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Beyond the Stone

The Fear of Historical Amnesia surrounding the
Colston and Rhodes Statues Controversy

Bachelor's thesis in English
Supervisor: Dag Hjorth Endresen
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Abstract

This thesis examines the conflict surrounding the statues of Edward Colston and Cecil Rhodes in contemporary Britain, within the context of racism, Empire, and Brexit. It analyzes the discourses and controversies generated by the toppling of these statues, considering the broader implications for racial equality. Through a memory studies perspective, the thesis explores how the current political climate shapes the perception and remembrance of historical figures, arguing that the removal of the Colston and Rhodes statues represents a larger struggle for racial justice, while acknowledging the complexities of altering interpretations of the past. Finally, it argues that the contestations surrounding the Rhodes and Colston statues highlight a fear of historical amnesia, as both defenders and opponents of the statues fear the potential erasure of their respective narratives, collective memories, and identity.

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in community activism against the ongoing violence and racism towards people of color, leading to the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement and protests around the world. In Britain, the discourse on racism and the legacy of Empire has sparked public controversies regarding certain statues honoring colonialists and slavers from the past, questioning the appropriateness of their visibility in the public space (Mohdin & Storer, 2021).

Much of the discourse has been centered on two historical figures in particular. In 2020, the statue of philanthropist and slave-trader Edward Colston was pulled down and tossed into Bristol Harbor by protesters who argues that the statue was a symbol of racism and should not be allowed in a public space (Otele, 2019). In 2015, a campaign to remove the statue of British imperialist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town captured global attention through the Rhodes Must Fall movement, with students calling to *decolonize* (See: Lindsay, 2020) education in South Africa, which then spread to the University of Oxford where another statue of Rhodes stands. While two of the statues were ultimately dethroned, they continue to divide public opinions on commemoration of the past, stirring up tensions between opponents and defenders of colonial-era statues. On one side, ancestors of enslaved people fear their collective memory and identity being drowned out by a dominant narrative that only supports the victors of the past. Others argue that toppling statues is a way of censoring the past and rewriting history. For example, one notable figure who have expressed opposition to the toppling of statues include Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who called the act “criminal” (Forrest, 2022). In other words, the controversy is deeply rooted in conflicting narratives regarding how the struggles and achievements of the past should be remembered, revealing the difficulties that emerge when various protagonists of the same community attach different meanings to the same events.

Through a comparative analysis of the discourses surrounding the Colston and Rhodes statues, this article will explore the conflict from a memory studies perspective, considering how the current political climate in relation to racism and the legacy of Empire in contemporary Britain has affected the way statues from the past are perceived and remembered today. While considering the implications of removing or altering previous interpretations of a past we may not agree with today, it will argue that the toppling of the Colston and Rhodes statues should be understood as a part of a larger struggle for racial equality. Through this discussion, the thesis will demonstrate how memory can be recrafted in

line with the political and cultural values of the present, and how the tensions that emerge between groups as a result of reframing historical narratives suggest a fear of one memory erasing the other, or a presumption that competing memories cannot exist simultaneously. In other words, the thesis ultimately aims to illustrate that the contestations of the Rhodes and Colston statues highlight a fear of *historical amnesia*, as both defenders and opponents of the statues fear the erasure of their respective narratives, collective memories, and identity.

When Monuments Divide

Contested monuments are not a new phenomenon. The contentious nature of monuments is often linked to their historic subject matter, as controversy appears to be an inherent characteristic of public memorials that reference the past. Ann Rigney highlights a series of historical instances showcasing iconoclasm, including the Roman tradition of *damnatio memoriae*; the destruction of George III's statue in New York during 1776; the targeted attacks on icons associated with the *ancien regime* in the French Revolution; and the widespread removal of Lenin statues after 1989 (Rigney, 2022). More recently, in 1995, when the Smithsonian Institution in Washington constructed an exhibition about Enola Gay, "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II", it was attacked and rejected by ex-servicemen who sought to voice their own perspectives of the events (Maurantonio, 2014). Similarly, in 2017, protesters destroyed the 1792 Christopher Columbus monument in Baltimore, citing Columbus' connection to racism and genocide (Caiazzo, 2017). There are countless examples of monuments being attacked or contested, and it is evident that these symbols of remembrance hold significant importance for people based on the recurring nature of iconoclasm. Nevertheless, there is a growing struggle to comprehend why these monuments incite such intense emotions and how their destruction represents more than just senseless defacing of tangible heritage (Rigney, 2022).

To understand why they might evoke such anger and controversy, we can start by considering the *function* of monuments. As Pierre Nora states, monuments are "lieux de memoire", or *memory sites*. According to his concept, a memory site is:

[a]ny significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community. It may refer to any place, object or concept vested with historical significance in the popular collective memory, such as a monument. (Nora, 1989).

In other words, a memory site acts as a vessel of memory, referring to an important, specific event in the past. The function of monuments, or memory sites in general, is therefore to embody and materialize these memories, created in order to produce a collective memory – they act as a symbol of remembrance, preserving collective shared interpretation of the past.

Halbwach noted that the past is social, and thus, memory itself is socially acquired. The nature of memory is therefore closely tied to politics, and each generation seek to shape and remake memory to suit their own contemporary agenda. As such, the continuity of memory relies on the interplay between collective recollection and repetition (Mitchell, 2003). As Maurantonio (2014) states, “the significance of sites such as museums, monuments, and memorials rests in their rhetorical power to act upon bodies and cultivate narratives that provide anchors for collective identity.” Memory sites can shape a group’s sense of both unity and individuality, and this aspect shows why they are often so volatile and contested – memory supports identity. Not only do memory sites guide communities toward a specific interpretation of the past, but they root people’s identity, providing them with a clear connection to their collective memories and past. Thus, they act as points of reference not only for those who lived this past, but also for future generations who may add new meanings to it based on their current experiences.

However, the power of memory sites and the collective memories they represent can also be challenged by historical amnesia. By historical amnesia, I refer to “the disposition to omit, forget, or delete aspects of history that are inconvenient for the politics and policies of the present” (Clarke, 2012). In other words, historical amnesia is a phenomenon where people forget or are unaware of significant events, ideas, or achievements of the past, occurring at the individual or collective level and resulting from a variety of factors, such as shifts in cultural values, political or ideological agendas, or simply the passage of time.

When different groups attach different meanings to the same events, the shared past from which a memory site stems can be altered. A memory site may have historical significance for several groups and to their collective memories, which is why tensions and divisions may emerge when they have different views of how that past should be remembered. In addition, communities are guided towards particular interpretations of the past by the memory sites, often limiting or repressing the possibility for alternative representations (Maurantonio, 2014, p. 6). Moving into the realm of the politics of memory, where memory is seen as a communicative process that occurs in a contested and negotiated terrain (Maurantonio, 2014, p. 3), this raises an important question regarding who decides which representations of history should be remembered, and for what purpose. Memory is not

only about remembering a past that is historically accurate, but it is also about the values and beliefs that shape cultures at a particular point in time. Recollection of the past is an active process, not a matter of simply retrieving information – remembering is to place part of the past in relation to the conceptions and needs of the present (Schwartz, 1982). In other words, memory can be recrafted through a dialogue with the present political, social, and cultural imperatives of the time (Maurantonio, 2014, p. 1).

How the past is remembered, and who decides that is therefore a complex matter. In some cases, the past is shaped by those in power, such as governments, institutions, or people with influence, to serve a nation's political interests or shape its sense of identity. As Winter (2010) argues, the debate surrounding memory sites centers on their role in promoting the dominant political forces in society, serving as material manifestations of national, imperial, or political identity. On the other hand, memory sites can also highlight the potential for marginalized groups to contest their subordinate status in public by protesting the memory sites that exclude their collective memories. This school of thought emphasizes the diverse voices of remembrance and the possibility for new groups to appropriate memory sites for their own purposes. Nevertheless, which memories and historical narratives are sustained through monuments is vastly dependent on the socioeconomic power of the groups who produce and maintain them (Mitchell, 2003). As Mitchell (2003) states, memory is bound up with power, and memory and forgetting are both hegemonically produced and maintained. The power dynamics present in a society during a particular era are reflected in its memory. These relationships of power are constantly in flux, following the ongoing evolution of dominance, and are always shaped by the specific context in which they occur. The evidence of memory remaining in the physical environment indicates the political, cultural, and economic forces that combined during that period to create a vision of the way the dominant society viewed and portrayed itself to itself (Mitchell, 2003).

Monuments serve as a tool to selectively shape our memories by emphasizing certain events or individuals while disregarding others. In times of significant political upheaval, when the foundations of national and personal identity are called into question, the politics of memory become especially prominent. At such times, monuments can become the focal point of conflict (Mitchell, 2003).

The Role of Statues

Statues, by their very nature, celebrate and immortalize individuals from the past. They are

often erected in memory of people that held great importance to society and serve as a representation of who and what people should admire and strive to emulate (Rofe, 2022). Eric Hobsbawm describes them as a “museum of national identity” that immortalizes the ideas and values of great men (Osbourne, 1998). In other words, they act as a shared memory and a symbol of common identity, because not only do these statues commemorate the deeds of men and their accomplishments, but also the benefits that their achievements have had for succeeding generations.

However, the act of commemoration is inherently linked to history, and it is precisely this historical context that often leads to conflicts surrounding statues (Winter, 2010). Debates on monumental statuary continually arise when the individuals that are immortalized in the public landscape promote values that are now considered contentious. Many of the statues are associated with historical figures whose character once endorsed these values and systems of oppression, such as colonialism, fascism, and slavery (Pereira-Fariña et al., 2022). As a result, debates arise about whether they should be kept in the public landscape, because by displaying them, their values are also on display. These discussions are not just about the statues themselves, but about the values and legacy that they represent and promote (Pereira-Fariña et al., 2022).

Thus, statues are not merely static objects that preserve the past, even though they are attempts to freeze ideas in space and time. They are, like other monuments, always reconstructed in the context of the present – and never detached from issues of power (Osborne, 1998). According to Halbwachs, monuments such as statues establish imagined landscapes that dominate over other cultural systems. This is accomplished by colonizing time and space; time is colonized by fixing significant dates in a commemorative chronology, while space is colonized by the erection of commemorative structures in the public space. By doing so, power is asserted by excluding or transforming the commemorative practices of other groups (Osborne, 1998). In other words, control is exerted not only by keeping statues of people who have oppressed others in place, but also by excluding the narratives of the oppressed.

This power dynamic regarding the dominance of certain narratives and the exclusion of others is deeply intertwined with issues of national identity. John Gillis proposes that national identity is maintained by socially constructed systems of remembering and forgetting. Gillis proposes that national identity is upheld through socially constructed mechanisms of remembering and forgetting. He argues that nation-states have established a “bureaucracy of memory” that prioritizes “elite memory” while marginalizing “popular

memory”. Within this framework, the notion of “public memory” emerges as a result of the interplay between “official” and “vernacular” cultures. Official memory is promoted is promoted by societal elites who seek to foster social cohesion and maintain institutional continuity, while vernacular memory represents the diverse and specialized interests that challenge the universal narrative put forth by official identity and memory. (Osborne, 1998, p. 432-433). In other words, Gillis suggests that the silencing of certain narratives may be a consequence of the dominance of “elite memory” and the suppression of alternative memories and identities. Commemorative statues point us to people whose achievements should be remembered, while also silencing narratives that do not fit in with the “elite memory” that is ingrained in the national identity of certain societies. This point is also echoed by Troillot (1995, p. 27): “[a]ny historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.” In other words, history, memory, and identity are social constructs that are constantly being reworked in the present and which need to be decoded to discover the underlying structures and processes (Osborne, 1998). Statues tell a story about power, pushing the narratives of those who won. In the context of Edward Colston and Cecil Rhodes, their statues were erected as symbols of their achievements, but have in present times become reminders of their involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and the colonization of Africa, respectively. These statues were erected during a time when the dominant narrative of British history celebrated colonialism and imperialism, while silencing the experiences and perspectives of those who were subjugated and exploited by these processes. As the public have become more aware of the true legacy of these figures, their statues have come to represent not only their individual achievements, but also the systemic injustices they helped perpetuate. To understand how these mnemonic terms relate to ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ and the BLM movement, one must look into the history of Rhodes and Colston.

Edward Colston: Philanthropist and Slave Trader

It is readily apparent from Edward Colston’s history why he has become such a controversial figure in present times. Born into a wealthy merchant family in 1636 Bristol, he began working with the Royal African Company (RAC) in 1680, which was responsible for shipping 84,500 enslaved people from the west coast of Africa and transporting them to the Americas, becoming the largest supplier of enslaved people in British history. Of the

thousands of individuals that were displaced, 19,300 died from the brutal conditions they were forced to endure. Those who survived were sentenced to a life of hardship. Colston played a prominent role in the RAC as Deputy Governor, overseeing the management of the company (Nasar, 2020).

In Bristol however, Colston has been memorialized as a great benefactor and philanthropist. His statue in Bristol was erected in 1895, 175 years after his death, with an inscription that read “Erected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city AD 1895” (Otele, 2019). According to Nasar (2020), a newspaper at the time stated that the statue was “designed to encourage citizens of today to emulate Colston’s noble example and walk in his footsteps.” Furthermore, the memory of Colston is deeply ingrained in Bristol’s cityscape, as evidenced by the numerous landmarks and institutions named after him, including Colston Hall, Colston Tower, Colston Street, Colston’s Girls’ School, and the Colston Window (Nasar, 2020). Colston endowed several institutions throughout the city, and Otele (2019) states that many Bristolians attach great emotional value to Colston due to their pride in the city’s seafaring history and the rise of its merchant classes, which he epitomizes.

It is the juxtaposition of these two memories of Colston that has fueled the debates regarding the appropriateness of his statue’s public display in Bristol. Still, despite years of campaigning against the public display of Colston’s statue, it was not until the global protests in response to the murder of George Floyd and police brutality in the United States that it was finally removed. On June 7th, 2020, the statue of Colston was toppled by anti-racist and social justice protesters and tossed into Bristol’s harbor. The event attracted international attention and reignited public debate on Britain’s memory of the Atlantic slave trade, uncovering the nation’s complex views towards its imperial past and the contradictory attitudes pointed towards its narrative (Nasar, 2020). It was only in the late 1990s that the portrayal of Colston as a “saintly” benefactor began to be challenged (Dresser, 2007), showing that Britain’s relationship with its colonial history is a complicated one.

Due to the impact the Empire has had on British culture and national identity, it is not surprising that it has become a key element in the contestation of Colston. The Empire is also a controversial topic in itself, with widely varying perspectives. As Jackson (2013) states, The British Empire had a profound impact on the development of British identity, contributing to the formation of an imperial mindset and a belief in the superiority of British culture. However, the Empire's attitude towards cultural diffusion was often contradictory, as it aimed to both assimilate people to European culture while preserving their traditional culture. This

was rooted in the understanding that empires are not composed of equals, and that rulers cannot allow the ruled to become too similar to them. Empire played a significant role in shaping British values, ideas, and practices and became an essential aspect of national identity and race consciousness. The British Empire's influence on British culture was evident, with historians noting that imperialism was steeped in it, and that the concept of nationalism depended on it (Jackson, 2013). Furthermore, the perspectives on non-European cultures that the Empire bred significantly influenced British culture. Jackson (2013) also argues that the British Empire was a racial construct where white people held a higher status than non-white people, with race being the critical factor in how colonial peoples were perceived and ranked.

For many, the Empire is a source of pride and nostalgia, representing Britain's past as a superpower. For others, the Empire is a legacy of oppression, exploitation, and violence, and represents the darker aspects of Britain's history. Overall, the subject continues to shape conflicting memories of the past, impacting debates about immigration, multiculturalism, and national identity. I would argue that the toppling of Colston's statue was just one example of the ongoing struggle to come to terms with this complex legacy.

In addition to the Black Lives Matter movement and Britain's colonial history fueling the debate, the issue of Brexit has greatly influenced the controversy of Colston's statue. Beyond the recurring debates about the nation's colonial past, as Otele (2019) argues, "questions of identity and belonging have taken a new turn since Britain's decision to leave the EU." Furthermore, Otele writes that the vote, which was initially perceived as a decision on the allegedly undemocratic EU, has become a platform for discussions fueled by resentment towards immigration, resulting in the intertwined amalgamation of the post-memory of colonialism and the future aspirations of the country's leading political parties. We can clearly see a divide between groups based on the voting patterns. In Bristol, the vote to remain was supported by 62% of voters, while 38% voted to leave. The majority of minority ethnic people voted to remain, with Black activists highlighting the rise in hate crimes against minority groups during the campaign and arguing that a Brexit victory would only increase racial tension (Otele, 2019). On the other side, three distinct groups made up the vote for Leave; those who were economically deprived and anti-immigration, affluent Eurosceptics, and older working classes. The referendum was highly divisive, highlighting a wide range of social differences in Britain. It was, in other words, more about identity and values rather than a traditional left-right battle (Swales, 2016).

In Bristol, Brexit furthered discussions about the city's imperial past and its memorialization strategies (Otele, 2019). The decision to leave the EU prompted a

reevaluation of the nation's position in the world and reignited debates on Britain's colonial legacy, activating a new divide in British society. In this way, Brexit intersected with the controversy surrounding Colston's statue by adding to the discussions on identity, nation, and class (Saunders, 2023). I would argue that Brexit was a disruptive event that challenged the established narratives of the past, as the referendum's divisive nature and the tensions it exposed highlighted a struggle to reconcile different historical narratives. The intertwined amalgamation of post-memory of colonialism, future aspirations, and notions of identity fueled by the Brexit vote further underscored the fear among both defenders and opponents of the statue that their respective narratives and collective memories might be erased or overshadowed. Thus, Brexit played a significant role in shaping the debates surrounding the memorialization strategies in Bristol and the broader implications for acknowledging and confronting the nation's historical legacies.

In summary, the toppling of Colston was a manifestation of deep-rooted underlying structures and social issues that had been brewing for years. The Black Lives Matter movement exposed the systemic racism and discrimination faced by Black people, leading to a re-examination of Britain's colonial past. Colston's statue became a symbol of this past and sparked a debate on the glorification of figures associated with the slave trade. Moreover, the rise of Euroscepticism, memories of Empire, and Brexit brought to the fore questions around national identity and Britain's place in the world, leading people to question the celebration of figures like Colston.

Cecil Rhodes: Great Benefactor and Racist Imperialist

The debates surrounding Colston's statue were also influenced by similar controversies in the wider national and international context. The Rhodes Must Fall movement, originating in South Africa, became a highly polarizing public campaign in Oxford, and share many similarities with the discourse in Bristol.

The University of Cape Town witnessed the inception of the Rhodes Must Fall movement in March 2015, with students aiming to remove a monument from their campus of the imperialist politician and mining magnate Cecil Rhodes. It began with student activist Chumani Maxwell throwing human feces on the statue of Rhodes, stating, "[a]s black students we are disgusted by the fact that this statue still stands here today as it is a symbol of white supremacy." (Knudsen & Andersen, 2019). The Rhodes Must Fall movement was thus born and the statue of Rhodes was removed from its pedestal at UCT a month later. The movement

sparked a similar response from students in Oxford, who initiated their own campaign to have their statue of Rhodes removed (Kearns, 2020).

Like Edward Colston, Rhodes is a controversial figure. Born in England in 1853, he established himself as a prominent diamond mogul in South Africa by 1870. Over time, he gained significant influence in the Cape parliament and served as prime minister from 1890 to 1896. Rhodes also held several high-profile positions, such as chairman of De Beers diamond company, joint managing director of Goldfields of South Africa, and managing director of the British South Africa Company, which played a key role in colonizing Zimbabwe. Gaining vast wealth from his influential roles, Rhodes became one of the most powerful figures in South Africa during his time (Beinart, 2022).

According to Kearns (2020), Rhodes' wealth was obtained through plundering and exploitation, while his attitudes and beliefs demonstrated "pure racism" as he considered the Anglo-Saxon race superior to all others. Using his political and financial powers in South Africa, he worked to expel Indigenous Africans from their lands, restrict the vote for Black people in the Cape Colony, and supported racially segregated locations for Africans in Cape Town (Beinart, 2022). Knudsen and Andersen (2019) state that the discrimination against black people from Rhodes' government "has been regarded as a precursor of the segregation and apartheid politics that shaped South African politics in the twentieth century." In addition, Rhodes' promotion of the British Empire and ideology of Anglo-Saxon supremacy became part of his legacy following his death in 1902, as the wealth he left was used to establish scholarships and trusts intended to cultivate his imperial and racist ideals, such as the Rhodes scholarship, which was "established with Rhodes' bequest with the purpose of creating and educating a cadre of imperial-minded males to help promote the British Empire and Rhodes' ideas of Anglo-Saxon predetermination to rule" (Knudsen & Andersen, 2019). His tangible legacy has also taken the form of buildings and statues erected in his name at the University of Cape Town and Oxford. It is this highly visible legacy that has become increasingly controversial over time in the West, resulting in the Rhodes Must Fall movement.

Essentially, the movement in Cape Town emerged as a response to the perceived lack of transformation in South Africa after colonialism and apartheid. The highly visible presence of Rhodes in the University of Cape Town became a symbol of institutional racism and a constant reminder of the colonial rule and racist ideology of the past, which according to Herwitz (2022), students found unbearable because they felt the university remained inadequately transformed in other ways as well. It thus prompted students to call for the removal of colonial monuments as part of their active opposition to colonial and apartheid

heritage (Castro & Tate, 2017). For them, this was a crucial step towards creating a new national narrative that emphasized equality and a rupture with ‘resilient colonialism’ (Knudsen & Andersen, 2019). In other words, for the proponents of the RMF movement, keeping the statue up signifies a preservation of historical amnesia, where the broader context of their history is overlooked and marginalized. By prominently displaying such a colonial monument, they believe that society is perpetuating a narrative that downplays the injustices and inequalities of the past, and instead they seek to create a new national narrative that promotes equality and breaks away from what they perceive as the enduring influences of colonialism. The removal of the Rhodes statue thus represents a crucial step in reshaping the historical narrative, as it challenges the dominance of colonial and apartheid heritage.

However, the attacks on the Rhodes statue also represents a departure from the heritage policy established by the Heritage Resources Act of 1999. This act, which was developed during the democratic transition, stipulated that monuments of the past should not be removed, torn down, or disturbed. Instead, they should be preserved as reminders of past injustices, serving as a form of moral instruction. This policy was designed to promote harmony between different groups and foster a culture of participation during a critical moment of transition, when an attack on the monuments of apartheid could have led to a derailment of the transition by a still prominent apartheid regime (Herwitz, 2022). For the Rhodes Must Fall students, their relation to these monuments changes because they are a new generation “born free” who have not experienced apartheid. As Herwitz (2022) states, these students have little interest in “the benign nature of the political transition” but is instead angered over the state corruption and ongoing inequality that these monuments represent. For these students, the statue of Rhodes represents the silent re-affirmation of colonialism, expressed at several levels in their university, including the curriculum, university hiring practices, and the presence of visible icons of colonialism (Knudsen & Andersen, 2019).

A month after the excrement incident at Cape Town in 2015, the movement spread to Oxford, where students at Oriel College sought to “decolonize” the curriculum and institutional memory in order to combat intersectional oppression within Oxford (Kearns, 2020). The students raised nearly 3000 signatures to have their statue of Rhodes removed and called its presence “an open glorification of the racist and bloody project of British colonialism.” (Chigudu, 2020). While the statue in Cape Town was torn down shortly after the protests, the project of having Rhodes removed from Oxford seemed more challenging. In 2020 however, the toppling of Colston brought renewed vigor to the Rhodes Must Fall campaign. Inspired by the citizens of Bristol, approximately 1000 people gathered around the

Rhodes statue in Oxford in protest, also motivated by the Black Lives Matter movement (Kearns, 2020). Despite the many calls for its removal, the statue still stands as of May 2023. In June 2020, the Governing Body of Oriel College voted in favor of relocating the Rhodes memorial. However, the commission identified significant challenges in removing it. Oriel College's website outlines several obstacles, including the protracted and time-consuming nature of the process, the high cost of completion, and the strong likelihood of the process ultimately failing (The Rhodes Legacy, n.d.). The continued presence of the Rhodes statue in Oxford poses intriguing questions when compared to the toppling of Colston in Bristol and Rhodes in Cape Town. Despite similarities between these cases, it is interesting that the protests were significantly more effective in Cape Town and in Bristol. This issue will be examined in greater detail, but first, I will examine the similarities between the movements behind the Colston and Rhodes statues more closely.

Similarities between the cases

There are several similarities between the toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol and the Rhodes Must Fall movement in Cape Town and Oxford. After taking the historical context into account, it is clear that both movements were a response to the perceived glorification of historical figures with controversial pasts. More specifically, both Colston and Rhodes is tied to the legacy of colonialism, the British Empire, and slavery. Colston's fortune was built on the exploitation and enslavement of African peoples through the transatlantic slave trade, while Rhodes was an imperialist who was instrumental in the colonization of southern Africa by the British Empire, also exploiting African people and their resources.

Furthermore, both movements were driven by grassroots activism and protests from people who believed that the statues should be removed. In both cases, they were organized campaigns to raise awareness about the controversial histories of the figures represented by the statues. In addition, the protests against Colston in Bristol and Rhodes in Oxford were both influenced by Black Lives Matter. The movement's global protest against systemic racism and police brutality brought issues of racial inequality and historical injustice to the forefront of public discourse, challenging the celebration of historical figures such as Colston and Rhodes. The debates around their statues have therefore been shaped by these wider discussions about racial injustice, and by the calls for greater representation and recognition of marginalized voices in the public space. Both movements therefore aimed to confront

historical amnesia by raising awareness about the problematic legacies represented by the statues, reflecting a desire to reclaim and reshape historical narratives.

Lastly, both cases sparked a wider debate about the role of public monuments in society and the need to reassess the way history is remembered. While the removal or alteration of historical monuments has been seen as a necessary step towards acknowledging and rectifying past injustices in the cases of Colston and Rhodes, it has also raised important questions about the implications of such actions on society and how we remember the past.

Forgetting and Remembering: The Fear of Historical Amnesia

The heated debates surrounding the toppling of Colston and Rhodes illuminate the complex relationship between forgetting and remembering and the ways public monuments shape our collective memory and identity. After exploring the reasons behind the protests, two distinct groups stand out with conflicting opinions regarding the statues' toppling. There is a tension between these groups which I argue is rooted in a fear of historical amnesia. More specifically, this amnesia is seen as a threat to each groups' collective identity, thus intensifying the conflict.

Public memory, such as statues, are important in creating a national and cultural identity. As Errera and Deluliis (2023) argues, they are representations of cultural identity that are always in a state of reconstruction, relying on public agreement to either uphold or forget elements of the past. This “politics of forgetting” can perpetuate hegemonic narratives that forget marginalized collectives and undermine social justice. In other words, dominant narratives, such as Colston and Rhodes being celebrated, rely on selective remembrance, precluding the opportunity for contemporary issues, like racism, to be confronted and situated within its forgotten history and perpetuate power relation and dominant narratives. Furthermore, Errera and Deluliis (2023) state that forgetting and remembering are both necessary in order to establish new memories and identities, and the politics of forgetting recognizes that those who have control in curating memory have power in telling the story and attributing specific characterizations to people and groups.

Memory and identity are thus closely linked, and in the case of Colston and Rhodes, there are two opposing groups who feel that their identities are being threatened by the debate over whether the statues should be removed or not. This is because the statues represent different narratives for each group's collective identity and memory. On one side, black people and descendants of enslaved people fear their ancestors' narratives being silenced by

the celebration of Colston and Rhodes, and through this, their identities are being suppressed. On the other side, supporters of the statues argue that the celebration of these historical figures and their philanthropy and contributions to society is a way of honoring their past and their cultural identity – and that removing them erases an important part of history.

In the case of Colston, Otele (2019) states that focusing solely on Colston's philanthropic deeds only obscure the city's contentious past, and by commemorating slave owners like Colston without acknowledging the pain they inflicted on enslaved people excludes important narratives of history and robs descendants of their past. This argument is also enforced by Clive Myrie, an Afro-Caribbean man with a lineage that extends back to the transatlantic slave trade. In a BBC news article, he ties this argument to his identity, stating that his connection to the past has been obscured by the exclusion of his ancestors' histories, and as a result of this missing representation, his identity has become "untethered to the ground" (Myrie, 2020). Furthermore, former Bristol Lord Mayor Cleo Lake, who also has ancestry in Africa, stated that she was "filled with relief" to see the statue of Colston removed. Lake had also previously removed a portrait of Colston from her office and urged city institutions to "remove their statues and symbols that glorified slavery, white supremacy, and oppression." She reasoned this statement by adding that "We owe this, not just to the memory of all those who have so cruelly and unjustly lost their lives in the past, but also for generations to come to live in a fair and equitable society." (Pereira-Fariña et al., 2022).

These are only a few examples that exhibit how important the removal of Colston is for these people's identity, because it reflects a larger societal shift towards acknowledging the harmful legacies of slavery and systemic racism. The debate surrounding the removal of Colston's statue extends beyond the focus on an individual figure and encompasses the profound influence that statues hold over public perception and memory. Statues have a powerful impact as they serve as constant reminders, shaping the collective consciousness of a society. By existing in public spaces, statues contribute to the preservation of historical narratives and influence how people perceive and engage with their surroundings. The removal of Colston's statue, therefore, represents a significant symbolic gesture aimed at dismantling the structures of power and privilege that have allowed for the glorification of figures associated with slavery and oppression. It signifies a commitment to reevaluating and transforming the narratives that have perpetuated pain and trauma within marginalized communities, while also challenging the broader societal frameworks that have upheld these structures of inequality.

This is also the case for the group protesting the Rhodes statue in Cape Town and Oxford. Current generations still suffer the consequences of discrimination that was reinforced by people like Rhodes. For many, Rhodes represents a painful and oppressive past that continues to shape their experiences in the present, especially regarding the legacy of racism and colonialism in the university. Therefore, like the case of Colston, the debate is not just about the physical object, but about larger issues of identity, power, and representation. By removing the statue, the protesters are pushing the validity of their experiences and perspectives, and how their narratives deserve to be acknowledged.

The act of protesting the statues of Colston and Rhodes is thus a way of remembering their past, and therefore an act of counter-memory. According to Michel Foucault, “counter-memory designates the residual or resistant strains that withstand official versions of historical continuity” (Davis & Starn, 1989). In other words, the protestors are bringing forth new perspectives about the past by demanding revision of the dominant narratives, and in a way taking back their identities.

However, the toppling of these statues has also provoked a range of negative reactions. While some protesters see the statues of Rhodes and Colston as symbols of a painful and oppressive past suppressing their identities and collective memories, others argue that toppling the statues is a way of censoring the past and rewriting history. In 2017, for example, protesters covered the statue of Colston with white paint in order to imbue it with new meaning and challenge its portrayal of Colston. In the *Bristol Post* however, it was described as “an act of vandalism and willful destruction” (Otele, 2019). Furthermore, the plaque on Colston’s statue has also been met with dissatisfaction regarding its wording. While some protesters of the statue wanted it rewritten and centered around his role as a slave trader as an alternative to its removal, others – like the Society of Merchant Ventures – argued that the new plaque did not fairly reflect his deeds as a great benefactor to Bristol (Otele, 2019). With regards to removing the statue completely, Lawrence Goldman has put forward that removing Colston from the cityscape will make it harder to acknowledge Bristol's involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. By erasing a part of the past from the public sphere, we also eliminate various means of exploring the intricate ramifications of slavery's legacy (Goldman, 2018). Additionally, Constantine Sandis contends that we must not forget the legacies of both those who profited from the slave trade and those who were enslaved, as both have had a significant impact on history (Sandis, 2014).

Regarding the statue of Rhodes, there are those who contend that Rhodes’ contributions to higher education, particularly through the Rhodes and Mandela-Rhodes

scholarships, as well as other donations to university campuses, are significant and should not be forgotten (Pereira-Fariña et al., 2022). Furthermore, reports indicate that several former members of Oriel College had threatened to withdraw financial support if the statue was removed (Goldman, 2018). Other critics of the movement have often used the phrase “a man of his time” as a euphemism to suggest that Rhodes’ actions were appropriate in his era but not relevant to ours (Pereira-Fariña et al., 2022).

In light of these opposing opinions, it could be argued that the debate regarding the statues of Colston and Rhodes illustrates how such debates are not just about historical accuracy but also about how we choose to remember and reinterpret the past in the present. The tensions that exist between groups when their interpretations of the past differ suggest a fear of one memory erasing the other, or a presumption that competing memories cannot co-exist, in other words, a fear of historical amnesia. The rhetorical power that statues possess enables them to influence narratives and establish a shared sense of identity. As we construct and revise our collective understanding of the past within our current frame of reference, forgetting thus becomes a threat to our identities (Maurantonio, 2014), which is why the debates of Colston and Rhodes are so heated. Not only are collective memories threatened, but also collective identities.

Not A Zero-Sum Game

The complex discourses that encompass Colston and Rhodes illustrate the fear of one respective memory drowning out the other. This fear stems from the changing contemporary issues that cause us to view these monuments differently in the present. As Rigney (2022) states, while monuments are built to last, they can also outlast the context in which they were produced and the cultural values that led to their construction. As a result, they become contested symbols that reflect the desire for social transformation. The histories connected to these issues are closely linked to identities, making them even more contentious. However, is it truly the case that two competing memories cannot exist simultaneously?

Michael Rothberg argues against this, stating that memory is not a “zero-sum game”. His “multidirectional memory theory” is an approach to understanding how different groups remember historical events and the ways those memories intersect and interact with each other. The theory seeks to move beyond the idea of a singular, unified memory of the past and instead recognizes that memories are diverse, dynamic, and often in conflict with each other. He argues that memories are not only individual or collective, but rather multidirectional,

meaning that they are constantly in dialogue with other memories while influencing each other (Rothberg, 2009).

One of Rothberg's key elements in his theory is especially applicable to the cases of Colston and Rhodes. It is what he calls "uneven development", which is the idea that not all memories are equally powerful or dominant. This element also bears resemblance to Gillis' theory of "elite memories". Some memories may be more widely accepted than others and more influential in shaping public discourse, while others are marginalized and silenced. This element of his theory may help to explain why the debates surrounding Colston and Rhodes express a fear of historical amnesia. It recognizes the ways some groups and their memories are privileged over others and addresses the power imbalances and inequalities that exist within memory. When two distinct memories of the same event compete, one historically dominant and the other marginalized, the fear of being silenced becomes a central element in the discourse because there is a risk that one memory will become dominant and push other memories to oblivion. In order to work towards a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of history that allows for multiple memories to coexist in dialogue with each other, we must recognize the fear of historical amnesia and the risks of memory becoming dominated by one particular group or narrative. In turn, this can better help us understand the past and its ongoing impacts on the present.

The Results of Colston and Rhodes' Contestations

As we have seen through the discourses surrounding Colston and Rhodes, monuments offer a material source for counter-memory (Rigney, 2022). As Rigney (2022) explains, the recent trend of iconoclasm rarely leads to the destruction of physical monuments, but it has resulted in a shift towards adopting various decommissioning practices. These practices aim to diminish the power of the monuments to cause offense. One such practice is reframing, where monuments are relocated to museums and transformed into objects of historical interest, rather than political symbols. Another practice is signifying, where monuments are repurposed by for example adding new plaques to imbue them with new meaning (Rigney, 2022). The results of the protests of the statues have had tangible effects on how and where the statues are presented. Since 2021, the statue of Colston in Bristol has been relocated to a local museum. Visitors can now gaze upon the statue in a different context – now in a horizontal position still covered in the paint that protestors threw at it. The statue has lost its power and the dominant view of Colston has changed (Rigney, 2022). The statue of Rhodes in

Cape Town has not been decommissioned but removed completely from the public eye. As of spring 2021 the statue remains in storage at the University of Cape Town (World History Commons, 2021). Finally, the statue of Rhodes in Oxford remains in its place, but Oriel College is reportedly working on contextualizing the statue. Information signs have been placed under the statue, signifying it with new meaning (The Rhodes Legacy, n.d.).

The results have, in other words, varied greatly, even though the contestations have been driven by similar causes, such as the statues' connection to colonialism, slavery, and racism. This shows that not only is the specific historical context of each statue important, but also the cultural, political, and social context of each location. The Colston statue in Bristol has a significant Black population and a history of slavery and resistance to it. In Cape Town, the Rhodes statue was a symbol of oppression to many Black South Africans who had suffered under apartheid. The Rhodes statue in Oxford, on the other hand, is in a university setting with a long history of colonialism and imperialism, which has led to a different approach to interpreting and contextualizing the statue. Regardless of the outcomes, the contestations have marked a crucial turning point in the transformation of a collective narrative. It signifies a rejection of the old and a need of remembering silenced memories that are driven by the call for social transformation and a fear of succumbing to historical amnesia.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this thesis has been to illustrate how the contestations of the Rhodes and Colston statues highlight a fear of historical amnesia. Through a comparative analysis of the statues' historical backgrounds and the reasons behind their contestations, the thesis has explored the conflict from a memory studies perspective. It has shown how the current political climate in relation to racism and the legacy of the Empire, cultural values, and identity has influenced how these statues are perceived today. Additionally, various groups and their arguments for and against toppling the statues have been examined, demonstrating how tensions emerge between groups when attempting to reframe historical narratives.

Furthermore, the analysis has illustrated that the debate is not just about historical accuracy but also about which narratives we choose to remember, and which are forgotten. The contestations of Colston and Rhodes have been shaped by wider discussions about racial injustice, and by the calls for greater representation and recognition of marginalized voices in the public space. The rhetorical power that statues possess enables them to influence

narratives and establish a shared sense of identity – an identity that is perceived threatened when the statues are contested.

By utilizing Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory, the analysis has revealed that memory sites can serve as a battleground for power struggles and conflicting interests. Moreover, that the negotiation of competing memories is never impartial or politically unbiased. To cultivate a more inclusive and all-encompassing comprehension of history that accommodates multiple memories co-existing and conversing with each other, it is crucial to acknowledge the fear of historical amnesia and the dangers of memory being controlled by a single group or narrative. Doing so can better help us to acquire a better understanding of the past and its continuing influence on the present.

The topics of power dynamics and intersectionality in memory, as well as memory activism are all important areas for further study in the context of contested historical statues and how they highlight a fear of historical amnesia. Power dynamics are a crucial aspect of the negotiation of public memory and require further investigation in order to understand how memory is used as a tool for oppression and resistance.

The fear of historical amnesia underscores the importance of engaging with and challenging dominant narratives as it creates opportunities to transform collective memory in a way that better reflects contemporary values and concerns. Ultimately, the controversies surrounding the Rhodes and Colston statues have shown that contestations of statues represent more than just a physical act but rather a rejection of dominant narratives that reminds us that while statues may be set in stone, their meaning is not.

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