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Published online: 28 Apr 2024.

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Toppling statues and making space: prospects for anti-racist cultural activism

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ABSTRACT

Statues have long been recognized as impositions of a particular past that legitimize a power-laden present. Consequently, toppling statues, and engaging with the space they once occupied, opens up the possibility of new and multiple narratives. This article takes this moment of possibility as its starting point. Drawing from nine case studies in five countries, and from thirty-one interviews with cultural activists and other stakeholders, we identify three patterns that emerge in the aftermath of removing statues. First, removing a statue changes the hegemonic narrative of the space it once occupied. Second, stakeholders resist the imposition of a singular new narrative on that space. Third, policymakers and institutions attempt to regulate the space and the narratives it carries. We argue, further, that whilst attempts to impose a new, single narrative on the same site are widely met with obstacles, empty plinths become multivocal sites of memory in their own right.

Introduction

On 7 June 2020, a crowd of ten thousand people converged on Colston Avenue in Bristol, in front of a large, canvas-covered structure that had been pelted with eggs. Climbing atop the structure, several protesters removed the canvas to reveal the bronze statue beneath it. They fastened ropes around the statue, jumped down, and began to pull. As they heaved, the statue leaned forward, spun, and then fell to the ground and bounced, leaving behind a dusty Portland stone plinth. The crowd erupted in cheers and swarmed to the middle of the square, kicking the statue and dancing on

it. They doused it with red and blue paint, and one person pressed their knee on the statue's neck. Then the crowd began to roll the statue down Anchor Road. They rolled it for a third of a mile, joyfully, collectively. When one person grew tired, they stepped aside and another took their place. Finally, they reached the edge of Bristol Harbour and raised the half-tonne statue upright, tipping it over the chain barrier and dropping it into the water.

The euphoria that accompanied the fall of Colston, a seventeenth-century enslaver commemorated two centuries later as a 'philanthropist', was concentrated on a city square and a bronze sculpture. Yet the enthusiasm of the crowd, and the fall-out from the government, indicated that something more was at stake. To topple the statue of Colston was to dethrone the hegemonic narrative of Britain's history – a narrative that 'sanitised' the violent history and legacies of imperialism by scrubbing national culpability for slavery from national memory. The hegemonic narrative lauded wealthy men as philanthropists and benefactors whilst erasing the origins of their wealth in the kidnapping and trafficking of human beings. This narrative, and its contestation, are not unique to Britain; Colston and his ilk were the product of transnational social and economic systems, including capitalism, empire, and slavery. These systems arose from, and rearticulated, transnational knowledges and sets of values that glorified colonial elites (Campbell 2020; Michalski 2013). Likewise, in the tradition of anticolonial insurrections (Linebaugh and Rediker 2000), transnational political movements (Young 2005), and anti-racist cultural practices (Gilroy 1993), the contestation of colonial statues took shape through solidarity, and travelled transnationally (Gusejnova 2018; Mohdin and Storer 2021). Indeed, Colston fell alongside dozens of other statues worldwide in the summer of 2020, heralding a range of analyses that made sense of the global and local processes that had culminated in their removal (Burch-Brown 2022; Lester 2022; Manicom 2020; Savage 2011). The trajectory of erecting and toppling statues highlights the interplay between the materiality of statues and their intangible meanings. It also foregrounds the importance of material sites of memory for producing narratives about past and present. This sometimes means that memory is contested visibly, through erecting, altering, and toppling multiple statues at a single site. Yet sites of memory may also take on uneasy, unsettled material forms in ways that overrule the intentions of any of the people involved (Michael 2017).

This article draws from original empirical research on nine empty plinths across five countries (UK, US, South Africa, Belgium, and Martinique), which include imperial metropoles, settler colonies, and former colonies. Both the demographic profile and national myth of each country has been shaped, in different ways, by slavery and abolition, migration and multiculturalism. Importantly, anti-colonial cultural activism travelled from South to North, and from former colonies to former imperial metropoles (Winter and

Waterton 2013). We argue, engaging with memory studies, critical heritage studies, and cultural sociology, that statues of enslavers and colonizers are localized, material sites that both encapsulate and facilitate the contestation of past and present. When statues are removed and narratives dethroned, the empty plinths become active, dynamic sites of memory in their own right. At these sites, stakeholders – activists, memory workers, public officials, and ordinary members of the public – recognize the contingency of memory and the opportunity to make new histories visible. As such, attempts to impose a single meaning on empty plinths are widely resisted and met with obstacles. In the sections that follow, we examine how cities, activists, and cultural institutions deal with empty plinths in the aftermath of toppling statues. We consider, in turn, the implications that these curatorial decisions hold for critiquing collective memory at large.

Statues, contestation, and agency

Erecting statues of human figures in public space has long been a tactic of imposing a particular narrative of past and present. In order to give salience to the nation, elites set about creating a collective identity predicated on the memory of a shared past. As such, they wrote histories and invented traditions to commemorate them (Hobsbawm 1982; Nora 1989). Notably, these elite narratives are most effective when they are not forcibly imposed amidst active resistance, nor even noticed by ordinary people. Cultural hegemony, rather, entails shaping 'common sense' to reflect the norms and values of the elite (Gramsci 1995). It is attained when ordinary people in a diverse society internalize the elite's memories, values, and aesthetic forms as their own. Conversely, challenging cultural hegemony requires making visible the narrow, exclusionary character of elite norms and values, and the everyday violence of their imposition on society at large. This means that marginalized groups – whose histories are contradicted or ignored by elite monuments – play a disproportionate role in challenging the hegemonic narrative of the past.

The social, political, and cultural significance of statues means that waves of statue- and monument-building frequently coincide with 'hot' periods of nation-building and urban planning. As such, they clearly delineate and spatialize belonging and unbelonging. Statues are often larger-than-life human forms elevated on plinths, their gaze fixed in the distance, above spectators. Their size and their matter lend an impression of permanence, which is often given legal backing by councils and heritage boards. Further, the human form of statues makes them appear sacrosanct: contesting a statue is frequently equated with defaming or doing violence to a human being (Dunstan 2016).

The statues' presence, in turn, alters the way that contemporary urban-dwellers navigate public space. The prominence of statues demands acknowledgement from passers-by – by laying wreaths, by looking upward, or simply by altering their path to walk around a statue. Long after the novelty of a statue wanes and its subject fades from organic memory, a statue retains power by its very ordinariness: under cultural hegemony, statues, like other mundane symbols of the nation, form part of the omnipresent but uninterrogated backdrop of everyday life (Billig 1995; Edensor 2019). As societies change – through decolonization, migration, and revolutions – statues appear intransigent, even as the gulf widens between the values statues represent and those of contemporary denizens (Marschall 2020; Siblon 2009). This is most apparent in formerly colonized societies, where the majority of contemporary citizens experience a sense of alienation from statues that were erected by and for a colonial elite.

By their very materiality, statues betray the contingency of past and present. History is never neutral, nor is it uncontested (Bell 2008; Sumartojo 2018). Indeed, members of the public make sense of the statues in light of their own experiences, memories, and emotions, attempting to impose their own – often contradictory – meanings on apparently authoritative stones (Savage 2011; Smith 2020). Statues set the past in stone; stone, however, is vulnerable to crumbling. It may become a resting spot for pigeons, a wall for posters, or a canvas for graffiti. Likewise, simply proclaiming that a particular version of history is authoritative invites evidence of other ways of thinking. Grappling creatively and critically with the past both reflects and reproduces counternarratives of the present (Young 1993).

Because statues give material form to the hegemonic narrative of past and present, contesting statues is a means of openly, visibly challenging that narrative. Contesting a statue – whether by graffitiing, covering, or toppling it – paradoxically makes a statue hyper-visible, as the public is reminded of a historical figure anew. Just as challenging cultural hegemony is most pronounced when it is unnoticed, beginning to contest a statue may be particularly difficult when it forms part of an uninterrogated, ordinary cityscape (Taussig 1999). Yet as Gusejnova (2018) argues, a type of public 'derecognition' – which removes a historical figure's superhuman status – is necessary in order to symbolically topple a historical figure. By extension, a form of public re-recognition reminds the public of the problematic historical figure whom a statue purports to represent. The process of derecognition (and re-recognition), in turn, typically arises from, and facilitates, a larger set of demands for recognition and equality that are focused on the national present and future. In this way, the material practice of contesting statues sets the stage for the theoretical critique of past and present (Witcomb and Buckley 2013).

The role of statues in constructing and disseminating memory, and the ability of altered statues and empty plinths to change collective memory, raises questions about the relationship between human agency and material forms. In particular, statues do not perfectly encapsulate the meanings that their builders and funders intend to present; rather, they convey multiple and contradictory meanings that change over time. This aligns with the posthumanist argument that human beings are neither autonomous from the non-human world nor solely responsible for its meaning (Nayar 2014; Nimmo 2019). Rather, the meaning of statues is constituted by the interaction between (among others) human beings, technology and mass communications, urban space, weather, and time. Actor-network theory takes this further, arguing that agency is located in assemblages of human and non-human actants, so that a change to any of the actants (for example, if moss grows on a plaque and makes it illegible) changes the meaning of the assemblage (FaríFaríAs and Bender 2012; Kipnis 2015; Oppenheim 2014).

Whilst activists may emphasize a particular counter-narrative, to topple a statue is to demonstrate that the meaning of past and present are not fixed. The aftermath of toppling a statue brings this question to a head: razing a contested site of memory, replacing a toppled statue with another statue, or commissioning a new art installation necessarily entails elevating one narrative over others – and, by extension, foreclosing history. Conversely, empty plinths and defaced statues open up the possibility of multiple, uneasy memories and counter-memories (Forsdick 2012).

The aftermath of toppling statues

Whilst the removal of a multitude of statues worldwide since 2020 has generated scholarly attention, public debate, and political backlash, most of that attention has focused on either the decision to remove a statue (e.g. Burch-Brown 2022; Mohdin and Storer 2021; Timmerman 2020) or the means of physical removal (e.Evans 2020; Manicom 2020; Parekh 2020). Attending to the aftermath of removal, however, provides new insight into the politics and process of contestation and removal. To make sense of how stakeholders have engaged with space in the aftermath of toppling a statue, we selected nine sites in five countries. The nine statues had been removed by various means; these are summarized in Table 1. All were linked by global trajectories of slavery and colonialism, alongside contemporary transnational anti-racist and anti-colonial movements. Each was recognized by its defenders and detractors alike as part of an important local or national story. Each, further, had been erected by particular individuals and groups, took a particular aesthetic form, and was challenged by local activists. Taking a transnational approach to data collection enables us to identify global patterns alongside national and local

Table 1. Statues included in data collection and analysis.

Statue	Location	Status
Edward Colston	Bristol (UK)	Toppled by activists, June 2020; statue is currently held in collections in M Shed museum in Bristol; plinth has hosted several temporary installations and is currently empty
Robert Milligan	London (UK)	Removed by local authorities, June 2020; plinth is currently empty
The Emancipation Group	Boston (USA)	Removed by local authorities, December 2020; plinth is currently empty
Robert E. Lee	Richmond (USA)	Removed by local authorities, September 2021; plinth removed by local authorities, February 2022
The South's Defenders	Lake Charles (USA)	Toppled by Hurricane Laura, August 2020, following a local authority decision to retain the statue; statue is currently in storage; plinth is currently empty
Josephine de Beauharnais	Fort-de-France (Martinique)	Toppled and destroyed by activists, July 2020
Pierre Belain d'Esnambuc	Fort-de-France (Martinique)	Toppled and destroyed by activists, July 2020
Cecil Rhodes	Cape Town (South Africa)	Removed by University of Cape Town authorities, April 2015; plinth is frequently the site of student rallies, protests, and performances
Leopold II	Antwerp (Belgium)	Removed by local authorities, June 2020

particularities, all of which may be shaped by varying relationships to empire, slavery, and migration. It also facilitates the evaluation of the socio-political efficacy and possibilities of various processes of contesting and removing statues. Our methodological approach also extends and deepens existing research on this topic by scholars who have provided detailed accounts of particular local struggles around statues (Dresser 2007; Nyamnjoh 2016), who have made sense of this in light of longer histories of contestation (Draper 2020; Nasar 2020), and who have analysed their national and transnational implications (Campbell 2020; Rhodes Must Fall Oxford 2018).

Data collection took the form of 31 semi-structured interviews (conducted by the authors in the spring of 2021) with activists, policymakers, and heritage workers, each of whom had participated directly in the contestation of a particular statue. Whilst our interview protocol addressed the longer history of the statues and the interviewees' own relationship to them, we focused on what happened after a statue was removed. We asked, in particular, to what extent, and how, the removal of a statue changed the hegemonic narrative of both the statue and the historical figure it represented. We also asked what should happen to the statue and the space it once occupied following its removal. Our framing enabled us to make sense of an often-overlooked aspect of contestation. Since the interviews generally took place only a few months after the removal of a statue (or the decision to pursue this course of action), we also were able to capture the uncertainty of this process, and the multiple possibilities that stakeholders confronted.

In addition to the interviews, we collected secondary data in the form of videos and transcripts of public meetings, reports of commissions, public statements by activist groups, and local and national media coverage of the contestation. This additional data informed our interview questions and our analysis thereof; it provided important background information for each site; and it enabled us to identify the various, often conflicting, discourses surrounding a particular statue. In some cases, we were also able to trace longitudinal changes to the hegemonic narrative, as certain perspectives gradually received more or less public attention.

The interviews were transcribed, uploaded to NVivo, and analysed thematically. We developed a series of codes reflecting key themes as they emerged in the interviews, applying these across all nine case studies to facilitate comparison. Drawing from grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1997), we began analysing the transcripts whilst continuing to conduct interviews, and refined the list of codes as our understanding of the sites increased. Our analysis focused on the changing and contested meaning of space in the aftermath of removing statues. Equally, in pursuit of transnational histories and social movements, we sought to place the nine case studies in conversation with one another. Thus, whilst we divided the case studies amongst the research team, we analysed the interviews collectively: the member of the research team tasked with a particular case study authored a report summarizing the history of the statue and its contestation, as well as the initial findings of interviews associated with that case. Each of us presented our reports to the entire research team, and together we identified the common themes and local particularities of each case. We made sense of the aftermath of toppling statues based on our analysis of the 31 interviews, as well as critical readings of public statements, visual and print media coverage, and reports. Unless indicated otherwise, all direct quotes are excerpted from the interviews.

Making space

When statues are contested, they become hyper-visible. Supporters and detractors alike proclaim their importance, even as they ascribe oppositional meanings to the statue. In the aftermath of toppling a statue, the space it once occupied continues to be contested – in some instances, even more openly, and with higher stakes, than it had been previously. In the section that follows, we analyse how the contestation of the nation plays out on the site of a toppled statue. We consider, in particular, how narratives and counter-narratives emerge and change, how they are imposed in urban space, and how the materiality of empty plinths might give rise to new,

unsettled narratives. In particular, we discuss three themes: first, removing a statue changes the hegemonic narrative of a site. Second, backlash comes in the form of regulating urban space. Finally, de-sacralized plinths become multivocal sites of memory in their own right.

Changing the narrative

Statues create heroes, memories, and myths: their commanding presence in urban space makes them appear untouchable. Conversely, when a statue is removed, this broadens the scope of public, permissible memories. It reveals the malleability of sites of memory, and it changes the possibility of the memories that may take material form. As stakeholders engage and experiment with memory in public space, new understandings of past and present become speakable, and others are displaced. In that way, the narrative follows materiality: removing a statue changes the dominant understanding of the past. Moreover, in line with actor-network theory (Michael 2000), agency is articulated through an assemblage of actants that includes cultural activists, policy and history, statues, and the climate. These, in turn, produce meanings – weathered and decayed statues of forgotten 'heroes', decapitated or bullet-ridden statues that recall resistance – that may transcend the original intentions of any of the people involved.

In interviews, participants discussed the ways in which removing a contested statue had broadened the scope of what was possible. In Fort-de-France, Martinique, the Commission Mémoire et Transmissions, convened by Mayor Didier Laguerre, had called for the removal to a museum of one colonial statue in La Savane (Pierre Belain d'Esnambuc, who had colonized Martinique in the name of France) whilst recommending that another (Joséphine de Beauharnais, first wife of Emperor Napoleon I) remain. For the commission, the statue of Josephine was more nuanced, and more subversive, than the statue of d'Esnambuc because it had been beheaded and smeared with red paint decades earlier. A new generation of anti-racist activists, however, shifted the parameters of the possible: in July 2020, the anti-racist, pro-independence group RVN (Rouge-Vert-Noir) called on Mayor Laguerre to remove the statue of Joséphine by 26 July If he refused, the activists warned, they would bring it down. After Laguerre rejected the ultimatum, a group of young people painted the words 'Mort au colonialisme' on a concrete block next to the statue, smashed the pedestal with sledge-hammers, and pulled down the statue with ropes. The statue broke into several pieces when it hit the ground. Afterwards, the activists covered it in dried palm fronds and set fire to it, destroying it completely. The same fate befell the statue of Pierre Belain d'Esnambuc.

Unlike Colston, the statue of Josephine de Beauharnais had not polarized the city in the preceding years, and its toppling was not widely celebrated.

Rather, the meaning of the statue (rather than the historical figure it represented) was hotly contested after its removal. At the first meeting of the Commission after the toppling, some members expressed frustration at the activists' methods, calling them disrespectful of history. For Melody Moutamalle, the chair of the Commission, this criticism missed the point: in an interview, she stated that '[Toppling the statue] is history. We need to accept it as it was. I'm not saying that we should be for or against the method, you can have your personal opinion about that'. The toppling of the statue, for Moutamalle, had contributed another page to its history. Whether its destruction was legitimate was beside the point; it had happened, and it had changed the parameters of the possible. Alex Ferdinand, a longtime activist and public intellectual who had contested colonial monuments in the 1970s, was more explicit: in an interview, he said of the young activists, 'They finished the job'. The statue of Josephine de Beauharnais will never again stand on La Savane, whether or not members of the public would like it to do so.

The case of *The South's Defenders* in Lake Charles, Louisiana, presents perhaps the most acute case of material conditions shaping the meaning of a site in ways that overrule human intention (Latour 1993; Michael 2017). There, a towering bronze statue of a musket-bearing Confederate soldier atop a plinth on the Calcasieu Parish court house lawn, had been the object of contestation for decades: dedicated in 1915, it had been repaired and replaced on the plinth in 1945, in response to its physical precarity. In 1995, after a wind storm had nearly knocked the statue from the plinth, it was taken down, repaired, and replaced. Whilst the repairs were in progress, opponents of the statue – most of them Black, many of them community leaders – argued that this was an opportune moment for its permanent removal from the courthouse grounds. This request was squarely rejected by the police jury (the municipal governing body), but a new plaque was affixed to the back of the plinth. Cultural activists dismissed this move as insignificant, as the plaque failed to name and reject what local historian Janet Allured, in an interview, called 'the myths of the Lost Cause'. Twenty-five years later, the global Black Lives Matter movement presented another opportunity to contest the statue, and anti-racist activists brought their demand to the police jury. Once again, the police jury voted overwhelmingly to retain the statue, divided clearly along racial and partisan lines.

Only two weeks later, Hurricane Laura tore through Lake Charles, causing catastrophic damage to the city's built infrastructure and knocking the statue cleanly from its plinth. The material fact of the monument's destruction has upended the status quo, and the narrative has followed. Strikingly, opponents of the statue framed its destruction as an 'act of God': Craig Marks, a community advocate and city councillor, proclaimed in an interview that 'justice found itself coming to Calcasieu Parish, because, whereas men and

the police jury and all the powers that be would not do their due diligence and would not do the city the service that it was elected to do, God stepped in and Mother Nature stepped in'. Since August 2020, the immediacy of climactic and economic concerns have taken precedence over any movement to return the statue to its plinth. It remains in storage in an undisclosed location, and whilst activists express concern that there may be calls to erect the statue once again, the easiest option for both sides is to accept that the statue's removal in some ways resolved a seemingly intractable conflict. One member of the police jury acknowledged in an interview, 'When the storm came, it took care of it itself, you know . . . And so we have not addressed what we're going to do with it. Kind of that's at the bottom of the list of things to do during our recovery process'.

Resisting the imposition of narratives

Once the materiality of a site of memory changes, and the discourse surrounding it follows, stakeholders actively resist the imposition of any single narrative on a contested site. Consequently, it becomes difficult for stakeholders – who find their narratives on equal footing in material space, faced with an empty plinth – to agree upon a new site of memory to occupy the space. Rather, plans for new sites of memory widely meet with obstacles.

In Bristol, a plethora of temporary installations have occupied the plinth where Colston once stood. Eight days after Colston was toppled, a resin statue appeared in its place: it depicted a Black woman, a Bristolian activist named Jen Reid, standing atop the plinth with her fist raised. The statue was the creation of Marc Quinn, and it was installed surreptitiously. Only hours later, the council removed the statue, explaining that any new work of art in that space must be agreed upon by the people of Bristol. Cultural activists were quick to point out that the council's decisive condemnation of Quinn's statue stood in stark contrast to its longstanding refusal to take action to remove Colston.

Richmond has faced a similar challenge in the aftermath of removing its iconic Confederate statues from Monument Avenue. The street was once an imposing and foreboding proclamation of white supremacy, built in direct response to – and refusal of – the city's rising Black middle class. It retains its geographic centrality in the city and its proximity to many cultural institutions. For many stakeholders, this raises the importance of commissioning new works of art that might become the focal points of the street. A plethora of ideas have been proposed, including statues of Black Richmonders (a statue of the tennis player Arthur Ashe, erected in 1996, is the only statue remaining on Monument Avenue) and large, decorative fountains (a proposed tourist attraction that one interviewee compared favourably to Las Vegas). At present, the large traffic circle where a towering statue of Robert

E. Lee once stood is sparsely planted with flowers whilst city planners and other community stakeholders continue to debate the future of the space. No agreement has been reached, and stakeholders have struggled to find a course of action that recognizes the street's violent and power-laden history without reimposing racial terror.

In Boston, stakeholders have been unable to agree upon a replacement for another contested statue. *The Emancipation Group*, which depicted a solemn Abraham Lincoln extending his hands in benediction above a kneeling Black man clad in a loincloth, was removed in December 2020 following a unanimous vote by the Boston Art Commission. Since then, the small public park where it once stood has remained empty. At the public meeting that culminated in the vote to remove the statue, speakers supported the idea of commissioning a new public artwork by a local Black artist. An events sub-committee has been given the mandate to enact this task, and is weighing options from temporary installations to technological innovations. Thus far, however, the subcommittee has not settled on any clear course of action. For Byron Rushing, a civil rights advocate and former state legislator who opposed removing the statue, this paralysis is unsurprising. In an interview, he argued:

> The sense of the statue, the statue will never leave. I mean, the statue is gone, but the sense of the statue will never leave until that place is landscaped. So there will always be this question, you see, so that the next group of people who want to do tours, they will take people over to the pedestal and try to explain to them why there's no statue on top of this pedestal . . . You see, it did make the space really important . . . And so it's there, I think people are stuck with it because you're never going to get rid of the connection between this space and *The Emancipation Group*.

The removal of *The Emancipation Group* had created the space – and, indeed, the need – to build a new work of art and a new narrative about and by Black Bostonians. Yet for Rushing, the deliberately, conspicuously empty space where the statue had once stood could not be filled by any single site of memory (nor any single new narrative). Instead, the contested memory of the statue haunted the space, without closure (Coverley 2020).

Regulating urban space

In response to the plethora of material and narrative possibilities that follow the removal of a statue, combined with the difficulty of erecting a single site of memory, people in power both acknowledge and attempt to restrict the power of material space. In the aftermath of removing a statue, however, any attempt to frame a site of memory as permanent and intractable is unlikely to succeed. Rather, regulatory action, which mobilizes political and social

institutions to impose a rigid and sanitized narrative of history, may be read as the reactive attempt to regain control of the contested past.

This regulatory logic shapes the discourse of national and (especially) local and institutional decision-makers even when these bodies remove contested statues. In Boston, for example, one argument in favour of removing *The Emancipation Group* was that it would be less dangerous, and more predictable, for the city to remove the statue than to face the possibility that demonstrators would topple it themselves. And in London, the decision to remove the statue of Robert Milligan was folded into the mandate of the new mayoral Commission for Diversity in the Public Realm, and it set the agenda for that body in the public eye.

When statues were removed by social movements, national governments and a broad spectrum of politicians frequently condemned their actions, charging that spontaneously pulling down statues was (in Keir Starmer's words) 'completely wrong' (quoted in Walker 2020). In reaction to the toppling and destruction of statues in Martinique, Emmanuel Macron went further, claiming that these actions were tantamount to erasing history (Okello 2020) and pledging to protect statues in public space across the Republic. The power dynamics of an official in Paris condemning the toppling of colonial statues in the Caribbean were not lost on anti-colonial activists. In a particularly reactionary move, Home Secretary Priti Patel tabled the Policing, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Act, which added statues, tombstones, and the items deposited on them (e.g. wreaths) to the category of protected monuments and raised the maximum custodial sentence for defacing monuments from three months to ten years. At the same time, Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick (2021) restricted the avenues for removing any statue by means other than toppling, requiring councils to consult with Historic England before taking any action to remove a statue, and reserving the power to adjudicate between councils and Historic England for himself. In each instance, policymakers framed cultural activism as an attack on the national past – and, by extension, on the nation in the present.

At the local level, leaders largely expressed support for (or acquiesced to) removal after the fact, but refrained from endorsing the act of toppling a statue. Instead, mayors frequently convened commissions to discuss the future of contested public space. These were viewed with scepticism by many cultural activists, who perceived commissions as powerless token gestures and/or elite bodies populated by academics who were detached from popular opinion. Whilst there was no single mould for a commission's composition or mandate, members of those commissions strongly challenged the claims made about them. The Boston Art Commission, for example, had existed since 1890 and had a longstanding record of commissioning public art. Prior to the contestation of *The Emancipation Group*, however, their work

was largely invisible to the public. This meant that in the summer of 2020, many cultural activists questioned why this group held so much decision-making power over public space.

In other instances, commissioners acknowledged the gap between activists' goals and bureaucratic constraints. Melody Moutamalle said of the Commission Mémoire et Transmissions:

Real time is not municipal time. It takes a huge amount of time. Even I am sometimes exasperated by the time it takes to say, 'Yes, we're going to load the printer with paper'. . . . It was going to take too long, then get forgotten, because people need to be mobilised. You might need to contract a company to dismantle the statue. From memory, I think it was considered a historical monument. It was either already listed as such or in the process. The time it would take for it to get to the DAC [Cultural Affairs Directorate], for them to approve it . . . It was going to take time.

The legal and institutional attempt to regulate urban space was, in all instances, a reaction against the real challenges to both the appearance of urban space and the narratives underpinning it that social movements had brought about. Thus, when the statue of Cecil Rhodes was removed from its plinth at the University of Cape Town, the workers who lifted it were employed by the University. But the scene that day left no doubt as to who was responsible: the crew and the crane were surrounded by hundreds of jubilant students, several of whom climbed atop the statue to whip it with a leather strap, wrap tape around its face, and place a bucket over its head. Others lifted posters with a telling slogan: 'We're not done yet'. The artist Sethembile Msezane re-enacted her work *Chapungu – The Day Rhodes Fell*. After it was pulled down, one student used spray paint to recreate an unmoving version of the shadow the statue had cast over the steps leading to the podium on which it had sat. In an interview, Zethu Matebeni recalled that a placard that day read: 'Next, the invisible statues'. In Cape Town, the scene at Rhodes' newly emptied plinth signalled what was to come: the spread of the Rhodes Must Fall movement across the world, and the birth of the Fees Must Fall movement in South Africa. It also signalled that decision-making bodies – whether national, local, or institutional – could not control the multiple meanings of contested sites of memory.

Discussion: embracing empty plinths

After statues are toppled, the contestation of past and present continues in the newly de-sacralized spaces they leave behind. This is a messy process, in which stakeholders often compete for space. Calls for erecting new statues of (for example) civil rights activists are issued in the spirit of 'balancing' the power dynamics of public space (and undermining calls to topple statues of

enslavers and colonizers). In Boston, a local sculptor proposed replacing *The Emancipation Group* with a statue of the same two subjects, but with Archer Alexander (the Black man originally depicted on his knees) standing at eye level with Lincoln. These calls, whilst well intentioned, miss the point of cultural activism: statues, by their very nature, curtail the complexity of the past and restrict the imagination (Younge 2021).

Wary of imposing any single narrative, many decision-makers have sought to replace permanent statues with temporary public art. These recommendations frequently are made in a democratic spirit, recognizing that because the public led the charge to remove problematic statues, the public should also decide what replaces them. Janet Allured, for example, is sympathetic to this approach in Lake Charles. She stated in an interview:

> People have talked about … putting up a different monument or maybe even rotating them around … And make them out of plaster of Paris or something like that, why does it have to be permanent? It doesn't have to be permanent. And then you can begin to honour you know all of the other people who live in this parish besides just the Confederate soldiers. Why is it a soldier up there, you know, why isn't it maybe, I don't know a businessman, or a worker? Can't it represent a working-class person, Black or white?

In Lake Charles, discussions of what to do with the emptied plinth of *The South's Defenders* have not yet reached the level of policy debate. Yet there is cause for caution: attempts to accommodate multiple and competing narratives frequently produce incoherent sites of memory (Harrison 2013). In 2022, a temporary installation in Bristol, for example, used digital technology to 'mount' dozens of real and imaginary statues on the empty plinth in the Centre. Visitors could scan a QR code, point their cameras at the empty plinth, and see a succession of statues, ranging from primary school pupils' drawings to Colston's statue. Whilst this installation created space for a plurality of memories and visions of the future, it was also politically incoherent. The violence of erecting Colston's statue, and the explicit anti-racism of toppling it, gave way to a flattened claim that anyone could produce a site of memory, which could mean anything. This approach risks emptying sites of memory of their subversive power – and, indeed, their claim to articulate the contestation of history and memory.

In pursuit of an alternative, it is helpful to remember why anti-racist activists took action in the first place: to confront the legacies of empire and slavery and to open up space for Black students and urban denizens, activists, and community members to imagine other ways of thinking and being in the present. For example, Simukai Chigudu, a founding member of Rhodes Must Fall Oxford, explained in an interview that for the group,

the statue was kind of a litmus test, that if you begin to expose and bring to the fore who Rhodes actually was, what his legacy is, what he stood for, that it becomes quite unacceptable just to keep the statue in situ like that with no qualification or anything ... So, eventually, the position that was taken was that we will target the statue and we will use that as an occasion to lay out our varied agenda, so there was a, kind of, instrumental view of taking down the statue. Because toppling statues is only the first step in decolonizing institutions and urban space, the empty plinths they leave behind are reminders to continue the work of toppling 'invisible statues', including institutional racism, state violence, political and economic injustice, and the sanitization of history. Indeed, the 'We Are Bristol' History Commission has acknowledged the promise of empty plinths by calling for 'periods of intentional emptiness' alongside temporary art installations on Colston's plinth (Cole et al. 2022). Additionally, the immediate aftermath of toppling statues – before new narratives are imposed – offers glimpses of what could be. At the University of Cape Town, the protests and performances that had played out next to the Rhodes statue before its removal continued on and around the empty plinth thereafter. Once a material reminder of white supremacy, the site of Rhodes' statue became a symbol of ongoing struggle. Its association with the Rhodes Must Fall movement meant that the gatherings that took place there acknowledged the student movement that had brought the statue down and carried on its promise to topple the 'invisible statues' of empire and racism.

Richmond's Marcus-David Peters Circle (formerly Lee Circle) provides a similar model for the promise of empty plinths – alongside a caution. At the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the circle was a hub for the creative, anti-racist reclamation of space. For the time being, Lee's statue remained atop the plinth, but its fate was sealed: Mayor Levar Stoney had agreed to the movement's demands to remove the statue, so the site had already been 'liberated' symbolically. The grassy circle that had once marked the heart of white supremacy in Richmond became a popular public park, where Black Richmonders tagged the plinth with colourful anti-racist graffiti, posed for wedding photos, danced and played instruments, and relaxed in the sunlight. For the people who visited Marcus-David Peters Circle, the plinth and the space surrounding it came to symbolize creativity and resistance to state violence. Cultural activists expressed hope that the new life of Marcus-David Peters Circle would be permanent, with the empty and graffitied plinth remaining as a site of public art. Yet the government[1] quickly intervened to regain control of the space and the narrative: in January 2021, fencing was erected to prevent people from entering the circle. After Lee's statue was removed by authorities in September 2021, the plinth – which had become a work of public art – soon followed: it was dismantled in February 2022 and

relocated to the collections of the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia. The current plan to fill the circle with plants leaves no space for public gatherings, nor does it acknowledge the social movement that made the space its locus.

Empty plinths, unregulated by institutions or governments, are reminders of triumphant social movements as well as the racist monuments that once stood there. Their very emptiness is an invitation to continue the creative, productive, unfinished work of commemoration, drawing upon the tradition of anti-racist social movements whilst imagining new ways of thinking and being. Empty plinths proclaim that no attempt to set the past in stone is authoritative or permanent. Instead, cultural activism opens up the past and revives forgotten histories, which point towards an anti-racist future.

Conclusion

The widely told story of cultural activism often ends with the highly visible, material act of toppling a statue. Statues, however, are the product of global and imperial histories, hierarchical power dynamics, contested urban space, and transnational social movements. Consequently, when a statue falls, this both reflects and resonates in its social and spatial context. Our study of nine cases in five countries revealed that toppling statues of slavers and colonizers alters the dynamics of material space in at least three ways: by destabilizing the hegemonic narrative of the urban space a statue once occupied, by resisting the imposition of a new narrative to fill that space, and by triggering a swath of attempts by those in power to regulate space. All of these dynamics hold implications for the success of cultural activism and, by extension, of challenges to the hegemonic narrative of past and present.

In the aftermath of toppling statues associated with racism and colonialism, stakeholders openly interrogate the relationship between imperial history and contemporary collective identity. It is thus unsurprising, but deeply significant, that statues have fallen amidst a resurgence of imperial nostalgia, increasingly violent bordering practices, and the criminalization of cultural activism – all of which attempt to curtail the possibility of anti-colonial memories and anti-racist futures. Within this contemporary, transnational social and political context, the significance of cultural activism far surpasses the singular act of toppling a statue.

Note

1. Interviewees were unsure whether the city of Richmond or the Commonwealth of Virginia had been responsible for the fencing, particularly since official control of Monument Avenue and 'Lee Circle' is split between the two.

Disclosure statement

Funding

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