

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Attending to Legacies of Slave-ownership and Enslavement: Reshaping Memoryscapes in Bath and Bristol after the Fall of Colston



In the wake of the brutal killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA on 20th May 2020, marches were organised worldwide to protest against anti-black violence, institutional racism and inequalities exacerbated by the Covid 19 pandemic which hit black communities disproportionately. In numerous cities of the world, demonstrators took to the streets in breach of the lockdown rules, claiming a long-overdue reckoning with the colonial past. They targeted monuments to Winston Churchill, King Leopold II of Belgium, Christopher Columbus or Cecil Rhodes, arguing that these statues continue to glorify colonisation and empire in the contemporary cityscape. One of the first monuments to be toppled was the Grade II-listed statue of Edward Colston by sculptor John Cassidy, erected on Bristol's Colston Avenue in 1895 to remember the 17th-century philanthropist who was responsible for the enslavement of 100.000 Africans between 1672 and 1689 (Guardian 7/6/2020).

Images of BLM activists tearing down the statue from its pedestal and throwing it into Bristol's harbor not only made headlines around the world, they also created an imperative for the cities of Bath and Bristol to stage a long-overdue public debate about how to engage with the reluctant past and how to make it visible in both cities' memoryscapes. In Bristol, several campaigns and online petitions demanding the removal of the Colston statue had failed to persuade the authorities. Over the years, the monument also served as outlet for artists and activists to challenge whitewashed narratives by subverting it with tags and often debated guerrilla art installations, the most memorable of which consisted in 100 human figures laid out around the statue to form a slave ship in April 2019. In June 2020, the empty plinth of the Colston statue was occupied by 'A Surge of Power', a statue made of resin and steel by artist Marc Quinn, representing BLM activist Jen Reid with her fist raised in a black power salute. Welcomed by some as active allyship and scrutinised by others as an opportunistic stunt, the temporary monument was promptly removed by the Bristol city council, leaving the plinth empty until the city decides what should go in its place.

Bristol, once Britain's busiest slavery port, is today a large and diverse city in which activists, historians and campaigners are actively engaged in exploring the legacy of the transatlantic trade. Civil society had been involved in shaping museum displays since 1996 when an exhibition celebrating the city's maritime explorers sparked controversy for its oblivion of the trade of enslaved Africans. Funded with £1 million from the Heritage Lottery, the bi-centennial exhibition 'Breaking the Chains' in 2007 attempted to break with the 'white saviour' narrative to celebrate the agency and resistance of the enslaved. Since the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum closed its doors in November 2008 for a planned and then cancelled relocation to London, only a small part of the exhibition has survived and continues to be on display in the M Shed, opened in 2011.

For historian David Olusoga 'no British city is more wilfully blind to its history than Bristol' (*The Guardian*, 2017). It can be argued, however, that white silence has been even more enduring in the UNESCO world-heritage city of Bath, situated only 12 miles away from Bristol. Marketed to its estimated 6.25 million annual visitors (Visitor Impact report, 2018 - <https://visitbath.co.uk/members/facts-and-figures/>) as a city 'built for pleasure and relaxation' and a 'wellbeing destination since Roman times' (<https://visitbath.co.uk/>), Bath has combined images of its iconic Georgian architecture, Jane Austen's novels, natural hot springs, and vibrant shopping and dining scene into a beguiling narrative from which the profit derived of the trans-Atlantic trade and the generous compensations received by local citizens after the Slavery Abolition Compensation Act passed in 1833 and the Slave Compensation Act in 1837 remained perfectly absent. Smaller-scale exhibitions and installations took place in Bath for the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade, these have however largely faded from institutional corporate memory. Recently some museums and National Trust properties in and around Bath have launched cautious initiatives to engage with objects in their collections with palpable connections to slavery. This desire to decolonise has resulted in mission statements acknowledging the founders' connections with plantations in the West Indies and declarations of commitment to 'identify objects related to empire and slavery through the subjects depicted, their original purpose or the material used' (<https://www.holburne.org/about-us/the-legacy-of-slavery>). Scottish artist Graham Fagen's installation, 'The Slave's Lament', exhibited in the Holburne museum from May to September 2019 and the Bath Abbey's forthcoming exhibition on 'Monuments, Empire and Slavery' in 2020 are some of the latest steps taken by Bath-based institutions in this new direction.

The aftermath of the Colston toppling in summer 2020 has left us with a set of unanswered questions. How could Bristol's and Bath's historical connections with empire and the trade in, and wealth generated by captured and enslaved Africans be uncovered and made part of the official narratives? What should happen to monuments celebrating Britain's legal slave owners and traders and how to break with the enduring 'white silence' in places like Bath where there is no statue to be removed and replaced? What is the role of a memorial today? Is erecting statues or monuments the most efficient way of making reluctant past visible in a city's memoryscape? If silence is complicity, is acknowledging institutionally forgotten legacies of the slave trade sufficient to take responsibility for what happened in the past? Do references to the Abolitionist movement in Bath and Bristol and the anti-slavery movement and support for the Underground Railway in the USA risk obscuring white privilege and draw attention away from Black resistance? Are discussions about modern-day slavery and human trafficking a necessary part of the conversation about trans-Atlantic slavery legacies or rather a way to divert attention from past responsibilities and present-day inequalities? These are

some of the current debates this collective volume seeks to engage with by looking at the most recent attempts to engage with colonial history in Bristol and Bath and explore the two cities' links with the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans. The volume, to be proposed to Policy Press, Bristol, aims to bring together researchers, artists, activists, institutions, teachers, curators and other stakeholders to reflect on both cities' changing memoryscapes and various strategies enabling different communities and stakeholders to be part of the conversation.

We are inviting contributions dealing, in particular, with the following questions:

- How to avoid debates about the past that remain confined to the realms of experts, curators and administrators without involving in the conversation representatives of broader civil society? How can communities of stakeholders engage in collaboration with institutions and what are the pitfalls of often unequal dialogs with institutions?
- What strategies should be adopted to make hidden connections with historic legacies of the trade in captured and enslaved Africans visible? What is the role of artists, researchers and activists in this process? How can unequal power relations between these groups be balanced and mitigated?
- Is it possible to decolonise exhibits, buildings, institutions and memorials? How to present collections derived from a contested past to encourage fairer representations of the enslaved and promote more equal futures?
- Whose story should be remembered and how should it be presented? How can museums critically reflect on their own histories and collections in collaboration with their audiences and stakeholders?
- Can similar strategies be used to shape Bristol's and Bath's memoryscapes or should local differences be recognised to elaborate effective ways of engaging with the past?
- How can young audiences be involved in the current debate? How can artistic or walking practices promote an active and democratic engagement?

Contributions can be theoretical or arts- or practice-based. 250-word abstracts accompanied by a short biography should be sent to ch970@bath.ac.uk and r.white2@bathspa.ac.uk by 15th January 2021. Accepted contributions should be submitted by September 30th 2021.