive qualities of auto-ethnography, and writing mechanics.

A further component can be in-class discussion where the course anonymously reads some responses and deliberates about its themes, so that students can understand differences in lived experience.