

# Justice Pedagogy: Grade 1–3 Students Challenge Racist Statues

Meir Muller

“All of these monuments make me think of Jim Crow.”  
“Who is Jim Crow?”  
“He said black and white children could not be friends.”  
“Does he have a monument?”  
“I don’t see it, but I think he is here.”

This conversation between third graders occurred when 35 students (in grades 1-3) joined together to discuss monuments on the grounds of the South Carolina State House. The dialogue at this independent school was facilitated by pre-service teachers enrolled in my social studies methods course designed to address issues of inequity and privilege. The children’s comments about the monuments and their thoughts about the apocryphal Jim Crow prompted the pre-service teachers to engage the children in a ten-week inquiry project that ultimately led to insights shared in this article about the processes involved in enacting justice-focused pedagogy.

Located across 30 different states, there are more than 1,700 symbols of the Confederacy including 772 monuments and statues on public property, and 100 schools named after prominent Confederates, as reported by the Southern Poverty Law Center in June 2018.<sup>1</sup> Questions about the appropriateness of keeping these tributes to the Confederacy in places of honor have become flashpoints for public controversy in many communities. They came to a head in 2017 when white supremacists organized a rally to block the removal of a stature of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia, which tragically resulted in the death of a “counter protester” who favored civil rights and reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> These events, along with President Trump’s description of some of the white supremacist marchers as “very fine people” heightened debates across the country. The media coverage was not lost on the pre-service teachers or on the children in their care at that time. Current events brought issues of racism and racially-motivated violence into their daily discussions. It is within this national context that this story of justice pedagogy is situated.

## Images Matter

Young children may encounter symbols glorifying prejudice and inequity when visiting public spaces with monuments memorializing racists, attending schools named for an avowed racist, or watching evening news reporting on the activities of white supremacists. Scholars have documented that when that happens, children need cognitive and emotional tools to process their experiences in a thoughtful and informed manner.<sup>3</sup> In spite of the fact that some educators appreciate the importance of counteracting messages of racism, they can find it difficult to enact lessons (or even have informal conversations) around issues of racism and social justice.

To address the discomfort or lack of confidence and expertise that teachers may feel, this article describes a justice-based project implemented by 26 preservice teachers pursuing early childhood (birth-through-third-grade) education certification. In addition to findings related to the process and impact of the project, this article includes a description of the project’s 10-week implementation, which involved 9 first graders, 15 second graders, and 11 third graders. However, the goal of this article is not to suggest that teachers reproduce this experience precisely, but to inspire teachers to become familiar with justice-orientated pedagogy and embark on efforts to engage in justice-based work in their own classrooms.

## Teaching Framework

Justice-orientated teaching is a framework built upon the supposition that students learn from critically examining existing structural inequities.<sup>4</sup> It is designed to foster students’ critical examination of the world and to prompt them to consider possibilities for social change. This approach asks teachers and students to identify and address issues of injustice, analyze underlying causes, and develop and enact possible solutions. Teachers who are successful using this pedagogy continually deepen their own social studies content knowledge; develop reciprocal relationships with students; embrace their role in

challenging unjust conditions or events; and work with students, communities and other stakeholders to create change.<sup>5</sup>

In her book *Teaching Civic Literacy Projects*, Shira Epstein offers a three-step, practical approach: students can (a) describe, (b) study, and (c) then address a social problem.<sup>6</sup> These three phases of civic literacy align with the Four Dimensions of Inquiry Arc set forth in the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework*: (1) Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries, (2) Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools, (3) Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence, and (4) Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action.<sup>7</sup>

### Preparing to Teach in the K-3 Classroom

To prepare for this project, each pre-service teacher polished her social justice lens by critically examining a number of picture books. The goal was to understand whose voices were upheld, minimized, or overlooked. Three books were used: *The House*

*that George Built* by Suzanne Slad; *Chocolate Me* by Taye Diggs; *Brick by Brick* by Charles Floyd; and *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* by Ramin Ganeshram.<sup>8</sup> The preservice teachers problematized the latter book for its romanticizing of enslavement. They critiqued *The House that George Built* for barely mentioning that enslaved people performed much of the manual labor during construction of the White House. They felt that the author prioritized white male leaders and “silenced” enslaved people’s voices.

The pre-service teachers also analyzed two recent advertisements found on social media. The first was a video for Dove body wash, which includes a sequence in which a black woman pulls a shirt over her head and emerges as a white woman.<sup>9</sup> The students felt that the ad could be interpreted as showing that soap “gets you whiter,” glorifying white people and diminishing the dignity of black people. The second example was an ad for Gap Kids in which the elbow of a tall white child rests on

Table 1. Phases of Civic Literacy aligned with the Four Dimensions of the C3 Framework’s Inquiry Arc

Pedagogical Components	Classroom Application
<b>Justice-orientated Teaching</b>	
Explicitly address issues of injustice	Children discuss the injustice of having monuments for people who supported slavery or segregation.
Critique the status quo through the use of a “critical lens”	Children ask who made the decisions to erect these monuments; why other people (Harriett Tubman, Hilary Clinton, etc.) did not have monuments; whether African Americans were consulted in the decision-making process.
Analyze the cause of injustice	Children try to understand why these monuments were built.
<b>A. Teacher Components*</b>	
Develop reciprocal relationships with students	Spend large parts of the first few weeks forming relationships with the students.
Deepen students’ content knowledge	Take part in independent research.
Embrace the role as active participants in challenging unjust conditions or events	Agree to focus on issues of race, equity and social justice.
Work collaboratively with students, communities and other stakeholders to create positive change	Work with the young students to draft communications to legislators about desired changes.
<b>B. Phases of Civic Literacy and the Four Dimensions of the C3 Framework*</b>	
Describe a social problem. Dimension 1: Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries	Children discuss the problem of monuments memorializing racist individuals.
Study the problem. Dimension 2: Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools, Dimension 3: Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence	Children use a critical lens to explore issues of history and civics.
Address the problem. Dimension 4: Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action	Children write letters legislators about their own observations and opinions.

\*Preservice teachers enacted these Teacher Components in our project

the head of the shorter child standing next to her. The shorter girl is the only black child in the photo.<sup>10</sup> While this ad was supposed to champion female empowerment, the students felt that it degraded the only black person in the advertisement by posturing her like “an arm rest” for the taller child. After reading the books and discussing the advertisements, one pre-service teacher commented that she could no longer look at any text without thinking about who might be degraded and who glorified. Gaining confidence in their ability to use a critical lens, the pre-service teachers were ready to employ this skill with the children by focusing on the three phases of civic literacy over a ten-week period.

### Implementing a Social Justice Curriculum with Children

The preservice teachers worked with the children for 30–40 minutes once a week. Each session began with two pre-service teachers describing the session’s goal to all the children. Then small groups of three children, predominately from the same grade level, worked with two pre-service teachers who facilitated discussions related to history and civics, which are core disciplines in the C3 Framework.

#### Weeks 1 to 3: Describing the Social Problem

During week one, the pre-service teachers introduced the notion of critically reading texts and initiated discussions of social problems using books read aloud. They began by engaging the children in discussions about *The House that George Built* and then *Brick by Brick*. After reading each book, the preservice teachers asked, “Who built the White House?” Initially, most children replied that George Washington built the White House. However, after reading the second text, which emphasized the role of enslaved Africans during construction, they reconsidered. One third grader described the problem with reading only one book: “If we only read the first book, we would have never known the whole story.” Many children observed that that slaves’ voices were not heard in the first text. The pre-service teachers taught the children the term “critical lens” by explaining that reading with a critical lens means noticing when people’s stories are missing, stories are mis-told, or told from only one perspective. If only one person’s viewpoint dominates a story, then we should put our “critical lens” to use and think about what other experiences and viewpoints may have existed at that time and place. Whose voice is left out of this telling?

In the second week, the pre-service teachers reminded the children about their critical lens and showed them pictures of monuments located on the South Carolina State House grounds, including those of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and George Washington, as well as South Carolina governors Wade Hampton and Ben Tillman. The three questions were posed:

- What is a monument?
- Why might we build a monument showing a person or event?
- What do you notice about monuments at the State House?

In response to the first question, almost all of the younger children said that a monument is a way to honor people. In response to the second question, they exhibited a shared understanding that people are honored with monuments because they “were good,” “deserved respect,” or “helped our country.” When asked the third question the children only supplied general information: gender, style of clothing, color of the monument, and the material the monument was made from.

In the third week the pre-service teachers decided that more concrete resources might encourage richer conversations, so they introduced the Library of Congress’ Primary Source Analysis Tool ([www.loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/primary-source-analysis-tool)) to support children’s observation, reflection, and questioning (C3 Framework, Dimension 2). The pre-service teachers added the following prompts to the Library of Congress’ tool asking:

- What did you notice first?
- What details do you see?
- Are there any words on the monument?
- Who might have made the monument?
- What message do you think the monument’s creators hoped to give?
- What can you learn from examining the monument?
- What do you wonder about the monument?

Even with this supporting tool, the younger children focused primarily on the physical aspects of the monument while some of the third-graders engaged in more nuanced conversation. For example, the third graders examined a plaque accompanying a statue of President Washington reading that soldiers from Sherman’s army damaged George Washington’s cane as depicted on the statue. They discussed why this fact was chosen to be on the plaque instead of facts about President Washington. They reasoned that those deciding on the plaque’s text wanted to make the Union soldiers seem bad. The children were beginning to bring the possibility of bias in the design of monuments into their critical talk.

The following entry from a pre-service teacher’s journal entry illustrates another instance when children reflected on the message of a monument:

My “social studies buddies” and I were researching Wade Hampton’s monument and discussing his role in the Civil War. Each of the second graders

was convinced that Wade Hampton wanted to end slavery. The children knew that Wade Hampton was a Confederate soldier and owned 3,000 slaves, but they were sure that Wade Hampton wanted slaves to be free. Two children explained, “He must have wanted them free because he has a monument.” The children continued, “Only good people have monuments, and therefore Wade Hampton must have been good.”

During these conversations, it seemed clear that the monuments and their inscriptions created cognitive dissonance for several of the children. They struggled to understand motives for the wording on Washington’s plaque and were even more confused about why a monument was built to celebrate a man who had owned many slaves.

### **Weeks 4 to 6: Studying the Social Problem**

At this point, the pre-service teachers decided to have the children choose one monument to study together. By focusing on one monument, the groups might share resources and eventually take joint action if they felt action was warranted. The children were excited to vote, each group hoping their monument would be chosen. First, each group gave a 3-to-5-minute presentation on the monument that had been their focus of study. They shared three facts, as well as reasons why their monument should be studied by the full group. After listening to the presentations, the children voted to focus on the monument of Benjamin Tillman. One child described him as, “The meanest person to have a monument because he said black people would never have rights in South Carolina and that black people could never be equal to white people.” This description, along with his penchant for angry speeches and colorful nickname, “Pitchfork” (the weapon that he threatened to use on President Cleveland), seemed to influence the children’s decision.

In the fifth week of the study, the children again used a critical lens by examining magazines to see which groups of people were pictured most often, which least often, and how groups were depicted. These conversations included the treatment of gender, race, economic status, and body image. Also, during this session, the two groups that had spent the first three weeks learning about Tillman shared additional information about him. The pre-service teachers saw this as an opportunity for the children to analyze the Tillman monument, so, in the sixth week of the study, they asked the children these questions:

- Do you see issues of injustice present in the Tillman monument?
- If so, where do you see evidence of that?
- Based on your answers, what might be the impact of having this monument on display?

To address the first question, the children read the inscription on the Tillman monument and used the Library of Congress analysis tool to facilitate discussion. This time, however, the pre-service teachers amended the tool by asking children to use a critical lens to observe the monument to determine whether it represented injustice, and if so, how it reflected injustice. Did the monument silence, degrade, or celebrate specific individuals or groups? Students developed questions they might ask the people who built the monument, legislators who voted to build and sustain it, and people who visited the monument.

The monument’s inscription quotes Tillman as saying that the “country belongs to all of us ... let us share it with each other,” and describes Tillman as “the friend and leader of the common people.” The children were thoughtful about this complimentary language as compared to what they had read about Tillman’s racist remarks and actions (C3 Framework, Dimension 3). They seemed unsure about whose voices were being privileged. Hesitant guesses included common people (as written on the monument), rich people, Tillman’s friends, and “people who won the Civil War.”<sup>11</sup> When it came to whose voices were being marginalized, many children from each grade level seemed to agree that African Americans were being silenced, reasoning that since a monument had been built honoring a person who hated African Americans, then those who were hated must have been silenced. This led directly to discussions about the monument’s impact on how visitors might perceive South Carolinians generally to be racist. One child pointed out that the monument would not project a welcome to African Americans coming to the state: “Tillman was a racist, and if an African American comes to South Carolina [and sees the monument] they will feel uncomfortable.”

### **Weeks 7 to 10: Addressing the Social Problem**

As the study entered its final phase children were more vocal in challenging the injustice of having monuments that memorialized racists. These questions framed their work during this third phase of Epstein’s civic literacy framework:

- Should changes occur regarding the monument?
- Should actions be taken to create change? If not, why? If so, what actions?

The children were unanimous in the view that change was necessary. They brainstormed changes that they would like to see. Most of them wanted to see the Tillman monument destroyed. The children were disappointed to learn that the South Carolina Heritage Act makes the removal of a monument very difficult because no historical monument can be altered or moved without a two-thirds vote in both chambers of the General Assembly. However, they had other suggestions. Some wanted to fill the State House grounds with non-racist monuments so that the racist monuments would be less noticeable. They wanted to add women such as Hillary Clinton and

Harriet Tubman. Children also suggested creating an app that would activate as people passed the monuments, providing a description of Tillman's racism. First graders wanted the app to make a blaring alarm while repeating the word "racist" over and over. Neither the children nor the pre-service teachers voiced the opinion that the monuments should remain unaltered. In hindsight, it would have been valuable to share this option and to discuss the varying points of views so that the children could learn more about evaluating and responding to multiple perspectives (C3 Framework, Dimension 2).

During weeks eight and nine, the children reviewed their ideas, realizing that they did not have the time or expertise to put them into action. The pre-service teachers suggested that they write to legislators (C3 Framework, Dimension 4) and

provided guidance about how to write effective letters (identifying oneself, keeping the letter brief, getting to the point, and explaining why this issue matters). It should be noted that some schools might prefer that the letters are written as a class exercise and not sent to legislators.

The children worked together to identify the issues they wanted to emphasize and, individually or with their small group wrote letters to legislators (page 22). Fifteen of the letters indicated that the writer thought the monument should be removed because Tillman was a racist. Other recurring themes were that African Americans would feel uncomfortable seeing the monument and people will think that everyone in our state supports the monument remaining there. The letters were sent to legislators but unfortunately, no responses were received.

## Background for Teachers on Benjamin Tillman and White Supremacy

Benjamin Riley Tillman, Jr. (1847–1918) served as governor of South Carolina and U.S. senator. He was among the founders of Clemson University and Winthrop College. Tillman was born at Chester, his family's plantation in Edgefield District, South Carolina. The young Ben helped his mother run the inn and manage the family's plantation and her slaves. He was a bookish child, reading eagerly and widely at a local private school. In 1864, just shy of 17 years of age, he withdrew from the Bethany Academy to enlist in the Confederate army. However, a cranial tumor incapacitated him for two years. Tillman recovered, but he lost his left eye.

As a U.S. senator in 1900, Tillman stated that the African-American "is not meddling with politics, for he found that the more he meddled with them the worse off he got. As to his 'rights'—I will not discuss them now. We of the South have never recognized the right of the negro to govern white men, and we never will. We have never believed him to be equal to the white man, and we will not submit to his gratifying his lust on our wives and daughters without lynching him. I would to God the last one of them was in Africa and that none of them had ever been brought to our shores. But I will not pursue the subject further."

During the 1876 gubernatorial campaign, rifle clubs, often calling themselves Red Shirts, were determined to use violence, intimidation or fraud to ensure the victory of ex-Confederate general Wade Hampton and the Democrats. This strategy was often called the Edgefield Plan.

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1876, the Red Shirts harassed and assaulted black voters and murdered African-American politicians. Tillman's prominent role in the Hamburg and Ellenton massacres that year secured his prominence among Edgefield District's political elite. For example, he played a leading role in the Hamburg Massacre on July 8, 1876, resulting in the death of one white man and six black freedmen.

During Tillman's governorship, there was a dramatic rise in the number of lynchings of African-Americans in South Carolina and across the South as a whole. Tillman initially made efforts to control mob rule, and, during his first term as governor, actually spoke out against lynchings. But during his second term he often defended lynching in his public statements, once saying that in certain circumstances he would be willing to lead a lynch mob himself. In 1893, he was widely and justly criticized for his inadequate protection of a black prisoner named John Peterson that probably led to Peterson's lynching. Perhaps most damaging in the long run was Tillman's rhetoric over the course of his career that bolstered the idea that white violence was justified and to be expected whenever white supremacy was challenged.



Statue of Benjamin Tillman on the grounds of the state capitol in Columbia, South Carolina, erected in 1940.

**SOURCE:** "Historical Figures: Benjamin Ryan Tillman" (Clemson University), <https://www.clemson.edu/about/history/bios/ben-tillman.html>.

Billy Haythorn/commons.wikimedia.org

This caused the pre-service teachers to speculate that they could have sent the letters to more legislators and followed up with phone calls.

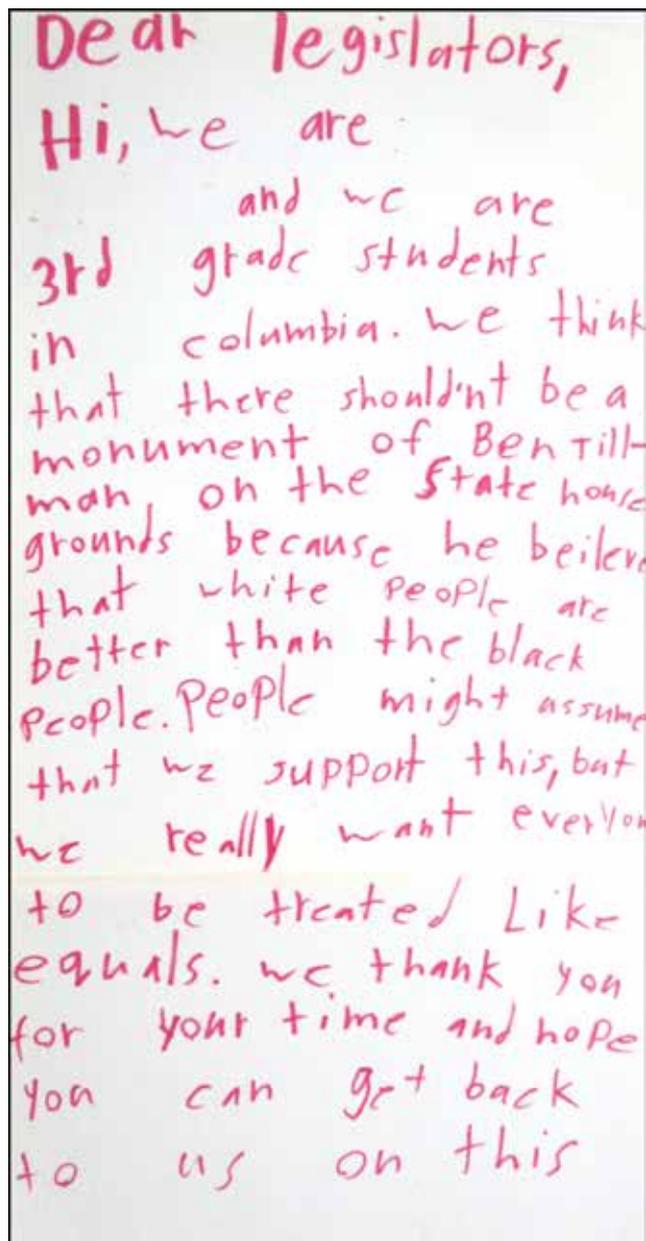
## Conclusion

In assessing the effectiveness of their teaching, the pre-service teachers felt the children had effectively applied the three phases of civic literacy. Using a justice-oriented framework, they felt that the children addressed issues of injustice after critiquing the status quo using a critical lens. However, the pre-service teachers did not feel they had been successful in helping the children analyze the causes of these injustices. They had hoped that the children would gain an understanding that systemic racism is part of the United States' history. Although they facilitated the children's examination of how legislation surrounding the funding of monuments occurs, the children did not address those concerns in any of their letters. Their understandings seemed to focus on the individual actions of Tillman as a racist, and not the systemic action that led to him being honored with a monument. However, the fact that the children became more adept at using a critical lens to see how a monument could degrade voices in the community suggests that further explorations could lead children to develop deeper analytical skills and use them to examine and respond to systemic issues of injustice.

Through this experience, a group of young children grew in their understanding of inequity, critical thinking, and ability to take appropriate action. In the final session, the third grader quoted in the opening vignette was asked if she had any new thoughts. She replied, "African American and white children are now friends so that is good, but Tillman was not taken down so I guess we have to write more letters because Jim Crow's ideas are still around." Providing students with opportunities to use a critical lens is a foundational step in helping them become agents of transformation. With the echo of Jim Crow still heard in actions of today, such preparation is anchored in the deepening of our own abilities to describe, study, and address social problems, thus fulfilling our responsibility to enact social justice pedagogies for a better tomorrow. 🌍

## Notes

1. Southern Poverty Law Center, "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy" (Accessed June 4, 2018), [www.splcenter.org/20180604/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy](http://www.splcenter.org/20180604/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy).
2. S.G. Stolbery and B.M. Rosenthal, *Man Charged after White Nationalist Rally in Charlottesville Ends in Deadly Violence*, *New York Times* (August 12, 2017).
3. Gloria S. Boutte, *Educating African American Students: And How Are the Children?* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).
4. Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath, Alison G. Dover, and Nick Henning, *Preparing to Teach Social Studies for Social Justice: Becoming a Renegade* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2016); Alison G. Dover, N. Henning, and R. Agarwal-Rangnath, "Reclaiming Agency: Justice-Oriented Social Studies Teachers Respond to Changing Curricular Standards," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 59 (2016): 457–67.
5. Bree Picower, *Practice What You Teach: Social Justice Education in the Classroom and the Streets* (London: Routledge, 2012).



6. Shira Epstein, *Teaching Civic Literacy Projects: Student Engagement with Social Problems, Grades 4–12* (New York: Teachers College, 2014).
7. NCSS, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Study State Standards* (Silver Springs, MD: NCSS, 2013), [www.socialstudies.org/c3](http://www.socialstudies.org/c3).
8. Taye Diggs, *Chocolate Me* (New York: Square Fish, 2015); Charles Floyd, *Brick by Brick* (New York: Amistad, 2015); Suzanne Slade, *The House that George Built* (New York: Charlesbridge, 2015); Ramin Ganeshram, *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2016). Critics lambasted this book, and the publisher quickly recalled it. A few used copies are available today from Amazon for about \$191 each.
9. "People are Accusing this Dove Ad of being Racist," [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).
10. "Gap Kids Accused of Passive Racism," [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).
11. Teachers later clarified that these monuments were erected by those who sympathized with the Confederacy, which lost the Civil War.

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## Resources for Teachers

### Websites

"Civil War Memory," a crowdsourcing project, aims "to assist high school and college educators to better understand "the ongoing debate surrounding the meaning of Confederate monuments and the American Civil War." It's curated by Kevin M. Levin, a history teacher and author. [cwmemory.com](http://cwmemory.com)

"Confederate Monuments: A Lesson Plan (Choices)." To find this free teaching resource (grades 9–12) at the Choices webpage for teachers, enter this phrase in quotes: "History in Dispute: Charlottesville and Confederate Monuments" into the search box (scroll down, left margin to see that box). Choices is a program of Brown University. [choices.edu/teachers-corner](http://choices.edu/teachers-corner).

"Set in Stone," an article by Brian Willoughby in the summer 2013 issue of *Teaching Tolerance*, explores how monuments that venerate individuals who promoted hate and bigotry "affect our efforts to create a more tolerant society." [www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2013/set-in-stone](http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/summer-2013/set-in-stone).

"Who's Heritage?" South Poverty Law Center's webpage on "public symbols of the Confederacy" includes a report (with a map indicating monuments in the continental U.S), action guide, and tips for teachers. [www.splcenter.org/20160421/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy#findings](http://www.splcenter.org/20160421/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy#findings).

### Articles

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Marcus, Alan. S and Levine, Thomas. H., "Remember the Alamo? Learning History with Monuments and Memorials," *Social Education* 74, no. 3 (May/June 2010): 131–134.

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### Books

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