Remembering Sappho: New Perspectives on Teaching (and Writing) Women’s Rhetorical History

Jessica Enoch and Jordynn Jack

Upon reading Sappho’s poem, feminist scholars likely find exigency for teaching histories of women’s rhetoric.1 Remembering Sappho, from a pedagogical perspective, usually means that teachers bring recovered women’s rhetorics into the classroom, prompting students to come to know women as rhetorical agents by analyzing the rhetorical strategies they used to make their voices heard. Teaching women’s rhetorics in this way works toward the ultimate goal of introducing students to a revised and expanded rhetorical tradition—one that not only includes women rhetors but also embraces rhetorical practices alternative to the competitive, public, agonistic, and linear tactics so highly valued for over two thousand years.

In this essay, we imagine a different way to remember rhetorical women like Sappho, and a different way to teach women’s rhetorical history. The pedagogies we forward explore the rhetorical practice of remembering women. Our pedagogical

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project is not so much to ask students to consider women’s place in the rhetorical tradition, but instead to examine with students women rhetors’ historical presence in the public imagination by investigating the rhetorical work that goes into inscribing these women in and erasing them from public memory. Public memory is often defined as a vernacular presentation of the past that significantly shapes understandings of the present as well as expectations for the future. Accordingly, our pedagogies ask students to see the public memorialization of women as a “highly rhetorical process” that makes powerful and persuasive statements about how women have participated in and should participate in public life (Phillips, Introduction 2). Investigating and experimenting with the rhetorical processes at the heart of women’s commemoration opens up new possibilities for feminist teachers and their students. We have found that this pedagogical approach expands our own and our students’ concerns beyond a decidedly academic focus on rhetorical history to meditate more broadly on the rhetorical practice of remembering women in the public arenas we enter and travel through every day of our lives.

The discussion that follows reflects on our individual pedagogical projects that explore the part women’s pasts play in the public imagination, focusing particularly on the work we do with students to analyze and produce public memories about rhetorical women. As we engage in this conversation, we join with scholars such as Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald, who continually experiment with innovative ways to teach women’s rhetorics (e.g., “Pedagogy,” “Riding,” Teaching). Our ultimate goal is to forward a new pedagogical option for teachers of women’s rhetorics—one that draws students’ attention outside the classroom to consider the public and rhetorically powerful project of women’s memorialization.

As we take up this work, we are also interested in letting our pedagogical interventions engage with the work of feminist historiographers in rhetoric. We have found that pedagogies centered on the rhetorical practice of remembering women have the potential to offer different opportunities for scholarly investigation. Thus, in creating this relationship between pedagogical theory and historiographic scholarship, we enact the kind of pedagogical inquiry encouraged by Amy Lee and Shari Stenberg, who argue that instead of using the classroom as a place to test out or “translate” theory, we should consider how our “teaching practice might allow us richer conceptions of theory or might, in fact, constitute theoretical activity in itself” (331). A second project for this essay, then, is to investigate how our pedagogical work can expand the ways scholars compose feminist rhetorical history by approaching the project of “remembering Sappho” from a different angle.

**PUBLIC MEMORY AND PEDAGOGICAL DISSONANCE**

Before we discuss the pedagogies we have developed, we want to identify the pedagogical dissonances we experienced that prompted us to rethink our approaches
to teaching women’s rhetorics. These dissonances, we have found, stem from a fundamental problem of public memory. Over the past five years, we both have taught a variety of courses on women’s rhetorics. While Jess incorporated women’s rhetorics into such courses as first-year composition, persuasive writing, and history of rhetoric, Jordynn has had the opportunity to teach a first-year seminar titled “The Politics of Persuasion: Southern Women’s Rhetorics” for four years running. At first, teaching women’s rhetorical history in these courses did not seem to elicit any pedagogical concerns. With the publication of such excellent anthologies as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s *Man Cannot Speak for Her: Key Texts of the Early Feminists*; Jane Donawerth’s *Rhetorical Theory by Women before 1900*; Shirley Wilson Logan’s *With Pen and Voice: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century African American Women*; and Ritchie and Ronald’s *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric(s)*, we could supply students with rhetorical texts produced by women and then ask our students to analyze this new canon of writings for their rhetorical significance.

Although we certainly recognize the invaluable contribution these anthologies make to rhetorical study, as we experimented with this particular approach to teaching women’s rhetorics, we realized that it was not addressing the persistent questions and concerns students were raising in class. Because Jordynn’s institution is located in the South and because most students come from the region, they often entered her classes intrigued by the very idea that southern women were rhetorical at all. Drawing from the popular and public memory that has surrounded them for most of their lives, her students have in large part been exposed only to portrayals of southern women as stereotyped and often romanticized figures: southern belles, steel magnolias, mammys, or slaves—few of them endowed with the agency to speak (or write) for themselves. Thus, students’ perceptions of southern women’s rhetorical absence implicitly stood at both the center and starting point of the course.

Although Jess’s courses did not always focus on women from a particular region, her students were also working from a perceived absence of women from public memory: they too were amazed that women in the nineteenth century and earlier wrote and spoke publicly. Their response to this absence often moved in two directions. Similar to the ways Ritchie and Ronald write of their students’ experiences with reading women’s rhetorics, Jess’s students also commented, “Look how skillful these women were as rhetoricians. What courageous women they were. How inspiring. More people should know about this heritage” (Ronald and Ritchie, “Pedagogy” 208). In addition to expressing the desire to both appreciate and “spread the word” about women’s rhetorics, however, Jess’s students also voiced frustration. Upon reading writings by women from Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz to Frances Harper, students often asked, “Why haven’t we learned about these women before? Why are we just now learning about these women’s rhetorical achievements?”
As both of us contemplated students’ perceptions of women’s rhetorical absence from the public, rather than the academic, domain, we realized that although presenting students with anthologized readings may enhance their knowledge of women’s rhetorical achievements and the rhetorical tradition, this practice would not address how and why rhetorical women exist (or don’t exist) in articulations of public memory. In response, we began to ask these types of questions: How are rhetorical women remembered and forgotten in the public sphere? How might we produce public memories of rhetorical women that speak to their rhetorical absence?

In the following two sections, we consider our separate pedagogical responses to these questions. Jordynn discusses pedagogical practices that introduce students to archives as sites for the production of alternative public memories about southern female rhetors, and Jess reflects on the pedagogies she developed that involve the public remembrance, forgetting, and commemoration of rhetorical women. Seen together, these pedagogies suggest new ways of teaching women’s rhetoric and new ways to envision feminist historiography.

**Composing Women’s Memory from the Archives**

**Jordynn Jack**

Archives are often associated with the creation of history; they house the documents that enable researchers to conduct meticulous historiographic research. Archives can also be seen, however, as “vehicles of memory” (Millar 121), for it is through an engagement with documents in the archive that people from all walks of life, not just historians, compose public memories, using archival evidence to resurrect a past for public audiences that works to define identities, shape communities, and inform interpretations of the world at the present moment. At large state universities like my own, archives serve as storehouses that generate institutional and regional memory in a number of ways. By compiling records related to the institution, town, state, and region, my university constitutes “the South” as a place with a past worth remembering and saving. The Southern Historical Collection, North Carolina Collection, and University Archives each take charge of a different site of memory (the region, state, and institution), and each one produces public exhibits (both print and digital) that seek to share that memory with students, local residents, and visitors. The goal of my course is for students to use these archives to disturb dominant public memories of southern women’s rhetorical achievements. To reach this goal, my students and I engage in a four-part critical project that includes assessing these archives as complex sites of memory production, recovering southern women rhetors from the archives, examining their rhetorical significance, and producing texts for audiences outside the classroom that offer new memories of these women.
I often start my course by asking students to do a Google image search for “Southern women.” The results are consistently dismaying: most common are images of Vivien Leigh as Scarlett O’Hara (or other nineteenth-century women in hoop skirts), scantily clad women draped over cars or in the confederate flag, and women peddling down-home cooking. All of these images evoke the public memory of the Old South or the Lost Cause—a romanticized version of southern history in which women’s roles are primarily decorative. In class, we examine websites of women authors who have cashed in on such memories of the southern lady, from celebrity home cook Paula Deen to syndicated columnist Ronda Rich, author of the book *What Southern Women Know (And What Every Woman Should)*. Though remarkably successful, these contemporary women draw on public memories of the South: of southern women, of southern hospitality, of cotillions and lemonade on the porch. Dominant images project the message that southern women’s words matter only when they are spoken with a twang and served up with a slice of key lime pie. Taking these messages at face value would make the study of southern women’s rhetorics primarily a study of relationship advice, home cooking recipes, and other texts that send the comforting message that women do not intervene in the realm of politics and public life.

Because the main goals for my course are to trouble this perception of southern women’s rhetoric and to broaden students’ awareness of women’s rhetorical contributions, students and I move from this explication of public memory regarding southern women to investigate texts that offer different iterations of women’s public engagement and rhetorical contributions, starting with texts written in the Civil War and post–Civil War eras. Among the texts we read are Loreta Janeta Velazquez’s 1876 autobiography, *The Woman in Battle*, and Ida B. Wells’s 1892–1900 piece of investigative journalism, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*. Cuban American Velazquez chronicles her exploits as Confederate Lieutenant Harry T. Buford, the role she assumed by cross-dressing as a man. In relaying her narrative, Velazquez places herself within a lineage of women in battle, from the nun-lieutenant Catalina de Eranso to Joan of Arc, to validate her reasons for breaking traditional gender roles. In contrast, as an African American activist, Wells uses her text to carefully challenge dominant justifications for the lynching of black men—justifications that claimed these men raped white women—by relying on testimony from white women who themselves refuted these claims. In analyzing texts such as these, students begin to gain a different picture of southern women, their rhetorical practices, and their role in the region’s public memory.

Including only women such as these in my class might result in students leaving the course knowing about a few exceptional women who defied the expectations placed on them. Such an approach would risk reinforcing a notion of southern women’s history premised on a few notable women, which, as Gerda Lerner has long
argued, assumes a compensatory model of history focused primarily on “exceptional, even deviant women” (358). In the South, especially, such a notion of deviance or exceptionality might only end up supporting the assumption that everyone else was sitting on the porch drinking sweet tea while a few stalwarts were off making speeches or writing essays.

Keeping in mind the injunction to move beyond “exceptional women” in the study of women’s rhetorics, I turn to the archives of the Southern Historical Collection at my university, where my students and I can expand our rhetorical inquiry to the ways everyday women shaped public life through the use of letters, diaries, reports, and articles. My hope is that archival research, as Gesa Kirsch and Liz Rohan suggest, will help us “to understand and explore the fissures of historical narratives, the places where voices have been suppressed, silenced or ignored” (3). Not all of the women featured in the archives at my institution had national reputations, went on lecture tours, or published books; some wrote only in private, while others achieved a modicum of local influence. As just a sampling of the range of women rhetors students might pursue, the university archives hold collections of such prominent local figures as Jessie Daniel Ames, founder of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, and Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, author of *The Making of a Southerner*. They also contain the work of less famous local women such as Harriet Moorehead Berry, secretary for North Carolina’s Good Roads Commission in the 1920s and 1930s, and Katharine Carmichael, former dean of women at my institution. In researching collections such as these, students have the opportunity to gain a richer picture of how southern women communicated and of what issues mattered to them, without necessarily requiring the women they study to be of national repute.

A major goal of this project, however, is for students to enter the archive on their own and to research the women rhetors they find compelling. So that students can conduct such research, they meet with the archivist at my institution, who acclimates them to the nuts and bolts of doing research in the archive: how to request a folder or box, how to handle delicate materials, how to cite archival sources, and so on. In addition to this basic discussion of research methods, students learn something about how archival collections themselves affect the researcher’s ability to shape public memory.

For example, in their discussions with the archivist, students consider who is and who is not represented in the Southern Historical Collection as a whole. As Kirsch and Rohan argue, archives can “re-inscribe power structures and imperialist discourse” (6), and this is certainly the case at my institution. At the orientation session, the archivist explains that the collection was founded in 1915 by Louis Round Wilson, who, along with history professor J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, scoured the region for available materials. From the start, Wilson and Hamilton’s collections focused on white southerners, a legacy that continues to shape the available contents at the
library. My students learn that African American women are significantly underrepresented in the archive, as are African American men, although the library is now actively attempting to correct this bias by seeking out materials that will enrich its holdings in African American history and culture. In addition, the archivist informs students of possible roadblocks in identifying and retrieving women’s materials, explaining that women’s holdings are sometimes filed under family collections named after men, rather than in collections of their own. Thus, we learn that the structure of the archive is itself rhetorical, as it positions researchers to see white men as the primary actors in southern public memory.

Yet, by selecting figures and texts to study, my students do speak back to the archive and its elisions of women from public memory. While most students choose to work in collections housed at the university, some look outside this designated research site to find historical materials about women rhetors in unexpected places. For example, one student, Leighton, discovered a set of papers in her family’s attic belonging to Frances Newman, a relative of hers whom she knew previously as an eccentric. Through her attic archive, Leighton learned that Newman had published three novels (one unpublished) as well as a collection of short stories. Like feminist scholars Wendy Sharer and Charlotte Hogg, this student realized that researchers frequently need to look outside conventional archives to find evidence of women’s rhetorical practice.

As students search both traditional and nontraditional archival sites, they often choose to work with subjects they can identify with in some way, whether it be through their family connections, as in Leighton’s case, their raced and classed identities, or their social and political investments. And these connections, not surprisingly, initiate student constructions of southern women’s rhetorical past that disturb dominant public memories in different ways.

Often, for example, African American students in my classes seek out archives that feature African American women, such as a series of diary entries from the University of North Carolina’s (UNC) first black female student, Karen Parker, or the letters from Pauli Murray, who was denied admission to UNC’s law school. For these students, Parker’s and Murray’s writings help to identify a past for black women at my university that challenges institutional memories, which are overwhelmingly white and male, oriented around sports and Old Boy’s Club traditions. Similarly, students interested in questions of civil rights have chosen to study women who were active in this cause, such as Ames and Anne Queen, leader of UNC’s Campus YMCA. Although civil rights certainly forms part of the dominant public memory of the South, studying these women’s efforts helps students to better portray women’s involvement in those issues, which has often been marginalized.

Other students’ personal interests and family backgrounds lead them to archives that work to complicate the public memory of the South as unrelentingly white and
gentle. For instance, Chester decided to study Anne Romaine, a folk singer involved in an interracial folk music project in the 1960s, for the following reasons:

Personally, Anne Romaine first attracted my interest because of her songwriting ability. Being an artist myself, I admire art that clearly sends across a true message and I thought that analyzing the rhetorical qualities in her lyrics would be very interesting. Then I noticed how a lot of her music has an involvement with the textile industry. There is a cotton mill factory about twenty minutes away from my house and my grandparents and great aunts actually worked there when they were younger. My grandmother and great aunts never really told me much about their time in the mills, so as I read the lyrics to the folk songs that Anne sang in her concerts, I wondered what life was like for my own family members. Essentially, through learning about Anne Romaine’s work, I’m learning about my own heritage.

Another student, Helena, chose to investigate sociologist Olive M. Stone, giving this rationale in her proposal:

I chose to work with this archive because as a person from a lower social class, I see a lot of the problems everyday that some people miss, being from a higher social class, issues like race conflict, hunger, drug abuse, etc. Those problems have been present in society for as long as the country has been around; some people may think they’ve gotten “better” and some may feel they’ve gotten “worse.” Whatever the general opinion may be, I’ve always found it interesting how other generations apart from my own viewed the issues we still face today.

In each of these cases, students find rhetors and texts that help them to construct new memories of people, issues, or time periods that matter to them. The researcher’s hand in shaping public memory does not go unnoticed, however. In making their choices and identifying rhetors of interest, students gain critical insight into the fact that the construction of public memory is just as much about present concerns and individual interests as it is about past actions.

The work for students certainly does not end with identifying subjects of study. Based on my students’ and my own frustration that the women they study are often virtual unknowns in the public imaginary, I began a website, Southern Women’s Rhetorics, to showcase students’ work. Accordingly, a great deal of my course asks students to explore ways to produce memories of southern women rhetors by sharing their research and writing with outside audiences we identify, such as public and high school teachers, local history buffs, and college-level researchers (students and professors) who might be interested in southern history. Here, students create a series of projects based on their archival findings. They compose a blog post introducing their figure, a research article to be posted on the course website (http://siteslab.org/courses/jjack/80), and a digital project in which students work together to place women rhetors in groups (civil rights activists, women in politics, university women, and so on) and highlight how such women attended to these particular issues.
A major focus of these Web-based projects is for students to consider how they want to intervene in the memory of southern women. One way in which they accomplish this intervention is through choosing and framing the design features of their websites. For instance, the group of students who worked with archives related to university women (20th Century Women at UNC, http://carolinawomen.web.unc.edu) chose an iconic image related to my institution—the Old Well—in order to brand their site as part of the school’s history, while the group working on southern women’s activism (Southern Women Activists, http://southernactivists.web.unc.edu) chose an image of a magnolia to reclaim and revise the steel magnolia stereotype. In making these choices, students expect their audience to recognize the image as a metonym for a specific aspect of southern history; their goal, however, is to play on these familiar images of the past, repurposing them so that they now evoke new memories about southern women’s rhetorical activities. The Southern Women Activists group worked toward such ends, making the following statement on its website home page:

The listed women are [...] characteristic of “steel magnolias”; they are self-motivated, determined, and strong-willed activists. Many were mothers, but they continued to help those who were unfairly represented. The historical and modern women drew on their southern values and characteristics to begin movements, start organizations, and change the South.

Here, students’ use of the steel magnolia image provides a familiar entry point for audiences, while the text that accompanies the image redefines who steel magnolias are. Such a strategy usefully challenges what students considered to be the more nefarious concepts of southern womanhood (such as the passive southern belle) as they leverage the image of the magnolia in particular, and the website more generally, as an argument for an alternative public memory of southern women as rhetors.

Though Web design and image selection are certainly important aspects of the project, the most crucial part of students’ work is to focus their audience’s attention on southern women’s rhetorical accomplishments as a means of challenging the perception that these women were historically seen, but not heard. Accordingly, students have to decide how to integrate consideration of their research subjects’ rhetorical skills, along with their accomplishments. For instance, in her section on Olive Stone (http://ncwomenpolitics.web.unc.edu/olive-matthews-stone), Helena identified “generalization” as a unique strategy in Stone’s sociological writing, one that allowed her to connect to readers by describing, in detail, a place and set of people that has been fictionalized—a technique much like the one Shirley Brice Heath uses in *Ways With Words*. Similarly, Cora used her Web page on Annabel Morris Buchanan (http://engl080.web.unc.edu/about) to describe how Buchanan argued for the preservation of southern culture not only through explicit appeals in speeches, but also through
composing, arranging, and collecting traditional southern hymns. In projects such as these, students help to compose new memories about southern women’s involvement in culture and politics by showcasing their rhetorical achievements.

As students produce analyses of southern women’s rhetorical work, they also often include and analyze archival materials that remind audiences of the constraints women faced in their daily lives. For example, Hannah posted to her digital exhibit the permission slips and rules governing first-year female students at my institution in order to support her claim that “[i]t was expected of these women to be representatives not only of themselves and their families, but for southern women as a whole” (20th Century Women at UNC, http://carolinawomen.web.unc.edu/dean-of-women). Similarly, by highlighting the challenges facing Parker, Ava and Tanya drew attention to the fact that the university was not a welcoming place for black women. “Her words are chilling,” Ava and Tanya write, and “you can almost hear the vulnerability in her young voice” as Parker describes the loneliness and isolation she felt at the university. By drawing attention to the racist and sexist attitudes and policies these women faced, Hannah, Ava, and Tanya produced websites that not only figure southern women as rhetors but also challenge more broad-based and comforting narratives that shape public memories about the university.

Asking students to compose public memories about southern women rhetors has tremendously shifted my pedagogical concerns. Here, the emphasis is not so much on teaching students that these women spoke, wrote, sang, and researched; instead, the focus is on exploring with students how they might leverage archival documents as a means to bring women’s rhetorical achievements into the public imagination. Of course, this pedagogy brings with it new opportunities and challenges: right away, I realized I could not teach this class on my own. I needed help educating students about the archives themselves and the research methods they had to cultivate in order to make the best use of the collections’ holdings. Thus, I had the opportunity (and the good fortune) to build a network of expertise that included a subject specialist librarian, an archivist, and an undergraduate research assistant funded by the university’s Office for Undergraduate Research. Other moments weren’t as rewarding. For example, a major concern for the digital projects was helping students to negotiate technological constraints. Because the Southern Historical Collection discourages photocopying, I had to make sure that students had access to digital cameras, and once students “copied” images of their documents, I had to find the best way to make these images available, which was a challenge given the low resolution and high bandwidth requirements of many of their photographs. Overall, though, the pedagogy I created allowed me to reexamine the most basic premises for teaching women’s rhetorics, as this locally based, archival project enabled me to think once again about such questions as why students should learn women’s rhetorical history, how they should learn it, and most important, what they might do with it.
Remembering, Forgetting, and Memorializing Women

Jess Enoch

Like Jordynn’s, the public memory pedagogy I developed also positioned me to think critically about the most basic concerns at the heart of teaching women’s rhetorics. And, like Jordynn, I asked myself these questions because of the pedagogical dissonance I experienced in my first instantiations of teaching women’s rhetorics. As noted earlier, upon being introduced to women’s rhetorics, my students consistently evidenced both a frustration that they had not previously learned about these women and an interest in the possibilities of “spreading the word” about these rhetorical figures. My pedagogical revisions have worked to address these concerns by composing courses that take up a kind of four-pronged approach to women’s rhetorical history. I work in my courses to (1) introduce students to women’s rhetorical achievements; (2) analyze the strategies of forgetting that often strike these achievements from public record; (3) investigate public memory projects that commemorate rhetorical women; and (4) produce commemorative projects that aim to bring these women and their work into the public imagination. While all four of these course goals connect to and reinforce the others, I often couple the first and second objectives and then the third and fourth objectives so that each pairing works in tandem.

The first pairing asks students not only to analyze the significance of women’s rhetorical productions, but also to explore the various ways that publics have remembered and forgotten these women and their words. For instance, when studying Native American teacher and rhetor Zitkala-Ša, my students and I begin by analyzing the rhetorical strategies she invokes in three autobiographical essays she published in the Atlantic Monthly that critique the educational practices deployed at the Carlisle Indian School where she taught. We then extend this discussion by considering questions of public memory, asking how Zitkala-Ša and her arguments have been remembered. To answer this question, we read excerpts from the young adult historical novel by Ann Rinaldi, My Heart Is on the Ground, and a ghost story about a young Carlisle student, Take the Tail (also known as Lucy Pretty Eagle),” which continues to circulate in the city of Carlisle. Both of these public memory texts work to supplant Zitkala-Ša’s claims about the school, as the first offers a positive picture of Carlisle’s education and the second diminishes, and even makes light of, the harsh treatment students received.

These latter texts exemplify strategic acts of memory that ultimately cover over Zitkala-Ša’s words through what Renato Rosaldo calls an “imperialist nostalgia,” a memorializing process that “transform[s] the responsible colonial agent into an innocent bystander”; it is a memory project that “establishes one’s innocence while talking about what one has destroyed” (108). By learning how imperialist nostalgia functions, students see that Zitkala-Ša’s arguments did not simply dissipate into thin
air. They were instead challenged and then diminished by powerful and persistent memory texts that garnered greater public attention because their authors and audiences were, most likely, more comfortable with the memories these texts produced.

As my students and I take up such work, we also gain a deeper and more complicated sense of what it means to forget by understanding forgetting as a rhetorical process and investigating the (often) strategic ways in which it is employed. Thus, in addition to analyzing acts of erasure such as imperialist nostalgia, we also explore how forgetting occurs through the practice of remembering differently (Phillips, “Failure” 212). In this case, my students and I not only read Sappho’s poetry as an example of feminist rhetorical practice, but also uncover how Sappho has been remembered and leveraged by various groups throughout history: as lyric poet, lesbian, madwoman, feminist, creative force, distraught lover, sexual deviant, and so on. In thinking through these many Sapphos, students see that she is not a static figure who has been retrieved only for the purposes of the twenty-first-century rhetoric course. Rather, she is a figure who has been remembered differently by different groups and for different rhetorical purposes.

Such examinations lead us to understand forgetting as an action with various rhetorical nuances. Surely, forgetting could be the simple and innocent act of falling out of use or into oblivion. But, forgetting can also be seen as a more overt and strategic process of erasure—a purposeful act of striking from public memory—because the memory of the person or thing proves dangerous to the status quo. Or, in less dramatic fashion, but possibly equal in terms of political effect, forgetting could be the move to “substitute one memory for another” (Zelizer 220): Sappho is not a poet; she’s a madwoman. Thus, forgetting here is envisioned as a complex and productive rhetorical process, one that is “induced by elaborate rituals of remembrance” (Vivian 103). The goal for my students and me is to investigate these elaborate rituals as a means to understand how (and possibly why) women and their rhetorical achievements have been remembered, remembered differently, or forgotten.

While rhetorical acts of remembering and forgetting may be the focus in the first pedagogical pairing, the coupling of the third and fourth objectives explores the rhetorical work that goes into public commemoration. Here, my students and I focus attention on what Pierre Nora calls “sites of memory”: the physical places where memory presents itself in our everyday lives through memorials, monuments, and museums (“Between”). Our goal here is to analyze and help to produce sites of memory dedicated to rhetorical women.

The analytical component is not difficult to imagine; the work is to identify and analyze sites of memory that celebrate women’s rhetorical achievement and public intervention. In my courses, for example, students have analyzed memorial installations such as “In Sisterhood: The Women’s Movement in Pittsburgh,” an oral history, multimedia production that commemorates the work of feminist activists living...
in Pittsburgh. After visiting the installation, students reflect on the rhetorical work of this site of memory, considering such questions as these: What is the argument of the exhibit? What effect do these strategies of remembrance—the oral history, the recorded video, the images, artifacts, and voices—have on the commemoration process? What vision of feminism does this site of memory project? What does it mean to remember these women today? Such questions prompt students to consider the purposeful and exigent commemorative work going on in the installation by reflecting on how arguments about the past speak to concerns in the present.

Analyzing such public memory texts prepares them for the work of memorial production. I turn now to one of the more interesting projects that students and I have engaged. This project centers on the African American female rhetor Harriet Wilson. Wilson wrote *Our Nig, or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* in 1859, making her the first African American novelist in the United States. In my course, we also defined the novelist as a rhetor who used the genre to describe northern white treatment of black indentured servants and to critique the horrible working conditions these servants had to endure.

Working at a university in New England at the time, I became interested in Wilson after meeting JerriAnne Boggis, founder of the Harriet Wilson Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to raising awareness about this African American female rhetor. Boggis initiated the Project in 2002—the year she discovered that Wilson was not just a northern writer, but a Milford, New Hampshire, writer. Milford just so happens to be the town where Boggis lives, and it sits about sixty miles from my former university’s campus. One might think this kind of history would be celebrated inside the state that could call Wilson its own, but her presence was virtually nonexistent. In Milford, even the town’s librarian had not read *Our Nig*, which is not surprising, because the book was not taught in local schools or discussed by local historical societies, and, of course, not one historical marker in the town acknowledged Wilson or her work (Boggis 227). Given the veritable absence of Wilson from the landscape, one objective for the Harriet Wilson Project was to assert her presence by building a monument dedicated to her.

After talking with Boggis and sharing my interest in teaching a class that worked at the intersections of women’s rhetorical history and public memory, I saw an opportunity for students to learn how organizations like the Harriet Wilson Project commemorate African American female rhetors in the public sphere by constructing sites of memory. The hope was that the project would resonate with students in terms of their own lives. To be sure, most students in the class were from the New England region, so we imagined that in working through questions about Wilson’s memory and her memorial, students might critically engage and even revise their memories of the area as well as an African American woman’s place in it. Moreover, because the Harriet Wilson Project was working to recover a figure who was both
black and a woman, students would also be working to understand the “multiple, interlocking oppressions” of sexism and racism that condition public commemoration and memorial-making (Houston 49). With these goals in mind, we created a series of reading, writing, and analytical projects that ultimately led students to contribute to the work of composing a site of public memory.

We began the series of projects with students reading *Our Nig* and analyzing the text’s rhetorical significance. Next, students explored *Our Nig’s* recuperation, reading scholarship by Henry Louis Gates Jr. that discussed his finding of the text in 1983. Then, Boggis attended class, speaking to students about the Harriet Wilson Project and the two goals for the monument beyond the obvious one of raising awareness about Wilson. First, Boggis explained that a monument dedicated to Wilson would counter the belief that the history of Milford in particular and New Hampshire in general is a white one. As Boggis writes in “Not Somewhere Else, but Here,” “One never has too look too far [in the state] or search too hard for signs of [. . .] white history; [. . .] . It is written. It is visible. It is concrete. Buildings, parks, and streets all bear witness to the deeds of founding fathers, town benefactors, and prominent landowners” (225). Creating this monument to Wilson, then, would counter the state’s assumption of whiteness because, at the time, there were no monuments anywhere in the state dedicated solely to the accomplishments of male or female African Americans.

The second additional goal for the monument, Boggis noted, was to call into question beliefs about the historic treatment of blacks by white northerners. Wilson’s novel challenges the long-held understanding that the North “had been a safe haven for blacks and that its inhabitants were kinder than their Southern counterparts” (Boggis 228). Thus, a monument—one people can see and touch—would send a message about both the rhetorical significance of Wilson and the historic presence of African American people in New Hampshire, while also evoking questions about how northern whites see themselves and their history.

After Boggis’s class visit, students and I studied the various ways the Project had already worked to bring Harriet Wilson into the public eye and keep her there. Examining awareness-raising activities such as conferences, book editions, and outreach programs with local high schools, students analyzed the project’s achievement of “rhetorical sustainability,” what I have elsewhere defined as “the small-scale, multiply connected rhetorical forms that keep a conversation going” (Enoch 180). Here, we learned the crucial role of rhetorical sustainability in commemorative practice in particular as it enables organizations like the Harriet Wilson Project to continually reassert their varied arguments for the relevance of a particular historical figure in their community’s public memory.

In addition to analyzing the Project’s work toward rhetorical sustainability, we learned about the long and arduous process of establishing the right to create
the monument, as well as the fund-raising efforts that go along with it. Finally, my students and I examined plans for the monument: we learned how Boggis and her colleagues chose the artist, Fern Cunningham; we reviewed the artist’s sketches for the monument; and we assessed the rationale behind the artist’s aesthetic and rhetorical choices. This final issue was especially interesting for the students to consider since there are no existing photographs of Wilson on which the artist could base her work. As we discussed all of these concerns, we also contemplated the persuasive effects the monument would have on the town and the state.

Once we completed our analyses, we were ready to shape public memory through helping to make the monument a reality. First, students identified an individual or group of individuals anywhere in the country who might be interested in the work of the Harriet Wilson Project. Then, they composed two documents that informed their readers about Wilson and persuaded them to support the Project’s efforts to build the monument. They composed a letter in which they made an argument explaining why their readers might be interested in the monument, and a pamphlet that offered readers more extensive information about the Harriet Wilson Project. To create these documents, students relied on a range of rhetorical strategies to address an array of audiences, from Milford bookstore owners and car dealers to African American women’s book clubs and activist/rapper Talib Kwali. Students especially experimented with the concept of remembering differently and the malleable consistency of public memory, as each student had to decide how he or she wanted to remember Wilson given the interests, background, and knowledge base of the intended reader. For some recipients, Wilson was a local New Hampshire writer, and for others she was an African American activist. Once students completed these two writing projects, they presented their work to Boggis in an in-class conference. Students created a poster that displayed their work and presented their persuasive efforts. Boggis and I both responded to their work. I assessed their writing, while she decided which letters and pamphlets went in the mail.

Boggis did indeed send some (not all) of the letters to their intended audiences, enabling my students to contribute to the goal of creating this site of memory: on November 6, 2006, the monument was unveiled. The Harriet Wilson Memorial is now the first of its kind in New Hampshire to commemorate the accomplishments of African Americans in general and an African American woman in particular. In addition to the success of contributing to the completion of the monument, however, this public memory project also proved successful in terms of how students conceived of both women’s rhetorical and their region’s histories. Not surprisingly, students were shocked to learn of Wilson’s existence and frustrated that they had not learned about her or the critiques she made regarding New Englanders’ treatment of black indentured servants. The emphasis on public memory and memorial production,
however, enabled them to do something about the shock and frustration they felt. Through their class projects, students found a way to articulate their own arguments regarding how the monument would rectify Wilson’s erasure from public memory in New Hampshire.

It is true that this final series of writing assignments is not radically different from what one might assign in a more traditional rhetoric or writing course, meaning that students wrote letters and composed pamphlets for intended audiences. However, this public memory pedagogy does offer a new perspective on how we might rethink the teaching of women’s rhetorics—a perspective that, like Jordynn’s pedagogy, brings to the fore new opportunities and challenges. Like Jordynn, I needed help with my course. The guidance and expertise of JerriAnne Boggis were crucial to its success. For a good portion of the semester, I was not the expert on women’s rhetorical history, but a student who had the opportunity to learn about the rules governing public memorials as well as the advocacy work and fund-raising that people do to create such monuments as the Harriet Wilson Memorial.

Though the collaboration with Boggis was immensely rewarding for me, other teachers might not be lucky enough to be able to identify a monument dedicated to women in their region, much less a group working toward this end. As Courtney Workman’s research reveals, only 5 percent of the 2,200 National Historic Landmarks are dedicated to women. Of these, “few succeed in showing women as positive role models; instead they often feature women by their relationship to and sometimes subordination to men” (62). But even with this seeming dearth of commemorative sites, there are indeed local memorials, monuments, and museum exhibits dedicated to women, and with some digging, teachers might be able to identify groups like the Harriet Wilson Project that are trying to add to the number of women’s memorials in their region.

Despite the challenges that come with this kind of project, focusing students’ attention on how women’s rhetorical significance is present in or absent from the physical landscape enables them to address more concretely how women have been and can become a more significant part of public remembrance. As Carole Blair writes, sites of memory necessitate our attention because of their “recalcitrant ‘presentness.’” She continues, “These are structures, for the most part, that remain in our perceptual fields as long as we are nearby. They do not fall into silence like oral speech, nor are they (in most cases) ‘put away’ like the writings that we read and then store in bookshelves out of our way” (17). By analyzing and arguing for women’s “recalcitrant ‘presentness’” on the landscape, students have the opportunity to understand the physical imprints that rhetorical women have made and can make: imprints that reveal not just who they were but how they have been remembered.
Another Way to Remember Sappho

Through this new pedagogical emphasis, we and our students explore the place of women rhetors in public memory. In our courses, students learn to analyze women’s rhetorical achievements, certainly, but they also consider what it means to remember and forget these women in our everyday public life outside the classroom. The question for them, however, is not so much whether these women are remembered or forgotten, but how they are remembered and forgotten, and what effect their presence and absence has on everyday life in the present moment. As Roger Simon writes, “practices of remembrance” configure the past as a “force of inhabitation, as a way we live with images and stories that intertwine with our sense of limits and possibilities, hopes and fears, identities and distinctions” (3). Simon’s words underscore the relevance of a pedagogy that asks students to examine representations of women in public memory and compose new memories of rhetorical women. Through their work, students have the opportunity to put the past in conversation with the present, and to explore how the rhetorical practice of remembering women can reshape ideas in the contemporary moment about who women have been and who they might become.

Our pedagogies here obviously call attention to new ways to teach women’s rhetoric, but they also speak to our work as scholars, enabling us to reimagine who we are as historians and public intellectuals. First, our pedagogical innovations have revealed to us feminist scholars’ dedicated investment in disciplinary memory. As Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch explain, the focus for much feminist scholarship is on the “rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription” of rhetorical women into rhetorical history (642). Although we certainly value feminist interventions in the rhetorical tradition, our pedagogies have enabled us to see how scholars might broaden the scope of feminist historiographic vision to consider questions of public memory. For, while public memory scholarship is certainly a burgeoning discussion in communication studies, it is an area that only a select few feminist rhetoricians have engaged. Barbara Biesecker, Jennifer Borda, Rosalyn Collings Eves, Kristy Maddux, and Carol Mattingly are among a small group of scholars who have taken up this project, as they center their analyses on a range of topics that range from documentary and feature films that attempt to remember women’s political activities to the traditional ways (monuments) and alternative ways (cookbooks) ways in which different publics have tried to commemorate women.

Building on this scholarship and the work we have done in the classroom, scholars can begin to outline a feminist perspective on public memory scholarship. Such scholarship would

• analyze the dominant and alternative modes of production that groups have used to remember women;
• examine the ways in which women’s pasts have been leveraged and the rhetorical ends they have served;
• investigate the rhetorical role of the archive in the production of women’s public memory;
• interrogate the strategies of forgetting and modes of “remembering differently” that have erased or downplayed women’s rhetorical presence in public memory;
• assess the rhetorical strategies that groups have used to sustain women’s historical presence in the public imagination; and
• investigate the constraints groups have faced and the negotiations they have made to commemorate women in the public sphere.

These concerns, of course, signal just the beginning of this project, but even in these initial inquiries, we can see new possibilities for feminist scholars—possibilities that envision the rhetorical practice of remembering as a complex and compelling site for feminist historiographic exploration.

Just as this pedagogical work has prompted us to consider new scholarly opportunities, it has also reoriented our attention to the public sphere and encouraged us to imagine how feminist historiographers of rhetoric see themselves as public intellectuals, or more specifically, as producers of public memory who can bring their research and writing into public arenas. The possibilities here might range from working with local museums and heritage sites and preparing exhibits with library special collections, to getting involved in local heritage events and creating digital archives of women rhetors that both scholars and community members can access. Significantly, all of these possibilities provide more opportunities for scholars to work together with students on community service projects—a pedagogical strategy embraced by compositionists but less frequently advocated by historiographers of women’s rhetorics. In taking up this public pedagogical project, feminist scholars would join a long line of women who have worked outside academic venues to shape public consciousness about the past. As Julie Des Jardins writes in *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America*, “[W]hen we look outside the ivory tower, we see that women became savvy marketers and disseminators of their versions of the past on the grassroots level: in classrooms, over the airwaves, in popular markets, and for mass consumption” (7). As “savvy” readers and composers of public memory, feminist scholars can approach their courses and their scholarship from a new direction, by exploring a different way to teach, research, and remember Sappho.

**Notes**

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1. In fact, Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald use this poem to open their anthology, *Available Means*.
2. For more detailed definitions of public memory, see Carole Blair, John Bodnar, Stephen Browne, Kendall Phillips, Bradford Vivian, and Barbie Zelizer.
3. For a critique of *My Heart Is on the Ground*, see the book review in *Oyate* by Atleo et al., http://www.oyate.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=111:my-heart-is-on-the-ground&catid=35:avoid>. For a discussion and critique of the Take the Tail ghost story, see http://home.epix.net/~landis/lpe.html.

**Works Cited**


