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# Redefining collective heritage, identities, and belonging

## Colonial statues in the times of Black Lives Matter

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### Introduction

On 25 May 2020, in Minneapolis, United States, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer. Although Floyd repeatedly stated that he could not breathe and went unconscious after being held on the ground for six minutes, the police officer on the scene kept kneeling on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. Floyd's death was another addition to a long list of African American men, women, and children who had died at the hands of law enforcement officers in the United States. The reactions to Floyd's death have, on the other hand, been quite remarkable. His death seems to have been the straw that broke the camel's back. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement founded in the United States in 2013 to protest police brutality and anti-black violence expanded into an international phenomenon almost overnight.

In the following two weeks, a wave of protests swiped across the United States, Europe, and beyond. One of these protests was held in Bristol on 7 June 2020, and, like Floyd's death, this particular protest had a significant consequence. It culminated in the forceful removal of the statue of Edward Colston (1636–1721) – a Bristolian “philanthropist” who had made part of his fortune in the transatlantic slave trade. The statue, sculpted by John Cassidy in 1895, was pulled down, rolled hundreds of metres down the road, and eventually thrown into the Bristol harbour. On 13 June 2020, approximately 300 people gathered for an “all lives matter” protest at the Cenotaph close to the former Edward Colston statue. The protest seemed relatively insignificant compared to the 10,000 people who had marched for Black Lives a week earlier. However, this second protest was very revealing from the perspective of heritage, identities, and belonging.

This chapter aims to analyze the fall of the Colston statue as a form of politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis et al., 2006; see also Antonsich, 2010) – as an attempt to demand public recognition and space for Bristolians, whose public visibility had been marginalized by earlier heritage practices around Colston. More precisely, what kind of discourses were invoked online during the protests, how these discourses relate to earlier waves of heritagization around the Colston statue, and what effects the protests had from the perspective of identity politics and belonging.

The relationship between heritage, identity, and belonging is at the heart of these questions. I follow Anthias (2008, p.8), who states that

Identity involves individual and collective narratives of the self and other, presentation and labelling, myths of origin and myths of destiny with associated strategies and identifications. Belonging is more about experiences of being part of the social fabric and the ways in which social bonds and ties are manifested in practices, experiences, and emotions of inclusion.

As a discursive resource (e.g., Wu and Hou, 2015) that can be used to both create these myths and narratives and connect them to specific objects and cultural landscapes (e.g., Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013), heritage is incremental for creating collective identities (Graham and Howard, 2008). However, heritage is not simply about our past or collective identities that have emerged at certain points in history. It is a contemporary political act (Association of Critical Heritage Studies, 2011). It *does* things in society (Turunen, 2021, p.39; see also Harvey, 2001): it creates, legitimates, and maintains communities and cultural values – but more importantly – different heritage practices also continuously challenge and renegotiate both collective identities and individual belonging.

If identities are a way to collectively position people (Hall, 1990, p.225; see also Somers, 1994) and heritage is one tool used in this positioning, (non-)belonging, as defined by Anthias previously, consists of the varied ways our attempts to position ourselves and each other are mirrored back to us in our cultural environment (see also the introduction to this volume). Although memorials, like the Colston statue, are physically single objects existing in one single space, they simultaneously represent different dimensions of European heritage (see Whitehead et al., 2019). As this chapter will show, these dimensions are not equally mediated in our public spaces – quite the opposite. There is significant “affective inequality” (see Modlin, Alderman, and Gentry, 2011) between different interpretations, and this inequality is also mirrored in the different degrees to which communities feel as though they belong in society.

## Data and methods

Empirically this chapter is based on an analysis of debates that emerged in response to the BLM protest in Bristol on various media outlets, social media, blog posts, and comment columns. I initially used a snowball method to search for relevant platforms. I started from selected international, national, and local newspapers, discussion forums, and activists’ social media accounts. By following these initial entry points, I created a manageable sample that was representative of the wider debates. The sample consists of data from Twitter and the comment sections in the *Bristol Post*’s online branch *Bristol Live* – a popular local newspaper with an active comment column used for public debate. I want to avoid undue association with *Bristol Post* and/or *Bristol Live*, as these comments are produced by external,

anonymous actors whose views do not reflect those of *Bristol Post* nor Reach plc or its associated group companies. Hence in the analysis, this latter dataset will be referred to as the “anonymous platform” or as “anonymous commentators”.

On both platforms, data was collected from the date of George Floyd’s death on 25 May 2020 until 31 July 2021. As such, I was able to analyze also the debates that emerged during the first anniversary of the protest. No additional software was used in either of the cases nor was any big data collected from the sites. I relied on the openly available search functions of the sites in question. On Twitter, my keywords resulted in relatively reliable hits, from which I collected a sample of roughly 5,000 tweets. On the anonymous platform, I analyzed the comments posted under the news stories tagged with “Edward Colston”.

There is a seemingly clear division between Twitter and the anonymous comments in this chapter. Rather surprisingly, my keywords for Twitter resulted almost uniformly in pro-BLM commentaries, while systematic tracking of critical comments on Twitter proved difficult. Comments that critiqued the BLM protest or the fall of the statue were not structured under widely shared hashtags. Even the examples of critical Twitter comments (e.g. by Boris Johnson and Robert Poll) follow a peculiar structure. Despite garnering thousands of likes and retweets that create a sense that the comments have broad support, the quote tweets that allow the commenter to complement the initial tweet with his or her insights were almost by default critiquing and condemning the initial tweet. As such, the only “new” content provided by those who engaged with the tweets was uniformly pro-BLM. For this reason, the analysis is partly split so that the analysis of pro-BLM commentaries is based on Twitter and the analysis of the “all lives matter” counter rhetoric is based on a few individual commentators on Twitter and the general trends that arise on the anonymous platform.

There are many ethical concerns related to the use of social media data. There is a growing corpus focused on the ethics of social media research (e.g., Zimmer and Proferes, 2014; Bonacchi, Altaweel, and Krzyzanska, 2018; Richardson, 2018; Bonacchi and Krzyzanska, 2019; Richardson, 2019). These studies span from quantitative big data approaches and data mining to qualitative approaches. Although tweets are commonly shared in media, researchers, for the most part, seem to follow a much stricter code of ethics to protect the anonymity of Twitter commentators who may not be aware that their comments are in the public domain and therefore open also for research use (e.g., Fiesler and Proferes, 2018; see also Farrell-Banks, 2019). Despite this principle, practices that researchers use while conducting research on Twitter vary greatly: some avoid using any direct quotes as they are easily trackable, some quote only public figures, while others claim that quotation with full usernames and details is required as means to give copyright to the person who made the original statement. I follow the middle road and use direct quotes from Twitter only from people who have marked themselves as public figures. In accordance with the Terms of Service of the *Bristol Live* community outreach activities, no direct quotes, usernames, or other identifiable information will be published.

## Virtually marching for Black Lives on Twitter: unity, truth, and pride

Statues had already become targets during the 2017 BLM protests in the United States and in the 2015 #RhodesMustFall protest in South Africa. As the BLM protest spread towards Europe in the early summer of 2020, it did not come as a big surprise that interest in Colston and his slaving past heightened quickly in Bristol.

When the protest started on 7 June 2020, photos, videos, and news pieces spread on social media like wildfire, and the most popular videos had tens of thousands of views. Typical hashtags include #BLM, #BLMBristol, #BLMUK, #colstonstatue, and #BristolProtest. Some thematic hashtags, like #RaceEquality or #Slavery, are also used.

Many commentaries are very emotional. People express pride, enthusiasm, unity, and joy in their online posts. As is typical for online debates, many tweets include different kinds of memes or GIFs, and as such, they also include an element of laughter and irony – an essential element for group formation in online environments (Särmä, 2016). The atmosphere of the protest is actively reproduced online.

Especially three elements repeat in people's expressions – unity, truth, and pride. Declarations of unity are widespread, especially on the day of the protest and the following days. In addition to general exclamations which asserted a collective sense of belonging together, like “We stand united” or simply “Unity!”, a large portion of the tweets include an emoji of a brown fist – a well-known symbol of the BLM – or a black heart. The black power salute is also repeated by many on-site and then shared online. Once the statue has been pulled down, people take turns to stand on the plinth thereby physically asserting their right to be in and belong to the space formerly occupied by Colston. This pose has later been made famous by Marc Quinn's sculpture *A Surge of Power*, which depicts a Bristolian BLM activist Jen Reid. The statue was raised on the Colston plinth on 15 June, roughly a week after the protest, as a form of unauthorized “guerrilla memorialisation” (Rice, 2010). Although officials quickly took down the sculpture, the image of a confident black woman with her fist held up has become an iconic symbol of the protest for many: it is actively recirculated, recreated, and shared across social media.

Solidarity is also expressed by actors who were not present at the protest. One widely shared image is a screenshot of Google maps taken on the night of the protest. As an example of international solidarity, Google was quick to act on the protest and update the location of the statue in the middle of the harbour and change the status of the statue to closed (for example, @abebrown716, 7 June 2020). As time goes on, unity is also strongly expressed in connection to the #Colston4 aimed at supporting the four people charged with criminal damage for the destruction of the statue. The idea that true responsibility is collectively on all 10,000 protesters who took part in the protest is prevalent.

The second repeating element, truth, is connected to making the silenced history of Colston's slaving past more present in the city's heritagescape. Symbolically

this ability to “speak the truth” or to make “Colston’s true nature” visible is especially narrated through the image of Colston at the bottom of the the harbour. The responses to the statue’s changed physical location exemplify the spatially located character of belonging (Eckersley 2022). This symbolism is shared especially visually in a variety of memes and drawings where Colston meets his former victims in the water. The associated poetic justice is also acknowledged by Bristol-based historian and broadcaster David Olusoga, who comments on it in a much-shared opinion piece published on 8 June 2020, in the *Guardian* (Olusoga, 2020):

But tonight Edward Colston sleeps with the fishes. The historical symmetry of this moment is poetic. A bronze effigy of an infamous and prolific slave trader dragged through the streets of a city built on the wealth of that trade, and then dumped, like the victims of the Middle Passage, into the water.

As time goes on, the debates on Twitter are slowly taken over by actors focused on sharing information around Colston, slavery, and racism. These include numerous academics and activist networks such as Countering Colston, founded in 2015. As a result, the tone of tweets changes as time goes by. Instead of emotional commentaries, the majority share media reports, news pieces, and blog posts aimed at raising awareness of the situation. Nurturing this type of historical awareness is crucial for learning to deal with difficult histories (e.g., Turunen, 2020), for unlocking the potential of places and spaces for previously absent or silenced aspects of belonging, and, ultimately, for building new communities.

Finally, there is a prominent sense of pride among the Twitter community. Many want to take a stand by sharing related photos or videos and simply make everyone know that they too took part in the protest. More specified hashtags like #GladColstonsGone or #BristolTakeover are used to narrate the perceived shift in power. The sense of pride is not a temporary phenomenon. Rather, the sense of pride that emerged during the protests seems to remain strong: it is alive and actively passed on to the next generation. For example, roughly a year after the protest, Dan Hicks, professor of contemporary archaeology at the University of Oxford and the curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum, commented in a tweet (@profdanhicks, 11 June 2021) after a visit to the recently opened temporary exhibition in M Shed where the statue was put on display after it was recovered from the harbour:

overheard in the exhibit:

a three-year-old boy who’d been taken to the exhibit by his dad: “it’s that man from the video who fell over!”

the dad: “yes that’s right, but remember that he was ‘pushed’ over”

❤️ Bristol

As the example shows, there is a clear sense of ownership and agency. Highlighting an increased sense of place-belongingness (Antonsich, 2010, p.645), the physical

location of the statue – or rather the remaining plinth – is turned into a space of empowerment. The protests, therefore, led to a reclamation of public space. Much like the empty plinth of the Rhodes statue in Cape Town (see Shepherd, 2020, 2022), the Colston plinth has become a place of gatherings, protests, and creativity. For example, a short video is published on Twitter two days after the protest. The video shows three young women dancing on the plinth. At the time of writing, the tweet had received over 323,000 views, nearly 23,000 likes, over 6,300 retweets, and roughly 480 quote feeds. The response is cheerful, even exuberant.

Additionally, Colston has featured in local artists' work in various forms after the protest. It is present in the poems of Vanessa Kisuule and Lawrence Hoo. The fall has been commented on by Banksy (Instagram, 9 June 2020), and a large mural of Jen Reid, the BLM activist whose powerful stance was already encapsulated in the work of Marc Quin, is also currently in the making by a renowned street artist Mr Cenz.

### **Anonymous loyalty, anger, and blame**

It does not take long to see that the debate over the Colston statue is an extremely charged and divisive political topic in Bristol. As Dressen (2009, p.225), an honorary professor of history at the University of Bristol, noted already over a decade ago:

his statue has become a symbolic lightning rod for highly charged attitudes about race, history, and public memory. The statue has been defaced, and his name reviled, yet he still inspires loyalty and pride amongst many Bristolians.

This loyalty can be easily identified in comments made by local and national actors. Although the mainstream international coverage of the events in Bristol was mainly positive or supportive, the reception of the protests and the fall of the Colston statue was far from unanimous. Two days after the protest on 9 June 2020, a senior Conservative city councillor, Richard Eddy, claimed on *Bristol Post* (Cork, 2020) that

Since this frenzied thug violence on Sunday [the BLM protest], I have received a stream of outraged responses from constituents and others – more than I've ever received in such a short time in my 28-year Council service.

Similar discourses are evident also in the national debates. A week after the protest, Boris Johnson, the prime minister of the United Kingdom, took a stand on Twitter (90,766 likes, 16,751 retweets, and 5,053 quote tweets), stating:

We cannot now try to edit or censor our past ... To tear them [statues] down would be to lie about our history ... But it is clear the protests have been sadly

hijacked by extremists intent on violence ... The only responsible course of action is to stay away from these protests.

(@BorisJohnson, 12 June 2020)

Soon after the protest Robert Poll, the founder of the Save Our Statues Twitter account (@\_SaveOurStatues) and an online petition platform with the same name, is also gaining momentum. Although he joined Twitter only after the fall of Colston, by December 2021, he had published over 4,500 tweets and received over 20,000 followers. Poll founded his site as a reaction to what had happened to Colston's statue, claiming it is "part of a much bigger fight for the soul of Britain" (Poll, 2021, para. 2). In addition to the UK, Robert Poll seeks to protect "our heritage" in former UK colonies with continuing settler populations, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. Through his personal brand of propaganda, he decries the critique of different statues as a "triumph of barbarism over civilisation" (@\_SaveOurStatues, 9 September 2021). He uses his platform to mobilize people to attend public consultations and sign petitions to block the removal of statues.

On the anonymous platform, the discussion is initially relatively quiet. However, as time goes on, it starts to fill with comments that seem to echo the ones by Eddy, Johnson, and Poll. There is only a small minority of pro-BLM commentators. In the community that is slowly forming on this anonymous comment section, BLM activists are repeatedly called a "mob", "criminals", "far-left", or even "terrorists", and their actions are primarily referred to as "criminal acts" or "vandalism". Some also suspect that a significant portion of the protesters were not from Bristol. As these people did not "belong" to Bristol, the protest did not really reflect the opinions of "true" Bristolians.

There are many different discourses used to shift attention away from Colston. Many belittle his role in the slave trade. It is pointed out that, although he made money from the slave trade, Colston never personally enslaved people. Moreover, as slavery was legal back then, it is unfair to judge Colston by modern standards. Others try to side-track the discussions by highlighting other forms of slavery, especially the "Arab slavers" and "Romans and Vikings" who enslaved Britons. Responsibility for the slave trade is also repeatedly posited on the Africans, who are blamed for selling their "own people".

This active diminishing of Colston's connection to slavery also has a national historical dimension. For example, Nasar has shown that active silencing of slave histories has been used to shift attention away from Britain's part in the slave trade and into the celebration of "its efforts in the abolitionist movement" (Nasar, 2020, p.1220; see also Moody, 2018) – a discourse that is also often repeated on the anonymous platform. Accordingly, Colston is primarily portrayed as responsible for building and helping the city. He is not only depicted as a local hero but a national one and the BLM protesters are blamed for destroying his legacy.

In addition, this blame-shifting is targeted not only towards the BLM movement, but also towards local authorities and the press. There are constant criticisms



of the police and the legal system. Additionally, Marvin Rees, Bristol's first mayor of colour, is blamed by both sides – for not protecting the statue and for not removing it early enough. Some also start to blame the platform's moderators for blocking some of their comments for racist content as time goes on. It is seen as a sign that all media outlets are biased against them.

## Double authorization of Colston

Van Huis has argued that there are times when “heritage is more visibly contested and more rapidly changing” (van Huis, 2019, p.218). Comparing the two aforementioned discourses – the ones supporting and opposing the fall of Colston – it seems that the fault lines were quite easily and quickly drawn. This split could be interpreted as a rapid change in how Colston's societal role has been understood. However, I believe this to be too simplistic. By bringing the online discourses discussed above together with the history of heritagization around Colston, we can see that the changes are not the result of the protest *per se*. Instead, I argue that the fall of the Colston statue is a result of the evolving relationship between two authorized heritage discourses (see Smith, 2006) that have shaped public ideas around Colston for several decades.

Authorized heritage discourse refers to the official discourse produced by heritage experts and legitimated and sanctioned by local, national, or international authorities (Smith, 2006). They often represent the official discourse – for example, the national narrative – that is actively reproduced in society through museums, schools, and media. As authorized heritage discourses are often deeply entwined with social and cultural integration, their effects are durable and long-lasting. However, they are not immune to change. As Harrison (2013, p.198) points out, they require “regular revision and review to see if [they] continue to meet the needs of contemporary society”.

The first round of authorization around Colston occurred around the time the statue was erected in 1895 – an impressive 174 years after his death. Therefore, the creation of the statue was not a direct response to his death. Instead, as Dresser (2009) and Branscome (2021) have highlighted, his veneration was used to legitimate and sediment the economic and political aims of the Victorian era Bristolian elite – in part created both by Colston's philanthropy and direct proceeds from the transatlantic slave trade. As Branscome (2021, p.19) explains,

The Victorian Colston statue thus needs to be understood as a representation of Bristol's class ideology at the time of its erection. It was, in reality, a statue to the city's reformulated elites, and only about Colston in the sense that he had been turned into a proxy for their continued dominance.

The subsequent decades were used to entrench this power dynamic: a certified “cult of Colston” (Dresser, 2009) was institutionalized at the heart of Bristolian heritage, identity and politics of belonging. Over the years, also several smaller

statues, memorials, and traditions have been created around Colston. The first authorization process culminated in 1977 when the statue was officially granted status as a Grade II listed structure. There is the annual Colston day and Colston bun. Colston is also embedded into local cartography: there are Colston Avenue, Colston Street, Colston Hall, Colston Tower, and several schools that bear his name – or at least there were. Colston Hall is today Bristol Beacon, Colston Tower is Beacon Tower, Colston’s Primary School is Cotham Gardens Primary School, Colston’s Girls School has changed its name to Montpelier High School, and so on. There has even been a local petition to change the names of Colston Street and Colston Avenue back to their original forms, Steep Street and St Augustine’s Bank.

Although Colston’s involvement in the slave trade was already made public in 1920 by H. J. Wilkins – only 25 years after the erection of the statue – this rather one-sided focus on celebrating Colston as a Bristolian philanthropist continued until the 1990s (Dresser, 2007, p.164). However, increased awareness of Colston’s role in the Royal Africa Company and the transatlantic slave trade directly correlated with increased discussions and activism around the statue. As such, the 1990s consist of an activist awakening and a shift in the authorization around Colston.

It is crucial to notice that the city’s museums – the expert voices associated with authorized heritage discourses – had a central role. In 1998 a process for a new temporary exhibition, *A Respectable Trade? Bristol and Transatlantic Slavery*, was launched by the City’s Museum and Art Gallery. As described by Dresser (2009, p.229), who was herself also involved in the planning, the controversial nature of the exhibition raised questions among the public: “there was a marked defensiveness about the project from elements within the majority population” (p.229). Despite the early opposition, during the six months that the exhibition was open, it “attracted over 160,000 visitors. This was an unprecedented number, which represented an increase of 79 per cent over usual visitor levels” (Dresser, 2009, p.230). It was highly successful in increasing attention towards Bristol’s slavery heritage (see also Otele, 2012, for later phases of the exhibition).

Moreover, an accompanying Slavery Trail organized by Bristol Museum enabled people to become more aware of the traces of the slave trade still visible in Bristol. It was one of the first interventions that placed Colston at the centre of critique. As Branscome (2021, p.20) explains,

Colston was heavily featured as part of this urban trail, further intensifying local discontent with a figure that so many citizens had been prompted to herald since their early childhood, yet who was now being exposed by an upsetting historic narrative that most of them had not been aware of.

In the following decades, there have been several interventions around the statue. Several rounds of petitions have been circled demanding that the statue be removed or at least a second plaque added to complement the highly one-sided description

of the original plaque that described Colston simply as “one of the most virtuous and wise sons” of Bristol. Although many of these interventions received thousands of signatures and organized numerous discussion forums and consultations, none of these campaigns successfully got the actual statue removed, relocated, or managed to have another perspective added to complement the original plaque.

The statue has also inspired several critical artworks that have promoted critical public awareness around Colston. For example, *Colston* (2006) by Hew Locke exhibits a large photographic reproduction of the statue draped with massive golden chains, pearls, diamonds, seashells, and other accolades to the extent that they are now pulling him down. Additionally, there have been many anti-racist artworks focused on the broader black history of Bristol, such as *The Seven Saints of St Paul* (2015–2017) by Michele Curtis and the performative *Who Was Pero?* (2017) by Libita Clayton (see also Schütz, 2020).

Similarly, over the years, the statue itself has been the target of numerous “guerilla memorialisations” (Rice, 2010). Over the years, the statue has been covered in posters that call him a “murderer”, a “human trafficker”, and a “slave trader”; the statue’s face has been painted; and a ball and chain have been attached to his leg (see also Buchczyk and Facer, 2020). On Anti-Slavery Day on 18 November 2018, an anonymous artwork commenting on modern-day slavery was built around the statue. One hundred small casts of human bodies were arranged on the ground like slaves on board a ship. The hull is structured out of cement blocks that read: fruit pickers, nail bar workers, car wash attendants, sex workers, domestic servants, kitchen workers, farmworkers, and finally, at the bow, “here and now”.

This list is not exhaustive. These are simply some examples of the wide variety of interventions that have taken place throughout the years. They exemplify the decades of “competing” authorization around Colston that, I argue, was crucial for empowering those 10,000 people to take a stand on 7 June 2020. These people challenged Colston and claimed space and visibility for forms of belonging that had remained marginalized in Bristol’s public space.

## **Losing our heritage vs reclaiming space**

Heritage is often understood in connection with “a threat of losing some material or immaterial element that individuals and communities see as meaningful” (Turunen, 2021, p.66; see Harrison, 2013). It is not only a means to secure the things we feel are threatened, but it also garners part of its value and power from this risk (DeSilvey and Harrison, 2020). The more threatened something is, the more valuable it becomes. In the context of the Colston statue, the fall of the statue sparked an elevated sense of threat in many people’s minds. From Johnson and Poll to the anonymous platform, commentators equated the fall of the statue as an erasure of history – in other words, as a loss of something that had historical significance. This experience of heightened risk towards important monuments with British significance was also engrained into a UK policy in the wake of the fall of Colston. In September 2020, Oliver Dowden, the Secretary of State for

Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport, announced that the government was banning the “removal of statues or other similar objects” (UK, 2020) and advising publicly funded museums to avoid “taking actions motivated by activism or politics” (UK, 2020).

Dowden’s policy highlights heritage’s ability to de-politicize ideological debates into a matter of technocratic knowledge (see Smith, 2006; Gnecco, 2015). The perceived risk gives their protection greater legitimacy and turns a deeply divided and contentious political matter into a legislative concern – into a question of simply following established protection and conservation protocols. I believe the events in Bristol also prove the opposite. Critical activism and citizens’ protests can re-politicize heritage that has remained dormant. As Dresser (2007, p.164) puts it, “even dead statues have the power to provoke”.

Although the discourse of heritage is not actively brought up by most commentators, the protest is clearly seen by the “all lives matter” commentators as an attack on Bristol’s heritage and, more importantly, on (White) Bristolian identity and belonging. His continued presence in the minds of many Bristolians exemplifies the ways “statues and urban landscapes together, through their names and associations, create memories and hence become critical in forming a feeling of identity” (Branscome, 2021, p.20). The reaction to the fall of the statue, therefore, was not really about the statue or even Colston. Quite the opposite, it is likely that the statue itself was rather insignificant for many prior to the protest. The fall of the statue materialized the more abstract threat that some Bristolians had felt towards their identity and position in society – in other words, their sense of belonging. This threat is not new, nor was it born in response to the BLM protest. It is part of a broader discourse on racial tensions that have gained political traction as part of the Brexit campaign (e.g., Bonacchi, Altaweel, and Krzyzanska, 2018; Shankley and Rhodes, 2020; Mears, this volume).

Although the sense of risk or loss is central to the experiences, the effects of the first layer of authorization are still strongly present. Hegemonic heritage narratives promote the belonging of only a small culturally privileged section of society. As Anthias explains, “collective places constructed by imaginings of belonging ... [are] produce a ‘natural’ community of people” (2008, p.8). For those who fail to identify with this “natural” community, the authorized heritage discourses are often experienced as rather exclusionary and hostile constructs. Although not having as strong demographical effects as colonialism (see Shankley, Hanneman, and Simpson, 2020, p.16), the societal consequences of the slave trade and how they are heritagized in Bristol are central to understanding contemporary inequality in Bristol (Runnymede, 2017). Colston’s celebration and veneration, symbolized by the statue, is a key element contributing to the conservative, white notion of Bristolian identity. As argued in this chapter and throughout this volume, promoting a feeling of belonging on a broader spectrum requires legitimizing more diverse heritage narratives and changing the ways these narratives are mediated in cultural environments and public discourses. In this context, the growing

awareness of Colston's involvement in the slave trade, symbolized by the statue's fall, is a form of politics of belonging emerging from the growing diversity of British and Bristolian identities.

This chapter shows that the Colston statue has been a target of both political and creative interventions for roughly 30 years. Together these movements are slowly and gradually changing the narrative of Colston – or, as argued earlier, they are re-authorizing him. As a result, people have been learning to “re-read their city” (Branscome, 2021, p.9) and “to comprehend fuller, complex, and often more troubling histories” (p.9) that are associated with it.

This growing critical awareness around Colston is not only about increasing knowledge. The pro-BLM comments were inherently very emotional, and participation in the protest was often a deeply affective experience. As pointed out by Crang and Tolia-Kelly (2010, p.2315), inclusion also requires the “production and circulation of feeling and sentiment”. It requires a degree of ownership, agency, and emotional engagement beyond simply existing in a community (see Eckersley, 2022; and the introduction to this volume).

The fall of the statue testifies that the place formally perceived as a space of oppression and violence can be transformed into a space of empowerment, solidarity, and creativity. It sedimented a new layer of meaning to Bristol's public landscape. As such, the BLM protest was able to connect to the two sides of belonging identified by Antonsich. The protest provided a powerful “discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion” (2010, p.645), while the transformation of the space around the former Colston statue has enabled a “personal, intimate feeling of being ‘at home’” (ibid.) in the public environment. It has enabled parts of society that formerly have not had a stake in the city's heritagescape to claim a space and speak their mind.

The process has been oppositional and challenging, but it has provided a much-needed re-evaluation of local cultural heritage. This newfound spirit also manifests in the addition of a new guerrilla plaque to Pero's Bridge, where Colston was thrown in the harbour. The plaque has a picture of a crowd cheering as the statue of Colston is in mid-air, falling from its pedestal. The plaque reads:

June 7, 2020, at this spot, during worldwide anti-racism protest, a statue celebrating the 17th century slave-trader Edward Colston was thrown into the harbour by the people of Bristol. Various campaigns to have the statue removed through official channels had been frustrated.

You came down easy in the end.  
As you landed  
A piece of you fell off, broke away,  
And inside, nothing but air.  
This whole time, you were hollow.  
Vanessa Kisuule, Bristol City Poet 2020

The long-awaited inclusion of a second plaque highlights that “monuments alone will not, in themselves, stimulate a constant rethinking of the past” (Drescher, 2001, p.112). Only the space and discourses created around them enable new forms of knowledge and new forms of community to emerge.

### **Conclusions: coloniality of European heritage**

In this chapter, I have focused on the statue of Edward Colston. As the only statue in Europe that was removed forcibly by protesters, the national and international media spectacle around Colston was on a whole different scale when compared to statues that were removed more quietly by authorities in the wake of the protests – for example, the statue of Leopold II in Antwerp or Robert Millicent in London. As Branscome (2021, p.29) points out, the Colston statue has become “a monument to monuments”, a media spectacle that is “worth a million statues” (2021, p.29).

Nevertheless, the events around Colston are not unique. Other similar processes of veneration took place across the globe. We can see Colston’s echoes in the 2015 #RhodesMustFall campaigns in Cape Town and Oxford, the 2017 fall of the Confederate statues across the United States, the repeated attacks on Leopold II statues in Belgium, or the recent removals of dozens of Christopher Columbus statues in South and North America. The list goes on. All the aforementioned examples have at some point been described as vandalism. However, the forced removal of statues is not always considered an attack on history – quite the opposite. Sometimes the fall of statues is justified, needed, and legitimate. Drayton (2019, p.654) has captured this uneven dynamic perfectly:

the Daily Telegraph described the destruction of statues in South Africa in April 2015 as “vandalism”. Twelve years earlier, however, in April 2003, the same newspaper had reported the destruction of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad as the symbol of liberation and the toppling of despotism.

The juxtaposition between rightfully removed statues and illegal acts was also reversed in the pro-BLM discourse. The absence of statues of Hitler, Stalin, or Lenin was commented on as a justification for why Colston also deserved to go. People stated that removing symbols of power, like statues, is the norm of political regime change. So, why are colonial statues still prevalent across the globe? And more importantly, why are so many ready to defend them?

An obvious solution would be to look for the answer from the nature of colonialism. Although decolonization as a political process, for the most part, took place over 60 years ago, the overall regime of power colonialism created has remained largely intact. This coloniality is almost like a veil. As Shepherd (2022, p.66) notes, coloniality is “hidden from us, in the sense that we see [it], but we do not recognise [it] as such”. It exists as “a form of deep inscription, in landscapes, in lives and in bodies of ideas and practices” (ibid.). Colonial sentiments, values, and biases are also central elements of the European cultural archive (Wekker, 2016;

Turunen, 2021) – they are ingrained in the whole idea of European or Western culture. The debate is, therefore, also far larger than simply statues. In a way, Robert Poll was correct: it is about our collective soul.

Knudsen and colleagues (2021, p.10) have suggested that the murder of George Floyd has become “a lieu de mémoire” of sorts. I would add that places like the empty plinths of Cecil Rhodes or Edward Colston have taken on a similar property. They have become places of memory, belonging, and creativity. They are incremental parts of emerging forms of collective heritage. Therefore, as much as we need to understand the histories that gave birth to these statues, we should “not forget the circumstances in which these monuments are coming down in the present” (Moody, 2021, p.5). They are history and heritage in the making. Although it is premature to debate whether the BLM protest will succeed in becoming a formative moment (see Ringmar, 1996) in the history of Europe, it is undoubtedly a transformative one. It is an active, ongoing phenomenon where different change processes build momentum but whose results – their true formative nature – are still being constructed and debated.

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