

## **What Do We Mean When We Talk About Statues?**

*10<sup>th</sup> Africa Day Memorial Lecture*

*University of the Free State, Bloemfontein*

When I first heard, in March 2015, that students at the University of Cape Town had begun agitating to have a statue of Cecil Rhodes removed from their campus and, a bit later, that students at the University of Oxford had followed suit, I felt something akin to guilt. I had been a Rhodes scholar from 2001-04 and like all applicants to the scholarship I had sought a piece of Rhodes's famous bequest in the full knowledge of its dubious colonial provenance. I had attempted to work through the moral quandaries implicit in this quest by promising, in my application essay, to be the very antithesis of the values that Rhodes stood for, and by sublimating whatever guilt I may have felt at the time into an academic career built around the intellectual and political legacies of anticolonial and postcolonial thought. But it has never felt enough. Now, here were students, in Cape Town, Oxford and elsewhere, doing something concrete and collective to dismantle the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. I mention this, not because I think my personal guilt will interest anyone else, but to emphasise that despite having watched the events that I have just referred to from afar, I felt deeply connected to them, perhaps even implicated in them. And yet precisely because I was watching them from afar, I can claim no great knowledge of them. Certainly you all, in this room, have had a far more intimate experience and knowledge of the debates and conversations precipitated by Rhodes Must Fall, and the repercussions that it continues to have on South African university campuses and in public life more broadly. Thus, while events in South Africa form the point of departure for my lecture, I will focus more on their reverberations and echoes in other parts of the world principally in the form of mobilisations around and against other statues that have sought to bring attention to hitherto marginalised issues concerning justice, memory, redistribution and reconciliation among other preoccupations. In doing so, I hope we may be able to reflect on how statues, far from being merely ornamental, have become terrains for the expression of some of the most vexing challenges inherent in the very attempt to live together in community.

In both South Africa and the UK, the call for iconographic decolonisation ('Rhodes Must Fall') was accompanied, and quickly overtaken, by a host of other demands—though this happened differently in each place. In Cape Town, Chumani Maxwele's scatological assault on the statue of Rhodes that sat brooding at the entrance to the University of Cape Town was the spark that ignited student discontent around broader issues of institutional racism manifest in the Eurocentrism of the curriculum and the racial demographics of staff and students. A month after the protests began, the statue was gone, lifted off its plinth by a crane to the sound of applause and celebration. As the protests spread to other campuses, students reflected on what 'must fall' in their respective contexts, their demands coalescing in the rallying cry #FeesMustFall. In Oxford, Oriel College became the principal target of Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford (RMFO) on account of the statue of Rhodes that graced its façade in recognition of his benefaction to the college. The College announced a 'listening exercise' to consult on ways of distancing itself from the more toxic aspects of Rhodes' legacy, only to stop listening when its development director warned that it risked losing over a hundred million pounds in bequests from prospective donors incensed at its apparent ingratitude to its most generous benefactor.<sup>1</sup> Here too, the protesters' demand for the decolonisation of 'institutional structures and physical space in Oxford and beyond' entailed not only tackling 'the plague of colonial iconography (in the form of statues, plaques and paintings) that seeks to whitewash and distort history' but also a transformation of Eurocentric curricula and measures to address the underrepresentation of black and minority ethnic students and staff at Oxford.<sup>2</sup>

## **1. The material and the symbolic**

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria Ward and Javier Espinoza, "Is this how we treat our donors?" Read the full Rhodes document here', *The Telegraph*, 29 January 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/12128861/Is-this-how-we-treat-our-donors-Read-the-full-Rhodes-document-here.html>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://rmfoxford.wordpress.com/about/>.

What is striking in all of this is how quickly—albeit in radically different ways—the question of the statue itself was dispensed with. In the UK, even commentators sympathetic to Rhodes Must Fall were quick to relegate statues to the sidelines. Amit Chaudhuri thought ‘it would be...sad if Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford became identified with the statue in Oriel College alone’ because he regarded its wider ambitions around the decolonisation of education to be more significant.<sup>3</sup> David Olusoga worried that by building their manifestos around calls for the taking down of statues, the campaigns had ‘distorted’ complex and worthy ideas around decolonisation ‘into a simple right-wrong yes-no statue debate’.<sup>4</sup> Some writers saw the production of controversy around the statue as a clever tactic that successfully provoked the kinds of debates that publics seem otherwise uninterested in. As Amia Srinivasan wrote, ‘complaints of structural racism and calls for curriculum reform don’t draw public attention like the toppling of a statue, and the RMF leaders know this.’<sup>5</sup> There is something to this of course. One of the difficulties of motivating collective action around ‘structural’ issues is that the very labelling of a problem as structural, effectively distributes responsibility for its alleviation onto everyone and therefore no one. Conversely, campaigns centred on individuals provide a narrative of origin and responsibility that, however mythical, elicits and focuses anger on an identifiable target while holding out the possibility of using this affect for progressive and transformative purposes. Even ‘structural’ change needs a king whose head it can aspire to cut off in the full knowledge that this will never be enough.

RMFO activists, while declaring, somewhat defensively, that their campaign ‘is about more than a statue’, nonetheless insisted that ‘statues and symbols matter; they are a means through which communities express their values.’ In contrast, instrumental readings of statue politics in which the focus on the statue is regarded as a distraction from more important material issues (access to

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<sup>3</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, ‘The real meaning of Rhodes Must Fall’, *The Guardian*, 16 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/16/the-real-meaning-of-rhodes-must-fall>.

<sup>4</sup> David Olusoga, ‘Topple the Cecil Rhodes statue? Better to rebrand him a war criminal’, *The Guardian*, 7 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/07/cecil-rhodes-statue-war-criminal-rhodes-must-fall>.

<sup>5</sup> Amia Srinivasan, ‘Under Rhodes’, *London Review of Books* vol. 38, no. 7, 31 March 2016, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n07/amia-srinivasan/under-rhodes>.

education, curricular content) or, at best, a clever route into them, effectively drive a sharp wedge between the material and symbolic dimensions of politics and proclaim the priority of the material over the symbolic. Analytically, such readings leave much unexplained and indeed inexplicable—the passionate intensity with which Fallist activists beat the statue of Rhodes as it was brought down in Cape Town and, more generally, the ubiquitous practice of statue vandalism, defacement and mockery; the vitriolic, even violent, reactions that controversies over statues arouse in many places, bringing into relief many of the fault lines of contemporary societies; the considerable capital that continues to be invested in the construction and maintenance of statues. Normatively, the more reductive instrumental readings fail to take the iconographic seriously as a potential site of injury and injustice in its own right. Writing about struggles against homophobia, the philosopher Judith Butler has cautioned that the relegation of some injustices to the realm of the ‘merely cultural’ has the effect of downplaying the urgency with which they demand redress, in line with the tendency of much left political thought to prioritise the material.<sup>6</sup> In short, we might say that dismissals of statuary as so much superficial ornamentation fail to appreciate what might be called the psychic lives of statues.

There is something rather phallic about statues as public artefacts beyond the sometimes obvious consideration of their shape. Typically placed at the centre of the agora, they demand attention. Where virtually every other medium of representation—books, film, theatre, music, painting—requires an approach from the reader or viewer, statues do not seem to need our permission to thrust themselves upon us. At the same time, like the phallus, statues are vulnerable, typically standing alone, unguarded, exposed in the public square. Simultaneously aggressive and insecure, they lend themselves to becoming lightning rods for public discontent. To understand how this happens we cannot simply invert the relationship between the material and the symbolic, but need to be attentive to the traffic between them. We are surrounded by statues of historical figures with complex and unsavoury pasts, but only a small minority of these attract controversy. Statues of figures whose violence remains locked in

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Merely Cultural’, *Social Text* 52/53 (1997).

the past, because the conflicts to which they were central have either been resolved or superseded by more significant fault lines, tend not to arouse demands for their removal on account of their historic misdeeds. Those that do, tend to be symbols of some *continuing* violence or oppression.

We can see this in the recent controversy over Confederate monuments in the United States, at the epicentre of which stood the statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia. While Confederate monuments have always been controversial for their valorisation of champions of slavery, the first suggestions in Charlottesville that the city consider taking down its Confederate monuments came a month after the seventeen year old Trayvon Martin was murdered by George Zimmerman in 2012.<sup>7</sup> Black Lives Matter was formed that year to protest Zimmerman's shocking acquittal and the narrative of blame that had come to attach to Martin during the trial, as well as to draw attention to the alarming numbers of African American men who had died in violence at the hands of the police and white vigilantes. The struggle to uproot Confederate symbols gained further traction in June 2015, when the white supremacist Dylann Roof murdered nine African Americans in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The discovery of photographs of the twenty one year old Roof posing with Confederate flags and other memorabilia spurred a grassroots movement to remove the flag from public spaces and triggered a number of incidents of vandalism against Confederate statues, including in Charlottesville.

Roof posted these pictures of himself on a website called 'The Last Rhodesian' in an apparent reference to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), the colonial entity founded by Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company and named after Rhodes himself. The website features a manifesto-like diatribe in which Roof claims to have been radicalised by the Trayvon Martin case, which he describes as having made him

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<sup>7</sup> Jacey Fortin, 'The Statue at the Center of Charlottesville's Storm', *The New York Times*, 13 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-rally-protest-statue.html>.

‘racially aware’ that blacks were ‘the biggest problem for Americans’.<sup>8</sup> In a number of photographs, he is wearing a jacket decorated with flags of apartheid-era South Africa and the white supremacist state of Rhodesia. Historian Peter Cole explains Roof’s infatuation with these symbols by reminding us of the affection with which tens of thousands of southern US whites viewed Rhodesia in the 1970s, given its ability to establish the institutional forms of white supremacy that they had been forced to dismantle as a result of the advent of black civil rights.<sup>9</sup>

If Roof’s white supremacism was transnational in its inspiration, this was also true of the resistance it provoked. When Bree Newsome, in a stunning act of civil disobedience, tore down the Confederate flag from a flagstaff on the grounds of the South Carolina statehouse, she said, among other things: ‘I did it in solidarity with the South African students who toppled a statue of the white supremacist, colonialist Cecil Rhodes. I did it for all the fierce black women on the front lines of the movement and for all the little black girls who are watching us. I did it because I am free.’<sup>10</sup>

## 2. The temporalities of statues

Perhaps the most frequently articulated objection to the removal of statues and symbols is the claim that to do so would be to erase or whitewash the sordid histories that they would otherwise remind us of. This view regards statues as faithful testaments to the events of the past. In fact, statues exist in multiple times, at least three of which seem relevant to unpacking what they might mean

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<sup>8</sup> Scott Neuman, ‘Photos of Dylann Roof, Racist Manifesto Surface On Website’, *NPR*, 20 June 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/20/416024920/photos-possible-manifesto-of-dylann-roof-surface-on-website>.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Cole, ‘Dylann Roof’s Rhodesian, South Africa Flags Symbolize White Supremacy. So Does the Confederate Flag’, *In These Times*, 24 June 2015, <http://inthesetimes.com/article/18107/what-do-rhodesia-apartheid-era-south-africa-and-the-confederacy-have-in-com>.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Bree Newsome: In Her Own Words’, <https://colorofchange.org/InHerWords-full-statement/>. I am indebted to Tadiwa Madenga’s extraordinary meditation on life as a Zimbabwean student living in the US and studying in Oxford for an exploration of the relationship between white supremacism in the US and southern Africa (‘Rhodes’ Legacy: From Dylann Roof to Oxford’, *Skin Deep*, 7 November 2015, <http://www.skinddeepmag.com/online-articles/rhodes-legacy-from-dylann-roof-to-oxford/>).

at any given time. There is the time of the events and historical figures that they represent; the time in which, and the purposes for which, they are built; and the time in which they are viewed. Frequently, the gap between the first and second of these moments renders dubious the view of statues as mute and faithful witnesses to the events that they depict.

In the wake of Dylann Roof's killing spree in Charleston, the Southern Poverty Law Centre—a group that monitors hate crime and extremism—identified 1,503 public spaces in the US that bear Confederate place names and symbols.<sup>11</sup> While these memorials commemorate the events of the US Civil War which took place between 1861-65, the overwhelming majority of them were constructed much later in two waves: the first two decades of the twentieth century, when Southern US states were enacting Jim Crow laws to disenfranchise newly liberated African Americans and to re-segregate public space (the statue of Lee in Charlottesville was erected in 1924); and the 1950s and 60s, when judicially mandated desegregation and civil rights provoked a white supremacist backlash. Political scientist Joseph Lowndes has argued that the Jim Crow phenomenon was an attempt to pre-empt the formation of alliances between poor whites and blacks against rich southern white planters.<sup>12</sup> The passing of laws that privileged whites effectively disbursed what W. E. B. DuBois called the 'wages of whiteness'—a public, psychological boost that drew poor whites closer to rich ones without any alleviation of class disparities between them.<sup>13</sup> The construction of memorials to the Confederacy was an integral part of this project. Far from chronicling the decisive defeat of the southern attempt to preserve the institution of slavery by seceding from the Union, they offered southern whites a false and comforting view of the Civil War as a noble 'Lost Cause' fought to defend the sort of life that Margaret Mitchell immortalised in the thoroughly nostalgia-drenched 1936 classic *Gone With The Wind*. In short, the statues are propaganda rather than history. Very little seems to have changed. If

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<sup>11</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center, *Whose Heritage? A Report on Public Symbols of the Confederacy*, <https://www.splcenter.org/data-projects/whose-heritage>.

<sup>12</sup> Jason Wilson, 'Why is the US still fighting the civil war?', *The Guardian*, 16 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/16/why-is-the-us-still-fighting-the-civil-war>.

<sup>13</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935).

Charlottesville showed us anything, it is that Confederate memorials continue to perform the only function they have ever had. It is telling that the defence of a statue of Robert E. Lee became a rallying point for disparate white supremacist groups seeking to 'Unite the Right' in the face of increasing anti-racist campaigning and activism. And we might regard President Trump's defence of the statue as a contemporary instance of the disbursement of the 'wages of whiteness' that offers a kind of psychic appeasement to his white working class constituency while obviating the need for him to improve their material welfare.

In this regard, the controversy over the Confederate statues might present an easy case for the testing of our moral intuitions, given that the meaning of the statues has remained remarkably consistent—for both white supremacists and anti-racists—across different temporal moments. More interesting and complex perhaps are those instances in which something about the meaning of a statue or the historical figures that it depicts has changed over time. In June 2016, the then President of India Pranab Mukherjee unveiled a statue of Gandhi at the University of Ghana in Accra. Almost immediately, angry blog posts and articles in the local press denounced the installation of the statue and demanded its removal.<sup>14</sup> Protest tweets coalesced under the hash tags #GandhiMustFall and #GandhiForComeDown, in a clear nod to the influence of #RhodesMustFall (the connection is more than incidental, given that Gandhi was also a settler in turn-of-the-century South Africa). An online petition made a number of arguments against the statue.<sup>15</sup> First, it claimed, Gandhi was a racist. As an activist in South Africa, he had campaigned primarily to renegotiate the position of the Indian community in the then extant racial hierarchy without ever attacking the underlying premises of racial ordering. The protesters demonstrated this by reproducing a series of self-incriminating quotes drawn from Gandhi's writings across a significant period of his career (1894-1908), in many of which he seems to think nothing of referring to black South Africans with the racial slurs that

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<sup>14</sup> Shafic Osman, 'The Deception of Mahatma's Iconography: Why #GhandiMustFall in Legon', 3 July 2016, <http://ugfile.com/the-deception-of-mahatmas-iconography-why-ghandimustfall-in-legon/>; Felix Ntehehene, 'UG: Pull down Ghandi's statue, he was a racist', 4 July 2016, <https://www.rawgist.com/ug-pull-ghandis-statue-racist/>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/the-members-of-the-university-of-ghana-council-gandhi-s-statue-at-the-university-of-ghana-must-come-down>.



were in use at the time ('Ours is a continual struggle against a degradation sought to be inflicted upon us by the Europeans, who desire to degrade us to the level of the raw Kaffir whose occupation is hunting, and whose sole ambition is to collect a certain number of cattle to buy a wife with and, then, pass his life in indolence and nakedness' (1896).) The petition also linked Gandhi's apparent acceptance of racial hierarchy with his justification of the hierarchical institution of caste in the Indian context. In a 1936 essay entitled 'A Vindication of Caste', Gandhi had offered an idealised and disingenuous account of the caste system, arguing that whatever its abuses in practice, 'the calling of a Brahman—spiritual teacher—and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man.'<sup>16</sup> His fiercest Indian critic B. R. Ambedkar, leader of the Dalit community and later architect of independent India's Constitution, was suitably withering in his response, reminding readers that the Hindu reformers that Gandhi idolised had been 'lamentably ineffective' in eliminating the scourge of caste: 'They did not preach that all men were equal. They preached that all men were equal in the eyes of God—a very different and a very innocuous proposition which nobody can find difficult to preach or dangerous to believe in.' Gandhi, Ambedkar concluded, was 'prostituting his intelligence to find reasons for supporting this archaic social structure of the Hindus.'<sup>17</sup>

Having drawn attention to Gandhi's racism and casteism, the petition made a final argument that had less to do with Gandhi and more to do with the shifting place of India in an African imaginary. Noting that there were no statues of 'African heroes and heroines, who can serve as examples of who we are and what we have achieved as a people', the petition argued that 'it is better to stand up for our dignity than to kowtow to the wishes of a burgeoning Eurasian superpower.'<sup>18</sup> This last comment suggests that whatever India might once have meant to Ghanaians as a leading postcolonial state speaking truth to geopolitical

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<sup>16</sup> M. K. Gandhi, 'A Vindication of Caste', *Harijan* (1936), [http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/appendix\\_1.html](http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/appendix_1.html).

<sup>17</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: An undelivered speech*, ed. Mulk Raj Anand (New Delhi: Arnold Publishers, 1990), 116, 128.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/the-members-of-the-university-of-ghana-council-gandhi-s-statue-at-the-university-of-ghana-must-come-down>.

power, perceptions have changed as a result of the manner in which a rising India currently impinges on the African continent through its investment and infrastructure-building activities and its hunger for resources. In a striking parallel with the grouse against Gandhi, India increasingly figures in a contemporary African public consciousness via alarmingly frequent reports of racist hate crimes against African students in major Indian cities. In the very month that the Gandhi statue was unveiled, the murder of a Congolese man in New Delhi prompted African Heads of Mission to threaten to boycott the Africa Day celebrations being organised by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in the city.<sup>19</sup> At least one of the Ghanaian protesters argued that rather than building statues, taking concerted action against the racism that Africans experienced in India might offer a more effective way of deepening relations between the two regions. If Gandhi's reputation has suffered, this is as much the result of a shift in the image of India itself as of a revisionist appreciation of his beliefs and actions prompted by antiracist and anti-caste organizing. Whatever devotion the historical Gandhi might have inspired as apostle of ahimsa, he has—for reasons not entirely within his control—become a cipher for the might of a newer, uglier India.

### **3. Decolonisation or recolonisation?**

If tearing down statues offers one mode of iconographic decolonisation, the Dalit movement in India has pursued the alternative strategy of building statues, principally of the great Dalit leader and architect of the Indian constitution B. R. Ambedkar. In 1997 alone, when the Dalit Bahujan Samaj Party was in power in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, it built 15,000 statues of Ambedkar.<sup>20</sup> Its leader Mayawati oversaw the construction of an immense Ambedkar Memorial Park in the heart of the state capital Lucknow. Ambedkar statues can today be seen all over India, many in the Dalit areas of the smallest villages, where they are often erected at the expense of the local Dalit community. The statues

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<sup>19</sup> Simona Vittorini, 'Africa Day', 20 June 2016, <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/ssai-notes/2016/06/20/africa-day-by-simona-vittorini/>.

<sup>20</sup> Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 238.

typically depict Ambedkar wearing his trademark suit, holding a copy of the Constitution and pointing the way forward with an outstretched hand. Each element of this portraiture gestures at a different aspect of Ambedkar's philosophy. The suit calls to mind Ambedkar's immersion in Western learning, not least through stints at the London School of Economics and Columbia University, and his unabashed willingness to embrace Enlightenment ideas notwithstanding their European provenance. The book in his hand underscores his role as chairman of the committee charged with drafting the Indian Constitution. The outstretched finger is a prophetic gesture leading his people out of caste bondage on a journey that is spiritual as much as it is political: towards the end of his life, Ambedkar would lead a mass conversion of his followers to Buddhism, powerfully signalling his view of the inadequacies of both caste Hindu reform efforts and the promise of a purely secular liberation.<sup>21</sup>

Ambedkar statues do significant material and symbolic work. They make a claim to space in a socio-political context in which exclusion from public space and segregation have been central instruments for the oppression and humiliation of Dalits by caste Hindus. At the same time, they are powerful symbols of Dalit pride and dignity, celebrating a community icon while forcefully reminding a broader public of the debt they owe him. Unsurprisingly, Ambedkar statues have often provoked antagonism, frequently becoming targets of vandalism at the hands of caste Hindu activists. Some local authorities, claiming to be anxious about their inability to prevent such incidents, have taken the extraordinary measure of locking up Ambedkar statues in cages. In a different register, critics have bemoaned the allocation by Dalit leader Mayawati of immense sums of money, estimated at somewhere between US\$ 500 million and \$1.3 billion, for the construction of statues and memorials at the expense of purportedly more pressing material priorities, raising the perhaps unanswerable question of how much it may be worth paying to restore a sense of iconographic justice.<sup>22</sup> These high-minded criticisms have not impeded rival statue building projects by caste Hindus. India's governing rightwing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party has

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<sup>21</sup> Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mayawati>.

championed the construction of a statue of the independence-era leader and rightwing icon Sardar Vallabhai Patel, boasting that once completed (at a projected cost of \$460 million), it will be the tallest statue in the world.<sup>23</sup> Construction had scarcely begun before the announcement of an even more ambitious project to build a still taller statue of yet another Hindu rightwing icon, this one of the Maratha warrior king Shivaji, off the coast of Mumbai at a cost of \$626 million.<sup>24</sup>

One of the striking features of the contemporary Indian statue wars is that colonial iconography has not typically been the focus of controversy. Indeed judging by the condition of the once famed Coronation Grounds, site of the imperial Delhi durbars, colonial statues in India have tended to suffer a kind of benign neglect, victims more of weather and apathy than iconoclasm.<sup>25</sup> Instead, the fault lines in ongoing Indian statue controversies have all been internal to the body politic: Hindu versus Muslim, dominant versus subordinate caste, left versus right. In part this reflects a long running dynamic in Indian politics beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, when the introduction of limited forms of self-government seemed to intimate that the sun would eventually set on the British empire, shifting the locus of power elsewhere. But in part, the relative insignificance of colonial statuary reflects a more recent geopolitics in which British decline has been accompanied by India's rise, making fulminations against colonial power sound like tired slogans from the struggles of a faraway time.

Faced with the retaliatory cycles of violence and monetary expenditure that constitute the contemporary Indian statue wars, it can be tempting to call for a moratorium on statue building, as the decidedly centrist historian and public

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<sup>23</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statue\\_of\\_Unity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Statue_of_Unity).

<sup>24</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiv\\_Smarak](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shiv_Smarak).

<sup>25</sup> J. Daniel Elam, 'As the US debates Confederate statues, a powerful lesson from Delhi—let them rot', *Scroll.in*, 17 October 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/852791/in-delhi-statues-of-british-monarchs-have-been-trashed-left-to-rot-a-fitting-end-to-a-cruel-rule>.

intellectual Ram Guha recently did.<sup>26</sup> But there is something a little too glib about this position in the way that it posits a false moral equivalence between the claims of radically dissimilar social groups. Ignoring historic relations of oppression and dispossession, it overlooks the ways in which the contemporary public sphere is a radically unequal space, actively hostile to the participation of certain social groups. It cannot see how mobilisations around statues—both for their construction and destruction—are often attempts to force entry into the public, sometimes via the formation of what the political theorist Nancy Fraser has called ‘subaltern counterpublics’.<sup>27</sup> Fraser understands counterpublics as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment within which members of subordinated social groups invent and articulate counterdiscourses which permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. She sees value in such spaces insofar as they are not separatist—they are publics rather than enclaves, functioning as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed towards the transformation of wider publics.

But insofar as statue mobilisations are about creating *subaltern* counterpublics, we would need to distinguish between statue claims that are about securing a toehold in a public sphere out of which one has been shut out, and those that are about ratifying a stranglehold over a public sphere into which no one else is let in. The former is a decolonising gesture, the latter a colonising one. It is the failure to make this distinction that has generated facile comparisons between the demand that Rhodes Must Fall and the destruction of statues deemed unIslamic by the Taliban and ISIS in territories under their control.<sup>28</sup>

Things are less clear-cut when expressions of iconoclasm can be interpreted simultaneously as gestures of decolonization and recolonization, depending on the audiences at whom they are directed. I grew up in the south Indian city of

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<sup>26</sup> India Today, ‘Desecration of statues abetted by political elements: Ramachandra Guha to India Today’, 7 March 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/desecration-of-statues-aided-abetted-by-political-elements-says-noted-historian-ramachandra-guha-1184079-2018-03-07>.

<sup>27</sup> Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, *Social Text* 25/26 (1990).

<sup>28</sup> Brendan O’Neill, ‘Never mind Rhodes—it’s the cult of the victim that must fall’, *Spiked*, 28 December 2015, <http://www.spiked-online.com/newsite/article/never-mind-rhodes-its-the-cult-of-the-victim-that-must-fall/17762#.WyBKNjNKiRs>.

Bangalore (now renamed Bengaluru), not far from a statue of Queen Victoria, whose presence in the city has never been seriously challenged. The groups that have protested against the statue episodically have primarily been linguistic nationalist groups that seek to give Kannada, the local language, pride of place in public space, particularly insofar as education, public signage, cinema and cultural production are concerned. While assertions of Kannada pride were initially directed at colonial symbols, resulting in the 1964 demolition of a war memorial commemorating British soldiers, they were soon deployed against other Indian linguistic groups in the city, principally the Tamil-speaking minority. Indeed the focus of significant sections of the Kannada movement has since been on keeping other regional Indian political, linguistic and cultural heroes out of public space.<sup>29</sup> This may be why their demands for the removal of Victoria have never acquired widespread support, instead generating a deep ambivalence amongst Bangalore's cosmopolitan population: against the global hegemony of English, Kannada language groups appear to be engaged in decolonial protest; but against the claims of minorities within their midst, they take on a recolonizing hue. Meanwhile, far from being reviled for her imperial presence, Victoria endures at the entrance to Cubbon Park, even becoming a much loved rallying point for protests to defend the park against its encroachment by avaricious politicians and real estate developers.

#### **4. What is to be done?**

What does iconographic justice look like? Clearly there can be no one answer to this question. Indeed answers might be beside the point. More interesting perhaps is the question of what new relations might be forged in the attempt to reach for answers.

As my brief survey of the foregoing controversies makes apparent, tearing down, building up, and doing nothing might all be appropriate responses to the problem of colonial iconography. But each of these possibilities begs further

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<sup>29</sup> Janaki Nair, 'Battles for Bangalore: Reterritorialising the City', <http://data.opencity.in/Documents/DocumentCloud/Battles-for-Bangalore-Reterritorialising-the-City-Janaki-Nair.pdf>.

questions. What should we do with statues that are taken down? Whom should new statues commemorate and how? How might we balance the imperative to remember the past with the reality that existing statues materialize very particular, often propagandistic, ways of remembering? ‘Contextualisation’ is often the fudge that is suggested to mediate between these imperatives, but the possibilities for contextualisation are themselves constrained by considerations such as aesthetics and siting. The insertion of a message providing ‘context’ for a historical figure or event often does little to disrupt the power and impact of a commemorative artefact because the aesthetics of celebration are very different from those of critique. Where one places the object of veneration on a pedestal—often literally—the other is more invested in taking down. Siting matters too. Placed atop a state building or in the middle of a public square, symbols do more than simply remind people of history. They make a claim to represent the community. When they reference the oppression of one part of the community by another, they reiterate the act of domination and reinscribe the historical wound, tearing apart what they might otherwise make whole. Finally, if representation is often what is at stake in controversies over statues, what of the unrepresentable—the absent, the disappeared, the enslaved, the subaltern, the ones who leave no trace? Might it be necessary to give up the fiction of perfect representation? Can we find adequate forms of recognition without representation?

The Parque de la Memoria on the banks of the Rio de la Plata estuary in Buenos Aires commemorates the victims of Argentina’s ‘dirty war’ of the 1970s, when its rightwing military junta disappeared tens of thousands of its opponents. A series of long walls, recalling Maya Lin’s Vietnam memorial, records the names and ages of those who were disappeared. Running along the edge of the park beside the river is a boulevard, frequented by walkers and runners. It is lined with streetlights, each of which has a sign attached to it about halfway down the pole. From a distance, they look like standard traffic signs. On closer inspection, each tells a harrowing story in the wordless universal iconography of traffic signage. In one black and yellow diamond-shaped sign, the symbol for a man—such as might be used on the sign for a toilet—is silhouetted against a black plane: one of

the junta's favoured methods of disappearing dissidents was to throw them alive from helicopters into the sea. In another, a stencilled image of a pregnant woman—of the kind one might see on public transport—is placed behind bars. In a third, the number 500 is placed within the outline of a child's head. A 'men at work' sign is labelled 'Precarizacion'. On yet another, below the logo of the 1978 World Cup, hosted and won by Argentina, is a TV screen with the words 'espacio cedido al terrorismo de estado' ('space assigned to state terrorism'). A sign for 1982 depicts only a fallen helmet, reminding us of the Falklands War. A sign for 1983 depicts a ballot box with the words 'silencio' and 'perdon', these being the only two options. The traffic sign for a dead end is marked with the word 'impunidad'. This is the history of a country as told through traffic signs.

Rahul Rao

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