

# Mexico City's Indios Verdes: Exploring Cultural Processes Using Public Memorials

Seth Dixon

## ABSTRACT

Finding ways to convey current research in cultural geography that is predicated on theoretical frameworks in a manner accessible to high school and undergraduate college students is pedagogically important but difficult in practice. Statues in Mexico City nicknamed the Indios Verdes offer a rich example of fluid cultural dynamics that illustrate how heritage is socially constructed and contested and how place is central to cultural meaning. Analysis of public monuments offers an effective method that can be used in a variety of regional contexts to demonstrate complex cultural processes and patterns.

**Key Words:** *cultural geography, monuments, Mexico City*

## INTRODUCTION

Monuments in Mexico City, depicting colonial, indigenous, and mestizo identities, are used to publicly portray Mexican identity within the cultural landscape. Often these portrayals do not mesh together as there are many visions about what is truly Mexican, and the interpretations and meanings of the monuments have changed over time. Monuments then can be used in the classroom as portals to understanding cultural geographic processes and the symbolic landscape.

Research regarding the interpretation of symbolic landscapes in cultural geography has become increasingly theory laden in the last two decades (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Duncan 1990; Mitchell 1996). Theoretical frameworks such as Marxism, postmodernism, feminism, and poststructuralism are common starting points of research in the new cultural geography (Jackson 1989; Mitchell 2000). Finding ways to incorporate these perspectives and current research into the high school or introductory college course is not so straightforward. Educators are challenged to teach cultural geography in a way that incorporates new research frames that remain accessible to them without the burden of dense theoretical language (Domosh 2000). This article argues that examples of symbolic landscapes, specifically monuments, can be used to convey highly complex cultural patterns and processes and addresses issues associated with the political organization, construction, and usage of space that can be effective in the classroom.

An investigation into the design, placement, and politics behind a monument's construction and subsequent reinterpretations can show how cultural representation is highly dynamic even though it is often designed to appear to be fixed, permanent, and "cast in stone" (Johnson 1995). Public statues and other monuments are a common part of the urban landscape, often reproduced in movies, highlighted in tourism literature, and seen as iconic symbols of both cities and nations (Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998). For example, the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe are landmarks that are synonymous with Paris and quickly evoke an entire cultural milieu and sense of place through their iconographic reproduction.

The notion of heritage is not just reflected in the landscape, but rather it is actively constructed. What are seen as heritage landscapes are often carefully designed and deliberately constructed to embody discourses. Discourses, or ways of perceiving and interpreting phenomena, make a particular vision (and certain social relations) appear perfectly natural and timeless (Schein 1997). This is more than just creating a strong sense of place; it is layering place with representations that have social meanings attached to an entire way of interpreting the world as the most correct, or even only, way to truly understand reality. Discursive meaning, then, normalizes and legitimizes this perspective within the landscape (Gregory 2000). In the case of nationalistic monuments, they are often designed to embody certain ways of understanding what the nation is, and how to properly interpret national history, as well as the ideal citizen's relationship to the state.

Consequently these monuments and their meanings are often resisted by some and naturalized through rituals by others. For example, few African Americans would embrace Confederate war heroes as icons of a Southern heritage that they want to glorify, while some white Southerners for generations have seen Southern heritage to mean a *white* Southern heritage, with a naturalized sense

*Seth Dixon, a former junior high school geography teacher, is an assistant professor in the Departments of Political Science and Educational Studies at Rhode Island College in Providence, Rhode Island, USA.*

of privilege over the heritage of the entire region at the exclusion of other pasts and other perspectives (Leib 2002). This concept of heritage in part springs from the discourses embedded in the monuments that have naturalized this view of Southern heritage.

Analyzing the varying perceptions of discursive meanings offers a portal into the ideological implications of power, the social construction of identity, and the forging of group identity. This article provides an example from Mexico City about how place and space have been actively used to construct ideas about nationalism, ethnicity, and heritage, and explains how to present these complex ideas in a way that is accessible to Advanced Placement high school students and undergraduates who are not necessarily geography majors.

On the surface, issues and themes that are explored by researchers in the new cultural geography are not so easily found in most curricular plans or high school textbooks. Precisely because these research agendas are designed to shift paradigms and question commonly held assumptions, some of the current research in cultural geography does not have an assigned slot in the high school or college curriculum. The ten themes suggested by the National Council for the Social Sciences deal with issues connected to cultural representations and place (National Council for the Social Studies 1997). The majority of the ten themes (i.e., culture; time, continuity, and change; people, places, and environments; individuals, groups, and institutions; power, authority, and governance; civic ideals and practices) are highly applicable to a focused analysis of monuments and their cultural representations. Furthermore, monuments provide valuable insights into virtually all of the subpoints in the *Geography for Life* standards 9–12 under the category of People and Regions. Using controversial monuments in the classroom allows students to see firsthand the cultural complexity of places and gives them tools to interpret that complexity (Geography Education Standards Project 1994).

Still, teachers have grappled with ways to integrate current theoretical and geographic thought into the classroom. The politically sensitive nature of the topics of race, class, and gender can make the teacher uncomfortable about how to handle these important aspects of culture and shy away from engaging the class in a potentially enriching opportunity to expand their view of society (Dowler 2002).

Kobayashi has suggested that a teacher should supply students with “an appropriate blend of theory and fact,” to give them the examples necessary to make the theory ring true (1999). This research, be it focused on race, ethnicity, gender, or class, can and should be incorporated into the existing curricula (Dwyer 1999). Yet showing that culture is dynamic, contested, and contingent on its social context can be a daunting task (Domosh 2000).

After a class discussion revolving around monuments, statues, and identity, one college freshman remarked: “I have always seen monuments as permanent and timeless, [but] the moving of the statues in Mexico City has changed that . . . this is the first time I have really been able to see the

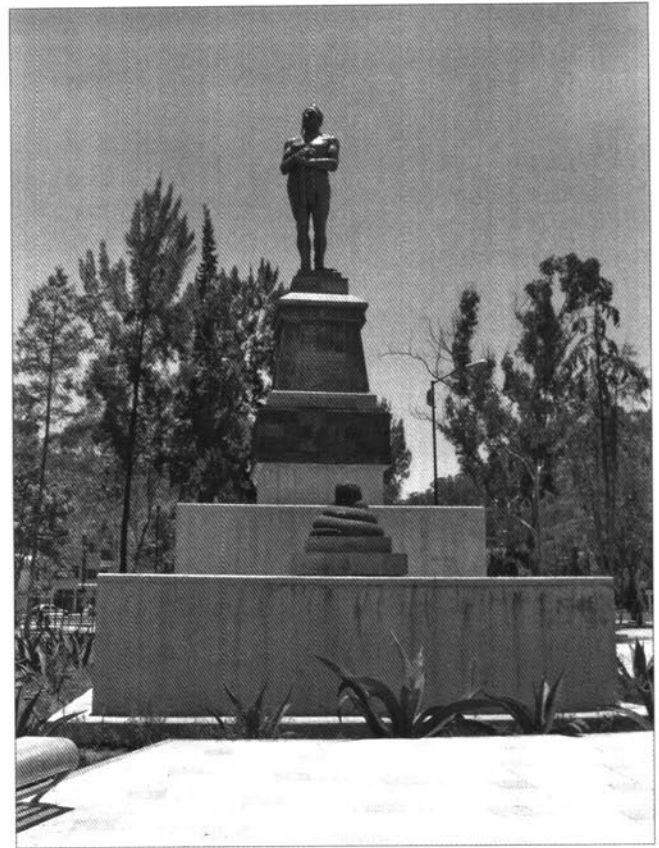


Figure 1. The statue of Izcoatl was augmented in 2005 in its fifth location.

fluidity of culture.” Incorporating discussions such as this into the classroom can provide students with insight into very complex cultural processes.

### MEXICO CITY EXAMPLE—LOS INDIOS VERDES

The historical geography of the Indios Verdes (Green Indians) in Mexico City shows the highly political nature of cultural representations connected to multiple axes of identity such as ethnicity, class, and gender (Fig. 1). These statues, unveiled in 1891, were sculpted by Alejandro Casarín, a well-respected Mexican artist who was praised in the press for being very modern and sophisticated. Before the statues were unveiled, they received complimentary reviews from newspapers such as *La Patria*, which, on March 27, 1889, described Casarín as “a well-known Mexican artist” whose forthcoming statues “are truly pleasing structures.”

These statues were designed to grace the entrance of Paseo de la Reforma, the elite promenade on the western side of Mexico City. This tree-lined boulevard, first laid out in the 1860s and continually built up and decorated over the next half century with massive monuments dedicated to important aspects of Mexican identity, was the most elegant promenade in the city. It was designed to display the most sophisticated elements of nineteenth-century urbanism.

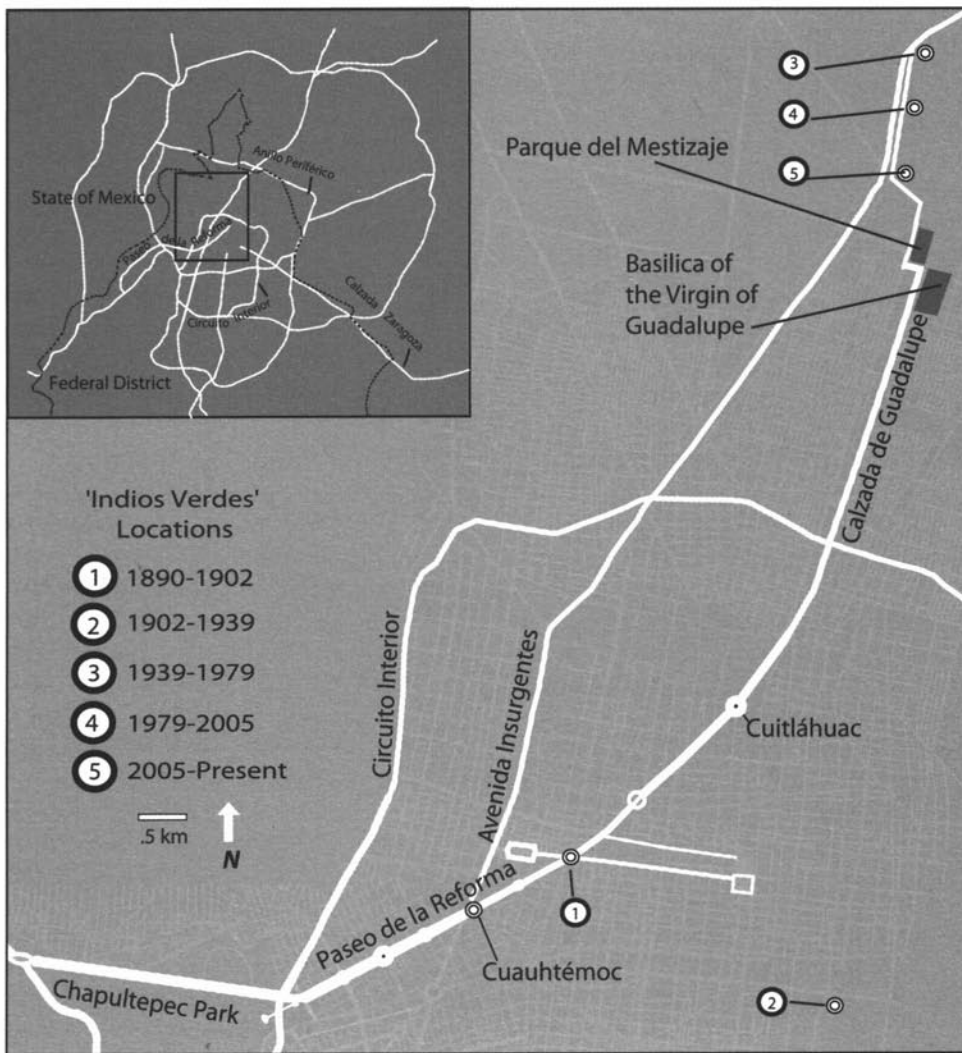


Figure 2. The itinerant path of the Indios Verdes in northwestern Mexico City. (Cartography by Nick Pinto.)

This three-kilometer boulevard anchored an emerging southwest corridor that was at the heart of the Mexican government's project to shape a vision of modern Mexican society that was as cosmopolitan as any of the great capital cities of Europe. Its public monuments were also part of an attempt to reconcile competing visions of Mexican history, to tangibly alter heritage by reforming the landscape. In this environment, the new statues were unveiled in the premier place for celebrating and defining the nation (Fig. 2).

The two statues represented Ahuizotl and Izcoatl, both Aztec emperors (Fig. 3). Yet they are almost never acknowledged as emperors but rather described simply as warriors. The statues are lacking the symbols of royalty, clothed with loincloths instead of stately robes and holding a *macana* (a traditional Aztec weapon) and staff. Without this recognition of class and social prestige, they were simply ordinary Indians. The term *Indios* itself in nineteenth-century Mexico

as well as today is a derogatory term that connotes social backwardness. Many politicians, intellectuals, and social elites in Mexico in the nineteenth century argued about "the Indian Problem" confronting a modernizing Mexico (Powell 1968). An indigenous identity was something that many felt needed to be overcome, not something to be celebrated.

As a major part of their symbolic representation, they were placed at the head of Paseo de la Reforma, along with an equestrian statue of the Spanish colonial ruler, Carlos IV. Together they would symbolize the fusion of the indigenous cultures of Mesoamerica with the colonial Spanish, celebrating the creation of the modern Mexican nation. To emphasize this symbolism, the Indios Verdes were unveiled on Mexican Independence Day, September 16, 1891.

It was precisely this juxtaposition of an indigenous and Hispanic heritage that caused a public uproar. After the statues were unveiled, the glowing reviews ceased; instead they were openly derided and scoffed at. The representations of the Aztec Warriors were disparaged as "monkeys," "monstrous," and "ridiculous." The green tinge of the statues diminished their value when compared to the more traditionally accepted bronze or marble colorations. They were criticized by art critics, foreign

dignitaries, and wealthy Mexicans for their supposedly poor artistic rendering. The statues drew attention away from the stately, European equestrian statue of Carlos IV.

On November 13, 1898, a journalist of an antiestablishment newspaper, *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, noted that the attacks and anger against the statues on Paseo de la Reforma were truly anger at the "manifestations of a nationalism that remembers the martyred, suffering and progressive indigenous race" and not about artistic sophistication. This was not just a question of artistic aesthetics but also a question of whose vision of national heritage would become canonical.

This newspaper openly acknowledged what the "high society" that lived and socialized on Paseo de la Reforma avoided mentioning: the Indios Verdes did not fit their version of Mexican heritage, and so therefore they campaigned to have them removed. The neighborhoods flanking Paseo de la Reforma were not only wealthy but also characterized





Figure 3. Photograph of the Indios Verdes, Ahuizotl and Izcoatl, on Paseo de la Reforma, in the 1890s, by Abel Briquet.

as a part of the city that was predominantly of European origin. This indigenous identity was not central to their Mexican heritage.

After the Indios Verdes were deemed unimportant and unpleasing to the upper classes, relocations plans were soon under way. Preferably they would be moved to a place where the lower classes (who were typically from a more indigenous background) could reflect on their Mexican heritage, as distinctly bracketed from the upper-class, European-shaded notions of Mexican identity. The national memory of Mexico in the late nineteenth century was far from being fully reconciled and remained highly divisive despite massive efforts to synthesis a unified telling of national history.

In 1902 the city council approved a budget to have the statues relocated to Paseo de la Viga, the second *paseo* (boulevard) of the city (Fig. 2). Paseo de la Viga, which followed a canal, was one of the great *paseos* of Mexico City in the nineteenth century. Located in the southeastern quadrant, it was considered by the upper classes to be the least exclusive and most indigenous *paseo* of the city. For middle-class Mexicans it was regarded as the most heterogeneous and most inclusive *paseo*. When the Indios Verdes were deemed offensive to the ethnic and aesthetic sensibilities of those in the villas and mansions of the

western part of Mexico City, this was considered the most appropriate site because it still had a air of sophistication, although largely populated by middle-class people.

In 1925 the canal that bordered Paseo de la Viga and added to its prominence was deemed by the city council as a necessary casualty of urban expansion and modernization. The canal was filled in, and over the next decade Paseo de la Viga lost its distinctive flair and the neighborhood's economic vitality dwindled. The statues had lost their *raison d'être* for being in that particular location and were again deemed expendable. In March of 1939 the Indios Verdes were shipped to a more peripheral location, the Villa de Guadalupe at the entrance of the northern highway linking Mexico City and Laredo. On November 25, 1964, a newspaper columnist for *La Prensa* lamented this shift by saying that the Indios Verdes were "little more than abandoned" that far north of Mexico City, victims of both neglect and vandalism.

The swiftly accelerating urbanization of Mexico City meant that

the Indios Verdes that were placed outside of the city in the 1930s soon became enveloped within the city. In 1979 they were unceremoniously dislodged again as the plans for the subway terminal (also named Indios Verdes) forced them to be shifted some 250 meters, victims of changing urban transportation policies of a city government that had little cultural attachment to their iconographic and discursive meanings. These particular representations of indigenous heritage at this time were not fully integrated into the national narrative and not seen as central to Mexican heritage. The fact that they were continually seen as "out of place" was echoed by the whimsical joke that these were "nomadic Indians."

In 2005 these statues and the identities they embodied were finally discursively integrated into the national narrative through their final spatial shift. They stayed within the neighborhood of the Villa de Guadalupe but were moved closer to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The statues were moved to the newly created Parque del Mestizaje (Park of Miscegenation), the park that honors the union of indigenous and Spanish that created the *mestizos* who constitute the majority of the Mexican population today. The creation of this park served a variety of functions. It is near the pilgrimage/tourist site of the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the city government was keen

to improve the neighborhood since so many people visit the area. This heritage tourism site has been seen as a vital component of Mexican identity since the colonial era. The Basilica and its religious associations are themselves a manifestation of the mixing of indigenous and Spanish cultures to create a supremely “Mexican” icon, and the creation of the Parque del Mestizaje further cements the symbolic cultural importance of this neighborhood.

This places the Indios Verdes into the modern national narrative as a key element of *mestizaje*. In this neighborhood they had been abandoned, but through this park, as a part of an urban revitalization project to improve the neighborhood so close to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the statues’ place in Mexican culture was also being revalorized and revitalized. These statues have both figuratively and literally been elevated in this site (Fig. 1).

The Indios Verdes in their current location not only represent the glories of an indigenous past; they represent a core component of the modern *mestizo*. Ironically this is the very same message that was rejected by the upper-class residents of Paseo de la Reforma over one hundred years earlier, because the overindigenous images detracted from the venerated, stately equestrian statue of Carlos IV that symbolized the Spanish element of Mexican heritage. This then begs the question, how is Spanish heritage represented in the Parque del Mestizaje today?

Throughout the park, the statues are almost exclusively indigenous, or they are composites of indigenous and Spanish. There is only one “purely Spanish” sculpture group and it is tucked away in the corner of the park. Don Quixote, alongside his faithful sidekick Sancho Panza, rides on his decrepit steed, Rocinante. This literary reference draws on the cultural heritage of Spain, but Don Quixote the whimsical knight cannot be taken seriously as an affront to Mexican nationalism or a threat to national sovereignty. This decidedly nonstately “equestrian statue” that today is paired with the Indios Verdes does not even reference real historical figures, but Spaniards who never were; they were conquistadors who never stepped foot in Mexico.

The valuing of an indigenous past to honor the modern-day *mestizo* is reinforced by the final statue in the Parque del Mestizaje; the Monument to *Mestizaje* that is the central monument of the park (Fig. 4). This monument has an unnamed Aztec warrior and a generic conquistador at the base underneath two hands clasped together, symbolizing the merging of two cultures from two continents to create a new people. Rising above these is a woman, embodying the *mestizo* people who are a blend of indigenous and Spanish people (an example that can be a launching point for discussion about the gendered representations of nations such as the female personas for the English Britannia and French Liberty, and all that they imply). Indigenous identities in this national context do not constitute a fully Mexican identity; they are typically most accepted as an essential ingredient to the recipe of the supremely Mexican ethnic identity that is embodied by the *mestizo*.

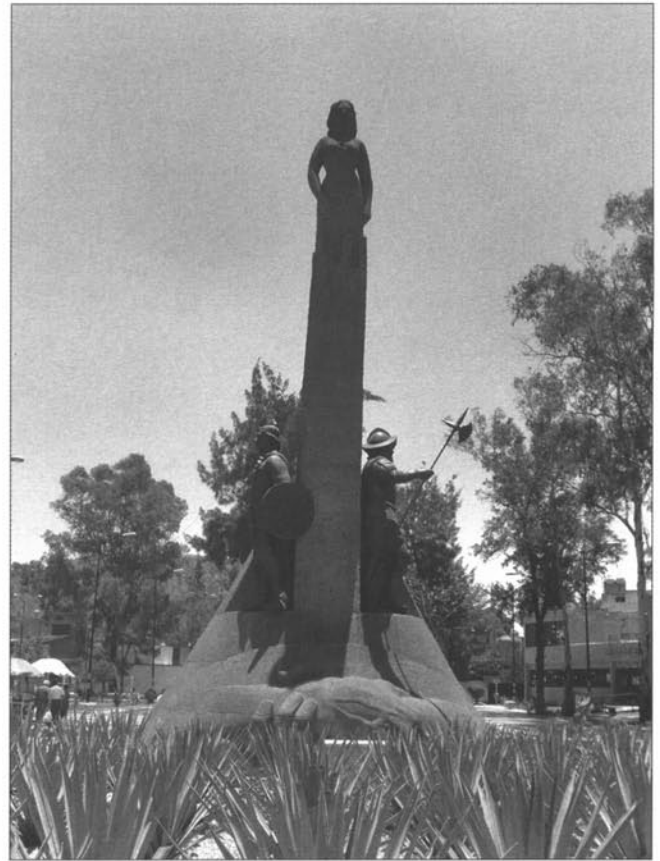


Figure 4. The Monument to *Mestizaje* in the Villa de Guadalupe in 2006.

While informally acting as a tour guide at the site for some acquaintances, I became acutely aware of how these national identities can also become intensely personal. While interpreting the site for my mother, I came to understand how strongly the iconographic message resonates with her as well as many Mexicans in a very personal way. “That woman up there, that’s me,” she said with a profound sense of reverence for the past. The national narrative is molded in bronze in a powerful way that helps to shape identities. Whether it is an accurate representation of history or not, identities at the global, national, local, and personal scales are in part constructed and shaped through monuments.

#### CLASSROOM USAGE

The example of the Indios Verdes raises questions regarding the fluidity of social identity, national heritage, and the social construction of identity as manifested in the landscape and how they intersect various axes of meaning such as ethnicity, gender, and class. It destabilizes a homogenizing, oversimplistic narrative of what is “Mexican” and shows that these concepts are both temporally and spatially bound concepts that have changed

in the past and will surely continue to change. Connections between culture and political power are revealed in cultural representations, and the ability to control and reinterpret these representations is a form of social capital that is important to most governments.

Opening up the topic of statues and monuments to students allows them to explore themes of how group identity is manifested in the landscape in a way that is transferable to diverse settings and regional backgrounds far removed from Mexico City. With these questions, the focus can be extended to other examples in potentially more familiar regions to the students, since public monuments and statues are found in virtually every region of the world. As students extend this framework to a region they are more familiar with, they can ask the questions that will allow them to find deeper meaning in the landscape.

Examples such as the Sacajawea monument in Bismarck, North Dakota, open up questions about how the national narrative interprets the frontier, exploration, ethnicity, and gender. This is a hotly contested bit of history: the space and the heritage commemorated there is highly political; public gatherings are not permitted at this monument "in order to honor the statue of Sacajawea" and presumably to avoid protests that could challenge the dominant narrative. This raises numerous questions and perspectives all hinting at the social construction of identity and heritage. Ephemeral examples can arguably be even more poignant. The Goddess of Democracy that was erected in 1989 by Chinese students in Tiananmen Square was tremendously charged with iconographic meaning with its placement in the square adding layers of historical, political, and cultural meaning (Hershkovitz 1993).

The histories of numerous monuments to Lord Nelson and Queen Victoria throughout the former British Empire are incredibly telling about how former colonies either acknowledge or reject the colonial past. These examples are especially useful because similar historical and thematic background can be used to tease out differences in identity throughout the former empire. A different story emerges from the heart of the empire in Trafalgar Square in London to the animosity that led to the toppling of the Nelson Monument in Dublin, Ireland. In between these two positions is the monument to Nelson in Montreal, Canada, that carries added social complexities because of competing regional and national identities regarding an Anglophile heritage in a predominantly Francophile region.

Showing similar ethnic strains in Canada, a statue to Queen Victoria in Quebec City had her head blown off in 1963 by separatists, while other representations of the queen are still honored throughout Canada. Another statue of Queen Victoria was removed from Dublin, Ireland, and relocated to Sydney, Australia, in 1947. Australia gratefully received what Ireland considered an offensive reminder of the colonial past. These imperial examples show the particularities of place, history, and identity that is

accessible to beginning undergraduate and advanced high school students.

Questions can guide a variety of projects or essays or can build on students learning during the class. What do statues say about the neighborhood? State? Country? This line of inquiry opens up the notion of scale in a very practical sense as well as showing that landscape is not simply a static reflection of society, but an actively constructed image produced for both internal and external consumption. Another question that can stimulate geographic thought: how does place add to the meaning of a monument? Uncovering the historical geography of the production of the monument (i.e., Who was the artist? Who commissioned the project? Why is the monument in that particular location?) is pivotal to understanding the message that the patron, often the government, was hoping to convey to the public. This enables students to answer the question of *whose* heritage is being represented (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000). Consequently they will discover which segments of society are marginalized by this representation and the larger discourses that these statues embody. These types of questions and inquiries can make cultural processes highly relevant and readily accessible to a high school and undergraduate audience.

## CONCLUSION

Identities are constructed to appear natural and timeless, but an analysis of cultural processes and patterns show they are highly complex. The fluidity and contested nature of culture is central to much of the research in cultural geography today but difficult to show. Tangible examples in the classroom help balance the theory with practice. Teaching the concepts of the new cultural geography without overburdening students with theoretical frameworks becomes both a struggle and a challenge. However, these theoretical frameworks should not be the starting point for teaching cultural geography, especially not to younger and less experienced students. Teachers who use real-world examples with theory kept in the background may make the concepts readily accessible to an introductory audience. Elusive notions of power and ideology can be made manifest through practical examples in everyday classrooms.

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