Remembering Edward Colston: Histories of Slavery, Memory, and Black Globality

Abstract

On 7 June 2020, footage of Edward Colston’s statue being taken down in Bristol, UK, made international headlines. The statue of the 17th century slave trader was first toppled by anti-racist and social justice protestors. It was then rolled down to the city’s harbour where ships carrying slaves once moored and from there it was, almost poetically, thrown into the water just south of Pero’s Bridge, which is named after the formerly enslaved Bristol resident Pero Jones. This short piece reflects on what the memory of Edward Colston can tell us about histories of slavery, racial inequality, and Black political activism. While some commentators have suggested that the removal of Colston’s statue serves to erase history, this Viewpoint contends that it offers a significant opportunity for Bristol, and Britain more broadly, to meaningfully confront and understand its own history.

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On 7 June 2020, footage of Edward Colston’s statue being taken down in Bristol, UK, made international headlines. The statue of the 17th century slave trader was first toppled by anti-racist and social justice protestors. It was then rolled down to the city’s harbour where ships carrying slaves once moored and from there it was, almost poetically, thrown into the water just south of Pero’s Bridge, which is named after the formerly enslaved Bristol resident Pero Jones. The events of 7 June followed years of campaigning against the public display of an individual that transported an estimated 84,500 Africans into slavery and was responsible for the deaths of approximately 19,300 men, women, and children. Prior campaigns to address the history of the statue, however, were met with resistance. Instead, the removal of Colston’s statue came in the midst of global protests in response to police brutality in the USA – and more specifically, the violent and horrifying murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. What started off as a local Black Lives Matter demonstration paved the way for urgent global and historically significant discussions on race and historical memory. This short piece reflects on what the memory of Edward Colston can tell us about histories of slavery, racial inequality, and Black political activism. While some commentators have suggested that the removal of Colston’s statue serves to erase history, this Viewpoint contends that it offers a significant opportunity for Bristol, and Britain more broadly, to meaningfully confront and understand its own history.

Edward Colston

Edward Colston was born into a wealthy merchant family in November 1636 in Bristol. He started his early mercantile career sending shipments of goods, such as textiles and wine, from London to Lisbon, Tangier, the Canary Islands, and Rotterdam. In 1680, Colston began working with the Royal African Company (RAC). The RAC was the most prominent purveyor of slaves in British history: it displaced thousands from the west coast of Africa and transported them to the Americas. Colston oversaw the management of the Company as he served as the RAC’s Court of Assistants and later the Deputy Governor. He thus played a leading role in the Atlantic slave trade. Indeed, as Roger Ball has estimated, the Company was responsible for the shipping of 84,500 enslaved people who were branded with the acronym ‘RAC’ on their chests. The brutal conditions of the middle passage meant that among this group there were 19,300 fatalities and thus a mortality rate of roughly 23%. The bodies of those that perished were thrown overboard and into the ocean. Those that survived the transatlantic crossing faced a life of hardship and suffering on British plantations in the Caribbean.
Despite carrying out these atrocities, the city of Bristol has played an active role in memorialising Colston. In 1895, 174 years after Colston died, a statue was erected in the centre of Bristol. Created by sculptor John Cassidy and unveiled during an elaborate ceremony, the statue, according to one newspaper article published at the time, was ‘designed to encourage the citizens of today to emulate Colston’s noble example and walk in his footsteps.’ It was engraved with the inscription: ‘Erected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city AD 1895.’ Indicative of wider efforts to honour and preserve the memory of Colston and the significant sums of money he endowed to hospitals, schools, and churches, the statue was designated a Grade II structure in 1977. Of course, the statue is not the city’s only nod to the former slave trader: Colston Hall, Colston Tower, Colston Avenue, Colston Street, Colston’s Girls’ School, Colston Alms-houses, and Colston Window are among many city landmarks that carry his name.

Moreover, thanksgiving services continue to be held in Colston’s honour on ‘Colston Day’ (13 November), where Colston buns are distributed to schoolchildren. There is no doubt that for hundreds of years, Colston has been venerated as one of Bristol’s most famous benefactors. He has been remembered for his ‘philanthropy’ and has been memorialised as a benevolent figure. In most circles, few questions had been asked about the source of his wealth. Accordingly, Colston has for far too long been selectively represented in the city. In this piece, I would like to use the life cycle of Colston’s statue to unpack what it can tell us about key historical events and actors: I begin with the unveiling of the statue in the nineteenth century to examine what this reveals about Britain’s relationship with histories of slavery and empire. This section seeks to clarify popular misconceptions about slavery and the abolitionist movement. I then turn to the years in which the statue took up residence in Bristol – that is, during a time when Britain sought to remap its position on the world stage amongst ongoing calls for metrocentric, peripheral, and epistemic decolonisation. In the final section, I explore the aftermath of the statue’s removal in order to reflect on transnational Black political organisation, with particular reference to the role of Black female activism.

Memorialisation in an era of abolition

Recent attention to Colston’s statue has reignited public debate concerning Britain’s memory of the Atlantic slave trade. In many ways, these heated discussions reveal Britain’s complex, and oftentimes, contradictory attitudes to its imperial past. Colston’s statue was not, after all, erected during his lifetime. Rather, it was established in the nineteenth century at the same time that Britain was celebrating its efforts in the abolitionist movement. During this period, it was hoped that emancipation would ‘wash away the sins of the nation’, and figures such as William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson were celebrated for their contributions to the successful campaign to end slavery. As historian Catherine Hall argues, a shift in the balance of empire took place in the nineteenth century. Whereas the West Indies were once considered as the jewel in the imperial crown and a lucrative site for the largest agricultural businesses in the world, it can be observed that after the official abolition of slavery, attention was increasingly directed to regions deemed more productive, such as India and Africa. As a result, attitudes to slavery and to Britain’s involvement in the trade were to be forgotten and were ‘best expunged in so far as was possible from public memory.’ The commissioning of Colston’s statue in the nineteenth century thus does much to expose the apathy towards Bristol’s ties to the ruthless exploitation of enslaved men, women, and children. As historian David Olusoga has noted, figures like Colston were ‘being honoured throughout the age in which Britain regarded itself as the moral leader of the world.’

Contemporary debates not only lay bare inconsistencies in historical memory, but they also reveal the prevalence of historical amnesia. Supporters of Colston’s statue have a tendency to
emphasise Britain’s role in the abolitionist movement, which signalled its commitment to liberty and progressive politics. Vigorous campaigning by anti-slavery groups, such as the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, was an important factor in shifting public opinion and pushing for legislative reform. However, a narrow focus on selective and celebratory narratives of abolition does as much to conceal as it does to reveal Britain’s relationship to slavery and empire. Indeed, triumphalist accounts that emphasise British exceptionalism have contributed to national myth-making and have served to minimise the brutal realities of slavery. The slave trade was abolished in 1807 by an Act of Parliament, and slavery itself was formally outlawed in 1833 with the Slavery Abolition Act. However, these legislative reforms did not mean that slavery ceased to exist thereafter, or that Britain had solved the issue at hand.11 After the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 was put into place, a system of apprenticeship came into effect in the British Caribbean. This meant that slaves over the age of 6 were apprenticed for up to 8 years. ‘Apprentices’ continued to work for their former owners and received a small wage. This transitional period between slavery and freedom was designed to ‘teach ex-slaves how to be free’ but, in reality, little had changed in their living conditions. In fact, some plantation owners recognised that it was cheaper to pay a small wage rather than to provide food and housing. Under this new system of apprenticeship, approximately 700,000 Africans remained in bondage in the colonies after the parliamentary act. It was not until 1838, thirty-one years after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, that the British government made meaningful steps to fully abolish slavery and its abhorrent practices.

Before the removal of the statue, very little was known about Colston in public circles. Connected to this, for many years there have been calls to decolonise the curriculum and to critically engage with histories of the British empire. The ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ campaign at UCL, alongside those led by the Institute of Historical Research and Runnymede Trust, have argued that the education system tends to ignore the more difficult and untidy aspects of British imperial histories. As conversations about Britain, empire and memory circulate, it is useful to acknowledge popular misconceptions that have been used to support a problematic balance-sheet view of empire. For example, contrary to what some recent commentators have claimed, Britain was not the first country to abolish slavery. Denmark passed the first legislative abolition of the trade in 1792. Elsewhere, following revolutionary insurrection, the French colony of Saint Domingue (present-day Haiti) achieved the de facto abolition of slavery in 1793. Emancipation was recognised by the French government in 1794 across all French colonies. The selective forgetting of the Haitian revolution, as anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot observes, has been part of a long tradition of erasure, which has served to neglect the agency of Black abolitionists.12 Slave rebellion and slave insurrection were not infrequent: the 1733 slave insurrection at St John, Tacky’s Rebellion in 1760, the 1791 Haitian Revolution, and the Baptist War in 1831 are just some examples of Black activism. These episodes are rarely given adequate attention in public histories.

The role of female abolitionists has similarly been neglected. In the Bristol context, this has meant that rather than promoting the work of Bristolians such as abolitionist Hannah More, the city chose to memorialise a prolific slave trader. More publicised the campaign for abolition in her 1788 poem ‘Slavery, a Poem’. She joined the 1778 boycott of West Indian slave-produced sugar and was vocal in her opposition to the ruthlessness of the trade and the impact it had on slave women. Born in Fishponds, Bristol, she was a prominent member of the ‘Society for Effecting the Abolition of the African Slave Trade’ and she worked with a number of other campaigners, such as Ann Yearsley, to detail its inhumanity.

Erasure and national myth-making of this kind has important implications. Celebratory narratives serve to distort the past, the legacy of which can be seen in twenty-first century
recollections. For example, in 2018 HM Treasury declared that millions of pounds collected from British taxpayers put an end to slavery. It claimed that Britons payed £20 million to buy freedom for all slaves in the empire. What the Treasury failed to explain was that this money did not go to slaves. This sum was paid in compensation to slave owners to ‘cover the loss of human property’.

Additionally, as Hall et al. have shown, a great number of British businesses were built because of this. Indeed, Britain’s economy became more dependent on slavery after abolition. Bristol was, after all, not just a hub for slavery but it was built with the profits of tobacco, sugar, and cotton plantations which used slave labour. The memorialisation of Edward Colston in nineteenth century Bristol and its political afterlives therefore demonstrate the need for Britain to engage with the uncomfortable realities of its relationship with slavery and empire. A focus on British abolitionism alone does little to help Britain come to terms with acknowledging both its past and the ways in which slavery has shaped the contemporary landscape.

**Race and Racism**

Activist responses to Colston’s statue are indicative not only of campaigns for racial equality in Bristol, but they also align to a broader, rich tradition of global Black activism. In other words, the events of 7 June tell both a local and a global history of Bristol’s anti-racist struggles. Bristol underwent a profound transformation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Documentary evidence shows that there was a Black presence in Bristol at least 400 years ago. The relatively small population was made up of enslaved Africans and some free men and women. For instance, before her death in 1612, a Black woman called Katherine worked in the Horsehead Tavern on Bristol’s Christmas Street. Others, such as a Black woman named Frances, was a servant and a member of the city’s Baptist congregation. More settled communities can be traced in the city after the Second World War. By the 1960s, it was estimated that there were 3,000 West Indian residents in the city. During this time, Bristol continued to celebrate the legacy of a slave trader while also negotiating new geographies of race and racism. It was unsurprising then that these new arrivals faced prejudice, housing discrimination, colour bars, and racial violence.

In response to these racial inequalities, residents like Princess Campbell played a decisive role in challenging prejudice in nursing and housing. Campbell, who moved from Jamaica to Bristol in 1962, was the first Black employee at the Wills Tobacco Factory in Bedminster and later became the city’s first Black ward sister. She helped to set up the United Housing Association to support Black people who were frequently discriminated against. Mary Seacole Court in the St Werburgh’s area of the city was built by the association in order to offer multicultural sheltered accommodation for those in need. Similarly, Carmen Beckford was a key figure in laying the foundations for anti-racist struggle in the city. She helped to set up St Paul’s Carnival and became the first community development officer for Bristol City Council. Her advocacy for social justice was recognised when she became the first Black recipient of an MBE in the South West region.

These examples of Black activism illustrate an established tradition of social justice campaigning in the city that is not limited to events that took place in Bristol on 7 June 2020. Indeed, Bristol has historically placed itself at the centre of Britain’s anti-racist struggles. In 1963, the Bristol Bus Boycott responded to the Bristol Omnibus Company’s refusal to employ Black and Asian bus crews. Inspired by the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, it demonstrated the ways in which Black globality was used to frame local issues. Organised by Paul Stephenson, a local youth worker, and members of the West Indian Development Council (Roy Hackett, Owen Henry, Audley Evens and Prince Brown) the four-month boycott, as Madge Dresser has shown, forced the bus company to overturn the colour bar. Local and national support for the boycott and the overturning of racially exclusive policies marked a decisive turning point in the history of British race relations. Indeed,
when a Labour government came to power a year later in 1964, one of their policy pledges was to legislate against racial discrimination. This led to the passing of the Race Relations Act 1965, which made it illegal to discriminate against anyone on the basis of skin colour.

Bristol’s struggle for racial equality did not of course end in the 1960s. The St Paul’s riots took place in 1980 in response to housing inequality and the use of ‘Stop and Search’ laws that saw significantly more Black and ethnic minorities being targeted by the police. When the Black and White Café was raided by the police on 2 April 1980, racial tensions reached a breaking point. Hundreds of youths demonstrated, police cars and buildings were damaged, and 130 people were arrested. In its aftermath, local and national authorities recognised the need to meaningfully tackle racial harassment and inequality.

It is clear that issues relating to policing and social, political and economic inequality faced by Black communities consistently feature in struggles for social justice. It is therefore not surprising that when protestors gathered to demonstrate against the murder of George Floyd, they did so within a wider framework of Black globality. While protestors called for Colston’s statue to be taken down, they were also calling for a broader recognition of ‘Black Lives Matter’. For many, the toppling of the Colston statue offered a useful starting point to discuss the needs, ambitions, and political outlook of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 when three Black female activists, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, embarked on a political project to highlight issues of systemic racism, police brutality, and anti-black violence. The movement was founded in the USA in the aftermath of George Zimmerman’s acquittal for the murder of Trayvon Martin. It gained further momentum following the police killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and eventually developed into an international activist movement which now has over 40 chapters worldwide. Its founders clarify that the movement is ‘an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systemically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.’

Once Colston’s statue was taken down, protestors were seen kneeling on its neck, which was reminiscent of the choke hold that policemen in the US used against George Floyd. The salience of Black global activism and the connections between the fight for racial equality in the US and the UK has arguably never been more evident in the current climate. Statues across the world shared a similar fate to Colston’s in the last few months: statues of Robert Milligan in London, the confederate soldier John Castleman in Kentucky, and a confederate monument in Indianapolis have since been taken down. In addition, the plinth where Colston once stood is now surrounded by messages of support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

Amongst other things, the Black Lives Matter movement is demonstrative of the historical significance of Black women’s political organisation. While figures such as Ella Baker, Jo Anne Robinson, Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer played a key role in the civil rights movement, their contributions have been less acknowledged in comparison to their male counterparts, such as Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X. Indeed, Garza, Khan-Cullors, Tometi and many others have invested in the fight for social, political, and economic equality. The contemporary landscape offers us an opportunity to amplify the voices and work of Black women in the struggle for justice. Now is the opportunity to listen and learn about anti-racism. Where better to start than the work of
inspirational women such as the founders of Black Lives Matter, as well as anti-racist campaigners working in Britain, which include the likes of Claudia Jones, Olive Morris, Doreen Lawrence, and Olivette Otele.

**Statues, History and Memory**

The removal of Edward Colston’s statue in Bristol did anything but erase history. Colston’s statue is an important historical artifact, and its meaning over time has and will change. It offers a valuable learning opportunity to reflect on how difficult pasts are negotiated. Statues, after all, do not reflect history – they reflect historical memory, which is contingent, temporally remote, and subject to contestation.

These contestations are ongoing. On 15 July 2020, a temporary sculpture was erected in the centre of Bristol. *A Surge of Power (Jen Reid) 2020* shows a Black Lives Matter activist with her fist raised in a Black Power salute. The sculpture sat on the very plinth where the statue of Edward Colston resided just 6 weeks prior. While some welcomed the new addition, the sculpture of Jen Reid was eventually removed as Bristol’s Lord Mayor, Marvin Rees, called for a city-wide conversation about what should happen in the aftermath of 7 June. Rees asserted that the people of Bristol must decide the future of the plinth, which should be determined democratically through community consultation.

Discussions about the role of statues, their place in our national narratives, and the spaces they occupy in urban geographies thus rage on. But these are important discussions to be had. It is imperative to ask ourselves what statues and monuments are for. That Colston’s statue might eventually find a new home in a museum is certainly welcome: here the statue will be appropriately contextualised and the legacy of Colston can be fittingly interrogated. The toppling of Colston’s statue did not remove Colston’s imprint on the city; it did not remove his association with slavery, his charitable giving, or the many landmarks that bestow Colston’s name. But what the toppling of Colston’s statue did do was to shed light on the unfinished revolution of emancipation, that is the continued fight for social, cultural and political equality. It has invited a cacophony of voices and storytellers to participate in co-construction of local and national narratives. Providing space for marginalised voices to challenge dominant narratives in this way will only enrich public and professional histories.

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1. Colston was a leading investor in the Royal African Company and later its Deputy Governor. Colston was also involved with the South Sea Company which deepened his ties to the slave trade.
The treatment of enslaved Africans was particularly brutal on West Indian plantations. Slaves had to be frequently imported because slave populations were oftentimes worked to death. Whereas slave populations in North American plantations increased due to a higher birth-rate to death-rate, slaves in the West Indies typically survived for a short number of years.