

BLACK LIVES MATTER AND THE REMOVAL OF RACIST STATUES

PERSPECTIVES OF AN AFRICAN

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ABSTRACT

The killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests have been accompanied by calls for the removal of statues of racists from public space. This has generated debate about the role of statues in the public sphere. I argue that statues are erected to represent a chosen narrative about history. The debate about the removal of statues is a controversy about history and how we relate to it. From this perspective, the Black Lives Matter movement is not a drive to remove or topple statues, but a call for an honest examination of systemic racism and the residual effects of slavery. This call can be a *kairos* to engage in a constructive dialogue about the societies we aspire to live in. The result of this dialogue, which includes a re-examination of dominant narratives, will decide which statues and monuments can occupy public space and represent our societies.

KEYWORDS

Black Lives Matter; Statues; Racism; Slavery; Dialogue.

Premise

I begin this paper with a confession. I cannot be neutral in the Black Lives Matter conversation because mine is a black life and I would like it to matter. Nevertheless, as an academic philosopher, I can only try to be rational and possibly dispassionate.

The residual effects of the North Atlantic slave trade and its essentially racist framework have always been present in my life. My ethnicity, the *Bulsa* of Northern Ghana, is linked to the slave trade. The unity of the *Bulsa* as a distinct ethnic group came about when various clan and village leaders united to defend themselves and their families from the frequent attacks of slave raiders. The *Feok Festival*, celebrated by the *Bulsa* every year in December, affirms the *Bulsa* identity by commemorating and reenacting the defeat of *Baabatu*, the last notorious slave raider of the Upper East region of Ghana.¹ The architecture of the *Bulsa* homes also bears witness to defence against human and livestock raiders. All domestic animals are kept within the courtyard of walled compounds, where, amidst the thatched roofs, there is always a flat-roofed terrace which serves among other things as an observation tower.

Growing up in the northern territories of Ghana, I was quite oblivious of racism. This changed when I left Ghana for the UK at the age of seventeen to continue my education. It was only then that I was made to become conscious of the weight of being black. Yet, apart from a few isolated incidents of being verbally and physically attacked because of the colour of my skin, the weight has been present principally in two subtle forms. First is a sort of burden of proof that I am a normal law-abiding, honest person and an intellectual. If we consider that *onus probandi incumbit ei qui dicit, non ei qui negat* (the burden of proof lies with the one who affirms and not the one who negates), this is tedious. When a burden of proof is needed for such basic human characteristics, there is an implicit assumption that by claiming to possess these qualities I am making an affirmation that requires proof because it is not the accepted view about persons like me. The qualities which have often been assigned to me gratuitously and generously, such as being a good dancer, an athlete, a party freak, and possessing 'joints' or being able to procure them, are qualities which I unfortunately do not possess. The second aspect of this weight is alienation. Even though I have lived, studied and worked in the UK, Ireland, Spain and Italy, and I speak four modern European languages fluently (whereas I can barely get by with two African languages), I have always been considered a foreigner in Europe, an outsider. I do not really belong. With hindsight, I realize how this has conditioned some of my reactions, especially on those occasions when I should have spoken up. The feeling of alienation, accompanied by the burden of justification, has made me think speaking out is counterproductive or

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Amos Yaw Ademin, *Indigenous Resistance to Slavery by the Bulsa People of Northern Ghana*, MA Thesis, University of Ghana, Legon 2016.

pointless. I have been perhaps more fortunate than other persons of African descent born in Europe and America, since I always have a home to return to in Africa, whereas for them it must be more difficult because the only home they have and they know is the one that alienates them.

When I returned to Ghana after living in Europe for twenty-nine years, I chose to settle in a small fishing town on the Atlantic coast called Apam. There are three things I notice whenever I am returning home to Apam: the distinct smell of fish as I drive by the port; the Apam skyline, which is an endless series of bamboo sticks, none perfectly perpendicular to the ground, holding up TV antennas from low-rise rusting roofs; and, above all, the imposing structure of slave Fort Lijdzaamheid (Fort Patience), built by the Dutch from 1697 to 1702, standing on top of the promontory overlooking the town. It is an indelible and jarring reminder of the North Atlantic slave trade and its racist agenda.

It is with this baggage that I write about Black Lives Matter and the removal of statues of racists.

I. Introduction. *Una passeggiata estiva romana* (A Roman summer walk)

Cities and towns around the world are adorned with monuments and statues commemorating events, deities and persons that have shaped the present. I write this paper from Rome, a city whose centre can be described as an open-air museum. I walk from Via Cola di Rienzo – named after the Renaissance demagogue and populist, mythologized by the leaders of the Italian risorgimento – to Piazza Risorgimento towards Piazza San Pietro and the imposing Saint Peter's Basilica. From the piazza I look up to the loggia balcony from which popes over the centuries have sent out messages of peace and fraternity through *urbi et orbi* blessings at Christmas and Easter. Many thoughts about the meaning of monuments race through my mind. This magnificent monument of Catholicism was built with money raised through dubious means, such as selling papal noble titles and indulgences. As I walk away from the Basilica along the Via della Conciliazione – built by fascist leader Mussolini – towards Castel Sant'Angelo, which was originally built as a mausoleum for Emperor Hadrian (134–139) before becoming a Papal Fortress with a secret passage to the Vatican and finally a prison where the likes of Giordano Bruno and Il Cagliostro were detained and where executions were carried out, I begin to wonder whether there are any monuments without a dark side? From Castel Sant'Angelo, I descend the steps from Ponte Sant'Angelo with its ten statues of angels holding sponges, lances, whips, crown of thorns and other religious symbols. Away from the traffic and walking on the riverbanks, I head towards Isola Tiberina, where the temple of Aesculapius, the Greek god of medicine lies underneath what is now the Church of Saint Bartholomeus. Along the way, I find

myself wishing that the river Tiber, witness to all these events of the past as well as all the ways each era has rewritten history, could speak. Across the river, now from the Isola Tiberina overlooking the Jewish ghetto, I see the cupola of Rome's major synagogue. I ask myself, what is the Jewish version of the history of Papal Rome and its ubiquitous Christian monuments?

The building of monuments and statues is a symbolic representation of a heritage. As Simon John puts it, statues "are symbolic of the fixed ideas of a specific community regarding its past, as captured at a particular point in time".² In fact, most monuments and statues are erected to immortalize a retrospective interpretation of events and lives of persons. Statues, unlike other monuments which are not always celebratory, tend to exalt the persons they represent. For example, monuments like the holocaust memorial in Berlin inaugurated in May 2005 is a grim reminder of a dark page in human history. On the contrary, most of the statues of historical persons that occupy the public spaces in cities and towns around the world are celebrations of the achievements of persons who are believed to have made positive contributions to their societies. From this perspective, as Pippa Catterall points out, it is hardly surprising that "another perennial facet of statues throughout history" is that "they have mostly been of men, usually from the military. The database of the Public Monuments and Sculpture Association suggests that only 2.7 per cent of the civic statues in Britain are of non-royal women."³

From this perspective, statues are symbolic representations of an interpretation of history. This often takes the form of a secular or religious hagiography of historical persons based on the views of the persons who commissioned them. It is worth noting that these narratives do not always coincide with the honoured one's own perception of themselves. A recent example is the case of Professor John Attah Mills, a president of the Republic of Ghana who died in office in 2012. He has become known as *Asomdwee Hene* (king of peace) and the park where his mortal remains lie has been renamed Asomdwee Park. Even though studies undertaken after his death have sustained the idea that Attah Mills championed a peaceful agenda in politics,⁴ the humble professor would have never considered himself a 'king', let alone 'a king of peace'. And yet, future generations will know him as the 'king of peace'. An even more astonishing example of how later epochs can represent

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Simon John, Statues, Politics and The Past, in: *History Today* 69, 9, September 2019, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/behind-times/statues-politics-and-past> (12.08.2020).

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Pippa Catterall, On statues and history: The dialogue between past and present in public space. *British Politics and Policy at LSE* (2020), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/statues-past-and-present/> (18.08.2020).

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Jacob Anderson and Eric Ziem Bibiebome, Analysing John Evans Atta Mills' Speeches Projecting him as 'A Man of Peace', in: *International Journal of Language and Translation Studies* 7, 2019, 105–110.

historical facts and find novel meanings to suit their contexts is the case of the most widely diffused Christian symbol: the Crucifix. In the Roman Empire, crucifixion was a gruesome execution, so much so that in the first century it was applied only to non-citizens of the empire. For the first three centuries of Christianity until the era of Helen and Constantine, the crucifix was not the symbol of Christianity. Early Christians preferred other symbols like the fish and would perhaps have been horrified to see an instrument of torture and capital punishment as a representation of their beliefs. Yet later theological interpretations have constructed a narrative that portrays the crucifix as a symbol of love and salvation.

Three points have emerged so far: first, statues are not an objective historical representation of the figures they represent. Second, they represent an attempt by those who commissioned them to celebrate and perpetuate their version of history. Third, these attempts to fix history can be unfixed – meaning can change with time.

II. Do Statues Die?

Metaphorically, we may ask: when does a statue die? If we agree that statues die, then who is the coroner to determine and certify the death? The pulling down of statues is not a twenty-first-century discovery. Controversies around artistic representations have taken place in different moments and for different reasons in history. Thomas Noble, in his book on iconoclasm, offers a key to interpreting these controversies:

Throughout history, heated debates about artistic representations, and the actual destruction of public and private works of art, have been by-products of other kinds of social, political, or religious movements. One thinks immediately of Protestant iconoclasm in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; of the political iconoclasm of the French Revolution; of the ideological iconoclasm of both Fascist and Communist states and their successors; or of contemporary American disputes over flag burning and public subsidies for artistic work that some people deem blasphemous or obscene. The iconoclastic moment in these movements almost always provides the careful observer with a sharp view of the stresses and tears in the social fabric of a given time or place.⁵

Thomas Noble talks of “stresses and tears in the social fabric”. These can sometimes be long-pent-up frustrations within a society that erupt into social movements when groups of people within

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Thomas F. X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*, Philadelphia 2012, 4.

a society feel misrepresented or marginalized. Anger is directed towards monuments and statues which are perceived to represent a perpetuation of the narrative that the movements want to change. In 1776, when the American Revolution was in full swing, anger was directed at the equestrian statue of English King George III on Bowling Green in New York. With the help of George Washington's troops, protestors pulled down the statue "from its plinth and broke it into pieces". Much of the lead was shipped to Connecticut and melted down to make 42,008 bullets. A British officer who had the decapitated head rescued from a tavern before it reached the furnace noted that the nose was severed, the laurels were awry, and a musket ball was lodged "part of the way through his head". He had it shipped back to London "to convince them at home of the infamous disposition of the ungrateful people of this distressed country".⁶

The destruction of statues of perceived disreputable persons was not only an American phenomenon. In the UK, in 1650, a year after the English King Charles I was condemned and beheaded, Parliament ordered that his statue at the Exchange in London "be demolished, by having the head taken off, and the scepter [taken] out of his hand".⁷ A few decades later, in 1689, it was the turn of Catholic King James II's statue in Newcastle to be removed, dragged along the streets, and tossed into the river. The removal of statues by the British not only took place within the confines of the British Isles. Hermann von Wissmann, a German explorer, colonizer and governor of German East Africa, was famous among other things for his ruthless exploits on natives and their villages. In 1890, four years after his death, a statue was erected to his honour and placed in Dar-es-Salaam, today Tanzania. After the defeat of Germany in the First World War, the British took control of the former German territory of East Africa. They removed Wissmann's statue and transported it to London where it was put on display as a trophy at the War Museum. The story doesn't end there. During the Weimar Republic, when Germany exalted her colonial heroes, the country succeeded in repatriating the statue. It was placed in front of the University of Hamburg. Later, when the narrative about colonialism and relations with Africa changed in the 1960s, the student movement sprayed and toppled the statue of Wissmann in 1968. The University of Hamburg decided that Wissmann's statue had no right to be in this public space. The statue was removed and transferred to the Hamburg Observatory where, "in order to create a visualization of Germany's relationship to its colonial past, the curatorial team at the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* decided that the exhibition

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Andrew Lawler, Pulling down statues? It's a tradition that dates back to U.S. independence, in: *National Geographic*, 1 July 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/07/pulling-down-statues-tradition-dates-back-united-states-independence/> (18.08.2020).

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Ibid.

should similarly feature the monument lying on the ground”.⁸ To date, the statue of Wissmann remains in this position.

In the twenty-first century, the most emblematic fall was perhaps that of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad on 9 April 2003. The attack on the statue was initiated by Khadim al Jabourri, an Iraqi motorbike repairer wielding a sledgehammer. He was joined by American Marines who used an armoured vehicle to topple the statue before witnessing crowds rushed in, unleashing their anger and frustration on the fallen statue. Ironically, Al Jabourri, in a 2013 interview published in *The Guardian* newspaper, regretted the toppling of the statue: “Then we had only one dictator, now we have hundreds”, he said, echoing a popular sentiment in a country mired in political problems and corruption, where killings still occur on an almost daily basis. “Nothing has changed for the better.”⁹ The toppling of a statue is not a guarantee that the desired change will indeed occur.

Some initial conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing. First, statues represent an interpretation of history. The stories they tell are often partial, if not decidedly ideological. Second, statues can become obsolete when the narrative they portray or the persons they represent can no longer be upheld as worthy occupants of public space. Third, the process of removal of statues can be institutional, but quite often it is not. Fourth, removal of a statue from public space does not always entail destruction; the statue can be placed in a context and in a way that corresponds to the current narrative (Wissmann). Fifth, the removal of statues when driven by a surge of public emotion can become regretful (Al Jabourri). Finally, the toppling of a statue is not a guarantee the change hoped for will be achieved.

A more difficult question to address, however, is why the removal of some statues is more controversial than others? The famous Via dei Fori Imperiali in Rome, leading to the Colosseum, which was built by fascist Mussolini, is lined with statues of four Roman emperors: Caesar, Augustus, Nerva and Trajan. None of these figures will survive ethical scrutiny if we consider their military exploits and the internal power-grabbing manoeuvres they used to rise to the highest ranks of the Roman Empire, not to mention their endorsement of discriminatory attitudes towards classes of citizen and non-citizens. Yet, we do not witness an outcry from descendants of Roman slaves and citizens of former Roman colonies calling for the removal of the statues of the emperors. The acceptance of their presence in public space cannot merely be attributed to the aesthetic value of the statues, which are in fact

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Memorial to Hermann von Wissmann. Deutsches Historisches Museum, <https://www.dhm.de/blog/2017/04/20/memorial-to-hermann-von-wissmann/> (12.08.2020).

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Peter Beaumont, Saddam’s statue: the bitter regrets of Iraq’s sledgehammer man, in: *The Guardian*, 9 March 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/09/saddam-hussein-statue-kadom-al-jabourir-sledgehammer> (09.03.2013).

copies. The original statues are conserved in the Capitoline Museums. A possible reason for this could be that there is consensus that the imperial dreams and ideals of a superior and invincible Roman Empire are no longer a threat. In the words of Simon John, the debate about controversial statues concerns “wider conflicts between competing visions of history”.¹⁰

With all this in mind, we shall now look at the current movement for the removal of statues of racists and promoters of slavery, especially in the light of the Black Lives Matter movement that has garnered more energy in the wake of the killing of George Floyd.

III. The Debate: Statues of Racists in Public Space

Since the public killing of George Floyd by officers of the Minneapolis Police Department on 25 May 2020, a long list of statues of historical figures known to be racists have been removed from public space in the USA and the UK. Among these are Charles Linn, 31 May (Birmingham, Alabama); Robert E. Lee, 1 June (Montgomery, Alabama); Raphael Semmes, 5 June (Mobile, Alabama); John B. Castleman, 8 June (Louisville, Kentucky); Edward Colston, 7 June (Bristol, UK); Jefferson Davis, 13 June (Richmond, Virginia); and Albert Pike, 19 June (Washington, D.C.). Many Confederate monuments and statues of Christopher Columbus have been removed or toppled. Not everyone agrees with the removal of these and other statues. The African American writer Sophia A. Nelson believes that removing statues is to run away from the past and to gag freedom of expression.¹¹ Similar views have been expressed by Oxford University’s vice-chancellor, Louise Richardson. In the face of renewed calls for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes overlooking the High Street from the façade of Oriel College, she commented “that hiding our history is not the route to enlightenment”.¹² The university and Oriel College have since modified their position and have set up a committee to investigate, deliberate and advise on the question. Others, Donald Trump, for example, see the toppling and defacing of statues and monuments as a sustained assault on revered American monuments carried out by “arsonists and left-wing extremists” adding that those “who have carried out and supported these acts have explicitly identified themselves with ideologies – such as Marxism – that call for the destruction of the United States system of government”. As a result, on 26 June, he

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Simon John, Statues.

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Sophia A. Nelson, Don’t Take Down Confederate Statues. Here’s Why, in: *NBC News*, 1 June 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/news/opinion-why-i-feel-confederate-monuments-should-stay-ncna767221> (12.08.2020).

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Sean Coughlan, Don’t hide history, says Oxford head in statue row, in: *BBC News*, 11 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-52999319> (12.08.2020).

issued an “Executive Order on Protecting American Monuments, Memorials, and Statues and Combating Recent Criminal Violence” to “prosecute to the fullest extent permitted under Federal law, and as appropriate, any person or any entity that destroys, damages, vandalizes, or desecrates a monument, memorial, or statue within the United States or otherwise vandalizes government property”.¹³

The controversy around the removal of statues has become such a major issue in the debates surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement that it risks transforming questions of racism, white privilege, justice and equality into questions of law and order, or, worse still, a question of patriotism, where to be patriotic means subscribing somehow to the narrative that created the statues in question. From conversations with persons who are concerned about the current drive for the removal of statues of racists from public spaces, I have collected reasons that I discuss in the next paragraphs before going on to present a possible paradigm for addressing the controversy.

1. No one really cares about statues these days. We do not even notice them. By pulling them down we are opening a hornet’s nest.

In fact, apart from a few exceptions like Narendra Modi of India, few leaders today are concerned about erecting statues in honour of past heroes. The statuomania era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seems to have died down. What is more, even in cities where statues abound, many citizens hardly notice them or know what they stand for. Bristolians and the world at large knew very little about Edward Colston and his engagement in the slave trade until calls for the removal of his statue started becoming louder in 2015. This view also holds that, it is more urgent to address the existential, practical and systematic issues of racism. When these questions have been addressed sufficiently, the narrative about the past will change and monuments that misrepresent the past will either be removed or complemented with newer ones which tell the other side of the story without too much controversy.

This argument embodies a lot of common sense. Indeed, the removal of a statue is not a guarantee that the underlying issues of racial injustice will be addressed. It may just become an occasion to vent frustration at lifeless objects, all the while allowing authorities to sweep the vexed questions of systemic reform under the carpet by calling for calm and making promises of systemic change that will not be fulfilled.

On the flip side, allowing statues of racists a permanent place in the public sphere does have a negative effect on victims of racism.

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The White House, Executive Order on Protecting American Monuments, Memorials, and Statues and Combating Recent Criminal Violence, issued 26 June 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-american-monuments-memorials-statues-combating-recent-criminal-violence/> (12.08.2020).

When public space is adorned with figures with which black people cannot identify, even if they are not aware of the full story of these persons, a feeling of alienation is created. A similar argument can be made for the absence of statues of women in public space. Statues celebrate people who have contributed to making history. The absence of figures of blacks and women in public space reinforces the idea that our societies are led by white men and that only white men are worthy of commemoration in our societies. It is worth pointing out moreover that victims often experience what Miranda Fricker has described as hermeneutical injustice.¹⁴ This is when victims of injustice perceive something wrong and yet, on account of a deficit in shared tools for interpretation, victims or marginalized groups may not have the epistemic concepts to express what they are feeling. It is often quite difficult for persons of African descent to express the contours of racism, but this does not mean that the effects are not perceived. The predominance of figures of colonialists, racists, slave owners and traders, and the absence of monuments and statues of slaves and black anti-racists, can contribute to making public space silently but perceptibly unwelcoming towards people of African descent.

2. Persons pulling down statues are violent criminals. Law and order must prevail.

Images of angry demonstrators defacing or pulling down statues have accompanied some of the demonstrations in favour of the Black Lives Matter movement. This has led to authorities placing protective coverings around statues that risk being damaged by demonstrators. On 12 June, the statue of Winston Churchill in London's Parliament Square was covered up to protect it from being attacked by demonstrators. The Executive Order issued by President Trump on 26 June interprets the defacing and pulling down of statues as acts of violence against the state. On this premise of aggression towards the state, the President threatened to use the army to defend these monuments and to ensure that law and order are observed. For many persons opposed to the pulling down or defacing of statues, the demonstrations in favour of the Black Lives Matter movement are being hijacked by violent persons whose actions need to be suppressed.

This line of reasoning is practically relevant from a social viewpoint. However, logically, it may be riddled with a fallacy of changing the subject because it shifts the question from *whether* statues of racists should be allowed in the public space to a question of *how* demonstrators are expected by law to express their frustrations. Concentrating on vandalism by some of the demonstrators is a distraction that can lead to a missed opportunity to address issues of importance regarding identity and history.

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Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford 2007.

There is no doubt that it is part of the duty of government to ensure that law and order prevail. The state cannot allow citizens to express their frustration by damaging property or objects. However, the appropriate response, in this case, may not be to increase the coercive powers of the police and military. The Black Lives Matter movement was galvanized by a viral video showing police violence towards George Floyd, an African American man. This act of violence, which led to his death, was perpetuated by members of the police force. The police force is an arm of government that is supposed to protect citizens. If there was already a perception that the police do not discharge this duty equally to all citizens, and indeed, a lack of trust in their impartiality, then this event was a confirmation of that belief. Therefore, escalating the coercive powers of the police and other armed forces towards demonstrators is perhaps not the best way to restore the trust required for successful policing. Other ways of engaging with demonstrators and isolating radical elements need to be explored. What is more, a deeper understanding of civil protests is needed. These arise when social groups feel that the existing channels of dialogue for change are not open to them or do not heed their calls for change. It is the absence of adequate fora to engage in constructive dialogue that fosters the need for mass protests. A better response to protests would be to create space for the protesting parties' voices to be heard and to follow up with real responses that seek to address their concerns. This would be a more inclusive approach.

3. The statues are an important part of our collective history which we cannot and should not erase. The removal of statues is an act of *damnatio memoriae* which is always negative.

Various persons, including the vice-chancellor of Oxford University, have warned against trying to erase history by pulling down statues. The persons who are represented by the statues are protagonists of events that have made us who we are. The removal of statues would seem to be an act of *damnatio memoriae* in which conscious attempts are made to cancel positive traces of ignoble persons from the annals of history. Such actions may in turn contribute to greater ignorance about the past and a poorer understanding of the present.

This argument is problematic because it encapsulates many questionable assumptions. First, statues represent an interpretation of history. In fact, many statues are erected to reinforce a narrative that does not always present a complete picture. Many of the Confederate statues in the USA were erected during Jim Crow, an era known for its affirmation of white supremacy. The claim that statues teach history is a tall one; at best, they reinforce a particular narrative of history. Secondly, the removal of a statue cannot be equated to the ancient practice of *damnatio memoriae*. As Charles W. Hedrick argues, the *damnatio* was an effort to repress and obliterate the representation of a person. It was not so much a question of

oblivion as of disgrace.¹⁵ The removal of the statue of a racist from public space does not obliterate, it is an act of refusing to celebrate the achievements of the person either because those achievements are ethically questionable or other important aspects of the person's life cast a large dark shadow on their achievements. To continue to keep statues of infamous persons in the public space might require re-interpreting our understanding of statues, that is, as representing not persons we celebrate but also those we vilify. It is difficult to imagine, for now, statues of villains in public space. Would it be advisable to erect statues of villains standing on high plinths and in postures denoting success?

4. It is unfair to judge persons from the past with today's criteria.

When I visit the slave forts along the coast of Ghana, which I often do, I walk down into the dark dungeons, breathing in the damp air of the large cells where young black women and men were chained and held for weeks whilst waiting to be led through the infamous 'doors of no-return', onto ships to be carried away forever across the seas to the New World. The experience of visiting these forts is so hideous that most visitors exit with a feeling of sadness. For whites, the sadness is tinged with guilt; for blacks, the sadness is tinged with anger. Exiting these forts, I have on many occasions asked myself the hypothetical question of what I would have done if I had been born into a white slave-trading family 400 years ago? Of course, I have no answer to this question. The context in which a person is born and lives is part of the moral heritage which influences their choices and decisions. However, it is difficult to subscribe to total moral relativism. A moral distinction can be made between those who actively enslaved people, engaged in the slave trade or went to war to defend slavery, and those who perhaps benefitted from it without actively engaging in slavery. There is also something to be said about those who did not challenge the institution of slavery but in their own little ways tried to be humane towards slaves. And, of course, there were those who actively fought to put an end to slavery. In other words, even within the era of the North Atlantic slave trade, there were different moral positions and there was room for choices even if the choices were narrower and conditioned by the general climate of acceptance of slavery. Thus, active engagement in the slave trade or fighting battles to defend slavery was arguably a matter of choice and not just a result of the era in which the slave traders lived.

To judge figures like Colston, Jack Lee and Rhodes negatively is not just an opinion of the twenty-first century. There were contemporaries of these persons who did not agree with their choices and would not buy into a narrative that celebrates these figures. The difference today, perhaps, is that these critical voices have become

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Charles W. Hedrick, *History and Silence. Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity*, Austin 2000, 114.

louder. Statues are erected to immortalize narratives about persons. When that narrative no longer holds in public opinion, the statue can be perceived as a monument that is propping up a lie or an injustice.

5. All human characters have flaws. To demand that persons represented by statues are flawless is a tall order. It will ultimately lead to an end of human statues in the public space.

There is a benevolent view towards statues of fallen heroes which holds that it is impossible or almost impossible to come across a human character that has no flaws. The persons represented in statues are humans who had their flaws and failings, but they also had achievements worth celebrating. It is unfair to fail to recognize their achievements just because they had some failings like all humans do. What is more, since flaws can be found in almost every human being, if we continue along this path, perhaps the only statues that will remain are those erected in honour of unknown or mythical persons, like Molly Malone on Dublin's Grafton Street or some of Botero's statues. Perhaps we are heading towards the end of the era of statues of historical persons. And this, some hold, might not be a desirable end.

It is true that one can find faults in any human character. It is virtually impossible to find human beings that are perfect or blameless on all fronts. When Mother Theresa of Calcutta was declared a saint by the Roman Catholic Church, critics argued that she was a cynical activist making money and building a brand out of the suffering of the poor.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in the context of the current discussion about the removal of statues of racists from public space, there are some considerations that need to be taken into account when following this line of reasoning.

First, in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, the persons whose statues are being challenged are those whose achievements relied on slavery and racism. This is not about other flaws linked to character or virtue in the strict sense. The calls for the removal of the statue of Winston Churchill from Parliament Square in London are not because of the stories or myths that he was a heavy drinker.¹⁷ Edward Colston built up wealth through slavery, Cecil Rhodes through white supremacy. The Confederate generals fought bravely in a war which, for them, was a battle to uphold slavery.

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Douglas Robertson, Mother Teresa wasn't a saintly person – she was a shrewd operator with unpalatable views who knew how to build up a brand, in: *The Independent*, 4 September 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/mother-teresa-wasnt-a-saintly-person-she-was-a-shrewd-operator-with-unpalatable-views-who-knew-how-a7224846.html> (12.08.2020).

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On the question whether Churchill was an alcoholic or not, see an analysis by Michael Richards at <https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/myths/alcohol-abuser/> (12.08.2020).

There are other cases where a statue is erected to celebrate a person's admirable achievements in fields not directly related to slavery or racism, yet the person has a deeply flawed record. An example is the famous twentieth-century Italian journalist, Indro Montanelli, who as a young man of twenty-four, during the invasion of Abyssinia, bought, married, and regularly raped a twelve-year-old local girl. Montanelli later abandoned the fascist camp, became a champion of press freedom against fascists and dictators, was imprisoned, even suffered an assassination attempt by the *Brigate Rosse* terrorist group, and remained throughout his long life an uncompromising sharp leader of Italian independent journalism. This earned him awards and a public statue in Milan. However, throughout his lifetime Montanelli remained unrepentant about his actions towards the young girl in Abyssinia. Even decades after these events, as an old man and a celebrated hero of Italian journalism, he tried to justify his actions by saying, "that was the way it was done in Abyssinia". And he added: the young girl was a "docile little animal".¹⁸ In the wake of the Black Lives Matters movement, protestors splashed red paint on the statue of Montanelli, wrote 'rapist and racist' on the plinth, and called for its removal. The mayor of Milan, Giuseppe Sala, replied that he is open to dialogue, however, he is of the opinion that the statue must remain because "lives are to be judged in their complexity", adding that whereas it is possible to demand an unblemished life from all, if we pursue this line, there will be few persons left to remember.¹⁹

Mayor Sala is perhaps right in his assessment, but his conclusion is debatable. Great thinkers and philosophers like Voltaire, Hume, and Kant all made explicitly racist and white supremacist affirmations.²⁰ Yet, their works are still studied, admired and commented on by students of philosophy from all races. The perdurance of their intellectual legacy cannot be attributed to statues that have been erected in their honour. Persons like Montanelli, whose undeniable contribution to good journalism and press freedom in the face of tyranny and dictatorship is enviable, can perhaps be better analysed, studied and understood in contexts of reasoned dialogue. A mute statue in a public square may not provide the best context for a pondered evaluation of the ideas of a person like Montanelli.

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Annalisa Teggi, «Lei, signor Montanelli, violentò una bambina di 12 anni?» chiese Elvira Banotti, in: *Aleteia*, 16 August 2018, <https://it.aleteia.org/2018/08/16/indro-montanelli-elvira-banotti-violenza-bimba-12-anni-africa/2/> (12.08.2020): "Regolarmente sposata, in quanto regolarmente comprata dal padre. Aveva 12 anni, ma non mi prendere per un bruto: a 12 anni quelle lì sono già donne. [...] Avevo bisogno di una donna a quell'età. Me la comprò il mio sottufficiale insieme a un cavallo e un fucile, in tutto 500 lire. [...] Lei era un animalino docile; ogni 15 giorni mi raggiungeva ovunque fossi insieme alle mogli degli altri."

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Sala: "La statua di Montanelli resta, le vite si giudicano nella loro complessità", in: *ADNKronos*, 14 June 2020, https://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/cronaca/2020/06/14/sala-statua-montanelli-resta-vite-giudicano-nella-loro-complessita_vayPmLbg2XFrxrELdPFXCM.html (12.08.2020).

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Björn Freter, White Supremacy in Eurowestern Epistemologies. On the West's Responsibility for its Philosophical Heritage, in: *Synthesis Philosophica* 33, 1, 2018, 237–249.

What is more, the statue of a person who is declaredly unrepentant about being a paedophile and racist rapist is not a reassuring presence to children who need to grow up with a certainty that their society is willing to protect them.

6. Many statues are works of art that have aesthetic value which goes beyond the persons they represent. Destroying them is similar to burning libraries or 'bad' books.

There is no doubt that some statues have an aesthetic value that needs to be preserved irrespective of the historical facts they represent. Michelangelo's *Pieta*, *David*, *Moses* and other statues are of immense value even though historians or theologians could raise questions about his depiction of these figures. The equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius has influenced political sculptures for centuries. More modern statues, those from the era of Romanticism, which may have lesser artistic value, are worthy of conservation because they represent an era of artistic expression, which is always a window into understanding the spirit of the times.

From this point of view, the destruction of statues can deprive citizens and art students of important pieces that enrich our aesthetic experience and enhance our understanding of the past and the present.

A counter argument could be made that the removal of statues from public space does not mean destroying them. Indeed, some will be better conserved over time if they were kept in a museum where they can be protected, preserved and presented within a framework that allows people to understand and interpret them better. One might ask: what about statues carved into natural spaces, the bas-relief of the three Confederate leaders, for example, which cannot be transferred to museums or other sites? Here, perhaps the only alternative is to widen the narrative by ensuring the silenced voices are also heard.

IV. Black Lives Matter as a *Kairos*

When we look at the timeline (*chronos*) of slavery and racism, the current Black Lives Matter movement could be a *kairos*, a propitious moment for decision and action. Much has been achieved, and the condition of Africans in Europe and America today is much better than it was 300 years ago or even sixty years ago. The North Atlantic slave trade, which was unique because it used race as the deciding element in who was to become a slave and who was not, has been abolished. The United States of America can boast of even having elected a man of African descent to the highest office in the nation. As an African, I have studied and worked in some of the most prestigious institutions in Europe, where a few centuries ago I would only have been admitted as a janitor or a domestic servant.

Nevertheless, it is also true that racism and white male supremacy are still present in many parts of the world. We are a long way from achieving equal opportunities for all. The current COVID-19 pandemic has raised a curtain on some of the underlying inequalities. At the end of April, COVID-19-related deaths were almost twice as high in the Bronx, as in Manhattan (224 versus 122 per 100,000 residents).²¹ Life expectancy across geographic, income and racial groups can vary by up to thirty years. For example, inner-city residents of Chicago, who are more likely to be black, can expect to live to sixty years, a lower age than countries like Zimbabwe, Burundi and Mali. Yet, in suburban areas, persons who are typically white, live to ninety.²² The list of prolonged and systemic deprivations of equal opportunities for persons of African descent is endless. At Oxford University's Oriel College, which has benefitted from the generosity of Cecil Rhodes and whose statue towers over the entrance to the college from the High Street, a mere six black students were admitted from 2017 to 2019.²³

The Black Lives Matter movement is not a debate about statues. Neither is it about George Floyd or Derek Chauvin. It is about the conditions that allow events like the killing of George Floyd to happen. The famous words of George Floyd as he struggled under the knee of Derek Chauvin, 'I can't breathe', are a symbolic cry of black persons who live with the weights I alluded to at the beginning of this paper. Black Lives Matter is a call to lift those weights so that persons of African descent may breathe freely and have the same opportunities that are available to white citizens.

Even though the issues to be resolved deal with the present and the future, the roots of inequality and racism can be traced back to the past, to slavery and to colonialism. The structural and individual racisms of today are mainly residual effects and a continuation of historical slavery and colonialism. Unfortunately, neither the European nations nor the USA have ever really made a concerted effort to deal with this past by carefully examining its impact on the present. Discourses on racism tend to focus on programmes of inclusion, which are useful but avoid an honest confrontation with the past. A more organic programme aimed at putting an end to racism and promoting greater harmony in society would require an uncomfortable dialogue about past injustices. After all, true reconciliation requires the identification and admission of errors together with a future commitment to justice. This is what makes the contro-

²¹

Harald Schmidt, Vaccine Rationing and the Urgency of Social Justice in the Covid-19 Response, in: *Hastings Center Report* 50, 2020, 46–49 (<https://doi.org/10.1002/hast.1113>).

²²

Harald Schmidt, The Way We Ration Ventilators Is Biased, in: *New York Times*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/opinion/covid-ventilator-rationing-blacks.html> (18.08.2020).

²³

Number of black students in Oxford rises, but low numbers admitted to colleges, in: *ITV News*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.itv.com/news/2020-06-23/number-of-black-students-in-oxford-rises-but-low-numbers-admitted-to-colleges> (12.08.2020).

versy around history important in the Black Lives Matter debate. This debate is not primarily about statues, it is about how to position ourselves today given the common and unequal past we share.

V. Concluding Remarks about Statues of Racists in Public Spaces

A general comment about statues of human persons is that they aim to immortalize mortals. They do this by keeping the mortal alive through a legendary narrative. When that memorializing runs into difficulty, the project of immortalization of the person also enters into difficulty. The person may be condemned to a second death, the death of a legend. Whether this second death requires the statue memorializing this person to be removed from public space is a question that has to be agreed upon through dialogue, not through imposition or vandalism.

The public sphere should be a place in which all the members of the community can feel at home or at least represented. If the story told by public space is skewed, this story can be corrected by complementing it with other stories, or by removing those elements that are in full contradiction with who we are or aspire to be as a society.

The task is to create the space needed for constructive engagement and dialogue. Black Lives Matter is an occasion, a *kairos*, to finally commit to engaging in that dialogue about racism and the residual effects of slavery that has been pending for centuries. In the meantime, the statues may remain (many have been around for decades and a year or two longer would not make such a difference). When a consensus has been reached, a statue can be de-commissioned or other monuments erected to give a more complete view of history. When this happens, entire communities will hopefully emerge victorious as a people, not as a particular group gaining victory over another.

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